

Cursed Blood - 41.Midnight Assassins.41[1,359 words]

That night, I slept like I'd never slept before. My head hit the pillow and I was out, worn from my day of studying with Lillian. Not only did I learn plenty, but I began to realize that I enjoyed her company, and Janora was a highly clever woman. They were both kind to me despite my blood and helped me with everything I needed until I was burnt out of energy.

Sleep well, Storm-Cloud, Kai whispered in my head as I dozed off, settling in by the door for my protection. A smile rose to my lips as I began to drift into the land of dreams, though my mind was quiet as I slept. Peaceful, nothing to disturb me.

Until I felt a cold breeze on my arms, a strand of hair blown into my face. The windows to the outside were opposite of the door, and I always left them closed.

My eyes remained closed as my heart pounded, my mind racing to find a way to figure out what was happening to me. Kai was asleep, but a telepathic blast to wake him up would also alert whoever was in my room if they were Darkblood or similar to Elijah. I exhaled softly, trying not to stir as I mapped out a plan.

One that might've worked had a clawed hand not wrapped around my shoulder.

Whoever it was gently rolled me onto my back, their eyes on my face. The ghost of a hand brushed the hair out of my eyes, and there was a deep purr above me. Tears nearly sprang into my eyes as I panicked, fighting back my Darkblood form.

"Sweet, sweet angel..," a voice whispered, "your peace is too fragile. My poor love."

Hot breath brushed against my bare neck and I repressed a shiver, the claws piercing through my skin and drawing blood as whoever it was leaned forward.

"You should get ready to run, love."

With that, the pressure on my shoulder and the breath on my neck was gone. I flew upright, chest heaving as blood trickled down from five gaping cuts in my shoulder. I choked on the pain, doubling over as it felt like fire on my skin.

However, once the feeling of fire passed, I noticed the dampness of blood was gone as well. I was panting and glanced down to see the wounds were closed, scars in their place. It looked like someone had shoved my shoulder through the entire healing process within seconds -- the scars were gnarly and rather ugly, but they also seemed to be fading.

I swallowed, feeling fangs press against my lips. My eyes widened and I reached for my lower back, but there were no tail or wings. There was also no pressure on my head, which meant no horns.

I partially turned? I wondered, sliding out of bed. Several things were knocked over, so I took the time to search the room and fix it up, carefully moving to not wake the dragon. Once my room was back in place, I glanced toward my nightstand where the files I'd been given were hidden.

My heart pounded as I reached for the drawer, hesitantly pulling it open.

"Thank the gods," I whispered under my breath, flipping through the intact pages. With everything in its place, I was ready to head back to sleep.

Until suddenly, someone screamed.

Kai's eyes burst open, the dragon propping himself up instantly. He stared at me, sweating in my tank top and shorts, my hands shaking. I ran to close the window, locking it up tight before glancing toward the door of my bedroom where Kai was sitting.

"We need to go see who's out there," I hissed, trying to shove the dragon out of the way.

It's dangerous, Storm-Cloud. The guards will take care of it, the dragon countered, using his head to nudge me back into the room. I tripped, falling onto the ground as Kai remained stoically in front of my door.

I glared, growling. The fangs in my mouth ached for a fight, and adrenaline pumped through my veins.

I will not let someone die tonight, I thought, *no matter what someone tells me about running away.*

"If you don't let me through, Kai, I'll find a different way," I warned, staring at the dragon. He held my gaze, trying to find an ounce of regret or weakness, but I was dead set.

You will get hurt out there, Storm-Cloud, the dragon told me, his purple eyes soft and sad as he dropped his head down to me, leaning his forehead into mine. *You are not yet the strongest you can be.*

"I may never be," I replied softly, "I may never get to the bottom of this. But I know that I need to help whoever is out there, Kai. They're in pain."

The large reptilian oaf exhaled hot breath onto my face before shifting, giving me enough room to slip by him.

If you get in trouble, come back to this room. No one will touch you while you are in here, the dragon ordered me, watching me with a keen eye as I slipped out the door, into the hallway. It was dead silent, with the castle holding a ghostly stillness. No one else had stirred, but I was certain I'd heard a real scream. I swallowed my fear, allowing more of my form to creep out. Horns sprouted from my temples, but wings and a tail thankfully were nowhere to be seen. Running around in a full Darkblood form could either make me a target, or a suspect. Allowing more of my more powerful blood allowed my vision to sharpen, and I managed to climb the staircase in the foyer without much trouble.

But someone else was a little less lucky.

I heard a thump behind me, on the bottom stair, and saw a shadow fall. While I had made it up the stairs no problem, someone else had tripped.

I was already being followed.

My eyes widened as the shadow flew at me, clearly abandoning the idea of an ambush. I shrieked, pulling myself onto the banister. Balance that was still new to me kicked in as I wobbled on the thin surface, the shadowy attacker falling to the stairs. I gulped, sliding down the railing until I reached even ground. The attacker followed, and through a window, moonlight bounced off a dagger in their hands.

My worry melted away as wings sprouted from my back and a tail that sprung spikes appeared as well. Furthermore, I could feel my fingernails lengthen and sharpen into claws, and my eyes twitched as things brightened.

There's even more to the form than I knew, I realized, brushing my claws against the palm of my hand. *How much more is there?*

The attacker, or rather an assassin seemingly, paused as my black wings fluttered in the moonlight.

Smirking, I felt my confidence increase. "You should leave this place now, before I force you to," I warned, watching the assassin curse under their breath.

Whoever it was had a second wind of confidence and scoffed, pulling out a second blade. "I cannot leave them alive. But for the sake of the gods, why do you meddle in this, Gray One? You could easily let us fight it out before your rule," the assassin spat, their voice raspy. I couldn't tell anything from the scratchy tone, and continued to stare them down with my wings ready for anything.

"What do you mean?" I demanded, keeping an eye on the shining blades.

"Let us weaklings fight our battle," the assassin said, "the stronger blood will come out on top and win the war; then you can be named their Queen."

I frowned, puzzling over the words.

They always told me it was up to me to stop the fighting for them.

But this person believes I should let them fight it out because I'm too good or something?

A loyal worker or a cunning ruler.

I gulped, my body relaxing against my will. I wanted to stay loyal and to fight, but something within me knew it wasn't my job to stop the assassin.

Shame flooded through me, because one part of me truly believed it.

Truly believed that they weren't worth it anymore.

Cursed Blood - 42.Haunting Choices.42[1,843 words]

The assassin and I were both frozen, watching each other, trying to predict the other's moves. It was another piece to the puzzle of what was happening around me falling into place, given to me by an assassin in the night.

These circumstances seem to suck, I thought, trying to bury my wish to allow the assassin to continue on. I wanted to talk to them, to hear them out, but I also knew that as someone loyal to the Queen, it was up to me to protect her from assassins.

"Please," the assassin began, "let me continue on my mission, Lady Gray. I will not hurt you."

I exhaled, the breath whistling as I clenched my teeth together. My emotions were a mess, and my thoughts were only making me act indecisively.

"My loyalty is pledged to the Queen," I said apologetically, "I cannot let her die."

The assassin sighed, sheathing their blades. I was surprised by the act, but soon made it even by allowing my wings to morph back into my body.

"If this Queen dies... the last war will begin. Then one side will be able to rule. We will survive this, but the Lightblood royal family must be sacrificed."

Elijah, my mind screamed. A feeling that wasn't just being bound by word, but of protection that came from friendship. Loyalty than ran deep because I actually *wanted* to protect the Lightblood Prince, even if he could be oblivious and stuck up.

"The Prince is a friend of mine. He will not die," I hissed, my voice going cold as the assassin stared back at me.

Finally, they took a few hesitant steps toward me before kneeling at my feet.

"You have not been given the full story, my lady. Please, once you have found out the truth, seek me out. This will guide you."

The assassin dug into their pocket before pulling out a thin crystal, a single rivet in the side. Other than that, it looked smooth and expensive, holding a light purple colour at its center. I turned it over in my hands, feeling it roll around my fingertips before it flashed twice, and I noticed a choker around the assassin's neck with a twin crystal. When mine flashed, the other reciprocated it.

"Find me, my lady. Then, all will be clear."

With that, the assassin got to their feet, eyes meeting mine. They stared at me with a sad look that rattled my core, before turning on their heel and throwing their blade into the front window. It shattered, allowing them a quick escape. Knowing that someone would've heard the noise, I ran back to my room. Kai was already asleep when I snuck back in and got into bed, holding the crystal to my chest.

One thought replayed in my mind as I drifted back into the world of sleep.

Who screamed?

~o•o~

In the morning, there was no sign of anyone being hurt. No matter who I spoke to, they all said they hadn't heard anything last night. The Queen had found the shattered glass and thrown a fit, forcing the guards to drop everything to not only fix it but also investigate what had happened. She and Elijah had spent the entire morning trying to piece together what had happened, while everyone else was trying to prepare for the ball while ignoring the recent events. My stomach was constantly in knots -- not because I felt guilty about the window, but because I was fighting with myself over the choices presented to me, and I was nervous for the ball happening tomorrow night. Lillian informed me that Janora and the woman's friend would be preparing me for the ball and presenting dresses to me later today, but other than that, I was free to panic in a corner.

Which was what I was doing in the corner of the servants kitchen, sitting in the empty room with my knees up to my chest, absentmindedly chewing on a bite of the bright red apple in my hand. I stared at it, almost seeing past it as I remained deep in thought. No one had come searching for me, yet, and as far as I knew, I had nothing scheduled for the day beside the dress search. Kai was gone, supposedly to do something with Kyra and Elijah. I was alone and drowning in my own madness.

The apple was good, though.

With a sigh, I tilted my head back and rested it on the cool wall. Here, I was safe from prying eyes, mysteries and the whispers of afraid Lightbloods. No matter who I was or where I came from, they all saw me as a dangerous freak.

I took a lazy bite of the apple. My hunger had driven me to get out of bed this morning, and nothing else.

My mind flashed to the lesson with Lillian from the day before. As I'd been leaving, the woman had handed me a pouch of coins, waving away my protests. Janora had giggled at me while Lillian explained that it was my pay for technically being a servant to the Queen, but also more like allowance. The pouch was currently sitting in the base of the closet, the coins inside useless to me at the moment.

Useless, unless I decided to take the day off and escape. Someone may try to keep me inside castle grounds, but I would just do my best to avoid everyone.

With a slightly better mood, I finished off the apple and tossed it away before getting to my feet and brushing myself off. Imagining all the things I could buy, I began to walk as casually as possible back to my room. I was nearly in the clear when I heard a pair of heavier footsteps and someone called my name.

"Cloud! There you are," Shade said, jogging toward me. I sighed, leaning my forehead onto the smooth wood for a moment before turning to him. He wasn't in gear, but rather cloth pants and a loose t-shirt.

"Hi Shade," I replied, trying not to sigh again as he grinned at me. If anyone was going to pick up on my scheme to leave, it would be one of the Prince's favourite warriors.

He gave me a once over before glancing at my bedroom door. "What were you planning to do today?"

Shit. I ran my hand through my hair, trying to come up with a response. "I was thinking of studying or getting out a training dummy," I mumbled, meeting his eyes as confidently as possible. Shade lifted an eyebrow, crossing his arms in front of him.

"Really? After all you've had to do, you're still gonna do work?" Shade asked, clearly not buying it. He leaned down so that his face was directly in front of mine, and I tried not to blush as I eyed the distance between us. "I don't think I believe you, Cloud."

Damn. That's too bad, I thought to myself, because I am not changing my answer. I want out of this freaking castle.

A smug smirk crossed his face, and though it was aggravating, I also had to admit that Shade and the rest were all extremely attractive, like many of the fighters in the castle.

I swear there has to be a glamour on these people.

Shade and I eyed each other, trying to figure out which one would give in first. I crossed my arms as well, tilting my chin up in defiance. However, my confidence left as Shade slammed his hand into the wall next to my head, causing me to jump and squeak. He laughed at me, repeating the same thing on my other side and causing me to flinch. I glared at him, jabbing my fingers into his stomach, but he didn't stop chuckling.

As his laughter finally died away, I noticed our faces had gotten closer as he supported himself using the wall behind me. I glared up at him, staring him down as the wide smile on his face melted away, my senses telling me that his cheeks hurt from laughing too hard. The fact that I knew he found me amusing but wasn't taking me seriously hurt my pride even more.

For a second, we just stared each other. I hadn't noticed him focusing on me as I stared at him in blind frustration. Part of my anger melted away as I gaped, seeing him hover above me. He was watching my face, not breaking away even with the little amount of space.

"Gorg--" he began to mumble, but was cut off by a sharp voice coming from down the hallway.

"Shade and Cloud!" Janora snapped, causing the warrior to jump back from me. My cheeks burned bright pink as the right hand of Lillian Garcia approached us, arms crossed. Not only was she close with a very influential person, but she was also one of my tutors.

"Nice to see you, Janora," Shade coughed, eyes on anything but me. I looked at my feet, praying to be free of the situation.

Janora cleared her throat, crossing her arms. "Shade. If you have a liking for Ms. Rose, you may find a time to ask her to the ball like a gentleman. Otherwise, do not try wooing her while she's distracted. Now, shoo."

Shade blushed, a light pink appearing dusted across his cheeks before nodding and turning on his heel, rushing away from the two of us. I flinched as Janora turned to face me, her brow raised.

"Sorry...?" I offered.

She rolled her eyes, took me by the wrist and pulled me inside my room. I stood in the center as she searched through my closet, pulling out the pouch of coins and a cloak. She then began searching through my clothes without a word.

"There will always be strong, handsome men in this castle, Cloud," Janora told me as she rifled through many pairs of shoes, "but you cannot fall for them all. It complicates things and makes life harder. And you, my dear, will already have a difficult life."

The woman picked out a pair of boots and threw them next to the other things, followed by one of my favourite pair of pants. I listened to her, giving her my full attention as she went back to flipping through my shirts.

"You are a young, beautiful, powerful, *smart* girl, Cloud. They will probably all find you worth a shot, but you must know what you will do. You can't walk around blindly being smitten by every man here," she continued with a sigh, throwing a tight black shirt onto the bed. It had a halter neck instead of sleeves, and was easy to move in. She then added a light scarf that wouldn't make me sweat in the warm weather and a scabbard for a dagger.

Janora paused for a moment before closing the closet and turning to me, gently placing a dagger on the bed. Her eyes found mine, and I could see genuine worry in their depths.

"Will you try to remember this, Cloud?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then let's get you out of here."

Cursed Blood - 43.Like the First Time.43[1,258 words]

Janora winked at me before motioning to the stuff on the bed. "I know you want to go out, Cloud. I'll close the window behind you, and you should be able to fly down and find a way to go unnoticed. The shirt shouldn't tear; the back is thin and low."

A smile found its way to my face. My nerves had been put at ease as I got dressed, Janora giving me privacy by waiting out in the hallway. I was pulling on my boots when she knocked and came back in, watching me clip the scabbard into place and slip on the cloak. I took my pouch and found a safe pocket on the cloak for it, turning to Janora set and ready to go.

The woman frowned for a moment. "You may want to hold the cloak until you get down there. I don't want that ripped."

"Right," I agreed, pulling it off and bundling it up in my arms. The woman walked to the window and pulled it open, the same one that *thing* had entered through. The one who spoke to me while I was 'asleep'. I grimaced as I slipped through, nearly tripping as I landed on the ground below the window. Janora flashed me a thumbs up before shutting and locking the window, leaving me on my own. No one was on this side of the castle, and I jogged toward the edge of the mountain. My wings shot from my back as the dirt crumbled a bit under my feet. A cold breeze blew past and I shivered, the feathers shaking themselves out.

Here goes nothing, I thought, clutching my bundle of cloth tighter.

The second I jumped, my wings flared out and I was soaring. A laugh bubbled up from my throat as I found myself grinning, directing myself to the edge of the marketplace. My speed allowed me to zoom by without raising too much alarm, but I was still going too slow. Holding my breath, I allowed my wings to fold in and shot like an arrow toward the alleys. The wind was like explosions, the noise was so loud. Just as I was about to hit a building, I flared out my wings and slowed down before my feet reached the ground. I was panting, my wings folding in and melting away before I pulled on the cloak, spotting something on my back.

What the--

No one ever mentioned those.

My shoulder blades had a mess of three or four scars on each -- exactly where the base of my wings were. In my shock, I lifted my shirt and twisted, pulling down my waistband and staring at the scarred skin of my tailbone. My mouth and fingernails had no marks on them, but when I touched my temples underneath my hair, I could also feel the small scars of my horns.

It makes sense to have scars, I realized, *but why did no one mention them to me?*

I sighed, fixing the cape over my shoulders so that it covered the exposed scars. Messing with my hair, I tried to take a few strands and pull them in front of my face to help block out prying eyes. As I began walking toward the street, my hand instinctively dropped to the dagger strapped to my thigh, and I was ready for anything.

But at the same time, as I stood in the center of the busy road, watching people go by, I felt like I was experiencing this for the first time. Memories of the first time my mother let me out to go into the marketplace alone drifted through my mind as I let the sounds of the people going by wash over me. It all felt new, like something I'd been missing.

My only job is to enjoy myself today, I smiled, searching around for a store to start at. A bakery stood out to me, one I'd never tried before.

Perfect.

Warmth oozed from the bakery doors as I approached, a childish smile on my face. Those behind the counter called out hearty greetings to me as I stepped inside, brushing the cloak's hood off my head. I felt at home here -- I wasn't worried about being found out.

"How can I help you?" An elderly man chirped as I approached the counter. I didn't recognize him, and the feeling of having missed something in my home tried to dampen my mood.

One glance at the man's kind face lifted my spirits again, and I began to point at different things on the other side of the glass. Tarts, muffins, sweets -- he laughed each time I picked another. The man began to ask me about myself as I got my coins from my pouch, handing over the correct number and taking my bundles of deliciousness.

"Are you from the Valley, Miss? Haven't been seeing many people like you," he said offhandedly. I lifted a brow, tilting my head.

"Like me?"

He gestured to my body. "Your aura, Miss. Very powerful, almost overwhelming."

That's what most people say, I wanted to reply, but instead I smiled. "I've been staying up in the castle doing some training. I snuck away today," I admitted with a small laugh, the baker winking at me.

"Enjoy yourself, darling. But if you run into trouble, try to help a Lightblood brother or sister out, okay? Those guards only step in when it's serious."

I nodded fiercely. "Of course. Thank you, sir."

We shared identical smiles before I left the bakery, the warmth and smell lingering as I walked toward the fountain in the center of the marketplace, slipping my pouch into my secure pocket before choosing with treats to begin with. I perched on the edge of the fountain, peacefully watching Lightbloods go by, my hood flipped up as I snacked happily. A memory drifted into mind, one with my brothers and happy parents.

It was around the time when I was maybe seven. The twins were as rowdy as ever, and hyper. Charles was calmer around them, but definitely let his wild side out with me. Whenever we hung out on our own, we would be up for hours using his energy abilities. Our parents were the classic adorable couple, with their affectionate actions and loving smiles. We were going through the stores, and walked by a traveler's supply store. The smooth texture and smell of new leathers got my attention, and that was the day my mother got me my first outfit that was made entirely of leather. My brothers had called me boyish for it, but I had felt badass. After that, I'd always gotten a new set whenever I could.

The thought made me look around, searching for a tailor's. I finished off the last of my baked goods, tossing out the garbage before continuing to search.

"Excuse me, Miss," a small voice said, "can I help you?"

I turned around, eyes meeting those of a young boy. A nametag was on his shirt, one made of leather. He had a hat that was adorably large on him, and big eyes that seemed more like something out of a picture than of reality.

"Help me with what?" I asked, not realizing what was behind him until the little boy grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. It was the same shop from years ago, and my eyes landed on the smoothest looking set of leather armor I'd ever seen. The shopkeeper, who looked like the boy's father, gave me a grin as he noticed me eyeing the set.

"Would you like to try?"

"Would I ever."

Cursed Blood - 44.Splash Zone.44[1,176 words]

The leather set fit like a glove, especially with the undershirt and thin shorts the man threw in. I chatted with them pleasantly as I admired myself in the mirror, imagining myself on a mission dressed in my finest leather clothes. This was definitely more my speed than dress fittings, but I knew deep down the dress fitting was more important. I began to hurry up, purchasing the things and also a few other handy tools before waving goodbye to the father and son, a large smile glued onto my face. Outside the shop, I spotted a clock that told me I had enough time for a bit more exploring before I'd have to fly myself back up the mountain. Fixing my hood over my face, I slung the bag of clothes over my back and began strolling down the road, surveying the store names. Different things seemed okay, but nothing interested me. I did pick up a few small things here and there, and some decorations for my room, but otherwise I was rather bored. Counting my coins, I sat back down in my spot on the fountain edge, realizing I hadn't spent nearly that much of what was in the bag. The idea of coming back brought a smile to my face and I tucked the money away, tilting my face up to bask in the warm sunlight.

The peace didn't last long as I heard a woman's scream, my eyes popping open. I made sure my bags would stay out of my way in a fight and drew my dagger, feeling my fingernails shift into claws. People were shouting, gathering around a trio of people in front of a flower shop on the other side of the street. I grimaced, and while no one was looking, did an inhuman leap onto the top of the fountain, water splashing my legs as I perched on the top. It gave me a bird's eye view into the center of the crowd where I could see two men facing off, a woman with a bloody face yelling at them from the side. One man held a wicked looking short sword in his hand, the tip coated in sparkling blood. I growled, watching as the unarmed man lunged for him. It was clear that the fight was unmatched as the swordsman expertly defended himself, a deep gash appearing across his opponent's thigh.

That man is going to be ripped to pieces, I thought, pulling off my bag and placing all my heavier things inside along with my cloak. I fastened it to the top of the fountain where it was safe from being stolen but not getting soaked, and jumped down to the back of the crowd. My dagger felt heavy in my hand as my claws scraped the hilt, nothing else yet changed. I kept an eye on the two men, slowly making my way forward in the crowd.

Everyone was too busy cheering on the dangerous man to notice the muscled girl sliding up to the edge of the circle. The woman was now on her side, crying, her shoulder slashed open. The man holding the bloody sword was actually cut as well, the defending man clutching a knife that someone must've given him.

I shook my head as the two blades clashed, one working off of determination as the other used skill. *It's hopeless, dude. Just run*, I wanted to yell, but instead I watched them with hawk eyes, trying to find an opening. When the swordsman cut across the other's empty hand, I tensed, and the man beside me grabbed the wrist of my freehand. I tucked the knife behind my back as he pulled me in, spitting in my face as he spoke.

"No interfering girlie! This guy owes some money," he sneered in my face, licking his lips. I felt my fangs poke my lips, jutting out my chin so that they were still covered. "You should just sit back and enjoy."

By now, people were staring. Even the 'boss' was watching us with keen eyes, the man temporarily running to the bleeding woman while his opponent was distracted.

"Hey you," I snapped to the man, "take your lady friend and go. I'll deal with them."

The man holding me laughed, and as he did, I drove my knife into his shoulder. He screamed, and people backed away as I pulled the blade out and spun, my physical abilities shining through with my Darkblood. I smirked, feeling my foot connect with the man's jaw and send him flying. Without wasting time, I spun on my heel to face the boss, lifting my knife in a defensive stance. My fangs popped free as I exhaled through my mouth, holding back the larger parts of my form. I flexed my fingers, feeling the unbloodied ends of my claws.

They wouldn't be spotless for much longer.

The boss stole a glance at the man and woman on the ground. The woman was much more responsive now, whispering to her lover as he tried to pull her away from the fight. My eyes scanned the area -- this would easily become a bath of blood and fountain water, and everyone here could be caught in the splash zone if I wasn't careful. Especially since calling the swordsman *boss* seemed to indicate some sort of gang. I scowled, clutching the hilt of my knife tighter as the man who I assumed to be a criminal turned his hating stare onto me.

"Who. The. Fuck. Are. You," he spat, swinging his sword in a wide arc. I held back a snicker, stepping aside and beckoning for the man on the ground.

"Get behind me."

He nodded, pulling the woman with him as they made their way into the safety of the crowd who was too afraid of me to double cross me by hurting them. The boss was shaking in anger, the guards nowhere to be seen.

So this is what the baker meant, I realized, my focus like a laser on the furious man. They don't help these people. They won't fight other Lightbloods because they won't risk getting any powerful one killed.

My jaw clenched together and I felt my lips turn up in a snarl.

I have no such worries.

The swordsman, his anger clouding his judgement, smirked.

"I'm gonna kill you slow, girlie," he warned me, taking a step closer. I tensed, watching his every movement. I could even tell the exact rhythm of his breathing.

This is new, I thought as I felt the sheer power of my new detection senses. Pain was radiating from a few places on his body from his last fight, but I could see old remnants of wounds. It became clear that he had many problems with his right wrist, his weapon hand. Probably too many close calls or pressure on the delicate joint.

He won't walk away from this the victor, I vowed, lining up my dagger. I would aim directly for that wrist and stop him from ever wielding a sword again.

At least, that was my plan.

Cursed Blood - 45.Coming Out On Top.45[1,231 words]

The boss growled as I remained silent; cold and calculating. The crowd had closed around us, the soft splashing of the water hitting the fountain bowl echoing behind him. Warm sunlight scorched the skin of the bystanders, a shadow cast by my pack tied to the fountain falling across my face and allowing me to see clearly.

"Tell me," the boss said, "why you saved him? You explain that while you bleed, how does that sound?"

My feet glided over the pavement as I lunged, my knife hitting close to the base of his sword. His reflexes were faster than before, and I had to use my claws to hold the blade back from being able to swing at my head. He finally spotted the razor-sharp claws on my fingers, his eyes widening as I brought my foot up toward his side. The man easily took his blade back from my flimsy grip on it and swung toward my neck, but I had already prepared to block it with my sturdy knife. The clang of blade on blade made the crowd wince, but we were too focused on trying to kill each other. I snarled, shoving him off. He stumbled back toward the crowd, the citizens moving away until he hit the fountain with his knees. As I moved forward, the crowd closed around us so that the fountain made up one side of our ring, the pavement slick with water.

"It sounds like a shitty idea," I spat, resuming my defensive stance. My empty hand was curled into a tight fist, and I felt surprisingly lively as I faced off with the criminal. The tips of my fingers ached from having to try and hold back a sword blade, but other than that I felt alive and charged like a live wire.

The boss straightened, rolling out his shoulders. He looked like he was preparing for a show, and I began to realize that that was what this was. To him, this wasn't a real fight. It was a show for the crowd, to scare them into submission.

"What are you the boss of?" I asked, my voice carrying out over the marketplace. Many shopkeepers had begun watching as well, and a larger crowd was gathering. *Maybe they've never seen someone fight this guy with this much cockiness before, I thought. They think I'm about to be killed.*

Several whispers ran through the crowd. Now it looked like I was a clueless traveler trying to be heroic by saving two people while not knowing anything about who I was going up against. With the state of Lightblood magic as it was, they were all assuming I had no trump card or hidden strategy here. They wanted the show that a bloodbath would give them -- and then they'd probably wash it away with the fountain water behind them without a second thought.

"I am the boss of the Valley, sweet cheeks. More powerful than you'll ever know. After all, I set metal on *fire*."

His sword burst into flame, and several pieces of jewellery were thrown to the ground. I, however, didn't have any metal on me that he could see except for the knife, which had a cloth hilt.

My eyebrows raised as I took the flaming knife, carefully avoiding it, and tucked it behind my back. Not only did the fire *only* light up the metal -- the cloth hilt was untouched -- but the second it was out of the line of sight, the fire around my blade slowly died.

Not only do I see remnants of pain and new sources of it, I thought, my brain taken over by the malice I felt toward the man, but now, I see what everyone else senses. What they mean when they tell me my power is painfully overwhelming.

Because yours is as insignificant as a fly.

The Lightbloods watched with wide eyes as the blade of my dagger, clear of any burn marks and its flame completely put out, came into view of the man. Once his eyes spotted it, the flames reappeared, but all it took was me putting it behind my back to put it out. I snickered, dropping the knife back into the scabbard on my thigh. His own flaming sword was insanely bright, and probably hot as well, but I knew he was no match for me as I bared my fangs, lifting my hands so that my deadly claws were on display. At this point, I also realized the sun would be beating down on the scars on my back where the base of my wings would be.

I wonder what they see me as?

Surely someone more than this useless boss fly... Or maybe they see me as stupid.

Ironic, considering theoretically, I could crush them all.

The idea of putting on a real show tiptoed into my mind, but the morally correct side pushed the idea away, focusing on the man with the flaming sword instead.

"You're such a pest," I hissed, estimating his reaction time. The man lowered his guard for a split second every time he looked at my mouth, a flicker of fear crossing his face. He glanced down a few times a minute, and gradually, I began to predict when he would look down.

The next time he did, I took the opportunity. The tip of his sword dropped a bit as he stole a peek at the sharp fangs in my mouth, his guard dropped momentarily. I dove at him, feigning to his right before slipping in the water -- something I purposefully planned for -- and using the extra momentum to kick his legs out from underneath him. His sword's flame flickered as he fell, unable to keep up the concentration needed. My claws dug into his fingers as I ripped the sword from his hands, tossing it into the crowd before wrapping my hands around his neck, carefully avoiding piercing him.

For now.

"Give me one reason not to kill you," I snarled, my voice coming out raspy through the fangs. The man glared at me, his own hands trying to pry mine off, but I was much stronger.

"I'll kill your family if you don't, girlie. I am powerful, I will get them."

I rolled my eyes and slowly got to my feet, lifting him up into the air by his neck. The man began to claw at my hands, trying to get some air.

"I'd like to see you try."

With that, I threw him into the fountain and stepped onto the edge, watching him scramble in the water. Laughing, I leapt onto the peak of it once again and collected my pack, pulling my cloak over my shoulders.

Walking away with the sound of applause.

Hey, author here.

I just want to leave a quick note asking that if any readers have any comments whatsoever on the chapters, please leave them for me to see! I would love to interact

with anyone taking the time to read my writing, and feedback is always important if I want to improve.

Another thing -- if it's possible, please leave a like on any chapters you can. It supports the book and me, and lets me know that readers are enjoying the story. So do reviews, so if you have any big ideas about Cursed Blood, write them out! :)

That's all for now, see you all in the next chapter <3

Cursed Blood - 46.What Happens.46[1,477 words]

My smile never dropped as I did the reverse process of escaping and snuck my way back into the castle, my flying improving on the daily. I made sure to place everything back in its original positions and wash up as soon as possible to hide the fact that I'd been gone. The window had been opened with a note sitting on the sill from Janora, reading; *I left this open not too long ago, and if you're not reading this in half an hour, I'll close it and wait for you to drag your sorry ass back inside this castle.* She had popped her head in while I'd been brushing out my tangled, wet hair, her face melting into a grin. I'd mouthed a quick thank-you to her before returning to my task of making myself presentable, knowing that I had dress fittings to play along with now. Part of me was exhausted from my short adventure that had really felt like an eternity, but it made me all the happier.

If only this good mood lasts until the ball tomorrow night...

I dressed myself in thin night clothes and tied back my freshly washed hair, smoothing out the flyaways before grabbing slippers and stepping out into the hall. My dragon friend, who was basically actually mine nowadays, was nowhere to be seen as I crept to the end of the hall, trying to spot where Janora had gone. She and her friend would be presenting the dresses to me, and I knew I had to find her before someone decided to tease me about my rather girly pajamas.

"Cloud..?"

Damn.

I blushed, turning around to see Andrew staring at the frills and thin silk covering my body. He began to go pink, from what I assumed to be amusement.

"Hey, sorry, have you seen Janora?" I blurted, taking his attention from the pajamas to my face. He blinked for a few seconds, slowly processing my words before he sputtered, slapping his own face. I frowned, raising both eyebrows as he rubbed his hands over his eyes.

"No, I haven't," he finally answered, "but Cloud, you should probably change."

I waved him off. "I can deal with embarrassment! I need to find Janora so that I can have my dress fitting," I explained, motioning to my pajamas. "That's the only reason why I'm wearing these right now."

"Cloud, do you know what happens when a guy stumbles upon a girl like you running around in frilly pajamas..?" Andrew groaned, glancing down once before covering his eyes. I frowned, crossing my arms and leaning onto one hip.

"I was raised with boys, Andrew. My brothers only ever made fun of me."

He sighed, waving off my confusion. "Whatever, whatever." The warrior glanced down once more, his eyes focusing on something other than whatever he found so daunting.

"You have a *tattoo*?!"

Sheepishly, I followed his eyes to my thigh, where the scar was hidden by my tattoo. I'd forgotten about the symbol, too wrapped up in everything that was happening on a daily basis. It had already become a regular part of me, with the wings dripping down my thigh helping me out into perspective who I was. Or they at least calmed me down about being who I was, somehow. Being me felt more like an expression of power instead of a curse at the moment.

"It's something I got done..," I answered feebly, shrugging a bit.

Andrew paused, his eyes searching my face for something. He was probably dying to ask a multitude of questions, but he held his tongue and glanced down at my thigh once again. Suddenly feeling bold, I stuck out my leg so that he could see it clearly, a shy smile on my face.

"Pretty. Who did it?"

I opened my mouth to answer before shutting it almost instantly. Revealing Zen's identity, while may not seem important at first, would still allow them to add more data to their collection on the Darkblood camps.

I could become a spy without even knowing it, I realized, my eyes widening as I dropped Andrew's gaze. Doubt had filled my mind by now, and once again I could feel a waver in my trust.

"I-I should find Janora," I blurted, turning on my heel and jogging down the hallway, my chin tilted down as I began to fight with my own thoughts. I turned into one hallway, leaning into the wall, holding a hand over my mouth as I tried not to scream in frustration.

Am I a spy for them? Is that what this is?

But then why didn't they send me after Terrance sooner?

They could've been trying to gain my trust and train me into a spy without me even knowing.

But I could've been useless, they don't know my power. I could've been a healer for all they know.

My head hit the wall, the blow soft enough not to give me a headache. I stared down the hall without really paying attention, my mind whirling.

"What to do, what to do..," someone mumbled. My eyes widened, and I began to focus on what was actually in front of me.

A man. His eyes were bright red, and his skin paler than Shade's. Platinum blond hair hung down in front of his eyes and reached down to his shirt in the back. He looked surprisingly well-dressed, but his attire was accompanied by a scabbard slung across his back. The sword's hilt reached about a foot above the top of his head, and the tip brushed the floor when he moved. All in all, I felt myself gaping at the massive weapon. Even I was slightly afraid of the mysterious man carrying *that* around. Not only was he terrifying just by existing, I was also spooked by the fact that when I tried to move away, my body was met with a wall. I could move forward, but when I tried to back away, I hit an invisible barrier.

"Not everyday you meet someone that has the gift of immunity," the man murmured to himself, picking at his fingernails as he leaned against the wall. "Especially when that immunity made them survive a botched reincarnation."

I sputtered, forgetting my fear. "*Reincarnation?! Are you even talking to me?!*"

Red eyes found mine, flicking over to me with surprising speed. "Of course I am. No one else is in this private pocket in time, angel. Only you and I."

I gulped, using the invisible barrier for support to hold myself up. I was afraid, and already confused. This mysterious man wasn't helping either. I wanted to curl up into a ball and eat another apple -- since that had led to me having a pretty decent day.

"Do you know who I am, angel?"

I gave him a once over before shaking my head. The man sighed, folding his arms over his chest. He had the stern look that my father normally had, and for once, he didn't look all too scary. Part of me even wanted to smile as I held his unwavering gaze, knowing I was searching around in the dark at the moment.

But that was what I had always been doing.

And I was tired of being in the dark. I didn't know what I was doing, and it was driving me nuts.

I swallowed the last trace of fear and balled my hands into fists, holding my head high as I glared at the man. He lifted an eyebrow, clearly interested in my change of heart.

"Listen here, mister. Either you're going to tell me what you want," I spat, "or you're going to leave me the hell alone. Too many people have been feeding me lies and riddles. So either be straight up or screw off."

My face heated up from anger as we stared each other down, the man weighing his decisions in his head. His eyes drifted down to my leg, where my tattoo was on display, and his eyes grew sad for a split second.

"Sorry, Storm-Cloud. I can't give you those answers, so I will respect you and leave."

"Finally, thank--"

"But," he interrupted, pushing himself off the wall. I stood my ground as he strolled toward me, stopping a good foot or two away.

"I will give you a hint, angel."

He leaned down to my height, his red eyes glowing for a moment. His own wings and horns sprouted from his body, but where mine were dark and angelic, his were wiry bat's wings.

"Search for the gods. Then you will get the key to your answers."

I opened my mouth to ask a question when he gently kissed my forehead, cutting off my thought process before melting out of existence like he was never there. The sense of power was gone from the hallway, and I knew the barrier would've dropped.

Which left me there, gaping like a fish with my hand pressed against the ghostly feeling of lips on my skin.

Cursed Blood - 47.Social Troubles.47[1,043 words]

Janora was the one to find me instead of vice versa. The companion of Lady Garcia ushered me back to my room while chastising me about my state of undress, not noticing the look of distress on my face as I mulled over what the red eyed man told me. I trusted

him, at least enough to trust the clue he'd given me. The second this lousy ball was over, I'd be in the library researching the gods of Terrafell. Then I would visit my old home and meet with that spirit, and finally get my answers.

By the time I had calmed myself down, the idea of closure had actually raised my spirits. I was grinning as Janora and her friend, a seamstress named Raeni, pulled me into my room and shoved me into a slip before unpacking several ballgowns. They were all gorgeous and well-made, and I was glad I had cleaned up because they took a *ridiculous* amount of space. My eyes lit up every time she revealed a new dress, her bags stacked against the walls as twelve different gowns were placed around the room. There were varying styles, and all of them were catching my eye.

Which led into hours of trying and retrying dresses. Out of the twelve, I came up with a top four that were the hardest to choose between. One was a navy blue and rested off my shoulders, with a slit in the front in the center of my chest. Another was a wine red, a wider slit in the front with the straps like a tank top. The third was a vibrant green, with no sleeves and a skirt with layers of lace that made it look like it was floating.

But then there was Raeni's favourite.

As white as snow, with a full, layered tulle skirt. There was a collar, and a slit much like the others -- it was obviously Raeni's style to be risky -- but this one was different. A triangle exposed most of my chest, with the point meeting the waistline and the widest end at the collar. The tulle straps were attached to the collar, meaning that my chest and entire back were exposed.

It was breathtaking, but so were the others. Even with messy hair and a sweaty face, I felt elegant and like a queen in the snow white dress. Raeni began to fiddle with the skirt, and Janora leaned against the wall as she watched me intently.

"Cloud," Janora said softly, "you may want to see if your tail and wings will fit with this dress."

I paused, watching a small smirk appear on her face. She wasn't actually worried about the dress -- she was meaning for me to see the dress with my form. Shy anticipation caused my hands to tremble in excitement as I reached out to my form, my control over shifting in and out much better now. The wings slid out of my body -- from who knows where -- at flared at my sides, my tail remaining tucked under my skirt. Amazingly, the tulle straps of the dress were positioned in just the right places so that they were unaffected by whether or not I had my wings out.

"Feels perfect," I admitted, gently running my hands over the layered skirt. "This is the one."

Raeni waved her hands around her face as she spoke. "You haven't even seen it in the mirror yet!"

I let out a soft *oh* and glanced toward Janora. She was eyeing me in my dress, criticizing the fit and the look of it. I felt rather like a young noble girl on her way to her first royal event under her gaze, which essentially I was.

"You can see it tomorrow," Janora decided, "let's not ruin the surprise for you. Pull those hazards in; you still need to go to the Darkblood camp and check in on your plus one."

I grinned, imagining Becca in a scandalous, flattering ballgown. My wings morphed back into my body without a problem along with my tail, and the two women helped me out of the dress before Raeni packed up and took them all away, promising to bring it to me before the ball. According to Janora, she was staying in the servants' quarters, so I'd know exactly where to go to locate her. Lady Garcia's right hand woman continued to tell me about Raeni with a certain fondness that caused me to smile when she wasn't looking.

Once my room was back in order, I changed into my new set of leather clothing and brushed back my messy hair, grabbing my pouch of coins and slipping it into my pocket. Janora handed me my dagger and its scabbard, and I clipped that into place around my thigh without hesitation.

"Go quickly and see the lady you're bringing. The Queen wants everyone in the castle who isn't a servant to spend time together in the ballroom for an after-dinner private party. Be *on time* for it. Grab dinner on your way back if you must."

I nodded, committing her instructions to memory. This time, I was allowed to leave by the front door. Janora escorted me to the foyer, but that was where she turned onto her own path to go find Lillian, leaving me alone as I approached the door.

My eyes found the once-shattered window.

Find them. Once I have the truth, find them.

My mind went to the crystal sitting in my nightstand, safe from prying eyes. The path of mysteries laid out for me had so far had many pitstops, but now I could at least use the information given to me by the red eyed man to gain the knowledge needed to go visit the spirit again.

Then I could talk to the assassin.

Sighing, I tore my eyes away from the newly made window pane and pushed through the door, the nearly-evening sunlight hitting my face. Time was scarce, and without Kai, I was much slower.

I was slower until wings sprouted from my back, flaring up in the fading sunlight. The castle doors slowly shut, and I felt my black feathers flutter in the breeze. They folded in to my body as I began to sprint toward the edge of the mountain.

Then, I leapt.

Cursed Blood - 48.Airborn.48[1,175 words]

I skyrocketed off the side of the mountain, arms at my sides as the rest of my Darkblood form made itself known. Wind whistled past my ears as my horns grew from my temples. The path curling around the mountain rushed up and my wings flared, catching me before I splattered on the road. I then shot upward, gaining altitude as I flapped my wings and hovered above the Valley, watching the busy streets as I began to soar across the sky. Trees came into view and I picked up speed, flipping from side to side as I began to weave through the trees. Birds scattered as I, a much larger flying being, rocketed through the forest toward the camp. They alerted the Darkbloods to my presence, several of them turning to watch as I shot into the sky before gently floating down in the center of the sky, wings brushing the ground as I steadied myself. I recognized Zen, the tattoo artist, as I shook myself off. He was the first to come greet me, the others still shocked from how quickly I'd gotten to the heart of their base.

"Cloud! Nice to see you!"

I grinned, patting his shoulder in greeting. "Hi, Zen. Good to see you too, but I have to find Rebecca," I told him, looking around for the blonde werewolf. Other Darkbloods breezed by, most of them saying kind hellos and playful greetings as they went. The deaf twins from before were gently pulling my sleeves and I smiled at them, shrugging apologetically to Zen. The artist waited for the girls to skip along before gently steering me in the direction of a wooden building I hadn't been in before. Inside, racks upon racks of clothing were placed around the store. A desk and chair were set up near the door in the front, and far in the back were secluded areas hidden by floral curtains.

Whoever supplied the clothes had amazing style -- each piece stood out for different reasons and looked like it would compliment many different people. Zen caught me staring and grinned, brushing past me to the desk. His hand hit the bell sitting there with an aggressive amount of force, knocking it to the ground. Before I could inquire about why he hated the bell so much, a screeching voice came from the back of the store.

"I'm going to kill whoever just hit that damn bell!" A tiny woman snapped, causing Zen to laugh. My eyes widened as I spotted a flash of bright orange hair before a pair of wings carried the small woman into the air. Unlike mine, her wings were small compared to her body, and she couldn't stay airborne for long. She was mostly able to leap and float, her wings like sheets of spiderwebs that looked rather strange. It was almost in the pattern of a butterfly wing, but looked like a cheap costume piece for a scare attraction.

"Zen!" She shrieked, leaping at him. Her fingernails dripped with what looked like poison, and he did his best to dodge them as she pinned him to the ground. The tattoo artist

winked at her before a faceless copy of himself appeared behind her and wrestled her off, immune to her poison.

The real Zen bounced to his feet, a bright smile on his face. "Nice to see you too, Izzy," he snickered, the clone disappearing. Izzy, the angered, tiny woman, glared at Zen and crossed her arms. Her hair was the colour of orange ice cream, bright and looking as if it was dyed, and her eyes were a piercing, cat-like yellow. Bright orange freckles dotted her cheeks and nose, looking like stickers. On closer inspection, I realized they were real, and that the girl was almost like a pixie.

"What do you *want*, Zen?" Izzy snapped, obliviously to my being here, even with my wings and tail and everything else.

I raised my eyebrows, almost chewing on my lip before feeling the pressure from my fangs. "You really hate him, don't you?"

The girl's eyes snapped over to me, widening at the large wings folded at my sides. "Holy guacamole, who the hell are *you*? And why are you hanging out with him?"

Scoffing, I turned away from them and began looking through the racks of clothing. Zen could deal with the girl with a temper, and I would wait for him to lead me to Rebecca if I had to. The pixie and the astral clone maker began bickering as I passed through the clothes, feeling soft and rough fabrics brush up against my arms. My tail flicked back and forth, hitting several different things as I went. I was growing bored and irritated when I finally zeroed in on something Zen was saying.

"...that it's a fitting, but Cloud needs to see her."

Rebecca's here, I thought, the fact clicking in my mind. My senses extended until I could feel the familiar sense of emotions, and a small trace of wonder and awe was coming from the back of the room, where the changerooms were. The idea of Rebecca being amazed by clothing made me smile as I walked toward the back, hazardous wings and tail, along with the other pieces of my form, melting away.

"Becca..?"

There was a small gasp, and the werewolf's blonde head poked out from behind one of the curtains.

"Cloud, can you help me? I need you to zip something up," she said hurriedly, forgetting any introductions. An amused smile popped onto my face as I jogged toward her, slipping past the curtain. However, the instant I made it inside, she slapped a hand over my eyes.

"I don't want to ruin the reveal, so just zip it up and get out," Rebecca laughed, guiding my hands to the zipper. I rolled my eyes under her hand, clumsily pulling the zipper up to the top and fastening the clip. I then had no chance to say anything before she shoved me

out of the changeroom, causing me to trip. My instincts kicked in and I began to save myself, but someone else did it faster, and I found myself staring up at an upside-down view of Zen's clone. It pushed me upright, holding up it's hand in a thumbs-up before disappearing, leaving in its place a grinning Zen and Izzy next to the last rack in line. The two of them walked over to the cushioned bench for people waiting, Izzy pulling me down with them. The once-angered pixie was now bubbly, an irresistibly adorable grin on her face.

"Sorry about that whole bitchiness, I didn't realize you were coming to see Rebecca. She's just doing her last fitting, then she'll be right out," Izzy chirped, jumping into a rant about her store. That's right; *her* store. All her own, the best one in the region according to her.

As the rant continued on, I glanced at Zen for help and he snorted, crossing his arms and leaning back into the back of the bench.

This would take a while.

Cursed Blood - 49.Dinner Party with Darkbloods.49[1,204 words]

The second Rebecca was out and dressed again, admittedly a while later since getting out of ballgowns was no easy task, I grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the store. Zen said quick goodbyes to Izzy, who made him promise to bring me back at some point, before escaping as well, the three of us running to the other side of camp to put distance in between us and the talkative, short-tempered pixie. The tattoo artist was panting as we came to a stop, while I was wheezing from laughter.

"Rebecca," I giggled, but it came out raspy as I was out of breath, "you... you cursed us... by indirectly forcing us... t-to meet Izzy."

She snickered, stretching her arms high above her head. The tattoo-covered blonde werewolf sported a long skirt and tight bandeau, her torso exposed. More tattoos littered her skin, but she was still graceful and gorgeous. I laughed as she began to yawn, looking worn out as if Izzy's store had zapped her energy. Zen was still panting as he straightened, putting his hands on his hips. Eventually, a cool feeling washed over me and my energy was replenished.

I dragged my fingers through my hair before sighing, turning toward Rebecca.

"Anyone who's going to the ball tomorrow has to attend a dinner party tonight," I told her hesitantly, "so... we should eat and get going."

The Darkblood sighed before cracking her knuckles, sending me a grim smile. "Guess so."

We stood in awkward silence for a moment before Zen cleared his throat, running his hand through his hair as if it was a nervous habit. "I'll grab you guys something to eat and you two can get pretty, okay?"

I nodded my thanks to him before I got pulled away by Rebecca. I followed her like a puppy until we reached a hut on the outskirts of the camp, a little ways away from all the others. She threw me a cautious look before pushing open the door, allowing me to slip past her before she closed it behind her.

Inside the hut was a simplistic living space and kitchen. A hallway branched off into more rooms, but I was too focused on absorbing it all to notice. Her kitchen looked well loved, and there was a leftover hint of the scent of pastries on the air. Coats and shoes laid in racks and on pegs next to the door, and I could see a ratty looking ball sitting beside a small pair of shoes. The couches were maintained, and the table was covered in wire and beads. The werewolf watched me as I took in her home, feeling a familiar homey vibe from it.

It felt like my home at the farm. A wave of pressure lifted off my shoulders as I felt free -- free from the eyes of people in the castle and the idea of always having to look the part of someone living among royals. Part of me wanted to curl up on the couch and sleep for a week, but I knew I didn't have the time.

"It's not much, but--"

"It's a really nice home," I interrupted Rebecca, walking toward the hallway. She followed me, casually passing ahead of me. Four doors were in the hallway, one of them already open. Rebecca knocked on the first closed door and shot me a sly smile.

"Who is it?" A soft voice called.

My eyebrows shot up as light footsteps came toward the door before a young girl hesitantly heaved it open, her twinkling eyes an identical shade to Rebecca's. Dimples were indented in her cheeks, and her hair was in a cropped chocolate brown style. Instantly I could see the resemblance between her and the werewolf beside me, especially when her eyes began to sparkle like Becca's.

"Daisy," the werewolf said softly, "this is Cloud, my friend. She's just coming over for dinner before we leave."

The short girl stepped out of her room, twiddling her thumbs behind her back. She stared at Becca with wide eyes before giving me a suspicious glance.

I knelt down and held onto the reins of control to keep back my Darkblood as the shy girl began to observe my features. "Are you a werewolf too?" I asked her with a shrug, trying to keep it light between us.

"My name's Daisy," she announced, "and I'm Rebecca's little sister. I'm a werewolf too, I shifted for the first time not too long ago."

Through her shy demeanor I could sense her newfound confidence. A smile broke out on my face as she proudly turned to her sister, who was happily watching our interaction. "Shouldn't you two be getting stuff done, Becca?"

The older werewolf nodded, leading me toward a second bedroom. Daisy followed us as we entered the room, Rebecca instantly unearthing a formal dress. She held it up for me to see and I shot her a thumbs-up, Daisy approving as well.

"I'll fly us over so I can get changed there. We should eat first, then you can get changed," I proposed, slowly getting to my feet. Daisy bounced up as well, just as a knock came on the front door. The young werewolf rushed to get it, but I made sure to watch over her as she pulled open the door. It was Zen, and he greeted Daisy with a wide smile. Under one arm were quite a few containers of food, and Rebecca came out when she smelt the warm nourishment that was just for us.

The four of us sat down on the couches in their homey living room as Zen unpacked multiple containers of food. I began to laugh at something Daisy said as Rebecca handed out plates, a smile on my face as we joked about Izzy's shop and the Darkblood camp. The underlying sense of looming threats and secrets was practically non-existent as I spent a simple dinner with my newfound friends, already prepared for the party of snobs ahead of me.

~o•o~

The second we were done, Rebecca was dressed and made up with her hair done and I was waiting outside with my entire form on display. Daisy and Zen were long gone, the artist saying something about taking the young wolf to a sports game among the children of the camp. My wings were quivering in excitement and anxiety as Rebecca locked up her house, wordlessly grabbing my hand.

"All good?" I checked, just in case. I wanted to ask about her parents or other family, but knew better than to upset her now. She nodded and we embraced each other like it was a hug, but really it was me making sure I wouldn't drop her as I shot into the air, Rebecca screaming in shock as we climbed into the sky. She gasped, eyes glued to the ground as I began to soar, keeping us high up in the air as I headed for Mythic Mountain. The werewolf was silent in her amazement, watching the ground go by at crazy speeds as I pushed my wings to go faster.

With the wind going by, it was nearly impossible to catch the words of others.

But then, I caught a snippet of Rebecca's words.

"...you would've loved it, Mom..."

Cursed Blood - 49.5.Dinner with Darkbloods.49.5[1,138 words]

Rebecca was quick to help me get dressed and presentable for the dinner party. While she wore a one piece, black, silky jumpsuit, I donned a black dress with a slit going up my left leg and showing a scandalous amount of skin. The black dipped low as well, allowing me to release my wings if I wished without tearing holes into delicate fabric. She did my hair, tying half of it back while leaving the rest in curls, and I touched up her blonde braid. We then both fixed our faces with makeup after the harsh winds of flying and high-fived for extra confidence before an escort came to my room to fetch us. After I tidied and cleaned up the explosive mess that had become my room, the werewolf and I linked arm in arm and followed the guards to the throne room. Rebecca was on edge, her eyes darting around the room. She was absorbing information and collecting data, I was just praying I could trust her. The escort of five royal Lightblood guards ushered us into the throne room where three went to patrol the area and two continued to follow us. People turned as we arrived last, the guards closing the doors behind us with a soft thud. The Queen and Prince were near their thrones, speaking with a servant, while everyone else littered the room with wine glasses in their hands. They all stopped dead and the room went silent as they spotted the guards looming behind us and the ink on Rebecca's scars. Her golden eyes sparkled brighter as she stared back at them, her chin tilted up. Their eyes sized her up, looking intimidated as they felt her Darkblood power waft off of her. They then stared at me, and many of them judged the slit in my skirt until their eyes found the tattoo in my skin, wings etched permanently into my body. Whispers travelled through the crowd as people remembered the supposed sightings of a winged demon flying through the skies with black wings.

Queen Amara broke the silence and she led the Prince toward us, her subjects staring at her in worry. Many of them looked like they were ready to kill both of us, seeing me as just another Darkblood.

The crowd gasped as the royals bowed to us, which we returned with genuine respect. Rebecca gritted her teeth together, taking my hand in hers as she met the stares of the Lightbloods. To comfort her, I forced myself to find my voice, and stepped forward to address the Queen.

"Your Majesty," I smiled, "I hope we're not late. We came from the camp as quickly as possible."

Elijah and his mother smiled at me, and I felt a genuine happiness replenish my confidence.

"Thank you for coming, Storm-Cloud Rose," the Queen responded, some of the other Lightbloods recognizing the name. They began to see who I was, and several of them were shocked that it was me who was the infamous Gray One. "Who is your friend?"

Rebecca tensed, and I laid a hand on her shoulder.

"This is Rebecca. She is a Darkblood, and her powers are that of a werewolf's. She lives in a settlement of them with her younger sister Daisy, and is a strong fighter. But she is also a loyal friend, and will not hurt any of you."

The werewolf's confidence seemed sucked away as she gulped, eyes falling to the ground. I began to grow worried until the Prince stepped forward, walking until he was directly in front of the werewolf.

The crowd held their breath as their cherished Prince reached his hand out to Rebecca. Her eyes were wet with hidden tears as her hand met his and they briefly shook.

"Welcome, Rebecca."

She nodded, looking away as the Prince returned to the Lightblood crowd. Their tension melted away, and gradually they began to talk amongst themselves again, sipping wine and having the time of their lives. Rebecca exhaled softly, her chest decompressing as she breathed heavily for a moment. I glared at the guard looming behind her for a second before patting her back.

"Are you okay?"

The werewolf nodded. "Their energy is... a lot. I can sense it all at once. It feels like I'm surrounded by pure danger."

"They won't touch you," I hissed, the conviction in my voice causing her to stare up at me with wide eyes. I smiled for a second before turning to find the drink table, leading Rebecca by her hand.

Ignoring it when I heard her whisper an apology under her breath.

~o•o~

In the morning, I laid in bed staring at the ceiling. My energy had been zapped after the night before. I had mostly spent time with Rebecca and Elijah, but the Darkblood couldn't stand being around Lightbloods for long and we stuck to the edges of the room. I'd seen glimpses of other people I knew, but was too busy laughing with the Queen to pay attention. I appreciated the royal family for treating Rebecca like any normal Lightblood, though I knew we would have many debates about Darkbloods after the ball tonight. A game plan would be created, and the actions of Rebecca had a lot to do with how the plan would go. I prayed it went well and that we could work toward peace.

That would mean that I would be free from any mysterious job that I was meant to see through, and Rebecca and I would have a chance to be good friends.

The thought kept me smiling through the day. Around every corner was another bunch whispering about the ball of the century -- the ball of demons is what they called it. Every time my heightened hearing picked up on their whispers, I made sure to put on my best bitch face and walk by, sometimes even glaring. Janora popped her head into my room often, just to check on me, and the Queen actually invited me to have tea with her. We didn't speak much, but the mutual appreciation for the companionship gave me lasting courage. After that, I spent time looking through the castle library, documenting books for later. There was no sign of the Prince, the three warriors, Dmitri or anyone else I recognized for most of the day.

But the second Janora came to find me in the library, my nerves broke through my layers of confidence and twisted my stomach into knots.

"Time to get ready, Cloud."

Quick reminder (shameless self promo actually) to check out my other book; the Shifters: Katrina! It's one of many to come set in a world where shapeshifters exist and Katrina just discovers she's one of them, but still with her own difference that sets her apart :) thank you for reading, and as always, I'll see you in the next chapter!

Cursed Blood - 50.Ball of Demons.50[2,446 words]

There was no time to breathe. Janora pulled me out of the library and to my own room, Raeni appearing randomly as if she'd teleported. The three of us holed up in my room, Raeni helping me get into my dress, or gown, really. I had to be ready to greet Rebecca at the front doors when she arrived, which would probably be later than all the Lightblood guests. The chatter of nobles filling the castle drowned out my thoughts -- they would spend quality time amongst themselves before the rest of Mythira had a chance to enter. My hands shook as I realized that anyone and everyone in the kingdom had a chance to attend this ball. I had known that my so-called duty would take me outside the safety of the Valley, but this felt like too soon. I didn't feel ready.

Raeni slipped my shoes onto my feet and fixed my dress, patting down the lovely tulle skirt before giving me over to Janora. Lady Garcia's companion made quick work of my face, claiming I didn't have many imperfections to fix, before moving to my hair. My eyes couldn't follow the sharp movements of her hands as she weaved my once-frizzy hair into an elegant braid, the style something I hadn't seen before. The girls slipped small jewelled accessories into my hair before finally, Janora adorned the braid itself with several white roses.

I swallowed, staring at myself in the large mirror the maids had brought for me. I looked beautiful, and daring like I knew nothing in this world could beat me. My sweaty hands laid flat on the skirt, my rapid breathing noticeable with the plunging neckline.

It was perfect, in the end.

"You're ready Cloud," Raeni finally announced. "Only one tiny detail left."

I raised my eyebrows. "Which is?"

Janora sighed, her gown of silks moving with her. Both of them were already made up for the ball, Raeni sporting a waterfall of silk and colour while Janora chose an elegant dress of maroon lace. The latter had a classic updo while the stylist let her hair down in waves, ones I envied.

"Your wings? Don't you think you should let them free?"

Janora's prompting made my breath catch. They both hesitated, unsure if the question had upset me. My nerves were increasing as I imagined hundreds of Lightbloods staring at me in disgust, black wings flaring from my back.

I closed my eyes, a sense of peace washing over me. Such tranquility was rare these days - everything seemed to move so quickly. Despite what happened, I missed my mother, and longed to have that girls' day we would never experience. Never again would I spend a day of fun with the woman who raised me. Things had changed, and I still couldn't come to terms with that. Moisture gathered in the back of my eyes, but I promised myself to let it out later. For now, I had a ball to attend.

When my eyes opened, my wings were laying against my skirt. Feathers of dark, pure black against the purest white. Both women were staring up at me with smiles, and I felt myself building up my confidence. Whether it was real or not was a debate for another time.

My heart jumped into my throat and I brushed my hands against the tulle. Janora and Raeni offered me final grins before leaving the room, the silence blanketing my senses and dulling them until I felt like a zombie. Supposedly, someone would be coming to escort me. Then, my escort and I would fetch Rebecca and us Darkbloods would enter the ball with an announcement. A sense of being numb filled my stomach as I relied on the power in my blood to calm my nerves.

A knock on my door made me jump, and I rushed toward it. My eyes were downcast as I pulled it open, falling onto two black, shiny shoes standing just outside my room. My gaze traveled upward, noting the black leather pants and pressed, crisp white shirt underneath a dazzling baby blue tailcoat with golden adornments. They then made their way to a strikingly handsome face, one I knew all too well.

"Cloud," the Crown Prince of Mythira said, my name rolling off his tongue like it was natural. "I decided to be your escort tonight."

After a moment, I found my voice. "A-Alright. Thank you, Elijah."

He smiled at me, though it didn't reach his eyes, and offered me a hand. I stepped through the doorway and pulled my bedroom door shut with a soft click. The Prince then allowed me to link my arm through his as he led me toward the foyer. Music came from the ballroom I had yet to see, but we had to make one stop. Guards fell in step behind us, giving me and my wings a wide berth. The Prince dropped my arm as I went for the door, horns sprouting from my temples and managing to leave my hair in its place. Fangs grew as well, but I kept back the clunky tail and claws. Fading sunlight drifted into the foyer as I pried open the castle doors, revealing the golden haired werewolf.

I was instantly jealous from how beautiful Rebecca looked. She wore blood red silk with lace off-the-shoulder sleeves. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders in pin-straight strands, and her eyes were highlighted by a cat's eye wing of black pigment. The silk stopped just above her knees, layers of skirt bunching up and returning to her waist.

Rebecca glared over my shoulder at the fancy-looking Prince, drilling holes into his head. Gently, I took her hand and pulled her into the castle, her eyes landing on the wings relaxed at my sides. Instantly, she relaxed. She may have her scars and tattoos on display, but her comfort level rose when she realized she wasn't the only one of display. I had fangs and horns out, and I noticed her eyes begin to gleam and her nails elongate.

We were equals, displaying hints of our power together.

"I guess this won't be too bad," the werewolf said, following me toward the guards and Prince. I grimaced, looking at her over my shoulder.

"We're being announced in front of the entire ball, Rebecca. This may get to be very unpleasant."

She sighed, exhaling in a way that made her breath come out as a whistle. The werewolf fell silent as the Prince ushered us to doors, which were still shut in our face. The guards lined up on either side of our trio, Rebecca and I a little behind the Prince at the sides. One mousy man with a small moustache brushed by us, putting his hands on the door.

On his exhale, I tensed. The man flung open the doors, and the music faded out on cue. Dead silence fell over the guests as the vast ballroom came into view, with the Queen's fancier throne at the other end of the room and servants bustling about. It was a sea of colourful cloth, and as the Prince led Rebecca and I through the doors onto the balcony, my breath caught. My wings flared, light bouncing off my horns and making my fangs flash as my form was on display. Rebecca's eyes glowed gold as we stared down at the Lightbloods, their Prince accompanying us.

The mousy man stepped forward.

"May I present, the Crown Prince of Mythira!"

Elijah bowed, his loving citizens creating a thundering applause that drowned out my nervous thoughts.

"And Darkblood guest and representative, Lady Rebecca of Mythira!"

The applause was more to be polite than actual enthusiasm, but I myself began to clap. The Queen had obviously requested for Rebecca to have a title, and I could *feel* the werewolf glow with pride.

"And finally..," the man bellowed. Silence took over the large room once more, and my eyes widened as Rebecca and Elijah took a few steps back, leaving me in the center spotlight. My feathery, soft wings brushed up against my arms as I tilted my chin up, stepping to the edge of the balcony as if my heart wasn't pounding. I even spotted my brothers and father down below, looking up at me with the widest smiles.

"Lady Storm-Cloud Katlyn Rose, Gray One of Mythira!"

Following his words, it was silent. Dead silent, as if the Lightbloods were holding their breath. My confidence was about to falter when a strong clap came from the back of the room. Myself, and all the other guests, whipped our eyes around to the Queen herself, who was slowing applauding me. Once the eyes were on her, Queen Amara of Mythira swept into a curtsy.

I mirrored it with a smile, feeling the worst had passed. A slow applause began, and I joined the Prince and my werewolf friend as we descended the stairs onto the dance floor. In the back, at the sides of the room, tables were set up with desserts, snacks and drinks, where my brothers were currently pigging out. The Queen had begun speaking with her advisers, and Elijah disappeared with a quick apology. That left Rebecca and I as I passed through the crowd, wings pressed to my skirt. Several people gave me room to move, though it seemed less like it was out of fear. After all, a lot of the guests knew who I was by now, and some of them *knew* me from childhood or recent life in the castle.

It was a comforting thought.

Rebecca followed me to the tables where my brothers were. Charles was the first to notice us, and when his hand touched my shoulder, I could feel him giving me energy.

"Hey, little sis. You look amazing."

I smiled at him, and encased him in a one-arm hug despite my large wings. I relaxed into his side, my brother holding me up as I allowed myself to slump over for a moment of peace. He then forced me to straighten and gently brushed his fingers along my feathers,

causing my wings to flutter and spook nearby Lightbloods. A pair turned toward us, both of them younger girls. They were familiar, as if I'd gone to school with them. The two joined the circle of my brothers, father, Rebecca and I, politely nodding in recognition to the boys before turning to Rebecca and I. They dropped in unison, their curtsies carefully measured as they displayed respect for us.

"Lady Rebecca, Lady Storm-Cloud."

I waved off their words. "Just Cloud please."

Rebecca mirrored the gesture. "Please just Becca," she murmured, "and you two are?"

One, with platinum blonde hair braided into two long tails that brushed her hips, pursed her lips together before answering. "My sister and I are scholars. We study the blood origins of Lightbloods and Darkbloods as well as the gods."

The other girl, a redhead with short hair, smiled. "We aren't blood relatives, by the way. My name is Athena, this is Lori. The Queen invited us to this *Ball of Demons*, and the Prince suggested we stay and study in the castle."

Two things made me blink in shock for a moment. One was that they were scholars -- my mind instantly went to them helping me find the clue I needed. After all, the gods were my starting point. Secondly, it became clear to me that this Ball of Demons name hadn't just been a one-time thing. It had caught on, and I knew everyone around me was seeing Rebecca and I as the demons.

"I hope to speak with you in the future," I told the scholars, trying not to sound angry with them. They seemed like nice girls. "But right now, I think I need a drink."

I excused myself, Rebecca getting the message. She looked fine with staying with Charles, who I noticed had a light pink tint on his cheeks as he began to talk to her. The twins, who I had yet to greet properly, also began light conversation with the werewolf. The sight made me smile despite myself as I pushed through the crowd to the other side of the room to locate a glass of champagne or wine. Lightbloods were less antsy as I went through the crowd, and I swore I could feel various hands reach out to touch the wings on my back. I let it slide, picking up a glass of something red by the thin stem. Fangs met glass and I nearly cringed as I felt them scrape against the thin surface, but soon learned to drink without hitting my elongated teeth off my cup.

"Struggling?"

The teasing tone of voice had me guess exactly who it was. I expertly sipped my wine as I turned around to see Dmitri looking stunning as ever. His light brown eyes were sparkling with mischief, his dark hair swept off to the side. Unlike the Prince who wore light colours, the Darkblood specialist had decided on full black attire, even his undershirt. His

broadsword was still strapped to his back, but somehow attracted less attention than my mostly-harmless form.

No wait, it's extremely useful and could hurt many people. Maybe it is a little scarier than some sword.

I stuck my tongue out at him. "I'm doing fine, thank you. I figured it out," I told him, proving my point by taking a long gulp of wine, finishing off the drink. I handed the glass to a nearby server, crossing my arms as I looked back at a smirking Dmitri. "What?"

"Nothing," he chuckled, "you're just cute, kid."

I leaned on one hip, tilting my head at him. My horns added more weight to my head which made things feel uneven, but I managed. "I'm the one who beat you, *kid*. The deal was that you'd stop calling me that."

He shrugged, grinning. "Oh well. How about you come dance with me, Cloud?"

Opening my mouth to say no, I found myself hesitating as he shot me a wink. While I still wanted to be alone, to think and to mull over what was going on, I was at a ball.

And Dmitri looked extremely handsome in his high quality, shining silk clothi.

He lifted an empty hand, covered by a black glove. By now, peoole had noticed a strangely handsome man offering a dance to the infamous, most likely despised, hybrid.

I slipped my hand into his.

Hey, author here!

This was obviously a much longer chapter than what I normally write (it was like 1200 words more than usual) but I wanted to do something to differentiate the 50th chapter from others. I also missed a few updates and I don't exactly have a reason for it - just human forgetfulness. Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy the story!