



Stolen Star

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: They're bound by love. Hunted by fate. And the only way to save the world... is to survive each other.

After surviving gods, curses, and a kiss that fused their souls, Sapphire and Riven are finally united.

In name. In power. In purpose. In marriage.

Their mission now is clear: travel to the Summer Court to solidify a political alliance, gather the forces needed to stop the Night Court, and rescue Zoey from the hands of the enemy before it's too late.

But nothing about this journey is safe. Not the assassins hiding among their own guard, and certainly not the secrets lingering between them.

Because Sapphire is haunted by visions of herself as a killer, standing over the people she loves. And Riven, once the cold and calculating Winter Prince, is unraveling in his love for Sapphire after she brought him back from death by fusing her soul to his. The more his feelings consume him, the harder it is to lead. And if he slips, he could destroy everything he's trying to protect.

Together, Sapphire and Riven are stronger than ever.

But strength doesn't matter if they can't navigate the intense bond that links their souls—one that could either save them or lead them both into darkness.

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SAPPHIRE

She—theother me, the one from the vision—stands above Zoey and Riven’s broken bodies, dagger raised and ready. Blood’s splattered on her dress, and her eyes are hollow. Empty. No remorse in sight.

They’re my eyes—sapphire blue—but at the same time, they’re not.

Because they’re also the eyes of a cold-blooded killer.

Her expression is a mask of perfect calm. As if killing the people I love most in the world is nothing more than crushing an insect beneath her boot.

She reaches into the darkness and pulls out a torch, flames licking at the air. And from the way she stares down at Riven and Zoey’s bodies, the fire casting shadows across her face...

No, I try to scream, but the word claws at my throat, refusing to break through.

I try again.

Still, nothing.

All I can do is watch as this version of me smiles.

It’s not cruel—cruelty I could hate.

It's knowing. Satisfied. Like this was always the plan.

"No," I mouth again, the word silent and useless.

My chest tightens as panic, fury, and desperation swirl inside me, like an avalanche of sound trapped beneath skin and bone. But still, my voice betrays me. My feet won't move. I claw at the invisible force holding me back—tearing at the magic, or the fear, or whatever the hell else is paralyzing me—but it doesn't budge.

"Do you see now?" she asks, her voice soft and melodic, blending into the hiss and snap of the flames. "This is what we're capable of. This is what we become. This is the power we'll have."

The torch leaves her hand, arcing through the air in slow motion, like a comet trailing destruction.

It hits Riven's chest first, swallowing his body in an instant.

Then it spreads to Zoey.

I can't move. I can't scream. I can't even cry. It's like I'm drowning, my chest burning more and more with every passing second, and then?—

A sharp breath tears through my lungs as I'm jolted awake, my heart pounding, my body shaking.

Beside me, Riven sleeps soundly.

He looks younger in sleep, the razor-sharp edges of the Winter Prince softened by vulnerability. And as I gather myself together, I brush a strand of midnight hair from his forehead.

He's here, I tell myself. Alive. It was only a dream.

It has to only be a dream. Because I would never take him from the world. I don't care what that twisted version of my future self says. I couldn't become her. I just couldn't.

But as much as I want to hear Riven's voice telling me that it's okay—that he's here, and he'll always be here—I won't wake him. Not when he's finally found peace in sleep.

He's been sleeping deeper since we gave his father the potion. Like he's finally let himself stop waiting for disaster to strike.

I envy him in that peace. But after that dream... I don't want to go back to sleep. I don't want to be pulled into that nightmare all over again.

So, I slip out of bed, pulling a robe tight around me, and quietly step onto the balcony.

The cold hits me immediately.

It's not uncomfortable. Not anymore, with the ice that's been running through my veins since my soul fused with Riven's. Now, his winter magic runs alongside mine, turning what should be discomfort into something almost... pleasant.

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The Winter Court sleeps below me, peaceful and still. But I know better than to trust this calm. Because the Night Court is still out there, needing to be stopped.

Zoey's still out there, needing to be saved.

I close my eyes, and for a moment, I see that vision from the Tides—that other version of Riven and me. The one where we laughed at our perfect wedding, surrounded by friends and family. Where his mother lived, and we never endured the trials that forged us.

There was an ease to their happiness. Something untouched by darkness.

They weren't us, but at the same time, they were.

Will we ever have that? Or are we destined to always live on the edge of catastrophe, bracing for the next battle, the next betrayal, and the next impossible choice?

“You should be sleeping,” Riven says from behind me, low and soft.

I take a deep breath and savor the awareness of him—the way my body responds to his presence, even before he touches me.

“So should you,” I say, turning to look at him.

He stands in the doorway, moonlight dancing across the beautifully perfect sharp angles of his face. Even in soft linen sleep clothes, his body is all lean muscle and grace—the body of a warrior, of a prince... of my husband.

His lips quirk upward, eyes locked on mine.

“I was sleeping,” he says. “Then you left, and the bed got cold and emotionally empty.”

He gives me a small smile, but I can’t return it—not after the images haunting my mind from the dream.

“Sorry,” I say, running my fingers through my hair, trying and failing to shake it off. “I just needed...”

I trail off. Because what do I need?

I need to stop having that dream. I need to stop seeing Riven and Zoey dead at my feet. I need to stop feeling like I’m one terrible choice away from becoming her.

Riven crosses the balcony in three silent strides. His hands find my shoulders, his touch grounding me, pulling me back from the nightmare’s edge.

“I know that look,” he says softly. “You had the dream again.”

“It was worse this time,” I say, and his gaze sharpens, the sleepy warmth in his eyes turning alert. “She burned you. She didn’t hesitate. I love you so much, and she did that to you, and I couldn’t do anything to stop her, and...”

I suck in a sharp breath, my cheeks wet with tears. I don’t even know when I started crying, but they’re there, hot behind my eyes, more of them threatening to break free at any second.

Riven’s arm slides around my waist, pulling me flush against him.

“You’re not her,” he says firmly, his lips brushing my temple. “You could never become her.”

“But what if I do?” I close my eyes, leaning into his touch. “What if everything we’ve been through turns me into someone you don’t recognize?”

“If that ever happened, I’d feel it,” he says, brushing away my tears. “Through our bond. I’d know.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I say.

His eyes flicker with amusement. “Says the girl who fused her soul with mine to bring me back from the dead.”

“That was different,” I say, although I can’t help smiling slightly.

“Yes, it was,” he agrees. “But the love between us? That’s the same. No—it’s stronger.” His voice deepens, conviction ringing through every word. “I love you, Sapphire Hayes. And I will never let this world—or anything else—take you from me.”

I press my forehead to his chest, letting the truth of his words fill the cracks the nightmare left behind.

“I feel it, you know,” I whisper. “Your love. In everything you do.”

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“I’ll never stop showing you,” he says. “Because I spent too long thinking I didn’t deserve to love you, or to be loved by you. Now, I know I do. And I’m here for you, always, until the end of time.”

His hands slip lower, one settling at the curve of my back, the other brushing the scar on my palm—the one he gave me when we sealed our vows in the Tides.

He traces those same eight letters onto my skin that he did in the ocean at Montauk: I love you.

My throat tightens. “You’re going to make me cry again.”

“I’ll allow it,” he says dryly. “As long as they’re tears of love and not more post-nightmare trauma.”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “You really know how to ruin a moment.”

“Yet you married me anyway,” he says with that smirk I’ve come to love all too much.

“I love you,” I tell him, and then, rising on tiptoes, I kiss him—slow and intentional. There’s no urgency. Just the steady, reassuring pressure of his lips against mine.

His magic responds, ice and water swirling around us in a dance that mirrors the emotions flowing through our bond. And as we kiss, the world falls away until there’s nothing but us, standing together under the star-filled sky of endless winter.

When we break apart, I rest my head against his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart. It's the most reassuring sound in the world. It's a reminder that we survived the impossible—the dryad's deal, Eros's lead arrow, the Cosmic Tides, and so much more.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Everything that's coming next,” I tell him, pulling back just enough to meet his eyes. “The Night Court. Zoey. All of it.”

His expression hardens. “We'll get her back.”

“How?” The word comes out more desperate than I intend. “We don't even know what condition she's in, if they've hurt her, if she's even?—”

“One step at a time,” he interrupts, catching my hands in his. “First, we go to the Summer Court for our diplomatic mission to publicly establish our alliance, and to pool our resources. Then we take it from there. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, steadying myself—grounding myself in him.

He pauses for a few heartbeats, drinking in every inch of me.

“I'm going to keep you safe, Sapphire,” he says, the sharpness in his eyes intense enough that it could cut through realms. “No matter what creatures from nightmares jump out at us, I'll keep you safe, through all of it. I swear it.”

“I know you will,” I say, giving him a small smile. “But as a reminder... I'm not exactly defenseless myself.”

“You do look so incredibly sexy when you throw that Star Disc,” he says, his vibe

easily shifting to match my own.

“And you look so incredibly sexy when you do... anything,” I say, since it’s impossible to pick only one.

“Then it’s a good thing we’ll have an entire carriage to ourselves for three days straight while we make our way to the Summer Court.” He smiles mischievously, his fingers skimming my waist. “Plenty of time and privacy to fully appreciate each other.”

“A carriage?” I pull back, blinking at him. “You mean a horse-drawn carriage through the fae realm?”

A small smile tugs at his lips. “Yes, a carriage,” he says. “How else did you expect us to get there?”

“Portaling to the mortal realm, stealing a car, and entering the Summer Court through Central Park?” Magic stirs beneath my skin, responding to my frustration. “Wouldn’t that be faster?”

“Faster, yes—assuming there are no roadblocks to slow us down. More strategic, no. We’ll have a royal entourage.” Riven shakes his head, as if suggesting anything else is appalling. “It will show the Summer Court that we’re strong and united. Besides, fae avoid entering the mortal realm when possible. We’re not...” He pauses, as if searching for the right word. “We don’t belong there.”

“So, Zoey stays captive for longer because fae are allergic to roads and highways?” I frown, my voicerising. “We both know how to drive. And, for your benefit, I’ll let you DJ this time around.”

“You’d really submit yourself to... what did you call it again?” he asks, giving me a

knowing smirk as he thinks. “A brooding orchestral piece to match my whole frozen heart aesthetic?”

I smile at his perfect recollection. “I happen to love your frozen heart aesthetic,” I tell him, trailing a finger up his chest. “Especially when that heart melts for me.”

“I will always melt for you,” he says quietly, serious again. “And I never told you, but that third song—the one you settled on...”

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I tense. “What about it?”

“I hated it because it worked. Because it drowned me out.” His voice is raw now, stripped of every defense. “And in that moment, I needed to be drowned out. Because if you’d let me speak, I would have said something I couldn’t take back.”

A pause stretches between us. The kind that doesn’t feel peaceful, but earned.

“What would you have said?” I ask, breathing slower as I wait.

“I would have told you that I loved you,” he says. “That even though I didn’t remember loving you before that dryad’s deal, I’d already fallen in love with you again.”

I stare at him, heart pounding, because there’s nothing clever to say to that. No comeback sharp enough to hide the way my chest feels like it’s splintering open from the intensity of his words.

He pulls me back into his arms again, and as always, I sink into him as if he’s where I’m meant to be.

“Come back to bed,” he murmurs against my hair. “You need rest.”

“And if the dream comes back?” I ask.

His arm tightens around me. “Then I’ll wake you up and remind you that you’re the woman who brought me back from death. The woman who saved her best friend

from drowning when they were children. The woman who defied a king, fought gods, and who has the capacity to love deeper than anyone I've ever known." His voice drops lower. "The woman who will never become the monster in her dreams—because she questions whether or not she could."

I lean back to look at him, surprised by the fierceness in his eyes. "What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means that the ones you should fear are those who don't doubt their capacity for darkness," he explains. "Not the ones who are haunted by it every night in their dreams."

I reach up, cradling his face between my hands.

"If I ever forget who I am, it'll be because I gave every last piece of myself to you," I tell him. "Because I love you, Riven Draevor. I always have, and I always will."

With that, I let him lead me back inside, and we settle beneath the sheets, his arms wrapped securely around me.

I might never be able to escape the visions of what I could become.

But at least I'll never have to face them alone.

RIVEN

The ice in my veins thrums with tension as noon approaches.

Sapphire stands at the mirror, adjusting the silver circlet nestled in her hair—a gift from my father after his return to sanity. Her white-blond waves cascade down her back, the blue streaks on the ends catching the light with every movement. The deep

sapphire of her dress mirrors her name, cut in the Winter Court style, but with subtle nods to her summer heritage. The best of both worlds, just like her magic.

Just like her soul.

“Stop staring,” she says without turning, smiling at me in the mirror. “You’re making me nervous.”

“I can’t help it,” I tell her. “You look just like what you are—a princess.”

She turns, those blue eyes finding mine across the room, making every nerve in my body come alive. “Not just any princess,” she says. “I’m your princess.”

My heart—the one she brought back from death—aches with fierce devotion. Because I will never get over how lucky I am to have her. Never.

Unfortunately, a glance at the clock shows me that I don’t have time to properly show her how much I appreciate her.

So, I hold my arm out to her, to brace her—and myself—for what’s coming next. “Ready to make history?” I ask, sounding far more at peace about leaving our winter paradise than I feel.

“As long as we’re making it together.” She slides her hand into the crook of my elbow, allowing me to lead her out into the hall.

As we step into the corridor, Nebula appears, padding to Sapphire’s side. The golden cheetah’s presence is new to the Winter Court, a splash of summer warmth against our eternal frost. And when she and Ghost find each other, their bond hums as strongly as mine and Sapphire’s.

Together, we make our way through the palace and out to the courtyard, ice and water magic trailing in our wake. Nobles in their finest furs line the path, their expressions a mix of curiosity and caution.

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Not all of them are pleased with this alliance. There are those who would rather see Sapphire frozen in the tower than standing beside me. But none would dare speak against us after watching me defeat my father in the Frost Arena.

Six carriages wait at the center, their white wood carved with intricate frost patterns, twelve silver-white steeds hitched to the one in front.

Standing before it all, tall and regal in a way I haven't seen in years, is my father.

King Nivian's eyes—clear now, free of the madness that once clouded them—find mine, and the pride in them lands like a blade of ice to my ribs.

As we approach, my father raises his hands, and the murmurs of the court silence.

"Today," he begins, his voice carrying across the courtyard with ease, "we witness not just a departure, but a beginning." His magic swirls around him, ice crystals forming and dissolving in the air. "For centuries, the Winter Court has stood alone against threats from beyond our borders. But the world is changing, and so must we."

My grip tightens on Sapphire's arm, feeling her tension through our bond.

"I present to you Prince Riven Draevor," my father continues, "protector of the Winter Court, guardian of our traditions, and defender of our people."

A ripple passes through the crowd. Because the title is no longer just a birthright—it's earned.

“And Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor,” he adds, turning to her with a formal nod. “Daughter of Queen Lysandra Solandriel of the Summer Court and King Damien Fairmont of the New York Vampire Clan, bride of my son, and by royal decree, Princess of the Winter Court.”

Her titles ripple like thunder through the assembly. She’s fae and vampire, summer and winter, mortal and divine. A walking revolution in sapphire silk.

I love her so much it hurts.

But amidst her titles, my father purposefully left out the whole “Star Touched by Celeste part.”

We’re keeping Sapphire’s goddess-given gift classified for the moment.

“Together,” my father continues, “the Prince and Princess will journey to the Summer Court to formalize our alliance against the darkness that threatens all fae. The Night Court has been stealing our own from our border, and their transgressions will not go unpunished.” He turns to face the assembled nobles, frost magic crackling around his fingertips. “Any action against this alliance is an action against the Winter Throne itself.”

His eyes sweep the crowd, daring anyone to object.

No one does.

So, with a gesture, he signals for the farewell to commence.

The court bows in unison as Sapphire and I make our way toward the carriage in the center, with Ghost and Nebula by our sides.

Just as we're about to board, my father's hand falls on my shoulder.

"A moment," he says quietly.

I glance at Sapphire, squeezing her hand once before releasing it. "I'll be right there."

She nods, understanding in her eyes, and climbs into the carriage, Nebula following close behind.

Ghost remains at my side as my father leads me a few steps away from the crowd.

For a moment, he simply looks at me, as if seeing me properly for the first time in years. The clarity in his eyes is almost unnerving.

"I remember the day you were born," he finally says, his voice softer than I've heard it since my mother died. "Your mother held you and said you would be the strongest of us all."

I say nothing, unsure how to respond to this sudden vulnerability. Because this isn't the father who drove me to perfectionism, who beat me in combat training until I couldn't stand, and who told me love was a weakness that would destroy me.

"I didn't believe her then. I thought she was just being sentimental. But she was right—as she often was," he says, a ghost of a smile touching his lips as he reaches into his cloak and withdraws a small blue, velvet box. "This belonged to her."

My breath stills as he places it in my palm. The box is cold to the touch, preserved by what must be ancient magic. And whatever's inside... the buzz of magic is so strong that I can feel it in my bones.

"Open it," he urges, and I do.

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Inside rests a compass unlike any I've ever seen. The face is made of polished moonstone, and instead of pointing north, its needle spins slowly in a steady circle, trailing frost in its wake.

"The Stillpoint Compass," my father explains. "It was your mother's most prized possession. It's the twin of a compass hidden in the Summer Court—the Astral Compass."

I stare at it, ice crystals forming in the air around us. "What does it do?" I ask, studying it closer, as if it can tell me itself.

"It freezes time," he says, and I quickly look from the compass back to him.

"That's not possible," I say. Because freezing time... a power that strong is unheard of.

If he's telling the truth, then why not use it earlier? Unless he has been using it for all these years? Although that wouldn't make sense, since he certainly would have used it when we faced off in the Frost Arena...

"I'd demonstrate its capabilities, but you're going to have to try for yourself when you need it, because the compass can only be used once per moon cycle," he continues. "Set it out on the nights of the full moon, and it will recharge, ready for the next time you'll need it."

Well, I suppose that answers why he didn't use it in the arena. It likely wasn't "charged." Otherwise, he surely would have used it to kill me before I had a chance

to defend myself.

I'd like to think my father wasn't that much of a monster, but it wouldn't have been the first time his madness drove him into doing the unthinkable. Because killing someone like that—while they're frozen in time—isn't an honorable kill. It's a slaughter. A cold-blooded execution. It's the sort of kill meant for a beast—not for a man.

“Why are you giving this to me now?” I eventually ask, choosing to keep my thoughts to myself. I can discuss those with Sapphire later in the carriage.

No one understands me like she does. No one ever will. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

“I'm not giving it to you as your king,” he says quietly. “I'm giving it to you as your father. One who finally sees his son.”

Something shifts between us—a crack in the ice that's separated us for decades. It's not forgiveness. Not yet. There are too many scars, too many years of pain and absence. But it's a start.

“It's an honor,” I say, the words inadequate, but all I can manage.

He nods once, understanding more than I say. And as I turn to leave, his hand catches my arm.

“Riven,” he says. “Your mother would be proud of the man you've become. Not because you defeated me—but because you did it without becoming me.”

The words hit harder than any blow he's ever landed in combat.

I don't trust myself to speak. So, I simply nod once, closing the lid and slipping the

box into my pocket. And as I rejoin Sapphire at the carriage, the compass's magic buzzes through me like a living thing.

I suspect she feels my tumult of emotions through our soul bond, but she doesn't pry.

Instead, she simply takes my hand, her magic curling around mine in silent support as we step inside the carriage and get ready to head off.

RIVEN

As the carriage door closes and Ghost settles at my feet, I finally allow myself to exhale.

"Are you okay?" Sapphire asks quietly, her fingers intertwined with mine.

I look at her—at this woman who defied gods for me, who refused to let me drown in my own coldness, and who refused to let me sacrifice myself for her—and the ice in my soul melts a little more with every breath she shares with me.

"I am now," I tell her, squeezing her hand in affirmation.

A sharp rap on the carriage door interrupts the moment. I recognize the pattern immediately—three quick taps followed by two slower ones. Only one person in the entire Winter Court knocks like that.

"Come in, Calder," I call, and the door swings open, revealing a tall, broad-shouldered man with silver-streaked black hair tied back in a severe knot.

His normally sharp features break into a rare smile when he sees me.

"Your Highness." Calder bows his head, the formality in his tone offset by the

amused glint in his frosty eyes. “Or should I say, Your Victorious, Battle-Hardened, Father-Defeating Majesty?”

Despite everything, I can’t help but smile. Calder has been my combat instructor since I was old enough to hold a sword. He’s seen me at my worst—bloodied, broken, and defeated. But he’s also seen me rise, again and again.

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“Just ‘Riven’ will do,” I tell him dryly. “At least when my father isn’t within earshot.”

“Old habits.” He shrugs, then turns to Sapphire. “Princess Sapphire. An honor to formally meet the woman who managed to teach this stubborn prince something I couldn’t.”

Sapphire raises an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“How to lose gracefully,” Calder says with a wink.

I scoff, but there’s no real heat behind it. “I never lost to you, old man.”

“No?” Calder crosses his arms, leaning against the carriage doorframe. “What about that time when you were fourteen and I disarmed you so thoroughly that your sword ended up embedded in the ceiling?”

Sapphire’s laughter fills the carriage, her water magic bubbling in response to her amusement.

Just the sound of it makes my heart swell. Because after the torturous days when Eros’s arrow poisoned her gaze with hatred and I agonized over the possibility that she’d never love me again, each laugh she offers is redemption—and I’ll chase this sound into eternity.

“I need to hear this story,” she says, and when she glances at me, the joy in her eyes is downright contagious.

“Another time,” I say softly, shooting Calder a warning look.

He completely ignores it.

“I’ll tell you on the journey, Princess. I have decades worth of embarrassing stories about your husband.” Calder’s expression sobers slightly. “Speaking of the journey, that’s why I’m here. I’ll be leading your personal guard detail.”

I straighten, since this is good news. If I had to choose anyone from the Winter Court to protect Sapphire, it would be Calder. His loyalty isn’t just to the crown—it’s to me. And now, by extension, to her.

“Who else?” I ask.

“Twelve of my best, including Lirabelle.” A hint of pride enters his voice at the mention of his daughter. “She’s waiting nearby to properly introduce herself to the princess.”

As if summoned by her name, a slender figure appears behind Calder. Where he’s all bulk and intimidation, Lirabelle is grace and precision, her dark blonde hair cropped short against her skull, emphasizing the sharp angles of her face. But despite her lean frame, I know from experience that she’s one of the deadliest fighters in the Winter Court.

“Prince Riven,” she says, her voice cool and measured as she steps forward. “Princess Sapphire.”

Lirabelle’s bow is perfect—exactly the right depth for acknowledging royalty, while maintaining the dignity of an elite guard, while also getting across the comfort shared between old friends. I’d expect nothing less. Even as a child, sparring with her in the training grounds, she never gave an inch more than necessary.

“It’s been a while, Lira,” I say, easily switching to her nickname. “Last I remember, you were being deployed to the northern border.”

“Three years on the frost line,” she confirms. “I’ve only just returned.”

Sapphire shifts beside me, her water magic twining with my ice, forming beautiful patterns that dance and shimmer through the air between us. I’m tempted to capture them, just so I can have one more part of her to hoard for the rest of eternity.

Forcing myself back to reality—and away from the beautiful distraction beside me—I return my attention to the important topic at hand: every measure we’re taking to keep Sapphire safe.

“Lira is our best tracker,” I explain to her. “She’s deadly with her crossbow.”

“Looks like ‘crossbow’ just earned a spot on my private lesson wish list,” Sapphire replies, winning my heart all over again before she returns her focus to Lira. “Have you ever been to the Summer Court?”

Lira’s expression remains neutral, but I catch the slight tightening around her eyes. “Once,” she says. “Seven decades ago, on a diplomatic escort for a trade negotiation.”

Before Sapphire can press further, Calder clears his throat.

“We should depart, Your Highnesses. The longer we delay, the more likely we’ll encounter the Twilight Mists in Boundary Pass.” He looks directly at me. “And I think we all remember what happened the last time you crossed the pass after sunset.”

I wince at the memory. I’d been twenty-four, reckless and overconfident, pushing my scouting party to continue despite the approaching nightfall. We ended up trapped in

the mists for three days, amongst creatures that fed on fear and doubt. I'd lost two guards before Calder found us.

"The Twilight Mists?" Sapphire asks.

"An unpleasant feature of the southwest borderlands," I tell her, keeping my tone even. "Twilight is hunting time for the... things that live there."

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“Things that even the Winter Court fears,” Lira adds, her usual stoicism slipping just enough to reveal genuine concern. “We’d do well to avoid them.”

Calder nods sharply. “I’ll signal the other carriages. We move in five minutes.” He gives me a pointed look. “Try not to get into any royal trouble before then, Riven.”

With that, he steps back, Lira following in his wake.

Sapphire turns to me, her eyes alight with curiosity. “So, embedded in the ceiling?”

I groan, leaning back against the plush carriage seat. “I was fourteen and thought I could counter a disarming move by jumping.”

“And?”

“There was no way to remove it without breaking the building.” I shake my head, smirking at the memory. “We needed to gather nearly the entire royal guard to extract it without causing a total collapse.”

Sapphire’s magic dances around her as she laughs—water droplets catching the light like tiny prisms, creating rainbows that shimmer against the carriage walls. And for a second, I forget. I forget the weight of my crown, the blood on my hands, and the ghosts that follow me. All I see is her. All I feel is this. The unbearable ache in my chest that only she can soothe.

I lean forward, silencing her laugh with a long, deep kiss.

She's warm and sweet, her breath cool like spring water, and when she sighs against my lips, desire coils tight and hot. My grip on her waist tightens, pulling her closer until I can feel every soft curve pressed against me—tempting me, daring me to lose control.

I'm seconds away from breaking when a shout from outside signals the caravan's imminent departure.

"These three days in this carriage are going to be quite..." I trail off, resting my forehead against hers and weaving my fingers through her silky hair as I search for the right word. "Unforgettable. I intend to see to it personally."

"Careful, Winter Prince—three days is a long time," she says with that smile I love more than my own life. "You might end up begging me for mercy."

"That's 'husband' to you," I reply, and then we're kissing again, this time, slower. Deeper. More dangerous.

She tastes like starlight and sin, and I want her everywhere—under me, around me, inside every crack I've tried to freeze shut. Her fingers thread into my hair, tugging just enough to make me growl against her mouth.

I don't care that the caravan is moving. I don't care that Ghost huffs at our feet, or that Calder is probably smirking from his saddle. Because the rest of the world can freeze. I'd let it, if it meant I got to keep kissing her like this for the rest of eternity.

We're so lost in each other that we barely hear the crowd's applause.

And then, the carriage lurches forward, carrying us toward whatever fate awaits us at the Summer Court.

ZOEY

Three weeks in the quarters attached to Aerix's chambers, and I'm still no better at the harpsichord than I was the day he gifted it to me.

The sheet music stares back like a cruel joke, those little black notes swimming just out of reach. I thought five years of childhood piano lessons would count for something—but the harpsichord is no piano. It's colder. Sharper. A beast that resents me.

"You can do this," I say to myself, flexing my fingers over the keys again.

For a moment, it flows—water-like and perfect. Then my finger slips, striking a jarring minor chord that makes me wince.

"Don't stop," a voice says from the doorway. "The mistake is part of the learning."

I startle, nearly falling off the bench as I whip around.

Aerix leans against the doorframe, his midnight eyes fixed on me with that unnerving stillness—the kind that makes your skin tingle before your brain even registers danger. His wings are tucked in, but they shift slightly, betraying his mood.

He's pleased.

"How long have you been standing there?" I ask, heat rising to my cheeks.

"Long enough." He steps forward, all predator fluidity and dark intent. "You're improving."

I snort. "Was that before or after I massacred that last chord?"

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“It will take time.” He joins me on the bench, air magic swirling around him, caressing my skin in cool currents. “But with enough practice, you’ll be a master in no time.”

In no time.

The words sink into my stomach.

How much time does he think I have? How long does he plan to keep me here, trapped in these beautiful rooms with nothing but games, books, and artistic pursuits to fill my days?

“I brought you something,” he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a narrow velvet-lined box.

I lean forward in curiosity, studying it. It’s not small enough to be a ring. A bracelet, maybe? A necklace?

“What is it?” I ask, taking the box and feeling its weight in my hand.

“Open it and see.”

I lift the lid, and nestled against dark velvet is a handcrafted, obsidian fountain pen that gleams in the soft light of the chamber.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, lifting it from the box and admiring my newest trinket. Something about it looks expensive. Dangerous. Magical. More so than anything else

he's given me so far—and he's given me alot.

Aerix's lips curve into that smile I've loved for longer than I care to admit.

"It isn't filled yet," he says, and then he reaches into his pocket again, retrieving a slim, empty crystal vial. "Retrieve your dagger."

The world tilts. He can't mean...

But Aerix doesn't like hesitation.

So, I walk to the desk where I keep the weapon I was given in the Winter Court, when Riven sent me and Sapphire on those three deadly trials. The one I used to attack Aerix in the bunker. The one he promptly took away from me... then eventually returned, just in time for me to kill Henry.

But when I touch it, I don't feel guilt, or shame.

I feel powerful.

"The ink chamber," Aerix explains, watching me closely, "is meant to be filled with your blood."

My heart clenches.

"My blood?" I repeat.

"Yes, your blood," he says, his gaze so intense that I tighten my grip on my dagger just so I can stay standing. "So that everything you create carries your essence. Your truth. Your soul."

I stare at the tiny glass reservoir of the pen, my heart pounding so hard that I'm sure Aerix can hear it.

He's watching me. Always watching. Waiting to see if I'll flinch. Break. Refuse.

But I won't.

So, with a steadying breath, I press the tip of my dagger to my index finger. The pain is sharp and clean, and blood wells instantly, bright crimson against my pale skin.

Aerix inhales. A sharp, almost imperceptible sound—like a man drowning in restraint.

He doesn't touch me. He doesn't taste. He just... waits.

Go ahead, his nod seems to say.

I can't wait any longer. If I do...

I don't think about it further. I just hold my hand over the tiny vial, letting my blood drip into the glass, watching it hit the bottom.

One drop. Two. Three.

Aerix's breathing deepens, his chest rising and falling in a rhythm that matches my pulse. His wings shift behind him, stretching slightly before folding tight again, like he's physically restraining himself.

The air chills. The shadows hush.

"That's enough," he says, rougher than before.

At his command, I stop, pulling my finger away, a stray droplet of blood falling on one of the harpsichord's keys.

Aerix simply takes the vial from me, his fingers brushing against mine, and slips it into the pen's reservoir.

"Now," he says, sealing it with practiced fingers, "it's complete."

Before I can respond, he takes my hand again, lifting my bleeding finger to his lips. His eyes lock with mine as his tongue slides across the small wound, pricking the exact spot with his fangs so his magic can knit my skin back together.

"All better," he murmurs, releasing my finger and reaching for the sheet music I was struggling with. "Now, use it on this."

I smile slightly, since I've been irritated enough with that music to revel in the thought of staining it with my blood. I honestly don't know why I didn't think of it

sooner. So, I press the pen's tip to the paper, just beneath a particularly difficult measure. It glides across the surface, leaving a cathartic trail of deep crimson in its wake.

Satisfaction curls inside me as I examine the mark I've made.

"I want you to use it daily," Aerix says, his gaze fixed on the glistening lines. "Draw for me. Write for me." He pauses, then looks up, his midnight eyes swirling with desire. "Bleed for me."

The space between us crackles with tension—his air and ice, and my rapidly beating heart. His wings flare, and even though I can't see his back, I know just what it looks like when that sensitive place where his wings meet his skin grow taut.

But it's his face that undoes me. That aching need behind his power. That fragile hunger he'll never admit.

"I love you," I tell him, the words coming easier each time I say them.

His wings fold. His breath steadies. And then he kisses me—slow, consuming, and desperate in its restraint. Like he's starving but afraid of breaking the feast.

The kiss is gentle at first, quickly deepening with the hunger he always has around me.

But even as my lips respond, my mind drifts. Because these walls—this palace—it's all so beautiful... and I'm drowning in silk-lined silence.

Aerix pulls back, his brow furrowing, frost forming in patterns along the harpsichord's keys. He studies my face, then glances at the pen.

“You don’t like it,” he says, the temperature dropping several degrees, his wings tensing.

“No,” I say quickly, reaching for his hand. “It’s beautiful and thoughtful. I love it. Just like I love you.”

“Then what’s troubling you?” His dark eyes continue to search mine. “You’re tense. I can feel it.”

I hesitate, knowing how precarious this conversation could be. But these thoughts have been circling for days, and I can’t keep them contained any longer. If I do, I might burst from it.

“I was just thinking about the future,” I admit, my voice softer than I intended.

“The future?” he repeats, his head tilting slightly.

I gesture around the luxurious room. “Is this all there will ever be for me? These rooms? This...” I pause, searching for the right word. “This gilded cage?”

His wings stiffen, and frost cracks and blossoms along every key of the harpsichord like frozen veins—elegant and deadly.

I misstepped.

“I didn’t mean?—“

“You feel trapped,” he cuts me off. “Even with everything I’ve given you.”

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I clutch the pen tighter.

“It’s not about what you’ve given me,” I rush to explain, desperate for him to understand. “It’s about wondering if I’ll ever see anything else. If this is all there ever is—these rooms, and these walls, day after day, year after year.” I swallow hard, but now that I’ve started, I can’t stop. “I keep thinking about what the rest of my life will be like, and I can’t see beyond these chambers.”

He doesn’t get angry.

He gets still. Dangerous. Quiet.

A storm building behind locked doors.

“You have freedom here,” he says, his voice so soft and measured that it feels more dangerous than if he’d shouted. “Everything you could ever want. You never have to fear the world again.”

I swallow, heart pounding. “Aerix?—”

“Haven’t I kept you safe?” he continues. “From the Court, from the king... from being discarded like Victoria?” His jaw tightens, his eyes narrowing.

“I know,” I whisper, guilt tightening in my chest. “You have. But?—”

“It’s still not enough.”

His gaze drops from mine, his fingers curling around the pen resting on the harpsichord. His movements are precise, but I can see the tremble beneath the grace. The effort it takes for him to not snap the pen in two.

“Do you still want this?” he asks quietly, studying it as if he can’t bear to look at me.

“Of course I want it. I meant what I said, Aerix—I love you.” I hesitate, my voice softening as I force myself to continue. “But I can’t live like this forever.”

He nods once, and that single, mechanical movement terrifies me more than any outburst.

Then, with absolute calm, he places the pen back in my hand.

“Then draw your freedom,” he says. “Show me where you think you belong.”

“Aerix—” I start, but he silences me with a kiss, his lips lingering on mine as if trying to memorize their shape. When he pulls back, he gives me one final look, then turns away and walks out, leaving me alone in the lavish silence of my suite.

My gaze lands on the sketchbook resting on my nightstand. The leather binding is creased from how often we’ve passed it between us—its pages filled with sketches of me, Aerix, and of us together. We’ve spent these past few weeks adding to each other’s work, a silent dialogue of ink and paper.

I flip open the cover and run my fingertips over our intertwined drawings. Each one pulses with the energy we poured into it, reflecting pieces of ourselves we’ve shared in stolen moments. It’s by far the most precious thing I’ve ever owned.

With newfound determination, I find a fresh page and smooth it out.

Draw your freedom.

A challenge and a plea.

And so, I do.

The blood from the pen flows smoothly as the Night Court palace takes shape beneath my hand, its spires and arches more imposing than beautiful. I draw the entrance where I first arrived, terrified and defiant, on Nyx's back with Aerix's arms around me. I bring the streets to life where night fae leered at me in town, whispering cruel predictions about how long I would last.

But I change it.

In my drawing, Aerix still rides Nyx... but I'm on a jaguar of my own, my back straight, my chin lifted.

And the night fae who line the pathway aren't leering or threatening.

They're bowing their heads. Not in fear, but in respect.

To both of us.

SAPPHIRE

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After hours of tense travel through the otherworldly fog of the Twilight Mists, the sky parts, revealing a star-studded sky that stretches above the tree line.

Now, the atmosphere grows almost festive as the entire caravan gathers around the fire for dinner. Riven sits beside me on a log, our shoulders touching in an easy, familiar way. Nebula settles at my feet, while Ghost prowls the edge of our circle, his vigilance reminding me of Riven's.

"To surviving the Mists," a guard—Kyler—toasts, raising a goblet.

"To new alliances," Calder adds, looking at me. "The Winter Court has weathered many changes through the centuries. Shifts in power, unexpected threats, and treaties formed in moments of necessity. Change is uncomfortable, but it's what keeps us strong. It's what allows us to endure when the world tries to break us."

He's staring at me so intensely that I glance down at my food—a selection of berries and cheeses—and move it around with my fork. It looks good, but I'm far more excited for the meat that's roasting above the fire—

"Sapphire!" Riven's scream interrupts my train of thought, and then a shield of ice is in front of me, a blade buried in it, its tip inches from my eyes.

The camp erupts into chaos.

I leap to my feet, reaching for the Star Disc in my weapons belt as I scan the clearing.

Calder stands across the fire. His hand is still extended from the throw, his expression

stone-cold.

This isn't the same kind, caring man who spoke to us earlier in the carriage. But at the same time, that exchange was real. At least, I thought it was. Riven thought it was.

And I can't bring myself to kill someone who was so important to the man I love.

So instead of throwing the Star Disc at him, I channel my water magic into a shield and block his next attack.

"Behind you!" Riven yells, and I pivot as another guard lunges from the shadows.

His blade slices through the air where my neck had been a second before, his eyes gleaming with deadly intent.

A surge of energy races up my arm from the Star Disc.

Use me, it seems to be saying. Defend yourself. End them.

"For the true Winter Court!" another attacker shouts, and I don't hesitate again.

The Disc leaves my hand, trailing stardust in its wake, and slices clean through the guard's sword. The blade's remains clatter to the ground as the Disc continues its arc, slicing through his chest and sending him crumpling to the ground before returning to my outstretched hand.

From there, the attacks continue in a blur.

I barely track the Star Disc's movement as it cuts through one guard's armor, then keeps its curve at the perfect pace to intercept another dagger.

Riven's occupied with Calder, keeping other guards at bay with his air magic while his sword clashes with his mentor's, the two of them exchanging words as they fight.

Before I can process what's happening, Lira—Calder's daughter—appears beside me, her frost-edged blade slicing through an attacker's throat.

I ready the Disc to throw at her.

"The carriage!" she shouts a split-second before I throw, stopping a group of frost daggers from hitting me. "Now!"

Three more guards converge.

Lira turns to face them, frost crackling around her hands. "Go!" she screams at me over her shoulder. "I'll hold them off."

"No," I snap at her, throwing the Star Disc at another guard who's lunging to attack. "Not without Riven."

I turn to find him in the chaos—and that's when I feel it. The shift in the air behind me.

I spin and dodge out of the way just as Lira's blade thrusts toward my back.

Her eyes have changed—cold, calculating, and merciless—and I use my air magic to force her blade out of her hand.

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Three more guards approach from different angles. One is wielding daggers, another has a bow, and a third is... attacking the archer?

Is he on our side?

As I'm trying to figure it out, Lira strikes again. Her blade slices across my arm, burning cold, cutting so deeply that I cry out from the pain.

"Sapphire!" Riven appears between me and Lira in a blink, taking another blow that was meant for me.

Her dagger sinks into his shoulder instead of my heart. But watching it—seeing his bright-red blood, feeling its warm splash on my skin, and smelling its sweet, familiar scent—might as well hurt me worse than her blade hurt him. Because our hearts beat as one. Our souls breathe as one. Ever since I brought him back to life, it's sometimes impossible to tell where Riven stops and I begin.

White-hot anger rushes through my veins at the sight of someone hurting the man I love. I'm ready to destroy her... but his sword answers before I can, slicing her throat in one savage arc.

She drops without a sound, eyes wide, as if shocked the blade came from him. As she does, Riven's gaze locks with mine. They're wild, unhinged, and burning with a fear I've only seen once before: when I was dying in the Cosmic Tides.

Before I can reach for him, another guard charges. Kyler, who joked around with us during breakfast this morning, who started the toast to our marriage at the campfire.

As I'm preparing to throw the Star Disc, the guard who was helping me earlier raises his sword next to Kyler.

Is he helping me again? Do I trust him? Is he on my side? Or do I fight him? Will he turn on me like Lira did?

"Move!" Riven shouts as another blade flashes toward me.

His ice magic erupts in a devastating wave, impaling another guard through the chest.

And then, the world stops.

The sounds of battle cut off mid-yell. A guard lunging for me is frozen mid-air, his expression a twisted mask of hatred. Calder stands a few feet away, his blade raised, hatred etched across his features. Even the campfire's flames are motionless as they lick against the now-charred meat.

Nebula and Ghost are the only other ones still moving, padding silently to our sides.

Riven stands at the center of it all, clutching the Stillpoint Compass. The dial is glowing faintly, its ticking soft and rhythmic—the only sound in this frozen world.

"We don't have much time," he says, his voice unnaturally loud in the eerie silence. "We have to take care of this. Now."

Now that I have a moment to look at him, the guilt I find in his eyes is unbearable. It's the weight of betrayal, of lost faith, and of a kingdom fracturing in his hands.

"This wasn't your fault," I tell him, even though I know it won't be enough.

His gaze cuts to mine, his jaw tightening as he tries to hide the storm raging within

him. “It was my fault,” he says. “Calder was my mentor. I trusted him. I trusted all of them. And look where it got us.”

He sweeps a hand around the frozen clearing, where guards stand locked in mid-attack, eyes wild with rage, determination, or fear.

“You had no way to know.” I step closer, reaching for him, feeling his pain through the bond. “They chose this. They chose betrayal. That’s on them—not you.”

He flinches as my fingers brush his arm, and my heart tightens as he steps away, turning his back to shield his expression.

“If we don’t finish this before the compass’s magic breaks, they’ll kill us,” he says, as if he didn’t even hear me. “We have to eliminate them all.”

“But not all of them attacked,” I remind him. “Some of them fought to protect us.”

“Maybe. But maybe they were just biding their time, waiting for an opening. Look at Kyler—he laughed with us this morning. Shared breakfast. And now?” He gestures at Kyler, frozen mid-lunge, his blade raised to strike me down. “Every guard in this caravan was hand-picked by Calder. The only way we survive now is by ensuring none of them live.”

Dread pools deep in my stomach as I look around at the frozen guards. “If we do that, it won’t just be us defending ourselves,” I say slowly. “It will be an execution.”

Riven inhales sharply, as if the word is a dagger to his heart.

“Don’t think for a second that this is easy for me,” he says, his voice tight. “This betrayal rips apart everything I believed about who I could trust, and my ability to judge who stands with me. But right now, the only thing that matters more than my

pride, more than my judgment, and more than the guilt I'll carry after tonight, is you. And if protecting you means doing this awful, unforgivable thing, then I'll bear that burden every day for the rest of my life. Because I will always keep you safe. Always. No matter what it costs."

I still, my heart fluttering at his words. But then my gaze shifts to Kyler, his face locked in furious determination as the guard who seems to have been defending me is raising his sword against him.

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“I just wish there was another way,” I finally say, my heart hurting—or maybe it’s Riven’s heart hurting.

He moves toward me, his eyes begging me to understand.

“Turn around,” he says, gentler now, sorrow softening his voice. “Let me do it. Let me carry this burden.”

“But what if some of them weren’t going to turn on us?” I ask again.

“That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.” His jaw tightens, frost spreading across the ground where he stands. “Turn around. Please, Sapphire—I don’t want you to watch me do this.”

I flash back to a similar request I had of him weeks ago, when I fed from that night fae in the cave. I was so ashamed of what I was that I couldn’t bear the thought of having him see. And he accepted my request without question.

I might technically be the Winter Princess, but these are his people. His mentor, his friends, and his guards.

I owe him the same mercy he gave me.

“Okay,” I tell him, and then I add, “I love you.”

Something raw and vulnerable flashes across his features, and his magic ripples in response, ice crystals forming and melting on the ground between us.

“I love you more than anything else in this entire universe.” He lets out a shuddering breath, each second paining him more than I know he cares to admit. “You’re not just the most important thing in my life—you’re the reason I have a life. So please,” he says again, his voice breaking. “Turn around and let me finish this.”

RIVEN

Sapphire turns away, her shoulders tight with the weight of what I’m about to do.

For a moment, her trust steals my breath away. She’s seen the worst of me—my cruelty, my coldness, the weapon I become when I’m protecting her—and still, she gives me what little privacy she can instead of turning against me.

Given what I’m about to do, I don’t deserve it.

But I can do this. I have to. After all, I’ve done it before—when I left the Winter Court, crossed the ravine, and spilled my own knights’ blood just to get to her. I killed them easily then. Without hesitation. Each strike was efficient, calculated, and necessary.

But that was different.

That was before I knew what it felt like to be hers. Before her touch rewired every instinct I once trusted. Before her love became the compass by which I judge every act and every sin.

She didn’t just touch my heart—she dismantled it. Slowly. Lovingly. Without mercy.

Back then, killing was strategy. A necessary sacrifice. Something I’d been born and bred to do.

Now, my fingers tighten around my sword's hilt as I face Calder. My mentor. The man who taught me how to wield this very weapon.

He was like a father to me, I think as I look at his frozen form, ice crackling along my blade. I trusted him with everything.

Now he's a statue of betrayal, and I'm his executioner.

My blade meets resistance as it slices through his neck, separating his head from his shoulders in one clean arc. No blood sprays—the compass's magic holds it suspended in his veins. When time resumes, there will be nothing but the aftermath... and the echoes of my choices.

My new water magic trembles beneath my skin, churning in protest. It recognizes what I'm doing as a slaughter, not a battle. It knows this isn't war, but grief with a blade.

The bond between Sapphire and me pulses with each flash of my sword.

Can she feel it, too? This growing fracture inside me? Probably. But still, she stays quiet. Because she knows I have to do this—that this is my burden to bear.

And so, I return to the task at hand. Each frozen guard is a monument to my failure—my catastrophic lapse in judgment that nearly got Sapphire killed.

I memorize them all as I move methodically through the clearing. These are the faces of my mistakes, and I will not forget them.

I pause before the guard Sapphire mentioned. Bastian, who appears to be fighting for us. He and I occasionally trained together. Now, his blade is angled to block Kyler's attack, and his eyes hold no malice. Only determination.

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My sword hovers at his throat.

What if I'm wrong? a voice inside me whispers. What if he was one of the good ones?

But I can't risk it. Not with her life.

So the blade slides through, precise and terrible. But while my hands stay steady, my soul doesn't. Because he may have been loyal. He may have fought for us.

But I'll never know for certain, and certainty is the only currency I can afford right now. Love demands sacrifice... and I will always choose her.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to no one. To everyone. To the man I used to be. Because these were my people—my knights—sworn to protect me. And here I am, extinguishing them like candles.

Kyler's face is the worst. Just this morning, he'd joked about his wife's terrible cooking. Now, his eyes are filled with hatred as he lunges toward where Sapphire was standing before she gave me the small mercy of turning away.

Every laugh, every shared drink—was it all the practiced charm of a man waiting to draw his blade the moment I turned my back?

I can't think about it. Can't dwell on it. There's only the mission now: protect Sapphire. Get us safely to the Summer Court. Find Zoey. Defeat the Night Court. Save the world.

The compass's ticking grows faster. Time is running out.

And so, coating my heart with a layer of frost so thick that it burns, I return to the task at hand and finish it.

SAPPHIRE

As I respect Riven's wishes and turn, Nebula presses against my legs.

I sink my fingers into her golden fur, drawing comfort from her warmth.

Ghost stays beside Riven, loyal to the end. And, like Ghost, I stay close enough that Riven knows I'm with him, even if I can't watch. Even if I can't help.

Other than his one whispered apology—meant for the knights, not for me—there are no screams. No cries of pain. There are only quiet, methodical steps as Riven moves from one frozen guard to the next, doing what needs to be done.

I keep my eyes closed, but each moment of his guilt and grief spikes through our bond.

"It's done," he finally says, and I turn to see him standing in the center of the clearing, surrounded by fallen bodies.

Calder, Lira, Kyler—people who shared meals with us, laughed with us, and protected us. All of them lie motionless, their expressions locked in their final moments of betrayal, rage, or fear.

Riven's sword is still in hand, his face a perfect mask of control. But his eyes—the ones I know better than my own by this point—are shattered.

“We need to take care of the bodies,” he says mechanically. “We can’t leave them here like this.”

I want to go to him, to pull him close and share this burden with him. But the way he’s holding himself—too rigid, too controlled—shows me he’s barely keeping it together.

“Riven,” I say gently.

He doesn’t look at me. “We should build a pyre. It’s the fastest way.”

“Riven, please. Look at me.”

His eyes find mine, and the pain in them steals my breath away. This is Riven without his armor, without his defenses. This is the boy who lost his mother, who watched his father descend into madness, and who trusted Calder as a mentor—only to have that mentor try to impale his heart with a sword.

“This wasn’t your fault,” I tell him, stepping closer. “None of this was your fault.”

“I should have known,” he says again. “I’ve known Calder my entire life. How did I not see this coming?”

“Because you trusted him. Because he was family to you.”

“And he tried to kill you.” Ice crackles around his clenched fists. “They all did.”

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I reach for him, needing to bridge the space between us, to offer some comfort in this nightmare. But my fingers barely brush his arm before time resumes.

Bodies fall. Blood spills.

I want to turn away, but something inside me can't.

Riven steps away, turning to survey the clearing with clinical detachment. "Let's get this over with," he says, moving away from me to gather some wood.

I swallow the hurt and follow his lead, channeling my energy into the grim task at hand. Nebula and Ghost patrol the perimeter, alert for any new threats.

When the work is finally done, Riven stands before the pyre, staring at Calder's body. There's so much death—and all of it because Calder couldn't accept change. Couldn't accept me.

Flames crackle as they consume what's left of the Winter Court guards. Neither of us speaks for what feels like an eternity.

"I thought some of them were my friends," Riven says quietly, like he's speaking to himself instead of to me. "As much as I could call anyone friends, at least. Being a winter prince never allowed much room for that. Friendship requires equals, and I've never been allowed equals. Especially when my father made it clear that I wasn't deserving of love—or deserving of having anyone care about me as anything more than a deadly weapon for the Winter Court."

“You have me now,” I remind him softly, stepping closer, needing to ease the ache radiating through our bond. “You’ll always have me.”

The moment the words leave my lips, the image of me standing over Riven’s body, blood-soaked dagger in hand, my eyes hollow with hate, flashes through my mind.

All rivers reach the sea eventually. No matter how many branches they take along the way.

That’s what she—the version of myself in the vision—said to me. And then there was the newest version of the nightmare, where she conjured that torch and burned Riven and Zoey’s bodies...

“What are you thinking?” Riven asks me, apparently feeling my troubled thoughts through the bond.

It’s moments like these that I wish I could lie. Or that I was at least as skilled as Riven is at spinning truths from lies.

“Sapphire?” he presses again, and something in his eyes tells me that he needs to know—that he won’t rest until I tell him.

“I was remembering the Tides,” I say simply, hoping to leave it at that.

“What were you remembering from the Tides?”

“The visions,” I say softly. “The nightmare. The one of me...” I trail off and glance at the burning bodies.

“We shattered the Tides,” he says sharply, reaching for me and lacing his fingers through mine. “We carved our vows in blood and starlight. You won’t become her,

just like how I won't become that frozen shell of a king, alone on the throne."

I exhale shakily, his words grounding me, like a tether to the present.

"I love you," I say the only words that come into my mind. "I'm yours forever."

Ghost rumbles low in his chest. Not a growl, but something softer. A sound of approval.

"As is Ghost," I add, my eyes traveling up Riven's sword to meet his gaze again. "And Frostbite."

I can't help but smile at that last part.

Riven breathes out a short, almost disbelieving laugh, as if the sound surprises him after all this ruin.

"You're never going to let that go, are you?" He shakes his head, his eyes losing some of their haunted shadows.

"The fact that you named your favorite weapon when you were five?" I tease, squeezing his hand. "No, I don't think I will. But it's endearing. Honestly."

"Then perhaps you should join in with yours." He gestures to the Star Disc at my side. "That thing should have a proper name."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly," he says, but there's a hint of playfulness in his voice that tells me he's trying—for my sake—to lift us both from the weight of what just happened. "How about Comet?"

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“Too simple,” I counter, playing along. “It needs something more... imposing.”

“Frostline,” he suggests with a smirk.

“That’s just trying to complement Frostbite.” I roll my eyes.

“Guilty.”

I shake my head. “It’s a star weapon, not a snowflake.”

“Fine. Then maybe Glimmercut,” he offers next. “Or Moon Doom.”

“Moon Doom?” I repeat, laughing despite myself. “It’s a star, not a moon. And I’m starting to question your grasp of astronomy.”

“I grasp enough to know that Glimmercut suits it,” he says, his fingers trailing frost along my arm with deliberate slowness, like he’s memorizing the shape of me all over again. “Elegant but deadly, just like its wielder.”

My breath catches, and I pull the Disc from my belt, studying the way starlight reflects off its polished surface.

“Glimmercut,” I test the name, feeling how it rolls off my tongue. “I like it.”

“Then Glimmercut it is.” Riven nods, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. “A worthy name for the weapon of the star touched princess who stole my heart and razed my world.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, drawing me close. For a long moment, we just exist, surrounded by the crackle of flames and the hum of magic. His heartbeat is steady beneath my ear, a soothing rhythm reminding me he's alive, safe, and mine.

"I like this," he murmurs after a while, his voice quiet, almost hesitant.

"Naming weapons?" I tease, lifting my chin to meet his gaze again.

"No." He pulls back enough to look at me, his eyes impossibly soft—although still haunted. "Having you stand with me. Even after..." He glances at the pyre, his jaw tight. "Even after everything. You ground me, Sapphire. You have since the moment I saw you across that bar."

He doesn't say it, but I feel his panic through the bond. The terror that I'll fade away, that he'll wake to find it was all a dream. That the gods—or fate—might rip me from his arms again.

So, I rise onto my toes and press a kiss to his lips. It's soft and slow, a silent promise that says everything I can't put into words.

I'm here with you, and I'm not going anywhere.

When we break apart, the moon is high, casting silver light across the clearing. Ghost and Nebula sit quietly nearby, nuzzling each other and watching us with calm, knowing eyes.

"Glimmercut and Frostbite," I say, trying—and failing—not to smile again. "Quite the formidable team."

Riven chuckles, taking my hand and leading me away from the smoldering remains of the pyre. "The most formidable team," he agrees, but then he glances back, his

expression turning cold again “And one the Night Court will soon regret crossing.”

SAPPHIRE

The rest of our journey passes swiftly and easily.

Now, the Summer Court gates rise before us as the sun reaches its peak, trees woven together with flowering vines that bloom perpetually in defiance of the seasons.

Ghost and Nebula leap from the carriage, choosing to march regally beside us. Their presence sends a clear warning—these are not pets, but sentinels. Battle-tested, bonded, and ready to kill.

The sentries at the gate stare openly at our approach, their expressions shifting from curiosity to suspicion.

“Princess Sapphire,” the first guard says, bowing his head. “Welcome back to the Summer Court.”

Back.

As if this place was ever a true home to me.

The second guard eyes the empty carriages in our caravan. “The Summer Court was informed that you would be arriving with a diplomatic entourage,” he says simply.

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“There were complications on our journey,” Riven says, his voice carrying the unmistakable authority of royalty. The kind that demands they cease all questioning at once.

The guards nod at each other, then step out of our way.

As we pass through the gates, the weight of stares follow us. Summer fae lining the flowering path toward the palace, their eyes tracking our progress, whispers rising in our wake.

“The hybrid princess...”

“...unnatural...”

“...where are their guards?”

“...Winter Prince in our midst...”

Riven’s hand finds mine, his grip firm. “Ignore them,” he murmurs. “They’re just afraid of what they don’t understand.”

When we arrive at the palace, we disembark from the carriage and are led through the grand corridor to the throne room. It’s a vast chamber where the glass ceiling allows full view of the sky, and water flows down crystal walls, collecting in pools where lilies float.

At the far end, seated on a throne carved from living wood and blooming with

flowers, is Queen Lysandra.

Mymother.

A fact that feels far from real.

The royal announcer—a tall summer fae with flowers woven through his hair—eyes us with barely concealed shock before composing himself.

“Her Royal Highness, Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor of the Summer Court, the Winter Court, and the New York Vampire Clan,” he declares, stumbling over the sheer weight of my titles. “And His Royal Highness, Prince Riven Draevor of the Winter and Summer Courts.”

“Leave us,” Lysandra commands.

The announcer bows and vanishes.

The queen studies me for a few uncomfortable seconds, her expression giving away none of her thoughts.

“Daughter,” she finally says, the word undeniably strange between us. “Prince Riven. And...” Her gaze drifts to the cheetah and snow leopard by our sides.

“This is Nebula, my familiar,” I introduce my cheetah. “We were united after Riven and I left the Summer Court.”

Riven gestures to Ghost, his voice coolly regal. “And this is Ghost—my familiar, and perhaps the only creature in existence more stubborn than I am,” he says, drawing a smile from Lysandra.

Her laugh spills freely, melodic and teasing. “WinterPrince, your wit remains delightfully tempting,” she says. “You nearly make me regret that my daughter is the one who claimed you first.”

Riven’s eyes glint mischievously. “A near miss, indeed,” he says. “But fortunately for you, Sapphire is a natural at the endless task of managing both my sarcasm and my insufferable disposition.”

I shake my head with mock exasperation. “Someone had to protect the realms from his ego,” I say, turning to him. “Although... I have to admit that I’ve grown rather fond of it.”

His expression shifts to that soft, real smile that he only ever gives me. And when he speaks to Lysandra, his gaze remains locked on mine.

“She’s the only one brave enough—and perhaps foolish enough—to love me exactly as I am,” he says. “And I’ll always honor her courage... by never changing a thing.”

My breath catches. Because this side of Riven—the side that openly loves me with no reservations—is one I’ll appreciate until the end of eternity.

Lysandra’s gaze drifts between Riven and me, a knowing smile playing at her lips.

“My, how things have changed between you two,” she muses. “The last time you stood in this chamber, the air practically froze from how much you hated each other.”

My cheeks warm at the memory—the hatred that wasn’t mine, and the emptiness in Riven’s eyes that wasn’t his. The lead arrow’s poison and the dryad’s bargain still feel like a nightmare, even though we overcame them in the Cosmic Tides.

“A lot’s happened since then,” I say, reaching for Riven’s hand.

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He glances at our intertwined fingers, then back at Lysandra. “We’ve faced darkness I wouldn’t wish on anyone, but it showed us exactly who we are together,” he tells her. “It turns out that love—true love—is worth dying for.”

Lysandra’s lips curve knowingly, and she shifts her focus to me. “The streams of fate wouldn’t allow you to give up so easily,” she says. “Despite your protests, the threads binding your souls proved unbreakable. Which brings us to where we are now. Because the bond between you two is strong enough to reshape worlds, and we’ll need that strength for the challenges ahead. But first—” Her tone shifts, becoming more serious, her gaze steady as it returns to Riven. “I must ask about the caravan that was supposed to accompany you. Where are your guards?”

Riven’s jaw tightens, his grief spiking through our bond. “They’re dead,” he says simply, his voice dropping to a dangerous chill. “Calder, my combat instructor since childhood, orchestrated an ambush. It turns out that not all in the Winter Court will accept our alliance.”

“That would make it too easy, wouldn’t it?” Lysandra gives him a knowing smile, a surprising amount of empathy crossing her eyes. “But you did what needed to be done to protect my daughter, and I will not fault you for it.”

“Sapphire helped, too,” Riven jumps to my defense. “She’s devastatingly deadly—and beautiful—with the Star Disc.”

“So, you did get the Disc.” Lysandra’s tone sharpens with interest, her posture straightening. Then, she claps, the gesture strangely childlike and delighted. “Show it to me.”

I unsling it from my belt and place it into her outstretched hands.

She runs her fingers across the weapon's edge, her eyes glinting with approval—until she pricks her fingertip on one of its razor-thin points. “A star weapon with bite,” she murmurs, watching the crimson bead with interest. Her blood smells like honey, as if summer lives inside her veins. “Now, the war council awaits. Time is no longer our friend, and we must solidify our plans against the Night Court and their allies.”

She returns the Disc to me, and as we follow her down the hall with Ghost and Nebula padding silently beside us, I squeeze Riven's hand. He's tense, bracing for hostility the way he would before a battlefield, but I pour calm through the bond, like a breeze across ice.

“I love you,” I whisper, as if it's a secret just for him.

A slight smile touches his lips. “Good thing,” he murmurs back. “Because we're about to walk into a room full of summer fae who have spent centuries hating everything about the Winter Court.”

“Yet here you are,” I say, “holding the hand of the Summer Princess.”

“Yes,” he agrees, his silver eyes meeting mine with fierce devotion. “Here I am. With you, where I was always meant to be, until the end of time.”

SAPPHIRE

The war room is different than the lavish throne room—it's severe and utilitarian, dominated by a large table formed from a single, massive tree stump.

Maps of the mystical realm and the mortal realm cover the walls, marked by colored pins and careful lines of strategy. Guards stand at attention, watching with curious

eyes as we enter, their expressions shifting with wary respect.

Around the table stand a dozen summer fae, their bodies adorned with various symbols of rank and station. Some wear armor etched with flowing patterns that remind me of water in motion, while others are dressed in robes embroidered with the symbols of the Summer Court.

“My advisors,” Lysandra says, gesturing to the assembled fae. “My weapon forgers, strategists, and military commanders.”

A tall fae with golden hair steps forward, his deep blue eyes assessing us with cold calculation.

“Prince Riven,” he says. “Princess Sapphire. I am Commander Thorne, head of the Summer Court’s military.”

Riven inclines his head in acknowledgment. “Commander,” he says simply.

“I must admit,” Thorne continues, “we were expecting a more... substantial entourage.”

“The Winter Court’s loyalty is more fractured than anticipated,” Riven answers coolly, his voice edged with ice. “But the majority of the court stands with us.”

A murmur of approval ripples through a few of the commanders. Thorne nods, and Lysandra steps forward to the table, waving her hand across its surface.

Water rises from hidden channels within the wood, coming together into a shadowy outline that I realize is meant to represent the Night Court—although much of it remains blurry and undefined.

“The Night Court remains largely unknown to us,” Lysandra says. “We only know what the Winter Court has uncovered— that they’ve been stealing winter fae from the borderlands and transforming them into night fae.”

A chill runs through me as I think of Zythara—the night fae we captured and tortured in the Wandering Wilds. She was the one who provided the information about what the Night Court is doing to the winter fae. I hated what we had to do to her to learn what we did, but it’s impossible to deny that it was invaluable.

“Fleur, show them what we’ve been working on,” Lysandra commands.

A slim, silver-haired fae steps forward and places a cloth bundle on the table. She unwraps it with careful movements, revealing a dagger with a blade that emits a warmth that my instincts recognize immediately—summer magic.

“Our theoretical advantage,” Fleur explains. “Weapons infused with summer magic. Since the night fae are winter fae who were transformed, we believe they retain their fundamental vulnerabilities. Summer magic should, in theory, be effective against them.”

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In theory.

“The weapons are only part of our effort,” Lysandra adds. “Our true challenge is breaching their defenses. Until recently, it seemed impossible. However, we’ve been doing research in the depths of our sacred temple, and there, we found our answer.”

“The Ember of Prometheus,” a scholarly-looking fae says, stepping forward with a water-form illustration of a glowing stone about the size of a soccer ball. “An ancient relic of pre-Court magic. With it, we can create a counter-enchantment strong enough to tear down the Night Court’s wards.”

“But you don’t have fire magic,” I point out, watching the water illustration carefully.

“The Ember isn’t just fire,” Lysandra says. “It’s a creation of the primordial gods. A force capable of bridging magical divides.” Her gaze lands squarely on me. “With your unique combination of winter, summer, vampire, and star magics, you are our best hope of wielding it.”

Riven tenses beside me, his emotions flaring through our bond. Protectiveness, concern, and defiance.

Our eyes meet. We don’t need words.

“We’ll go,” we say in unison.

The room falls silent, every eye watching us with a mixture of shock, respect, and in some cases, barely hidden skepticism.

“Your willingness is admirable,” Commander Thorne finally says, “but we must consider the risks. You’re both irreplaceable components of our alliance.”

“Yes,” I agree. “We are irreplicable. Especially because I can do this.” I reach for Glimmercut, and in one fluid motion, I send the Disc spinning across the room. It streaks through the air, trailing stardust in its wake, before slicing cleanly through the summer-infused weapon Fleur had just proudly displayed—splitting it in half and returning to my outstretched hand.

The two halves clatter to the table, water spilling from the dagger’s core.

Fleur stumbles back, pale. Even Thorne stiffens. Lysandra’s eyes glint—not just with approval, but with pride.

“I’m not just a princess to be locked away in a palace while others fight in my name,” I say, the Star Disc humming with power in my hand. “I was chosen by a goddess who forged a celestial weapon for me.” I step closer to Riven, our magics weaving together—ice and water, starlight and wind. “Riven and I share more than magic. We share a soul. Together, we’re the most dangerous force in existence. If anyone can retrieve the Ember, it’s us.”

Fleur’s too busy gaping at the ruined weapon to focus on my statement. “You just destroyed a priceless enchanted dagger...” she says, her voice trembling. “Do you realize how much time—how much magic?—”

“I demonstrated what our enemies will face while fighting us,” I say, sliding Glimmercut back into its holder. “You can recreate the dagger. But there is no forging another us.”

Riven’s pride pulses through our bond as his hand finds the small of my back, ice magic cool against my spine.

“My wife is correct,” he says, the word crackling between us like a vow renewed. “We’re not asking permission. We’re telling you what’s coming.”

Fleur nods stiffly, gathering the broken halves of the dagger with trembling hands.

Lysandra gestures to the map on the table. “You’ll find the Ember in the Pyros Vault,” she says, pointing to a mountain, back to business. “It exists parallel to what mortals know as Mount Etna in Sicily, Italy, although the part of the mystical realm you’ll enter is far more dangerous than its earthly counterpart.”

“You’re sending us to a volcano?” Riven asks, his brow furrowing.

“Not just any volcano,” the scholarly fae adds, a little too eagerly. “The Pyros Vault is guarded by creatures born of flame and stone. The heat alone is enough to kill most summer fae, let alone winter.”

I move closer to Riven. Because I won’t let anything hurt him. We’ll either leave that mountain together, or we won’t leave at all.

“And the Ember itself?” I ask.

“Volatile. Unpredictable,” Lysandra answers. “It holds the original fire that Prometheus stole from the gods.”

Riven’s fingers trace the outline of the Stillpoint Compass in his pocket, his magic coiling around me. “We’ll need every advantage,” he says, an unsettling darkness crossing his eyes.

“Which is precisely why you won’t leave immediately,” Lysandra declares, her gaze following Riven’s movement. “That compass is too valuable an asset to not be fully charged. You’ll wait until after the full moon, when its power has reset.”

Riven stiffens beside me. “How did you?—”

“I know the artifacts of the fae realms, Prince Riven,” Lysandra says with a knowing smile. “The Stillpoint Compass was created in the Lost Fae Temple with its summer twin—the Astral Compass—which was invaluable a few months ago in defeating the shadow souls in the mortal realm.”

“The full moon is in three days,” Commander Thorne points out. “We’ll use that time to prepare you.”

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“What else do we need to know?” I ask.

“Not much.” Lysandra’s expression grows grave. “Only that the Vault doesn’t just guard the Ember. It tests those who seek it.”

“Tests how?” Riven asks, his voice tight.

“That’s all our scholars were able to find,” she replies with a shrug. “The last group who sought the Ember never returned.”

I reach for Riven’s hand, our fingers interlocking as our magics swirl together.

“We’ve survived worse,” I say to him quietly. “The Tides. The gods. Even death.”

From the way he pulls me close, I can tell he knows what I mean. He feels it in the bond—the memory of my dying body in his arms, the taste of his blood in my throat, and the fusion of our souls.

We’ll get through this, just like how we’ve gotten through every other crazy thing the universe has thrown at us these past few weeks.

From there, we continue strategizing, but my mind is already racing ahead. To the Pyros Vault, to the Ember, and to Zoey, still trapped in the Night Court.

Hold on, Zoey, I think. We’re coming for you. Just hold on a little longer, and then you’ll come back with us, and you’ll finally be home.

ZOEY

Five days have passed since I drew my future with the blood-filled pen Aerix gifted me. Five days since I showed him where I truly belong—not cowering behind him, but riding beside him.

He's said nothing about it.

Absolutely nothing. And while I continue to draw for him daily, I don't draw the future anymore. I return to what I've always done—memories of the two of us together—of how majestic he is when he has his wings out for me to see and touch.

It pleases him... but with every day I draw, the lines grow more harsh and jagged, the page at the mercy of my anger and frustration.

No matter how much of my frustration comes out through my art, Aerix says nothing. He doesn't even respond to the pressure I put on the harpsichord's keys when I play songs I'm sure sound like far from music to his ears.

Now, I'm seated in a plush chair across from where he feeds from Sophia. Her eyes are half-closed, her expression a mix of shame and ecstasy as his fangs pierce her neck. Air magic swirls around them both, cold and controlled, but Aerix's gaze—hungry and haunted—never leaves mine.

This has become a daily routine, but the ritual no longer disturbs me. Instead, a strange, possessive pride fills my chest. Because his mouth may be on her neck, but his attention is mine.

"Enough," he eventually says to her, pulling away, his wings rustling behind him. "You're dismissed."

A thin line of blood trails down her neck, and she avoids my eyes as she presses her hair to the already healing wound.

“Not yet,” she says, surprising me. “I’d like to speak with Zoey alone.”

Aerix’s wings bristle, frost forming at his fingertips.

“Is that so?” His tone is deceptively light, but I recognize the dangerous undercurrent.

She needs to be careful what she says next.

I lean forward, curiosity burning through me as I focus on Sophia. “What do you want to talk with me about?” I ask her.

She meets my gaze directly, something defiant flickering in her eyes. “Something personal. Woman to woman.”

Aerix’s laugh is sharp and cold. “How quaint.” He crosses to me, his fingers trailing across my collarbone, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “You may speak in Zoey’s quarters, if she pleases. Ten minutes.”

The question hangs between us, and I nod, unable to resist the mystery.

“Ten minutes,” I repeat, and he trails his finger along my cheek, as if he’s pleased with me.

Then, he motions at the door to my quarters, and I lead Sophia inside, the door closing behind us with a soft click.

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Sophia looks around, examining our surroundings.

“Your room is beautiful,” she finally says, focusing on the canopy bed—the one I rarely use, since I spend my days sleeping with Aerix. “Luxurious.”

“Aerix takes care of those he loves,” I tell her, although I quickly snap back to attention, since our time together is limited. “Now, what’s this really about?”

“You’ve changed,” Sophia says, her eyes taking in my silken dress. “The Night Court has swallowed you whole.”

“I’ve adapted,” I correct her. “I’ve survived.”

“At what cost?” She steps closer, and suddenly the spacious room feels smaller. “I know, Zoey.”

My blood stills.

“Know what?” The claustrophobia intensifies, a pressure against my lungs that makes it harder to breathe.

Sophia’s eyes harden, all traces of the vulnerable girl I once knew vanishing. “I know Victoria didn’t kill Henry. You did.”

The accusation hangs in the air, sharp and dangerous. But I keep my expression neutral, even as my heart pounds against my ribs.

“That’s ridiculous,” I say, but the lie doesn’t land.

“Is it?” She steps closer, and I back up, hitting the wall. “Victoria is gone because of you. They took her away, and we both know where she’ll end up. The barns. Or worse.”

The room continues to shrink around me, the walls closing in with each breath. Air—I need air. But there’s none to be found. There’s only the oppressive weight of Sophia’s accusations, and the tightening of invisible bonds around my chest.

“You’re wrong,” I say, each word carefully measured. “Victoria killed Henry. I was with Aerix when it happened.”

The lie slides from my tongue with practiced ease. Back in Presque Isle, I’d fabricated countless excuses to escape trouble—why I was late for work, why I hadn’t finished homework assignments, and why I couldn’t make plans. This is different only in scale, not in nature.

Sophia’s eyes narrow, disbelief etched across her features. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t care what you believe.” I straighten my posture, drawing myself up to my full height. “Victoria was found guilty. She’s the one who killed Henry. Case closed.”

Guilt twinges inside me, but I push it down. Because I defended myself against Henry when he tried to force himself on me. Aerix, along with Isla and Aurora, helped me cover it up. Victoria was taken away. It’s done. In the past. It does no good to ruminate on it.

In fact... part of me wants to claim my actions. To stand proudly in the knowledge that I defended myself against Henry’s assault. I want to tell Sophia how his blood

felt on my hands, and how his death freed something inside me.

But I can't risk her carrying that truth to others. So, I hold firm to my lies, even though they ache to come out.

"You've become one of them," Sophia whispers. "You've forgotten what it means to be human. To be one of us."

Before I can respond, the door opens.

Aerix stands in the threshold, his wings extended, his midnight eyes fixed on Sophia. The temperature plummets, frost spreading across the floorboards in delicate, threatening patterns.

He doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. His presence alone fills the room with a suffocating weight, his air magic pressing down on us all.

"You're done here," he says to Sophia, his voice dangerously soft. "My consort doesn't owe you explanations. Remember your place—unless you'd prefer to join Victoria."

Sophia flinches, her eyes flicking to me.

I give her nothing.

"No, Your Highness," she finally whispers, all fight draining from her body. "I apologize."

"Don't apologize to me." His wings flare. "You need to apologize to Zoey."

ZOEY

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Sophia turns to me slowly, her eyes hollow. “I’m sorry, Zoey,” she says, the words sounding far from genuine. “It won’t happen again.”

I nod once, accepting her fake apology with the cool detachment I’ve learned from Aerix. “You’re forgiven.”

Aerix steps aside, and Sophia hurries past him, her shoulders hunched. The door closes behind her with a soft click that somehow sounds like a prison cell locking.

But her departure doesn’t relieve the pressure in my chest. If anything, it makes it worse. The walls haven’t stopped creeping inward. The ceiling hasn’t stopped lowering. The air still refuses to move.

Aerix turns to me, his head tilted in that predatory way that usually makes my pulse quicken with desire.

Today, it only adds to the suffocating weight.

“You lied,” Aerix says, stepping closer to me. His wings draw in tight behind him, but the edges tremble, betraying the storm beneath. “Convincingly.”

The silence between us stretches, sharp and trembling.

“What am I to you?” I ask, the question tumbling from me, raw and unguarded.

His head tilts, frost swirling around his fingertips. “What do you mean?”

“You called me your consort,” I say. “You’ve never called me that before.”

“Ah.” His wings shift, feathers rustling in that way I’ve come to recognize as amusement. “Does the title please you?”

He’s deflecting.

At least, he’s trying to deflect.

I won’t let him.

“Titles mean nothing without substance,” I say, holding strong, even though everything about his cold aura warns me that I’m close to crossing a line. “You keep me in these rooms day after day, but you won’t let me walk beside you through court. You say I’m yours, but I’m not. Not really. And if this is all I’ll ever see,” I continue, gesturing to the ornate walls of my gilded prison, “then these rooms will kill me just as surely as if you’d drained me dry that first night in the bunker.”

The air between us grows thick with frost, each crystal a reflection of the truth I’ve just spoken. His wings pull tight against his back, and for a moment, he looks almost human in his stillness—vulnerable in a way I’ve never seen before.

When he finally speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper.

“I’ve given you everything I thought you wanted.” His eyes search mine, midnight darkening to pitch black. “Safety. Comfort. Beauty.” The words fall between us like shattered glass. “Protection from a world that would destroy you.”

As he speaks, something shifts in his expression—a crack in the perfect façade. His wings flare, stretching to their full span, the shadow they cast engulfing the room. Wind circles us, cold enough to burn my skin, a physical manifestation of the storm

building inside him.

“Do you know how many humans survive their first month in the Night Court?” he asks, continuing without allowing me to answer. “Their first year? Their first decade?” The air whips around us now, knocking over a vase, scattering pages from my sketchbook. “Almost none, Zoey. Almost none.”

Suddenly, the wind stops.

“And still, it isn’t enough,” he continues, although it isn’t a question, but a realization—one that seems to wound him in some fundamental way.

But I don’t take back my words.

Instead, I look around at all the beautiful things Aerix has given me. The blood pen, the harpsichord, the painting set, the books—and feel nothing but the weight of confinement.

“I can’t live like this forever,” I repeat, quiet but unwavering. “I can’t grow old and die within four walls, no matter how many gifts you give me to keep me busy inside them.”

The frost spreading from where he stands creeps outward, delicate ice patterns climbing up the legs of the furniture and crawling across the floor toward me.

He studies my face, searching for something. Perhaps a version of me that could be content with what he’s built, a version that would choose luxurious captivity over uncertain freedom.

“Aerix—”

My whisper is a plea. Or a warning. Or both.

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His fingers lift, hovering near my cheek, his eyes so torn that I can't help myself from leaning forward.

"If I touch you, I won't be able to stop." He pulls away, and he blinks once, something shuttering behind his eyes. A door closing on whatever vulnerability I'd glimpsed there moments before.

Then, without a word, he turns away from me. His movements are slow and deliberate, as if each requires immense concentration, and frost trails in his wake, spreading across the floor with each step he takes toward the door.

He doesn't look back.

The moment he's gone, the chill in the air vanishes. But while my body is physically warming, the cold is bone deep. It settles in my chest, right where my heart continues to beat. Steady, human, and mortal.

As I look around at the frost melting in the room—beautiful and deadly like Aerix himself—I wonder if I've finally gone too far. If this is the beginning of the end, or perhaps, the end of the beginning.

I don't know.

But either way, there's no going back now.

SAPPHIRE

She—the other me—stands above Riven and Zoey’s broken bodies, dagger in hand, burning torch in the other. Blood darkens her dress, turning it from sapphire blue to a sickening black. Her eyes remain hollow, devoid of remorse or humanity.

“You can’t stop this,” she says, eerily calm. “No matter what path you choose, no matter how hard you fight, we will always return to this moment.”

No, I try to scream, but no matter how hard I try to push it out, the word is stuck.

So, I reach for my magic—water, ice, air, anything—but nothing responds. It’s as if all my power has been stripped away, leaving me helpless as she lowers the torch to Riven’s chest.

“Some fates can’t be changed,” she continues, tilting her head as she studies me. “The threads bind us to this end. By fighting it, you’re merely delaying the inevitable.”

As the flames touch Riven’s skin, a scream builds in my chest, desperate to escape. Water magic churns inside me, but it can’t break free. I’m powerless, watching as the fire consumes him.

Her eyes—my eyes—meet mine again.

“All rivers reach the sea eventually,” she repeats, and then I jolt awake with a gasp, my heart hammering against my ribs so violently I fear it might shatter.

Riven sleeps beside me, the moonlight streaming through the Summer Court windows catching on his beautifully perfect features. The sight of him alive and whole, his soul tethered to mine, should calm me.

Instead, another memory crashes into me.

Riven, deathly pale, his life draining away as I drink his blood in the Cosmic Tides. His heart stopping. His voice whispering his final haunted words to me:

“If love is destruction, then let it destroy me. At least this way, I’ll be part of you forever.”

I reach out with shaking fingers to touch his cheek. He’s warmer than before our souls fused in the Tides, when I stole him back from death.

I curl against him, pressing my ear to his chest to listen to his heartbeat, and the tears come without warning. They soak through the fabric of his shirt, and I can’t stop them.

“Sapphire?” Riven’s voice is thick with sleep, worry cutting through it as his arms tighten around me. “What’s wrong?”

The tears come faster now, water swirling around us, a silent echo of the grief trying to drown me.

“Hey.” His silver eyes, now sharp and alert, search my face. Frost spreads across his palms as he cups my cheeks, his thumbs brushing away tears that are quickly replaced by new ones. “Talk to me. What happened?”

“The dream. She spoke to me.” I curl my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, needing him closer, needing to assure myself he’s real. “She told me that I can’t stop it. That no matter what I do—no matter what path I choose—I’ll end up there, standing over your bodies...”

“We’ve already changed our fate once,” he says, his arms tightening around me, anchoring me to reality. “We’ll do it again if we have to.”

“But what if we can’t?” The question escapes before I can stop it, raw with the fear that’s been haunting me since the Tides. “What if fate just bends around us and still brings us there in the end, no matter how hard we try to stop it?”

“Then we keep fighting. We bleed. We burn. We break the world open again if we have to.” He grabs my hand and places it over his chest. “But I’m not letting you go. Not to fate. Not to visions. Not to anything.”

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His fingers trail along the scar of frost and starlight carved into my left palm—our vow made in blood. Then he traces eight letters into it, slow and deliberate:

I love you.

My heart all but bursts with gratitude for him, and I turn his hand over, tracing the same words onto his scarred palm.

When I finish, he brings my hand to his lips and kisses the center, his eyes never leaving mine. There's something wild in his gaze—something beautiful and broken, the kind of storm that only exists after love survives death.

"I'll keep you safe," he says, his voice dropping lower. "No matter what it costs. No matter what I have to do, or what I have to become."

There's something in the intensity of his gaze that sends a chill through me—not from his ice magic, but from what I feel radiating through our bond. Fear. Doubt. And a darker emotion I can't quite name.

"Riven?" I reach out, tracing the sharp line of his jaw. "What aren't you telling me?"

He blinks once, the mask of the Winter Prince sliding back into place so quickly it steals my breath away. "Nothing I want you to worry about," he replies, clearly wanting to leave it at that.

But I feel it. Beneath the frost, the storm churns.

Without thinking, I lean in and kiss him. It's tentative at first—a question without words—and I tug him closer, needing something solid to hold on to. Needing him.

For a heartbeat, he remains still. But then the wall crumbles, and his arms wrap around me, pulling me impossibly closer, his lips moving against mine with an urgency born of fear, need, and love.

When we break apart, his breathing is ragged, his eyes darker and wilder than before. And for just a moment, I see him. Not the prince. Not the warrior. Not the weapon. But the boy who lost his mother. The one who watched his father descend into madness, and who has now taken the lives of those he once called friends—all to protect me.

“I won't let you face this alone,” I whisper, resting my forehead against his. “Whatever's coming, whatever you're afraid of becoming—you don't have to carry it by yourself.”

I slide my hands up his chest, feeling his heartbeat steady beneath my palm.

“It's yours,” he says. “Our souls are fused, Sapphire. Every breath I take is yours. Every heartbeat belongs to you. As long as I'm alive, no god, no court, and no fate will ever take you from me again.”

The storm still rages in his eyes, but now there's heat crackling through it, too.

In response, I kiss him again. Harder. There's no question this time. Only fire.

And then—something snaps.

His hands, usually so controlled, turn desperate as they slide beneath my nightdress with the sort of urgency that makes my body heat with desire. Every touch sears.

Every breath is shared. And soon, we're moving together in perfect rhythm, as if our bodies remember the dance, even when our minds are lost to fear and fate.

Magic builds between us—water and ice colliding, swirling up into a dome of shimmering beauty above the bed. Then it bursts, collapsing into a gentle rain that soaks the sheets, our hair, and our skin.

We're drenched in magic. In each other. And it's wonderfully, impossibly perfect.

"I love you," Riven whispers against my skin. "You're mine, Starlight. Always."

I freeze. Not from fear, but because I feel the truth of the name through our bond. The way he's held it in silence. The way it slipped free now, when he was too undone to stop it.

He lifts his head to meet my eyes, and there's no smirk this time. No shield.

Just truth.

"That's what you are to me," he continues, brushing a damp strand of hair from my cheek. "My Starlight. You always have been, ever since you navigated us through the Wandering Wilds by the stars. But," he says, and the smirk returns, curling at the edges of something far too sincere, "if you're still uncertain about my state of existence, I'm happy to demonstrate it again. And again. And again."

My stomach flips, and I tilt my head thoughtfully, fingers skating across his shoulder. "It might be wise to test that theory at least one more time," I tell him, feigning as much seriousness as possible. "For scientific purposes, of course."

He leans closer, his voice a velvet whisper against my ear. "Then allow me to provide you with conclusive evidence."

His mouth finds mine again, just as demanding, just as consuming. I gasp as his hands slide down my sides, trailing intricate, freezing patterns of ice that bloom and melt against the heat of my skin. My fingers tangle in his hair, dark silk beneath my palms, as I pull him closer, as if I could ever be close enough.

The kiss deepens, turning into something hungrier, something primal. Something not just about proving he's alive, but about claiming that life. About feeling it burn between us, through us.

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Ice meets water, pressure building like a tide beneath the skin. Riven groans softly into my mouth as I arch against him, his body pressing me down into the sheets, his magic wrapping around us like a storm kept barely at bay.

“I’ll never get enough of you,” he breathes between kisses. “Not in this life. Not in a thousand.”

My heart clenches, his words carving themselves into the deepest parts of me, right where my magic lives. Right where he lives.

And just as it crests again—just as our bodies align in that perfect rhythm—

A knock.

We freeze.

Riven growls low in his throat, a sound of pure, feral annoyance. “If that’s Thorne, I’m freezing him into solid crystal,” he says, his forehead dropping to mine.

I try not to laugh, but I fail. “He might deserve it.”

“Your Highnesses?” A voice calls from the corridor—one of Lysandra’s attendants, bright and formal. “The Queen awaits you in the throne room. Preparations for your departure are nearly complete.”

Riven pulls back, groaning in frustration as frost creeps across the sheets. “We’ll be out shortly,” he calls, his voice controlled despite the coiled tension pulsing through

our bond.

“Very well, Your Highness,” the attendant replies. “I’ll inform Her Majesty that you’ll be joining her within the hour.”

Riven flops back onto the pillows with an exaggerated sigh. “Time moves far too quickly when you’re thoroughly convincing your wife that you’re still alive,” he says, his smirk curling as he stretches with intentional slowness, showcasing every unfairly perfect inch of himself like a weapon he knows he’s mastered.

Then, all lean muscle and devastating grace, he rises and crosses to the windowsill where the Stillpoint Compass rests.

“It’s recharged,” he says, satisfaction evident in his voice as he lifts the artifact, its dial glowing with a soft, pulsing light. Something about it makes his features look sharper, deadlier, and more impossibly beautiful. “The full moon did its work.”

I slide out of bed and join him at the window, looking at the compass but not touching it.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, quieter now. “Ready to leave for our mission?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be to walk into a mythical volcano with my devastatingly handsome husband,” I reply, letting my gaze shamelessly drink him in. “Although I can think of at least three better ways we could be spending this already incredible morning.”

“Only three?” Riven raises an eyebrow, frost patterns swirling around his fingertips as they trace my collarbone. “I counted at least seven before we were interrupted.”

“Maybe you can explain seven more to me during the journey,” I suggest, fingers

sliding down the smooth lines of his chest.

“In excruciating detail,” he promises, his silver eyes darkening. “Complete with practical demonstrations in our carriage.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

We stay there like that for a few seconds. Then, somehow, we pull away from each other, and as I dress in my travel clothes, his fingers are cool against my skin as he helps me with the fastenings, his lips pressing against the nape of my neck in a way that makes me seriously consider being very, very late to the Queen’s audience.

“The sooner we save the world, the sooner we can get back to more important matters,” he says, pulling me against him one last time, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that’s equal parts promise and frustration.

When we part, I’m breathless, my water magic swirling in agitated patterns around us both. “That,” I say, pressing my palm against his chest, “is excellent motivation.”

He laughs, the sound melting through me like sunlight on snow. Then he steps back—just enough to offer me his arm.

“Ready, Starlight?” he asks, and my heart stutters, a smile blooming across my face.

That’s the second time. And this time, he says it like it’s the only name I’ve ever had.

“Always,” I reply, and I slip my hand through his arm, magic pulsing beneath my fingertips as we slowly—reluctantly—make our way out of our quarters and toward the throne room.

RIVEN

The throne room of the Summer Court is too bright. Too warm. The air is thick with an oppressive sweetness that clings to the back of my throat like honey turned to rot.

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I try to focus on Sapphire beside me, but my mind keeps drifting back to that frozen moment in the forest. Calder's sword raised to strike. The sound of my blade slicing through flesh. The weight of bodies falling as the world snapped back into motion.

I killed them all while they couldn't move, couldn't defend themselves. Guards I trained with. Ate with. Bled with. Men and women I'd known for decades. Some I'd even dared to hope saw me as something more than a weapon.

I flex my fingers for what must be the hundredth time this past hour, the phantom stickiness of bloodcoating my skin. I've scrubbed my hands over and over again, but it still clings. It probably always will.

Sapphire glances at me, concern flickering across her beautiful features.

She feels my anguish. I feel her worry. It's a cycle of shared pain and silent devotion, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. But even her presence—her magic brushing against mine—can't quiet the screaming silence Calder left behind.

But now is hardly the correct moment to show any signs of weakness. So, I call on my ice magic, guiding it into patterns across my hands in a failed attempt to bury the guilt that's consuming me whole.

As I do, I return my focus to the scene before me.

Lysandra sits regally on her throne, water cascading down crystal walls behind her, creating patterns that shift and dance. Before us stand two fae warriors, both with the unmistakable bearing of elite fighters.

The man has copper-toned skin and hair the color of autumn leaves. His posture is perfect, shoulders squared, his hand resting on the hilt of a blade that ripples like water caught in sunlight. The woman is equally impressive, lithe and deadly, with silvery-white hair and eyes that shift between blue and green.

They remind me of Calder. Of Lira. Of what loyalty meant... before I started killing the people who swore it to me. All of them dead by my hand while they were frozen in time, taking their final blows with no idea they were even coming.

“Prince Riven. Princess Sapphire,” Lysandra says, her voice melodic and light despite the gravity of our mission. “These are two of my most trusted warriors, Maeris and Thalia. They have faithfully served the Summer Court for centuries, and they will accompany you to retrieve the Ember of Prometheus.”

Maeris and Thalia bow in unison, a fluid movement that speaks to their centuries of training together.

My heart stumbles in my chest as Calder’s face flashes in my mind again—his frozen expression as my blade severed his head from his body. The man who taught me how to properly hold a sword when I was five years old. The man who snuck me winter berry pie after my father’s brutal training sessions and hateful words.

The man who betrayed my trust and tried to kill my wife.

My Starlight.

She’s the one my lungs breathe for and my heart beats for. The only light I have left, and the only one I haven’t failed. The only thing standing between me and something colder, darker, and more dangerous than even I can name.

I will destroy everything if it means keeping her safe.

“Queen Lysandra,” I say, my voice tighter than I intend as I shove back the flood of memories of bodies burning in the pyre I created, “might I request a private audience with you and Princess Sapphire before we finalize these arrangements?”

Lysandra studies me for a moment longer than feels comfortable, her expression unreadable.

Then she nods once. “Maeris. Thalia. Leave us,” she commands. “Wait outside until summoned.”

They bow in unison and glide from the room without hesitation. Their movements are perfectly synchronized—just like my guards had been, right up until they tried to kill us over a shared toast.

Stop, I tell myself, trying with everything I can to push it down, to stop my thoughts from coming so quickly that I’m drowning in them. Focus.

Lysandra looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to speak.

I draw in a slow breath, calling the chill into my chest, letting it wrap around the wildfire that hasn’t stopped burning since Sapphire fused our souls together in the Tides.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” I begin, somehow keeping my voice steady, despite the storm raging inside me, “I’m not comfortable with additional guards joining us.”

She bristles, but I press on.

“The Winter Court guards who traveled with us were handpicked by Calder—my combat instructors since childhood.” I pause, the words sticking in my throat, letting

my ice numb the pain. “They ambushed us after toasting to our marriage. They tried to kill your daughter, and then I executed them while time was frozen.”

The confession hangs in the air, heavy and terrible. I haven’t spoken it aloud until now. I haven’t needed to. Sapphire already knew.

Saying the words now makes the reality of what I did hit me all over again.

I killed them like a butcher slaughtering livestock. Methodical, efficient, and merciless. And part of me didn’t regret it.

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I think that might be what terrifies me the most.

“I will not risk your daughter’s life again,” I tell Lysandra, steel threading my voice.

“I will not be forced to kill more people I’m supposed to trust.”

“Nonsense,” she says, brushing off my concerns with a wave of her hand. “In the Summer Court, our loyalties run deeper than ice. Maeris and Thalia have served me faithfully since before your father took the Winter throne. I would trust them with my life—and, more importantly, with my daughter’s.”

I narrow my eyes at her, frost forming beneath my boots.

“My guards were equally as respected,” I counter, my voice hardening as ice spreads further across the floor. “Some had served the Winter Court for centuries. And still, they turned. I had to look into their frozen eyes as I killed them one by one. I had to hear their bodies hit the ground. I had to build the pyre that devoured them whole.”

Each word burns Calder and the rest of them to ash all over again.

“You think I don’t understand betrayal?” Lysandra’s laugh is cold, at odds with the warmth of the Summer Court. “I am a queen, Prince Riven. Your decades of life are but a flicker compared to the millennia I’ve endured.”

Sapphire steps forward, water swirling around her, commanding the room with quiet power.

“Riven isn’t questioning your judgment. He’s simply concerned about my safety.”

She squeezes my hand, and the bond surges between us—warm, aching, and full of everything I’m trying to contain.

That’s when I feel it again. The edge of something sharp in me, something growing. Something my father once carried. A willingness to kill, to destroy, and to let the world freeze over if it means she lives.

This isn’t destruction by sacrifice anymore. It’s destruction by annihilation.

Because I no longer want to die for her. I want to live for her. Mercilessly, violently, and without remorse.

“I’m also concerned for your safety,” Lysandra replies, softening slightly, seemingly unaware of the silent war I’m fighting within myself. “Which is why Maeris and Thalia will accompany you. The journey to the Pyros Vault is perilous, even with your combined magic, and their presence is non-negotiable.”

I clench my jaw. Because I know how this works. Which battles are worth the bloodshed.

“Then I want a binding oath,” I say. “A magically enforced vow of loyalty—to both of us. Especially to her.”

My hand tightens around Sapphire’s, and the Compass pulses in my pocket, as if agreeing with my words.

Because no one will ever touch my Starlight again.

Not unless they want to bleed for it.

RIVEN

Lysandra's eyes narrow. "You dare question the loyalty of my warriors?"

"I dare to protect my wife," I reply, my voice as cold as the frost spreading across the floor.

Through the bond, I feel Sapphire's anxiety spike, her magic brushing against mine in gentle, rhythmic waves. She's urging caution. Reminding me that not every threat needs to be met with a blade.

Reminding me that I'm not like the father who raised me.

Still... what if I'm more like him than I care to admit? Because I've killed for Sapphire before, without hesitation. But this was different. I stopped time. I made a choice to not disarm or defend, but to execute my knights while they were frozen, stuck in the moment before their blades could reach her.

I robbed them of the chance to fight back. Not because I had to, but because I wouldn't risk her for a fair fight.

And I don't know what's worse—the slaughter itself, or the fact that I don't regret it. That it makes me feel more powerful than ever, and that I wouldn't hesitate before doing it again.

"Riven's concern is valid after what we experienced," Sapphire's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts, measured and diplomatic. Court-perfect. As if she was born for this—which, given her parentage, she was. "If Maeris and Thalia are as loyal as you claim, a binding oath should be no issue for them."

My ice retracts, curling back into me. Not because I'm any less haunted, but because I can't look away from her. From how flawlessly she's adapted to our courts, and how quickly she's learned to speak our language.

Soul-fused or not, I'll never be able to express how deep my love for her runs.

But I feel it now, sharper than before. And maybe that's the problem. Because I'm hers. Fully and completely. And with me, she'll always be safe. Always. Even if it destroys me. Especially if it does.

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Lysandra studies me again. But this time, her expression shifts, softening slightly.

“Perhaps I misjudged you, Winter Prince,” she says. “Your devotion to my daughter is admirable, even if somewhat... ferocious in its intensity.”

“My devotion,” I say, my voice even, “is what keeps her alive.”

Our eyes lock. Neither of us blinks.

She has no idea what I gave. What I’ve already lost. What I’m willing to sacrifice. And I’m not budging until we’re as protected as possible against Lysandra’s so-called trusted warriors.

Because yes, I want to win this war. I want to end the Night Court’s threat. But above all else, I will not live a life that doesn’t have Sapphire in it. Now that our souls are fused, I hopefully won’t even be able to.

Lysandra inclines her head. “Very well,” she says simply, and then she stands, makes her way to the doors of the throne room, and opens them.

Maeris and Thalia enter again, their expressions unreadable as they approach.

This time, they give us a little more space.

Good.

Let them feel the warning in my posture. Let them see the frost that clings to the

stone at my feet. Let them know that if they try to cross me—if they try to hurther—I will stop time and make them pay for it before they can blink.

If my father knew the monster he was unleashing when he gifted me the compass, would he have handedit over so willingly? Or did he see what I'm only just beginning to understand—that no matter what state his mind is in, he will always do whatever it takes to forge me into the weapon he designed me to be?

No, not just a weapon. A legacy.

A silver storm that doesn't ask for permission.

“Maeris. Thalia.” Lysandra's voice jolts me out of my thoughts as she moves to stand in front of her throne, thin streams of water swirling like serpents around her fingers. “Prince Riven has raised concerns about your loyalties.”

Maeris's expression remains impassive, but Thalia's eyes widen slightly.

“Your Majesty?” Maeris asks, his tone respectful, but touched with the kind of bewilderment only centuries of service can justify. “We have served you faithfully for generations.”

“Indeed, you have,” Lysandra agrees. “But the alliance between our courts is new, and Prince Riven was recently betrayed by Winter Court guards he trusted implicitly. Guards who did not support his union with my daughter, and who tried to kill them both.” She gestures toward us with a fluid motion of her hand. “Given that experience, they have requested a binding oath of loyalty before you accompany them to the Pyros Vault.”

Understanding dawns in Maeris's eyes, and he straightens his shoulders, nodding once. “I will swear whatever oath is required,” he says.

Thalia hesitates for just a heartbeat, then nods as well. “As will I, Your Majesty.”

“Perfect,” Lysandra says, the sharpness of the word making it clear that it was never up for debate. “I will now state the terms of this oath.”

The room grows silent, the only sound the gentle splash of water in the fountains.

“You will swear to protect Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor and Prince Riven Draevor with your lives, placing their safety above your own,” she begins, her gaze locked on the two summer warriors. “You will not betray them, abandon them, or turn against them with any intent, malicious or otherwise. You will stand between them and danger, follow their commands as if they were my own, and remain loyal to them until they return safely to the Summer Court.”

The weight of her words hangs in the air, heavy with power and implication.

“Maeris,” Lysandra commands. “Step forward.”

He moves without hesitation, stopping an arm’s length from the queen.

“Do you accept these terms?” she asks.

“I do, Your Majesty,” he replies without a second’s thought.

She offers her hand, and the moment their skin connects, water surges upward, encircling their wrists in glowing spirals that twine to their elbows. The magic pulses once, then sinks into their skin, leaving behind a blue shimmer that fades as quickly as it formed.

Maeris steps back, his expression solemn but unwavering.

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“Thalia,” Lysandra calls. “Step forward.”

Thalia approaches, and I catch it again—a tightness in her brow.

“Do you accept these terms?” Lysandra asks her.

“I do, Your Majesty,” she answers, her voice steady despite whatever I saw in her expression a moment earlier.

Their hands clasp, and again, the water seals the deal.

But I’m watching her now. Closely. And I won’t stop.

“Now,” Lysandra continues, pivoting with court-perfect grace, “we must discuss your journey to the Pyros Vault. Because as you know, its mortal realm counterpart in Mount Etna lies in Italy—a distance that could take weeks, or even months, to traverse in the mystical realm. Therefore, you will cross into the mortal realm and travel from New York to Italy by private plane.”

“By plane?” Thalia scoffs. “And who, exactly, is going to fly this plane? Last I checked, most fae don’t have pilot’s licenses.”

I smirk despite myself. Because her distaste is common among our kind—especially those too old or too proud to adapt.

The idea of surrendering control to a metal contraption powered by combustion? Unthinkable.

Lysandra gives Thalia a small, somewhat understanding smile.

“I know someone who does,” the queen says. “T has flown for the Summer Court, the vampire kingdoms, and several shifter territories. She’s efficient, discreet, and utterly unflappable.”

I exchange a glance with Sapphire, feeling her uncertainty through our bond. It mirrors my own. I’m not quite as accustomed to the mortal realm as I’ve had her believe, and while she was raised there, international travel wasn’t exactly part of her experience in Presque Isle. As far as I’m aware, she’s never been on a plane at all.

She simply gives me a small, encouraging smile, then shifts her focus back to Lysandra.

“When do we leave?” she asks, her voice steady despite her fear.

Love for her rushes through me all over again. It’s the type of love that doesn’t just make me vulnerable, but that makes me willing.

Willing to suffer. To fall. To be her blade, her shield, and her ruin. Anything, so long as I’m hers.

“The veil between realms opens in less than an hour. T will be waiting in Central Park, and from there, she’ll take you directly to a private airfield. Retrieve the Ember and return to us as quickly as possible,” Lysandra says, and she approaches Sapphire, placing her hands on her shoulders in a gesture that would seem motherly, if not for the calculation in her eyes. “The fate of all realms depends on your success.”

RIVEN

It’s nearly six in the morning, the time when the veil between realms will thin and the

four of us can enter the human realm. The air is cold and dark, the horizon still star-streaked in that eerie hour before dawn, where even the Summer Court feels subdued.

Ghost and Nebula stand next to us, their eyes fixed on us with solemn understanding. They won't be coming.

Leaving our familiars behind will be necessary, since the mortal realm will weaken their magic. Plus, fae already dislike planes—a giant snow leopard and cheetah would absolutely despise it.

“One minute,” Lysandra counts down, and then the world is shimmering around us, my skin tingling as the magic takes hold and the world fades away, bringing us from the mystical realm to the mortal realm.

My skin tingles, my senses twist, and then—just like that—we're somewhere else.

My hand, of course, stayed in Sapphire's the entire time. It tends to gravitate toward her, even when I don't realize it. I think some part of me would lose control if we weren't connected. And through the bond, I know she wants me as badly as I need her.

The end of February in New York is nothing like the Summer Court. Everything is dead in comparison, the trees bare, the grass muted. But it's more than that. Because the air in the mortal realm feels wrong—thick and dull, lacking the vibrant currents of magic that permeate the fae courts.

“Everyone stay alert,” Maeris commands, water forming into pointed droplets that hover around his wrists, ready to strike if needed. “T should be waiting near the park's exit.”

Thalia takes the lead, her silver-white hair almost luminescent in the darkness.

I watch her closely, that momentary hesitation during the oath-taking lingering in my mind like a splinter beneath skin.

Sapphire pauses next to me, flexing her fingers.

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“You okay?” I ask her, even though I can feel the shift in her magic, the unsteadiness rippling across our bond.

“I feel...” she starts, her brow furrowing. “Off-balance. Like I’m missing a part of myself.”

I stop and turn to face her fully, studying the subtle changes in her expression. Even in the dim light, she’s breathtaking—white-blond hair streaked with blue that catches the last of the starlight, and eyes that shift from deep to pale sapphire depending on which type of magic she’s using.

Not to mention the hum of something greater that clings to her no matter where she stands. It’s like the mortal realm doesn’t know what to do with her—like it’s trying to flatten something that was never meant to be small.

“That’s because you don’t belong here,” I tell her, lifting my free hand to brush a strand of hair from her face, frost patterns forming briefly where my fingers touch her skin. “You never have. You belong in the mystical realm—with me.”

The words come out more possessive than I intended, but I don’t care. They’re true. What I feel for her is starting to outgrow language, and I don’t know what it looks like from the outside anymore. I don’t know if it looks like love, or if it’s become something else.

So, I try to pull the edge back. To smooth the blade, just in case my love has grown into something so sharp it might cut her, too.

Because after what I did in that clearing, she'd be right to fear me. And gods help me, if she ever does... I don't know who I'll become in the aftermath. I don't want to know.

I pray I never will.

"I grew up here," she reminds me, and I shake myself back into focus, even though it's getting harder and harder to focus with my soul bound so tightly to hers. "I spent nineteen years thinking I was human."

"And yet you always felt out of place." I step closer, until there's barely a breath between us. "Always knew something was missing. Always yearned for more. I saw it in your eyes the first night at the Maple Pig. You were searching for something you couldn't name."

A smile tugs at her lips. "And you found me instead."

"And I found you instead," I agree, not bothering to hide the depth of emotion in my voice. "The single thing I've ever truly gotten right in my life."

The air between us buzzes, and I need to be closer to her, mission be damned. She's the only thing anchoring me to this world. Without her, I would literally be gone from it.

"If you two are quite finished," Thalia interrupts, her tone sharp with disapproval, "we have a mission to begin and a plane to catch."

"My wife and I are discussing the effects of realm transition on her magic," I say coolly, not looking away from Sapphire as I address Thalia. "A vital strategic consideration, wouldn't you agree?"

The words come out light. Teasing. Calculated.

They're for her. Only ever for her.

Sapphire's eyes sparkle with barely contained laughter, and my heart—the one she brought back from death—skips a beat. Because ever since executing my men in the clearing, the sight of her smiling like this is the only thing keeping the weight in my chest from crushing me completely.

“You're terrible,” she whispers, but she leans in to kiss me anyway.

“I most definitely am,” I murmur against her lips, hating how the words feel truer now than ever. “But you love me anyway.”

“I do,” she says, pulling back with visible reluctance. “Even when you're deliberately provoking our traveling companions.”

“Especially then,” I correct her with a smirk.

But it's thinner now. A little forced at the edges. A performance I can't stop playing, because if I let her see what I really am, and if she ever stops laughing when I need her to?—

I don't know what will be left of me.

Maeris pointedly clears his throat. “There's movement ahead,” he says. “Be ready.”

The playfulness evaporates from Sapphire's expression as she reaches for her Star Disc—Glimmercut—and I draw Frostbite, its familiar weight balanced in my grip, ice magic flowing through the blade.

“Stay close to me,” I tell Sapphire, because even with four different types of magic at her command and the deadly accuracy of her Star Disc, the need to shield her beats in my blood like a second heartbeat.

“Always,” she replies, and through our bond, I feel her resolve spike.

But what she doesn’t feel—what I refuse to let her feel, what I’m trying with every breath to keep from flowing from me and into her through our soul bond—is how I’m barely holding the storm together. Because I won’t let her carry this, too. Not when she’s already carried me through death and back.

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She deserves my strength—not my ruin.

As we approach the park's exit, a lone figure comes into view, leaning against a lamppost. A woman with wild, dark hair that seems to move with a breeze that isn't there, dressed in sleek black clothing that suggests both modern fashion and something timeless.

I study her, unease rippling through me. There's something off about her—a vibration in the air around her, as if her presence disturbs reality.

When she spots us, her lips curl into a knowing smile.

“Lysandra's envoy finally arrives,” she says. “I was beginning to think I'd been stood up.”

“You must be T,” Maeris says, although he doesn't lower his guard.

“The one and only,” the woman replies with a slight bow. “I'm your pilot, guide, and general guardian through the tedium of mortal travel.”

Magic hums around her—but not water. Not ice. Not anything I can name. It feels like a hurricane mid-spin, or lightning about to choose its target.

My grip tightens on my sword, frost spreading down the hilt.

“Something wrong, Your Highness?” T asks, her strange eyes fixed on me. They shift like storm clouds—gray one moment, and almost electric blue the next. “You look

like you've seen a ghost."

I force my expression into neutrality. "Just eager to get moving."

"Yes, well," she says, glancing at her watch. "We have a flight to catch. The private airfield is waiting, and I don't like to keep my baby waiting."

"Your baby?" Sapphire asks.

T's smile broadens. "My plane. Custom modified G650. The fastest way to get from here to there without..." She trails off, making a vague gesture with her hand. "Well, other means."

Maeris steps forward, spirals of water hovering around his wrists. "How experienced are you with flying?" he asks.

T's expression darkens, and the previously clear sky rumbles with thunder.

"Better get moving before this storm gets worse." She raises her hand, pointedly ignoring Maeris's question, and a yellow taxi van pulls to the side of the road next to us. "Our chariot awaits."

Sapphire's fingers lace with mine, water and ice swirling together in response to our shared unease.

"She's not what I expected," she whispers.

"She's not what anyone expected," I reply under my breath, my eyes fixed on T. Not out of awe, but with calculation. Watching, measuring, and deciding what I'll do if she turns out to be a threat.

Because if she puts Sapphire in danger, I won't hesitate.

T opens the taxi door with a flourish. "In we go. Time is wasting, and storms wait for no one," she says. "At least, not when I don't want them to."

We climb in, the city lights flickering across Sapphire's skin as she settles beside me. She looks like something out of myth, leaving me breathless at the fact that this beautiful, star touched warrior—the one I knew would unravel me from the moment I saw her in that bar—is mine.

Or, more accurately, that I'm hers.

Once we're situated, the taxi pulls away from the curb.

"Sicily awaits," T says cheerfully, lowering the window. "I hope you're all ready for a little adventure."

But I'm barely listening. Because my hand has already drifted down, fingers tracing the ridged edge of the compass beneath my waistband.

T was wrong about one thing.

Time doesn't wait for no one.

Not when it bends to me.

ZOEY

I've touched each puzzle piece at least a dozen times, trying to make them fit where they don't belong. The image is supposed to be a forest scene—trees and flowers and wildlife—but right now, it's just fragments scattered across the table, much like my thoughts. Chaotic, broken, and senseless.

Aerix didn't come to me last night.

The realization sits heavily in my chest, a cold weight that makes it hard to breathe. I've spent the entire night tossing in sheets that feel too empty, too cold without him beside me.

Now, I'm still in my nightclothes, hair half coming out of its braids, my face unwashed. What's the point? If Aerix has decided I'm not worth his time anymore, then nothing matters. Not breakfast, not appearances, not even the hunger gnawing at my stomach.

I return to the puzzle, but no pieces fit.

So, I swipe my hand across the table, sending a bunch of them scattering to the ground.

I'm picking them up when a knock echoes through the room.

Three precise raps. Aerix's knock.

I don't move. I just stare at the door, bracing myself.

Will he be cold and cruel, ready to remind me what happens to humans who forget their place in the Night Court? Will his eyes be flat and empty again, his wings sharp with restrained anger?

The door swings open without waiting for my invitation.

Aerix steps into the room. He's a vision in black, as always. His wings are folded behind him, sleek and lethal, his expression unreadable.

My heart stutters as I take him in, searching for any sign of the frost and fury from last night. But his face is calm, his midnight eyes clear and untroubled. As if our argument never happened.

And just like that, the pressure in my chest begins to ease.

"Are you coming to breakfast?" he asks casually, stepping into the room.

I blink, thrown completely off balance. "I—what?"

His lips curve into that familiar half-smile that always makes my pulse race. "Breakfast," he repeats, crossing the room toward me. "The meal one consumes upon waking." His fingers brush my cheek as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Unless you'd prefer to stay here playing with your puzzle?" He glances pointedly at the floor, where the pieces are scattered about. "Although, that looks like it's going only slightly better than your harpsichord practices."

Before I can reply, he leans down and kisses me. Not gentle, not explanatory, but a storm reasserting its dominion. His magic swirls around us, cold air caressing my skin, and my body responds instinctively, leaning into him despite my confusion.

When he pulls away, I stare up at him, searching his face for any hint of the wounded man who left me last night.

“What’s going on, Aerix?” The words tumble out before I can stop them.

“Going on?” He raises an eyebrow, his head tilting in that predatory way of his that makes a thrill curl up my spine. “I came to ensure my consort will be joining me for breakfast.”

There’s that word again.

Consort.

The one that sparked everything last night.

“Last night, you—” I begin, but a warning tightens in his eyes, sharp beneath the surface.

A clear message: don’t push.

He turns away from me, moving toward the dresser where I keep my sketchbooks. Then, from inside his jacket, he pulls out a folded piece of paper I recognize immediately—the drawing I made with my blood pen. The one where I’d sketched myself riding beside him into court, each of us on our own jaguar.

“I took this while you were sleeping,” he says, unfolding it carefully. “You’ve been improving.”

The realization that he came into my room while I slept—that he went through my things—makes my breath catch, and I’m not sure if it’s in a good or a bad way.

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“I’m going to have it framed in gold,” he continues, refolding the drawing with precision and sliding it back into his jacket. “A fitting display for such a powerful statement.”

“Why?” I ask, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

His wings shift—just slightly—but enough to betray the tension running beneath his smooth exterior.

“Because I always want us to see it,” he says. “To see what you want. What you’re ready for. What you’re becoming. Now, come to breakfast as you are. You don’t need to change. Not forher.”

Her.

Sophia.

Aerix’s breakfast.

“I haven’t even brushed my hair,” I point out, confusion mounting.

“Good.” Aerix’s hand skims down my arm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

“I like you this way. Wild. Untamed. Unafraid.”

From the way he leans forward, his eyes burning into mine, I think he’s about to release all that wild, untamed energy out on me.

Instead, he gives me a single nod, turns, and leads the way through the connecting door into his quarters.

When I step inside, I find a girl stands silently by the window, her head bowed, her hands clasped in front of her. She's older than me—maybe in her lower thirties—with copper-colored hair and skin so pale it's almost translucent.

I don't know who she is.

All I know is that she's not Sophia.

"Aerix?" I whisper, my voice catching.

His gaze remains fixed on the girl. "Sophia has been reassigned."

"Reassigned?" I repeat. "You mean?—"

"To the barns," he confirms, his tone casual, as if discussing the weather. "Her disrespect toward you yesterday was unacceptable."

Horror floods through me as I think of Sophia—sweet, welcoming Sophia—now condemned to the barns because she accused me of killing Henry.

Which, as Aerix and I are both aware, was an accurate accusation.

"But I forgave her," I say, the words rushing out. "I told her it was fine."

He turns to me then, one eyebrow raised. "Sophia was not your servant to discipline," he says, his wings shifting slightly, the only sign of his irritation. "She questioned you. Accused you. In my court, that is treason."

My throat tightens. “You didn’t even tell me?—“

“You might have tried to stop me if I did,” he cuts me off, his eyes begging me to understand. “If you had, I would have listened to you. I would have given in. You don’t see it, but you could unravel me with a word, Zoey. You have more power than you know.”

My heart pounds as I take in his admission. Because all this time, I thought I was the one at his mercy, when in reality...

“Are we okay?” he asks, the question so human, so ordinary, that it catches me off guard.

I study his face—the perfect angles, the midnight eyes that have haunted my dreams since that first night in the bunker. He’s the dark prince who sends people to the barns for disrespecting me, who drinks human blood without remorse, and who sees most of my kind as little more than cattle.

And yet here he is, waiting for my answer like it’s the only thing that matters in all the realms.

Calm settles in. Not quite peace, but just enough clarity to nod. To breathe. To say what he needs to hear.

“Yes,” I say finally. “We’re okay.”

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His shoulders relax, although his wings remain tense against his back.

And then, he extends his hand to mine.

“Sit,” he says, gesturing to the table where breakfast is laid out. It’s larger than usual—pancakes, waffles, eggs, and even the cookies I love so much. “Please.”

My stomach flips at the vulnerability in that one word.

Please.

So, I take his hand, letting him guide me to the chair across from his.

The unnamed woman remains standing by the window, perfectly still, like a statue or a piece of furniture.

Aerix sits with practiced grace, his wings adjusting to accommodate the chair’s back. He doesn’t release my hand, instead tightening his grip slightly, as if afraid I might withdraw.

“Come,” he commands, not looking at the woman, but clearly addressing her.

She approaches without hesitation, her steps silent against the stone floor. As she stops beside his chair, her eyes remain fixed on some distant point, her face expressionless.

Is she new? She has to be new. Royals don’t take hand-me-downs.

Without needing further instruction, the woman bends her neck to the side, exposing the pale column of her throat.

Aerix's eyes lock on mine as he lowers his mouth to her neck, his fangs extending and puncturing the skin with zero hesitation, zero mercy. There's no care in the way he bites—no pretense of gentleness. It's completely opposite of the tenderness he uses when he feeds from me, or the distant respect he used to offer Sophia.

As he drinks, he doesn't release my hand. If anything, his grip tightens. Hard. Fingers interlaced with mine like a vow he's carving into my bones.

My breath catches, and he notices—of course he does. A flicker of pleasure passes through his eyes, so subtle I might have missed it if I wasn't watching him the way he's watching me.

When he eventually pulls away, his lips are red and perfect. He lingers for a moment, his mouth close to the woman's throat, but his hand continues to grip mine like it's the only thing tethering him to the room.

And maybe it is.

"Go," he tells the woman, who bows slightly, then retreats from the room without a backward glance.

We sit in silence, and I wait for him to say something about what just happened. About Sophia, and about this new girl whose name I don't even know.

Instead, he shifts gears.

"I have something for you." He releases my hand and crosses the room to his wardrobe, pulling out a silk-covered box from inside—long and flat. "I want you to

put it on.”

I look up at him, searching his face for some clue about what this means.

His expression gives nothing away. It’s only sharp lines and unreadable stillness.

“What is it?” I finally ask.

“Open it,” he says, coming over and holding the box out to me, the breakfast he’d had arranged for us apparently forgotten.

Just like Sophia was forgotten. Just like everything is, once he remembers I’m the only thing in the world that matters to him.

I lift the lid, and my breath catches. Because inside lies a gown unlike anything I’ve ever seen. The fabric is dark, and it’s shot through with hand-stitched streaks of red, the same hue as blood. Silvery gems glitter in swirling patterns across the bodice... or are they diamonds? I’m not sure.

It’s decadent. Violent. Beautiful. A warning dressed in silk.

It’s the kind of dress that belongs in a fairy tale. Not in the hands of a small-town girl from Presque Isle.

But Aerix doesn’t see me as that girl anymore. Maybe he never did.

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Which is fine by me, since I don't see her anymore, either.

ZOEY

"Aerix," I breathe, running my fingers over the dress's soft fabric. "It's beautiful."

"The real masterpiece stands right before me." He brushes his thumb along my cheek, his gaze darkening. "Because nothing—no gown, no diamond, and no star in the sky—can touch the beauty I claim as mine. Now... turn around so I can help you into it."

I stand, every heartbeat throbbing in my ears, and slowly remove my nightgown, so I'm bare before him.

He looks me over, then moves forward, placing a soft kiss on my hip—on the place where his name is scarred onto my skin. His lips linger there for a few seconds, and in those seconds, I suspect it's going to be a while until clothes are put on me again.

I lean into him, threading my fingers through his silky hair, needing more pressure between his lips and my body.

He breathes a soft sigh against my skin, then reluctantly pulls away.

"You're distracting me," he tells me, his voice low with reluctance. "And as much as I'd love to indulge in every inch of you right now, we have plans that can't wait."

I open my mouth to ask him what plans, but he stops me before I can.

“You’ll find out soon,” he promises. “But not if you don’t put on this dress.”

He reaches into the box and removes something delicate—a chemise of sheer silk that looks like it was spun from moonlight.

“Arms up,” he instructs, and I comply, allowing him to slip the whisper-soft fabric over my head.

It settles like cool water, pooling around my hips.

I’ve never had someone dress me before. It feels strangely intimate, almost more so than when he feeds from me. Because this isn’t seduction—it’s ceremony.

“You are magnificent,” he says without even a hint of predatory edge to his voice. Just pure, raw admiration as he lifts the magnificent gown from its box. “Now, the dress.”

I step into it, and Aerix moves behind me, his fingers working the laces of the corset with practiced precision. Each pull cinches me tighter, molding the dress to my body.

I’ve never worn anything so exquisite—or so restrictive.

“Breathe,” he reminds me as he pulls the final lace. “But not too deeply.”

“If I’d known I was signing up for breath control,” I say, glancing at him slyly, “I’d have asked you to carve a safe word on me along with your name.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he growls, standing up, turning me to face him, and sliding his hands against the fabric at my hips. “Come with me. I want you to see yourself.”

He takes my hand—gently this time, not tight like while he was feeding—and leads

me over to the full-length mirror in the corner of his chambers.

The woman staring back at me is a stranger. Regal, imposing, and dangerous. The dark fabric makes my skin look like polished ivory, and the diamonds—because I’m sure now that’s what they are—catch the light, creating a constellation across my bodice.

This is the girl who killed without remorse. The one who’s been in love with a vampire prince since longer than she cares to admit. The one who wouldn’t trade that prince for anything in the world.

“This isn’t just for me,” I realize, and his eyes meet mine in the mirror, his lips curling into that knowing smile I’ve grown to love and fear.

“No,” he confirms. “It isn’t.”

And suddenly, everything clicks into place.

The framing of my blood drawing. Sophia’s banishment for disrespecting me. The dress that’s clearly meant for public display.

This is his answer to my plea from last night. I told him I couldn’t live trapped within four walls forever, and he listened—in his own twisted, possessive way.

“You’re taking me outside these rooms,” I say, not quite a question, but an observation.

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He steps closer, his chest pressing against my back, his wings curving forward. “Wait here,” he says, pulling himself away from me and walking toward his dresser.

He returns with a silver hairbrush, its handle inlaid with what looks like obsidian. Without a word, he turns me away from the mirror and carefully begins to undo my messy braids. His touch is gentle as he works out the tangles, starting at the ends and making his way up to my scalp.

The intimacy of the gesture transports me back to my first days in the Night Court—to the throne room when King Thanatos unbraided my hair with deliberate cruelty, stripping away my dignity with each stroke.

I felt violated then. Exposed, scared, and powerless.

“You’re remembering something,” Aerix observes, his fingers never pausing in their work.

“The king,” I admit, since there’s no point in hiding it from him. “When I first arrived. You saw it—he did this, too.”

Aerix’s hands still, and his magic sharpens, the air turning brittle around us.

“Not like this,” he finally says, resuming his brushing. The strokes are slower now, more deliberate. “Never like this.”

“No,” I agree, leaning into his touch. “That was about breaking me. This feels like...”

I trail off, uncertain how to describe the difference.

“Like worship,” he finishes, his voice barely above a whisper. “Because that’s exactly what it is. You’re mine to protect. Mine to display. Mine to...”

I tense, waiting for him to say it.

His to love.

It doesn’t come.

It never comes from him first.

The silence hangs between us, his unfinished sentence leaving a void I’ve grown used to filling. Every time, it’s the same dance. I say it first, he echoes it back, and then he asks me to say it again—as if he didn’t believe me the first time.

I look up at him through the mirror, watching his wings shift behind him, betraying emotions his face won’t show.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell him, running my hands over the front of the dress, feeling the way the diamonds catch on my fingertips. “The most beautiful thing I’ve ever worn. I love it. Just like I love you.”

His eyes darken at my words, and his wings extend slightly, feathers rustling with a sound like distant thunder.

“You’ll stay with me?” He places the brush down on the table and lets his fingers graze my waist, as if he wants to hold tightly, but can’t bring himself to do it. “No matter what?”

The question beneath the question. The fear beneath the demand. It's there in the tension of his wings and the slight tremble of his hands.

"Yes," I promise. "I'm yours by choice, not by force. And I never want to let go."

He exhales, a sound of relief so slight I almost miss it. Then he moves my hair aside, exposing the curve where my neck meets my shoulder. His lips brush my skin, and I feel the sharp graze of his fangs, not quite breaking the surface, but enough to steal my breath.

"You're meant for me, Zoey. Designed for me by the gods themselves," he whispers against my skin, his air magic cooling the spot where his mouth just was. "I love you more than you'll ever know. You're in my veins and my bones, woven into the fabric of my soul. There isn't a realm I wouldn't tear apart to keep you. And now, you're ready for me to show all of them that you're mine."

ZOEY

Thirty minutes later, I'm following Aerix down the palace's grand staircase, my fingers gripping the railing for support as I try to adjust to the height of the heels he's given me to match the dress. The beautiful crystal chandeliers float overhead, each movement making the diamonds in my bodice flash in the light.

Guards bow their heads as we pass. Some look at me in surprise, others with barely concealed disdain. But not one dares to hold my gaze for more than a second.

As we approach the massive front doors of the palace, my heart pounds so hard I'm sure Aerix can hear it. Because I haven't been outside these walls in weeks. Time has become almost nonexistent in this eternal night.

"Where are we going?" I ask as we step into the open air of the courtyard.

The night is alive with smells and sounds I'd almost forgotten—frost-tipped flowers, the metallic tang of the blood moat, and somewhere beyond, music.

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Aerix's wings shift as he turns to face me.

"Tonight is the night of the full moon," he says, his midnight eyes reflecting the starlight, as if it's a part of his soul. "When all night fae, regardless of station, celebrate in the streets."

"And you're taking me there?"

"Yes." His wings extend, stirring the air around us. "Tonight, you'll walk at my side, dressed as you deserve, where the entire court can see who you belong to."

My breath catches, remembering my drawing—the one he took, the one he plans to frame in gold.

"Why now?" I can't stop myself from asking. "Yesterday, I wasn't sure how long it would be until you'd even want to talk to me again. And today..."

His thumb traces my lower lip, silencing me.

"Because I realized," he says, "that what I fear more than anyone stealing you from me is you wanting to leave. Knowing that what I was giving you might not be enough to make you stay—that your desire to escape could outweigh everything I offered—terrifies me more than death."

His confession takes my breath away, and I stare up at him—at this beautiful prince of darkness who kills without remorse and rules through fear.

The prince who's apparently afraid of losing me. The one who tells me he loves me in every way that counts, even if he can never bring himself to say the words first.

Before I can respond, he steps away, motioning to the edge of the courtyard as a sleek black shape emerges from the shadows. Nyx, his jaguar, prowls toward us, her golden eyes gleaming, her muscles rippling beneath her midnight coat.

"Come," Aerix says to me. "Tonight, we cross the blood moat. Tonight, you'll see what it means to be mine in the Night Court."

He lifts me onto Nyx's back before mounting behind me, his arms encircling my waist, his chest pressed against my back. I feel the soft rustle of his wings folding tight against him, the cold trail of his breath on my neck.

"Are you ready?" he asks, his lips brushing the shell of my ear.

"Yes," I manage to say, overwhelmed by the proximity of him, by the promise of freedom after so long in captivity.

"Hold on tight," he tells me, and then Nyx leaps forward, her powerful limbs carrying us toward the crimson moat that separates the palace from the town beyond.

As we approach the wooden bridge that spans it, I catch sight of my reflection in the blood-tinged water and nearly gasp. Diamonds glittering against dark fabric, hair swept into elegant waves, sitting tall and straight before Aerix.

Not his pet. Not his prisoner.

His consort, for him to display for the Night Court to see.

I snuggle back into his hold, his arms tight around me. Safe.

His.

Warmth curls inside me at the thought.

We cross the bridge, the sounds of revelry growing louder with each of Nyx's strides. Music with a pulsing, primal beat. Laughter that's both joyous and menacing.

As we make our way down a narrow, winding street, the crowd parts for us. But it's not the respectful scene from my drawing. Instead, I'm met with predatory stares, hushed whispers, and pointing fingers.

"Look at the prince's little pet," a female with red hair says to her companion.

"Dressed up like she's one of us," another sneers.

"I wonder if she tastes as sweet as she looks," a male voice calls out, sending ripples of laughter through the crowd.

I stiffen. Because it's the same as last time. It doesn't matter what I wear—I'm nothing to them. As long as I'm human, I'll never be anything to them other than their next meal.

Aerix's body tenses, the air turning cold and sharp around us.

Then, from our left, a muscled man with jagged scars across his face steps forward.

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“What a waste,” he says, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Using a perfectly good human for just one royal when she could serve all of us. I bet she’d break so beautifully after a week in my?—“

Aerix pulls out his dagger and throws it.

The blade embeds itself in the man’s heart, silencing him mid-word, surprise flashing across his face before he crumples to the ground.

The chatter stops, air thick with tension and magic.

“Does anyone else wish to comment on my consort?” Aerix challenges, ice and air magic pulsing from him in visible waves, frosting the ground beneath Nyx’s paws.

Silence falls so complete I can hear my own heartbeat.

Aerix turns his gaze to a trembling woman standing next to the man’s corpse. “You,” he commands. “Bring me my dagger.”

The woman’s wings pull tight against her back, but she doesn’t hesitate. She simply bends down, her fingers shaking as she pulls the blade from the dead man’s chest.

Blood drips from the tip as she approaches us, her head bowed in submission as she holds the bloody dagger up to Aerix with both hands, like an offering.

I should be horrified. A man just died—was murdered in front of me—for nothing more than crude words.

Instead, dark satisfaction blooms in my chest.

This is what it means to be Aerix's. This is what it means to be valued in the Night Court. What it means to be a prince's consort.

And, God help me, I want more.

Aerix's midnight eyes flick to me, and something shifts in them. Something calculating and dark. Something that sets my body on fire.

"Actually," he says to the woman, his voice carrying across the now-silent square, "I believe my consort should have it."

The woman freezes, her wings completely retracted now.

"Your Highness?" she whispers, the words barely audible.

"You heard me," Aerix says, chillingly calm. "Give the dagger to Zoey."

The woman's hand trembles violently now, her complexion paling to a sickly gray.

"Now," Aerix commands, air snapping like a whip. "Unless you want to be next?"

She turns to me, and the loathing in her eyes is absolute. But beneath it lies something I've never seen directed at me from any night fae—fear.

She extends the bloody dagger toward me, handle first, her eyes lowered in the ultimate act of submission.

I hesitate only for a moment before taking it.

The weight of it in my hand is balanced and deadly. And as I study it, power surges through me. Because this is Aerix's dagger—the one he uses to deal death without hesitation or remorse. And now he's given it to me, in front of his entire court. Which makes it mine.

My fingers tighten around the hilt, and I feel a hunger I've never known before—not for blood, but for the respect it commands. It's different from what I felt while staring down at Henry's dead body. No, this is hunger for the way the night fae are looking at me now. Not as food or entertainment, but as something to be feared.

Aerix's arms tighten around my waist, his lips close to my ear.

"How does it feel?" he murmurs, his breath cold against my skin.

"Like I belong," I whisper back, surprised at the truth behind the words.

"They'll talk about this for decades—centuries, perhaps," he says, his words meant only for me as his air magic creates a quiet bubble around us. "The night that Prince Aerix killed for his human consort, then armed her with his own blade."

I turn the dagger, watching how the moonlight catches on its blood-coated edge, marveling at how natural it feels in my grip.

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“What if they try to take it from me?” I ask.

His laugh is low and dark. “Then use it,” he says simply. “Show them why the gods gave you to me, to keep and protect, until the end of time.”

The urge to do just that—to prove myself worthy of this gift—should frighten me. But it doesn’t. Because fear is distant now, replaced by a hunger for more.

More power. More respect. More of whatever this is that makes me feel like I belong in this dark, beautiful world.

“Keep it close,” Aerix tells me, loud enough now for those nearest to hear. “It’s yours now.”

A possessive thrill runs through me.

His dagger. His court. His protection.

His love wrapped in blood and steel.

“Shall we continue?” he asks, deadly calm now, one hand around my waist while the other gestures toward the center of town where the celebration continues.

I nod, tucking the dagger into the sash at my waist. Unlike my other dagger—the one I used to kill Henry—this one is visible. A warning that Aerix will do anything for me. That he’ll kill for me. That I belong to him.

“Yes.” I straighten my shoulders and lift my chin higher, trying to look and sound as royal as he does. “Let’s continue.”

Aerix’s magic swirls around us, like a caress telling me I’ve said exactly the right thing. And then Nyx moves forward again, carrying us deeper into the celebration. But this time, the crowd parts with more purpose. Less curiosity and mockery, more caution and deference.

And with every step, I feel myself becoming something new.

Something dangerous, powerful, and irrevocably his.

ZOEY

We exit the narrow path, and Nyx moves further into the celebration, carrying us through streets that grow wider as we approach the town center.

Every few steps, I touch the hilt of Aerix’s dagger, reassuring myself it’s still there. That this newfound power isn’t a dream that will vanish by morning.

As we turn a corner, the main square opens before us—a vast expanse filled with hundreds of night fae in various states of wild revelry. A massive fountain stands in the center, blood and water mingling in crimson cascades that catch the moonlight. It’s nightmarishly beautiful, and the music pulses with a rhythm that makes the air vibrate with danger.

But before we reach the edge of the crowd, Aerix brings Nyx to a halt beneath the shadow of a towering archway.

“Here,” he says, dismounting in one fluid motion. His wings extend as he reaches up to help me down, his hands firm at my waist.

When my feet touch the ground, my legs wobble slightly from the long ride. Aerix steadies me, one arm around my waist, his magic forming a cool barrier between us and the celebration.

“Why are we stopping?” I ask, confused.

Aerix’s eyes scan the crowd, cold and calculating. “It’s always best to observe first,” he murmurs. “To know where each player is located, so you can be three moves ahead, setting the stage for checkmate.”

“You sound just like Isla,” I note.

“She learned from the best.” He smirks, then guides me to a spot half-hidden in shadow, just at the edge of the massive square.

From here, we have a perfect view of the celebration without being immediately noticed. The night fae are so caught up in their debauchery—dancing wildly, drinking from goblets that seem to refill themselves, and feeding from humans—that they pay no attention to the shadowed archway where we stand.

“Watch,” Aerix says, his lips close to my ear. “And learn.”

His hand settles at the small of my back, cold air swirling between us. I lean into him, my eyes scanning the crowd, trying to absorb everything at once.

“There,” he says suddenly, directing my gaze with a subtle nod. “Do you see her?”

I follow his line of sight to a slender woman with wings that reflect the stars. Her movements are graceful as she dances with a tall male whose golden hair catches the fountain’s bloody light. They move together as if they were created for this single purpose—to complement each other in every way imaginable.

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“Princess Mirena,” I say, recognizing her from that first day in the throne room, when I was presented to the royals.

And the man she’s dancing with... he looks so familiar...

“That’s Katerina’s brother,” I realize.

“Yes,” Aerix confirms. “Dimitri. He looks like her, don’t you think? Like Katerina?”

“He does,” I agree, watching as Mirena’s hands slide over Dimitri’s shoulders, her wings curling around them both.

“She loves him,” I say—or rather, I observe.

“Yes,” Aerix says, almost wistfully. “They’re happy together.”

From the way he says it, it’s like he’s trying to puzzle out what happiness even means.

I scan the rest of the courtyard, and when I spot Queen Ravenna, it’s not her that I focus on. Because Isla stands by her side. She’s not dressed like a human pet, or even like a favored servant. Instead, she wears a gown of midnight blue, adorned with silver thread that catches the light with every movement.

She smiles and nods at something the queen says, looking every bit as if she belongs at the monarch’s side.

Then, our eyes lock across the crowd. There’s no surprise in hers, no shock at seeing

me here with Aerix, wearing this diamond-covered gown. Instead, she tilts her head slightly. It's an acknowledgment, not a challenge. The gesture reminds me of our chess games—of her careful, deliberate strategy.

Isla excuses herself from the queen's side and begins moving through the crowd toward us. Night fae part for her almost as they did for Aerix—not with quite the same fear, but with a respect that no other human in this court receives.

She stops in front of me and takes in my gown, the dagger at my waist, and the way Aerix's hand remains possessively at my back.

“Look at how far you've come, Zoey,” she says slowly, in definite approval.

“Isla,” Aerix acknowledges her with a nod that seems almost familial.

“The dress suits her,” Isla says to him, her eyes never leaving mine. “I told you it would.”

“You helped pick this out?” I ask.

Isla's laugh is light, almost musical. “Of course I did. Do you think our prince here knows the first thing about fashion? About what would flatter your particular... assets?” Her gaze flicks to the low neckline of my gown, then back to my face, and she gives me a conspiratorial smile.

“I know enough,” Aerix retorts with a half-smile, and his wings shift slightly, almost playfully. “I know what looks good on her. Or rather—what she looks good without.”

Isla makes a face and rolls her eyes. “Isodon't want to think about that,” she says.

For the first time since I've known him, Aerix actually looks... embarrassed? His

midnight eyes narrow, but the frost patterns that form at his fingertips are delicate, not threatening.

“The diamonds were my idea,” he says defensively.

“And a good one,” Isla concedes. “I’ll give you that much.”

I watch their exchange, fascinated by this new side of Aerix—the way his usual deadly demeanor softens around Isla, how he allows her to tease him without consequence. It reminds me of me and Sapphire—like watching siblings bicker.

I smile slightly at the thought of Sapphire. Luckily, I trust that she’s okay with Riven. He loves her—there’s no doubt about it. Even though she was fighting it, she’ll see the light soon.

Plus, I’ve learned firsthand that fae princes are impossible to resist.

“You did a fantastic job with choosing the dress,” I tell Isla, meaning it. “I appreciate it. Just like I appreciate you helping me the other night.” The words are spoken quietly and carefully chosen, ensuring no one else will hear.

Isla waves a dismissive hand. “It needed to be done. Besides, it gave us the perfect excuse to get rid of Victoria. It was about time she moved on from the human wing.” Her smile is sharp, her eyes calculating, despite the lightness of her tone. “Her time there was done, and she knew it as well as anyone else. Best to get it over with instead of having to dread it every day.”

I tilt my head, taking in this side of Isla that I saw while we played chess, but never when we discussed people.

The craziest thing? I don’t hate it.

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No—I respect it.

She reaches out, adjusting a diamond on my dress. “We’re the same, you and I,” she says. “Humans playing a fae game. The difference is, I’ve been playing for far, far longer.” She gives Aerix a pointed look, then she returns her attention to me. “And I’m happy to have you as a sister.”

Sister.

The word sounds strange coming from her mouth. Because there’s only one person I’ve ever considered a sister—Sapphire.

But Aerix is everything to me. Isla is his sister. Not by blood, but by soul. If my relationship with Aerix becomes more permanent, that would make Isla my sister, too.

A thrill courses through me at the thought that Isla views my connection with Aerix to be as serious as I do, and I find myself completely and utterly speechless.

I’m still trying to find words when a hush falls over the crowd, cutting through the wild partying. The music fades, conversations die, and all eyes turn toward the center of the square, to the giant fountain flowing with blood.

Aerix’s hand presses firmly against my back.

“It’s starting,” he whispers, his lips close to my ear, his breath cool against my skin. “Watch carefully.”

King Thanatos emerges from the shadows on the other side of the square, his wings unfurled to their full, impressive span. Aurora follows at his side, her head held high, but her eyes downcast in submission. And her dress... it makes her look like Cinderella attending the ball. She's even more perfect and pristine here than she was in the human wing.

The king stops when he reaches the fountains. Then, he extends his hand to Aurora, who tilts her head to expose the long, pale column of her throat. His fingers trace her jawline, and when his fangs sink into her flesh, Aurora's lips part in a silent gasp, her body arching into him.

Some in the crowd watch with hunger, others with envy, but all with the same reverence one might show a sacred ceremony.

"She loves it," I whisper, surprised by the obvious pleasure on Aurora's face.

Because it's not just the feeding that she seems to be loving. That's always a pleasurable experience, no matter how much you try to fight it. No... it's the attention she loves. The respect she's commanding as the king's favorite pet.

When the king pulls away, Princess Mirena emerges from the crowd, her wings glittering in the fountain's bloody light. Dimitri follows, his gaze never leaving her face as she leads him to the spot the king just vacated.

Their feeding is more intimate, more equal. She draws him close and kisses him first, pressing her body against his as her fangs pierce his throat.

Dimitri's hands grip her waist, his fingers digging into the fabric of her gown. The look on his face is pure bliss.

This isn't submission. It's loyalty. Pure, unashamed devotion.

I scan the crowd, noticing Queen Ravenna watching from her place of honor. But she stands alone—no pet beside her.

“The queen doesn’t have a human with her,” I murmur to Aerix.

“No,” he replies. “The human she always brought with her is gone. Murdered in the human wing. In the living room of my suite, to be exact.”

He smirks, as if the mention of Henry dead at my feet just impressed him all over again.

“The way you’re looking at me makes me wish I’d stained your floors sooner,” I say, and he pulls me closer, as if he wants to memorize the way I look right now, deadly and completely his, before anyone else has the chance.

As if on cue, Queen Ravenna’s gaze shifts, her eyes finding mine across the crowd. There’s something calculating in her stare. Something sharp and assessing that makes my skin crawl.

Does she know about Henry? Does she suspect my role in his death?

Isla steps closer, her fingers brushing my arm.

“She’s watching you,” she says, her voice barely audible over the renewed murmurs of the crowd. “She knows something’s different about you.”

The dagger at my hip seems to pulse with power, reminding me what I’ve already done—of what I’m capable of.

“Then let her watch,” I say, surprising myself with my own boldness. “Let her see that I’m not afraid of her... and that I’ll never let her make me afraid of her.”

ZOEY

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“You don’t need to be afraid of the queen,” Aerix says, his eyes finding mine. “Not when you have me.”

His words wrap around me like his magic—cool and protective, a shield against everything else. I’ve never felt so safe, even as I stand in the middle of what many would consider to be a courtyard full of monsters.

A new tension fills the air as Mirena and Dimitri step away from the fountain, and I realize with a start that the crowd’s attention is shifting, gazes turning in our direction.

“It’s our turn,” Aerix says. “Are you ready?”

My heart hammers against my ribs, and suddenly, my feet feel glued to the ground.

But this is what I wanted, isn’t it? To stand beside my dark prince—to be seen as his equal? To belong in the Night Court, to be protected from creatures who could snap my neck with a flick of their hand?

“Yes,” I say, surprising myself with the steadiness in my voice.

Aerix gives me a small, satisfied smile and takes my hand, leading me through the crowd that parts silently before us. The blood fountain looms larger as we approach, and the diamonds on my bodice glitter, as if eager to join the display.

We stop at the spot where the king and Mirena performed their feedings, and Aerix turns to face me. Then slowly, deliberately, he raises his wrist to his mouth. His eyes

remain locked on mine as his fangs pierce his skin, drawing beads of blood that well up and drip onto the ground between us.

One drop. Two. Three.

Each one is a declaration. An offering to the court itself.

My chest tightens as I watch, my hands curling into fists.

Am I supposed to let him bite my wrist, too? Is there some sort of night fae/consort bonding ritual that he didn't tell me about?

Millions of questions must be flashing across my eyes as he extends his bleeding wrist to me, his expression both challenge and invitation.

The crowd holds its collective breath, waiting to see what I'll do.

I simply stare at the blood trailing down his pale skin, and then I understand.

The other royals fed from their humans... but Aerix is offering himself to me.

"Go on," he tells me softly. "Taste."

His gaze stays on mine, his eyes more vulnerable than I've ever seen. They're full of something that might be fear. Not of me, but of rejection.

"This is proof," he whispers, so softly that only I can hear, "that I would give you anything. My life is in your hands, Zoey." His voice catches on my name. "Be gentle with it."

The words strike something deep within me. Because he's not just asking me to be

careful with his blood. He's asking me to be gentle with him—with his heart, his soul, and with everything he keeps hidden beneath his cold, deadly, beautiful exterior.

And so, I take his wrist and bring it to my lips.

The first taste of his blood is rich and ancient, thrumming with power. His air magic hums inside me, flowing through my veins, binding us together in ways I can't comprehend, but can feel with every fiber of my being.

As I drink, a shudder works through me as his essence flows across my tongue. Because this isn't just blood. It's him—his power, his magic, his very life force.

I can feel his heartbeat as if it's my own. I can sense the cool rush of his magic as it mingles with my blood. Even when he's let me touch the sensitive base of his wings, it wasn't as intimate as this.

That was him permitting me access to his vulnerability. This—right here, right now—is him surrendering it completely.

My fingers tighten around his arm, nails digging into his skin as I pull him closer.

"Zoey," he murmurs, his voice strained. "You've had enough."

I don't want to stop. I want more. But his breaths quicken, and I know I have to listen to him.

It might ruin him if I don't.

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When I pull away, I look up at him, and what I see in his eyes steals my breath all over again. There's hunger there, yes. But there's also something deeper—a vulnerability so raw it makes my heart ache. Because for all his power, all his deadly grace, Prince Aerix Nightborne has given me the one thing no one else in this court has ever had: his trust.

A noble woman drops her glass, crystal shattering on the stone. Another opens his mouth as if to speak, but no words come.

Aerix turns to face the crowd, his wings extending to their full, impressive span, air magic crackling around him in visible currents of frost-tinged power.

“She drinks from me,” he announces, his voice carrying across the square with commanding authority, “because she's mine. And no one—” his gaze sweeps the crowd, lingering on the queen, and then the king, “— will dare challenge that.”

Before anyone can react, Aerix turns back to me, pulls me toward him, and crushes his lips to mine. His intensity is brutal, demanding, and unyielding, cold air swirling in a vortex around us as he claims me in front of the Night Court.

I taste his blood again, metallic and rich on both our tongues, and something primal in me responds. My arms circle his waist, one hand sliding up to the base of his wings—the forbidden, sensitive place that drives him wild. He groans against my mouth, the sound vibrating through me as his wings shudder beneath my touch.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, the crowd has backed away several steps. Some look disgusted, others fearful, but a few—including Isla, who stands beside

Queen Ravenna with a small, knowing smile—seem almost impressed.

King Thanatos breaks the silence first, his laughter echoing across the square like distant thunder. “Well, well,” he says, stepping forward with Aurora at his side. “My son has always had... unusual tastes.”

Queen Ravenna’s eyes narrow dangerously. “This is unprecedented,” she says, her voice carrying a subtle threat.

“Perhaps,” Aerix counters, his arm circling my waist, “it’s time for new traditions.”

The tension in the air thickens, magic crackling between the royal family members like lightning before a storm. Aerix’s muscles tense. But King Thanatos merely raises a hand, silencing any further protest.

“Tonight is a night of celebration,” the king declares, although his eyes hold a warning that suggests this conversation is far from over. “And so, we will celebrate.”

The musicians resume playing, and slowly, the revelry builds once more.

Aerix’s lips brush against my ear, his breath cool against my skin. “We made our point,” he whispers. “And you were beautiful. You are beautiful. Especially right now, with my blood staining your lips for the entire court to see.”

I nod, dazed from the kiss, from his blood, from the enormity of what just happened. And as he leads me away from the fountain, night fae part before us with respect—and fear—in their eyes.

“What happens now?” I ask once we’re clear of the worst of the crowd.

Aerix’s smile is sharp and dangerous. “Now, my little consort, we’ve shown the court

exactly what you are to me.” His fingers trace the curve of my cheek, feather-light, yet possessive at the same time. “They will never forget it. And if they do...” His eyes darken, the moonlight flashing across them like a warning. “They will regret it.”

ZOEY

The celebration continues around us, having moved from the initial ritual at the fountain to a more festive atmosphere. Tables laden with delicacies have appeared, and fae servants weave through the crowd with trays of blood-filled goblets. Nobles and merchants dance and laugh, although they give Aerix and me a wide berth, their eyes flicking toward us with a mixture of fascination and fear.

I lean against a marble column, the cool stone grounding me as Aerix’s arm drapes around my waist. Despite the looks and whispers, I feel strangely at peace—elevated, even. Powerful. The dagger at my hip and the taste of Aerix’s blood lingering on my tongue are constant reminders of what happened at the fountain.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Aerix asks as he hands me a glass of wine—one without blood in it. His wings are relaxed behind him, although I can feel the tension coiled beneath his skin.

“Very much so,” I say as I take the glass. “Although I’m pretty sure that half the court wants me dead right now but is too terrified to say it.”

His lips curl into that predatory smile I’ve come to love. The one that promises violence dressed as charm—toward everyone other than me, obviously.

“If the other half of them isn’t terrified to say it, then I must be losing my touch,” he says, and I laugh, the sound drawing more stares from nearby fae.

Before he can say more, the crowd before us parts, and a striking woman with gold-

streaked wings approaches, her chin lifted in haughty disdain. The expensive silk of her gown rustles as she walks, and the fae around her defer to her with subtle bows and averted gazes.

“Prince Aerix,” she says when she reaches us, and while she shoots a glance my way, she doesn’t address me. “What an unusual display you treated us to tonight.”

Aerix’s wings rise slightly. Not enough to alarm, but enough to warn.

“Lady Reesia,” he acknowledges with a slight nod. “I trust you’re enjoying the celebration?”

She ignores his question, her gaze settling on me with detached curiosity. “The Night Court has rules for consorts, Your Highness,” she says to him, swirling the blood in her crystal goblet as she continues to stare me down.

Aerix tenses beside me, a cold breeze blowing around us.

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“You forget yourself,” he begins, his voice dropping to that dangerous register I know precedes violence.

I place my hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “Let me,” I murmur—not because I doubt his fury, but because I want the satisfaction of tearing her down myself. If I want respect around here, I need to earn it. The night fae won’t accept anything less.

“It’s Lady Reesia, yes?” I ask, my voice steady despite the determination building inside me.

She preens slightly, her lips puckering in displeasure. “Indeed.”

“Aerix has never mentioned you.” I tilt my head, studying her, as if I’m trying and failing to place her.

Her wings stiffen, and nearby conversations halt as fae turn to watch.

“I understand your concern over what happened tonight,” I say, my tone conversational, but carrying just enough of an edge to hopefully make her wary. “When you’ve spent centuries clinging to relevance, it must be terrifying to see change happen right before your eyes. To witness something new and powerful that makes you question your own worth.” I take another step closer. “Tell me, Lady Reesia—when was the last time a prince of the Night Court looked at you with anything but polite disinterest?”

Gasps ripple through the gathering crowd. Someone laughs—a sharp, surprised sound quickly stifled. Isla, watching from nearby, raises her glass in subtle approval. The

queen's eyes are narrowed, but surprisingly, her lips curve up into a slight smirk.

Lady Reesia's face contorts with rage, her composure cracking.

"You insolent creature," she hisses, flinging the contents of her goblet at me.

Blood splashes across my face and chest, soaking into the diamonds of my gown, dripping down my neck.

Then Aerix is behind Lady Reesia, his dagger buried to the hilt in her back, directly through her heart.

Her mouth opens in a silent scream, blood flowing out of it instead. Her wings convulse, like they're giving one last attempt at keeping her alive, then go still.

"No one," he growls as he twists the blade, "touches what's mine."

The moment he pulls out the dagger, she crumples to the ground, her blood pooling on the stone, mingling with the droplets that fell from my face.

Aerix stares down at her body, and then—chillingly—he smiles. It's not his usual predatory grin. Instead, it's something ancient. Something feral. A reminder of just how deadly he is.

He steps over her body, returning to my side as if nothing extraordinary has happened. However, his breathing is controlled and steady—unnaturally so, as if he's barely holding on to control—his eyes dilated as he gazes down at me like I'm the only other person here with him.

"Red suits you," he says softly, wiping a drop of blood from my cheek, savoring the feel of it between his fingers, "but I prefer it to be mine."

I lean into his touch as a cool breeze caresses my skin, like an extension of him is checking for injuries. “Good,” I say quietly, meeting his steady gaze, never wanting to look away. “Because yours is the only kind I want.”

He leans down and gives me a soft kiss, one full of care and promises, his body tense as he pulls away to scan the crowd. “Does anyone else wish to question my consort’s place in this court?” he asks them. “Anyone at all?”

One noble flinches, his wings pulling tight against his back. Another lowers her eyes, refusing to meet his stare. But what’s most telling is the silence—complete and heavy with fear.

“No?” Aerix’s satisfaction ripples through the cold air. “I thought not.”

He steps over Lady Reesia’s body with elegant disdain, as if she’s nothing more than discarded rubbish. Then, to my shock, he raises his wrist to his mouth once more and bites, blood welling against his pale skin, dark as spilled ink.

I move forward to drink again, his blood calling to me like a siren song.

“No.” He catches me by the wrist, and then his fingers are at his mouth, dipped in blood, rising to my face.

“What are you?—”

I don’t have a chance to finish the question before he’s smearing his blood across my cheeks like war paint, the scent of him dizzying, his touch grounding me in place. Down my throat his fingers trail, following the line of my pulse—a devotion and a declaration all at once.

“You are my salvation,” he says softly, but not so softly that others can’t hear. “And I

will drench this court in blood before I allow anyone to question your place beside me.”

ZOEY

I love you,I want to say to Aerix, but the words won't come.

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Not in front of everyone. Not when I don't know if the words that make him so vulnerable are ones he's comfortable having them hear. So instead, I lean forward and kiss him again, hoping it can get across what words can't right now.

He pulls me closer, his mouth moving against mine with deliberate possession. His wings curl around me like a shield, and a breeze stirs around us as I kiss him back with equal fervor, my body arching into his.

When we break apart, I'm breathing hard, my lips stinging from the pressure of his.

The crowd's expressions range from fascination, to disgust, to grudging respect. Isla catches my eye from across the square and raises her goblet in a subtle toast. Aurora stands beside the king, her beautiful face unreadable, but there's something in her eyes that might be approval. Queen Ravenna watches with an intense, calculating stare, as if reevaluating everything she thought she knew about her son—and about me.

And then Prince Malakai is striding toward us, a smug smirk on his sharp features. Like all fae, he has an unnatural grace, his midnight eyes studying me and Aerix like he's not sure what to make of us.

But it's the woman at his side who catches my attention. She's tall and regal, with pale skin that glows under the moonlight. Unlike the other fae in the courtyard, her wings aren't out.

"Brother," Malakai greets Aerix, his gaze flickering to Lady Reesia's body with casual disinterest. "What an entertaining evening you've provided us so far tonight."

Aerix's arm tightens around my waist. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," he says, a warning breeze blowing around us.

The woman beside Malakai studies me with a curious intensity, her lips curved in a smile that seems genuinely warm.

"You haven't introduced us to your consort," she says, the final word rolling off her tongue with deliberate emphasis.

Malakai smirks. "Forgive my rudeness. Zoey, this is Evangeline. Evangeline, Zoey."

I stare at him in confusion. Because minus that one time in the throne room when I first arrived in the Night Court, I've never even seen Malakai. Yet, he's addressing me like we're... not quite equals, but like I'm something more than Aerix's human pet.

"Nice to meet you," I say to Evangeline, trying and failing to get a read on her. There's something different about her. I just can't place what it is...

"The pleasure is mine," she says, her eyes never leaving my face. "It's been too long since someone shook the foundations of this court."

There's a weight to her words, as if she expects me to know the meaning behind them.

"Evangeline was once like you," Malakai explains, his voice carrying a hint of pride. "Human. Mortal. Fragile." His fingers trace her back, at the place where the base of her wings should be. "Now, she's turned."

Understanding washes over me in a cold, clarifying wave.

Evangeline was human. Malakai turned her into a vampire.

“Do you have wings?” I ask her, unable to curb my curiosity.

My question elicits a small smile from her. “No wings,” she says. “And no ice magic. But I do, however, command air.” She flicks her wrist and creates a breeze around us, although she releases it quickly, as if she doesn’t want to show off.

Still, there’s confidence in her posture. Power that radiates from her like a physical force. She belongs here—not as a pet or plaything, but as an equal to the night fae.

And I realize with startling clarity: that’s exactly what I want to be.

“Your display at the fountain was magnificent,” Evangeline continues, stepping closer and touching my arm with cool fingers. “The first time I drank from Malakai, I thought my heart would burst from the power of it.”

Malakai reaches for her and pulls her closer, wrapping his arm protectively around her waist. “You took to it well, my dove,” he murmurs in her ear, tracing the shell of it with his tongue before turning back to Aerix. “I was skeptical at first, but after seeing your consort tonight, I approve. After all, true brothers always stay together. Especially when it comes to recognizing... potential.”

Something dangerous flashes in Aerix’s eyes. A warning, perhaps, or acknowledgment of some shared secret.

Wind whips around us in a sudden, violent burst.

“We appreciate your support,” Aerix says, but before Malakai can respond, the crowd parts again as King Thanatos approaches.

Aurora follows two steps behind, like a beautiful shadow.

Malakai and Evangeline step back, bowing their heads in deference, and leave us alone with the king.

Thanatos stops in front of me, his tall form looming. But unlike when I first arrived at the Night Court, I don't shrink away. Instead, I stand firm, my expression carefully blank, channeling every shard of hard-won confidence I've earned since arriving in this deadly, beautiful realm.

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“Well,” he says, his voice like gravel wrapped in silk, “what have we here?”

His fingers reach out to cup my chin, tilting my face to examine Lady Reesia’s blood on my skin. His touch is cold and clinical—nothing like the possessive heat of Aerix’s.

I don’t flinch. Not this time. Instead, I hold his gaze, refusing to look away. Because I’m not the terrified girl he examined in the throne room that first day, praying he didn’t claim me as his pet.

I’m something else entirely now.

“Your hair is exquisite tonight,” he observes, and much to my relief, he doesn’t try to touch it. “Like inky starlight in the darkness of our court.”

“Aerix styled it, Your Majesty,” I reply, careful to keep my voice steady.

His lips curl into a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “You wear our darkness well,” he finally says, releasing my chin and turning to Aerix. “Keep her and do whatever you want with her.”

It’s not approval—not exactly. It’s permission. As if I’m a finely wrapped weapon he’s allowing Aerix to wield. Not a woman, not a force, but a prize.

But it’s enough. It’s a recognition of my place in this court, however grudging.

With a final appraising look, the king turns and walks away.

Aurora gives me a subtle nod before following him. Good job, it seems to say. You learned well.

The moment they disappear, Aerix pulls me against him, his wings curving forward to cocoon us in shadowed privacy.

“They all see it now,” he murmurs for me—and only for me. “You were never meant to be anything but mine.”

His words sink into me, as potent as his blood and as binding as his magic. And as I look around at the night fae who now watch me with cautious respect instead of open disdain, I can’t help but think he’s right.

I was made for this darkness. For him. For everything the Night Court represents.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

SAPPHIRE

The plane touches down, and my stomach lurches at the impact, my hands gripping the armrests so tightly that water leaks between my fingers.

I’m in another country. Not just a different state, but an entirely different country. We flew across an ocean. And now I’m in Sicily, Italy, thousands of miles from the small corner of the world I’ve ever known.

“Mount Etna awaits,” Riven says beside me, his voice low and steady.

But I can’t tear my gaze away from the scene in front of us to look at him. Instead, I keep staring out the window at the landscape that looks nothing like Maine—the rolling hills, the Mediterranean vegetation, and the quality of light that seems

completely foreign.

I've only ever seen places like this in the movies Zoey and I would watch on our sleepovers, dreaming of adventures I didn't think I'd ever have.

"I never thought I'd leave Presque Isle," I whisper, mostly to myself. "And now I'm in Italy."

Riven's fingers find mine, his frost soothing against my skin. "It can be our first of many international adventures, Starlight," he says, and even though this particular adventure involves entering a dangerous volcano to retrieve an ancient artifact, I smile.

T meets us at the cabin door, her wild hair moving in a breeze that doesn't seem to touch anything else.

"This is where I leave you." Her strange eyes shift between storm-gray and electric blue as she looks at each of us in turn. "I'll be waiting here when you return with the Ember."

"We appreciate your assistance," Riven says formally, but there's an edge to his voice that warns against further commentary.

T gives us a mocking bow, the air crackling around her as she steps aside to let us disembark.

The drive to Mount Etna takes just over an hour, and I spend most of it with my face practically pressed against the window, absorbing every vivid detail rushing past. Compared to the simple, muted buildings of Presque Isle, the architecture here feels alive, full of intricate stonework and painted in warm Mediterranean colors. Even the landscape shines with color and motion, from lush groves of citrus trees to

cobblestone streets filled with people dressed in clothing brighter and more expressive than anything I've seen back home.

It's so magical that if someone told me we'd already crossed back into the mystical realm, I'd believe them.

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“You look like a child at Christmas,” Riven observes, amusement warming his voice.

“This is all so... different,” I say, not even bothering to hide my wide-eyed wonder.

“The Summer Court, the Winter Court, even the Wandering Wilds—they all still felt connected to my world. But this...” I gesture at the passing scenery. “This feels like I’m on another planet.”

Riven doesn’t respond at first.

When I glance over, he’s staring out the opposite window. Not at the view, but through it, as if he’s seeing something far beyond what’s there.

His expression is calm, but too still. The kind of stillness that usually means he’s bracing for something—or brooding about something.

“Are you okay?” I ask, touching his arm.

“I’m fine.” He gives me a tight smile. “Just recalibrating a lifetime of instinct telling me to avoid climates that get warmer than ice water.”

I laugh softly, relieved by the humor, but also noticing the tension in him that doesn’t fully ease.

“Just think of it as thawing out decades of stubbornness,” I offer with a small smile, although as I study him and feel the ache quietly pulsing in the deepest part of our bond, my love for him is suddenly laced with something else—protectiveness.

He needs me. I've known it since he sacrificed himself in the Cosmic Tides, but ever since he killed his guards in the clearing, there's been something different about him. Something that makes me want to reach for him and promise him that I'm here for him no matter what, that I love him unconditionally, and that together, we can get through anything.

"Careful, Starlight," he warns, his silver eyes flashing with the sort of wild desire that makes my body feel like it's about to be set aflame. "If you keep looking at me like that, I might thaw completely."

My breath quickens, and I'd be on his lap kissing him in a heartbeat if we were alone. Instead, I call on the ice magic I now share with him, trying and failing to cool down.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" I ask, scooting closer to him, needing him to know I'm here for him. "Because right now, I'm hoping it's the second."

Thalia glances over at us from her place in the passenger seat and frowns. "This is a journey to the Pyros Vault—not to your honeymoon destination," she says, although from the way she rolls her eyes, I have a feeling she's nottotallyannoyed at us. "How about youfollow through on that dethawing promise later? Inprivate?"

"A valid request," Riven says to her with a knowing smirk. "After all, I suppose it would be unfair to distract my wife with my charm until after we've faced the life-threatening danger."

Thalia nods in satisfaction, but for the rest of the drive, I stay curled against Riven like I'm afraid he'll vanish if I blink. After losing him in the Cosmic Tides, I don't think a day will go by that I'm not grateful that he's here—solid, breathing, andmine.

But beneath that gratitude lies something else. Fear from the part of me still wonders how long he'll stay that way—the part of me that haunts me every night in my

dreams.

At the thought of the cruel version of myself from the nightmare, I lean closer into Riven, letting him ground me in the reality of the present. He pulls me tighter, saying nothing, but I feel it through the bond: that fierce, aching devotion that wraps around me like a vice. It's so overwhelming in its intensity that it almost hurts to breathe.

Just as I start to drown in it, he eases off—enough to let me catch my breath, but not enough to pull away. But it's too late. I already know. What he feels for me is more than love. It's an unspoken language of its own, one that whispers to me in heartbeats and pulsesthrough him with every breath he takes. It's all-consuming, almost feral in its protectiveness, and deeper than anything I've ever known.

“You feel it, don't you?” He lowers his voice, brushing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “The way it keeps growing, like a storm I can't control.”

“Do you want to control it?” I ask, since now that I've felt the magnitude of its intensity, I wouldn't blame him if he did.

“No,” he whispers, and when his eyes meet mine, the world shrinks to the space between us. His gaze is a gravity I can't fight—silver, storm-dark, and locked entirely on me. “You're the only thing that makes sense to me—the only thing worth keeping. All I want anymore is you.”

My breath leaves me all at once from the desperation in his voice—from the way it feels like he needs me to understand, to accept his unrelenting, all-devouring love as a law that can never be undone.

Words aren't enough. At least, not any that I can find. So, I reach for his left hand, turning over his palm and tracing the letters onto the scar of frost and starlight I once carved into his skin: I love you.

His breath hitches, and he leans in—just barely. A fraction of a breath. A slow, aching tilt of his head. Close enough that if I move half an inch, our lips will touch.

He doesn't close the gap, but he wants to. I see it in the way his jaw flexes, in the flicker of doubt and need in his eyes, and in the frost patterns he's creating that are crawling up my arms.

Instead of a kiss, he brings my hand to his heart, holding it there as if he's imprinting its steady rhythm into my soul.

I'm here, the gesture seems to say. And I'm not going anywhere.

I'm lost in the silver depths of his eyes when Thalia clears her throat, yanking us out of the moment.

The temperature in the car drops by several degrees. I'm not sure if it was my doing, or Riven's. Likely both.

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Neither of us speaks for the rest of the drive. But we don't let go of each other, either. There's no need. Not with the bond humming between us, a powerful, wordless confirmation that I just glimpsed something far beyond love—something limitless, intense, and almost frightening in the magnitude of how completely it consumes him.

It would scare any normal person.

Luckily for both of us, I'm a star touched fae vampire princess who brought her soulmate back from the dead, which puts me far out of any possible realm of "normal." And I love him with every single part of my heart and soul.

We eventually park at Mount Etna and make our way up a narrow hiking path, following coordinates Maeris says will lead us to the hidden entrance. Tourists cluster in designated viewing areas far below us, but our journey takes us to a secluded section closed to the public—one that security seems blissfully unaware we're passing. Apparently, the eyes of mortals typically slip over our kind. It's their unconscious way of protecting their minds from the knowledge that they live amongst powerful supernaturals.

After about an hour of climbing, we round a bend and stop.

Before us stands a massive stone, twice my height and nearly as wide, its surface covered in ancient carvings. At its center is the image of a monstrous figure—part human, part serpent, with giant wings spreading out from its back. The carving ripples in the heat, as if the creature might break free at any moment.

"Typhon," Maeris says, looking to me, since I must be the only one who doesn't

know who—or more likewhat—this Typhon is. “The Father of Monsters. One of the most powerful creatures of ancient myth. He fought Zeus himself, and it took all the god’s might to imprison him beneath Mount Etna.”

“It’s said that Typhon’s rage is what causes the volcano to erupt,” Thalia adds in a tone that feels way too lighthearted for the topic at hand.

I instinctively reach for the Star Disc at my hip. “We won’t have to fight him, right?” I ask, unable to move my gaze away from the monstrous figure on the stone. Because yes, we’re powerful supernaturals, but that monster would surely take an entire fae army to defeat—if even.

I turn to Riven. “Did you know about this?” I ask him, unable to believe he’d keep something like this from me.

“I’ve heard of Typhon, yes,” he says slowly. “In children’s tales. Because Typhon is a myth. We have nothing to worry about with him.”

“Your soulmate is correct,” Maeris adds, waving it off. “The stories about Typhon are myths.”

Eventually, I nod in acceptance. Riven would never let us walk into a fight with a monster we have no way of beating.

“How do you know what’s a myth in a world where so many myths are real?” I ask, directing the question to all three of them.

Thalia scoffs. “Because we know what’s reasonable and what’s not,” she says, as if the answer should be obvious. “A monster whose hundreds of heads in the shapes of wild beasts brush the stars, with innumerable arms, dozens of hands, and vipers from the thighs down to the ground is obviously a myth. He would have overtaken the

world if he wasn't."

"Well, when you say it like that..." I mutter, my focus drifting back to the ward stone. "How do we get through?"

"Blood," Thalia says simply, drawing a small blade from her belt. "We each contribute. According to the texts in our ancient library, the stone will recognize the magic in our blood—it's how the entrance knows we're worthy to attempt the trials."

Before we can further discuss, Maeris is in front of the stone, slicing his palm and letting a single drop of blood fall onto it. Thalia follows suit. Riven takes the blade next, making a clean cut across his palm and letting a few drops of his blood fall.

The scent hits me instantly—sharp, alluring, and delicious. But I won't taste. Not after what happened last time. Not after...

"It's okay, Starlight," he says quietly, frost magic cooling the air between us. "I know. I trust you."

His voice is soft but sure. And even though his blood still calls to me like a siren song, his trust silences the hunger.

"I love you," I tell him, and then I take the blade and draw it across my palm, wincing at the sting. My blood—a mixture of water, air, frost, and star magic—falls onto the stone, a drop of crimson against the ancient gray.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then, the carving of Typhon begins to glow, pulsing with a deep, fiery light that spreads outward like veins of lava. The air before the stone shimmers, distorting the landscape beyond.

We all look at each other, waiting for the go ahead.

“Now,” Maeris commands, and we step forward together.

The moment we cross the threshold, the world shifts around us. The air grows thick with magic, pressing against my skin like a living thing. Colors intensify, sounds deepen, and the weight of the mortal realm falls away.

This place isn't just old. It's sacred.

And it's watching.

SAPPHIRE

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We're still on Mount Etna, but not the Mount Etna I was looking at seconds ago.

The tourist viewpoints have vanished, replaced by ancient stone structures. The vegetation has changed, becoming more vibrant, yet more primal. The sky above us has shifted from clear blue to a strange amber hue.

"We made it," I breathe, my various magics swirling together in response to the power surrounding us.

"Stay close," Maeris warns. "From here on, we follow the path of fire."

I scan the transformed landscape, noticing a trail of onyx stones leading upward. They pulse with an inner heat, like a heartbeat beneath the mountain's skin. Steady, ancient, and alive.

As we follow the winding path upward, the air grows thicker and hotter. My ice magic feels dampened by the overwhelming heat, my water feels like it's boiling, and my air magic stirs restlessly, as if sensing a coming storm.

As for my Star Disc, it's the biggest thing holding me steady right now.

Maeris and Thalia seem like they're doing okay—probably something to do with their centuries of training, which is why Lysandra sent them with us.

Riven's hanging in there, although there are a few beads of sweat on his brow.

His skin is paler than usual, his jaw locked tight, his shoulders rigid beneath his shirt.

And he's quieter than usual—like he's retreating inward to survive the heat.

“Like what you see?” he asks with a smirk.

“Always,” I reply, and Thalia shoots us a look that reminds me about her honeymoon comment in the car.

After what feels like hours of climbing, we reach what can only be the entrance to the Pyros Vault—a massive circular depression in the mountain, its center sealed by a dome of black volcanic glass.

“Is that it?” I ask, stepping closer to the dome.

Maeris approaches cautiously, water pooling in his palms. “According to the texts, yes. The Ember should be contained within the volcano.”

Thalia circles the dome, her eyes narrowed. “There must be a mechanism to open it. Some way to prove ourselves worthy.”

“Or we could just break it open,” Riven suggests, a dangerous glint in his silver eyes. Something sharper than humor lives in that expression—something colder than ice.

I reach through the bond, but it's distant. As if he's holding it back.

My heart stutters. Because even though we haven't had this soul-fused bond for very long, I've never felt him block me out before. And he was so open with it in the car earlier. He let me feel everything. I don't think he meant to, but still, he did.

What on earth could he be trying to hide from me now?

I don't know. But I can't let myself get distracted. Riven knows how to take care of

himself. Everything he does is to keep me safe, which he now understands means keeping himself safe, since I have zero interest in having a life without him in it.

He'll be okay. We'll be okay. We always are, and I refuse to let that change.

So, I force my attention back to the Vault, studying the dome. There are intricate patterns etched into its surface—symbols that remind me of flames and smoke.

“These markings must mean something.” I turn to Maeris, since he seems the most knowledgeable about the ancient texts.

“They must,” he agrees. “Unfortunately, I’ve never seen them before, nor were they mentioned in any books in the temple.”

I kneel beside the dome, my fingers hovering just above its surface, feeling the heat radiating from it. As I do, the Star Disc pulses at my side. So, I reach for it, studying it.

“Its points are sharp,” I say simply, watching as one sparkles in the sunlight. “Do you think that if I threw it at the symbols, maybe it could... cut open the dome?”

A glance around at the others shows me one thing: they don't know.

Riven eventually nods, stepping away from the dome. “You could try,” he says, his eyes locked on mine. “But be careful, Starlight. And remember that I'll rip apart the universe itself if that's the cost of keeping you by my side.”

His voice is calm. Too calm. And that's what makes my chest tighten. Because Riven doesn't get like this unless something inside him is unraveling. He might think he's covering it up by dulling the bond, but he can't do that anymore. Not with me. We're too connected by this point.

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I want to stop. To push. To make him open the connection between us so I can know what he's hiding.

But I can't. Not right now. There's too much at stake.

"When am I not careful?" I say instead, and he raises an eyebrow, frost patterns swirling around his fingers and up his wrists.

"Would you like the list alphabetically or chronologically?" he replies, and despite the tension of the moment, I can't help but smile.

"You remember them all, don't you?" I ask softly.

"Of course I do." His eyes don't leave mine, his hand drifting to his pocket where he's keeping the compass. "Because I should have stopped them—every single one of them—before they happened."

His words echo in my chest, sharp and cold as the magic between us. I want to argue. To tell him that everything that's happened in the past isn't his burden, and that all we can do is focus on the future. But I don't. Because if I do, I'll fall apart.

So instead, I do what I always do—I focus on what's coming next and act.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter, and then, determined to not overthink this, I throw.

The Disc flies from my hand, trailing stardust as it arcs toward the dome. When it strikes the center, the impact sends a spiderweb of cracks across the surface.

For a heartbeat, nothing happens.

Then the dome splits open with the sound of shattering glass, the pieces dissolving into embers that float upward like fireflies.

The Star Disc boomerangs back into my hand, humming with satisfied energy.

Thalia actually smiles.

I'm about to look at Riven to see his reaction when the stone floor opens with an ear-splitting crack and two massive forms rise from the fissures—serpent-bodied creatures with wings made of smoke and flame. Their torsos tower above us, their menacing eyes burning like hot coals. And, most alarmingly, they're holding whips blazing with fire.

Riven draws his sword, coating it with a layer of frost that's already melting in the intense heat.

The monster on the left snaps its whip.

“Maeris, Thalia—take the one on the right,” Riven commands them. “Sapphire and I will handle this one.”

The Summer Court warriors nod, already positioning themselves to face their opponent.

“Stay close,” Riven tells me, his voice low and fierce, his grip tightening on his sword. “These creatures are fire incarnate. Water magic will be our best defense against them.”

Before I can respond, the one facing us roars and its whip lashes out with blinding

speed—directly toward my face.

Water surges out of my palm that's not holding the Disc, creating a wall between us and the attack. But the moment the creature's fire meets my water, my shield evaporates with a hiss, turning to scalding steam that billows around us.

Through the cloud, I hear Riven's furious growl, followed by the crackling of his frost magic. The steam clears just in time for me to see a barrage of ice shards aimed at the monster's face melt midair.

Across the crater, Maeris and Thalia have combined their water magic to create a high-pressure blast that disrupts their opponent's balance, buying them precious seconds to reposition.

Zeroing in on the one Riven and I are set to kill, I take my Star Disc, focus on the place in its chest where its heart should be, and throw with every ounce of magic I can muster.

Stardust trails behind it as it cuts through the air.

The monster twists with impossible speed.

My weapon glances off its molten skin, leaving only a shallow groove before returning to my hand.

I curse and tighten my hold on the Disc, reaching deeper for its magic, feeling it thrum through my soul as I back up to stand closer to Riven. He doesn't speak—but the second I move into his shadow, he exhales. Just once. Like my proximity pulled him back from a ledge I didn't see.

"We need to—" he starts, but he doesn't get a chance to finish. Because the creature

spins its whip overhead in widening circles, generating a cyclone of flames that spirals outward toward us. The heat is overwhelming, my lungs burning with each breath as Riven and I are forced away from each other.

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“Watch out!” I scream as the edge of the cyclone catches Riven’s shoulder, fire licking across his sleeve.

He stumbles, hissing as he uses his water magic to douse out the flames. His pain shoots through the bond—hot and sharp—before he clamps down on the connection between us again.

I thrust my hands forward, channeling a blast of air into the heart of the fiery vortex and parting it like a sea.

“Get through now!” I shout to Riven, and he dives through the gap, rolling to his feet on the other side and shooting a blast of ice at the monster’s whip mid-swing.

Frost spreads across the fiery weapon, and the creature screeches as the flames dim, cracks forming along the whip’s length.

“It’s working!” I call out to Riven, gripping the Star Disc tighter. “Keep it frozen!”

Riven pours more winter magic into the whip, frost spreading further along its burning surface. His expression is focused—but there’s a wildness in his magic now. A quiet fury in every movement, as if the power he wields is the only language he has left to express how desperately he’ll fight for me.

The creature roars, attempting to reignite its weapon, but the flames flicker weaker than before.

Spotting an in, I send the Star Disc spinning through the air, slicing the whip clean

through, severing the weapon at its base.

Fragments of it scatter across the stone, hissing and smoking as they die out.

“Now!” I shout to Riven as the Disc returns to my hand, humming with satisfied energy.

With his sword coated in ice, Riven charges forward, ducking under the monster’s desperate swipe with its remaining arm. His blade sinks into a crack in its chest, ice spreading from the wound like frostbite.

“Die,” he growls, and as he twists the sword deeper, the bond opens again, stronger than ever.

I’m nearly thrown off my feet by the tidal wave of fierce, raw emotion that promises he’d rip the world apart and challenge fate itself to ensure my safety. It’s so overwhelming that I can’t focus on anything else around me. All I can feel is his love burning brighter than a thousand stars, strong enough to reshape reality.

Then there’s the darkness creeping along the edges, threatening to inch its way through his veins and destroy every part of him that cares about anything other than me. It’s like his devotion is bringing out the weapon forged in steel and frost he’s been training to become for his entire life, built to destroy anything that gets in his—and now my—path.

Maybe he wanted to dull the bond to ensure its sheer force didn’t hinder me in the fight rather than help me? Given how crushingly intense it is right now, I don’t think I can blame him for it.

As he continues to throw everything he can into the attack, the monster thrashes, its molten skin hardening as Riven’s ice overcomes its internal fire. And then, with one

last defiant screech, the creature crumbles to stone, the light in its coal-red eyes fading to nothing.

Riven yanks his sword free, turning to me with triumph blazing in his stormy eyes, power coming off him in waves. “One down?—”

A scream cuts him off.

We spin around to see Maeris caught in the second monster’s whip, flames wrapping around his torso like a fiery serpent. The creature jerks the summer warrior off his feet, pulling the whip tighter as Maeris’s body ignites.

The smell hits me first. Burning flesh, char, and magic unraveling all at once.

“No!” Thalia screams, unleashing a torrent of water at the monster. Steam explodes upward, but when it clears, Maeris is still burning, his agonized cries echoing through the crater.

I’m already running, Star Disc ready. “Hold on!” I scream as the Disc leaves my hand, cutting through the air and slicing through the whip in a burst of stardust.

The monster stumbles backward.

Maeris—or rather, what’s left of Maeris—collapses to the ground, his blackened body crumbling to a pile of ash.

I stare at the place where he fell, my pulse thundering, my legs suddenly too heavy for me to move. I try to breathe, but it’s like the heat has stolen even that.

This is what we’re up against. This is what it means to be unprepared for just a second.

I swallow down the bile threatening to rise in my throat as I continue to stare at the pile of ash.

“Maeris!” Thalia falls to her knees beside the remains, her eyes burning with unrestrained fury as she turns to face the monster that killed her soulmate. “You,” she hisses, water gathering around her like a storm, “will pay for what you’ve done.”

The monster cracks its remaining whip, its eyes glowing with malevolent intelligence as it prepares for another attack.

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“Thalia, wait!” I call out, raising the Star Disc. “We need to coordinate?—”

Her primal scream cuts me off, and she charges at the creature, her blade drawn, water swirling around her as she plunges her sword through the monster’s chest.

SAPPHIRE

Steam explodes outward as Thalia drives her sword deeper into the monster’s molten skin. Its fiery eyes widen, and then it gives one final, earth-shattering screech, collapsing into cooling stone.

Thalia stands over its remains, her blade embedded in its chest, her shoulders rising and falling with heavy breaths. Burns are already healing along her arms, and blood trickles from mending cuts across her face, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

“He’s gone,” she says, her voice hollow as she yanks her blade free, her eyes glazed with grief. “Maeris is gone. Just... gone.”

A gust of wind scatters what remains of Maeris’s ashes across the crater floor, golden flecks of summer magic rising with them before dissipating into nothing.

Thalia looks... shattered. And my heart breaks for her. Because I know what that feeling is like. The moment when you think the love of your life—your soulmate—is gone. The devastation when you realize you’ll never see his beautiful eyes again, or have him give you that soft smile reserved only for you, or feel his heartbeat under your palm...

It's the type of pain that empowered me to project my soul into Riven's body and drag him back from death.

But there is no bringing Maeris back. He's really, truly gone. And Thalia will have to live with that awful feeling—the devastation that I only had to endure for minutes—for the rest of her immortal life.

Riven's eyes are fixed on what remains of the scattered ash, his jaw clenched so tight I can see the muscle jumping beneath his skin.

"This is my fault," he says, the words barely audible.

I move to his side, reaching for his hand. "Riven?—"

"No." He jerks away, ice spreading out from the ground where he stands. "I was the one who split us up. I told Maeris and Thalia to take that monster while we handled the other one."

Thalia turns, her eyes meeting Riven's. For a moment, I think she might attack him—there's something dangerous in her expression—but she simply stares, her grief too fresh for blame.

"I should have done it differently," Riven continues, his voice rising. "I should have?—"

"Stop," I interrupt, stepping in front of him, forcing him to look at me. "You couldn't have known what would happen."

But even as I say the words, a small, treacherous part of me sees his point.

Riven and I together have more magic than either of the summer warriors

individually. If we'd split differently, maybe Maeris would still be alive.

I hate myself for even thinking it. But the thought is still there. And now that it's surfaced, I can't push it back down.

Riven must see it in my eyes, because his expression hardens.

"You see it, too," he says quietly. "You know I made the wrong call."

I say nothing for a few seconds. Because firstly, I can't lie, since I'm fae. Secondly, Riven would be able to feel it if I tried to dance around the truth. He knows me too well for us to play those sorts of games anymore. The soul fusing made sure of it.

"What I know," I say firmly, keeping my eyes locked on his, "is that we were faced with two deadly monsters and had seconds to react. You made the best decision you could with the information you had."

But Riven is already shaking his head, pacing now, frost spreading with each step. His hands curl into fists, his breath coming faster.

"I told you to fight with me, and the others to fight together," he says. "I did that. I gave that order."

His guilt radiates through the bond—a crushing, suffocating weight that threatens to pull him under. It's not just sadness or regret. It's condemnation. A deep, visceral self-loathing that makes my chest ache.

But telling him this isn't his fault isn't helping him feel better. Because no matter what I want him to feel, that isn't how he feels. Repeating it to him won't change that.

If I want to help, I need to understand where he's coming from. I need him to

communicate with me. To trust me with the pain instead of only the love and protection.

“Can you explain your logic to me?” I finally say, trying to sound as level-headed and calm as possible, despite the flames burning around us. “Help me understand why you made that call?”

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He stops pacing, his silver eyes finding mine. The vulnerability there—the rawness—makes my heart stop.

He breathes slower now, thinking.

“Maeris and Thalia are centuries-old summer warriors,” he finally says, each word precise and deliberate. “Highly decorated, known for fighting in perfect sync. They’ve survived wars together. You don’t split up a bonded unit like that—it’s tactically unsound.”

I nod, encouraging him to continue.

“I assumed pairing them was the smartest call,” he admits. “They’ve survived together for far longer than I’ve been alive.”

“That makes sense,” I say gently. “Anyone would have made the same decision.”

His fingers curl into fists at his sides, frost cracking around them. “But in hindsight, experience didn’t matter,” he continues. “Elemental balance did. If I’d paired each of them with one of us, we could have balanced their water with our air and ice?—”

He breaks off, his shame sharpening through our bond.

“And there’s something else,” he says finally, his voice dropping. “I didn’t want you out of my sight. And that—” his voice cracks “—that is where I failed Maeris. I let emotion cloud my judgment, and he paid the price.”

I reach for him again, and this time, he doesn't pull away.

His skin is ice-cold beneath my fingers, and all that does it make me hold him tighter, steadier. Because colder doesn't scare me. Silence doesn't scare me.

Losing him does.

"Listen to me," I say, pouring all my conviction into my words. "You made a call based on decades of tactical knowledge. Like you said, Maeris and Thalia were a unit. It made sense to keep them together. This isn't your fault."

His gaze remains locked on where our fingers are intertwined, refusing to meet my eyes.

Thalia's voice cuts through the tension, surprising us both. "She's right," she says, and when I look at her, I find her standing over what remains of Maeris, her expression unreadable.

I swallow, unable to find words. Because what could I possibly say? That everything will be okay? That Maeris died a hero? That his sacrifice will be worth it after we save the world from the Night Court and the Blood Covenant?

Those words would feel empty. Because right now, none of that matters—not when the remains of her soulmate are scattering away in the wind. Not when those specks of ash might be the last parts of him she'll ever see.

And so, I respectfully wait for her to continue, as grateful as ever for Riven's hand in mine.

"Maeris and I have fought together for centuries. No one would have split us up." Thalia's eyes harden. "So, stop your self-pity, Winter Prince. Maeris died because

these monsters were designed to kill, and today, one of them succeeded. If you want to honor him, help me complete this mission so his death wasn't for nothing."

Riven stares at her, his frost curling back inside him, his thumb tracing light patterns across my palm.

I love you.

As he traces the letters, I feel his guilt shift—not disappearing, but changing. Becoming something more complex. More resolved.

"You're right," he finally says to Thalia, and I squeeze his hand, the bond pulsing with shared love and determination.

He's not the only one who loves with everything he has.

"We'll make it count," I promise, although whether I'm speaking to Riven, Thalia, or the scattered ashes of Maeris, I'm not entirely sure.

Thalia spins around without another word, heading for the crater with determined steps. Her shoulders are rigid, her body radiating grief that she's trying to contain through sheer willpower alone.

I stay back with Riven, watching her go. Through our bond, I can still feel his guilt, raw and heavy. It's deepened after what I said. Hardened into something dangerous.

"What's really wrong?" I ask him softly.

He stares at the place where Maeris fell, his silver eyes reflecting the embers still floating in the air. He's so quiet that I don't expect him to say anything. Not here, not when what he's struggling with is so fresh.

“Maybe it wasn’t just strategy,” he admits, his voice so low I have to lean in to hear him. “Maybe I just made the wrong call.” His eyes find mine, and the anguish in them steals my breath away. “Maybe I just wanted to protect you.”

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The confession hangs between us like smoke. Too fragile to hold, and too thick to ignore.

“My love for you,” he continues, clenching and unclenching his fist, those delicate, beautiful frost patterns crawling along it, “became Maeris’s death sentence.”

I step closer, my chest aching for him, my heart pounding from the sheer intensity of his love.

“I wanted to be fighting with you, too,” I tell him, gentle but firm, needing him to believe me. “And there’s nothing wrong with that. I know it’s been drilled into you as a child, and that’s something that’s going to take years, or even decades, to overcome, but emotions—love—they’re not a weakness, Riven.”

“No,” he says, his voice sharp as the ice forming around us. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. That’s the problem. I don’t care—not at all. Because the only thing I care about is you. The rest of the world, and everyone else in it, can freeze for all I care. Having you with me is the only thing that matters now. It’s the only thing that will ever matter.”

He shakes his head and trails off, our bond dulling again—like a light being dimmed, or a sound suddenly muffled.

I could push. I could draw him back out, like when I dragged his soul back to his body in the Cosmic Tides, and remind him that our love has saved us time and again.

But I don’t.

He'll come back when he's ready. This isn't like before, when the dryad stole his love or when Eros's arrow poisoned my heart. This is Riven processing his guilt the only way he knows how—by retreating inward.

And that's okay. It's more than okay—I want him to do it. I want him to work through what he's feeling. We all carry our pain differently. That's one of the beautiful, messy parts of being alive.

What matters is that we always come back to each other in the end.

Nothing in this universe is strong enough to drive us apart. And if anything ever does...it will regret it for the rest of its existence. Because the side of Riven I just saw while he was fighting that monster could destroy everything that ever gets in our path, without hesitation or remorse. It's dangerous, but I know exactly what fuels it—an unbreakable, all-consuming love, fierce enough to shatter worlds and rewrite destinies.

“Let's go help Thalia,” I say gently, my water magic still reaching for him, even as I step away. “And Riven... I love you. I'm here for you when you're ready. I'm always here for you.”

His eyes flick to mine, gratitude in their silver depths. And as I turn to follow Thalia, I let my fingers brush Riven's—a fleeting touch, but one that says everything words can't.

I'm here. I understand. I love you anyway.

And through our bond, as dulled as it is, I feel the faintest echo in response.

It's flickering, fragile, but beneath that fragility lies the fierce promise of something unbreakable. Something that will always lead us to the only home we have left—each

other.

ZOEY

Hours later, as the sun is starting to rise, I'm riding high as Aerix and I return to his chambers.

Lady Reesia's blood has dried on my dress, turning the diamonds into crimson stars. Aerix's blood lingers on my lips, its power humming through my veins like lightning trapped beneath my skin.

Now, I watch him as he sheds his formal attire, his wings folding against his back. The memory of Evangeline flashes through my mind—a human turned vampire, commanding air magic with casual elegance, standing by Malakai's side.

"I want more," I say into the silence, my voice stronger than I expect.

Aerix turns, midnight eyes finding mine across the room. "More of what, little consort?" he asks, although there's a sort of knowing in his voice that makes it clear he anticipates exactly what's coming.

"More of everything." I step closer, my heart pounding. "More power. More respect." I gesture to my blood-stained dress. "More of this."

His head tilts in that predatory way that always makes my knees weak, and frost patterns form at his fingertips, air swirling around us.

"What exactly are you asking for, Zoey?" he finally replies, his eyes locked with mine, challenging me.

"Turn me." I lift my chin, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Into one of you."

The frost patterns freeze mid-formation, the only sign that he's processing my demand.

"Humans cannot become night fae," he says simply. "Night fae are winter fae who were turned vampire, and one cannot become a fae. One must be born a fae. That sort of power is entwined in a piece of our DNA so deep that not even vampire venom can penetrate it."

"I know that." It takes all my effort to not roll my eyes, since this is far from a good time to say or do anything that might anger him. "But humans can become vampires. And that's what I want—to be like Evangeline." I take another step toward him, keeping my gaze level with his. "Strong. Feared. Free to walk through this court without anyone daring to look at me wrong." My fingers find the dagger at my waist—his dagger, gifted to me after he killed for me. "I never want to feel weak again."

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He studies me, perfectly still, a predator assessing its prey.

But I'm not prey anymore.

I drank the predator's blood tonight. That makes me... well, I don't know what it technically makes me, but I know it makes me feel powerful.

"Do you have any idea what you're asking?" His voice drops lower, the temperature in the room following suit. "The transformation could kill you."

"It didn't kill Evangeline." I counter, standing my ground, even as his magic turns the air colder around us. "It didn't kill you."

"I was born winter fae," he reminds me, a dangerous edge to his tone. "You're human. Mortal. Your body might not?—"

"I don't care." The heat of my conviction pushes back against his cold. "I'd rather die attempting to become something more than live forever as something less. Plus... I'm mortal, Aerix. You'll be here in this world forever, but if I stay this way, I'll only ever be a flicker of candlelight in your life, gone before I ever truly had a chance to burn. I'll grow old. I'll die. And all the while, you'll be the exact same."

Something shifts in his expression—a wave of respect, perhaps even admiration. Then, his lips curl into a slow, calculating smirk.

"You're not asking me," he says, realization dawning. "You're telling me."

I nod once, refusing to back down.

His smirk widens as he closes the distance between us, wind swirling around him. His fingers trace the line of my throat where some of his blood still stains my skin, and then they trail down to my wrist—to my pulse point, where my heart hammers against his touch.

“It’s already changing you,” he murmurs, his breath cool against my ear. “My blood. My power.” His fingertip traces the vein in my wrist, frost forming and melting with each circle. “You feel it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Because ever since I drank from him at the fountain, something’s been different. My senses sharper, colors more vivid, sounds clearer. And when he touches me, it sets my skin on fire in the most pleasurable way ever.

His wings extend slightly, feathers rustling. “And you want more?” he asks.

“I want all of it.” I reach up, my fingers finding the base of his wings, my breaths shallow with satisfaction when he doesn’t pull away. “I want to stand beside you, not behind you. I want the court to fear me as they fear you, just like they did tonight.”

His eyes darken further, his grip on my wrist tightening as frost patterns crawl along my skin. It’s not painful, but it’s still cold enough to make me gasp.

“Do you understand what you’re asking of me? Truly?” He pulls me closer, until there’s barely a breath between us.

I think of Presque Isle, of the small-town life I once had. Of Sapphire, my best friend and soul sister, who I may never see again. Of the human world with its mundane

problems and petty concerns.

Then I think of the Night Court. Of the respect in the eyes of the night fae tonight. Of the power that surged through me when I drank Aerix's blood. Of the thrill that shot through me when that woman handed me Aerix's dagger in the streets, and when Lady Reesia crumpled to the ground, her arrogance extinguished forever.

"I know exactly what it means," I tell him, my free hand sliding to the back of his neck, pulling him closer. "And I want it. All of it. I love you, Aerix. And I want you—forever."

The frost patterns crawling along my skin still as his eyes widen slightly, his wings quivering behind him.

"You love me," he says softly, as if it's a revelation for him, even though I've said it a hundred times before.

But something in his voice is different this time. Like it hurts to hear it. Like he's afraid it might not last.

"Yes. I love you, Aerix Nightborne," I repeat, as if this might be the time when he'll fully believe me. "And I want to be yours—truly yours—forever."

He doesn't speak. Doesn't move. But I can feel the exact moment something inside him fractures. Like he's been waiting for this, dreading this, needing this—and now that it's here, he doesn't know how to hold it without breaking.

Then, his lips are finding mine with desperate intensity. This kiss is different from all the others. It's not just possessive or demanding, but searching, as if he's trying to taste the truth of my words on my tongue.

I pour everything into this kiss—all my fear, all my hope, and all my love—showing him what I can't find the words to say. That I choose him. That I choose this life. That I'm ready to leave my humanity behind. That I've already left it behind—from the moment my dagger broke through Henry's skin and I watched him die at my feet.

When we break apart, his eyes are darker than I've ever seen them, his breathing uneven.

"You mean it," he says, wonder threading through his voice. "You want this. You want me."

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“More than anything,” I whisper, and then his hand is coming up to cup my face, his touch uncharacteristically gentle.

“Then I will turn you,” he declares. “Tomorrow night. You asked, and it will be done. Because you’re mine, Zoey. And now, I’ll be yours—forever.”

ZOEY

“Tomorrow?” I breathe, both thrilled and terrified at how quickly everything is happening.

“Tomorrow,” he confirms. “But first, we must prepare.” His expression shifts, becoming sharp and calculating—the same expression he wore while plotting how to cover up Henry’s murder. “We’ll go to the barns when we wake.”

I blink, pulling back. “The barns? Why?”

“To choose your pet, of course. You’ll need to select someone who pleases you. And you’ll need to do it before you’re turned.”

Pet.

Like me. Like Sophia, Matt, Jake, Victoria, Aurora, and all the others who were everything from friends to enemies in the past few weeks.

“I assumed I’d feed from the fountains,” I say slowly, grappling with it as I speak. “Or animal blood. Or from glasses, like at the celebration tonight.”

Aerix's wings pull tight against his back—a warning sign I've learned to recognize.

"You are my consort," he says, his fingers tightening at my waist. "Therefore, you will have only the best. And the best is feeding from the source—warm, fresh, and willing."

He studies my neck, his pupils dilating, as if assessing exactly how willing I am right now.

"I've never... I don't know how to..." I hesitate, trying to find the right words. But it's impossible to have the right words when I'm not even sure about my own thoughts.

"I'll teach you everything," Aerix promises, his thumb tracing my lower lip. "You had your first taste of power tonight. Imagine how it will feel when you're the one doing the taking. Imagine how strong you'll feel. How powerful."

I think of the times Aerix has fed from me—the initial sting that melts into a heady, overwhelming pleasure. The way my body responds to his bite, craving it, needing it. But for some reason, I've never imagined myself with the fangs, piercing someone else's warm skin, their blood flowing down my throat...

"Does the thought of drinking from humans disgust you?" Aerix asks, yanking me out of my thoughts. "Do I disgust you?"

"No." My eyes widen, and I place a hand on his chest, unsure how he could ever think that. "Nothing about you could ever disgust me, Aerix. I love you. I trust you." I hold his gaze, letting him see the truth in my eyes. "And if feeding straight from humans is what you want me to do, then I want to learn it. I want to do it right. For you. Always for you."

The air stills around us, and I can barely breathe as I wait for his reaction.

“You mean that?” he finally asks, his eyes searching mine.

“Yes,” I say, not having to think twice. “Show me how. Teach me everything. I want to learn it all—from you. Only from you.”

The tension drains from his wings, his arms coming around me.

“You’re so brave. So perfect,” he murmurs in my ear, although he pulls back instead of kissing me again. “Tomorrow, you’ll die with my venom in your veins. And then, you’ll rise as mine. You’ll be my mate, forever. My family by blood that I’ve always wanted but have never had the luxury of truly having. Not really. Not since I left the Winter Court.”

I study him carefully, watching him, his eyes shining with a vulnerability that makes me wonder if he’s holding something back. There was something in the way he said family...like it hurts him to want it. Like it’s something that was dangled in front of him, but never actually in reach.

“You’ll be what I never had,” he continues, his voice rough with emotion. “You’ll be my everything.”

“I already am your everything,” I whisper, as if I speak too loudly, he might not believe me.

“Promise me you’ll never question our love,” he says suddenly, his hand coming up to cup my face, his eyes so intense it’s like they’re burning into my soul. “And you’ll never fight what you’re becoming.”

“I promise,” I reply without hesitation. “You’re my world now, Aerix. I won’t fight it. I won’t question it. Because I’m yours—always. Forever.”

Satisfaction spreads across his features, his wings rustling with pleasure. “Good,” he says simply, and then his lips are on mine again, more insistent this time, almost desperate.

What would Sapphire think if she could see me now? Would she recognize the girl she grew up with? Or would I be a stranger to her—just like how the version of me from Presque Isle has become to myself?

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The thought of Sapphire fades away as Aerix's kisses deepen, his touch growing more deliberate. There's something different in the way his hands move over me tonight—not with his usual hungry possession, but with a careful reverence that makes my breath catch.

“What is it?” I whisper against his lips.

His eyes meet mine, something ancient and knowing in their depths. “I’m memorizing you,” he says softly. “This version of you. The warmth of your skin. The sound of your heartbeat.” His fingers trace down my throat and across my collarbone, his touch cool and gentle. “Because tomorrow, everything changes.”

“Does that bother you?” I ask. “That I’ll be different?”

“Different, yes,” he murmurs. “But still mine. Always mine.”

He undresses me with deliberate care, each movement unhurried, as if we have all the time in the world. And when I stand before him, the dawn light filtering through the window, his eyes darken with appreciation.

“Lie down,” he says, gentle, but still commanding.

I do as he asks, watching as he removes his own clothing, his wings folding and unfurling with fluid grace. The sight of him still takes my breath away—all lean muscle and deadly elegance. It always will.

And now, always has a new meaning.

Because it's forever. Until the end of time.

I can barely wrap my mind around the concept of immortality, but right now, it doesn't matter. All that matters is Aerix. Him and me together, right here, right now.

He joins me on the bed, his body hovering over mine without touching, his wings creating a canopy of shadow above us. Then, slowly, he lowers himself, skin against skin, the coolness of him making me gasp.

"Your heart," he says, pressing his palm against my chest. "It's racing."

I reach up to touch his face, trailing my fingers along the sharp angle of his jaw. "Only for you."

His smile is tinged with something that might be sadness. "This is the last time I'll ever feel your heartbeat like this," he says, and then he's making his way down my body, kissing every inch of me, as if committing it to memory. When he reaches my hip—the place where he carved his name into my skin—he lingers, tracing the raised scar with his tongue, as if memorizing the grooves of it. "This will remain," he says, looking up at me with possessive satisfaction. "Any scars from when you were human will stay with you through the transformation. It's why I marked you when I did."

The realization hits me with sudden clarity. "You always planned to turn me."

"From the moment I saw you, I knew you were meant for me." His fingers tighten on my thighs, his eyes pleading, as if he needs me to understand. "The gods designed you for me, Zoey. And tomorrow, I'll give you the finishing touches, binding us in the most intimate way possible."

His eyes burn into me now, desire swirling in their inky depths.

“But if you knew,” I say, breathless, “why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have been ready to hear it?” He crawls back up my body, his face hovering just above mine. “Would you have believed that you were meant for this darkness? Meant forme?”

I think back to that terrified girl in the bunker, pleading for her life. The girl who fought against Aerix’s control at every turn, who clung desperately to her humanity. Who tried to stab him in a hopeless attempt to escape.

I’m so, so glad I didn’t escape—that he never wants to let me go. That he’ll keep me with him, safe from all the monsters in this realm who have been trying to kill me since I followed Sapphire into that stream and my life changed forever.

“I don’t know what I would have believed,” I say honestly. “But I’m ready now.”

“And what made you realize you’re ready?” His voice drops lower, his magic swirling around us in cool currents.

He’s watching me with that familiar look—the look of a man who wants nothing more than to be loved.

“It was when I realized I love you,” I tell him, and his wings shudder, and then they’re folding closer around us and his mouth is on mine again, the kiss deeper, more urgent. Like he’s afraid this will be the last time I’ll be soft beneath him. And I kiss him back like I’m not afraid at all.

My dark, deadly prince—the one who kills in a flash if anyone ever crosses me—is mine. Forever.

This has always been my destiny. He has always been my destiny. He might have

known it first, but now I know it with absolute certainty, too.

As we lose ourselves in each other, his hand slides between us, finding the places that make me gasp and arch against him. His fingers move with worshipful precision—mapping me, claiming me.

“I want to remember you like this,” he whispers against my throat. “Warm. Alive. Breakable. Mine.”

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When he finally moves over me, his hips settling between mine with agonizing slowness, I feel the full weight of what I'm giving up—and what I'm gaining.

My humanity for eternity. My mortality for power. My old life for one with the man I love.

The stretch of him inside me pulls a gasp from my lips, and he stills for a beat, like he wants to memorize the sound. Then he moves—slow and devastating, deep and controlled—as if he's carving the shape of forever into my body. Like this is a ritual, and I'm the altar.

And as we lose each other in the shadowy cocoon of his wings, I realize this isn't just goodbye to my humanity.

It's hello to my forever.

SAPPHIRE

We descend from the surface of Mount Etna, following a narrow path that spirals downward into the crater. Each step takes us deeper into a world that feels increasingly alien—a realm where the normal rules of nature bend and blur beneath the volcano's ancient power.

“Stay close,” Riven says to me, one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other reaching for mine, as if he's afraid he might lose me if I move too far away from him.

Thalia leads the way, her grief giving her reckless courage as she descends into the

inferno. Water swirls protectively around her, but even that isn't enough to shield her from the blistering heat.

The further we descend, the more bizarre our surroundings become. Vents in the volcanic rock release plumes of steam that glow with eerie red light. The air becomes thick, my clothes sticking to my skin, each breath a conscious effort.

"By the gods," Thalia gasps as we round the final bend.

Riven and I come to a sudden stop behind her. Because before us stretches a vast chamber—the heart of the volcano.

It's breathtaking. Magma flows in glowing rivers across the floor. The ceiling arches impossibly high above, and the walls are solid obsidian, polished to a mirror shine, reflecting our images back at us in twisted, dancing patterns.

I'm barely orienting myself when the ground rumbles and the floor cracks, lines of magma seeping through like veins of molten gold.

In an instant, the Star Disc is in my hand, its energy pulsing in rhythm with the tremors beneath our feet.

Riven steps closer to me as three distinct mounds emerge from the magma pool.

They glow red-hot, cooling as they take form, as if sculpted by invisible hands into... ourselves.

But they're not us. Not really. Because the me I'm looking at is one I'd recognize anywhere. She's the twisted version of myself from my nightmares. As always, her eyes are empty, devoid of conscience or remorse, and her hands and arms are coated with dried blood.

Next to her stands a corrupted version of Riven. The Lonely King, but twisted into something fiery and cruel. His eyes burn with malice, and his crown is hot magma instead of ice, veins of red spreading under his feet in jagged, threatening patterns.

A pained whimper sounds from Thalia's throat, and I follow her gaze to see Maeris directly ahead of her. But like the versions of me and Riven, Maeris is wrong. His features are twisted into a mask of hatred, his stance aggressive where it had once been loyal and protective.

"This can't be real," Thalia says, water surging around her in chaotic waves.

"It's not," Riven says, but his voice lacks conviction, his gaze locked on his dark counterpart.

Suddenly, the floor between us splits, and I stumble backward as the ground beneath me rises, separating from the main floor to form a floating obsidian platform. Across the chamber, Riven and Thalia experience the same, each of us now isolated on our own dark island in a sea of molten rock.

"Riven!" I call out, but my voice is swallowed by the rumble of shifting stone and hissing magma.

Movement nearby snaps my attention back to my immediate surroundings.

The shadow version of me is on the opposite edge of my platform, perfectly still, watching me with those dead eyes. Blood drips from her fingers, sizzling when it hits the stone.

My Star Disc pulses in my hand. Not in warning, but in recognition. As if my weapon knows this twisted version of myself as well as it knows itself.

The other me doesn't attack.

“What do you want?” I ask, staying grounded, ready to throw the Star Disc in a perfect arc to slice her throat if she does so much as raise a finger against me.

She lifts her hand, and a shadow version of my Star Disc materializes in her palm, sparks of fire trailing from its edges. Just as sharp. Just as deadly.

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“Fine,” I mutter, channeling my magic into my Star Disc—Glimmercut, I affectionately remember Riven and I naming it together. “Let’s see what you can do.”

I throw the Disc with all my strength, sending it spinning toward her chest, ready to end this.

She doesn’t dodge. Instead, her hand snaps up, catching Glimmercut mid-flight, her bloodied fingers closing around the edge without cutting her flesh.

Her empty eyes meet mine, and then she’s sending it hurtling back toward me with equal force.

Just like she did, I catch it. And before she can attack again, I dig inside myself, reaching for my water magic, sending a pressurized blast surging at my shadow self’s chest.

She instantly—not with water, but with fire—meets my magic in the middle.

The collision creates a spray of scalding droplets that rain down between us, hissing where they hit the stone.

I switch to ice next, coating Glimmercut’s edge with frost so cold it steams in the volcanic heat before I charge forward, slashing at the twisted version of myself with calculated precision. But once again, she matches me perfectly, her own weapon gleaming with heat that melts my ice.

Through the steam of our clashing powers, I glimpse Riven across the chamber,

locked in combat with his dark reflection. Ice and water magic collide in spectacular bursts as he fights with all the skill and power of the Winter Prince.

He'll be okay. I saw the sheer force of him while we fought the fire monster together, when he was driven to kill and destroy for his love for me. Assuming his shadow self doesn't share that love—which is slightly disturbing to think about—I have full faith in him that he'll come out of this victorious.

Beyond him, Thalia faces her corrupted Maeris, her attacks desperate and wild, driven by grief rather than strategy.

My attention snaps back to my own battle as my shadow catches my wrist, stopping my attack mid-swing. Her grip is like iron, cold despite the infernal heat surrounding us. Up close, her eyes are worse—like looking into empty wells where something vital should be.

I break free with a surge of air magic, pushing her back several steps. But she doesn't stumble. She doesn't blink. She just smiles. That same empty, blood-slicked smile from my nightmares.

“Why won't you speak?” I demand, circling her once more. “What are you trying to tell me?”

She resumes mirroring my movements, silent, waiting for my next attack.

After several more exchanges—each as futile as the last—I stand panting, blood covering my skin from dozens of small wounds that heal almost as quickly as they form.

My shadow remains pristine. Untouched. Untired. Apart from the blood that coated her from the beginning, she's perfect. Inhuman.

She's everything I fear I could become.

The metallic scent of blood fills my nostrils, bringing with it memories of the dark angel, of all the animals I've killed since my vampire side awakened, and of Riven's life force flowing into me as I fought to save him in the Cosmic Tides.

Panic rises in my throat as I stumble back, barely avoiding another slice of my shadow self's Star Disc.

"You're not real," I say again, louder this time, my voice echoing across the chamber. "You're what I fear becoming, but I'm not you. I'll never be you."

The shadow pauses, her head tilting slightly, as if considering my words.

Then, she raises her fiery version of Glimmercut and throws it, the weapon spinning toward me with deadly precision.

Instead of dodging or trying to deflect it, I lower my arms and stand tall.

"I choose my fate," I say, staring straight into those empty eyes. "Not you."

The Disc strikes me, cutting deep across my chest.

Pain explodes through me, fiery agony, cutting deep into my soul. I'm only halfway aware of my scream echoing through the chamber, unsure if I'm truly capable of making a sound as raw and primal as the one I hear. But through it all, I remain standing, blood soaking the front of my clothing. And as the wound begins to heal, Glimmercut—both hers and mine—vibrates.

Gripping my Star Disc tighter, I channel all my elements at once, the power rushing through me so strongly that I can barely see straight.

My air magic lifts me slightly off the platform. Water coats Glimmercut in a shimmering layer, ice sharpens its edges, and finally, I add my star-touched will—the cosmic energy Celeste bestowed upon me.

“You don’t control me,” I say to my shadow self, throwing my star forged weapon one final time.

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The Disc cuts through the air with blinding speed, trailing not just stardust, but a combination of blue and yellow magic—ice, water, and air.

It strikes her in the heart, and her normally empty eyes widen as cracks spread across her form, light spilling from within. She staggers, reaching toward me with one hand, and then sheshattersinto obsidian dust that scatters across the platform, flecks of it blowing into the magma below.

My platform stabilizes, the edges solidifying as the magma recedes.

Glimmercut returns to my hand, humming with satisfied energy.

“I know who I am,” I whisper to my deadly, gleaming weapon. “I’m Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor of the Summer and Winter Courts, the New York Vampire Clan, and the chosen Star Touched warrior of Celeste—and I choose my own destiny.”

RIVEN

My stomach lurchesas my platform rises, separating me from Sapphire and Thalia.

When it stops, I’m facing an obsidian throne covered in frost that shouldn’t be possible in this infernal heat. Sitting upon it, watching me with silver eyes so like my own, is the Lonely King from the vision in the Cosmic Tides.

But here, in this chamber, his face is lined with cruelty rather than emptiness. His eyes are flat and dead, holding cold calculation and absolute power. And his crown

isn't one of ice. Instead, it's made of sharp, obsidian daggers that gleam like death in the fiery chamber around us.

In his hand, he holds a blade the same size as mine. Dark blood drips from its edge, sizzling as it falls to the stone, and shadows dance along its length like living things.

"Is this supposed to scare me?" I ask, ice crawling over my own blade. "Some twisted reflection to make me doubt myself?"

The Lonely King doesn't respond. He simply stands, his movements unnaturally fluid, and steps down from his throne.

Magic surges through me, and I charge forward, Frostbite aimed at his heart. My strike is perfect—the culmination of decades of Winter Court training—but he parries it effortlessly, his corrupted blade meeting mine with a sound like breaking glass.

"Too predictable," he finally speaks, his voice a hollow echo of my own. "You always were."

His tone, his words... it's like hearing my father speak to me, before the potion stabilized his mind.

But I won't let him derail me. I can't. I was victorious against my father in the Frost Arena, and I can be victorious against the Lonely King, too.

So, I press the attack, channeling more ice into my strikes, turning the air around us frigid despite the volcanic heat.

Each blow is met with equal force, each strategy countered before I can execute it. It's like fighting my own shadow—one that knows my every move before I make it. Because he does know my every move. He's made of every decision I've made. Every

silent calculation. Every deadly blow.

And the more power I pour into my attacks, the stronger he grows.

“You can’t win through strength,” the Lonely King says, deflecting another attack with contemptuous ease. “I’m everything you were trained to be. Everything you still could be, if you abandon your biggest weakness.”

He glances at Sapphire, who’s fighting her shadow self with her starlit beauty that I love with my entire soul.

As if he can read my mind, he laughs—a cold, empty sound that shakes me to the core.

“I’m your future, Riven,” he says. “The only possible outcome for a Winter Prince who thought he could defy nature. You may have stopped time, but you didn’t stop me.”

Stopped time.

Executed my guards while they were frozen.

Didn’t flinch. Didn’t blink. Didn’t feel anything more than my undying need to save her—my Starlight, the only thing that matters anymore. The only thing I won’t let myself lose.

“You’re wrong,” I growl, and I lunge again, channeling water and ice together in a technique Sapphire and I developed after our souls fused.

Surprise flickers across the Lonely King’s face, and his parry comes a fraction too late, Frostbite slicing across his forearm.

Darkness spills from the wound, returning to solid form almost immediately.

His expression hardens.

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“You’ll never save her,” he says quietly, his voice cutting through the roar of the magma below. “You’ll only bury her beside the others.”

My rhythm falters, and his corrupted Frostbite slashes across my chest, cutting through fabric and skin. Pain flares, hot and sharp, but I tighten my grip on my sword’s hilt, forcing myself to ignore it.

“Is that what you tell yourself?” I demand, circling him carefully now. “That everyone you loved died because you couldn’t save them?”

His eyes narrow. “Love makes you weak. It clouds judgment. It leads to failure.” His voice drops lower. “Our father was right to have hardened you.”

I flinch at his words as my father’s lessons, brutal and unforgiving, echo in my mind. The weight of them, the shame of never being enough—never being cold enough, controlled enough, or perfect enough. Not until I killed my own men. Not until I stopped time and became the weapon he tried to forge me into.

“Maeris died because of you,” the Lonely King presses his advantage, both with blade and words. “Everyone you love will die because of you. She’ll be scared of what you become. She’ll hate you. Maybe not yet, but she will. And then, when she does, you’ll be ruined. You’ll become me.”

Ice surges through my veins, and I strike wildly, slashing with no rhythm, no control. Just raw force that never seems to be enough.

“You should have stayed cold,” he continues, each syllable precise and cutting. “The

Winter Prince. The perfect weapon. Instead, you let her in. You let yourself feel.” His lip curls in disgust. “And what has it cost you already?”

With a gesture of his hand, ice erupts from the platform beneath me, climbing up my legs and locking me in place. I struggle against it, but this ice isn’t like mine. It’s unyielding and absolute. My own magic can’t melt it.

The Lonely King approaches slowly, savoring his victory.

“You failed Maeris,” he says softly, his corrupted version of Frostbite gleaming in the volcanic light as he raises it to deliver the killing blow. “You’ll fail her, too.”

“No,” I growl, my voice steady despite the ice creeping up my waist. “I’m not you. I never will be you.”

“You will when she leaves you,” he says without so much as faltering.

“She won’t leave me,” I say, power flaring hot inside me. “You don’t get it, do you? Her love isn’t something fragile enough to break. It’s fierce enough to rewrite destinies and shatter curses. It’s powerful enough to save even someone like me.”

“Are you blind, boy?” The Lonely King sneers. “I am you. I’m the culmination of all your past actions and all your future mistakes. And trust me when I say that when she leaves, your heart will freeze so completely that you’ll never feel warmth or love again. Numbness will be your only escape from the pain of losing her. Especially when you realize you never deserved her at all.”

My first instinct is to scream. To say he’s right. To repeat what my father drilled into me more times than I could possibly count.

But then my mind drifts back to the Lost Temple, when I saw myself the way

Sapphire sees me. I remember the reflection of a man I didn't recognize at first—a man radiant with quiet strength, fierce loyalty, and unbreakable devotion. Not a perfect weapon, but something far more powerful: someone worthy of being loved. And at the memory, strength surges through me again, unstoppable and absolute. Because Sapphire loves me—not despite who I am, but because of it. And that love is stronger than any ice, any fear, and any shadow.

“Love isn't about deserving,” I say steadily, my voice hard as steel as I keep my gaze level with his. “It's about choosing, over and over, even when it's hard. And Sapphire chose me. She sees everything I am, every mistake I've made, and she still chose me. Your fear doesn't stand a chance against that. Nothing does. And it never will.”

RIVEN

The Lonely King hesitates, confusion flickering across the sharp lines of his face.

In that second, I reach for the bond I share with Sapphire. Despite being dulled by my earlier withdrawal, it's still there—warm and alive. A heartbeat of starlight in the dark. And with it, my power surges, starting to melt the ice trapping me, fueled by an emotion so fierce it nearly overwhelms me.

The Lonely King steps back.

“What are you doing?” he demands, uncertainty creeping into his voice.

“You think you know loss?” I say, cold and lethal, my magic raging inside and around me. “You know nothing. Sapphire isn't just the one I love—she's the core of who I am. And if anything tries to take her from me, it won't be numbness that awaits. It'll be vengeance. Cold, merciless, and absolute. I would become the nightmare even you fear. Because you underestimate how deep—how dangerous—my love for her truly is.”

He falters, his corrupted blade shaking slightly in his grasp. “No,” he says, more to himself than to me. “That type of love isn’t strength—it’s madness. It will burn you from the inside out. It will consume you until you drown in it.”

“Then let it consume me,” I say quietly, my voice deadly calm. “As long as Sapphire’s there with me when the flames die out, I don’t care what else is left. Because as long as she’s with me, I’ll still have everything.”

Fear flashes openly across his face, raw and unchecked.

“No one can survive a love like that,” he snarls, desperation bleeding through every word. “It will rip you apart piece by piece, until there’s nothing left but ashes and regret. You’ll lose everything you are, and everything you could be. And then, eventually, you’ll become me.”

For a heartbeat, my breath catches as his words echo with a clarity I can’t deny. Because the destructive potential of my love—as obsessive and consuming as it’s become—is powerful enough to reshape me entirely. It already is reshaping me entirely.

And for her, I’ll let it.

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“I’ll become whatever nightmare I have to be,” I say with absolute certainty. “Because without her, I’m nothing.”

I don’t wait for him to reply.

Instead, I focus on Frostbite, connecting to my sword on a level deeper than the physical. This blade was forged for precision, but it’s always known my heart. It’s been with me since childhood—it knows me better than anyone, except Sapphire herself.

It was there when I was trained to be cold and unfeeling. It was there when I met Ghost. It was there when I met Sapphire at the Maple Pig, when I saved her in the forest, and when I helped her through the trials.

It knows who I am. Not just who I was trained to be—but who I am. And I can’t let this shadow version of myself win. If he does, and if I fall into the magma below, I’ll be forced to leave her. That would break her, and I won’t let her break. I know what it feels like to be broken, and I’ll never let that happen to my Starlight.

Annihilation, the word echoes in my mind. Destroy him. Not for myself, but for her.

Silver-blue light emanates from my blade’s edge, brighter and clearer than the shadowy glow of the Lonely King’s corrupted sword. The air around me sharpens, temperature dropping—not with the brutal cold of winter, but with the precise chill of deliberate focus.

The ice around my legs begins to crack. And then, with a final surge of will, I shatter

it completely, shards exploding outward as I free myself from the Lonely King's burning ice.

"Impossible," he breathes, his eyes wide. "You can't?—"

I rush forward, moving with a speed and grace that surprises even me. My attack isn't calculated or cold—it's driven by passion, by purpose, by everything my father tried to train out of me, and by everything Sapphire has turned me into.

He raises his corrupted blade to block, but Frostbite slashes through it, shattering it in a spray of darkness and frost. And before he can recover, I scream with everything left in me and drive my sword into his chest.

Steam erupts from the wound, and lava sparks hiss around us as frost and fire collide.

For once, the Lonely King is silent. He just stares at me, shock evident in those silver eyes so frighteningly similar to my own as I twist the blade, cracks spreading across his body.

"Die," I growl the same word I did to the fiery monster guarding the crater.

And then, with a final wrench, I pull Frostbite free.

The Lonely King doesn't speak, doesn't plead. He simply shatters, fragmenting into ice and shadow that evaporate in the volcanic heat.

My entire body is numb as I lower Frostbite.

Across the chamber, I see Sapphire standing alone on her platform, bloodied but victorious. Her shadow self is gone, and relief floods through me at the sight of her unharmed.

She gives me a small smile, and I know she feels as connected in this moment as I do. And even though I don't know what I've become, she's still looking at me like she sees the man I used to be. Like she still believes he exists—somewhere beneath the ice, the blood, and the frozen silence.

Maybe that's the most dangerous thing of all. Because I will do anything to keep her looking at me that way. No hesitation, and no regret. I'll stop time again, freeze the universe mid-breath, and erase anything that tries to take her from me. And I won't flinch while doing it. Because like I said to the Lonely King, she's the only thing that matters anymore.

Not the court. Not the war. Not even the man I used to be.

Just her. My Starlight. My beginning and my end. The other half of my soul. And if loving her turns me into the monster I've spent my whole life fighting against, then so be it. As long as she's mine, I'll become whatever the world fears most, just to keep her next to me.

But while Sapphire and I have beaten our shadow selves, Thalia is on her knees on her platform, continuing to fight the corrupted version of Maeris. Her watermagic explodes in chaotic bursts, waves crashing against stone and steam hissing into the volcanic air.

"You're not him!" she screams. "You'll never be him!"

Shadow Maeris moves with grace, dodging Thalia's wild attacks. His expression remains blank, but there's something cruel in his eyes that the real Maeris never possessed.

"You couldn't save me," he says, his voice an empty echo of the man she loved. "You never could."

Thalia's magic falters, water droplets hanging in the air around her. "Maeris..."

"All your strength, all your centuries of battle," Shadow Maeris continues, circling her like a predator. "And when it mattered most, you failed."

I grip Frostbite's hilt tighter, helpless to intervene. This is Thalia's battle, not mine. And the truth is... I have zero desire to intervene. Not when it would mean putting myself at risk. Because I won't risk myself for anyone but her. Not anymore. Not again. Never again.

"I love you," Thalia whispers to Shadow Maeris, her voice so pained that I'm taken back to the Tides, when Sapphire was motionless in my arms, and I thought she was gone forever. I can still feel the terrifying emptiness, the numbing horror of a world stripped of her warmth, and the realization that without her, nothing mattered.

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“And look where your love got you,” Shadow Maeris taunts Thalia. “Alone. Broken. Weak.”

“I’m not weak,” she sneers, water swirling around her clenched fists.

“Then prove it,” he challenges, raising his weapon.

She launches herself at him with a primal scream, water surging in her wake. Her attacks are reckless and unbalanced, driven by rage and heartbreak rather than skill. But there’s power in her pain—raw, terrible power.

Power I recognize. Power I understand. Power that reflects my own—my devotion, my desperation, and my undying love for the star touched princess who lights up my dark, frozen world.

Shadow Maeris blocks Thalia’s initial assault, but she doesn’t relent. Her magic lashes out in jagged, unpredictable patterns, more emotion than technique.

“You think I don’t know pain?” she demands, water slicing through the air between them. “You think I don’t know loss?”

Shadow Maeris falters, the first sign of uncertainty crossing his features.

Her next strike catches him off guard, water condensing into a blade so sharp it gleams in the volcanic light. It slices across his chest, darkness spilling from the wound.

“You are not my weakness,” she declares, advancing on him. “You’re my strength.”

Shadow Maeris attempts to counter, but Thalia’s magic surrounds him now, water encircling him like a living thing.

“I loved Maeris,” she says, her voice dropping to a deadly whisper. “I will always love Maeris. But you? You’re nothing but a shadow.” She raises her hand, water surging in response, and sends it crashing into him.

Like mine and Sapphire’s shadows before him, he shatters into dust.

Thalia remains standing, her chest heaving, tears streaming down her face. Slowly, she sinks to her knees, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs, her grief radiating through the chamber.

The ground beneath us shifts again, our platforms retracting toward the center of the chamber.

As we descend, I catch Sapphire’s eye across the space between us. Her gaze is steady, unwavering—a beacon in this hellish place. A beacon in my life. No matter how deep the darkness claws at me, I always find her. I always will.

When our platforms lock together, I hurry to Sapphire’s side. I need her hand in mine like I need breath. Like I need blood. Like I need purpose. And finally, it finds hers, ice and water intertwining as our fingers lace together.

“You did it,” she murmurs, her free hand coming up to touch my cheek.

“We did it,” I correct her, pressing my forehead to hers. The contact steadies me. Grounds me. Burns through every part of me that wonders if my love for her is growing so much that it will consume me entirely, until I don’t know what else is left.

And yet, as her warmth floods through me, I'm reminded that I don't care.

Let my love for her consume me. Let it rewrite me. Because with her, I'm finally the person I was always meant to be.

But the Pyros Vault doesn't give us the generosity of a moment to recover. Instead, the ground rumbles, and the wall behind us splits down the middle, stone grinding against stone as it parts to reveal a cavern larger than the chamber we're in now.

Rivers of lava snake across its floor, casting everything in a hellish red glow.

And there, suspended above a crumbling stone platform in the center of the cavern, floats a sphere of pure, condensed fire—pulsing like a heart, its light so bright it hurts to look at directly.

The Ember of Prometheus.

SAPPHIRE

"There it is," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the bubbling magma. "The Ember."

Riven stands beside me, frost forming and melting around him in rapid cycles, his silver eyes reflecting the Ember's glow. "It's beautiful," he says softly, and then his gaze flickers to me. "But nowhere as close to as beautiful as you."

"Careful, Winter Prince." I arch an eyebrow, my lips curving into a small smile. "Keep sweet-talking me like that and I might forget we're standing next to a deadly pit of magma."

"Then allow me to remind you," he says softly, leaning closer, his breath cool against

my ear. “Deadly situations have always been my preferred form of romance.”

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Thalia clears her throat, pulling me out of my Riven-induced haze. “Do you mind saving the romantic banter until we’re no longer in mortal peril?” she says. “Unless you’re eager to join my soulmate in the afterlife.”

Her words slice through the air, and Riven tenses beside me, frost patterns crawling up his arms before shattering in the heat. Guilt pulses through our bond—raw, fresh, and volcanic beneath his composed exterior.

But I don’t have a chance to say anything, because the platform shudders, sending a spray of rocks skittering into the lava below.

“We need to move,” I say, my eyes fixed on the Ember hovering above the central platform—impossibly far across a sea of molten rock. “Now.”

The distance stretches before us, at least thirty feet of bubbling magma between our crumbling ledge and the stone pedestal.

“It’s too far to jump,” Riven says, his voice clipped. “Even with air magic, the heat would drag us down before we made it halfway there.”

Another tremor rocks the platform, more violent than the last, splitting the stone between my feet.

I leap back, nearly colliding with Thalia.

“Whatever we’re going to do,” Thalia says, “we need to do it now.”

My fingers find my Star Disc at my hip, and I flash back to the disintegrating tower in the Cosmic Tides—to the moment Riven and I leaped through nothingness to reach the spectral ship.

“The Star Disc,” I say, pulling it free. “It can glide us across.”

Riven’s eyes meet mine, understanding flooding through our bond. “Like in the Tides.”

“Exactly.” I grip the Disc tighter, its energy responding to my touch. “I’ll hold onto the edges, you’ll hold onto me, and we’ll use our air magic to propel us forward.”

Thalia’s expression darkens as she glances between us and the Ember. “It can carry three?” she asks.

I swallow, knowing the answer—and hating it.

“No,” I admit, the weight of it settling in my chest. “Only two.”

Riven’s frost patterns intensify, spreading across the ground at his feet and melting into steam.

I brace myself for him to say he’ll stay instead of Thalia. That he’ll sacrifice himself.

He says nothing. His eyes are simply locked onto the Ember, a sharp, dangerous glint in them that I don’t recognize at all. Because it’s not calculation. It’s certainty. If the choice was me or the world, he would let the world freeze over entirely.

The platform lurches beneath us, dropping several inches with a sickening crack.

Panic shoots through the bond, and then Riven’s arms are around me, pulling me flush

against him, keeping me steady. His heart is racing—almost like for a moment there, he thought he'd lost me all over again.

I almost tell him not to worry about me—that I'm fine—but something holds me back. Because the fear pulsing through him from the bond is strong. It's a living, breathing thing that scares me nearly as much as it scares him.

"It's okay," I tell him softly, steadily. "I'm okay."

He exhales, as if he needed me to say it for him to truly believe it. Which, in its own way, terrifies me. Because if this is how he got after a fake-out drop from a floating platform, what's going to happen to him when the threat increases? Will he be able to stop looking out for me enough to look after himself? Or will his dedication to keeping me safe be what destroys him in the end?

"I know," he says, his voice tight and barely audible, as if trying to reassure himself more than me. "Just stay close. Okay?"

"I'm right here," I murmur, offering him the steadiness he desperately needs.

The tension leaves his shoulders, and his breathing steadies, clearing the fog of fear enough for his logic to resurface.

"Thalia's right," he says after taking a few more seconds to make sure I'm not about to slip through his fingers and fall into the magma below. "If either of us dies, the courts fracture. If the alliance falls?—"

"The Night Court wins," I finish. "And thousands die."

"Millions, eventually," Thalia adds. "I knew what I signed up for when I took my oath to the Summer Court, and when I made the deal with Queen Lysandra to protect

the two of you at all costs. This is my duty, and I will fulfill it.”

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Another violent tremor shakes the platform, chunks of rock the size of my head breaking away and plunging into the lava with sickening hisses.

We have seconds—not minutes.

“Sapphire.” Riven’s voice is strained, his hand finding mine, holding it like a man grasping the edge of a cliff. “We need to go.”

I glance at Thalia, guilt filling my chest.

“Thalia...” My voice breaks on her name.

Her expression softens. “Tell them I found peace,” she says, her fingers going to a small ring hanging from a chain around her neck. “Tell them I wasn’t afraid.”

Riven’s turmoil pulses through the bond—a mixture of shame and resolve. And then the platform gives another sickening lurch, more stone breaking away beneath our feet.

“Go!” Thalia shouts, water erupting around her in one final, defiant display. “Now!”

I position the Star Disc above my head, gripping it with both hands.

Riven steps behind me, his arms circling my waist, his chest pressed against my back.

“On three,” I say, gathering my air magic despite the stifling heat. “Don’t let go.”

“I’ll never let go,” he replies. “No matter what I have to do to stay with you and keep you with me... for me, it’ll always be you.”

“And you better believe I’m holding you to it,” I say, and then I begin counting before the magma beneath us can terrify me more than it already is.

“One... two...”

“Three!” we shout together, taking a running leap from the edge of the crumbling platform.

We drop.

My air magic explodes behind us, Riven’s joining mine, propelling us forward. The Star Disc catches the current, and suddenly we’re soaring, the Disc humming with energy as it guides our flight.

I look back in time to see Thalia press the ring to her lips and run to the edge of what remains of the platform, gathering her magic in a desperate surge. She leaps with all her strength, water erupting beneath her to boost her jump.

For a breathless moment, she soars through the air.

“She’s trying to follow us,” I cry, hope flaring in my chest.

But her water dissolves into steam, her momentum stalls, and she begins to fall.

“No!” I scream, reaching out with my air magic, trying to catch her, to push her toward us.

Riven’s grip tightens around my waist, his own magic lashing out alongside

mine—but it's not to help me save Thalia. It's to push us faster. Further away from her, and closer to the Ember. Closer to survival.

My magic dissipates before it can reach her.

Thalia falls, our eyes meeting one last time—not with fear, but with a strange peace—before the lava closes over her.

I only half hear myself screaming as Riven guides us the last few feet to the central platform, his arms tight around me as we land hard on the stone.

“She's gone,” I whisper, staring at the spot where Thalia disappeared. “It...”

Consumed her.

The magma pulled her in and swallowed her whole.

Riven's body is rigid against mine, his magic dangerously still. When I look up at him, his face is composed, but his eyes—those beautiful silver eyes—are so haunted that it makes my heart stop.

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“First Maeris, now Thalia.” His voice is too calm. Too flat. Like if he lets it shake, he might never stop. “TwoSummer Court warriors dead because of me. This isn’t the best publicity statement for my new position as the Summer Prince, is it?”

Unlike usual, his wry sarcasm isn’t enough to cover his pain.

“No,” I turn to face him fully, gripping his arms. “This wasn’t your fault. Any of it. Thalia made her choice—just like Maeris did. They died for their court—for our court. For their duty.”

He just shakes his head. Not in defiance, and not in disagreement, but in refusal.

Refusal to believe. Refusal to feel. Refusal to let me see what it’s doing to him. And my heart hurts when I feel the bond mute slightly again, like ice re-forming over something cracked beneath.

Next to us, the Ember of Prometheus glows with ancient fire, bathing us in its otherworldly light. It pulses before us—once, then again—like it’s alive. Like it knows what it cost to be claimed.

“It’s responding to us,” I whisper, water swirling around my fingertips, ready to react if the flame turns hostile.

Riven steps closer, frost patterns forming beautiful, intricate designs across his palms. “Then let’s not keep it waiting,” he says, glancing at my satchel, where I’m keeping the container Lysandra provided us.

The vessel is deceptively simple—a crystal orb no larger than my palm, etched with ancient runes that pulse with summer magic. And when I open the lid, the fire comes to it. It's like Pandora's Box, but backward—instead of escaping, the fire is hurrying inside.

Once it's all safely tucked away, the container seals with a soft hiss, the runes flaring and settling into a steady glow.

Riven and I are staring at it in awe when a violent shudder ripples through the chamber, sending cracks spiderwebbing across the platform beneath our feet.

"I think the Vault doesn't appreciate us taking its treasure," I say, securing the container in my satchel.

Riven's gaze drifts to the spot where Thalia disappeared, his expression hardening—masking something that wants to crack through.

"We need to move," he says. "Now."

On the far side of the chamber, a narrow bridge of crumbling stone extends from our platform, arching over the lava toward what looks like an exit tunnel.

"That doesn't look stable," I say, eyeing the thin walkway with distrust.

"It's not," Riven agrees. "But it's our only way out. I'll reinforce the stone with ice for as long as possible. You keep your air magic beneath us. If the bridge starts collapsing, focus on lifting us upward, not forward. Okay?"

"Okay." I nod and summon my air magic, wrapping it around us both as we step onto the brittle bridge. With each step, stone cracks beneath our weight, pieces breaking away to sizzle in the magma below.

Riven moves ahead, frost spreading from his feet to reinforce the stone. “Stay close,” he calls over his shoulder. “My ice won’t hold for long in this heat.”

I focus on keeping us stable, using currents of air to balance our weight and take pressure off the crumbling path. The bridge groans with each step, the sound echoing through the chamber.

We’re halfway there. Not much longer?—

A violent quake rips through the Vault, the pedestal where the Ember hovered splitting open, lava surging upward in a towering column. The stone beneath us begins to dissolve, Riven’s ice magic barely holding it together.

“Run!” he shouts, grabbing my hand.

We sprint across the disintegrating bridge, air and ice magic working frantically to keep us from plunging into the bubbling death below. My lungs burn with each breath, the heat intensifying as the Vault continues to collapse around us.

The platform ahead is just out of reach when the bridge finally gives way.

I push with everything I have—a desperate surge of air magic—propelling us forward.

We land hard on the edge of the platform, rolling to safety as the bridge crumbles behind us.

Panting, I look back at the ruined chamber, the Ember secure against my side.

“We made it,” I gasp, relief flooding through me.

But the relief is short-lived. Because the pedestal—now split in two—erupts in a fountain of molten rock, and a monstrous form rises from the fiery column, born of fire and stone.

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A giant, twin-headed dog, its body rippling with veins of lava. And its eyes, which glow like pools of liquid fire, are zeroed in on us.

SAPPHIRE

The double-headed dog-monster throws back both its heads and roars.

“Orthrus,” Riven says, drawing Frostbite with a metallic hiss. “I suppose every treasure has a guardian.”

“You think?” I snap, and then the monster—Orthrus—is bounding across the chasm, leaping from stone to stone, each landing sending shockwaves through the chamber.

Riven hurls a jagged ice spear toward the creature. It melts before making contact, but the resulting steam buys us precious seconds.

“In here!” Riven shouts, pulling me toward a narrow crevice in the tunnel wall.

We squeeze through the opening, Orthrus’s jaws snapping inches from my leg as we tumble into an alcove. The monster howls in frustration, one head attempting to force its way through while the other slams against the rock, trying to break the opening wider. One of its heads hits the wall so hard that the chamber shifts, and I hold my breath, waiting to be flattened in an instant.

“That won’t hold it for long,” I gasp, pressing my back against the stone wall.

Riven’s expression shifts, that calculating gleam I’ve come to know so well entering

his silver eyes.

“The Compass,” he says, reaching into his pocket. “If I freeze time?—”

“We can slip past it,” I finish, hope flaring in my chest.

The Stillpoint Compass rests in his palm, its face glimmering softly in the dim light of our hiding spot. Its power radiates from it in waves, and the light coming off it makes Riven look undeniably dangerous. If he has any qualms about using the artifact after what happened in the clearing with his guards, he’s doing an excellent job of masking it.

“We’ll collapse the tunnel behind us,” Riven continues, the mechanisms in his mind whirring so quickly that I can see it on his face. “The Star Disc can cut through the support columns while time is frozen. When it resumes?—”

“The beast gets buried under half a mountain,” I finish.

He shoots me a proud smile. “Exactly.”

The wall beside us cracks as Orthrus rams it again, stone fragments showering our heads.

“Now or never,” I say, gripping the Star Disc at my hip.

Riven flips open the Compass.

For a heartbeat, he doesn’t speak. He just stares down at the Compass like it’s alive. Like it’s whispering to him. And while his face doesn’t change, something sharp flickers through the bond. Not fear. Not urgency. No—it’s something colder. Something distant, focused, and dangerous.

When he finally looks up, his silver eyes are gleaming with something I can't name. Something that makes the air feel thinner and my chest tighten. Because for a moment, it feels like I'm looking at a stranger.

"It's time," he says, and then the dial spins, the world around us freezing.

Orthrus's jaws are locked in mid-snarl. Falling debris are suspended in the air. Even the magma beyond is hardened into unnatural stillness. But it's not just stillness—it's absence. Not even an echo remains, and the very air feels like glass, delicate and ready to shatter at the slightest touch.

"Ten minutes," Riven says, the Compass ticking steadily in his hand. "Let's make them count."

We slip past the frozen beast, careful not to touch its motionless form, although I can't help gawking at it as we make our way by.

Once in the main tunnel, I survey the structure, looking for weak points.

"There," Riven says, pointing at four massive columns supporting the ceiling. "Take out those pillars, and the whole tunnel will collapse."

"I didn't realize you had a PhD in architecture," I say with a small smile.

"Architecture, weaponry... my talents are endless," he quips. "Calder used to say I could break anything—even stone ceilings. Especially stone ceilings." He hesitates, his expression sobering. "He taught me how to see weak points in everything."

His pain pulses through the bond like a living thing.

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“It’s okay to miss him,” I say quietly, squeezing his hand. “Even after everything. Especially after everything.”

His mouth curves slightly, although sadness lingers beneath.

“I don’t know what I feel right now,” he murmurs, something dark crossing his eyes again. “Other than that he’d tell me to stop wasting time and blow up the damn pillars already.”

“Then let’s blow up those damn pillars,” I say, and then I summon my magic, push it into the Star Disc, and send it spinning toward the first column.

Glimmercut slices through the stone like it’s butter, the column remaining upright only because time itself holds it in place. As always, it returns to my hand like a boomerang, and I repeat the process with the second column, then the third.

“Three minutes left,” Riven warns, the Compass’s ticking growing more urgent.

I throw the Star Disc one final time, watching it sever the last support before returning to my palm.

“Run!” Riven grabs my hand, and we sprint toward the exit, leaving the frozen beast and the compromised tunnel behind.

We’re twenty yards down the passageway when the Compass’s ticking accelerates, signaling the end of our borrowed time.

“Brace yourself,” Riven says, pulling me against him, his arms wrapping around me as his ice magic forms a shield at our backs.

Time lurches back into motion, the tunnel collapsing as the severed columns give way, thousands of tons of rock crashing down onto Orthrus.

The monster roars so loudly that I think it’s going to cause another cave-in. But it doesn’t have a chance, because it’s quickly silenced, buried beneath the mountain.

Then, the shockwave hits us, sending us tumbling forward, despite Riven’s shield. We roll across the roughstone, his body cushioning mine as dust and debris rain down around us.

For a long moment, we lie there in the settling darkness, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear. Only the faint glow of the Ember in my satchel provides any light.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, his hand moving to cradle my face. His palm is cold, but the way he holds me—like I’m something sacred, breakable, and irreplaceable—burns hotter than the magma behind us.

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “In case you forgot, I have this pretty incredible thing called supernatural healing?”

He cuts me off with a kiss.

It’s not urgent or desperate. It’s reverent. Like he’s trying to memorize the shape of my mouth. Like he’s trying to memorize me, to brand this moment into his bones, so he’ll have it if the rest of the world falls away.

“I know,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing across my cheek, “but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop making sure you’re all right. Not when you’re all I have left. Not when

you're the only thing holding me together."

The absolute, unshakable depth of what he feels for me slams into me again, and I give his hand a gentle squeeze, my heart fluttering despite the chaos around us.

"I love you," I say softly. "But let's save the heartfelt moments until we're not in a collapsing mountain?"

He gives me a quick, playful look as he stands, pulling me up beside him. "Fair enough," he says, resting his forehead against mine, his voice lowering as he breathes me in. "I'll get us out of here, and then you can resume your favorite hobby of melting at my feet."

I smile, but something about the way he says it feels... off. Too smooth. Too carefully placed. Like armor he's putting on piece by piece.

But he's watching me, searching my face, as if he needs me to believe him. As if I don't, something in him will break.

So, I steady my voice and lean into the familiar, giving him what I hope is something to hold onto.

"Just so we're clear, I'll only melt for you after we're safely out of imminent danger," I say, forcing a light smile.

He nods, that perfect smirk settling into place like it never cracked. "I'll hold you to it, Starlight," he says, but the bond stays quiet, even when I reach for it. "Now, let's get out of here so you can properly thank me for my heroic efforts."

I give him a mock-exasperated look. "Too much heroism, and your ego won't fit through the exit," I say, but instead of returning my comment with something equally

as sharp, he squeezes my hand and turns to survey the damage.

The tunnel behind us is sealed. There's no sign of Orthrus, and no way back to the chamber where Thalia fell. All that remains is the way forward.

We're making our way out when a roar shakes the mountain from the other side of the collapsed passage.

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My heart stops. “That can’t be?—”

“Orthrus,” Riven growls, ice crackling along his blade. “Run.”

We sprint down the tunnel, the enraged howls of the beast growing softer behind us. Eventually, the tunnel narrows, forcing us to slow our pace.

“How’s it still alive after being buried under half a mountain?” I ask as we squeeze through tight spaces.

“Immortal, maybe,” Riven replies as we climb a particularly steep incline. “Or just very, very hard to kill.”

We continue like that for a few minutes, until the tunnel opens into a vast chamber where massive stalactites hang like stone daggers, ready to impale anything below.

“No way out,” I say, scanning the walls. “It’s a dead end.”

The chamber feels smaller, suffocating, pressing in on us as dread pools in my stomach. And even though every instinct is screaming at me to keep moving, hope’s slipping away like water through my fingers.

“Look.” Riven points to a narrow opening high on the far wall, his voice cutting through my spiraling thoughts. “There’s our exit.”

It’s at least fifty feet up the sheer rock face, barely visible in the dim light. But before I can fully process that we’re supposed to somehow get up there, another ear-splitting

howl echoes through the tunnel behind us.

Riven sheathes his sword and begins scaling the wall, finding handholds where I see none. His movements are fluid and precise, his apparent wilderness survival training evident in every controlled motion.

He stops after ascending about ten feet.

“Come on,” he calls down to me. “I’ll guide you.”

“You can’t be serious.” My throat tightens as I gaze up the rock wall. If either of us falls when we’re near the top, our air magic could possibly catch us, but that’s not an experiment I want to conduct anytime soon—orever.

“I’m deadly serious,” he says, staring down at me as if the entire world rests on what’s coming next. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

After everything we’ve been through, feeling any other way would be impossible.

“Good,” he says, releasing a breath he’d apparently been holding. “Then get over here and climb.”

Gathering myself together enough to somewhat steady myself, I take a deep breath and reach for the first handhold, pulling myself up. Then I do it again, and again. Each foothold seems narrower, each grip more fragile, sending tiny avalanches of dust and gravel cascading into the darkness below.

“Here,” Riven says, stretching down to guide my hand to a secure grip. “I won’t let you fall.”

His eyes lock with mine, and the intensity there makes my breath catch—that fierce, possessive look that says he’d tear the world apart before he’d let anything happen to me.

“I know,” I whisper, and for a moment, the monster pursuing us, the mission, and even the Ember in my satchel all fades to background noise.

Another crash from below breaks the moment.

“Keep going,” I urge him. “I’m right behind you.”

Riven climbs with graceful efficiency, pausing every few feet to help guide me to the safest path. He’s moving slower than he could—I know he could scale this wall in half the time if he were alone—but he refuses to leave me more than an arm’s length behind.

“Almost halfway,” he calls down, reaching to take my hand as I struggle with a particularly smooth section of wall. His grip is sure and strong, ice magic cooling my overheated skin as he pulls me up to his ledge.

For a heartbeat, we’re pressed together on the narrow outcropping, his chest against mine, our faces inches apart. His breathing quickens, frost patterns swirling around us in delicate spirals that reflect his emotions better than words ever could.

“You’re doing great,” he murmurs, his breath cool against my cheek. “Just a little further.”

But before I can respond, the wall at the chamber’s entrance explodes, stones flying in all directions as Orthrus bursts through, both heads snarling, muscles bunching beneath its scorched hide as it locks its coal-red eyes on us.

SAPPHIRE

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“Climb faster!” Riven shouts, and I scramble upward, panic making my movements clumsy.

Orthrus charges across the chamber with terrifying speed. When it reaches the base of our wall, it rears up, slamming against the rock, making the entire chamber shudder from the force of its weight.

My foot slips, and for a heart-stopping moment, I’m dangling from one hand, the other flailing in the air.

“Sapphire!” Riven lunges down, catching me around the waist. His arm locks around me like steel, and he hauls me up, pressing me against the wall, his body caging mine as he stabilizes us both on the narrow ledge.

“I’ve got you,” he says, his voice hoarse, as if he’s a second away from breaking. “I’ve always got you.”

Our faces are only an inch apart, and despite the danger—despite everything—my heart races for reasons that have nothing to do with fear.

His hand moves to cup my face, thumb brushing across my bottom lip in a gesture so tender it makes my chest ache.

“Don’t you dare fall,” he whispers fiercely, leaning into me as if he’s trying to make sure I’m solid and here. “I need you too much for you to fall.”

Below us, Orthrus slams against the wall again, the impact sending tremors through

the stone. Tiny rocks rain down around us, but Riven doesn't flinch, doesn't look away from my eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promise, my hand covering his where it rests against my cheek.

Something passes between us—something deeper than words, more powerful than the magic flowing through our veins. But then Riven's expression shifts, his jaw setting with renewed determination.

"We need to move," he says, reluctantly pulling back.

"Lead the way," I tell him, and he guides me higher, our climb quickly becoming a synchronized dance.

When I falter, his hand is there. When loose rocks threaten to give way beneath my feet, his ice reinforces my footholds. There's a harmony in our movements, as if we've tapped into an invisible force that's guiding us, anchoring us, and whispering that no matter what happens, we're never truly apart.

We're twenty feet up when Orthrus makes another desperate lunge, its jaws snapping just feet below us. The hot, sulfurous breath washes over my legs, making me climb faster, adrenaline surging through my veins.

"Almost there," Riven encourages, reaching the wider part of the ledge just below our escape route. He pulls himself up, then turns to help me, lifting me with supernatural strength to join him on the narrow shelf.

Breathless and dizzy from adrenaline, I cling to him, feeling the wild beat of his heart matching mine. And for a moment, we just stand there, breathing hard, pressed together by the narrowness of the ledge.

“Look at that,” he says softly, one hand coming up to brush a strand of hair from my face. “Even covered in volcanic dust and running for our lives, you’re still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Flirting now?” I tease. “Really?”

His lips quirk into that half-smile that never fails to make my heart skip. “Is there a better time?”

“I can think of a few,” I say with a bitter laugh, unable to help smiling back.

Riven’s eyes soften, his hand moving to rest against the side of my neck, his thumb tracing my pulse point. “When we get out of here,” he says, low and certain, “I’m going to spend days showing you exactly how much I love you.”

The promise in his voice sends a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with fear. “Is that so?”

“Oh yes, Starlight,” he murmurs, leaning close, his lips brushing my ear. “In excruciating detail.”

My breath catches, but before I can respond, another violent impact from below yanks both of us back to the present.

Orthrus has resumed ramming the wall, each hit making the ledge beneath our feet tremble with warning of potential collapse.

“Later.” I squeeze his hand, turning toward the crack that leads to freedom. It’s just wide enough for us to slip through one at a time.

“You first,” Riven insists, positioning himself between me and the drop below.

I start to argue, but the determined set of his jaw tells me it's pointless. He won't budge—not when it comes to my safety.

“Fine,” I relent, “but you’re right behind me.”

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“Always,” he promises, and I know he means it, in every possible way.

But before I can take a breath, the mountain lets out a terrible groan, like an ancient beast awakening from hibernation.

“Run!” Riven grabs my hand, and then we’re sprinting across the rocky terrain as the mountainside begins to crumble, boulders tumbling down as the entrance to the Pyros Vault collapses.

The ground trembles as we race toward a small outcropping, my lungs burning with every breath, the Ember at my hip pulsing with heat against my skin.

“Jump!” he commands as we reach the edge of a steep drop.

Without hesitation, I leap forward alongside him, magic surging through us both, the wind propelling us farther than what should be possible to jump.

We slam into the ground on the other side, rolling across sharp rocks as the final implosion sends a shockwave through the air. Riven pulls me against him, his body shielding mine as debris rains down around us, as if his only purpose in life is to keep me breathing.

When the rumbling finally stops, we lie there tangled together, covered in ash and blood from dozens of small cuts that are already healing. Morning light breaks over the horizon, bathing the land in a golden glow that feels jarringly gentle after the hellfire we just escaped.

Riven's silver eyes are already on me, intense and searching as his hand finds mine.

The contact grounds me, anchoring me to this moment—to him.

"The Ember?" he asks, sitting up slowly.

I reach for the pouch at my hip, feeling for it.

"Still here," I confirm, and he exhales, a mix of relief and exhaustion that I feel in the depths of my soul.

Now that the world's finally still, I look back at the destroyed mountain, thinking of the two summer warriors who gave their lives for this mission. They swore an oath to us, and they followed through. Just like Lysandra said they would.

"Come on," Riven says. "We need to get moving before something else tries to kill us."

"Such an optimist," I mutter, but I let him pull me to my feet, since he's right—we need to move.

He looks at me then, and something vulnerable passes through his eyes as his arm slides around my waist, as if he's grounding himself in me. "I almost lost you back there," he says quietly. "When you slipped?—"

I press my fingers to his lips, stopping him. "You didn't lose me. I'm still here."

"Promise me you'll stay that way," he says against my fingertips, his eyes deadly serious. There's no teasing in his voice now. Only fear. Only fire.

I slide my hand to cup his face, brushing my thumb over the angles I've memorized

perfectly by now. “I promise to try.”

“Not good enough,” he says, his eyes darkening in that haunted way they’ve been since he stopped time and killed his guards in the clearing.

“It’s the best I can do,” I tell him. “We don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. But I swear to you, Riven Draevor, that when this is all over, I plan on being here, with you, forever.”

He sighs, leaning his forehead against mine. “You better be,” he says. “Because if you’re not...”

He trails off, as if the thought is too painful for him to think, let alone say out loud. And for a moment, we simply stand there, foreheads touching, as the sun rises higher in the sky. Our magic swirls between us—ice, water, air, and starlight—moving in a synchronized dance that feels as natural as breathing.

But amidst it all, the Ember pulses at my hip, a reminder of the unfinished mission.

“Ready?” I ask, pulling back to study his face.

He nods, as if he’s drawing strength from the determination in my eyes. “Ready.”

RIVEN

The jet hums around us, the sound hollow and distant compared to the silence between Sapphire and me.

T is locked away in the cockpit. So, given that Thalia and Maeris are gone, Sapphire and I are the only ones in the cabin.

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I stare out the window, watching the clouds part before us, drowning in the thoughts and feelings that have been threatening to consume me whole since... well, since I don't know when. Everything since the dryad's deal has felt surreal. My love torn away, only to be replaced with the pain of taking the brunt of Sapphire's hatred from Eros's lead arrow, and then her fusing our souls together in the Tides...

I feel like I've been completely rewired, rebuilt from the ground up. Every thought, every breath, every heartbeat, is now anchored to her.

After a stretch of silence that feels both endless and insufficient, Sapphire finally speaks.

"She knew what she was doing," she says, her voice quiet—not meant to comfort, but to acknowledge the weight of everything we faced in the Vault.

I don't respond at first. Because of course Thalia knew what she was doing. She was a warrior—she had been for centuries. She understood sacrifice better than most.

But it's not Thalia and Maeris I'm thinking about.

"If it had been you or me, it would have broken the other," Sapphire continues, apparently blissfully unaware of what's truly going through my mind.

"Yes," I say, my voice rougher than I intend. "It would have."

For a moment, I look at her—really look at her. Her white-blond hair with those blue streaks that catches even the dull cabin light, her eyes that shift between shades

of blue depending on which magic she's pulling from, and the soft glow of starlight that always seems to shimmer across her skin.

This is the woman I've died for, who I've frozen time for and killed for. The woman whose soul I share, who unmade me and remade me into somethingers.

I hope she knows. I think she does. She must feel it through the bond—the way I burn every time she's near. The way there's nothing left in me untouched by her. It's an endless, aching desire, bound together in a soul-deep connection that defies logic and reason.

And now, she's watching me, waiting for me to say something. Likely to express grief for Thalia and Maeris.

However, I can't lie to her. I can't express something I don't feel.

"I made the right call," I say instead, pulling my frost back inside me. "And I'd make it again if I had to."

And again. And again. Even if it means losing everything else.

Even if it means losing myself.

Her head tilts slightly, studying me with those eyes that take my breath away. "With Maeris and Thalia?" she asks, and with that, something inside me snaps.

Because I don't want to talk about Maeris and Thalia.

I want to talk about her. She's the only thing that matters now. I need her to understand that, and for her to accept it. If she doesn't, and if she walks away like the Lonely King said she would, then he's what I'll be forced to become.

And a future like that isn't worth living.

"With all of it." The words come out cold and precise—the Winter Prince speaking an undeniable truth. "Because anything and anyone who threatens you will freeze and shatter, and I don't feel guilty about it anymore. That's the way I love you now. Without remorse. Without hesitation. Without limits. My universe begins and ends with you, and I've never felt more at peace with anything in my life."

My fists clench as I brace for her to pull away. To show some sign of horror at the monster I've revealed myself to be.

Instead, her water rises to meet my ice, twining together in impossibly beautiful, delicate patterns.

"Good," she breathes, her eyes blazing, her magic an echo of my own. "Because I don't want your guilt. I want you exactly as you are—ruthless, fierce, and able to love with a depth and intensity I never thought possible."

I cup her face, pulling her closer, desire rushing through me as our bond pulses hotter than ever between us. "Do you mean that?" I ask, the question raw, almost broken. Because it's not just longing—it's need. Crushing, all-consuming need.

"With all my heart," she says, the four words meaning more to me than she could ever possibly realize.

"Then I'm done pretending I care about anything other than you," I admit, relaxing in a way I haven't since executing my guards in that clearing. "You're my world now, Starlight. Forever."

My words hang between us, electric and fierce, slicing through the quiet hum of the jet engine until there's nothing left but charged silence.

“Good,” she says softly. “Because I want all of it. And I don’t want you to pretend to be something you’re not. Not to me. Never to me.”

Heat flares through me at her words, and I lean closer, my fingers tangling in her hair, the blue streaks catching the muted cabin lighting like a reflection of her magic. My thumb traces her jawline as I tilt her head back gently, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss that steals the breath from both of us.

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She responds instantly, melting into my touch, her body pressing close, her magic pulsing in rhythm with my heartbeat. I feel her warmth against my ice, creating a perfect, intoxicating balance as I lift her effortlessly, guiding her to sit across my lap, holding her firmly in place.

Her legs shift around me, our magic entwining into something powerful and undeniable. Water and ice. Chaos and control. Everything I am, needing to be swallowed whole by her.

“I promise,” I tell her, meeting her gaze, our faces mere inches apart now. “I belong to you forever.”

“And I belong to you,” she whispers back. “Always.”

My lips linger against hers for one more moment before the steady hum of the jet engine reminds me we’re not alone. It is just beyond that cockpit door.

But I don’t care. Because Sapphire is in my lap, her hands buried in my hair, her magic twining tighter around mine with every breath. And she’s looking at me like I’m not a prince, or a weapon, or a monster.

She’s looking at me like I’m hers.

Our bond pulses bright and sharp as she kisses me again. It’s deeper this time—hungrier, needier, threaded with everything we’ve endured and everything that’s impossible to say as my hands roam her body like a prayer, savoring every detail of this moment. The curve of her spine. The warmth of her hips. The way my

body ignites when we finally shed every last inch of clothing that's keeping me from being exactly where I need to be.

When she finally makes me whole again, my breath catches, my magic flares, and I wrap my arms around her like I'll never let go. Because I won't. I can't.

And so, right there on this seat in the plane, we give each other everything. Slowly. Desperately. Without hesitation. The bond surges between us, wild and consuming, pulling us deeper until there's nothing left but magic and love and need.

Eventually, the intensity fades into something softer, like a storm finally calming. And as the wild magic quiets, a gentle warmth remains. A peaceful intimacy that wraps us up in its soothing embrace as she stays curled against me, her fingers tracing lazy circles over my chest in a way that's setting my body on fire all over again.

"As much as I'd like stay like this forever," she murmurs, making me brace for words I expect I won't want to hear, "perhaps we should get ourselves presentable before our pilot decides to check on us."

At the suggestion, I only pull her closer, relieved when she doesn't resist.

"Another minute," I whisper against her skin, a plea more than a request. "I want to remember exactly how this feels. Just in case the world tries to steal it from us again."

She moves back slightly, her thumb brushing my jaw, anchoring me to her warmth. "Even if it tries again," she says, fierce and determined in a way that makes it clear she needs me to believe it, "it won't win."

Another rush of love flows through me, so intense that I swear it's going to break me. She's going to break me. And I'll let her, every single time.

“No. It won’t,” I agree. “Because I won’t let anything ever take you from me.”

Her eyes darken, her magic surging against mine. She’s temptation incarnate, wrapped around me like sin and starlight, and every instinct I have screams to keep her right where she is, connected to me in the most intimate, primal way possible, until the end of time.

Instead, I gather every ounce of control inside myself as she lifts herself from my lap, even though it feels like peeling myself out of the only truth I’ve ever wanted to live inside. The space between us feels unbearable as we gather our clothes from where they’ve ended up strewn across the cabin to get ourselves together.

Eventually, I make my way to the small galley at the back of the jet, frost trailing in my wake as I struggle to rein in my magic.

The cold metal of the refrigerator handle feels grounding against my palm as I pull it open, revealing an assortment of drinks. After a moment’s consideration, I select a bottle of sparkling wine—something about the bubbles reminds me of Sapphire’s magic when she’s unraveling in my arms: wild, electric, and impossible to contain—and pour us each a glass.

When I return, she’s tucked one leg beneath her, looking out the window at the clouds drifting by. For a moment, I just watch her, memorizing this moment of quiet beauty amid the chaos of our lives.

“This doesn’t sparkle nearly as much as you do, but it’s the closest I could get to capturing starlight in a glass,” I finally say, offering her one.

She takes it from me, watching me with that smile that sets my world on fire. “To getting the Ember,” she says, raising it in a toast.

“No,” I say, fierce and unfiltered. “To the only thing that matters. You.”

Her smile softens, her eyes holding mine as if she’s seeing straight into my soul. “To us. Because that’s the only thing that makes any of this worth it,” she says, and then she laughs softly, her magic shimmering around her like constellations on a mirrored lake. “You really know how to distract a girl from an impending war, don’t you?”

I tilt my head, giving her a teasing look. “You’re not exactly making it easy to focus.”

She takes a deep breath, then reluctantly gestures toward the bag beside us. “Before your inability to focus wears off on me, maybe we should take a look at exactly what we risked our lives for?”

“I suppose we should,” I say with a sigh, my eyes drifting along every part of her body as she opens the satchel, removing the box that contains the Ember of Prometheus.

Inside, the Ember pulses steadily, a rhythmic heartbeat of molten gold and deep crimson.

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“It’s beautiful,” she whispers, water spiraling around her fingers as she hovers them near the orb.

“And deadly,” I add, my eyes fixed on the shifting glow reflected across her features. “This is what will breach the Night Court’s wards. What will allow us to finally bring the fight to them.”

The reality of it settles over me as I speak the words.

Because this isn’t just an object of power. It’s a declaration of war. With this Ember, we’ll cross a line that cannot be uncrossed.

Sapphire’s eyes meet mine, fierce determination glowing in their depths. “We’re really doing this. Starting a war.”

“They started it,” I correct her, and my hand covers hers, ice meeting water in a dance as familiar as breathing. “We’re just finishing it.”

The Ember pulses between us, its ancient fire casting long shadows across the cabin. In its light, I see the future stretching before us. Not the doomed ones from the visions in the Cosmic Tides, but something new. Something forged in our own image. Something where we don’t survive by fate—we survive by force.

Because whatever stands in our way, we will destroy it. This is what we’ve become now. Not just husband and wife, not just Summer and Winter united, but something more. Something even the gods should fear.

Because for Sapphire, there's no line I won't cross. No enemy I won't destroy. No fate, no matter how cruel, I won't defy.

The Night Court may have started this war—but we are the storm that will end it.

ZOEY

Dusk brings a surreal calm.

Because this is the night I'm going to choose which human will become my personal blood source for when I'm turned into a vampire.

"Are you ready?" Aerix asks, his wings extending behind him as I finish getting dressed.

I nod, smoothing down the black silk dress I've chosen. It's elegant enough to assert my status, but not so gaudy as to prance around the barns looking like I'm going to a party instead of choosing one of the humans there for possible death.

"I am," I say, meeting his midnight eyes, both terrified and exhilarated for what's to come.

He studies my face, cold air swirling around us as he takes my hand. "You're perfect," he murmurs, satisfaction evident in his voice.

"Only because you made me this way." I give him a soft smile, drawing strength from his touch.

He brushes his thumb across my knuckles, his eyes glowing with dark pride. "Every artist needs their muse," he whispers. "You were always mine, Zoey. And after you're immortal, the entire Night Court will see my completed masterpiece."

“Then let’s create something the Night Court will never forget,” I tell him, and he draws me to him, his lips claiming mine, his fingers tracing lines across my back that make my entire body shudder with desire.

Aerix pulls back first, his wings flaring before folding against his spine again.

“Not yet,” he says, his voice rough with an edge of frustration. “As tempting as you are—and believe me, you’re very, very tempting—we need to finish this first.”

I huff in annoyance, but he’s right. We need to get this next part over with.

So, I let him lead the way out of the palace, where Nyx joins us, carrying us on her back as we prowl across the blood moat’s bridge. The courtyard is beginning to stir with night fae going about their evening routines, but they step aside as we pass, eyes downcast.

Word must have spread about what I did last night.

Good. Let them talk. Let them fear me. Let them see that I belong to their prince now.

The path to the barns takes us through a section of the Night Court I’ve never visited—past the artisan quarter where fae craftsmen work. Then, eventually, we’re making our way through a series of increasingly sparse gardens, until we reach a tall, dark stone building with narrow, barred windows.

“The barns,” Aerix says, his voice neutral as he pushes open the heavy iron door.

“I thought they’d be... wider,” I say simply.

“Why build out when you can build up?” he says with a deadly smile, helping me off Nyx’s back, opening the doors, and leading me inside. “It takes up less space this

way.”

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The ceiling stretches impossibly high, with cells lining the walls in circles that rise all the way to the top. The center remains open, creating a dizzying atrium effect where every cell is visible from the ground floor. Pale moonlight filters through skylights, casting elongated shadows across the stone floor.

“It’s bigger than I expected,” I say, my voice sounding small in the vast space.

“The nobles enjoy their options,” he says simply, his hand settling at the small of my back. “And you have your pick of the entire lot. Now, allow me to take you on the grand tour.”

He holds out a hand, and I take it, squeezing it to ground myself.

“You’re going to do great,” he assures me, as if he can sense my nerves. “You’ll know which one is right for you when you meet them.”

It’s the same advice we gave people when they came by the animal shelter where I volunteered that one summer. As if I’m here to adopt a stray.

But I don’t shudder. I don’t give away a hint of emotion. My immortal future is on the line, and I won’t have Aerix doubt my ability to handle what’s coming next.

He has no reason to doubt it—because I can handle what’s coming next.

So, I walk next to him with my head held high, looking at each person we pass. In one cell, a man stares blankly at the wall. In another, a woman flinches at our approach, pressing herself into the corner. Another sits perfectly still, as if hoping to

become invisible.

I pause at a cell where a young man watches us with calculating eyes.

“No men,” Aerix reminds me, his body stiffening, his wings flaring. “No man other than me is going to touch you ever again.”

“As they shouldn’t,” I assure him, yanking my gaze away from the man and continuing forward.

That’s when I see her.

Sophia sits on a narrow cot in her cell, her posture ramrod straight. Her clothes are different now. Plain and utilitarian—nothing like the elegant outfits she wore in the human wing.

But unlike the others, Sophia doesn’t cower. Instead, she watches us, her eyes following our movements with a clarity that seems out of place in this living hell.

Aerix says nothing when I stop in front of her cell. He simply stands beside me, his magic a cool, constant presence as I process what I’m seeing.

Sophia rises to her feet, approaching the bars with deliberate steps.

“Zoey,” she says, soft but steady. No tremor, no tears. Just recognition.

“Sophia,” I reply, studying her. Even here, stripped of everything, there’s dignity in the way she holds herself.

“Taking a tour?” she asks, her eyes flickering to Aerix before returning to me.

He steps forward, ice crackling at his fingertips as his wings spread in a display of dominance.

“Not just a tour,” he says, his voice carrying a musical lilt of satisfaction as he speaks. “She’s here to choose her first pet. You see, tonight is a special night for my consort. Tonight, I’ll transform her into something magnificent. Something eternallymine.”

The temperature drops around us as his magic intensifies, frost patterns forming on the bars of Sophia’s cell.

“She’ll be mine to worship forever,” he continues, his voice dropping to that possessive register that makes my skin tingle. “My masterpiece. Perfect in every way.”

The way he says it—like I’m already immortal, already his forever—makes me step closer to him, as if I’m assuring him that I’m going to be everything he wants me to be and more.

Sophia’s eyes narrow, her gaze shifting from Aerix back to me.

“You think this makes you powerful?” She gestures at my dress, my posture, my place beside Aerix. “Because it doesn’t. You’re becoming the exact thing we feared.”

“And look where fear got you,” I reply simply. Not cold. Not cruel.

Just honest.

Sophia steps back from the bars, still maintaining eye contact. “We all make choices,” she says. “I hope you don’t regret yours.”

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Aerix's magic shifts, his wings ruffling, the air around us chilling further as he places his hand at the small of my back.

"Shall we continue?" he asks me, as if Sophia is simply a minor inconvenience. "There are many more to see before you make your selection."

I nod, letting him guide me away from Sophia's cell. But I can't help glancing back, just once. When I do, it's to the sight of Sophia sitting back down on her cot, her spine straight, her gaze forward.

She hasn't broken. She hasn't surrendered her dignity. She's simply... adapted. Like I did.

But unlike me, she doesn't have a prince's power to save her.

ZOEY

Aerix brushes his hand against my back as we continue our walk through the barns, his touch deliberate and approving.

"You handled that perfectly," he murmurs, his magic wrapping around me like a caress. "You didn't flinch from her accusations. Didn't justify yourself. You continue to prove why the gods crafted you to be mine."

His midnight eyes are fixed on me with an intensity that would terrify anyone else, his jaw tight, his body tense. As if he's waiting for something.

I know exactly what he needs from me. It's what he always needs from me.

But this time, I let him wait. Just long enough to feel it—to recognize the power I hold over him, even as he believes he's the one with all the control.

"I am yours," I reassure him. "Because I love you, Aerix. Always. And soon, I'll be with you forever."

The tension leaves his body in an instant, his wings relaxing against his back as a light, cool breeze blows around us.

"And I love you, Zoey," he says, low and reverent. "More than any creature has ever loved another. More than I thought I was capable of. More than I can survive, if I ever lose you." He leans closer, his voice dipping into something possessive, quiet, and devastating all at once. "You are my crown and my undoing. My chaos and my clarity. And I will freeze this entire world solid before I let anyone take you from me."

My breath catches, and I tilt my head, letting my fingers trail up the edge of his wing. "You talk like you're afraid you might lose me," I say softly. "But you won't, Aerix. I promise you won't."

Exhaling like I've given him oxygen, his fingertips trace the curve of my cheek, leaving a trail of cold that burns in the most delicious way. And then, he kisses me—slow and deep. Like he's carving his name into me all over again.

"Now," he continues after we break apart, "let's find you someone worthy to sustain your new life."

We move deeper into the barns, past dozens of cells filled with humans who don't meet my eyes. Some stare at the floor, others at the wall—anywhere but at us.

The silence is broken only by occasional whimpers or the shuffling of feet as people retreat to the backs of their cells.

“How far up does it go?” I ask, craning my neck to see the uppermost levels.

“Twenty tiers,” Aerix replies, his fingers laced with mine as we walk. “The highest cells are for those the nobles find less appealing.”

As we round a corner to view another section of cells, my breath catches in my throat. A flash of white-blond hair, familiar blue eyes—for a moment, my heart stops.

“What is it?” Aerix asks, the air swirling protectively around us.

I step closer to the cell, my eyes fixed on the woman inside.

She isn’t Sapphire—not really. Her hair is a shade too yellow, her eyes more gray than blue. But something in the set of her shoulders and the defiant tilt of her chin reminds me so much of my best friend that it makes my chest ache.

“This one,” I say, my voice firmer than I expected. “She’s the one I want.”

The woman rises from her cot, wary but not cowering.

“What’s your name?” I ask her.

“Laura,” she answers, her voice soft but steady, just like Sapphire’s used to be when she was thinking through a problem.

Having someone who reminds me of Sapphire to keep me alive here feels like fate. A tether to who I used to be, even as I let go.

“A good choice,” Aerix murmurs, turning to face me fully. “She has spirit. Not broken, but bendable.”

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“She looks like Sapphire,” I admit, although I don’t elaborate further.

“She does,” Aerix agrees. “Remember—I saw them, too.”

Them.

Sapphire and Riven. They were there when Aerix flew me away from the attack at the waterfall—when he saved me from those monsters who were going to drown me if I remained there any longer.

He studies my face, his eyes seeming to see far more than I’m saying.

“Your human life is fading, Zoey,” he says softly. “After tonight, the memories will feel like a dream.”

“I know,” I whisper, and I do.

I’m ready to let go of my old life—even of Sapphire. But having Laura will be like keeping a small piece of that past, transformed into something that fits my new existence.

Aerix lifts his hand to my face, his touch gentle as he tilts my chin up. “Are you having second thoughts?” he asks, a dangerous edge beneath the softness of his question.

“No,” I say firmly, since any hesitation will cost me. “I want this. I want you. Forever.”

The tension in his wings eases, and then he's drawing me closer, his lips finding mine again in a slow, controlled kiss. It's a claim. A promise. A quiet possession. His thumb traces along my jaw while his other hand finds my hip—the spot under the dress that's signed with his name.

“You're the only thing I've ever been certain of,” he whispers so quietly that the words are for me alone. “I knew it from the moment I saw you.”

Just like at the fountain when he had me drink his blood, it feels like he's offering himself to me—every twisted, powerful, broken part of him. The thought steals my breath away, making my heart race beneath my ribs. This dark, deadly prince who commands fear from an entire court is offering me everything he is, and I absolutely love him for it.

I let my hands slide up his back, fingers finding the sensitive base of his wings where feathers meet flesh. I press lightly, watching his eyes darken as a shudder of pleasure runs through him.

“Careful,” he warns, his voice rough with desire. “Keep touching me like that, and I might ruin you right here in the barns.”

I press deeper, feeling the tremor that runs through his wings as I caress the sensitive spot. And as I do, power floods my veins.

Intoxicating. Addictive. Dangerous.

“Then let them see,” I challenge, and then his mouth is on mine again, his wings tightening around us as he backs me against the nearby wall, his body pressing against mine with delicious urgency.

“You're playing with fire,” he murmurs against my throat, his fangs grazing the

sensitive skin there.

My fingers thread through his hair, pulling him closer. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not afraid of getting burned.”

His laugh is dark and hungry as he lifts his head to look at me. “So eager to be consumed, little consort, even though we have a ceremony to prepare for.” His wings pull back, although his body remains pressed against mine, as if he can’t gather enough control to pull away. “And believe me, when I finally make you immortal, I want you in my bed—not against a cell wall.”

I sigh, dropping my hands from his wings. “Fine. But afterward?”

“Afterward,” he promises, his eyes gleaming with dark promises, “I’ll show you exactly what an eternity with me means.”

As we walk back toward the entrance, heads turn to watch. The humans in their cells, the guards at theirposts—all witnessing the prince and his consort locked in their own private world.

Tonight’s just the beginning.

After my transformation, we’ll have forever to explore what we are to each other. Forever to love in our own dark, twisted way.

And I can hardly wait.

ZOEY

The night airswirls around us as we return to the palace, and we pass through silent hallways, emptier than I’ve ever seen them. Any night fae we encounter bows deeply

before hurrying away, as if they know better than to be near us tonight.

Eventually, we reach what appears to be a dead end—a wall of black stone.

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“Step back,” Aerix says, pressing his palm against the stone.

Ice blooms from his hand, spreading in elegant, crystalline patterns across the wall. The lines of frost trace ancient-looking symbols, and then the wall slides open with a sound like breaking ice, revealing a narrow staircase leading downward, illuminated by floating orbs of cold light.

“The Tower,” he explains. “Where you’ll enter a human and leave a vampire. I’ve already had your things sent up.”

“It’s happening now?” I swallow, unprepared for it to happen this quickly. I thought I’d be able to go back and prepare...

“Are you scared?” He watches me closely, his body frozen as he waits for my answer.

“No.” I straighten, relieved that unlike fae, I can lie. “I’m ready.”

He nods in satisfaction, and we descend for what feels like an eternity, the air growing colder with each step. The walls glisten with ice crystals, and my breath forms small clouds in front of me.

“The halls that lead to the Tower predate the palace,” Aerix explains as we reach the bottom of the stairs and face a door made of seamlessly fitted stone. He places both hands on the door, and it swings inward, revealing a staircase that spirals up into darkness. “Now, we climb.”

The Tower's staircase is narrow, forcing us to ascend single file. Eventually, we reach a door at the top, made of the same black stone as the hidden entrance below.

Aerix presses his palm against it, and once again, frost spreads in intricate patterns, unlocking whatever ancient magic seals it.

The door swings open to reveal a circular chamber with high, narrow windows that offer glimpses of the night sky.

Unlike the stark stone stairwell, the Tower's chamber is a perfect blend of elegance and comfort. The circular space is dominated by a massive four-poster bed draped in midnight blue silk. A spiral staircase in the corner of the room leads somewhere overhead.

Bookshelves line one curved wall, filled with volumes whose spines gleam in the soft light. A writing desk sits beneath one of the narrow windows, and I spot my blood pen resting on its polished surface, along with fresh parchment and my sketchbook. There's my harpsichord in the corner, the chess set Isla taught me how to play with, and canvases and paints arranged near another window where the light falls just right.

Every detail is deliberate. Every item is placed with care. It's not just comfort—it's control. It's a shrine built in my name.

"You really did have everything brought here," I say, looking around in amazement.

"Everything you might need for the month ahead," he says, his wings folding against his back as the door swings shut behind us.

"A month," I repeat, the reality of my isolation beginning to settle. "I'll be locked in here for that long?"

Aerix comes to stand beside me, his magic cooling the air around us. “The adjustment to being a vampire can prove... difficult,” he explains, his voice low. “The bloodlust is overwhelming at first. Uncontrollable.” His fingers trace along my jaw, tilting my face up to his. “But you’ll have it easier than the night fae. You don’t have to grow wings.”

“You grew your wings? Through your back?” My eyes flick to his dark feathers, which are rustling with his movement.

Obviously, I knew winter fae don’t have wings, and that night fae do, but I never stopped to think about the mechanics of it all.

“For fae who become vampire, wings must tear through flesh and bone.” His expression darkens with what might be remembered pain. “It takes a month—hence the isolation period. The process is excruciating.”

I try to imagine it—the agony of feathers splitting skin—and shudder involuntarily. “But I won’t?—“

“No,” he confirms. “I would never allow that pain anywhere near you.”

“Good. That’s good,” I say, and my gaze drifts to the writing desk, where my blood pen catches the light. “You brought that, too.”

“It’s the last piece of your humanity that will be preserved.” He moves to the desk, picking up the pen with careful fingers, his eyes intense and searching when they find mine. “Whenever you use it, it will remind you of what you used to be. And then, when it runs out of ink, the last traces of who you once were will be gone.”

The realization hits me with unexpected force. His gift to me was... me. A piece of myself, preserved in crystal and metal, to be slowly used up until nothing remains of

the human I once was.

It's haunting. It's holy. It's so perfectly Aerix that it makes my heart ache.

He holds the pen out to me, and I take it, feeling its weight—heavier now, thick with meaning.

“Will I be alone the entire month?” I ask, gripping the pen tighter.

“As your sire, I'll bring your human to you once a day at midnight,” he says, his wings shifting behind him. “We'll have some... private time together after your meal. But yes—other than that, you'll be alone until your adjustment period is complete.”

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I set the pen down and walk the perimeter of the room, taking in more details as I process the reality of my situation. The patterns in the rug match those from my chambers, the books are titles I've mentioned enjoying, and even the scent in the air is reminiscent of the perfume I favor.

"You prepared all this for me," I realize, turning back to him. "Long before I asked, didn't you?"

"I've been preparing for this since the moment I first saw you," he admits. "Everything in this room—from the bed linens to the books—was chosen with you in mind."

"Wow. That's..." I say, unable to form words. "You really always knew."

"I did." The words sound almost strained when he says them.

I should feel manipulated, maybe even trapped by his absolute certainty. Instead, I feel strangely honored that he knew me so well, and that he saw what I would become before I could see it myself.

"Now, there's one more thing I want to show you," he says, leading me to the spiral staircase. "I want you to see the Night Court from above, for one last time through your human eyes."

ZOEY

Moonlight filters from above, growing stronger with each step, until we emerge onto

an open platform at the top of the Tower.

The Night Court spreads beneath us like a dark jewel, thousands of lights glittering against the blackness. From this height, I can see everything—the blood moat circling the palace, the courtyard where I drank Aerix’s blood, the towering barns, and dark expanse of forest that marks the boundary of the court’s territory.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, moving to the edge to take in the view.

“This is my favorite place in the palace,” Aerix says, coming to stand beside me. “Whenever you feel alone, I want you to come up here and think about me.”

“That won’t be hard.” I scoff. “I’m always thinking about you.”

His lips twitch up into a smirk. “Good,” he says. “That’s how I like it.”

Before I can reply, his expression shifts, his eyes darkening as he takes in the view alongside me.

“There are rules when it comes to the transformation,” he says, his voice taking on a formal edge. “Traditions that must be respected.”

“What kind of rules?” I ask, watching him, waiting for him to continue.

“Control is paramount in the Night Court.” His wings shift behind him, betraying tension his face doesn’t show. “Members are expected to maintain composure at all times, especially during feeding. If you kill your pet by draining her completely, you will have failed the test.” His eyes lock with mine, deadly serious. “You’ll be deemed unworthy of our court.”

The air around us grows colder, and I wrap my arms around myself, understanding

the unspoken threat.

“Execution,” I whisper.

He nods once, confirming my fear. “The same fate that awaits you if you leave the Tower before your month is complete.”

I step back from the edge, confused. “But you told me I’d be locked in.”

“Exactly.” His head tilts toward the ledge, frost patterns extending from his feet across the stone floor. “When they leave before the month is up, it’s never been through the door.”

The implication hits me like a gust of wind, and I move closer to the edge, looking down at the dizzying drop. The ground seems impossibly far away, dark and waiting.

How many have lost control while transitioning—of their hunger, of their minds—and chosen this way out rather than face execution?

I reach for Aerix’s hand, lacing my fingers through his. “I won’t fall,” I promise, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

His wings flare, sending a rush of cold air that makes my dress billow around my legs. And then he’s pulling me away from the edge and against his chest, his mouth finding mine in a kiss that’s desperate and possessive at the same time.

When he breaks the kiss, his eyes are nearly black with intensity. “No,” he agrees, his voice rough. “You won’t. Because I won’t let you get close to that ledge.”

His hand traces the curve of my face, and I lean into his touch, drawing strength from his certainty.

“I’m stronger than you think,” I tell him.

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“I know exactly how strong you are,” he says, his voice softening. “It’s why you were given to me. It’s why I knew from the moment I saw you that you were meant for this—forme.”

And in this moment, gazing up into Aerix’s eyes with the Night Court spread beneath us, I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.

“Take me back down,” I say, pressing one last kiss to his lips. “I’m ready.”

“Then it’s time.” He nods, studying me before leading the way back down the spiral stairs.

The room is charged with anticipation as Aerix lights several candles placed around the room, their flames casting long shadows across the stone walls. Once finished, he circles me slowly, his wings extending with each step. And when he stops before me, his fingers find my face, tilting it up to meet his gaze.

“For rebirth,” he says, his voice like velvet wrapped around ice, “we return to our most vulnerable form.”

His hands move to the fastenings of my dress, not exploring—we’re far beyond that stage of discovery—but with the touch of an artist preparing his canvas. And despite the hunger swirling in his eyes, each movement is deliberate and unhurried. As if he’s savoring not my body, but my offering.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs when the dress falls away, stepping back to remove his own clothing with fluid, elegant movements. His wings extend fully when he’s done,

casting shadows that seem to swallow the candlelight as he takes my hand, leading me to the bed with its midnight blue silks.

I lie back, watching as he joins me, his body moving over mine with familiar grace. But unlike our previous encounters, there's a ceremonial quality to his touch now—each caress weighted with significance beyond mere desire.

His hands move with purpose, trailing across my skin as if he's memorizing the shape of his creation before breathing new life into it. His kisses are slow and consuming, like he's sealing a vow with every press of his mouth.

My hands slide over his back, feeling the strength beneath his skin, the tremble in his wings when I touch the place where flesh meets feather.

He responds with a groan that vibrates through me as he finally joins us together. Each motion is deliberate, controlled, paced like a ritual meant to honor the gods. He isn't just taking me. He's claiming me. Conjuring me. Completing something he's waited lifetimes to create.

"You're mine," he breathes, his voice fraying around the edges, repeating the word like a prayer.

Every sound, every brush of skin, every whispered name becomes part of something larger—something eternal. And after, as we lie tangled in silk and moonlight, his hand finds mine, grounding us in this final moment.

"Do you remember the first time I tasted you?" he asks, tracing my neck. "How you trembled, caught between fear and pleasure?"

"I remember everything," I say, shivering at the intensity of his touch—at the knowledge of what's to come. "Every moment with you. All of it."

His midnight eyes darken further as he shifts to hover above me again, his wings creating a canopy over our bodies.

“Tonight, you will die.” His voice drops to a whisper that seems to echo through the chamber. “And when you rise again, you will be my eternal masterpiece.”

He pulls back and stills, watching me, waiting. Always waiting.

My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer. “I love you, Aerix,” I tell him. “Only you. Forever.”

His wings tremble, feathers rustling with satisfaction, but he doesn’t move immediately.

“I’ve sculpted you from pain and pleasure, from darkness and desire,” he says, his fingers tracing the scar on my hip, his touch light but possessive. “Now I’ll give you immortality, and you’ll wear it like my crown—beautiful, ruthless, and entirely mine.”

And then, he bites.

The initial sting blooms into sharp, exquisite pleasure, making my back arch and a gasp escape my lips. I don’t just feel it—I surrender to it, warmth and pain twining into something deeper, something primal.

His body presses me deeper into the silk sheets, one hand at my waist, the other curling in my hair like he’s anchoring me to the world as he takes me apart and consumes my life one swallow at a time. And as his arms tighten around me, I feel the shift in his breath, the way his hands adjust, the way his body aligns against mine as if the inches between us have become unbearable.

His growl vibrates through my throat, and then, with one fluid motion, we're joined as one again. Pleasure and pressure, desire and death—twining together until I can't tell them apart.

“You're mine,” he whispers, his magic curling around me in a dance that feels like it was written in the stars. “Now. Forever. Always.”

Eventually, the pleasure begins to fade, replaced by a spreading coldness that moves from my extremities inward. Colors blur at the edges of my vision, sounds becoming distant and muffled. My limbs grow heavy, fingers loosening their grip in his hair as my heartbeat slows, each thud more labored than the last.

This is the end approaching.

Just as consciousness begins to slip away, a sharp, burning sting spreads from the puncture wounds on my neck.

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Venom. Aerix's venom, flowing into me, replacing the blood he's taken.

The burn intensifies, a tidal wave of agony and ecstasy, flooding every nerve, every cell, and every hidden place inside me. No sound comes when I try to cry out. But he's there with me, holding me, whispering in my ear as the pain scorches through every nerve, consuming me from the inside out.

Mine. Beautiful. Forever. Perfect.

His venom reaches my heart, and my body convulses one final time as the world fractures into blackness, deeper than sleep, heavier than death.

But my last thought isn't of pain.

It's of Aerix—above me, inside me, around me—and the terrifying, exquisite peace of knowing that in my final moments, I was his in every possible way.

And then, there's nothing but darkness.