



Midnight Star (Star Touched: Fae Bound #3)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Betrayal is a blade. Love is the wound. And some hearts are meant to shatter.

When Sapphire Hayes learned she was fae, it was shocking enough.

Finding out she's half-fae, half-vampire—a combination that shouldn't exist—is something else entirely. It's a secret she must guard with her life.

Even from Riven.

The cold, calculating, irresistible winter prince who miraculously let her in.

But secrets don't stay buried forever. So when the truth rips through the love between them, Sapphire and Riven are left bound together by fate and divided by lies. Now, they must run, fight, and survive side by side—whether they like it or not—evading dark enemies while he trains her to wield her magic.

But some betrayals can never be forgiven.

And with war on the horizon, Sapphire is running out of time to prove that the girl Riven loved is still in there.

Because in a world where emotions are currency and love is a weakness, how far will Riven go to save his kingdom—even if it means breaking Sapphire's heart and soul in the process?

The Fae Bound series by USA Today bestselling author Michelle Madow is an addictive urban fantasy romance packed with forbidden magic, adventurous quests, and heart-wrenching twists that will leave you breathless.

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Sapphire

The dark angel is tied to Ghost's back. Her wings are retracted, and she's nearly unconscious, thanks to the relaxation potion Riven forced down her throat.

Another reason she's unconscious? The blood loss.

The blood loss caused by me.

The moment I caught her blood's scent, I lost control. I remember every moment of it—the rush of heat through my veins, and the hunger tearing through my chest as instinct overtook reason.

Even now, with the taste of her still lingering on my tongue, the craving claws at me. Especially because I wasn't finished yet. I want more. And it's here beside me, ripe for the taking, pumping through her body and tempting me so much I ache for it.

I swallow against the ache—against the whisper in the back of my mind that tells me to take. To feed .

I won't give in. Because the memory of the way Riven looked at me when I turned and met his eyes—as if I was a stranger, or a monster—makes my chest feel hollow in a way it never has before.

Now, as we walk toward the cave with Ghost and the dark angel, I can't bring myself to look at him. His disgust clings to the air between us like ice, like something shattered beyond repair. It will hurt too much when I see it, too.

But the silence between us is unbearable. Each minute we stay quiet, the distance between us grows.

So, I take a deep breath and glance at him.

His shoulders tense, but he doesn't look back. He just keeps staring forward, like if he acknowledges me, even for a second, he'll break. Or worse—he'll hate me even more.

It's another blow to my heart. One so strong that for a moment, I can't even breathe.

Because Riven isn't the only one who hates me.

I hate myself, too. For what I am. For what I've become.

But mostly, for the secrets I've kept, and the people I've hurt.

I wish I could go back in time and be honest with Riven from the start.

I wish I could go back in time and change so many things .

I'd protect Zoey from being taken at the waterfall by that dark angel. No—I wouldn't have brought her with me to this realm in the first place. Maybe I wouldn't have drunk water from that stream at all, and remained ignorant about the supernatural world in general.

But the moment I think it, I know that out of all this craziness, I wouldn't sacrifice knowledge for ignorance. I'd never give up knowing what I really am. Who I really am. Trading something so life changing would be one of the most tragic things a person could ever do.

Still, the regret's consuming me. Drowning me. Making it impossible to remain present in the current moment.

Unfortunately, I can't go back in time. I can't undo what I've done, no matter how much I wish I could rip the hunger from my bones and throw it into the trench where it belongs.

All I can do is move forward and pray I can right this mess I've gotten myself into.

Starting now.

"Riven," I say softly, but he doesn't stop walking. He doesn't even flinch.

"Don't," he says, coldly enough to freeze the air around us. "Just... don't."

As we continue toward the cave, the silence is so thick that I feel like I'm choking on it. And even though he doesn't want me talking to him right now, I can't ignore this. I need him to understand that I never kept my vampire side from him to hurt him.

"I wanted to tell you," I try again. "I just?—"

"You just what?" He whirls around, and the force of his anger slams into me like a storm. "Thought you'd wait until I told you I loved you to reveal that you're..." He motions to the dark angel, not saying any more.

He doesn't have to.

I hear the unspoken words in the sharpness of his tone and the way his eyes gleam like shattered glass.

The dark angel lets out what sounds like a chuckle, but it could also be a groan. Even

though she's barely holding onto consciousness, she can apparently still hear most of our conversation.

My cheeks warm with humiliation that one of the most intensely private moments of my life is being overheard by this winged stranger.

But I have Riven's attention now, and I refuse to lose it.

"It wasn't like that," I say to him, keeping my voice as steady as I can manage.

"Then what was it like?" he asks, and my thoughts spin at the question.

Did I keep the secret out of fear? Of shame? Of wanting to be seen for who I am, instead of for what I am? For not wanting this darkness to define me ?

Or because I knew that the moment I told him, I'd lose him?

"I'm sorry," I say instead, unable to meet his gaze.

Ghost looks back and forth between us, his intelligent eyes filled with concern.

Riven just reaches for the hilt of his sword, as if it's the only thing keeping him grounded—the only thing he can trust.

He says nothing.

The rejection slices through me sharper than a blade ever could.

I don't try to speak again. There's no point. Riven clearly needs some space, and given how much of a death sentence it would be to ditch each other in this wilderness, silence will have to be enough.

But deep down, I know the truth.

No amount of silence will ever be enough to make him forget what I've done.

Nighttime's fallen by the time we reach the cave, and the stars are singing to me, pointing me north.

But following the stars won't do us any good right now. Right now, Riven and I need information—any information this dark angel might have about where Zoey was taken, or about the ancient woman who will hopefully tell us how to create the potion that will restore the Winter King's sanity.

Riven seals the cave's entrance with ice, unties the dark angel, and places her into a sitting position against the cave wall.

"The potion will wear off soon, and she's already healing from the blood loss," he says, clinical and detached. "We need to prepare for the interrogation."

"Riven," I try again. "Look at me. Please."

He does, and I almost wish he hadn't. Because his silver eyes, usually so calm and calculating, are now stormy, filled with something between fury and hurt.

It breaks my heart.

"You had so many chances to tell me," he says quietly. "In the cave during the storm. When we trained together. After we..." He breaks off, jaw clenching.

I don't need him to finish the sentence to know what he was going to say.

After we gave everything to each other. After I made him believe I was something

pure, when I was anything but.

“I trusted you with everything,” he continues, sharper now, cutting into me with each word. “My father’s madness. My mother’s death. Ghost. And you were keeping this from me the entire time.”

His words are a physical blow, and wind swirls around us—a reminder of the magic I kept from him. Air magic— vampire magic. The same magic I’ve been using to kill to survive.

“Control yourself,” he says steadily, eyeing me like I’m a bomb about to explode. “I’m going to try learning where Zoey is. Because wherever these creatures took her is the place where they are. And if we know where they are, my people can further investigate what they are. Understood?”

There’s no softness in his words. This is simply a logical step forward. A strategy to solve a problem that’s blocking our way from making the potion to restore his father’s sanity.

“You’re going to try to find Zoey?” I ask, since finding her has always been far less important to him than figuring out how to make the potion.

“We can’t give up this opportunity to learn what and where these winged creatures are,” he repeats. “But if we want this one to talk, you’ll need to control your magic. Okay?”

Unexpected warmth flashes through his eyes, and I take a few deep breaths, grounding myself. It’s gone a second later, but I know it was there.

Despite everything, he still cares.

If he doesn't... I'm not sure I'll ever recover from the shame burying itself in my soul.

"Okay," I say, and I force my air magic down, although it fights me every step of the way .

It wants to be acknowledged. To be free. But I can't release it. Not when Riven's trust in me is already shattered, the pieces slipping through my fingers like melted ice.

He nods in approval. Then he kneels in front of the dark angel, reaches forward, and grabs her hand.

Ice creeps up her body like crystalline vines, encasing her body from toe to neck. The frozen prison glistens in the dim light, jagged and beautiful in its deadly precision, although her head remains free. Assumedly so she'll still be able to talk.

She struggles against her bonds, but they hold firm.

"This will do." Riven stands, gazing down at her as if she's an animal in a cruel experiment. "Now, let's see how far we'll have to go to get her to reveal the truth."

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Sapphire

The dark angel's midnight eyes glint with defiance as she gives up trying to free herself from the prison of ice.

“Go ahead,” she says, weak but taunting. “Do your worst.”

Riven draws his sword and lets the tip hover near her throat. “Is that a challenge?” he asks, calm and calculating.

Too calm. Too calculating.

I grip my dagger, my fingers trembling, a breeze brushing across my skin.

How far is Riven going to go? How far is he capable of going? After all, he designed those three trials for me and Zoey—trials designed to break our bodies and minds.

Now, there's something in the quiet precision of his movements that terrifies me .

“One of your kind took our human companion,” Riven says to the dark angel. “Zoey. Where is she?”

She tilts her head back, laughing softly. “Why waste your time on a human?” she asks. “She's nothing. Less than nothing.”

“She's not nothing,” I say, but the dark angel shakes her head and smiles, as if I'm a child talking back to my parent.

Anger rushes through me, and I pull water from the air, splashing it on her face.

Surprise flashes in her midnight eyes, and she laughs again, although she doesn't use her magic to dry herself off. Which means she's still weak, from both the blood loss and the relaxation potion.

Riven glances over at me, cool and detached. "Use your air magic," he says. "Make it hard for her to breathe."

"I don't know how—" I start, but he cuts me off.

"Do it," he presses. "Or do you not care about getting answers?"

The memory of Zoey being flown away by that dark angel plays through my mind—the terror in her eyes, and the pain that's been eating at me about how she could be dead right now.

If she's dead, it would be my fault.

Which means I have to step up. I have to do everything I can to find her, even if that means embracing the monster lingering under the surface.

"I do care," I tell him, determination rushing through me as I focus on the dark angel's throat, constricting the air around it just enough to make it difficult—but not impossible—for her to breathe.

Ghost prowls closer to me as I do, pressing against my leg in an offer of support.

Riven might hate me, but at least Ghost still cares.

"We're not here for games," Riven says as the dark angel gasps for air. "We're here

for answers. And if you don't start giving them, I'll make you wish you had."

I increase the pressure, and she gasps again, sharper this time.

I hate this. I hate myself for being capable of doing it.

But it's what I have to do. For Zoey.

"Release your hold," Riven commands me. "Let her speak."

I do, and the dark angel narrows her eyes at me, as if she's challenging me.

"Your friend could be anywhere," she says, and I tighten my grip around the hilt of my dagger at her obvious non-answer.

Riven responds by sending ice crystals crawling up her neck, stopping just short of breaking skin. "Answer the question," he demands.

"You're weak," she says instead. "Both of you. Especially you, little hybrid. Too scared to embrace what you truly are."

Her words hit that feeling I've been trying to push down since drinking from the first dark angel I encountered at the ravine.

The feeling I think might be fear. Of myself.

"I don't know what I am," I say, and this time when I gather water and send it toward her face, I don't just splash her. I hold it in a globe around her head, drowning her in it, watching as her chest stops moving as she tries to not breathe in.

According to Riven, breathing underwater is a tough skill for even the strongest water

wielders to master. I imagine it's close to impossible for one who's already weakened.

She flails her head around, but it's no use. The sphere is so large that she can't escape.

"Enough," Riven says, and I release my hold on my magic, letting the water splash to the floor.

The dark angel opens and closes her mouth like a dying fish.

"Where's Zoey?" Riven demands again.

"Even if I told you," she says through gritted teeth, "you'd never make it there alive."

Riven doesn't flinch. "We'll take that chance," he says simply, and the ice shards along her arms press deeper, as if they're trying to squeeze the answers out of her until she pops.

She doesn't give in. Even after continuing like this for hours, she remains as evasive as she was from the start. And, to make it worse for her, she eventually heals from every injury we inflict, which allows us to keep starting the torture from the beginning.

"Wait," she finally says, her eyes glazed with exhaustion. "Perhaps we can negotiate."

I release my hold on my magic, relief flooding my bones. Because as much as I've been trying to hide it, hurting this woman is causing me another type of pain. The pain of knowing I'll never be able to wipe what we're doing to her from my mind, for as long as I live.

Sure, she's a monster, but her cries have been disturbingly human.

Riven's startlingly unaffected, but I don't know how much longer it'll be until I break from the brutality of it all.

"We're listening," he says coolly, not sparing a glance back at me.

The dark angel's chest heaves as she catches her breath. "I'll answer your questions," she says. "But I want assurances."

"You're not exactly in a position to make demands," I point out .

She laughs weakly. "Then get it over with and kill me. But good luck finding your friend without my help."

Ghost growls low in his throat, but he stays pressed against my leg.

I rest my hand on his head in a subtle gesture of thanks. Because I don't think I could have stomached all of this if not for him.

Riven remains focused on the dark angel, sizing her up, as if he's trying to decide if her offer to negotiate is a decoy or not. "What do you want?" he finally asks.

"My life, obviously." She shifts against her ice prison. "And I want limits. A time frame for questioning. After that, you let me go."

"And then what?" I ask, since while I'm no expert in deals, there seems to be a lot of holes in this one. "You'll try to kill us again?"

"We'll give her the rest of the relaxation potion." Riven's cold eyes meet mine, challenging me. "And you'll drink from her again. Make her as weak as possible

before we leave.”

I still at the calm way he says it.

Drink from her again.

As if what he saw me do didn’t disgust him so much that he shut me out entirely.

But I force myself to nod, since his proposal is a practical one. Plus, there’s no denying that her blood will give me extra strength as we continue our journey .

The dark angel chuckles and tilts her head in amusement. “And what’s to stop you from killing me while I’m defenseless?” she asks, although she directs her question to Riven—not to me.

Understandably so. I’m new to this whole fae negotiation thing. Riven’s been doing it for his entire life.

“Not killing you will obviously be part of the deal,” he says, his attention snapping back to her. “And you’ll answer our questions as quickly and directly as possible. No riddles, no games, no manipulation, and no dancing around the truth.”

She says nothing for a long moment.

I hold my breath, worried she’s going to say no and put us right back where we started.

Then, finally, she speaks.

“Thirty minutes of questioning. Complete honesty from me. I’ll drink the potion and allow your girlfriend to feed from me afterward.” She grimaces, then swallows down

her disgust. “In return, you’ll let me live, and you won’t seek me out again.”

“Two hours,” Riven counters.

“One hour,” she replies, barely needing a second to think.

Riven looks back at me, and I nod in response. Partly because I’m anxious to get answers, and partly because I don’t think I can stomach this interrogation session for much longer .

“One hour.” He directs his attention back to the dark angel and nods, stepping forward. “Now, here are the exact terms. For one hour, you’ll answer all our questions as completely, honestly, and directly as possible. You won’t attempt to mislead or manipulate us through careful word choice or omission. After the questioning, you’ll drink the remaining relaxation potion and allow Sapphire to feed from you until you’re barely holding on. In return, we’ll leave you alive and unconscious in this cave when we depart. Do you agree?”

“I agree.” She exhales shakily, as if a wall is coming down.

“Perfect.” Riven lowers his sword, his expression as cold as ever. “Then let’s seal it and begin.”

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Sapphire

Riven moves toward the dark angel and kneels in front of her, studying her face as if he's searching for something in her sharp, cutting features.

Then, as if in slow motion, one of his hands moves to her chin, tilting her face up so their eyes lock.

No.

Fae deals can be sealed in two ways: with a handshake, or with a kiss.

The dark angel parts her lips, and my stomach twists at the thought of what Riven might do.

Ghost nuzzles me with his head, as if sensing my distress, but it doesn't matter. Because my heart's racing, and I'm frozen in place, as if one wrong move will make the ground fall out from under me.

Breathe, I tell myself. Calm down .

But I can't.

Not while I'm watching Riven's thumb trace the dark angel's bottom lip.

She lets out a breathy laugh that makes my heart stop. "Well?" she purrs, her eyes locked on Riven's. "Are you going to seal our deal?"

She glances at me and smirks, clearly getting a rise out of this.

I say nothing. I won't stoop to begging. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he's hurting me as much as I hurt him. Because keeping my secret from him was something I did out of fear, or shame, or something of the sort.

It wasn't out of spite.

His other hand moves to her shoulder, steadying her as she tilts her head back in what looks like mock submission.

Every fiber of my being screams at me to look away.

But I don't. Not even when his lips get so close to hers that the blood drains from my face.

The Riven I knew—the one I spent all that time with in this cave, the one I fell in love with—wouldn't do this to me.

Unless it was all a lie?

Could he have been playing with my heart this entire time? Could he actually be the cold, heartless prince I believed him to be when he first brought me and Zoey to court to face his father? Was I naive enough to ever think anything else? To fall for his twisted games?

To believe he'd fallen in love with me?

I hold my breath, the air eerily still as I wait for the moment of truth—for him to press his lips against the dark angel's and tear my heart from my chest.

“No,” he finally says, pulling back. “We’ll seal it the more conventional way. With a handshake.”

With that, I can breathe again.

He looks at me over his shoulder—really, truly looks at me—and there’s a surprising amount of vulnerability in his eyes. Enough that it brings me back to when we were alone in this cave during the storm, which now feels like a distant fairytale, despite having only ended a few hours ago.

My heart warms.

The love between us might not be lost. The Riven I thought I had by my side—the one who I believed would fight on the same team as me no matter what—is still in there.

I’d thank him for not going through with kissing her, but I know better than to thank a fae. Not even a fae who might possibly love me.

“How gentlemanly of you,” the dark angel says to Riven, snapping me back to the present. “Although I’m not sure how I can shake your hand while mine is encased in ice.”

Riven says nothing. Instead, he simply reaches forward and presses his fingers against the ice imprisoning her hand.

Frost crawls away, the ice cracking and shattering until her fingers are free.

“There,” he says. “The countdown will begin once the deal is sealed.”

She flexes her fingers slowly, as if savoring her regained freedom. “So considerate,”

she says, although he doesn't rise to the bait.

He simply takes her hand in his and repeats the terms of the deal.

"I agree to your terms," she says, and frost blooms between their joined hands.

The deal seals with a crackle, then sinks under their skin, the ice disappearing completely.

"It's done." Riven puts the ice cage back around her hand, releases it, and steps back.

Despite the tension between us, I move to his side, standing tall. Because while Riven and I have our issues, we have one common goal right now—getting answers. So, we're going to have to be a united front until she gives them to us and we get out of here as quickly as Ghost's four legs can handle.

Which is hopefully faster than the dark angel can fly .

Riven moves toward me, but he doesn't look at me. His entire focus is directed at the dark angel.

"Your name," he says, getting straight to business.

"Zythara," she responds, adding nothing more.

"And what are you?" I ask firmly, despite the nervous flutter in my chest.

Riven might have worded the deal, but I'm perfectly capable of asking her direct questions.

"A night fae," she replies.

I glance at Riven to see his reaction. But if he's ever heard of night fae before, he's not letting on.

"What are night fae?" he asks.

"We're what happens when winter fae are turned into vampires," she says, her words dripping with pride. "More powerful than either race alone. We have air magic and water magic—in both ice and liquid forms—and we require blood to survive."

My chest tightens. Water and air magic—just like me.

Except I don't have wings. At least, I don't think I do?

I reach to touch the place on my back where wings would be, but there's nothing there.

On the other hand, I didn't know I had fangs until those suddenly emerged, so it's too soon to put wings off the table of possibilities.

"That shouldn't be possible," Riven says. "When supernaturals are turned into vampires, they lose their original magic. They only have air magic. "

"I'm fae," she says. "I can't lie—both because of what I am, and because of the terms of our deal."

Riven frowns, clearly grappling with what Zythara's telling us.

"How do you have both air magic and water magic?" I ask her, and my own magic thrums to the surface, as if it wants to know, too.

"The vampire who turned our queen was special. Powerful," she replies.

Riven steps forward, glaring down at her. “What made him so special?” he asks.

“He was a fae turned by the original vampire,” she answers, as if such a thing is an everyday occurrence.

“And where is he now?” Riven’s shooting off questions nearly faster than I can think.

“Dead.”

“Who killed him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did that night fae take Zoey?” I chime in, since while I’m interested in learning about this supernatural species that has similar magic to mine, Zoey’s my priority.

“I can’t say for sure.” She shrugs.

I glare at her, and before I realize what’s happening, spheres of water are floating above my hands, threatening to nearly drown her like I did earlier .

“When night fae take humans, where do they typically bring them?” Riven smoothly breaks in.

“The Night Court.” Zythara scowls, as if angry at herself for revealing this information.

My heart leaps at getting a decently concrete answer about Zoey. “What happens to them there?” I ask.

“They become pets of the royal family.” Her lips curl into a smile that makes my skin crawl. “The king, queen, princes, and princesses each keep their own collection.”

I stiffen at the word.

Pets .

As if human lives are mere possessions.

But we have limited time, and I need to know more.

“What does being a pet entail?” I ask, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“The most desirable of them serve the royal family,” she replies. “As I said, each member of the royal family keeps a small collection. The ones they don’t want are sent to the barns, for the nobles to enjoy as they please.”

She continues to tell us more, and horror grows in my stomach as I learn about what Zoey’s been dragged—well, flown—into.

“And what makes them?—”

“Enough,” Riven cuts me off, and I freeze, jarred by his interruption. “We’ll get into more of those details later.” With that, he turns back to Zythara, as focused as ever. “Where’s the Night Court? ”

“To find the Night Court, you must go northwest through the forest, crest the highest hill, and locate the black stone archway,” she says. “Passing beneath it under the night sky activates the court’s magic, a ripple that notes your presence and grants you passage. Without it, the court remains veiled. But be warned that without an escort, you’ll never make it through alive.”

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Sapphire

Riven asks Zythara more questions about how to get to the Night Court, which I note as well, given my sudden gift at navigating by the stars. He's intensely thorough about it, ensuring that whenever we try to find the Night Court, we don't get lost. He also asks about the rulers of the court, and other questions about how the court operates.

There are a lot of details to keep track of.

"Why were you in the Wandering Wilds?" he eventually asks Zythara.

"I was sent here on an errand," she replies.

"What kind of errand?"

"The king wanted a winter fae," she says. "I was heading to the border to find one."

Riven sucks in a sharp breath, clearly shocked by this information .

"How many winter fae have the night fae taken?" he asks. "And what happens to them when they're there?"

"I don't keep count." She holds his gaze, challenging him to push her further. "But the queen has turned at least twenty since the Harvest Moon. Probably more."

Horror and rage war in Riven's eyes.

Did Zythara just shock the Winter Prince speechless?

“What does the Night Court want with winter fae?” I ask, since we’re getting close to hitting our time limit, and we don’t have a second to waste.

“Power,” she says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “We no longer want to remain concealed in the shadows, scared that when others learn of our existence, they’ll wipe us out because they fear the unknown. So, given our small numbers compared to the Winter and Summer Courts, we want power. Pure, endless power.”

“Your kind already has both air magic and water magic,” Riven says, and frost crawls up his arms, as if he’s growing restless. “How much more power could you gain?”

“The power of the Revenants.” Zythara raises her chin, as if these Revenants are things to be worshipped and feared. “When Ambrogio regains his full strength, we’ll join the Blood Coven—which we’ve been aligned with for nearly a year—and he’ll turn us into Revenants.”

“Who’s Ambrogio?” I ask.

“Ambrogio is the key to all of this.” Zythara tilts her head as much as she can in her ice prison, her expression mocking. “He’s the first vampire.”

“The one whose son turned your queen,” Riven says, studying her as he pieces it all together.

“Yes. That one,” she says, and my mind spins, desperate to learn how this all might affect Zoey.

“What will happen to the humans of the Night Court if you all join?”

A sharp crack interrupts my words, and the ice around Zythara's body begins to splinter, the magic of our deal reaching its end.

Our hour is up.

My throat tightens with desperation. Because there's so much more I need to know.

Why do I have the same powers as the night fae? Am I one of them? Am I a descendant of this Ambrogio, too? Could I have been unknowingly turned by him? Or maybe I was too young when it happened to remember? Is this darkness—this insistent hunger—something I can learn to control, or will I be a slave to it forever?

The questions swirl in my mind, and I'm drowning in them, unable to separate them into coherent thoughts.

Not like it matters, since I've run out of time to ask.

"Time to fulfill your end of the bargain," Riven says, pulling out the vial of relaxation potion .

He kneels next to Zythara, uncaps the vial, and holds it to her lips.

She drinks without resistance.

In seconds, her body slackens against the melting ice prison, her eyelids drooping as the potion takes effect.

The silence somehow feels louder than the brutal interrogation session.

Because it's time to complete the next part of our deal. The part I've been dreading.

Feeding from her. Draining her of enough blood to weaken her without killing her.

My gaze travels to her neck, and shame burns through me. Shame at what I am, and at what I have to do to survive.

But most of all, fear that whenever Riven sees me, he'll see darkness that haunts me instead of the real me he fell in love with.

"Don't look," I say, my voice small, unable to meet his eyes. "Please."

For a moment, there's only silence.

Then, quietly, he says, "I won't."

I give him a small, thankful smile, and he turns away, giving me privacy.

Ghost follows him, as if the snow leopard knows this is something I have to do away from prying eyes, too.

It's now or never. So, taking a deep breath, I walk toward Zythara, who's slumped against the cave wall, thanks to the relaxation potion.

The night fae looks disturbingly innocent in sleep. No one would ever know that she agreed to what's coming next.

Slowly, I kneel next to her and study the place where her pulse beats beneath her pale skin. It calls to the darkness inside me in a way that makes me want to fear myself.

I glance back over at Riven.

He's turned away, just as I requested.

Just like he promised.

Trusting that he'll keep his word, I return my focus to Zythara's neck. I need to do this. For Zoey, for Riven, for everyone back home who likely thinks I'm gone forever, and for myself.

And so, I close my eyes and bite.

Her blood floods my senses, rich and electric, power thrumming through my veins like lightning as her life force rushes through me.

I hate how good it feels. I hate myself for needing it. And I hate doing this horrible thing while the man I love stands off to the side, giving me privacy I'm not sure I deserve.

Somehow—likely thanks to the part of the deal where they specified I won't drain her completely—I pull back.

Zythara's breathing is shallow, but she's still alive. Barely. And the bite mark on her neck is already starting to heal.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, trying to erase the evidence of what I just did. Of what I am.

"It's done," I say as I stand, unable to meet Riven's eyes.

The thought of the disgust waiting for me there makes me want to sink into the ground and disappear.

"Then let's go," he says, and he strides toward the cave's exit, the ice wall melting at his approach.

I follow with Ghost by my side, as if the snow leopard is making sure I'm okay.

At least one of the three of us doesn't think I'm a monster.

The stars greet us outside, their light both comforting and accusatory. Because thanks to the deal with Riven where I promised I'd do everything in my power to help him make the potion to heal his father's mind, I can't ask the stars to take me northwest, to the Night Court—to Zoey. We have to continue on our way to find the ancient woman, who hopefully knows the final ingredients we need for the potion, along with how to brew it.

Riven moves toward Ghost with purpose, his back rigid, his entire demeanor screaming that he doesn't want me anywhere near him. I can already feel the tension rolling off him in waves at the thought of how close we'll have to be for the foreseeable future .

Unlike usual, he doesn't help me onto Ghost's back. He simply gets on and impatiently waits for me to join.

I shouldn't have expected anything else.

So, I do it myself.

The moment I'm situated, I wrap my arms around Riven's waist for balance.

The contact feels more intimate than it should, given the emotional gap between us. But I can't hold on to nothing. So, he'll have to deal with me touching him for the time being.

"Don't fall off," he says sharply.

“I won’t,” I fire back, and with a low growl from Ghost, we’re off, the leopard’s powerful legs eating up the snow as we race into the darkness.

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Sapphire

As we run, my arms around Riven's waist feel like chains tethering me to someone who clearly wants nothing to do with me. But I swallow the lump in my throat and make myself useful, focusing on navigating by the stars instead of on the pain of being rejected.

Minutes blur into hours. Hills rise and fall, trees cast long, skeletal shadows across the snow, and the air grows colder. The only sounds are the rhythmic pounding of Ghost's paws and the occasional gust of wind as I use my magic to blow around the snow behind us to cover our tracks.

After nearly a full day of traveling, Ghost's pace slows.

"We need to rest," Riven declares, and Ghost comes to a gradual stop in a small clearing surrounded by towering evergreen trees .

He swings off Ghost's back with a grace that shows they've been doing this for years.

I, on the other hand, am not as graceful. Especially given how tired I am from the endless traveling.

Riven doesn't notice. He's already scanning the forest with calculated focus, his expression as cold as the ice he wields.

"The branches will help block the wind," he says, not looking at me as he speaks.

"And the snow will be good insulation for our shelter."

“What shelter?” I ask, looking around for something I might have missed.

“The one we’re about to build,” he says, as if it should have been obvious. “I’m assuming you’ve heard of an igloo?”

“Of course I’ve heard of igloos.” I scoff, since Zoey and I built them all the time as kids during the winter.

Well, we tried to build them. Our attempts resulted in walls that shot straight up to the sky, since we could never figure out how to get them to curve inward and meet at the top.

“We’re going to build one,” Riven says, ice shards dancing around him as he begins bringing the snow together in what looks to be blocks. “Use your magic to heat the air around the snow to stick the blocks together, like when you made the icicles stick to the bottoms of your and Zoey’s boots during the bridge trial. ”

Heat the air around the ice.

I pause as the words sink in.

“I used air magic to melt the ice,” I realize. “Not water magic.”

“That’s my working theory, since summer fae can only control water in its liquid form,” he says, motioning to the two blocks closest to me. He created them quickly, although that isn’t a surprise, given how fast he put up the ice wall in the cave to shield us from the storm. “How about you give it a go and put my theory to the test?”

I nod and kneel next to the blocks, trying to focus on the task rather than the cold distance between me and Riven.

My magic is shaky. Unstable. When I try warming the first block to thaw its surface, I melt it to the point where it's misshapen completely.

Riven exhales sharply. "Careful with your focus," he says. "You're using too much heat. Ground yourself. Steady your breathing. Control your emotions, and therefore, your magic."

"I'm trying," I snap, although all I do is heat the air so much that the remains of the block melt completely. "I don't exactly have a lifetime of practice, like you."

He stops working on the igloo, his silver eyes locking on to me like knives pinning me down.

"I'm aware," he says slowly, forcing a calmness into his voice that wasn't there before. "Which is why I'm trying to help. Unless you don't want a place to sleep?"

"Of course I do."

"Then try harder."

I bite back an argument rising in my throat and focus on the blocks again, inhaling deeply and summoning the air magic within me. As I do, I imagine being as Riven described: grounded, steady, and controlled.

Three things I'm definitely not feeling right now.

The next pulse of warmth I send out is lighter, and the edge of the ice block melts just enough to fuse to the one beside it.

"There." Riven nods with approval. "That's better."

“I told you I was trying,” I say, and for the next few minutes, we fall into a steady rhythm.

He crafts the blocks with swift precision, and I cautiously follow his instructions to meld them together.

“Why do you even need my help?” I finally ask. “You created that ice wall in the cave—the one that protected us from a mega blizzard—in seconds. Why is an igloo so much harder than that?”

“I never said I needed your help,” he says simply. “You, however, need mine.”

I freeze and stare at him, dropping hold of my magic.

“So, this is another training session?” I ask, and he gives me that trademark smirk of his—the one that means he’s enjoying catching me off guard .

It’s frustrating, but at least he’s giving me something other than anger and stonewalling.

“Like you said—I have a lifetime of practice,” he replies. “You have less than two weeks of it. And since we’re stuck working together for the foreseeable future, I’m going to mold you into the best asset possible.”

Whatever connection I thought had formed between us shatters in a second.

“Did you really just call me an asset to be molded?”

I stand as anger rises inside me, the trees whistling from the wind blowing around the clearing.

“Yes. An asset,” he replies as he also stands, his tone as frosty as his magic. “And right now, not a very reliable one.”

“I got here less than two weeks ago.” I remind him, moving closer, enjoying the feeling of the wind in my hair—of the power rushing around me. “In those two weeks, I learned I’m not human, was sentenced to death by an insane king, completed three brutal trials designed to break my body and soul, nearly died at the hands of multiple murderous monsters, watched a night fae abduct my best friend, and survived on the literal blood of my enemies. I didn’t want this. Any of it.”

Not to mention the fact that I fell in love with a winter prince who now hates me and was potentially toying with me this entire time.

Because all I’ve ever been to him was an asset .

He pauses mid-motion, and the block of ice in his hands falls to the ground, as if my words physically hurt him.

“Whether you want it or not, this is where we are now,” he says sharply. “And the only way we survive this is if you stop pitying yourself long enough to work with me and learn to be as lethal as possible.”

“I’m not pitying myself,” I say. “I’m...”

“Brooding? Distracted? Keeping secrets that could have gotten you—and me—killed?”

His words cut through me, twisting at my heart.

“It wasn’t like that,” I say, although I hardly sound convincing, even to myself.

“Then what was it like?” he challenges, and now that he’s looking at me with those silver eyes that probe into my soul, I wish he’d go back to avoiding me like he was doing before.

“I wanted to tell you. I just didn’t know how,” I admit, relieved when Ghost moves to stand beside me, protecting me from Riven’s icy wrath. “I didn’t want you to look at me like you’re looking at me now.”

“And how am I looking at you now?” His gaze intensifies, as if he knows exactly what he’s doing.

“Like I’m something you can’t trust,” I say, trembling despite my best effort to keep steady. “Like I’m dangerous. Like I’m...” I trail off, hating how small I sound. “Like I’m not me anymore.”

He releases a long, controlled breath and runs his fingers through his hair, as if gathering his thoughts and containing his magic.

“You didn’t trust me enough to tell me,” he finally says. “And maybe worse, you didn’t trust me to help you—even though helping you is all I’ve been doing since you fell into this realm and nearly got yourself killed on multiple occasions.”

“You’ve been keeping me alive because I’m a good asset,” I snap, using his word from earlier against him.

He doesn’t so much as flinch.

“At first, yes,” he admits. “But then, when you were under the ice in the lake trial, swimming to find the key, I realized I’d never forgive myself if you didn’t make it back up. The thought of not seeing you again tore at a place in my heart I didn’t know existed.”

I still, since while I'm not sure what I expected, it certainly hadn't been something as raw and real as that.

"Really?" I ask, wanting him to say it again. Wanting him to tell me he still cares.

Wanting to know I'm not alone in this cold, dark, endless wilderness.

"I'm fae. I can't lie," he says, brushing it off so easily that all the hope leaves my heart at once. "But you have an entire other arsenal of magic at your disposal. If I knew you were part vampire, I could have done a better job at teaching you how to use both your water magic and your air magic. Not to mention your projection magic, which we still know next to nothing about."

"I didn't know I was part vampire until I got to the Wandering Wilds and killed that night fae," I say, rushing to clarify.

He takes a moment to study me, and I have no idea if he likes what he sees. All I know is that I feel like I'm under a microscope, with every flaw—down to the absolute smallest of them—laid bare beneath his penetrative gaze.

"What, exactly, happened with that night fae at the ravine?" he finally asks.

I flash back to that moment—when the night fae pinned me down, pierced my neck with his fangs, and started drinking from me. He was going to drain me dry. He was likely only a few minutes away from it, at the most.

So, I projected and killed him from behind.

And then, I drained every drop of blood from his already dead body.

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Sapphire

“That night fae was going to kill me,” I say, shame crushing my lungs as I tell Riven the details of what happened, up until he found me and Zoey in the cave.

As I speak, he paces in front of the half-completed igloo like a caged animal. His body is taut with restrained energy, and his eyes flick between the rising sun and me, his hands flexing and clenching as though they can’t decide if they want to grab his sword, or if they want to grab me.

Ghost watches him, ears twitching, but he doesn’t move from my side.

After I’ve told Riven everything, the weight of the world lifts from my chest.

“Do you have any idea how reckless that was?” he asks, turning to face me. His voice is sharp, but there’s something beneath it—something rough, like he’s been holding onto this anger for too long. “Keeping it from me, I mean. Do you know what could have happened?”

“Yes,” I say, even though the lump in my throat makes it hard to get the word out.

He steps closer, the space between us shrinking until the cold radiating off him seeps into my skin.

“You don’t,” he says, the intensity of his gaze rooting me to the ground. “If you knew, you wouldn’t have hidden it. And because you hid it, you put all of us—me, Zoey, and Ghost—in danger. Do you understand that?”

His words are an accusation. A reminder of my failure. But it's the way he says it—the way his eyes search mine, the way his breath comes just a little too fast—that makes my heart race.

“Yes,” I repeat again, my magic swirling inside me, begging to escape. “I hear you, and I agree. I should have told you the moment I knew I could trust you. I was scared, but I shouldn't have let fear get in the way of honesty. And for that, I'm sorry.”

The air thickens between us, and he glances at my lips—so fast I might have imagined it.

Then, finally, he nods.

“We could have been working together this entire time,” he says, and he takes another step closer, only stopping when there are a few inches between us. “Instead, you chose to struggle alone and put everyone at risk. Including yourself.”

“I know,” I say again, lifting my chin so I can hold his gaze.

How many times will I have to say it for him to believe it?

The wind picks up around us, responding to my frustration. Or maybe to his. I can't tell anymore.

“There's still one other thing I can't figure out,” he says, and when he steps back, putting what feels like a chasm between us, I brace myself for another round of questioning.

“And what's that?” I ask, even though it's taking every last bit of self-control to not close the space between us and apologize in a way that definitely isn't verbal.

“Your entire existence should be impossible,” he says, detached again, as if we’re working on a school project.

And, given that it’s a rather important project, I take a deep, cooling breath, gathering myself together so I can listen.

“Vampires aren’t born—they’re created,” he continues. “But that night fae didn’t turn you at the ravine.”

“How do you know?” I ask, since being turned at the ravine has been one of my working theories.

“Because being turned into a vampire is a process. It wouldn’t have happened that quickly. Secondly, you had cravings for raw meat before he bit you, which still has blood in it. And you used air magic before then, too, like when you warmed the ice to shape it into icicles to attach to your boots. My guess is that your vampire side was always there, buried inside you. It just needed something to awaken it.”

“And his biting me awakened it,” I say slowly, since it decently adds up.

“Possibly,” he muses. “But that’s all I’ve got right now. Unless there’s something else you omitted from your story that you’d like to share?”

“No,” I say, his accusation another blow to my heart. “I told you everything I can think of right now.”

“Okay,” he says, and while I’m not sure if that means he forgives me or not, at least it’s a start. “If you think of anything else, I’d appreciate if you told me. Now, let’s finish our shelter. Tomorrow, I’ll start teaching you properly, keeping in mind that you have both water magic and air magic. Because you have an incredible amount of power. Once you learn how to harness it, you’ll be near unstoppable.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promise him.

“Good.” He looks me over, as if making sure I mean it, and we return to building the igloo.

When we’re done, he leans back on his heels, inspecting our work. He had me do a decent amount of it, and while it’s hardly an architectural marvel, it looks sturdy enough.

“It’ll do,” he decides, and then he strides over to it, touches it, and smooths it over, creating a beautiful bubble of peace in the wilderness.

Effortless. Like all things with him. Like magic itself bends to his will, reshaping, refining, turning something functional into something breathtaking.

“Show off,” I mutter, but he’s already moved to the pack he dropped earlier, rummaging inside of it and pulling out a small bundle of waxed cloth.

“We need to eat,” he says, opening the cloth and examining what we have left of our rations.

“What gourmet delight do we have tonight?” I settle down across from him, grateful that the tension between us has subsided enough that he can talk to me without snapping at me.

“Dried meat. A few berries. Some nuts.” He glances up at me. “Not exactly feast-worthy, but it’ll keep us alive. I’ll forage tomorrow to replenish. As for you...”

He looks me over, that far off, guarded look returning to his eyes.

So much for the tension subsiding.

“There’s no point in you having the rations when berries aren’t what you actually need to survive,” he finally says.

I flinch back at the way he’s talking about me—like I’m something other.

Like I’m a mystery he’s still trying to solve.

Which, to his credit, I am .

“I might be half vampire, but I’m also half fae,” I remind him. “Even before I knew what I was, I ate normal food along with rare meat. I think I need a little bit of everything. And from my short bit of experience, I won’t need to hunt for at least two more days.”

As he thinks about it, I can practically see him filing away this information about my feeding patterns for a later date. And I can’t shake the feeling that I’m on trial—that every word I’m saying is being measured, analyzed, and calculated.

Finally, he reaches back into his pack and drops a handful of dried berries into my palm, his fingers grazing mine. The touch is barely there—accidental—but it lingers between us like something heavy and unsaid.

As we eat, he glances at me every so often, like he’s searching for something. The fae part of me that exists alongside the vampire? I don’t know. All I know is that the tension between us is coiling tighter, no longer sharp and cold but slow and smoldering.

Eventually, our eyes meet, and the wall of ice between us starts to melt.

“You’ve been adapting faster than I expected,” he finally says, low but steady, like he’s trying to keep something buried beneath the surface.

“Is that a compliment?” I tilt my head, studying him as much as he’s studying me.

His eyes darken, just a fraction. “It’s an observation,” he replies, and I swear there’s something smug in the way he watches my breath catch.

He doesn’t elaborate.

“Any more observations you want to share?” I eventually ask, forcing my voice to sound light and teasing, when all I want is for him to close the space between us.

“You frustrate me,” he says, quieter now, like he’s admitting something he wants to hide. “You push back at every moment you can. No one’s ever treated me like that. They wouldn’t dare upset the Winter Prince. But you...”

“I don’t like being pushed around,” I finish. “Winter Prince or not.”

“I know,” he says, and something shifts. No—it cracks. “Which only makes me want you more.”

“You still want me?” I ask. “Even after...”

Even after knowing what I am? After seeing me lose control? After watching me become something monstrous?

“I don’t care what you are,” he says, as if he can read my mind. “What matters is who you are. And you, Sapphire...” His fingers brush against my cheek, light as snowfall, but the touch burns hotter than any flame. “I don’t care if you’re fae, or vampire, or anything else. Because I love you. Every single part of you.”

When our lips meet, it’s a collision, a desperate crash of fear and hunger and something far more dangerous than either of us is ready to name. The night air swirls

around us, responding to our combined magic—ice, water, and air dancing together in perfect harmony. And as his hands find my waist, pulling me closer, I sink into him, drowning in this single moment.

I wish it could last forever.

Because it's not just a kiss—it's everything.

A promise. An apology. A declaration.

"I love you, too," I breathe when we finally part. "So much."

His forehead presses against mine, and then he's picking me up as if I weigh nothing and carrying me to the igloo. It glows softly in the early morning light, the power of this moment transforming it from a simple refuge into something magical.

But the most magical thing about it is that it was built by us, from the ground up.

Which makes it something that will always be ours.

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Zoey

Block it out.

Over the past few days of having Prince Aerix of the Night Court drinking from my neck every evening for breakfast—yes, getting used to a nocturnal schedule is as confusing as it sounds—that mantra has kept me sane. Kept me from slipping into the haze he seems to want me in.

I can't let him in. Not in my mind, not in my emotions, not in the way my body reacts to his touch.

He can't hurt me emotionally if I don't let him hurt me emotionally.

As he drinks, I keep my eyes closed, trying to distract myself by thinking about the others I've become close to in this place. The ones who make this gilded prison feel a little less suffocating.

Sophia—also one of Aerix's—who finds any bright side she can around here, who welcomed me without hesitation.

Elijah—one of the queen's—who surprises me with his depth, his thoughtful silences heavy with things he never says aloud.

Isla, one of the king's, who's far sharper and fierier than she should be for her young age.

Matt, Sapphire's ex-boyfriend, who I've barely gotten a chance to talk to, since he's rarely around. He's so obsessed with the queen that she keeps him in her quarters far more often than what's normal around here. And when he is around, he avoids me at all costs.

Then, of course, there's Jake. One of Princess Cierra's, who resembles my ex from home. Their similar looks drew me to him at first. However, the more I get to know him, the more I realize how different they are. Mainly because Jake is simply... simple. He's not stupid, but he's not the sharpest, either.

Running through the people I think I can trust in this place helps distract me from Aerix's fangs in my neck—from the dizzy euphoria that comes with feeding. The euphoria I pretend doesn't exist.

The sensation is a betrayal. My body betraying my mind, and my instincts betraying my will.

Because it makes me want to relax. To sink into the pull of him and give in completely.

But I won't .

I refuse to give him that sort of power over me.

When he finally pulls away, the loss of contact is a shock. Like being wrenched from a dream I never meant to fall into.

I push myself up in the bed as much as I can manage, and his midnight eyes study me as he moves to sit on the side of the bed. The way the light from the enchanted chandelier floating near the ceiling catches in their inky depths reminds me of the night sky before a storm. Beautiful and dangerous in equal measure.

“You’re being particularly cold today,” he observes, and while his voice is smooth, there’s something else beneath it. Something sharp. Something unmet. Like a hunter who doesn’t like when his prey stops running. “Anything on your mind?”

From the concerned way he says it, a person might think he actually cares.

“Just tired.” I shrug, keeping my voice deliberately flat as I glance over at the nightstand, where a glass of juice awaits. “No cookies today?”

“None,” he says, even though given the grandiosity of the Night Court, I highly doubt the kitchen would have run out.

It’s a game. A test.

He’s probably withholding treats because he doesn’t like the way I’ve been withdrawing .

Such goes the life of a pet to the royals of the Night Court.

“Interesting,” I say, because even though I won’t admit it to him, those cookies are delicious. I look forward to them every time I come here.

“Do you want them?” he asks, and it’s clear from his tone that he’s trying to get a rise out of me.

I recognize the game. And I refuse to play.

“Sure,” I say, and as I reach for the glass of juice, something flashes in his eyes—anger, or wounded pride. The air around the glass shifts subtly, and the liquid inside ripples in a reminder that the elements themselves obey his command.

I pick up the glass and take a slow sip, forcing myself to remain steady.

“Stop acting like someone you’re not,” he suddenly declares, taking me by so much surprise that I nearly drop the glass.

I freeze.

Then, slowly, I set the glass back down.

He’s watching me like a predator, every inch of him sculpted from shadow and seduction. But his beauty feels wrong. Like a statue carved too precisely, too perfectly, until it no longer looks real.

Stop, I think, snapping myself back into the reality where he assumes he knows everything about me. Because I don’t care if he looks like some dark, celestial being fallen from the sky.

Well, maybe I do. A little.

But that’s not the point.

“Who, exactly, am I?” I challenge after getting myself back together.

His eyes narrow, like he’s trying to pin me down and read the pages of my soul, and a breeze stirs the edges of my dress.

A warning.

“You’re someone who doesn’t give up.” There’s something vicious about the way he says it, like he’s trying to remind me of something I’ve forgotten—or trying to remind himself. “And yet here you are, retreating into yourself, pretending to feel

nothing. To be nothing.”

“You assume too much,” I say, and I put the glass to my lips and drink, needing to do something to stop myself from giving into his goading.

He watches me the entire time, his gaze burning into my skin, his frustration humming between us like an unspoken threat.

And given that his fangs have already been in my skin, I refuse to let any other part of him in there, too.

So, I force myself to relax. To let the silence stretch. To make him be the first to break it .

Block it out, I remind myself. Stay in control. He can’t hurt me if I don’t let him hurt me.

By the time I finish the juice and place the glass back onto the nightstand, my walls are firmly back in place, and I’m bracing myself for him to ram into me again for not liking the way I’m behaving.

Instead, he rises to his feet with infuriating, effortless grace. His dark wings unfurl behind him, and a gust of air swirls around the room, lifting a stray lock of his black hair and sending ripples through the juice in my glass.

“We’re done here,” he says instead, and he walks to the door and pulls it open, revealing Aethelthryth—the night fae “handler” who has to watch me when I’m not in the human wing—waiting on the other side.

Without looking back at me, he says to her, “She’s all yours.”

And then, I'm gone, not sparing him a glance on my way out.

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Zoey

An hour later, I'm at the small pond in the back of the palace—right behind the outside walls of the human wing—with Jake, for my daily swim lesson.

Aethelthryth, of course, stands off to the side, watching us. Jake's night fae handler stands next to her.

Both of their wings are out.

There's no such thing as free rein for humans when we're not locked inside our cage.

"Let's try floating again," Jake says, standing waist-deep in the pond. "Try to relax this time."

Easy for him to say. He's not the one sitting at the edge of the pond, feet dangling in the cold water, trying to summon the courage to push off. Not to mention the fact that fae don't have bathing suits—I'm stuck with a loose, ankle-length, full-sleeve chemise-type thing instead .

If it weren't for Jake's wandering eyes, I'd probably rip the thing off and swim naked.

"You won't let me sink?" I ask him, even though we've been through this a dozen times already.

"Never." He holds out his hands, ready to support me. "Trust me."

I do trust him. That's not the problem. Jake's genuinely sweet, and I know he wants to help. It's just...

"Remember to keep your back straight and..." He moves toward me, but when he takes my hand, it's not to help me into the water. It's to run his thumb in circles over my palm and gaze longingly into my eyes. "You look really pretty today."

Yeah. There's the problem.

"Jake," I say gently. "Focus?"

"Right, sorry." He shakes his head, his cheeks reddening. "Back straight, arms out, like we practiced on land. Sound good?"

I glance at Aethelthryth—since she's the one who advised we practice on land—and she gives me an encouraging nod.

Then I slide into the water, trying to ignore how my heart races as I do.

Jake's hands are there immediately, one supporting my back, the other ready to catch me if I panic.

"Good," he says, watching me closely. "Now, lean back slowly. "

I try to follow his instructions, but the moment my feet leave the bottom and my back touches the surface, memories of almost drowning in that frozen lake flash through my mind. The crack of ice, the shocking cold, the helpless feeling of sinking...

"You're okay," Jake murmurs, but he's closer than he needs to be, staring at my face instead of watching my form.

I push away, relief flooding me as I find solid footing.

Aethelthryth shifts at the edge of the pond, and I swear I see her roll her eyes.

“Maybe we should try something else,” I say to Jake, as I continue to steady myself.
“Something upright?”

Jake waggles his eyebrows, and now I roll my eyes—along with Aethelthryth. Even Jake’s handler is trying to suppress a smile.

“Something upright as in treading water,” I clarify, even though I’m starting to regret asking him to teach me how to swim in the first place.

Maybe I can get Sophia to teach me instead? Or Isla?

It would crush Jake, and he’s sweet enough that I don’t want to hurt him, but I’m slowly reaching my breaking point.

“Treading water,” Jake repeats, shooting me a sheepish grin. “So, you just kind of move your arms and legs. Like you’re bicycling with your feet and scooping water with your hands. ”

“I know what treading water is,” I say, and he flinches back, as if the words physically hurt him.

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “I didn’t mean to snap. I’m just frustrated.”

“Because swimming’s the only thing in the world you aren’t good at?” He smiles, and while I know he’s going for light and playful, it feels more insulting than anything else.

“I’ll be good at it. I just have to learn,” I say, and in an act of defiance, I push off from the shallow end into where it gets deeper... and realize my mistake a second later.

I’m floundering.

Sinking.

No matter how hard I try to move, the water refuses to hold me.

My breaths come fast and shallow. The edges of my vision blur as my head dips under. The water’s entering my eyes, and my nose, and I kick harder, flailing my arms in desperate, uncoordinated movements that only pull me down deeper.

Jake’s there in an instant, his hands gripping my arms. “I’ve got you,” he says, helping me up and out to the shallower end. “You’re okay. Just breathe. You’re safe.”

“I’m fine,” I manage to say, even though the air’s burning my lungs, and my legs feel like jelly .

“You just sank like a rock.”

“I know.” I shake him off and regain my footing, the water now lapping somewhat safely at my shoulders. “I noticed.”

“A very sexy rock?” He says it like a question, as if the comment will earn back my affection.

“Rocks can’t be sexy.” I huff, and he backs off, holding his hands up in surrender.

“Hey,” he says, although he thankfully keeps his distance this time. “I’m just trying

to help.”

I close my eyes for a moment and press my fingers to the bridge of my nose, steadying my breathing. “I know,” I say when I’m ready, opening my eyes again and meeting his gaze. “I just don’t understand why this is so hard.”

“It’s hard because you’re making it hard,” Aethelthryth calls from across the way. “You’re overthinking everything and flailing around like a fish caught in a net. Relax.”

“Easy to say when you have water magic,” I mutter, which makes Jake chuckle.

“Maybe try again?” he suggests. “I can hold you while?—”

“I think I’ve had enough for the day,” I cut him off, pushing through the water to get back onto dry land.

The solidness below my feet is absolute heaven .

A second later, Aethelthryth is next to me, placing her hand on my shoulder and using her magic to dry me off.

“Let’s get you changed for lunch,” she says after the last drop of water is gone. “Maybe you’ll have better luck tomorrow.”

“Maybe.” I shrug, since as much as I hate it, this is starting to feel beyond hopeless. Swimming might just not be in the cards for me.

“See you later?” Jake asks, suddenly beside me. His eyes are searching mine, asking for confirmation.

No, more like begging for it.

Princess Cierra always has him go to her quarters for lunch—so she can have him for lunch—which means this is where we part ways.

It's a relief, since after every lesson, I need a break. At first, I thought I needed the break from swimming, but I'm gradually realizing that I need the break from him.

"Sounds good," I say, and then I'm following Aethelthryth back to the human wing, relieved to leave Jake behind before he tried to kiss me.

"If you're not into him, you'll do him a favor if you let him down now," she says once we're out of Jake and his handler's earshot. "He has a habit of getting attached."

I glance at her, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"Jake's harmless, but he's also persistent," she says, her wings shifting as she studies me. "If you don't set boundaries now, you'll be stuck dealing with him until someone else catches his eye."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"Because..." I pause to think about it.

It's an excellent question.

"He was one of the first people to be nice to me around here," I finally say. "I don't want to hurt him."

I also need him on my side—the side of the humans who aren't just going to lay down and accept our fates as pets to be enjoyed before they're sent to the slaughterhouse. Also known as the barns.

We haven't done anything to turn things around other than start carving pieces for a chess board together, but at least we're preparing to play the game.

“It never is,” Aethelthryth says as we approach the doors to the human wing. “But it's better to deal with it now than to let it fester. Trust me.”

With that, she opens the doors, and leaves me to continue from there.

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Zoey

Thanks to ending the swim lesson early, I have a bit of time before I have to change for lunch. And I know exactly what I intend on doing with that time.

So, instead of heading back to my suite, I continue down the hall to the most elaborate door in the human wing. It has beautiful designs of moons and stars, the wood is embossed with gold paint, and marble columns stand proudly on each side.

It's the suite for the humans who serve the queen.

Henry, Elijah, and most importantly, Matt. He's never in the courtyard, and he hasn't come to any meals. Even though he's likely in the queen's quarters, I'm not going to give up this rare time when I'm finally alone without trying to see him.

I knock on the door, and it swings open, revealing Henry. His slimy grin spreads across his face, and the way he leans against the doorframe makes my skin crawl.

"Well, well," he says, his voice dripping with fake charm. "What brings Aerix's favorite pet to my humble abode? Couldn't stay away?"

I fold my arms, keeping my expression neutral. "I need to see Matt."

"Ah, the ex-boyfriend. I can't say I've seen much of him lately." He steps aside, motioning for me to enter. "But by all means, come in. Unless, of course, Aerix is keeping you on a short leash these days."

“He’s my friend’s ex-boyfriend,” I correct him. “Not mine.”

“You knew each other from home.” He shrugs it off. “Same difference. There’s a certain bond between the humans who knew each other back in the mortal realm, don’t you think?”

As much as I hate it, I can’t help but be intrigued.

“Did any of the others know each other before coming here?” I ask. Because if any of them knew each other before they were taken, they’ve said nothing.

“If they did, they wouldn’t tell.” He smiles mischievously, as if he knows something I don’t, and tilts his head again for me to come in, his dark red hair falling over his forehead.

I hold my head high and step past him, ignoring his bait, just like I ignore Aerix’s. After all, I didn’t come here to get roped into a conversation with Henry. I’m here to talk to Matt.

The queen’s suite is darker than the one I share with Sophia and Victoria, dimly lit, the faint smell of incense lingering in the air. Plush chairs and thick velvet curtains give the space a false sense of luxury, but it feels suffocating—like the room itself knows the kind of power games that happen here.

“It’s interesting how fascinated Aerix is with you,” Henry continues, looking me up and down in a way that makes me wrap my jacket tighter around me. “I’d love to learn more about what you’ve done to entrance him so much.”

I glare at him and tell him to buzz off, although in a far more explicit way.

He laughs, the sound as hollow as his eyes. “Fine. Matt’s in his room.” He gestures

lazily toward a door at the end of the suite. “Although I’m not sure he’s up for company.”

I stride toward the door, Henry’s chuckle following me like a shadow, and knock.

No response.

“Matt?” I call out.

Still nothing.

“He’s in there,” Henry repeats. “And I don’t know about you, but if I wanted to talk to him as badly as you do, I’d just walk in. Who knows when you’ll get another chance?”

There’s something in his tone that I don’t like. A warning.

“Did something happen to him?” I ask.

“Why don’t you go in and find out for yourself?”

Curious—and worried that something’s really, seriously wrong—I push the door open and step inside.

The room’s small, but tastefully designed in fine silks and plush furniture, like all the rooms given to the humans.

Matt’s lying on the queen-sized bed, his face turned away, sleeping.

Relief fills my lungs at the fact that he’s here. I’ll finally have a chance to actually talk to him, without anyone else around.

As I close the door and slowly make my way toward him, he stirs, groaning softly.

He turns his head, and my heart clenches. Because his face is pale, his eyes sunken and shadowed, his blond hair flat and dull. He looks like he hasn't eaten or slept in days.

Confusion flickers across his features before recognition dawns.

"Zoey?" He blinks at me slowly. "What are you doing here?"

I walk over to the bed and perch on the side of it, taking a sharp breath inward at how he looks even worse up close than from far away. "What happened to you?" I ask. "You look?—"

"I'm fine," he cuts me off, smiling weakly. "Just tired."

"Tired?" I shake my head. "You're barely hanging on. This place—it's killing you."

"She's not killing me." He chuckles softly, the sound more like a rasp.

"She?" My stomach twists. "You mean the queen?"

"She's..." He trails off, his eyes glazing over. "She's everything. You wouldn't understand."

Given what I already know, it's not difficult to piece together what's happening here.

"She's drinking from you too often, and too much," I say it as a fact, daring him to contradict me. "She's going to kill you."

"No," he insists, the one word stronger than any he's said so far. "She loves me. I just

need rest. I'll be fine."

"You're not fine." I force myself to take a steadying breath, not wanting to anger him to the point where he shuts down. I've seen him shut down on Sapphire far too many times to know it's in the realm of extreme possibility. "You need to eat something. Drink something. Anything to keep your strength up."

He shakes his head, his smile slipping. "You don't understand. She needs me."

I bite back a curse, frustration bubbling in my chest .

"And what about what you need?" I ask. "Have you seen yourself today? Because if you don't take care of yourself, you're not going to survive this."

"I'll be fine," he says, closing his eyes again. "I just need to rest."

A lump of tears forms in my throat, but I swallow them down.

"I'll find a way to help you," I say, even though I have no idea how. "I promise."

His breathing evens out as he drifts off, and I sit there for a moment, watching him.

At home, I never liked him. In high school, he was full of himself. Then he turned bitter when he didn't get a football scholarship and therefore couldn't go to college. He treated Sapphire like she was something he wanted to own. Hot and cold all the time, as toxic as all else.

But now, he's my lifeline to home. He's the reminder that the life I had before coming here is more than a distant dream. He's the only thing familiar in this place that's more dangerously fantastical than I could have ever imagined.

I have to help him.

Eventually, I rise and leave the room, closing the door quietly behind me.

Henry's still lounging in the suite's common area, a smug expression on his face. I'm pretty sure it permanently lives there.

"Didn't like what you saw?" he mocks.

I glare at him. "Shut up, Henry."

"Careful, Zoey." He smirks and leans back in his chair. "You wouldn't want to make an enemy out of me."

Seriously? That's the best he can do?

"If you have to tell people to be afraid of you, then you're doing it wrong." I smirk right back at him and turn on my heel, storming out of the suite before he can reply.

Henry and whatever game he's playing are the least of my problems. Because I have to figure out a way to save Matt.

Before it's too late.

Zoey

After lunch, I go back to my room, retrieve my oil painting supplies, and return to the courtyard.

There are a few others around. Two of Malakai's girls—Katerina and Lacey—playing cards with Isla and Sebastian. Aurora's reading, and Elijah's sitting at a table working on his pieces for our chess board.

Elijah looks at me, and I assume he wants me to join him and work on my own piece—a knight. But I shake my head no and head to the opposite side of the courtyard, to the farthest away fountain, and set up my materials. Distance feels safer. I need space to breathe, space to think, and space to shake off the lingering effects of Aerix's presence.

I'd only just started painting the stone basin of the fountain, so I'll be busy with this for a while.

Eventually, after a few hours have passed with everyone else thankfully leaving me alone, I reach the part of the painting I've been avoiding. The liquid inside the fountain. A mix of water and blood. The deep crimson I've mixed in my palette is almost too perfect, too real, like fresh-spilled blood pooling in the water.

As I dip my brush into the paint, memories come rushing back. Uninvited, unwelcome, yet impossible to push away.

The whisper of his breath against my neck. The press of his body, cool and

unyielding. His fangs sinking into my skin. The sharp sting, the dizzying pleasure, the way my heart hammered against my ribs as if it didn't know whether to race toward him or away.

I hate how his feeding lingers, not just in my body, but in my mind. Hate how the sensation of him remains long after he's gone, curling around my thoughts like an intoxicating mist.

My hands move faster, almost frantically, the brushstrokes sharp and erratic. As if I can paint him out of my head. As if I can drown out the sensation of him, and erase the way his midnight eyes see through me—as if he already owns the pieces of me I'm trying to keep for myself .

“Zoey,” a voice cuts through my haze, pulling me back into reality.

Aethelthryth .

I must have been so absorbed in my painting that I didn't see her approach.

She's usually composed, but there's something urgent in the way she's looking down at me right now.

“What?” I ask, setting the brush down.

“It's time to go back to your room,” she says. “You need to get ready.”

“Ready for what?” I ask, although the answer is already pressing against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

She shifts uncomfortably. “Aerix requested you for dinner.”

My stomach drops. I hear the words, but they don't fully register right away.

"But he never has me over for dinner," I say quickly. "Victoria?—"

"He requested you," Aethelthryth interrupts, and the look in her eyes is clear.

Don't fight this. Don't make it worse.

"Fine," I say, because what else can I say? No? Refuse? As if that's an option?

Well, it is an option. Everything's an option.

It just isn't the strategic one.

I start gathering my materials, even though the tubes of paints are open, and the brushes are everywhere. Not to mention that there's paint all over my hands.

"I'll clean this up and bring it back to you," Aethelthryth looks at my hands, which are covered in paint that goes all the way up past my wrists. "You need to clean up and get ready."

I nod, but inside, my mind is screaming. Because I know, deep down, that no matter how much paint I scrub over my hands—no matter how much soap I use—there are some stains I'll never be able to wash off.

Victoria and Sophia are reading in the common room when I arrive, both of them already dressed for dinner.

Victoria's attention snaps to my paint-covered hands. "I thought finger painting was for children?" she quips, but there's something off about her voice. A forced lightness. A brittle edge hiding something far more fragile beneath.

I ignore her jab. Not because I can't come up with a snappy reply, but because what I need to tell her is far more important.

If she doesn't hear it from me, she'll be even more upset than if she hears it from someone else.

And she will hear it from someone else. Word spreads like wildfire in the Night Court.

"Victoria..." I start, taking a deep breath in preparation to drop the bombshell. "Aerix requested to have me over for dinner tonight. "

Her face pales, her fingers clenching the edge of the book she's holding so tightly that I half expect it to tear.

"What did you say?" she says, as if I'll tell her something different if she asks again.

"Aerix requested for me to come over for dinner tonight." I can barely meet her eyes, but I force myself to do it, anyway. "I didn't request this. I'm as surprised as you are."

"No." She shakes her head, as if she refuses to believe it. "You're lying. He always has dinner with me. Always. Ever since I first got here."

"Victoria—"

"What did you do?" She slams the book down on the table and stands. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"I'm not playing any game," I say, standing strong. "I told you—I didn't ask for this. I didn't want it."

Sophia rises and reaches for Victoria's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "It's going to be okay," she tells her, although from the way she glances back and forth between me and Victoria, I doubt she believes it.

"It's not okay." Victoria pulls her hand out of Sophia's, her eyes filling with tears. "If he stops wanting me, if he gets tired of me..."

"He won't," I tell her, but since we both know I can't know that, I add, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry won't help me when he decides I'm too old. Too boring." She lets out a hollow, bitter laugh. "When he sends me to the barns."

"I can talk to him," I say quickly, desperate to fix this. "I'll tell him..."

I trail off, because what can I tell him? How can I make him want Victoria instead of me? How can I make him stop looking at me like I'm something he wants to claim?

He's so fixated on me that trying to convince him to spend more time with her will just make things worse.

"Tell him what?" she challenges me.

I wrack my mind for something—anything.

"That's what I thought," she says, and she spins around to stomp to her room, Sophia giving me a sad smile before she follows at Victoria's heels.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

I enter Aerix's quarters, and my heart nearly stops.

Because there, on his polished ebony table, displayed like some kind of dark masterpiece, are my oil paints, brushes, and the unfinished painting I'd left in the courtyard.

But it isn't the same. The blood flowing from the fountain, once a soft scarlet, is now a deep, menacing black. It's thicker, more ominous, as if it could seep off the canvas and stain the wood.

He even had the nerve to sign it at the bottom right corner.

Prince Aerix Nightborne.

Cool currents of air swirl around my ankles, brushing against my skin like unseen tendrils.

"Do you like what I've done with it?" Aerix's voice cuts through the silence as he steps out from the shadows, his midnight eyes gleaming. "I thought it needed a bit more... perspective."

Perspective.

The word curls through me like a blade.

“It’s not yours to alter.” My hands ball into fists, but I keep my expression neutral.

“Isn’t it?” The air around him shifts, a breeze brushing my cheek. “I gave you the paints, the brushes, and the canvas. Every stroke you make with them—every color you mix, every line you paint—belongs to me.”

My throat tightens. Because his words are a reminder I can’t ignore.

Everything I have here, everything I do, is because of him. If he takes it away, I’m left with nothing.

I draw in a slow breath, somehow staying calm. “Is that why you called me here?” I ask. “To remind me of your generosity?”

“No. I called you here because I wanted to see how much you’ve enjoyed my gifts.” He gestures toward the painting, the blackened blood on the canvas seeming to darken further under his gaze. “And to remind you that the same hands that give can also take.”

The current of air around me grows colder, and I suppress a shiver.

But I force myself to keep my chin high, meeting his gaze without faltering. “I’ve enjoyed them,” I say carefully, each word chosen like a fragile step across thin ice.

His eyes narrow, glinting with something between amusement and challenge. “You’re learning,” he says, and he begins to circle me, slow and deliberate. “But I wonder... how much of this is an act? You’ve been so distant lately, Zoey. Cold, even. It’s almost as if you’re trying to block me out.”

The breeze around me sharpens, brushing against my arms like cold fingers.

I need to tread carefully. If I keep stonewalling him, I risk pushing him too far. And if I want him to do anything for me, I need to make him think I care.

“I’m not blocking you out.” I swallow, allowing the vulnerability I feel here—every single bit of it—to seep through. If I want him to bend to me, then I need to show him the parts of me that even I struggle to face. “I’m scared.”

He stops circling, the current around us pausing as well. “Scared?” he repeats. “Of what?”

“Everything.” My voice trembles, but I lean into it, letting the vulnerability spill out. “I was thrown into this world without warning. I didn’t even know supernaturals existed until a few weeks ago. And now I’m here, surrounded by creatures more powerful than I could ever imagine, trying to survive in a place that doesn’t care if I live or die. ”

His midnight eyes bore into mine, and for a moment, I think I see something shift in his expression. Understanding, maybe. Or curiosity. But then he smiles—a slow, deliberate curve of his lips that makes my stomach twist with the same fear I just shared with him.

I hate that I’m scared.

Even more, I hate the hold he has on me.

He steps closer, until he’s right in front of me. “You’re stronger than you think,” he says, and cold radiates off him, the air around us stirring in a way that raises the hairs on my arms. “Stronger than most humans who end up here.”

The words, meant to be a compliment, sound more like a challenge. As if he’s daring me to prove him wrong.

“Maybe,” I say quietly. “But strength doesn’t make this any less terrifying.”

“Good.” He leans in slightly, his voice dropping to a murmur. “Because you may paint your pretty pictures and play your little games, but at the end of the day...” His gaze darkens, the air around us growing colder still. “You belong to me.”

“I belong to no one.” The words escape my lips before I can stop them, sharper than I intended.

His eyes narrow, cutting into me like shards of ice.

“Such defiance,” he taunts. “But tell me—where does all that fire go when you’re with Jake?”

The question blindsides me, and I blink up at him, confusion briefly breaking my resolve. “Jake?”

“Yes. Jake,” he says, the growing intensity in his gaze making me take a step back. “The way he hovers around you like a lost puppy is almost endearing—if it wasn’t so pathetic.”

My jaw tightens. Because Aerix isn’t just curious.

He’s jealous.

The realization both shocks and unnerves me.

“There’s nothing between me and Jake,” I say, since the truth is easy enough to admit. “He reminded me of someone I knew back home. But the more I get to know him, the more I realize he’s not the same.”

“And Matt?” he asks. “Surely you’ve sought comfort in someone familiar?”

My stomach twists painfully at the reminder of how sick Matt looked in his room earlier. “Matt isn’t himself anymore,” I say, and again, it’s easy to be honest. “He’s obsessed with the queen. It’s like she’s drained everything out of him. He doesn’t even look at me, let alone talk to me. He’s... dying.”

At the final word, emotions I’ve been trying to keep inside crash over me like a tidal wave.

And then, the tears come. Hot and uncontrollable, they blur my vision as weeks of fear, frustration, and despair flood me all at once .

I try to hold them back—to stuff them down like I always do—but it’s no use.

My attempt at vulnerability has morphed into far more than I intended.

Aerix steps closer, and I brace myself for him to mock me, or to make some sort of snide comment about how it’s unbecoming of his pets to cry.

Instead, he reaches forward, his hand brushing my shoulder.

I don’t resist. Instead, I let his arms encircle me, solid and cold, like I’m being pulled into the eye of a storm.

“It’s all right,” he murmurs, softly enough to send another wave of tears coursing down my cheeks. “Let it out.”

I don’t know how long I stand there, crying into his chest while his fingers trace gentle circles on my back. But eventually, the storm inside me quiets, and I pull away—mortified.

I just broke down in the arms of a prince of the Night Court. In the arms of someone I should hate.

“I’m sorry,” I say, trying to compose myself as I wipe at my eyes. “I shouldn’t have?—”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” His voice is steady, and when I meet his gaze, there’s no judgment there. “Even the strongest people need to break sometimes. ”

My heart pounds as his fingers brush my cheek, wiping away a stray tear.

Then, something snaps.

All of the tension between us—the first night when we shared that bed in the bunker, the easy banter when we had breakfast the next day, the moment when he stopped the king from claiming me in the throne room, and all those times when he sank his fangs into my skin, pulling my life force from me and into him... it comes crashing down in a moment of need and desire.

And then his lips are on mine—cool but firm, commanding yet gentle—and I don’t move away.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

My heart lurches at Aerix's kiss.

This is a mistake.

I should pull away.

I don't.

Instead, I melt into him, my body betraying me as I respond to the press of his lips. The way he takes, demands, and yet somehow gives all at once.

A soft breeze stirs in the room, wrapping around us like an invisible tether, as if the very air refuses to let me go. It lifts strands of my hair, and the desire that's been building inside me—the one I've been trying to suppress every time he's fed from me—blossoms into something uncontrollable, consuming me entirely.

The pull between us is magnetic, inescapable. I can feel it in the way his hand slides to the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair as he deepens the kiss, tilting my head just enough for him to take what he wants.

His other hand finds my waist, pulling me flush against him, and as our bodies align, something inside me ignites. It's an electric surge of need, with the heady rush of something far more dangerous than magic.

The chandelier overhead flickers. Cool moisture seeps into the air, bringing the

unmistakable scent of rain.

My breath catches.

Because Aerix's control is slipping.

Suddenly, his wings are out and wrapped around me, stealing the breath from my lips. And, as the force of his need moves us across the room, I realize I'm drowning in it. Because his magic is everywhere. It's seeping into my skin, wrapping around my lungs like a vice, making it nearly impossible to breathe.

Then, my knees hit the bed.

The impact snaps me back into focus.

If I don't stop this now, it's going to escalate into something far more than a kiss or a feeding session.

"Aerix." My hands land on his chest, and a sharp breeze cuts between us—like the air itself is reluctant to let go. "Wait."

He stills, and his wings retract.

When I force myself to meet his gaze, it nearly undoes me. Because his midnight eyes are darker than I've ever seen them, swirling with hunger and stormy with desire.

Yet, his hands stay on my waist, as if he's waiting for me to take it back.

I almost do.

“I’m sorry,” I say instead, even though the words taste like a lie. Like something I don’t even believe myself.

“No, you’re not.” He gazes down at me in challenge. “If you were, you wouldn’t have kissed me back.”

“I wasn’t?—”

“Careful.” His smirk is as sharp as his unnervingly perfect features. “You don’t want to lie to me, Zoey.”

Heat flares in my cheeks. “I wasn’t going to.”

“No?” His thumb brushes against my waist, his fingers resting lightly on my skin. “Then what were you going to say?”

“I was going to say that I wasn’t thinking. That it shouldn’t have happened.”

He just shakes his head and pulls me closer.

“Do you think I don’t feel it?” he murmurs in my ear, and then his wings are wrapped around me again, trapping me in his presence. “The way you tremble when I touch you? The way your breath catches when I get too close? The way you?—”

“That’s enough,” I snap, yanking myself free.

For a moment, he just watches me, a flicker of something dangerous in his eyes. One that makes my lungs tighten at the reminder that this isn’t why he brought me here. A reminder that I will end up on that bed again, like I always do.

“Go,” he finally says, and his wings flare, despite his voice returning to its usual

smooth, controlled tone. “Take your painting and materials with you.”

I blink, startled by the sudden shift.

“That’s it?” I ask. “You’re just letting me leave?”

Then he moves.

But not toward me.

To the table with my artwork.

“I wanted to show you the improvement I made to your painting.” He gathers the materials into a satchel, leveling his gaze with mine. “And to remind you that you belong to me. Which, as you may have noticed, I successfully did.”

My nails dig into my palms. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

“Yes. You do.” There’s a warning in his tone that makes my breathing slow, reminding me that no matter how much autonomy I try to have, he’s the one in control here.

As we stare each other down, memories of that kiss slam into me again.

I try to shove them away, but they linger. Taunting me. Tempting me .

“Was there something else you expected?” His voice is a dare now, edged with something darker. “Something else you wanted?”

I glance at the bed.

The moment I do, his smirk curves into something lethal.

If I give in again, there won't be any turning back.

Which means I need to snap out of it.

Now.

"It's dinnertime," I remind him, the words slipping out before I can stop them. "Don't you need to feed?"

His smirk doesn't fade. If anything, it deepens.

Whatever spell he's weaving around me, I need him to stop, before I find myself over there with him offering far more than my blood.

But he simply places the satchel onto the table and motions to it. "Take it and leave," he says, which is enough permission I need to hurry over to it, pick it up, and all but run to the door. Because if I don't get out of here now, I'm definitely going to do something I'll regret.

When the door opens, Aethelthryth is standing there, her sharp gaze flicking from me to Aerix.

"Bring Victoria," Aerix commands her. "I still need my dinner."

I don't look back.

I don't have to .

Because I can still feel his eyes following me until the moment I'm gone.

Sapphire

As the afternoon sun filters into the igloo, I wake to Riven's arms wrapped around me, his steady heartbeat a soothing rhythm beneath my ear. It's a stark contrast to the chaos of the past few days—a fleeting moment of peace I wish I could hold on to forever.

But it's not his closeness that has my heart racing. It's the dream still vivid in my mind—of the mysterious woman I encountered in the forest before I drank from the stream and fell into the fae realm.

The image of her is already fading, but what she said to me in the dream echoes in my thoughts: Above the earth and bound to light, your soul must rise to claim your sight.

I frown, the words settling over me like a puzzle waiting to be solved.

But I don't have to solve them alone.

So, turning in Riven's embrace, I find his silver eyes already open, watching me. There's a softness there reserved only for me, in these quiet moments we share together.

"You're awake," he murmurs, his voice low and groggy.

"I had another dream." My words tumble out, as if I'll forget them if I don't say them quickly enough. "It was her. The woman from the forest."

His brow furrows as he sits up, the strands of his midnight hair catching in the light.
“What did she say?”

I recite the line, each word clear in my memory.

“It sounds like a riddle.” He absently strokes my arm as he thinks. “Tell me exactly what you remember.”

I describe the dream in detail—the woman’s ethereal presence, the colorful galaxy that spiraled around us, and the way her words resonated through my very being.

As I speak, he listens intently, his expression thoughtful.

“When you project, your consciousness rises above your physical form,” he finally says. “That could be what she means by ‘above the earth.’”

“Maybe,” I say, since for a reason I can’t explain, I feel like there’s more to it than that. “But what about ‘bound to light?’ And ‘claiming my sight?’”

“Perhaps it’s about discovering more of who you are.” His eyes search mine with an intensity that makes my breath catch. “You’re unique, Sapphire. A hybrid of fae and vampire—something that shouldn’t be possible. There could be abilities within you that we don’t understand yet. Like your projection ability, for one.”

“Does that scare you?” I ask softly.

“No,” he says, taking my hands in his. “Like I told you yesterday, being part vampire is just one aspect of who you are. It doesn’t define you. Identity isn’t a matter of circumstance, but of discipline. It’s in the choices you make, the integrity you maintain, and the principles you keep. You have the power to take what you’re given and sculpt it into what you become. And, luckily for you, you have an extremely

talented, well-trained, irresistible winter prince to help you along the way. Some might even call that an unfair advantage.”

I can’t help but smile at that last part. Then I look down at my bracelet—the only thing I have from the mother I’ve never met—and I realize just how much his words hit home.

“I’ve spent so long wondering what things might have been like if she hadn’t left,” I admit, meeting his eyes again. “But maybe I’m not going to find myself by digging through the past. Maybe I’ll do it by looking toward the future.”

“A wise decision,” he says, his trademark smirk returning. “Although right now, I say we forget about both the past and the future, so we can focus on enjoying the present.”

Before I can reply, he leans forward and presses his lips to mine in a kiss that makes all my worries about who I am and the future in store for me disappear in a heartbeat.

When we part, I rest my forehead against his. “I love you,” I whisper.

“And I love you,” he replies. “Every single part of you.”

From there, the world outside the igloo ceases to exist—no mission, no looming threats, no unanswered questions. Just the comfort of his touch, the way his hands know exactly where to hold me, and the way he makes me feel grounded and weightless all at once.

Much later, as the sun’s starting to set, we lay on the thin sleeping roll with my head on his chest, his fingers lazily tracing patterns along my spine. There’s a comfortable silence between us—the kind that speaks louder than words.

I don't want to step back into the reality waiting for us outside this space we've carved for ourselves. But the stars will come out soon, which means it won't be long until we're forced to leave our newfound sanctuary behind.

"We should pack up," Riven says reluctantly, although he doesn't pull away. "But first..." He meets my gaze again, serious now. "You should feed."

I stiffen, remembering the last time I drank blood—from the dark angel, in the cave, with Riven's back turned.

But he's right. It's been over twenty-four hours since then, and I need to keep up as much strength as possible. Sure, I can go around three days without feeding, but it's hardly comfortable when I do.

"Okay," I say. "Let's hunt."

And so, we pry ourselves away from each other, pack up, and venture deeper into the forest.

Ghost pads ahead of us, and Riven moves beside me, scanning the terrain with practiced precision. There's tension in his posture—a readiness for anything that might emerge from the shadows.

And despite the comforting things he told me earlier, I can't get three specific words of his out of my mind. Not "I love you," but "you should feed."

Because even though he says he accepts the vampire side of me, the idea of him witnessing it again makes me want to shrink into the snow and disappear. But still, I keep going with my head held high, reminding myself that he loves me for me, and not for what I am.

After about an hour of careful stalking, Ghost freezes, his ears pricking forward .

Through the trees ahead, I spot a massive caribou, its antlers stark against the darkening sky.

Riven steps closer, his hand brushing mine. “You’ll need to be quick,” he says. “Ghost and I will keep watch.”

“Just try to not watch me,” I tell him, since I really don’t want him to see me bite a living thing and feast on its blood. Not after the shame I felt after pouncing on that dark angel after the storm and losing control.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe,” he says, which I take as an unfortunate—and irritatingly practical—no.

But there’s no time to argue. So, with a deep breath, I reach for my air magic, using it as a cushion below my feet as I move silently through the snow.

When I’m close enough to the caribou, I lunge.

My fangs pierce its neck, and the hot rush of blood floods my senses, easing the ache that’s been growing inside me since the last time I fed. The rush of power is nearly impossible to not get lost in.

Suddenly, something shifts in my peripheral vision.

I jerk back from the caribou and whirl toward the movement, trying to see where it’s coming from.

There. In the trees.

Dark shapes flicker between their trunks—but they’re not quite right. They’re just... shadows. Moving independently, without bodies to cast them .

Riven’s by my side in an instant.

“Tariaksuq,” he says, drawing his sword. “Shadow people. They’re said to appear as half-man, half-caribou, but only when killed. Until then, they’re nothing more than shadows.”

Before I can ask more, the nearest shadow lunges.

I dive to the side, rolling through the snow as more shadows converge on our position. It’s hard to make them out, but the clearest part of them is also the most alarming: their hands. Long and spindly, with claws capable of ripping a person to shreds.

Ghost snarls, positioning himself between me and the approaching threats.

“There are too many,” I say, counting at least fifteen of them circling us. Maybe more.

“Stay close,” Riven orders, his blade glowing with frost magic. “Back to back. What are the most important things I’ve taught you so far?”

My heart hammers as I tighten my grip on my dagger. “Stay strong. Adapt. And be unpredictable,” I say, already feeling the pulse of magic stirring within me.

I let it build, drawing on both sides of myself—the air magic that sharpens my senses, and the water magic that steadies my aim.

As I hone in on the power, one of the shadows darts toward Riven .

He pivots with inhuman speed, his blade slicing through the air and leaving a trail of ice in its wake.

The shadow recoils, its form twisting violently, and then a creature—half man, half caribou—is lying dead on the ground in its place. It looks so human—well, half human—that guilt twists in my chest at the sight of its mangled form.

“One down,” Riven says, his sword at the ready, his body and blade buzzing with magic and determination. “Five to go.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Sapphire

Another shadow lunges at me, and I react on instinct, thrusting my palm forward and summoning a blast of air.

The gust ripples through the forest, scattering snow and forcing the shadow to retreat.

“Good,” Riven says, slicing through another shadow that veers too close. “But don’t waste your strength on wide attacks. Focus your power. Your magic. Your dagger.”

“I’m trying,” I snap, ducking as another shadow darts at my legs.

Ghost intercepts it, his jaws snapping shut on empty air.

The shadow recoils, reforming behind him.

It all happens so quickly that it’s hard to keep up. Yet, somehow, Riven and I move together as if we’ve been fighting side by side our whole lives, keeping each other safe as the shadows dart in and out of the trees like phantoms in the night.

When the next shadow lunges, I summon tiny orbs of water from the humidity in the air and hurl them at it like bullets.

They strike true, pushing the shadow back, catching it by surprise.

I use the moment of opportunity to launch myself at the shadow and slice through it with my dagger.

Just like that, another dead caribou man appears in the shadow's place and falls to the ground.

"That's more like it," Riven says, sharp with approval.

I glance over my shoulder at him as his sword arcs through the air, frost spreading along the blade as he dispatches another shadow. His movements are precise, calculated, and beautiful—like a dance perfected throughout the decades.

Then, a shadow lunges at his blind spot.

"Behind you!" I shout, but he's already turning, his blade cutting through the darkness and taking the creature down.

Still, another shadow seizes the opportunity, aiming for his side.

It's fast.

Too fast .

In less than a second, I'm moving, my air magic carrying me across the snow with a burst of speed. A scream tears from my throat as I throw myself into the shadow's path, raising my dagger and slashing it through its chest.

It lets out a hollow screech, dissolving into a half-man, half-caribou corpse at my feet, so close that I nearly trip over it.

I'm still centering myself when a shadow lunges from my left, its claws raking across my arm.

Pain explodes through me. It's hot and sharp, and I stagger back, clutching the

wound. It takes everything in me to not lose hold of my dagger.

“Sapphire!” Riven’s voice cuts through the chaos.

“I’m fine!” I shout back, the adrenaline surging through my veins keeping me moving.

Plus, thanks to my supernatural healing, the gash is already starting to close.

Riven takes another shadow down, and the half-caribou corpse slumps to the ground, joining the growing pile of their fallen.

Now, the remaining two shadows circle us, their movements faster and more erratic, as if realizing their numbers are dwindling. The air feels alive with tension, my magic thrumming under my skin as I brace for their next move .

Ghost snarls, shifting his weight from paw to paw, his golden eyes locked on the flickering forms.

“They’re trying to split us up,” Riven says, widening his stance. “Stay by my side.”

I nod, my dagger’s hilt slick with sweat and blood. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The first shadow darts forward and feints toward me. But it pivots at the last moment, heading for Riven instead.

He raises his sword, ready to strike.

I don’t see the second shadow until it’s too late.

It lunges at me from the left, claws outstretched. I can already feel the sharp sting of

pain that's about to follow, bracing for the hit as I realize I don't have enough time to move out of its way.

Then, suddenly, Riven's throwing himself in front of me, and the shadow's claws are raking across his shoulder to his chest, the force of the blow sending him staggering back.

A startling amount of blood sprays out of the wound.

No, I think as I launch myself through the air, driving my dagger into the shadow's back.

Then, running on adrenaline and instinct, I spin and throw my dagger at the final shadow, using my air magic to guide the blade into the shadow's chest.

It hits exactly where I aimed.

The shadow screeches in pain, and the final caribou- man corpse thumps to the ground, my dagger landing on the snow beside it.

But I can't stop yet—not when I'm separated from my weapon. So, I rush forward, snatch up the dagger, and turn to face Riven.

There's blood on the snow around him, a startlingly bright red against the white, but his wounds are nearly healed.

“Are you insane?” I snap at him. “You didn't have to?—”

“I'm not letting them touch you,” he says fiercely, his eyes locking onto mine. “Not ever. I'd take a hundred hits if it meant keeping you safe.”

The raw emotion in his voice steals the breath from my lungs.

“You could have died,” I say, softer now, the pain tearing at my heart from the thought of it sharper than the claws of the shadows.

Ghost prowls between the fallen bodies of the caribou men, ensuring they’re truly dead.

Which, thankfully, they are.

“We were just attacked by Tariaksuq,” Riven says—as if I needed a reminder. “We both could have died. But we fought them together, and we made a hell of a good team. Although perhaps next time you need to feed, you should drink from me instead. It might be safer than becoming prey while we’re hunting.”

“No,” I say, taking a step backward. “I’d never do that. Don’t ever ask me to again.”

He tilts his head, studying me, and I suddenly feel like a cell under a microscope.

“You’ve thought about it, haven’t you?” he finally asks.

My gaze drops to the snow, shame curling in my chest like a living thing. “In the cave. When we were trapped during the blizzard,” I say, clutching my dagger tightly. “You got cut during training, remember? It had been too long since I fed, and the scent of your blood—it was overwhelming. Intoxicating.”

Riven’s expression shifts as realization dawns in his eyes. “It had been almost three days since you’d last fed. You were starving,” he says, more a statement than a question.

I nod, my voice caught in my throat. “It took everything I had to hold back.”

Suddenly, he's in front of me, reaching for me, his hand cupping my cheek. "Your strength amazes me," he says, the tenderness in his touch making my heart ache. "Not just your magic or your fighting skills, but your ability to love so fiercely that it overcomes your darkest instincts."

When his lips meet mine, it's gentle—nothing like the kisses we shared in the cave and the igloo. It's not about passion or urgency. It's an acknowledgment of the trust between us—of the way we protect each other not just in battle, but in these quiet moments, too.

Ghost's low growl breaks the moment, reminding us that we're surrounded by corpses in the middle of a dangerous forest.

When Riven pulls back, his forehead rests against mine. "We should keep moving," he says, although there's a reluctance in his voice that mirrors my emotions.

"Right. The ancient woman," I say, forcing myself to focus.

After all, we have a mission to complete, a potion to create, a king's sanity to restore, and a best friend to rescue.

We can do it.

Because now, we have each other's backs more than ever.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

I'm sitting at the side of the courtyard, working with Isla, Elijah, and Sebastian on carving our chess pieces, when I feel it.

Henry's eyes burning into me from across the way.

It's not the first time he's watched us as we work. But today his stare feels even more invasive as he leans lazily against a tree, his gaze flicking between us like he's sizing up prey.

Isla nudges me with her elbow, her voice low. "Ignore him. If you react, he wins."

"Easier said than done," I mutter, focusing on the knight I'm almost finished carving.

Elijah pauses his carving for a second to look up at me. "Being the queen's favorite gets to Henry's head," he says, returning to shaping the curve of a pawn. "But Isla's right. Ignore him enough, and he'll back off. "

I raise an eyebrow. "I thought Matt was the queen's favorite."

Sebastian chuckles dryly. "Matt's just her current toy," he says. "There's a difference."

Elijah nods, his expression grim. "Henry's not just a favorite. He's her eyes and ears. He watches everything and everyone, and he likes to see how people unravel. The queen loves it, too. Watching newcomers deteriorate is like a twisted game to her."

“And the queen doesn’t just weaken her newest pawns physically,” Sebastian adds. “She picks at their minds, bit by bit, until there’s nothing left.”

Isla stops carving her pawn for a second to look at me. “It’s sick,” she says. “She’s even more twisted than the king.”

My stomach drops at the reminder of the king. Of how he unraveled my braids and lowered his mouth to my neck, seconds away from claiming me as his.

As much as I hate it, I’m grateful that Aerix stepped in and stopped him.

At the thought of Aerix, memories of the kiss we shared a few hours ago flash through my mind. The way his magic wrapped around me, filling the air, making me crave more. His hands on my waist, the way his breath ghosted over my skin before I pushed him away, and the hunger in his midnight eyes that mirrored the one simmering deep inside my soul .

My fingers tighten around my carving knife as I curse the way my body burns at the thought of him. At the way I want more, even though memories of his touch should be filling me with disgust instead of pleasure.

I’m yanked back into the present when Jake strides up to us and drops onto the bench beside me.

“Miss me?” he asks, pressing so close that our thighs touch.

“You’re blocking my light.” I move away so quickly that I almost slice my finger.

“Sorry,” he says, and he picks up one of the bishops he carved, turning it over in his hands like it’s a priceless artifact.

“What do you think?” he asks, holding it up.

It’s rough and uneven, like a toddler’s first art project.

“It’s...” I search for a more diplomatic response. “Creative.”

“I was going for unique,” he says, leaning closer. “Like you.”

Elijah poorly disguises a laugh with a cough.

Isla rolls her eyes.

Jake’s too focused on me to notice either of them.

“Jake,” I start, but he’s already talking again, his hand moving to rest on my arm.

“We should do something later,” he says. “Just us. Maybe we can paint? I saw you painting the other day. You seemed really into it.”

I take a deep breath and set my carving tools aside. Because I can’t do this anymore. Not with Jake hovering over me, acting like we’re some kind of item when we’re not—and never will be.

However, something tells me I shouldn’t be alone with Jake for this conversation. Not after learning about how attached he tends to get when he sets his sight on someone.

“Actually, can we check on my garden plot?” I ask him. “I want to talk to you about something.”

Jake’s eyes light up. “Sounds great,” he says, and he stands up eagerly, like an

overexcited puppy.

The garden is at the far edge of the courtyard, tucked away behind a low stone wall. The plants Aerix gifted me—a mix of vibrant flowers and herbs—are thriving, their colors a stark contrast to the darkness of the Night Court.

I crouch by a patch of mint, running my fingers over the leaves to check their condition.

Jake hovers behind me, his presence like a weight pressing against my back.

“You’re good at growing things,” he says. “You’re good at everything.”

“Jake,” I cut him off before he can continue talking about how amazing he thinks I am. “We need to talk. ”

His grin falters. “About what?”

I glance around, making sure no one’s listening. “About us.”

“What about us?” he asks.

My heart pounds, since the pressure is on. I want to do this kindly, but at the same time, I don’t want to lead him on and make him think he has a chance.

And I need to stop stalling.

“I don’t think we’re good together,” I say quickly. “We’re too... different.”

He stares at me, his smile fading completely. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” I say. “Look—I was scared when I got here. Matt wouldn’t talk to me. And you reminded me of someone from home. An ex-boyfriend. When we were together, I could almost pretend like...”

Pretend like you were him.

But I don’t say it out loud. It feels too cruel.

“Maybe I look like him because you and me are meant to be together,” he scrambles, as if searching for any way to change my mind. “It’s always been so easy to talk to you. We just click. And when we kiss...” He pauses, his eyes turning dreamy. “It’s like the entire world stops. I love you, Zoey. I have since the first time I saw you. I knew, right then, that we’d spend our lives here together. That we’d support each other and love each other, no matter what. ”

My chest tightens with a mix of shock and dread.

He can’t actually believe this.

Can he?

“We’ve only known each other for a little over a week.” I keep my voice steady, even though my nerves are fraying. “You can’t love me. You barely even know me.”

“But I do know you,” he insists, moving closer, the desperation in his eyes making me take a small step back. “You’re strong, brave, and funny. You don’t give up, even in a place like this. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. Just give me a chance, and you’ll see. You’ll fall in love with me, too.”

I shake my head, a knot forming in my stomach. “This isn’t love,” I tell him. “It’s infatuation. It’s not real.”

“It is real,” he insists. “You’re just scared. I get it. This place makes everyone scared. But I can protect you. If you let me in, I can make you happy. I promise.”

Wow. This went from zero to a hundred so quickly that it’s giving me whiplash.

“Stop and listen to me,” I say sharply, holding up a hand. “I’m sorry for leading you on, but I don’t feel the same way about you. I wanted to, but I don’t. And that’s not going to change. Ever.”

Especially not after this.

His expression hardens, the hurt in his eyes giving way to something darker. “You don’t mean that,” he says. “You’re just saying it because of Aerix.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “This has nothing to do with Aerix.”

“Really?” His laugh is sharp and bitter. “Is that why you can barely look at me during our swimming lessons? Because you’re too busy thinking about him?”

“That’s not?—“

“I see the way you look after he feeds from you,” he continues, stepping even closer. “How you get all dreamy-eyed and distant. Did you let him kiss you, too? Did you go to his bed with him? Let him...”

He trails off, as if he can’t bring himself to say it, and I freeze as I think about how close things got with Aerix earlier.

How close I wanted things to get.

“We have to do what they want.” I narrow my eyes at him, challenging him. “You

know that as well as I do. Unless you and Cierra haven't?—"

"Cierra doesn't get fully intimate with her pets," he interrupts, and I don't push for more, since I have no interest in knowing what Jake does and doesn't do with Princess Cierra. "And from what I've heard, neither does Aerix."

I flinch, since judging by how Aerix acts around me, I assumed he got fully intimate with Victoria and Sophia. Although now that I think about it, I've never discussed my sessions with Aerix in detail with the other girls. I just made assumptions and left it at that.

"You have, haven't you?" The hurt swirling in Jake's eyes turns to rage. "You've slept with him. All this time when you were with me, you've also been with him."

"I haven't slept with either of you!" I reach for a small rake and hold it by my side, my grip tight around its handle. "And you don't get to talk to me like that. You don't get to act like you own me."

He stares at me, disbelief written all over his face as he glances down at the rake. "You'd hurt me?" he asks. "After everything we've been through together?"

"You. Don't. Know me," I say through gritted teeth. "And I don't love you."

"I do know you. And I'm trying to protect you," he insists. "He's using you, Zoey. They all are. But I actually care about you. I love you. Maybe you don't believe me now, but you will soon. I promise."

He reaches for my wrist, his hand outstretched, and every single warning bell in my body blares like a siren.

"Don't touch me," I say, but he doesn't listen. He just continues to reach for me, his

fingers getting closer...

And before I realize what I'm doing, I swing the rake, the tines catching his forearm and leaving behind three shallow scratches that well up with blood.

Zoey

Jake stumbles back, staring at his arm in shock.

“What the hell, Zoey?” he yells, his voice trembling with a mix of anger and disbelief.

My heart pounds as I stare at the blood trickling down his skin and at the rake I used to do it.

“I told you not to touch me,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just... reacted.”

“If you didn’t want to hurt me, then maybe you shouldn’t have broken up with me and attacked me with a garden rake,” he says, although somehow, his anger softens again, and he lowers his scratched-up arm. “But I understand. You’re scared. You don’t trust me yet. But once you settle in here, we can fix this and get back on track.”

“Wow,” I say slowly, not lowering the rake. “Are you completely delusional?”

“No. You’re the one who’s not thinking straight,” he rushes to continue. “It’s because of Aerix. He’s jealous of us. He’s trying to turn you against me. Don’t you see that?”

“There’s no way Aerix is jealous of you,” I say, and I raise the rake, threatening to slash him with it again.

I won’t—at least, I don’t think I will. But if I don’t get through to him now, I have a

sinking feeling that his infatuation will just get worse.

Plus, his accusations and assumptions about what's going on between me and Aerix are really pissing me off.

"Zoey," he repeats my name slowly. "You need to calm down. I'm not going to hurt you. I love you. If I didn't love you, I wouldn't still be here with you after you attacked me with that thing. Don't you see that?"

I'm staring at him, thrown by how quickly this escalated, when Aurora's suddenly standing at the edge of the garden, her eyes wide with concern.

Aurora—the king's pet who's always reading in the courtyard. She's the most beautiful of all of us, and the most docile. The least willing to socialize, let alone place herself in the middle of a confrontation.

"Is everything all right here?" she asks, her eyes darting between me and Jake.

I lower the rake, my knuckles aching from how tightly I've been gripping it. "It's fine," I say quickly, even though my heart is racing, and my hands are trembling. "I have it handled."

Aurora raises one delicate eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "If you say so," she tells me, and then she looks at Jake, her eyes narrowing. "You should go," she tells him, and he bristles, his shoulders tightening.

"This doesn't involve you, Aurora," he says, his voice edged with frustration.

"It does now," she replies evenly, not giving an inch.

He laughs and runs his fingers through his hair, as if he can't believe this is

happening. “You never say a word to any of them,” he says, “but suddenly you’ve got something to say about this?”

She doesn’t move, her measured calm unshaken. “I speak when it’s necessary,” she says, glancing at the scratches on his arm. “And it looks like you’ve said enough here.”

Jake exhales slowly, his face crumpling with frustration. “Fine,” he gives in. “I’ll go. But Zoey... this isn’t over. You’re just confused right now, and scared. I’m going to fix this. I’ll figure out a way to make things right. I promise.”

He turns to leave, his shoulder bumping Aurora’s as he hurries past her to storm inside the palace.

When he’s gone, I become painfully aware of our audience.

Malakai’s girls—Lacey, Katerina, and Brenda—are huddled over the table where they’re playing cards, whispering among themselves. Isla’s holding tightly onto her whittling knife, as if she was ready to attack Jake with it if he kept pushing me.

Henry’s already moving toward us, his trademark smirk firmly in place.

“Well, that was quite a show,” he says, his eyes traveling down my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. “Never thought I’d see someone take down lover boy with a garden tool.”

“I’m sure you know a thing or two about handling tools,” I say, raising the rake.

“You’re funny.” He laughs, tilting his head and studying me. “And now that you’re in need of a new swimming instructor, I’d be happy to offer my services.”

“I’d rather drown,” I say, not breaking his gaze.

Aurora looks back and forth between us with a hint of a smile.

Meanwhile, I continue my staring contest with Henry, refusing to lower the rake.

Aurora takes the opportunity to break the tension.

“I’ve always been interested in gardening,” she tells me, speaking slowly, as if she’s trying to talk me down. “Do you need any help with anything?”

Only if it involves using this rake to slash the smug smile off Henry’s face, I think, although now that she’s here, I don’t want to startle her and lose what could be a good opportunity to talk to her.

Maybe I can learn more about the Night Court from her. Or maybe I can make another friend.

Right now, I’d take either.

“Actually, yeah.” I glance at her, while also keeping an eye on Henry. “I could use a second opinion on whether this mint is ready to be harvested.”

Henry huffs out a laugh, but he doesn’t move. “You’re really going to ignore my offer like that?” he asks me. “I’d be a great coach.”

“Oh, were you still talking?” I look at him, feigning innocence. “I thought you left.”

Aurora snickers softly, and Henry’s smirk falters.

He leans in, lowering his voice. “You’re going to regret rejecting my help,” he tells

me, although I don't step back, unwilling to let him assert power over me. "You've barely skimmed the surface of the way things work around here."

"And you'll regret standing so close to me while I'm holding this rake," I reply sweetly, lifting it for emphasis.

I don't actually expect the threat to work.

But he simply shrugs and saunters away, throwing one last grin at me that makes me want to hurl the rake at his face.

When he's gone, Aurora steps closer, her expression thoughtful. "You handled that well," she says .

"Did I?" I laugh, finally lowering my makeshift weapon. "It doesn't feel like it."

"It did to me," she says, and she crouches beside the mint, her fingers brushing the leaves. "You stood your ground. With both of them."

"The rake helped." I glance at it, hoping to look unbothered, even though I can't shake off the confrontations with Jake and Henry. "And I didn't mean to hurt Jake."

"But you meant to stop him from pushing you," she says, gentle, but firm. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Her words are oddly calculating for someone who usually seems so demure.

Maybe there's more to her than I assumed.

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," I say, not wanting to push, but also wanting her to open up.

“Let’s just say I’ve learned a few things during my time here.” She plucks a mint leaf, rolling it between her fingers. “The Night Court has its own rules, and its own patterns. The sooner you understand them, the better equipped you’ll be to survive.”

“Is that what you’ve done?” I ask. “Survived?”

“I’ve done more than survive. I’ve thrived.” Her green eyes meet mine, sharp with intelligence, and when she stands, there’s miraculously no dirt on her dress. “The mint’s ready, by the way. You should harvest it soon.”

With that, she walks away, and I get the distinct feeling she wasn’t just referring to herbs.

But between Jake’s delusions, Henry’s threats, and Aurora’s cryptic advice, I need time to think.

Because one thing’s becoming crystal clear: in the Night Court, every alliance, every confrontation, and every seemingly casual conversation is a move on an intricate chessboard.

And I’ve yet to even put my pieces into place.

Zoey

The next “morning,” before sunset, pounding on my door jolts me awake.

“Zoey.” Aethelthryth’s voice is sharp and urgent. “Get up. Now.”

I blink groggily, disoriented by being woken before my usual time.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, but she’s already inside my room, tossing a dress at me.

“Put this on,” she says. “Quickly.”

Something in her tone makes my stomach drop, and I change as fast as I can, not caring that she’s watching.

The moment I slip on my shoes, she grabs my arm and practically drags me from the room, down the halls, and into the courtyard, where a few people have gathered near the center fountain. Katerina, Nathaniel, Sebastian, and Aurora, each of them accompanied by their handlers. They must be the early risers—although I wouldn’t know, since I’ve never been the type to wake up early.

They’re all just standing in a circle, staring at something in the center.

I hurry toward the commotion, weaving through the onlookers, my heart hammering so hard it’s like it’s trying to claw its way out of my chest.

Then, midway there, I see it.

No—I see him.

Jake.

He's sprawled on the ground beside the fountain, lifeless and crumpled like a discarded doll. His skin is pale—too pale. His eyes, wide open, stare at nothing. They look wrong, the life drained from them, their usual glint of hopeful humor replaced with a glassy, vacant emptiness.

But it's his throat that makes the bile swirl in my stomach. A single, clean slice that gapes like a second mouth. The wound is grotesquely precise, as if whoever did this took their time, making sure it was perfect.

I don't remember moving, but suddenly I'm standing between Sebastian and Aurora. Neither of them looks at me. No one does. Their gazes are glued to Jake, their expressions frozen masks of fear and revulsion.

This can't be happening.

It doesn't make sense .

All the moments I've shared with Jake flash through my mind in a dizzying blur—his attempted charm during swim lessons, his boyish grin when he explained penguin courtship rituals, and the way he kissed me here in this courtyard, tentative and hopeful.

Despite how defensive he was yesterday, I do think he cared for me. Not love, but something he believed was love.

How could that Jake be the same person lying in front of me now, empty and discarded?

Part of me wants to believe I'll wake up from this nightmare at any second. The other, more practical part knows this isn't a dream. It's too real—too vivid.

Jake's gone. He's never coming back. And, as much as I don't want to believe it's true, every single instinct in my body is saying that this happened because of me. It lines up too perfectly with the incident in the garden yesterday not to be connected.

My gaze darts away, desperate to find something to focus on other than Jake's body.

It lands on the fountain, which is turned off.

But the basin isn't empty.

Instead of the usual watery blood mixture that flows through it, there's something thicker. Darker. More viscous.

It's no longer watered-down blood.

It's pure blood .

My stomach churns, and I stagger back, barely catching myself before crashing into Aurora.

It's his blood. It has to be.

"There was a note," Jake's handler says, and then he's in front of me, showing it to me, as if it was written to me.

The paper is thick and expensive, the message inked in elegant script.

If anyone threatens her or touches her again, they'll share his fate.

My heart slams against my ribs as I read the sentence over and over again, as if it might change if I will it to. But of course, it stays the same.

Jake didn't deserve this. Not for what he did yesterday. I was angry with him, furious even—but this?

Sure, I scratched him with that rake. But I never wanted him dead.

“I need to see Aerix,” I say, trembling as I take a step back. “Now.”

Aurora catches my arm. “Zoey, wait?—”

“No.” I shake her off, turning to Aethelthryth. “Take me to Aerix's quarters. Please.”

Technically, I have no say around here. I'm just a human, and even though Aethelthryth is only a servant, she's still fae. She outranks me. I probably shouldn't be asking her to do anything for me at all, and I especially shouldn't be demanding her to take me to Aerix's quarters.

However, she's also only shown me kindness so far. And I'd like to think it never hurts to ask... but the scene in front of me makes it clear that in the Night Court, anything can hurt—and it can hurt hard. But I've already asked, so I might as well wait for an answer instead of taking it back.

Aethelthryth studies me for a long moment, her wings shifting uneasily. “Are you sure that's wise?” she finally says.

“I don't care if it's wise.” Relief fills me at the fact that she didn't say no, and I scramble for my next words, since my thoughts are a storm of shock. “Aerix killed Jake because I scratched him with that stupid rake. This is my fault.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Aurora says firmly, surprising me by jumping into the conversation. “Jake’s actions were his own.”

“And now he’s dead because of them,” I snap. “Because Aerix decided to?—”

I can’t finish the sentence. Because even though I’m purposefully not looking at him, the image of Jake’s slit throat is burned into my mind, along with the knowledge that his blood is filling that fountain right now.

Somehow, through the horror, the blood is one of the worst things here. Because Aerix couldn’t even bother using it for sustenance. He just left it there. For all of us to see.

No... he left it there as a threat.

Aurora glances back and forth between Aethelthryth and me.

“It might not be a bad idea to take her to him,” she finally says. “So she can learn.”

Aethelthryth lets out a low sigh, her gaze heavy with something between pity and frustration, and turns her focus back to me.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks.

“Yes.” I don’t need a second to think about it. “I want to see him.”

“I can’t promise he’ll want to see you,” she says, and she studies me again, as if she’s sizing me up. “But I’ll take you to him. And if you need anything, remember I’ll be right outside his doors.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

The walk to Aerix's quarters is a blur, my heartbeat thundering in my ears, drowning out the sound of my steps against the marble floors.

Aethelthryth doesn't say a word, and I don't, either. I can't. Because every time I open my mouth to speak, I see Jake's lifeless eyes staring back at me. Then there was Aerix's note...

He'll kill anyone who touches me.

The question is—why? Yes, he has an unusual infatuation with me, but this feels extreme. Although, I'm not sure what to think, given that there are likely more secrets and lies woven throughout the Night Court than I could create in my wildest dreams.

No, not dreams.

Nightmares.

Aethelthryth and I are turning the corner into the hall that leads to Aerix's quarters when raised voices echo from inside.

"...reckless!" A female voice shouts. "Do you understand what you've done?"

"He threatened what belongs to me," Aerix replies, cold and precise. "He hurt her."

His door is cracked open, as if whoever's inside of his room with him entered in such

an angry rush that she couldn't be bothered to close it.

Aethelthryth shoots me a warning look, but I'm already pushing past her, throwing open the door and stepping inside.

Aerix is leaning against a tall-backed chair.

Princess Cierra is standing in front of the fireplace, shaking with rage.

If the night fae could control fire, I'm pretty sure she'd have burned Aerix's quarters to a crisp by now. As it is now, her auburn hair is blowing around her as she uses her air magic to demonstrate the depth of her wrath, like a goddess with a vengeance.

Her gaze snaps to me, the fury in her eyes hotter than the fire behind her.

"You," she snarls, and then she's across the room, her hand around my throat, lifting me off the ground and slamming me against the wall.

The world spins at the impact, her fingers tightening until spots dance in my vision. Even if I wanted to speak, it would be impossible, thanks to the crushing strength of her grip.

She's going to kill me, the realization hits me like a ton of steel.

I claw at her wrist, my lungs burning, but she doesn't even flinch.

"This is all your fault," she hisses, low and venomous. "Jake was mine. Now, he's dead because of you."

I didn't kill him. It's not my fault. All I did was scratch him with a rake. I didn't ask for this, I want to tell her, but it's impossible to speak with the pressure on my throat.

I can't get in a breath, let alone actual words.

"You destroyed everything," she continues. "He was mine to punish, mine to deal with, and now?—"

The pressure vanishes, and I collapse to the floor, gasping for air as Aerix throws Cierra across the room.

She lands in a crouch, but before she can move, Aerix is there. His hand wraps around her throat—an echo of what she just did to me—and he pins her to the ground with supernatural speed.

The air whooshes around the room as their magic collides, like two storm systems crashing together.

"If you ever touch her again," he growls, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper, "I will tear you apart piece by piece and scatter your remains across every corner of this court. "

"You wouldn't." Cierra smiles up at him, her deadly grin giving me the impression this isn't the first time they've gone against each other like this.

"I would," he says, and her grin disappears in a second.

The air stills, which is somehow eerier than when it was rushing around us.

All I can do is wrap my hand around my throat and focus on catching my breath.

"She's nothing but trouble, Aerix," Cierra says, although she stops fighting him, which might be the only reason he hasn't snapped her neck by now. "You're so obsessed with her that you can't see it, but she's not good for you. Just because she

looks like Kallista doesn't mean she is Kallista."

I freeze at the unfamiliar name, and Aerix's expression darkens further.

"I know exactly who she is," he says, his voice so low that goosebumps rise along my arms. "And if you lay a finger on her again, you will beg for a death as quick as Jake's."

"How unbecoming." Cierra laughs, even though he's yet to let her go. "The mighty Prince Aerix, weakening for a human. You should know better than to overstep. Especially when we're so close to joining the Blood Coven and becoming Revenants. It's not going to end well for any of us if you don't control yourself and your precious human."

Aerix stiffens, his eyes flashing with something dangerous. "I'm not the one who needs to be controlling themselves right now," he warns. "You're speaking of things that shouldn't be mentioned in front of her—in front of any of them."

"Maybe it would be easier to kill her than to risk her repeating what she's heard." Cierra smirks, as if she's already won.

"The solution here is simple—keep your pets away from her," he says simply. "And if they or you so much as lay a finger on her, Jake won't be the last to bleed out in this court."

Finally, he releases her, stepping back with a fluid grace that shows he's ready to stop her if she tries anything again.

Cierra rises slowly, and her midnight gaze finds me, burning with hatred. "You will pay for what happened today," she says. "Both of you."

With that, she spins on her heel and storms out, the door slamming behind her with enough force to make the walls shudder.

It's so quiet now that all I can hear are my ragged breaths and pounding heart.

Aerix's expression softens as he kneels in front of me and reaches slowly for my neck. His fingertips, cool against my overheated skin, send fire surging through my veins, each touch igniting a trail of sparks that threaten to consume me on the spot.

I suppress a shiver, but from the way his lips curl into a subtle smirk, I know he notices.

"Hold still," he tells me. "I'm checking for injuries."

"You don't need to," I say, although I'm barely able to get the words out. "I'm fine."

But he doesn't stop. His fingers brush my jaw, then linger at the base of my throat, just where my pulse pounds the hardest. It's like he's daring me to call him out—daring me to break this electrified silence.

I don't.

"She went easy on you," he finally declares, his hand retreating, leaving a void in its place. "Nothing's broken."

I exhale sharply, relieved the moment is over, yet unnerved by how much I'd wanted it to last.

"I assumed as much." My voice is hoarse, but at least I'm speaking. "Given that if she broke my neck, I'd be dead."

The final word echoes around the room—a reminder of what Aerix did to Jake.

The connection between us vanishes, and I flinch away from him, scrambling to put space between us. “You killed Jake,” I say, praying he’ll deny it .

“He threatened you,” he says simply, as if that’s supposed to explain everything. “He hurt you.”

“That doesn’t mean he deserved to die!” I snap, standing as the image of Jake’s lifeless, mutilated body flashes through my mind again. “I could have handled him myself.”

Aerix stands as well. “With your rake?” He chuckles, low and dark, as if he saw it all play out himself. “The question is... if Aurora hadn’t intervened, would you have continued to defend yourself with it? Would you have done what you needed to do to survive in this court?”

“Jake is hardly the one threatening my survival,” I shoot back.

“Was,” Aerix corrects me. “Past tense. Jake’s dead.”

The unnecessary reminder hits me like a punch to the gut.

“Which he shouldn’t be, since he wasn’t a threat to me in the first place,” I say. “He was confused, upset, and hurting. We were having normal human problems. But clearly, you don’t understand how those work.”

“And clearly you don’t understand how the Night Court works,” he replies, closing the space between us so suddenly that I’m backed against the wall. “You’re in our territory now. You’re my responsibility. You will follow our rules, and you will let us to handle situations the way we see fit. Especially when we’re doing everything we

can to protect you and keep you safe.”

Zoey

Aerix's words should terrify me—and they do.

But as he speaks, the air in the room shifts, becoming heavier, pressing down on me like an invisible weight. It's harder to draw a full breath, and I realize with a jolt that it's his magic. He's doing this on purpose—turning the air around me into a weapon, a reminder of just how powerless I am here.

“You don't own me,” I say, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to sound strong.

He brushes a stray strand of hair from my face, and a chill radiates from his fingertips, like frost creeping across glass.

Ice magic.

“Don't I?” he murmurs, and the weight of his gaze is unbearable, heavy with truths I don't want to face. Because in the Night Court, Aerix sort of does own me. And we both know it.

He tilts his head, a slow, predatory motion that makes my heart race. “That's what I thought,” he says, and the frost retreats, like it was never there at all. “You may not like it, but this is the reality you're in now. You're mine to protect. Mine to control. Mine to keep.”

My heart stops, his words cutting deeper than I want to admit. “So, you think you're

protecting me by treating me like a possession?” I finally say. “By making decisions I never agreed to? By keeping all those secrets?”

He stiffens, his gaze sharpening. “What secrets?”

“Kallista,” I say, the name slicing through the air between us. “When we first met—before I fell asleep in the bunker—you said I should be grateful that I remind you of her. I’m going to take a wild guess that you were talking about Kallista. So, who is she? And why does Cierra think I’m her replacement?”

“That’s none of your concern.” Aerix’s expression hardens, his jaw tightening, and the temperature in the room drops by a few degrees.

“It is my concern,” I insist, staying completely still, unwilling to let him off that easily. “You treat me differently than the others because I remind you of her.”

A rush of air swirls around us, tugging at my hair and clothes, as if warning me to stop .

“And the Blood Coven?” I press on, my voice rising. “The Revenants? What does all that mean?”

“Enough.” His voice snaps like a whip, and the rush of air stills, the silence more suffocating than the pressure had been. “You’re treading on thin ice, Zoey. Do you really think you can demand answers from me? After everything I’ve done to keep you alive?”

“Why are you acting like Jake was going to kill me?” I answer his question with one of my own.

“Why do you care so much?” he asks in return.

“Because I’m not a monster,” I practically hiss.

The room goes deathly silent, and Aerix steps back, his expression so calm that it makes every hair on my body stand on edge. Behind him, frost creeps up the walls, delicate and deadly, the jagged patterns climbing like veins toward the ceiling.

“Maybe you should think about what survival really costs before you throw words like ‘monster’ around,” he finally says.

I open my mouth to fire back—to deny the cold, brutal logic in his tone. But the image of Jake’s lifeless body flashes through my mind. The blood in the fountain. The note. The warning. All of it.

Something inside me snaps.

“You didn’t even drink his blood,” I say. “You just wasted it and left it there. Like he didn’t matter.”

“He didn’t matter.” Aerix straightens, and the frost on the walls thickens. “You’re the one who matters to me here. And I don’t let anyone touch what’s mine.”

From the way he’s staring at me, I’m not sure if he’s going to lash out or close the space between us.

“Get out,” he says instead, his voice low and sharp. “And send for Victoria. I’ll be having breakfast with her today.”

I blink, caught off guard. “What?”

“You heard me.” His lips curl into something that’s not quite a smile. “We’re done here.”

The tension between us is a suffocating, electrified silence. But I take a deep breath, forcing my anger down. Because as much as I want to keep fighting him—to make him see how wrong he is about this—it won't get me anywhere.

I need to think long term. I need to remember my game plan—make him believe I'm falling for him. I need to get him on my side, so I can use whatever power I gain to help myself and the other humans here. To stay alive, and to not get sent to the barns.

None of that will happen if I keep antagonizing him. And sure, maybe he only cares about keeping me alive because I remind him of the mysterious Kallista. But his reason doesn't matter. What matters is using every advantage I can to accomplish my goals.

Besides, he did save my life. A few times.

"You're right that I wouldn't be alive right now if not for you," I say, softer now, praying this will work. "Cierra would have killed me just now, but you stopped her."

"I did." His expression shifts, the frost along the walls receding slightly.

I'm getting through to him. But the tension is still here.

He doubts me—as he should.

"I don't forgive you for killing Jake." I meet his eyes, since he'll never believe me if I give in that easily. "But because you stepped in with Cierra, I'm still alive. That's not something I'll forget."

He studies me, and I have a feeling that I blew it. He's seeing through my act.

Why did I think I could trick a fae who's been alive for far longer than I can likely

even process?

“You’re learning,” he says instead, approval creeping into his tone.

Surprise rushes through me. But I can’t let him see it. I can’t let him think he’s shaken me more than he already has.

“I am.” I meet his gaze steadily, even though my heart is racing. “And I don’t want to die here. I want to survive. To thrive,” I add, reminding myself of Aurora’s words from yesterday.

He nods in approval, the air around us warming. “Your shock this morning was understandable,” he says, and when he steps closer, I don’t back away. “But you’re adapting faster than most.”

The space between us crackles with tension—different from before. Less angry, and more charged.

This can be a turning point.

And I’m going to use it.

“Does this mean you still want Victoria for breakfast?” I ask, doing everything I can to keep myself from shaking.

His lips curve into that dangerous smirk I’m beginning to know all too well. “No,” he says, and suddenly, I can breathe again. “I think you’ll do just fine.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Sapphire

After our close call with the shadow people, Riven, Ghost, and I continue following the stars until the sun begins to rise and forces us to stop.

We build another igloo, our magic working in harmony. The synch between us feels deeper than before—maybe because I’m not keeping a giant secret from him anymore, or because we’ve moved past his anger about my vampire side, or even because fighting a common enemy has a way of bringing people closer together.

Either way, when we settle into the igloo and he pulls me into his arms, there’s no hesitation. No walls between us. Just the kind of raw connection that makes me focus on the present moment and forget everything else.

But as I’ve been learning since falling into this realm, peace never lasts .

Not even in my dreams.

I wake before sunset with a gasp, my heart pounding, my body tense.

It takes me a moment to remember where I am—curled against Riven, his arm draped protectively over me, his breathing steady.

His eyes snap open the moment I move. “What’s wrong?” he asks, immediately alert.

“I saw her again,” I tell him. “The woman from the forest. She was in my dream.”

“What did she say?”

Like the last time, the words remain clear in my mind, even as the rest of the dream fades.

“To claim the wisdom shining far, you must journey to the Midnight Star,” I repeat, watching him closely, hoping it’ll make more sense to him than it does to me.

Instead, his brows draw together, making him look as confused as I feel.

“First, she told you that your soul must rise to claim your sight. And now this, about journeying to the Midnight Star.” His fingers absently trace patterns of frost on the ground between us, as if magic might hold the answers. “There has to be a connection.”

I nod, wrapping my arms around myself. “It feels like she’s trying to guide me—or warn me.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” He snaps back to it, looking as determined as ever. “Let’s pack up and keep moving.”

We journey through the darkening forest, following the stars’ increasingly urgent song. My connection to them is stronger with each passing hour, as if we’re getting closer to something important. Something ancient.

Ghost’s pace quickens, as if he senses it, too.

“You’re quiet,” Riven eventually says over his shoulder.

“I’m thinking,” I reply. “About her. About what this all means.”

His posture stiffens slightly—a tell I’ve come to recognize. He’s thinking, too. Likely weighing every angle and every possible trap this riddle might spring.

Then, when the stars are singing so loudly that I’m almost drowning in the intensity of it all, the forest thins out.

“There,” I say, pointing to the clearing ahead.

Riven coaxes Ghost to a stop, and we slide off his back together. The moment my feet touch the ground, I feel it—a thrumming of magic that makes my skin tingle.

“Do you feel that?” I ask Riven.

“It’s magic,” he says what I already knew, scanning the area. “Powerful magic. Stronger than anything I’ve ever felt.”

“It’s her. The ancient woman,” I say without a doubt. “We made it.”

He takes my hand in his, and his touch is a promise—one that settles the storm brewing in my chest.

There are no words to express the way I’m feeling for him in this moment. So, I rise onto my toes and press my lips to his in a soft, unhurried kiss that carries the weight of everything unsaid.

His hand moves to the small of my back, pulling me closer as the rest of the world fades away. Before long, his magic stirs—a subtle drop in temperature, and mine answers in a ripple of air that swirls with growing humidity around us.

My fingers find the fabric of his cloak, clutching it tightly, as if I’m anchoring myself to him. Because that’s what Riven’s become throughout all of this—an anchor. One

that holds me steady, even in stormy seas. It's a love that doesn't demand or rush, but that simply exists, powerful and undeniable.

When we eventually break apart, he rests his forehead against mine, our breaths mingling in the cold.

"Sapphire," he says, and my name on his lips is like a vow—a promise that he'll support me, no matter what.

"Thank you," I find myself saying. "For everything."

With that, he stills, surprise crossing his eyes .

My stomach drops as realization crashes over me.

"You thanked me." His eyes narrow in that calculating way of his, as if he's already three steps ahead and weighing the consequences.

"I didn't mean—" I start, but he cuts me off, holding up a hand.

"It doesn't matter if you meant to or not." His tone is serious, but there's something beneath it—a glint of amusement. "Intent doesn't factor into it. You said the words."

I blink, unsure if I want to scream or groan. "So, what does that mean?" I ask. "Do I owe you now?"

His lips twitch, and I realize with growing horror that he's fighting back a smirk. "You do."

I gape at him. "You're kidding."

“Oh, I’m not.” The smirk finally breaks free, and the guardedness melts away, replaced with that infuriatingly cocky expression I’ve come to know all too well. “You thanked a fae, Sapphire. And now, you owe me. But don’t worry. I’m sure I can come up with something that’s... mutually beneficial.”

Heat rushes to my face, and now that the relief’s settling in, I glare at him. “You’re impossible,” I say, even though my heart’s already racing with anticipation about what favors he might ask of me.

“And you’re predictable,” he shoots back. “But I’m going to wait until the time is right to tell you what the favor will be. It’ll be far more enjoyable that way. Plus, I think I’m going to like seeing you squirm.”

The tension between us crackles like the frost underfoot, but instead of feeling strained, it feels alive. Electric.

His grin turns wicked, and he steps back, his hand still holding mine. “Now, come on,” he says. “Let’s see what this Midnight Star of yours has in store for us.”

With that, we walk forward together, with Ghost trailing behind us.

My breath catches the moment we step into the clearing. Because in its center sits a pond unlike anything I’ve ever seen—a perfect mirror of the night sky, so pristine that it’s impossible to tell where the reflection ends and reality begins. Especially because the stars shimmer brighter here, creating twin constellations both in the sky above and the water below.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, immediately drawn to the pond’s edge.

Riven follows, joining me as I kneel beside the pond. He doesn’t speak right away, but I feel his eyes on me, watchful and calculating as I reach out to skim my fingers

along the surface.

I close my eyes and reach out with my magic, trying to connect with the pond's energy. The water responds, swirling gently around my fingers, but it feels... resistant. Like it's holding something back .

Frustration prickles across my skin and into my bones.

This isn't working.

"It's not giving me anything," I say, opening my eyes as I pull back my hand.

Riven leans closer, scanning the surface of the pond, as if he'll be able to see something I didn't. "Maybe it's not the water we're supposed to focus on," he eventually says. "Maybe it's the stars."

I tilt my head back, looking at the endless expanse of night above. The stars are brilliant, their light piercing the cold darkness, but they give me nothing—no pull, no guidance. The song I felt earlier is still there, faint and elusive, but it refuses to sharpen into clarity.

"I don't think they're telling us anything, either." I huff, lowering my gaze back to the water.

Riven exhales slowly, his frustration written in the tightness of his jaw. "Then what are we missing?" he asks.

"It's here. I know it is." I shake my head, trying to shove down my own rising frustration. "The magic is practically buzzing, but it's like it's waiting for something. Or someone."

As if on cue, a low hooting sound echoes through the clearing. It's soft at first, but then another joins in, and another, the sound building in a strange, haunting harmony .

I glance at Riven, and his hand moves to the hilt of his blade. "Owls," he says quietly, his voice both alert and wary.

I reach for my dagger, too. I wouldn't usually think owls would be dangerous... but who knows in this realm?

Who. Knows.

I chuckle at my accidental internal joke.

The hooting grows louder and closer, until the forest is alive with it. Then, as if on cue, the owls emerge. They perch on the low branches around the clearing, their golden eyes glowing like molten light, fixed on us, like they expect us to do something.

I tighten my grip on the hilt of my dagger. "That's not creepy at all," I mutter.

"They're watching," Riven says. "Waiting."

"For what?"

As if in answer, the owls fall silent, their collective gaze turning toward the pond.

"Look," Riven says, glancing back down at the water.

I follow his gaze, and my breath catches at what I see. Because the stars reflected in the pond are no longer a mirror of the sky above. They're shifting, rearranging

themselves into a new pattern.

A clock, its face formed by constellations. The hands point to twelve, and at the top, a single star glows brighter than the rest. It's unlike any star I've ever seen—bluer, fiercer, and more alive.

In the center of the clock, the constellations align into the silhouette of a woman, her arm outstretched, pointing to the glowing star.

“The Midnight Star,” I say, recalling the messages from my dreams. “Above the earth and bound to light, your soul must rise to claim your sight. To claim the wisdom shining far, you must journey to the Midnight Star.”

“Your soul must rise.” His gaze snaps to me, more intense than ever. “She’s telling you to use your magic. Your astral projection. To go to the star.”

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Sapphire

“To go to the star?” I repeat. “As in, up there? In space?”

“That’s the only place stars exist,” he says simply, as if he’s suggesting a trip to Hawaii instead of one to outer space.

“I can’t astrally project that far.” I shake my head, the idea too absurd to comprehend.

“I can only project to places I can see.”

He glances up at the star, then back to me. “You can see the star,” he points out.

“From a gazillion miles away!” I snap, glaring at him, waiting for him to say he’s kidding.

“I don’t think ‘gazillion’ is a technical metric term,” he says instead, actually having the nerve to smirk at his own statement.

I continue glaring at him, expecting him to take his idea back. To propose another—actually rational—idea. Or to do something other than just sit there, waiting for my response to an insane suggestion.

But he doesn’t take it back.

He’s truly, one hundred percent serious.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I finally ask.

“You won’t die,” he says, annoyingly calm. “Do you remember the night you broke into my quarters at the palace? My sword went right through your projected form. You weren’t harmed.”

I freeze, the memory flashing in my mind. The way his blade went through me, leaving no mark. No pain. As if I was a ghost.

“That was different,” I say, throwing my hands up in frustration. “I wasn’t leaving the planet.”

“But the principle is the same,” he says. “Your projection isn’t tethered by physical limitations. And every time you’ve used it, you’ve returned to your body. Every single time. No matter what.”

He’s right, but that doesn’t make the prospect any less terrifying.

I open my mouth to argue further, but a sharp, biting cold creeps across my skin.

The ice magic from our deal. It’s spreading over me like frost on glass, demanding that I fulfill the deal we made that I’d do everything I could to help him make the potion .

Right now, that means trying to reach the Midnight Star. Even if that involves launching myself into space to do it.

I glance back up at the star, terror rushing through me as the biting cold grows sharper, sinking beneath my skin, twisting through my veins like shards of ice. I clutch my arms, trying to shake it off, but the frost crawls faster.

Riven reaches out, his hands on my shoulders, although it does nothing to stop the cold.

“Stop fighting it,” he says, pressing his forehead to mine, as if he’s trying to ground me with his closeness. “The magic will hold you to our deal. If you keep resisting, it will kill you.”

“But what if I don’t come back?” I whisper, trembling from both the fear and the cold.

“You will,” he says with certainty. “You always have. And remember, I’ll be here. With you—the real you—keeping you safe.”

The frost tightens, making it hard to breathe.

Zoey’s face flashes in my mind—her terror as the night fae dragged her away. She doesn’t have time for me to be afraid. And I can’t help her until my deal with Riven is completed. Which means every second I waste is another second she’s in danger.

“Okay. I’ll try to go to the star,” I say, and the ice magic retreats, although the chill still feels etched on my bones.

Riven pulls me closer, one hand cradling the back of my head while the other wraps protectively around my waist. “I’ll be right here,” he promises. “Watching over you. Nothing will harm you while you’re gone.”

The owls hoot, and Ghost moves closer, as if they’re all promising to protect me, too.

I lean into Riven, drawing strength from his steadiness.

The owls silence again.

“If I get lost up there...” I start.

“You won’t.” His arms tighten around me, until the space between us feels like nothing. “You’ll find your way back. You always do.”

“But if I don’t?—“

He cuts me off with a kiss, fierce and desperate. It’s like he’s trying to pour all his faith, his strength, and his unshakable belief into me. And even though he represents all things winter, there’s a fire in the way he kisses me—a rawness that speaks to every unsaid thing between us.

When he pulls back, his eyes burn with an intensity that takes my breath away.

“You’ll be okay,” he says again. “You’ve survived everything else so far. This won’t be an exception.”

The conviction in his words seeps into me, warming me from the inside out, chasing away the last remnants of the ice magic’s chill. The fear is still there—it would take an irrational person to not be scared about astrally projecting into space. But I can do this, even if it means doing it while I’m scared.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

I hesitate for a second, but the look in his eyes—the unshakable trust, and the steady assurance—helps me steady myself.

“As ready as I think I can be,” I say, letting him pull me into his lap and cradle me in his arms.

Every point where we touch feels electric—his arms around me, my head tucked beneath his chin, and his steady heartbeat against my ear. Despite everything we’ve done together, this feels different. Deeper. Like we’re sharing a level of trust more

precious than ever before.

“I’ve got you,” he tells me. “You’re safe with me—always.”

“I know,” I say, and I let out a slow breath as his arms tighten around me.

With that, I turn my gaze back to the Midnight Star. Its light pulses, bright and beckoning, and I feel its pull deep in my chest. As if it’s calling me home.

Keeping my eyes locked on the star, I dig inside myself and reach for my magic .

It stirs slowly at first, like a ripple over my skin. But it’s not enough. Not even close to it.

So, I draw more, pulling it upward and forcing myself to go deeper. As I do, the air around me shifts, humming with power. It’s radiant and luminous, and I feel it in my veins, my bones, my blood, and in my soul.

The Midnight Star’s glow intensifies, sending tendrils of light cascading toward me. The threads of starlight aren’t physical—I can’t touch them—but I can feel them, an intricate web connecting me to something so ancient it’s beyond comprehension. It’s like touching the heart of the universe—a dizzying, overwhelming rush of power that blurs the edges of who I am, where I begin, and where I end.

“Breathe,” Riven says, as steady as always. “You’re in control. You’ve got this.”

The threads of light around me grow brighter, wrapping around me like a cocoon, binding me to the star’s glow. It feels otherworldly, like stepping outside of time—outside of reality itself.

All the while, I keep my gaze locked onto the star.

Then, I let go.

In less than a second, I'm surrounded by endless darkness.

Stars streak past me like comets, and panic claws at my throat as I realize I can't breathe, can't move, can't? —

I snap back into my body with a gasp, sitting up and burying myself into Riven's chest.

"I've got you," he murmurs, his arms tightening around me. "You're safe."

I'm trembling, my breaths coming in sharp, shallow gasps as I cling to the sensation of being back in my body. Ice cold terror rushes through me at the memory of that infinite darkness—a darkness so consuming that it felt like being erased from existence itself.

"You're okay," Riven repeats. "You're safe. Just breathe."

My chest heaves as I force air into my lungs, the crushing weight of what I just experienced still pressing down on me. But once I'm able to pull back and look at him, he leads me through some relaxation exercises like the ones he gave me when he was helping my mind calm so I could sleep at the beginning of our journey, and soon, I'm okay.

Well, as okay as someone can be after being trapped in the vacuum of space.

"What happened?" he asks when I'm finally able to think again.

"I missed," I say simply.

“Missed?” His brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

“I was in space. Just... floating. There was nothing around me. No air, no ground, no—” I break off, unable to articulate the sheer terror of that void .

“Maybe we should try something else,” he says carefully. “Find another way to?”

“No.” The word surprises me as it leaves my lips. “I was in space, Riven. Actually in space. And I survived. I’m not physically hurt. I’m not dead. I just...” I glance up at the Midnight Star, sizing it up. “I aimed wrong.”

“Sapphire—”

“I can do this,” I say, and this time, I believe it. “I just need to try again.”

The owls shift on their perches, their eyes reflecting the starlight as they watch us. Waiting.

Riven’s mouth opens like he wants to argue, but then he stops, studying me.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” I tell him. “I’m sure.”

“All right.” He gives me a half-smile and cups my face, and right now, I think I’m more confident about this than he is. “Then let’s do this.”

He cradles me against him again, and I inhale deeply, focusing on the Midnight Star.

My magic comes faster this time, flooding my veins with so much power that it feels like I might burst from it.

Again, I let go.

I'm surrounded by blinding, radiant, all-encompassing light. I can't see, can't think, can't? —

I snap back into my body with a gasp, my heart pounding as I re-orient myself.

Riven's hands are on my face instantly, his eyes scanning me with a mix of worry and relief. "What happened?" he asks after determining I'm okay.

"I missed again," I say simply. "It was bright."

He frowns, his jaw tightening. "We can stop?—"

"No." I cut him off. "I'm trying again."

"Then try again," he says, apparently knowing better than to argue with me by this point, and he holds me tighter, as if he can help me find my way.

This time, when I call on my magic, it sears through me like liquid starlight, filling every inch of me until there's nothing left but the glow overhead.

Again, I let go.

And then, miraculously, I'm there.

On the Midnight Star.

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Sapphire

I spin in a slow circle, awestruck by the impossible beauty surrounding me.

I don't know what I expected. Learning that I needed to project myself to a star happened so quickly that I didn't have time to think about it. But never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined the sprawling city stretched out before me, its every detail perfect and surreal.

Arranged in circles both big and small, the buildings are crystalline sculptures that rise in elegant, twisting spires, glowing with hues of lavender, gold, and pale blue. And the sparkling pathways connecting the buildings aren't on the ground. They're suspended above a starry abyss, shimmering bridges of light that weave gracefully through the city .

At the very heart of it all is the palace.

It's impossibly grand, rising above everything else, gleaming with a brilliance that defies words. Its spires stretch high into the sky, and its walls radiate silver-white, threaded with veins of liquid gold that pulse softly, as if the entire structure is alive and powered by starlight.

The only thing that outshines the city is what's above it. Because an entire galaxy is hovering so low that it takes over the sky, its bright core and surrounding stars casting the city in a soft, otherworldly glow.

I feel so small standing here, on a high balcony of one of the buildings, gazing out at

the overwhelming magnificence spread out before me.

“You made it,” someone says from behind me, and when I spin around, I see her walking through the doorway.

In my dreams, she was always hazy. I could see an outline of her, but never the details.

Now, I see a woman who embodies the cosmos itself.

Her silvery hair cascades down her back like liquid starlight, tiny gems woven through it like captured fragments of constellations. And she moves with a grace that’s both otherworldly and soothingly commanding, watching me with eyes like distant galaxies, deep and endless, as though they hold the secrets of the universe inside them .

But the most startling part? I’ve seen her before. In the woods, when she placed her hand on my forehead and put me through the most pain I’ve ever experienced in my life.

“You’re the ancient woman?” I ask, and a soft, melodic laugh escapes her lips.

“I prefer to go by my given name—Celeste,” she says with a smile that holds lifetimes of wisdom, pain, and hope. “The star goddess. And I chose you, Sapphire Hayes, to be one of the star touched.”

“One of the what?” I ask, internally chiding myself a second later for sounding so ineloquent in front of a goddess.

“I came to you when you were lost in the woods,” she continues, and I nod, since I’ve already pieced that together. “Or, rather, I astrally projected myself to you. When I

touched your forehead, I gifted you with a piece of my magic. And, by doing so, I also freed your air and water magic. Because you will play a pivotal role in defending the mortal and mystical realms from the coming darkness, and you'll need to draw on as much of your magic as you can to do so."

Her words settle over me like a storm, too heavy to process all at once.

"The coming darkness?" I finally repeat, even though it's only one of the many questions I have right now. "What does that mean? "

Celeste's expression softens. "There are ancient forces at work that seek to upset the balance of the world," she says. "It all started when a mortal named Ambrogio was cursed by the gods. He was in love with a goddess—my mother, Selene—and she loved him, too. But she also feared him for what the curse made him become. So, she had him banished to one of the deepest layers of the Underworld, where he remained trapped for centuries."

Wow.

Lesson learned: never fall in love with a god.

"Ambrogio was the first vampire," I say, recalling what the night fae, Zythara, shared in the cave.

"You know your history." Celeste smiles proudly.

"Not much of it," I admit. "Just that Ambrogio's son turned the queen of the night fae into a vampire, and that the Night Court wants to join his Blood Coven so they can be turned into something called Revenants."

She nods, her expression grim. "The Revenants will be like nothing the world has

ever faced before,” she says. “They won’t only be vampires stronger than all others of their kind—they’ll also retain the powers they held in life. They’ll then be capable of overturning the existing order, to destroy those who have hunted and oppressed vampires for centuries. If they succeed, they’ll shatter the balance of power between the realms, leaving everyone at their mercy and no one to stand against them. ”

Well, when you put it like that...

“You expect me to stop Ambrogio from being raised from the Underworld?” I ask, since it sounds like a tall order for someone who only got their magic a few weeks ago.

“Unfortunately, the Blood Coven has already succeeded in raising Ambrogio,” she says. “He was weakened in the process—the resurrection didn’t go as planned—but if the Blood Coven restores him to his full power, he’ll be able to turn them into Revenants.”

“And you expect me to stop them,” I say flatly.

“You and three others,” she clarifies, as if that makes it easier to digest. “The four of you were chosen by me and my sisters—the moon, sun, and storm goddesses—at the time of your births. We each subtly influenced your names as well. Our precious gems, destined to shine in times of darkness.”

My heart pounds as I grapple with the hugeness of what she’s telling me.

Riven’s going to be mind blown when he finds out.

Speaking of Riven...

“We’re trying to stop the Night Court from joining the Blood Coven,” I tell Celeste.

“Me and my...” I trail off, unsure how to refer to Riven, since calling him my boyfriend feels too casual. “Me and the prince of the Winter Court.”

“Oh?” Celeste raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow .

I shift uncomfortably, glance out at the gleaming city, then return my focus to the goddess. “Anyway,” I tell her, moving on. “We need to restore Riven’s father’s sanity first. The Winter King. Because before we knew the Night Court existed, we made this deal that I would help him create a potion to help his father, in exchange for him helping me make a potion to save my best friend’s life.” A lump rises in my throat when I try to imagine what Zoey’s going through right now, tears welling in my eyes when I realize that whenever I picture her in my mind now, all I see is the terror on her face when that night fae flew away with her. “She was kidnapped to the Night Court. She needs my help.”

“I know what it’s like to feel the weight of someone else’s survival on your shoulders,” Celeste says gently. “Your love for Zoey is fierce, but no matter how powerful you are, you and the Winter Prince cannot take on an entire fae court alone. You need more.”

“Riven told me the same thing,” I say with a frustrated huff. “He’s hoping the Winter Court’s army can help us defeat the Night Court. But for that to happen, we need his father’s sanity back. And the only way to do that is to create this potion. He has a few of the ingredients, but not all of them. He doesn’t even know what the rest of them are. That’s why we came to find you. He said you’d be able to help us.”

“The Winter Prince was correct,” she says. “The ingredients required to restore love to a hardened heart are specific, each serving a crucial purpose in healing the king’s fractured mind. However, certain ones only thrive in warmth. Which means you’ll have to go to the Summer Court to retrieve them.”

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Sapphire

The Summer Court.

My heart jumps.

I finally have a reason to go to the place that might hold answers about my heritage. At least, for the summer fae half of it. I know I'm not defined by what I am, but it sure would be nice to learn more.

“Riven's going to love that,” I say sarcastically instead.

Amusement dances in Celeste's eyes, but it's quickly replaced by seriousness.

Then, with a wave of her hand, she creates a shimmering projection in the air between us. Images shape together inside it—a towering tree with golden sap dripping from its bark, a berry gleaming in the twilight, flowers opening to the dawn, a crystal glowing with pale light, and a vial full of blood .

I recognize the crystal and the flowers. They're the two ingredients that Riven knew of before meeting me, and he carries them with him, always. The crystal amplifies emotional magic, and the flower represents new beginnings and fresh perspective.

“We already have the moonshard crystal and dawn's first dew,” I tell her, since those are the names of them.

Out of all the other ingredients, the one that makes me sick to look at is the blood. It

reminds me of when I had to kill the dove to create the healing potion for Zoey. Yes, the dove came back to life, since I performed the ceremony correctly, and yes, I now have more experience with hunting for blood. But it was different with the dove. The bird was so pure. I don't want to do something like that again.

"You're on the right track," Celeste says with approval.

"What are the others?" I ask, studying them in the projection.

"First, there's the amberdew sap," she says, and the image of the towering tree with golden sap comes into sharper focus. "It flows from an ancient Black Tupelo tree in the Summer Court. The sap has a unique property—it captures and preserves fleeting emotions."

"And that will help stabilize the king's mind?" I ask.

"Correct." She nods. "His emotions are volatile and unstable. The amberdew sap will act as an anchor, helping him maintain emotional balance once the potion takes effect. However, the tree's importance is not lost on the summer fae, and they do not give its sap freely."

"So, what do we need to do to get it?" I ask.

"It's different for everyone who ventures there," she says, although from the trouble that crosses her features, I have a feeling that getting the sap is going to be harder than scraping it off the bark. "But the tree thrives off strong emotions. So, be prepared to deal in them."

Unease expands in my chest. But before I can ask another question about the sap, the projection shifts to the dark, luminescent berry.

“That’s a duskberry,” she explains. “They’re incredibly rare, even in the Summer Court, found only in its queen’s garden. It’s essential to use one for the potion’s base, because duskberries open pathways to locked emotions.”

“They’ll help the king remember how he felt before the Winter Queen’s death,” I say, recalling the devastation on Riven’s face as he told me about his father’s descent into madness after his mother’s death.

“Exactly.” Celeste waves her hand, and the final image comes into focus—the vial of blood. “For the final ingredient, you’ll need summer fae blood.”

My stomach drops. “My blood.”

“Your blood will suffice.” Her galaxy eyes study me intently. “Though I suspect Riven already knew this. It’s part of why he’s kept you close, although his reasons have grown far beyond the practical by now.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks as I think of how our relationship has evolved—from his cold manipulation when we first met, to the depth of feeling between us now.

“That’s why he was so insistent at first about keeping me alive,” I say. “Even before he...” I trail off, remembering the moment outside the cave when he first told me he loved me.

“Before he fell in love with you?” Celeste smiles knowingly.

Butterflies form in my stomach as I remember the moments Riven and I spent in the cave and igloos together. The desire in his eyes when he looks at me, the shivers he sends through my body when he touches me, the way I feel perfectly whole when he’s...

Realizing where my mind is going, I snap back into focus. Fantasizing about Riven isn't where my head should be right now.

The ingredients, I remind myself as I ground myself in the present. The blood.

"The blood has to be mine specifically?" I ask now that I'm focused again. "Because I'm also half vampire?"

Celeste shakes her head, and from her small smile, I have a feeling she knows exactly what I was thinking about a minute ago. "Any summer fae blood would work," she says. "But yours is readily available, and you're willing to provide it. The fae in the Summer Court would be... less accommodating."

I nod, since her point is valid, and listen as she goes on to explain how to brew the potion.

"Do you have pens and paper around here?" I ask when she's finished, glancing at the door that leads inside the building. "So I can write this all down?"

"I have something better," she says, and with a flick of her hand, she sprinkles glittering silver sparkles over my bracelet.

The sapphires strung in it ignite with a brilliant, pulsing glow, each gemstone catching the light as if a piece of the night sky has been trapped within. The magic doesn't just settle—it seeps in, burrowing deep, threading through the metal and embedding itself into the core of the stones.

Then, as quickly as it surged, the glow dims, the bracelet settling back into quiet stillness. But it's different now. It's heavier, charged, no longer just an accessory, but something alive.

“Stardust,” Celeste explains. “I used it to enchant your bracelet. Now, whenever you need to remember the ingredients or brewing instructions for the potion, focus your magic into the sapphires and think about what you need to know. The information will project itself, just as I showed you with the ingredients moments ago. Try it.”

I run my fingers across the cool gems, picturing the ingredients we discussed. Immediately, spectral images appear above my wrist—the Black Tupelo tree, the duskberry, the flower, the moonshard, and the vial of blood, along with the instructions for brewing the potion written on a parchment in warm, glowing script.

“Perfect,” she says. “You learn quickly.”

The praise sends a flutter of pride through me, but it also reminds me of how much I still don’t understand. About being star touched, about my dual fae vampire nature, and about everything that’s happened since I fell into the mystical realm.

“I have so many questions,” I begin, but Celeste holds up a hand, cutting me off.

“And no time to ask them,” she says. “You need to leave. Now.”

“What? Why?”

“Because to reach the Summer Court, you must be in Central Park before one,” she explains. “During the hours the park is closed to mortals—between one and six—the wall between realms grows thin. Anyone inside the park during those hours shifts into the mystical realm the moment the clock strikes one.”

I stare at her, confusion mounting. “But we’re already in the mystical realm. And even if we’re near a portal to the mortal realm, we’re nowhere near New York City. There’s no way we’ll be able to?—“

“The pond where you found me is no ordinary body of water,” she interrupts. “I’ve transformed it into a portal that will take you directly to Central Park. But you must hurry. You have less than fifteen minutes until the shift occurs.”

My mind spins as I process what she’s saying. “So, we just jump in the pond, and we’ll land exactly where we need to be?” I ask.

“You’ll emerge from a lake near the Black Tupelo tree, in an area of the park called the Ramble.” She steps closer, her expression serious. “But you’ll need to be careful, especially with the Winter Prince by your side.”

“Will Riven be okay there?” I ask. “The heat?—”

“Will weaken him,” she confirms. “But he’s strong, and his love for you is stronger. Trust in that. Always.”

“I will,” I say, meaning it with every piece of my heart. “But what about Ghost? Can we bring him with us?”

“I’m afraid not,” she says. “But don’t worry. He’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask. “Because he almost wasn’t okay in that winter storm a few days ago.”

“My sisters and I will ensure his safety,” she says. “We have ways of predicting where the next storms will appear.”

“Because one of them is a storm goddess,” I remember.

“Precisely. ”

As she says the word, the galaxy above us pulses, as if sensing the urgency of the moment.

“It’s time,” she says. “Return to your body and make the jump. And remember—being star touched means you’re never alone. When you need guidance, all you have to do is look to the sky.”

With that, the world around me fades, and the last thing I see is Celeste’s knowing smile as the beautiful star city dissolves into darkness.

Sapphire

I gasp as I snap back into my body, my eyes flying open.

As promised, I'm still cradled in Riven's arms, his love wrapping around me like a shield against the chaos swirling in my mind. The steady rise and fall of his chest grounds me, and the way he's holding me—like I'm the most precious thing in the world—makes it impossible to not feel safe.

“You're okay,” he says, and he cups the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair. “You're here. You're safe.”

There's a rawness in his voice, a tremor that tells me how much concern he was holding back while I was gone. I feel it in his heartbeat pounding against mine, faster than ever before, and I realize that he wasn't just worried—he was terrified.

The sheer relief in his touch makes me want to stay like this forever, wrapped in the certainty that no matter how dark things get, I'll always have this. Always have him.

As it is now, I blink back into focus, since there's no time to waste.

“I did it,” I tell him. “I projected to the Midnight Star. And I met her. Celeste. The ancient woman.” I sit up straighter in his arms, my mind racing with everything I learned. “Although she's not just an ancient woman. She's a goddess. The star goddess.”

Confusion flickers across his face. “The ancient woman is a goddess?”

“Yes, and she told me everything we need to know about the potion. There was a lot more, too, but—” I break off and scramble out of his arms, nearly stumbling in my haste to reach the pond’s edge.

Sure enough, the constellations reflected in its mirrored surface are still aligned into a clock face. And the hands are minutes away from striking one.

“We have to go,” I continue, my heart racing. “Now.”

“Go where?” Riven asks, coming to stand beside me.

Ghost prowls over too, his golden eyes reflecting the starlight.

“The pond—it’s a portal. Celeste enchanted it to take us to Central Park in New York City.” I grab Riven’s hand, tugging him closer to the water’s edge. “But we have to jump through before one, or else we’ll miss the shift.”

He doesn’t move, his gaze shifting to Ghost. “We can’t just?—”

“Ghost will be fine,” I cut him off. “Celeste and her sisters will make sure of it. But we need to go. Now.”

I pull him forward, but he resists with so much intensity that I nearly freeze on the spot.

“I’m the Winter Prince,” he says slowly, as if I’m out of my mind. “I know what happens in Central Park at one. You’re asking me to jump straight into the Summer Court.”

His jaw tightens as he stares me down, searching for answers I don’t have time to give.

“It’s where the final ingredients are,” I tell him, and I squeeze his hand, as if that might convince him to come without asking more questions. “We have to go there to get them.”

His eyes search mine, a storm of emotions swirling in their depths, so intense that I brace myself for anything. “The Summer Court,” he says again, softer this time. “My magic will be weakened there.”

“And I’ll be right there with you.” I step closer, placing my free hand on his chest, right over his heart. The connection between us is tangible, electric, and it’s like the rest of the world falls away, leaving us in its wake. “I promised to do everything in my power to help you make this potion. The ice magic that binds our deal wouldn’t let me lie about this.”

Being fae also makes it impossible to lie about it, but there’s no need to get into semantics. Riven knows as well as anyone that there are many creative ways to dance around lies with truths.

The moment stretches between us, and a wave of worry crashes over me at the possibility that he’ll say no.

Then, his expression softens, and he cups my face in his hands, his touch gentle despite the war he’s clearly battling within himself.

“I know,” he finally says, and slowly, his gaze travels from me to Ghost.

The snow leopard’s eyes are bright with intelligence as he looks between us, the low rumble in his chest sounding almost like approval.

Without a word, Riven moves away from me and makes his way to Ghost, kneeling beside his faithful companion and burying his fingers in his thick white fur. “We’ll

find you again,” he promises. “Until then, stay safe.”

Ghost presses his forehead to Riven’s, and the gesture is so profound it brings tears to my eyes. It’s a silent goodbye—a promise shared between two souls who have survived together against impossible odds.

Eventually, Ghost’s attention shifts to me, and he prowls forward, pressing his head in an affectionate nuzzle against my chest.

“Stay safe,” I repeat what Riven told him, running my hands along his fur. “Celeste and her sisters will watch over you.”

He huffs softly, as if to say he’ll be fine, then steps back to let us go.

I swallow hard as Riven moves to stand next to me, forcing down the lump in my throat before it can get any worse.

“Are you ready?” I ask Riven, steadier than I feel.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” His gaze lingers on Ghost for just a second longer, and then he takes my hand. When our fingers intertwine, it’s more than just a gesture—it’s a vow. A promise that no matter what lies ahead, we’ll face it together.

With the decision now finalized, we position ourselves at the pond’s edge, and the constellations reflecting off its mirrored surface shift again.

Our time is almost up.

“Together?” he asks, the love shining in his eyes so fierce that it feels like he’s laying his soul bare for me. It’s overwhelming, humbling, and perfect all at once, and I swear my heart might burst from how much I feel for him in this moment.

“Together,” I repeat, and with one last meaningful look shared between us—one filled with trust, hope, and the kind of love that feels eternal—we jump.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

Aethelthryth volunteers to take over my swimming lessons.

We have our first one right after I leave Aerix's quarters. And already, I'm making far more progress with swimming than I ever did with Jake. I'm not going to be entering the Olympics anytime soon, but at least I can now sort of float without going into sheer panic mode.

I can't believe Jake's gone. Just like that. He was here when I went to sleep yesterday, and now...

The image of his body next to that fountain makes my stomach twist and my heart sink.

It's my fault. If I hadn't been so harsh with him, or if I'd ended things with him in private, none of this would have happened.

Aerix wouldn't have killed him .

I lift my hand to my neck, my fingers drifting to the spot where Aerix sank his fangs into me after our confrontation this morning. And, as it always does when I think of him, my mind goes to places it shouldn't.

"Zoey?" Aethelthryth says from next to me as we make our way back to the human wing.

“Yes?” I ask, snapped out of my thoughts.

“You’re no good to anyone if you lose yourself in this place,” she says. “Focus on what you can control—your mind, your strength, and your will to survive.”

Her words hit me harder than I expect.

“I’m doing the best I can,” I finally say.

“Jake’s death isn’t your fault, but it’s consuming you.” She glances at me, her sharp features softening just enough to let me know she isn’t trying to be cruel. “And Aerix? He’s dangerous, yes, but you’re letting his actions overshadow your choices.”

I scoff, bitterness creeping into my voice. “It’s hard not to when he’s deciding who lives and who dies around me.”

“You can’t change him. You can’t control him,” she says. “But you can choose how you conduct yourself. Which means you have to stop this cycle of self-blame before it has a chance to truly start.”

Her words settle heavily over me, stirring something deep in my chest .

She’s right, of course. Especially because I have other things to worry about—like some of the things Cierra and Aerix said in my presence during their skirmish in his quarters. The questions Aerix refused to answer, about the Blood Coven, the Revenants, and Kallista.

I want to ask Aethelthryth. I’m seconds away from it.

But something stops me. Because while she’s been kind to me since I arrived, the fae are always playing games.

And there's no reason to believe she's any different from the rest of them.

During lunch, I keep glancing at the central fountain—the one where Jake's body had been discovered before I woke up.

It looks so deceptively normal now. There aren't even any bloodstains around it, since all of Jake's blood had been drained into the fountain's basin.

The others in the courtyard are quiet, refusing to look at me.

Including Victoria.

Admittedly, Victoria's never excited to talk to me. But given that it's just the two of us at this table—since Sophia's at Aerix's quarters for lunch—she usually makes a bit of an effort .

“You blame me for what happened to Jake,” I say after I can't take a second more of the awkwardness, setting my fork down with more force than necessary.

Her eyes snap to mine, sharp as broken glass. “Aerix killed Jake because Jake dared to touch what belongs to him,” she says, venom lacing her tone.

My breath catches in my chest. Because she's right. If I'd done something differently, then maybe...

Stop the cycle of self-blame, I remind myself what Aethelthryth told me. It's not going to get me anywhere.

“I didn't ask for any of this,” I say, giving no explanation beyond that.

“Are you so sure of that?” she asks.

“Does Aerix really seem like the type who would submit to anything I’d asked?” I scoff.

She glares at me again, which I take as admittance that I’m right.

“I’ve been here for years,” she says instead. “And no matter how many of Aerix’s girls filter in and out, he’s never acted like this before.”

“Like what?”

“Protective. Possessive. Obsessed.”

Her eyes grow more haunted with each word spoken.

“He’s not obsessed with me,” I argue, even though the events of this morning suggest otherwise. “He’s just...”

“Just what?” she challenges. “So captivated that he’ll kill anyone who threatens his claim on you? So enthralled that he’s changing his routines to spend more time with you?”

I think of this morning, when I asked Aerix to choose me over Victoria for breakfast, and I know she’s right. He’s not the type to bend to what we ask, but yet, he has for me, on multiple occasions.

I’m getting a pretty good idea by now about why that might be.

“Have you ever heard of someone named Kallista?” I ask, and given the way she tilts her head, she’s genuinely surprised by the sudden change of subject.

“No,” she says, her brow furrowing. “Why?”

I hold her gaze, realizing with each passing second that she's truly clueless.

Interesting. Very, very interesting.

"No reason." I shrug, although from the way she presses her lips together, I can tell she doesn't believe me.

But apparently done conversing with me, Victoria turns her attention to the table next to us, where Nathaniel—Princess Mirena's sole human—sits by himself, as always.

I poke at the food on my plate, but after the events of today, I'm barely able to eat. The only reason I force myself to get a bit down is because I need my strength after losing blood this morning. Especially given that Aerix will likely call on me again for dinner.

I hope he does.

Because each minute I spend with him will be another chance I'll have to soften him up so I can eventually get him to tell me more about Kallista, the Blood Coven, and the Revenants.

Zoey

After lunch, I make my way to the far end of the courtyard where Isla and Elijah are waiting for me at our chessboard. A few of the pawns are only partially finished, but that doesn't stop Isla from putting the pieces in place to start a game.

She nods for me to sit across from her, which I do.

Elijah sits on the bench at the side of the board. He glances at one of the bishops carved by Jake, which is the most jagged of all the finished pieces.

My stomach drops at the sight of it.

"I'll be generous and let you go first," Isla says to me, keeping her gaze level with mine.

Even though she's only thirteen, it is generous of her, since she's apparently some kind of chess prodigy.

I choose a random pawn to slide forward, since it's impossible to focus on strategy when all I can see are my memories of Jake's body, Matt wasting away at the hand of the queen, and the possessiveness swirling in Aerix's eyes during our confrontation in his quarters. And it's not like I can strategize from only one move, anyway.

"It's not right, you know," Isla says as she moves her first pawn. "What happened to Jake."

“No,” I agree. “It’s not.”

Elijah sighs and leans back. “In my three years here, I’ve never seen anything like that,” he says. “Normally, they’re sent to the barns when the royals are done with them. We never see them again. But this...”

“Is unacceptable,” Isla finishes sharply, looking to me to make my next move.

“There’s nothing we can do to stop it,” Elijah says, his voice flat as he leans back on the bench. “We can only lay low and avoid their attention.”

So we don’t end up like Jake.

None of us say it.

But we all know we’re thinking it.

We play in silence for a few minutes, and I watch as Isla wipes piece after piece of mine from the board.

“Laying low around here isn’t the best choice for all of us,” she says as she takes another one of my pawns. “After all, some of us have opportunities that the rest of us don’t.”

My hand freezes over my queen. “What are you getting at?” I ask, already suspecting her answer .

“Aerix has a weakness for you,” she says, and she studies the board, as if she’s trying to predict my next move.

She likely already has predicted my next move.

“If he’s weak, he sure has an interesting way of showing it.” I scoff and move my rook instead—which I always called a castle before Isla corrected me during our first day of whittling—and glance back over at the central fountain.

Jake’s mutilated corpse flashes through my mind again.

No.

I don’t want to think about it.

So I refocus on the board, noting the locations of each chess piece.

I read once that the brain can only think one thought at a time. Which means if I run through the position of each piece, I can’t also think about the fact that Jake was murdered by the frustratingly irresistible fae prince who kidnapped me and flew me away while Sapphire and Riven were fighting for their lives against a horde of water zombies.

What if they didn’t survive the fight? What if they’ve been dead the entire time I’ve been here?

What if I never get back home?

I curse internally, since I’m doing a terrible job at regulating my thoughts .

“Aerix killed for you.” Isla snaps me out of it and lifts her queen, positioning it dangerously close to my king. “He was angry that Jake touched you. He emotionally reacted. And that makes him weak.”

“You’re probably the only person on the planet who would call Aerix weak ,” I say as I make my next move, even though my heart races as I wonder if she’s come to the

same conclusion I have about the next move that would be best for me to take.

“The point is,” she continues as she puts me in check, “he’s different with you. And that gives you power.”

I move my king out of danger, but it’s a temporary solution at best.

As Isla contemplates her next move, I glance at Aurora, who’s sitting at the fountain near the courtyard’s edge, per usual. Her gaze is fixed on the book in her lap, but I know she’s listening. After our chat in the garden, I suspect she listens to a lot more than it initially appears.

Then, my attention shifts across the courtyard, to Henry.

He’s lounging in the shade of a tree, his eyes locked on Malakai’s girls as they play a game of cards. The way he stares at them—hungry, cold, and predatory—makes my stomach churn.

They don’t seem to notice. Or maybe they’ve just learned to ignore it .

“Henry’s at it again,” I mutter, nodding in his direction.

Isla follows my gaze, her lip curling. “Creepy bastard,” she says, and her choice words catch me off guard, given her young age. “You’d think the queen would have done something about him by now. I have a hard time imagining that she’d tolerate one of her pets looking at other girls like that.”

“Actually, she encourages it,” Elijah says. “Henry’s antics amuse her.”

“Creep,” Isla repeats as she makes her move, and I’m not sure if she’s talking about Henry, or about the queen.

Probably both of them.

I capture her castle and glance at Henry again with a growing sense of unease. But he's either ignoring me, or he doesn't care.

Ideally, he's scared of me after Jake turned up dead this morning. Although, I doubt it. Henry doesn't seem like the type who scares easily—if ever.

Five moves later, Isla lays her king down on the board and loudly announces her checkmate.

"I'll get you back next time," I tell her—even though that would take a miracle—and then I look over at Elijah. "Your turn to get annihilated."

Before he can reply, Katerina moves toward us, her presence startling in its quietness. Her golden hair glimmers in the moonlight, and she carries herself with the same calculated grace that all of Malakai's girls seem to share. She doesn't speak—she never does—but her piercing gaze locks onto mine, then flicks toward the chessboard.

"You want to play?" I ask, glancing between her and the board.

She nods, and there's something haunted in her deep blue eyes—something that makes me wonder what scarred her so much that she no longer speaks.

Isla raises an eyebrow and exchanges a look with Elijah. "Well, this just got interesting," she says, setting her king right side up and standing.

Elijah lingers a moment longer, curiosity written all over his face. "We'll leave you to it," he says. "Good luck."

I return my attention to Katerina as she slides into the seat across from me and starts setting up the pieces with quick, precise movements.

When she's done, she motions for me to go first, and I take her up on it by moving my first pawn.

I hold my own for longer than I did against Isla. But eventually, Katerina takes my king with a quiet grace that somehow makes the defeat sting less, giving me a close-lipped, challenging smile.

Point taken.

I have a lot to learn around here.

“Wow.” I sit back, bringing my hair over my shoulder. I've been wearing it down since the braid incident with the king, and it's starting to get on my nerves. “That was impressive.”

Katerina doesn't react to the compliment. Instead, she looks around the courtyard, her gaze sharp as it sweeps over the nearby tables.

Once she's certain no one's watching, she reaches into the pocket of her dress, pulls out a folded piece of paper, and slips it across the chessboard as she moves to clean up the pieces.

My heart pounds as I take it, careful to also make it look like I'm moving the pieces back into place.

Her eyes meet mine for a fleeting moment. Then, without warning, she stands and walks away.

I glance around, making sure no one's paying attention, and unfold the note under the table.

The handwriting inside is neat but hurried.

Going back to my suite. Come see me in twenty minutes. Bring no one.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Zoey

I watch Katerina disappear into the palace, my mind racing as I shove the paper into my pocket.

Twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes until I have a chance to find out why someone who hasn't spoken in over a year reached out to me.

In the meantime, I put each piece back into its place, examining them as I do. They're all so different—some crude, some smooth—and yet, they still fit together to play the same game.

I'm putting the final pawn into place when Henry materializes beside the table.

"Making new friends?" His eyes flick to where Katerina disappeared, then back to me.

"Hardly. We were just playing chess," I say as he sits uninvited into Katerina's chair .

"Were you?" His gaze burns into me. "Because Katerina doesn't 'just' do anything. Not anymore."

Despite every bone in my body telling me to get up and keep my distance from Henry, I can't help being curious.

And, from his arrogant smirk, I have a feeling he knows it.

“What are you talking about?” I finally give in.

His smirk widens, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Katerina doesn’t do anything for no reason,” he says, serious now. “She’s dangerous. You’d be wise to stay away from her.”

“Dangerous?” I scoff. “She doesn’t even speak.”

“And have you ever wondered why?” He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Why someone would choose total silence? What kind of awful things they might be trying to hide?”

“Like what?” The words are out before I can stop them.

“Let’s just say she’s earned her silence,” he says. “Stay. Away.”

I narrow my eyes at him, not buying it. “So, you’re telling me to avoid her because you’re concerned for my safety?”

“Exactly.” He tilts his head, and for a fleeting moment, he almost looks amused. “Katerina’s mine to manage. And if you interfere, well—” His hand darts under the table faster than a viper, grabbing my wrist in a vice-like grip that makes me gasp in pain.

“Let go,” I warn, but when I try to pull back, his grip tightens.

Hopefully learning how to swim will simultaneously improve my upper body strength.

Although, while I might someday stand a chance against Henry, I'll never stand a chance against the vampires. No human ever could.

As it is, I make sure to not bring attention to myself. Not when there's a chance I might be able to get information from Henry—regardless of how reliable that information might be.

“Listen carefully.” His fingers tighten further, sending sharp pains up my arm. “You’ve caused enough of a commotion with Jake and Aerix. When the queen learned about Aerix and Cierra’s little misunderstanding in his quarters earlier, she was far from happy. She doesn’t want discord between the royals—especially not now. And let’s not forget your friend from home. The one who’s already so fragile from the queen’s attention.”

“What about him?” Ice floods my veins, not liking where Henry might be going with this.

“I’d say he has about a month left in him,” he says. “Two, if he’s lucky. It would be a shame if someone close to the queen encouraged her to speed up the process, don’t you think?”

I stare at him in shock.

“You aren’t seriously hinting that the queen would do something because you asked her to?” I can’t help it—I laugh.

Which, annoyingly, doesn’t bother him in the slightest.

“The queen and I have an understanding.” His grip loosens slightly, but the threat remains. “She finds my observations about the other humans here quite entertaining. And she already doesn’t like you, because the king nearly claimed you. If she hears

that keeping your friend from home alive for longer will make you indebted to me, then I suspect she might do it. For the entertainment factor and all.”

“You’re sick,” I say, and this time, when I try to pull my hand back, he releases me.

“I do what it takes to survive here, just like the rest of them,” he says, standing and towering over me in a way that makes me reach for the pointy castle piece and hold tightly onto it, as if it were a weapon.

I really wish I had a rake right now.

But it’s okay that I don’t.

After all, I have a not-so-secret weapon.

Aerix .

And there’s no way he’s going to let Henry get away with this.

“Remember what I said,” Henry warns as he backs away. “And keep in mind that the most influential players can often be found in unexpected places. Potential allies, too.”

I shake my head as he walks away.

Henry is out of his mind if he thinks I’d consider him an ally.

On the other hand, what if it’s true that he can encourage the queen to speed up what looks to be Matt’s inevitable death?

I can’t risk that happening.

Which means that until I learn more—or until Henry's dead—I'm going to have to play along with him, whether I like it or not.

In the meantime, I storm out of the courtyard, my heart pounding in time with my hurried steps. My wrist aches where Henry grabbed me, but it's nothing compared to the storm raging in my chest. His threats, his smugness, his audacity—it's all too much. Yet, through the haze of anger, one thought blazes brighter than the rest.

Katerina.

Even though it hasn't been twenty minutes, I head to the suite where Malakai's girls stay. Lacey and Brenda—his other two—were still playing cards when I left. Which means if Katerina was being truthful with me in her note, she'll be there alone.

Before I can second-guess myself, I knock.

The door creaks open a moment later, revealing Katerina. She steps aside, her movements graceful and deliberate, and gestures for me to enter.

The main room in the suite is dimly lit, the heavy curtains drawn tight against the windows. The walls are painted a deep, blood-red hue, almost black in the low light, and the furniture is imposing, heavy, and gothic.

Katerina moves toward the door with her name engraved on its plaque, and I follow, looking over my shoulder as I enter.

When the door shuts behind me, she turns to face me, her expression calm but unreadable.

Then, to my shock, she speaks.

“I want Aerix to take care of Henry,” she says, with more venom than I would have guessed possible, given her soft looks. “Like how he took care of Jake this morning.”

Zoey

“You can talk,” I say to Katerina, despite the answer clearly being yes.

“When I choose to.” Her eyes are hard, haunted. “And right now, I’m choosing to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Because Henry needs to die.” Her gaze doesn’t waver, and there’s no trace of hesitation in her tone. “Aerix can make that happen.”

I blink, trying to process her words. It’s not just the intensity of what she’s saying that’s throwing me—it’s the fact that she’s speaking at all.

“What did Henry do to you?” I finally ask.

She doesn’t answer right away. Instead, she walks to her dark canopy bed and sits on the edge, her movements deliberate and poised .

“He betrayed us,” she says finally, steady but distant. “You see, Henry, my brother, and I were taken from the mortal realm together. Henry was a family friend for years. He used to come over for dinner, and to study together. But there was always something off about him. I didn’t see it then. Now, I can’t believe I missed it.”

I take a cautious step closer. “What happened when the three of you got to the Night Court?”

Her expression hardens, fury sparking in her eyes. “Henry made sure my brother was sent to the barns.”

My stomach drops.

“Why?”

“Because my brother was competition for the queen’s attention,” she says simply. “I don’t know what Henry said to the queen, and I don’t think I’ll ever know. But one day my brother was here, and the next, he was gone.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, because what else can I say? If I was in her position, I have no idea what I’d do. All I know is that I wouldn’t be as collected as she seems to be right now.

“You can be more than sorry,” she says sharply. “You can help.”

I nod, although I don’t say yes. Because despite it all, I remember what Henry told me.

The most influential players can often be found in unexpected places. Potential allies, too .

How do I know who’s being truthful and who’s lying around here?

The answer is simple—I don’t know. At least, not yet.

This game has layers, and I can’t just trust what I see on the surface. I have to learn how to keep myself afloat and make my way over to the deep end.

And right now, I have to listen to Katerina to see what I can learn.

“After my brother was gone, Henry turned his attention to me,” she continues, and just like that, her composure cracks. “He told me he’d ensure my brother’s safety, and that he’d speak to the queen on his behalf—if I did things for him.”

The way she says “things” makes my skin crawl. The tension in her voice, the haunted look in her eyes... it’s not hard to piece it together.

I swallow hard. “You mean?—”

“Yes,” she interrupts, cold and clipped. “Exactly what you think. Henry likes having power over me. He likes knowing I’ll do whatever he demands—protect my brother. And the queen and Malakai? They enjoy it. They treat it like a game. A show. They make comments, and they laugh about it, as if our lives are just entertainment for them, at best.”

My chest tightens. “Is that why you stopped speaking? ”

She nods. “If they can’t hear my voice, they can’t twist my words.”

“Do you mean the other humans?” I ask, since surely, Malakai must be able to make her speak. I doubt he would have kept her here for so long if he couldn’t.

Although, who knows? Maybe he enjoys her silence.

“I do,” she confirms. “You shouldn’t trust them. Not any of them.”

“But I can trust you?” I ask.

“You can trust your gut instinct about Henry,” she replies. “So, will you help me? Will you tell Aerix about Henry? Will you lie and say he touched you? Will you make him pay?”

Of course—Katerina doesn't know that Henry approached me and grabbed me after she left. But she clearly knows him well enough to suspect.

I glance down at my hand, remembering Henry's fingers digging into my wrist. His threats about Matt. The way he's been looking at me since the moment I got here—as if he wants to break me.

But what Katerina's asking is dangerous. Reckless. It's like taking out a pawn instead of analyzing the entire board.

“What about your brother?” I ask, since that's the one thing not adding up.

If Henry dies, won't the queen take it out on someone? And isn't Katerina's brother an easy target in the barns?

“I've come to accept that I have no way of knowing if my brother's still alive or not,” she says, so evenly that it gives me chills. “But if Henry dies like Jake did, I'll know. And, despite everything, at least I'll have that.”

Her haunted gaze pins me in place, but my thoughts race ahead, weaving through the threads of danger and deceit that entangle us all.

A few hours ago, I might have jumped at the chance to get rid of Henry.

But Isla tried to teach us about chess while we were whittling the pieces, and one of her lessons stands out to me now.

You can't just focus on the piece directly threatening your king. You have to see the whole board, anticipate every possible countermove, and consider what sacrifices might be necessary ten moves ahead.

I might not have put as much thought into it while we were playing earlier—I was distracted by my own spiraling thoughts—but I’m not just playing with pieces anymore. I’m playing with people.

I can’t afford to play impulsively. Not when lives are on the line.

“I need time to think,” I say carefully, not wanting to lead Katerina in one way or the other .

Something flickers in her eyes—respect, maybe. Or recognition.

“Fair enough,” she finally says. “But when you go back out there, don’t tell anyone that I spoke to you today.”

“Or else what?” I ask, stepping back.

“You’re not getting any more out of me. Not until Henry’s dead.”

She presses her lips together and motions to the door, her message clear.

I’m not going to hear her voice again until I do what she wants.

And for some reason, that puts me more on edge than any of Henry’s threats.

I do more than survive, Aurora’s voice echoes in my mind as I leave Katerina’s room. I thrive.

As I make my way through the halls, my mind maps out the web of alliances and betrayals surrounding me. Henry’s threats, Sophia’s kindness, Katerina’s silence, Victoria’s anger, Aerix’s possessiveness, Aurora’s subtle help, Isla’s surprising sharpness, Elijah’s wisdom—they’re all moves in an endless game where the rules

keep changing.

If I want to survive here—no, if I want to thrive—I have to be more than one move ahead, but five.

Ten.

I have to stop reacting and start playing .

I need to be the one making the moves—not the one being moved.

And so, I straighten my spine as I return to the courtyard, my resolve hardening like iron. The fae may think humans are nothing more than pawns, but pawns have potential.

Because pawns can cross the board and become queens.

Sapphire

The shock of cold water hits me like a thousand needles, and for a moment, I'm completely disoriented. But Riven's hand finds mine in the darkness, anchoring me as we steady ourselves and break through the surface.

The water here is different from the mystical pond we left behind. It's murkier. More real.

But it's still just as cold.

Which makes sense, given that it's January in New York City.

Without a word, we swim to the edge and haul ourselves onto the grassy bank. My clothes are soaked through, clinging to my skin. Riven's just as drenched, his hair plastered to his forehead, droplets trailing down his face.

"Are you okay?" I ask, reaching out to brush a wet strand of hair from his eyes .

He catches my wrist, his touch sending a shiver through me that has nothing to do with being wet. "I'd say that went rather well. Dramatic and memorable—just as intended," he says, his thumb tracing light circles on my palm. "But I'll be even better after you use your magic to dry us off."

"Demanding much, are we?" I smile, letting out a small, breathless laugh.

"I just endured a portal drop into enemy territory," he says, pulling me closer. "Surely

that earns me a favor?”

“On top of the one I already owe you?” I tease.

“You’ll enjoy repaying me,” he promises, and after a kiss that’s decently long considering we’re in said enemy territory and need to be aware of our surroundings, I place my palm on his chest and close my eyes, reaching for the intertwined threads of my water and air magic.

They respond instantly, and before long, we’re dry.

Even so, I keep my palm on his chest, not wanting to let go.

His eyes lock onto mine, the intense look in them sending a wave of heat through me.

“Impressive,” he says. “You get better at this every day.”

“Magic lessons with a powerful, well-trained, irresistible fae prince will do that,” I say, our lips so close now that I can feel his frosty breath mingling with mine.

But instead of another kiss, his expression shifts, and he leans back, breaking the connection .

“Sapphire,” he says my name in the way he always does when he’s about to say something serious. “What happened on the Midnight Star?”

I pause to gather my thoughts—since a lot happened on the star—then launch into everything Celeste told me, condensing the flood of information into what’s hopefully something coherent.

“Celeste lives in this incredible city on the Midnight Star with buildings that looked like they were carved from crystal and light,” I say, the memory of it taking my

breath away all over again. “She’s the one I saw in the woods before drinking from the stream and falling into the fae realm. That night, she gave me a piece of her magic and made me one of the star touched.”

“Star touched?” Riven’s brow furrows.

“There’s so much more to explain, but we don’t have time right now.” I reach for my bracelet and call on its magic, since showing him will be easier than telling him. “She answered my questions about the potion. Look.”

The gems glow, and a shimmering projection appears on the ground—a vivid image of the ingredients we need, along with the instructions for how to brew the potion.

“That tree,” Riven says, looking over my shoulder. “It’s behind you.”

As I turn around, a wave of magic sweeps through the air, thick and heady, wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

And then, it happens.

The carefully maintained paths of Central Park dissolve, replaced by something ancient, colorful, and magical. Trees with massive trunks and shimmering leaves stretch toward the night sky, and flowers bloom everywhere—huge and exotic, their scents heavy and intoxicating. Then there are the fireflies—or something far more magical—gliding through the air, leaving behind trails of silver and gold, like stars pulled too close to the earth.

It’s like coming home to a place I never knew I missed.

My magic responds too, the water in the air practically singing to me, begging to be shaped and controlled. I was already doing a good job at connecting with my magic

in the Winter Court, but this is something else entirely.

My magic is no longer a part of me that I have to reach for.

Here, my magic is me.

Riven, however, doesn't look as good. His cheeks are flushed, sweat already beading on his forehead.

"This place," he says as he glares around at the beauty I was just admiring, "is not exactly ideal for ice magic."

"We'll be as quick as possible," I promise, reaching for his hand. "Especially since we were dropped off right near the tree."

With that, I turn back around to face it.

Commanding and ancient, it towers above the surrounding forest, each curve and knot in its massive trunk telling stories older than anything I can imagine. But it's the leaves that steal my breath away. They shimmer like molten gold caught in the starlight, each one radiating a soft glow that makes the tree seem one with the Universe itself.

Riven wipes a bead of sweat from his brow and frowns. "It looks... alive," he finally says.

"Well, it is a tree," I tease, although my own nerves prickles as we get closer. "And unless the Winter Court has a special brand of tree that I'm unaware of, they tend to be alive."

"That was a wonderful botany lesson," he says, scanning the tree cautiously. "Please,

enlighten me further while I slowly melt into the forest floor.”

“Don’t go melting on me now,” I quip, although I tighten my grip on his hand, as if that will hold him together. “I’m quite fond of you in solid form.”

“Oh—I know what you like in solid form,” he replies with a smirk, and I simply roll my eyes and continue toward the tree.

At least the heat hasn’t melted his ego .

When we’re finally a few feet away, I see the thick sap peeking through the cracks in its bark.

“The amberdew sap,” I whisper, reaching out to touch it.

“Sapphire, wait—” Riven starts, but it’s too late.

The moment my fingertips graze the bark, roots thick as tree trunks burst from the earth, surging toward us from every direction, whipping through the air like massive serpents.

Silver flashes in the corner of my vision as Riven draws his blade in time to slice through the nearest root surging toward my chest. But the severed limb barely hits the ground before two more lash out to take its place.

So, he raises his hand, frost forming at his fingertips, and hurls a surge of ice magic into the oncoming attack. The roots stiffen as the frost spreads—but then, just as fast, they shudder and crack, steam rising as the heat of the tree’s magic melts the ice.

At almost the same time, I fling my hands out, summoning a wall of wind to shove the roots back. It stops them from reaching us, but it’s not enough. I try again, and

again, but the tree puts up a worthy fight, determined to wrap around us and trap us in its clutches.

Riven growls and conjures a group of jagged ice spikes, launching them like a hailstorm toward the twisting limbs. They strike with deadly precision, impaling one of the roots and shattering it into splinters.

The attacks pause for a second.

Then, a thick root slams into the ground between us, splitting the earth in a violent tremor. Another comes at me, and I throw myself into a roll, barely escaping its clutches.

Miraculously, I catch myself somewhat gracefully. As I do, my water magic surges inside me, and I send a concentrated jet of it slicing through the air, aiming for the root's base.

It connects, but it barely leaves a mark.

I glance around, but the roots are surrounding us. There's no way out.

Riven's sword flashes as he hacks at a particularly thick root. Ice spreads from his blade, but again, it melts before it can get a proper grip on anything.

Anger rushes through me, and I summon a gust of wind, propelling myself backward as three roots converge on my position. My dagger strikes one, but it's like trying to cut through steel.

The root barely seems to notice.

From there, Riven and I fall into a rhythm—him using his ice to slow the roots down,

me using my air and water magic to push them back. But the more we fight, the more the tree fights back. The roots move faster, stronger, their magic pulsing through the ground with an intensity that makes my head spin.

I put every bit of my training into the fight, but the roots are too big. Too fast.

“Riven, your left!” I scream as a massive root surges behind him.

He spins, blade ready, but he’s not fast enough.

The root catches his sword arm, yanking it back, and his weapon clatters to the ground as more roots wrap around his legs, his waist, and his chest. He struggles against it, trying to free himself, but any attempts at trying to freeze it with his ice magic are futile.

“No!” I blast the roots with a combination of water and air, controlling my magic enough to hit the tree and not Riven.

But they’re unstoppable.

Then, something tightens around my ankle.

A root’s coiling up my leg like a snake, its grip firm and unyielding. I slash at it with my dagger, but before I can land a second strike, another root seizes my wrist, twisting hard enough to make my fingers go numb.

My dagger falls.

More roots surge forward, wrapping around me, pulling me in, squeezing until my breath comes in short, panicked gasps.

I thrash, summoning my magic. But the roots press tighter, their magic sinking into me, like they're trying to drain the fight from my bones.

I can't move. Can't win.

I'm trapped.

But I don't have to stay trapped.

I can project. The roots won't be able to get their grips on me when I'm in my astral form.

My star magic hums in response.

Then, in a heartbeat, I'm standing across the way—out of reach of the roots—watching as my body goes limp in the tree's grasp.

Sapphire

The roots are everywhere.

Even if I had my dagger, I'd have no chance.

Still, I look around, trying to figure something out. There has to be a gap somewhere. A place where I can use my air magic to pull Riven and me out of the roots and drop us off so we can hightail it out of here and brainstorm another way to get the sap.

“Sapphire!” Riven’s voice is sharp and commanding, startling me enough to stop searching for an escape. “Look at your body.”

I glance down.

“Your real body,” he corrects, rolling his eyes even though he’s currently entangled in roots.

“Right.” I chuckle and look over to my unconscious body across from him .

The roots coiled around it are shifting, their grip softening.

“They’re responding to resistance,” he says. “The more we fight?—”

“The harder they fight back,” I finish as another root shoots through my projected form, the sensation bizarre and disorienting.

“Return to your body,” he says. “Now.”

“But you’re still trapped?—“

“And getting more trapped by the second because you’re still fighting.”

He forces himself to relax, and the roots around my unconscious body continue to loosen, too.

He’s right. Our struggle is only making things worse.

So, I take a deep breath and snap back into my body.

Returning is always jarring, but this time it’s accompanied by the strange warmth of the roots around me. They’re still holding me in place, but their grip is almost curious now. Like they’re studying me rather than trying to crush me.

I tense up, trying to wiggle free.

The roots tighten their grip, squishing me, threatening to shatter my bones.

“Sapphire,” Riven says calmly. “I love you, but if you don’t relax, this tree is going to crush us before I kiss you again. And that’s not the tragic ending I signed up for.”

Those three words when they come from him—I love you—are always enough to make me melt. Especially when they’re said in the same sentence as kissing him.

Now, they help me relax, and I steady my breathing, letting the tension drain from my limbs.

The roots stop thrashing. And then, slowly, they lower me down. A glance at Riven

shows that he's being lowered, too.

But the tree doesn't release us. Sure, my feet are planted firmly on the ground, and I can breathe again, but the roots are still a cage around me, threatening to break me if I try anything against them.

I stay as still as possible, not wanting to make any sudden moves.

In the silence, the tree creaks, its trunk shifting as if someone steps out from the bark, as if emerging from another world. She's tall and slender, her skin the color of rich wood, with moss and vines cascading from her shoulders like a living cloak.

Her glowing green eyes sweep over us, an unsettling combination of curiosity and authority in her gaze.

"I am Chryserra, a dryad of this sacred grove. This tree is my flesh and blood." Her eyes narrow, glittering with amusement as they sweep over me and Riven. "And you've come for its sap."

"The sap is crucial for saving lives," Riven says steadily. "We had no intention of harming you or your tree."

The roots holding me tighten, their rough texture biting into my skin.

The dryad, however, remains focused on Riven.

"What's a winter fae doing in the Summer Court?" she asks him.

"I'm the winter prince," he corrects her. "And the sap in your tree won't just save lives in the Winter Court, but for the Summer Court as well."

She doesn't answer him. Instead, her gaze turns to me, studying me so intensely that I nearly squirm.

"And you," she says. "You look familiar. Have I seen you before?"

"No," I say, since when could she have possibly seen me? "I've never been to the Summer Court, let alone to your tree."

"I suppose I'd remember meeting someone who can wield both water and air magic," she replies. "And then there was that trick when you left your body. There were two of you. One in my roots, and the other a ghost."

"I wasn't a ghost. I was an astral projection," I correct her. "It's magic gifted to me by the star goddess."

She tilts her head, and from the way her lips part, I think I've actually caught her by surprise.

"You're claiming to be one of the star touched?" she asks.

"You've heard of me?" I ask in response.

"You're not the first star touched to cross into this court," she says. "There have been two others before you."

"So, you know what's at stake here," I say, although from the way the roots tighten a bit more, I'm unsure if she sees me as a friend or a threat.

All I know is that she's not killing me, which I take as a good sign.

"I've heard bits and pieces." She shrugs, the leaves on the tree rustling with the

movement. “However, the only thing at stake for me right now is the sap in my tree. And I do not tolerate thieves.”

“We’re not thieves,” I say quickly. “We didn’t mean to?”

“Silence.” Her voice cuts through the air like a blade. “Your intentions do not matter to me. You touched my tree without permission. You fought against its defenses.”

“We apologize,” Riven says, his voice steady despite the sweat beading on his brow. “You’re correct—we should have approached with more respect.”

He glares at me, as if this is my fault.

Which, admittedly, it sort of is, since I’m the one who reached out to touch the tree. Although, I had no reason to think that it housed a dryad who would punish me for doing so.

The dryad’s lips curl into something between a smile and a sneer. “Pretty words from a winter fae,” she says. “But words mean nothing when your actions speak of violence.”

My heart sinks. She’s not going to give us the sap.

I glance at Riven, but he’s focused on Chryserra, his face an icy mask.

“However...” Chryserra steps closer, her bark-like skin shimmering in the moonlight. “Perhaps we could come to an arrangement.”

“What kind of arrangement?” Riven asks, and I hear the careful diplomacy in his tone—the voice of a prince used to negotiating delicate situations.

“A deal,” she says, circling us slowly. “One that could benefit us both. That is, if you’re willing to listen.”

Riven glances at me, and I nod, since what other choice do we have?

“We’re listening,” I say.

She stops in front of Riven, tilting her head like a bird studying particularly interesting prey. “I heard what you said to her earlier, Winter Prince. That you love her. Is it true?”

“Yes,” Riven says without hesitation, and my heart skips at how quickly and firmly he answers.

“And you, Star Touched?” Her gaze shifts to me. “Do you love him in return?”

“With all my heart,” I say softly.

“Fascinating.” She moves closer to Riven, studying him like he’s some rare specimen. “Your kind are carved from ice, your hearts as frozen as your magic. And yet, you love a summer fae.”

“You know nothing about my heart,” Riven says, and there’s an edge to his voice that makes my breath catch.

“Then enlighten me,” she challenges. “Tell me what she means to you. Prove that what you feel for her is real.”

I expect Riven to bristle at the command—to respond with his usual icy control.

Instead, his voice fills with a passion that takes my breath away.

“She’s everything,” he says. “From the moment she fell into my realm, she’s challenged everything I thought I knew about myself, and about what I’m capable of feeling.” His gaze finds mine, burning with fiery emotion. “She makes me want to be better, to be worthy of her trust and her love. She’s the warmth in my eternal winter, the light in my darkness. Every wall I built, every piece of ice I wrapped around my heart to keep the world out—she shattered it all.”

I stare at him, stunned. I knew he loved me, but this...

“And if I told you that obtaining my sap would cost her life?” the dryad asks.

“I would watch my entire court crumble before I’d let any harm come to her,” he says without pause.

“You don’t mean that,” I say, unable to fully process the weight of his words .

“I assure you that I do.” He focuses on me so intensely that the rest of the world falls away. “You’re touched by a goddess, Sapphire. But you’re more than that. You’re the only person who’s ever seen me—not the prince, not the ice-wielding fae—just me. And you didn’t run. You stayed. Even when I tried to push you away, you stayed. I didn’t think I was capable of love until you proved me wrong.”

My heart pounds, his words wrapping around me like a storm I can’t escape—one that I don’t want to escape. All I can do is feel the raw, concentrated truth of his love pouring over me like a wave.

“Riven,” I say, wanting to show him my heart as much as he’s showing me his. “I came back to this realm because if I never saw you again, I’d regret it for the rest of my life. And then, in that cave, I saw you. Not the prince, not the warrior, and not the heir to a frozen kingdom. I saw the real you. Now, you’re the only person who’s ever made me feel like I belong. With you, I don’t have to question whether I’m enough.

You've taught me that I'm more than what fate carved me into. And I couldn't walk away, even if I tried."

"Promise me you'll never try," he says, his voice so full of emotion that it leaves me breathless.

"I promise," I say, desperate to break out of this rooted cage and reach out to him. To hold him. To anchor myself in the storm of everything we've just laid bare .

But before I can try, Chryserra's voice cuts through the air like a knife.

"How sweet," she says, and the roots around Riven and me shift again, tightening just enough to remind us of her control. "Such pure, powerful love. A love so strong it defies the nature of a winter fae." She reaches out as if to touch Riven's face, but stops just short. "I want to feel it."

My stomach drops. "What do you mean?"

"A trade," she says, smiling at me in a way that makes dread curl through my body. "I'll give you the sap you need, in exchange for the love he feels for you."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Sapphire

“No,” I tell her, my chest tightening with panic. “You can’t just take something like that. You can’t take his love. Or my love. Or anyone’s love.”

“I absolutely can.” Her smile turns sharp and predatory. “And if you want the sap, I will.”

The roots encasing me tighten in a silent warning.

Across from me, Riven tenses, his eyes locked onto Chryserra with lethal intensity. Even now, trapped by magic that resists our powers, he’s waiting for the right moment to strike.

“There must be something else you want.” His hands flex at his sides as he tests the roots that bind him, as if sheer willpower alone might break them. “The Winter Court has vast resources. Name your price—gold, jewels, magical artifacts. Anything you want. It’s yours.”

“I have no need for material things.” Chryserra steps closer, weaving effortlessly through the tangled vines and glowing leaves. “I want to experience impossible love. I want to feel how a heart born of frost can love so fiercely, especially for something made of heat and starlight.”

No.

The word slams through my mind like a violent tide.

The roots shift again, this time around Riven, pulling tighter against his chest like they're eager to claim him.

He grits his teeth, but he doesn't flinch. He doesn't break eye contact with Chryserra. Still, I see the tension in his jaw, and the way his fingers flex, as if reaching for a weapon that isn't there.

"And if we refuse?" I ask the nymph, although I already know the answer.

"Then you leave empty-handed." She shrugs, the movement causing a few leaves to drift from her shoulders and fall to the ground.

"There has to be something else you want," I plead, and the roots shift again, pressing into my ribs.

"There isn't," she says again.

Riven launches into more propositions, offering anything and everything, grasping for something that might spare us from this choice.

Think, I tell myself as he throws out idea after idea, searching for ones of my own.

Then, it comes to me .

I could give her my magic. Not all of it, but part of it.

Which would I want to keep? Air, or water?

"My star magic," I say softly, and all eyes go to me. "If you could project, you could explore the world beyond your tree."

The roots tighten, as if reacting to my words.

Riven's body tenses.

"No," he snaps, his eyes flashing with something more than anger—fear. "Your magic was gifted to you by a goddess. If you trade it away, you'll never get it back."

"You're the one who told me that my magic doesn't define me." My voice is firm, unwavering, even as the roots pulse against my skin. "But love? Love is something that's built. Fought for. It's not something that can be reduced to a bargain. Not because it makes me whole, but because it makes me more. It reminds me that I don't have to stand alone against the darkness. And besides," I add, my eyes locked on his, "I'll still be me. And I'll still have my air and water magic. I'll still be able to fight. I'll still be able to stand. And I'll have you by my side as I do."

His jaw tightens, his muscles tensing against the roots that bind him.

"I will not let you trade away something that was gifted to you by a goddess," he insists, not breaking, even in the slightest .

"You don't have to let me," I counter. "Because it's not your choice to make."

His gaze darkens, but he doesn't fight me. He looks like he wants to, but he doesn't.

I take a deep breath and look to the sky, praying that Celeste can hear me. Please understand, I think, but I get no response.

Chryserra, on the other hand, tilts her head and smiles. "It's also up to me," she says. "And I reject your offer."

The roots slacken slightly, as if amused by my failure.

“See?” Riven exhales sharply, his voice laced with relief, despite the tension in his shoulders. “Even a dryad knows that taking your magic would be a terrible idea.”

But the relief is short-lived.

Because when he looks back at Chryserra, his voice is no longer bargaining. It’s resigning.

“Will I still have my memories of the moments she and I shared?” he asks. “All of them?”

My heart feels like it’s shattering, and I twist against my binds, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“No,” I say to him. “You can’t do this.”

He doesn’t look at me. His sharp, silver eyes are locked onto Chryserra, waiting, calculating, deciding.

“Your memories will remain untouched,” she says. “You’ll remember the moments you shared, but not the emotions you felt during them. It will be like watching a play you once performed in. You’ll know the lines, but the passion will be gone.”

The breath leaves my lungs all at once.

“Don’t.” I struggle harder, pushing against the roots, but they tighten again, holding me down. “There has to be another way.”

Chryserra watches me with cold amusement, like she already knows my attempts to stop Riven from doing this are futile.

“Think of it like emptying a cup,” she continues, smooth as silk. “The cup remains intact, capable of being filled again. I’m merely taking what’s inside it now.”

“But there’s no guarantee he’ll fall in love with me again,” I say, and my voice breaks—just like my heart.

“No,” she says, gentler now. “But the possibility remains. The capacity for love will still be there, waiting to be awakened.” She pauses, studying me with those unnerving green eyes of hers. “However, I do have some compassion. So, given your resistance, I won’t take his love unless you agree to the deal as well.”

Finally, I’m able to relax.

“Good. Because I don’t agree,” I say but then I feel it—the ice magic from our original deal creeping across my skin. The magic that binds me to do everything in my power to help Riven make the potion.

The magic that insists I say yes to Chryserra’s heartless offer.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Sapphire

Grounding myself, I push back at the frost.

I'll be no help to Riven if I try to do it with a broken heart. The pain will hold me back from being able to focus, to think, and to breathe. I'll be worthless to him.

Miraculously, the ice creeping along my skin starts to melt. Not completely, but it's a start.

"Sapphire." Riven's voice is soft but certain, drawing my attention back to him. "Look at me."

I do.

The love shining in his eyes makes my chest ache. Because if he does this, that love will be gone, replaced by nothing but hollow memories.

"Do you remember the first trial?" he asks. "When you were in that frozen lake, trying to get the key?"

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat.

"That's when I started falling in love with you," he says, and my heart stops at the realization that he's confessing this truth so I'll always remember it, even when he doesn't. "When you emerged from that water, alive and triumphant, I knew you weren't just a game anymore. I knew my feelings for you were real." His expression

softens, and he continues, “I wasn’t just coaching you through the whisper stone because I needed to keep you alive to get what I wanted. I was helping you because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you. And when you surfaced—when I knew you were safe...” He trails off, shaking his head. “Everything changed.”

Tears well in my eyes, and I hate that I can’t stop them. Because I’ve never loved like this before. I don’t think I ever will. I’ve always believed in soulmates, and I know in the deepest part of my heart that Riven is mine.

“I’ll have a moment like that again,” he says with fierce conviction. “A moment when I look at you and everything shifts. When I realize that what I feel is more than attraction, or curiosity, or duty. I’ll fall in love with you again, Sapphire—I promise.”

The ice magic from our deal surges against my skin, demanding that I accept his words.

But I push back. Harder. Because he might believe what he’s saying, but belief isn’t certainty.

The frost recedes again, just slightly .

“You can’t know that for sure,” I say, somehow able to speak through the tears.

I want to run to him—to kiss him and remind him what he’s considering giving up.

And luckily, even though I can’t physically escape this rooted jail cell, breaking through it isn’t my only option.

So, I project, materializing in front of him.

His eyes widen in surprise, but before he can speak, I press my lips to his.

The kiss is desperate and demanding, filled with every ounce of love, fear, and need coursing through me. I pour my entire soul into it, willing him to feel everything I can't put into words. The way he's become my anchor, my reason, my everything. The way losing him—not physically, but emotionally—would destroy me in ways I can't comprehend.

He responds instantly, matching my intensity with his own. His hands thread through my hair, pulling me closer, and the rest of the world falls away. Wind rushes around us, and it's like we're surrounded by a storm, standing in the peaceful eye of it.

Every memory, every emotion, and every dream of my future with him rages through me at once.

The spark that ignited between us when I first saw him across the bar. The gentle way he held me after I fell into the fae realm. The trust in his eyes when he opened his heart to me in the cave. The steady belief he had in me every time he taught me how to use my magic and my weapons. The safeness of his arms around me in the igloo. The conviction in his voice when he first told me he loved me. The confidence he had in me that I could successfully project myself across the universe to the Midnight Star.

All of it flows from my heart to his in a desperate attempt to make him understand the gravity of what we'll lose if he decides to go through with this.

When we eventually break apart, his eyes are dark with emotion, his hands cradling my face like I'm the most precious thing he's ever held.

"Don't do this," I whisper against his lips. "I can't watch you forget how to love me."

"I'll find my way back to you." His voice is rough with emotion, and the resolve beneath it makes tears well in my eyes again. "Because you're not just in my heart."

You're in my soul."

At his confession, the frost from our deal crawls back over my skin.

I fight it again, clinging to the fragile threads of hope that remain.

"No," I say, my tears spilling freely now. "I don't want to start over. I don't want to lose you."

"I'll still be here," he promises. "We have a long road ahead of us. Just think of this as a car breaking down and needing to take a detour. It delays the journey, but we can fix the car. We can make it even better than it was before."

"I'm guessing you're the car?" I ask, somehow managing to smile through the tears.

"Yes, I'm the car. But you're the road I want to travel on for the rest of my life," he says, and I commit his words to memory, so I'll never forget them. "Even if I lose my way for a while, I'll find my way back to you. You're my compass, Sapphire. And you don't just navigate the stars—you navigate my heart."

When he's done, I memorize every detail of his face and the way his hands cradle me so carefully, like he's terrified of letting go. I memorize the sincerity in his voice, and the quiet, unshakable conviction in his promise.

If this is all I'll have left of us, I will burn it into my soul so deeply that nothing in this world will ever be able to take it from me.

"How touching," Chryserra's voice cuts through our moment, sharp and cold. "But I'm growing tired of these dramatics. Return to your body, or I'll kill it, and you'll never see your winter prince—or anyone else you love—again."

Panic grips me as I glance at my physical form, immobilized and helpless.

The roots constrict around it further, curling around my chest and throat. I see my own lips parting, gasping for air, and my fingers twitching in a reflexive plea for freedom.

It's surreal to watch my own body being crushed while I feel nothing. Like watching a horror movie where I'm the victim, but only seeing it through a screen.

"Sapphire, please," Riven's voice breaks through my panic, rough and raw. "Go back. I will fall in love with you again. But if you don't go back into your body right now, my heart will be frozen forever, and I will never, ever forgive you for it."

I lock eyes with him, trembling under the weight of his words.

I don't want to break his heart, like he's about to break mine. I also don't want to leave Zoey in the Night Court, with those dark vampire fae who are doing who knows what to her. I want to see Aunt Martha again, to let her know I'm safe. I even want Matt to know that despite my turning down his proposal, he'll always be an important part of my past—which is saying a lot, given that he basically left me in the woods to die.

And I want to help Riven make this potion—not just because of our deal, but because I want to help him get his father's sanity back, so he can have a family again.

On top of all that, Celeste trusted me with her star magic. She believes I can be a guiding force in ensuring Ambrogio and the Blood Coven never rise to power .

Riven was right that trading it away would have been reckless. Foolish. A sacrifice that might not have only weakened me, but one that might have thrown the entire world into darkness.

Would I have been able to go through with the trade?

I don't think so. Because yes, my magic doesn't define me. But this magic was entrusted to me. Keeping it safe is—and will always be—my responsibility.

Not to mention that there are others out there like me—other star touched. And I intend on joining them to stop Ambrogio, the Blood Coven, and the Revenants.

I love Riven with all my heart. And if I'm right that we're soulmates, his promise to find his way back to me is one that will be impossible to break.

On top of all that, I'm not going to sit back and let a dryad crush me with a tree before I can make any real difference in the world.

So, I snap back.

Agony explodes through me. My skin's rubbed raw, and every heartbeat is pure torture as my crushed lungs fight for air.

But just as quickly as the roots tightened, they loosen, giving me space to breathe again. And my body, with its supernatural healing, is already starting to repair itself.

However, nothing can stop the frost, which is swirling from my hands up to my elbows, demanding me to follow through with my deal to help Riven with the potion.

"Much better," Chryserra says, looking me over in approval. "Now, about our deal..."

I glare at her through the tears pooling in my eyes. "You're a monster."

"So harsh." She tilts her head, unaffected by the venom in my words. "And so inspiring that now, I'd like to add an addendum."

Hope rises in my chest. She's going to offer something else. She sees what she's doing—the pain she's causing—and she's not enough of a monster to follow through with it.

“What?” I ask, although the coldness that crosses her eyes crushes every ounce of momentary hope I had.

“A deal revolving around love must be done properly,” she says, and she turns to Riven, her lips curling into a sly smile. “Therefore, I'll only seal it with a kiss.”

Sapphire

“No,” I snap at Chryserra. “We’re already giving you enough.”

The thought of Riven kissing her makes my stomach churn—and it makes the ice from the deal crawl from my elbows to my shoulders.

“Sapphire.” Riven’s voice cuts through my thoughts, the determination in his eyes making me freeze in place. “Remember earlier, before we entered the clearing that led us to the Midnight Star?”

I nod, remembering the kiss we shared. It was magical, as our kisses always are.

But that time was different.

My heart drops as I remember what I said to him afterward.

Thank you. For everything.

Those first two words bound me to a favor to him .

He was so playful when he replied by saying it would be a romantic favor. An intimate favor. One we’d both enjoy.

But now...

“I’m cashing in that favor,” he says, his eyes burning into mine with an intensity that

tightens around my lungs more painfully than the tree roots wrapped around me ever could. “I want you to agree to the dryad’s deal.”

I try to protest—to tell him that he can’t force me to do this—but ice surges from my feet to my thighs, relentless in its mission to steal my free will.

“Stop,” I plead, although it only makes the ice spread faster. “You can’t do this.”

“You’re bound by a fae bargain, which means I absolutely can do this,” he says quietly, almost gently. “And given that there are no terms when one thanks a fae, there are no loopholes.”

The ice spreads further, making its way up my hips and to my stomach.

But I don’t accept this. There must be a loophole.

Aren’t there always loopholes when dealing with the fae? He already told me that the favor was going to be an... enjoyable one. He can’t just take that back. His saying it has to count for something.

But the ice doesn’t stop. It doesn’t even pause. It just continues on its way, spreading across my chest, threatening to make its way under my skin, and eventually, to my heart.

My teeth chatter. My fingers turn blue.

Magic, I think. I can use my magic. I can stop this.

Astral projection won’t help—my body will still freeze, whether I’m inside it or not.

Which leaves me with two other options.

I push out my air magic, forcing the space around me to heat.

The ice beads with condensation.

It's working...

But the frost surges in response, hardening and spreading faster, overwhelming the warmth.

No.

I struggle to stop it, but it's no use.

So, gritting my teeth, I pull at the moisture in the air, wrapping it around the ice.

But the frost remains solid—unyielding.

I try again, pushing harder. But the ice doesn't respond. My magic can't touch it.

Eventually, I stop fighting it and turn back to Riven, my glare colder than the frost trying to kill me.

“Is this really what you want? To force me into giving in?” I say to him, even when I'm so cold that I can't feel my arms or legs anymore.

The only things keeping me up are the roots wound around my body .

My anger at this point isn't even because he was considering the dryad's offer. I was even starting to believe we could get the sap, save his father, defeat the Night Court, and that he'd fall back in love with me in the process.

Now, I'm so enraged that he's trying to control me with magic that I'm surprised the ice isn't melting from the heat of my anger.

Instead, each breath burns as the cold seeps deeper into my chest, crawling toward my heart, threatening to freeze it.

Black spots dance in my vision.

If I don't give in, the frost is going to kill me.

"Fine," I manage to say through my nearly frozen lips. "Yes. I agree to the deal."

The ice retreats.

Warmth rushes back into my limbs, bringing with it a flood of pain.

Relief crosses Riven's face, and I glare at him again, my anger razor sharp.

"You took away my free will," I say, surprising myself by how calm I sound through the rage. "You used my gratitude for everything you've done for me against me. And I will never, ever forget that."

He sucks in a sharp breath, as if my words were a knife to the heart, and the roots holding us down retreat .

Chryserra's looking back and forth between us with a smugness that makes me want to throw a knife at her face. But I don't. I don't attack her with my magic, either.

I don't care about her. The frost threatening to kill me is gone, but my heart still feels like it's covered in ice.

Now that we're free from the roots, Riven approaches me cautiously, as if every step toward me is a battlefield he knows he's losing.

I'm so numb that I can't move.

"Please try to understand," he says, and his eyes, always so steady, flicker with a storm of guilt and determination. "We need that sap. I needed to keep you alive. This deal accomplishes both."

"At what cost?" My voice breaks. "My trust? My ability to ever look at you the same way again? Because I was going to agree to the deal on my own. I was almost to the point where I could say it. Did you even think about that before using my gratitude to control me?"

Guilt crosses his face, and for a second, I almost regret speaking to him so harshly.

Almost.

"Even if you were thinking about agreeing, you didn't say it," he reminds me. "And every moment we argued about this, the more danger we were in, given that I'm a winter prince in Summer Court territory. My magic is weakened here. And I doubt the fae in these outer regions care about the political consequences of attacking a royal visitor from another court. Case in point." He motions to Chryserra, who's leaning against her tree, looking painstakingly satisfied.

I frown, since he's right—I hadn't considered any political implications. I'm hardly fluent in the politics of fae courts.

Still, that's not the point right now.

"That doesn't justify what you did," I say instead, fury heating my skin. "You

manipulated me. You used my love against me. You made me say yes.”

He exhales sharply, his jaw tightening. “It was either that or let the frost kill you. And I couldn’t stand there and watch. Not when I had a way to stop it,” he says, and then he reaches for me, his fingers brushing my cheek.

“Don’t.” I jerk away, wrapping my arms around myself.

“I know you’re angry,” he says, the pain in his voice making my chest ache. “You have every right to be. But I promised I’ll fall in love with you again, and I meant it. Now, I’m promising you something more—I’ll win your heart back, too.”

A bitter laugh escapes me.

“You won’t care about winning my heart back in a few minutes,” I remind him. “You won’t remember what it feels like to love me at all. ”

“You’re wrong.” He moves closer, the electricity buzzing between us making it impossible to breathe. “I might forget how I feel, but I’ll remember every moment we’ve shared. And when we make new moments—when I see you fight for what you believe in, or when I catch you smiling at something as simple as the way the starlight hits the water—I’ll feel it again.”

I look away, because if I hold his gaze for any longer, I might break completely.

This isn’t anger anymore. Because when he used my gratitude against me, it became something deeper. Something fractured.

But he forces me to look at him again, and the agony twisting in his eyes is so intense that I want to kiss him and make this entire nightmare magically disappear.

“You were dying,” he says, softer now. “Your heart was about to freeze.”

Those final words are all I need to put it together.

Your heart was about to freeze.

That’s what happened to his mother.

She died from a frozen heart.

He couldn’t stop the ice from killing her. But he could stop it from killing me.

It doesn’t make his decision to control me any better, but his reaction makes more sense now. And if these are the last minutes we’re going to spend together while he still loves me, I don’t want to spend them fighting .

“I understand,” I finally say, and just like that, the tension between us vanishes. “But I’m never going to say those words to you ever again.”

“Which words?” he asks, his half smile showing that while he’s trying to tease me—to bring back our typical banter—his heart isn’t in it.

“Well, obviously I’m going to keep telling you that I love you,” I say. “As for those other two? Consider me officially educated.”

His half-smile falters, and he reaches for me again, slower this time.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he says, and jagged shards of ice erupt from the ground around us, as if his magic is demonstrating the depth of his intent. “I swear it.”

“I know.” I force a smile, even though everything inside me is unraveling. “And I

hope you're prepared. Because I'm not going to make it easy for you to forget why you love me."

His eyes darken, as if my challenge is both dangerous and irresistible. "You never make anything easy," he murmurs.

I arch a brow. "You wouldn't want me to."

"No. Because I expect you to make it impossible for me to forget why I love you," he says, and I memorize those words, ready to cling to them like a lifeline.

"This is all very touching," Chryserra interrupts, pushing away from her tree. "But I'm tired of waiting. We've all agreed that you'll give me the love you feel for the star touched in exchange for the sap in my tree, and that we'll seal the deal with a kiss. Now, let's proceed."

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Sapphire

Riven's gaze doesn't move from mine.

"I love you," he says, and while those words should make me feel whole, my heart feels like it's being ripped from my chest from knowing he might be saying it for the last time.

Then, he straightens, his expression hardening as he turns to Chryserra.

"Let's finish this," he says, and when he steps over the ice shards surrounding us and walks to her, I can already feel the knife twisting deeper into my chest—an echo of the pain I'm going to experience soon.

His hands curl into fists at his sides, the only sign of the turmoil gathering beneath the surface.

I want to run to him. To grab him and pull him back. To beg him one last time to find another way.

But there is no other way. Even if there was, the magic of the favor I owe him binds me into staying silent.

I'd still be furious with him if I wasn't about to lose him.

Chryserra smiles—smug and greedy—as her bark-textured fingers reach out to cradle his face.

He doesn't flinch—he doesn't even move—but I can see the rigidity in his posture, every muscle in his body tensing like he's bracing for a blow.

And then, without another word, she kisses him.

He looks like a statue, utterly still, his face void of any emotion. But he endures it, his jaw tight and his arms hanging straight by his sides, his hands curled into tight fists.

I don't breathe. I don't blink.

The words he just spoke— I love you —are ringing in my ears and vibrating in my bones, already ghosts of something slipping away.

A moment later, the ice shards surrounding him begin to melt. First, just a few droplets sliding down the jagged edges, glinting like tears in the moonlight. Then more. And more.

His posture relaxes, his clenched fists loosening.

Then, the melting quickens.

Each shard that disappears is a heartbeat lost. A piece of him—and of us—slipping away.

My nails dig into my palms, as if physical pain can remove the emotional pain. But it doesn't. Everything inside me shatters as I watch the love Riven feels for me disappear, piece by piece, like sand slipping through an hourglass.

It's like I'm being unmade, one slow, torturous second at a time.

When Chryserra finally pulls back, her eyes flutter closed, and she inhales deeply,

savoring the golden light that transfers from Riven to her.

That light was his love for me.

And now, it's hers.

The moment it absorbs into her body, every ounce of hope I had that his love for me ran so deep that the deal would fail shatters.

"It's done," she says, and when she opens her eyes again, there's a satisfaction in them that wasn't there before. "Such exquisite love. So rare. So beautiful. I'll hold onto it, always. And now... I'll leave you both to it. Collect as much sap as you can carry. It's yours."

"We will," Riven says, and just like that, Chryserra walks over to the tree, gives me one last smug look, and vanishes into its trunk.

Riven turns away from her, his eyes meeting mine.

I wish they didn't.

Because they're cold. Distant. Clinical. Like he's assessing a stranger instead of looking at someone he poured his heart out to moments earlier .

"We should collect extra sap if possible," he tells me, getting straight to business. "It might prove useful for future potions."

He walks to the pack, and I watch him, waiting for him to say something more.

He doesn't. All he does is focus on the task at hand.

I guess it's up to me then.

So, I stand straighter and take a tentative step closer, praying to every god in the Universe that he'll run to me, kiss me, and say he still loves me.

Still, nothing.

I try to inhale, but it hurts.

I can do this, I tell myself, since I'm not giving up on him. Not now, and not ever. I have to do this. For both of us.

"How do you feel?" I finally ask, even though he's completely focused on the pack, retrieving the waterskin like this is just another step in a mission.

"I'm fine. Although I must admit, I've had better." He shrugs. "You'd think that in all those centuries of being alive, that dryad would have had more time to practice her technique."

My chest aches at his attempted humor.

It sounds like him—that dry, sarcastic wit I fell in love with—but there's something missing.

The warmth that usually lingers beneath his jokes is gone, replaced by empty observation .

"That's really what you're thinking about right now?" I ask. "A dryad's kissing technique?"

"The feeling of kissing sandpaper will likely leave me haunted for life," he replies, so

casually that it's almost cruel. "I'd give it a three out of ten, at best."

I stare at him in shock, waiting for him to say something— anything—to show he cares.

All he does is walk to the tree to examine the sap.

He's joking. He has to be. Any second now, he's going to give me that familiar smile and tell me he can't believe he tricked me like that.

Seconds pass.

He says nothing more.

"You just bargained your love for me away in a deal with a dryad," I say flatly, unable to believe this is happening. "And all you can comment on is rating the kiss, like you're some sort of frat boy?"

He exhales in frustration and focuses on me again. "Given that you're apparently in need of a reminder, I'm a winter prince," he says, and a swirl of frost curls in his palm, solidifying into a sharp, intricate crystal. "Not some mortal playing drinking games in a local bar."

I flinch at the obvious jab at my prior job and use my air magic to blast the ice crystal out of his horribly arrogant hand.

It melts before it can hit the ground.

"Someone's wound up," he says with that trademark smirk of his. "And it's certainly not me, since I've just confirmed that tree spirits aren't my type."

I glare at him again, searching his face for some flicker of warmth, some trace of the man who—just minutes ago—looked at me like I was his entire world.

I find nothing.

His smirk remains, casual and detached, like none of this matters. Like I don't matter.

I can't accept that. I won't.

"We both know what your type is." I keep my gaze level with his, challenging him to say that his type is me.

"Would you care to enlighten me?" He steps closer, slow and deliberate, his eyes raking over me with measured interest.

Interest is good. Right?

"The cave. The igloo." I step closer, emphasizing each word as if doing so will drill them into his mind. "Either of those ring a bell?"

"Those were certainly... enjoyable moments," he says, and then he's in front of me, my body humming at the sudden closeness.

I can barely breathe as he reaches out, his fingertips grazing my wrist—light, teasing, and barely there.

"The sap will take some time to collect. Which means we've got time to kill," he murmurs, leaving a trail of cool frost along my skin. "We should make good use of it. After all, you did tell me earlier that you enjoy solid things."

I yank my arm back and scowl at him. "Are you serious?"

His smirk doesn't waver. If anything, it deepens, like I'm the one being unreasonable.

"What?" he says, spreading his hands in mock innocence. "It wouldn't be the first time we used waiting around as an excuse to have a little fun."

My chest tightens.

Fun.

Nothing more.

Nothing real.

"That's really all it would be for you?" I ask, even though I'm already clenching my fists, dreading his answer. "Just a way to pass the time?"

"A particularly pleasant way." His fingers brush my cheek, but the gesture feels hollow. Empty. Meaningless. "You liked it before. A lot, if I remember correctly."

I jerk away from his touch again, my chest aching. "Don't."

"Why not?" He tilts his head, studying me with detached interest. "The attraction is as strong as ever. For both of us. And it's not like it's something we haven't done before. So, why not enjoy it?"

"Because there's more than that between us. More than..." I trail off, gesturing at him. "More than this. "

"This is all there is now." He shrugs, his eyes traveling over my body as if he's assessing if he'll get what he wants from it or not. "Take it or leave it. Although I must say, leaving it seems like a waste of a perfectly good—and an extremely

enjoyable—opportunity. Don't you think?"

Sapphire

I shove him, hard, wind whipping around us.

But he barely moves, instead managing to catch my wrist before I can put more distance between us. The way he holds me—gentle, controlled, with just enough pressure to keep me close—makes me ache with the need for him to say those three words to me.

“You’re shaking,” he says instead, his lips only inches from mine now. “Are you sure you don’t want this? Or is this just some fun, new foreplay? Because if it is, I’m into it.”

He waits for my reply, and I can feel how much he still wants me. The way his body reacts to mine, the way his breathing slows, the desire in his gaze.

But there’s nothing underneath it. No emotion. No love .

So, I wrench my wrist free, my breaths coming too fast. “No. I don’t want this,” I say fiercely. “I want you. The real you.”

His smirk falters—just for a second—but it’s enough to make my heart jump.

Then, it’s back, colder than before.

“The real me?” he repeats, his tone light, but his words cutting. “This is the real me. I want you, Sapphire. And given how familiar we already are with each other, I know

you want me, too.”

“You want me,” I repeat, the words sounding hollow. “But you don’t love me.”

“No,” he says simply, and he doesn’t need to think about it, which makes it even worse. “But this is better. It’s simple. No complications. Just you, me, and…” He trails off, his eyes sweeping down my body in the way that makes my cheeks flush every time. “Opportunity.”

I stare him down, anger rushing through me, willing him to take it back.

Wind whips around us. Water droplets from the melted ice shards rise, suspended like tears in the air. My magic is a storm raging inside me, and I want him to know what that sort of turmoil feels like, too.

I want him to feel.

He just glances around and chuckles, as if I’m performing a magic trick. “Showing off now, are we?” he asks in amusement. “Trying to make me love you by reminding me how powerful you are?”

Remind him.

Yes.

That’s what he told me to do.

So, that’s what I’m going to do.

“The frozen lake. During the trial,” I say quickly, the words tearing from my chest as I claw for every detail he told me. “That was the moment you fell in love with me.

You saw me disappear under the ice and realized you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if I didn't come back up. Then you used the whisper stone to teach me how to breathe underwater and help me get the key. And when I came back up and you saw me again—and you knew I was safe—that was when it all changed.”

He stills and sizes me up, taking in every inch of me, as if he's considering each word I said.

I hold my breath, searching for a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

“If I recall the conversation correctly, I said that moment at the lake was when I started falling in love with you,” he finally says, and I lean forward, waiting for him to remember. Really, truly remember. “You see, I know I said all those things to you. The dryad didn't take my memories. But it was just a game, Sapphire. All those words, all those nights together, all of it culminating with seeing you break right now... it's been a game since the beginning. And guess what? I won.”

“No.” I step back, shaking my head. “You don't mean that.”

“I absolutely do.”

He doesn't budge. Doesn't care.

“Maybe you believe it right now,” I say, scrambling for an explanation. “But you told me you loved me. And we both know you can't lie. Which means what you said was true.”

“I've been dancing around truths for my entire life, Sapphire. Long enough to know that while I can't lie, I can omit. Which is what I did every time I said I loved you,” he says, and ice-cold dread rushes through my veins at the cruelty that passes over his once familiar eyes. “After all, I never specified which part of you I loved. I can love

the power I have over you. I can love the challenge, the game, and the fire in your eyes when you think you can change me. I can love the way you bend for me, even when you fight. I can love the way you crave me—the way you throw yourself at me and shatter into pieces when I touch you. But loving you? That was your mistake—not mine.”

The water droplets floating around us splash to the ground.

The air stills.

Pain twists into anger .

Anger turns to shock.

Shock gives way to numbness. Cold, unyielding numbness. Worse than when the ice was about to kill me before Riven stripped me of my free will.

I knew he was guarded, devious, and calculating.

But I didn't realize he was this cruel.

No. None of this is true. This isn't him, I remind myself, but as much as I try to convince myself, it doesn't make it any less painful.

Then, he does something worse than standing here saying these horrible things to me.

He shakes his head, turns away, and checks on the progress of the sap. As if he's growing bored with me. As if he's wasting his precious time by talking about this with me.

But after what he said to me, he's not the one who just wasted his time.

I am.

After all, actions are what's really important here. He's not going to remember his love for me simply because of my words.

Which he stops me from saying, anyway, because he turns back around to face me—his eyes just as cold—to get in a few final blows.

“Now, if you've decided you aren't ready to accept the truth of what this really is and have some fun together, might I suggest focusing on why we're here in the first place?” he says, and with that, whatever hope I had inside me snaps.

I don't care that my words aren't going to trigger his memories.

I have to say them, anyway.

“When you made that deal, I knew you'd probably forget that you loved me,” I tell him, still praying that none of this is real, even though I know it is. “But I didn't realize you'd hate me.”

“Hate?” He laughs, a hollow sound that chills me to the bone. “This isn't hate. If I hated you, then you wouldn't be able to stand right now, let alone speak. You should be thanking the queen herself that I don't hate you. As it is, I'm tired of this conversation, and the sap is almost ready. So, let's make like a tree, and get out of here. Where did you say the duskberry is?”

“I didn't,” I tell him, so jarred by his sudden shift in attitude that I can't gather my thoughts, let alone my feelings.

“Did your star goddess tell you?” he presses.

“She did.”

I can barely bring myself to say more than two words to him at a time. If I do, he’ll probably use it as an opportunity to say more cruel, horrible, heart wrenching things. He’ll use them to crush my soul.

And then, miraculously, his expression softens.

“Look, Sapphire,” he starts, running his fingers through his hair in the way he always does when he’s getting exasperated. “I’m sure this is hard for you. But we made that deal with the dryad because this potion is bigger than you or me. So, take a few seconds. Center yourself. Then we can focus on what’s actually important.”

When he says it like that, reality hits me like a ton of bricks.

He doesn’t love me.

He doesn’t hate me.

He just thinks my feelings... aren’t important.

And, as I watch him now, I know this isn’t the moment I’m going to get through to him. And I will get through to him. It’s just going to take longer than a few minutes. I can’t give up after a few minutes.

Our love deserves better than that. It deserves every minute until the end of my possibly immortal life.

Plus, he’s been a jerk to me many, many times. I got through it then, and I’ll get through it now.

But he's right that our end goals are important. Saving Zoey, restoring his father's sanity, and making sure the Night Court, the Blood Coven, and Ambrogio don't turn into Revenants and destroy the world.

As we work together to make that all happen, he's going to fall back in love with me. He's going to see and feel everything that made him fall in love with me the first time around. All of those feelings will flood back to him, and he'll be thanking me for not giving up on him. Which I really hope is how this will play out, because when this is done, he's going to owe me a lot more than one single favor.

I have to believe it'll happen.

If I don't, I'm afraid my entire heart will shatter, and that I'll lose the pieces forever.

Sapphire

“The duskberry grows in Queen Lysandra’s private garden,” I tell this empty version of Riven, keeping my voice steady despite the hollow ache in my chest. “At the palace.”

He frowns as he gazes over the lake, frost spreading in intricate patterns around his hands and wrists as he thinks.

“The Summer Palace,” he muses, more to himself than to me. “It’s not ideal, but even without formally announcing my visit, Queen Lysandra would be foolish to treat me with anything less than diplomatic courtesy. Doing otherwise would risk a war with the Winter Court. Plus, once we inform her of the Night Court’s activities—and about their existence in general—she’ll have no choice but to listen, since the threat they represent affects both courts equally. ”

“And you think she’ll just give us access to her private garden?” I ask.

“Not immediately.” He begins to pace, the temperature dropping with each step. “But she’ll negotiate. The summer fae are proud, but they’re not stupid. If the Night Court truly intends to wage war against both courts...” He trails off, his mind clearly racing ahead to possibilities and contingencies.

I watch him, trying to reconcile this coldly logical version of him with the man who held me in the cave and the igloo, who promised to love me forever. And despite knowing that we need to be focusing on the duskberry, it’s impossible to not replay the cruel things he just said to me in my mind.

He stops pacing and fixes me with an impatient look.

“Your emotional turmoil is distracting,” he says flatly. “I need you focused. Can you handle that, or should I leave you at this tree while I speak with the queen?”

The air around us grows heavy with moisture as my magic responds to my anger.

“I’m perfectly capable of focusing,” I shoot back at him. “And you need me there. Or did you forget what an important asset I am to you?”

“No,” he curtly replies. “Having you stand by my side supporting me while we speak with the queen makes you an extremely valuable asset when it comes to getting her attention. You’re imperative to this mission. You wouldn’t have made it this far if you weren’t.”

Frustration coils inside me, mingling with the ache in my chest.

I know I resolved to stop trying to make him fall back in love with me in this very moment. But I refuse to let him act like I’m some tool at his disposal. Especially not here, in the Summer Court, where I have the upper hand.

So, I immerse myself in my magic, combining the warmth of the air with the gentle pull of water, focusing on the ice twisting around his hands as I do.

Then, I channel my air magic at him in a wave of heat, combining it with my water magic to create a suffocating humidity around him.

His frost dissolves into a misty vapor.

“What the hell was that about?” he snaps, his eyes flashing with warning.

“You forget that you’re the weaker one here.” I lift my chin and let the warm, humid air wrap around us, emphasizing my point. “This is the Summer Court. Your magic is dulled here. Which means you need me if you want to make it to the palace in one piece.”

He flexes his hands, straining as he summons more ice.

Only a few crystals form.

Thanks to the air I heated around him, they melt almost instantly .

Sweat beads on his forehead, and he reaches for his sword, but the blade’s glow is dimmer here, and we both know it.

“What are you going to do with that—kill me?” I challenge, although I pull back on my magic, since despite everything, I don’t want to hurt him. “Because I’d advise against that. You can’t risk losing your most valuable asset.”

His jaw tightens, and I can see the gears turning in his mind as he recalculates.

I say nothing as he does. I just keep my stance strong, my chin lifted, and my magic humming under my skin.

And then—slowly—he sheathes his sword.

“Well played.” His gaze drifts over me, lingering a beat too long. “Although I wouldn’t recommend making a habit of challenging me. After all, I’m the one who trained you. Your magic may be stronger than mine here, but power means nothing if you don’t know when to strike. And let’s be honest—you hesitated. Just for a second. That’s all it takes for someone like me to rip victory out of your hands in a single heartbeat.”

The weight of the moment presses in, thick and heavy, laced with warning and tearing at my heart. But he doesn't take his sword out again. Which, I suppose, is a start.

I take a steadying breath and ground myself, fighting to focus through the pain. And there is pain. A lot of it .

“Do you know how to get to the palace from here?” I finally ask.

“We need to find a stream,” he says, his tone returning to something more focused and efficient. “All water in the Summer Court flows toward the palace.”

He studies me for a moment, then adds, “Use your water magic. Reach out and sense the nearest stream.”

I bristle at his instruction, since the last thing I want right now is another one of his training sessions. I can do this myself.

So, I close my eyes and stretch my magic outward.

At first, there's nothing. Just the whisper of the wind and the damp warmth of the Summer Court air against my skin.

As I search, I can practically feel Riven's gaze burning into me, growing more impatient by the second. But after having put him in his place by melting his ice magic, I will not give him the upper hand again.

So, I take a deep breath and focus harder.

My magic rushes through me in a wave of power that flows through the earth, courses beneath my feet, and flows through the Summer Court like veins of liquid starlight.

Then, suddenly, I feel it. The gentle flow of water, weaving its way through the land like a silver thread.

I open my eyes and zero in on the direction of the pull .

“There,” I say, pointing past the trees. “There’s a stream that way.”

Riven raises a brow, evaluating me. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Then lead the way, Asset,” he says, and I scowl at him, turn, and let my magic guide me forward, taking a small bit of pleasure in the fact that his only logical choice is to follow.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

Sapphire

As we follow the stream, Riven returns to “strategy mode”—cool, detached, and devoid of the heat from our argument at the tree.

Despite how tempting it was to give in back there, I’m proud of myself for resisting. Because I can’t be intimate with Riven unless his entire heart is in it.

Anything less would break mine too much in the process. More than it already has, which given how much it hurts right now, would be unbearable.

“We need to be careful how we approach the queen,” he says, barely looking at me as he talks. “Lysandra is pragmatic, but she won’t be easily manipulated. She’ll listen, but only if we present the situation in a way that benefits her. Any sign of weakness, and she’ll turn us away—or worse, use us to her advantage.”

I nod absently, fine to let him talk this through to himself. After all, he’s the expert in court politics here—not me.

His pace quickens. “Are you listening to me?” he snaps, stopping me in my path.

“Yes,” I snap right back at him, anger rushing through me too quickly for me to push it down. “Far more than you listened to me when I was reminding you who you were before you sold your love for me to a dryad.”

He exhales, slow and deliberate, as if trying to force patience into his body. “You need to stop clinging onto something that doesn’t exist,” he says. “It’s distracting

you. Making you weak. The best thing you can do for yourself to ensure you're not a liability is to move on from whatever fantasy you've built in your head and accept that I don't love you."

"Love isn't a liability." I step toward him, my magic brimming just beneath my skin—a reminder of the power I hold here.

"It is when it makes you distracted." His eyes harden, and he doesn't back down. "Is that what you want, Sapphire? To be so distracted by this fantasy of me loving you that it gets both of us killed?"

I stand there, frozen, my breath shallow, my fingers curled into fists.

And then—everything shifts.

The air thickens, pressing in around us, coiling around my ribs and squeezing the breath from my lungs. The forest, once so alive and vibrant, goes silent. No rustling leaves. No chirping insects. Even the water in the stream stills, as if time itself has stopped.

Riven goes rigid, his fingers wrapping around the hilt of his sword as he scans the trees. But I can already see the tension in his jaw—the quiet calculation of a predator who realizes he might not be the most dangerous thing here.

Then, the air ripples, like the fabric of the world itself is unraveling.

And, out of that ripple, steps a man.

Tall, broad-shouldered, and golden-haired, that magic radiating from him is so strong I can taste it. It's heady and intoxicating, like the first rush of pleasure before a fatal drop. I want to relish in it—to be comforted in its seductive warmth.

I'm not even bothered by the bow he's holding in one hand, and the quiver of arrows strapped to his back. Because he's so perfect—his face carved like a statue of some long-forgotten deity—that he's clearly benevolent.

However, Riven must not feel the same, because he draws his sword.

“Come any closer, and you'll regret bringing arrows to a sword fight,” he says, although the man simply laughs—a sound that wraps around me like a soft embrace .

As he does, magic surges around us, creating a dome of golden energy that seals the three of us inside. It's like a perfectly smooth, giant igloo, although unlike an igloo, there's no obvious way out.

Ice crackles along the length of Riven's blade, thin and delicate, but the heat in the air is already melting it.

“I wouldn't recommend that, Winter Prince,” the man says. “Despite your talents, fighting a god usually doesn't end well. And lucky for you, I'm not here to kill either of you.”

Riven's grip tightens on his sword, his eyes locked onto the man—the god—with pure, lethal focus.

However, even though this god just trapped us in a prison of magic, the aura rolling off him is alluring. Ancient. Divine.

It reminds me of Celeste.

It's not exactly the same—Celeste's magic was celestial, vast, and all-encompassing. Like looking into the night sky and feeling the pull of eternity.

But his magic has a similar, unmistakable weight to it. Which means he's not lying.

He really is a god.

"Riven," I say, forcing steadiness into my voice. "Lower your sword."

He doesn't so much as glance at me. "Not a chance."

"If he wanted to attack, he would have by now," I say, keeping my movements slow and controlled .

"That doesn't mean he won't." Riven's voice is sharp, but there's a flicker of something in his expression—something calculating and aware.

None of us say a word.

Finally, Riven exhales sharply and lowers his sword.

"Wise choice," the man says, his warm smile turning somewhat predatory. "Allow me to properly introduce myself. I'm Eros, the god of love."

"Love?" Riven scoffs, like he's been doing every time I've mentioned the word since he traded his for me away.

"Indeed." Eros's expression darkens. "Which is why your current situation greatly interests me. You see, I couldn't help but overhear your charming discussion about love being a liability. So, tell me, Winter Prince—do you really believe that's true? Do you think love's a liability?"

Riven stiffens. "What I believe is none of your concern."

“Oh, but it is.” Eros circles us slowly, fluid and graceful. “You see, I can sense the void where your love for her should be. Stolen. Erased. Hollowed out like a gutted fruit. A disturbing perversion of everything sacred in this world.”

Hope flutters in my chest as I study the arrows in Eros’s quiver. As I do, the stream grows restless, the air thickening with enough moisture that droplets of water cling to my skin.

“You’re here to help?” I ask, stepping toward him. “To fix it?”

Riven lets out an incredulous laugh. “Sapphire?—”

But I don’t look at him. I can’t look at him. Not when the god of love is standing in front of us, acknowledging the void in Riven’s heart where his love for me used to be.

This is our chance to make this right. And I’m not going to lose it.

Eros draws an arrow from his quiver and twirls it playfully between his fingers, something undeniably dangerous flashing in his eyes.

I step back, slammed with the realization that no, he’s not here to help us.

“Did you know that I have two types of arrows? Golden-tipped, to bring on undying love,” he muses, and then he pulls out another arrow, this one darker— wicked-looking. “And lead-tipped, to cast consuming hate. Quite the dichotomy, isn’t it? The beauty of love, and the brutality of hate. Two sides of the same coin. Each arrow able to ignite either passion or fury the moment it strikes the heart.”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry, only able to focus on one thing. “The gold arrows,” I say slowly, praying with every bit of my heart that I can reason with the god standing in front of me. “Can they restore love that’s been lost?”

Eros watches me for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

Then, he laughs, and something inside me breaks.

“Oh, sweet girl.” He shakes his head, as if I said something enjoyably foolish. “Do you really think I came here to help you?”

I want to say yes. I want to believe he sensed the emptiness in Riven’s heart and came here to make it whole again.

Unfortunately, as much as I wish it was true, I can’t lie. And everything about the way this god is interacting with us—his words, his tone, his expressions—points to anger instead of empathy.

A glance at Riven shows that he’s simply shifting impatiently, as if he wants to get this show on the road and hightail it out of here.

He doesn’t care. Of course he doesn’t care.

But, when this is finished, he will. This is my chance, and I won’t waste it.

So, since I’m apparently the only one who’s going to be useful in getting back what Riven bargained away, I return my focus to Eros.

“Will you help us?” I ask him, since the god of love must have love in his heart.

“I could,” he says, studying the golden arrow with disturbing intensity. “But you don’t deserve it.” His eyes flash with anger, and gold magic buzzes across the dome like electricity, reminding us of his power. “You treated love like a commodity. Like something to be bargained away for personal gain. Both of you.” His gaze cuts to Riven. “You for trading it, and you—” Back to me. “For agreeing to the deal.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” I protest, wind whooshing through the dome as my magic senses my desperation. “He used magic to force me.”

The reminder makes my stomach swirl with nausea. It’s so disturbing that I can’t blame Eros for being angry about it. I’m angry about it, too.

But that’s an issue for another day.

A day when Riven loves me again.

“There’s always a choice,” the god continues. “And you made yours. Both of you. Now, you’ll face the consequences.”

“What consequences?” Riven asks, the air cooling around him as he keeps his gaze level with Eros’s.

“I’m here to punish you,” Eros says simply. “To show you what happens when you treat true love—once in an immortal lifetime love—like a trinket to be traded.”

His threat hangs in the air, and I glance at Riven, hoping he’ll prove Eros wrong. That he’ll show this vengeful god that he does love me.

All he has to do is say those three words .

Three words, and the god of love will—hopefully—leave us alone.

“Your point is valid,” Riven says instead, positioning himself slightly in front of me, in a way that could almost be perceived as caring about me. “However, it doesn’t apply to us. Because if I ever truly loved her, nothing could have taken it from me. Why should we be punished for something that was never real to begin with?”

I take a sharp breath inward, the coldness of his words a punch to my soul.

“I am a god of love,” Eros says, more golden energy crackling across the dome in bright electrical veins. “I see the truth of what you’ve thrown away. The emptiness it left behind screams at me like a shattered vow. And I will not stand idly by while you desecrate what others would die to have.”

“You’re mistaken,” Riven replies, with no flickers of regret or hesitation. Just that same unwavering certainty that digs into my chest like a blade. “Whatever you think you see?—”

“I see everything,” Eros cuts him off. “I see the void in your heart where love should be. I see her pain, raw and bleeding—a wound that festers because you refuse to acknowledge it. I see the threads of what you shared—threads you carelessly severed as if they meant nothing.”

My breath catches, my vision blurring, the wind blowing my hair in strands across my face. He’s saying what I already know is true, but hearing it aloud—spoken with divine certainty—makes it real in a way that tears even deeper into my soul.

“Do you know how rare true love is?” Eros continues, his voice dropping to something quieter, but no less dangerous. “How many beings in this universe search their entire lives for what you two once had? Meanwhile, you traded it away like common currency. I should shoot both of you down on the spot for it. However, I’m going to be generous, since I am the god of love and all. I’m going to let you choose your punishment.”

Sapphire

Eros draws both arrows—one gold, one lead—and he holds them up, side by side.

The metallic tips gleam under the golden light of the dome, and my heart pounds as I stare at them.

I reach for Riven's hand, but he shrugs me off.

“What are our options?” he asks calmly, as if we're standing in the center of court and he's ready to enter negotiations.

Given that our options are to either negotiate with this god or to fight him, I can't fully blame him.

“It's simple,” Eros says with a cruel smile, directing his attention to me. “I'll either shoot you with gold, intensifying your love until it consumes you completely. Or...” His gaze shifts to Riven. “I'll shoot him with lead, driving what remains of his capacity to love you so far away that all that's left is hatred.”

“No.” I step back, staring at the arrows in horror.

Eros continues as if I hadn't spoken.

“Choose wisely.” He nocks a golden arrow to his bow, but he doesn't draw it. Not yet. “Although I must say, both options are rather poetic. Either he'll hate you with the same intensity he once loved you, or your love will grow until it drives you mad,

knowing he'll never feel the same."

"This is ridiculous—" Riven says, but Eros cuts him off.

"This is justice. You both agreed to trade away something sacred. Now you'll both suffer the consequences of that choice. The only question is... how?"

The wind howls around me, but I barely feel it. All I feel is the weight of the choice hanging before me and the threat of the arrows gleaming in the golden light.

"The answer is obvious," Riven says, cold and precise. "Because if I hate her, I'll likely kill her. And that would be rather counterproductive to our mission."

The casual way he says it—like he's discussing trade negotiations instead of our hearts—makes me want to scream. As it is, the stream surges toward my feet, water licking at my ankles as if it wants to drag me under.

Eros glances at it, but he seems unbothered.

"Always so calculating, Winter Prince," Eros muses, studying Riven, as if he can see into his heart. Which, fairly, he likely can. "Even now, you reduce everything to strategy and gain. Tell me, does it not bother you at all? Using her feelings against her like this?"

"She and I can each handle ourselves." Riven shrugs. "Protecting her feelings isn't my responsibility."

I look to him, searching his eyes for some flicker of the Riven I know. The one who pulled me against him when the cold got too harsh, who let me break down in his arms when I thought I lost Zoey forever.

If he's still in there, he's doing a heartbreakingly good job at hiding it.

"You wouldn't kill me," I finally say, the words barely audible over the roar of my pounding heart. "Even if you hated me, you wouldn't do it."

His jaw clenches, but his gaze remains impassive. "Don't be so sure."

Eros chuckles, the sound rich with amusement as he twirls the golden arrow between his fingers. "You speak of killing her as if discussing the weather," he says. "Do you truly believe you could do it? Take her life so easily?"

"If I hated her?" Riven's voice is like ice. "It would be rather motivating. But I'm growing restless. So, if we're done with this display, I believe you were about to shoot her with that golden arrow."

Eros smirks at Riven, then turns back to me, looking eager to hear my response .

"We can't risk him hating me," I say, needing to tread carefully. "Especially since I already love him."

I glance at Riven, hoping for support, or gratitude, or pride that I'm potentially agreeing to take this hit.

Surprisingly, he takes a step closer to me.

"You'll be okay." His voice is low but firm, cutting through my nerves like steel.

"I know I will," I reply, and this time when I reach for his hand, he doesn't pull back.

His grip is firm. Solid. And even though it's not warm—because nothing about Riven has ever been warm—it's steady.

That's what keeps me standing here, my chin lifted, my gaze locked on Eros's.

"Do it," I tell the god, bracing myself for the strike.

Eros tilts his head, studying me, as if deciding if he wants to follow through. "Are you sure?" he finally asks. "Because I don't think you fully understand what you're committing yourself to." He taps the golden tip against his lip, pretending to consider explaining further. "Let's go over it, shall we?"

I bristle. "There's nothing to?—"

"Oh, but there is." His eyes darken, the playfulness draining from them like ink spreading over a page. "You think this will be bearable? That because you already love him, a little push in that direction won't make much of a difference? "

The air shifts, the space between us thickening like honey.

Riven's grip on my hand tightens.

His other hand inches toward the hilt of his sword.

Eros steps closer, his voice smooth as silk, but as sharp as a blade. "You won't just love him," he tells me, enjoying this far more than he should. "You will only love him. He'll be the sun in your sky, the stars in your night, and the air in your lungs. You won't care if you live, if you die, or if you break, as long as it means you can be near him. You won't love anyone other than him. You won't even love yourself. And when he chooses another? The pain will be so intense that you'd rather die than live with knowing he wanted someone who wasn't you."

A cold rush sweeps through me, and I'm not sure if it's from fear, or if Riven's ice magic is reacting to whatever emotions he still has left for me. Because his grip on

my hand is tight. Too tight. And when I look at him, his eyes are stormy with something I can't quite place.

Not love. Not yet.

But at least it's not ambivalence.

"What are you thinking?" I ask him, since this is the man I trusted with my heart. Whether or not he loves me back yet, I trust him to keep me safe.

"I'm thinking that I don't know what the future holds," he tells me, and there's something almost pained in the way he says it—something that tugs at my soul. "But I don't want to hate you. Because if you're no longer here, and if it's my fault, then I might hate myself forever, too."

A sharp breath catches in my throat.

Because even though he doesn't love me now, at least he doesn't want me dead.

It's a start.

"See?" I say to him softly. "You do care."

"I care about the mission," he corrects me, despite the flicker of uncertainty in his familiar silver eyes that wasn't there before. "And about making strategic choices."

"Is that all?" I challenge.

"Right now, I find you tolerable," he adds, as if I should be grateful for even that. "I can trust you at my side. I believe that whatever's coming next, we'll keep each other safe. I don't want that to change, and I'm going to make sure it doesn't. For both of

our sakes.”

“So, you do care.”

Despite everything, I can’t help smiling.

He exhales sharply. “I said I tolerate you. Not that I care.”

“Tolerate, trust, want around, don’t want to kill—it sounds dangerously close to care, if you ask me.”

His eyes narrow, but there’s no real bite to his glare. “ You’re pushing your luck, Star Navigator. Unless you’d prefer that I take the lead arrow instead?”

I inhale sharply, my teasing dropping away. “You wouldn’t.”

“It would be best for both of us if I didn’t,” he says, and his thumb brushes against my wrist—almost absently, like he doesn’t realize he’s doing it.

I swallow hard, my pulse pounding beneath the spot where he’s touching me.

“This is all very moving,” Eros breaks in. “But tell me, Star Navigator —do you really, truly understand the weight of what the gold arrow will do to you?”

“You already told me what it will do.” I lift my chin, refusing to let him intimidate me—even though as a god, he’s rather intimidating. “And Riven already loves me. At least, he will love me again, soon. I can handle the gold arrow.”

“Can you? Because I’d like to paint you a better picture of your future.” Eros’s smile is razor-sharp. “Every time he touches you, it will feel like drowning and burning at once. Every time he pulls away, you’ll feel like your heart is being ripped from your

chest. You'll lose yourself so completely in loving him that nothing else will matter—not your mission, not your friend, not your family, and not even your own survival. Your love will be a curse. A poison that devours everything you are, until only a shell remains. ”

The stream ripples at my feet, mirroring my unease.

Riven pulls me closer, and I lean into him, drawing comfort in the way his heart's racing in his chest. It gives me hope. Because his steady presence is a promise of protection, even if that protection isn't accompanied by love—yet.

“This won't just be heartbreak,” Eros continues, and more lightning flashes across the dome, as if it's angering him to see Riven and I standing so close. “It will be undying, unrequited, unbearable love. The type of love that will burn away at your soul and make you lose everything that makes you who you are and everything you could ever be.”

My breathing quickens, panic creeping into my thoughts.

“Are you ready?” Eros asks, drawing the golden arrow back in preparation to release.

Riven's hand squeezes mine, and I look at him one more time, memorizing the planes of his face and the silver storm in his eyes. Because even though I'm about to risk everything, I want to know for certain that he'll remain by my side, no matter what.

He gives me a small, encouraging nod.

Eros sighs impatiently. “I can always shoot him with the lead instead,” he says, glancing at Riven.

Riven's focus, however, remains on me.

“Didn’t you take a hit for me once before?” he asks, looking so deeply into my eyes that it’s like he’s speaking to my soul. “Isn’t that how we escaped the shadows? Did you not bleed for me, from your shoulder to your heart, and say you’d do it a hundred times more? Because I might have bargained away my love for you, but I kept my memories. Which means I remember that night as well as you do. And despite everything, the words spoken then remain true. So, if you remember saying you’d take a hundred hits for me, I want you to prove it by taking this one arrow now. Make the right choice, and we’ll beat the odds and get through this—together.”

Each word falls into place as I string together each sentence, making sense of exactly what he’s asking of me.

Taking a hit.

Bleeding from the shoulder to the heart.

Swearing to do it a hundred times more.

And then, the challenge—the truth of what he’s asking. Of what he’s promising to do with me.

Prove that I remember saying all those things by taking the golden arrow now.

We’ll beat the odds and get through this together.

The smallest flicker of understanding passes between us, so subtle that if I wasn’t watching for it, I would have missed it. The barely-there shift in his expression, the way his fingers tighten ever so slightly around mine .

It lasts less than a heartbeat, but it’s enough.

“I understand,” I tell him. “And it’s what I want, too.”

Because right now, my love for Riven is strong, but it’s mine. It’s real. If Eros shoots me with that arrow, it won’t be mine anymore. It will be a curse, consuming me from the inside out until there’s nothing left but ashes. And I don’t want to become a hollow shell of devotion, incapable of feeling anything other than my love for Riven. I don’t want to lose Zoey, my family, my mission, my sense of self—my purpose.

I’m more than my love for Riven. I’m more than a choice between his hate and my ruin.

I’m star touched. Chosen by a goddess to help save the world.

And I’m not going to let this power-hungry god reduce me to nothing.

Sapphire

“Are you ready?” Riven asks me.

The wind around us stills and the water recedes into the stream as I draw on their strength for what’s going to happen next.

“I’m ready,” I tell him.

“Good. But I don’t want to be touching you when it happens,” he says, untangling his fingers from mine. “It would only make it harder for both of us.”

I give him the smallest nod—understanding why having our hands tied would be far from the most strategic move. Then, I turn back to face Eros, keeping my heartbeat steady even as adrenaline hums beneath my skin.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say, both to Eros and to Riven, bracing myself for what’s going to happen next .

“Finally,” Eros says, and he raises the bow, the bright magic flaring like sparklers from its end, and then...

He lets go.

The golden arrow slices through the air, a dazzling storm of undying love hurtling toward me.

I go from stillness to pure motion, my air magic propelling me forward, nearly flying me to the stream. The closer I can get to the water, the better.

Riven's already moving, too—his sword a flash of silver as he hurries to my side, blade raised, ready to fight.

“A bold choice.” Eros laughs, nocking another gold arrow into his bow and releasing it. “One I can have fun with.”

The water from the stream surges up at my command, twisting around me in a liquid shield, but Eros's arrow doesn't just soar.

It splits.

One becomes two. Two become four.

They whip through the air in a storm of gold, their paths erratic, impossible to predict. And these aren't just regular arrows. They're magic arrows. Each one weakens my water shield, rippling it outward, making it harder to maintain.

One gets through.

I slash it with my dagger, stopping it mid-flight .

The moment all the arrows hit the ground, they roll toward each other, melding back into one.

Eros moves with otherworldly speed, his bow a blur as he looses another round of arrows. Except this time, instead of firing in a straight trajectory, they twist midair, moving like serpents zeroing in on their target.

That target is me.

I whip my hands up, calling on my air magic to shift their paths. The wind howls, sending several arrows veering off course, but one slices across my shoulder, another grazing my thigh.

I scream, the pain burning through me, but force myself to stay standing.

Because like Eros said, the magic only works when it strikes the heart. And—luckily—the arrows' magic isn't changing the speed of my supernatural healing.

As I recover, Riven's sword is a lethal blur as he intercepts another volley of arrows. He ducks low, easily evading their paths, then rolls to his feet and knocks another aside.

The frost on his blade flickers, but his skill more than makes up for his magic being weakened in the Summer Court.

But Eros isn't just fast. He's methodical. And he's apparently so fixated on making me experience the nightmarish picture of undying love he painted for me that he's only using the gold arrows, and he's not aiming for Riven at all.

They're all directed toward me. Every single one of them.

And he doesn't waste shots. He watches, adapts. He fires exactly where we're vulnerable. And since we're trapped in his dome-like arena, we can't run. We can't hide.

We can only fight. Until, presumably, he's out of arrows and we can get close enough to him to slice him with our blades. Maybe we won't be able to kill him—I'm

obviously unsure of the technicalities behind killing gods—but we can hurt him, just like we hurt that night fae in the cave.

Meanwhile, Riven uses his sword to deflect another arrow that breaks through my water shield, snatching it up before it can fuse back together with the others on the ground.

“Take it,” he growls, holding it out to me. “Use it against him.”

“Seriously?” I say, creating a gust of wind so strong that it knocks the next group of arrows off course.

“Throw it like you’d throw your dagger,” he continues, as if he’s not suggesting something crazier than me trying to project myself into space. “Your aim is all but perfect. ”

Frustrated by my hesitation, he forces it into my hand—the one that’s not holding my dagger.

I tighten my grip around it, my heart hammering, feeling its magic as it buzzes across my skin.

This is dangerous. Stupid.

But maybe just reckless enough to work.

“Guide it with your wind,” he continues to instruct, knocking aside another arrow with his sword as it hurtles toward me. “Don’t overthink it—just throw it.”

I don’t have time to argue. Because Eros has already nocked another arrow, his golden eyes flicking toward me, amusement curling at his lips.

So, I shift my weight, channel my air magic, and hurl the arrow straight at him.

The wind carries it like a missile, guiding it toward him...

But Eros is fast.

He leans to the side at the last second, and the arrow whizzes past, missing his arm by a breath.

I curse and strengthen my water shield.

“Nice try,” Eros says as he picks up the arrow, laughing softly as he twirls it between his fingers. “But you forgot—this is my game, not yours.”

Before I can respond, he unleashes a fresh wave of golden arrows, faster than any before. And these arrows aren’t just splitting. They’re creating patterns, forcing Riven and me to dodge in opposite directions .

I try to fight my way back to him, but Eros’s assault is perfectly calculated, herding us like sheep until we’re on opposite sides of the dome.

“Much better,” Eros says, standing between us, nocking three arrows at once. “Now, we can have some real fun.”

He releases the arrows, and they split into a deadly web that forces me to throw myself behind another water shield. Through the rippling barrier, I see Riven moving toward me, but more arrows cut off his path.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice your little strategy?” the god asks, his voice easily carrying despite the chaos. “Agreeing to work together and protect each other from the inevitable?”

“We’re not—” I start, ducking as more arrows slice through the air where my head was.

“Not what? In love? Are you sure?” He laughs again, and this time there’s real venom in it. “Because you’re still fighting together. Still trying to protect each other. Still trusting each other. Which, ironically, makes his sacrifice even worse.”

I catch Riven’s eye across the dome.

He’s breathing hard, his sword slightly lowered, a sheen of sweat on his forehead. But his expression is steady. Calculating. Challenging me to not let anything Eros says disrupt my focus.

Given the way he looks right now, with the Summer Court’s magic clearly affecting him, our survival depends on me figuring this out.

Eros sighs, twirling another arrow between his fingers, his eyes glittering with something between amusement, boredom, and malice. “I’ll admit, keeping you two apart has been fun,” he says. “But watching you struggle just isn’t enough anymore. It’s time to raise the stakes.”

In a heartbeat, he exchanges the gold arrow for a lead one, positions it with deadly precision, takes aim at Riven’s chest, and fires.

The lead arrow splits.

Two become four. Four become eight.

All of them swarm Riven.

Even with my air magic at my heels, there’s not enough time to get to him.

So, gripping my dagger, I zero in on the place by his side and project.

One moment, I'm watching everything unfurl from across the dome. The next, I'm staring at a group of lead arrows whistling straight toward us.

But I'm already moving, channeling air magic to knock them off course.

"Behind you!" I shout to Riven as Eros releases two more splitting arrows.

He spins, his sword flashing as he deflects a group of them at once. At the same time, I send a gust of wind that drives the others into the ground.

Eros shoots more, and more, and each time, we ward them off.

But with each attack, Riven's slowing. He's not using his magic at all anymore. Even more worrisome, he's keeping both hands on the hilt of his sword, his grip tight, as if he's afraid it might slip from his fingers at a moment's notice.

Then, in what feels like slow motion, a lead arrow grazes his arm.

I'm there, blocking what I can, but it's not enough. All I can hear are his pained groans, hitting me so hard that it's like they're my own.

"Sapphire," he manages to snap at me as another arrow grazes his thigh. "Go back."

Another group of lead arrows arcs toward us, but I'm too focused on Riven—on how the Summer Court's heat is affecting him, on how much slower his movements are becoming—to block them all in time.

One of them slices my side.

There's no pain.

No blood.

Because I'm in my projected form.

I reach for the place where the wound should have been, but of course, my skin is untouched.

Eros laughs, his eyes glittering with malicious intent. “ An interesting development,” he says as he nocks two arrows at once—one gold, and one lead. “How about I be a bit reckless myself and up the ante even more, so we can let the cards fall as they may?”

In one fluid motion, he spins and releases the arrows in a deadly arc—straight toward my helpless body.

“No!” I scream, and then I snap back, air rushing into my lungs as my consciousness locks into place.

Pain explodes through my chest.

White-hot and all-consuming, it rips through me like electricity unleashed, scorching every nerve ending and burning through my veins until I can't tell where the agony ends and I begin.

Someone calls my name. Riven, maybe. But I can't focus on his voice. I can't hold onto anything except the arrow lodged in my heart, and the magic coursing through my body like liquid fire.

Then, there's an overwhelming surge of... something.

Love? Hate?

I can't tell.

All I know is that it's an emotion so raw and overwhelming that it's devouring me whole, searing my soul and rewriting my entire existence in the process.

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.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:10 am

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/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."