



Burning Star (Star Touched: Fae Bound #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The gods want them broken. The stars have written their end. But they'll go down together before they ever give up.

Sapphire Hayes is bound to a winter prince who no longer knows how to love her, and chosen by a goddess who expects her to save the world.

Riven Draevor, the Prince of the Winter Court, loved Sapphire—until he bargained that love away in a fae deal to save her life, leaving him cold, hollow, and haunted.

Now they're forced into a political marriage, ready for war, and pulled into the Cosmic Tides—a realm of starlight, fate, and memory, where the future is written in blood and the past refuses to stay buried.

When they find a monster waiting beneath the stars, it doesn't just ask them to fight. It demands they destroy each other... until only one of them remains alive.

Meanwhile in the Night Court, Zoey is falling, too. Not into death, but into the arms of Aerix, the bloodthirsty prince who watches her like a secret, kisses her like a threat, and kills anyone who touches her.

She's playing the long game. She swears it's just strategy.

But what happens when it becomes more?

The gods are watching. The Night Court is rising. And the only weapon left that might save them all is a celestial disc wrapped in love, pain, and starlight.

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SAPPHIRE

The sea isn't water. Not here, in the Cosmic Tides.

It's a starlit galaxy that folds around Riven and me like a second skin, cool and infinite as we stand side by side on the deck of the spectral ship. It's a current of memory and fate, of futures that haven't yet happened and pasts that never should have been. And the deeper we sink, the more the line between what's real and what's possible blurs.

The Tides show you everything.

And they don't ask permission.

Riven, alone on the throne as the Winter King, his silver eyes empty, the frost crown heavy with regret.

Me, standing above Riven and Zoey's lifeless bodies, blood staining my hands, my eyes devoid of emotion.

And lastly, me and Riven entwined on a battlefield, our bodies broken, holding desperately to each other as our lives slip away.

Each vision strikes me like a twisted nightmare, making my stomach churn. Because if this is what awaits us—if pain and loss are our only options—I'm not sure how to keep going.

“Do you think it hurts?” Riven’s voice is quiet, almost lost beneath the steady pull of the Tides’ current.

I blink, turning toward him. “Do I think what hurts?”

“Dying like that. Together.” His gaze drifts to the expansive galaxy around us, distant and haunted, flecks of stardust catching in his dark hair like frozen tears. “Do you think we fought to the end? Or did we just... lie down and wait for it to come?”

A shiver rolls through me that has nothing to do with the cold.

“I refuse to accept that,” I tell him, my voice stronger than I feel. “That won’t be us.”

“You saw the same visions I did.” He laughs, hollow and bitter, frost crawling higher up his arms. “We know that whatever’s here between us—hate, love, destruction, devotion, or anything else it might be—killed us both.”

I try to tell him he’s wrong, but denial sticks in my throat.

“Being together like that in the end is better than the alternative,” he continues, his eyes darkening further. “It’s better than being him.”

He doesn’t have to explain who he means.

Because the vision of him—cold and empty, a king with nothing to live for—flashes behind my eyes again, and my chest clenches. That version of Riven—the one with the crown of ice and a frozen heart—is worse than death to him.

He would rather die beside me than live without me.

I don’t know if I love him for it or hate him for it.

“You can’t actually believe that dying together is the best we can hope for,” I say, my voice shaking.

He closes his eyes for a long moment, like he’s waging war with something deep inside himself. When he finally replies, the words are so quiet I almost miss them.

“It’s better than you becoming the version of yourself who could?—”

He stops abruptly, as if afraid of unleashing it. But the image is already there, burned into my mind, refusing to disappear.

“Who could what?” I demand, my pulse racing, needing him to say it.

“Who could kill me,” he finishes, his voice deadly calm. “Who could stand over my corpse, covered in my blood, and feel nothing.”

I flinch, his words piercing me as sharply as if that future was already reality.

“That wasn’t me,” I choke out, even as doubt coils in my stomach. “Those three futures—they can’t be the only choices we have. There must be others.”

But Riven doesn’t argue. He doesn’t push back with cold logic, cutting remarks, or even a hint of his usual stubborn fight.

And that silence terrifies me more than any vision.

Because he always fights. He always argues. He always pushes, twisting my words, challenging me and reminding me exactly who he is—proud, fierce, and infuriatingly in control.

Now, his silver eyes stare emptily into the swirling cosmos.

“Riven.” I step closer, gripping his face between my hands and forcing him to look at me. “Don’t you dare give up. Not now. Not ever.”

“But what if we can’t escape it?” he whispers, and the shattered look in his eyes breaks something deep inside me. “What if every branch of the river leads to the same sea?”

“Then we find a way to change the river,” I say, leaning closer, refusing to let go.

He exhales sharply, a shadow of pain crossing his features. “You make it sound easy.”

“No,” I say. “I make it sound possible.”

He watches me, mesmerized, like he might be coming around.

Or like he’s about to kiss me again.

I want him to. Badly. I need his lips on mine, his hands tangled in my hair, his body pressed close. I need proof that we’re alive, fighting, and still breathing. I need to feel something real with him, even as the universe tries to rip us apart.

But before he can, the current shifts, pulling us down through space and time. Stars streak past us, brilliant galaxies spinning into what looks like the bottom of a cosmic ocean. It’s beautiful and terrifying, like being suspended in the heart of an unraveling universe, and I gaze around in awe and wonder.

My hand finds Riven’s again, my fingers threading through his. Because right now, he’s my only tether to reality. To myself. To everything that matters.

His fingers twitch at the contact, curling around mine.

“There are so many paths forward for us,” I say, nodding toward a swirling nebula that floats past us, purple and blue and breathtaking in its enormity. “We just have to step into them and take them.”

His grip tightens, frost spreading from his palm to my wrist. It’s cold, yes, but somehow comforting. A reminder that he’s still here—still mine.

“You don’t know that,” he murmurs, his eyes locked on the spinning cosmos around us. “You can’t.”

“Maybe not. But I have to believe it,” I insist. “Because giving up isn’t an option. Not for me, and certainly not for you.”

He looks down, his eyes shadowed by uncertainty, and it breaks something inside me.

So, I pull him close, pressing our bodies together until I feel his heart pounding in rhythm with mine.

“Do you hear me, Winter Prince?” I ask, begging him to see clearly again. “You don’t get to surrender. Not here. Not now. Not ever.”

A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth—the first I’ve seen since the visions began. It’s barely there, just a ghost of his usual arrogance, but it sends hope surging through me like wildfire.

“You really won’t let me slip away, will you?” he asks, his silver eyes blazing with a vulnerability he rarely allows himself to show.

“Never,” I say, putting all my heart into the promise.

And now, as he gazes into my soul, his eyes flicker with something raw and

unguarded. Something he's been fighting to bury, that I don't think even he understands yet.

But I do. I feel it burning between us, wrapping around us as powerfully as the currents of the Tides.

And I can't stand here any longer, hoping and waiting in silence.

I have to know. And to know, I have to ask.

"You feel it, too." My fingers squeeze his tightly, refusing to let him look away. "The hate from Eros's arrow and the apathy from the dryad's deal are gone."

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RIVEN

I don't answer Sapphire's question right away.

Because she's right. Here, in the endless depths of the Cosmic Tides, the poison Eros's arrow planted in Sapphire's heart has retreated. And the ice I've forced around my heart, the carefully constructed walls?—

They're gone.

And I don't know how to exist without them.

I feel everything.

It's too much. It's drowning me, crushing me, and breaking me apart at the seams. As it does, every lesson my father hammered into me since I was a child screams at me to shove it down. That way, when Sapphire and I emerge from these cosmic waters and her hatred returns, I'll survive it. I'll be ready for her to tear me apart all over again.

Although according to those visions, I won't survive it. Because I was dead, or gone, in all three of them.

None of those futures are worth living for. Especially not after I traded my love for Sapphire away to that dryad, leaving a hollow space in my soul that I'll never be able to fill.

I've hated myself for it since the deal was sealed.

Now, as the ice forming at my fingertips dissolves into the cosmic currents, I pull away from Sapphire enough to gaze into those brilliant blue eyes that have ruined me, haunted me, destroyed me, and saved me all at once.

Her breathing shallows, her grip tightening around mine like she's afraid I'll slip away.

Maybe I should.

Maybe it would be easier.

But I can't.

Because for all the pain—for all the ways she's shattered me beyond repair—I want to hold on. I need to stay tethered to something real, even if it's the very thing that will destroy me.

“What I feel doesn't matter,” I finally say, my voice rough and breaking in a way that feels both wrong and right. “Because the moment we surface, you'll hate me again. Eros's arrow will make sure of it.”

She exhales sharply, like my words physically wounded her.

Ice crackles along my fingertips again as I brace myself for her to hit me back. To tear into me. To hurt me the way I need her to.

But... she doesn't.

Instead, she squeezes my hands, refusing to let me retreat into the icy shell I've

buried myself in for decades.

“And you’ll be the cold, calculating prince who doesn’t care,” she says. “But I’m not asking about when we surface. I’m asking about now. Here. You and me, in this moment. Together.”

The starlight reflects in her eyes, swirling like the universe itself is trying to pull the truth out of me.

And suddenly, I want to let it. Because I can’t keep cutting Sapphire apart just to stop myself from bleeding. It’s not right, nor is it fair.

Not to her, not to me, and certainly not to us.

“I’ve always cared,” I say, the truth slipping out easily in these cosmic waters. “Even after the dryad took my love for you, I cared.”

She inhales sharply, and her magic flares, the droplets of water around us transforming into brilliant constellations.

“But I hated you,” she says, her voice cracking. “I was cruel to you. If you never stopped caring... then how do you bear it?”

“I don’t.” The admission tears something inside me apart—something that was barely held together, anyway. “When you look at me like I’m worthless, insufferable, and heartless... it kills me, Sapphire. Every single time.”

Her face crumples, and the whirlpool around us intensifies, pulling us closer together.

“—” she starts, but I shake my head.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep once we’re out of here,” I tell her, unsure if I’ll be able to bear it if she does.

Don’t save me now only to let me drown again, I think, although I keep that one to myself. I’ve already been vulnerable enough for the day. There’s no need to throw anything more on her—to make her feel guiltier than she already does.

“I’m not promising anything,” she says, pulling herself flush against me. “I’m telling you that right now, I choose us. I choose you. I will always choose you.”

Then, she kisses me.

And I break.

This isn’t like the last time. No—this time, it’s a defiance of fate. A rebellion against the gods who want to tear us apart. It’s ice and water swirling violently before melting into each other, pulling us into something inescapable.

But maybe I don’t want to escape.

So, I grip her waist, pressing her against me as if I can hold onto this moment long enough to make her stay.

She’s so warm. So real. Especially when her magic surges, wrapping around me like a current, dragging me deeper into something that will destroy me when it ends.

Because when we surface, her hatred will snap back into place. She’ll look at me the way she did after Eros’s arrow struck—like I’m the worst thing that ever happened to her. Like she wants to tear me apart with her bare hands.

And I’ll have to let the ice creep back in. I’ll have to be cold again, even though this

moment is the only thing that's made me feel alive in days.

But I don't stop.

I can't.

All I can do is hold her closer, tangle my fingers through her hair, and breathe her in, as if her light can fill the empty space in my soul. Because in this place where fate has already decided we're doomed—where my feelings for her can't be used against me, where her eyes don't burn with pain when she touches me—she's mine again.

And, gods help me, I'll take it.

Even though it's going to ruin me.

But just as I'm losing myself in her completely, the ship lurches, ripping down in a freefall that sends us crashing onto the deck.

I grab her on instinct, my arms wrapping around her waist as the world tilts.

"Hold on!" I shout, reaching for the nearest rope, gripping it with everything left in me as the ship's bow dips dangerously downward.

If we fall, we're dead. We'll crash to the bottom of this endless void—if there even is a bottom—and I won't let go of her. Not now. Not ever.

Because if we go down, we'll go down together. Just like in that final vision.

So, I close my eyes, bracing for the impact.

And then, with a final, bone-jarring jolt, we stop.

The ship creaks, settling into soft sand, and silence echoes around us.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is her.

Sapphire is tangled against me, her breathing uneven, her fingers curled into the fabric of my shirt. A few strands of her white-blond hair have come loose, fanning across my chest, the blue highlights on its ends glowing with the celestial shimmer of the Tides.

She's alive. Thank the gods, she's alive.

For a brief, reckless second, I almost pull her back in and kiss her again.

But my training shoves the thought out of my head.

Assess. Locate. Secure. Survive.

We crashed. We need to find out where the hell we are. We need to locate the Star Disc. We need to get out of here before fate finishes what it started.

With a slow breath, I shift and untangle myself from her, as if one wrong move might break her.

"Are you hurt?" I ask, and she blinks, like she's remembering how to breathe.

"No. I just..." Her gaze darts around, taking in our surroundings. "Where are we?"

I chuckle, because she asks as though I have some secret map hidden away.

"I like to think I'm decently well-traveled, but if I had a bucket list, the Cosmic Tides wouldn't have even made the footnotes," I say as I push to my feet, scanning the

landscape around us.

The sand is like nothing I've ever seen, black and shimmering with stardust. Galaxies swirl overhead, spinning into infinity.

Despite how beautiful it is, something about the silence is wrong.

We shouldn't be here.

But we are. So, I extend a hand to Sapphire, pulling her to her feet as she steadies herself, relieved when she doesn't yank her hand away as if my skin is burning her flesh.

And with her standing so close, the weight of what just happened—of what we were before the crash—lingers between us.

But I don't acknowledge it. I can't. Because every decision I make in this place could determine if she stays alive or not, and I refuse to lose her. I won't survive it if I do.

"We need to find the Star Disc and get out of here," I say, breaking my gaze from hers to scan the horizon again. "Now."

She nods, shaking off whatever thoughts are running through her mind. "Agreed."

With the decision made, we move.

"Stay close." I draw my sword, watching with quiet pride as she does the same with her dagger, alert and ready.

I trained her well.

The sand shifts under our boots as we walk away from the spectral ship, leaving it abandoned behind us. Each breath feels heavier, charged with an ancient power that clings to my skin.

Then—

The sand shudders, rising and swirling into waves that crash against an invisible shore.

I pull Sapphire behind me, ice forming at my fingertips as the cosmic floor erupts like a geyser, stardust raining down as something massive emerges from its depths.

First, a head. Serpentine, with eyes that burn like dying stars.

Then comes a body, impossibly long, covered in scales that reflect entire galaxies. Fins like the tattered edges of nebulae unfurl from its sides.

Finally, its eyes open, two fiery orbs locked onto us with unmistakable intent.

Kill.

An inexperienced soldier would run.

We, on the other hand, stay where we are. No sudden movements. Nothing that will risk provoking it further.

“What is it?” Sapphire whispers, her magic pulsing against mine.

“Cetus,” I say, recognizing the creature from ancient texts in the Winter Court’s library. “The sea monster of the stars.”

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RIVEN

Cetus regards us with ancient, hungry eyes, his jaws opening to reveal teeth like shattered planets.

When he speaks, his voice isn't a sound. It's a feeling. A vibration through the air, through our bones, and through the very threads of fate.

Trespassers, he rumbles. You've come to steal what is not yours.

Sapphire steps forward, lifting her chin, ready to fight this creature that could crush her in a single second.

"We're here for the Star Disc," she says, and the wind curls around her, responding to her awe-inspiring power, her breathtaking defiance, and her remarkable refusal to bend. "Because I'm star touched, chosen by Celeste herself. She forged the Disc for me. It's mine."

Cetus laughs, and stardust swirls around his massive form as his body coils tighter, preparing to strike.

Many claim the blessing of the gods, he rumbles. Few prove worthy.

I step closer to Sapphire, sword ready, frost crawling along its blade as I stare down Cetus with a look that could shatter ice.

"We faced the trials," I say sharply. "We endured the visions. We earned the right

to?—”

Earned? Cetus interrupts. Nothing is earned here, in the deepest part of the Cosmos. Everything is tested, and nearly every test is failed.

My grip tightens on my sword. Of course he’s not going to make this easy. But I don’t care. Whatever twisted test he throws at us, I’ll take it.

For Sapphire, I can take anything.

Her dagger shakes, but her stance remains firm.

“Then tell us how to prove it,” she says, and here in the Tides, she’s so beautifully determined that it takes my breath away.

I wish I could freeze this moment and live in it forever. Because as much as I try to push it away, I have a sinking feeling that we’re about to be shattered beyond repair. And considering how broken we already are, that’s saying a lot.

But as powerful as I am, I can’t freeze time.

All I can do is stand here and watch as Cetus grins, the expression terrifying and monstrous.

Then, he lunges at me.

He’s fast, but not fast enough. Because I meet his attack in an instant, my sword slicing upward, cutting deep into his arm.

Sapphire screams and doubles over, clutching her side.

When she lifts her hand, her fingers are slick with blood—from a wound identical to the one I just inflicted on Cetus.

Love is destruction, Cetus hisses, his voice slithering into my mind. You will always destroy each other, no matter how hard you try to protect her.

No, I think, ice flooding my veins as horror sinks in.

I want to tear this monster apart. I want to watch him bleed, collapse, and die.

But I can't. Because my strike wounded Sapphire, too. She bled for my attack just as much as he did.

She lifts her head slowly, her brilliant blue eyes meeting mine.

“—” she starts, but there's no time.

Cetus lunges again, straight toward her.

She blasts a wave of water that hits the monster with staggering force, sending him reeling.

At the same time, agony rips through my ribs. I hit the ground hard, pain racing through me, stealing the breath from my lungs.

Cetus just laughs. It's a sound that's not a sound, but a pulse of something vast and cruel, vibrating through the fabric of space and time.

“No,” Sapphire whispers, understanding dawning on her face as I struggle to stand.
“Every attack...”

Yes, Cetus confirms, circling us slowly. Every wound you inflict on me transfers to the other. This is the final trial—a test of devotion to see which one of you loves the other more.

My hands shake around the hilt of my sword. Because this is worse than anything the visions showed us. This is a nightmare brought to life—a twisted game where protecting her means hurting her.

“There has to be another way,” I say, my voice strained from the pain in my ribs that hasn’t gone away. “A loophole, or a trick. We can’t?—“

You cannot escape your fate, Cetus interrupts, lunging toward Sapphire.

For the first time in my life, I hesitate. My sword hangs mid-air, useless. Because if I strike, I’ll hurt her more. If I don’t?—

Cetus’s tail whips around, slamming into Sapphire with bone-crushing force.

She flies backward, crashing onto the ground several yards away. And for a terrifying second, she doesn’t move.

Ice explodes around my feet, surging across the black sand.

“Sapphire!” I call out to her, panic flooding my veins.

She stirs, her breath coming in short, uneven gasps, her body trembling from the impact. Blood seeps between her fingers, its crimson shadow staining her shirt and crushing my heart into dust.

She should be healing. She should be getting up and striking back.

But her healing isn't working.

And the pain from my fall... I still feel it in my ribs. It's throbbing under my skin, bruising me.

I've never had a bruise in my life.

Snapping back into focus, I rush toward her, but Cetus moves swiftly, blocking my path.

Your bodies are tethered to mine now, he rumbles, his scales rippling with starlight. Your injuries won't heal until one of us is dead.

Realization slams into me like a death sentence as I look at Sapphire's bloodied form. Because we're vulnerable now—truly vulnerable. No supernatural healing. No safety net. Just flesh, blood, pain, and the crushing weight of a mortality that neither of us should ever have to experience.

She's going to die if this continues.

And there's only one way to stop it. At least, only one viable way.

"Kill him, Sapphire." I step forward, sword raised, ignoring Cetus's growl. "End this."

She struggles upright, her face pale, her eyes blazing with anger.

Anger I hoped to never see directed at me again.

"No," she snaps. "If I kill him, I'll kill you, too. I won't do that. How could you even ask me to?"

Her words whip into me, hurting worse than the bruise across my ribs.

“You hate a lot of things I do, don’t you?” I say softly, bitterness seeping into my voice.

Her expression cracks. “That’s not what I meant?—”

“It doesn’t matter. Because you’re what matters.” I exhale sharply, desperate for her to understand. “The Star Disc belongs to you. And when you’re out of this place, you’ll do incredible things with it. I know you will—I’ve always known. Even when you doubted yourself, even when you hated me, and even when I pushed you away to protect you. Throughout all of it, I knew you’d change the world.”

She freezes, anguish and fury warring across her beautiful features.

Cetus just laughs again. It’s almost like he knows that the part of me once capable of loving Sapphire the way she deserves is gone, leaving a hollow, haunted space in its wake.

How moving, the beast mocks, slithering closer to Sapphire. The Winter Prince, ready to die so you can live. But are you willing to inflict that pain on him, star touched one? Are you willing to end him to save yourself?

Every muscle in my body screams to blast him with ice, impale him with my blade, and tear him apart piece by wretched piece.

Instead, I clutch my sword so tightly that my knuckles turn bone-white, my jaw aching with the effort of holding back.

“You have to kill it, Sapphire,” I plead, my voice raw and desperate, breaking in ways I no longer care about hiding. “Do it now—fast and clean.”

She flinches, as if I struck her.

“No,” she whispers, and gods—it isn’t defiant. It’s broken. It’s a single word fractured with grief, destroying what remains of my soul.

Cetus takes the opportunity to lunge, his jaws wide, his tail whipping toward her.

At this speed, he’ll kill her instantly.

So, I leap forward, my sword slicing through the creature’s scales, icy magic erupting from the blade.

Cetus roars, the sound rattling every cell in my body. But Sapphire’s scream pierces deeper as she collapses, trembling, her hands pressed to her side, her blood seeping through her fingers.

I fall to my knees beside her, the world reduced to the crimson across my hands as I try and fail to stop the bleeding.

“Why won’t you fight?” I demand, and her eyes find mine, stormy blue and beautiful, even as the life drains from her body.

“For the same reason you won’t.” She smiles sadly, reaching up for me and tracing her finger along my cheek. It’s like she’s already accepted it, while I’m over here drowning, screaming inside my own skull.

I failed.

And she’s the one suffering for it.

Even if I tried to save her—even if I gave her my blood and forced her to drink—it

wouldn't be enough. Because as long as Cetus's heart beats, our injuries won't heal. Anything I give her will flow through her wounds and pour uselessly onto the cosmic sand.

"If you won't fight, then we'll both die here," I choke out, cradling her face between my bloodied hands. "Because I won't stop protecting you, Sapphire. I can't. You know I can't."

So much devotion, Cetus purrs, circling us, savoring our suffering. Such willingness to sacrifice yourselves for love.

I barely hear him.

The rage is too loud. The grief is too loud. The breaking of whatever's left of my soul is too loud.

So, I turn toward Cetus, and my magic surges, ice exploding outward in sharp, jagged spears.

"You want a sacrifice?" I snarl at him, raising my dagger. "Then fine. You'll get your sacrifice."

With that, I drag the blade's tip across my forearm, cutting through flesh, through reason, and through anything left of my control.

Because if Sapphire won't kill me... I'll do it myself.

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RIVEN

Blood wells from the cut, dripping onto the cosmic sand, dulling its sparkle where it lands.

Sapphire's hand grabs my wrist, her eyes wide with horror.

“What are you doing?” she whispers, her fingers tightening around my arm, her nails biting into my skin.

I don't reply. I don't need to. Because she already knows. And the pain in her eyes—that unbearable mix of fear and accusation—is sharper than any dagger could ever be.

Instead, I stare at Cetus, searching his body for the wound I inflicted upon myself.

There's nothing. Not even a scratch.

It didn't work.

The realization hits like a gut punch—a final, cruel twist of the weapon dangling by my side. Because if removing myself from this nightmare could have ended it, I would have driven the blade deeper in a heartbeat.

Instead, I stare at the wound in my arm, hating it. Because this was meant to be a sacrifice. A way to spare Sapphire from the impossible choice that's slowly destroying her.

Cetus smiles slowly, his lips pulling back to reveal rows of sharp, glistening teeth.

So eager to die, Winter Prince, he taunts. But your pain is just that—pain. Meaningless, futile, and so beautifully tragic.

He strikes again, lightning-fast, his claws raking toward Sapphire.

“No!” I shout, throwing myself over her, ice erupting from my palms to form a shield that shatters instantly.

The force hurls me aside, slamming me into the sand and knocking the air from my lungs.

When I look up, horror freezes my veins. Because Cetus has Sapphire pinned beneath one massive claw, pressing down, crushing her.

I stagger to my feet, ice solidifying in my hand as I mold it into a deadly blade.

Strike me, Winter Prince, Cetus goads me, pressing down harder on Sapphire, forcing a strangled cry from her lips. Kill me and watch her die.

Rage and desperation rush like frost through my veins. I want to rip him apart and carve into him until there’s nothing left but stardust and blood. I want to tear him from reality, to end him so brutally that the universe will forget he ever existed.

But I can’t.

And that makes me hate him—and myself—even more.

Sapphire gasps beneath his crushing weight, her fingers clawing at the sand, fighting for air.

But it's not enough. It will never be enough.

And if keeping her alive means inflicting pain upon her now—if it means hurting her to save her—then I'll become that monster. Because I can't lose her. Not like this. Not ever.

I meet her eyes, my soul breaking apart.

"Forgive me," I whisper, my voice fractured with anguish as I rush forward and drive my dagger into Cetus's side.

Sapphire's scream tears through me, shredding my heart to pieces.

Cetus recoils, roaring in pain, releasing her.

I hurry to Sapphire's side and gather her broken body in my arms. She trembles against my chest, her breathing shallow, her life slipping through my fingers as I desperately try to hold onto her.

You will destroy each other, Cetus says, circling us hungrily, his blood spilling out of his wounds and staining his scales. It's inevitable. Fate always wins in the end.

"No," I growl, ice crackling around me, spreading outward as if it can drown this place in frost. "You're wrong."

Am I? Cetus tilts his head, watching me with ancient eyes. Look at her. See what you've done to her.

Everything left in me—which isn't much—breaks when I do. Because Sapphire's fading in my arms, her breathing shallow, her skin growing colder. Her blood stains my hands, her wounds a reflection of my failures, her life slipping away in rhythm

with my shattered heart.

“You have to fight,” I whisper to her, trembling. “You have to kill him.”

She won’t, Cetus interrupts. And neither will you. The only question left is—will you end her pain, or shall I?

Fury roars to life inside me and explodes outward, savage and lethal, slicing through Cetus in a burst of glittering violence.

Sapphire convulses in my arms, fresh wounds ripping across her body, mirroring the ones I carved into the monster.

“No!” I choke out, horror consuming me as I hold her tighter, pressing my forehead to hers. “I’m sorry,” I whisper, my voice shaking, my soul fracturing, my entire existence breaking apart. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Cetus laughs, a cruel, weakened rasp. Even bleeding—even barely standing—he laughs.

Beautiful, he says, his voice echoing in my mind with sadistic satisfaction. Your suffering is exquisite.

I cradle Sapphire close, my grip desperate, as if holding her tighter can prevent the inevitable. But her blood stains my skin, and the darkness at the edges of my vision whispers the cruelest truth of all—every attempt I’ve made to save her has pushed her closer to death.

One more strike might kill her.

And one more strike can save her—if she’s the one who makes it.

“You just need to sit up,” I beg, praying to any god in the universe who might still care about me that she’ll listen. “Throw your dagger at his heart. Use your air magic to guide it. You’ll get it on the first try.”

She lifts a shaking hand, her bloodied fingers brushing my cheek, and I lean into the touch, starving for it.

“No,” she whispers again, her voice soft and fragile, already fading.

I close my eyes briefly.

Hold it together, I think, and then I open my eyes again, letting her see the agony that’s destroying me from within. Because maybe if she sees how shattered I am, she’ll fight for herself—for us.

“If you don’t do it, I’ll lose you.” My voice is hoarse, wrecked in a way that I didn’t know was possible. “And I’d rather you put a blade through my heart than watch you die.”

Her hand tightens around my wrist, but there’s no strength left in her grip. She’s barely holding on, barely here, barely breathing.

And it’s all my fault.

My gaze shifts to the cut on my arm, to my sacrifice bleeding onto the sand.

It’s deeper than I intended. Too deep.

Or maybe it was exactly what I intended. Because I’d rather bleed out next to her than live without her.

“It has to be you,” she chokes out, pleading with eyes bright from pain and grief. “You’re the one with the strength right now to do it. You have to be the one who lives.”

I exhale sharply and press my forehead to hers, desperate for any connection, for any warmth that might anchor us together.

I don’t accept what she’s saying. I can’t.

“I’m an insufferable, arrogant Winter Prince, remember?” I say roughly, tightening my hold. “I don’t take orders, I don’t listen, and I don’t play by anyone’s rules. So if you think I’m going to keep existing in an empty, meaningless version of reality that doesn’t have you in it, then you don’t know a damn thing about me.”

She’s silent for a moment, and I think she’s going to say okay.

I should have known her better.

“No,” she whispers fiercely, the single word sharp enough to pierce my heart. “You don’t get to choose this for me.”

There she is—my fiery, star touched princess who’s shattered pieces of my soul I didn’t know existed.

“Maybe not,” I say, my voice thick with emotion, “but I get to choose what I can live with. And I sure as hell can’t live without you.”

Leaving no room for argument, I lower us onto the cosmic sand, cradling her with the soul-crushing knowledge that this is the last time I ever will.

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SAPPHIRE

I lie in Riven's arms, my body betraying me with every labored breath.

He shifts, just enough to press his forehead against mine, and it's that movement—that closeness—that makes it unbearable. Because his blood is everywhere. It's soaked into his sleeve and smeared across his fingertips, mixing with my own where my hands clutch his shirt.

The scent of it wraps around me, making my throat burn. It would be so easy to taste him. To drink deep and let his magic fill me.

But if I start, I won't stop. I'll drain him dry.

I'll become the monster I saw in the visions, standing over his lifeless body, covered in his blood.

And I won't let myself become her. I refuse.

So, I give in to the heaviness in my lids and let my eyes flutter closed.

“.” Riven's voice is rough, like the words are being torn from his throat. “Open your eyes. Look at me.”

He sounds so raw. So desperate.

Somehow, I force my eyes open to meet his stormy silver ones, reaching up to trace

my fingers over his bloodstained cheek.

“I think this is it,” I whisper. “The vision. This is what we saw. Us, dying here, together.”

Riven’s jaw tightens, and something shifts in his expression.

“I love you,” he whispers the words I never thought I’d hear from him again. “I should have said it sooner. I should have said it a thousand times. I love you, Hayes. In every timeline, in every vision, and in every possible future—I love you.”

The words hang between us, and my magic stirs, creating a gentle current that circles us both.

“But the dryad—” I start, pain shooting through my heart as I remember the empty look in his eyes after he traded his love for me away.

“The dryad took a piece of my soul,” he admits, his grip on me tightening. “But the moment Eros’s arrow struck you—the moment I realized how close I was to losing you—I started falling in love with you all over again.”

My throat’s so tight I can’t speak. I can only watch him, listen to him, and break with him as he continues to talk to me.

“My love for you has always been inevitable. I knew it from the moment I saw you behind that bar on New Year’s Eve.” He releases a hollow, broken breath. “And when I saw that vision—me, alone on the throne—I realized I didn’t want a future where you weren’t in it. I’d rather die here with you than live a thousand years without you.”

My vision blurs with unshed tears, and despite my injuries, my water magic stirs, as if

it's crying right along with me.

Riven loves me.

I should have known. Maybe I did know, deep down, in the way he kept choosing me, even when it tore him apart.

But hearing him say it, broken and wrecked as we bleed into the sand together, unravels something in me that I'll never be able to piece back together.

"I love you, too," I whisper, and his eyes flutter shut, like the words physically undo him. "I think I started falling for you the moment you rescued me from that monster in the Winter Court forest, when you showed up with Ghost, looking like an avenging ice god. Even when I hated you for making me go through those trials, even when I was furious at you for letting Zoey get taken—a part of my heart was already yours."

Riven's eyes widen slightly, his fingers tracing the lines of my cheek as I somehow keep going.

"When you held me in the cave after that storm, that's when I knew for sure." Each word drains me further, but I need to say them, before it's too late. "And even after you gave up your love to the dryad, and even after Eros's arrow made me hate you... I never stopped loving you."

His breath catches, and frost blooms around us in delicate, intricate patterns.

I reach up, my fingertips tracing the sharp line of his jaw, wanting to memorize every inch of him. "Even at your coldest, when you were trying to push me away, you were still there, protecting me. Loving me," I continue. "I see you, Riven Draevor. Not just the Winter Prince who can destroy kingdoms, but the boy who found a snow leopard and made him family. The man who will do anything to save his father. Even those

dark, broken pieces of yourself that you try to hide—I love all of it. Because I love all of you.”

Something cracks in his expression, like I’ve touched the part of him that has always been beyond anyone’s reach.

“—” His voice breaks on my name, and he pulls me closer, one hand tangling in my hair.

When his lips find mine, it’s desperate and tender—a kiss that tastes of blood and tears and salt. It’s devastating in its intensity, both of us pouring everything we have left into this one moment, knowing it might be our last.

Then, I hear it. A whisper that’s not a voice, but a feeling pressing against my mind.

This is your fate. You love him, yet every time you reach for him, you destroy him.

The Tides. They’re talking to us.

I flinch, but Riven’s grip on me tightens, holding me close as the Tides direct their next cruel statement to him.

You thought sacrificing yourself would save her, yet here she is—dying in your arms.

Riven lets out a ragged breath, and I feel his pain, his rage, and his hatred for the universe that keeps doing everything it can to destroy us.

You were never meant to be together, the Tides continue. Every lifetime, every future—you will always end like this.

What’s left of my magic flares in defiance, but the voices only grow stronger.

You've spent every moment breaking each other.

You'll never stop.

And do you want to know the worst part?

"No," I manage softly, because I don't want to know the worst part. I really, really don't.

Even knowing that you'll destroy each other, you'll always choose each other. Every single time.

The truth of it hits me harder than the wounds already inflicted on me. Because the Tides are right—Riven and I have been destroying each other. Every moment we've tried to save each other has driven us deeper into this spiral of pain and loss.

"They're right," I whisper, my fingers curling against his chest. "We keep hurting each other."

And yet, looking at him now, I know I'd choose him again. In every timeline, in every iteration of fate, I would always find my way back to him.

Riven's jaw clenches, ice crackling beneath us. "They're wrong," he growls. "We're not destroying each other because we love each other. It's happening because of the dryad, and Eros, and Cetus. They used our love as a weapon against us. But that doesn't mean loving you is wrong. It means they're afraid of what we could be together."

Together.

The vision we saw earlier flashes in my mind—the two of us lying together, lifeless

on the battlefield.

What if it wasn't a prophecy? What if it was a warning?

A burning desire to try anything I might have left settles inside me.

"Riven," I whisper, tilting my head to meet his gaze. "I know you'll always catch me when I fall. So keep holding on, okay? I'll be back soon."

His brows furrow, his fingers gripping my waist. "What are you?—"

But before he can stop me, I let go.

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SAPPHIRE

My consciousness tears free with a violent snap.

I glance down at myself cradled in Riven's arms. My physical form looks so broken, so pale, and so close to death.

When I'm done, will I even have a body to return to?

I don't know. But I still have to try.

Riven looks more wrecked than the day he gave up his love for me, more broken than when I told him I hated him, and more ruined than when we saw the vision of him alone on the icy throne.

So, I kneel beside him until my lips brush his ear. "I'm still here," I whisper, brushing a stray strand of dark, blood-soaked hair from his forehead. "I need you to trust me. Don't leave me. Hold on a little longer."

"I will," he says, and he grips my body tighter, his breathing uneven, as if each inhale is costing him something precious.

"I love you," I whisper again, because if I don't make it back, I need those to be the last words I say to him.

"I love you, too," he replies, his eyes fluttering closed, looking more at peace than he has in days. "Always."

My heart breaks as I look down at him. But time is of the essence, so I push myself up and turn to Cetus.

The monster lies broken on the sand, his body torn apart, blood dripping onto the cosmic ocean floor. But even with his own end written into the stars, his glowing eyes burn into mine as I move toward him.

Every step feels like walking through a backward current. It's like the Cosmic Tides are dragging at me, pulling me deeper, trying to keep me here. But I force myself forward, because if I stop now—if I let go—Riven and I will die. Just like the vision said we would.

When I reach Cetus, I unsheathe my dagger—a perfect astral replica of the one strapped to my physical body.

But I can't strike him yet. First, I need to verify that my theory is correct.

You cannot escape fate, he hisses, but my only response is to drag the blade across one of his cheeks, deep enough to draw blood.

No matching wound appears on Riven.

“It worked,” I breathe, relief flooding through me.

Because Cetus connected our physical bodies. Which means when my projection attacks Cetus, the damage doesn't transfer to Riven.

Cetus's first attack happened too quickly for me to think through it, and now that I'm next to him in my astral form, I curse myself for not seeing it sooner.

But all I can do is move forward.

So, I raise my dagger for the final blow.

You think killing me will change your fate? The words materialize inside my head. It won't. You'll still destroy him. If not today, then in the future.

My breath shakes. My projection wavers. The memories of every wound Riven and I have inflicted on each other—every scar, every betrayal, and every moment of love turned to ruin—flash through my mind.

You will always destroy each other, Cetus continues, his voice a dark, seductive whisper. Even the stars can't escape their own collapse.

“Go to hell,” I snarl, raising my dagger and plunging it into his heart.

Light erupts from the wound, blinding and brilliant, spreading through him in fractured lines until his entire body glows from within.

Then, he shatters. Not into pieces, but into stardust that rains into a pile of sparkling light on the ocean floor.

In the silence that follows, I turn to where Riven and I are lying together on the sand.

Color is returning to his face, his wounds knitting together as his supernatural healing returns.

It worked.

So, I go to snap back into my body, reaching for the pull that guides me home.

But something's wrong. The connection is stretched thin, distorted by the unnatural physics of the Tides.

Stay with us.

The whisper isn't from Cetus. It's the Tides again, their collective consciousness reaching for me with hungry tendrils.

You belong here, Star Touched. Stay.

"No," I fight against the pull, focusing on Riven, trying to push past the haze that's blurring my vision. "I need to go back."

Why return to pain? To hatred? The Tides grow stronger, more insistent. The arrow's poison still flows through your physical form. If you return to your realm, you'll hate him again. Any progress you think you made here will be lost.

I struggle harder, pushing against the cosmic current.

And despite what he says, he'll never truly love you, the Tides continue. Not with that piece of his soul missing. The emptiness is destroying him, eating at him, haunting him. You can't fill it. You can't save him from himself.

As they say it, I know it's true.

Because even though Riven fell in love with me again, he's still not whole. He'll never be whole—not like he was before giving a piece of his soul to the dryad.

The Cosmic Tides can't fill it. I'm not sure anything can fill it.

Stay with us. Become one with us, the whispers curl around me, their voices weaving through my mind.

My body feels light. Too light. Like if I stop fighting, I'll drift away.

And then, the cosmic mist parts, and I'm not in the Tides anymore.

I'm standing behind the bar in the Maple Pig, laughing as I mix a drink for a customer.

Before I can finish, Zoey bursts through the door, her hair wild around her face, her smile brighter than I've ever seen it.

"Guess who got into NYU!" she shrieks, waving a piece of paper in front of my face. "We're going to New York!"

"We?" my other self asks, the drink she's making forgotten.

"The apartment I'm getting there would feel pretty lonely if I didn't have a roommate." She smiles slyly. "So, what do you say? New York or bust?"

Before I can hear my answer, the scene dissolves and reforms.

Now, I'm in a sunlit meadow in what looks like the Summer Court. I'm wearing a flowing blue gown, and Riven's riding toward me on Ghost, with a smile I've only seen in our softest moments together.

There's no ice in his eyes as he hops off his snow leopard and strides to my side. No tension in his shoulders. No frost coating his fingers.

There's only pure, unbridled joy.

"Ready for this, Princess?" he asks, taking my hands in his.

We're at some kind of ceremony—our wedding, but not the cold, transactional one we endured in that underground chamber.

This one is real. Wanted. Warm. Celebrated.

He leans down to whisper in my ear. “You’re about to be the luckiest princess in all the realms, because you’re going to have me for the rest of your immortal life,” he says, and I roll my eyes, because he’s as arrogant in that world as he is in ours.

In that world, he never gave up his love for you, the Tides murmur in my mind. You were never hit by Eros’s arrow. The two of you could simply be happy together.

I swallow down a lump in my throat, tears welling in my eyes as I see the happiness shining in Riven’s eyes as he picks me up, twirls me around, and kisses me.

He loves you, , the Tides press down on me, pushing me, tempting me. And if you want that life for yourself, all you have to do is step into it and let go.

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SAPPHIRE

As I grapple with what the Tides are offering me, the wedding continues.

Riven—the one in the vision—reaches for me and tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear.

“Do you feel that, Summer Princess?” he says with an effortless grin that makes my chest tighten. “The sun on our skin, and the wind in our hair? That’s happiness. That’s freedom. That’s our forever.”

Step into it. Into him, the Tides continue to tempt me. If you do, everything between the two of you will be perfect and easy, just like you’re seeing now.

I move closer to the vision, reaching out to touch it. And when I do, I see the Winter King standing nearby... holding the hand of a beautiful, radiant woman with the softness Riven’s face sometimes shows when his guard is down.

She’s his mother.

In this world, she never died. The Winter King never lost himself to grief. Riven never knew the heartbreak of pain and loss. He never had to push down his emotions—to force himself to feel nothing.

Join him there, the Tides continue. You can be happy. You can be a family.

One more step. That’s all it would take.

But somewhere, distantly, I hear a voice. Riven's voice. Not the perfect version of him in the vision, but my Riven. Real, broken, and desperate.

“. Come back,” he says, and I stagger, the warmth around me cracking at the edges.

“What's wrong?” Happy Riven asks, reaching for my hand and taking it in his. “I thought you wanted forever?”

“I do,” I say at the same time as myself in the vision.

But my Riven's voice cuts through my thoughts again, stronger this time. More insistent.

“Don't leave me. Not like this. Not ever. ”

I turn, looking back through the thinning veil between realms.

My Riven is hovering over my body, his hands touching my face, my hair, and my arms, as if he can pull me back through sheer force of will. As he does, his magic spreads in uncontrolled patterns across the cosmic sand, and when he speaks, his voice breaks on every word.

“You're the only thing holding me together,” he says, curling himself around me and pressing his forehead to my lifeless one. “If you leave me, I'll never come back from it.”

Then, something happens that I've never seen before.

Riven—my cold, controlled Winter Prince—begins to cry. Not the silent tears of someone who was trained to never show weakness, but broken, wracking sobs that tear through his body.

The sight of it pulls me back, anchoring me to reality in a way nothing else could.

Because this is my Riven. The boy who stood stone-faced at his mother's funeral, refusing to shed a tear as his father told him emotions were a weakness. The prince who buried his pain beneath layers of ice so thick that no one could reach it.

And he's breaking for me.

I look back at the vision of us—at the Riven who smiles easily and loves without reservation.

And suddenly, I understand.

That's not Riven. Not really. It's a shadow of him—a false promise. Because the Riven in that vision has never fought for me. He's never suffered for me, or sacrificed for me. He's never held me while we both bled out, choosing death together instead of a life apart.

He doesn't know what it means to love someone when it costs him everything.

"No," I say, stepping back from the vision. "This isn't real. It doesn't belong to me."

It could, the Tides insist, the vision growing brighter, more tempting. Give the word, and it will be yours.

"I don't want it," I say, turning away from the scenes of perfect happiness. "I want him. The real him."

Suddenly, the Tides change, the whispers transforming into screams that tear through my mind.

You will regret this.

I press my hands over my ears, but it does nothing to block the assault.

He's broken. And he'll break you again. He'll always bring you down with him. There's no running from it. No escaping it.

I look down at my hands, and panic spikes up my throat. Because the edges of my fingers are dissolving into static, little pieces of me disappearing into the cosmic void. My body is being ripped apart, every molecule fighting to stay together as the Tides try to scatter me across the universe.

"Riven!" I call out to him, but my voice is lost in the chaos. "Help me."

He remains crouched over my body, his fingers curled in the fabric of my shirt like he can physically force my soul to return. His breathing is erratic, his body's trembling, and his eyes are wild and wrecked. His lips move as he whispers something in my ear, but the words are lost beneath the howling rage of the Tides.

Then, he slams his fist into the ocean floor.

Ice explodes around him—sharp, jagged spears that blast outward in a wave of grief and rage. Frost races across the ground, climbing up the void around us, consuming everything in its path.

It's the raw, unchecked power of someone who's coming apart at the seams.

And I'm the one destroying him. Because if I let the Tides take me to one of those other realities, I won't just be choosing a different life. I'll be abandoning this Riven— my Riven. I'll be leaving him alone with the knowledge that he failed to save me. That I gave up on him.

That I didn't want him.

The thought shatters my heart. Because I will always, always want him. And no matter how many other versions of him exist in the universe, the one who's wrecked and broken, crying over my lifeless body on the cosmic ocean floor, is the only one I care about.

And then there's Zoey, trapped in the Night Court, waiting for me to come for her. She's counting on me. Who will rescue her if I'm gone?

If you return to your world, you'll be trapped in the cycle of pain, the Tides scream into my mind, louder than ever.

I plant my feet, reaching for the core of my magic.

"I'm not here to run," I tell the Tides, my voice rising above their howling rage. "I'm here to save my world. To love my Riven. To rescue my Zoey. And you're not going to stop me."

I summon every shred of magic I have left and reach for my body, ready to snap back to it.

My vision goes black. I'm unraveling faster, my projection tearing apart, ripping through me until I can barely breathe.

"Riven!" I scream, but the darkness presses in, leaving me with the terrifying realization that I might be lost forever, trapped in the space between worlds, unable to return to the people I love.

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RIVEN

She's gone.

I feel it—not just in the unnatural stillness of her body, but in something deeper. Something soul-crushingly empty.

It's the absence of her. The suffocating, unbearable void where she's supposed to be.

My arms tighten around her, my body curling around hers like I can shield her from the cosmic forces that claimed her soul.

“Sapphire.” I shake her, harder this time, unwilling to give up. “Come back.”

There's nothing.

The Tides took her from me. They ripped her projection away, swallowing her soul right when she was supposed to return. They stole her and left this pale imitation behind, taunting me with her lifelessness. She physically healed at the same time I did—after she killed Cetus—but the life that's always radiated out of her isn't there anymore.

“Don't leave me,” I whisper, burying my face in her hair, inhaling her sweet scent of summer rain, torturing myself with the memory of her warmth. “Not like this. Not ever.”

Still nothing. Just the shallow rise and fall of her chest and the pallor of death

creeping across her smooth skin.

Ice cracks through the cosmic sand—my magic surging, uncontrolled and unchecked. Unraveling. Because how the hell am I supposed to control myself when she's not here to anchor me?

I trace every detail of her face—every feature I've loved from the first moment I saw her. The delicate arch of her eyebrows. The gentle slope of her nose. The soft curve of her lips—lips that should be smiling or screaming or kissing me senseless, not still and lifeless like this.

I don't know if I'm memorizing her or worshipping her.

I don't know if there's a difference.

“You're the only thing holding me together. If you leave me, I'll never come back from it,” I tell her, and then I press my forehead to hers, not trying to hold it in anymore. All the tears, all the heartbreak—all of it—comes rushing out at once.

It's too much. It's shredding every piece of me. And I welcome the ruin, because it's what I deserve.

So, I slam my fist down onto the ocean floor, barely feeling the bones crack, relishing the blinding pain, the explosion of ice around me.

It's not enough.

It will never be enough.

“I can't go back to the Winter Court and lead our army without you next to me,” I say to her, even though she can't hear me. “I can't save Zoey when the only reason I gave

a damn about any of this was because you made me care. I can't even?—”

My throat closes around the next words, locking them inside me like a secret too painful to say aloud.

“I can't even save myself.”

I clutch her tighter, desperately, as if holding on hard enough can fuse us together and anchor her to this world. She looks so pale, like even though her wounds healed, her blood never returned...

Blood.

She's run out of her own. And gods know, she's always wanted mine. Every time I've bled in front of her, she's looked at me like she's starving.

It's the only thing I have left to give.

Her dagger is right next to her, the blade stained with Cetus's blood. So, without hesitation, I grab it, pressing the cold steel against my wrist, and carve. Deep, swift, and merciless.

The pain is instant and scorching, a beautiful agony racing through my veins. And I welcome it. Crave it. Anything to give meaning to this endless, empty ache that's been haunting me since the deal with the dryad. Actually, for far longer than that—since the day I stood in front of my mother's icy coffin, and my father told me to bury every emotion that could make its way into my heart.

With shaking hands, I lift Sapphire's head, cradling her even as blood pours from my wound, and press my wrist to her lips.

“Drink,” I tell her, forcing my blood into her mouth.

Nothing happens.

So, I pry her lips open, panic rising as I press harder, spilling more of myself into her. But the cut’s already starting to heal, so I take the dagger and carve into myself again, this time even deeper, letting more blood flow out.

“Please, Sapphire. I need you to live,” I repeat what I’ve been demanding of her since I realized she was dying.

Still, nothing. Just the steady flow of my blood, unable to help the one person I would give anything to keep safe.

“Take everything,” I tell her, my desperation bleeding into the words as much as my life bleeds into her mouth. “All of it. My blood, my magic, my life. Whatever you need. I don’t care, as long as you live.”

Desperation claws through my chest, a sob rising, choking me. Because the one thing I have left—my blood, my life—isn’t enough.

And then—a flicker. The faintest, smallest movement as she swallows.

“Yes,” I murmur in her ear, guiding her mouth more firmly against my wrist. “There you go.”

The pull of her lips is intoxicating. It’s fire and ice, pleasure and torment, colliding brutally in my veins. It’s an exquisite destruction—a ruin I crave more than sanity.

Her body arches against mine, hungry and insatiable. Her hands, once limp, now grip my forearm, her nails digging into me, marking me, claiming me even in her

weakened state.

“Sapphire,” I groan, my voice barely audible, caught between agony and ecstasy, between warning her and begging her never to stop.

She doesn’t listen. She doesn’t care. Her focus is on consuming me—on devouring me whole.

This isn’t just drinking. It’s obliteration. It’s the annihilation I’ve yearned for, the destruction of everything I am. And gods help me, it feels incredible. Like being unmade by the most exquisite torture imaginable.

Her teeth—sharper now, more defined—sink deeper into my wrist, and the sensation sends a jolt of pleasure so intense it’s almost unbearable down my spine.

She’s taking too much, I realize. Far too much.

And I don’t care.

A weak, breathless laugh slips past my lips. Of course this is how it ends. It was always going to be her teeth in my skin, my life bleeding into her body, my love for her burning me alive.

Darkness creeps into my vision, the edges blurring, the world fading.

I should stop her.

But I don’t. I won’t. Because if I stop her and if it’s not enough—if the life flows out of her again and I’m left on this cosmic floor without her—it will all have been for nothing.

“You’re doing great,” I murmur, dizzy from blood loss, from pleasure, from her. “It’s yours. All of it’s yours. It’s always been yours.”

My heartbeat slows, pain and pleasure fading into numbness. Darkness calls me, but I’m not afraid. Because it’s peaceful. Like falling asleep after the longest day.

With my last fading strength, I pull her closer, my lips brushing her ear as she continues drinking, desperate and deep, consuming my soul.

Maybe she can.

Maybe she already has.

And somehow, it feels right.

Because this is what love is, isn’t it? A sacrifice. A surrender. A willing, brutal, beautiful destruction.

This is what I was made for.

Not to rule. Not to be a prince. Not to fight in a war that never mattered.

I was made to burn for her. To bleed for her. To shatter completely, offering her every last, broken piece of me.

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

And as the last threads of my life unravel—as the world tilts into blackness and I fall into her like she’s gravity—I find myself smiling.

Because she'll live. She'll save Zoey. She'll be the incredible, beautiful, star touched warrior she was born to be.

And throughout it all, she'll carry me with her, always.

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SAPPHIRE

Every time I try to push back to my body, the Tides drag me deeper, tearing my projection apart piece by piece.

And then—something changes.

A warmth touches my consciousness, so familiar it shatters my soul.

Blood.

And not just any blood. It's Riven's blood. I'd recognize its scent anywhere—crisp snow and fresh pine.

I love you so much, I think, and then I'm hurtling back into my body, and the world explodes into ice, sharp and electric, racing through my veins and setting every cell on fire.

Riven's blood isn't just blood. It's winter storms and moonlight on frost, a collision of pain and ecstasy that feels like coming home and being shattered apart at once.

It's intoxicating. Overwhelming. It's everything.

But then—there's his voice.

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

As I drink—as it gets harder and harder to pull more blood from his wrist—what he’s saying threads together.

I’m destroying him. He’ll always be part of me, but he won’t be here beside me. Which means...

Reality slams into me, and I ground myself, forcing myself away from him, terrified of what I’m about to find.

His arm falls. Like he wasn’t even trying to hold it up.

And when I open my eyes...

The world stops.

His head is slumped against my shoulder, heavy, lifeless, and unresponsive, even as I try to make him look at me. His eyes are closed, his face pale, and delicate patterns of ice crawl across his skin, spreading over his chest like frost on glass.

But he’s still breathing. He’s still here.

“Riven?” My voice sounds foreign to my ears, small and desperate.

His eyes remain closed, his face eerily peaceful.

I’ve never seen him this still. Even in sleep, Riven maintains a coiled tension, ready to spring into action at the slightest threat.

But now? Nothing.

“I won’t let you do this,” I tell him, my voice cracking on every word. “You don’t get

to leave me now. You promised?—”

The memory hits me—Riven’s voice in my ear when he was telling me that he loved me, when he thought it was all going to be over soon.

If you think I’m going to keep existing in an empty, meaningless version of reality that doesn’t have you in it, then you don’t know a damn thing about me.

“You can’t give up now,” I say, shaking, needing him to open his eyes and make one of those insufferable comments about how I’m overreacting and messing up every thought-out plan of his. “You promised me forever.”

I grasp his frozen hands, squeezing as if I can transfer my warmth—my life—back into him.

But they remain cold and unyielding, like marble beneath my touch.

His pulse is weak. Fading. Barely there.

And then?

It’s gone.

Just... gone.

Like it was never there at all.

“No—” The word wrenches from me in a ragged sob, and I press my fingers harder against his throat, his wrist, and his chest, desperate to force life back into him.

“You don’t get to decide that you love me more than your own life,” I choke out,

barely able to breathe. “You’re supposed to be here. You’re supposed to catch me when I fall. How are you supposed to do that if you’re gone?”

The Tides are silent.

But I won’t accept this. I won’t let him go. I won’t let this be our end.

And then, Riven’s final words cut through my mind.

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

His blood is inside me. His life. The essence of everything he is.

I just have to give it back.

My hands tremble as I clutch his shirt, my nails digging into the ice-laced fabric. His lips—the ones that should be smirking, teasing, or kissing me with that irresistible arrogance of his—are parted just slightly, like he was whispering my name with his last breath.

“I love you,” I whisper, my tears falling onto his cheeks and mingling with the blood staining his skin. “I can’t lose you. Not when I just got you back.”

My hands move to his face, my magic crackling at my fingertips.

“You told me you’ll be part of me forever,” I say, and since he always enjoys a good challenge, I add, “So if you love me as much as you claim, prove it. Come back to me. Don’t give up on us when we were only just getting started.”

With that, I call on every last ounce of magic inside me. More, and more, and more,

until it bursts from my skin like liquid starlight.

The world trembles, my power raging, searing with determination.

And then—I kiss him.

Hard. Desperate. Bruising.

I pour everything into it. My love, my rage, and my refusal to accept his sacrifice. I kiss him like I can force life back into him through sheer willpower. Like I can bind his soul to mine so tightly that the universe won't be able to tear us apart.

And then, I reach for that place between worlds where my consciousness can separate from my body.

But this time, I don't project outward.

I project into him.

Not just my consciousness. Not just my thoughts. I send my soul into his body, shoving it inside him with every ounce of resolve I have left.

It's agony and ecstasy. A supernova collapsing inward, tearing me apart and weaving me back together inside him. Power burns through my veins, threads of golden light weaving through his heart, his lungs, and his magic.

The Tides shriek in protest.

They want to take him back. They want to take me back.

But I won't let them. Because his blood is in me. And now, I'm dissolving into him,

seeping into his heart like water in cracked ice. I'm filling every hollow space and every frozen void, until all that remains is us.

Live, I think, kissing him harder, sending spirals of magic through his soul as if I can bind every broken, shattered piece of it together.

Then, the universe snaps.

It's like a lock is clicking into place. Like the cosmos have rewritten their laws to make room for us.

And finally, miraculously...

His heart beats.

RIVEN

A force slams into me—a violent, desperate impact, like two stars crashing together at the end of the world. Threads of light wrap around my heart, warm magic braiding itself into my essence, interweaving with every single piece of me.

Sapphire.

She's not just calling me back. She's dragging me back.

And then, memories explode through me and into me, until I'm not just seeing them—I'm living in them.

* * *

She was always going to ruin me.

I knew it the moment I saw her at the Maple Pig, her white-blond hair catching the bar's dim lights, her brilliant blue eyes sharp with warmth and secrets.

“Do I seem like a man who orders pink drinks?” I raise an eyebrow, testing her reaction.

“You must not be from around here,” she counters, her eyes locked on mine, like she's sizing me up.

“I'll take it as a compliment that I don't seem like I'm from a small town in Maine,” I

say, allowing myself the ghost of a smile.

“People come here from all over. But I always remember a face. And yours...”

She smiled after that, having no idea she was about to change my life in the best way possible.

* * *

Soon, I'm in my quarters in the Winter Court.

Her projected form appears out of nowhere, and I react instinctively, my sword slicing through her ghostly figure. The blade passes through harmlessly, but something inside me fractures.

My sword clatters to the ground, my chest tight with panic.

Because even though I barely know her, the thought of harming her feels like plunging that blade straight into my own heart.

* * *

And then, the moment I realized how vulnerable she is while she projects...

“Were we going to discuss the pros and cons of my magic while the Stalo was punching its way through the tree?” she snaps, as irresistibly defiant as ever.

“Don't try twisting this around,” I growl, stepping close, crowding her against the tree's cold, rough wall. “You had plenty of chances to tell me. But instead, I had to figure it out by watching you collapse like you were ? —”

“Like I was dead,” she finishes. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it? You thought I wasn’t coming back. You were scared.”

My breath catches, words lodged painfully in my throat. “I thought you were gone,” I admit. “And that there was nothing I could do to save you.”

I don’t tell her the rest—that when she fell, something shattered inside me. That despite all my father’s lessons about weakness and control, I’d tear apart the world to bring her back.

Because confessing that would mean accepting how hopelessly lost I already am.

* * *

Next, the cave.

The storm howls outside, but inside, there’s only Sapphire.

“If you want to stop, tell me now,” I manage to say, my voice rough with emotion I’ve spent decades suppressing. “If you don’t ? —“

“No,” she interrupts, her eyes clear and certain. “Don’t stop. I don’t want to stop.”

Just like that, I’m surrendering to the inevitable. To something bigger than fate, bigger than war, and bigger than either of us could possibly know.

* * *

Finally, the moment I’ve replayed obsessively since the dryad stole that piece of my soul. The one I’ve tried to dissect, to feel, to make sense of—and failed every time.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to hers, and when I pull away, I hesitate. Because once spoken, the words building in my throat can never be taken back. They'll become real, dangerous, and destructive.

But I've lost too many things I care about. I won't lose her, too. Not without her knowing exactly what she means to me.

"I love you, Sapphire Hayes," I whisper, letting the words fall into the space between us. "I've loved you since the moment I saw you at that bar. You're my summer fae. And I can't lose you. Not like I lost my mother. Not like I might have lost Ghost."

For a terrible moment, I think I've made a mistake. That I've revealed too much, or asked for more than she's willing to give.

"I love you, too," she finally says, and something inside me—something frozen, starved, and aching—starts to warm.

* * *

The next memory... it's not a memory. At least, I don't think it is. Although, it feels so real. Like a dream—one I've been trying to remember but that keeps slipping through my fingers.

We sink beneath the water's surface, and the emptiness—that hollow ache where my love for Sapphire existed before the dryad stole it from me—flickers.

Because the hatred in her eyes is gone.

And suddenly, my hands are finding her in the water, one gripping her waist, the other threading through her hair as I tilt her face to mine.

When our lips meet, it's like breathing for the first time in ages. I could stay like this forever—her and me, floating in the water, lost in our own perfect world.

And I need her to know exactly what I'm feeling. So, I take her left hand, turn her palm upward, and trace letters onto her skin.

I.

Precise and deliberate, my finger moves slowly as I create the first letter. Then I tap her palm, silently asking if she understands.

When she nods, I continue.

L.

Another pause, watching her face closely, drinking in her reaction.

O.

I glance up at her, my heart racing at the raw emotion in her eyes.

V.

Her breath hitches, her eyes wide, waiting.

E.

She inches closer, silently begging me to finish.

Y. O. U.

Eight simple letters that mean everything.

* * *

As the memory fades, the part of my soul that I gave to the dryad stays. Because when I relived those memories, I experienced everything all over again. I was there, falling in love with her, just like I did the first time around.

My left palm tingles with the phantom sensation of her fingertips tracing those eight letters in return while we were underwater.

I love you .

A promise. A tether. A bond.

This isn't just love. It isn't just magic.

We're fused now.

Bound in a way that no force—not dryads, not gods, and not even death itself—can ever erase.

SAPPHIRE

My left palm tingles.

And then, Riven gasps—a sudden, desperate inhalation that makes his body arch before he collapses back onto the cosmic sand.

His eyes flutter open, unfocused and dazed. His chest rises and falls with renewed life, and the frost that was claiming his body flows back into his fingertips, as if it belongs to him again instead of him belonging to it.

Relief crashes through me, followed by something hot, furious, and unstoppable.

“You reckless, self-sacrificing idiot!” I punch his chest, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make him feel the sting of my anger. “How could you do that? You just laid there and died on me?! You let me...”

I can’t say the words. It’s too much. Too painful.

Riven blinks up at me, too weak to respond, although his lips twitch slightly.

“You’re crying,” he finally manages. “Over me.”

My hands shake as I grab his shirt, pulling him closer. “How dare you?” I continue, still trying to wrap my mind around what just happened. “You can’t just—you don’t get to just?—”

My voice cracks, and water magic explodes around us, droplets hovering in the air like tiny stars.

Riven's just staring at me, his silver eyes wide with wonder. There's something different about them now—a depth that wasn't there before. It's like he's seeing me— all of me—for the first time.

And then, impossibly, he smirks.

“This is what you signed up for when you married me,” he says, tracing a finger along my tear-soaked cheek. “And you're incredibly beautiful when you're crying over me after magically tackling your soul into my body.”

I sit up quickly, startled and flustered, torn between wanting to slap him and kiss him senseless. “That's not funny,” I snap, voice shaking. “You were dead, Riven. Your heart stopped. If I hadn't?—”

I can't finish the sentence. Because what did I do, exactly?

His smirk dissolves into quiet sincerity as he pushes himself upright.

“I felt you,” he says softly, his eyes holding mine. “All of you. Every memory. Every moment. You brought them back.”

My breath catches, and then his hand is finding my left one, turning my palm upward and tracing familiar letters across my skin.

I.

He pauses, his eyes locked on mine, making sure I'm paying attention.

When I don't pull away, he continues.

L. O. V. E.

My heart stutters, my magic swirling inside me, entwined with something that feels like Riven's heartbeat.

Y. O. U.

The final letter undoes me completely, and then I'm taking his left hand, turning it over, and tracing those eight letters in return.

As I finish, memories stolen by curses and heartbreak rush back in a flood, returned in vibrant clarity.

The ocean holding us, Riven's forehead pressed against mine, his fingertip spelling out our truths beneath the waves. The devastating ache knowing we'd forget all of it when we surfaced.

"You remember it, too," he whispers, awe coloring his voice.

"Yes," I breathe, the memories filling in spaces I didn't realize were empty. "The marriage chamber, and the ocean near the pier... I remember everything."

Something wild and desperate overtakes me, and I yank him to me, crashing my lips against his with bruising force.

He responds instantly, one hand tangling in my hair, the other at the small of my back, pulling me impossibly close. The kiss is all-consuming, an inferno of need and relief and something deeper—something that feels like coming home after the longest, coldest winter.

Because I feel him everywhere. Not just physically, but in places that transcend the physical. I feel the quiet ache of his longing, and the previously hollow space the dryad created that's now filled with my essence. I feel his devotion, his determination, and his certainty that I'm the only thing in the universe worth dying for.

When we part, breathless and dazed, I rest my forehead against his, unwilling to separate from him completely.

"Your soul is inside me," he murmurs, his voice filled with wonder. "I can feel you—your magic, and your emotions. I can feel everything."

"I feel you, too," I whisper back. "It's like?—"

"Like we're one," he finishes, and the rightness of it settles over me like a blanket of stars.

His fingers trace the mark on my ring finger—the one from our wedding ceremony—but the colors are deeper now. More vibrant.

Glancing down, I see the same marking on his hand, pulsing with a light that echoes my heartbeat.

Or maybe our heartbeat. I can't tell where mine ends and his begins anymore.

"What did you do, ?" he asks, but there's no accusation in his voice—only wonder.

"I couldn't lose you," I reply simply. "So, I pulled you back. I fought for you. I fought for us."

"You did more than save my life," he says, still trapped in a daze, as if my very

existence is hypnotizing him. “You bound us forever.”

“Do you regret it?” I shift in place, suddenly uncertain.

After all, he didn’t exactly consent to this whole soul fusion thing.

His laugh is soft and incredulous. “Regret being bound to you for eternity?” He shakes his head, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re the one thing I’d choose over and over again, no matter the cost.”

Relief washes through me, and I feel it reflected from his soul, an infinite loop of emotion and truth.

I could stay here like this with him forever—but we didn’t join our bodies and souls to disappear into the starry void again.

“We need to get out of here before the Tides try to take us again,” I say, glancing around at the galaxies spinning overhead. “Let’s find the Star Disc and return to the mortal realm, or the mystical realm—or whatever realm is closest to the exit of this place.”

He nods, resolve burning in his eyes. “Then we deliver the potion to my father.”

“And then we destroy the Night Court and save Zoey,” I say, a fierce protectiveness surging through me.

He smiles—not his usual smirk, but something warmer and more genuine. “Together,” he says. “You and me. Forever this time.”

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SAPPHIRE

A loud, obnoxious snort shatters the moment.

My water magic surges to my fingertips in sharp, crackling waves, while frost explodes from Riven's hands, forming daggers of ice. Our combined magic swirls together in a defensive perimeter around us, water and ice fusing into something new—something powerful.

And then, we freeze.

Because the enemy we're ready to obliterate? It's not some cosmic horror.

It's pigs.

Three of them, to be exact. Circe's pigs, trotting across the sand as if they're wandering through an ordinary barnyard rather than the deepest part of the Cosmic Tides.

My magic sputters, the water droplets splashing down onto the stardust sand.

Riven's ice daggers crack and shatter.

"Are you kidding me?" I say, not sure if I'm addressing the pigs, the Tides, or the universe in general.

Riven looks from the pigs to me, his expression deadpan despite the lingering awe in

his eyes from our soul-binding moment.

“This is turning out to be one hell of a honeymoon,” he says, his voice so dry it could turn the cosmic ocean to dust.

Laughter bursts from me, so sudden and sharp that I nearly collapse with it. Because it’s too much. Everything we just survived—everything we just became—and now Circe’s pigs trot in, surviving the Cosmic Tides as if they were a scenic detour?

Riven joins in, his laugh deeper and richer than I’ve ever heard it.

It reminds me of the happy version of him that I saw in the Tides, at our wedding, with his mother there.

The smallest pig—a pink one with white spots—trots over and nudges my leg with its snout, as if wanting to be part of the joke.

“I guess they like us,” I say once I can catch my breath, wiping tears of laughter from my face.

“Maybe your dramatic monologues on the spectral ship about how heartbroken you were over me won them over,” Riven teases, his eyes gleaming with newfound warmth. “Although, explaining our trio of enchanted pigs to the Winter Court should prove rather interesting.”

My laughter fades at the mention of his father, the potion, and the Winter Court... which of course makes me think about Zoey trapped in the Night Court.

Riven notices. Of course he does. He can feel me now, just as I feel him, our emotions flowing back and forth like water and ice melting into one.

“We’ll get her back,” he says, steady with conviction. “I promise. We’re stronger now than ever.”

“You feel it too, don’t you?” I flex my fingers, watching in amazement as water and frost materialize in my palm. “I don’t just have my magic anymore. I have yours, too.”

Instead of replying, he creates a ball of ice in his hand that’s shot through with threads of water.

“Incredible,” he says in wonder, and I rotate my hand, playing with the frost, trying to form designs as delicate and intricate as the ones he creates to express everything he’s feeling but doesn’t want to say.

All I manage are... blobs.

He tilts his head, amusement dancing over his eyes. “I wouldn’t recommend competing with my artistic talent, Princess,” he says, although his expression changes a second later, becoming more serious. “But there’s no need to compete. Not really. Because you’re inside me now. In my veins, in my bones, and in my soul. And I’ll never let you go.”

“You say that like it’s a choice,” I reply, dropping my arm to my side, incapable of focusing on anything other than him. “Like either of us could walk away now, even if we tried.”

“I’d burn the realms down before letting you go,” he says, and then we’re crashing into each other again, losing ourselves in everything we created and destroyed and built back up in what feels like a single heartbeat.

But eventually—frustratingly—he pulls away, his eyes locked on mine with visible

struggle.

I gaze up at him, knowing I'd drown in him and forget everything else if he asked me to. Because he was gone, and now he's here. And I'll never forget the devastation I felt when his heartbeat stopped, when I thought I was going to have to live the rest of my immortal life without him.

He reaches for my left hand and traces my palm, as if he's worshipping my existence with a single touch.

"As much as I'd love to stay here and revel in our whole cosmically bound, dangerously obsessed soulmates situation," he says, seeming to get an immense amount of joy from the words, "we did come here for something."

"Right," I say, trying—and failing—to ground myself. "The Star Disc."

We glance around the Tides, but there's nothing here other than Cetus's pile of sparkly stardust.

"Maybe we have to..." Riven focuses on it and trails off, grimacing slightly. "Dig through it?"

I wrinkle my nose, but nod in reluctant agreement. "It wouldn't be the weirdest thing we've ever done," I say, but as we're about to reach into the glittering dust, the ground tremors, and the cosmic sand shifts, vibrating with an energy that seems to come from the core of the Tides themselves.

Riven draws his sword, staying close. I do the same with my dagger.

Ahead of us, the Tides part, revealing a shimmering tower rising from the depths of the abyss. It's unlike any structure I've ever seen—a colorful turret made of

crystallized starlight, stretching upward through the gap in the Tides like it's trying to touch the sky.

Riven and I exchange a quick glance, and then we move as one, hurrying toward the tower.

There's no door. Just an open archway that leads to a spiraling staircase that seems to stretch infinitely upward. So, we climb what feels like hundreds of steps, our joined magic swirling around us, until finally, we reach the top. We're standing on an open platform beneath a domed, crystal ceiling, gazing up at the swirling cosmos above, infinitely vast and breathtakingly beautiful.

Riven exhales sharply, running a hand through his dark hair as he surveys the platform. "All right, Universe," he calls out to the cosmos. "We climbed your celestial staircase. Now, where's our prize?"

I barely have time to roll my eyes before a streak of golden light tears through the night sky.

A meteor—or a falling star—hurtling straight toward us.

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SAPPHIRE

As the blazing light nears, it slows—no longer wild, but purposeful.

The Star Disc. It has to be.

My breath catches. My pulse stutters. Every bone in my body screams for me to take it.

So, I do.

The moment my fingers extend forward, the Disc closes the distance. Not like an object, but as a living thing that's been waiting for me.

I gaze down in awe. Because it's not just beautiful—it's transcendent. Forged from celestial metal that glints with impossible color, its sharp, star-cut edges shimmer with ancient, swirling designs. It's also heavier than it looks—like holding fate itself—but somehow weightless.

At its center, a large, deep sapphire pulses like a living heart.

You have claimed your fate.

The words don't come from Riven. They don't come from me. They're not the haunting voices of the Tides, trying to slither into my mind. Instead, they come from everywhere and nowhere, threading through the air like a cosmic decree.

You will be the light that burns the darkness away, the voice continues, and a smile spreads across Riven's face—not his usual smirk, but something genuine and filled with pride.

“They got that right,” he says, reaching out to touch the Disc. “You’ve always been the brightest thing in any room.”

The compliment warms me from within, and the Disc responds to my emotion, its sapphire center glowing brighter.

“I think I’m in love,” I murmur as I stare down at it.

Riven's brow lifts. “Should I be jealous of a celestial weapon?”

“Never.” I laugh, feeling the Disc laugh with me. “You’re still my favorite deadly object.”

“High praise, coming from you.” He steps forward, and that energy buzzes between us—the one that’s been there since I fused our souls.

His breathing slows, and the air bends around us, chilled and charged.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he says, mesmerized, his fingers grazing my cheek.

“You’re saying it like it didn’t already happen.” I take a sharp breath inward, pain shooting through my heart all over again. “Like you didn’t just die in my arms less than an hour ago.”

“Yeah, well, you almost died in mine first. So let’s call it even.” His fingers skim my jaw, his touch softer than his words, his eyes studying me with such raw devotion that

butterflies go crazy in my stomach. “But let’s not make this whole dying in each other’s arms thing a habit, all right?”

“That’s not a habit I ever want to make.” I let out a bitter laugh, pressing my palm against his chest—against the place where his heart stopped. “But if you die on me again, I’ll bring you back just to kill you myself.”

“You’re the only thing keeping me alive now, anyway.” His forehead presses against mine, his breathing uneven and his eyes closed, as if he’s soaking in every moment we have together. “You own my heart, . And my soul.”

I want to sink into him and live in him forever.

Which, I suppose, I sort of already did.

“You know I love you.” I tilt my head, my lips curving slightly. “But owning a Winter Prince’s heart and soul sounds like a lot of pressure.”

“You don’t just own them. You are them,” he says, like a vow written in frost and starlight. “But—speaking of things we own, I have something of yours.”

“Other than my soul?” I ask, teasing, but curious.

Riven just smiles—that rare, genuine smile that makes my heart skip a beat—and reaches into his pocket.

“I’ve been carrying this since our wedding day,” he says, withdrawing something that catches the cosmic light and sends blue reflections dancing across his face.

My sapphire bracelet. The one I threw into the ceremonial pool in the Summer Court.

My throat tightens. “How did you?—”

“I caught it before it hit the water,” he says, turning it over in his hand. “Froze it midair, actually. You were too busy making your grand declaration to the Summer Queen to notice.”

The bracelet glows under the starlight, the sapphires pulsing like a heartbeat.

It was my one connection to my mother—or at least, to the woman I thought was my mother—even though it had actually been from Lysandra, my birth mother. And I’d thrown it away in a moment of anger and defiance.

“Why would you save it?” I finally manage to ask.

“Because it mattered to you,” he replies, as if it should be obvious. “Because even when you hated me and I couldn’t remember loving you, I couldn’t let you lose something that meant so much to you.”

His honesty floors me. Because I remember the rage I felt that day. The satisfaction of dropping the bracelet into the water, of rejecting the lie that had been my life. But now, I feel something different—a bittersweet ache for everything that was and everything that still could be.

“This reminds me of the first time,” I say quietly. “Before the trials. When you gave the bracelet back to me in the tent.”

“It’s a good thing our wedding bands are infused into our skin, because you’re terrible at keeping track of your jewelry,” he says, and then, with gentle hands, he takes my wrist. “May I?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

He fastens the bracelet around my wrist, and the moment it touches my skin, I feel a rush of warmth.

The Star Disc pulses in my other hand, responding to the bracelet like they've been waiting to be reunited.

"I can't promise I'll always make the right choices," he says, his voice low and intense. "But I can promise I'll always protect you, no matter where we go, or what we face, or how many times we have to save each other from cosmic monsters and vengeful gods."

"I love you," I tell him, since it's the simplest explanation for the emotions rushing through my heart that I can think of.

"I know," he says, that smirk finding its way back to his lips. "And you're stuck with me now. Soulmates, remember?"

"Soulmates," I repeat, as if testing the word on my tongue.

It feels right, somehow. Not just because of what I did to bring him back, but because of everything that led us here—every fight, every sacrifice, and every moment of connection.

"Yes, soulmates," he says. "Tangled together so deeply that even when gods tried to pull us apart, they failed."

And then his lips are on mine again, and I know that if we never emerge from the Cosmic Tides, it'll be because we lost ourselves in each other forever.

SAPPHIRE

The only reason Riven and I come up for air is because someone clears their throat behind us.

I pull out of his arms, my cheeks flushing when I see Celeste—the goddess who star touched me—watching me and Riven getting closer and closer to what honeymooning couples usually do while enjoying their first nights of marriage.

Fantastic.

“Celeste,” I say, drawing in a breath and smoothing my hair like it’ll somehow give me back my dignity.

“,” she says with a knowing smile. “And Riven Draevor, Prince of Winter. What you two have created transcends even my expectations.”

“That’s quite the compliment coming from someone who created this.” I raise the Star Disc, admiring its beauty all over again—and desperately needing to switch the topic away from celestial PDA before I’m embarrassed to death.

I’ve already died enough for one day.

“You proved yourself worthy,” she says, either ignoring—or not caring—that Riven and I were about to rip off each other’s clothing while the Star Disc was still in my hand. “You proved that you understand the balance between power and love. That you’re willing to tear through the cosmos to save the ones you care about.”

“I didn’t do it to prove anything.” I tighten my grip on Riven’s hand, frost and water spiraling along our skin, from our palms to our elbows. “I did it because I care about keeping the people I love alive. And I’ll tear through the cosmos again if that’s what it takes to make sure they stay alive.”

“And that’s why the cosmos bends for you.” Celeste’s gaze lingers on me, something knowing in the way she watches. “Because you don’t seek power. And yet, you claim it as if you were forged from it.”

Riven steps closer, the space between us crackling with protective energy.

“She wasn’t just forged from power—she is power,” he says to Celeste. “And gods help whoever forgets it.”

I prepare myself for Celeste to launch an attack on Riven for being, well... Riven.

“You’re lucky, Winter Prince,” she says instead. “Not just to have her, but to know what she’s worth. I approve.”

“Smart choice,” Riven says, already sliding into that insufferable tone that means a one-liner is coming. “I’d hate to have to overthrow a goddess for underestimating my wife.”

“I’d love to see you try.” Celeste raises a delicate brow. “But considering you were dead less than an hour ago, perhaps you should pace yourself on the divine vengeance.”

He lets out a low, amused laugh. “Fair enough.”

I glance between them and huff, forcing them to return their focus to me.

I am, after all, the reason we're gathered here today. Or tonight. Or whatever time it is in the cosmic void.

"As much as I love this whole family reunion moment, maybe my celestial godmother and my infuriatingly devoted soulmate can hold off on the bonding session?" I ask. "Because I just claimed a cosmic death frisbee and have no idea how to use it."

"Then allow me to show you what power looks like when you wield it," Celeste says, and a vision forms in the air between us—me throwing the Star Disc like a weapon. It cuts through the air with deadly precision, leaving a trail of stardust in its wake, and returns to my hand.

The vision version of me looks like an avenging goddess.

"As you see, it will always return to you," Celeste says to me, now in full mentor mode. "The Disc is bound to your soul, just as you're now bound to his." She nods toward Riven, then turns back to me. "But it's more than just a weapon. It's a conduit for your star magic, your water magic, your air magic, and the ice magic you share with your prince. The Disc will amplify it all."

I exchange a glance with Riven, who raises an eyebrow—his subtle way of telling me he's impressed.

"So, I just... throw it?" I ask Celeste, feeling both empowered and slightly underwhelmed by the simplicity.

She nods. "Throw it with intention. It can cut through nearly anything—even materials that should be impossible to break. And reaching for it with your air magic will return it to you, as air magic tends to do with weapons bound to their wielder's soul."

I give it an experimental spin in my hand, feeling how naturally it balances on my fingertips, admiring the stardust it generates as it moves.

Then, I hurl it across the platform.

It whistles through the air, trailing a comet's tail of shimmering light. For a heartbeat, it becomes the only star in the sky. Then, I reach for it with my magic to bring it back, and it curves and returns, slapping cleanly into my palm with a hum that echoes in my bones.

Celeste claps, her smile radiant. "You're a natural."

She walks me through a few more techniques, and it comes easily—like brewing potions always has, only faster and deadlier. Each time the Disc returns to me, it feels more familiar, like an extension of my body.

"Fantastic," she says after it returns to me again. "And now, that about covers our lessons."

"Is there anything else we should know?" I ask her. "Any hints about how to get the Winter King to drink the potion? About how to defeat the Night Court? About how to save Zoey?"

"The universe will reveal all in time," she says mysteriously.

I let out a huff. "So, that's a no."

I knew it wouldn't be easy. But I was hoping for something— anything —other than cosmic riddles and vague foreshadowing.

Riven steps forward, his gaze intense, focused on Celeste. "How do we get out of

here and back to the mystical realm?" he asks.

"The Cosmic Tides exist beyond the laws of time and space," she explains. "When you ascend in the spectral ship, think of where you wish to go and why. If your purpose is true, the Tides will deliver you."

"That's it?" I ask. "No portal, no map, no coordinates? No star to serve as our guide? Just... think about it really hard?"

Celeste's laugh chimes through the air. "Your intentions shape reality more than you know," she says. "Especially here."

Just as she finishes speaking, a rumble courses through the tower. I grab Riven's arm to steady myself, watching in alarm as the lower steps of the staircase dissolve into stardust.

"What's happening?" I ask, backing away from the disintegrating steps.

"The tower has served its purpose," Celeste explains. "It's returning to the cosmic matter from which it was formed."

"Well, that's lovely," Riven mutters. "Except we're still standing on it."

She motions to the Star Disc. "Your weapon is more than just a projectile."

I narrow my eyes. "Meaning...?"

If she says that the universe will reveal it in time, I'm flinging myself into the abyss and taking my chances.

"It can be used as a glider," she says, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

“Hold onto it with both hands. Riven will wrap his arms around you, and then, you’ll jump. The Disc will carry you on the currents.” She pauses, then adds, “Although, the added weight of Riven’s ego may pose a challenge.”

Riven scoffs. “If anything’s weighing me down, it’s the sheer gravity of how devastatingly irresistible I am.”

I shoot him a glare.

“Hey.” He holds his hands up in mock innocence. “I don’t make the rules. I just get the privilege of living in them.”

Celeste smiles knowingly at us.

“Yes, you’re very pretty, Winter Prince. Now, grab your wife and jump before the platform crumbles beneath your devastating charm,” she says, rolling her celestial eyes and turning back to me. “Let the Star Disc catch the cosmic currents. It will guide you safely back to your vessel.”

The tower’s disintegration speeds up, reaching the middle section of the staircase.

We’re running out of time.

“Thank you,” I say to Celeste, feeling the weight of her guidance, her blessing.

She inclines her head, her form translucent as she fades back into starlight. “The light that burns the darkness away is not just the Star Disc—it’s you,” she tells me. “Your courage, your heart, and your love. That’s magic the stars can’t replicate.”

With those final words, she dissolves completely, leaving me and Riven alone on the rapidly shrinking tower platform.

“Well,” he says, glancing down, “nothing like a cosmic death drop to keep things interesting.”

I take a deep breath, holding the Star Disc in front of me with both hands. “Do me a favor and keep your ego in check when we do this?” I ask.

“That’s like asking the sun not to shine,” he says, and then he steps behind me, pulling me close.

Even though we’re about to jump into the cosmic abyss, electricity rushes through me at his touch.

“I feel that, Princess,” he murmurs in my ear, and my stomach flips at the intimacy of the whole sharing souls thing.

“We have to jump, Riven,” I say, my heart leaping as his hold tightens. “Before I forget how to breathe again.”

“I’m not letting go.”

Three simple words.

But in them: everything. His vow, his guilt, his love, and his need.

“Ready?” I ask, poising the Disc like a shield in front of us.

“With you? Always,” he says, and then together, we leap into the stars.

SAPPHIRE

The Star Disc blazes to life—an explosion of light and power—and we’re soaring through the Tides, air currents guiding our way.

“It’s working!” I shout, exhilaration coursing through me as we glide toward the spectral ship.

Riven laughs, wild and free, his arms locked tight around me. “Of course it is,” he says, his breath cool against my ear. “Your magic is extraordinary.”

“And your existence is distracting in the best way possible,” I reply with a smile, although I manage to keep my focus on the spectral ship, which is calling to the Star Disc like a magnet.

The three pigs stand on the deck. They’re watching our descent with what almost looks like boredom, as if sailing through cosmic space on a glowing disc is perfectly ordinary. One of them even yawns.

Then, we land. Not with a jolt, but with a slow deceleration of starlight. A perfect glide.

The moment our feet touch the ghostly wood, the Disc dims in my hand.

Riven doesn’t move. Not right away. Instead, he lingers behind me, his body pressed to mine like he wants to stay like this forever.

I'd let him if he did.

But eventually—reluctantly—he steps back.

“That,” he says, slightly breathless, “was incredible.”

I turn to him, my pulse still racing. “The flying part, or the trusting each other with our lives while riding a cosmic death disc part?”

“Both,” he says, his voice laced with something softer now—wonder, maybe. “Although, let’s be honest—I’ve been trusting you with my life since tasting the pink drink you made me. Not to mention that I helped you through those trials, killed my knights for you, became a fugitive of my own court for you, faced down monsters beside you, bled for you, married you, died for you, and let you fuse your soul to mine.” He lifts a brow. “And you’re worried about a flying disc?”

Each incident he mentions sends a thrill through my spine.

“When you list it all like that, we really do have a problem making rational life decisions,” I say, and then I’m scanning the deck of the ship, making sure there aren’t any cosmic monsters about to jump out at us.

“Rational is boring,” Riven replies, sword out, also checking our surroundings. “And if there’s one thing you’ve never been, it’s boring.”

My water magic ripples around my fingers, responding to the warmth spreading through my body. But as much as I want to pull Riven into the ship’s cabin and finish what we started at the top of the tower, we need to sail out of the Tides first.

“Celeste said we just have to think about where we want to go, and we’ll go there,” I say, forcing myself back into focus. “Out of the two of us, you’re obviously the

expert on the Winter Court's geography. So, where should we go? What should we think about?"

"I don't want to find a where," Riven says, a shadow crossing his eyes. "I want to find a who."

"And who's that?" I ask, curious.

"Ghost," he says simply, and from the longing way he says his familiar's name, I don't think finding him is a want as much as a need. "We should have him by our sides when we return to the Winter Court."

"Then we'll go to Ghost." I nod, squeezing his hand that's not holding his sword.

The ship rocks, and the Tides swirl around us, as if they approve of our decision.

"We need to get this ship sailing," I say, looking up at the cosmic sea.

"Air magic should do it," he says, sheathing his sword. "Especially since we both have it now."

"If it doesn't work, we'll have to bribe Circe's pigs to row us out," I mutter, shooting him a sidelong look.

"They'd unionize before they lifted a hoof," he says, threading his fingers through mine.

The instant we touch, something raw and volatile explodes in my chest. Magic. Desire. The shared heartbeat of two people who have survived too much and aren't done burning.

“Think of Ghost,” Riven murmurs in my ear. “Of what he means to me.”

So, I do.

His ice-blue eyes, and his white fur like snow light. His loyalty carved in silence. The way he stands beside Riven—not because he’s bound to, but because he chooses to.

He’s not just a companion.

He’s proof that Riven is more than cold calculation. That beneath the armor and ice, there’s a heart that loves fiercely and unconditionally.

As I think about Ghost, the ship groans, the sails snapping with a sudden wind. My magic surges outward, and Riven’s frost answers it—two forces blending, weaving into one, spiraling through the currents of the Tides and pulling the ship forward.

When I open my eyes, Riven’s staring at me like I’m a constellation he’s terrified will disappear if he blinks.

“Don’t forget this,” he says, and while his voice is steady, I can feel something deeper beneath it. An unspoken fear. A plea.

A lump forms in my throat. “I won’t forget. I couldn’t, even if I tried.”

“Swear it,” he says, his eyes burning into mine.

“I promise,” I say, but it’s not enough.

Not for us.

So, I reach for the Star Disc, the sapphire in its center pulsing with the rhythm of our

hearts.

“We need something permanent,” I decide, studying it, thinking.

Riven lifts an eyebrow. “More permanent than fusing our souls?”

“I was thinking more like vows we make ourselves,” I say, moving my gaze from the Star Disc to him. “Not ones twisted by politics, or that exist because I shoved my soul into your body to resurrect you. I want this to be ours. Chosen. Claimed. Etched into us by our own hands.”

I pull the Star Disc closer, flipping it so one of its sharp edges catches the starlight. It’s lethal and alive, humming with the energy of something older than fate. It’s so sharp that I wonder...

I meet Riven’s gaze and extend my left hand, palm up.

“Carve it into me.”

His eyes darken. “Are you asking me to mutilate you with a star-forged weapon?”

“I’m asking you to scar me with something sacred. Right here, where you told me you loved me under the water.” I gesture to the spot on my palm. “I want to carry it with me forever, even if we forget everything else.”

Slowly, he breaks into that dangerous smirk of his that precedes chaos. Or confessions. Or both.

“If we’re marking each other,” he says, brushing his thumb across my palm, “then I’m choosing the design. You may have the cosmic weapon, but I’m the superior artist here.”

I laugh, watching as he creates intricate frost patterns up to his elbows, as if reminding me of his creative talent.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” I tell him, since his designs fascinate me more than I think he realizes. “You create beauty with your ice, and I want to carry that beauty with me—always.”

He leans in, his voice a whisper against my skin. “It takes something beautiful to create something beautiful,” he says, and as I realize what he means by it, I narrow my eyes at him.

“You’re complimenting yourself again.”

“Not entirely,” he says with a smile that makes it impossible to not love him. “Because it takes something beautiful to inspire something beautiful, too.”

The second part erases any hint of irritation I had at the first.

“Then give me something as deadly, as intricate, and as breathtakingly impossible as you are,” I say. “Because I want to wear your love like a memory that never fades.”

Air rushes around us, and I’m not sure if it’s from me, from him, or from both of us.

“Hold still,” he warns me. “Because you’re about to have a piece of me burned into you forever.”

“I’m ready,” I tell him, and he takes the Disc from my hand, turning it once, then again, testing its balance.

The sapphire’s glow brightens at his touch.

“A star and an ice crystal intertwined,” he says thoughtfully, “where both elements become indistinguishable from one another. Just like us.”

My heart thrums against my ribs. “It’s perfect.”

“It’s going to hurt,” he warns.

“Everything about us has hurt,” I reply, keeping my palm steady. “The pain has always been worth it.”

“Spoken like a true Winter Princess,” he says, placing one of the Star Disc’s points against my palm, his touch gentle as he steadies my hand.

Then—pain. It cuts clean and hot, like fire laced in starlight.

I inhale sharply, somehow not flinching as he drags the point across my skin, carving with the precision of someone who’s mastered control in everything he does.

“Breathe,” he murmurs, his voice smooth and steady as his hand guides the Disc. “You’re doing great.”

He starts with the star—five sharp lines radiating outward, crisp and symmetrical. Then he carves an ice crystal over and through it, interlacing the points with delicate edges that mimic the frost patterns he creates when he’s trying to contain his emotions.

My water magic responds to my pain, droplets hovering in the air around us like suspended tears. But I don’t let them fall. Instead, I channel the magic into the blood on my palm, making it shimmer with a subtle blue glow.

“Beautiful,” Riven whispers, almost to himself, frost blooming around the cut as he

continues with his design.

It's us.

Water and frost. Summer and winter.

And it's perfect.

When he finishes, he lifts my palm to his lips and kisses the edge of the wound, his eyes never leaving mine.

The intimacy of the gesture steals my breath away.

Then, wordlessly, he extends the Star Disc to me, his left hand outstretched, palm up.

"Your turn, Princess," he says, and my fingers tremble as I take the Disc, now stained with my blood.

"Don't worry," he adds. "I won't flinch."

"I know you won't," I say, positioning the Disc above his left palm. "That's what worries me. You never flinch, even when you should."

His laugh is soft. "Just carve, ."

I press the edge into his skin, carving the same pattern—a star at the center, with an ice crystal woven through it. My strokes aren't as clean as his, but there's a raw beauty to the result.

The air grows colder as frost spreads out below his feet, responding to the pain.

When I finish, I draw in a shaky breath and step back.

Our blood stains the Disc, blending along its edge like proof of what we just gave each other.

Then, stardust begins to fall—thick, silvery, sparkling flakes that land on our open wounds, mingling with our blood and sinking into our carved flesh.

“Now,” Riven says, watching me in a way that’s dark, beautiful, feral, and certain.
“We make our vows.”

SAPPHIRE

Riven takes my marked hand and presses his palm to mine. The sensation is electric, magic crackling between us as our stardust infused blood seals the wounds together.

And then, he begins.

“I, Riven Draevor,” he says, his voice rough with emotion, like it’s coming straight from his soul. “Take you, Hayes, as mine. Not because fate decreed it. Not because politics demanded it.”

His grip on my hand tightens.

“But because I choose you.”

The words slice through me, clean and deep, like the Star Disc itself.

“In a universe that has tried to tear us apart at every turn,” he continues, his voice stronger now, more certain, “I will always choose you.”

Frost forms around our joined hands like a crystalline embrace.

“I vow to stand with you against whatever comes,” he says, his silver eyes locked on mine. “To fight beside you, and to be your equal in all things. To remember this moment and every moment we’ve shared, even if the universe tries to steal them from us.”

His magic spirals up our arms in delicate, intentional patterns, like promises carved into eternity.

“I vow to love you with every broken, frozen piece of me,” he continues, “for as long as I exist in this realm or any other.”

Like a dam breaking, tears well and spill out of my eyes. Dozens of water droplets rise from the deck, until they’re suspended midair, like a constellation of heartache and hope.

Riven exhales, steady but waiting, and gives me a single nod.

My turn.

“I, Hayes,” I begin, and somehow, my voice doesn’t shake. “Take you, Riven Draevor, as mine. Not because I had to, and not because I was bound to you, but because I want to.”

His breath catches.

“Because every time I’ve had a choice, I’ve chosen you,” I say. “Even when I shouldn’t have. Even when it hurt. Even when it nearly destroyed me. And I’ll bring you back from death itself, again and again, because I won’t ever let you leave me.”

My water magic dances between us, swirling alongside his frost in perfect harmony.

“I vow to be your strength when you falter, and your light when darkness closes in. To call you out when you’re being an arrogant ass—“ I’m stopped when Riven laughs, a genuine sound that makes my heart swell, “—and to stand with you, even if the world turns against us and the universe feels like it’s falling apart.”

The glow from our joined palms intensifies, veins of light racing up our arms in a cosmic promise.

“I vow to love you with every star touched fiber of my being,” I finish, “until the end of time.”

The light from our palms spreads, enveloping us in a cocoon of magic so intense it’s almost blinding. I feel everything—not just my emotions, but his, too. The fear he never voices, the ache he hides behind cold logic, and the ice that clings to his heart like a curse he thinks he deserves.

And beneath it all, something devastating and pure.

Love. So much love it almost knocks me down.

The Tides surge and swirl in bursts of pink, purple, and green, and the stardust infused blood between our palms sinks into our skin, sealing into our flesh with a pulse that matches our heartbeats.

When we separate our hands, the wounds have closed, leaving behind identical scars—vows written in pain and sealed by love.

“It worked,” I breathe, staring at the mark in my palm in wonder.

“Did you doubt it would?” Riven asks, examining his own mark. The same symbol glows there, burned into him like I’ve been burned into his soul.

“I’ve learned to doubt everything,” I reply, lifting my gaze to meet his, “except for you.”

He pulls me against him, like he needs to feel my heartbeat against his to believe it’s

real.

“Then trust this,” he says. “Nothing—not gods, not magic, and not even fate—will separate us again.”

“I trust you more than I trust the stars,” I tell him, and the ship soars upward as our combined power pushes the vessel through the Tides.

But then, the wind shifts. Not the soft breeze of natural currents, but a sudden, raw force of magic. A storm awakened. The Cosmic Tides, alive and angry.

I stagger slightly, and a familiar whisper slithers into my mind.

You will return to us.

I tighten my grip on Riven’s hand. “Do you hear that?” I ask, searching his face.

His jaw clenches, his eyes narrowing as he scans the churning Tides. “Yes.”

The ship shudders, and our three pig companions squeal in alarm, huddling together near the center of the deck.

You will come back when the stars command it, the voices insist, growing louder, more insistent.

Frost erupts around Riven’s feet, spreading across the deck in jagged patterns. “We’re not listening to cosmic bedtime stories anymore,” he snaps, his ice sharpening into giant spears.

His rage burns through our connection, but beneath it lies something deeper—fear. Not for himself, but for me. For us. For everything we’ve fought so hard to build.

The Tides surge higher, starry tendrils reaching for the ship, trying to ensnare us.

“They’re not going to let us go easily,” I say, summoning my water magic to counter their pull.

“Then we fight harder,” Riven replies, his voice like steel. “Remember what we just promised each other?”

“We’ll stand together, even when the world turns against us and the universe feels like it’s falling apart,” I reply, stronger now, steadier.

“Let’s show them that we keep our promises,” he says, and we turn to face the encroaching Tides, our magic forming a protective barrier around the ship.

The Star Disc pulses at my hip, resonating with our determination.

Return, the voices of the Tides plead, softer now, almost kind. We can give you peace. A life with no pain.

“Peace without pain isn’t peace,” I say to them. “It’s emptiness.”

Riven’s lips curl into that dangerous smile I love so incredibly much. “And we’ve had enough emptiness to last several lifetimes.”

“We choose the pain,” I continue, my fingers tightening around his. “We choose the struggle.”

“We choose each other,” Riven adds, “with all the blood, chaos, and ruin that comes with it.”

The voices shift, hardening.

This love is doomed, they continue. You've seen the futures.

"We've seen possibilities," I correct them. "Not certainties."

"And we're writing our own ending," Riven declares, his frost magic spiraling outward to meet my water in a dazzling display of power.

The ship accelerates upward, driven not only by our magic, but by something deeper—raw power, bright and dangerous.

You cannot escape fate, the voices hiss, their whispers turning to screams as we near the boundary between worlds.

Riven's laughter is sharp, cold, and beautifully defiant. "Watch us."

His challenge hangs in the air, sparking across my skin like electricity, igniting a storm deep inside my veins. Our magic surges in response—not just water and ice, but air and starlight weaving together, entwining, caressing, and growing brighter with every heartbeat.

"We've already defied gods," I say as the ship ascends, thunder booming around us, echoing the rush of adrenaline under my skin. "We've already broken curses. And we've already survived death."

"And we're only just getting started," Riven adds, his grin feral, his eyes burning into mine with promises far darker, sweeter, and more dangerous than survival.

My pulse races as cosmic currents wrap around the ship, possessive in their hunger.

The deck tilts. The sails groan.

It's too much.

The Tides are too strong.

But then my eyes lock on Riven's, and every doubt burns away beneath the intensity of his gaze. His marked palm finds mine, fingers interlacing and gripping tightly, igniting a firestorm between us. Our souls merge as our magic does—every hidden craving, every denied need, and every unspoken longing poured into this shared surge of power, until it's impossible to tell where mine ends and his begins.

When we've gathered all we can without breaking, Riven lifts his arm, his muscles rippling beneath sweat-slicked skin. He releases a beam of light from his palm, and a raw, primal sound rises from his throat as he pushes his power out into the abyss, a challenge aimed at fate itself.

"Go to hell," he screams into the cosmos, his magic pouring from him unrestrained.

"Or whatever dark void you came from," I say, breathless, extending my own hand as our light burns hotter than ever, swelling to something neither of us can control. "You don't get to keep us. Not this time."

Our power grows and gathers at the ship's base, pushing it upward, as if fueled by everything we are to each other and everything we'll be. The spectral wood creaks and shudders, as if it might break.

But we keep going. We pour everything we have into our connection, magic blazing through our veins as we drive the ship higher, our bodies trembling as we surrender to it completely.

The Tides grip tighter, pulling at us, desperate to drag us down and erase us from existence.

“Dig deeper,” Riven growls, his voice strained, his breaths coming faster as he forces everything he can into our entwined magic.

I instinctively do the same, and just as we’re on the edge of something impossible to control, our light erupts, a shock wave pulsing outward from our joined hands, slamming up into the boundary between worlds with a force that leaves me gasping.

The barrier resists, stretching thin from our combined power, and then?—

Cracks.

The Tides scream their defeat as the wall between realms shatters into glittering fragments that burn around us like stars, leaving us breathless and victorious, standing together at the edge of infinity.

But we can’t bask in it. Because we’re not finished yet.

“Now!” Riven shouts, and we throw our air magic at the spectral sails, releasing a final burst of it to push the ship through the opening we’ve created.

We break through the barrier with so much force that I’m nearly thrown off my feet. But Riven’s arm wraps around my waist, anchoring me to him as the ship surges forward into air. Real air. Not the heavy, timeless atmosphere of the Tides, but crisp, clean air.

Behind us, the barrier collapses, a blinding supernova of cosmic energy that bathes the ship in celestial light as the Tides shatter into stardust.

Riven and I stand there for a long moment, holding hands, trembling with exhaustion and adrenaline. His breathing is ragged, matching mine, and when our eyes meet, I see everything I’m feeling reflected in his gaze.

“We did it,” he finally says, his voice rough with emotion. “We broke through.”

“We told the cosmos to go to hell,” I reply, which earns me a breathless laugh.

“That, too.” His thumb traces the new scar burned into my palm. “Are you okay?”

I take stock of myself—my body humming with star power, my magic stronger than ever, and my soul linked to his.

“I’m more than okay,” I tell him. “I’m alive. Really, truly alive.”

“We both are.” His smile is soft at the edges, vulnerable in a way only I get to see.

I step closer, pressing my free hand against his chest, feeling his heart beating strong and steady beneath my fingers.

“We’ve already died for each other,” I say, my voice fierce and trembling with everything I can’t put into words.

“And now, we live,” he finishes, sealing the promise with a kiss that tastes of starlight, frost, pine, and a love capable of breaking the cosmos.

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ZOEY

I enter the shared sitting area of my suite and find Victoria and Sophia sitting huddled on the couch, their heads bent close together.

They straighten, their eyes darting to me, as if I've interrupted something sacred.

"Morning," I say, keeping my voice even despite the chill that settles in the room.

Victoria's gaze cuts through me, sharp as glass. "Did he drain you completely, or just your dignity?" she says, getting straight to it.

Because as the two of them seemingly figured out, I slept in Aerix's quarters last night. Well, last morning, since the night fae keep a nocturnal schedule.

Sophia doesn't speak. She doesn't even look up.

Her silence hurts even more than Victoria's anger.

"Victoria," I begin, but the older girl cuts me off with a harsh laugh.

"You don't get to say my name like we're friends." Her hands tremble at her sides.

"You know what you did. One night with him, and suddenly you think you're special? You think you're above the rest of us?"

"I never said?—"

“You didn’t have to,” she interrupts. “Everyone knows. They realized when you didn’t return after dinner. We’re all perfectly aware that you spent the night in his quarters. Congratulations, . You’re the prince’s new favorite toy.”

“It’s not like that,” I say, but the excuse sounds hollow, even to my own ears.

Victoria steps closer, her face contorted with pain. “Not like that?” she hisses. “Tell me, what’s it like, then? Did you fall into his bed by accident? Get distracted painting while he seduced you with poetry and wine?” Her eyes narrow. “Or maybe you were too busy whittling your next wooden masterpiece to notice he’s using you, just like the rest of us?”

Sophia finally speaks. “Vicky, maybe we should?—”

“No. She needs to hear this,” Victoria cuts her off, returning her focus to me. “You waltz in here like you own the place—making your wood carvings, painting your pictures, and playing your little games. But you’re just like the rest of us. A plaything. A distraction. A warm body for him to feed from. And you’d do best to not forget it.”

She turns and storms out, the door slamming behind her so hard it rattles the walls, making one of the paintings above the fireplace tilt.

Sophia stands and shifts on her feet. “She’s just upset,” she offers weakly, not saying—or unable to come up with—anything more.

“And you?” I ask, already knowing the answer from her averted gaze.

“I...” She picks at the fraying hem of her sleeve. “You have to see how this looks. Especially after Jake and Matt...”

The implication hangs in the air between us.

Jake and Matt are dead. And now I'm sharing a bed with the prince who everyone thinks killed them.

"I didn't ask for any of this," I say, and Sophia gives me a sad smile.

"None of us did." She hesitates, then adds, "Just be careful, okay? The ones they favor the most are the ones who fall the hardest."

With that warning, she follows Victoria, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the crushing weight of likely isolation from here on out.

As if I wasn't already isolated enough after Jake and Matt were murdered by the Night King for touching something of his.

But that wasn't about me. It was about Aurora, who positioned herself in the perfect place to make it look like it the murders were done for me and not for her.

I have no idea why she did it, but I'm going to find out. And luckily, it's easy to find her. She's where she always is—reading in the courtyard like it's her own private sanctuary, her spine straight, her movements elegant, her stillness calculated.

She looks up as I approach, her perfect features arranged in an expression of mild curiosity.

"Prince Aerix's favorite has graced us with her presence," she says as she stands, but there's no bite to her words. Just a quiet observation.

"I know it was you," I say, skipping pretense.

“Know it was me who did what, exactly?” She tilts her head, like a predator assessing potential prey.

“I know the king killed Jake and Matt to protect you.” The words tumble out faster than I intend. “I figured it out from the handwriting on the notes. It wasn’t Aerix’s.”

“And now you’ve come to... what?” she asks with a smile. “Confront me? Blame me?”

“I’ve come to thank you,” I say, surprising us both.

Her brows lift. “For the deaths of two boys?”

“For helping me.” I lean forward, dropping my voice despite the empty courtyard. “Jake was making me uncomfortable. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. And Matt...” I swallow hard, thinking about what he did to Sapphire. “He was emotionally abusive to my best friend. He broke her spirit. He deserved what he got.”

The words feel strange on my tongue. Like they belong to someone else. Because I’m not supposed to celebrate murder, no matter how much I hate the victim. Yet here I am, doing just that.

And I don’t feel sorry about it.

Aurora studies me for a long, silent moment.

“I didn’t ask the king to kill them,” she finally says. “But he’s... protective. If someone touches what he values, they bleed for it.”

“The king truly values you?” I ask, my throat tightening before I can ask what I’m really wondering.

Does the king love you?

Can Aerix love me?

Do night fae even know what love means?

Aurora's laugh is soft, almost musical. "He values, but he doesn't love," she says, as if the question was written all over my face. "Not like humans do. But he possesses completely, and with his possession comes protection and security. With it, I'm able to live without fear, knowing that if anyone dares to touch me, they'll pay the price." She pauses for a moment, sizing me up. "That's what you want, too, isn't it? What you crave?"

I nod, fascinated despite myself.

"It's what I have with Aerix," I finally say. "When we're alone, he treats me like he cares about me."

Like he loves me.

"You're special, ." Aurora reaches out, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I saw it the moment you arrived here. Most humans cower or break soon afterward, but you adapted. It's a gift your prince clearly recognizes."

Something in her words feels like permission. Like validation for the choices I've been making. Like an invitation to confide in her.

"The others hate me now," I say, thinking of Victoria's barely contained rage and Sophia's withdrawn disappointment. "It's like I crossed a line I didn't know existed."

"They don't hate you. They fear what you represent." Her smile turns knowing.

“Separate can be lonely at first, but I think you’ll find it’s worth the price.”

I think about Aerix—his touch, his hungry kisses, and the way he looks at me like I’m the only thing worth seeing. About the safety I feel in his arms, despite knowing what he is and what he’s capable of.

Because here, in this strange, beautiful prison, I’ve found a kind of agency I never had in the human world.

My life at home was full of directionless wandering. The string of abandoned hobbies, and the desperate search for something that felt meaningful.

Here, every moment feels consequential. Like it means something.

Especially my moments with Aerix.

“I want what you have with the king,” I admit, surprising myself with my honesty. “I want to matter here. To be someone here.”

“Then take it.” Aurora’s smile is radiant with approval. “The prince has already shown his hand. He wants you. Use that. Become the one thing he can’t lose.”

“How?”

“Give him something no one else can.” Her big eyes gleam with excitement. “Your humanity. Your warmth. Your willingness to see him as more than just a monster.”

I think of Aerix’s wings unfurling around me, of the vulnerability in his eyes when I touched the base of them. Of the story he told me about Kallista, and the pain that lingers in his voice when he speaks of betrayal.

“I already know he’s not a monster,” I whisper, my heart racing. “He never was.”

“Then you’re already halfway there.” She picks up her book from the table, regal and composed. “The rest is just commitment to the path you’ve chosen.”

As she leaves, I know she’s right. My feelings for Aerix aren’t just a game anymore. I don’t know if they ever were a game.

Because I want him. I want all of this.

And I’ll take everything he has to give me. Because when I’m done, Aerix won’t just want me. He’ll need me, like I need him.

And I’ll never be powerless ever again.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:43 am

ZOEY

Aerix requests me for dinner the next day, like he always does.

By now, the ritual is as familiar as it is intimate. The slow approach. The tilt of his head. The touch that comes before the bite.

When he finishes up, the pain is already fading into a dull, pleasant throb that sends waves of warmth through my body.

“Delicious, as always,” he murmurs against my skin, his breath cold where my blood pulses hot.

His wings unfurl behind him, stretching to their full span before folding against his back. They’re breathtaking—midnight black and impossibly vast, feathers gleaming like obsidian, each one catching what little light exists in the room and swallowing it whole.

“Happy to be of service.” I mean it to sound teasing, but my voice comes out breathless.

His eyes darken, and his hands slide from my shoulders to my waist, pulling me closer with that effortless strength that makes my stomach flip.

“Your service,” he murmurs, low and dangerous, “goes far beyond feeding me.”

And then, his mouth is on mine, and I taste the metallic tang of my own blood

mingled with the wintery pine essence that's uniquely Aerix.

His kisses are always like this—possessive, demanding, and consuming. Like he's trying to devour me piece by piece until I forget who I was before he took me. And now, my fingers fumble with the buttons of his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against mine.

One by one, the layers fall.

His shirt. My dress.

His hands go to remove my chemise.

“Wait,” I breathe, the word escaping before I realize I've said it.

He freezes, and the temperature drops several degrees.

But he says nothing. He's just watching me, waiting, like one wrong word will make him snap.

“Aerix,” I say softly, placing my palm against his chest. “I've been thinking.”

His eyes narrow, the only indication that he's heard me.

“About everything you've done for me,” I continue, my voice steadier now. “About how you saved my life. Over and over again.”

He inhales slowly, enough to let me know he's listening.

“Continue.” His voice is carefully controlled, but there's an undertone of curiosity behind it.

“It started at the waterfall.” I straighten and hold his hypnotizing midnight gaze, more confident now, empowered for what’s coming next. “If you hadn’t pulled me out, I would have drowned.”

His wings flex once, then settle, as if my words are relaxing him.

“You would have,” he agrees.

“And then there were those water zombies. If you’d left me there, I would have been slaughtered,” I say, and the corner of his mouth twitches.

“Your odds,” he says, “were nonexistent.”

He says it like a fact. Not cruel—just true.

“The winter woods,” I continue, my fingers tracing the contours of his chest. His skin is cold beneath my touch, but heat rises in me like a tide pulling me under. “You couldn’t just leave me in the middle of nowhere. I would have frozen, or been hunted down, or something worse.”

He still hasn’t moved, but his eyes are fixed on me with a hunger that has nothing to do with blood. It’s something sharper—a predatory satisfaction that should terrify me, but instead sends a thrill through me.

“And bringing me to the Night Court,” I keep going. “You didn’t have to do that, either. But you did. You gave me safety, even if it wasn’t gentle.”

“I did,” he murmurs, and his voice drops—low, rich, and laced with something that scrapes deliciously down my spine.

“And then, of course, there was the king.” I step closer, so our bodies are flush

against each other. “You refused to let him claim me. You took me before he could.”

His hand comes up to cup my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip. “I’d fight him for you a thousand times if I had to,” he says. “And I wouldn’t lose. Not even once.”

My breath catches, wanting to lean in and give everything to him right there, but I keep going.

“Then there was Princess Cierra,” I say, thinking of the way he threatened his own sister when she came after me. “You stopped her from snapping my neck like it was nothing.”

His wings unfurl slightly, creating a partial cocoon around us.

“You’ve survived this realm because of me,” he agrees. “Your so-called friends—Sapphire and Riven—kept you locked in a frozen tower. A place that would have killed you.”

His fingers tangle in my hair, slowly and gently, like he’s winding it around his hand so I can’t escape.

“They made you walk across an icy bridge,” he continues, his jaw tensing. “One wrong step, and you would have fallen to your death.”

Technically, Riven is the one who made Sapphire and me walk across that bridge, but now isn’t the time for technicalities. Especially since even though I acted confident while walking across that bridge, I was terrified. Anyone who has a remote desire to stay alive would have been terrified.

I was only able to hide it because I needed to be strong for Sapphire.

“They sent you through a deadly forest,” he continues, frost crawling up to his elbows as anger courses through him. “Where you were attacked and left with fatal wounds. They made you jump over ravines. They let you fall down a waterfall.” His voice grows harder with each example, and he places his hands on my shoulders, his fingers pressing against my skin. “I’m keeping you safe, . I’m the only person who cares about you and prioritizes you in this realm.”

I swallow down a lump in my throat, suddenly seeing it all with perfect clarity. “To them, I was a burden,” I say slowly, and his eyes flare with triumph.

“And to me?” he asks, confirming what deep down, I likely already knew.

“To you,” I say, taking a deep breath, grounding myself in the moment, “I’m everything.”

“Yes,” he breathes, and there’s so much emotion in that single syllable that it makes me dizzy. “You are everything.”

I should stop there.

But I don’t. I can’t.

“I love you.”

The words tumble from my lips before I can stop them—before I even realize I’m saying them.

His hands freeze on my skin, his wings lock in place, and his eyes—those midnight eyes that have haunted my dreams since the moment he took me—widen with something that looks like shock.

My heart stops, and I curse internally.

That was too fast. Too soon. Too much.

But then, his jaw tremors. His breathing shifts. He holds himself still—too still—like if he moves, he'll shatter.

“What did you say?” he asks, and it's barely a whisper, like he's choking on the effort it takes not to lose control.

I swallow hard, but I don't look away. He might be dangerous, and I might be unraveling, but I've never felt more certain.

“I love you,” I repeat, bracing myself for anything. Harsh words, fangs pricking my skin, a command that I leave his quarters immediately and never come back.

Instead, his hands rise and cup my face, his thumbs brushing my cheekbones, like I might vanish if he blinks.

“Say it again,” he demands.

Not asks. Demands.

His eyes search mine, like he's trying to memorize the way I say it. Like he's trying to believe it's real.

“I love you,” I repeat, reaching up to trace the sharp line of his jaw, admiring his otherworldly, perfect features.

He stills, and his wings shudder. That same shudder I felt the first time I touched the base of them—the place where even he can't hide his vulnerability.

“Again,” he breathes, and it sounds like a prayer.

“I love you, Aerix Nightborne,” I say, dizzy with the truth of it.

His forehead presses against mine, and then his lips are claiming mine with devastating intensity, like he’s falling apart and I’m the only thing keeping him whole.

“I have loved you,” he says, low and strained, “since the night in the bunker.”

My heart stutters, and I remember that first night—how terrified I was, desperate to maintain some illusion of control.

“When you made that ridiculous pillow barrier,” he continues, a ghost of a smile touching his lips, “and demanded I stay on my side.”

His wings curl forward again, shutting out the rest of the world until there’s only him and me and this confession hanging in the air between us.

“I knew from the moment I saw you that you’d be mine.” His fingers thread through my hair, pulling me close, taking my breath away. “Not just my captive. Not just my pet. But mine in every way that matters.”

I should be frightened by this admission—that he wanted me and planned for me from the beginning.

Instead, I feel freed by it.

“Go to the bed,” he commands, and my breath catches as he strolls to his dresser with predatory grace, opens a drawer, and pulls something out.

A dagger.

The one I tried to kill him with the first night in the bunker.

ZOEY

Aerix twirls the dagger between his fingers, the blade catching the light in dangerous flashes.

But his eyes... they never leave mine. They strip away every defense and pin me bare.

“Do you know why I kept this?” he asks, moving toward me with measured steps.

I shake my head, unable to look away from the hypnotic movement of the blade.

“Go to the bed and I’ll tell you,” he says, and I’m there in a heartbeat, pulling my legs to my chest as if they can act as barrier between me and the weapon in his hand.

“I kept this because it was yours,” he says simply, and I relax and make myself more comfortable, angry at myself for ever doubting him. “Because your hands touched it. Because you raised it against me.” A smile curves his lips, dark and amused. “And I couldn’t let something so precious disappear.”

He sits on the edge of the bed, still turning the dagger in his hands, watching it with startling intensity.

“I loved your fire from the beginning,” he says, almost to himself. “That wild, reckless defiance. It made me want you in ways I didn’t understand. It made me hungry for you.”

I almost reach for him, but I stop myself, not wanting to break this moment.

“And yet... you didn’t feed from me that night,” I say instead, my breaths coming faster, my hand drifting to the place on my neck that he enjoys the most.

“No. But I wanted to,” he says, his eyes darkening with need as they roam over my body. “And now...” He pauses, like whatever he’s going to say next is costing him. “I want to sign my name on you. Like I did when I transformed your painting. Except this time, it won’t be brushstrokes. It will be a scar. So I’ll always know you’re mine.”

He watches me carefully, as if the dagger will go into my heart if I reject what he’s offering. Or maybe he’ll dig it into his. I have no idea with him anymore, and somehow, I love that more than anything.

“Yes,” I say, and my voice doesn’t shake. “Do it.”

His eyes and wings flare with a mixture of surprise, appreciation, and hunger. And then, he’s pressing me back onto the bed and positioning me how he wants me, tracing a spot just below my hip bone with the tip of the dagger.

“Here. Where only I’ll see it,” he decides, looking back to me, watching and waiting.

“Okay,” I say, but from the way he nods, I have a distinct feeling that it wasn’t up for debate.

“This will hurt,” he warns, his body going still again as he waits for my response.

“I want it to.”

The words come out of me in a second, and his breath catches, sharp and ragged as he

lowers the dagger.

The first touch of the blade is fire—a sharp, white-hot pain that makes me gasp. But I don't pull away. Instead, I watch, transfixed, as Aerix carves into my flesh with surprisingly tender precision.

He moves with the focus of an artist, the blade an extension of his hand.

Aerix Nightborne.

Letter by letter. Stroke by stroke. Deep enough to scar.

“You're so beautiful like this,” he murmurs, the air growing cold with his rising desire. “Marked. Mine.”

He finishes the final stroke and stares at me, his chest rising and falling unevenly, his magic crackling with something cold and dangerous.

Slowly, deliberately, he sets the dagger aside and drags his fingers through the blood that wells up from my skin. He stares at it for a moment, as if considering it, and then... he starts to paint me with it.

He smears it across my stomach, up between my breasts, and along my thighs, the strokes intentional and possessive.

“My masterpiece,” he whispers, his voice rough and shaking, like this moment is splitting him open. “You don't even know what you do to me.”

He focuses on my hip again, pressing his mouth to his name bleeding on my skin, kissing it like he's worshipping the scar he made. His tongue traces each carefully carved line, tasting me, making me shudder with a desire so fierce it feels like it

might consume me whole.

“You’re mine,” he growls against my skin, the words sinking deep into my bones. “And nothing will ever take you from me.”

Then, slowly, he picks up the dagger again and places it into my hand, his fingers closing around mine.

“Keep it,” he says, and I blink, staring at him, overwhelmed and breathless.

“Why?”

“So you’ll always be protected,” he says quietly, but there’s something more beneath his words—a promise, a threat, or a vow. Probably all three. “This isn’t just a weapon. It’s trust. It’s power. It’s a reminder that if anyone ever tries to hurt you...” His lips brush my cheek, his breath icy and delicious. “If anyone ever tries to hurt you, I want you to kill them. Slowly. Painfully. In a way that makes them beg for an end they don’t deserve.”

I shiver at his words, and he cups my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Do you understand?” he asks, hard and demanding.

“I understand.” I take a deep breath, centering myself. “If anyone tries to hurt me, I’ll make them bleed. And I’ll think of you while I do it.”

He exhales sharply, trembling with restraint. “I’ll dream of you covered in their blood,” he whispers, his voice thick with hunger. “And I’ll worship you for it.”

I smile slowly, dark and deliberate, feeding off the ache in his voice. “Then I’ll give you dreams worth worshipping,” I say, and he groans—low, guttural, and inhuman.

“You are a dream worth worshipping. And you look so beautiful painted in your own blood,” he says, his body shuddering with need. “And knowing it’s because of me... knowing you let me do this to you...”

His magic lashes out in cold bursts, the temperature in the room dropping as though he’s fighting to keep himself contained.

“Tell me again,” he demands, moving over me, trapping me. “Tell me what you feel for me.”

“I love you,” I say without hesitation, the words flowing easily now that I’ve set them free. “And I’ll keep saying it until you believe it.”

His eyes flare—black flame and endless hunger, raw and all-consuming. It’s not just desire in his gaze. It’s ownership. It’s obsession. It’s a predator who’s stopped pretending he wants to be gentle.

I feel it in my bones. In my blood. In the parts of me that already belong to him.

So, I reach out and brush my fingers over the base of his wings—that sensitive place where feather meets flesh, where he’s most vulnerable.

The sound that tears from his throat is raw and primal, and he shakes—not with weakness, but with a loss of restraint. Every part of him is strung tight with it, like he’s moments from snapping.

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me,” he growls. “You have no idea how close I am to losing control.”

“Then lose it,” I whisper, my fingers trailing down his spine and back up, tempting him further. “I want to see what happens when you stop pretending you can’t break.”

And then he's on me, slamming me back into the mattress with brutal need, his body covering mine like a predator caging its prey.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me," he says, his gaze locked on mine, like he's making sure I fully understand how much he means every word of it. "Every breath you take belongs to me. Every heartbeat is—and will always be—mine. And I'm going to enjoy every second of watching you fall apart with my name bleeding from your skin."

Then, he bites.

Hard.

His fangs sink into my neck, and I cry out—not in pain, but in pure, unfiltered pleasure. It floods me, dizzying and electric. My fingers tangle in his hair, nails scraping his scalp as I pull him closer, begging for more.

"I already belong to you," I tell him, arching into his touch, challenging him. "Now tear me apart."

His eyes darken further—black as the void, filled with hunger, devotion, and something feral that should terrify me.

"You're staying in these chambers until you forget the outside world exists," he vows. "Now, tell me again."

"I love you," I promise, gazing up into those midnight eyes that own my soul. "I love you, Aerix Nightborne, until the end of time. Because I'm yours. I'll always be yours."

Then he's on me, skin to skin, his body pressing me deep into the mattress. His hands

map every inch of me, claiming, marking, and worshipping. Frost blooms across the headboard, the sheets, and my skin.

I surrender to the sensation, to the intoxicating feeling of being wanted by someone so otherworldly and perfect.

“You were made for me,” he growls, his wings folding tighter around us, sealing us in. “Every part of you—your body, your fire, and your soul. All of it belongs to me.”

“I’m yours,” I promise him, wrapping my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. “Only yours.”

“Good. Because I’m never letting you go,” he says, and as we move together in the candlelight, shadows dancing across our skin, I realize that this is what I’ve been searching for all along.

Not freedom. Not escape.

But surrender.

Complete, willing, ecstatic surrender.

ZOEY

I head back to the human wing at sunset, feeling the sting where Aerix carved his name into my hip with every step.

The pain is exquisite. It's a reminder of what happened between us, and I love it so much I could drown in the dizzying high that makes the world around me feel inconsequential.

Because all that matters now is him.

I enter the suite and find Victoria sitting on the edge of the couch. Sophia stands by the window, her eyes widening as I enter.

"Miss me?" I ask them, since I have to say something.

Victoria sneers.

"You're not his equal, ," she says without bothering to greet me. "You're his pet. Just like we are."

The word should sting, but it doesn't.

Instead, I just tilt my head, amused by her outburst. Because I'm so far beyond caring what Victoria thinks of me now.

Still, she keeps going.

“The moment he gets bored,” she says, standing up and walking toward me, “you’ll be joining the rest of us in the barns.”

I smile.

Not a nervous smile. Not an apologetic one. I smile like Victoria is pathetic for trying to touch me with her words.

“You don’t know anything about him. About us.” I narrow my eyes at her, daring her to come closer.

“There is no ‘us.’” Victoria’s face flushes darker. “There’s you—his current obsession—and then there’s reality. Wake up, . He’s using you. Step back and see him for who he really is.”

I arch an eyebrow, biting back a smirk.

“You can hate me all you want, Victoria,” I tell her. “But you only know what he lets you see. I know the parts he hides from everyone else. And he’s never going to want you the way he wants me. He never has, and he never will.”

She tries to grab my arm, but I snatch her wrist mid-air and squeeze, hard enough to make her gasp.

Her eyes go wide.

“Don’t touch me,” I say simply, my grip unwavering. “Ever.”

My other hand drifts to my hip, where my dagger is hidden beneath my dress, one breath away from unsheathing it.

Because Victoria has no concept of the connection between me and Aerix. Of the love between us. She has no idea that he's let me touch him where no human ever has before.

"You think he loves you, don't you?" She shakes her head, like she thinks I'm pathetic. "You actually believe he cares."

"He does care," I say, and the certainty in my voice seems to unnerve her even more.

"Night fae don't love." She laughs as she repeats what Aurora told me in the garden. "They possess. They consume. They destroy. But they certainly don't love. Their kind isn't capable of it."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

My breaths quicken, and if I keep touching her for one more second, I swear I'm going to stab her.

So, I release her, and she stumbles back, rubbing her wrist.

Sophia rushes toward Victoria, checks her wrist to make sure she's okay, then turns to me.

"We don't want to hurt you, ," she finally says, quiet and desperate. "We just don't want to be sent to the barns."

"I wouldn't let that happen to either of you," I say, although it's mostly directed at Sophia—not Victoria.

Victoria's face contorts with renewed fury.

“You wouldn’t let it happen?” she hisses. “Do you hear yourself? Do you think you control him now? That you can make decisions about our fates?”

I blink, taken aback. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” she demands.

“I meant that I can talk to him,” I say, impressing myself with how calm I sound. “I can make sure you’re both protected.”

Victoria shoots me a glare that could burn me to ashes if she had any magic.

“We don’t want your protection,” she says, stepping in front of Sophia, as if trying to keep the younger girl safe. “We don’t want your pity, your favors, or whatever you think you can bestow upon us from your exalted position as the prince’s favorite plaything.”

I meet her glare straight on, amused that she thinks she can actually intimidate me.

“In case you missed it, Jake and Matt were killed because Aerix didn’t like how they were touching me,” I say, since even though Aerix didn’t kill them, no one here knows it. And in the Night Court, perception is everything. “If that doesn’t show you how much he cares about me, then I don’t know what will.”

Victoria balls her hands into fists so tight that I’m surprised she isn’t drawing blood.

“And what happens when he grows tired of you?” she asks, her voice suddenly quiet.

The question stings, but I refuse to show it.

Because Aerix loves me. He carved his name into my skin. He returned my dagger.

He whispered promises against my lips that I believe with every fiber of my being.

And he's fae. Which means he can't lie—not about any of it.

"That won't happen," I say firmly.

Victoria's smile is cold and knowing.

"We'll see," she says, and she turns to leave, pausing at the door to her bedroom. "Just remember that no matter how special you think you are—no matter what promises he made—you're still human. And in this court, that's all that ever matters."

With those final words, she disappears into her room, the door closing firmly behind her.

Sophia lingers, her chin quivering.

"She's just scared," she says after a moment. "We all are."

"I know," I reply softly. "But she doesn't have to be. Not of me."

"It's not you she's afraid of," Sophia says, although her eyes say otherwise. "It's what your relationship with Aerix means for the rest of us. The uncertainty. The possibility that he'll send us to the barns if he decides he never wants us again, because all he wants is you."

I nod, taking in her words, understanding where they're coming from.

"I meant what I said," I assure her. "And I'll protect you both. I promise."

After all, Aerix can't feed only on me without eventually killing me, like the queen

almost did to Matt. He needs Sophia and Victoria. And I don't particularly want him taking other pets. Because at least with Sophia and Victoria, I know what I'm dealing with. I know how to keep them in line. I know how to keep them controlled.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she says sadly, and then she makes her way out of the suite, leaving me alone in the common area.

I sink onto the couch and run my fingers over the place on my dress where Aerix's name is engraved underneath it, on my skin.

Victoria's wrong.

Because I love Aerix. And he loves me.

The two of us belong to each other.

And nothing in this world will ever take me away from him.

SAPPHIRE

The spectral ship glides across the ocean, its sails blowing in the wind, not needing my and Riven's magic to direct it. Because the ship knows. It senses our intertwined fates, as if it can feel the echo of every promise we've broken and remade.

It knows we're looking for Ghost, and hopefully, it will bring us to him.

Riven's been on edge for the entire trip, closed off to me again. He stands near the rail with his shoulders locked, his gaze fixed on the horizon, as if daring anything—man or monster—to stop us from finding Ghost.

But now, I'm not hurt by it. I don't worry that he's retreating inside himself because he doesn't care about me, or because he was using me to escape the Tides. Because my soul beats in time with his. I can feel the love projecting from him, even though he's lost in his worries about his snow leopard familiar.

So, I move to him, grab his hand, and squeeze it.

His skin is cold, but the frost melts slightly at my touch. And when his stormy eyes meet mine, some of the hardness melts away.

"He's going to be okay," I say softly.

He exhales, his thumb brushing my knuckles. "He has to be. Because Ghost isn't just my familiar. He's the part of me that knows how to survive, no matter how dark things get," he says, and when the final word escapes his lips, the ship slows, coming

to a stop.

There's... nothing.

No land in sight. No cosmic whirlpool sucking us into the ocean's depths. No full moon opening to let a waterfall rush out of the sky. There's only dark ocean water, as far as the eye can see.

Then, the sea shudders and parts, a massive building rising from its depths.

Riven's arm moves around my shoulders as we gaze out at spires of ice shimmering under the stars, sharp yet delicate, wrapped in emerald vines that glow in the moonlight. Waterfalls pour from terraces high above, freezing mid-fall into sculptures that defy nature—flowing and frozen, beautiful and dangerous.

It's not cold or harsh like the Winter Court. It's not wild and overgrown like the Summer Court. It's a perfect balance of ice and bloom, frost and sun.

"It's beautiful," I say, staring up at it in awe.

Riven's arm tightens around me, frost rippling across the ship's deck.

"The Lost Fae Temple. I thought this place was only a myth," he says, studying it as he continues to explain. "The legend is that this temple was built long ago, before the courts divided. When Winter and Summer were one."

I tear my gaze from the temple long enough to glance at him.

He looks... awestruck.

"You've never seen it?" I ask.

He shakes his head. “No one has. It was sealed away. Lost. Until now.”

We’re both silent for a few minutes as the ship glides forward, heading for the island where the temple hums with a deep, ancient magic that presses into my skin and curls around my bones.

“Do you feel that?” I ask Riven.

He swallows hard, his eyes meeting mine in quiet intensity. “Yes.”

The ship slows as it nears the dock, stopping when it reaches it, the gangplank lowering on its own.

“Ready?” Riven asks, reaching for the hilt of his sword.

I draw my dagger, its weight steadying my racing heart. “Ready.”

Side by side, we step onto the path leading up to the temple, magic thickening with every heartbeat. Frost blooms under Riven’s steps, while flowers unfurl beneath mine, as if the temple is recognizing and greeting us individually.

As I walk, my clothes dissolve into silver mist, weaving themselves into a gown that’s not fabric, but starlight. s gleam along the bodice and cascade down the front in delicate chains, and the corset hugs my waist, the skirt flowing in layers that sparkle like starlight.

And I’m not the only one experiencing a cosmic makeover.

Because Riven, who I’ve seen more than once in princely clothing, is now beyond regal. He’s otherworldly —strikingly fierce, achingly beautiful, and utterly mesmerizing.

A fitted dark jacket wraps around his frame, embroidered with silver threads in patterns that accentuate every powerful line of his body. The collar dips to reveal the sculpted lines of his chest, his skin kissed by frost. And around his neck rests a silver chain inset with sapphires to match my gown—two pieces of the same design, as if the temple crafted them just for us.

“How is this even real?” I sheathe my dagger, my fingers brushing the sparkling fabric of my gown.

“How are you even real?” he counters, earning a smile from me as he sheathes his sword and reaches for my hand, threading his fingers through mine.

“Maybe I’m not,” I tease, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe this is all a beautiful dream, and we’ll wake up any moment.”

Tension radiates between us in waves, and despite the temple before us, Riven is all I can see, feel, or care about.

“If this is just a dream,” he says, slowly and carefully, “then it’s the cruelest, most beautiful one I’ve ever had.”

“Then trust this,” I say, pressing our carved palms together, aligning the marks etched into our skin. “Because dreams fade, but we made sure this will last.”

We linger quietly, savoring the warmth of our joined hands, feeling the promise we’ve carved into our skin. But eventually, Riven breaks the silence with gentle amusement.

“If we stand here staring into each other’s eyes for much longer,” he murmurs affectionately, “the temple might start feeling ignored.”

“We wouldn’t want to offend an ancient temple,” I reply, holding back a smile. “Especially one generous enough to dress us like royalty.”

“Generous?” He arches a brow. “It’s only doing its duty. Because you are royalty, Princess. Temples, magic gowns—all of it.”

“Right. Royalty,” I say, lightly teasing. “Give me another few years—maybe I’ll finally feel like I deserve the title.”

“You deserve every beautiful, impossible thing the universe can dream up,” he says fiercely, stepping closer. “And I’ll fight until my last breath to give it to you.”

My heart races, and it takes me a few seconds to gather myself together enough to speak.

“The only thing I need is you,” I tell him, magic pulsing between our palms, a heartbeat connecting our souls. “But right now, we need to find Ghost. And it seems like the temple’s the key to doing that. So, as much as I’d love to stay out here with you and forget the rest of the world exists, we’d better get moving.”

He sighs dramatically, his eyes sparkling with exaggerated resignation. “Fine, you win,” he says. “Let the records show that I graciously admitted defeat—this one time.”

Laughing softly, I shake my head and lead him toward the massive double doors, where vines and ice form an archway so tall it seems to touch the stars.

“Should we knock?” I ask when we reach it, only half-joking, my muscles tense and ready.

Hopefully this place turns out friendlier than the one in Legends of the Hidden

Temple. I'm really not in the mood for guards jumping out at me in creepy masks.

The temple answers before Riven can, the doors slowly swinging open. It leads to a grand hallway lined with towering statues—fae made of ice and stone, each one with arms outstretched, palms glowing with golden light.

“Look at this place.” I turn in a slow circle to take it in, my gown moving with me as I do. “It’s incredible.”

Riven pauses beside me, his eyes narrowed in wonder and confusion, brushing his fingers against the intricate carvings on the wall.

“Did you know that according to legend, fae magic wasn’t always divided by seasons?” he asks, his voice soothing despite his caution. “Once, it existed as one unified force.”

“I’ve been a bit preoccupied with staying alive since getting here to study the history of the mystical realm,” I tell him with a teasing smile. “But if the courts weren’t always separated, then what changed?”

He hesitates, shadows flickering behind his eyes.

“War. Betrayal. The usual story of paradise lost. All because of a forbidden love.” He glances at me, vulnerability flashing beneath his usually guarded expression. “Between the daughter of Winter and the son of Summer.”

Energy hums between us.

But before I can ask more, the hall opens into a vast chamber with soaring columns and a domed ceiling that reflects the night sky in perfect detail. More passages branch off in every direction, leading deeper into the temple.

“Which way do we go?” I wonder aloud, glancing around at the overwhelming beauty of it all.

A trail of light illuminates the floor ahead of us, guiding us toward the largest passageway.

“I guess that answers that,” Riven says wryly.

“But aren’t the most beautiful things often the most dangerous?” I say, recalling what he told me while we approached Circe’s Island, where the cloud-shrouded island—the one Circe later told us held Blaze Academy—also waited.

“We asked the universe to lead us to Ghost.” His eyes turn serious again. “We need to trust that it knows what it’s doing.”

And so, we follow the light, passing through a series of increasingly grand chambers, each more beautiful than the last.

Finally, after what feels like hours, we reach a set of doors made of frost and wood.

“I can feel him,” Riven says softly. “Ghost is in there.”

I squeeze his hand, anticipation vibrating through our bond.

“Then let’s not keep him waiting,” I say, and the doors swing open at our approach, revealing a circular chamber with a high, domed ceiling that mirrors the cosmos above.

At the center of the chamber stands an ancient stone altar, covered in a layer of ice. And upon it...

“Ghost.” Riven exhales in relief, dropping my hand and rushing forward, his urgency echoing through our bond and piercing my heart.

SAPPHIRE

Ghost lies motionless on the altar, his white fur luminous against the dark stone.

But he's not alone. Beside him lies a cheetah, golden and graceful even in stillness, its body covered with delicate ivy that pulses with a gentle green light.

I follow Riven cautiously, my eyes scanning the chamber for possible threats. And I'm glad I'm aware of our surroundings, since Riven is only focused on one thing.

"Ghost," he says again, reaching the altar and placing a trembling hand on the snow leopard's head. "What happened to you?"

Ghost doesn't stir. His chest rises and falls in shallow breaths, but otherwise, he might as well be carved from stone.

"He's sleeping," I say, drawing closer to examine both animals. "They both are."

"But why?" Riven's voice is tight with frustration and worry. "And the cheetah... they're familiars of the Summer Court. Of summer fae."

Something in what he says resonates with me, and I reach for the cheetah, my fingers hovering over its golden fur. The ivy covering its body hums at my presence, responding to my summer magic, and I'm drawn to it in a way that's impossible to explain.

But before I can touch the cheetah, the air around the altar shimmers, and words form

on the stone beneath the sleeping animals.

Awaken them with a love that cannot break.

Riven's expression darkens with impatience. "I don't have time for riddles," he says, running his fingers through his perfectly tousled hair. "Tell us how to save Ghost."

The words shimmer and change.

Not just any love. A love that defies endings. A love that can't be shattered.

"A love like ours," I say, understanding blooming inside me.

As if in response, light spills across the floor and comes together in the shape of a man with golden wings and eyes that hold the wisdom of eons.

"Princess Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor of the Summer Court, Winter Court, New York Vampire Clan, and the star touched warrior of Celeste," he says my full, utterly pretentious name and titles. "And Prince Riven Draevor of the Winter Court and Summer Court. I've been waiting for both of you."

Riven steps protectively in front of me, frost forming a shield between us and this ethereal man who looks startlingly familiar. "Who are you?" he asks, keeping it simple.

"I am Anteros," the man says, inclining his head. "God of requited love. Brother of Eros, although he views love as a weapon, whereas I see it for what it is: a gift to be honored."

Water droplets form around me, so defined that they're pointed, and I take an angry step toward the god.

He—to his credit—steps back.

“Your brother shot me with a lead arrow,” I say, the memory of that hatred still fresh, even though it—thankfully—hasn’t come back since we emerged from the Cosmic Tides. “He made me hate the man I love.”

Riven steps next to me, his ice joining my water. “I was the one who deserved to be punished,” he says, his gaze locked on Anteros’s. “Not her.”

Anteros raises an eyebrow. “Were you not punished, Winter Prince?” he asks. “By her rage? Her hatred?”

“That wasn’t punishment. That was torture,” Riven replies. “I took it because I deserved it. But watching her hate me—watching her burn because of something your brother did—that wasn’t justice. That was cruelty.”

Shards of ice explode out of the floor near the altar, and I fear Riven’s about to attack this god on the spot.

Even though I hate what Eros did to us—and am prepared for anything from Anteros—attacking this god for his brother’s actions doesn’t strike me as the best idea. I’ve already incurred the wrath of one god too many in my lifetime.

But I’m still ready to reach for my dagger at a moment’s notice.

Finally, Riven exhales shakily, his eyes meeting mine.

“Eros took the shot, but that arrow was tipped with my mistakes,” he says, the words breaking my heart. “And I’ll never stop trying to make up for them.”

“You died for me,” I say, and I’ll repeat it a thousand times if it means he’ll

understand how much his sacrifice—regardless of how reckless it was—meant to me. “You deserve all the love in the world. And I’m never going to stop giving it to you. Ever.”

Riven’s breathing slows, and it’s like we’re the only two people in the universe.

But then Anteros moves toward us, his steps leaving trails of golden light in his wake, drawing our attention back to him.

“Few survive my brother’s arrow with their love intact,” he says, watching me in a way that almost looks like he’s impressed. “Fewer still overcome a dryad’s bargain. You’ve done both.” He gestures to the frost and water swirling between us, which must have formed without me realizing it. “Your bond has transcended the efforts of those set on destroying it. So now, I’m going to reward you for that... if you play my game.”

Ice crackles beneath Riven’s feet.

“What kind of game?” he asks. “And what does this have to do with Ghost? And the cheetah beside him?”

“The cheetah’s name is Nebula,” Anteros says, moving to stand beside the altar. “She’s Ghost’s soul twin. Born of Summer as he was of Winter.”

I step closer, fascination overriding caution. “Soul twin?”

“Two halves of one whole,” the god explains. “The celestial goddesses—moon, sun, stars, and storm—sent both animals here, where they entered their slumber.”

“What kind of slumber?” I ask, since it sounds exceptionally foreboding.

“Not a harmful one.” Anteros shrugs it off. “Think of it like the eternal sleep placed on Endymion so he could be with Selene forever. Love keeps Endymion in the world of dreams with Selene... and your love can bring Ghost and Nebula back to this world with you.”

As he speaks, my eyes are unable to leave the cheetah. Because she’s beautiful. There’s something ancient and powerful about her—regal and wild—and I feel the weight of her importance deep in my chest.

Riven moves toward Ghost and places his hand upon the snow leopard’s head with an ache so intense I can feel it. And when he refocuses on Anteros, his eyes narrow with determination, his hand going from Ghost’s head to the hilt of his sword.

“Name your game,” he says to the god. “The goal, the rules, and the prize.”

Anteros smiles, clearly liking what he’s hearing.

“The trial is not one of strength or magic,” he says. “You’ve proven yourselves more than capable of surviving gods and curses alike. No—this trial is about truth.”

The god lifts his hands, water and ice spiraling between us and the altar as a pool begins to form. It solidifies into a perfect mirror, its surface smooth as glass, yet shifting constantly—sometimes showing my reflection, and sometimes Riven’s.

Riven stiffens beside me, and Anteros lowers his arms, his gaze steady.

“This is the Heart’s Reflection,” the god says. “A ritual few are called to, and even fewer pass its test.”

My throat tightens. “What do we have to do?”

“Love is not merely felt,” he says, looking between us. “It’s seen. If you truly love each other—if your bond has overcome poison and sacrifice—then you must see what the other sees.”

“We share a soul.” Riven glares at the god, frost crawling up his arms. “She sees me. Her entire essence has been inside me. It’s...” He pauses, shaking his head and turning to me. “Incredible, terrifying, and unraveling all at once, and I don’t know if I’ll ever deserve it—but I’ll spend forever trying.”

I cross my arms and huff, although I can’t stop the smile that’s creeping across my lips. “Can you please go back to being insufferable?” I ask, since we need to focus on passing this trial instead of arguing with Anteros before it can even start. “It’s much easier than assuring you that you deserve my love, always and forever, until the end of time.”

The air pulses between us.

Then, his grin turns wicked.

“I’m just giving you balance,” he says, taking a step toward me. “The tortured soul and the cocky prince, all rolled into one perfect disaster.”

My breaths quicken, and I want to pounce on him and show him just how much of a disaster he turns me into when he gets all sexy and moody on me.

“Focus.” Anteros’s voice echoes through the chamber, stopping me from doing any Winter Prince pouncing.

Both of our gazes snap to the god.

“I might be a god of love, but people in love can be so exhausting,” he says with an

eye roll. “Now, do you want to know the rules of your trial, or not?”

Riven’s grin fades, and his attention shifts to Ghost, a cold breeze swirling through the chamber.

“Tell me how to wake him,” he says to Anteros.

“Gladly,” Anteros says, and the watery mirror shimmers, the surface rippling with images that blur and change. “You will kneel before the Reflection and gaze into it. Your hearts will be stripped bare, and you’ll see yourselves as the other sees you—the beauty, the strength, the flaws, and the wounds you try to hide. If you reject what you see, the Reflection will boil away, and the ceremony will fail. Ghost and Nebula will remain bound, locked in sleep for all eternity.”

The weight of his words crashes into me, my magic stirring anxiously beneath my skin.

“Here, there are no masks. No defenses,” Anteros continues. “There’s only truth. And if you accept each other’s truths fully—the good and the broken, the pain and the beauty—the Reflection will become light, and that light will flow into the altar’s heartstones. Then—and only then—will Ghost and Nebula awaken.”

SAPPHIRE

Anteros happily declares that I'm going first.

One moment I'm gazing at my face in the pool's reflection, and then Riven's sharp, beautiful features appear, his silver eyes intense as always. Our images dance and blur, merging and separating as if the water can't decide who we are—or if we're even two separate people at all.

Anteros moves to stand behind us, his golden wings casting shadows across the chamber. "Remember," he says softly, "what you see isn't just truth—it's vulnerability. You've already physically and emotionally given yourselves to each other and accepted each other. The question now is—can you love and accept the version of you that the other sees?"

"I'm not afraid," I tell Anteros, but my racing heart suggests otherwise.

The god smiles knowingly, a gentle but challenging curve of his lips. "You should be," he replies. "There's no greater courage than searching deep within yourself—acknowledging every strength, facing every flaw, and still believing you're worthy of unconditional love. Especially when the love you seek is your own."

Riven's hand finds mine, his cool fingers threading through my warmth, tightening until our palms lock together.

"I love you," he tells me, the truth of it shining deep in his eyes. "No matter what you see, know this—I will always love you. Every single piece of you."

“And I love you,” I say, tightening my grip. “Nothing I see here will ever change that.”

Anteros presses his fingertips thoughtfully together. “Beautiful words,” he says with a tilt of his head. “But love is easily spoken. Now, let’s find out if you can truly love yourself—as your beloved sees you.”

Something about his quiet challenge chills me, fear soaking into my bones. Yet slowly, I lower myself to the stone, my knees pressing onto the cold floor, my breath tight in my chest.

Riven lowers himself beside me. His shoulder brushes mine, and that simple contact sends a tremor through my body, reminding me I’m not alone.

I barely have a chance to steady my breathing before the surface of the pool shatters into swirling chaos. Colors and shapes spin wildly, a kaleidoscope of uncertainty.

Then, suddenly, the mirror stills, and I’m seeing myself through Riven’s eyes.

It’s dizzying. Disorienting. I’m inside his perception and outside my body all at once.

The first thing that strikes me is the light. Because in his eyes, I shine. Not only with magic, but with something fierce and undeniable, fueled by determination and strength.

And then the emotions flood me, overwhelming in their intensity.

His pride hits first. The way he watched me stand against the Stalo, refusing to back down. The admiration when I faced his father in the Winter Court, chin raised in defiance. The awe when I dove into the frozen lake for the key, my determination stronger than my fear.

Through his eyes, I see myself climbing onto the bridge during the trials, moving forward despite the fear of falling. I see myself in the forest during the hunt, refusing to give up even when all seemed lost.

He's always seen me as brave. Even when I was terrified, even when I was breaking inside, he saw courage and light.

"Is this really how you see me?" I whisper, water droplets rising around us, reflecting tiny rainbows in the temple's light.

As if in response, the reflection shifts, showing me through his eyes when I was healing Zoey, my hands steady, my focus unwavering. He saw brilliance where I saw necessity. He saw skill where I saw instinct.

I see myself astral projecting to the Midnight Star, commanding the currents of the Cosmic Tides, and carving our bond into his palm with the Star Disc.

But it's not all strength and fire he sees.

He sees my gentleness, too. The way I care for Zoey, and the kindness I show even to those who hurt me. He loves my humor, the brightness in my laughter, and the sparkle in my eyes when I tease him.

He also sees my flaws. My stubbornness, my impulsiveness, and my occasional recklessness. But in his eyes, these aren't weaknesses. They're just... me. Essential parts of who I am, pieces he wouldn't change, even if he could.

"You love all of me," I say, my voice catching. "Not just the good parts. Not just the heroic parts. All of it."

The reflection shifts again, vivid and intense. I see myself diving into his dying body,

forcing my soul into his, unwilling to let him slip away. I see the sheer force of my refusal to surrender—my conviction that death itself could never part us.

“You think I’m unstoppable,” I eventually say.

His fingers tighten around mine. “Because you are.”

I shake my head, my breath catching. “I’m not. You know I’m not.”

“You are to me.” His voice is steady. Quiet. Certain. As if all of this is simple fact. “I’ve seen the cracks. I’ve always seen them. And I love you even more for them.”

As I look back at the reflection, his words hit me harder than any magic ever has.

“I want to believe I’m her,” I say softly.

His thumb brushes my palm, steadying me.

“Then believe it,” he says, as if it’s the simplest thing in the universe.

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply as I breathe in his vision of me. The strength he trusts, the heart he values, and the warmth he adores.

And when I open my eyes again, I’m not afraid.

“I accept it,” I say, the words steady, quiet, and absolute. “I accept me. All of me.”

RIVEN

“Now you,” Anteros says to me, and the thought of being seen—truly seen—sends frost spiraling up my arms.

Sapphire squeezes my hand, her warmth melting through my cold, and I force myself to stare into the water.

The mirrored surface trembles, clears, and then I’m looking at myself through Sapphire’s eyes.

The shock nearly knocks me backward.

Because the man reflected isn’t the man I know. He isn’t the cold, ruthless Winter Prince who pushes everyone away. He isn’t the failure who couldn’t save his mother, who can’t heal his father, and who deceived the only woman he’s ever loved.

He’s radiant.

Not with warmth or light, but with a different kind of brilliance. Like moonlight cutting through darkness. Like the deadly beauty of an ice storm.

“This can’t be right,” I mutter, shaking my head as frost forms in my hair. “This isn’t me.”

“It is,” Sapphire whispers. “It always has been.”

The mirror shifts, pulling me deeper. I watch myself at the bar in the Maple Pig, dangerous and magnetic. She noticed the exact moment my gaze landed on her. She felt the charge in the air between us.

I feel her fascination with the frost patterns I create. How she finds beauty in my control, rather than coldness. I feel her admiration for my loyalty, my steadfastness, and my refusal to break, even when she doesn't know how shattered I am inside.

"You see warmth in me," I say through my surprise. "Even when I'm at my coldest."

But it's not just good she sees.

I also see my arrogance. Infuriating—and intolerable—at times. The way I dismiss her ideas, and the way I act as if I know better than everyone else—even though, let's be honest—I usually do know better than everyone else.

Then, the perspective shifts, and I flinch as I see myself after the dryad took my love. The hollowness, the casual cruelty, and the way I wielded her feelings for me like a weapon.

"How can you possibly love me after this?" I demand, ice daggers exploding in a circle around us. "I deserved the hatred you threw at me after getting struck by that arrow. Every sharp word, every furious look—I earned them all."

The reflection doesn't answer with words.

Instead, it shows me dying in her arms, and her terror and refusal to let me go. It shows me the way she tore her soul apart to save me, and how she touched every broken piece of me and loved them all.

She doesn't just see me. She knows me. Every dark corner, every sharp edge, every

frozen wasteland—and still, she chose me. She fought for me. She saved me.

“I don’t deserve this,” I repeat, frost glistening on my eyelashes as tears try to form.

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve every single second of it, and every single part of me,” she tells me, water droplets dancing around her and warming the air around us.

The reflection ripples, showing me in countless small moments—the softness in my expression when I look at her, the way my body shifts to shield her from danger, and the way I orient myself toward her like a compass finding north.

“This is who you are to me,” she says. “Not perfect. Not flawless. But whole. Complete. Worth everything and more.”

Something inside me—something frozen and dark that’s been there since I watched my mother’s ice coffin being carried out of the palace—begins to crack.

And then, it shatters.

Frost flowers bloom around us, impossibly delicate and fiercely beautiful, summer and winter combined into one.

“I see you,” Sapphire says, her water joining my ice in spirals that catch the light.

“And I love what I see.”

“Even the parts I tried to bury?” I ask, and the water glows, pulsing with light. “The ones I tried to freeze beneath layers of ice?”

“Especially those,” she says, and I close my eyes for a second, letting her love break apart every wall I’ve built since I was a child.

Finally, I surrender.

I pull her into my arms, ice and water exploding around us in a storm of light and magic. She clings to me just as fiercely, and when I open my eyes, the pool erupts into pure radiance, flowing into the altar's gemstones.

"I accept it," I say, my voice raw but unwavering, resting my forehead against hers.
"I accept who I am through your eyes."

The light intensifies, so bright it should hurt to look at.

And then Ghost and Nebula begin to stir, their bodies glowing with the same light that fills the chamber.

RIVEN

Ghost's eyes snap open—sharp and piercing, clearer than I've ever seen them. He rises in one fluid motion, leaps from the altar, and lands in front of me, his paws silent against the temple floor.

“Ghost,” I say, and I drop to my knees, wrapping my arms around him, burying my face in his thick fur.

He smells like snow and pine, familiar and grounding.

“I thought I'd lost you,” I say, my voice muffled against him. “When I saw you on that altar, I thought I'd failed you.”

He pulls back just enough to meet my gaze, his eyes reflecting a wisdom that transcends language. Then he nudges my face with his nose, the gesture as familiar as breathing.

“You stubborn, impossible beast,” I choke out, wrapping my arms around his neck again. “Don't you ever do something like that again.”

The snow leopard huffs indignantly, as if to point out that I'm the one who jumped into enemy territory and wandered into cosmic dimensions while he was sent to a lost temple and forced into an enchanted slumber.

“Fair point,” I say with a laugh, and just like that, everything between us is right again.

I'm barely wrapping my mind around it all when a soft gasp from Sapphire draws my attention.

Because on the altar, the cheetah—Nebula's—eyes flutter open. They glow like they're full of the cosmos themselves, blazing with the same primal intelligence that I recognize in Ghost. The ivy covering her body dissolves into pinpoints of green light that sink into her golden fur, becoming part of her, warmth radiating from her skin.

The cheetah rises gracefully, and when she turns, her gaze falls on Sapphire.

There's no hesitation. No uncertainty. Just recognition, as if she's been waiting for this moment for her entire life.

"Hello," Sapphire says to Nebula, water droplets hovering in the air around her like suspended stars.

Nebula leaps from the altar and moves to Sapphire's side, pressing against her leg. A low, rumbling purr vibrates from the cheetah's chest, as if she senses Sapphire's nerves and wants to soothe them.

"You're beautiful," Sapphire whispers to her, cautiously placing her hand on Nebula's head.

The cheetah leans into her touch, eyes half-closing in contentment as the familiar bond solidifies, just like it did between me and Ghost all those decades ago in the woods.

"She's yours," Anteros says to Sapphire, his voice soft with approval. "As Ghost is 's. Two parts of the same divine gift."

Sapphire turns back to me. "Come here," she says, her eyes shining with an intensity

that makes my chest tighten. “Feel this.”

I approach, Ghost at my side.

“Does she feel like... home to you?” she asks, resting her free palm on Nebula’s spotted fur. There’s a thread of awe in her tone, like she’s discovering something too big to name.

I give a slight nod, placing my hand over Ghost’s back. “Yes,” I say, watching both familiars. “Ghost is an echo of me, and it seems like Nebula is an echo of you.”

The snow leopard and the cheetah turn toward each other, their gazes locking. Something passes between them—a current of recognition and understanding. Even the surrounding vines and frost seem to hush, surrendering to the connection in that one shared look.

For a moment, they simply regard each other—ice and sun, winter and summer. And then, in perfect synchronicity, they touch foreheads.

The magic that erupts from that contact is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. It’s not just power—it’s completion. Balance. Harmony. The sensation floods through me, intertwining with the bond I share with Sapphire, amplifying it until I can feel all three of their heartbeats as distinctly as my own.

“They were always meant to be together,” Sapphire says, gazing at me with pure love and adoration in those beautiful blue eyes. “Just like us.”

“Two halves of the same soul,” I agree.

Anteros steps forward, his golden wings folding against his back, demanding our attention.

“The bond you share is rare,” he says, his gaze moving between the four of us. “Summer and winter, cheetah and snow leopard—opposites that complete rather than destroy. I’ve only witnessed such unions a handful of times.”

“What does it mean?” Sapphire asks, her hand resting on Nebula’s back.

The god’s smile is bright. “It means you’ve been blessed by forces older than the gods. It means you were always meant to find each other, across all realms and times, no matter what the universe tried to throw at you.”

“I have so many questions,” she murmurs, her magic stirring in the air—like she’s ready to summon water into a thousand shapes if it helps her understand.

Ghost nudges my hand with his nose, his presence filling my mind—strong and defined. And there’s something new there, too. A golden thread woven through our connection, linking us to Nebula and, through her, to Sapphire.

If anything ever happens to bond me to Sapphire more than I already am, I think I might die from the sheer feeling of completeness of it all. And that’s saying a lot, given that I’ve died for her once already.

Yet, standing here, any sacrifice seems like a small price to pay for a love like ours.

But I’m snapped out of the daze when Anteros clears his throat, commanding our attention once again.

“Allow the bond to grow, and it will become a source of power unlike any other,” he says. “However, since you passed your trial and your familiars have awoken, our time here—as educational as it’s been—is over. The temple will return to its slumber, and you’ll return to where you need to be.”

He gives us an approving smile, his form sparkling with golden light.

“Wait.” Sapphire steps forward, her hand curling at her side. “What about the Winter King? And the Night Court?”

“Many answers await you,” the god says gently. “But not here. Not now. You must return to your realm, to face the battles that cannot be fought in this sacred space.”

Frustration pangs through me, but I know he’s right. We can’t hide from our problems here. So, I exchange a glance with Sapphire, whose water magic coils protectively at her feet.

From the way her breathing slows, I know she understands.

“Ghost and Nebula will guide you,” Anteros says as the walls start to shimmer, the vines retreating, the ice melting into mist. “But as you continue your journey, you must understand—soulmates are not always forged in light. Some are born in shadow, molded by suffering, and tethered by the unspoken vow that even through darkness and destruction, they will stand together.”

Sapphire stiffens beside me. There’s fear in her expression, but she sets her jaw, defiant.

Frost crawls up my arms.

“You’re talking about me,” I say, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. “After all, destruction follows me everywhere.”

“You carry both ice and shadow, Winter Prince,” Anteros says with an amused smile. “But that’s not the whole of it.”

“No. It’s not.” I reach for Sapphire’s hand, letting her warmth melt my ice. “Because without her, I’m not whole.”

“And yet, the two of you were tethered together in light,” the god says cryptically, glancing at where Sapphire’s fingers are entwined with mine. “With a warmth that ignites your souls.”

“So, we’re the golden standard. That’s comforting,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’m sure that whoever you’re talking about now will be thrilled to know they won’t be as lucky.”

Water swirls at Sapphire’s feet, her focus locked on Anteros, as if she can read his mind if she stares at him hard enough.

“Who else are you talking about?” she asks him.

He regards us both for a long moment.

Then, finally, he speaks.

“Sometimes, the ones who fall end up there by choice,” he says, as if another cryptic message should clear up the rest.

Sapphire’s breath catches. “And other times?”

“Other times,” the god says, “they fall because they believe there’s no other way.”

The temperature in the chamber lowers, and Sapphire presses closer to me.

I circle an arm around her shoulders, wishing I could shield her from Anteros’s hinted truths.

“Is it someone we know?” she asks softly.

The god’s golden light continues to fade. “When the time comes, all will become clear,” he says, and then the temple’s nearly dissolved, leaving more questions than answers.

“Anteros!” Sapphire tries one last time, but it’s too late.

His form vanishes in a rain of light, the remnants of his power dispersing into the air.

Her magic reaches for me—seeking comfort—and I pull her close, crushing my lips to hers, my frost wrapping around her like a shield. This isn’t just desire and passion. It’s devotion and promise. The kind of promise I never thought I’d be capable of making—to love her with every broken piece of myself that she sees clearly, yet somehow loves anyway.

When we break apart, we’re standing in the forest of the Winter Court, behind the palace, just before sunrise. Our cosmic formalwear has transformed into an ice-blue tunic embroidered with silver thread for me, and a blue velvet gown for her. She looks devastatingly beautiful in it, as she does in anything she wears.

Ghost and Nebula are at our sides, their bodies glowing with remnants of the temple’s magic.

Nebula rubs her head against Sapphire’s leg, purring in reassurance.

Ghost stands next to me, as steadfast as ever.

“Well,” Sapphire says, breathless, her fingers still clutching my shirt. “That was intense.”

“The temple trial, or the kiss?” I ask, unable to stop my lips from curving into a smirk.

“Both, you insufferable prince.” She presses her palms against my chest and rolls her eyes, but there’s warmth there—for me.

I laugh, the sound freer than it’s been in decades. “And you love me for it,” I say, knowing now more than ever that it’s true.

Ghost nudges my leg, reminding me that we have more pressing matters than kissing my soulmate—although I’m inclined to disagree on the order of priorities.

Nebula offers a quiet growl in solidarity, earning a fond laugh from Sapphire.

“Yes, I know,” I tell Ghost, threading my fingers through his fur, relief flooding my body at the fact that he’s back where he belongs—with me. “We have work to do.”

“Next stop—making sure the Winter Court doesn’t freeze over with your father’s madness.” Sapphire steps back from me, her hand lingering in mine.

“And then,” I add, “we defeat the Night Court, and we save Zoey.”

ZOEY

“I swear, you taste better and better each time I have you,” Aerix murmurs against my skin, his breath cool against the heat of my neck, a feverish glint in his dark eyes.

“Guess that makes me your finest vintage,” I say with a mischievous smile, forcing a teasing edge to my voice despite the quickening of my pulse.

“You’re not just a vintage. You’re the addiction I’ll never recover from,” he says, and then his mouth crashes onto mine, wild and demanding.

My lips part at his unspoken command, and I taste my own blood mingled with the cold, sharp essence of him—winter storms, pine forests, and danger.

I want to crawl inside him, feel him under my skin, and let him consume me completely. The thought sends a bolt of adrenaline through my veins, and I arch closer, desperate to lose myself in him.

“Take this off,” he demands, tugging on the strap of my chemise. His voice is low, a dark purr that leaves no room for argument.

I sit up, slipping it over my head and tossing it aside. But instead of pushing me back down on the bed, he sits back on his heels, his gaze devouring every inch of my bare skin. His eyes are nearly black now, molten with hunger.

“What?” I ask, holding my breath, ready for anything.

“I want to see how it’s healing,” he says, his fingertips trailing slowly, torturously, down my body. He pauses at my hip, brushing over the red, angry mark where his name is carved into me.

The wound is still fresh, but it makes me feel alive in a way nothing else ever has as he traces each letter with his thumb, his eyes wild, his breaths coming faster. There’s a dark pride in his expression, something possessive and predatory that makes my stomach flutter.

“It’ll scar,” he declares. “You’ll carry me with you forever.”

I shiver beneath his touch, tilting my hips toward his hand.

“I love it,” I whisper, and he exhales slowly, as if I’ve undone him with three words.

Then he leans down, pressing a soft, worshipful kiss to the wound.

“You’re mine. Forever,” he says against my skin, and I tug him back up to me, needing him closer.

His wings curve forward, enveloping us in a cocoon of darkness and feathers as he kisses me again, deeper this time, more demanding.

“I should have done this sooner,” he says, almost to himself. “Claimed you in every way. Made it impossible for them to even think about touching you.”

At the mention of “them,” I hesitate, and Aerix pulls back just enough to search my face, his expression dark and dangerous.

“What is it?” he asks in the sort of tone that makes it clear there’s no point in trying to lie to him.

“I was just thinking about Victoria and Sophia,” I admit, and his magic crackles, cold enough to sting my skin.

“They’ve been hostile,” he says, seeming like he already knowing the answer.

I nod.

His body tenses. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

I shift beneath his weight, pulling the sheet over my chest, suddenly feeling exposed in a way that has nothing to do with having torn off my chemise minutes earlier.

His eyes narrow, catching the movement, displeasure crossing his face at my attempt to cover myself.

“Victoria thinks I’m just your latest obsession,” I confess, the last words sticking in my throat. “That when you get bored, I’ll end up in the barns.”

Aerix’s face darkens, his magic cold and sharp. “She said that to you?”

“She’s scared,” I rush to her defense, even though I don’t like her. “They both are. But I think I can fix it.”

He narrows his eyes. “What, exactly, are you suggesting?”

I take a shaky breath. “Maybe I should stay in the human wing sometimes. Just to smooth things over. I actually like Sophia. She’s been kind to me from the start. And Victoria...” I hesitate. “I’d rather have her as an ally than an enemy.”

His jaw tightens. “You want to leave my chambers to appease them.”

“Not leave,” I say quickly. “Just... not stay every night. Not yet.”

His wings retract with a sharp, controlled rustle, and I brace myself, half-expecting him to bite me again—harder this time, less forgiving.

Instead, his voice comes low and even more dangerous.

“Stick with Aurora and Isla,” he says, and I blink, thrown.

“Isla?”

She’s the youngest of the group. Smart, yes. Careful. An excellent chess player. One of the king’s girls. But Aerix has never mentioned her to me. I didn’t even know he noticed her existence until now.

“She’s been here long enough to know how to navigate the court,” he continues, although there’s something hidden beneath his words—something he’s not telling me.

“You’re being cryptic,” I say, studying him.

“I’m being practical. And I need you to trust me. Aurora and Isla are the best companions for you. However, if you insist on appeasing Victoria and Sophia, then I won’t stop you.” He pauses, his black eyes glinting like ice beneath midnight. “But I need you to remember where your true loyalty lies.”

My heart pounds.

“I will,” I whisper.

His eyes flash in quiet warning. “Tell me now,” he says, and my heart races, the heat

between us crackling to life again. “Where does your loyalty lie?”

“With you,” I promise him, grounding myself in it. “Always with you.”

“Good.”

He pauses, the moment stretching, his stare burning through me.

“I’ve already sent Aethelthryth home for the night,” he finally says, his voice low and intimate, “but I’ll escort you back to the human wing myself.”

“You’d do that?”

The question slips out before I can stop it.

He tilts his head, dark amusement crossing his face. “I’d do anything for you.”

My heart twists, and I lean forward, placing my palms flat on his chest.

“Just for tonight,” I promise. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

His gaze turns molten.

“You’d better be,” he growls, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me in for another kiss.

This one is deeper, more desperate, teeth scraping against my lower lip, claiming me all over again. His wings flare, wrapping around us like a shield from the rest of the world.

I don’t think he’s going to let me go.

I'm not sure if I want him to let me go.

But when he eventually pulls back, we dress in silence, the weight of unspoken tension pressing between us.

Every night fae we pass in the winding, mirrored halls bows their head. Their eyes are on me—curious, envious, some filled with barely veiled contempt.

Aerix doesn't care. He walks beside me like I belong to him, his hand resting on the small of my back with a touch that says: mine.

When we reach the heavy wooden doors of the human wing, he stops, his hand tightening on my lower back as if he can't stand the thought of letting me go.

"I love you," I tell him, the sentiment pouring out of me naturally now. "The fact that you're letting me try to make this right with Sophia and Victoria means a lot to me."

His magic stirs around us, sharp and cold, like frost seeping into bone.

"I'm going to keep you safe, ," he promises me. "No matter what it takes. No matter who I have to destroy to do it."

Before I can ask what he means, he crushes his mouth to mine, his teeth dragging against my lower lip like he's holding himself back from biting down.

"Until tomorrow," he whispers when he pulls away, trembling, each syllable heavy with need.

"Until tomorrow," I echo, soft and breathless.

His fingers trail down my arm, stopping at my wrist. He doesn't just hold it—he

clutches it, his thumb circling over my pulse like he's memorizing the rhythm of my blood.

When I step back, his grip loosens with agonizing slowness, his fingers trailing along my skin. And as the doors close between us, I catch one last glimpse of him—dark, beautiful, and dangerous—his wings flared as he watches me with a look that promises he'll burn this court to the ground if I asked.

Only when the doors shut do I exhale, pressing my palm to my hip, feeling the still painful wound beneath my dress and smiling.

Because Aerix's name is carved into my skin.

Into my heart.

Until the end of time.

ZOEY

As I round the corner to head back to my suite, Katerina appears at the far end of the hallway, her pale blonde hair unmistakable, even at this distance.

“Katerina,” I call out, quickening my pace.

She doesn’t look up. Doesn’t acknowledge me in any way. She just turns in the opposite direction, walking away with measured steps and turning the corner.

The rejection stings. After all, Katerina was the one who pulled me into her room a few days ago, breaking her years-long silence to tell me about Henry. To confide in me. To ask me to help get Henry killed.

And now she’s ignoring me? It makes no sense.

“Fine,” I mutter to myself, my hands curling into fists. “Be that way.”

By the time I reach our suite, I’m bracing myself for more hostility. I can almost feel the tension behind the door, a warning that tonight won’t be any calmer than the last few.

Victoria and Sophia have their doors open, both in their nightgowns, preparing for bed. Victoria is brushing her hair at the vanity, while Sophia sits on the window seat, a small book open in her lap.

They both look up when I enter, their expressions hardening in an instant.

“Look who decided to grace us with her presence,” Victoria drawls, setting down her brush. “The prince is already done with you for the night?”

“Actually,” I say, forcing myself to stay calm. “I chose to come back.”

“How gracious of you.” Her voice drips with sarcasm.

Sophia closes her book and joins me in the living area, her eyes darting between me and Victoria.

“I talked to Aerix,” I say, deciding to get straight to the point. “I asked him to make sure you stay here, to keep you both protected.”

Victoria stands slowly, her face flushing with anger. “You what?”

“I think it worked. He seemed open to helping?—”

“Save it,” she snaps. “I don’t need your pity or protection.”

“Why can’t you just accept that I’m trying to help?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“Because we’re not your handmaidens,” Sophia says quietly. “We’re not here to serve you, or to make you feel better about being his favorite.”

“I never said you were,” I protest, but the guilt gnaws at me, anyway.

“It doesn’t matter how you meant it,” Victoria says. “That’s how it is. And I refuse to spend another night with the reminder of what’s waiting for me when the prince decides he only wants you.”

She tosses her hair over her shoulders and storms toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I ask, tension swirling in my gut.

“Anywhere but here,” she says, not bothering to look back.

Sophia follows, pausing briefly by the door. “I’m going to stay with Elijah for the night,” she says softly, her cheeks turning pink. “We’ve been... talking.”

“Sophia, I really didn’t mean to?—“

“I know,” she cuts me off, giving me a sad smile. “That’s what makes it worse. You don’t even see what you’re doing.”

And then they’re both gone, the door closing behind them with a heavy thud that echoes in the suddenly empty suite.

I stand there for a long moment, the weight of what just happened settling over me. Part of me wants to run after them, to explain, to make them understand. But another part—the part that felt Aerix’s name being carved into my skin, that tasted my own blood on his lips—knows they’re right.

I’ve chosen a side. And that side is with him.

He’s the only one who can keep me safe here. He’s the only one who cares about me. Who loves me.

With a heavy sigh, I change into my nightgown, then pause, unable to resist checking the mark one more time.

Aerix Nightborne.

Not even his title. Just him.

I should go to bed. But I'm too restless, my mind racing with everything that's happened. So, I wander to the art supplies Aerix gave me a few weeks ago, grab a sketchbook and pencils, and settle onto the window seat. The moonlight streams in, bathing everything in a soft, silver glow that reminds me of the frost that forms when Aerix's magic spirals out of control.

Flipping open to a fresh page, I begin to draw, my pencil moving almost on its own. First, his eyes—infinite, dark, and hungry. Then his face, the sharp angles and perfect planes that shouldn't be possible. The curve of his mouth when he smiles, that rare, genuine expression that makes my heart flip.

One drawing becomes two, which becomes five, then a dozen. I lose myself in the process, capturing moments I don't want to forget: Aerix eating breakfast with me in the bunker, the two of us riding on Nyx's back through the woods, his pulling me out of the Night Court's moat and declaring me as his, him feeding from me for the first time, his wings unfurling around us in bed, his hands as he held the dagger and carved his name into my skin.

Some pages I leave half-finished: a wing with no body, a hand reaching for something unseen, a set of eyes without a face—secret corners of my heart waiting for him to fill them.

I'll tell him he can add to it. Let him trace his own lines and scribble his own shadows. He can complete the drawings I've left unfinished, then return it to me.

And I'll do the same, back and forth—a conversation in art that never has to end.

ZOEY

I lose myself in the sketches, the hours slipping away as I record every precious memory of Aerix. My fingers ache from gripping the pencil, but I don't stop. Each stroke anchors me more firmly to him, to us, and to what we've become.

A sharp knock on the door startles me from my thoughts, making me jerk my pencil and smear graphite across the page.

I freeze.

Maybe it's Aerix, come to pull me into his arms again. Maybe he heard how Victoria and Sophia walked out on me, and he can't stand the thought of me being alone.

Hurrying to the door, I open it—and regret it.

It's Henry.

He's leaning casually in the doorway, his arms folded. But there's nothing casual about the way his eyes travel over my body, along the thin nightgown that doesn't leave much to the imagination.

"Go away," I say firmly. "It's late."

"Come on, . I just want to talk," he says, pushing his way past me into the suite. "Katerina told me she saw you with Aerix. That he dropped you off here instead of keeping you in his bed."

“It’s none of your business,” I snap.

I never should have opened that door.

“In case you haven’t forgotten, I’m your ally, ,” he says, moving close enough that I can smell the alcohol on his breath. “Of course it’s my business.”

“You’re not my ally.” The words come out flat, but adrenaline spikes through me, setting my nerves on edge.

“That’s not very friendly.” He closes the door, his eyes raking over me again. “Especially since I came all this way to check on you.”

“I don’t need checking on.”

“Sure you do.” His gaze sharpens with desire. “Everyone’s talking about you, you know. The prince’s human slut who spreads her legs every time he crooks his finger.”

My fingers curl around the dagger in my pocket, rage hot beneath my skin. “Get out.”

But instead of leaving, Henry steps forward, forcing me back. Dark hunger swirls in his eyes, twisted and violent. I can almost taste the sour heat of his intention, and it makes my stomach lurch, every warning bell going off in my veins like wildfire.

“What are you doing?” I demand, backing away as he advances, trying to ignore the fast, panicked rhythm of my heart.

“I want to see what all the fuss is about,” he murmurs, a cruel smile curving his lips. “I want to see what makes you so special that the prince keeps you in his bed night after night.”

I edge toward the sitting area, trying to keep a chair or table between us. “You’re drunk,” I say, my voice shaking. “Go sleep it off.”

“I’m not drunk enough to miss how you strut around here like you own the place.” He lunges forward, grabbing my wrist. The impact of his hand is a clamp of iron, bruising my bones. “Like you’re untouchable.”

I twist, trying to wrench free, but his grip holds firm. “Let me go,” I snarl, my heart hammering so hard I taste blood on my tongue.

“Or what?” he taunts. “You’ll tell your prince? Do you really think he cares about you? That he sees you as anything more than a warm body to sleep next to and a soft neck to sink his fangs into?”

“He loves me,” I say, strong as steel, refusing to let Henry’s words rattle me.

He just laughs.

“Love?” he repeats, his lip curling. “Night fae don’t love. They use. They take. They possess. And when they’re done, they toss you into the barns so they can move on to their next young, shiny plaything.”

I stumble, the back of my knees hitting the edge of the couch. But before I can recover, Henry’s on me, his weight pinning me down as we fall onto the cushions.

“Stop.” I struggle, panic flaring in my chest. “Get off me.”

“Shut up.” His hand clamps over my mouth, the other tearing at my nightgown.

Terror and rage collide as he forces his knee between my thighs.

He's on me. Trapping me.

So, I bite his hand, tasting blood.

He curses, pulling back just enough for me to scream for help.

"No one's coming," he snarls, pushing me down again. "Your precious prince isn't here to save you now. It's just us, and no one here to see. Your word against mine. And I'm a pet of the queen, and queen trumps prince."

And king trumps queen, I think as his hands move to my nightgown, tearing at it again. It rips further, cool air brushing across my skin, and something inside me snaps—an explosion of fury and determination.

I will not be a victim again.

So, my hand closes around the dagger strapped under my nightgown—he'll eventually notice it there anyway, since he's trying to tear my clothes off—determination coursing through my veins. Better to use it on him than for him to find it and use it on me.

"Henry," I gasp, "don't do this."

He pauses, a cruel smile twisting his lips. "Begging already? Good girl. I knew I liked you."

His grip loosens just enough for me to yank the dagger free and drive it up into his stomach.

Steel sinks through flesh, his blood spilling over my hand as he howls in pain, rearing back as crimson blossoms across his shirt.

“Are you out of your mind?” He scowls, clutching the wound. “I’ll kill you for that.”

But all I see is red as Aerix’s words echo in my mind.

If anyone ever tries to hurt you... then I want you to kill them. In the most painful way possible.

So, I lunge forward, tackling Henry to the floor and bringing my dagger down again, this time aiming for his throat. A savage roar builds in my chest, more feral than I thought possible.

He shifts under my weight, and I miss, getting him in the shoulder instead.

“You—” he chokes, blood bubbling from his lips. “You don’t understand?—“

“I understand perfectly,” I snarl, yanking the dagger free. “You. Don’t. Touch. Me.”

His struggles turn futile, his wide eyes brimming with terror.

“Listen,” he gasps, blood streaming between his fingers as he clutches the wound on his stomach. It’s soaking the rug, my knees squishing into it as I hover over him. “Katerina lied...”

“What are you talking about?” I demand, my body shaking, the dagger poised for another strike.

“Her brother,” he wheezes, his eyes starting to glaze over. “Never sent to the barns. They tried to escape. She made... a deal with Malakai.” His breathing grows more labored, each word a struggle. “Turned on... her brother... for safety. And Isla...”

“Isla?” My grip on the dagger tightens, remembering what Aerix said about how I

should stick with Isla and Aurora. “What about her?”

“She was raised here,” Henry whispers, the words barely escaping his lips. “She’s not like us?—”

His body convulses, blood pooling beneath him, soaking into the rug. A wet gurgle leaves his throat, and we lock eyes—his wide with a final flicker of fear.

“Henry!” I shake him, panic threading through my rage. “What about Isla? How was she raised here?”

The rise and fall of his chest stops. His eyes, still open, stare sightlessly at the ceiling.

No.

Clutching the bloody dagger, I scramble back. My breath shudders. The metallic smell of blood fills the air, and my nightgown—what’s left of it—is streaked with red.

Henry’s dead. I killed him.

My nightgown is torn and soaked with blood. My hands are slick with it.

But I don’t regret it. Not for a second.

Henry tried to force himself on me, and I stopped him—permanently. Just like Aerix told me to do. I made it hurt. I made him bleed. I made him pay for it. I gave him what he deserved.

But his final words echo in my mind, tugging at loose threads I didn’t know were there. Because Katerina lied about her brother. Isla was raised in the Night Court.

How the hell does it all piece together? What does Aurora have to do with it? How did Henry know about all of this in the first place?

I have no idea. The only thing I know is that I need to clean up this mess. I need to think.

And most of all, I need Aerix.

ZOEY

As much as I'd love to, I can't simply march into Aerix's quarters. The humans are trapped in our wing, unable to leave unless we're escorted by a night fae.

Unless...

Aerix told me to spend time with Aurora and Isla.

Now, Henry's dying words echo in my mind.

Isla was raised here. She's not like us.

I look down at Henry's body one more time. I should feel something—remorse, horror, or guilt. Something.

All I feel is a cold certainty that I did what needed to be done.

So, I grip the dagger tightly, wiping it clean on a section of my nightgown that isn't already soaked in blood. The fabric tears slightly under my trembling hand, but I force myself to keep going. I have no time to waste.

Finally, as satisfied as I can be given my situation, I step over Henry's body and make my way to the door.

The human wing is arranged with suites lining the top floor—each suite designated to a royal, their humans given private rooms inside them. Since it's daytime, everyone is

asleep. The Night Court doesn't even bother putting guards in the human wing while the court is asleep, thanks to the magical wards keeping us in here, and the fact that even if we figured out how to get past them, we're so easily overpowered by the night fae that we wouldn't make it far.

Plus, I've heard they like knowing we're free to do what we wish in here while they sleep. It's entertainment to them—a test to see what we'll do in the dark, when our basic instincts take hold. A sick sort of reality show for them to sit back and watch.

Given the attention I've been getting from Aerix, I was already dripping with main character energy. Now, with Henry dead...

I'm going to positively reek of it.

Unless I can cover it up.

So, when I reach the king's suite, I don't pause. I knock.

No one answers.

I knock harder. And harder. Anxiety spikes through me with each slam of my fist against the wood, and my hand is definitely going to bruise.

Come on, I think, praying to whatever god is in the Night Court that they'll hear me. Wake up. Please.

Finally, someone answers.

Aurora. Her hair is wild from sleep, but even so, she's as beautiful as ever.

Her eyes widen at the sight of me—disheveled, blood-splattered, and breathing hard.

“What happened?” She opens the door fully, letting me inside. “Is that your blood? Are you hurt?”

I close the door behind me, spinning around and leaning against it. “I need help,” I say, my voice steadier than I expected. “I need to see Aerix.”

Aurora steps closer, her eyes scanning me from head to toe. “Is that blood yours?” she repeats, alarm creeping into her voice.

I shake my head. “It’s Henry’s.”

Her breath catches. “What?” she asks, scanning me over yet again, as if trying to put the pieces together.

“He came to my room,” I say, forcing the words out. “He tried to—” My throat tightens, my stomach twisting as I remember Henry’s hands on me. “He tried to force himself on me. I stopped him.”

Aurora’s expression shifts from shock to understanding. “You killed him.”

It’s not a question, but I nod anyway.

“Where is he now?” she asks.

“In my suite. In the living room. On the floor.” My voice sounds hollow and distant. “I need to get to Aerix.”

“Wait here.” She gives me an encouraging nod, then disappears into one of the bedrooms.

I exhale shakily, every passing second a reminder that Henry’s body is lying on the

carpet in my suite, bleeding into the rug. If Aerix can't—or won't—help me, I'm screwed.

But he'll help me. He loves me.

Hushed voices sound from the room Aurora disappeared into, and she returns with Isla.

Isla's wearing a silken robe, her long, dark hair loose around her shoulders.

"Leave us," she says to Aurora, sounding different than I've ever heard her. Harder. Stronger.

Aurora hesitates. "Shouldn't we?—"

"If you know what's good for you," Isla cuts in, "you'll stay quiet about this. Unless you want the king's infatuation with you to come to a sudden end?"

Aurora's face pales. She nods once, then retreats to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Isla turns to me, her gaze sharp and assessing. Then, she takes my bloodstained hands in hers, turning them over and studying them, as if admiring my handiwork.

"You're a natural," she says, her thumb brushing over the sticky, crimson mess. "And I'm pleased you realized that in the human wing, I'm the queen on the chessboard."

"What does that mean?" I ask, my heart racing so fast that I swear it's about to explode.

It's too much, too fast, and I'm drowning in it.

“It means,” she says, dropping my hands and pulling a slim silver key out from the chain around her neck, “that like the queen in chess, I can go anywhere.”

My breath catches. “That key can get us out of the human wing?”

“Yes.” Her intelligent eyes gleam with satisfaction.

“But how?”

“I was born here. Raised here,” she says, echoing Henry’s dying words. “By the king and queen.”

I stare at her, the pieces clicking into place. “You’re a spy in the human wing.”

“The king and queen placed me amongst the human pets as a decoy, to be their eyes and ears,” she confirms, studying my face. “Do you know why I’m helping you, ?”

I shake my head.

“Because the royals raised me. I view Aerix as a brother. And I see the way he looks at you.” She reaches out, tucking a strand of blood-matted hair behind my ear. “If he loves you, then I accept you as family, too.”

My mind reels with this new information.

Isla was raised by the king and queen? She’s a spy among the humans? And now she’s decided I’m an honorary member of the royal family?

“We need to cover you up,” she continues, hurrying into her room, opening the wardrobe, and pulling out a dark cloak. “Put this on.”

She drapes it around my shoulders, hiding the blood-soaked nightgown beneath. The soft fabric against my sticky skin makes me shudder, but I welcome the coverage. Anything to conceal what I just did.

“The night fae in the halls will smell the blood,” she warns, “but they know better than to question me. They also know better than to lose control and attack you. They’ll keep their fangs to themselves, since the ones incapable of self-control don’t survive the Night Court’s test that accompanies the change.”

She leads me to the door, key in hand, and I follow her in shock. But before she opens it, she turns to me one last time.

“Aerix will take care of this,” she promises. “But you need to be smart and take care of yourself, too. You have to play to win. That means taking out pawns, even if those pawns are your own pieces.”

“I understand,” I say, and I do. Because if I hadn’t killed Henry, he would have...

I stop myself, not wanting to think about his body in my suite’s living room, bleeding out, staining the rug.

Isla nods, seemingly satisfied, and opens the door.

We slip out into the hallway, and I follow her out of the human wing, uneasy about walking through the palace without a night fae to protect me. But like Isla promised, the few night fae walking about glance at us, avert their gazes, and hurry away.

Adrenaline burns through my veins, and I stick to her side.

She moves like a queen—head high, posture regal, gliding across the floor. She’s not a night fae—her eyes aren’t the dark midnight color that theirs are—but she sure

knows how to carry herself like one.

As we walk, everything that's happened tonight races through my mind.

"You know about Katerina, don't you?" I ask quietly, our only witnesses now the chandeliers floating overhead, sparkling constellations gazing down on us. "About how she lied about her brother?"

Isla's pace doesn't falter. "Of course I know," she says. "I know almost everything that happens around here."

Right. I should have figured as much.

"Her brother wasn't sent to the barns," I continue, needing as much information as possible. "That they tried to escape together, but she made a deal with Malakai."

"That's true," she confirms. "Her brother was taken elsewhere. She chose her own safety over his."

I press my lips together. "Where was he taken?"

"That's not important right now. What's important is that you understand the game you're playing. Because every move comes with a price." She pauses, then adds, "Are you willing to pay that price for Aerix?"

"Yes," I say without hesitation. "I already have."

We turn a corner, approaching a set of ornate double doors.

Aerix's doors.

The guards startle as we approach. But when they see Isla, they say nothing.

I shift on my feet, suddenly nervous.

What will Aerix think when he sees me like this? Will he be proud? Angry? Will he help me, or will he decide I'm more trouble than I'm worth?

“,” Isla says, her voice softer now. “Remember what I said. You're family now. But family can still be dangerous.”

With that cryptic warning, she turns and disappears, leaving me alone with the guards in front of Aerix's doors.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:43 am

ZOEY

My blood-slicked hands tremble under the cloak Isla gave me.

The hall is silent. The guards say nothing. The Night Court sleeps, but my heart pounds loudly enough to wake the dead.

Not wanting to spend a second more in this hall than necessary, I ball my fist and pound on the doors.

They open almost immediately.

Aerix stands there, shirtless, his dark hair tousled from sleep, his midnight eyes narrowing as they rake over me. His wings twitch, flaring behind him, and the frost in the air sharpens, crackling like ice beneath my skin.

“Inside,” he commands, and I stumble through the threshold, the door slamming shut behind me.

He’s on me in a second, his hands gripping my shoulders, his magic sweeping over me in a cool current.

“What happened?” he asks, his gaze sharp and assessing.

“I had to...” I trail off, shaking my head, my voice catching in my throat.

“Had to what?” he presses, the frigid intensity in his eyes making my breath catch.

“Victoria and Sophia left. Henry came to my suite. He forced himself inside. I thought...” I swallow hard, the memory of Henry’s fingers tearing at my clothes flashing behind my eyes. “I don’t know what I thought. Because then he was on top of me, ripping at my nightgown, and I—” My voice breaks, and I pull out my dagger, the blade stained with blood. “I killed him.”

Aerix’s eyes meet mine, and my heart stops. Because he’s not looking at me with disgust, or with fear.

He’s looking at me with dark, glimmering pride.

“And how do you feel?” he asks calmly, brushing his thumb across my bloodstained cheek.

I can barely gather myself together enough to breathe, let alone think. Yet, somehow, I do.

“Powerful,” I admit, and he smiles—predatory and possessive.

“You look beautiful,” he says, his fingers still caressing my face. “And I think I just fell even harder for you than I did before.”

I close my eyes for a second, swallowing the last of my fear, his words stroking the dangerous part of me that’s been growing since I entered the Night Court.

“You do know how much I care about you, right?” he asks, quiet and urgent, his voice laced with a vulnerability I’ve only heard when he’s on the brink of losing control.

“Yes,” I reply, not doubting him for a second.

“And you care about me, too?” he asks, softer now, tension coiling between us.

From the way he’s studying me, I know he needs to hear it. He’s practically begging for it, like if I don’t say it, something deep inside him will break.

“I love you, Aerix.” I press my palms to his chest, keeping my gaze locked on his. “And I trust you. Always.”

His body shudders with relief.

“I’m going to keep you safe. I promise,” he says, and then, as if a switch has been flipped, he pulls back, his expression turning calculating. “We can’t have you blamed for Henry’s murder.” He moves with practiced efficiency, pulling clothes from his wardrobe and thrusting them into my hands. “Change into this.”

I clutch the clothes to my chest, my heart pounding.

He steps toward me again, his closeness making my heart race. “You did what I would have done,” he says, and there’s something so calming in the way he’s looking at me—something that makes my muscles relax. “I’m going to make sure no one touches you without suffering for it. No one but me. Now—change. And stay right here while you do. Because I want to see it. I want to revel in it.”

My breath quickens as I strip off my ruined nightgown and pull on the garments he provided: black leggings and a soft, oversized tunic. It smells like him—winter air and fresh pine.

“Who knows you were alone with Henry?” he asks, although from the heated way he’s staring at me, I’m surprised he can think straight, let alone plan a cover up for murder.

“I think Katerina knew,” I tell him. “She saw us earlier, when you dropped me off.”

“Katerina is bound to silence,” he says. “And she knows exactly how precarious her position is in our court.”

Our court. Not his court. As if it belongs to me as much as it belongs to him.

My heart clenches at the meaning behind his words, and I feel more cherished and loved than ever.

But I need to focus. Time is of the essence, and I don’t want to learn first-hand what happens to those who kill the queen’s favorite pet.

“Isla helped me get to you,” I tell him, praying she won’t end up paying for it. “She’ll be okay, right?”

“Isla’s immune from anything at court,” he says, affection creeping into his voice. “The king and queen will protect her. They always have.”

I release the breath I was holding.

“She told me she was raised by them,” I say. “That she sees you as a brother.”

“Isla’s been with us since she was born. She’s family.” He shakes his head, as if dismissing the topic. “Who else saw you tonight?”

“Aurora was with Isla when I went to the king’s suite to ask for help,” I say, and he turns to the window, his wings fluttering, a breeze stirring around him.

“Aurora could be pinned as an accessory to the crime,” he muses aloud. “She saw you covered in blood, and Isla will make sure she doesn’t report it. That’s enough to

implicate her.”

My mouth goes dry. “But she didn’t do anything wrong.”

His gaze snaps back to me, cold and cruel. “If we need her, we’ll sacrifice her. My only concern is protecting you. Now, who else saw you?”

I draw in a sharp breath, searching his face.

There’s no mercy there—only devotion wrapped in ruthless resolve that makes me burn with desire.

“Victoria and Sophia,” I manage, my throat tight. “Victoria hates me, but?—”

“We’ll say that Victoria confronted Henry over you, and then she killed him in a fit of jealousy,” he interrupts, like it’s the simplest conclusion in all the realms. “She’s one of mine, and no one will care if she’s gone. I was close to sending her to the barns, anyway.”

I stare at him, letting it sink in. “You want to frame Victoria for Henry’s murder.”

He rushes toward me, grabbing my shoulders like he’s begging me to see reason. “I want to keep you safe,” he says. “And this is the cleanest solution.

“She’ll be killed,” I say, barely able to get the words out.

“Yes,” he agrees. “And I need you to be okay with it. To accept it. Can you do that? For me?”

The from before—the one who volunteered at animal shelters and worried about which colleges she’d apply to—would have paused.

But that girl died in the cold Winter Court.

Then she started to thrive in the Night Court. Where she'll continue to thrive, no matter who she has to step on—or stab to death—to get there.

“Do it,” I say, the words a heavy door closing on who I used to be.

His breath leaves him in a rush, his eyes flaring with pride.

“We need to move quickly,” he says. “Is Henry’s body still in your suite?”

I twist my fingers together, my stomach knotting. “On the floor in the living room. There’s... a lot of blood.”

Something in my voice must alarm him, because he pauses to look me up and down.

“You gave him what he deserved. Now, we need to get Victoria’s scent on the body,” he says, moving to a cabinet and retrieving something that looks like a large bottle of ink—or blood. “This will do. Especially given that she won’t have an alibi.”

“I don’t know where she went after leaving the suite. How do we know she wasn’t with?—”

“No one will give her an alibi,” he cuts me off, his eyes hardening with the look he gives me when he doesn’t want me to push further. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I nod, trusting him.

“And me?” I ask. “Where will I be?”

“Here, in my quarters,” he says simply. “Where you belong.”

The certainty in his voice—the possessive finality—sends a shiver straight through me.

“What about Sophia?” I ask. “She said she was going to...”

I trail off, unsure how Aerix will react if I tell him Sophia went to spend the night with Elijah. I know Aerix doesn’t care about Sophia—nowhere close to how much he cares about me—but she still technically belongs to him. And Aerix protects what’s his.

Although, given that he’s plotting how to frame Victoria for Henry’s murder, he apparently cares about the others far less than I realized.

“I’ll handle Sophia.” His wings flare, and he strides to the door, opening it and whispering to one of the guards outside.

When he returns, his expression is resolute.

“It’s done,” he says.

“That easily?”

“When you’re a prince,” he says, an edge of dark humor in his voice as he moves toward me, “murder is just another type of politics.”

I trail my fingers over his bare chest, feeling the tension there—the power just beneath the surface.

“Murder. Politics,” I say, my heart racing as I gaze up at him. “You make them both look beautiful.”

He gives a low, pleased sound, sliding his hand to the small of my back. “They’re all just tools,” he murmurs in my ear. “And I’ll wield every one of them for you.”

My heart stutters, and I lean back slightly, meeting his hungry gaze. “And I love you for it,” I say, not wanting him to doubt me for a single second.

With that, his mouth crashes onto mine, claiming and devouring. But in the back of my mind, I think of Victoria—asleep somewhere, oblivious to the noose tightening around her neck.

And I feel nothing.

Because in the Night Court, we all play the game.

And I’ve learned how to win.

When Aerix pulls back, he brushes his fingers along my cheek, smearing the blood there like war paint.

“Tomorrow,” he murmurs, his lips ghosting over my ear, “I’m having your things moved out of the human quarters. You’ll live in the suite connected to mine. No more separation, and no more distance. You’ll finally be where you belong.”

I pull back just enough to look up at him, my pulse quickening. “Has a royal ever done that for a human before?” I ask.

It’s rare,” he admits. “But not unprecedented. Isla lived in a suite connected to the king’s quarters before she was old enough to join the human wing. As for Katerina’s brother...” His tone shifts, an edge of amusement in it. “He’s been in Mirena’s quarters this entire time.”

I blink, stunned. “But Mirena only has Sebastian.”

“Sebastian’s a decoy.” His fingers trace my collarbone, his touch leaving frost patterns on my skin. “My sister keeps her true love locked away where no one can see him, and she takes enough from Sebastian to ensure no one questions his weakened state.”

I nod, processing this information. Because with Victoria gone, Aerix will only have me and Sophia to feed from—and he never takes close to enough from me to make me weak. He likes to have me strong for him.

Which means he’ll have to take more from her.

“What will happen to Sophia?” I ask, hoping he’ll answer instead of leaving me wondering.

“She’ll be weak, but alive. As for you... I’ll continue to only feed from you once a day,” he confirms my suspicion, his fingers trailing down my throat and lingering over his favorite spot to feed. “I like you strong, . I need you strong. And when I drink from Sophia... I want you to watch.”

A dark thrill pulses through me.

“I need you to know that she’s only a necessity. That I’ll never want her as anything other than a meal, because everything I do is for you,” he continues, rough and urgent, his fingers digging into my shoulders. “Do you understand? Do you trust me enough to do this for me?”

His wings flare, and his lips part slightly, like they always do when he’s thinking about feeding on me.

“I’ll watch,” I promise, reaching up to trace the sharp line of his jaw. “I want to see.”

“Good.” His eyes dilate with savage satisfaction, wind swirling around us, his breaths quickening. “Because I never want you to doubt, even for a second, that you’re the only one I hunger for.”

He closes the distance between us before I can respond, his mouth claiming mine with the same burning intensity he’s had since the night we said we loved each other and he carved his name onto my hip.

“You’ll be safe here with me,” he murmurs, scooping me into his arms and carrying me to the bed, pulling at my clothes in a desperate fervor as he removes them one by one. “I’ll have art supplies brought to your quarters. Books. Dresses. Anything you want.” His voice drops to a whisper that sends chills down my spine. “Because you’re mine until the stars burn out and the realms crumble into dust.”

I tangle my fingers through his silky hair, tugging just enough to make him groan.

“And I want every part of you,” I tell him. “Your darkness. Your hunger. Your love. Because if it’s for me, I want it all.”

Frost crackles across the sheets as he lays me down, his wings flaring with anticipation and desire.

“Say it again, .” His gaze burns into mine as he hovers on top of me, leaving a torturously few inches between my body and his.

“I love you,” I tell him, and he shudders, sinking into me in a fluid motion that steals my breath away.

“And I love you,” he says as he begins to move inside me, drawing a gasp from my

throat as need for him burns through my veins, threatening to consume me in a single heartbeat. “You have every broken, brutal piece of me, and I’ll destroy anyone who tries to take you from me.”

“Make them bleed.” I move my hand up to trace my fingers across the base of his wings, and he presses his forehead to mine with a sharp inhale, as if I’m undoing him with each word I speak.

“For you, I’ll do anything,” he growls, and from there, the night dissolves into a blur of sensation—his hands, his mouth, and his wings enclosing me in a cage I never want to escape. He worships my body with a manic intensity, like he’s branding himself into my soul.

And far later, cradled in the arms of my night prince as sleep claims me, I know I’ve made my choice. I’ve chosen darkness. I’ve chosen him.

And I’m going to stay with him—always.

RIVEN

“I didn’t think we’d get here so... quickly,” Sapphire says from beside me, gazing up at the Winter Palace, its icy spires stabbing the dawn sky.

More specifically, at the windows of my quarters. The same quarters she broke into weeks ago, where I would have ended up killing her if she hadn’t been in her projected form.

“Me, either,” I admit, my sword drawn, ready for anything.

I needed more time to think this through. Everything that’s happened since Sapphire fell into my life has resulted in us stumbling from crisis to crisis, trying to survive day by day. I assumed we’d have time to create a more detailed plan before returning the Winter Court, but apparently, Anteros and the Lost Fae Temple had other ideas.

“At least the palace hasn’t changed,” I say, ice crawling over the snow beneath my feet. “Sharp, imposing, and ready to freeze the heart of anyone who doesn’t belong.”

Sapphire’s shoulder brushes mine, her water magic responding to my frost. “And do I belong here now?” she asks softly. “Or am I still the outsider you dragged through three deadly trials in an attempt to break my body and soul?”

“You’re the Winter Princess,” I remind her, guilt rushing through my veins at the reminder of how badly my trials hurt her. I will never, ever stop trying to make it up to her, even though there’s no way I possibly can. “Although, I’m unsure my father will see it that way.”

She glances at me, her smile tight. “If he tries to kill me, at least it won’t be the most traumatic thing that’s happened to me this month,” she says so casually that one would think she’s been having near death experiences her entire life.

Frost travels up the blade of my sword, covering it completely.

“He’s not the only one with ice in his veins,” I say, meeting her gaze. “If he tries to kill you again...”

“Then we defend ourselves, like we always do,” she says steadily. “But we came here to help him—not to fight him. You don’t have to lose him when we can still save him.” Her gaze softens, a reminder that she’d follow me to the depths of the cosmos. “You deserve to have your father back.”

I don’t deserve you.

The words are on the tip of my tongue.

But I don’t say them. Because after what we experienced in the temple—after I saw myself through her eyes—maybe I’m deserving of far more than I thought.

“I love you,” I say instead, and it comes out so naturally that it’s impossible to remember a time when it wasn’t true. “More than anything. And you know how badly I want to help my father, but if this court tries to tear us apart...” My grip on my sword tightens. “I’ll bury it in ice before I let them take you from me.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” She reaches for my free hand, and the ice that was covering the blade melts. “Because I love you, too. And I want you to be happy. So, you’re going to do what you do best—fight smart, stay in control, and win. We both will.”

“Careful,” I say, leaning in close. “You have no idea how hard it is to think straight when you talk to me like that.”

Her lips curve into a soft, knowing smile. “Then focus. Because we’re not done here. Not by a longshot.”

I exhale slowly, dragging my gaze from her mouth back to the looming palace.

“So, Winter Prince...” she says, and my chest aches with longing at the teasing note in her voice. “What’s the plan?”

“We walk in, and we finish this,” I say, steady and sharp as steel. “We save my father from himself, gather our army, and prepare to face the Night Court.”

She goes for the Star Disc, but I catch her wrist, a bolt of frost crackling in the space between us.

“Keep it hidden—but still accessible—for now,” I tell her. “The last thing we need is my father seeing a goddess-forged weapon in your hand before he drinks the potion.”

She nods once, slipping the Disc into the folds of her cloak.

I draw in a breath, steadying myself. “We’ll walk in with deference—not defiance,” I continue. “I’ll invoke protocol. We’ll show him the potion. We’ll offer it as a gift from the Summer Court. A gesture of alliance—not a threat of rebellion.”

Her brow creases. “You think he’ll buy that?”

“No,” I admit. “His paranoia will tear at him, but if he lashes out and we don’t strike back, he might listen. We’ll obviously defend ourselves if it comes to it, but we’ll also let him see that we’re strong, united, and his to command if he accepts our help.”

“And if he doesn’t accept our help?” she asks.

I meet her gaze, frost curling at my fingertips.

“Then we’ll show him there’s more than one way to secure a crown.”

We stand there for a beat, the weight of what’s coming pressing down so heavily that even the snow beneath my boots feels fragile.

Sapphire exhales slowly and reaches for her dagger. “All right,” she says. “Let’s do this.”

The moment the words leave her lips, Ghost moves to my left and Nebula moves to Sapphire’s right, both familiars eerily silent, their bodies tense and alert.

We slip around the side of the palace until the main gates loom—towering pillars of ice and steel, with a small army of soldiers who once obeyed me without question stationed there.

“They’ve doubled security since we left,” I say softly, glancing at Sapphire. “Stay close.”

Her water magic swirls in response to my frost, our powers intertwining in the space between us.

As we approach, I recognize one of my father’s most loyal soldiers—Valerian. His beard is white with frost, his eyes narrowing as he takes in our approach.

“My Lord Prince,” he says, carefully neutral. “We received word of your... departure from the Winter Court. Your return is unexpected.”

“I’m sure it is,” I reply, keeping my voice level despite the ice forming at my fingertips. “We require an immediate audience with the king.”

Valerian’s jaw tightens, and he glances uneasily at the five guards beside him. “There are specific orders regarding your return, my lord,” he says, inching a hand toward the hilt of his sword.

He’s welcome to try, but he should know better than to attack. After all, he knows what I was before I left—cold, calculated, and deadly. As for now... the extent of the magic I have with my soul bound to Sapphire’s would terrify him.

“We invoke royal protocol to have an audience with King Nivian,” I say, letting the ice in my tone match the frost curling around my boots. “Stand aside, Captain.”

Ghost lets out a low growl, the sound vibrating through the frozen air. Beside him, Nebula’s muscles tense, her golden coat almost glowing against the snow.

Valerian’s gaze flicks to my sword, to Ghost, to Sapphire, then back at me, calculating his odds. “And the escaped summer fae?” he asks. “The one who you were supposed to have killed in your trials? Along with her...” He trails off, glancing at Nebula. “Summer familiar?”

“The Summer Princess is my wife,” I state, lifting my chin. “Now, if you have any sense of self preservation, you’ll let us pass.”

Fear crosses Valerian’s eyes as he looks back and forth between me and Sapphire. The other guards straighten, not daring to meet our gazes, their breath crystallizing in the air.

Finally, he steps back, his jaw clenched.

“I’m sure the king will be interested to hear of this recent development,” he says, and then he and the others escort us past the gates, through the halls of the palace, and into the throne room.

RIVEN

The throne room is colder than I remember.

Ice crusts the massive pillars in jagged formations that weren't there when I left, and the frost on the marble floor creeps up the walls like climbing vines. Icicles hang from the chandelier overhead, beautiful in their deadliness, and the windows are covered with frost.

The air hums with madness. Corruption.

Dread curls through my stomach at the memory of the older version of myself—the Lonely King—creating frost patterns along those same windowpanes. My first meeting with Ghost, the wedding kiss in the water with Sapphire, and my sword impaling the mysterious night fae.

I will not become the Lonely King. Whatever happens in the confrontation with my father, I will not take his crown.

Valerian positions his guards at the entrance, while four more emerge from the shadows to line the perimeter. They stand at attention, although their eyes dart between Sapphire and me, waiting for the slightest excuse to attack.

“Stay alert,” I murmur to Sapphire. “Judging from the state of the throne room, my father’s mind is fracturing faster than the court dares to admit.”

She nods, her water magic humming beneath the surface.

Ghost and Nebula move closer to our sides, their muscles coiled and ready.

Finally, the doors at the far end of the hall crack open, and my father strides in. His long, leopard fur cloak trails behind him, and a crown of ice glistens atop his dark, silver-streaked hair. His eyes—wild, glacial, and sharp—lock onto mine with a fury I haven't seen since the day he told me my mother was gone.

Magic ripples from him in waves, the temperature in the room plummeting further.

“So,” he says, his voice a deadly whisper that carries across the room, “the traitor prince returns—with the Summer spy who should have died by his hand.”

I step forward, placing myself slightly in front of Sapphire. “Father?—”

“Silence!” he roars, and spears of ice erupt from the floor around him. “You dare call me father? After what you’ve done?”

The guards tense, hands moving to their weapons.

“You murdered my knights,” my father continues, each word accompanied by another spike of ice shooting from the floor. “You fled the court with a condemned traitor. You abandoned your duties, your throne, and your blood.” His eyes narrow to slits. “You are no son of mine.”

I stand steady—as I’ve always done—not letting him see how much every word shakes my soul.

“We’re here to help you,” I say, keeping my voice measured despite the frost threatening to spiral out of my fingertips.

A bitter laugh escapes him. “Help me? By bringing the Summer Court’s assassin into

my throne room?”

His attention snaps to Sapphire, and he hurls a dagger at her heart.

Ice erupts from my right hand, creating a shield. At the same time, water from my left hand coils in a sharp current, wrapping around the projectile and redirecting it away from Sapphire.

The weapon crashes into the marble pillar behind us, nearly impaling the head of one of the guards in the process.

Sapphire’s fingers are inches from her dagger—or to her Star Disc—but she doesn’t draw. Instead, she glances at me, silently confirming what we already decided: it’s too soon to reveal our strongest weapon.

My father staggers back, his eyes wide.

“What—” he begins, staring at the mixture of water and ice swirling around us. “You wield water?”

I lower my shield, keeping the water dancing at my fingertips.

“Yes,” I say, holding his silver gaze.

His face contorts, twisted by fury and madness. “You are of Winter!” he snarls. “You cannot wield Summer’s gifts!”

“Yet here I stand.” My voice rings with hard finality. “Still your son, no matter how much you want to deny it.”

Sapphire steps closer to me, her elbow nearly touching mine.

My magic hums in response, although I keep my focus trained on my father. It would only take a moment of distraction for him to get in another strike.

“You are corrupted!” he says unleashing a storm of ice shards that slam against my shield. The impact rattles me to my core, but I hold my ground, dragging Sapphire behind me.

“The only reason I’m not slicing him with the Star Disc is because of you,” she murmurs so only I can hear.

“Smart girl,” I whisper back, letting my shield ease just enough to study my father’s face.

If he loses control completely, the only person allowed to end him is me.

The ice around my heart thickens at the thought.

“Father,” I say, my voice carrying the weight of authority I’ve earned through blood and sacrifice, “Sapphire is not a traitor. She’s the Summer Princess. And she’s my wife.”

His eyes narrow, and the ice storm around him grows.

“Remember when you mistook her for Queen Lysandra?” I press, stepping forward, feeling Sapphire just behind me. “Your instincts were generally correct. Because Sapphire is Queen Lysandra’s daughter, therefore making her the Summer Princess.”

His posture shifts.

“Explain,” he demands, and as he sits on his throne, the ice daggers rising from the floor quiver and melt slightly.

Even madness can't dull his political senses enough to ignore the ramifications of killing the Summer Queen's daughter.

I need to take hold of his moment of clarity and use it before it's gone.

"Everything I've done has been to protect our court from the threats beyond our borders," I say, as calm and measured as always.

Ice erupts from around the throne.

"I want to know about the Summer traitor," my father threatens, his voice rising.

I nod, letting no emotions show through. After all, the best way to prevent my father's outbursts is to not antagonize them in the first place.

"Sapphire was a changeling." My voice is steady, although my magic thrums beneath my skin, bracing for his reaction. "The strongest, most gifted changeling I've ever encountered."

My love for her is breaking through with every word I speak, but honestly, I don't care. Let them see it. Let it carve its way into their frozen hearts and prove that love, when wielded correctly, can be the deadliest of weapons.

My father's eyes narrow, calculating and suspicious, but listening.

"Sapphire's magic was necessary for a project of mine," I continue, "one I believed would strengthen the Winter Court against the threats circling our borders."

My father's gaze flickers.

I can see the question forming—after all, he's aware that winter fae are being stolen

near the borders as much as I am—but I press on before he can ask.

“My intention was always to get Sapphire out of this court and use her to our advantage. So, when the knights attempted to stop me, I made a choice to protect my... investment.” I don’t soften the words, and I don’t apologize. He wouldn’t respect that. He’d perceive it as weakness. “Upon arriving at the Summer Court, we met with Queen Lysandra. She offered us a deal—an alliance between our courts, uniting our magic to fend off what lurks beyond our realm. But she had one condition.”

I raise my hand slowly, showing him and everyone else in this throne room the mark that glows around my ring finger.

Sapphire mirrors the motion.

“We married,” I declare. “Which makes us the Prince and Princess of the Winter and Summer Courts.”

RIVEN

A charged silence ripples through the room as my father's eyes dart between the glowing rings, to Sapphire's steady posture, then back to me. His grip on the throne's arm digs so deep that the ice cracks beneath his fingers.

"How do I know this isn't an elaborate deception?" he finally asks. "That the Summer Court hasn't corrupted my son to infiltrate the Winter throne?"

I draw the sealed letter from my cloak, the royal parchment bearing Queen Lysandra's signature and her Summer Court seal—a blooming lotus surrounded by flowing water.

And then, holding it in plain view, I approach the throne in measured steps.

Sapphire follows, close enough that we almost touch.

My father rises and meets us at the bottom of the steps, his eyes locked on the letter. The throne room remains silent, every guard on alert, every icicle overhead seeming to tremble with expectation.

My father snatches the letter with frost-tipped fingers, breaks the seal, and scans its contents. His frown deepens with each line he reads.

"A clever forgery, perhaps," he mutters, although the uncertainty in his voice betrays him.

After all, he knows I can't lie. Not outright.

"There's more proof," Sapphire says, and she beckons to Ghost and Nebula, who approach with silent grace. "Our soul-bound familiars."

The snow leopard and cheetah circle each other in perfect unison, then press their noses together. A glow rises between them, winter frost meeting summer warmth, merging into a shimmering aura that swirls around their sleek bodies.

"Soul twins," my father says, awe creeping into his voice. "I haven't seen such a pairing in centuries."

"Because Winter and Summer have been divided for too long," I say, pressing our advantage while his curiosity outweighs his paranoia. "And like our familiars, Sapphire and I are more than married. We share a soul. Which is why we share each other's magic, too."

I summon my magic again—not just the familiar frost, but the flowing water. They weave together, neither canceling the other. Instead, they enhance and strengthen, becoming something greater.

Sapphire matches me, calling up her own swirling blend of water and ice.

"This is..." My father circles us slowly, watching our magic dance. "Unprecedented."

A flicker of the scholar he once was—before the madness consumed him—shows in his fascinated gaze.

But it's quickly overridden by suspicion.

"Why have you returned with this union?" he demands, ice spears shooting up from

the steps with so much suddenness that I step back. “What purpose does it serve?”

“We want to save both our courts,” Sapphire answers quickly. “From the Night Court.”

My father stills, and the ice spears melt back into the floor.

“It appears you know of the Night Court,” I say slowly, surprise stirring in my chest. Because if my father knew of the Night Court’s existence, surely he would have mentioned it at some point?

He scoffs, folding his arms over his fur cloak. “The Night Court is a children’s tale to scare young fae,” he says, brushing it off. “One I banned from my court a millennium ago.”

“The Night Court is real,” Sapphire counters, and my magic hums at my fingertips, fighting to break free—to protect her from anything my father might throw at her. “We encountered a night fae ourselves. We captured her. We interrogated her.”

The guards in the room shift on their feet.

I move closer to Sapphire, our shoulders touching.

“They’re the ones abducting winter fae from our borders,” I start where she left off. “They’re turning us into what they are—hybrids of winter fae and vampires.”

My father presses his lips together, rage swirling in his eyes.

He knew.

Somehow—impossibly—he knew.

“The Night Court has allied with the Blood Coven to resurrect Ambrogio, the first vampire,” I continue, pushing him further.

Ice explodes from the floor around his throne, spearing upward in chaotic patterns.

“Ambrogio is a myth,” he hisses, but there’s a new fear in his eyes, as if he knows just how much danger this myth might pose.

“He’s real,” I say. “And the Night King and Queen plan for their court to join the Blood Coven and become Revenants—beings with the powers of both vampires and fae, but far stronger than either.”

Sapphire’s voice joins mine, calm but urgent. “United, as Summer and Winter, we can defeat them,” she says, and my father’s breathing quickens, ice crackling up the walls.

“Spies... conspiracies... ancient vampires resurrected...” he mutters, pacing erratically. “Plots within plots. The courts merging, magic changing its nature...” He whirls on us, frost rolling in unstable waves beneath his feet, icicles lengthening overhead. “You dare spin these impossibilities to cloud my mind?”

I move slowly, deliberately, every gesture measured to avoid triggering another outburst. Because my father’s madness comes in waves. And now I see it in his eyes—the moments of clarity drowning beneath chaos.

“I bring more than stories and alliances,” I say calmly, careful not to challenge him.

His frost-laced stare drills into me, daring me to falter.

When I was a child, I might have stumbled. Now, not so much.

“As I mentioned, I’ve been working on a project for years,” I continue. “One I began long before this chaos escalated, that can help bring you clarity.”

His brow twitches, suspicion sharp and immediate. “Clarity,” he repeats, the icicles from the ceiling inching closer to the floor. “You think I’m clouded?”

Sapphire shifts beside me, her fingers twitching, seemingly ready to use the Star Disc if this goes wrong.

I choose my next words with the same precision I use while forging a blade.

“I think you carry the weight of centuries on your shoulders,” I say, pulling a small glass vial from my cloak. “This potion isn’t meant to weaken your rule. It’s meant to sharpen your vision. Because with the Night Court rising, we need every weapon we can get, including the strongest mind in the Winter Court. Yours.”

He clenches his fists, his eyes darting around the room as he digests my words.

“You speak of war,” he finally states, his voice gaining steadiness as the calculating edge returns.

“I do.” I hold his gaze. “The Night Court believes us divided. They think they can crush both Winter and Summer while we remain torn by old grudges.” I tilt my head toward Sapphire. “Our marriage is one step toward true unity. This potion is another. It will free your mind of doubt and confusion, so we can face the darkness head-on, together.”

Sapphire’s hand brushes mine, our magic mingling.

My father stares at the vial, then lifts his gaze to me.

“Is this why you killed my knights?” he snaps, jarring me so much that I almost flinch. “To protect this potion?”

Slowly, I inhale, steadying myself with the imagery of a layer of ice around my heart. Frost curls through me, my chest tightening as I push down the brewing storm of emotions—the pain, the anger, the betrayal, and the grief—desperate to cling to this final attempt at peace.

“I did what was necessary to finish what I started,” I say after reining in the storm, keeping my hand steady as I extend the vial. “Drink, Father. Restore your clarity and be the king who forges peace with Summer to defeat the greatest threat this realm has ever seen.”

RIVEN

“No,” my father says, the word landing like a shard of ice. “You think me a fool? You think I can’t see the trap you’ve laid?”

“It’s not a trap,” Sapphire says, steady despite the tension. “It’s help.”

“Help from the Summer Court? From Lysandra’s daughter, who wed my son without my blessing?” A sharp gesture of his hand makes spikes of ice erupt around the room, one of them impaling a nearby knight in the process. Ice can’t kill our kind, but still, the result isn’t pretty—neither is his hair-raising scream. “You dare preach unity after creeping into my kingdom like a thief?”

I stand firm, even as frost causes an arm of one of the chandeliers to break off and crash to the floor with a crack that makes the closest guard flinch.

“You bring me poison dressed as medicine,” he continues, his voice rising. “You speak of unity while plotting to weaken me and take my throne!”

“Father—” I begin, but he slashes the air with one hand, ice forming a barrier between us.

“I will not drink your potion,” he growls. “I need no Summer filth in my veins. I am King Nivian of the Winter Court. My mind is as sharp as the ice I command.” His eyes snap to the guards. “Confine them. Now.”

The guards step forward, hands on their weapons.

Ghost growls, the fur along his spine bristling, while Nebula tenses beside Sapphire, her tail lashing in warning.

I exhale slowly.

Looks like it's time for Plan B.

And while I knew this might happen, it doesn't make what I'm about to do any easier.

"Enough." My magic flares, a slushy mixture of frost and water spreading across the floor in a glittering circle, boxing me and Sapphire in.

The guards halt, uncertain, and I keep my gaze locked on my father's.

"If you won't drink the potion willingly," I continue, "then prove you don't need it."

A hush settles over the room. The guards shift, hands tightening on their swords. Sapphire's shoulder brushes mine, her presence anchoring me, as it always seems to do.

"What are you suggesting, traitor prince?" my father asks, his voice dangerously soft, ice lining the edges of his cloak.

I draw myself up to my full height, frost crackling along my arms, up my neck, and into my hair.

"I invoke the ancient right of the Winter Court," I tell him, hardening the slush around me so it's slicker than the ice I wield. "The Trial of Frost and Blood."

Shocked murmurs ripple through the guards.

My father's eyes blaze, outrage and disbelief flashing across his features.

"You dare?" he hisses, and ice crawls up the windows, the glass groaning under the pressure. "You challenge your king? Your own father?"

"I do," I reply steadily. "If you refuse to clear your mind with the potion, then show the court that your judgment isn't clouded. Prove you're the king we need in this time of looming war."

Sapphire's fingers clamp around my arm, her nails digging into my skin.

," she whispers, her voice tight. "What are you doing?"

I don't answer her. I can't right now. This is hard enough to do to him, let alone to justify to her.

So, I keep my eyes locked on my father, the icicles around him shaking with lethal unpredictability, the massive windows cracking from the weight of the frost.

"The Trial of Frost and Blood," he repeats slowly, as if testing the words on his tongue. "You challenge me for the right to rule?"

"I challenge you to prove you still can."

The distinction is important. Because I'm not here to steal his crown. I'm giving him one last chance to hold onto it.

From there... well, we'll deal with that when it comes to it.

"Very well," he says at last, a cruel smile spreading across his face. "The Trial it is. Although you may regret this path, traitor prince. I taught you much, but not all I

know.”

My jaw tightens, and I steady my breathing, picturing a layer of ice around my heart to stop it from burning. Because this isn’t just a fight for the court. It’s a fight for my soul. For the part of me that refuses to become him.

The Lonely King.

My father turns to Valerian.

“Stay back with five of your choosing to guard the Prince and Princess. The rest of you—gather every noble, every warrior, and every servant who can be spared.” He fixes his gaze on me again. “One hour, in the Frost Arena. Let the whole court see the fate of those who dare to defy me.”

With a sweep of his cloak, he strides from the throne room, icicles dropping from the ceiling and shattering on the marble floor in his wake. Guards peel off after him in hurried steps, careful to avoid the plummeting projectiles.

The moment they’re gone, Sapphire whirls to face me, her brilliant blue eyes wide with panic. “Are you insane?” she demands, water swirling around her in restless currents. “What even is this Trial? What did you just drag us into? What did you do?”

I exhale shakily, forcing steadiness into my tone. “The Trial of Frost and Blood is an ancient tradition,” I explain, keeping my voice low. “A formal combat. It’s the only way I can test my father’s ability to rule without being branded a traitor. It ends when one yields or—” I stop myself, but she finishes my sentence in a fearful hush.

“When one dies?”

“Death is rare.” I aim for reassurance, even though my chest clenches at the thought.

“Rare isn’t never,” she says, grabbing my shirt and pulling me close, her warmth burning through the carefully constructed ice around my heart. “, the vision—the one from the Cosmic Tides. You sitting alone on the Winter Throne, broken and empty. What if this is how it happens? What if you’re forced to kill him, and you become the Winter King?”

Her fear crashes over me through our bond, raw and desperate.

“I won’t kill him,” I promise, covering her hand with mine. “That’s not why I invoked the trial. I just need him to agree to drink the potion.”

“And if he doesn’t yield?” she presses. “If he forces you to make that choice?”

I pause as memories of my father’s training snap through my mind—every bruise, and every ice-sharpened warning. Because the truth is, I don’t know. My father has never been one to surrender.

“I’ll do everything I can to find another way,” I say, although it sounds hollow, even to my own ears. “I won’t become that version of myself. I promised you, remember? No matter what futures the Tides showed us, we forge our own path. Together.”

“This seems like the exact kind of path that could lead to that future,” she mutters, gathering herself enough to continue. “Let me help you. We can fight him together.”

I shake my head. “The Trial is one-on-one. Father against son, king against heir. If you interfere, the guards will kill you on the spot. And I won’t risk that. I won’t risk losing you.”

Not again. Not ever again.

I reach for her left hand, her magic warm against my skin. “I know what I’m doing,

Sapphire,” I tell her, searching her eyes and tracing the mark on her palm, desperate for her to believe in me.

Because without her, I’m nothing.

Just when I fear she might move away from my touch, she shivers, her eyes softening.

“I trust you,” she says, and I relax slightly, grateful for her love. “I just don’t trust ancient fae traditions that involve combat with your mentally unstable father.”

Despite everything, I give her a half-smile. “That’s fair.”

Ghost nudges my leg, while Nebula presses against Sapphire.

“We should prepare,” I say, looking around at the guards in the throne room. “Word will spread like an avalanche. The arena will be packed. Every noble will want to witness the spectacle, hoping for a chance to curry favor with whoever emerges victorious.”

Sapphire nods, then steps closer, pressing her forehead to my chest. “Promise me something,” she says, her voice muffled against my shirt.

“Anything.”

She looks up, her eyes fierce with determination. “Promise that no matter what happens in the arena, you won’t become the Lonely King from the vision.”

My eyes flutter closed as I give her forehead a soft kiss, then pull away enough to meet her gaze. “I swear on every drop of magic I possess,” I whisper, tightening my hold on her, “that no matter what happens in that arena, I’m not going to lose you—or

myself.”

She clings to me for a moment longer, then straightens, her water magic settling into calmer currents. “Then let’s make sure you’re ready to kick your father’s ass,” she says, her voice gaining a hard edge.

A surprised laugh escapes me. “That’s definitely the plan.”

We leave the throne room, Ghost and Nebula at our sides, as servants and guards rush by to spread the word. Already, I sense the murmurs through the palace halls—shock, excitement, and a hint of dread.

The Winter Court is about to witness something it hasn’t seen in centuries.

And I’m about to face everything my father ever taught me. Every icy lesson about control and emotionless perfection, and every brutal training session where weakness meant failure.

This isn’t just a fight for my father’s sanity.

It’s for everything I’ve become since meeting Sapphire—for this version of myself that feels, loves, and refuses to be the cold, hollow prince my father tried to forge me into.

RIVEN

The Frost Arena is like a crown of winter carved from a frozen lake, the smooth ice reflecting the sun's rays with blinding brilliance.

Guards escort Sapphire and me through the entrance tunnel, Ghost and Nebula walk beside us.

"Remember your promise," Sapphire says as we reach the point where we're told to separate.

"I will," I promise, inhaling the steady pull of her magic—the warmth of her skin, and the heartbeat that grounds me. "I love you."

She tightens her grip on my hand, frost— my frost—crackling at her fingertips. "I love you, too. And I need you to fight like the man I fell in love with—not the prince your father tried to carve you into. Because you're stronger than him, . Don't ever let him make you doubt that."

I exhale slowly, the weight of her faith settling onto my chest like armor.

"He rules with fear," I tell her, but even though my voice is low and steady, inside I'm a blizzard held barely in check. "I'll win because I don't need fear. I have purpose. I have you."

A guard approaches, breaking the moment. "Princess, this way to the royal viewing box," he says, motioning to where she'll be heading—a box I've sat in many times,

shielding my heart with ice as I watched countless displays of horror and bloodshed.

Sapphire gives my hand one last squeeze. “Don’t let him get in your head,” she reminds me, and then she follows the guard to the box.

Ghost and Nebula follow at her heels.

Alone now, I walk to the center of the arena, every step measured, every movement deliberate as I study my surroundings.

Walls of ice stretch toward the sky, circling the sunken combat floor. Tiered seating accommodates nobility in the lower stands, and commoners in the upper ones. At the highest points of the structure, massive ice sculptures of past Winter Kings loom over the battlefield, their frozen eyes following my every movement.

This isn’t just a fight. It’s a spectacle. A ritual as old as our court itself. And my challenge has drawn every winter fae who can squish their way into the stands from their homes to watch as father fights son—king against prince.

Across from me, my father enters, controlled, cold, and cruel. He doesn’t stop until he stands ten paces away, chin lifted, eyes full of disdain.

He unsheathes his sword and examines the blade.

The Master of Ceremonies stops the chatter, his voice loud enough to fill the arena from the box across from Sapphire’s.

“The Winter Court bears witness!” he says, his arms raised in excitement. “King Nivian Draevor and Prince Draevor are bound by blood and now separated by challenge. The Trial of Frost and Blood has been invoked and accepted!”

My father's eyes remain on mine as he takes his position opposite me. There's no warmth there—no acknowledgment that I'm anyone of note to him. There's only cold calculation and the madness that's consumed him for far too long.

"You were always weak, boy," he says, his laugh low and mocking. "Did you really think you'd become anything more than a trembling shadow at my feet?"

I stand strong, refusing to let him get to me.

"I challenged you so you can prove you're fit to rule, and to convince you to accept the clarity I'm offering you," I reply evenly. "Not to take your crown."

Ice shoots up along my father's blade.

Chatter sounds from the audience.

"The rules of combat are thus," the Master continues, silencing them. "Magic and weapons only. Both contestants are to stay inside the fighting ring. The trial ends with surrender or death." He pauses, his eyes meeting mine with something like pity. "May the coldest ice withstand the thaw."

The crowd repeats his final sentence, he strikes his staff against the ground, and the trial begins.

My father's first attack comes with no warning—a blast of razor-sharp ice shards that explode from the ground at my feet.

I leap sideways, summoning a shield that deflects the worst of it. But one shard grazes my cheek, drawing first blood.

"Too slow," my father taunts, circling me with predatory grace. "Will you cower

behind your shield forever? Or will you fight like the warrior I trained you to be?"

I launch my first attack, and from there, he fights like a hunter cornering prey. Methodical, patient, and cruelly precise. He deflects my frost-covered blade with insulting ease, barely moving as his magic responds to his will.

"Is this what the Summer Princess taught you?" he sneers. "Have you forgotten everything I beat into you—discipline, control, and excellence—because you tasted a different court's magic?"

I grit my teeth, focusing my power into a more concentrated attack—a spear of ice that shoots toward him with deadly speed.

He sidesteps it, but I graze his arm, pushing him back.

His smile vanishes as he rights himself. "Love makes you weak," he says, his voice dripping with venom. "Your wife is a liability. A burning chain around your neck. She will melt everything that made you strong."

He glances at Sapphire in her viewing box, and I make the mistake of following his gaze.

It's all the opening he needs.

Ice erupts in a circle around him, shooting outward in deadly spikes.

I dodge most of them, but one pierces my shoulder, pain shooting down my arm.

I don't make a sound. I don't even flinch.

"Your mother was weak, too," he says with a sickly amused laugh, and I draw my

sword, charging before he can continue.

His blade meets mine with a crash that sends shock waves through the arena. Ice against ice, king against prince, father against son.

“She believed in mercy. In compassion,” he hisses, each word punctuated by a strike that forces me back. “And what did it get her, other than a frozen heart?”

I block out his words, fighting back with everything I have. Ice forms at my command, turning into weapons, shields, and barriers. I’m quick, using my grace to counter his brute force, but for every successful blow I land, he counters with two more.

The crowd watches in silence, the only sounds the clash of our blades and the crackle of magic. From the corner of my eye, I see Sapphire leaning forward, her knuckles white as she grips the railing of the viewing box.

“You think you won because you married her?” My father laughs, deflecting another of my attacks. “Your little fairy-tale romance will shatter under the weight of reality. When it’s done, you’ll be alone. You already learned it once, with your mother. And look what she did? She left us. She left you,” he continues, each word breaking whatever remained of the wreckage her death left around my heart. “She saw how her softness was making you weak, and she chose to die rather than stay. This perverse marriage to the Summer Princess is no different. It will break you all over again. And this time, you won’t survive it.”

His words hammer into the deepest parts of my soul, and then the tip of his blade is catching my side, cutting through flesh and knocking me to the ground.

A scream pushes at the back of my throat, but I force it down, refusing to give him the satisfaction of it. Instead, I jump to my feet and strengthen my shield. The cut

along my side throbs, sharp and deep as it heals, the blood already freezing on my skin.

The pain is nothing compared to the agony twisting inside my chest.

You will always be alone.

I throw more magic into my shield, making it larger, thicker, and harder.

“No one will ever truly care about you,” he snarls, stalking forward. “Not even your precious Summer Princess. She might cling to her fantasy, but you and I both know the truth.” His voice drops to a softer, more vicious tone. “I made you what you are. Ice, through and through. Cold. Hard. Empty.”

He laughs, sharp and cruel as he hurls more ice daggers at me that I block at the last second.

“No one loves a heart that’s been frozen solid, chiseled into something sharp and hollow,” he continues, shards of ice bursting from the ground, forcing me to dodge them to avoid being speared or knocked to my feet. “They survive it. They bleed for it. They fear it. And then they leave. Because all ice does is crack and break. And when it’s over, you’ll be left alone, drowning in the shattered pieces of it.”

He rushes at me with his sword.

As I block his attacks, my time with him while I was growing up roars through my mind like an avalanche.

I’m thirteen, kneeling in the snow on the training ground after a humiliating defeat in front of the court.

My father loomed over me, his eyes filled with disgust.

“Emotion has no place in you,” he said, his voice a whip across my skin. “Swallow it. Freeze it. Or it will tear you apart.”

Me at fifteen, standing amid the carnage of my first border skirmish. Blood on my hands. Horror in my chest. My sword shook.

“Fear makes you slow,” my father said from beside me. “Slow gets you killed. Bury it.”

Then, I’m twenty-one. I’d just given an order that ended in far more bloodshed than expected, doubt gnawing at me until it nearly broke through.

My father turned on me, his eyes shards of ice. “Right and wrong are for the weak,” he said. “The worthless. The undeserving. Harden doubt, or drown in it.”

It keeps coming.

“Falter in front of me again, and I’ll freeze you where you stand and watch you shatter and melt.”

“Hesitate, and I’ll exile you to the Wandering Wilds, where the monsters will eat you alive until not even your bones remain.”

“You deserve nothing but silence, solitude, and ice biting at your throat.”

“Emotion makes cracks. You crack, and I’ll grind the pieces beneath my heel and throw them into the ravine.”

The memories echo in my mind, tightening around my chest like chains. They’re

pulling me down, dragging me back to that boy who swallowed every scream and buried every tear. Who told himself that if he could just be perfect—just be cold enough—maybe he'd be worthy.

Then I feel Sapphire through the soul bond.

She's steady. Warm. Here.

She knows me. The broken pieces, the sharp edges, and the fragments that never thaw. She's been inside the wrecked, shattered parts of my heart that were nearly destroyed by decades of my father's threats and malice. And despite it all, she loves me, anyway.

Still, as I grit my teeth and ground myself against my father's relentless cruelty, frost fills my chest and ice rushes my veins. Because even though Sapphire's fought like hell to make sure I'm not empty, frozen, or alone, I'll never be worthy to him.

Which is why there are only two options—force him to accept what I'm offering, or kill him.

RIVEN

“You want me to be cold?” I growl, raising my sword. “Fine. But don’t mistake it for weakness.”

“There it is,” my father sneers. “The ice beneath the rage. The callous monster you pretend you aren’t.”

I launch an attack, but he controls the battlefield with sheer precision, moving as if the laws of motion bend to his will. Frost swirls around him, shards of ice forming and melting at his command.

“I know every move you’ll make,” he taunts, sending a wave of frost that catches me off guard, throwing me against the barrier.

Shards of ice crack against my back, scraping through my shirt and biting into my skin.

“I created you,” he continues. “I forged you.”

I force myself upright, my vision blurring with pain. Blood drips from a cut above my eye, freezing on my skin.

The crowd’s silence has given way to murmurs, no doubt already speculating on the outcome of this increasingly one-sided battle.

But I won’t let myself fall. I won’t let him win.

“You forged nothing.” I unleash a torrent of ice daggers, followed by a wave of frost.

My attack connects, slicing into his side and forcing him back a step. A rush of triumph flares in my chest—until he straightens, his eyes hollow and cruel, merciless in their intent.

“No,” he agrees. “I failed. You failed. And because of that, you are nothing to me.”

The arena floor cracks beneath us, groaning as ice spikes erupt from every surface, cutting off my escape routes. I try to counter, my magic surging as I attempt to neutralize his, but it’s like trying to stop an avalanche already in motion.

He hurtles forward with his blade again, every blow landing with crushing force against mine, driving me backward.

Eventually, a particularly vicious strike knocks my sword from my hand.

The weapon skids across the ice, coming to rest far beyond my reach.

Frostbite, I think the sword’s name that I gave it in childhood. One whispered in secret, a name I shared only with Ghost. It’s a name I haven’t thought about in years. Now, it tugs at something deep in me, making me yearn for the innocence I lost long ago, when swords were toys and enemies were shadows.

My father’s next attack knocks the air from my lungs, sending me to my knees.

Blood spatters the ice. The crowd takes a collective intake of breath, and Sapphire’s terror rushes through our bond.

My father stands over me, victorious, frost swirling around him.

His blade rests at my throat, the edge sharp enough to draw a thin line of blood without him applying any pressure at all.

“You never deserved to be my son,” he says through clenched teeth. “I gave you every chance to harness your power. Every lesson and scar were for your own good. And yet you remain soft. Weak.” He lifts his chin. “I deserved someone ruthless. Someone who understood that power is all that matters. Someone who would defend our court with an iron fist and never flinch from necessary cruelty. Someone who would savor the taste of blood on his lips and smile when his enemies begged for mercy. Someone who took what he wanted and owned it instead of opening his heart and loving it.”

I swallow past the blade at my throat, already well-aware of how my father wants me to be. Cruel and cold, caring for nothing but power, matching the chaotic madness that consumes him.

“Yield,” he commands, pressing the blade closer. “Admit your weakness and beg for the mercy you don’t deserve.”

Blood drips from a half-healed cut on my cheek as I lift my head to meet his gaze.

I could surrender. I could avoid becoming the Lonely King, consumed by ice, sitting on a throne I never wanted.

But... I don’t. Because her voice cuts through the silence, clear and steady.

“You don’t have to be like him,” Sapphire calls across the arena, and I don’t dare to look at her—not with my father’s blade at my throat. “You don’t have to fight the way he wants you to fight and win the way he wants you to win.”

My father’s eyes narrow. “This Trial is between father and son alone,” he says, and

then he's creating a spear of ice in his hand and hurling it at her heart.

Sapphire dodges—barely—the spear embedding itself in the arena wall behind her.

The crowd screams.

Queen Lysandra will likely want to burn down this court in retaliation for my father's attack on her daughter, but that's a problem for later. Because Sapphire's words spark a recognition in me, clearing my mind like a gust of wintry air.

Since we stepped foot in this arena, I've been fighting this battle on my father's terms, matching his cold precision and his merciless calculation. I've been trying to beat him at a game he's been playing for centuries—a game he taught me how to play since I was a child.

But that's not who I am anymore. That's not the man who fell in love with a star touched summer princess, who gave his last drops of life so she could live, and whose soul she called back from death. It's not the one who learned that vulnerability can be a strength, and that love is more powerful than fear.

It's not the one who gained magic from her—magic I've been too blinded by my childhood traumas to remember.

“Well?” my father demands, pressing the blade harder against my throat. “What will it be, boy? Surrender, or death?”

I look up at him, seeing him clearly for perhaps the first time in my life. Not as the terrifying king who shaped my childhood, but as a broken man consumed by fear and grief. Who lost his mind to it.

And in that moment, I let go.

Not of my will to fight, but of the need to win on his terms. I stop trying to be the warrior he molded me into, and instead, I let myself feel everything.

The pain of my wounds, even as they heal. The fear of unleashing too much of my strength in this battle, killing him, and becoming the Lonely King, lost in an icy wasteland. I feel my love for Sapphire, fierce and terrifying in its intensity. The grief for my mother, the longing for what could have been if she'd been patient and waited to drink that potion until it was finished instead of believing she could overcome the missing ingredient because she simply wanted it badly enough. I even feel compassion for my father, trapped in his own frozen hell, unable to escape.

I let it rise, and it consumes me.

The ice beneath me shimmers, responding not just to my magic, but to the water flowing through me from Sapphire. Water that doesn't freeze at my touch, but that twines with my frost, creating a brilliant, sparkling display throughout the arena.

The crowd gasps, their anticipation rising.

“What are you doing?” My father presses the blade harder against my throat, drawing another line of blood.

I open my palm.

Frostbite trembles where he lies on the ice, and then he shoots across the arena into my waiting hand, my fingers curling around his hilt.

My father stumbles back, his eyes wide. “Impossible.”

A tremor ripples through the crowd, and I rise to my feet as water, ice, and air swirl around me in a storm of harmonized power.

“You were right about one thing,” I tell him, my voice cutting through the chattering in the stands. “You did create me.”

Water droplets rise around me, freezing into razor-sharp fractals that catch the light and glitter with deadly promise.

“Every punishment taught me pain,” I continue, advancing on him with measured steps. “Every harsh lesson taught me precision. Every time you made me believe I wasn’t enough—“ I bring my sword up in a swift, merciless arc, “—taught me how to prove you wrong.”

My father’s face contorts with rage. “You ungrateful?—”

He hurls ice spears at me, but I don’t dodge. Instead, I raise my hand, and the air around me heats, melting his attack and shaping it into a tidal wave that I send crashing back at him.

My father roars, charging at me with his blade raised high. “You’ve been corrupted! You’ve been turned!”

His accusation rings hollow against my ears, more desperate than triumphant, and I parry his blow with brutal efficiency, our swords meeting with a clash that sends frost spiraling outward.

“I’ve been neither,” I counter, forcing him back with a warm gust of air. “I’ve evolved.”

And then, with swift precision, I use my combined air and water magic to create a slick path of slush beneath his feet.

He slips, and I lunge for the opening, disarming him with a strike so fast my blade

becomes a blur.

“You don’t control me anymore,” I say quietly, and then I call his sword into my other palm, force him to his knees with a blast of air, and hold him down with the tips of both blades to his throat.

RIVEN

Triumph surges through me, as cold as the ice coating the arena floor.

I could end this now. I could end him.

But then, like a spark of warmth in the ice, Sapphire's presence rushes through our bond. Her hope. Her fear. Her plea before I stepped into the arena.

Promise me you won't become the Lonely King.

I said yes. And I will never betray my word to her. I will never lose her trust.

So, I lower my voice, keeping it steady through the adrenaline.

"You are no longer fit to rule," I say to my father, the crossed blades at his throat catching the light, glinting with deadly promise. "But I'm not going to kill you right now."

He jerks against the blades, but I press them tighter, applying just enough pressure to remind him who holds the power.

Cold, deadly whirlpools swirl in his eyes.

"You claim you haven't been turned," he says, frost curling around him—frost I melt with heated air. "Yet, you're using air magic against me. Vampire magic. But at the same time, you're not a night fae. Your eyes aren't black, and your wings aren't

spread wide for all to see.” His smile twists with fevered certainty. “No... it’s worse than that. You’re one of them. You’re a Revenant.”

The single word echoes across the ice.

Murmurs ripple through the crowd. Nobles rise to their feet, their expressions shifting from awe to horror.

I have to end this—now. Before the entire Winter Court turns on their prince.

“I am not a Revenant,” I declare. “My air magic did not come from the Night Court, nor did it come from Ambrogio and the Blood Coven.”

The crowd quiets again.

Thank the gods the fae can’t lie.

My father’s brow furrows, confusion battling the madness. Doubt clouds his expression.

And I use it. I offer him—and the entire court—the truth.

“My water and air magic came from my wife,” I say, turning to the royal box, where Sapphire stands frozen, her hand poised at her cloak, ready to grab the Star Disc at a moment’s notice. “Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor, daughter of Queen Lysandra Solandriel of the Summer Court and King Damien Fairmont of the New York Vampire Clan.”

“Impossible.” My father twitches, and I press the blades deeper—not enough to kill, but enough to remind him of his place.

My heart races, a storm of terror and determination gathering in my chest.

Don't make me do this, I pray to any god who might care about the outcome of this battle. Don't push me to become the broken, empty shell I'll be if I'm forced to take his crown.

Because one word from my father would allow the guards to kill me. And while I'm powerful, my odds of surviving against everyone in this arena is slim to none.

But with a calculated swipe of my blade?

The crown will be mine, and the Winter Court will answer to me.

So, I call on my air magic, heating the blades, watching my father's skin sizzle under the metal.

He screams—a raw, harrowing sound that chills me to the core.

When he gets control over himself, I speak louder, seizing the stunned silence.

“Sapphire and I are more than just husband and wife. Our souls are bound,” I say, making sure my voice reaches even the highest of the stands. “With that bond, I gained her magic—air and water—and she gained my ice.”

My father trembles beneath the blades, fury warring confusion, but I refuse to release my hold.

“Sapphire and I are one,” I continue, speaking to my father now instead of the court. “We're not corrupted, and we're not turned. We're chosen by the gods themselves. And we will lead the Winter and Summer Courts to victory against the Night Court, if you swallow your pride and drink the potion.”

Ice erupts from his fingertips, shooting upward in jagged spikes.

I melt it with a blast of heated air, keeping my burning blades at his throat.

“If you drink it, I’ll let you live,” I tell him as I sheathe one sword, my other pressed hot against his throat as I reach into my cloak and withdraw the vial.

I hold it before him, careful to keep it out of his reach. In his madness, he might crush it simply to spite me, and everything Sapphire and I journeyed to the ends of the universe for will be lost.

“It’s the same potion she was trying to create before she died,” I say, uncorking the vial with my thumb, not needing to specify who she is. “She thought it would help her see clearly through her emotions. But she couldn’t get the last ingredient, and she drank it before it was ready. And then, as we both know, it killed her. However, with the help of the Summer Court, I finished it—for you. To give you the clarity she sought.”

Something in his expression breaks as he studies the potion.

And then, suddenly, he breaks.

“Maybe I deserve to share her fate.” He releases a strangled laugh, his eyes glistening with madness and grief. “To have it burn through me and silence the noise. Maybe that’s the only way I’ll be free.”

My heart twists. Because for all his cruelty, he loved her. And losing her broke something inside him so deeply that not even the weight of his crown or the strength of his power could fix it.

“You don’t have to join her,” I say quietly, refusing to let him escape into his

madness again. “You can honor her instead.”

“Honor her?” He barks a bitter laugh. “I dishonored her every time I told her to harden her heart. I killed her long before the potion did.”

I tighten my grip on my sword’s hilt, knowing far too well what it feels like to be pushed to turn my heart to ice.

“You didn’t kill her,” I say firmly, pressing the blade harder against his skin. “You lost her—and you punished yourself and me ever since.”

His body shakes as he stares up at me, like he’s begging me to understand.

“Let it burn me from the inside,” he says, his voice breaking, reminding me of myself when I thought I’d lost Sapphire forever. “Let it tear me apart the way I tore her apart. Maybe then, when I lie frozen beneath the ice, I’ll see her face again... and she won’t turn away.”

“Or maybe you could become the king she wanted you to be.” I swirl the potion in the vial, as if doing so can tempt him.

He squeezes his eyes shut, a tear freezing on his cheek.

A tear.

One that means everything.

“Live in a way that would have made her proud,” I continue, holding the vial steady. “Because I can assure you—the potion has been brewed correctly this time. I can’t think of a single reason why it wouldn’t give you the clarity I’m promising.”

His fingers twitch. A telltale sign of his madness.

A slow, painful breath shudders out of him.

And then, finally... he nods.

“Very well,” he says, the words barely audible. “I’ll drink your clarity. But I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for her.”

RIVEN

I move the vial to my father's lips, my other hand keeping the sword at his throat.

Sapphire's anxiety floods our bond—her magic pulsing in waves that match my quickening heartbeat—but I don't look back at her.

She's here for me. She loves me. And I no longer have to see it to believe it. Especially not here, as my blade presses hot steel against my father's throat, in this moment that could change everything.

He parts his lips, and I tilt the vial, the potion flowing into his mouth.

He swallows once, then twice, his eyes locked on mine.

For a heartbeat, nothing happens.

Then his body jerks, magic sparking off his skin in erratic bursts. It's only my instinct to pull my sword away that ensures the blade doesn't dig deeper, killing him and landing myself in the future I've been fighting to avoid.

A strangled scream tears from his throat and echoes through the arena, chilling my bones and silencing the crowd.

Fear tightens my chest. Because he's thrashing violently now, collapsing onto the ice, fighting the potion's magic as if battling a demon within.

The arena is dead silent, every soul frozen in place, watching their king unravel.

Is this what happened to my mother? Did she scream until the frost swallowed her whole?

Suddenly, he stills, his limbs going limp.

It's done. Over. Finished.

The floor of the arena bottoms out from under me. Because this is my fault. I killed him. And now, the darkness the Tides showed me will become my reality.

But then slowly, agonizingly, he lifts his head and pushes himself up. His eyes—the same silver as mine—are sharp with intelligence, free from the feverish madness that's haunted them for decades.

“,” he says, as if he's speaking my name for the first time.

My heart stutters as he moves to his feet. Because he doesn't say my name with the bark of command, or the hiss of disappointment. It's not heavy with scorn or weighed down with expectations I'll never meet.

For once, he speaks it like it means something. Like I mean something.

Which somehow breaks me more than anything else ever could.

But I keep my expression neutral, ready to defend myself if this is another trick.

“Father,” I respond, tightening my grip on my sword.

He turns in a slow circle, his gaze sweeping the silent faces of the Winter Court. And

when he returns his focus to me, his eyes are haunted—guilt, regret, and pain etched into every line of his face.

“The things I said to you. The way I treated you—” He stops abruptly, his jaw tightening, frost crackling along his clenched fists. “You deserved better.”

Another shot of pain through my heart.

But still, I don’t waver.

“I did deserve better. But in some ways, everything you said and did made me stronger,” I admit, watching him carefully, clueless of what this man—this sane version of my father—will do next.

To my astonishment, he sinks to one knee, bowing his head to me. Not in submission—a Winter King submits to no one—but with the quiet dignity of a man facing the truth.

“You were never weak,” he says, steady despite the tremor in his shoulders. “And I only hope that someday, you can forgive me.”

Magic stirs within me, ice and water swirling at my feet as I fight to maintain composure.

I am, after all, the Winter Prince. No matter how much my heart has warmed for Sapphire, ice still runs in my veins. And I will not show weakness in front of the court—especially not in a moment as important as this.

“I don’t need your approval anymore,” I tell him, since I’m pretty sure I gave my desire for his approval away when I killed his knights to follow Sapphire into the Wandering Wilds. “But I will accept your respect.”

He nods and reaches for his hand, removing the ring that's been worn by the Winter King for as long as our court can remember. Then, he presses it into my left palm—the one Sapphire and I marked with our vows.

And as he looks up at me, it's not as a king, or as a tyrant.

It's as a man who's finally seeing his son.

“I tried to make you cold,” he says, speaking slowly, gathering his thoughts. “I thought ice was strength, and that love made you weak. But you found strength despite every lesson I drilled into your heart.”

Tightness grips my chest, a mix of relief and sorrow. Because these are the words I once would have died to hear. Now, they feel too late—yet still powerful enough to shake me.

But I can barely focus on his words.

I'm too busy studying the ring. It glints in the light, cruel and beautiful. And if I slide it onto my finger, I'll become king—possibly the one who sat on a frozen throne, drowning in silence, creating frosty memories on windowpanes of everyone who abandoned me, betrayed me, and broke my heart.

My father, apparently unaware of the dread racing through my bones, continues to speak.

“This ring has passed from king to king since the Winter Court's founding,” he says, watching me intently. “And now, it passes to you.”

I close my fist around the ring, its cold edges biting into my palm. A promise of the pain to come if I slide it onto my finger and accept.

But as much as I want to throw the ring as far away from me as possible—to shatter the future the Tides showed me—I can't refuse it. Not yet. Not until I know that everything I've worked for won't be destroyed the moment I place the ring back into my father's hand.

So, I gather myself together and hold his unwavering gaze.

"If I return this ring to you," I say, my voice carrying across the silent arena. "You will first swear a binding oath. A deal. With me."

Murmurs ripple through the crowd, but I quiet them with a raised hand.

Confusion flashes across my father's face

"After all the suffering I've inflicted," he says, his voice strained with disbelief, "you would allow me to rule?"

"Not without conditions." Frost forms around my closed fist, crystallizing the ring within my grip.

"I'd expect nothing else." He nods for me to continue, looking at me with something I never thought I'd see from him—pride. "State your terms."

I stand tall, drawing on every lesson in diplomacy I've been taught since childhood. This is no ordinary agreement between fae, and I won't leave room for escape or interpretation.

"I, Prince Draevor of the Winter and Summer Courts, offer these terms," I begin, clear and strong. "Firstly, you will unite the full strength of the Winter Court with the Summer Court against the Night Court and the Blood Coven's threat. You will commit our warriors, our resources, and our magic without reservation or delay."

His eyes remain locked on mine as I continue.

“Secondly, you will acknowledge Princess Sapphire Hayes Fairmont Solandriel Draevor as my wife and the Winter and Summer Princess, granting her all rights, privileges, and protections afforded to a member of the royal bloodline. You will ensure that every subject, every noble, and every warrior of the Winter Court treats her with the respect and deference her position demands.”

Frost gathers at my feet, spreading in intricate patterns across the ice.

“You will respect the bond between me and my wife,” I say sharply, “not only as a political alliance, but as a soul-binding recognized by the gods themselves. You will never attempt to separate us, undermine our authority, or question the validity of our bond.”

Calculation and question flash across my father’s eyes.

He still doesn’t know about Sapphire being star touched. He has no idea how the carving in my palm left a scar despite my supernatural healing, let alone anything about the celestial weapon that put it there.

But those explanations are for later, after I place the Winter Court’s pieces exactly where I want them to be.

“Finally, you will not allow madness cloud your judgment again,” I tell him. “At the first sign of your reason faltering, you will yield your authority to me until your mind is restored.”

I pause, letting each term settle into the frozen air of the arena.

“Those are my terms,” I finish. “Do you accept?”

I wait, barely able to breathe, praying it's enough.

For a moment, I think it won't be.

But he rises to his feet, his posture straightening as he faces the silent crowd, then turns back to me.

"I, King Nivian Draevor of the Winter Court, swear by ice and blood, by the ancient powers that have sustained the Winter Court since its founding," he begins, his voice carrying to every corner of the arena as he repeats the terms of our deal, exactly as I laid them out.

Once finished, he extends his hand to me, palm up, ready to seal the oath.

For a heartbeat, I hesitate. Trust is dangerous, especially with him. But this is the best chance at peacefully moving toward a future where the Night Court and Blood Coven don't pose a threat to the realms.

So, I reach for his hand, clasping his wrist.

Frost crawls outward from our joined arms, wrapping around us in spirals of winter magic. It seeps into our skin, binding the oath into our bones—unbreakable, inescapable, and eternal.

The crowd gasps as the frost shatters into diamond dust that rains to the ground.

It's done. The oath is sealed.

I study my father for a long moment, weighing the sincerity in his eyes against decades of mistrust. Then, I place the ring back into his palm, closing his fingers around it.

“Keep your crown,” I tell him, my voice low enough that only he can hear. “But never forget how close I came to taking it from you.”

“I will remember,” he promises as he slips the ring back onto his finger.

With a slow exhale, I release his arm and turn to the royal box where Sapphire stands.

Water droplets shimmer around her like suspended stars, her eyes locked with mine across the distance. And through our bond, her love flows toward me, her magic shielding me from the whispers of the lonely future that could have been.

It’s not just approval, but pride. Protection. Unwavering love and devotion.

I am so insanely lucky to have her.

As Sapphire and I are losing ourselves in each other’s eyes—as we seem so often to do—my father turns to address the arena, his voice carrying renewed strength.

“The Trial of Frost and Blood is complete,” he declares. “My son has challenged me and won. He has united Winter and Summer, forging our courts into a single blade against the darkness of Night!”

The crowd erupts, a mixture of cheers and chatter spreading through the stands.

“Together,” he continues, gesturing to me and Sapphire, “the Prince and Princess of Winter and Summer will lead our warriors alongside the Summer Court. We’ll show the Night Court a power they’ve never dreamed possible, and our strength will blaze brighter than the stars, burning away their darkness until nothing remains but victory!”

RIVEN

The cheers grow louder, ice magic erupting from thousands of hands as the Winter Court celebrates this newfound alliance.

But slowly, something changes.

One noble from the lower stands—a high-ranking general who has served the court for centuries—kneels, his fist pressed against his heart. His ice magic spirals outward in a show of fealty, not to my father, but to me.

Then, another joins him. Lady Elaria, whose sons were executed on my father's orders during the worst of his madness, accused of treason for questioning his judgment. Tears freeze on her cheeks as she bows her head in my direction.

One by one, they fall to their knees. Warriors. Nobles. Servants. All of them create a wave of respect that spreads through the stands like frost across a lake.

I keep my expression neutral, but ice crackles at my fingertips, betraying my emotions. Because this display of loyalty isn't what I sought when I challenged my father. I wanted peace, unity, and strength against the Night Court—not to usurp his authority after I returned it to him.

Now, he watches the display with deep concentration, frost forming and melting on his knuckles as he processes the scene.

I brace for the rage. For the anger that would have consumed him in his madness.

Instead, he turns to me, the crowd momentarily forgotten, and something like wonder crosses his features.

“You are everything I tried to beat out of you,” he says quietly, “and that is why you have won.”

I blink, thrown off-balance by his words.

“Your compassion,” he continues, his voice low enough that only I can hear. “Your ability to feel, to connect, and to inspire loyalty through love rather than fear. Your mother saw it in you from the beginning.” He swallows, grief flashing over his eyes. “She would have been proud of the man you’ve become, and the king you could be.”

The ice beneath my feet cracks slightly, responding to the surge of emotion I refuse to show on my face.

“I’m not a king,” I remind him, since those are the only words I can bring myself to say without breaking right now.

Nor will I ever be a king. At least, not if I can help it.

“No.” He glances around at the kneeling crowd. “But they would follow you if you were. Because they loved her, and you have her spirit—her warmth beneath the ice, and her disregard for the rules when she believed she was doing what was right. She always said that true strength comes from having something worth fighting for—worth dying for.” His gaze drifts to the royal box, where Sapphire watches. “She was right.”

My eyes lock on Sapphire’s blue ones, and all I want is to be there, with her.

“I’ve had enough of dying for the rest of eternity,” I say, half to my father, and half to

her. “Because now, I have someone worth living for.”

He smiles, and together, we make our way across the arena floor.

My hand finds Sapphire’s the moment I’m by her side, her fingers interlacing with mine as naturally as water flowing over ice. Her touch grounds me, steadying the storm of emotions I’ve kept locked beneath the layers of frost for far too long.

“You did it,” she whispers, her magic swirling with mine where our hands meet.

“We did it,” I correct her, drawing strength from her presence. “None of this would have been possible without you. Not even close.”

Her smile warms me from within, melting the last of the tension I’ve carried since challenging my father. Because here, with her hand in mine, I can finally breathe again.

My father watches us, a flicker of something—recognition, or memory—crossing his face. But whatever he sees, he keeps to himself, turning back to address the still-kneeling court instead.

“Rise,” he commands, and the crowd obeys, although their eyes remain fixed on me and Sapphire—the Winter Prince and his Summer Princess, standing united before them.

Without thinking—without calculating the consequences of my behavior in the public eye—I pull Sapphire close, my lips capturing hers in a kiss that says everything I don’t have words for. All the fear I felt facing my father, all the hope her love has given me, and all the wonder that she chose me despite everything.

When we break apart, her eyes are wide, her cheeks flushed with warmth that defies

the arena's chill.

"You know," she says slowly, giving me a mischievous smile that makes me want to do far more than just kiss her. "For someone who spent decades perfecting his icy composure, you have a surprising talent for causing a scene."

"Only with you," I tell her, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Only ever with you."

My father watches us with an unreadable expression, frost climbing up his wrists in delicate, swirling patterns.

Patterns I've tried to replicate every day since I was a child.

"Well," he says, his voice cutting through the stunned silence. "It seems the alliance between winter and summer is even stronger than I anticipated."

Whispers ripple through the crowd, but I hold Sapphire's gaze, finding in it the strength I'll need for whatever comes next.

"Come," my father says, addressing us both. "I'll have the war rooms prepared. We have much to discuss... and much to catch up on."

"Of course," I reply, although my attention remains on Sapphire—on the way her water caresses my frost like it belongs there. Like she belongs here, beside me, forever.

My chest tightens in a way I still don't know how to handle.

"Are you ready?" I ask her quietly, my eyes searing into hers.

“Ready to take on a court of psychotic night fae with delusions of godhood?” Her smile is fierce, fire and determination wrapped in impossible beauty. “Absolutely.”

“Psychotic night fae,” I repeat, somehow loving her more with every word she speaks. “It’s exactly how I wanted to round out our honeymoon.” I hesitate, just for a breath, memorizing every line of her face in this single, perfect moment. “But after we emerge victorious, I’m locking us in an igloo for a year. No war. No politics. Just me showing you all the ways I can make you melt.”

She laughs, melodic and bright.

“Melt me all you want, Winter Prince,” she says, her voice warm enough to thaw the frozen parts of me I didn’t think I’d feel again. “But when this is over, I’m going to teach you how to burn.”

SELENA

I'd always hoped my sixteenth birthday would be the moment I came into my witch powers. That was the way it worked in books and movies, right? You turned a certain age, something important happened, and then BAM.

The magic ignited.

Since I lived on an island full of supernaturals, I should have known better. That wasn't how our magic worked. Yet, as the only supernatural on the island that still showed no sign of any magic, I held onto the hope that maybe on this birthday, something would change. I mean, my biological mother was one of the most powerful witches born in the past century.

So why was my magic nonexistent?

No one knew.

I sat in my room in the castle after the party, surrounded by my presents. But I was only focused on the invitation in my hand. It was from the mage Iris—the event coordinator on Avalon—asking me to apprentice by her side for the next two years.

It pissed me off.

A knock on the door pulled me out of my thoughts. I could tell it was my best friend, Torrence, just from the pattern of the raps.

“Come in,” I said, dropping the invitation onto my lap.

Torrence waltzed into my room, her long auburn hair flying behind her, and situated herself on the end of my king-size bed. “I knew you were pissed about that one,” she said, glancing at the invitation.

“Can you blame me?” I huffed. “Iris is just trying to give me something to do instead of the magic classes I’m barely passing every year.”

I would have failed my magic classes if it weren’t for the written portions of the tests. Because I understood magic theory perfectly well.

Magic practice , on the other hand, was a different story.

It was impossible to practice magic when my magic didn’t exist.

“Yeah,” Torrence agreed. “It sucks.”

One of the things I loved about my best friend was that she never sugar coated anything.

I picked up the invitation again and glared at it. As I did, a buzz started from my toes, growing up through my body until it reached my hands. My insides felt like branches of a tree igniting, crackling and popping with electricity.

I gathered the electricity until it was buzzing below the surface of my skin and sent it flying out at the piece of paper in my hand.

In my mind, the paper burst into flames and turned to ashes.

In reality, nothing happened.

“You’re staring at that invitation like you expect it to spontaneously combust,” Torrence said.

“That’s what I just tried to do,” I said. “I felt the magic. It wants to come out. It’s just... stuck.”

I shrugged, because this was nothing Torrence hadn’t heard before. I’d told everyone about how I could feel the magic inside, wanting to come out. But when the other witches asked me what my magic felt like, they told me it sounded nothing like what their magic felt like when they performed spells.

I didn’t think they believed me.

So I’d stopped talking about it. To everyone except Torrence, of course. Sometimes it felt like she was the only person in the world who still had faith in me.

“There’s no spell I’ve heard of that makes anything spontaneously combust,” she said simply. “But if you feel like your magic wants to do that, then hey, it’ll be cool to see what you’ll be able to do when your magic makes an appearance.”

I was grateful that Torrence held out hope that my magic might emerge someday. But I nodded in agreement, since I also knew there wasn’t a spell to make things spontaneously combust.

Then I threw the invitation into the fireplace.

Once satisfied that it was burned to a crisp, I leaned back into the mound of pillows behind me, still staring into the flames.

“So...” Torrence said, and I turned my attention back to her. Her green eyes glinted with the look that I knew only meant one thing. Trouble. “The collectors’ edition of

Pride and Prejudice I gave you wasn't your real birthday present."

"It was a great present," I said, since it was. "But now you have me curious. What's my 'real' present?"

Torrence smirked and lifted her hands, chanting a spell I knew well. A sound barrier spell. Her purple magic swirled out of her hands, shooting up to the ceiling and soaring down along the walls as the spell locked into place. The purple disappeared, and now anything we talked about while she maintained the spell wouldn't be overheard.

Each room in the castle already had a sound barrier spell around it, but we liked to be careful. Just in case.

I leaned forward in anticipation. "So?" I asked. "What is it?"

She reached into the sleeve of her sweatshirt and pulled out a vial full of bright red potion.

My eyes widened at the sight of it. "Transformation potion?" I looked to her, to the potion, and back to her again. I didn't need her to nod to confirm what I already knew was true. "What's it for? And where did you get it?"

Transformation potion was one of the hardest potions to create. Only the most advanced witches could brew it. And once it was brewed, it expired after twenty-four hours. So it wasn't something that was kept in storage.

"I made it, using my own blood," she said. "So you can transform into me."

SELENA

“Why would I want to transform into you?” I asked, confused.

Nothing against my bestie. She was awesome. But as much as I admired and appreciated Torrence, I didn’t want to be her. I was perfectly happy being myself.

Except for my missing magic. But that couldn’t be fixed with transformation potion. Transformation potion would make me look like Torrence on the outside, but I’d still be me on the inside. Missing magic and all.

“Other than your magic igniting, what’s the one thing you want most in the entire world?” Torrence asked.

“To be allowed off of Avalon.” I didn’t have to stop to think about my answer. “But my parents won’t allow it. You know the rules. They won’t let me?—”

I cut myself off, the pieces clicking together as I stared at the bright red potion in Torrence’s hand.

“They won’t let you off the island,” she completed my thought. “But I can come and go as I please. Like I do every weekend when I visit my mom in LA.”

“You really think it would work?” My eyes widened, my heart racing with excitement and anticipation. “That I could pretend to be you and leave the island? Just like that?”

My entire life, my parents had drilled it into my mind that I'd never be able to leave Avalon. My mom was an Earth Angel—the only one in the world, and she was the leader of our island.

So many people on Earth—demons and supernaturals alike—would come after me if I stepped foot off this island. They'd want to take me and use me as leverage against my mom. Combined with the fact that my magic was non-existent, giving me no way to defend myself, it was too risky for me to leave.

Which meant I had to stay here. Forever.

That was a long time. Especially since because of the island's magic, once we reached our mid-twenties, we stopped aging and became immortal.

I held out hope that at some point in the future, Earth would be peaceful enough that I'd be allowed to see it myself. But until that time came, this island was all I'd see and experience.

I loved Avalon. I had a great life here. But even though I loved it, I still wanted to see the world.

And right now, Torrence was giving me that chance.

"I know it'll work." Torrence's eyes sparkled with mischief again. "You know me better than anyone. If anyone can convince my mom that they're me, it's you."

"Maybe," I said, since it wasn't a terrible idea. "But we'll need to practice."

"There's no time for that," she said. "It has to be this weekend."

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, I know the potion expires after twenty-four hours. But you

created it once. Couldn't you create it again?"

"Of course I can create it again." She tossed her hair over her shoulders, like it was silly of me to even ask. "But along with expiring after twenty-four hours in the vial, the potion will only keep you transformed for twenty-four hours after drinking it. And you know the deal I made with my mom when I was accepted onto Avalon."

"You can attend the academy here as long as you visit her every weekend." I was the one who'd suggested Torrence offer her mom that deal when her mom was hesitating about letting her go to school here. Torrence and I had clicked the moment we'd met, and I hated the idea of her not being able to stay. Having her here five days out of seven was better than nothing at all.

"Even though it's Friday, I was able to stay tonight because there was no way I was missing your birthday," she said. "Which means my visit home will be cut short this weekend. I head back tomorrow. Well... you'll head back tomorrow. As me." She pressed the pads of her fingers together, like a conniving villain in a superhero movie.

My head spun with excitement... and with all the possible ways this could go wrong.

"What's up?" Torrence asked, dropping her hands back down to her sides.

She knew me well enough to know I'd have questions. And knowing her, she'd already thought about what I'd ask and what the answers to those questions would be.

"A bunch of stuff," I said. "Firstly, thank you. This gift is amazing."

"I know." She smiled proudly.

"But how will I get to LA? I have no magic. I can't teleport."

“I’ll teleport you straight to my room,” she said. “I always drop my stuff off there first, anyway. Then I’ll pop back to LA the next day and take you home.”

“Okay.” I nodded, since that worked. “But I can’t do magic, and the transformation potion won’t change that. Won’t your mom wonder what’s up if I need to do magic and I can’t?”

“My mom’s always telling me I should rest my magic more so I’m fresh and ready for the school week.” Torrence rolled her eyes. She loved using her magic, but preferred using it for personal use instead of for classroom exercises. “Just tell her there’s a big test on Monday and that you’re resting your magic so you’re ready. She’ll be thrilled. That’ll be your reason for coming home earlier on Sunday, too. You need to study for the test.”

The test that didn’t exist.

“All right.” I nodded again, liking the sound of this more and more. “But what about me? And by that I mean the lack of me here on Avalon. People will notice if I’m gone. Especially since my parents’ big anniversary dinner is tomorrow night.”

“Easy.” Torrence shrugged. “I’ll create another transformation potion tonight, using your blood. It’ll be ready by tomorrow. I’ll drink it and take your place while you’re gone.”

“So we’re swapping places.” I sat forward, unable to help laughing at how crazy this all was. It was also perfect. Because if any two people knew each other well enough to swap places and pull it off, it was me and Torrence.

“Exactly.” She smiled again. “You in?”

“I am,” I said, since how could I not be? The possibility of twenty-four hours off of

Avalon was the most exciting thing to happen to me since... well, it was the most exciting thing to ever happen to me. “But what happens if we’re caught?”

I already knew the answer to that.

Anyone caught trying to get me off Avalon would be accused of treason. There were no set punishments for anything here—punishments were decided on an individual basis. But treason wouldn’t be taken lightly.

“Are you doubting that the potion will work?” She raised an eyebrow in question.

“No,” I said. “You’re one of the best witches on this island. I’m sure it’ll work.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I’m just trying to think everything through,” I said. “So we don’t make any mistakes.”

“No one will notice that we’re not who we say we are,” she said. “I can be you. You can be me. No one knows that I know how to make transformation potion, so they won’t think this is even a possibility. Everyone on Avalon will be too focused on your parents’ anniversary celebration to be paying attention to me. My mom’s used to my mood swings, so she won’t notice anything different with you. And it’s only twenty-four hours. What could possibly happen in twenty-four hours that would get us caught?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my stomach doing somersaults at the realization that this was going to happen. I was going to see the world beyond Avalon. Sure, it would only be a sliver of the big world out there, but it was still more than I ever thought possible.

“We’d have to mess up badly to get caught,” she said. “And we’re not going to do

that. You're going to see LA, and you're going to have a great time. No one will ever know you were gone."

"I guess." I did my best to squash down the worry in my stomach.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Was I really going to say no because I was scared?

Hell no, I wasn't.

So I buried the worry so deep that all I could focus on was my excitement. "You definitely win the prize for best-present ever," I said, nearly squealing with anticipation.

"Told you so." She beamed. "Now, give me your hand so I can take your blood. Transformation potion isn't the easiest thing to make, and I need to have the second vial ready by tomorrow."

SELENA

The next day, Torrence teleported back into my room right after lunch. She had bags under her eyes and her hair was in a messy bun at the top of her head, like she hadn't slept all night. But she dropped her bag on the trunk at the end of the bed, reached in, and pulled out two vials of bright red potion. One was marked with a T, and the other was marked with an S.

"Two vials of transformation potion," she said, handing me the one with the S on it. "As promised."

Despite looking tired, she sounded as excited as ever. She pulled off her clothes, revealing her skintight, black academy uniform underneath. The academy uniforms were spelled with special magic that would mold with shapeshifting. I was already in mine.

I uncapped my vial and held it up for a toast.

Torrence did the same.

"To the best birthday present ever," I said.

"To twenty-four hours of adventure." Torrence smiled and clinked her vial with mine.

We brought the vials to our lips and drank them at the same time.

The transformation potion tasted sweet, like raspberry, and it fizzed on my tongue.

The fizzing quickly expanded down into my throat, into my stomach, and out toward my fingers and toes.

Torrence blurred in front of me, the lines around her body becoming hazy. Her auburn hair turned blond, she became shorter, and her sharp green eyes turned violet.

She'd transformed into me.

"Whoa," Torrence said, looking at me. "That's sick."

I moved to stand in front of my full-length mirror. Sure enough, it wasn't myself staring back at me.

It was Torrence.

I reached up to touch my cheek, watching as Torrence's reflection in the mirror mimicked my movement.

"It worked," I said, surprised when the voice coming out of my mouth wasn't my own. It was Torrence's, although her voice sounded slightly different from inside her head. A bit lower pitched.

"I wouldn't give you a birthday present that didn't work," she said. "Now, are you going to change into my clothes or what? Because you only have twenty-four hours as me, and the clock started ticking the moment you finished that potion."

* * *

Once I'd changed into Torrence's clothes, she teleported me into her bedroom in LA. She had a pink comforter, a shelf full of kids' books, and matching pink, frilly drapes.

It was a bedroom for a ten-year-old.

“I guess you haven’t redecorated since coming to Avalon?” I asked with a laugh.

“Nah.” She shrugged. “I’m not here that often, so oh well.”

This was so weird. My best friend looked like me... but she still had that wicked glint in her eyes. My eyes. Although I was sure I’d never looked as mischievous as that.

“Don’t do anything too crazy while you’re pretending to be me,” I said. “No flirting with guys or anything like that. Got it?”

The last thing I wanted was to get back home and have to deal with any drama Torrence left in my wake.

“I promise I won’t do anything crazy, like flirting with guys.” The sarcasm in her tone made it clear she didn’t think flirting was crazy, although I knew she’d keep her word and respect my wishes. “But I’ll totally plant some seeds in Reed’s mind that’ll make him interested in me.”

“Of course you will,” I said, since there was no way of stopping her. Torrence was doing a lot for me this weekend. If she wanted to have her fun and plant seeds in Reed’s mind, then that was what she’d do.

“He’s not married yet,” she said. “He’s still fair game.”

Suddenly, she jerked her head to the side, instantly alert.

Now that we were both quiet, I heard what she’d already picked up on.

Someone was walking down the hall.

“That’s my mom,” she said quickly. “I gotta blink out. Cya tomorrow!”

I didn’t have a chance to say bye before she teleported out of her room.

A few seconds later, Amber—Torrence’s mom—knocked on the door. At least I assumed it was Amber, since that was what Torrence had said.

I needed to remember to call her Mom while I was here. It would be strange, but I could do it.

“Come in,” I said, trying to imitate Torrence’s blasé yet confident tone.

The door swung open, and sure enough, Torrence’s mom stood in the entrance. She wore light jeans and a pink tank, and her blond hair was up in a high ponytail.

Amber looked more like me than the pictures I’d seen of my biological mother.

Except for my violet eyes. No one was sure where those came from. A genetic mutation was the best guess.

“I thought I heard you pop in,” she said with a warm smile. “I had breakfast ready a bit ago, but you’re later than expected. It’s probably cold now.”

“We stayed up super late after Selena’s birthday party and I slept through my alarm.” I shrugged, giving the story Torrence and I had planned ahead of time. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” she said. “Want to head downstairs? I can whip up something else, if you’re hungry.”

“Actually, I was hoping we could go out to brunch,” I said. “And then maybe to the beach? We could do a mother-daughter day and explore like we used to.”

“I like that plan.” Amber smiled. “When do you want to leave?”

“Now.” I bounced on my toes in anticipation of my first day experiencing the world beyond Avalon.

This really was the best birthday present ever.

SELENA

My mother-daughter day with Amber was amazing . She had no idea I wasn't Torrence, which meant I was playing my part perfectly.

When we got back, we had dinner with Torrence's aunts—Evangeline and Doreen—on the outside patio. But it eventually grew late, and the others went up to their rooms to go to bed.

I went back to Torrence's room, but I was too amped up to get ready for bed. I only had twenty-four hours, and I didn't want to waste a single minute of it sleeping.

Unfortunately, there were gates and magical shields around the property. And while I wanted adventure, it would be stupid to explore LA at night alone. This city could be dangerous. Especially at night.

It looked like I was stuck staying in.

But just because I was stuck on the property, it didn't mean I had to stay in Torrence's room.

So I padded down the hallway toward the stairs. The three witches' lights were off and there were no sounds from their rooms. They were fast asleep.

Once outside, I walked past the gorgeous fountain in the driveway and up to the gate at the end of it, placing my hands on the metal bars. The gate was supposed to be sealed shut. But it moved after the slightest pressure of my hand and slid silently

open, as if beckoning me forward.

I stared at the gate in surprise. That wasn't suppose [http:// mybook. to/ faeriegameset/](http://mybook.to/faeriegameset/) mybook. to/ faeriegameset out of the gate and down the driveway. I wasn't going to actually try walking anywhere, but it could be fun to watch the cars drive by. We didn't have cars on Avalon, so just looking at the different varieties of cars they had in LA was interesting.

But when I walked to the end of the long driveway, I saw someone standing at the end of the driveway next door. His back was toward me. He was tall with dark blond hair, and he was wearing jeans and a black leather jacket.

He turned around, and the moment his bright blue eyes met mine, warmth burst from my chest and traveled through every inch of my body.

He looked to be around my age, maybe a bit older. And from the intense way he was staring at me, I wondered if I was somehow having the same effect on him that he was having on me.

But he snapped out of it, shooting me a devilish smile that made my heart race faster. "Torrence Devereux," he said my best friend's name, his voice like music to my ears.

Like a siren's call beckoning me closer.

How could Torrence have never mentioned her ridiculously hot neighbor? That wasn't like her at all.

Maybe he wasn't hot until recently? That happened a lot with guys. They had an awkward phase, they grew out of it, and then BOOM. Sudden hotness.

But I was staring. I needed to say something—anything—so he didn't think I was a mute freak.

“Have we met before?” I asked once I had my wits somewhat together.

“We used to play together as kids,” he said. “You don’t remember?”

“It was a long time ago.” It seemed as good of an answer as any.

“It was.” He nodded, his enchanting gaze locked on mine. “You’re not around here often anymore, are you?”

“I go to a year-round boarding school up north.” It was Torrence’s cover-story, so I didn’t have to think twice about that one. “I’m only here on the weekends.”

“Got it,” he said. “So... what are your plans for the rest of the night?”

I glanced back at Torrence’s house. The windows on the second floor were still dark. “Nothing.” I shrugged. “My mom and aunts went to sleep, but I wasn’t tired.”

“So you wandered to the end of your driveway.” He chuckled, that knowing twinkle still in his eyes.

“Yeah.” My cheeks heated, since it sounded ridiculous when he put it that way. I needed to switch the conversation away from me and my weirdness, quickly. “What about you?” I asked. “Why are you just standing here?”

“I’m heading out to hang with some friends. My Uber should be here in...” He paused to glance at his phone. “Three minutes.”

“Oh.” I deflated at the realization that he was leaving soon.

Of course he was leaving.

Normal people didn’t wander down to the end of their driveway to watch the cars go

by.

And I was doing a terrible job at pretending to be Torrence right now. Torrence always knew what to say around guys she was interested in. But none of the guys on Avalon had ever interested me as anything more than a friend, so I'd never thought about it much.

Now I finally met someone who took my breath away, and he was a human who lived on Earth. A place I could never return to. And I was meeting him as Torrence—not as me.

Just my awful luck.

“Do you want to come?” he asked.

“Out?” I blinked, sure I'd misunderstood. “With you and your friends?”

“I can ditch my friends tonight,” he said. “I mean, I haven't seen you in years. We should catch up. Just the two of us.”

Sometime while we'd been talking, we'd inched onto the yard between our driveways until we were standing a few feet away from each other. His eyes were an even brighter blue up close. Ice blue, although they somehow managed to be warm at the same time.

“Just the two of us,” I repeated, a small smile creeping over my lips. I might as well go for it. I had nothing to lose. “Like, on a date?”

“Yes.” He didn't pause for a second. “I'd like to go on a date with you. If that's okay with you, of course.”

From the way he was looking at me—like he was seeing all the way into my soul—I

had a feeling he knew it was more than okay with me.

I wanted to say yes.

But going out with a stranger was reckless.

He's not a stranger, I reminded myself. He's Torrence's neighbor. They played together when they were kids.

And he was looking at me like my answer meant the world to him.

I had no idea what to do. But wasn't this the point of swapping places with my best friend? To be reckless? To have experiences I'd never have on Avalon?

Something—perhaps fate—pulled me toward him, urging me to say yes. I didn't think I could walk away at this point even if I wanted to.

"You never told me your name," I realized. "I can't go out on a date with you if I don't know your name."

"My name's Julian," he said, and warm tingles ran up and down my spine at his voice.

"Julian," I repeated, his name sounding like music when I spoke it aloud. "Yes. I'd love to go on a date with you."

* * *