



# The Vampire Castle in the Sky (Tales from the Faraway North #2)

**Author:** *Iris Lake*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A sentient castle. A broken promise. A love that stands the test of time.

Thea Valentia spent her entire life following a path others decided for her until an unexpected tragedy forced her to carve her own. After she abandons her life in the Faraway North, she embarks on a perilous journey in search of the whimsical and full-of-magic castle of her childhood memories and the little vampire prince she had once called a friend. Instead she finds a lethal man with an inescapable destiny and a haunted castle that is determined to bind them together.

As the two of them are left with no choice but to lie their way into vampire society, they fall deep into a world of deceit, betrayal, and the worst kind of bloodlust.

The Vampire Castle in the Sky is a standalone adult romantasy about the dark path of grief and the rare love that lights the way through it.

This book can be read as a standalone or as a part of the Tales from the Faraway North series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Many stories have been told about me, but only this one is disloyal enough to the imagination to be called true .

One winter night, long ago, a star trickled down the sky, as stars often do, and fell somewhere upon the dense, sloping forestland outside the walls of Lumia.

This was not a remarkable event in itself, for the people of the Asteria Realm were accustomed to using stardust for all kinds of mystical and mundane purposes, especially in the cities of the Faraway North, where every human was born with a little bit of magic inside them.

But Lumia was a small, sleepy capital roosting deep in the heart of the West, where the people were simpler and unused to the wild ways of magic, its unexpected outbursts, and profuse peculiarities.

You see, people have a long history of fearing the things they cannot understand and often find more comfort in shunning them altogether rather than learning about them. Because people... Well, fond as I am of them, they do suffer from an interminable case of willful ignorance —a terrible disease, really, and highly contagious, but what can you do? You learn to take the good with the bad and so forth. But where was I? Ah, yes. Magic and its disastrous effect on the ordinary.

Indeed, the people of Lumia had more than enough troubles associated with magic to wish for nothing more than to lead quiet, peaceful, magicless lives.

But what they didn't know was that the very woods encompassing the city's walls were far from magicless, particularly the narrow glade upon which the star fell, for

under the flourishing shrubs and colorful clusters of wildflowers lay the ruins of a temple.

It was an ancient, godly place, and gods liked to leave traces of their divinity behind for the mortals to find. It amused them to see how easily people could get corrupted by the mere illusion of power.

When the stardust collectors rushed to Lumia to get a piece of the fallen star so they could sell it to the witches and the potion makers and the Curiosity Shop owners, they were shocked to discover that instead of a crater, the strangest alchemical reaction had occurred the second the star hit the holy ruins.

It was a magnificent sight (not to toot my own horn, but I've made more maidens swoon than every prince and knight in this entire Realm), a dwelling grand enough to be the envy of every king and queen. Yet it did not touch the ground but floated high in the air above the trail of shrubbery like a cloud or an optical illusion, and instead of treasures and riches, its impenetrable walls were filled with divinity.

A Castle of the land, of the sky, and of the gods.

I will not tell you how famed heroes and fearsome warlocks, and even great kings with their great armies, came from all over the Realm to build high ladders and lay claim upon me. This is not a story about greed, after all. In fact, this is not a story about me at all.

This is a story about love.

I will ease your concerns, though, and tell you that none of them was successful in their rapacious endeavors. No one even managed to reach my threshold, much less pass the sanctity of my doors. In truth, I guarded myself so well and for so long that eventually, I started to regret it.

Don't get me wrong, an entity of my intellect and magical superiority is above all mortal pettinesses, including the one of loneliness. However, quite unexpectedly and to my great disappointment, I did find myself craving company. And more than that, I craved to be loved. Not admired. Not lusted after. I wanted someone to want me for me and not for the things I could do for them. Which, I've discovered, is both the greatest and hardest wish one could ever make.

Still, I waited, alone and afloat with my iridescent spires and turrets shimmering like nightly apparitions amid the looming trees of Lumia. But, of course, waiting is the sum of an eternity to the one who waits, and as months turned to years and years to a century, my spirit and patience began to wither.

People forgot about me, or more accurately, their imaginations changed me, for nothing remains unchanged once it falls prey to human imagination. It is a very human assumption, you see, that everything other is also dangerous.

And so, as they nursed their myths and spun their legends, stories of ghosts and banshees and red-eyed demons, of haunted crypts and insidious death traps, started crawling out of my empty walls to penetrate their mortal hearts.

I was no longer desired but feared all across the Realm. No one dared to even look in my direction, let alone approach my star-stricken glade.

Finally, I accepted that there was nothing I could do anymore but wait for the day I would no longer be a castle. After all, if there was one thing I learned about life in this world, it was that nothing stayed the same forever, and in that I found both thrill and hope.

Then, suddenly, because these things always happen suddenly, my fate changed.

A miracle.

I still call it a miracle, for despite my infinite years and wisdom, I've yet to logically understand the way the human heart finds things to love.

Well, in my case, not human exactly.

Esperida Aventine was only twelve years old when she got lost in the forest and stumbled upon me. She was a forlorn, night-kissed child with long raven hair, star-bright silver eyes, and skin so pale you'd think she'd drunk the whole moon.

She also had blood on her teeth.

And on her frayed pink dress.

And maybe there were a few droplets on her worn-out red shoes—it was hard to tell since the moonbeams made everything look glossy and liquid beneath me.

The girl was a vampire, and her unfortunate victim was the mighty squirrel. She was a hungry little thing, a true creature of the night, for a vampire's life is cursed to be sunless and ravenous. But she was also many other things, things that to me were more important than a curse she had not chosen for herself.

Esperida was fearless and clever and loved to learn in a time when vampires were not allowed to learn anything, not allowed to be anything but the great evil of this world. Her parents had been killed by vampire hunters, and she'd been left all alone in a kingdom that was far from forgiving to her kind. Of course, these were not unreasonable reactions to her curse. Vampires, driven by bloodlust and maddened by eternal night, have committed some of the most grotesque crimes against humankind. But just as not all humans are good, vampires, fearsome as they might be, are not all evil either.

That night, Esperida cast her starry gaze upon me, licked the blood off her lips and

her two long fangs, and told me that I was the most curious thing she'd ever seen. So beautiful and magical, yet so miserably lonely. In a way, I was a vampire too, ancient and misunderstood, feeding off the essence of this land.

And so for the first time since I became a castle, I let down my stairs.

This is the wonder of living. Right in the midst of an ordinary existence, a random soul falls right next to yours, and your sky is forever changed.

A bond was forged between us, in magic and in blood, and we became inseparable. She spent days, months, years losing herself in my many secret arcades and alcoves and finding herself in my grand libraries and studies. Anything she wanted, I could provide. Anything she desired, I could bring to fruition. Peeks into other Realms. Knowledge reserved for the gods alone. Cups of tea that changed every time they touched her lips. Naturally, there were limits to my magic, but even that she had fun discovering, for her heart was never burdened by greed. To her, this was all but a wonderful adventure.

Her favorite colors were white, black, and pink, and so I dressed my halls in the shades that brought her joy with lacquer and onyx and mother-of-pearl. She loved things that sparkled, and so I flooded my ceilings with crystal chandeliers that dazzled day and night like eternal constellations. She was always cold, so my rooms were always warm. And when she told me she yearned to see the world, I was the one who took her to see it. I took her to bustling cities, enchanted forests, and faraway kingdoms, drifting like a cloud in the starlit gloom and hovering over empty fields and wide glades as I waited for her to return to me.

We were never apart. We were never alone. We were one. A single destiny.

Until one day, little Esperida was no longer little. As her limbs stretched, her heart stretched too and grew large enough to dream of much bigger dreams.

In the stories you've heard, vampires don't age, for they are already dead, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Everything ages. Everything changes. Vampires have hearts and souls and warm blood in their veins, and so they wither. They just do it differently from other creatures. Once born, they grow like humans do, fast and excitedly, until their curse transcends their physical bodies and they transform into something else, something wilder and darker. Something closer to divine. After that they age like mountains, like sea rocks and gemstones. Slowly. Too slowly for the human eye to detect.

My little Esperida was no different, and thus I had the pleasure of watching her grow into a brilliant and ambitious woman. She had dreams of changing the world, of helping her people come out of hiding and form a community of their own, a corner in society that was theirs alone. She wanted to prove that their bloodlust could not only be controlled, but with a little cooperation and a lot of empathy, vampires and humans could create an entire new world together.

And so they did.

It was not easy, and it was not bloodless, for humans cling to their prejudices and vampires cling to their ways, but no feat is impossible for the dreamer.

We traveled together from North to South, East to West. Under her guidance and with the power I bestowed upon her, the vampires of every kingdom gathered and created a society with its own laws and practices that respected their needs as well as human life. And to ensure that no vampire would hurt a human again, Esperida appointed a ruling family to each of the four kingdoms. These were not kings and queens but generals. Their job was to maintain the peace and project a certain sense of authority upon the vampire communities.

The Ravenors took the East, the Valkhars took the South, the Celestines ruled over the vampires of the Faraway North, and as for the West, she was there, and no one

would ever dare rise against the legendary Esperida Aventine.

Together they worked to cement interspecies relations, ensure prosperity for both parties, and forge an infallible pact of defense against the rogue vampires who still wished to indulge their appetites in a more... inhumane manner.

Soon, the vampire hunters gave up their curvy daggers, and after years of trials and failures, peace was made between the humans and the creatures of the night.

Esperida became the sovereign of the vampire world, a benevolent ruler and an insidious diplomat, and for many years she was happy continuing her holy work of bringing people and creatures together.

She had never been one for romance, which worried me sometimes, for I often found myself wishing she would fill my halls with a family of her own. I knew she liked to read about love—I was providing the reading material, after all—but in a century of thrill and adventure, she had never experienced it for herself.

Then another miracle happened. A miracle named Eron Soraendale.

He was a handsome but humble man who'd come to our glade to ask Esperida for her help. A pack of demon-wolves had been attacking his village east of Lumia, coming on the full moon and picking off his people one by one. These infernal creatures had been unleashed into this Realm at the dawn of time when the gods still walked upon these lands. Knowing this, the villagers made offerings of treasure and blood to them, but nothing proved satiating enough.

Yes, the demons were formidable opponents, but Esperida had the speed of a fallen star and the strength of a hundred soldiers, and despite his clear disadvantage—he was only a mortal man, after all—Eron did not hesitate to go into the woods with only a sword and the bravery of his heart to fight alongside her. Esperida won a great



battle that night, but she lost her heart forever.

Their union was celebrated all across the Realm as a true symbol of peace, the magical thread that bound humans and vampires together for eternity. So, when a year later Esperida gave birth to a half-vampire, half-human boy, she named him Hector, which means to hold .

The young dhampir prince had his mother's raven hair and his father's hazel-grey eyes, her intelligence and his bravery, her great strength and his human heart. What a marvel he was, a boy that could walk in both day and night. A vampire in a human body.

He was extraordinarily beautiful too, for when different people come together, beauty always follows, but he was also very proud and overly suspicious of others. His existence was wholly unique, and so was his loneliness.

Most days he spent in the sanctity of his room, studying the history of both of his peoples and documenting the advantages and struggles of his own singular experience. His every waking hour was consumed with what it means to be human in a body that craved inhuman things, but I like to think that only after he met her did he finally understand that some things cannot be explained so easily.

Some things are simply magic.

Interestingly enough, his story began much like his mother's. He was twelve years old and chasing a squirrel in the forest only to stumble upon something magical. That was the first thing that popped into his head when he found Dorothea Valentia, with her radiant brown skin, clever fawn eyes, and soft head of curls, lost in the heart of the Dragonfly Forest.

She looks like magic.

I told you this is going to be a love story, didn't I?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

A little girl lost in a forest was a feral, fearsome creature. She was aware of the dangers but free of the fears. Her mind made an adventure out of every dark little thing. The cawing blackbirds, the evolving shadows, the ghostly moonlight peering through the skeletal boughs, and the brambles that scratched her flesh and tugged at the edge of her cloak. They were all her companions, her fellow adventurers, or simply mysteries she needed to uncover. She saw no threat in the gleaming eyes of the owls, the scampering of the animals in the undergrowth, the slippery, moss-covered rocks by the riverbank, and the hungry family of nixies swirling beneath the black water. And she most certainly had no fear of the other, more insidious creatures of the night.

Unfortunately for me, I no longer was that little girl. I was twenty-two years old, alone in the woods after dark, and scared out of my right mind.

I'd always considered myself a woman of adequate intellect and notable capability. So, for the love of the stars, what madness had gone through my head to start this journey in the middle of the afternoon instead of waiting for daybreak?

My internal voice of reason must have thrown up its hands in exasperation at least a hundred times today, yet I did not seem able to listen to any of its many sensible arguments.

But honestly now, how was I supposed to wait even for a minute longer after receiving that wretched letter? Delayed letter. It had taken a whole month for it to reach me, and it hadn't even come from the Castle itself but from my dear friend

Lena, who lived with her wife in Kartha. The Eastern Kingdom had gotten the news first, for the Castle was currently resting above the strip of forestland outside the capital's walls.

I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Eron and Esperida Aventine were dead.

Once again, I had to stop in my tracks, lean against the trunk of a tree, and wipe the tears from my eyes before I was able to continue.

I'd known Esperida had been consuming a potion to help her age faster—it was a common practice among vampires who wished to grow old with their human companions—but I had no idea that the two of them had also taken the Eternal Vow. It was done so rarely and performed by so very few priestesses these days that most people had forgotten about the ritual altogether.

Long ago, during the wedding ceremony, couples had the option of binding their souls for eternity by branding their flesh with the words of a sacred spell that knitted their two individual life threads into one. A spell so ancient and powerful that it surpassed any curse, even the one of vampirism. It didn't matter if you were a fairy or a nymph or a witch. If your half's heart stopped beating, yours was spellbound to follow.

I understood that Esperida and Eron had loved each other more than they had loved life itself and that they'd refused to be separated even in death, but by the gods, I still thought it was the most absurd, selfish thing in the history of the world. After all, Death was rarely cruel to the dead. It was the ones who were left behind he tormented the most.

But Esperida, in all her mystifying immortality, could have never imagined that her

husband would be taken early and by something as mundane as a heart attack, let alone that she would have a child to worry about leaving behind. To this day, Hector was the only one of his kind.

Hector.

The mere mention of his name used to make me think of cozy winter nights. Intense gazes. Sandalwood and campfire smoke. The stiff leather of the chair in his study. Now it was a pang in my sternum.

Four years had passed since the last time I saw him. We disappeared from each other's worlds like it was nothing, with a handful of ugly words and a single broken promise. But a broken promise was a lot like a broken destiny. It changed the trajectory of your life forever.

We had been inseparable once, despite the notable wedge of our differences. I loved meeting new people and discovering new places. I loved to dance and sing and walk with my face turned against the sun. I loved daydreaming and reading romantic stories, for that was the only way I could weave dream into reality. But Hector... Hector was the dream itself. A prince of the sky and a creature of the night. That was the substance of our antithesis. I was of this world, and he was of the one above it. I was made of clay and fire; he was made of clouds and frost.

Sometimes, he could be breathtakingly alluring too, but that was just the vampire in him. All of them were like that, wrapped up in layers of beauty and charm while the true darkness of their souls lay deep beneath their marble skin.

Ultimately, the only thing Hector and I did have in common was our age, for I was a mere day older than him. Both of us had just turned twelve that fateful day we met in the Dragonfly Forest.

I'd been born in Steria, a small village outside Thaloria, the grand capital of the Faraway North. Mother owned the local oracle shop, while Father, who was from the South and therefore magicless, owned land. Miles and miles of flower-dotted strawberry fields, which you could only go through by horse. We lived comfortably, and I'd spent most of my childhood running around the Dragonfly Forest, getting into all kinds of wonderful and terrible trouble. I'd played with pixies and laughed with sprites and even learned a little swordplay from Walder, the forest's ancient spirit who had found me once wandering a little too close to Fairyland. He'd saved my life that day, for fairies were quite literally the vampires of the fey world.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been drawn to magic, and it was this exact yearning for all things extraordinary that united me with the Castle that day. My heart was a compass, and wonder was my north.

It was rare for the Castle to be in our part of the world, but Esperida happened to be visiting the Celestines, and so there it waited for her, in the heart of the Dragonfly Forest.

The stars aligned, Hector and I met, and before I knew it, he, Esperida, and Eron became my second family. The distance didn't matter. Time and time again I crossed it without a second thought, yearning for their whimsy and magic-touched wisdom, which was incomparable to my parents' land-bound one.

Yes, my friendship with Hector didn't end on the best of terms, but I still couldn't believe he didn't write to tell me of their loss. Was he too heartbroken to write? Or did he hate me that much now?

According to Lena's letter, the Castle was last seen outside of Kartha, so after I packed my suitcase with only the absolute necessities, I went straight into the city to Nepheli's Curiosity Shop for it had a Door and I needed a Door to get myself from North to East as fast as possible.

Although Nepheli Curiosity was my newest, she was perhaps my greatest friend and the only one not to deter me from taking this journey. We had spent every day of the past year together, attending classes at the Academy of Magical Arts and getting her new Curiosity Shop ready. She had star magic in her veins, for she'd accidentally swallowed a handful of stardust as a child. Of course, something like that would normally be deadly to a human—especially a little one—but the gods of fortune had other plans for my little Nepheli.

In the short year we'd been friends, she learned to control her starlight, infuse it in inanimate objects to make them sentient, opened a new Curiosity Shop in the heart of the city, and got engaged to Prince Apollo of Thalaria.

All I'd done this past year was read scandalous books, daydream about fictional men, and eat an obscene amount of chocolate cake. I did discover that I had an inclination toward fortune-telling, but this was no grand revelation considering the kind of magic that ran in my bloodline.

My grandmother could hear the future like the notes in a melody. She listened to the turnings of the wind, the buzz of the cicadas, the rustling of the willow trees at night. She could discover whole destinies in the shush of the ocean, the rush of the waves as they approached the shore. Mother could read the future. In a palm, in a deck of cards, in the darkened tea leaves lingering along the edge of a porcelain cup. And I, evidently, could see it. Indeed, I'd had more than a few prophetic visions throughout my life to call myself a seer. However, they had all been so abstract and insignificant that they could hardly be compared to the fate-touched magic of the women in my family.

I was... lost. Physically. Mentally. Magically. I was completely and overwhelmingly lost.

Letting out a ragged breath, I readjusted my grip on my suitcase and pulled my cloak

a little tighter around my gown, my only armor against the twinging cold of early spring.

At first, the night had been all chill and gloom, eager to gather the innumerable shapes of the forest and blend them into one daunting silhouette. My journey became a continuous stumble into prickling brambles and nests of stinging nettles, boughs laden with cobwebs swooping down to claw at the hood of my cloak. Then the clouds turned, and the moon was revealed, full and reddish, creeping across the misty sky. Moonlight painted a much eerier path for me, large shadows leaping out of every corner. But I soon grew grateful for them, for even shadows were better company than the abysmal hollows of the night.

The Door I'd gone through was the kind of portal one could only find in a Curiosity Shop, since Curiosity Shops tended to form around them, but, as all mystical passages had limits to the instructions you could give it. I'd chosen to be taken East and on land (Karthia was a coastal kingdom, and I really didn't feel like braving the great Sandrea Sea), and so the portal had opened up somewhere in the strip of forestland outside the capital's walls.

But, of course, my dear Nepheli couldn't simply leave me to my fate, so she had provided me with a pouch of soporific dust, which, allegedly, could knock even a grown demon out, and a stardust compass to guide me to my desired destination. The needle of the compass was made of actual starlight, the very magic Nepheli carried in her veins, and it pointed to the exact place its owner's heart wished to go.

I pulled it out of my pocket and consulted it once more, its silver face glowing like a lantern in the night.

Although it looked like I was on the right path, it didn't feel right. The dark crested down on me, making everything seem sharp and deadly, the mountains in the hazy distance looming as foreboding and solitary as a dragon's lair. Even the wind



whistling through the boughs of the trees sounded menacing. There was so much noise. The angry rush of the river, the animals lurking in their hollows, the fallen branches snapping underfoot. And then there were the other, invisible terrors, which I did not dare think of.

Suddenly, the distant howl of a wolf tore through the fog-dazed air. I jumped out of my skin, my yelp so loud it prompted the band of blackbirds, nestling on the tree above me, to shoot up into the sky, their disgruntled flapping amid the branches showering me in a waterfall of pale petals.

“It’s okay,” I hummed to myself, shutting my eyes to shun the fear from my mind. “Everything is fine. Nothing is going to eat me.”

I was not going to give up, I was not going to turn around, and I was not going to run because if I’d learned anything growing up next to creatures of the night, it was that one should never allow themselves to get chased if they didn’t wish to get caught.

When I opened my eyes again, a single pink blossom was twirling in the air before my face. It landed gracefully upon the radiant needle of my compass, and, filled with curiosity, I lifted both my gaze and my impromptu lantern to shed some light overhead.

The forest was mostly hemlock and birch, their ancient bodies rising high and lush in their early spring bloom, but the foliage was different in this part of the path, unwinding into a sea of almond and cherry trees, their pink and white blossoms drifting like snowflakes through the air. Their trunks were gnarled and twisting in all directions, huddled together so closely their branches formed a low, narrow arch. I had to duck my head and cradle my suitcase to my chest to be able to pass through it. The ground below my boots was all dotted with fallen petals, glowing pale in the dim. The black velvet of my gown swished over them, disturbing their continuous pattern and revealing patches of fluffy, dew-kissed grass.

A few more strides and the boughs started to thin. The blossoming saplings gave way to wild undergrowth, and the path opened up fully.

On this side of the trail, several trees were reduced down to stumps, large and uneven as age-fallen columns, with silver moss sprouting around their protruding roots. The bell-shaped mushrooms that sprang from their sides were diaphanous and opalescent. I was familiar with them since the Dragonfly Forest was littered with this type of fungi, and I knew that had it been day, they would gleam like crystals in the sunlight.

This sudden evidence of magic heartened me a little.

The Castle had to be near.

After a while, the wilderness of mushroom-flanked stumps faded into a moss-covered stone path with all kinds of curling weeds erupting between the split cobbles.

Squinting against the moonlight, which was ample and radiant despite the thick clumps of fog that attempted to obscure it, I got the barest glimpse of something that resembled stone but wasn't. Something hard like granite, shimmering like opals, and white as the purest pearl.

I put down my suitcase, tucked the compass into my cloak pocket, and, sucking in a deep breath, I finally craned back my neck.

There it was, hovering a few feet above the ground, the most magical thing a mind could ever conceive. The Castle.

Its dreaming spires and soaring towers untangled from the mist-dazed gloom to reveal a stained glass rose window, breaking the moonlight into an ocean of uncanny red beams. Below, the structure unraveled into a series of flying buttresses, serving as a frame to the facade, white stones curving into exquisite pointed arches and ribbed

vaults that transcended even the most artful levels of human detail and reached into the realm of the divine. The arch of its massive door was spangled with dead roses, the darkened blooms crawling out of the cracks in the wall with thorns as long and thick as fangs, making the black surface look like the mouth of a yawning monster.

A chill shivered across my skin. The Castle from my childhood and adolescent memories was a cheerful wonderland, full of color and mystery and endless possibility. Within its ornate chambers, I'd seen whole worlds. Rooms swimming in rivers and alcoves draped in desert sand. I'd taken peeks into other Realms, kingdoms where fairies ruled over humankind, and universes where the constellations had different names.

Now it stood eerie and frightening above me. And reeking of death.

Perhaps it was the little magic in my veins, or perhaps it was my exhaustion and fear to blame, but the most horrid thought bobbed up in the dark of my mind. Leave while you can. Bad things are going to happen here.

I ignored it, clenching my fists at my sides. But when several minutes passed without the Castle letting down its stairs for me, a terrible fear began to expand in my chest.

How I wished I could turn back the clock and see the Castle in its ceaseless bloom again. The way its door would crack only a little open as if to hide a wonder that not everyone was meant to see was a feeling I had come to know intimately. Even these past four years that I'd spent away from the Castle that feeling, that comfortable excitement that I often compared to diving into a brand new book, still found me in my dreams. Constantly, I was overwhelmed by the image of me standing before the Castle's door, waiting breathlessly to hear the hinges loosen and Esperida to appear like a fairy guarding the entrance to another Realm: ageless, moonlit, mischievous as a child. And then that initial burst of joy when Hector would dash down the stairs and close me in his arms.

“Please,” I whispered shakily. “Please, let me in. I’m worried sick about him.”

I brought to mind Hector’s face from the last time I saw him. Memory was infamous for smoothing the edges of the past, but I would never forget the way he’d looked at me that day, the way the curve of his mouth had turned into a stern line, and the way his hair had fallen over his watercolor eyes as he’d slanted his hard face over mine.

“Go, then. And don’t ever come back.”

These were the last words he spoke to me. Yet here I was.

I heaved a sigh, gazing past the bone-white spires of the Castle at the spill of stars across the sky. I did not regret the decisions that had formed my life, for if I hadn’t joined the Thalorian Court, I would have never met Nepheli and therefore wouldn’t have gained some of the most joyful and irreplaceable memories of my adult life. But gods, what wouldn’t I give to be able to tell the ignorant eighteen-year-old version of me that following a path others chose for you didn’t make life easier or simpler, nor did it magically transform you into someone good.

It just made you a fool. A weak, miserable fool.

“He can hate me all he wants,” I told the Castle, my voice steadier now, filled with conviction. “But he still needs me.”

Finally, with a nearly audible rustle of exasperation, the Castle let down its stairs.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

Lanterns hung on both sides of the massive door, but neither of them was providing illumination tonight. Still, I could see it clearly, set deep in the center of the gnarled surface like a gemstone: the letter A, surrounded by withered vines and gold filigree. People around the Realm called this the vampire castle in the sky, but for the few who'd wandered past this sacred door, it was simply Aventine Castle.

Several seconds passed before the Castle deigned to open its door, confirming its reluctance to let me in. Pricks of anxiety crept over my spine, making me still, a stilling of everything but breath and pulse.

You came all this way. For once in your life, finish what you started, the exasperated voice in my head grumbled.

My fist clenched around the grip of my suitcase as I finally stepped inside, the tremendous door closing behind me with a reverberating thud. Long shadows lapped over the room like deep sea water. Then I was in the dark.

"Hector?" I called out.

No answer.

I took another wary step, my eyes stretching wide to catch as many fragments of the deserted hall as the enduring gloom allowed.

It was impossible to describe the Castle in terms of breadth or height. It changed

constantly and on its master's whim—Hector's whim now. With its indecisive proportions and fairylike ambiance, it often looked like something you had dreamt or read about in a story rather than a real-life place.

Yet for the first time, the Castle didn't seem to be a living, ever-changing entity. It was lightless and eerily quiet, its air of abandonment filling me with a primeval sense of dread. Goosebumps surfaced all across my body. The hairs at the nape of my neck stirred against the chill.

The foyer, with its black paneled walls and impossibly high ceiling, stood cold and dark. The various chandeliers, spangling the entry up until the grand stairs, had fallen into disrepair, the countless rows of crystals dangling lifeless and dull amid the golden branches. The only illumination was coming from the stained glass window above the door, a softly filtered red light painting the room in the most unsettling of shades.

I tried using the compass as my guide again, but it was not bright enough to battle this darkness, so I set my suitcase atop the large bench by the door and rummaged through it for my matches. Clearly, the Castle wasn't feeling cooperative tonight, so I would have to make my own light.

After I found the box of matches, tucked haphazardly amid my undergarments, I grabbed one of the lamps that hung on ornate brackets along the entrance's walls and pulled at it with all of my strength.

The Castle resisted me—of course, it did, the old bastard—but I gritted my teeth and yanked harder, cold metal digging into the skin of my palms. “I will hammer it out of the wall if you don't surrender it to me. You know I'm not bluffing,” I growled.

The lamp gave in abruptly with an angry clink, and I had to stagger, impromptu lantern in hand, to keep my footing.

Blowing the curls off my eyes, I raised the wick to my nose and nodded contentedly at the smell of fresh oil. “That’s better,” I muttered, stifling my trembling anxiety so I could focus on lighting it up. After a try or two, a little orange flame licked the inside glass.

With a sigh of relief, I held it out before me and sailed toward the stairs, my flickering shadow being my only visible companion.

As I reached the wide landing after which the stairs twisted and looped in both directions, I was attacked by yet another swarm of memories. When Esperida would hold her annual winter ball, hosting every vampire family in the Realm, Hector and I would dance on this very landing to the music drifting from the ballroom above, since humans—with the sole exception of Eron—were not allowed to attend any of these balls and gatherings.

Their world was a sacred one, a world of precarious balance and clandestine codes of honor. Only here, in their Castle in the sky, did the vampires have the freedom to be their true selves. The creatures of our nightmares. The creatures of the night. To them, night was not something dreadful that one had to endure until dawn. It was its own kingdom with its own secret laws, and only they were allowed to enter it.

But Hector was not made of darkness alone, and so here he had danced with me on those nights. Haltingly. Bashfully. With his hand in a closed fist against my back so he wouldn’t touch me.

Now there was barely any space to move on the landing, much less dance. The grand chandelier that used to dazzle above it dangled so low that some of the teardrop-shaped crystals were brushing against the carpet while others lay crushed to pieces around it, glinting like a spill of treasure in the demonic red light.

Gingerly, with a boulder lodged in my throat, I stepped around it and trailed up the

left set of stairs. Although both sides unraveled into identical drapery-hung balconies, which then unwound into more stairs, creating a structure that seemed to spiral up into an infinity of destinations, I remembered that if you wanted to reach the bedrooms, you should always turn left.

I could also recall that this first level had been its own little forest once, covered in ivy and lichen and sprouts of multicolored minerals. I tried to console myself with the vividness of this memory. I know this path. These are the stones Hector's hands have touched. This is the grass his feet have walked. But the corridor was as unfamiliar and lightless as the entrance and even darker without the moonlight filtering through the rose window.

These walls were no longer covered with moss but with a sequence of paintings and onyx pedestals, the elaborate vases atop them holding bouquets of dead roses, their blackened stems and aged thorns forming unsettling, cobweb patterns.

The art, which had always been peculiar, as most things about the Castle were, had taken on a darker edge as well. These paintings used to tell stories of the sky and its many mysteries. Now they were abstract pieces of horror, full of blood moons, demon skulls, and rotting arrangements of fruits and florals. I could almost smell the decay through the canvas, hear the buzz of the flies circling their spoiled flesh.

Out of everything, the Castle's willingness to embrace all things dead was the most concerning to me. Dreadfully, chillingly concerning. In truth, I grew so nervous that my hand holding the lamp started to shake, the little magic in my veins rising to warn me, Turn around and leave. If you follow this destiny now, you will not be able to abandon it later.

I didn't want to listen. That was the problem with me. I always gave myself excellent advice, but I was never very good at following it.



“Could you point me in the right direction, at least?” I grumbled to the Castle.

Something in the wall to my left gleamed, one of the Castle’s many secrets, which Esperida had only shared with Eron, Hector, and me.

The Castle had multiple surfaces of running water set and framed into the walls like mirrors. They resembled waterfalls trickling over glass, something whimsical but decorative. In reality, they were portals that could take you anywhere within the Castle’s halls. The downside, however, was that they had a mind of their own. Not only was it impossible to choose your destination, but as you passed through them, you also got drenched to the bone.

Water , Esperida had explained to me once, is purifying . This one more than others. If you want to move through the Castle’s bones, you have to be cleansed of any mortal vanity.

But water, sacred or not, was still water, and I was already feeling the beginnings of a terrible cold creeping on me.

I decided it was wiser to ignore the Castle’s fiendish suggestion altogether, as my reflection in the mirror was alarming enough. My unbound curls were littered with pink petals, my complexion had taken on a rather ashen appearance, and my eyes were tugged so gruesomely wide you’d think they were trying to pop out of my skull.

And I could have sworn there was something in the glass. Something slippery and silver-white. Something shimmering. Something watching me.

I snapped my eyes shut, cursing my fear and wild imagination. When I opened them again, there was only frazzled old me, the lamp clattering in my trembling hand.

“At least warm the place a bit,” I bristled at the Castle. “Light a fire, perhaps?”

The temperature took a dramatic plunge, and my teeth started to chatter.

“Old bastard,” I hissed under my breath, continuing to shiver my way in the dim.

At the end of the hallway, another unfamiliar space opened up, a huge, round room with damask-dressed walls. As I raised my lamp, the light caught intricate patterns of untamed flora. Eventually they turned from fabric to real ivy and primrose, trailing up the vaulted ceiling and curling around the single lantern that dangled over the midpoint from a long brass chain.

Five entrances were circling the room, not including the one I’d just gone through. Four of them were arches, leading to other dark, mysterious corridors, but the one in the middle was a door. It stood ajar enough for a thin band of light to creep past the sill and stretch over the black and white squares of the floor. The light was dull and unsteady. It quivered like my heart.

Cautiously, with my breath caught in the siphon of my throat, I pushed the door further open, its screeching making the skin of my neck crawl.

The room was large but intimate, with dark walls and mismatched mahogany furniture. There was a great deal of velvet as well, hanging over the window and fitted over the armchairs. The ceiling was a dome, a night sky strewn with countless four-pointed stars, some artfully painted, others fragments of the universe itself.

What drew my attention the most, though, was the floor, which was covered by overlapping burgundy rugs and littered by a dizzying array of crystal decanters. They gleamed blood-red under the flickering light of the candelabra in the corner, holding about a dozen smoldering candles, wax dripping down the pale tapers. The decanters I knew were of wine and not of blood, for the whole place reeked of liquor and ripe sweetness.

At the far edge of the room, a massive, four-poster bed swam in various dark textures. And in the center of it lay a man.

I had only ever thought of Hector as a boy, but there was no doubt that the person on this bed was a man.

He was naked save for a pair of white linen undershorts, lying on his back with one knee bent and one arm thrown above his head. The candlelit beauty of his body was something of a marvel. It drew my eye against my will and struck from me a sudden sense of longing.

Hector had always been a beautiful boy, tall and lean-muscled with a gentle, aristocratic face, carved by a loving hand.

But everything about him was harder and broader now. His sculpted chest and abdomen, his strong arms, even the defined line of his jaw looked unfamiliar to me. He seemed taller too—tremendous, in fact—his long, muscled legs taking up almost the entire length of the bed.

With a low, restive sound, he turned, and the candlelight hit his face.

My heart sank. Everything inside me sank.

He was as pale as the moon, the skin around his closed eyelids etched with purple shadows. His full lips were slightly parted and pulled over his fangs. His dark brows were pinched, his expression tormented, as if he was having some kind of a nightmare.

Without thinking much of it, I rushed to his side, set the lamp on the nightstand, and climbed up on the bed. The sudden movement made him stir, murmuring something unintelligible under his breath. I bent over him and touched a hand to his forehead.

He was cold as ice.

“Hector?” I called gently, and when he didn’t respond, I cupped his bare shoulders and shook him a little. “Gods, when’s the last time you fed?”

The words barely left my mouth before his big hand shot out and gripped my wrist. The entire room tilted as he yanked me down, rolled over, and pinned me against the bed with the weight of his body.

I screamed, first in surprise, then in sheer terror, as he hovered inches above me with his fangs bared, his veins throbbing, and his wide-open eyes shifting into the vivid, unadulterated red of bloodlust.

I used to think the way vampire eyes changed to crimson in moments of rage or hunger was like gazing at a sunset. One moment you were savoring the colors, and the next it was too dark to see. But I found no beauty in it now. Only bone-deep horror.

“Hector!” I shrieked, writhing against him as he seized both of my wrists and pinned them high above my head.

“How dare you invade my Castle?” he roared with the wrath of a thousand gods. The whole room shuddered. The bottles on the floor rolled around clattering. The windowpane across the bed rattled, threatening to burst open.

“For the love of the sky, you drunken brute! It’s me, Thea!”

How much could he have drunk to render himself unable to recognize his own best friend? Fine, perhaps not his best friend, but still.

“Oh...” he mumbled.

Gradually, like moving through a dream, his grip on my wrists relaxed, the red in his eyes dissolving into a familiar hazel-grey. Amber around the edges and pure woodsmoke in the center, a reverse sunburst that eased my fear only to fill me with nostalgia.

It sawed at me—the surge of memories that these eyes brought me. I often called what happened between Hector and me a fight. But it hadn't been a fight. It had been a rupture. A shared destiny split down the middle.

Recognition had yet to grace his face, though. He looked at me through glassy, half-lidded eyes, the rise and fall of his shoulders slowing.

I yanked my hands free and brought them against his chest to push him back. But he was solid, impenetrable. Nothing gave way beneath my fingers. The bow of his lips seemed to rest a ribbon's breadth from mine. We were so close I could smell nothing but him. Incense and soap and sweet cherry wine. And something else that was only his. Something I didn't have the words to describe. Sometimes, when we were kids, I would pick fights and wrestle with him just to have this smell on my own skin later.

“Oh, I see now,” he murmured groggily. “I'm dreaming again. I'm dreaming of her.” A soft sigh escaped me as I felt the warmth of his fingers in my hair. “Her dark curls.” Slowly, he brought them lower to trace the arch of my brow. “Her lovely eyes.” Then, with a look of utter despair, he cupped my jaw and passed his thumb over the curve of my mouth. “Her lips. Gods, her lips. A holy man's undoing.”

I watched him, dazed, as he used his thumb to nudge my lips apart, his face lowering to mine. For a heart-stopping second, I thought he was going to kiss me, and I was paralyzed from shock—shock and disbelief and a hint of the most unexpected sense of desire.

My whole body seemed to grow both taut and liquid with anticipation, my skin

blazing as he moved closer. Closer. But then his lips brushed past my cheek, and he caved into the crook of my neck, his hands slipping down to grip my waist and pull me up on the bed so that his hips were aligned with mine and he could hold me against him as firmly as he wished.

“You smell so good,” he rasped, and to my further astonishment, his tongue darted out and traced a circle over the sensitive skin of my throat.

A strange feeling of suspense sloshed in my stomach as his fangs scraped the base of my neck, for a vampire’s bite was not as dreadful or deadly as some wanted to believe. It didn’t turn you like them unless their blood was already in your system, and it didn’t kill you if it was done properly. In fact, the vampire venom was famed to be the sweetest, most euphoric of intoxicants, the bite itself often described as something akin to fairy wine—a quick and thrilling way to lose all sense of reason. And of course, the stronger the vampire, the more potent the venom, and Hector... Well, he was the son of Esperida. I could only imagine how powerful his venom would be.

“I swear to the gods, Hector, if you bite me, I will defang you,” I grunted.

But Hector wasn’t listening. He was lost in a fever dream, chasing after his mystery woman. “That scent,” he groaned again, burying his nose in my hair. “Like honey and roses and magic.”

I couldn’t help the whimper that leapt from my lips. I would trust Hector with my life, but I was still painfully aware of my vulnerability, the strength of his body against the softness of my own.

Suddenly, as if he’d sensed my apprehension—and knowing him, he probably had on some subconscious level—he pulled back and just... stared at me, with pinched brows and eyes full of tears, cupping gently the side of my face.

“How lucky that dreams exist,” he said. “I wish to dream of you every night. I wish to go mad from it.”

“Hector,” I sighed, stunned by his delirium and fervor, this utterly unfamiliar side of him.

Who was he talking about with such heartbreaking longing in his voice? What manner of woman was haunting his dreams? The boy I knew cared nothing for romance, nothing for love. But I was starting to fear that this boy was forever lost.

He made a desperate sound deep in his throat as he rolled off me, falling on his back on the bed.

I lay there for a moment, numbed from adrenaline and revelation.

Then he turned, eyes closed, and took my hand in his. “Don’t leave me,” he whispered. “Everyone always leaves me.”

In the mournful silence of the Castle, my heart strained with something I could not name. Grief and hope and memory all at once.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

Dawn arrived with the remnants of a strange dream lingering in the forefront of my consciousness. Even in dream form, it was a shock to see Esperida. That was how arresting she was. Her radiance. Her imposing presence. The feral, unpredictable quality of her smile, down to the way she moved, swift and graceful like a marsh bird.

In the dream, she was in a mirror or perhaps watching me through a mirror, the glass as sleek and trembling as a puddle of rain. I stood before it, dreading to gaze directly at her, as if to look upon her face was to violate the very laws that separated the world of the living from the one of the dead. And just as I mustered the courage, just as I was about to lift my eyes to hers, a white vapor rolled between us, and I woke up.

Despite the eerie feeling the dream left me, I was determined to make the most of today. When the first strips of light branched into the bedroom and glazed over the armchair in which I'd found my rest yesterday, I got up at once, checked on Hector, who was still very much knocked out, and then headed downstairs to retrieve my suitcase.

I decided it was better to forget the whole Hector-pinning-me-to-the-bed incident and focus on the matter at hand. Reviving the Castle and its drunken wanker of a master.

I settled myself into the room nearest Hector's lest he needed something—perhaps a reminder to drink less wine and more blood—then I washed, changed into a muslin dress, and went on a mission to find some firewood for the stove, because not even a cranky old castle was going to keep me from having my morning tea.



In the lemon-bright light of day, things didn't seem so dreadful. The Castle still kept the majority of its rooms and corridors clean of dirt and dust, and there was nothing a little fresh air and some tidying up couldn't fix.

But first: heat.

Something about all of this chill and somberness felt wrong. It wasn't just that the Castle was in mourning. It was missing presence, sentience. It was missing its soul. Or, perhaps, since the Castle was a direct reflection of its master's emotional and mental state, this was how Hector felt on the inside now. Cold and dark and bereft of all essence.

If I were being honest, I wished I had the luxury of breaking down myself, especially after what Hector said last night. Everyone always leaves me.

To be left was inevitable. It was pointless to fight it. But how do you move on after you've been left? How do you put one foot in front of the other and arrange yourself a new path?

This sounded like the kind of question Esperida would know how to answer. She would put her hand on your shoulder or take your chin between her fingers and tell you in that gentle but firm manner of hers something simple, something you could easily understand, and insist on it until you gave yourself the answer you've been looking for all along.

She had visited me in Thaloria only six months ago, and if I closed my eyes now and concentrated hard enough, I could conjure the feeling of her warm touch on my shoulder, her wise voice in my ear.

A part of me still refused to believe that she was gone. She had to be somewhere around here. In her study. In the observatory. Down in the kitchen baking her awful

cookies.

Yes, she had to be there.

But when I rushed downstairs, I found the kitchen lightless and empty. No warmth. No laughter. No Esperida covered in flour and no Eron pretending that her foul concoctions were the best things he'd ever tasted.

Wiping tears from the corners of my eyes, I gathered the firewood that was stacked in a corner and got the stove going. I only saved a couple of logs so I could light the hearth in Hector's room. Back at my parents' house, I used to think it was drudgery to get the fireplaces going. Now I was glad to have my hands full, to be preoccupied with dull, mundane tasks.

So, I busied myself with brewing a cup of tea using the dried mint leaves I found hanging from a string over the arched window of the kitchen. The tea, of course, did not taste like mint. Every sip came with new depth and complexity, spices and herbs mingling in unexpected bursts of sweetness. Esperida believed that the Castle was conjuring things, including food and refreshments, from the Fey Realm, but not even she had discovered the full extent of the Castle's magic. For all we knew, it fed us the very substance of the gods.

Regardless, I enjoyed my mysterious, ever-changing tea crouched over the stove to keep myself warm, and after I was done and felt a bit more composed, I grabbed the two logs and trailed upstairs.

I had left Hector's door only a bit ajar, and since my hands were full now, I had to use my back to push it fully open. As I stepped inside, I was alarmed to find the floor clean, the bed empty, and the tangle of sheets and covers perfectly made.

For a moment, I merely stared, questioning the reality of last night. Perhaps I'd gotten

sick, and it had all been the product of a wild fever dream. Or even worse, some kind of illusion a fairy had forced on me after capturing me in the forest. My mind jumped from one dreadful scenario to another until a sudden creak snapped me out of it.

Tendrils of steam crawled out of the narrow door of the adjoining room as if it were the mouth of a very angry dragon—or the chamber of a freshly bathed vampire.

A second later, Hector emerged from the haze.

Naked.

Naked like the day he was born, with only a small towel thrown over his head. His long-limbed body glistened with droplets of water, and his cock simply... hung there for the world to see.

And by the gods, there was so much of it.

The logs fell from my arms and hit my left foot. I shrieked, hopping around, which earned me another surge of pain as I lost my balance and hit my hip against the handle of the door.

Hector looked up and screamed too, the towel on his head flying away.

“Why are you naked?” I squealed.

“Why are you here?” he growled, and in a second, he was on me, his strong hands seizing my arms.

I groaned, pinning my eyes to the ceiling. “And it’s touching my thigh. Your cock is touching my thigh.”

He swayed back, attempting to cover himself with his hands. “Don’t say cock. Since when do you say cock?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, please put the proverbial basilisk away before I cut off its head,” I snarled, feeling the skin of my face going from hot to blazing.

He moved around the room with the speed of a fallen star, and before I knew it, he was dressed in a pair of simple black trousers and a billowy white shirt. His hair had dried from the remarkable velocity and was left in a perfect jumble of raven strands, framing a face so striking it could make even a god envious.

For the first time in four years, our eyes held. “Thea,” he breathed out, “for the love of the sky, what are you doing here?”

I pulled myself straight, throwing my hands up in the air, exhaustion and indignation washing over me in alternating waves. “I don’t know, Hector, maybe I’m here because you didn’t bother to tell me that Esperida and Eron are dead!”

I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. I was hurt. No, I was grief-stricken and more heartbroken than words could ever express. The very ground seemed to have lost its point of gravity. All I could do anymore was float aimlessly in the vastness of their absence. But if I felt like that, I couldn’t even begin to imagine how devastated Hector was.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, nervously brushing my palms over my skirt. “I came here to see you, not to yell at you.”

Hector rubbed at his temples, his dark, feathery lashes lowering over his cheekbones. “Wait a second. Last night did I...”

“Pinned me to your bed and licked my neck?”

Now he looked even worse than devastated. He looked utterly appalled, which made me wish I'd kept my silence all the more. "Did I hurt you? Thea, did I touch you?"

Something inside me twisted. I'd never seen him like this before. Hector had always been the stronger one between us. Now he seemed to be just as lost as I was, and I had no idea how to help either of us.

I crossed the distance and took his hands in mine. So many things were different about him, but his hands were the same. I know these hands, I thought, and found more comfort in his touch than I'd felt in years. "Please don't give yourself a heart attack over this. You were drunk, and I did ambush you, but nothing bad happened."

He recoiled from me, his face as hard as granite. "Tell me the truth, did I do something to offend you?"

"If you'd done something to offend me, I wouldn't have left you with anything between your legs to swing around now," I huffed.

Hector shook his head, unwaveringly horrified. "I swear, I will not touch another glass of wine in my life."

At that, I almost burst out laughing. "Okay, now you're just being dramatic."

"I thought I was dreaming," he murmured.

"I know. Your mystery woman."

"Mystery woman?"

"The one you kept ranting about last night. The one who smells like honey and a baby unicorn's breath, apparently."

He blinked in comical bewilderment. Well, comical for me, at least. “What?”

“The mystery woman . The object of your darkest desires and most unutterable longings. Are you having some kind of illicit affair? Is she married? Oh, is she a priestess? Did you make her break her divine oath of celibacy with your irresistible vampire charm?”

Hector groaned, slumping on the bench at the foot of the bed. “What are you talking about? What is happening right now?”

I pressed my lips together, stifling a rather fiendish chuckle as I settled down next to him. “I’m sorry, Hector dear, but you know me. Confusing intelligent men is my favorite pastime.”

“Can we start over?” he asked wearily, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. “I think I’m still a little drunk.”

“Sure,” I chirped.

This was good. This was normal.

And yet, for every part of him that was familiar, there was one I did not recognize. His shoulders did not slouch like they used to. His hands did not fall awkwardly at his sides. His limbs arranged themselves with perfect grace as if for a painter to capture.

“You look different,” I said, half-praise, half-accusation.

It surprised him. “I do?”

“Your face.”

He touched self-conscious fingers to his temple. I felt bold enough to lean in, cup the back of his hand, and guide it gently to the plump bow of his mouth. “Here,” I said, then moved it lower to trace the firmness of his jaw. “Here.” Lower still, to the base of his neck where his skin began pulling tight with muscle. “Here.”

As he swallowed, my fingers threaded between his and rode against the motion. It was with great difficulty that I managed to untangle my hand from his, drawing back on the bench.

“Is that all?” he asked, unaffected, it seemed.

I glanced lower at his covered stomach, his thighs, everything in between. “You look different everywhere.”

He said nothing, which was just like him.

I poked the side of his arm with my finger. “Do I look different?”

“I suppose you do.”

“Do I look womanly?”

I knew I did, but I wanted him to say it. I wasn’t sure why. I just wanted him to raise his eyes now and gaze at me like a man tempted.

But when he lifted his head, there was no desire, no admiration in him, only a sharp, almost vindictive coldness. “Where is your husband, Thea?”

The air thinned as soon as he said it.

I had to swallow several times before I was able to speak, and even then my voice left

me low and strained. “You mean Jasper.”

Hector gritted his teeth, a muscle in his jaw twitching. “Is that his name? I don’t recall. To me he’s just the nobody your parents chose for you.”

The resentment in his eyes was a double-edged blade. Either way, it cut me. “I had a say in the matter, you know. They didn’t choose him for me and certainly not for the reasons you think.”

“Really?” he prodded venomously. “So they didn’t favor him for his relation to the royal family? Was it his inability to appreciate sarcasm, his disinterest in anything that doesn’t involve boats, or his receding hairline that won over their hearts, then?”

You don’t recall, huh? I almost taunted. Instead, I pleaded, “Hector.”

“No, please, enlighten me. What exactly makes a man who pursues a woman for her beauty alone with no regard for her feelings, dreams, and aspirations such a fine and irreplaceable suitor?”

I knew he was angry at me, but gods, did he have to make it sound as though my parents were monsters and I some mindless puppet?

Of course , they had asked for my permission. In fact, we discussed my union with Lord Jasper several times before they allowed him to officially propose to me. At the end of the day, they just wanted me to have a life of greater opportunity and for the family to gain a title. And there was nothing wrong with that. Marrying Lord Jasper, who was second cousin to the King of Thaloria, would have brought nothing but honor and prosperity to the Valentia household.

Sure, Jasper was a little... ungainly, and, yes, I didn’t personally care about status, but it had been my family’s greatest wish to see me in the Dreaming Palace, working



for the Queen. “Foresight and diplomacy—these are your gods-given gifts, Thea,” Mother would always admonish me. “Do you really want to waste them in dusty old Steria?”

Steria was not the problem, though. With its quaint market and picturesque houses, Steria was considered one of the most beautiful northern villages and even attracted tourists during harvest season. Steria wasn’t the reason I yearned for something greater than I was given, but the Castle. Within its walls I’d seen and experienced things beyond the wildest human imagination. Nothing in my life back home could compare to the grandness and sheer impossibility of this place. After a childhood of such wonder, only a city like Thaloria, where magic was taught like religion and breathed like the air, could appease my miracle-hungry heart. I understood now that Mother had recognized this about me all along. She just hadn’t believed me capable of surviving on my own out there, untitled and unmarried.

And at any rate, there were worse fates than marrying a complete stranger. I couldn’t promptly think of one, but I’m certain there were.

“Well, we didn’t get married anyway. So this conversation is pointless,” I muttered.

Hector’s face darkened like the sky before a storm. “Don’t tell me the wanker backed down.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, more pleased with this reaction than I had the right to be. “What if he did? Will you march into Thaloria and defend my honor?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I do not march . I will merely find and castrate him.”

“How chivalrous.”

He glared at me. “What happened?”

My stupid heart. That was what happened.

At eighteen, my life had been nothing more than an orderly checklist. After all, not all of us had castles in the sky that held the wisdom of the universe and enough magic to transform your perception of the impossible forever. Some of us had no choice but to live on land under the practical, unromantic light of reality. But in the end, my desire for impractical, romantic things grew larger than my desire to make my parents proud. It was selfish of me, I knew, but of all the sins, to put myself first did not seem so wretched.

I spent my whole life lost in pages of books that told stories of the bravery and passion of characters whose only duty lay with their hearts. And I wanted to live like that too. I wanted the chance to find out who I was when I didn't let the expectations of others reform me. I wanted to make a hundred heartbreaking mistakes and have the courage to pay for all of them. I wanted a love I was terrified to lose, agony and rapture inseparable from each other. And I didn't want a happy ending. Only the beginning of something worth fighting for.

"I was too selfish to go through with it," I admitted, releasing a sigh from the cage of my chest.

A spark of relief flared in his eyes. "Good," he said. "You ought to be selfish. It's your life." Then, with a bit more restraint, he asked, "Were Eleanor and Ajax upset?"

I curled my fingers under the edge of the bench, desperate for something to hold on to. "They were surprised, mostly, but they forgave me. And Queen Eloise kept me at the court regardless."

Hector snorted. "To find another husband, no doubt."

Heat crawled over the sides of my neck, frustration sizzling in my veins.

The Queen of Thaloria didn't keep me in her service out of magnanimity but because I'd proven myself a formidable diplomat and a careful advisor, someone who didn't need familial connections to uphold a position in her court.

It was hard at first. For the longest time, I felt like a little girl abandoned in the middle of nowhere. Until I didn't. Until I realized that my will was greater than my reality. I stopped telling myself the same old story that I was only there to appease someone else's ambition. I had ambition and hope and determination in my veins. I wanted to stay in Thaloria, and I made this dream come true.

But, of course, Hector had never met this version of me. In his mind, I was still that eighteen-year-old girl who had let the world convince her that the only way she could achieve her dreams was through an obedient smile and a convenient marriage. And once Hector's good opinion was lost, nothing short of a miracle could recover it. That was the vampire nature, after all. They were absolute creatures, their passions exceptional and pure. When they loved you, they worshiped you like a god. When they lusted after you, they consumed the very essence of your being. When they hated you, they made you wish you'd never crossed their paths. Like the stars, they were the fixtures of the night, eternal and unchangeable. Or so they believed themselves to be. And in the end, what you believed you became.

"Is that what you think of me, Hector?" I asked, trying to keep my tone light despite the heaviness of my heart. "That I spend my days hunting husbands for sport?"

He looked away, the column of his throat bobbing. "You don't want to know what I think of you, Thea."

"That bad, huh?"

Several moments passed before either of us spoke or even moved. Then Hector let out a resigned sigh. "I can't believe you came here."

“I can’t believe you didn’t write to me,” I countered.

“We haven’t spoken in four years,” was his sole excuse, his fingers curling under the edge of the bench, next to my own.

“So what? We might not be friends anymore, but we’re not enemies, either,” I argued, and when he didn’t respond, I pressed closer.

We’d sat this close before, closer even. Upstairs, at the observatory, we used to lie down right next to each other and watch the pinpricks of stars twinkle beyond the glass ceiling. He used to lean over me, pointing and naming the constellations, while I nodded distractedly, thinking that he was prettier than all the universe put together. Back then, I wouldn’t feel the kind of disquietude I felt now, as if the very nearness of our bodies was a weapon pointed at my chest.

Under the bench, his pinky finger brushed mine, and my heart rushed to that spot, to the tantalizing sensation of a secret touch. “You don’t hate me,” I said, looking into his eyes.

His brows raised in wry amusement. “Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Telling you, of course. We have too many wonderful memories together to be enemies.”

“I can’t recall a single decent memory with you,” he claimed.

I laughed, some of the tension melting from my body. “You’ve always been such a terrible liar. It’s what I like most about you.”

“Not my irresistible vampire charm ?” he mocked.

“Oh, please, there is nothing charming about you. You have the social graces and general attractiveness of a bat.”

He shook his head, as indignant as ever. “You, Dorothea Valentia, are the bane of my existence.”

“Well, with a little work I’m sure I can be promoted to the destroyer of your soul,” I chirped, nudging his shoulder with mine.

Our faces leveled. His eyes fell to my mouth, then lower, to my throat, the tip of his tongue passing over his fuller bottom lip. I pulled back an inch, scrutinizing the purple shadows under his eyes. “Hector, when’s the last time you fed?”

He sat up straighter, his shirt straining against the new broadness of his shoulders. “I don’t know. Recently.”

Vampires, although perfectly able to consume regular human food, received most of their nutrition from blood, and they could only go a couple of months without it before they started to decay. From the look of him, I’d say he hadn’t consumed a single drop for at least two weeks now.

Swiftly, I got up and went to the round table by the window, where a collection of crystal decanters and empty glasses was arranged atop a silver tray. These bottles I knew contained blood and not wine, for they gleamed with condensation as the Castle kept them eternally chilled.

“I understand that you’re grieving,” I rasped, my throat tight as a vise. “But you have to take better care of yourself.”

In the tense silence that followed, I watched the blood swirl inside the crystal cup and felt it grow warm against my palm, the strong metallic smell crawling under my

nostrils. Bringing it back to him, I couldn't help but hold it as far away from me as possible. "Gods, what is this?"

"Bunny," said Hector.

I pouted. "Poor bunny."

As I offered him the glass, our hands touched, and a crackling current passed from his skin to mine. The vision came like that too—a strike of lightning running down the darkness of my mind, then a feeling of airlessness, of separating from my physical vessel. I saw a man, a tall, black-clad man, the only visible part of his body his hands, which were slender and so white they verged on grey. It seemed as though he was walking away from me, his dark figure shrinking toward an indistinct brightness. Then, in a heart-skip, he reappeared right before me, looming out of tendrils of fog in his black and crimson livery. Death, the words swelled like a hissing rush of wind in my mind. He's coming.

Hector took the glass from my hand, and the vision washed away, the familiar room reemerging in all its dark finery.

I hardly had the time to make sense of who or what I'd just seen before I became painfully aware of the way I stood over Hector, right between his spread knees. I was so close I could see the chiseled valley of his sternum, peering through the undone collar of his shirt.

Slowly, without tearing his gaze from mine, Hector set the glass aside and reached out a hand as if to grip my hip. I froze in anticipation, but his fingers paused mere inches away, flexing over the fabric of my dress.

An unfamiliar, all-consuming longing kindled in my blood. I wanted him to touch me, to grab me and pull me down on his lap. But even as he stood up, his open hand

glided from my hip to my waist without ever touching me, only the space around my body.

“Your heart is beating so fast,” he said in some kind of a trance. “Are you scared or excited?”

“Hector,” I croaked, my cheeks blazing. “You shouldn’t jest like that. We’re not children anymore.”

His chin tilted forward, his lips lowering to mine. “No, we’re not.”

Suddenly, the floor beneath our feet jolted. I pitched forward, falling headlong into Hector’s arms. Then the entire room tilted, the iron chandelier swaying dangerously overhead. Shelves popped open. Various knickknacks rolled over and crashed to the floor. The cup Hector had left atop the bench toppled down, and blood crawled around our shoes.

“What—what is happening?” I panted, holding on to him for dear life.

“The Castle,” Hector growled. “It’s moving.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

The dread-inducing use of the words Castle and moving in the same sentence was underlined by Hector's decision to slip an arm under my knees, lift me up in his arms, and bolt—literally bolt, for he shot out of the room and down the stairs faster than thunder could crack down a blackened sky.

The Castle became a swerving blur of colors and shapes, and although I had the sense of us darting forward, I also felt by the tug in my stomach that we were drifting up.

Very, very high up in the air.

His velocity, or perhaps the Castle's velocity—I couldn't tell the difference anymore—increased rapidly, and the ribbon in my hair unraveled with a flourish and flew away. Dizzily, I watched it go over Hector's shoulder, the white silk fading fast into the darkening distance until my nausea became so acute that I had to snap my eyes shut.

“Hector! Let me down!” I shrieked, but I'd fastened my arms so tightly around his neck I doubted he could peel me off him even if he tried.

Hector jumped over the landing and finally put me down on my feet by the entrance. I teetered helplessly, raising my hands to cover my head as the chandelier-spangled ceiling hailed a shower of crystals over us. Hector wound an arm around my waist to keep me steady before he flung the front door open. A furious gust of wind whipped into the hall and thrust both of us back. My hair flew over my face. My dress blew up like a balloon. Then the room slanted, making the door shut and me fall forward. I



squealed, watching the marble rise up to hit me in the face, but Hector was quicker, and he managed to wedge his body between me and the floor to soften the impact.

For a moment, I just lay there, right on top of him, with my face buried in the crook of his neck while his two hands held firmly the back of my head.

“You okay?” he shouted so I could hear him over the manic roar of the wind outside the Castle. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

Our limbs entangled, and a fresh wave of embarrassment washed over me. Furiously, I shook my head and pushed myself up to a sitting position. But this was even worse. Now I was straddling him around the hips, with my skirts gathered around my waist and my palms pressing against the hard ridges of his abdomen.

“Get off me,” he grunted, his face heating.

“Well, help me,” I bristled, feeling as flustered as he looked.

In a flash of movement, Hector put me on my feet, then cast his enraged gaze toward the currently swaying ceiling. “Stop this, now!” he roared at the Castle, his clenched fists growing white at his sides. “I said stop moving, damn it!”

The Castle seemed to propel us even higher, making everything inside me drop and flip.

“Well, fuck you too!” Hector exploded, which was a shock all of its own, for I’d never heard him speak in such a manner before.

Shakily, I scrambled past the stairs to the row of windows, hiding under several mismatched draperies. As I drew back a set, a stream of golden light poured into the Castle and nearly blinded me. Squinting against it, I patted for the window’s latch,

and when the shuddering glass gave in, I stuck out my head, grabbing onto the sill with both hands.

To say that we were not near land anymore would be a wild understatement. We had drifted into the sky, and now we were cutting through the undulating swell of the clouds. Exquisitely colored clouds, glowing yellow and pink as the sun rose high over the tiny black dot that was the Kingdom of Kartha. Even the massive mountains encompassing the city looked minuscule from this height, their snowy peaks glistening like sugar jars left out in the heat. In the faraway distance, I could even make out the curve of the coast, the vast Sandrea Sea as hazy as a sun-dazzled apparition.

Suddenly, I felt Hector's solid body behind me, his big hand closing around my wrist. "Get away from there. You'll catch a cold," he gritted out, dragging me behind him so he could work the windowpane shut.

I touched a tremulous hand to my temple. "Where is it taking us?"

"Home," snarled Hector. "Lumia."

My heart shot up my ribcage and exploded like a firework. I could almost see the spray of sparks dancing at the edge of my vision. "Why is it taking us to Lumia?" I glared up at the Castle. "Why are you taking us to Lumia, you old wanker?"

Hector loomed over me, his windblown hair tumbling over his flaming eyes. "Because we have responsibilities and a schedule, which you interrupted."

"What responsibilities?" I croaked.

"I have to host the conclave in less than forty-eight hours, and you cannot be found here. Our meetings are private, Thea. You know this. You know not to come to the

Castle unannounced. What were you thinking?”

Something inside me convulsed, hardened. I gritted my teeth, resisting tears. But gods, I felt so... angry . With Hector, with myself, with the stupid Castle. My magic had tried to warn me, but I hadn't listened. I never listened.

“Okay,” I exhaled, trying to think through my increasing and perhaps childish desire to break down crying. “Okay, so once we reach land, I will go to the city and find a Curiosity Shop—”

“There are no Curiosity Shops in damned Lumia! These people treat magic like it's the fairy plague!”

“Stop yelling at me!” I shouted back, my voice silencing all the other noises of the Castle.

Hector retreated, his expression softening a little. “Thea,” he sighed. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

I took a moment to compose myself before I asked, “Isn't the ball usually held in the winter?”

“I'm not hosting a ball. Just the three families. For the ceremony.”

“Ceremony?”

Hector raised his arms at his sides, his exasperation reemerging from the shallows of his patience. “They're about to appoint me the new sovereign, obviously. And, please understand, I cannot start my reign by breaking the very laws that hold this society together. You're not a little kid anymore. Your presence here won't be tolerated, especially with the position you hold in the Thalorian Court. I can already hear them

accusing me of harboring human spies in the Castle. ”

Out of everything he said, only one thing stuck with me. The most bewildering one. “You? The sovereign?”

“Yes, of course, me,” he hissed. “This is the title my mother bequeathed me. I am the only surviving Aventine, lest you haven’t noticed.”

“But you hate vampire society. You said they’re nothing but a bag of cocks.”

“I never said bag of cocks. ”

“No, just that they’re a bunch of vicious bastards who only delight in plotting, fighting, and sucking blood, and that you want to live your life as far away from their insidious schemes and politics as possible.”

“I was a child,” he clipped. “I was a privileged, ungrateful, egotistical child who knew nothing of legacy and responsibility.”

Indeed, Hector had spent his entire life disdaining privileges others would kill for. But that hadn’t been out of ungratefulness. Hector had just been incredibly, heartbreakingly lonely. He was unique in every sense of the word, and that had made him more guarded than perhaps his own heart desired to be. To this day he was the only surviving dhampir known to history. The vampire condition was so intricate that most dhampir children, who were rare to begin with, died within a month of being born.

In the course of centuries, humans had nursed many myths and legends about the creatures of the night, but unlike what some of these stories claimed, vampires weren’t dead, and their bodily functions weren’t far from human. They had come from humans, after all, when long, long ago, Nazriat, the goddess of witchcraft,

cursed an entire village after they killed her half-human daughter.

The people had accused the young woman of making them ill so she could sell them her strange healing potions, and when her mother entered our Realm to find her child hanging from a tree, she cast the curse of vampirism upon them.

She took away their ability to walk in the sun, for they too had stolen the light of her life, and made them deathly allergic to juniper, which was one of the main ingredients in her daughter's healing potions. She gave them long lives so that they would experience the pain of loss over and over again as well as a hundred demons' strength so that they couldn't touch anything without destroying it. Their bodies became their prisons. Their blood became a poison. And since they wanted to behave like mindless, bloodthirsty animals, they would live like ones too, bound by their unquenchable thirst for blood, a thirst that oftentimes ate away any redeemable quality they might have possessed.

But the goddess had also made them beautiful, irresistible even, so that others might get drawn to them and experience the agony of their betrayal. And so the first creatures of the night were created. Creatures that were not supposed to mate with humans but be their natural enemies.

Hector was a miracle. A fate-kissed miracle. Even his name was touched by destiny. To hold, as he was born to hold our two worlds together.

Growing up, the human children feared him, while the vampire children tormented him endlessly, deeming him a weak halfling who was entirely unworthy of the holy Aventine name.

That dream he'd had of the two of us leaving behind vampire society and my family's expectations, working ordinary jobs, and living in a quaint little cottage in the middle of nowhere had not been a product of ungratefulness but of hope. Perhaps a silly

hope, for he was the son of Esperida, star-chosen and with a castle in the sky for a legacy, but still. He'd wanted to study history and become a professor, to grow a garden, and maybe learn to play the piano. And I had promised to do all that with him. I had promised to never leave him, never go far from him.

A promise I had broken.

"Hector," I said softly, "I hope you know that you don't have to honor your mother's legacy by sacrificing your future."

His face changed, hardened, revealing a part of his soul I never knew—dark, tempestuous, unforgiving.

He curled back his lips, his body drawing forward. "Says the girl who threw her entire life away to honor her family's wishes."

I knew fighting was pointless. It was just one ego clashing with another. But this time I couldn't hold myself back, couldn't bite the words down, and with a fresh swell of anger, I pressed forward too, bringing our faces a mere breath apart.

"What life?" I snapped. "I had nothing—"

"You had me."

"No, you had a plan. You had a dream. But not all of us live in magic castles in the sky, Hector. Some of us have to live on land, in the real world, where hard work doesn't always pay off, and sometimes people have to marry into a better future."

He jerked back as though I'd just slapped him across the face. "And you believe that I don't know that? How out of touch do you think I am?"

I shook my head, struggling to find the words that would finally make him see the difference between us. Hector was of the sky. I was of the land. And for a few brief, magical moments we had found each other in the middle, in a sweet but precarious in-between, until the opposing forces of what we were made of deep in our souls pulled us apart.

“You, like Esperida, are extraordinary,” I said. “You were put on this Realm to do extraordinary things. I’m just a human girl with barely any magic in my veins. And I know I broke my promise—”

“I don’t care about that stupid promise,” he snarled.

“Then why? Why is it so hard for you to understand that I had to think of my future?”

“I would have given you a future! I would have married you! I would have followed you to Thalaria! I would have given you the world!”

I stopped. Stopped breathing, moving, thinking.

For several thundering moments I could only stare at him, at the hurt that lay naked in his proud face. A mere whisper was all I was able to offer: “What?”

“This whole time you thought I was angry because you left me? Because I couldn’t be alone? I was not angry because you gave up on me, Thea. I was angry because you gave up on yourself. Because you let them convince you that you needed a man to make your dreams come true.”

He held back the silky strands of his hair in something like despair, his unraveling as rapid as our ascent in the air and as heavy as the cargo of clouds the sky carried above us.

“Have you any idea what it did to me?” he said, his voice like grains of sand. “To have no choice but to watch the most clever, capable, brilliant person I knew submit to the will of others like a mindless puppet. To know that the girl I loved was going to marry the first nobody her parents chose for her. A man she didn’t even know. A man she didn’t even love. Have you any idea what a torment it was to think that he was going to steal from you things that are only meant to be given in love? Your first kiss. Your first time.”

I could not speak. I was a jumble of confused thoughts and feelings, of things that hurt too much to admit.

Hector had never spoken of love, much less marriage, to me. Now I was drifting in the obliterating current of that one word— loved —and its faraway, irretrievable meaning.

“The girl you loved,” I rasped, both numb and aching all over. “Not love?”

Hector pulled himself together, returning to his usual sharp-edged reserve. “You shouldn’t have come, Thea,” he said steadily. “There is nothing left for you here.”

Before I could say anything, he disappeared, as swift and soundless as a ghost.

Once, on a hot summer night, I had asked him, When we’re older, will you go to Fairyland with me?

Thea , he’d told me, I’ll go to the ends of the world with you.

How silly I was, standing here in the deserted hall with tears in my eyes, realizing there was no distance Hector would cross with me anymore.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

A vision of myself standing in the middle of the Castle's library pierced me right between the eyes, and I decided it was probably wiser not to go against what fate had already written.

Perhaps the word vision was a bit dramatic, but I didn't know how else to describe the nature of my magic. First, I would get this tingling sensation at the nape of my neck, which would quickly shift into a feeling of weightlessness. Then the physical world would wash away, and scenes from the future would unravel before my wide-open eyes. Scenes that were often so brief and trivial that I almost felt like a fraud calling them visions and myself a real seer.

On the cusp of something— that was how I felt inside my skin. I spent every hour of every day waiting for the truth of my life to crack open and reveal itself to me.

Regardless, I gathered my skirts and stormed up the stairs, following the corridor that used to lead to the library, various lounging rooms, and the ballroom. After that I knew that another sweeping staircase led even higher to the observatory and Esperida's study, but I was certain the vision, no matter how fleeting, had shown me the library, for I'd gotten a glimpse of an impossibly high ceiling, black as the night sky and encrusted with just as many stars.

The familiar door with its gilded frame inlaid with whorls of nacre emerged at the end of the corridor, grand and mysterious like a portal to another world.

I hesitated before it with a ribbon of anxiety wrapped around my heart.

You shouldn't have come, Thea. There is nothing left for you here.

I wasn't sure if the feelings Hector had harbored for me once were as passionate as he'd described, but I did know his pride was formidable enough to have erased every trace of them after our separation. I also knew that pushing people away was what Hector did best. He never burdened others with the things he thought he could handle himself. He never said, I'm tired, or I'm lost, or I'm heartbroken . He never asked for help. So, now, I was going to ask for his help. I was going to stay here because I needed him. And if somewhere along the way he realized that he, too, needed someone to get through this, then I would be right here, by his side.

I took a heartening breath and opened the door.

The room was... different, as most things about the Castle were. Yes, the expansive walls were still covered with towering bookshelves stuffed full of books, promising you a sweet escape into the boundless realm of imagination, and yes, the ceiling was still a dark dome, holding the moon and all the other twinkling mysteries of the sky, but no celestial bodies were dancing amid the clouds, no glowing star was flooding the room in silver light. They were magnificently painted, but they were not alive .

Even the grand fireplace, which occupied most of the wall left from the door, was hollow and lightless behind its hive-like screen. In fact, the only light came from the stained glass window, casting cobweb shadows over the mahogany bookshelves.

Before me sprawled a series of cushioned couches and armchairs, floating over a sea of elegant rugs. The little wooden tables between them were all littered with stacks of books, unlit candles, and porcelain vases holding bouquets of dead roses. And in the center of it all, on a large velvet couch, lay Hector, absorbed in a massive black book. On the side table next to him, a half-empty cup of blood glinted vividly, and as I sailed a bit closer, I was pleased to see that the purple shadows beneath his eyes had vanished and the color had returned to his face.

Well, at least he was no longer starving himself.

See? I was good for him. The idiot needed me here. He just didn't know it yet.

Hector changed the page on the book with an indolent flick of his thumb, continuing to ignore me.

"So," I prompted, strolling inside the room with my arms wrapped around my middle for some warmth. "Are you going to tell me what happened to the Castle?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, it's cold and drab and miserable."

"It can also hear you."

"And what's with all the ugly paintings?" I persisted. "How can you even sleep with all these red-eyed skulls watching you day and night?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, what exactly did you want the Castle to display for you in its moment of grief? Baskets of kittens? Beach landscapes? Perhaps one of those caricatures of half-naked men one finds in the backs of those infernal books you like so much?"

"Do not insult my books."

The way he returned his attention to that ridiculous tome of his without so much as a hum of acknowledgment was a study in indifference.

"Insufferable man," I hissed, whirling around.

I intended to go down to the kitchen and look for some firewood. But then I noticed

it. Atop the pedestal by the door, the roses inside the small crystal vase were in bloom.

Slowly, I veered again, my mouth falling open as I watched the bookshelves lit up from within, the countless rows of books glowing vibrant and precious all around me. The sky above exploded like a firework, stars twinkling softly in the tender hands of the Castle's eternal night. Under the sea of stars, the sea of candles flickered to life, tiny flames bobbing up one by one. Next to them, the dead bouquets unfurled into blooming buds, dark red and pulsing like my heart, which was about to grow wings and fly up into the coruscating ceiling.

The sudden uproar of the fire made me spin once more as crackling flames emerged on the hearth, painting the screen a dreamy russet and enclosing the room in a wonderfully balmy embrace.

I could not remember the last time I'd felt such overwhelming joy. Perhaps it was the last time I'd been here, in this very room, when Hector and I were still friends and life was more dream and less responsibility.

I heaved a sigh. It felt as though I hadn't taken a breath in four years. The smells of the Castle filled my lungs. Woodsmoke and roses and the magic of it all.

"Hello, old friend," I whispered, grinning so wide my cheeks hurt.

By the armchair closest to me, a round table popped into existence. The silver tray atop it was overflowing with two pots, one of peppermint tea and one of hot chocolate, as the calligraphy on the little tags that looped around the curvy handles informed me. Right next to them glinted a crystal jar of star-shaped sugars and a tiny pitcher of steamed milk, which was accompanied by a basket of warm pastries and a mouthwatering array of breads and jams. Two different butter bells, one regular and one herbed, lay next to the empty cups and carafe of chilled water, while on top of the

serving plate rested a cloth napkin folded around the stem of a single red rose.

“There,” said Hector in a monotone voice.

“So the problem wasn’t the Castle,” I accused, hooking my hands on my hips. “It was you.”

“Just sit down and eat your breakfast. I won’t have you fainting on me. And drink some water. I can smell the dehydration from here.”

“And what do hydrated people smell like?”

“Like a five-course meal.”

“You’re shameless.”

“And you’re about to pass out. Drink your water.”

Now that he mentioned it, I did feel a bit lightheaded, but to be fair, our accelerating ascent into the clouds held most of the blame.

As I took a seat on the plush armchair next to the beautifully set table, a woolen blanket and a book materialized upon the armrest. And just like that, life was worth living again. Everything was so comfortable and cozy I was practically purring with satisfaction, but when I noticed the title on the bright pink cover, I nearly jumped up again, squealing at the top of my lungs.

Hector startled. “What in the world—”

“This is it! It’s the new Lord Verlion book! I can’t believe the Castle has this already!”

“You’re shrieking like a banshee over a book?”

“This is not just any book. This is The Rogue Lord Verlion ,” I argued, my voice still having trouble reassuming its normal volume. “I heard this is going to be even more steamy than the previous ones, which is a serious feat considering Verlion has been going at it with the heroine since book two.”

“How lovely for her,” Hector muttered, raising his book to his nose.

“Fine,” I relented, helping myself to a blueberry muffin and a creamy cup of hot chocolate. “What is your book about?”

“The division of the holy brotherhood after the first starfall. You know, to this day, there are people who believe stardust is sacred and should not be used by mortals,” said Hector very seriously.

“How interesting,” I cooed.

“I’m almost done with it if you want to give it a go.”

“Do they kiss and make up in the end?”

He cast me a quick but perfectly sardonic glance. “The priests? No, they do not kiss, I’m afraid.”

“I refuse to read anything that doesn’t have a happy ending. Real life is miserable enough.”

Hector changed the page, murmuring wryly, “Well, they did send a siren after the anti-stardust leader. So before he was murdered, he did have at least one happy ending .”

“Ah, he makes jokes,” I teased.

And just as I was about to say that his brooding had undergone significant improvement ever since I came here, Hector made a frustrated sound deep in his throat. “What do you want from me, Dorothea?”

“Dorothea? Things are getting serious.”

Suddenly, the cushion beneath me turned solid and gave me a swift but firm smack that made me leap up to my feet. “Your Castle just slapped my bum!”

Hector, the bastard, didn’t even pretend to look surprised. “It will do it again if you don’t tell me why you came here.”

I glared at him, sailing far away from the apparently sentient chair. “And here I thought you were a gentleman.”

“If you don’t have anything to say, please leave me alone, Dorothea . Otherwise you give me no choice but to prove to you how much of a gentleman I am not.”

The words wise-ass wanker burned at the tip of my tongue, but we were supposed to be reasonable adults now, so instead of verbally prodding him, I set my blanket and book aside and went to hover over him. And I continued to hover until he broke. Very mature, I know.

“Will you stop staring at me?”

“Why?” I crooned. “Don’t you like it when I stare at you?”

Hector shifted in his seat. “It’s making me... itch.”

“Well, I have questions.”

“Questions.”

“About the ceremony.”

He lifted his eyes at the ceiling, searching for his lost patience, most likely. “You already know what happens at the ceremony.”

I did—partly.

I knew an unbreakable bond was forged between vampires when they consumed each other’s blood. So when Esperida had first assembled the conclave, she had drunk from a chalice of ceremonial wine containing the blood of every member of each family, thus ensuring their eternal loyalty to her.

What I didn’t know was what that meant for Hector. Did he have to drink their blood as well? Were they going to accept him despite the circumstances of his condition? Or would they try to steal what was rightfully his?

I bit into my lower lip, disquiet lapping over me like icy water. “Aren’t you... worried?”

Hector’s face hardened with immediate understanding. “We are a society of laws. A society of balance. If this balance gets disturbed, our relationship with the humans will collapse as well, and then we ’ ll be back where we started, being hunted and put down like wild beasts. By challenging me, they put at risk the very foundations of vampire prosperity.”

So they could challenge him.



Oh, that wasn't good. That wasn't good at all.

"How would they go about it?" I croaked. "Challenging you, I mean."

Hector pursed his lips, considering it. "They wouldn't attack me in my own abode. There's no honor in that. Instead, they would... nominate a fighter, if you will. Someone strong enough to take on the challenge. But that's highly unlikely."

"Do you trust them that much?"

"I trust their need for peace and their intolerance of change," he clarified. "I trust their fear."

"Of you?"

His eyes snapped on mine, clear as ice-melted streams. "Of the Castle, Thea. Whoever has the Castle, has the most power, and whoever has the most power has the title. The Castle is bound to me by blood, and the families will have no choice but to respect that." He paused, and although he seemed to be as composed as ever, I felt the rise of apprehension in his blood as though it were my own. "I 'll make them respect it."

"And I'm supposed to pack my suitcase and leave you all alone with them just because of a stupid law?" I huffed.

"You realize that I'm a grown man, right?" he countered, and perhaps it was the way he said it in that deep voice of his or the way his body was sprawled on that couch, masculine and marvelous, but the only response that rose to my lips was, Believe me, I've noticed.

Thankfully, I was able to swallow down the words and focus on the matter at hand.

Part of my mind was already weaving the threads of a plan. A dangerous, ridiculous, absurd plan. But these usually proved to be the best ones, anyway.

“I have an idea,” I prompted.

Hector sighed dramatically. “Spare me.”

“We can pretend we’re married.”

Even the tips of his ears turned bright red. “Excuse me?”

“Before you explode, let me elaborate. Spouses are allowed to be present at your ceremonies, even human spouses. Eron accompanied Esperida everywhere, didn’t he? And besides, this is about you, not the old bastards. You’re about to be appointed sovereign . This should be a celebration, not a somber ceremony. And you should celebrate with someone who loves you. Since Eron and Esperida can’t be here, I will. The main reason Queen Eloise kept me at the court for so long is because I happen to be an excellent diplomat. You, on the other hand, are as unsociable and disagreeable as an incarcerated bat. If I stay, I can make sure that everything goes smoothly with the bloodsucking pricks and that you have the wonderful night you deserve. I mean, when was the last time you had actual fun? The last time you laughed and danced and didn’t take yourself so seriously? And you know you can’t have fun without me. The entirety of our friendship was based on the fact that you have no idea how to enjoy yourself without my delightful company.”

Hector shut his book, pulled himself up, and looked at me more earnestly now that he understood I wasn’t joking. “First of all, stop comparing me to a bat. This is exactly the heinous slander that perpetuates interspecies prejudice. And at any rate,” he continued crossly, “ if I’d gotten married, don’t you think that as the son of the vampire sovereign I would have invited the three families to the ceremony?”

“That can be easily explained,” I chimed merrily. “My family didn’t want me to marry a vampire, so we eloped. After that we didn’t get the chance to tell anyone because of our loss. We were in mourning. But now, as you’re about to be appointed the new sovereign, it is both timely and appropriate to introduce your human companion to vampire society. And in a couple of months, you can simply tell them that we decided to separate. Interspecies marriages rarely work, anyway. Just look at the statistics.”

“Thea,” Hector said firmly. “We cannot fake a marriage.”

“And why not?” I persisted. “It will only be for a night, and we already know everything there is about each other. And that way, I get to safely remain here, and you don’t have to fight about it with the old bastards. Let’s face it, Hector, you have never been a very good fighter. In case you’ve forgotten, I’ve seen you wield a blade.”

The faintest flicker of amusement flared in his eyes. “Well,” he drawled, “I have a sword now.”

“A sword?”

“A magic sword.”

I glowered at him. “Is that a euphemism? Are you going to tell me how you wrap your hand around the hilt and—”

“Dorothea.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you and your magic sword. ”

“Oh, for the love of the stars,” he hissed, leaping up from the couch with one hand in

the air.

At once, a fierce whoosh ripped through the room as a giant sword carried itself past the doorsill and into Hector's open fist. He grabbed it midair, brandishing the blade in one fluid movement before extending it toward me, silver flashing at the edge of my vision. The needle-thin point levitated a few inches from the bare skin of my throat, but before I could protest, Hector drew it back with another masterful twirl.

"Bloody Tartarus," I gasped, touching my fingers to where the blade had almost nicked me. "You have a magic sword."

The weapon itself was of remarkable craftsmanship, long and wide with an intricately carved hilt encrusted with a blood-red gemstone at the top. As Hector released it from his hold, the blade simply floated by itself next to him, waiting for the next command. A magic sword, indeed.

It was both frustrating and wretchedly embarrassing to realize that all I had managed to acquire these past four years were brand new levels of anxiety, an intractable book addiction with a subsequent fixation on unethical male leads, and a stack of letters from my mother in which she subtly but effectively criticized every single aspect of my life.

"I had no idea the Castle could make such weapons," I admitted, genuinely impressed.

"The Castle is not some kind of treasury," Hector bristled. "I earned this brawling with a minotaur."

I gaped at him, uncertain if I should be more astounded by the fact that Hector had brawled with a minotaur or that he had brawled altogether. "You, Hector Aventine, fought a minotaur."

He shrugged. "It has been a busy year."

I shook my head incredulously. "And to think there was a time I could pin you down just by sitting on top of you."

"I don't think this would work now," he said in a low, almost sultry tone. "But you're always welcome to try."

Was he flirting with me? Surely there was no way.

Hector Aventine did not flirt. In fact, he did not engage in anything that could bring any amount of joy to a warm-blooded person. But then again, the Hector I knew didn't brawl with minotaurs either.

I squinted at him in an air of mock suspicion. "You really know how to use this thing?"

"Would you like to see me use it, Thea?" he offered, his fangs showing just a little. "You might have to come here and wrap your hand around its long, hard hilt, though."

"Okay, that was a euphemism."

A smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth, but he brushed it away with a finger.

"Well, look at that," I chimed. "He almost smiled."

He rolled his eyes, reassuming the seat next to me while the sword whooshed itself out of the room. It was even polite enough to close the door behind it.

"Your plan," Hector prodded.

“What about it?”

“It’s not going to work.”

“And why is that, Lord Aventine?”

“Don’t you think you’d have my scent and at least one bite mark on you if we were married?”

My breath hitched. “You’d feed on your own wife?”

“I’d bite my own wife because she would beg me to do so. Vampires don’t always bite to feed, you know. Sometimes they do it to pleasure their partners, and other times they do it to claim a human as their own.”

It was a cold, bitter feeling to realize how separate Hector and Esperida had kept me from their world and how blissfully I’d embraced my ignorance all these years. Perhaps they’d done it to protect me, to shield me from the darkness of their nature. Perhaps their clandestine universe stretched beyond the reach of human comprehension. Or perhaps they hadn’t believed me capable of overcoming my innate human prejudice against the unknown. Either way, I was sailing upon new waters now.

“I didn’t know that,” I whispered.

“Of course you didn’t,” was all Hector said. There was no resentment in his voice, but there was sadness in it—sadness for all the inherent differences that had rendered some parts of ourselves unknowable to each other.

“Is the bite...” I hesitated, embarrassment crawling over the skin of my face.

“Yes?” Hector encouraged.

“Is it really as euphoric as they say?”

The question didn’t surprise him. Still, his response held more nonchalance than it ought to. “So I’ve been told.”

It took me a moment to realize what this really meant. “You’ve fed on humans?”

It was impossible to imagine Hector drinking from the vein. In my mind, he had always been more human than creature, and yet, here he sat now with the unperturbed insouciance of an immortal, not a single human spark in his eyes.

“Why does this surprise you so, Thea? I am a vampire, after all, and there are more than a few willing humans out there.”

Deep in my chest, I felt the jab of something stronger than anger and more persistent than shock. I would have called it jealousy had it not been absurd to be jealous of any poor woman who’d find herself in the arms of a bloodthirsty vampire. Even if that vampire was Hector. Even if he pulled that faceless girl into his arms and caught her mouth with his before claiming her throat. Even if his hands roamed well past the curve of her waist and he alternated between drinking from her neck and stroking a gentle hand between her thighs. Or who knew? Perhaps he was skilled enough to do both at the same time.

Bells of mortification started ringing in my head. I had to dig my nails into the skin of my palms just to shake the untoward image off my mind. “I’m just... confused,” I croaked, which was a horrendous understatement of my current emotional state. “You said that you’d never drink from the vein. That the mere idea disgusts you.”

“Things change.”

“Evidently,” I clipped. “Or perhaps you took a lover. Your mystery woman.”

I meant it as a taunt, but the sudden shift in his expression told me I hadn’t fallen far from the truth.

Indeed, why was I so surprised? Hector was a grown man. Of course, he’d taken a lover. Probably someone older and experienced who taught him how to fight minotaurs and drink blood from the vein and flirt like it was a sport.

I should be happy for him, shouldn’t I?

Then what was with this sick feeling in my stomach?

Hector stood from the couch only to cast his unforgiving gaze upon me. “Did you think I spent the past four years pining for you, Thea? If I said that I was miserable and alone and that life without you was not worth living, would you be more pleased?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed, skittering to my feet. “I just...I’ve never thought of you in that way.”

“Like a man, you mean.”

“Like a vampire,” I bit out. “A vampire who feeds on his lovers.”

The space between us narrowed to a grain of sand, his face dangling so close over mine that if I got up on my toes, our lips would touch. “Perhaps you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“Yes, so it seems.”



My chin tilted up just as his slanted down, and whatever we meant to say became the air we exchanged. For a few moments the only sounds in the room came from the crackling fireplace and the howling wind as it sped past the Castle. Everything else was stillness and ache and a thousand unsaid things.

The smallest flicker of surrender bobbed up in his eyes—hot, unsteady—then he pulled back with a sigh and aimed for the door. “Once we land, I’ll go into town and arrange a carriage for you. It will take you to the coast. From there you can board the first ship to Thaloria.”

A certainty rose in me. I gathered my skirts and chased after him. “No.”

He paused. “No?”

“I can’t leave.”

“Sure you can. You’ve left before.”

I wedged myself between him and the door and said the only thing that mattered anymore. “Hector. We lost them.”

That inexorable line between his brows deepened. Seconds passed. A minute. He didn’t say a word. He was a statue, cold and unwavering, his eyes like bits of stone. And perhaps his precious pride was contagious too, for I suddenly couldn’t stand the thought of him watching me cry.

I turned to leave, my chest hollowed.

But then, “Thea,” he said. It was like a spell. My entire body stopped as he cast it. “Don’t go.”

In the end, that was all it took for both of our prides to melt away. Two words. Don't go.

He curled a hand around my nape and pulled me into his arms. I clenched my teeth, pressing my lips together to keep them from trembling. "I..." I had no words. I had nothing but this striking, overwhelming sense of grief. My insides felt burned to cinders.

Hector pulled me closer, his body enveloping mine. The scent of his skin flooded me like the sorrow. "It's okay if you want to cry," he said in my ear. "I did."

I wasn't sure why I needed to hear this, why I needed permission to experience the full magnitude of my grief, but for the first time in a very long time, I let myself weep. I was inconsolable, incoherent. There was pain in me I didn't recognize, wounds so old I could not remember where they'd come from. It was as though this one terrible thing had magnified all the others, and now everything inside me was torn wide and bleeding.

Hector made a low, soothing sound deep in his throat, his fingers combing through my hair. "I know," was all he murmured. "I know."

In that moment he could have told me anything, and it would have soothed me all the same. I could not explain it. His arms felt more like home than any place, any house, any magic castle ever could. And somehow, as I wrapped my hands around his waist and pressed my face to his chest, my tears stopped tasting like despair.

When I was alone, my grief was a demon that I had to banish, to exorcise from my bones. But when we were together, it was a sacred thing, something we needed to honor, give it its own space, and live with it until it wasn't so unbearable. Maybe the strength to move on lay in the surrender. Maybe it wasn't time, the fading of memories that healed you in the end. Maybe it was the acceptance of the terrible

thing that happened to you.

“I don’t want to leave,” I whispered, wallowing in the lovely familiarity of being held by a pair of hands that had held me before. “I came all this way because I need you right now. And I think you need me too.”

His fingers left my hair and cupped the sides of my throat, his thumbs at my jawbone. Something about his expression made me think that he was going to kiss me: the raw apology in his eyes, the softness of his brow, his lips that parted just so. But Hector only pulled himself straight, nodding for me to follow. “Come.”

I sniffled, still blinking tears from my vision. “Where are we going?”

“Well,” he breathed, casting me an almost mischievous glance over his shoulder, “if you’re going to pretend to be my wife, you better look the part.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

Every step Hector took was a transformation. Chandeliers flew up, broken crystals rearranged themselves into new, more brilliant patterns, hearths lit up and roared in excitement, flowers unfurled and blossomed, and curtains drew back to let the light in. It wasn't the extravagant wonderland from my childhood memories where even the air was a thing of magic, but it was certainly a start.

The day outside had progressed to afternoon, and the sky was a sweep of yellow with a smattering of periwinkle clouds. In the distance, the colors faded into a dreamy, milky white as if we were heading toward the heart of a pearl.

I followed Hector down the corridor and up the winding stairs, wishing we could sit down and talk instead. I wanted to know everything. Everything he was feeling. Everything he was thinking. Everything he had done during the time we'd spent apart. He was right in front of me, yet I felt like I was observing him from a great distance. There were no walls between us I could break down, only vast, unexplored space. But even conquering the unknown didn't seem impossible within these walls.

As we passed by the observatory, I was delighted to find that my favorite part of the Castle remained intact. The fountain of the universe's wishes. Or at least, that was what I called it. It was made from the same peculiar stone as the facade of the Castle, pure white and ever-glistening. Its waters were the color of fresh moss, trickling from a tipped amphora into the round pool. The bottom was a mosaic of gold and green, littered with bronze star-shaped coins. Every time a star fell, a new coin appeared in the pool, and every few years some of the coins vanished, dissolving into stardust.

This is part of the original structure of the Castle , Esperida told me once. I believe that my star was very special before it fell—a king of the sky—and that these are the wishes the gods bestowed and still bestow upon it. That’s why the Castle can’t touch land. Where else would wishes belong but the sky?

How solacing it was to think that even the gods and spirits and nymphs had things to wish for and that we were not alone in our ceaseless dreaming. That was why I loved the Castle so much. Within its walls I was allowed to be incomparably marvelous and, at the same time, perfectly human.

Filled with nostalgia, I passed my fingers under the amphora and felt its divine water glide over my hand like liquid silk. Suddenly, two iridescent butterflies leapt from the amphora’s lip, fluttering their delicate wings around my hand. “Hector, look!” I exclaimed, but he was already gone, his tall silhouette a mere shadow in the distance.

I gathered my skirts and hurried after him to the funniest part of the Castle: a single stretch of corridor where the floor was the ceiling and the ceiling was the floor. Spots of upside-down gravity weren’t uncommon in the Faraway North, although we hardly ever had to battle such spaces in our own abodes.

“You should go ahead first,” I suggested, dreading that initial heart-dropping swoop.

Hector obliged, knowing well how terrible I was at sailing from one line of gravity to the other. Unlike us, vampires were so good at adapting to alternate gravity that it had prompted some humans to believe that they were able to sleep upside down, which is where the whole bat comparison started.

Of course, Hector could not find his rest standing and certainly not standing upside down, but he did finish walking the trail of black and white squares with a perfect flip of his body, landing gracefully upon the original path.

Having no other choice, I followed, and when I reached the final set of squares right before the gravitational pull changed, I shut my eyes, sucked in a heartening breath, and forced myself to step forward into my inevitable fall.

The feeling was absolutely wretched, not to mention stomach-turning, but Hector caught me as easily as ever, murmuring in that soothing, soft-spoken way of his, “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

I cracked one eye open and found us standing on the other side of the corridor, limbs entangled. His hands were firm on the curve of my hipbones, and his face hovered so close to mine I could see nothing but the ribbon of redness that had crept over the bridge of his nose.

Gods knew I loved watching him blush.

I smiled dreamily. “Some things never change, do they?”

Hector untangled himself from me, straightened the collar of his shirt, and continued down the corridor without so much as a word.

After a few more strides, the hall opened up into a familiar foyer, where two new rooms seemed to have materialized in my absence. One had a plain wooden door, brown and gnarled, while the other was a charming gilded arch adorned with rose carvings.

Hector closed his hand around the rosebud-shaped doorknob, and with the faintest hint of excitement in his voice, announced, “I think you’re going to like this.”

As the door creaked open, he stepped aside so I could enter first into what could only be described as a treasure trove.

It was a small, cozy space with a low, round ceiling threaded with ivy. The carpeted floor was cluttered with colorful bolts of fabrics, chests glimmering with rare gemstones and fine jewelry, and trunks overflowing with clothes and undergarments, wisps of lace and silk springing out of velvet casings. Along the walls, bronze racks were tilting from the weight of gowns so exquisite I believed them fairy-made, while the pink chaise in the center of the room lay strewn with elaborate hairpieces and strings of glowing pearls.

“Are the clothes to your liking?” Hector asked with an attentive expression on his face.

“Are you joking? I feel like I’ve stepped into a dream. But...” I hesitated, trapping the corner of my bottom lip between my teeth. “I can’t wear Esperida’s things. It doesn’t feel right.”

Hector rubbed the nape of his neck, the billowy sleeve of his shirt flying back to reveal the sculpted lines of his forearm. “These were not my mother’s,” he said. “Do you remember the small orchard my father had in Lumia?”

I nodded eagerly, intrigued to see where he was going with this.

“Well,” he exhaled, “I got into business with a few of the local farmers, and we ended up expanding it along the borders between Lumia and Sandrea City, and to tell you the truth, we’re making a fortune exporting our goods. Lumia has some of the best soil in the Realm. We may not have the North’s magic or the South’s technology, but that doesn’t mean the kingdom has to stay poor. We just have to utilize the resources that we have.”

I stared at him, feeling amazed and delighted and wistful all at once. I’d missed it. He’d made himself into this incredible man, and I’d just... missed it.

“Hector,” I said, a bittersweet smile hanging across my face. “I’m so proud of you.”

Hector shook his head. “There’s nothing to be proud of. It’s like you said. I had certain opportunities set out for me.”

“But you made the best of them,” I argued.

“At any rate,” he diverted, locking his wrists behind his back. “I traveled a lot these past few years, and since I had my own money for the first time in my life, I kind of cultivated the habit of collecting things.”

I bent over the overflowing chest at my feet and fished an ivory corset out of the heap. “Have you also cultivated the habit of wearing corsets? Because I don’t think this is the appropriate size for your bust.”

Hector leaned against the ornate dresser, his featherlight attention wandering to the curve of my breasts. From the color that had crawled up the sides of his neck, you’d think he was imagining me wearing this corset and nothing else. But perhaps I only flattered myself.

“You know, that’s real gold,” he drawled, pointing a finger at the stitching along the neckline.

I pulled the undergarment off me, tutting as I continued my rummaging through the chest. “Your wealth disgusts me,” I claimed, but when I got my hands on the prettiest little comb, decorated with red roses along its arch, I found myself exclaiming, “Oh, can I have this?”

“You can have everything.”

“Have you gone mad?”



“I’m serious. These don’t mean anything to me anymore.”

Letting the little comb slip back into the chest, I approached him warily. “Did you buy these things for your mystery woman?”

Hector didn’t say anything, only looked away.

“What happened?” I persisted.

His jaw clenched. “You don’t want to know, Dorothea.”

If I could describe Hector in one phrase, I would say, soul-crushing devotion . He was like Esperida in that way. To be the object of his devotion was to be a part of a brighter, kinder reality, and to be severed from it was the cruelest punishment.

That was how I felt standing there in the unbearable silence. Punished. And it was unfair. It was unfair because I’d lost my best friend too. I’d been left behind too. Yes, I had put my future over our friendship, but he had put his pride over it, and how was that any better? He could have told me how he really felt, or if that had been too hard, he could have written to me later. He could have reached out. I’d spent four years thinking he hated me when in reality he’d just... forgotten me.

Not having the strength for this conversation right now, I floundered helplessly in the tension until my gaze fell upon something that could break it.

I swiped the crimson mask from the array atop the couch and held it up to my face. “Okay, what does this remind you of?”

Immediate realization braced Hector’s face. “Oh gods. That ridiculous masquerade ball Mother threw for my sixteenth.”

“Now that was a party,” I crooned, passing my fingers over the delicate lacework of the mask.

“It was not a party,” grumbled Hector. “It was a fever dream.”

“Do you remember that Arawn got so drunk he fell into the fountain? The Castle almost kicked him out.”

Hector snorted. “He still has nightmares about that night.”

Arawn’s golden face focused in the center of my memories. His delicate features. His pale blue eyes. The messy heap of his blonde hair. “Have you kept in touch with him?”

“I saw him about a year ago in Thaloria. And we write to each other regularly.”

I pressed my lips together, resentment churning in my stomach. “You visited Thaloria.” But not me, I wanted to say, but couldn’t find the will. You didn’t even write to me. You didn’t even bother to learn if I got married.

“I was visiting the Celestines,” Hector clarified. “Calix and Esther wished to appoint Arawn the new Lord of the North.”

“Why? Did something happen to them?”

“Well, Esther is past five hundred. So she thought it was time her son took on the responsibility.”

“But Arawn is so young.”

Hector arched a brow. “He’s a year older than us.”

Most of the families' children were around our age, for Esperida's union with Eron had signified the first period of interspecies peace and therefore the first time in history where vampires felt secure enough to settle down and create families of their own.

Still, I had a hard time wrapping my head around it. When had we all grown up so much?

I clutched the mask to my chest, holding the memory of that masquerade ball in my mind for as long as I could until the scene, as all things lost in time, fluttered away, and I was shoved back into the bleak, uncertain now. "I wish Esperida and Eron were here. This place is not the same without them," I whispered, fresh tears stinging in my eyes. I dropped my lashes quickly so he wouldn't see. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me."

"It comes in waves," he said. "Grief, I mean. A scent. A melody. Words strung together in a certain way. It lurks and strikes when you least expect it. Eating at you. Draining you. Like a vampire."

My heart twisted painfully in my chest.

Was that how Hector saw himself? As the creature equivalent to grief?

I'd always thought that he despised vampire society because of the responsibility that came with his place in it. I never would have imagined that he also despised the part of himself that, in my eyes, was what made him so magical.

Before I could assemble something meaningful enough to say, Hector veered to face the dresser. He pulled something out of the first drawer and, wordlessly, came to drop it on my palm.

A simple gold wristlet.

A ceremonial wristlet.

Hector squeezed his hand into its larger twin before helping me with my own. “And... we’re married now. Congratulations, Lady Aventine,” he announced dryly.

Running my fingers over the cold, sleek metal, I recalled his words from earlier, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d gotten these for us on an adolescent impulse. With a raw ache in my throat, I lifted my head and looked into his sunburst eyes. “You know I didn’t know, right?”

Understanding hardened his face. “Come on, Thea,” he said with a short, bitter laugh. “You knew. You were constantly mocking me about it.”

“I never mocked you,” I protested. “Sometimes I teased you, yes, but that was the only way I could get some sort of reaction out of you.”

“I told you I was willing to leave the Castle. I told you I would move to Thaloria so you could study magic. I told you I would follow you to the ends of the world. But you never believed me. You never took me seriously,” he said with the air of someone who wasn’t bothered much by it anymore.

“It’s not that I didn’t believe you. It was just a sacrifice I couldn’t ask of you. Not when I knew that one day I would have to betray myself to honor my family. You ought to understand this, Hector. You’re doing the same thing now, aren’t you?”

He kept his head high, his proud shoulders straight. “I suppose we’re all products of our families wishes.” With one long stride he reached the door, dismissing the conversation. “I have to make sure the guest rooms are ready for tomorrow. I’ll move your things to my bedroom as well.”

I blinked, bewildered, before it dawned on me that we were supposed to be married now. Married people did not sleep in separate bedrooms. Not newlyweds, at least.

Considering how nervous I felt at the mere thought of sharing a room with Hector, maybe this plan of mine was ridiculous, if not downright childish. I should probably move into an inn for a couple of days and return to the Castle after the ceremony. Yes, that would be the most reasonable thing to do.

So why was I staring at him like a flustered idiot instead of suggesting it?

“Alright,” was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

Did I like the idea of pretending to be Hector’s wife, or was it the allure of joining one of the most exclusive societies in the Realm that made me want to stay here so much? Of course, a momentary lapse of sanity wasn’t completely out of the question. I should probably write to Nepheli and advise her to get herself a new best friend, for this one had gone completely and irrevocably bonkers.

“How flattering that you’re wincing at the thought of sharing a room with me,” muttered Hector.

“I’m not—”

“Don’t worry, Dorothea,” he cut me off, pronouncing my name like it was some kind of a curse. “We’ll only have to make it look like we’re sharing a bed.”

“What’s going to happen to us if we get caught?”

“We won’t get caught,” he said doubtlessly.

I narrowed my eyes. “How can you be so sure?”

He leaned against the door, hands in his pockets. Something dark and thrillingly dangerous gleamed in his eyes, and for the first time in a very long time, Hector Aventine smiled, and it was a cutting, deadly thing. “Because I’m good at pretending, and you love playing games. Let’s have some fun, Lady Aventine.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Hector

S ometimes I thought I was born loving her. The same way people were born with hearts, I was born with an unremitting love for a girl that would never love me back.

I blamed my years before Thea for this, which were nothing more than a blur of colorless, meandering moments. One eternal night, sacred and sunless and unending.

Of course, the rarity of my condition had achieved the impossible. I could walk in the brightest morning sun, the hottest summer day. I could see the flowers tilt their faces toward the sky and keep the smell of scorched grass in my lungs. But I still liked to think that I only experienced true light after I met her.

There were no words good enough to describe what it was to bask in the light of her perpetual merriment. She taught me everything that mattered. How to laugh, how to be bold, how to unbind my tongue. With everyone else, words always evaded me, but with her, all I did was talk and talk and talk. About everything. About nothing. Either way, I knew I would not be judged.

When she told me her name, I smiled for the first time in my life. Dorothea: a gift from the gods.

Indeed, there was something divine about this girl. Her tender stare, her soft lips, her heart, which could only be compared to a forest, a place full of life and undiscovered mystery. Once, an eternity ago, I had hoped to dwell in that forest of hers, live under her skin in the secret pathways of her longings. And to this day I still wonder how every person who has ever met her managed not to fall in love with her even just a

little bit.

Everything was different in her absence. Life became both harder and easier, for few things were more painful than the proximity to an unfulfilled dream. Away from her, I was free to follow my initial destiny, to become what I really was: a creature of the night.

I traveled far and long, the way the humans do, without the comfort and magic of the Castle. But I did not live as a human. I lived for the midnight hour, when the sky was tipsy with stars and the magic of the land rose like a layer of celestial mist to wipe away the mundane. I learned the taste of fresh blood, the taste of one's surrender, and the dark, primitive need to take, take everything one was willing to give.

But not once in four years did I forget her.

There were many odd things about life, but nothing like being haunted by someone alive. Absence, I discovered, only made the longing greater.

Everywhere I went, I found things that reminded me of her. A delicate wisp of lace. A bejeweled gown. A comb with roses along its dainty arch. I told myself that one day, I would summon the heart to send her a wedding gift. I would write to tell her that I was sorry for the things I said that day. I'd been young and proud and selfish, and I'd only thought of myself. I would tell her that I had only ever wished for her happiness and that she could always count on me to stand by her, take care of her, protect her. I would write things that, after a while, read less like an apology and more like a love letter. And so I only gathered gifts and never the courage to send them.

Whenever I would think of her with him, my whole body would clutch in anguish. Do you laugh with him like you laughed with me? I asked her in these unsent letters. Do you lean over to brush his hair off his eyes while he reads? Does he know why



your breath catches when you gaze at a sunset? Did you really not know that to me you were the most important person in the world? How could you not know? Everyone else did.

As I entered my bedroom now, I couldn't help but stare at the dead bouquet of roses by the windowsill. They'd been soft pink once. Mother's favorite. The Castle used to swim in pink roses all year round. Except for when Thea visited. Then I would ask the Castle to make the roses red, because red roses would always remind me of how we met in the Dragonfly Forest.

She had stung herself trying to pluck a bud, and the scent of her blood had driven me half-mad, abandoning the squirrel I'd been chasing to hunt for her instead. But when I found her, my hunger vanished, the curse inside me put into deep sleep. I'd only felt worry staring at that tiny human girl with the bloodied fingers and the bright yellow cape.

"Have you lost your mind? Who tries to pluck a rose with their bare hands?"

"Someone who isn't afraid to get stung," she had declared with a haughty little raise of her chin.

And that was it. I took her to the Castle to bandage her wounded fingers, and after I was done, she leaned in and kissed my cheek as a thank you. My heart had never beaten faster. We were the same age, but I didn't feel the same as her. She was so confident in her body, so striking in her mannerisms, while I was a mere awkward heap of muscles that could hardly hold her stare for longer than a minute.

So I promised myself that one day I would become a man worthy of her. And I tried. I tried to forge myself into someone that could make her happy, but in the end, she chose the possibility of someone else over the certainty of me. At least, that was how I saw it at eighteen. It took me a while to realize I was mostly at fault. I never spoke

of love to her. I never fought for her the right way. That was why I lost her. That was why I kept writing letters asking her all the what-ifs in the world.

Now she was here again. Fuller. Softer. The kind of woman that could bring a man to his knees with a simple tilt of her neck, a hint of a smile.

Only that love didn't make any sense to me anymore. Everything stood meaningless and distorted. Even the Castle weighed on me. It was no longer my home but my grave. The tomb in which everything I had once held precious had been buried.

I'd known about the Vow. I'd known that one day I'd lose them together. That was how they'd wanted it. Still, I never thought of their death. No one ever thinks of death until death becomes all you can think about.

What tormented me the most was that I never got a goodbye, a last word, an affectionate final glance. I was away traveling when it happened. The last significant memory I have of my parents was of my nineteenth birthday: the three of us down in the kitchen attempting to master the art of baking, their laughter as effortless and brilliant as the bob of a flame in absolute darkness.

I remembered feeling so incredibly, comfortably loved that I almost didn't want to leave the next morning. I wanted to stay in our little universe forever, here, in our castle in the sky, where even melancholy came with a sweet serenity, and everything was invariably secure and tenderly familiar. But I'd drowned myself in work after Thea's engagement, and Father insisted I get out and see the world. Adventure and discovery and all that. So I left. And when I came back, there was nothing for me here but a legacy I wasn't nearly worthy enough to carry.

As I swept a blackened rose petal off the floor, I didn't want to ask the Castle to make it lush and red again. I wanted to be buried under the ruins of my life. I wanted to shun myself from all light and beauty. I wanted my pain to turn into emptiness. How I

wished to be numb, to close my eyes and slump into an endless sleep where the ghosts of my family couldn't reach me and things like love died in the darkness.

I didn't ask the Castle to do it.

Yet, when I looked up again, the roses on the windowsill gleamed pure red in the twilight.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:24 am*

Thea

We were still so high in the sky that the air smelled of opals and pearls, the night growing liquid with moonlight.

“When will the Castle land?” I asked nervously, stepping out of the bathroom to find Hector turning down the bed, wearing only a pair of linen shorts and a billowy nightshirt.

We didn’t really have to share a bed tonight. No one was here apart from the two of us. But after dinner, Hector moved all of my things to his bedroom, and I simply didn’t object. It wasn’t like we hadn’t slept next to each other before. In fact, we would always fall asleep shoulder to shoulder at the observatory after hours of drowsy pointing at twinkling constellations. Thea, look! Look, the Ysorias are winking at us!

Part of me was glad he suggested it. I longed to occupy the same space as him, to have something of our youth back, to regain the lost time. So why was my heart making so much noise?

“Tomorrow. Midday, I think,” said Hector drowsily, my half-undressed presence in his bedroom leaving him utterly unaffected.

Well, half-undressed was probably an exaggeration. My nightgown was richly layered with a modest neckline and a hem that billowed around my ankles, far from the scandalous sort I used to wear whenever I spent a night with Killian.

I missed Killian sometimes. He was one of Queen Eloise's personal guards, and we had a wonderful little fling last spring, which ended sadly and abruptly after he started pressuring me about the future. But the whole reason I'd stayed at the Thalorian Court after I broke my engagement with Jasper was because I didn't know what I wanted for my future.

I didn't know what my life was for nor what I was supposed to do with it. The only thing I did know was that I needed more time. Time to learn who I was and who I wished to be, for I had already spent so much of my life being other people. It was a terrible thing not to know who you were. Everyone always took it as an invitation to take ownership of your void.

But the good thing about Killian was that he was a simple and straightforward man, and I never felt all muddle-headed and tongue-tied whenever I was with him. With him I didn't feel the way I felt when I was with Hector.

It saddened me to think that every boy I'd ever met had been compared to him. No one was as smart as Hector or as interesting or as thoughtful. No one knew or understood me like he did. Oftentimes I asked myself, Then why not have him? Him, who compared to no one. But the answer was always the same. Having someone meant there was a possibility of losing them too, and there'd been nothing I'd dreaded more than a life without Hector.

Irony, wasn't it?

My eyes darted to him as he got into bed, pulling the cover up to his waist and tucking a forearm under his pillow to prop up his head. The neckline of his shirt parted, revealing a shred of smooth, marble skin. Suddenly, I needed instructions on how to breathe. Not that he noticed.

"Oh, before I forget..." he mumbled distractedly as he grabbed something from his

nightstand. He tossed the pretty little comb from earlier toward my side of the bed. “Here.”

Still dawdling by the bathroom door, I glanced between him and the comb as if waiting for some kind of explanation.

“It’s what you wanted, no?” asked Hector casually.

I didn’t have to look in the mirror to know there was nothing casual about the expression on my face. “Um... yes,” I croaked. “Thank you.”

Hector sighed in unhelpful exasperation. “For the love of the stars, Thea, there is no need to be so nervous. Come to bed. I’m not going to devour you.”

“Then why did you move my things here?”

“I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“That is not a real answer,” I argued, setting the comb upon the nightstand and slipping into a bed that was already warmed by his body.

He shifted a little to make some space for me, staring at the velvet-draped canopy. His profile glowed red and orange against the unsteady light of the fireplace, crackling a few feet away from his side of the bed. I’d never noticed how arresting his profile was. The way his lashes looked impossibly dark against his pale skin. The way his forehead cut into the line of his nose, mouth, chin. If you took in his features one by one, you’d call them delicate, and yet in his strong, square-jawed face, they gave him a very powerful, almost severe look. An air of command.

I pulled my gaze away, inwardly cursing the silence. Our silences had always been a thing of comfort in the past.

When I finally felt brave enough to steal another glance at him, I was startled to find him facing toward me. I hadn't heard him turn. I never heard him.

His eyes were liquid in the firelight, his face drawn in shadow. "What do you want me to say?"

"The truth," I whispered.

"Which is..."

"That you missed being with me like this. That you missed me."

"Maybe you should go back to your room."

"Why is it so hard for you to admit it?"

"Or, better yet, get on a boat to Thaloria."

"I thought you said you wanted to have fun. "

He exhaled, the breath whistling between his clenched teeth. "I will not lie. I'm anxious about tomorrow, too. I've never hosted the families before, let alone by myself, and yes, it will be more fun with you here. But if you're going to be this nervous every time I breathe near you, I'd rather not risk my head for the price of an entertaining night."

"I'm not nervous," I hissed. "I just... I don't know you as well as I used to. You drink from the vein now. I don't want to do anything to tempt you."

His lips twitched, holding back laughter. "Tempt me? Oh, Dorothea, it takes a lot more than a pretty neck to tempt me."

I narrowed my eyes, doing my best to ignore the pulsing knot in my stomach. “Like what?”

Hector crept closer, and although he seemed perfectly unmoved by the proximity of our bodies, when he was near enough to take my jaw in his hand, I felt the tension in his hold, the faltering will behind it. His thumb traced the shape of my mouth. My lips parted. He tasted different than I’d expected. Saltier. Even his voice sounded unfamiliar in that moment, harsh and resonant. “Just go to sleep,” he said, slowly withdrawing. “It’s getting late.”

But I couldn’t sleep. I was flustered and excited and terrified all at once, not only because Hector was a vampire but because he was... Hector .

If something ever happened between us, it couldn’t be a meaningless little fling. It couldn’t be a distraction from our grief or the disarrayed paths of our lives. It would mean something. It would mean everything. But I wasn’t sure if I was ready to give myself to someone else, let alone him, when I had yet to figure out who I was going to give.

When had life become so complicated? A week ago my only problems were my demanding classes and my ever-increasing pile of unread books, and now I had to figure out a million different things all at once.

“Do you want to cuddle?” I blurted before I could stop myself. It was like muscle memory, for it had always been him I sought when life seemed unbearable.

Hector cocked a brow. “You cannot be serious.”

“It will break the ice.”

“There is no ice.”



“Yes, there is.”

“Thea,” he growled. “I promise, there is no ice. In fact, we’re swimming in lava right now.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Do I make you feel hot, Hector dear?”

“Were you this annoying when we were kids?”

“I’m fairly certain I was worse.”

He turned his back on me, pulling the covers up to his neck. “Goodnight, Dorothea.”

Minutes passed, but his breathing never slowed.

“Hector?”

“What now?”

“Why didn’t you write to tell me about Esperida and Eron?”

He didn’t say anything for so long I started to reconcile with his silence.

I was about to turn my back on him too when he said very quietly, “I knew it would break your heart. And I didn’t want to break your heart. I didn’t want you to see me like this either. I... I was in a very dark place. I still am, if I’m being honest.”

“Keep going, then,” I whispered. “You don’t want to stop in the dark.”

I wanted to touch my palm between his shoulder blades, but just before my fingers reached him, his whole body stiffened, and I let my hand fall on the empty space

between us.

The distance didn't bother me this time. I could see now it was not an ocean or a vast space as I'd initially thought. It was a closing rift. It was a bridge waiting to be built. All my earlier fears and reservations hushed as I held onto the bundle of my memories with him, the small and grand things that were going to help us cross this distance now.

"Do you remember the last time we slept like this?" I asked. The light in the room was dimmer now that his broad frame had swallowed the glow of the fireplace. It was easier to speak of the past in the darkness.

"Observatory. Four years ago," he murmured.

I remembered he had bent over me as I was dozing off to cover me with his jacket, and when his forearm had accidentally brushed against my breasts, he'd jolted back, blushing through his hairline.

"Oh, I love a man who blushes," I'd teased him.

"You're a menace."

"Best thing a girl can be in this world."

The color never left his face that night.

"You were adorable."

"Ten minutes ago you were afraid I was going to maul you. Now I'm adorable?"

"I used the past tense for a reason, you know."

“If I’m so scary, then why do you insist upon staying?”

Without thinking much of it, I slid a little closer, close enough to find myself drowning in the warmth and scent of his body, my face hovering a few inches from the commanding slope of his back.

“Because I missed you too, Hector,” I said. “I still miss you. Every day.”

I fell asleep after that.

It was the best sleep I had in four years.

Thea

When I woke up, Hector's side of the bed was cold, and my head was muddled by the lingering effects of yet another strange dream, not of Esperida this time, but of three completely unrelated objects. A burgundy cravat with a subtle pattern of the same color thread, an ornate silver vial the contents of which remained a mystery, and a hunter's sword, long and wide with a slight curve to its blade.

Indeed, a very peculiar assortment of objects to be dreaming about while in the Castle and even more bizarre once considered as a continuation of my other premonitions: Esperida in the glass, and the black-clad man with the pale hands drifting toward me like a fairytale portent of doom. I had no idea what to make of them. They all felt like the odd and mysterious part of a story I hadn't quite grasped yet.

It was a gloomy morning, crows nestling by the eaves while rain-swollen clouds glided past the fogged windowpanes, but the early hours flew pleasantly by as Hector and I spent them in the drawing room going over the details of our supposed union and the reasons for our upcoming separation. The Castle was in a genial mood as well, for everywhere you looked flowers were blooming—roses and anemones and forget-me-nots—their lushness mingling with the wafting of bergamot and the vague scent of sugar from the array of sweets cluttering the table between Hector and me. We painted a rather comical picture, actually, sitting here in our nightwear, eating desserts for breakfast, and devising our plans like a couple of naughty children. Now, if I could only convince him to turn tonight's banquet into a proper ball, that would be just fantastic.

"I'm still in mourning, you know," bristled Hector as he refilled his teacup with

blood. And yes, the irony of sipping blood from something as delicate as a porcelain teacup was not lost on me, although it was clearly lost on him.

“You know what I think?” I prodded, then answered my own question before he could interject, “I think you’re refusing to experience joy in their absence. You’re punishing yourself for being alive while they’re not. But we both know this isn’t what Esperida and Eron would have wanted for you. They would have wanted you to celebrate your ascension to vampire society, not just have another one of your somber dinners.”

“According to you, I’ve been refusing to experience joy ever since I was born,” he muttered under his breath.

“I’m being serious,” I hissed, nervously nibbling on a sugarplum.

Determinedly, Hector pushed a glass of water and a plate of eggs, roasted tomatoes, and hearty rye bread toward me. “The answer is no.”

I squinted at him. “Are you trying to make me healthy or more appetizing to you?”

“I’m trying to keep you from having a stomachache first thing in the morning,” he grumbled and did not stop glaring at me until I finished every bite of my proper breakfast.

Even the glaring he did handsomely, though. To say that he looked even more striking with his sleep-tousled hair and his rumpled nightshirt would be a terrible understatement. He looked like a prince. A rather solemn, hopelessly brooding prince, but still.

“Will you look at me for a moment, Hector dear?”

Hector hid his face behind the dainty teacup. “The fawn eyes don’t work on me, so don’t even bother.”

“Then look at me.”

“No.”

“Because if you do, you’ll fold like a lawn chair?”

“Maybe.”

Long story short, we were going to host a ball tonight.

After we reached land, Hector went into the forest to hunt—the details of which I preferred not knowing—so there would be plenty of blood to go around with our repast, while I made sure that all the rooms were restored to their initial glory.

The families were only going to be here for one night, and I planned on making the most of it. I let Hector think I wanted to make this a grand event for the sake of entertainment alone because I didn’t want him to be more anxious than he already was, but I did have other reasons as well.

Vampire hierarchy was an unsophisticated thing. The Castle was the ultimate symbol of power, and whoever held its loyalty was bound to be their ruler. A little diplomacy and a blatant display of Hector’s unbreakable bond with the Castle were going to help him prove that he was more than capable of leading vampire society even in a time of great personal anguish.

Of course, diplomacy had never been Hector’s strong suit. I, on the other hand, had witnessed more than enough political maneuvering at the Thalorian Court to know that a celebration was a lot more than an excuse to wear a pretty dress and get tipsy

on sweet blueberry wine. A celebration was a statement of prosperity, security, strength. And this was exactly the kind of air Hector and the Castle should exude tonight.

After I was done assessing the rooms, I selected a gown from Hector's little treasure trove and spent an hour or so preparing myself for our guests.

The dress was of dark green velvet, lush but effortless, with layered skirts and long, flowing sleeves that fell a bit carelessly off the shoulders. Then I focused on the details: a necklace of trickling emeralds to cover my neck—and any possible mark I might have there—no bracelets, of course, to bring more attention to my gold wristlet, and a hairpin encrusted with peridots in the exact shade of green as my gown to secure my updo.

By the time my reflection in the mirror brought me enough confidence to get through this first meeting, dusk had already fallen over the forest, misty and grey. From the bedroom window, I could see the city of Lumia coming up to a firefly glow. If this were the Faraway North, the night would be laden with a golden mist akin to pixiedust, unburied souls meandering around the Dragonfly Forest. Even the air was pure magic there, divinity spilling from the stars in ribbons of celestial light. But Lumia shone as still and clear as a city in a painting, the Castle the only spark of wonder in the air.

I was heading downstairs, following the curious shadows the sconces drew across the walls and wondering where Hector had disappeared to all day, when suddenly, a male voice traveled to my ears. A smooth, cheerful, familiar voice.

Filled with excitement, I gathered my skirts and rushed to the foyer.

There he was, all six feet of him. Crystal blue eyes. Messy golden hair. A collection of the finest features. And a smile that could win and break a girl's heart in the span

of a single night.

“Arawn!” I half-exclaimed, half-giggled as I hopped over the last few steps, falling straight into his arms.

He twirled me in the air, hugging me tight around the waist before putting me down at arm’s length to get a good look at me. “Gods, Thea, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!” he laughed, his eyes growing bleary with remembrance.

I hadn’t seen Arawn and Margaret, his long-time beloved, in about three years, and I was a bit surprised by how different he looked up close. He’d always been as tall as a willow, but now he was as slender as one too. In fact, he was alarmingly thin, his nearly translucent skin pulling tight over his otherwise personable face.

I was about to ask if he was feeling okay—perhaps he’d had a bad journey—when Hector’s deep rasp sounded somewhere behind me. “She certainly is.”

He was standing by the door, dressed in an all-black attire, his high-waisted trousers rendering the path from his narrow hips to his strong thighs a truly tantalizing one. The dark strands of his hair were combed back, and the light from the chandeliers gave his open face an unsteady, ethereal glow.

He was unfairly, heartbreakingly beautiful. And he was smiling at me.

Arawn cleared his throat. “If you’re going to fuck in the middle of the foyer, at least have the decency to ask me to leave first.”

Hector’s passionate expression shifted into a scowl. “You’re not one to talk of decency, Celestine.”

Arawn rolled his eyes, turning to me with a flair of conspiracy. “Thea, darling, please



tell me he's not going to grumble like a weary old man all night. This is supposed to be a joyous occasion."

"And yet your parents didn't come to share my joy," countered Hector, wincing at the word joy as if it were something vulgar.

"Oh, please," Arawn huffed, "you know very well they didn't mean any disrespect. They're just enjoying their retirement."

Hector opened his mouth to say something I knew was going to be, at the very least, unpleasant, so I cut in with a wide grin, hooking my elbow around his. "Yes, Hector did say something about Calix and Esther retiring."

Arawn's little smirk turned positively devious. "Hector also said something about you two eloping, by which I'm mortally offended. I didn't even know that you were still speaking to each other." He made a dramatic pause, squinting at me. "But I am curious if this is why you've spangled that pretty neck of yours. Has our dear Hector gone feral for his bride?"

Hector did not find this remark very amusing. He pinned Arawn with a look of chill disdain and said in a toneless but lethal voice, "If I were you, I'd worry about my own neck right now."

"Ah, I see Thea has yet to successfully remove the stick from your—" Arawn never got to finish that sentence. He lurched back, hissing, his hand cupping the suddenly red side of his neck. "Did your Castle just punch me?"

Hector arched a brow. "I don't know, did it?"

"You're such a sly bastard, Aventine."

“And you’re ever the sleazy cockwad, Celestine.”

“Aw, it’s like we’re fifteen again,” I chirped, clapping my hands together. “So tell me,” I prodded Arawn, hoping to steer the conversation far away from my neck. “How is Margaret?”

Margaret, much like Arawn, had a personality as full of sunshine as her looks. Sweet, kind Margaret, who had the voice of a nymph and the patience of a priest, for it had taken Arawn seven whole years to finally propose to her. Although Calix and Esther had a part in that as well, for Margaret’s one and only flaw was irredeemable in their eyes. She was a human. And they wanted strong, vampire heirs.

To my surprise, Arawn’s face fell at the mention of her, his eyes darting to Hector with a hint of guilt. “I haven’t told you either...” He struggled with the words, his throat, white as bare bones, narrowing with tension. “Margaret and I parted ways. About three months ago.”

I bit my tongue, feeling like I’d just sliced open a freshly healed wound. “Arawn, I’m so sorry—”

“It’s okay,” he reassured me. “There wasn’t much of a future for us anyway. She was a human.”

He didn’t say the words pointedly, as if to imply that Hector and I were bound to fail as well, but there was still a pinch of resentment in his voice, something raw and sharp-edged.

At last, he glanced away, clearing his throat. “So, did you get the letter from the Valkhars?”

Hector’s brows drew closer, a shadow of apprehension unraveling over his

cheekbones. “No, we’ve only just arrived. What happened?”

“Well, apparently, a small cult has formed in Elora that worships the goddess who cursed us—”

“What?” Hector cut him off in a hissing rush. “Why wasn’t I informed of this?”

Arawn’s expression softened enough to verge on pity. “You were grieving.”

“It’s still my responsibility—”

“Look,” Arawn interjected, “they’re only eight people, and the Valkhars are plenty capable of handling their territory. The whole reason we exist is that you don’t have to deal with every vampire-related issue in the entire Realm. Everything is under control. They’re just going to be a little late.”

Late?

“Late?” Hector echoed my thoughts, all color draining from his face.

“They’re to leave for Lumia tomorrow, so they’ll be here in a couple of days. Surely, you don’t mind if we wait until then.”

The words dropped over me like a bucket of ice water.

This charade was supposed to last a single night. We were supposed to have our little soiree, declare Hector sovereign, fall asleep at dawn, and wake up at dusk to see them out of the Castle. We were not supposed to wait, and certainly not wait for days .

The most ominous, blood-curdling feeling stole over me. Then the vision came. With a violent, inward tug, I was pulled somewhere deep into my mind, and with a painful

flash, the scene took hold of my eyesight. A man, who I knew to be Kaladin Valkhar, was standing in this very foyer, black-clad and as pallid as a ghost. His greyish lips were curled back in a snarl of rage, and his skeletal hands were reaching for Hector's throat.

"We can't wait," Hector's growl jostled me out of the vision just as I felt that it was about to change, that the wheels of destiny were about to reveal to me something else—something greater.

I shut my eyes and tried to call it back, but the scene was a startled butterfly, fluttering its way into the sky.

"Come on, Aventine, can you at least try to look a bit less appalled?" Arawn mocked, the humor in his voice unable to assuage us this time around.

Hector and I exchanged a horrified look, a look neither of us had the time to wipe off our faces before the front door flung open and a glacial gust of wind thrust into the floodlit room. The flames inside the sconces went up in sparks, then down in curls of smoke.

Ten slender figures emerged from the nightly mist, their faces like something out of a nightmare, glowing eyes stitched on darkness. Even the air seemed to give way where they walked as they entered the Castle.

Thea

The last time I saw the Ravenors, I was seventeen years old. Although I'd never been allowed to attend any of Esperida's famed balls—Hector's birthday parties had been the only exception—every now and then I would get glimpses of the three families, brief passings that sometimes kept me awake at night and other times haunted my dreams, fascination and terror inseparable from each other.

The Ravenors, who were in charge of the vampires of the East, were the largest of the families, with Espen and Collette at the top of their little pyramid.

Espen, the patriarch, was a quiet, solemn man but built like a god, with deep brown skin, long lustrous braids, and a pair of ever-watchful black eyes. Invariably, he carried himself with an air of authority and the expression of someone who didn't allow anyone to question it. Anyone except his wife, perhaps, who was so old she'd been amongst the villagers the goddess had cursed more than a thousand years ago. She was as pale as the moon, her black hair draping like silk down her shoulders. In some lights her eyes shone icy blue, in others pure white, verging on transparent.

Their youngest daughter, Dahlia, who was only a year younger than Hector and me, was the spitting image of her, apart from her eyes, which were much larger and darker, with a smoky ring circling each pupil. I had no idea if Dahlia was as sweet and timid as she seemed, but she did have a set of delicate, almost girlish features that gave her the appearance of a fragile doll and a tilt to her brows that made her look perpetually shy.

Her older siblings, Roan, who should be in his late twenties by now, and Alexandria,

who was well into her hundreds, looked much more like their father, a blend of deep browns and honeyed blacks. Alexandria's children, the twins, Nikko and Delyth, had also taken after their grandfather, considering that her husband, Lance, had an almost greyish complexion with a head of snow-white curls. Out of everyone, he was the most human-looking: dimpled, sleepy-eyed, with a pleasant quirk to his mouth.

They were all breathtakingly, uniquely beautiful, but the most captivating amongst them—the most cunning, lethal, terrifying vampire in the entire Realm—was Espen's half-sister.

Camilla Ravenor.

The moon-kissed Lady of the East, they called her, for her skin and hair and eyes were all of the palest silver. Her mother had been a sea nymph, something that made Camilla's existence as rare and extraordinary as Hector's, despite her common sunlight intolerance. She didn't have Collette's years or Espen's raw strength, but there was no question she was the sole reason why vampire-related issues never rose in the East.

After all, who would dare go against a woman who was notorious for hanging her enemies upside down and draining them of blood?

She was also known for refusing to consume actual food, sustaining herself on blood alone, and more specifically vampire blood, which implied a level of bloodlust I did not dare to think about right now.

The hairs at the nape of my neck stirred, the rush of my blood quickening. Nothing had ever disturbed me more than the subtle horror of their presence. Their beauty was a handful of juniper, something that looked like sweetness when in truth it was a poison.

The only unfamiliar person amongst them was the tall, pale man that stood between Camilla and Roan. Vampire, obviously, but not by birth. No, this man had been turned, for his eyes were in a shade of red that had nothing to do with hunger.

The first law Esperida had imposed on vampire society had rendered the turning of humans a crime punishable by death, and given that the Ravenors were the enforcers of these laws, I suspected that this man had been turned a long time ago, back when vampires were still the reason people were afraid of the dark. I also realized that he was Roan's husband since they both wore identical silver wristlets. And yet... Camilla seemed oddly possessive of him as well. She hadn't left the man's side from the moment they'd entered.

"Welcome," Hector's deep voice boomed in the hall. When I turned to look at him, I was surprised to find him changed, having slipped into the shoes of a man who was plenty aware of the position he held, the inherent power that coiled within him. He bowed at the waist, one hand placed upon his heart, the other in the air in a simple but elegant gesture of hospitality. "Welcome to the Castle."

In an uproar of movement, Espen surged forward, towering over Hector's still bent form. "Care to tell me why a human is present, Aventine?"

Hector straightened, and the two of them came face to face, charging the room with a promise of disaster.

I was about to intervene, but Hector had more courtliness in him than I'd expected. His presence became a spell, bright and bewitching as he sailed toward me in his effortless grace. Mannerly, he placed a hand at the small of my back and ushered me forward. "Thea is my wife," he announced to them with implacable confidence. "The Lady of the Castle."

Silence descended over us. There was nothing like the stillness of the vampire, the

absolute pause of their internal mechanisms. My human heartbeats struck like bells in the room.

Camilla pulled her blood-red lips over her fangs in a smile that could only be described as ravenous. “A wife,” she crooned, her voice like glass covered in silk. “How delicious.”

I didn’t breathe. I didn’t even dare to blink, for the last time I’d done so she had moved, and now she stood right before me, her impossibly tall figure casting a clawing shadow across the wall. She smelled like the ocean: salt, driftwood, and metal. From this distance, I could see there was a smudge of blood, still fresh, at the corner of her mouth.

Hector’s fingers twisted at the small of my back. I squeezed his other hand firmly to remind him that Camilla was no Arawn and that one wrong sentence could turn our little soiree into a bloodbath. My vision about Kaladin Valkhar had been ominous enough. The last thing we needed was to make enemies out of the Ravenors as well.

“Since when do you have a wife ?” Espen bit out, his piercing black eyes crawling over me.

I felt like I’d been judged and found wanting, but most of all, I felt confused. Considering the Ravenors’ position in vampire society, I’d expected their behavior to be more... Diplomatic? Refined? Something more sociable than this poorly veiled hostility anyway. Hector must have had similar expectations, for I didn’t think he would have given in to my whim had he known Espen would react in this way.

“Thea and I eloped a few months back,” explained Hector with remarkable calm. Then he added a bit more sharply, “After that we decided it would be in bad taste to celebrate, considering my parents just died.”



In her pale blue gown, Collette glided over the checkered floor and touched her slender hand on her husband's back in something like a warning. "Yes, of course, we understand." Her voice was eerie, ancient as stone and light as air. "We do wish to offer once again our sincerest condolences." Her cold, steady gaze captured mine, her lips curving into a passionless smile. "And our warmest congratulations. We're a bit surprised, surely, but we're also glad that Hector has decided to follow in his mother's footsteps."

Her wraithlike manner was impossible to reconcile with the tactfulness of her words. Something deep in my bones rattled with disquiet.

"I thought we had other arrangements," Espen growled at Hector, each word a resonant thrum.

"Arrangements?" Arawn cut in, alarmed by the idea of East and West having any kind of arrangement behind his back. "What arrangements?"

Hector's composure did not waver. "Yes, I am aware of your wishes, Espen," he said firmly, ignoring Arawn and at the same time reassuring him that no agreement had flourished between them but the mere expression of wanting one. "However, I'm not willing to tailor my personal life to your desires, nor are you in a position where you can expect me to do so."

Roan, who I had not heard or seen move, emerged right next to Espen. His eyes were kind, young, the skin of his face like the softest silk, but something in the way he held himself was as ancient as his mother. "Well, that was the politest fuck you I've ever heard," he chuckled.

To my surprise, they all laughed, their dark amusement rippling in the air. Even Espen let out a sigh and shot Hector a look of fatherly exasperation. Only Dahlia didn't seem able to relax, her fangs digging into her lip.

With a fresh surge of discomfort, I realized that the arrangement was that she was to marry Hector. An incredibly powerful match. One I couldn't believe Hector was jeopardizing for the sake of having me here for a couple of nights. Or, perhaps, this was exactly why he'd agreed so easily to my ridiculous—and evidently dangerous—plan.

Was this charade his way out of an unwanted engagement? And if so, why didn't he just tell me about it?

My eyes flew to him, a million questions buzzing in my head, when suddenly, the crystal chandeliers released a swift clinking sound, shifting to filter the moonlight that streamed through the rose window. The entire hall spun into a kaleidoscope of colors, a gust of warmth enveloping our forms.

"The Castle is happy to see you," Hector claimed, his voice reaching us from every direction at once. "And so am I. Let us use this rare occasion to celebrate the foundations upon which vampire society was built. Harmony. Strength. Civility." Once again he wound an arm around my waist and pressed me to his side. "I hope you welcome Thea into our world the same way you once welcomed my father, and I urge you to remember that the sole reason this society exists is so that we can continue to live our lives freely and in peace with humankind." During his brief pause, various red roses with golden keys tied with ribbons around their stems popped in the air before each guest. "The roses will guide you to your rooms so you can rest and prepare for tonight's celebration," he continued in the same courteous but firm manner. "If you wish for anything, please don't hesitate to ask the Castle. It is more than happy to grant your wishes."

Camilla arched a silver brow, her hands resting on the voluptuous curve of her hips. "All of our wishes?"

"You'll find more than a few bottles of blood in your room, Camilla," said Hector

steadily.

“Squirrel, no doubt,” she guessed as she pranced toward the stairs, the long tail of her silk dress gathering a few steps behind her like sea foam. The air stirred with her, and my breath hitched as her scent washed over me again: ocean and blood.

The corner of Hector’s mouth twitched. “Do you have an issue with that?”

“Of course not, my sovereign,” she purred, trailing up the flowing red carpet. I listened for the thud of her footsteps, the swishing of her dress. She made no sound. She was stillness embodied. And it frightened me.

She paused mid-ascent and cast Hector a sharp look over her shoulder. “I wonder, though... What happens if someone challenges this title?”

Hector’s face was carved in stone. “War.”

“Hmm,” hummed Camilla, passing her tongue over the edge of her left fang. “Sounds delectable.”

Hector

A rrogance. Inexperience. Misjudgment. The list of reasons that had gotten me into this predicament went on and on, and it all came down to one thing: I was not ready for this. My whole life had been shadow and plot and unseen devices, but I'd never been a part of that darkness. I had only been a creature trapped within it.

Something beneath the stones of our civility was breaking—the Celestines not coming, the Valkhars arriving late, Camilla openly threatening me, and Espen twisting a year-old conversation into some kind of clandestine arrangement between us were all signs of a disturbance beyond my control. And the worst thing of all was that I had dragged Thea into it too.

What was I thinking letting her stay here? Had I honestly believed that this was going to be just another one of my mother's tasteful soirees, as if her death hadn't changed everything?

The heart in my chest pounded like a war drum, my fingers around Thea's wrist tightening as I hauled her up the stairs. Even as I held her, I felt her slipping further and further away from me like a vessel on water.

"Hector," she panted. "Where are we—"

Quickly, I shoved her inside my study, shutting the door behind us. "You need to leave."

She whirled, catching my eyes with hers. I used to treasure these moments when I

was young. The moments when the path of our gaze would connect and the world around me would explode into color. These were the only times I felt anything at all. Drop of my stomach. Stutter of my breath. Liquid heat coursing through my veins.

Now it tore at my very heart.

“If I leave,” she asked breathlessly, “what are you going to tell them?”

My thoughts raced, jumping from one possible scenario to another. “You were feeling sick, and you went to see a physician in Lumia,” I suggested.

Something shifted in her gaze, a furtive knowing that made me think that perhaps her panic and mine were not products of the same terror.

“What is it?” I pressed.

“I had a vision,” she revealed. “You and Kaladin were fighting about something. He looked...” Her expression grew haunted, remote, as if the vision was stealing over her eyesight anew. “He looked enraged with you. He looked like he wanted to kill you.”

This didn’t surprise me much. Kaladin was easy to offend, as most vampires of his age and status were, and a violent dispute with him could unravel over any number of insignificant reasons. Still, I could not risk Thea getting caught in the middle of it.

Not many things scared me in this life, but the mere thought of something happening to her paralyzed me. A terrible coldness dropped over me, pinpricks of ice stabbing up my spine. My voice came out shattered. “I’m so sorry, Thea.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“This is all my fault. I should have never let you stay.”

Part incredulity and part accusation braced the gently drawn lines of her face. That was Thea’s greatest strength. She looked as soft and delicate as a rosebud, but her mind was as sharp and resilient as the thorns beneath. Sometimes, looking at her was like confronting myself in the mirror. “Why did you then?” she asked with a flare of defiance. “Because of Dahlia?”

“I’m not using you to get out of an unwanted engagement if that’s what you’re implying. You asked to stay. You asked me not to turn you away,” I reminded her, steadier than I felt.

“You could have refused.”

How easy it was for her to look at me with those eyes and tell me I had a choice. I never had a choice, not with her. Every time she asked for something, I yielded. Every time she cried, I crumbled like a castle made of sand. “Tell me one thing I’ve refused you,” I demanded. “Tell me of one time I didn’t give you exactly what you wanted.”

She averted her gaze, her face heating. I could not understand why this embarrassed her so. But, perhaps, the words weren’t to blame. Perhaps it was the way I stood so close to her she had no choice but to lean against the wall. I tried taking a step back. I begged my body to do so. It did not want to listen.

“I was there, you know,” she murmured, after that heart-skipping pause. “In the vision. I was watching you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m not going to leave.”

The word was physical. It left me with a forward surge: “No.”

Before I knew it, I was caging her in, bracing my hands on either side of her face. My thoughts scattered, my skin warmed. We were so close, all I could smell was the almond oil she used on her hair. The rose undertone of her perfume. The very scent of her skin, which was something like honey. Sweet, woody, intoxicating if you got greedy with it.

She lifted her chin, and the back of her head fell against the wall, next to my hand. A stray curl brushed over my index finger. Its satin softness sent a bolt of need through me. Only the gods knew how much I wanted to bury my hands in her hair.

“Hector,” she sighed. “What if I leave and something bad happens?”

“What if you stay and something worse happens?”

“I’ve never defied a vision before,” she argued, a stubborn crease between her brows. “Destiny is not something to disregard so easily.”

I did not believe in destiny. I did not fear unseen gods and invisible threads. The only thing that scared me was her agony.

A sudden knock on the door made Thea jump forward, seeking cover in my arms. Part of me ached seeing her so frightened. Part of me was relieved that her first instinct was to curl her fingers into my shirt and hide her face in my chest.

This was the root of my conflict. This was why I kept wavering between bringing her closer and letting her go. My endless, physical longing for her had made me believe that there was no safer place in the world for Thea than in my arms. No harm or misery could ever find her so long as she was with me. But, in truth, the very entanglement of our worlds was putting her in harm’s way.

It had been different for my parents. Eron was the husband of Esperida, and I was not Esperida. Far from it, if today had proven anything.

Slowly, Thea untwined her body from mine, mouthing a flustered, Sorry.

The fullness of her body lingered upon my limbs. I had to clear the desire from my throat before I turned toward the door. “Come in.”

Roan’s face came into view, wrapped up in an expression of wary curiosity. “Are you two alright?”

“Thea isn’t feeling very well,” I announced steadily. I was good at lying. I was good at being whoever and whatever I needed to be depending on my company. I would say it was a vampire’s skill, as deception and illusion often accompanied the other darker attributes of my kind, but I had yet to meet a creature—vampire or otherwise—who didn’t lie, even if it were only to themselves. “She’s thinking of going to Lumia to see a physician.”

As Roan turned to face her, I wasn’t sure if the flicker in his eyes was one of disbelief or genuine worry. I just knew I didn’t like it. “Well, my husband, Tieran, happens to be an excellent physician. Unless, of course, your ailment is of a feminine nature, I assure you he’s more than capable of providing you with the care you require.”

“No, it’s fine, really,” Thea croaked, touching a tremulous hand at the base of her throat. “I was just feeling a bit lightheaded. I didn’t drink enough water today.”

It took everything in my power to conceal my indignation. She was too stubborn for her own good, too fearful of her own magic. It shouldn’t surprise me that she’d rather face a group of bloodthirsty vampires than roam beyond the limitations of her power. Her whole life she had dreaded living outside the lines of destiny. But the cursed creature in me couldn’t help but wonder what the point of free will was if not to



challenge these gods-made constructs.

“Are you sure?” Roan persisted.

“I’m feeling much better already,” Thea claimed.

Roan offered her a polite, if not a bit dismissive, smile. “In that case, can I have a private word with Hector? I promise not to monopolize him for too long.”

“Of course,” said Thea courteously, walking backwards toward the exit.

I went to open the door for her, my hand sliding down her arm to close around her wrist. Her pulse beneath my fingertips quickened, her round lips parting in a silent question.

I leaned down and whispered in her ear, “Don’t go far from me.”

Was it eight, nine years ago that I’d spoken these words for the first time? The Castle was visiting Thaloria, and Thea and I were scavenging the Dragonfly Forest for a pixie nest. Lumia, a magicless kingdom as it were, was diligently avoided by the fairy folk, and in the newness of boyhood, I was burning with curiosity, for the only magical thing in our woods was the Castle. So we searched by nixie-infested brooks and mushroom-littered willows until we got separated on the path close to Fairyland—a dreadful place for a little human to be near indeed.

Once I found Thea, after the longest and arguably the most agonizing fifteen minutes of my life, I closed her in my arms and implored her, “Don’t go far from me again.”

We ended up saying this a lot growing up, every time one of us left or sometimes even as a greeting. Part of us, I thought, had always known a greater separation was coming.

Now, her gaze trapped mine in its unbeatable confidence, and I felt the uncertainty of our situation washing away from my body like dirty water. “Never again,” she promised.

I watched her go, but even after her lithe figure disappeared in the candlelit shadows of the corridor, I could still feel the warmth of her skin buzzing over my fingers. I flexed them at my side, hoping to ease the tension. I didn’t know what kind of magic that was. I just wished for it to stop.

Roan made an impatient sound deep in his throat.

I veered, forcing myself into a more companionable mood. “I’m listening.”

“I want to apologize to you,” he said.

I cocked a brow. “Shouldn’t Camilla be the one apologizing to me?”

“Oh, please,” snorted Roan. “Camilla hasn’t apologized for anything in her entire life. You know how she can be. She just likes the drama. She didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“We all want stability, Hector.”

“Even if stability means having a dhampir as your sovereign?”

“You heard about the cult the Valkhars are dealing with. This is because Esperida isn’t here. This is because people think we’re about to use her loss as an opportunity to violate our treaties. Now more than ever we need a dhampir sovereign. And even Camilla knows that.” He paused to give me a meaningful look under his brows. “You don’t have to send your pretty wife away. She’s safe with us. The Ravenors will stand

by you and your human bride.”

Although Roan was not as formidable as Camilla or as dexterous as Alexandria, he was their best diplomat and therefore always inclined to describe a situation in the most amicable of terms. What he was actually trying to say with his raised brows and knowing expression was that if I sent Thea away now, it would make me look weak. It would make me look like I couldn’t protect my wife in my own home, giving Camilla further proof of my powerlessness and therefore more reason to challenge me.

Roan, though he would never admit it aloud and certainly not to me, despised Camilla. After all, she was the one who had turned the only man he’d ever loved. This tampered with the gravity of his benevolent declarations, but it also rendered him a far more incentivized ally. Someone who could help me ensure Thea’s safe stay in the Castle.

“You’re certainly eager to declare your loyalty to me,” I prodded.

He merely shrugged. “Camilla breaks things, I fix them. That’s what I do. I give you my word—”

“Your word means nothing to me. There is only one thing that can make me trust you,” I said, and now I was the one with a subtly pointed look on my face.

I expected indecision, a moment of suspense. But as it seemed, Roan had come prepared and did not hesitate to raise his hand to his mouth and use his fangs to carve an incision along his wrist. Blood gushed—dark, potent, as mystical as life itself. The kind of blood you’d have in your veins if you were feeding on your own species.

He extended the wound to me, gleaming droplets trickling down his hand to stain the floor red. “Just don’t bite me,” he said, stable as a corpse’s pulse. “I don’t want

Tieran to think I went behind his back.”

I had no intention of biting him anyway. Unlike Camilla, who delighted in challenging the conventions of our kind, I respected them deeply. A lot of vampiric behaviors, such as biting, were attributed to feelings of love or hunger and were not to be greedily implemented. I did find this correlation between love and hunger a bit ironic—after all, to love was to be consumed too—but I would never be so arrogant as to bite the man who offered me his loyalty just to prove myself superior.

I only guided his wrist to my lips and ran my tongue over the gushing incision. A spurt of blood flooded the roof of my mouth. It was sweet and powerful like a burst of treacle.

When I had my fill, I released his hand but held his gaze as I slid a fang along my own wrist. I extended my bleeding flesh to him, watching a beam of incredulity flare wide in his honey-speckled eyes. “You gave me your loyalty and protection. In return, I give you my gratitude and friendship.”

His dark brows met above the aristocratic arch of his nose. “Are you sure about this?”

“You’ve always treated me like I was less than you,” I said and found no shame in his face, only a shadow of admission. “Let this make us equals now.”

He drank from me, his mouth as strong as his blood had tasted. After he was done, he wiped his lips on the translucent linen of his handkerchief and threw it in the fireplace.

I did the same with my own, watching the wound on my wrist knitting itself as if my skin were made of thread. Then I looked at him, grim as death. “No matter what happens here, you must stand by Thea’s side, protect her like your own.”

Roan nodded solemnly. “I promise.”

Someone knocked on the door. I rushed to it, expecting Thea, only to be met with Dahlia’s huge, perpetually startled eyes.

“Oh,” she gasped as if she hadn’t been expecting me either, contradicting her subsequent statement: “Good, I thought you’d be here.”

“You’re very popular tonight,” drawled Roan, slipping past me to flick his little sister’s nose.

Before he left, he gave me one final firm look, acknowledging the gravity of what had passed between us, and when the outline of his shoulders disappeared around the corner, Dahlia took the liberty of inviting herself into the study.

Gods, I groaned inwardly, this is going to be a long, long night.

“Your wife is lovely,” she remarked the second I shut the door behind me, her voice an unmade decision between unbothered and intrigued.

I fumbled for patience.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like Dahlia, but we’d always regarded each other with a certain level of coldness—even disdain on her part—and whatever conversation she wished to have with me now, I knew would be at the very least unpleasant.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” I said. “It wasn’t my intention to put you on the spot.” When she didn’t say anything, I added a bit more sharply, “But I know you’re not disappointed.”

“No, I’m not,” she admitted. “Actually, I’m relieved you got married. Is that terrible

of me?”

“Since when do you care about my opinion, Dahlia?”

Once again, she said nothing.

I sighed resignedly. “You should tell your father.”

Her throat bobbed. “Tell him what?”

“About Dain.”

Blood flooded her pale face. “Father won’t give me to a Valkhar. He thinks they’re brutes.”

They were brutes. In fact, Dain, Kaladin’s only heir, was also a despicable bully, but I thought it was probably wiser not to remark on this now that I was hoping to strengthen my relationship with the Ravenors.

And at any rate, we all knew the real reason Espen didn’t want to unite the two families was Camilla’s history with Kaladin. The two of them had been lovers once, a pair as fearsome as passionate, until he betrayed her by marrying Sybella. His unfaithfulness didn’t come as a surprise to anyone, though. Back then, Sybella had been my mother’s closest friend, and in our world, having the favor of Esperida Aventine was like having the favor of a god. People did a lot of terrible things for proximity to power, and marriage, evidently, was one of them.

“Espen is a reasonable man,” I admonished Dahlia. “He doesn’t oppose your union just to hurt you. He thinks Dain has lured you in with false promises. It’s within your power to make him see the truth.”

Dahlia's timid expression turned to stone as she snapped her coal-smoke eyes on mine. She looked so much more like Collette now. An eerie combination of light and darkness, white pearls, and the black depths of the sea.

"This is all Camilla's fault, you know," she seethed, her anger quiet but impatient. "She has filled my father's head with all kinds of lies about the Valkhars. Dain is a good man."

"I'm sure he's good to you," I said.

Her gaze took on an edge of unreality, as if her thoughts had reached the shores of another world. "I wish we could elope like you did," she whispered. "But Thea is so much stronger than me."

The irony was a blade. It twisted inside me. It bled me dry.

If only I had been able to see and understand the gravity of Thea's dilemma the way I could see and understand Dahlia's now, perhaps everything would have turned out differently. But ego loved to take hold of reason when you needed it the most, and now...

Now, it was too late. Wasn't it?

I hated that there was still a question in my head, a secret hope in my heart.

Whenever I thought I was past my feelings for Thea, she always found a way to rekindle the spark of my longing. She was my autumn. My season of comfort, season of change. And every time she returned to me, unfailingly, inevitably, I fell.

Thea

I wasn't sure how or why it happened, but when I finally unlocked myself from the bedroom where I had a very respectable and much-needed emotional breakdown, I came downstairs to find Hector and Arawn sword fighting in the middle of the drawing room for the—completely irrational in my humble opinion—reason of fun .

Whatever had occurred between Roan and Hector in the study had obviously reassured the latter enough to resume his role of genial host, if, of course, one could call genial the thrusting attack he managed on poor Arawn, who was barely able to refute it with a plunge of his sword. But unlike Hector, I'd received no such assurances and therefore remained very much on edge.

The vision about Kaladin still lingered on me in a persistent prickle at the back of my neck. For the first time in my life, a life filled with brief glimpses into mundane futures, I was confronted by the true gravity of my magic. Yet I did not feel powerful under its divine weight. I felt shell-shocked and helpless, for to see destiny's plans without knowing if you were meant to follow or defy them seemed more like a curse than a gift to me.

However, if Hector had indeed come to some kind of agreement with Roan, then Kaladin didn't stand a chance against him. Besides, I'd seen no blood in the vision, no weapons, no extreme physical violence. Vampires were prideful creatures. For all I knew, this fight was going to be about something as harmless as a rude remark and would end up being pacified by one of Arawn's untoward jokes.

For the sake of my sanity, I allowed myself to believe that, rolling my shoulders to



relieve some of the tension they'd been holding, as I took a seat by the fireside.

Arawn let out a low snarl as Hector ward off an impressive high attack with only one hand in the fight, the other folded gallantly behind his back. He didn't fight like Esperida or Eron. He did not rely on the strength of his body or the steadiness of his blade. Hector's miracle was speed. He was too fast for human eyes to follow, the gleam of his sword like thunder, a momentary flash in the air. His feet were never still, never hesitant. He was uncatchable.

With a swift brandish, he managed to nick Arawn's neck, wringing another frustrated hiss from him. Unless their heads were no longer attached to their shoulders or their hearts were no longer residents of their chests, vampires recovered from any other injury easily, and so Arawn's skin took only a second to reknit itself.

Still, Hector did not relent. He leveled his blade and spun around in a circle to add more power to his next blow, the hem of his shirt escaping the waistband of his trousers and revealing the sculpted muscles of his lower abdomen.

At once, I felt my face grow warm, my mouth desert-dry. "I think I'll go start on dinner while you boys play with your swords," I rasped.

Arawn whirled around, a garland of sweat gleaming above his fair brows. "Not so fast, Lady Aventine," he drawled, and before I knew it, he was tossing away his sword and grabbing me around the waist.

Hector came next, closing us both in a massive embrace, his force so formidable that we all tumbled over. It was a feat to untangle ourselves from each other, and for a few moments we just lay there before the roaring fireplace, panting and chuckling, Hector on my right and Arawn on my left, just as when we were kids.

"I missed you guys," I sighed, my hand leaving my stomach to rest on the small space

between Hector's body and mine.

Hector dropped his hand as well. "We missed you too," he whispered.

Slowly, secretly, his little finger curled around mine.

My heart thumped erratically. I twisted my neck, searching for him, but he was staring at the ceiling, his profile golden against the glow of the fire, his disordered hair like the edges of a gilded afternoon.

"So," said Arawn, his voice a distant murmur, "whose idea was it to pretend you're married anyway?"

"Mine," I blurted out. Then sheer, bloody fright swept through me, and I jolted up. I stole a panicked glance at Hector, but he remained perfectly unperturbed. He trusted Arawn with his life, and he would have told him about our little secret from the start had I not insisted upon the danger of implicating him in such a ruse. "How did you know?"

Arawn snorted. "Oh, please. Hector doesn't have the balls to actually propose to you."

"Yes, fuck you, too," said Hector dryly.

"Your wife won't mind?" Arawn retorted with a wry little smirk.

I tutted at them, shaking my head. "Why do men show their affection by verbally abusing each other? For the love of the sky, you're adults."

"Okay, but seriously now," Arawn persisted, "how did you manage to get yourselves in this situation? Actually, no, let me guess." He narrowed his eyes theatrically. "You

learned about the Aventines, came to check on our darling Hector, the Castle took off, you refused to leave his side, and, of course, he refused to refuse you.”

I gaped at him, genuinely impressed. “You’re good.” I turned to Hector, who was looking at us through amused, half-lidded eyes. “He’s good.”

“Well, it helps that we’ve known each other since we were all this tall,” drawled Arawn, holding his hand only a handful of inches above the pink rug.

“Thea has barely grown any taller,” Hector taunted.

“What?” I squealed, skittering up to my feet to tower over both of them. “I’ll have you know I’m among the tallest women in the Thalorian Court.”

The bastards exchanged an incredulous look before they burst out laughing.

I crossed my arms over my chest, seething, “Bloody vampires.”

Suddenly, the crystals on the sconces stirred, and the shift in optics produced an unsteady rainbow edge, kaleidoscopic light flickering over us. The colors were radiant, uncanny; the forget-me-nots in the vase atop the table were blushing under their brilliance.

We were all together again. And the Castle was alive.

Hector

Arawn's demeanor shifted the second Thea left the room, his smile falling away like a veil.

Wordlessly, he got up to his feet, untucked his shirt from the waistband of his trousers, and used the hem to wipe the sweat off his brow. I was disturbed to see how thin he was under his clothes, how the skin around his stomach clung so closely to his bones that it looked translucent, a fragile piece of cloth marbled with purple veins.

Before I was able to ask him about it, he turned, quick anger rising in his eyes. "So how does pretend marriage work, exactly? Do you pretend-fuck her as well—"

On sheer instinct, I grabbed him around the collar, sending us both in a tumble against the wall. "Watch your damned mouth when you speak of her."

He tried shaking me off, but he was too weak, his muscles too stiff. I could tell he hadn't fed in a while. I just couldn't tell why.

I took his jaw in my hand and shoved his head against the wall, forcing him still. "What in Tartarus is wrong with you, huh? Why would you say something like that?"

"Get off me," he growled, digging the heels of his palms into my shoulders.

We struggled against each other, our breaths growing ragged, until he finally relented. "I'm sorry, okay?" he gritted out. "I was out of line."

I pushed off him, my bewilderment complete.

Arawn and I had never fought. Among Dahlia's cold disdain, Roan's unwavering indifference, and Dain's taste for physical violence, Arawn's friendship, although reluctant at the beginning, had been precious to me growing up, even more so after Thea and I parted ways.

I would never forget the first time he stood up for me. We were thirteen years old, and all of our parents were up at my mother's study, discussing matters we weren't allowed to hear. Arawn, Dain, and I were helping Dahlia to gather flowers for a crown. It was spring, and she was sad that she was missing the festival back home, so we thought this would cheer her up a little. Of course, Dain, being Dain, took every opportunity he could to push me around and call me all kinds of unimaginative names. But I had grown immune to his cruelty, for he had never been very creative with it anyway. I'd also grown four inches that year, which, very boyishly, I'd mistaken for strength. I ended up punching him square on his jaw, and he retaliated by knocking me out senseless. Later that night, Arawn came into my room blood-bathed from head to toe, his pretty silk garments torn to pieces. "Let's not pick a fight with Dain ever again," he had groaned, slumping on the bed next to me.

"I was not aware we picked the fight together," I'd muttered ungratefully.

His smile had been the sun itself. "I think I broke his ribs. I'm telling you, the bastard will think twice before calling you a halfling again."

Arawn... He was a lot like Thea, actually. Sharp-witted, magnanimous, adrift in an air of perpetual joyfulness. I'd never seen him like this before, weakened and starved and so angry he was shaking from it. In a way, Arawn looked exactly how I felt, and it was this simple realization that made me understand what was wrong with him.

Arawn was in mourning. Margaret wasn't dead, but their love was, and loss, I knew

well, took many forms and shapes. Everyone was always grieving something. There was no life without it.

“Arawn,” I said steadily. At last he pulled his bloodshot gaze back to me. “I think I’ve been a terrible friend to you—”

“How could you drag her into this?”

“Who?”

“Thea, damn it!” he snapped, pointing at the door she’d closed behind her. “This isn’t pretending for you, and we both know it. You let her stay here so the families will accept her because you still think you can have a life with her. Even though you know what you are. Even though you know she deserves better.” His voice broke. His eyes grew bleary with tears. And I knew he wasn’t talking about Thea anymore. “Your life is a prison. You have a single destiny. She can have many. She can be a hundred different things, and you can only be this one—this one dark thing that is more monster than human.”

I had never been very good with words. I was a lot like Father in that regard, reticent and overwhelmed by all the things I didn’t know how to express. If Mother had been an open field, he had been the roots beneath the soil. To survive in our world, he’d had to vault himself, bite his tongue, hide his true nature. Even with Mother’s protection, he’d still been the sole human in a society of vampires.

It was him I recognized in myself the most. So I didn’t bother with heartening soliloquies now. I only crossed the distance and braced Arawn’s shaking shoulders to show him that I was here and that I would be here for as long as he needed me to be.

I was not wounded, let alone surprised, by his words. I was already familiar with every wall and barrier that kept Thea and me apart. Time, for one, had never been our

friend and never would be, for she was a flower and I was an evergreen. Our passings through this world would never look or feel the same. This was why Mother had been consuming the potion to make herself age faster, and this was also why they had both taken the Eternal Vow at their ceremony. It was to give themselves the illusion of having control over something as unequivocally uncontrollable as time.

And perhaps I did have a single destiny. I was bound to this Castle, to its power and the responsibility that came with it. But I was not the monster Arawn described, and especially not with her. How could I be? The best parts of me she made. The best parts of me were hers.

Yes, I was tempted by her blood. For all my humanity, I was still a creature of appetite. Day and night I was consumed by thoughts of her taste on my tongue, her surrender in my hands, my name as a sigh upon her lips. But that was only because I allowed myself to be consumed, to be tempted.

Endlessly, I indulged in the idea of her being mine, not because she was a human but because she was... Thea .

Blood had no part in it. I would have wanted her regardless. In every body, every shape. She could have been a vampire, a fairy, a cursed demonic thing. She could have been the ocean, the sky, the edge where the world came to an end, and I would have wanted her with the same supplicant's devotion.

But Arawn had struggled with Margaret's nature, always fighting for control, always wondering if a part of him was only drawn to her because of her blood. Until, in the end, his hunger grew greater than their love.

Arawn looked at me now, his face contorted. "Your love for her will kill you."

Perhaps. But trying not to love her was a million times worse. It was a physical

agony, and the more I resisted, the more painful it grew. That was the thing about unrequited love. It was hopeless; it was hurting you, yet you found nothing more agonizing than letting it go, letting all the love in your heart remain unfelt. To love her in suffering silence was better than to not love her at all.

“Then let it kill me,” I said, stirring him a little. “When I’m ready, I’ll crawl out of the grave and start again. And so will you.”

I wasn’t sure if Arawn was ready to start again, but the Castle seemed to know that I wasn’t. In the hollow of our silence, the forget-me-nots in the vase atop the table twisted and pulsed like a heap of microscopic hearts until seven red roses took their place, filling the room with the scent of her skin.



Thea

It was getting close to midnight, and I was sitting on the little cushioned chair before the vanity table, already dressed for the ball and battling with the mass of my curls, when Hector returned to the room.

“Finally!” I exclaimed, twisting around to face him. “What happened with Roan?”

“Let’s just say the Ravenors won’t be an issue,” said Hector as he sailed toward the bathroom.

I frowned at his relaxed back, confusion sloshing through me.

The image of Camilla standing up on the grand stairs haunted me still. The inhumanity of her face. The sharpness of her fangs. The way her moonstone eyes had hungered over me as if I were something to be consumed.

“Camilla,” was all I was able to choke out.

He veered, an unexpected gleam of calculation in his eyes. “You don’t have to worry about Camilla.”

Incredulity wrapped claws around my heart. “Because Roan said so?”

“Because he gave me his oath,” he revealed. “If Camilla decides to act out, Roan will stand by my side. And yours, of course.”

I pondered for a moment, chewing at my lower lip. “Will Roan succeed Espen? Is that why you value his loyalty so much?”

Hector shook his head grimly, as though he wished that was the case. “As the eldest Ravenor, Camilla is next in line, but since Espen doesn’t trust her to keep the peace with the humans, I believe Alexandria will take over. Unless, of course, Camilla fights her for the position. But that is highly unlikely.”

“You were in the study for a long time,” I persisted, finding all this convenience a bit suspicious. “Are you sure nothing happened with Roan?”

“I was just talking with Dahlia,” he said.

Oh. Oh.

He was just talking with Dahlia .

Beautiful, refined, aristocratic Dahlia.

How lovely.

I shifted to face the vanity again. “Your betrothed, you mean?”

He sighed. “We were never officially engaged.”

“Yes, why is that?” My voice cut harder than I wished it to. It betrayed me like the rest of my body. “She’s perfect for you, no? I mean, she’s practically vampire royalty.”

“Are you jealous, Dorothea?” Hector drawled, and as my eyes darted up, I was startled to find his reflection in the mirror. He bent over me, grabbing the back of my

chair with one hand and the edge of the table with the other. His head tilted into the space next to mine, his hot breath swirling over the skin of my throat.

“Of course not,” I gritted out, but my fingers under the table were carving crescents in my palms.

“Looks good on you.”

“What looks good on me?”

The beginning of a smile tugged at his lips. “Jealousy.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” I huffed. “It’s rather unbecoming for a grown man, you know.”

He eased into the space before me, resting his hip against the vanity table. The distance between us became an accidental brush of my shoulder against the side of his thigh. “Oh no, not unbecoming,” he mocked.

I glared at him, broiling in frustration. “Don’t you think that as your wife—”

“Pretend wife.”

“As your pretend wife, I ought to know about your former dalliances?”

Subtle raise of his brow. Condescending incline of his neck. Gods knew I hated him sometimes. “Dalliances,” he echoed dryly.

“Well, there’s your mystery woman, and Dahlia—”

“Maybe I should ask about your dalliances as well,” he interposed.

“Would you like me to form you a list, Hector dear?” I hummed contentiously, knowing very well there was no such list. There had only been Killian. But he didn’t have to know that.

To my immense satisfaction, Hector’s haughty expression gave in to a morose scowl. “No, I would not like a kill list.”

“I said list. Not kill list, for sky’s sake.”

“Sounds the same to me.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“While you being jealous of the scenarios you’ve made up in your head is the epitome of seriousness, right?”

I ignored him, returning my attention to my disconcertingly feverish reflection in the mirror. I pinned up the last of my curls. Put on my earrings. Grabbed my perfume bottle. Hector refused to leave my side. He watched me with keen fascination, as if I were going through the most interesting tasks in the world.

“You must make haste. It’s almost midnight. We shouldn’t leave our guests waiting,” I urged, running the perfume wand from behind my ears to the dip of my collarbones.

Suddenly, Hector bent over me and took the underside of my jaw in his hand. My breath hitched at the abrupt contact, but I dared not move as he angled my head to the side and lowered his face to the crook of my neck. He inhaled deeply. Once. Twice. “Is this why you always smell of roses?” he asked as he pulled himself upright, completely unaware of the underlying sensuality of what he’d just done.

But I was aware. Terribly, painfully aware.

My hand shook a little as I let the wand slip back into the pink bottle. “It’s from Ollar’s Palace,” I croaked. “It’s this little shop in Thaloria. Esperida took me there on my sixteenth birthday and got it for me. I haven’t stopped wearing it since.”

At the mention of Esperida, the tension in the room changed, shifting from fickle and playful to heavy and mournful. When Hector spoke again, his voice was low, barely a murmur. “I’m sorry I didn’t invite you to the funeral. You should have been there, and it’s my fault you weren’t. I know an apology doesn’t fix what I’ve done. I know how cruel it was of me.” He turned his face away. “But... I don’t know, Thea. Maybe this is all that I can be.”

I tried to swallow around the boulder in my throat, but it was impossible. It was forged from things so much stronger than me. Sorrow and grief and bone-deep anger, for I knew this was not all he could be. “Did you hate me that much?”

“I could never hate you,” he whispered.

“Then why didn’t you write to me? And I’m not just talking about the funeral. I know you were too devastated to write then, but earlier—”

A sudden knock made us both flinch. Hector fixed his shirt quickly and rushed to the door, cracking it open only wide enough to give me a glimpse of Alexandria’s long, lustrous braids.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” she said courteously, and I was surprised by the deep quality of her voice, which didn’t match her youthful appearance. “Mikko and Delyth wanted to ask you something.”

As Hector opened the door fully, I saw the twins’ white-clad forms standing hand in hand before their mother, their wide, unblinking eyes pinned on Hector.

“Good evening, Lord Aventine,” Mikko said with an eerie formality for a ten-year-old.

“Please, you can just call me Hector,” Hector reassured him.

The boy did not return the sentiment. “Well, sir, we don’t mean any disrespect.”

“We really, really don’t,” Delyth contributed, with her high, ghostly voice ringing as solemn as Mikko’s.

“But could we be excused from tonight’s dinner?” continued Mikko, prompting a rather unsettling dialogue between him and his sister.

“For you see, Mother says it’s going to be a very adult evening...”

“Since Aunt Camilla will be there...”

“And as we’ve stumbled upon your observatory...”

“And discovered the most peculiar set of instruments...”

“Like your telescope, for example, that sees into other Realms...”

“Yes, how remarkably delightful to sit in your room and watch the fairies dance through the glass...”

“We would like your permission to spend our night there...”

“And promise that by dawn we’ll be in bed...”

“Is that alright with you, sir?” Delyth finished, and the two of them stared expectantly

at Hector.

“Of course,” said Hector warily. “The Castle will set you a nice dinner up there.”

“We’re not hungry,” Mikko countered.

“For food,” clarified Delyth.

“Blood will suffice.”

“Warmed.”

The twins cocked their necks to the side and fixed their black, steady eyes on me. “Like it’s from the vein,” they said in unison.

Alexandria hummed a note of disapproval. “That’s enough, children.” Gently, she ushered them out of the room, and like a pair of ghosts, they vanished in the shadows, a mere swish of movement reverberating in their absence.

“Thank you for your understanding. I try to keep them as far away from Camilla as possible,” said Alexandria in an air of subtle but unmissable resentment. Then, as if to correct herself, she offered us a blithe smile. “Anyway, I’ll see you two in a bit.”

I released a breath as soon as Hector closed the door behind her. “Okay, these are some scary children.”

Hector said nothing, only cast his attention out of the window. It was clear that the remnants of our interrupted conversation were still weighing on him. But we had no time for it now. Midnight was approaching fast, the starlit wilderness of the night sky stretching endlessly over the Castle, the moon waxing and aglow.

“I should get ready,” muttered Hector curtly before disappearing into the bathroom.

Stifling my disappointment, I went to inspect my appearance in the standing mirror. The extravagant crimson layers of my gown glinted like burnished metal in the watery glass. It was the most exquisite garment I’d ever worn, with a rich bouffant skirt made of the softest velvet and a fitted corset dotted with lacy red roses along the neckline. The short puff sleeves came around the upper arms, stopping right where the shimmer of my white gloves began. A large oval-shaped ruby decorated my neck, held by three rows of pearls, matching the glowing pins in my hair. Never in my life had I looked more regal, more imposing, yet inwardly, I was as unstable as a vessel on water, floundering in waves of giddy nervousness and sick excitement.

I must have been standing there staring at my reflection for quite some time, for when Hector returned, he was already bathed and dressed for the ball. He was in all black again, except for the vest under his jacket that had a subtle pattern of crimson. His hair was still a little damp, and a few strands fell dark and sleek over the curve of his cheekbones.

“Will you tie me up?” I asked a bit absentmindedly, fixing the tiny ringlets along my forehead by curling them around my index fingers.

His figure loomed behind me, a flustered expression on his face. “What?”

I put a hand on my shoulder, indicating my back. “The laces, I mean.”

He blinked in slow understanding, then shook his head as if to push an unwelcome thought from his mind. “Right.”

When he shifted closer behind me, I was disturbed by a sudden ripple of awareness. I became attuned to every movement, every noise our bodies made. The rustle of my skirt against the fabric of his trousers. His hands gliding down my back to take hold



of the laces. His hot breath dancing over the nape of my neck. I wondered if he could see the goosebumps that rose on my skin, if he could guess that under the layers of my gown my knees were wobbling.

I was so immersed in the crackling tension that I didn't resist him when he pulled at the laces. I fell back against his chest. His arm came low around my stomach to keep me steady.

"Careful there," he rasped in my ear. "Is it too tight? Bend forward a little. I can loosen it up for you."

Flustered like a bee in spring, I stumbled out of his hold. "Let me see if I can sit down," I mumbled. I could. The problem was not the dress. The problem was him, Hector, who had grown into a man capable of rendering me breathless just by standing too close to me.

Had I always wanted him like this? Was I simply surrendering to a desire that had lived with me for so long that I could no longer separate it from all my other feelings?

For once, I wished I had the answer.

"Is it okay?" he asked, genuinely worried. "We have time if you want to change—"

"It's fine," I sighed, skittering to my feet to smooth down the pleats of the skirt. "How do I look?"

He had looked at me thousands of times before, but when his gaze fell upon me now, it was something new. "You look..." He paused, taking a long, deep breath. "You look like my wife."

Hector offered me his arm, and as I slipped my gloved fingers over the crook of his

elbow, I stopped feeling so miserably anxious.

The night outside unraveled with a sweep of magic, strings of divinity glowing by the Castle's many windows. My dress was beautiful. My feet were light. And all the wounds we had given each other stopped bleeding for a single perfect moment.

Thea

Freshly rained roses swooped down the vaulted ceiling of the corridor and twisted around the pale columns in clusters of white, red, and pink. The walls beyond the blooming pillars were a vast night sky encrusted with purple clouds, while the floor was a diaphanous moonscape, marking the luminous path to the ballroom. Below, the world was infinite. I felt as though we were treading upon a bridge in the middle of the sky, heading to a previously undiscovered Realm.

A gust of magic swept us inside the dreamy scope of the ballroom, where all the chandeliers were blazing, garlands of crystals breaking the light into a thousand uncanny patterns as some shimmered low above the marble floor while others twinkled high overhead. Everything was glimmering and undulating, light-dazzled mirrors expanding the ballroom into an infinity of brightness.

A sparkling dust was cascading from the glass ceiling as well, fine like snow, leaving golden streaks along the floor and clinging onto the hems of the elaborate gowns and trousers that dressed the Ravenors.

The only spot undisturbed by the whirling dust was the long table at the back of the hall, glowing soft and pale like the inside of a seashell. Our repast was splayed upon ivory silk, served on moonstone plates and gilded cups, and illuminated by a series of white candles floating at irregular heights above it. There were grapes and figs and pomegranates. Bottles of wine and bottles of blood. And, of course, the roast I'd prepared earlier, accompanied by a colorful array of caramelized vegetables. Yet the air smelled sweet, like honey and incense and starlight.

“We’re sorry to keep you waiting,” I said as soon as I found my voice, still in awe at the Castle’s outstanding transformation.

“Don’t worry, dear,” cooed Collette, shining like the first winter snowflake in her flowing white gown and crystalline coronet. “The Castle has been more than entertaining so far.”

Before I could ask what sort of entertainment the Castle had divined for them, Espen slipped in front of me, a stern expression on his face. “I would like to apologize to you,” he said, too solemnly to decipher the level of his sincerity. “I was a little taken aback earlier, and I think I made a terrible first impression on you.”

“Well,” I chuckled, somewhat relieved. “Terrible first impressions make for the greatest friendships.”

“And the greatest enemies,” interjected Camilla, twisting her red lips into a fraudulent smile. Her black gown gave her moon-kissed skin and unbound silver hair an eerie, ghostly glow. It was almost a shock to gaze directly into her pale eyes, her bloodless face. She was the only person in the room that looked out of place, as if her sense of superiority had given her the edge of an illusion.

“Do not listen to my sister,” sighed Espen resignedly. “She just delights in stirring chaos.”

“Only thing that excites her rotten heart,” Roan muttered under his breath, his pearl-threaded braids catching the light into a brilliant halo.

“That’s alright,” I crooned, meeting Camilla’s shrewd gaze in something like a challenge. “I quite thrive in chaos.”

Hector, not bothering with pleasantries at all, ushered me to the high-backed chair at

the head of the table before allowing the rest to assume their own seats. He took the one on my right while Camilla, after hissing something I didn't catch in Roan's ear, claimed the one on my left.

Covertly, in the commotion of gowns swishing and chairs being pulled, I whispered to Hector, "Shouldn't you be sitting at the head?"

"The Lady of the Castle sits at the head. It's tradition," he explained, giving me a secret, tender smile that made the swarm of butterflies that had indefinitely settled in my stomach go positively feral.

After the Castle filled our glasses with the blueberry wine I'd prepared, Espen stood once more, as commanding as a god in his bright silk garments. "Hector," he began, "please allow me to steal your toast and say on behalf of everyone around this table that we are deeply, sincerely proud of the man you've become. I suppose one of the reasons I was so upset earlier is because I've always hoped to make you a part of my family. But you have to know that I respect you all the more for deciding to carve your own path. This is the Aventine way, after all, and there is no one more worthy of this honor than you." He raised his glass, the wine glinting purple-red amid the floating candles. "To Hector, our star-chosen sovereign." He cast his dark gaze upon me, tipping the edge of the glass ever so slightly. "And Thea, the new Lady of the Castle."

In truth, I doubted he meant any of this, but I raised my glass along with the rest and drank to his exceptionally diplomatic toast.

"Gods, what is this?" sighed Alexandria after taking a sip.

Hector squeezed my hand over the table. "Thea made it. It's a Thalorian recipe."

Thaloria was mainly famous for two things: infinite magic and sweet blueberry wine.

However, I'd made this one ten times stronger and therefore undrinkable to me, for vampires had very dull tastebuds when it came to human food and beverages and could hardly tell the difference between spices and herbs. Whenever Esperida was in a particularly self-deprecating mood, she would joke that there was no creature easier to poison than the vampire. Of course the only thing that could poison a vampire was juniper, but even that they had trouble distinguishing over the scent of blood, which often overpowered their sense of smell entirely.

"Wait, you made all of this?" whistled Lance.

"Just the roast. The Castle doesn't provide food that once had a soul," I ventured, only for Camilla to interrupt me with a disdainful snort.

"We know," she said sharply. "We've been a part of the Castle's history long before you existed."

Petty. She was being tiresomely petty, and I refused to stoop to her level.

I offered her a cold, blatantly disingenuous smile and continued, "Yes, how lovely. Well, about the wine, I found a basket of seasonal offerings in the kitchen. I don't know who brought it in, but I thought it would be nice if I made something with it. The blueberries looked particularly scrumptious."

"That would be my mother's doing," explained Arawn, shooting me a playful little wink. "She sent the basket with me as an apology for not joining us."

"Thank you for taking the time to prepare all of this, Thea," Dahlia contributed with a small, shy smile, which made me feel like a complete wanker for being so resentful toward her earlier.

She sat there in her white tulle dress and fine jewelry with the grace of a princess and

the face of a woman who'd rather be anywhere else in the world but here. I would recognize that look in anyone—the look of a woman trapped by familial obligation.

“No need to thank me,” I said as warmly as I could without revealing too much of my thoughts.

“You should make the wine for the ceremony too,” Arawn suggested, already digging into the roast.

“I'd be honored to.”

“Why aren't you drinking, Hector?” Camilla's icy voice cut through the air. “Not in a celebrating mood, or are you just too full on your darling wife?”

“Camilla,” snapped Collette.

“It's okay,” I hummed, hiding a sly smile behind my wine glass. “I'm flattered that the famous Camilla Ravenor is so jealous of my husband.”

Arawn choked on his food, and everyone broke out laughing.

“Ah, she bites back,” purred Camilla, leaning nearer. Near enough that I could smell the heady scent of her skin and the distinct metallic tang of blood. “I like the ones who bite back.”

“Cover your fangs, Camilla,” warned Hector with deceptive calm.

Camilla regarded him with a look of chill contempt, her eyes like jagged stones. “Let me guess. Otherwise, you will remove them from my gums.”

“Of course not,” said Hector blithely. “But I can't promise she won't.”

Intrigue sparked in Camilla's spectral face. "Vicious little fawn, then," she decided.

I arched a brow. "You shouldn't allow yourself to get so easily deceived by appearances, Camilla. I may look delicious, but I ' m no fawn."

As Camilla raised her glass in a mocking salute, I realized she was not easy to offend, which was rare for a vampire of her age and status. In fact, the more I studied her, the more perplexed I became by her cold indifference not only toward me but also toward everyone around this table. She spoke her mind, and if the others didn't like it, she simply didn't care. In a way—a very unsettling, unpredictable way—she was above them, above, perhaps, the very laws and social graces that constrained the rest.

This was what made her so dangerous. This was why Espen would sometimes look at her with an expression of indignation, Collette with distaste, Dahlia with caution, Alexandria with frustration, and Roan with a sharpness that often verged on hatred. The dynamics between them were as intricate as precarious, and I wasn't sure how this was going to affect Hector's ascension to sovereignty, only that it somehow would.

For a while we all enjoyed our dinner, talking about the fineness of the wine, the richness of the food, the blood that tasted as sweet as the figs on our plates. Then came talk of their own affairs: the situation the Valkhars were dealing with and the vampire who was recently caught in Kartha feeding on a human child. Espen said the vampire was executed by the order of the king. Lance asked if they beheaded him or if they cut out his heart with a hunter's blade. No detail was too gruesome amongst a company of vampires.

The cups were emptied and poured again. Their lips grew red with blood and wine, their elegant faces shining like gemstones, their laughter like the clearest water. I'd never felt more out of place in my life. I kept catching myself staring at them, mesmerized, frozen in my seat. They were all so unbearably radiant, like living works



of art. Yet to be in their presence was less of an inspiring experience than a frightening one. There was terror in their beauty, or perhaps they were only so beautiful because of it.

I forced myself to participate despite the inexplicable rise of apprehension in my blood, but, at last, I became so disengaged that I ended up getting startled when a low grunt sounded from my left.

Tieran, who was seated between Roan and Camilla, was bleeding . His wrist had been sliced down the middle and was now dripping dark red inside a tall crystal cup. For a stomach-turning moment, I thought it was for Camilla, but to my further dismay, Roan was the one who raised the cup to his lips. He swallowed slowly as if to savor the taste before leaning down to run his tongue along the gushing incision, not a drop of blood wasted.

Tieran's face softened with affection when Roan offered him his wrist in return, but he only managed to shake his head before Camilla drew him into her arms. Impatiently, she untied the collar of his shirt, exposing his bone-pale throat.

Then she bit into him.

Her fangs sank deep enough to tear through nerves, bobbing up and down to widen the wound. Tieran moaned quietly, his scarlet eyes falling shut as his head lolled back, right into Camilla's palm. Her fingers curled firmly around the roots of his dark hair, her other hand clutching down his unfurled shirt.

My whole life I'd never seen anything so subtly horrid. She was devouring him, right in front of us, twisting in her seat and pulling him closer until the blood overflowed her mouth and started trickling down his throat. Tieran grew listless, leaving sounds that only he could know if they were of severe agony or unimaginable pleasure.

In a sick panic, I gazed around the table only to find that no one, not even Hector, was paying the slightest attention to them, the conversation meandering from one matter to another as if a man wasn't being bled dry right before our eyes.

My mind stuttered.

Was I imagining this? Were my human eyes deceiving me somehow, distorting the scene into something more grotesque than it actually was?

Everywhere I looked, I saw red. Wine and meat and blood, blood, blood. I was sickened by it. Bile churned in my stomach and welled up my throat, the iron tang crawling deep into my lungs.

Camilla was careless as she released Tieran, and more blood gushed out of his wound to stain his white shirt. A few droplets hit the table, dark red and viscous. Lance's pale eyes fell on them, and something torn between lust and hunger braced his face. Before I knew it, he was turning in his seat to bite into Alexandria's neck, his big hand closing firmly around her delicate jaw.

Some sort of sound must have escaped me then, because several pairs of eyes snapped in my direction at once, their attention bright and painful, like a peal of thunder.

Camilla leaned back on her chair, collected as a priestess on Solstice Night. Her lips and chin were smeared with blood, thick droplets gliding down her throat. With a slow, almost sensual sweep of her finger over the tops of her breasts, she gathered the blood and licked it clean with vicious delight. "Hasn't Hector taught you not to stare at vampires while they feed?" Tracing her still-dripping fangs with her tongue, she reached across the table and snatched my wrist in her claws. "They might take it as an invitation."

It happened lightning-fast. Hector sprang up, vanished momentarily, then reappeared behind Camilla's chair. He bent over her like a death creature, dark and enormous, and dug his fingers into the stained column of her throat, to the exact spot where her pulse beat the strongest.

For the first time since Camilla entered the Castle, she seemed alert, her eyes rounding, her long pearlescent nails digging into the ivory tablecloth before her.

Then the light dissolved. A ripple of wind snuffed out the floating candles, and a sheet of frost crept along the walls and arched over the table. Crackling icicles dangled over our heads, precarious and sharp as daggers.

"Do not forget your place, Camilla," Hector snarled, his mouth drawn into a ruthless line above his fangs. "You might not think of me as your sovereign yet, but I am an Aventine, and you are in my Castle." His fingers pinched the hollow of her throat, making her red lips part for air. "If you disrespect my wife again, I will make an example out of you, and if you think I'm afraid of it starting a war, then your arrogance has not only blinded you but has also turned you into a fool."

"Hector," warned Espen, his fist closing around the handle of the meat knife.

Collette, following the path of my gaze, put her hand over his. "I think we all had too much of Thea's wine," she said steadily.

For a moment, everyone was still, poised and vigilant like soldiers waiting for their general's command.

At last, Hector drew his hand away from Camilla's throat.

The first ounce of breath she regained she spent on a dark, deranged laugh. "Look who finally grew some spine."

Hector's brows lowered, his eyes black as the night. "This is not a joke, Camilla."

"No, but it is not a threat either," I interjected before matters escalated. I forced myself to stand, my heart to quieten, my tongue to voice words of honesty. "I will not lie to you. I am a stranger to your world. More than I thought. More than I want to be. So now I have to ask for your patience, not only towards me but also towards Hector. He and I are a family, and since you too are a family, I'm sure you can understand why he's so protective of me. Please, let's not allow one unfortunate moment to ruin our evening."

"But the Castle," Dahlia's frightened whisper pierced the tense silence that followed my perhaps poor attempt at diplomacy. She looked up at the darkened, frost-covered ceiling, bracing herself against the cold. "Is it mad at us?"

As I gazed upon their ashen, thunderstruck faces, I finally grasped the Castle's hold over vampire society. Over the years it had become so much more than a symbol of power. Vampires were cursed and therefore godless creatures. They could not enter sacred ground. The Castle, which was a hallowed place in its own star-stricken way, was the only exception. It was their temple and their god.

Good, I thought, smiling at all of them, even at Camilla, who not only didn't appear to be insulted by Hector's attack but seemed disconcertingly bored with all of us. Let them be too scared to try and take what isn't theirs. Let Camilla be alone in her irreverence.

"Of course not," I chimed, just as the ice thawed and warm light dazzled over the room. Tall crystal glasses popped into everyone's hands, and the long table between us was exchanged for a smaller, round one covered by a fountain of sparkling wine and tiered cakes spangled with pearls. I slipped my glass under the fountain, soaking my glove in the pale liquid before raising it high in a toast. "The night has only just begun."

Slowly but surely the tension melted away, shifting into quiet laughter and excited sighs as the ceiling exploded into a shower of fireworks, golden sparks descending over us in petals of light.

At the far edge of the hall, a podium of magical instruments emerged, and music echoed all around us, notes pure and flowing as a river stream. The rush of the melody swept the golden dust from the floor and formed phantom silhouettes that began to dance in the air under the ever-shifting light of the fireworks.

Hector touched his hand to the small of my back, his hard face coming into view. He brought his cheek next to mine, his mouth to my ear. “Are you okay? I’m sorry if she scared you.”

I shook my head, speaking just as quietly, “I’m fine. But you know better than to make threats like this. It isn’t like you to be so impulsive.”

“She touched you.”

“She’s messing with me.”

Hector leaned back, holding himself with such dignity you’d think the gods were watching. Gently, he caught an escaping curl from my forehead and brushed it away. Then his fingers wandered lower, to my jawbone, his thumb resting on the dip under my mouth. “No one messes with my wife,” he said. “No one but me.”

I had no idea if we were pretending anymore. I just knew that here, in this magic-dazed room, Hector Aventine was mine, and I was his.

He cocked his head to the side, his warm fingers lingering on my face. “Your gaze is very intense, Lady Aventine. Do you see something you like?”

I glanced far behind him at the framed glass running with water. “Yes, Lord Aventine. My reflection in the mirror. I think I like myself swathed in velvet and pearls.”

“I like you always,” he blurted out, then bit his lip, blood flooding his cheeks. “But I believe you know that already.”

Suddenly, the music swelled, and all the noise around us got drowned in its buoyant rhythm. Even the golden phantoms in their dust-made finery seemed to twirl higher in the air, demanding our attention. Or perhaps daring us to join them.

Hector bowed at the waist, extending one hand toward me. “May I have this dance?”

I recalled every single time I had to beg and prod and taunt him for a single spin, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I surrendered my hand to his. “Took you ten years to ask.”

His eyes shone like ambers as he reached for my glove. It was still damp with wine, and he pulled it off me carefully, taking the time to tug loose each finger before letting it slip to the floor.

“I didn’t realize you were waiting,” he said, and without removing his gaze from mine, he raised my bare hand to his mouth, turned it around, and pressed a soft kiss on the inside of my wrist.

In Lumia, if you kissed the inside of a woman’s wrist, it meant you wanted to marry her. My whole body kindled as I realized it. My heart, my soul, my bones—nothing remained unlit.

With a hand at my waist, he brought me closer and plunged us into the rhythm. Alexandria and Lance joined us as well, then Collette and Espen, their elegant

silhouettes spinning amid the increasing haze of the phantom dancers. After that, I stopped being aware of my surroundings.

Our bodies never touched apart from my fingers on his shoulder and his hand on my waist, but I could feel the very essence of him. The heat of his body. The scent of his skin. Sandalwood and incense and his own indescribable scent, the one I went to sleep with last night.

“Were you always so good at this?” I asked, a bit breathless as he swayed us faster now, in perfect harmony with the undulating melody.

“I’ve had some practice,” he said with another tiny smile. I loved his smiles. They were like secrets. Something that looked like a shell but inside was a pearl.

“Your mystery woman again?”

He rolled his eyes before rolling me too, unraveling our embrace only to pull me close again, so close that our bodies fell in perfect alignment. His chest pressed against mine. His knee slipped between the folds of my skirt. I could feel him everywhere.

“Will you let that go already?” he sighed. “They can’t see us grumbling like a cranky old couple. We’re supposed to be newlyweds.”

“They can’t see or hear us. The Castle is covering us. Besides, we’re also supposed to be separating soon,” I reminded him sweetly.

“Why do you always have to be so disagreeable?”

“Because you love it.”

He spun me again, and our breaths came in unison. “You’re as delusional as ever, I see.”

“Why won’t you admit it?”

“Admit what?”

“That this would have been torture without me here.”

His fingers twisted into the fabric of my dress. He nudged me forward, slanting his face over mine until our noses touched. “It is torture with you here too.”

My lips parted. His eyes followed them. I was seized with the certainty that if he tried to kiss me now, I would let him. I would forgive him for everything. For the things he said. For the things he didn’t say. I would give us both another chance. The heart, after all, was a brave thing. It took risks the mind wouldn’t.

But just as I began to taste him in that minuscule space between our lips—hot and sweet with the figs he ate at dinner—Hector plunged us into the rhythm again, our twined silhouettes speeding past the mirrors.

A strange white light seemed to waver inside the watery facades, following us, chasing our movements. Head whirling, I tried to focus on it, to decipher its origins. Where was it coming from? Inside the glass? Or was it a reflection of something else entirely?

Suddenly, an invisible force struck my shoulder and made me stumble out of Hector’s hold. My feet caught in the frilly hem of my skirt, and I pitched backward. I was about to fall on one of the freestanding benches that circled the room when Hector brought his hand around my waist and slipped behind me to break the impact, which resulted in me slumping on his lap.



Panting, I glared at the ceiling. “I swear the old bastard pushed us.”

The chandeliers twinkled. The Castle was laughing at us.

I started to get up, but Hector’s hand pressed down on my stomach, pulling me more firmly against him. The touch was a command. It lit a fire in my bones.

“What are you doing?”

“Give me a second,” he rasped, his labored breath dampening the skin at the nape of my neck. “I’d rather not make a spectacle of myself.”

“What? Why?”

He shifted under me, our legs tangling. As I felt his hardness pressing against my backside, droplets of pleasure trickled beneath my skin. More, I thought. “Oh,” was all I said.

His forehead fell against the knuckle at the top of my spine. Hot. Damp. I knew exactly how he’d look if I turned now. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I muttered hoarsely. “It happens.”

“Does it?” he whispered, his lips moving right up against my skin, sending waves of mind-numbing want through me. “Because I only seem to get like this when I’m with you.”

I squirmed in his arms, not because I wanted him to release me but because I wanted desperately to feel him through the layers of our clothes. The more I stirred, the more restless he grew in response, until a low, guttural sound escaped him, something between a grunt of agony and a groan of pleasure. Either way, it was a strike to my

nerve endings. I began to tremble, my palms pressing down upon his thighs. “Hector, I—”

“I know,” he said. “I know. But try to stay still for me, yes?”

I held my breath, forcing my body to behave. Each second was the length of an eternity.

Hector brought his lips to my ear. “Good girl.”

“If I ask Lady Aventine to a dance, will you make an example out of me too?” Arawn’s drawl was a splash of cold water.

In a blink, the ballroom came into focus along with a brutal and heart-dropping surge of mortification.

Thankfully, the phantom dancers had multiplied, and everyone, apart from Dahlia and Camilla, who were standing around the wine fountain with their backs turned to the room, was too busy spinning alongside them to pay any attention to us.

“Won’t you fuck off, Celestine?” growled Hector.

Arawn shot him a wry look. “I would, but the only available partner at the moment is Camilla, and I’m pretty sure that every orifice of her body has fangs.”

I grimaced. “You’re disgusting.”

“Yes, yes, I’m a repulsive, despicable vampire. Now dance with me, for old times’ sake.”

“Alright, alright,” I sighed as Hector got us up from the bench in one sweeping

motion.

Arawn's face was pallid, etched in shadow, but his smile was bright and mischievous as he grabbed my hand and swirled me theatrically onto the dance floor. Hector laughed, and the sound of it filled me with sparkling joy.

Outside, the night was cold and dark, the forest vast and foreboding, but inside the Castle, the creatures of the night were more alive than ever.

Thea

Dawn arrived with the promise of a glorious day, but my heart felt too moonburned to be moved by the grand sweeps of pink and peach that made the sky outside look like a fragment from a painting. How strange it was to be going to bed at this meandering, in-between hour. No wonder Esperida always said that her life was like one endless night, days and months and years inseparable from each other.

The Castle was blissfully quiet. Everyone had already locked themselves away from the lethal light of the sun, and our two lonely shadows, Hector's and mine, seemed to reach for each other in the stillness of the floor. "Why don't you go ahead and rest?" he suggested.

Immediate disappointment swelled in my chest. "Where are you going?"

Perhaps it was a little presumptuous of me, but now that we were alone, I thought we were going to talk about what had happened earlier in the ballroom. Maybe even do more than just talk. I hoped for two bodies in one bed. I hoped for confessions and admissions and relief. I felt as though a barrier had crumbled between us, and whatever we chose to do with the pieces of this shattered wall now was going to alter the trajectory of our lives forever.

"I need to speak with Arawn," was all Hector said.

He's avoiding me, I realized, my heart eggshell thin. "Earlier... Did I misinterpret..."

“You didn’t.” The words left him in a rush. They didn’t allow much room for doubt. Still, he was not staying.

“I thought you might want to—”

“I did,” he interjected again. Then more firmly, “I do.” His gaze softened on mine, like the daylight outside softened the edges of the night. “Believe me, I want nothing more than to be alone with you right now. But Arawn...” He hesitated.

My own worries quieted as Arawn’s sunken eyes focused in the prism of my mind. “He’s heartbroken,” I murmured. “I don’t think I’ve seen him like this before. And he’s so thin, did you notice?”

A look of gut-wrenching guilt seized Hector’s face. “I don’t know how I missed it,” he whispered. “I should have been there for him.”

Had Hector not been in such a terrible shape himself, I knew he would have done much more than simply be there for Arawn. After all, Hector had been the one to hold me in his arms the first time a boy rejected me. Hector had been the one to rush across the Realm with or without the Castle every time I wrote to him that I’d fought with my parents or that I’d been feeling terribly lonely without him.

I pressed a little closer, slipping my fingers over the crescents of his arm. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You suffered a great loss. And when you’re hurting, it’s hard to see that the people around you are hurting as well. Sadness falls upon your eyes like a veil. It blinds you. It secludes you from the rest of the world.”

His throat bobbed, the shame in his face shifting into melancholy. “And how do you lift the veil?”

“You don’t,” I said, and the smile accompanying that sentiment was a sad one. “You

wait for it to fall away little by little until you're able to see the world in full color again."

"But the people I've hurt—"

"They'll forgive you," I reassured him, squeezing his arm. "We're not characters in a play. We're not perfect, and we don't have to be. We're people. We're messy and flawed and egotistical at times. And I will probably never understand why some people's destinies are so much harder and heavier than others', but I do know that if someone can't forgive your sadness, then they don't deserve your happiness."

Hector looked at me closely for several silent moments, his backlit face as unreadable as ever. Then he leaned down and flicked my nose, his lips curving into a small, wistful smile. "When did you become so wise, hmm?"

Wise.

Would a wise woman follow the will of others as I'd done? Would a wise woman have so much trouble connecting with the parts of herself that were supposed to define her the most? Would a wise woman have been so blind to the man who'd been standing right in front of her all along?

"I'm an idiot," I sighed resignedly.

Hector's eyes grew hard on me, but not hard like stone, hard like glass. A hardness that was easy to break. "You give so much of your kindness to others," he said. "I wish you left some for yourself."

I didn't know why these words hurt me so much, but suddenly everything inside me twisted. I wanted to disappear, recoil from him, and fade into the dark walls of the Castle.

“I’m going to bed,” I said with a dramatic yawn. “Let’s talk in the morning, yes?”

I turned on my heel, the hem of my dress swishing furiously against the marble floor. I didn’t have to check over my shoulder to know that Hector watched me shrink into the darkness.

How many times , I wondered, have we watched each other go?

???

Burgundy draperies were drawn over every window, and with all the lamps and candles snuffed out for the day, the hallway was somber enough to kindle a spark of unease in my chest.

As the mass of gloom stretched out before me, I was overtaken with the same strange feeling that someone or some thing was watching me.

I both dreaded and ached to check over my shoulder to confirm I hadn’t gone completely mad, but my dilemma ceased when I felt the chill of a phantom touch along my arm.

Death. This feels like death , I thought, and with a scream lodged in the back of my throat, I whirled at once.

The corridor seemed to spiral away into the darkness: endless, bleak, and bereft of life apart from the frightened beats of my heart and the shuddering of my body.

No death creature loomed behind me, no passing ghost, only the sweeping sequence of black and white squares and the dark expansive walls. Yet the temperature took an eerie plunge, the bouquets on the pedestals withering, as if the magic of the Castle was failing one petal at a time.

My breath turned to fine mist before my eyes. Slowly, with a shiver crawling up my spine, I veered again—and screamed at the pale, red-eyed face that floated right above me. My fist came up on sheer instinct and beat against a stone-hard surface, which turned my panicked shriek into a howl of pain.

“What in the damned sky is wrong with you?” growled a frightfully unfamiliar voice.

I shook out my throbbing hand, blinking rapidly, only to realize that the floating, demon-eyed head before me belonged to Tieran, whose voice I’d never heard before.

“I’m so sorry,” I gasped, cupping my mouth in horror as I noticed the clean stream of blood trickling down his nose.

Tieran bared his fangs in a snarl, but his scarlet eyes were too flat, his marble face too passionless to convey real threat. Still, I felt myself recoil in suspicion, a sour taste of fear on my tongue. “Why—why are you following me?”

“I am trying to move past you. Our room is right next to yours,” he gritted out, pointing at the shiny black door behind me.

“Oh,” I mumbled, my alarm giving way to mortification.

Tieran wiped the blood that had settled over his upper lip with the back of his hand, the movement unsteady, almost spasmodic.

His skin, I realized, would have been rich and tan had he not looked so ill, and his almond-shaped eyes would have been warm and bright with intelligence had they been less listless.

How much had Camilla drunk from him? And why would Roan allow his husband to be treated like this?



Earlier in the study, I thought I saw love in Roan's eyes and heard tenderness in his voice when he'd mentioned his husband. Camilla had to have some kind of hold over them. Something that prevented Roan from intervening and allowed her to do whatever she pleased.

I knew it was not my place to say something about it; in fact, I was certain I didn't want to get caught in anything that involved Camilla, but I couldn't abandon Tieran in this condition and go about my evening with a clean conscience either.

"Tieran, are you feeling okay? Can I get you something? Perhaps a cup of blood?" I asked, reaching up to brace his shaking shoulders.

Tieran shoved my hands away, his white fangs gleaming silver in the dim. "You can get lost."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want your pity, and I don't want your judgment," he growled. "You think just because Hector doesn't feed on you that you're better than us?"

Shocked to the marrow of my bones, I brought a hand to the base of my throat, curling my fingers under the last string of pearls. "He—"

"Don't bother lying," he spat, stepping forward to slant his death-touched face directly over mine. "I don't know if Hector chose you for political reasons, if he was afraid to evoke Dain's wrath by marrying Dahlia, or if he simply didn't want to deal with her romantic delusions for the rest of his life, but everybody here knows he doesn't feed on you. You don't have his scent, and you don't have his bite, so don't you dare judge me for something you can't even comprehend."

I wanted to be kind to him, for he seemed to be in great pain, and people in pain were

often cruel without meaning to, but my anger overthrew my patience, and I pulled myself straight, forcing him to step back so our faces wouldn't touch.

“Get out of my way, Tieran,” I said steadily, gathering my skirts in my fists. “I don't care what you think about me, but I still am the Lady of the Castle.”

Tieran's glowing eyes narrowed a fraction, his square jaw clenching as he stepped aside for me to pass.

My heart thundered as loudly as my heels clicked on the marble floor. I felt like I could no longer trust my eyes in the dark. I was in a new world, cold, bloodstained, and obscure, and it was erasing the one I'd known my entire life.

It was not a lawless world. But laws were chaos to the one who did not understand them.

Thea

They were all dead. The Ravenors, Arawn, Hector.

The dinner table was a confusion of spilled wine and melted wax dripping from skewed candles. The withered flower arrangements smelled of rot and mildew. The silk napkins were mere crumpled balls of dried blood. And they were all dead .

Some of them were slumped on their chairs, heads hanging back in unnatural, bone-snapping angles, while others lay with their faces pressed upon the drenched tablecloth, their eyes grotesquely wide, grey irises death-stopped in expressions of horror. All of them had the same bluish froth crawling out of their gaping mouths, the poison—the juniper—drying down the unmoving columns of their throats.

I was weeping—weeping and shaking Hector’s rigid body with such violence that he fell from his chair and collapsed to the blood-speckled floor. In my hysteria, I got down on my knees next to him and dug my fingers into the smeared collar of his shirt, ear-splitting sobs emerging from the very racking of my heart.

He was cold as ice, his lips red and purple, his stiff neck soaked in poison. I didn’t care. I hugged him to my chest, staining myself with his death, and begged any god who was willing to listen to please, please, bring him back to me.

But when the gods didn’t answer, my grief burned into rage, and I started screaming. I screamed with the fury of a thousand demons, and I almost didn’t hear the soft voice in my ear.

It's just a bad dream.

How did one dream without falling asleep? How could this be a trick of the subconscious when I was still wide awake?

Wake up, the voice murmured again, a smell of sandalwood tickling under my nostrils. Please, Dorothea. It's only just a dream.

Dorothea. There was only one person in the world who called me that, and he was lying dead in my arms.

"Hector?" I asked. My voice was so raw from screaming, I could taste the metallic tang of blood at the back of my throat.

Then the dining room spiraled in a distance, falling away from my vision fragment by fragment, their dead bodies misting through an expansive void.

Yes. Now open your eyes for me.

Slowly, I blinked. Once. Twice. The haunting whiteness started peeling off like sheets of old wallpaper, revealing colors and shapes and objects that barely made sense to me. A dark red canopy. A sunlit window. A glowing, crackling hearth. I stared at them blankly until sensation returned to my body. A hand was brushing back the curls from my damp forehead, and another was clutching my arm, lifting me up from the bed. Then a pair of sunburst eyes stumbled into my sphere of vision, and my mind exploded into consciousness.

"Hector!" I gasped.

His arms wound around my waist, hugging me so close to his chest that I felt his heart pounding right up against mine. "I'm here. Shhh. I'm right here."

I drowned a sob in the crook of his neck. “I was so scared.”

“I know,” he murmured, untangling himself from me so he could use the heels of his palms to dry my tear-stained cheeks. “It’s over now. Please, don’t cry anymore.”

“You were dead.”

“It was just a dream.” He searched for my eyes, a line of worry carving between his brows. “Wasn’t it?”

I didn’t have an answer. I didn’t remember falling asleep. I remembered coming into the bedroom, breathless and shaken from my encounter with Tieran, and running to the bathroom to remove my jewelry so I could splash my face and neck with cold water. Then I’d slumped on the bed with my dress still on, throwing a forearm over my eyes. A tingling sensation had crept over my skin, spider-thin prickles spreading from the base of my spine to the roots of my hair. And before the nightmare had closed over me, I’d felt the familiar pull of my magic, a tug coming straight from the core of my soul.

What if this hadn’t been a dream?

What if it were a vision?

I jolted back, my body breaking out in fresh chills. “Hector... I have this terrible feeling,” I choked out, and even the sound of my voice was eerie in my ears. “He’s here. I can feel him. I can feel him watching us.”

Hector’s dark brows drew closer, twin shadows unraveling over his cheeks. “Who?”

“Death.”

If Hector shared my fear, he did not show it. His face in the pale morning light looked weary but unyielding. He curled a hand around my nape and pulled my face to his. “The Castle protects me, and I protect you,” he said with implacable certainty. “You know I won’t let anyone hurt you, right?”

Yes. Yes, the Castle would never let anything bad happen to Hector. He was going to be fine. We were all going to be fine.

I repeated the words in my head, surrendering my body to his arms. Even within his infinite warmth, this cold, deathlike feeling refused to lift off me. It kept on slithering under my skin, draining my veins of blood and filling them with ice.

Carefully, Hector took my hand in his, his expression darkening. “What happened here?” he asked, passing his thumb over my bruised knuckles.

“I punched Tieran in the face,” I admitted shamefully.

“What did he do?” he demanded.

“Nothing, he just startled me in the hallway,” I reassured him, and when the murder in his face didn’t budge, I pressed him into more urgent matters. “Hector, they know we’re not physically intimate.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“We can smell that sort of thing.”

More confusion swept through me. “Yet they don’t question our marriage?”

“They think I married you because you’re a human,” he explained. “There’s been a lot of commotion ever since Mother died.”

“You mean that cult in Elora?”

Hector shook his head grimly. “The King of Elora stated that if we violate any of our treaties going forward, there will be no further negotiations between us. There will be war. The vampire sovereign marrying a human is a declaration of peace at this point.”

Such news always arrived late to the Faraway North, for our little kingdom was a universe of its own, eternally swathed in layers of mystery and magic. Even maps of Thaloria tended to be unreliable, as the land constantly changed. Still, I was shocked by the amount of things I didn’t know about Hector’s life. I could see now that his world, much like Thaloria, had existed next to mine vaguely and mystically, belonging more to myth than reality.

Hector squeezed my hand gently, drawing my attention. “Are you okay, Thea? Did Tieran say something to upset you?”

“I think I was the one who upset him. During dinner.”

“Ah,” he understood.

“The way I reacted... I insulted him, didn’t I? I must have looked appalled.”

“It’s my fault. I should have warned you about them.” He released a long breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “My head is all over the place.”

“How is Camilla allowed to do this to him?”

Hector’s whole body tensed at the mere mention of Camilla, the muscles of his throat

narrowing. “Because she’s his creator.”

His creator.

The words dropped over me like a premonition, making the skin of my neck crawl. “I thought it was forbidden.”

“It is. Tieran is an exception.”

“How so?”

“Roan and Tieran got married three years ago, while Tieran was still a human. He was a physician, and at the time he was treating a patient with a rare lung disease. It proved infectious.”

I cupped my mouth, stifling a horrified gasp.

“Tieran was dying, and he was dying horribly. So he asked Roan to turn him.”

“And why didn’t he?”

Hector’s gaze fell away from mine. “He loves him. Who would condemn someone they love to this life?”

“Hector,” I sighed, my heart sinking. “You’re not damned.”

“Of course I am,” he said very quietly. “We’re all born godless and cursed. That is the substance of our condition. But for the turned ones, it’s even worse. The balance between man and creature is more unstable. So Roan refused him, and Tieran, desperate to stay by his husband’s side, turned to Camilla for help.”



“And Esperida allowed her to turn him?” I asked, unable to hide the accusation in my voice.

“Mother only had one weakness,” whispered Hector.

“Love,” I realized.

“Love,” he echoed. “Tieran was willing to do anything to stay by Roan’s side. Even curse himself. Mother could not find it in her heart to refuse him.”

“But why is Camilla still doing this to him?”

“It is rare, but sometimes turned vampires become addicted to their creators’ venom. Tieran is in constant pain. Her bite is the only thing that soothes him. Of course, rehabilitation is still possible, but Camilla has made sure Tieran needs her more than he needs his next breath. She’s fixated on vampire blood, and no one is going to be more willing to indulge her obsession than her own turned one.”

I recalled the look on Tieran’s face when Camilla sunk her fangs into him, pleasure and agony strung together. No wonder Roan looked at Camilla with such blatant hate in his eyes. Not only had she turned his husband into a vampire, but she had also turned him into an addict.

“Why did Roan drink from him too?” I persisted, hopelessly trying to understand things that seemed to hover just beyond my reach.

Hector shrugged. “I’m sure Tieran drinks from Roan as well. It’s very common between vampire partners.”

My face warmed as I imagined Hector with some faceless woman in his arms, drinking from her neck in a blissful stupor. Reflexively, I traced my fingers over the

side of my throat. “If you bite me, will I become addicted to the venom?”

He smiled a little at my curiosity. “There are humans who actively seek out the bite, but research has proven this is due to an addiction to adrenaline rather than the venom itself, considering how unstable vampire urges can be. Actually, I attended a lecture on this while I was visiting Kartha.” His tiny smile turned tender, his eyes as soft as dappled light. “I was astonished by how many people were there, and I ended up writing to my parents about it. I’m glad I got to tell them one last time how proud I was to be their son. They planted this seed, and now the roots of knowledge are spreading all across the Realm. ”

“There is so much I don’t know about you,” I murmured, hugging my knees to my chest.

He didn’t pretend it wasn’t true. “You were always here, but you were never really...”

“A part of your world.”

For a moment he was silent, pensive. “Does it disgust you? My world?”

He asked it so gently, with such profound understanding in his voice, that I could not believe I’d spent the past four years thinking he hated me. I could tell Hector the cruelest things, and he still wouldn’t know how to hate me.

“Sometimes,” I answered truthfully.

“Does it scare you?”

It did. I couldn’t help it. Humans were designed to be afraid of the things they didn’t understand. But perhaps we were also designed to overcome them. “Tell me,” I

prodded, staring at his parted lips, his fangs that gleamed pure white in the daylight.  
“What is it really like? Being a vampire, I mean.”

He didn't have to think much about it. “It's all so incomparably bright. And hauntingly dark.”

“Beautiful and terrifying then.”

“Yes.”

“Like getting lost in the woods.”

“Yes.”

“Or falling in love.”

He blushed a little. “ Yes .”

Hope, small and unexpected, bloomed in my chest. “Being human is a lot like that too.”

The intensity of his attention magnified. Here, in this sun-dazed room, there was nothing else to see but each other.

“Come here,” he rasped.

My breath hitched. “Why?”

He responded by seizing my wrist and hauling me right into the warmth of his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked, raising my wounded hand to his mouth.

He’s going to heal me , I realized, and a strange thrill stole over my body. My throat was too tight for words. I merely nodded.

“Say it,” he pressed, his eyes on mine bright and unsteady. “I just want to hear you say it for once.”

The words were easy to utter, unlike all the other truths that remained unsaid between us. “I trust you. With everything I am.”

His lips found the spot above my knuckles, and my heart leapt from my chest to beat to the exact spot where his mouth connected with my hand. His fangs pierced my skin, not a bite but a nick, brief and light enough to inject me with only a drop of venom. The tip of his tongue lapped over my skin to soothe the sting. But there was nothing to soothe. My hand was left unbruised. I felt no pain. Only a bright, acute rush of something indescribable . Something that tasted of euphoria and smelled of ecstasy. The room spun, yet I was not dizzy. I was flying, slipping through the ceiling and drifting amid the clouds.

Even in weightlessness, I was aware of the innermost workings of my body. The blood in my veins ran hotter. The breath in my lungs turned heavier. The pulse at the base of my throat grew wilder. A molten, trickling sensation slid low, then lower in my body until I had to press my thighs together and bite down on my lip to stifle an outcry of what I knew was desire but felt like agony. For a second, I knew exactly what it was to be him, to have this... appetite . To crave. To yearn. To want for all the dark little things to crawl out of the night and claim you.

“Are you alright?” Hector’s voice was unfamiliar in my ear. Not low and rough but clear like water running through a glade, inviting you to a midnight swim.

“I feel a bit strange,” I mumbled, blinking fireflies from my vision. The only light in the room came from the window, but my eyes were swimming in undulating spots of luminosity. The temperature grew warmer too, spring shifting into summer. My skin dampened. My breasts grew heavy and tender against my corset.

“That’s normal,” said Hector. His eyes were the only dark things in the room. “It’s your first time.”

“Hot,” I sighed.

“What?”

“I feel hot. Will you get me out of this dress?”

He gave me a very peculiar look, which I didn’t bother deciphering. I was drowsy and feverish, and I just wanted him to hurry up and free me from this corset already.

“Are you wearing anything underneath?” he asked, an odd wariness to his voice.

I nodded eagerly. “My chemise.”

“Good,” he said, exhaling. “Good. Okay.”

I tried twisting around so I could offer him better access to my back, but my skirts kept getting in the way.

“Hold still for a moment,” Hector muttered, moving behind me like a shadow.

A fierce rip sounded in the room, and the garment finally unlatched from my body. “Oh sweet relief,” I panted, fanning myself with my hands and not feeling mortified at all that Hector was holding up my ripped corset like he didn’t know what to do

with it. “You know, that’s how Lorn Verlion rips bodices too. Although his wife rarely goes to sleep after it.”

Hector bristled between his teeth, throwing the ruined garment on the floor. “I’m sure your fictional lovers make up in vigor what they lack in manners, but I will not be following their example tonight.”

His words didn’t make any sense to me. I watched his lips move and heard his throat make all sorts of sounds, but I could not understand any of them. I was wonderfully groggy, eyes and limbs leaden with sleep.

I fumbled with the tangle of covers until Hector stopped me, closing his strong hand around my arm. “Don’t lie down yet.”

Confusion sloshed through my blissful mind. “I was joking about Lorn Verlion . Not that I don’t want to do this with you—”

“Your hairpins, Dorothea,” Hector grumbled. “You’re going to hurt your head, and then you’ll no longer be able to make all these ridiculous scenarios up in there.”

“Oh, we don’t want that,” I agreed ruefully.

Hector brought me back so I could sit between his spread legs. I assumed he was going to use his vampire speed and be done with it in a second, but he took his time, freeing my curls one at a time, his featherlight fingers raking through my hair.

“I love this,” I murmured.

“I love...” I didn’t hear what he said after that. My eyes fell shut, my breathing slowed, sweet darkness closing over me. I must have dozed off for a while because my mind was completely blank when I felt Hector’s hand squeezing my shoulder.

“You can lie down now.”

“Are you going to sleep too?” I yawned.

He stood from the bed so he could work off his vest and shirt. “In a little bit.”

“Are you going to sleep here?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“In this bed?”

His fingers paused on the cuff of his shirtsleeve. “Do you wish me to go?”

The opposite. I wanted him out of his clothes and into this bed so we could hold each other close and talk until we became too exhausted for words. Just as when we were kids.

Despite the nightmare, nothing sinister had happened here tonight, and yet I was overwhelmed by this inexpressible need to return to something innocent. As if a part of my soul had been tainted somehow, and the only way I could restore it to its initial state was through the familiar.

“No, I don’t want to be alone,” I admitted.

His lips quirked. Mischief sparkled in his eyes. “Do you want me to hold you? Is that why you’re interrogating me about tonight’s sleeping arrangements?”

“Maybe.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “You’ll have to ask nicely.”

Supercilious wanker. Ever since he was twelve years old.

Still I asked, “Will you hold me?”

Hector cocked a brow.

“Please,” I added bitterly.

Finally, he climbed back on the bed, his lips pressing together to hide a satisfied grin.

“Sometimes, I think you’re the most arrogant man I know,” I claimed as I crawled into his arms.

“As opposed to who? The pretty boys you distracted yourself with at the Thalorian Court? Please, Dorothea. I’m the only man you know.”

“You’re aware that you’re kind of a pretty boy too, right?”

“Really? And here I thought I had the general attractiveness of a bat, ” he threw back my words.

I glared at the sliver of bare skin showing between his unfurled shirt. “Aren’t you going to change?”

“I’ll wait till you fall asleep. Now close your eyes. It’s been a long night, and a longer one is coming.”

“Are the Valkhars arriving tomorrow?”

“Night after that.”



“What are you going to—”

“ Sleep , Dorothea,” he cut me off, pronouncing my name in a way that gave each letter its own unique inflection.

“You’re the only one who calls me that.”

“I know.”

“Why do you do it?”

We were so close that my own body followed the movement of his shoulders as he shrugged. “I just like it. It’s long. It lingers on the tongue. It gives you time to taste it.” Every word he spoke vibrated against my skin. I had the urge to cup his throat, feel his voice with my fingertips the way he felt my name with his tongue.

Exhaustion tugged at my eyelids, but it took me a while to fall asleep. There was an ache pulsing deep inside my chest, an anxious, secret agony. The future seemed very daunting all of a sudden, full of choices I didn’t know how to make and bridges I didn’t know how to cross.

How would I return to Thaloria, to my studies and my life at the court with Nepheli, after all of this?

I learned once how to live without Hector. But right now, I wasn’t so sure that I could do it again.

Hector

I filled my arms with her that morning. I felt her small hand on my stomach, the warmth of her cheek against my chest, the softness of her hair as I touched my lips to her forehead. It was a shock how perfectly she fit there. How effortlessly she stretched her limbs against mine, nestling closer.

I did not dare move. I just held her until the light started greying around noon. It was going to be a stormy night. The air smelled electric, angry clouds unfurling around the Castle's white spires.

Soon I would have to get up and go hunting for tonight's dinner. I would have to prepare myself for the Valkhars. Keep an eye on Arawn. Have a long conversation with Espen about Camilla's behavior. But none of these things mattered now. In her presence, I was solely absorbed by contemplation of her. It had always been like that. The mere sight of her inspired an inexhaustible amount of desire in me. From vulgar to reverent, she was the sole protagonist of my fantasies. Her eyes. Her lips. The curve of her hip and how it would fit in my hands. The fullness of her breasts against my sternum. Her damp thighs wrapped around my waist. And then other, bolder images—fantasies I sometimes did not dare to conjure even in the privacy of my thoughts.

Now she stirred, and my heart stirred with her, a quick drop of my pulse to my stomach.

I thought to myself, How could I ever let her go ? I thought, I will follow her to the ends of the world before I lose her again.

Thea

The night howled with wind and crackled with lightning, but as dinnertime approached, Hector was left with no choice but to go hunting again while I was burdened with the daunting responsibility of entertaining our guests.

The Castle didn't seem to be in a particularly attentive mood, either. Some corridors had gone completely dark, others cold and creaky. Combined with the raging storm outside that pelted the windowpanes like some kind of portent of doom, the entire place appeared haunted. I could not escape the sense that under the layers of the Castle's magic, something was breaking.

Dahlia must have also noticed the Castle's inexplicable unraveling, because she was practically shaking when she suggested we girls have some tea in the drawing room, which was the cheeriest and warmest chamber at the moment. A suggestion that got disrupted by Arawn's determination to remain glued at my side—Hector's instruction, no doubt.

So here we were, with him sitting beside me on the small pink couch, while Collette, Alexandria, and Dahlia were huddled together in the one opposite to ours.

They were all dressed in springtime shades of yellow, the layers of sparkly chiffon looking more like buttercream frosting than actual fabric. Indeed, they looked as sweet as the array of cakes, scones, and marmalades that the Castle had set out to accompany our rose tea and milk.

Camilla had settled at the bay window, reading some ominous-looking book that had

the word torture in the title, which I shouldn't complain too much about considering it had kept her quiet and distracted for the past thirty minutes.

Perhaps a little too quiet.

So, so quiet.

In fact, the occasional swish of Camilla turning the pages and the startling peals of thunder were the only reoccurring noises in the room. You could drop a pin in here, and it would sound like glass shattering. You could have also passed them all for statues had they not bent so often over the little table to add sugar to their cups. Enough sugar to rot a normal person's teeth, but I supposed vampires didn't have these kinds of issues.

Turning of page. Stirring of sugar. Thunder charging the air. Over and over.

I stole a desperate glance at Arawn, who looked as uncomfortable as I felt, nervously stirring a spoon inside his teacup. My own cup was left untouched on the tea tray, for my stomach was twisted into so many knots I could hardly breathe, much less consume anything.

Finally, Arawn let out a dramatic sigh and set his cup down on the armrest. "I've always wondered what ladies discuss during these clandestine tea parties of theirs. If I'd known it would be so mind-numbingly dull, I would have stayed curious."

"Arawn," I growled under my breath, elbowing him in the ribs.

He looked at me with huge blue eyes, the portrait of innocence. "What did I do?"

Collette's cup clattered loudly against its saucer, making us all stop cold for a moment. "Perhaps, Arawn," she ventured sharply, her voice like a sheet of frost, "the

fact that Thea needs a bodyguard to have a cup of tea with us is what has caused this party to become so mind-numbingly dull .”

Arawn tensed, ready to rush to my defense, but this was my battle to win. “Hector is just—”

“Very protective of you. Yes, we know,” she interrupted me, folding her hands over her glittering skirt. “But I don’t believe it is Hector’s heart that is trembling like a newborn hummingbird at the moment.”

How I had managed to offend nearly every single Ravenor in the span of two nights just by existing was beyond me. There was no winning with these people, and gods knew I was on my best behavior. If I bit my tongue anymore, I would start to bleed.

“Forgive me,” I gritted out. “I’m just very new to this—”

“Didn’t you and Hector grow up together?”

“We did, but—”

“And yet you’re new to vampire society?”

“Mama,” groaned Dahlia.

“No, please, let her,” Camilla interjected from the bay window, unleashing the full scope of her attention upon us. Her blood-red dress had a scandalous slit going up the left leg, and as she shifted, the silken skin of her thigh was revealed, as well as the leather holster that was strapped around it, holding a mysterious silver flask. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen Collette’s claws.”

“There are no claws,” claimed Collette, but her smile was a scythe, a perfect deadly

arch. “But we are about to appoint Hector our sovereign. Do you know what this title means in our world, Lady Aventine? Your dear Hector will be no king. He will have no throne and no crown. His only loyalty would lie with the society. His only duty would be to protect and defend us. And yet his own wife, the Lady of the Castle ,” she said mockingly, a sneer cracking the stone of her face, “seems to harbor nothing but fear and disdain for the creatures of the night.”

Arawn drew forward, his eyes sparking with fury, and the last thing we needed right now was a fire. Yet I found myself burning too. My anger was quick, blazing. I was so sick of being nice, of being unassuming and diplomatic. For once, I wanted to hear my own voice, not just be a part of the conversation but the catalyst. I knew I could not change others’ opinion of me, but I could still change the opinion I had of myself, and meekness, I decided, did not suit me at all.

“Perhaps the problem isn’t that I harbor disdain toward you, Lady Ravenor, only that you are harboring hatred towards my kind. You asked me if I grew up next to Hector. I did. And you know what I saw? A little boy being constantly mocked and degraded for being half-human. How many times have you allowed your children to call him an abomination and a filthy halfling behind Esperida’s back? How many times have you used these words yourself? But of course now that Esperida is gone and he has the Castle under his command, you’re eager to have him marry your daughter, right?” Dahlia flinched as though I’d slapped her across the face, but I had no more courtliness in me to spare. “You came here with your fraudulent smiles and declarations of peace, yet the first thing you did when we welcomed you into the Castle was to threaten us.” I met Camilla’s piercing gaze, and although I had no fangs to bare, my teeth felt just as sharp when I curled my lips away from them. “I know how I seem to you. Ignorant. Weak. Fearful. But I assure you I will exchange my ignorance for knowledge faster than this human heart of mine beats in my chest. And as for my weakness,” I hissed, dragging my eyes back to Collette, “I shall think it is only a matter of perspective, for my flesh may be soft, but my will isn’t. My love for Hector is stronger than all of you put together. And you can deem me unworthy and

try to chase me away, but you will not succeed. I will stand by his side, in light and darkness, and I will do so for as long as I have breath in my lungs. So go ahead, Lady Ravenor. Tell me one more time how my disdain is what has made the balance of our worlds so precarious.”

The silence that followed my little soliloquy wasn't as triumphant as I'd hoped it would be. In fact, no one was even looking at me.

I twisted in my seat, following the path of their gaze only to find Hector standing by the door in his long, rain-peppered coat. His cheeks were flushed and damp, like he'd just come from outside, his eyes hard and fixed on me alone. I could not read his face, but then again, I never could. I just hoped he knew I meant every word he'd just heard me utter.

“Are you satisfied now, Mama?” Dahlia's indignant huff forced me to face them again.

“Don't mind her, Thea. She did that to Lance too,” sighed Alexandria, rolling her eyes at the ceiling.

Collette ignored her daughters and gave Hector a subtle but firm nod. “She's determined. I like that. Humility does not fit a woman. You chose well, Lord Aventine,” she said coolly, her moondust eyes drifting to the table before us. “However, her tea-making skills could improve.”

My blink was slow, bewildered. “What?”

The girls broke out chuckling.

Collette shook her head. “The tea . It's too bitter, my dear.”

“It’s why we keep reaching for the sugar jar,” explained Dahlia, offering me a small, apologetic smile.

“But I didn’t make the tea,” I whispered, my chest clutching in sudden dread as I raised the teacup to my lips. I took a sip. It was bitter. Inexplicably so. “I don’t understand. The Castle made it.”

Then the vision came—a rapid glimpse into the night that was about to unravel. Lightning struck the sky, and the whole room flashed white. The cup fell from my hand, hot tea spilling across the tulle of my skirt .

“Thea? What is it?” Hector’s voice was an arrow piercing the ringing in my ears. His handsome, worry-stricken face was the last thing I saw before my mind turned dark.

“It’s poisoned.”



Hector

Terror sweetens the blood, Father told me once. It calls upon the darkness and all its creatures to devour you. The only way you can fight the darkness is by not being afraid of it.

I tried to be strong like him. I tried not to let fear creep into my heart, not to let the air turn thick with the scent of my despair. But I failed. Disastrously so. I was now made of nothing but terror. I was torn and shaken to the very racking of my soul .

The whole Castle seemed to tremble alongside me, its darkened rooms taking on a new horror edge. Even the moonbeams quivered as they broke off the windowsill and stretched over Thea's crouched form. She had emptied the contents of her stomach twice already, and with a prick at the tip of her finger, I had injected her with enough venom to extinguish whatever poison floated in her system. Still, the dry heaves persisted, and all I could do now was hold back her hair, murmuring soothing words in her ear as if this could change the fact that she got hurt tonight. She got hurt because I'd allowed it. Because I kept her close when I should have sent her away. Because I listened to desire when I should have listened to reason.

My selfishness sickened me, but even self-reproach was a mere wave compared to the ocean of my rage. Rage, I used to think, was a weakness. The dignity of composure was all the strength a man needed to possess. But it came at me now, blood-red and vengeful, and for her alone I would be weak.

"Hector," Thea panted, slumping on the marble floor, her skirt rising like a twilight cloud around her midriff. "Will you please stop your growling? I'm fine."

She didn't look fine. Her skin was drained of color, and her lips were cracked like unwatered soil. In a panic, I got to my knees next to her and swept her cold hands in mine. "How do you feel?"

"Dehydrated," she croaked.

Upon a silver tray, a glass of water and a cup of herbal tea materialized next to her. She drank every drop of the water, gasped with relief, and cast me another weary glance. "Breathe, Hector," she commanded, her voice as hoarse as my insides felt. "I won't die."

The mere notion of death in relation to her was a pang in my sternum. It took more strength than I knew I had in me to cling to my fragile composure as I offered her the brew. "Just drink."

She slipped her palm over the cup, gently pushing it down along with my hand. "I won't die," she repeated, more firmly this time. "I saw it."

My whole body clutched in dread. "What did you see?"

As she turned her face to the side, the small bathroom window painted her profile in a white, ghostly light. I felt like she could vanish any moment now. "I can't tell you," she whispered.

"Thea—"

Her head whipped around, black ringlets tumbling over her onyx eyes. "If I tell you, you might do something to prevent it, and you can't. You mustn't."

I looked at her more severely than she could ever deserve. "Do not talk to me about destiny right now."

Her lips pressed into a thin, stubborn line. I knew that line. I knew it all too well. “It can’t be helped.”

“Yes, it can,” I gritted out, reaching for her shoulders. She tried to slip away, but I hauled her back with an arm around her waist. When she turned her face away, I cupped her jaw and forced her to look at me. “Listen to me. Listen . There is no destiny. Destiny is just another word for life and what you make of it. You have power. Your life is your own, and you decide what happens in it—”

“Hector,” Arawn’s grim voice sounded behind me.

I whirled, hardly able to keep myself from snarling at him. “What was it?”

“Nightshade,” he said, strained with guilt. “I swear it tasted just like any other tea to me.” His gaze darted over my shoulder to Thea, his face looking just as clammy and pale as hers. “It must have been a very small dose. Whoever did this didn’t want to kill you.”

Of course they didn’t want to kill her. Killing her meant coming before the King of Lumia. It meant facing trial, facing execution. What they did want to do was scare me. Unravel me. Provoke me. Prove me incapable of holding the balance between our two worlds.

They used to be terrified of my mother’s rage. They used to lower their eyes and bow at the waist in her presence. But I was no Esperida Aventine, and Espen thought I would be so much easier to handle, to manipulate. This was why he wanted to marry me to his precious daughter. So he could have access to the Castle. So he could have power over the man who controlled it.

How blind, how naive, how lethally wrong I’d been to think that the vampires’ fear of change was greater than their thirst for power. But it was clear now. They hadn’t

come to the Castle to appoint me sovereign. They had come to terrorize me out of it.

Arawn's face hardened as if he'd just realized the exact same thing. "Go," he said grimly. "I gathered them all in the drawing room. I only let the twins stay in their bedroom. I don't think this is a conversation you can have in front of children."

I turned to find Thea leaning against the porcelain sink, and at the sight of her sunken eyes and ashen cheeks, my muscles locked in place, refusing to take me from her side.

"I'm fine," she reassured me.

Arawn seized my arm and nudged me past the door. "I'll help her clean up," he promised, then pressed closer, lowering his voice to a nearly inaudible snarl, "Just find out who did this and make them pay."

"Hector, wait!" Thea gasped, lurching forward. "I just remembered. Camilla had a flask secured around her thigh. Could it be..."

I heard nothing after that. Inside me, something seethed; something dark and vengeful clawed at the prison of my ribcage. How lovely vengeance was, a beautiful void. Stronger than grief. Fiercer than sorrow. It made my bones smolder, my heart spit fire. And all of my devotion turned violent.

My sword found me a second before I burst into the drawing room. The lamplights exploded, and the eruption of startled gasps and shattered glass veiled the swift ringing of the blade as it cut through the air.

The Castle shoved Camilla back with a brutal gust, and her back hit the wall just as the sword wielded itself against her throat. Her face contorted, burning with a rage no tamer than my own. "What is the meaning of this?" she hissed when my fist found

the hilt of the blade.

I kept it still. I pressed it down upon her. “Where is the flask?”

“Hector,” Espen warned, lunging for me only to come crashing into an invisible wall.

Blood started trickling down Camilla’s slender throat, the blade wedging itself into her flesh. My fangs itched from the desire to dig into her, empty her of substance just as the poison had done to Thea. “I will not ask again.”

“Enough!” growled Espen behind me, filling the room with the violent thrashing of his body as he drove it over and over against the Castle’s magic. “That’s enough!”

“I say when it’s enough!” I thundered.

Camilla bristled, cutting her palms on the blade as she tried to push it back from her throat. The tendons stood out on her neck. Her lips curled over her fangs in half rage, half torment. The very hinges of her jaw loosened, viscous drops of venom trickling from the needle-thin tips of her fangs.

I did not falter. I did not think a single thought of mercy.

Her words were labored, hissing like water on hot stone, “Look at you turning on your own kind the second things get tough. How long did your conflict last? How long did it take for you to go against the people you’re supposed to protect? And for what? A girl you don’t even fuck? You’re insane if you think we’ll make you sovereign after this.”

“Give me the flask!” I roared, my mind too seized in fury to pay attention to her meaningless threats. My pulse struck in my veins. Who is she to speak of loyalty to me? What does she know of devotion so strong it could please the greediest of gods?

When she realized it would take the strength of a million demons to overpower me here, inside the Castle, where my bones and blood were soaked in its starstruck magic, Camilla stopped resisting and reached for the holster around her thigh, smearing her sea-foam skin with the blood from her palms.

There was a crowd roar buzzing in my ears. My fingers were shaking with a rage unknown to my body as I swiped the silver vial from her hand. Without hesitation I raised it to my lips. The taste was overwhelming. Salt and iron, tinged with the darkness of our curse. Vampire blood.

I tossed it away and whirled around. The sword in my hand rasped as it grazed the floor. “Who was it, then?” I snarled, resisting the terrible, catastrophic urge to let the blade take all of their heads with one single swipe. “Which one of you bastards poisoned my wife?”

No one answered. No one moved. No one even breathed.

But the Castle did.

In an uproar of motion, all the windows around the room boarded up, vaulting the moonlight away and trapping them in cold, enduring darkness.

Under the single stitch of light leaking through the busted doors, their shadows turned manic. Alexandria rushed to Lance’s arms. Dahlia recoiled in a corner. Roan slipped in front of Tieran to shield him from me while Collette reeled forward, dashing in full speed to grab Espen by the arm.

Frightened. They were all frightened and astonished, and I reveled in it.

“You will not lock us in here,” warned Collette in her raging snowstorm voice.

“Or what?” I spat, turning to Roan with a deranged smile. He stared back at me with blatant bewilderment, as if he could not comprehend how any of this had happened. “Your son has already pledged his loyalty to me.”

“He did,” Espen sputtered, his dark eyes narrowing into two blazing slits. “But the rest of us will fight you, Hector. And you will not win.”

The sword at my side made a rapid, whirring sound. It thirsted for their blood as much as I did. “You have a lot of audacity to come into my house, harm my wife, and then think you’ll survive me, Espen.”

“He’s right, Father,” Roan intervened, his voice steady, reasonable. “What happened today, here of all places, is unforgivable.”

Espen bared his fangs at me. “Yes, but we have laws.”

“I am the law! You are in Aventine Castle! I am the law! ” My voice reverberated through the hollow of their silence. They all looked at me, frozen as statues, disbelief in their glowing eyes. They had not believed my love deep enough for this. Of course they hadn’t. Worship was a human thing.

“You have until dusk to come forward,” I declared, storming toward the entrance. “If you fail to do so, the blame will befall you all.” I paused but didn’t turn to see the rise of terror in their eyes. Still, I smelled it in their blood, and I was glad for it. Now you know how it feels.

“No need to fret,” I said venomously. “I will be merciful. Death, after all, always is.”

Thea

How long could a single night last? As I opened my eyes to the same somber, thunderstruck sky, the answer seemed to be forever. The clock atop the mantel claimed I'd only slept for a handful of minutes, but in my exhausted, muddle-headed state it felt as though a lifetime had passed.

I had that peculiar dream again. Not last night's nightmare but the sequence of seemingly arbitrary objects. The fashionable cravat. The curious silver vial. The vampire hunter's sword. The image of them floated glowingly in the forefront of my consciousness; everything else was haze and shock.

I could not believe it. I got poisoned. Here. In the Castle.

I wasn't very familiar with the workings of sentience, but I had seen the Castle act on its own volition plenty of times. So why had it not intervened before I drank the poison? I knew the Castle had its limits and could not see everything that was happening within its walls all at once. Perhaps it couldn't have stopped it from being spiked in the first place, but it could have knocked the cup out of my hand or flared an odd light in my direction—something to indicate danger to me.

"Maybe this is all just a bad dream," I mumbled to myself, lowering my heavy lashes.

Unfortunately, one could not wake up from reality, so with a resigned sigh, I opened my eyes again, threw my weight on my palms, and pushed myself to a sitting position. It was then I noticed that the roses on the windowsill had withered. In the flickering orange light of the fireplace, the rosebuds looked black and frail like balls



of burned paper.

Was this Hector's manifestation or the Castle's? Was there a difference between the two at all?

Suddenly, the door banged open, and a gust of glacial wind whipped into the room, making the flames quiver upon the hearth, ash scattering across the rug.

In the eventful decade I'd known Hector, I'd seen him angry, betrayed, heartbroken, but I'd never, not once, seen him look so... murderous .

The door shut behind him with a resonant click, and our gazes collided like planets out of orbit. Something of his ruthless resolve seemed to falter. His face turned soft, his eyes shifting from rage-red to melancholy-grey.

My lips parted for words my mind had yet to conjure. Then, in a blink, Hector was kneeling on the floor next to the bed. His hand clutched mine, his forehead dropping on the small space next to my hip. "Forgive me," he choked out. "This is all my fault."

For a moment, I was too stunned to say or do anything but stare at the black sweeps of his hair as they spilled over the snow-white sheets. I was almost afraid to speak. I felt like anything above a whisper could break him. But as he raised his head again and looked at me with his brows pinched in agony, I could no longer stay still. I slipped to the edge of the bed so I could take his face between my palms. He followed the movement, his arms closing around my calves, his chin falling atop my bent knees, where the hem of my nightdress had gathered. I could feel the heat rising from his shoulders. In the mirror across the room, he looked like a suppliant kneeling before his priestess.

"Please forgive me," he rasped again.

My fingers shook as I threaded them through his hair. “I asked to stay here, Hector. It was my choice alone.”

He shook his head, the motion nearly manic. “I shouldn’t have let you stay.”

I summoned a smile to my lips. I did not have the heart for smiles right now, but in his presence, I had the tenderness for it. “Very bold of you to presume you can tell me what I can and cannot do, Lord Aventine.”

His brows lowered, something of determination piercing through the wall of his sorrow. “I cannot lose you again. I won’t survive it this time.”

“You never lost me to begin with,” I said gently. “My heart was always with you. My heart is always, always with you.”

Slowly, like coming out of a dream, Hector blinked the tears from his eyes and got himself off the floor, pulling the covers over me in a manner that felt more dismissive than caring.

I pushed them away, launching to my feet with enough fury that a wave of dizziness washed over me. But there was no sickness in this world worse than a broken heart, and I could hear mine cracking already.

The words left me with a wounded gasp. “You don’t believe me, do you? Not anymore.”

I knew him so well, he didn’t have to say it. I could see it in his defensive gaze, his clenched jaw, his body that drew inward, steeling itself against me.

He had not forgiven me, I realized with a twinge of anger. Anger, for I, too, had struggled. I, too, had been abandoned and forced into an unrecognizable version of

myself. Everybody always tells you how hard it is to be left behind, but no one ever tells you how devastating it is to be the one who has to leave.

I wiped tears from the corners of my eyes, shaking all over. “Do you even know me, Hector?”

“You did not just ask me that,” he hissed, his expression as severe as the roaring in my blood.

“Answer me!”

Fiercely, he seized me by the arms. “Is this a joke? Does it amuse you to pretend that you don’t know? Am I funny to you?”

His face fell in alignment with mine, making it impossible not to breathe the same air as him. Still, I could turn my face away. I could twist my arms out of his hold, and he would let me. Instead, I raised my chin, narrowing the space between us. “Know what?”

“If you came to me with a face I’ve never seen and a voice I’ve never heard, I would still know you,” he said. “I would know the sound of your heart, your footsteps on the stairs, the way your breath catches when you gaze at a sunset. I would know all the words that make you laugh and all the ones that make you cry. I would know your every secret agony, your every dark desire. To say that I don’t know you would be the same as saying that I don’t know myself.”

There was a hot ache in my throat. My voice sounded like air passing through reeds when I managed to reclaim it. “Then why did you forget me?”

“I never—”

“Yes, you did! Every day I went to the post office hoping for a word from you, to at least tell me where in the world you were so I could send you a letter. But you didn’t even grant me that. You just disappeared. I was scared and alone, and you weren’t there. You act now as if you care a great deal about me, but you abandoned me when I needed you the most. You never asked your parents about me. You didn’t even bother to learn if I got married. Honestly, Hector, I doubt I ever crossed your mind.”

“Crossed my mind ?” he hissed, his eyes flashing. “Every day is a struggle to get you out of my head.”

“Then why didn’t you write to me?”

“I wrote to you! I wrote to you every day for four years!” he roared, pushing off me to rampage through the room.

He tore open every drawer and cabinet, throwing out heaps and heaps of notepapers. Some were sealed inside envelopes. Some were folded down the middle. Some were left open, their edges torn or creased. Letters. Hundreds of them twirled in the air like a whirlwind of lanterns before scattering all across the bed and floor in a cream-colored haze.

One of them got caught at the hem of my nightdress, and I stared at it numbly, breathlessly. My mind was blank, my thoughts displaced. I was nothing but pulse and sickened hope.

I barely felt my body move as I bent to take the fragile piece of paper between my fingers. Tremulously, I unfolded it. It had a faint floral scent and was cluttered with Hector’s neat calligraphy.

Thea , it read, Happy birthday!

I can't believe we're twenty already. Remember how a slow afternoon used to feel like a year? Now time flies by so fast it frightens me. Twenty always sounded very mature in my head, but here it is, and I still feel like a little kid. I have no idea what I'm doing or who I'm supposed to be. That's why I've been traveling so much. I'm still trying to figure it out.

I haven't seen my parents in a while. I know they visit you often, but they never tell me about you. They're trying to force me to reach out, you see. 'If you want to know what Thea is doing, then write to her. Go see her, for gods' sake. Let your precious pride take a blow, for once,' they keep grumbling every time I hear from them, which I'm sad to say is not very often, for I tend not to stay in one place for too long.

Anyway, I came to Kartha to watch the harvest moon like we always did. It's huge this year and so orange it verges on red. I wish you could see it. I know this is your favorite festival of the year.

I'm staying at an inn in town, and the whole place smells of cardamom and woodsmoke, and from my window I can see the festival's lanterns glow like tiny suns as they drift into the sky. Below, the trees are shedding their orange leaves. The nights have grown longer, too. Cozier. For some reason, autumn always reminds me of you.

Margaret says we should pack our bags, march into Thaloria, and steal you away. She's here, of course. Arawn too. They didn't want to leave me alone on my birthday, but, in truth, I feel more alone with them here. They're so happy, so wonderfully in love, it's like they're in their own universe, speaking their own secret language. Do you remember how we used to be like that too? Not in love, obviously, but the way we would talk and talk for hours, and whenever someone asked about the words that passed between us, we were ever unable to articulate them.

Sometimes, I wonder, what do you talk about with him? Do you tell him about us?

Do you tell him about me? I don't think I could ever explain myself to someone without talking about you.

I should have cherished these moments more. I should have told you how I really felt. Now I'm terrified to know. What if I reach out and find out that you're miserable? What if I find out that you're happier than ever?

I'm the one who told you to go, but do you know what these words cost me?

I wish I were brave enough to tell you.

The stillness in my chest shattered. Now it was all activity and hum, like bees at spring's bloom. I tried to form words, but it was impossible. The rushing in my throat was made of love too old and inward to express. "Hector... I..."

He shoved the hair from his forehead, releasing a tremendous breath. "I couldn't send them. I couldn't pretend. I couldn't tell you that I was happy for you and Jasper. I couldn't act as if I hadn't spent every day of every year thinking of you, longing for you," he said, his voice quieter now, beseeching. "From the moment we met, you've been haunting me. And I want you all the more for it."

The very air turned electric. It hurt too much to take it in my lungs. Everything hurt. Because that longing, that infinite, all-consuming ache he talked about, I felt it too. My entire being was filled with waiting. I waited for the press of his body on mine. I waited for his hands in my hair. I waited for his kiss, for his lips to swallow the distance.

Finally, he backed me against the wall, his hands bracketing each side of my face. His chin tilted down, his mouth drawing nearer. Nearer. And just as I readied myself for his lips, his face caved into the crook of my neck. "What are you doing to me?" he murmured, his hot breath dampening the skin of my throat. "I came here to ask you to

leave the Castle, and now I'm..." He pressed closer, his knee wedging between my thighs, stirring something unfamiliar inside me—dark, voluptuous, intoxicating. "I should be able to let you go, shouldn't I? Love is supposed to be selfless. Perhaps Arawn is right. Perhaps this is obsession."

There was more pain in these words than I could bear. I could not believe I'd spent four years thinking he had unlearned the shape of my soul, that this version of me was some kind of mystery to him. Nothing about me was new to him, for Hector had always known of the woman I would become. Time and time again he'd told me of her. And if this was not love, then I didn't want to be loved. I just wanted to be his.

I wanted to tell him all of this, but I had already seen this moment happen, and the uncanny sense of repetition trapped me inside my mind. Earlier, in the drawing room, I'd seen myself expelling the poison from my body, and then I'd seen Hector pressing me up against this very wall, right before sinking his fangs into my neck.

"Do you want to bite me, Hector?" I asked, my pulse jumping between excitement and terror.

Slowly, he pulled himself straight, searching for my eyes. "I would never."

"Do you want to?"

His tongue caught against his fangs as he exhaled, "Yes. But not for the reason you think."

"You asked me earlier what I saw. I saw you bite me."

A shadow of horror glazed over his face. He took a step away from me, steady and determined. "Then I will prove to you that destiny can be unwritten."

“Hector—”

“No,” he snapped, his hand slashing the air. “For once, I will do the right thing. When dawn breaks, I’ll take you to the city.”

“Would you leave me alone with a potential murderer?”

“It’s not the same.”

I shook my head furiously. “Trust me when I say that worse things are going to happen if I leave.”

The sternness of his brow turned inexorable. “What do you mean?”

“I know you think you’re above destiny. You’re a proud man. You don’t like the idea of something or someone pulling at your strings. But my very magic is destiny. So many things could have gone wrong just on my way here, but it was as if I was guided by a divine hand. And I keep having this vision. At first, I thought it was a dream, but I’ve seen the objects twice already, and after tonight, I’m certain they’re pointing toward something or someone.”

“Objects?”

“A cravat. A silver vial. A hunter’s sword.”

“What kind of vial?”

“The kind that could contain poison.”

He looked at me, grim as death. “I gave the Ravenors until dusk to come forward.”



“And then?”

“Then I will kill whoever did this to you.”

I should not be so surprised. Still, my heart skipped like a stone on water. “I’m a human. This is a matter the king should settle. You will take them to the city so they can face trial.”

“They hurt you.”

“It was a drop of poison.”

“And it hurt you.”

I braved the small distance and pressed my hands against his stomach, my fingers curling into the fine silk of his vest. “Listen to me, Hector. Your devotion must lie with the society—”

“My devotion lies with my heart. I don’t know how else to be.”

“You will never forgive yourself if you do this,” I implored him, cupping the hard stone of his face. “You will never be able to wash the blood from your hands. It will follow you for the rest of your life. Do not risk your position over nothing. You can do so much good for vampirekind. Throwing away your mother’s legacy for revenge will not honor me. It will not bring you the freedom you think either. I know you’ve always wished to be rid of this responsibility, but believe me when I say that having a wish come true and being happy are two completely different things.”

He was silent for a moment, statue-still and expressionless.

When I tried to withdraw my hands, he slipped his own palms over them and held

them in place. Turning his face, he touched his lips to the inside of my wrist for the second time since I came here.

“What was that for?” I whispered.

“For being my reason when I lose mine,” he said.

I smiled a little, relieved by my small victory. “Drink some blood and come to bed. The Valkhars are coming tomorrow. You can’t face them looking like this.”

But Hector slid away, agile as the wind. In a blink he was by the door.

A dark feeling spread inside my chest. “Where are you going?”

“I need to get some air,” he rasped, half of him gone already.

The night did not last forever after all. Morning came. The sun drove high, then higher still. He did not return. I did not know why I waited. Perhaps I could not find rest in the same world he was suffering. Perhaps it was the same old wounds we’d given each other that kept me awake, the ones we had yet to heal.

Either way, the sky arched with a fresh sheet of darkness by the time I was able to close my eyes again.

Thea

I was awakened by a scream. A woman's sickening wail of agony that spiraled on and on into the night like a herald of death.

I sprang off the bed, kicking back the covers, and did not bother with shoes or even with throwing a robe over my nightgown before I flung the bedroom door open and lunged into the corridor.

All the windows were shuttered, the only light the anxious flicker of the tapers on the candelabras as I stumbled past them in my shaky, disoriented state. My panic deepened as I watched the golden band of light, leaking out of a half-opened door at the end of the hallway, grow closer. I found myself slowing down, my feet refusing to take me any further no matter how hard I pushed them.

Again I had the crawling sense of being watched, being haunted by something much greater than my comprehension. The familiar prickle of my magic crept over the back of my neck, my skin breaking out in gooseflesh. No premonition accompanied it this time, only a terrible, boundless sense of dread that made me freeze by the door.

The cries grew louder, more hysteric. There was shouting and grunting too, vague noises of struggle.

Then I heard him. Hector. "Get your fucking hands off me," he was growling, and my fear for him grew greater than my fear for myself. With a choked gasp, I pushed the door fully open and staggered into the room.

It was almost identical to Hector's. Dark wood. A wide window hung with heavy draperies. A massive fireplace crackling tirelessly in a corner. And a large, four-poster bed. A bed with crisp white sheets drenched almost entirely in blood.

There was blood everywhere . Splattered across the canopy, the headboard, dribbling down the edges of the mattress, and shining along the wooden bedposts. It had spread over the carpet too, thick and red like spilled wine.

The smell was unbearable. Rust and iron and decay.

Camilla's dead body lay in the middle of the crimson puddle with her head pressed against the matted-down pillow, the fabric so soaked it looked lacquered. Her skin was the color of ash, her eyes white as snow, her mouth hanging open in an eternal howl of rage.

A scream I didn't let out scraped the back of my throat. I took another step. The firelight caught the viscid pulp of her shredded neck. No, not shredded. Severed. The cut was precise, straight, done by a blade.

A vampire hunter's blade, I realized, my stomach clenching in terror. Like the one from my visions.

I tasted bile and had to clamp a hand over my mouth as I gazed around inanely, unable to grasp the full horror of what was happening.

Tieran was kneeling on the floor next to the bed, wailing and tearing through his hair. His hands were smeared up to the elbows with blood, and Roan was fighting tooth and nail to wrench him from the pool of gore. Dahlia, whose scream I must have heard earlier, was sobbing inconsolably in a corner with an ashen-faced Arawn running his hands up and down her shaking arms. Next to them, Alexandria had her face buried in Lance's heaving chest, and Espen... Espen was holding Hector by the

throat.

When Hector's gaze connected with mine, a fuse lit up in my brain. "What are you doing? Get away from him!" I howled, lunging toward them only for a fist to curl into my hair and pull me back violently.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Collette's full height unfurling, rising behind me like a wraith. Her serpent's hiss reverberated against my ear, and sheer, death-cold fright swept through me, forcing me still.

"Don't you fucking touch her!" Hector roared, and the room crumbled.

The walls shuddered, and the floor erupted, making us all stumble in different directions. Paintings fell off their hinges, entire shelves collapsed, vases flew in the air, and crystals exploded into a dazzle of fractured color.

It was only a second before Hector managed to escape Espen's hold and come to shield me from the shower of glass, his arms forming an impenetrable halo over my head.

"What—" I panted, desperately trying to remember how to speak through the magnitude of my astonishment.

Camilla was dead.

Someone within these walls had killed her, and the Castle had done nothing to stop it.

I could not believe it.

It was all too horrible and happening too fast for my mind to process, much less find any reason in it. And this act, no matter how brutal, was reasonable—calculated.

Because after the events of last night, of course everyone would think that Hector was the one who did this to her.

Arawn was right. That drop of poison was never meant to harm me. It was to give Hector motive.

As the uproar quieted down, Hector lowered his hands, and my eyes flew back to Camila's severed head, the image of which I knew would haunt me for the rest of my days.

"How could this have happened?" I whispered, feeling bleary and bloodshot, my voice so diminished I thought no one heard me.

But Espen surged forward, dashing over the carpet of shattered glass. "Ask your damned husband!"

Hector shoved me behind him, his hand twisting at his back to keep me close. "For the hundredth time, I did not do this."

Espen's face contorted in half rage, half agony. "You threatened her. You threatened all of us." The words were meant to sound harsh, but a sob choked them as his gaze reconnected with his sister's dead body.

"I understand better than anyone the anguish of such loss," said Hector, and although I couldn't see his face, I heard the naked despair in his voice. "I wouldn't have brought this pain upon you out of mere suspicion. Camilla never came forward. And even if she had, I would have brought her before the king, not slain her in her bed."

Espen seethed, his lips curling into a snarl. "You spoke of death. We all heard you."

"Yes, I did," admitted Hector solemnly. "But my wife will not have a killer for a

husband, and I will not have my pride over her.”

From the edge of my vision, I saw Arawn prowling closer as if he were afraid that any sudden movement could set everything off. “Espen,” he ventured warily. “You know Hector is not capable of such savagery. He might’ve made certain threats in the heat of the moment—”

“He meant them,” Espen bristled, his whole body shaking. His clenched fists at his side were dripping blood.

Hector didn’t even try to defend himself. He would not lie. But maybe I could lie for him. Maybe if I told them that Hector had spent the night taking care of me—

“Father,” Roan intervened before I could. “Please, let’s take a moment and try to understand what has happened here.”

“There is nothing to understand,” Espen growled. “Who else amongst us would have acted so despicably?”

“I don’t know,” spat Hector. “Maybe the same person who poisoned Thea.”

Collette’s icy eyes flickered like silver flames. “Let’s not—”

“Let’s not what, Collette?” Hector cut her off, his voice steeped in venom. “Camilla never confessed, and I would never murder someone out of mere suspicion. This,” Hector hissed, pointing at the blood-bathed bed, “gives me no justice.” He dashed past Espen and faced Alexandria. I got a glimpse of the crazed smile that split his face, and with a sinking heart, I realized exactly what he was about to say. After all, nearly everyone in this room had greater motives than him. “But you’re officially next in line, aren’t you, Alexandria? And Dahlia, now that Camilla is out of the picture, maybe Sybella will finally allow you to marry Dain. Oh, and Roan?” He let

out a low, vicious laugh. “Congratulations. Your husband is free.”

Tieran launched to his feet, beating a bloodied fist against his chest. “Have you any idea the kind of torment I will go through—”

“Exactly,” Hector said sharply. “You will go through . You will survive, and you will become stronger for it. You will be clean of venom for the first time in your second life. So don’t tell me I’m the only one with motive here. In fact, for all I know, whoever did this poisoned Thea just to make me look more guilty.”

Everyone seemed to draw in a sharp breath at the same time, their faces growing as colorless and haunted as my own felt.

“This is madness,” Arawn muttered, his eyes lifting as if in inward prayer.

A sudden knock struck from deep within the Castle’s turnings, the sound vibrating at our feet.

“No, it’s not,” Roan gritted out. “But it’s about to become.”



Thea

I barely felt Hector's arm winding around my waist before we were tearing through the Castle faster than sea nymphs dashed over Sandrea's waves.

After a few whirling seconds, he put me down by the entrance and caught my wrist in his hand, stealing a moment of peace in this tiny universe of chaos. "I did not kill her," he choked out. "After I left last night, I went hunting—"

"I know," I reassured him. "They know it too. They're just too scared to admit there is a traitor amongst them."

He gave me a look as if he wasn't so sure anymore. Then his face changed, hardened like lakes at winter's frost. Wrapping a hand around my nape, he brought my forehead to his. "No matter what happens to me, don't let them see you cry. Don't gift them your despair. Keep your head high, Lady Aventine."

The words felt like a prophecy. It reminded me of the first time I visited the Academy's temple, when the high priestess touched her warm fingers to my forehead and called me a seer. A surrender-to-fate feeling.

Before I could utter the myriad of pleas and protests that flooded my mouth, Hector turned from me and flung the Castle's door open.

The night outside was unlike any other. Moonless. Starless. A vast expanse of dark sky draping over the sloping mass of the mountains. The Valkhars in their all-black livery were mere faces floating in the air, their bodies inseparable from the gloom.

Sybella and Kaladin were just as I remembered them. She was cool and slim as a river fairy, her hair, long and fair, curling around her forehead. Her eyes were the color of moss, narrow and intelligent. She did not appear to be a day older than twenty, but I knew she was as old as the curse itself. He was no younger, but his face revealed his ancientness more generously. He had a shiny, greyish complexion that made him look more like a spirit than a vampire, a soul stuck in-between realms.

But Dain? Dain looked nothing like the boy from my childhood memories. His eyes were still his mother's, calm and green, and his hair was the same jumble of dark locks that caught upon his long lashes. And although he'd always been big-boned and severe-looking, now he was enormous, as tall as Hector but double his size. His shoulders were as broad as a ship's deck, his arms and thighs roped with muscles. I could see the unmatched power in them, for he was clad in skin-tight leather armor. He has come prepared, I realized, my breath trapped in the siphon of my throat.

As they stepped inside the Castle, I found myself retreating. I'd heard stories of mortals who'd been visited by gods. I felt the same awestruck dread now.

Kaladin's dark eyes crawled over us, assessing us from the arch of our brows to the gold bands around our wrists. I could not read his face. It was carved in granite, the statue of an indifferent immortal.

When his calculating gaze flickered far behind us, I followed it nervously. The Ravenors had gathered on the landing of the staircase. Tieran stood like a beacon among them, sticky red smudges marring the noble lines of his face. I wondered if the Valkhars could smell the blood from this distance, if they knew exactly who it belonged to.

The door shut with a tremendous, reverberating thud. A beat passed—nervous and rapid like the flutter of a dragonfly.

Then Kaladin thundered, “What has happened here?” I had never heard such a voice. Vast and persevering, it was the night itself.

As Hector failed to respond, Kaladin’s eyes darted to Espen again. This time, his question held the sharpness of a threat: “Where is Camilla?”

“Dead,” Espen announced with a vengeful gleam in his eyes, knowing well the kind of fire he’d just lit.

I noticed the way Dain clutched his mother’s hand as if to keep her from reacting. But Sybella did not react. Her face was written in a different language, one of clear, smooth waters. In the cold terror of it all, I could not understand why Dain felt the need to console her first, considering Kaladin’s severer reaction.

His eyes had grown huge with shock, his fists clenching at his sides. The backs of his hands were gnawed with veins and had a pearlescent sheen around the knuckles. I remembered them from my vision. I remembered them curling into Hector’s shirt, dangerously close to his neck.

I shuddered, fresh horror washing over me. Hector, as though he sensed my fear, broke his solid stance to thread his fingers through mine.

“Is this a joke?” Kaladin snarled.

Sybella put a hand on the back of his shoulder. The light from the sconces streamed directly into her face, and the gold glimmer blended into her hair, giving her a spine-chilling glow. Her voice was death-cold and cutting. “Kaladin, let’s not—”

“Is this a fucking joke?” seethed Kaladin, his face so contorted with rage he looked more monster than creature now.

I'd known exactly what was going to happen, and yet I heard myself scream all the same as Kaladin pierced the distance and grabbed Hector by the collar of his shirt. They staggered through the air and came crashing against the wall, their fangs jutting from their snarling mouths.

I barely felt myself move. In a blink, I was on Kaladin, screaming and clawing at his back. I doubted he even felt the drag of my nails on the leather of his vest. But I did not stop, not until Arawn came and forced me off him. In a sick panic, my eyes flew to Roan, quietly beseeching, and within seconds he and Alexandria rushed to split Hector and Kaladin apart.

"We don't know that he did it," Roan panted, holding Kaladin back with an arm across his collarbone.

"Of course we do!" roared Kaladin. "We all know human treachery has no bounds. And there are two of them here."

Hector pushed past Alexandria and faced Kaladin with his unwavering self-command. "If you didn't come here to give me your oath, then you are no longer welcome in this Castle."

"My oath?" spat Kaladin. "I came here to challenge you."

The words were a hollow clang in the room.

For a solid minute, no one moved; no one even dared to breathe in anticipation of the Castle's reaction. But the Castle was just a cemetery of beautiful things. Paintings and rugs and crystals and gold, inanimate vanities that had no real meaning or value without the Castle's pulse and star-bright energy.

Inwardly, I prayed to it as if it were a god and I a priestess fallen out of its favor.

Please, please, please do something. Throw them all out. Can't you see? Hector is too proud to give the command.

Nothing happened, and Kaladin, reassured by the Castle's lack of intervention, sauntered around the room. In the echoey silence, his heavy steps were like peals of thunder, his voice like a judge's verdict: "When, a century ago, we vowed to follow the woman who ruled this sacred place, we did it proudly and in trust. No one is denying that Esperida Aventine was a great leader. But I think we can all agree her greatness was marred the moment she refused to turn her human companion. Now here we are, in a time of great uncertainty, having to rely on a human to defend our interests, our welfare. We are expected to give our oath to this boy, knowing that our loyalty will be mistreated and misused in order to further the human agenda—"

"There is no human agenda," said Hector through clenched teeth. "We all want to live in peace."

"For now," clipped Kaladin, squinting at Hector like he was a bright flare of sunlight, something deadly he needed to extinguish. "What happens when a vampire goes rogue, commits a crime against a human, and then our entire species gets prosecuted for it? Whose side are you going to take, then?"

"There will be no sides," said Hector in a controlled, pacifying manner that didn't match the intensity of his expression. "I will follow the procedures of justice that my mother—"

"Justice?" hissed Espen, sailing down the stairs in a mad fury. "A few hours ago, you threatened to kill us all. You turned against us—"

"Because you poisoned my wife!" Hector snapped—snapped like never before.

His rage was incandescent, a flame trembling under his skin. The veins along his

neck and temples stood out, harsh like scars, his eyes burning purest red as if all his blood pulsed right beneath his dilated pupils. Even the bow of his mouth was pulled in lines unfamiliar to me. “You come here, to Aventine Castle, dare to harm my family, and then call me a traitor?” A swift ringing sound echoed in the distance, drawing nearer with preternatural speed. In a silver flash, Hector’s sword came to float by his side, glorious and deadly. Hector didn’t bother to take it in his fist. He didn’t have to. The insinuation was clear. “You want to fight me? You want to know what it is to fall under the wrath of an Aventine?” He gave them all a mocking bow, his hand above his heart. “Well, be my guests. Your pretty heads will make for great decorations.”

As the room spun into a web of horrified sighs and wrathful snarls, Arawn released me from his hold and threw himself before Hector, covering him like a shield. “This is getting out of hand,” he gritted out. “No one is going to challenge Hector for the Castle—”

“I will,” said a clear, resonant voice that made my skin prickle.

I would have thought it a figment of my imagination had Dahlia not let out such a bloodcurdling cry. “No!”

She started toward Dain, tears in her charcoal eyes, but Collette came up behind her and snatched her arm in a punishing grip. “This is not your place, Dahlia,” she seethed.

Dahlia’s huge eyes darted to me. Do something, she seemed to plead. But I had no idea what I should or could do but pray for disasters. I prayed for cataclysms and cyclones. I prayed for the land to crack in two, the whole world to split down the middle. Anything to stop this madness. Anything.

“Let her go,” Alexandria growled, looking more exasperated than frightened as she

glared at us all. From the top of the stairs, her children watched, keen as unsheathed blades. “Have you all lost your minds? This is nothing that can’t be resolved with reason. We should all work together to find out who killed Camilla and poisoned Thea, give Hector our oath, and get out of his family home before it literally crushes us.”

Dain took another step forward, his piercing eyes fixed on Hector alone. I’d seen wolves prowling like that around our farm at night. Poised and hungry, soundless as they moved. “These walls won’t harm you, Alexandria,” he said. “For I will win. And the Castle will be mine.”

Hector stiffened but showed no signs of relenting.

I would recognize the look on his face anywhere, in a hundred years from now, in an entirely different body. He would not surrender. He did not know how. He was the same as always: strong and proud and fearless when it came to defending the things and people he loved.

For the life of me, I could not understand how they could all be so blind. Hector was the best of them. That was why the Castle obeyed him, not because of his Aventine blood. He was made of all the better parts of two incredibly flawed worlds, and he had worked his whole life to make himself someone truly and unquestionably worthy of the Castle.

I tried to find my voice and tell them all of this, but in the face of what was about to happen, I had no breath to speak. My mind was a void of denial. This isn’t happening, I kept humming to myself. This can’t be happening.

“Are you going to resist?” sputtered Kaladin. “Will you turn the Castle against us? Or will you fight with honor, Aventine?”

They all shared a look I didn't understand, and another wave of sickening dread assailed me.

Hector bowed his head, black locks tumbling over his eyes, obscuring them from me. "Of course I'll fight with honor."

"What does that mean?" I asked, my heart striking at my temples.

I was ignored.

Arawn charged toward Hector, yelling something I couldn't register over the continuous roar in my head. The room around me swiveled, their quick-darting shapes whirling into light and shadow.

"What does that mean!" This time I screamed, and everyone turned to me at once. Everyone except Hector.

I reeled past Arawn and stood before the boy I'd loved ever since I was a little girl in so many different ways that I hardly knew what to make of this feeling anymore. "Hector?" I whispered.

Slowly, he lifted his head and looked at me with his watercolor eyes. There was no rage in them now. No panic. No fear of what was to come. Only an ocean of longing and a drop of resignation. The resignation was what scared me the most.

He knows he will not win, I realized. He knows this is a death sentence.

Hector didn't release me from his gaze as he called out harshly, "Arawn."

Before I knew it, Arawn was pulling me away, his arms winding around my midriff.



I thrashed like a madwoman, howling at the top of my lungs, “What are you doing? Let go of me!”

Enough madness coursed through my veins that I managed to escape him and ran back to Hector. He did not push me away this time. Instead, he seized the back of my neck, pulled me to him, and touched his warm lips to my forehead. “You know I was dreaming about you, right?” he said. The words were quiet, meant only for my ears.

“What?”

“I only ever dream about you.”

Kaladin came and grabbed Hector by the shoulders just as Arawn snatched me from behind again. We were torn apart from each other with such swift violence that I felt as though I’d lost a limb. I was bleeding. I had to be bleeding. But when I looked down, I saw nothing, felt nothing but a pressure, sharp and instantaneous, expanding from the side of my neck.

Then the world closed over me, shapes fading to black.

Hector

I was not sure who said first that our world was a sacred one, only that it was true in a way humans could never fully understand. We were one part reverence, one part hunger—this unquenchable thirst for the elixir of life. Blood. Our divine substance, our greatest agony, our darkest desire. Everything else was order, structure, honor. Our world had to be built upon the stones of civility and loyalty because our human ancestors and their first act of betrayal were the reason why our world could not be only sacred.

Tonight these stones crumbled. Tonight our world descended into bleak, perverse chaos.

Will you fight with honor, Aventine? Kaladin had asked, and I could not deprive myself of this last dignity. I would step out of the Castle, my sanctuary, my home, my armor, and I would fight with my hands and my hands alone, as honor would have it.

They would act in honor too. They would not interfere. They would accept the outcome of this battle no matter what this might be. If I lost, they would bury me in my family's crypt. If I won, they would give me their oath and support my reign till my very last day.

If I won. I did not think I would win. I was a decent fighter— quick as an arrow, Father used to say—but not an exceptional one, for all the strongest, greatest, brightest parts of me were not made of violence. They were made of love and loyalty and a girl who was not here anymore.

I was glad about that, at least. Thea was a creature of light, and I wished nothing more than for her life to reflect the bright wonder of her soul. I never got the chance to tell her how much I loved her, but I was reconciled with that now, for saying the words seemed meaningless, even cruel, in the face of death. To have the opportunity to show her... Now, that would have been a completely different story.

I hope you and your pride are happy , I imagined her saying, her hands hooked on the curve of her hips, considering you're about to die together .

How could I ever explain to her that when you were forced to live amongst creatures so much stronger than you, pride was the only armor you had? Even so, I was not doing this out of petty pride alone. I was simply doing what Esperida Aventine would have done. She would have died rather than surrender her castle in the sky. She would have died because this place was something worth dying for.

When Dain and I stepped outside, I found myself starkly unafraid of death or pain or even the indignity of being coerced out of my family home. I only thought how unfair it was that I was to die on a night the stars had forsaken their duties. I didn't think I'd ever seen a more desolate sky. Even the air was flat and desert-dry, almost unbreathable.

The Castle let down its stairs, the last stone step grazing the patch of soft grass right before the glade unraveled into clusters of wildflowers and towering birch trees.

When our feet touched land, Dain's eyes lifted to the Castle, a man seeking god. "I can't believe we've come to this," he whispered to himself. The rest, who had gathered on the landing, wouldn't have been able to hear him utter these words. Everyone was there but Lance and Alexandria, who had very wisely decided to take their children inside.

"Ah," I sighed mockingly. "So this is not your ambition. It's your father's."

Dain didn't meet my gaze. His eyes, green as fresh moss, were pinned on the largest of the trees surrounding the glade, its trunk thick as a giant's backbone and silver with winter decay. There, I realized. He's going to corner me there so he can crush my skull against it.

"What can you do?" he murmured, the knuckles of his fists shining pure white. "We are all but prisoners to our family's wishes."

My lips quirked, offering something like a smile. "I think I've heard that before."

The first strike I landed on Dain's abdomen filled his stomach with blood, which he coughed out violently while Dahlia's spine-chilling cries of protest echoed like a mournful song in the night. But the first strike he managed at the side of my ribs didn't just give me a taste of blood. It sent me rocketing through the air, my limbs falling numb.

For a second, I was hung between land and sky, just like the Castle, until my back collided with that giant birch tree, the impact so brutal its roots ripped off the soil.

The fall left me pain-stunned, my mind so empty that I barely managed to roll my body away before the tree collapsed on the underbrush with a crack akin to thunder, dust and moss and dirt flying over me in a detonating haze.

It was a miracle how I mustered the strength to get up and even charge first. But Dain was fast too. One moment he was reeling backward, half-crouched behind the shield of his raised arm, and the next he was grabbing me around the waist. His head beat against my abdomen and knocked me down breathless.

We rolled on the ground, scrabbling for advantage, fighting not only each other but the eyes that seared upon us through the dark, the destinies neither of us had asked for.

He punched madly in the air, flipping blows at my face, which I avoided on instinct alone. There was no skill, no elegance to any of it. Each punch, each throw across the glade, each time the ground beneath us shuddered from the preternatural force of our impacts was nothing more than a mindless, chaotic whirl of limbs colliding with limbs.

After a while, everything became a red blur. My skin was chilled with sweat and crusted with blood. My knuckles were stripped down to the bones, and although the wounds seemed to skirl against every hiss of air, I could no longer feel the pain every time I moved, every time he hit me. There was only a roaring buzz of activity, my body carrying out movements in a trance.

Nothing seemed to hurt him enough. His pale face, hovering like a death spirit over me, was a mere paste of torn flesh. His left hand, the one I was resisting as he kept pushing it down, trying to dig into my chest and claw out my heart, was broken around the elbow, the bone jutting out, craggy and sleek with blood. There was so much blood on him, both his and mine, shining black and thick like oil. But he would not stop.

I was immobilized under him, his knees digging deep into my stomach while I could only focus on keeping his hand from getting any closer. It was already too close. Too close to ripping my chest open. Too close to claiming everything that was my birthright and honor to defend.

In the blood-splattered depths of my consciousness, I wondered why the Castle hadn't warned me about any of this. Why had it not protected me like I was dying to protect it now? Perhaps it did not want me as its master. Perhaps I was not worthy enough to uphold this title. Mother told me once her greatest fear was that I would define myself as an Aventine before I ever got a chance to define myself as Hector. Now I wondered if the Castle knew that I was an Aventine in blood alone.

Dain's other hand threaded through my hair, his fingers closing around the roots. He knocked the back of my skull against the rocks folded amid the grass. I was already bleeding from the head, but I felt the fresh flow of blood starkly now, warm and wet as it watered the ground beneath me.

My body flailed and spasmed. The waves of pain ran cold, then hot, then numb. Bursts of light burned upon my eyes. Then a single one. A distant, silver gleam. The sky above us was lightless and tremendous, save for a forlorn star shining down upon us.

Blurily, I thought how that single twinkling dot in the sky was like life itself—an unexpected bright flare amid two vast darknesses.

I was about to give in to this final, unknown darkness when the silver light swooped down and dazzled over my wedding band, wedging itself into the raw skin of my wrist.

Thea, I thought in a throbbing daze. My sun-bright, lovely-eyed, clever-tongued girl. I thought of her soft curls and the witchery of her lips. I thought of all the time we had lost, all the kisses we had yet to share.

Something took hold of me then, a strength that welled up from a deep, undiscovered part of me. It was painful and starlike, and it guided my hand, the one bearing the wristlet, without my command, forcing me to leave Dain's arm and take his throat instead.

I didn't feel my fingers clenching, curling, digging into the bulb of his throat, yet his eyes bulged and his breath was cut as if by the scrape of a blade. I didn't think of him at all. In my mind, I only held Thea. The possibility of us.

My whole life I'd been weak for her. Maybe, for once, I could be strong for her too.

Thea

A forlorn star, high up in the fathomless black sky, was what greeted me at the first wink of consciousness. The second thing I noticed was the line of treetops floating past me like restless clouds, which didn't alarm me much even though I had no idea which one of us was moving. My body felt numb, light as air. I could only lie there, cataloguing their many leaves. There were birches and hemlocks and the occasional almond tree, which I recognized by its shivering pale blossoms. They reminded me of the night I arrived at the Castle, that dreamy, blossom-paved path I had followed with my suitcase pressed to my chest.

Vaguely, I recalled something Esperida told me once. No one can step into the Castle twice. Either you have changed or the Castle has. Indeed, how strange it was to be out of the Castle now. I felt so different from when I entered it.

Finally, it struck me. The Castle. The Valkhars. Hector.

With a gasp that sent a flock of blackbirds into a frenzy, I sprang from a pair of hands, hitting my forehead against another.

"Bloody Tartarus," crowed Arawn, dropping me remorselessly to the cold, hard ground.

"You bastard!" I seethed as I staggered to my feet, clutching skirts I had not put on myself. "You dressed me?"

"Did you prefer to venture out into the woods in your nightdress, you crazy woman?"

Arawn growled—the audacity of this man!—then hurled my suitcase to the ground so he could rub at the red mark on his forehead.

He'd be lucky if a headbutt was all he suffered tonight.

“Take me back,” I snarled. “Take me back now, and I'll forgive you.”

“Forgive me,” he echoed angrily.

I lunged at him in full force, grabbing him around the collar of his overcoat. “You abandoned him!”

“I did what he asked of me!”

“He's not your damned sovereign! He's your friend! He's your friend, and he needs you!”

Arawn shook me off, his fair eyes looking wraithlike, almost insubstantial in the enduring darkness. “He made this decision himself.”

“He didn't make a decision,” I hissed. “They gave him no choice. Someone orchestrated this. I know it. I—”

“Thea,” Arawn sighed, coming forth to seize my arms. “He did make a choice. He chose to die with honor. He could have stepped down—”

“And surrender his legacy? His own home? Have you lost your mind?”

“Look at me. Look at me, Thea,” he panted, cupping the sides of my neck and forcing my head straight so I could see all the things I was too selfish and frightened to care about right now. His pallid skin. His sunken eyes. The alarming hollows of his



cheeks. “I’m a mess. I’m heartbroken and sick to the marrow of my bones, and I’m in no position to stand beside anyone right now. I could not protect him, but I can protect you. I can still honor him by taking you away from here. Please.” His voice broke, his eyes shining with unshed tears.

I could not find the grace in me to feel sorry for him. Hector was in danger, and he needed us, and that was all I could think about.

Suddenly, a loud rustle sounded from the bramble to our left, a heap of leaves yielding to movement. Arawn surged his body before me while I clutched my skirts, ready to bolt if need be. For a second we both kept still, waiting for the prowling creature to reveal itself. Fear lapped over me as I realized how deep we were in the woods, the trees billowing into dark hills and mountains not too far in the horizon.

In the end, only a nervous rabbit hopped over the thorny shrub, scurrying into the night.

Still, I was not appeased. The hollows of the forest swelled all around us, and in them, I could sense that something was lingering, watching us. Something that, evidently, not even a vampire could detect.

“Let us leave this wretched place at once,” sighed Arawn. “We’ll find accommodations in the city. After you’ve settled somewhere safe, I’ll return to the Castle.”

Another wave of resolution set in my bones. “I’m going back, Arawn.”

“To do what? To watch him die?”

“He will not die!”

“Have you ever seen him in the future?” Arawn demanded, his lips curling over his fangs. “Have you ever had a vision of him that goes beyond tonight?”

One moment I was trying to remember how to breathe, and the next I was hurling myself at him, my fists beating against his chest. “I can’t believe I thought you were my friend! I hate you!”

Arawn raised his arms to embrace me, which only made my rage burn hotter, brighter, vengeful as a blade. “Don’t touch me!” I howled.

But Arawn, even in his weakened state, was still a vampire, and it didn’t take much for him to band his arms around mine and trap me against his solid body.

“Please, Thea. Please, darling, let me take you away from here,” he murmured in my ear, his cheek pressing against mine. “You’re shaking.”

I was shaking. But it had nothing to do with the cold.

It came to me like the surge of a lamp in a dark room. Cold. My coat. My suitcase—and the pouch of soporific dust inside it.

“I—I have a coat in my suitcase,” I stammered, forcing my teeth to chatter. “Can you let go of me for a moment?”

Arawn exhaled, slowly unhanding me so I could trail back to where he’d dropped my suitcase. I gathered up my skirts, got down on my knees, and flung it open. The velveteen pouch lay at the very top, right next to the sentient compass Nepheli had also gifted me. With one hand I pried the velvet apart, grabbing a fistful of dust while I pretended to fumble for my coat with the other.

When I got up, veering to face Arawn, I found him staring at that forlorn star, his

throat outstretched, his soft hair falling back like a disordered halo. He looked tormented, broken into a million pieces, and for a moment, guilt spread in my chest.

I closed the distance warily, hesitantly, my whole body aching. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, although a part of me wasn’t, and for that I felt the greatest guilt of all.

His head straightened, his eyes meeting mine in a split second of confusion. “What?”

The dust twirled kaleidoscopically as I blew it in his face, shifting specks glimmering in the air. His lashes fluttered rapidly, then, knees buckling, his eyes rolled white, and his body slumped on the ground with a grim thump .

Hardly a second passed before a high-pitched voice sounded behind me, making me jump. “I like your compass.”

A small sprite was floating above the cluster of shrubbery, her viridescent skin sparkling like a spill of treasure in the gloom. Her dress was made of fresh moss, her hair a leathery tangle of vines, standing out in all directions. Her huge yellow eyes, framed with thick, dew-kissed lashes, darted curiously from the compass to Arawn before circling back to the glowing object.

“You know,” she said in a congenial, almost concerned manner, “if you leave your friend here and he doesn’t wake up before dawn,” she made a theatric arch with her tiny hands, fingers fluttering in explosions of golden dust, “he’ll light up like a solstice firework.”

My heart dropped.

I had absolutely no idea how long the dust’s effects were meant to last. It could be ten minutes or ten hours. And then the sun would rise.

How— how —had I not thought of that? Gods, what was wrong with me? I was about to murder poor Arawn out of sheer negligence.

With a frustrated cry, I buried my face in my palms and slumped on the ground next to him, despair sawing at my chest. “What am I going to do?”

I wasn’t expecting an answer, but the sprite offered one regardless. “You need to dig a grave. Just in case. He’ll crawl out of it when the sun comes down.”

My head jerked up from my hands. “Well, as you can see, I forgot my damned shovel!”

Failing to read the sarcasm in my voice, she nodded solemnly. “It’s okay, I can dig one for you. I’ll make it really nice.” Flying down, she held her palm right above the ground, green light flickering under the curve of her fingers. Breathless, I watched the soil crack, giving way to her influence. Then she stopped. “But I do require an offering.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m a forest sprite, silly,” she said very seriously. “I deal in goods. Now, if I were a fairy, I might be content with your favorite childhood memory or the taste of your first kiss, but we little folk like a good trinket.” Sniffing the air, she shook her head and cast me a disappointed look. “I can smell the magic on you. You’re from Thalloria. So you ought to know this.”

I did know this. But I also knew that sprites were not supposed to dwell outside the Dragonfly Forest, for their powers tended to deplete in magicless lands, and they needed double the amount of offerings from desperate humans such as myself to maintain them.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Haven’t you ventured a little far from home?”

She lowered her gaze, twirling a finger in the stringy foliage of her hair. “I am an exile. We tiny creatures have our issues too, you know.”

Great. Hector was all alone fighting for his life, and Arawn’s only hope was an exiled, possibly dangerous, and most definitely insidious forest sprite. “Things cannot get any worse.”

“Actually,” the sprite said cheerfully. “There is a high chance of rain tonight, so we should probably speed this bargain up unless you wish to catch yourself a nasty cold as well.”

“I will not bargain with a criminal,” I clipped.

The sprite scoffed, or rather she tried to, for her voice was so thin it sounded more like an outraged squeal. “Says the girl who knocked out her friend and is about to leave him for dead.”

“I beg your pardon—”

“You can beg all you want, it won’t make you any less of a murderer.”

“I’m not a murderer! I am desperate!”

Her expression grew positively demonic. I felt like I’d fallen into some kind of trap. “Well, look at that,” she chimed. “So you do understand what it is like.”

I had no words, only the same old feeling of lost agency.

The sparkle of the sprite’s silhouette dimmed as she rested between the dirt-spattered

folds of my skirts, continuing in a more contemplative manner, “It’s a rough world out there. For the different ones, I mean. If you’re not one thing, you’re bound to be another, and no one likes anything with the word other in it. It certainly got me exiled.”

My eyes blurred with tears as I pulled Arawn’s serene face onto my lap. What am I going to do? I asked myself over and over. No answer emerged from the squall of my thoughts.

The sprite reappeared before me, her tiny face bright with hope. “If you take a chance on me, I will not disappoint you. I swear it on the stars.”

Conflicted, I glanced down at Arawn, then back at her, time slipping from me like water down a drain. “Please, don’t hurt him. I’ve done enough damage.”

“You know how this works. If you give me an offering, I have no choice but to uphold my end of the bargain.”

“If only your greatest mission in life wasn’t to lurk about the woods so you can dupe helpless wanderers such as myself,” I grumbled.

“And perhaps if I were better at it, I wouldn’t be so far away from home now,” she shot back.

I didn’t want to trust her. For all I knew, she wanted me to give her my compass so I would get lost in the forest and then fall into some kind of elaborate fairy trap.

But what other choice did I have? Hector could be dying right now. I had to go back. I had to try to wake up the Castle somehow.

Tremulously, I stretched one arm to fish the compass out of the suitcase while still

cradling Arawn's head with the other.

It pained me to see the object plucked off my hand, but not more than the possibility of losing more time, of returning to the Castle only to find it without an Aventine waiting for me in it.

The sprite dug no grave, after all, for which I was more thankful than words could express. Instead, she threaded a cave of thornless vines around Arawn's sleeping body and vowed to protect him if he did not wake before the first rays of the sun touched the sky.

"Thank you," I sighed, facing the black hollow of the forest. I didn't know the way back, but I hadn't a minute to spend in worry. Each moment felt the length of a lifetime.

"As do I," said the sprite with a huge, sharp-toothed smile. "This is my first trade. I will cherish it forever."

"I have to hurry."

I was about to bolt when she stopped me, her voice behind me high with curiosity. "Are you going back to the Castle?"

"You know it?"

"Everyone knows the Castle. It appears like a ghost in the night. Its white spires reflect the moon and make the whole forest shine. It brings us all great terror and great pleasure to see it coming. It's funny how these things go so well together, isn't it?"

"Do you know the way?" I pressed, breathless with impatience. "Or perhaps do you

have another compass I can use?”

She frowned at me, perplexed. “Don’t you have magic?”

“I can see the future sometimes,” I blurted out, too anxious for instructions to talk about magic right now.

“It’s very odd for a seer to rely on a compass to cross a path her future self already has,” the sprite mused unhelpfully.

“That’s not how fortune-telling works,” I groaned.

“Follow your instincts then,” she advised. “Run. Run until you see the lightning-stricken tree. Then go straight through the thicket. Trust your magic to do the rest.”

It was easier said than done. The forest was a sloping mass webbed in shadow. It was impossible to see anything further than two steps ahead of me, listen to anything beyond the beat of my own blood.

Still, I ran. I ran until my muscles burned and my lungs drained, and the tears in my eyes meant nothing more than fear leaving my body.

In the end, it was a lot like the sprite said. Everywhere I went, I found I’d been there already. The woods were dense, threaded as a labyrinth. The air was musty with far-off woodsmoke and sharp with dawn chill. But my heart knew the way, and it refused to give up. Even as it knocked itself against my ribcage, bruised and bleeding, it kept on guiding me forward.

Please, I beseeched my throbbing body. Please hold on for a little longer. He has to know. He has to know I love him.



Thea

The Castle appeared black and enormous against the approaching sunrise, the meadow undulating with cotton-thick fog.

The white tendrils hung so densely in the air that at first I didn't notice him: Dain kneeling in the center of the haze, his face marbled with blood. His throat was stretched back. He was looking up at someone. Hector.

Hector.

I almost collapsed when I saw him, the ground slipping off my feet. He was not only alive but also standing over Dain like a column of light, solid and shining bright with power.

Sobs racked my chest as I screamed his name with whatever air was left in my lungs. He veered, and the searching hope in his gaze was the most familiar thing in the entire world to me.

I'd like to say that our collision was a cosmic one, all force and spark and fate. But it was the opposite. It was easy and peaceful, like closing the door between you and an ocean of noise. I caught him around the waist and buried my face in his blood-soaked shirt. He kept still with his arms hanging open, too astonished to even release the breath I heard climb up his throat. It could have been a single moment or the sum of an eternity by the time he spoke, and I wouldn't have known the difference.

"You're here," he rasped into my hair.

Furiously, I drew back and smacked his sternum with my fists. “Of course I’m here! How could you do this to me? Do you have any idea how scared I was?”

The guilt in his face was as raw as the skin of his hands that shone dark with dirt and blood. The sight of him cut me open, even as a part of me floundered in the maelstrom of my anger. I wanted to scream at him, hit him, do all the terrible things Dain had failed to do. But I also wanted to close him in my arms and forget all the rest, forget all the misery and despair that was unraveling around us.

Roan was focused on holding up Tieran, who seemed to be on the verge of collapse, so there were only Espen and Collette to restrain Dahlia as she writhed and thrashed, wailing inconsolably. Sybella was standing high up by the entrance of the Castle, staring at her husband with what could only be described as flaming rage. But Kaladin was paying no attention to her. His dark eyes were pinned down on Dain, the first beams of mourning dawning in them already.

“Hector,” Dain choked out, an efflux of dark blood pouring out of his mouth. “Finish it.”

“No!” Dahlia howled, and in her mania managed to escape and flung her body over Dain’s.

Espen started toward us, his face sickened with dread for his daughter’s fate. “Dahlia, get away from him now!”

Dahlia ignored him. She stared up at Hector, her expression relentless despite her tear-stained cheeks. “You’ll have to kill me too.”

Hector let out a soft sigh, pushing the drenched tips of his hair away from his eyes. There was a sticky gash along his forehead as if Dain had struck it with a rock. It took more strength than I knew I had in me not to moan at the sight of it. Even the skin

around his knuckles had yet to knit, his healing process slowed by the severity of his wounds. That was how close he'd come to death. That was how close I'd come to losing him.

Finally he turned, towering over Dain and Dahlia's knotted forms like Death himself, impervious and immortal. He bent to grab Dain's arm with one hand and Dahlia's with the other, forcing them both up to their feet. "No more," he said in a steady, solemn voice. "No more death."

Without another word, he crossed the wildflower path and glided up the Castle's stone steps in his unhurried, otherworldly grace.

Once he reached the landing, he faced Kaladin, pointing a finger at the Castle's entrance. "Look at this door," he thundered. "Look at its filigree. Look at the initial that's carved into its eternal flesh. This is not a property you can claim. It is not a temple to lay your worship upon its marbles. The Castle is alive. It has a soul, and it belongs to my mother."

The Castle seemed to rise at these words, ready to tear a hole in the veil of clouds and scrape the stars. I half-expected it to do so, and my breath hitched with thrill. But the Castle performed no such miracle. It merely hung there between land and sky, a mere ghost of itself.

"And you are right," Hector continued somberly. "I am not nearly as capable or charismatic or strong as she was. But at least I would never disgrace the Castle with my greed like you've all done tonight." His hard gaze locked with Kaladin's once more. "If you're still unwilling to pledge your loyalty to me, I will strip you of your title and appoint someone else Lord of the South, and I will do so gladly. But then again, how can I relieve you from a title you never really had? After all, my mother did not appoint you Lord of the South, but Sybella." He turned to her, sharp as a blade. "You failed her the second you relinquished this honor to him. However, if

you do give me your oath along with Espen and Arawn at dusk, as tradition wants it, I will forgive your transgressions for the sake of your son. Because that is the humane thing to do. Because what you consider to be my greatest weakness is the very strength that holds our two worlds together. My heart is human, and so my heart forgives.” Hector stepped forward, coming toe-to-toe with Kaladin. “But make no mistake, it will not forget. And neither will the Castle. Aventine blood was spilled at its doorstep tonight, and if you think it will ever accept you as its master after this, then your greatest sin is not your greed but your folly, and for that alone we can all agree you are unfit to replace me.”

He gave them a moment to process, to protest, but none of them did. Their mouths were pulled thin, their eyes downcast, their bodies made small before the grandness that was him. If it was out of fear or respect, I didn’t know and didn’t think it mattered anymore.

When I was a little girl, I watched the vampires gather in the Castle and let myself believe they were one huge, messy family. But I’d been wrong to see their balance through a human lens, for that was all they were. A balance. One that was easy to disturb, easier to shatter. That was why they needed their divine oaths and secret codes of honor. Their instincts betrayed their civility. They could only trust their laws.

“Very well,” Hector permitted, sailing down the stone steps.

Espen cut in front of him. “About Camilla,” was all he said, his voice ragged.

To my surprise, Hector leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Something that made Espen’s dark brows draw closer and his eyes widen. Warily, he gave Hector a small, consenting nod and removed himself from his path.

Hector came and swept my hand in his. My limbs were heavy as lead, but I walked,

solid and proud beside him, and when his hand in mine started to shake, I only held it tighter.

We were almost at the landing when a loud groan sounded behind us. “Well, at least you’re alive.”

It was Arawn. Thank the gods , it was Arawn.

He looked exhausted, panting at the ground with his hands on his knees. His golden locks were strewn with twigs and leaves, and his clothes were torn in places as if he’d gone through the forest with the speed of a hurricane.

Hector blinked at him, bewildered. “What happened to you?”

Arawn glared, tipping his jaw in my direction. “ She happened to me.”

Hector looked at me, strained with guilt. Good , I thought bitterly. He should feel guilty. He should suffer just like he made me suffer tonight .

“Thea...” he whispered.

I didn’t stay to listen to his apology. I forced my aching body to climb the last of the steps and went inside.

The Castle stood cold and silent, not a stitch of light in sight.

Perhaps Hector was right. Perhaps the Castle could not be inherited. It would still exist in outbursts of magic, granting us our frivolous, mundane wishes, but its soul and spirit would always belong to Esperida. Perhaps we were doomed to spend our lives walking over the ruins of her memory.

Thea

Upstairs, in our bedroom, the early morning sun was a shy band of light peering through the slightly parted drapes. It was reassuring to know that night was still able to shift into dawn, that the birds still chirped their daily song, and that the snow-drizzled mountaintops were still thawing under spring's brilliance. So many strange things had happened lately I'd been afraid the world beyond the high walls of the Castle had crumbled too.

At the sound of the lock clicking, I veered to find Hector leaning against the closed door. "Hello," he rasped, his voice desert-dry.

"Hello," I muttered.

He bowed his head, but there was no real apology in it. "You're furious with me, aren't you?"

Furious was not the right word. Incensed wasn't satisfactory either. In fact, words were too plain to convey the magnitude of my wrath. "I thought you were going to die."

Hector blew out a breath. "I thought I was going to die too."

"Then why did you agree to it?" I demanded, my nails carving crescents in my palms. "Kaladin is just a power-hungry fool, and you gave in to his whim—"

"I needed to earn their respect," Hector interjected sharply, holding out his blood-

stained hands for me to see. “This violence was necessary, not just to prove me the strongest amongst them but to show me capable of exceeding the boundaries of my own power. I bled for them tonight, and I survived. And so at dusk they’ll bleed for me in return. I will have their oath—”

“I don’t care about the bloody oath! I care about you !”

Silence. Bleak, unfillable silence blanketed the room.

Again we’d given each other wounds, and now... What was going to happen to us now? In the stories I’d read, people always kissed and made up. In the stories he’d read, someone always died. I did not think the middle was possible for us.

He didn’t say anything for so long I began to fear he’d open the door and leave me here to stare at his absence.

But then the faintest murmur, “I know you do.”

“Do you?” I snapped. “Is that why you sent me away?”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Anything but this . You told me not to listen to destiny. You told me to never let other people decide for me. And then you went ahead and stole my choice.”

He surged forward, narrowing the distance between us. “And what a great choice that would have been.”

“It was not up to you to decide!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he mocked, “I didn’t realize you wanted to see me beaten to a pulp

so much.”

“What I wanted was to stand by your side!”

“And then what? Do you honestly think they would have let you go had I died tonight?”

“They wouldn’t break the treaty just to harm me!”

“They already have! They poisoned you!” he broke out, clutching at his heaving chest. “I didn’t ask Arawn to take you away to diminish you. All I wanted was to keep you safe, and you would understand this if you weren’t so—” His jaw clenched as though he was biting down the words.

“What?” I prodded, throwing back my head. “I’m what, Hector?”

“Stubborn and prideful—”

“I’m prideful?”

“A nuisance at best.”

“You certainly go to great lengths to protect someone you find so vexing,” I bit out, furiously trying to move past him. His hand closed around my arm and pulled me back. I hissed. I wanted to wrench myself free, but my body refused to do anything but stay in his hold.

“Yes,” he muttered, his voice lower now, measured. “Yes, you are vexing. Sometimes. And other times...”

He never finished that sentence. He drew nearer, and I found myself retreating, step



by step, until my back hit one of the bedposts. His hand grabbed the pole above my head, his face slanting over mine. Even like this, bloodied and haggard and maddeningly exasperating, he managed to steal the breath from my lungs, quicken the beat in my veins.

“Do you remember what you wished me on my sixteenth birthday?” I asked, much more composed than I felt. “Be difficult in everything you do, you said. Do not make anyone’s life easy but your own. Now you’re mad at me for it?”

“I’m not mad,” he whispered. I had never heard his voice so soft. “Not in the way you think, at least.”

His eyes fell to my lips. My pulse leapt to them.

We were so close that the only thing separating us was a lonely ray of sunlight streaming through the window. Under it, I could see each tiny golden speck in his eyes. I could feel the living warmth of his body enveloping mine. I could smell the blood on his skin, the metallic scent as overwhelming and dizzying as the force of our proximity.

I felt myself lift to my toes, ready to swallow the sunlight, the fragment of space between us, but Hector pulled back, blinking like he was waking up from a long, confusing dream.

“I’m covered in blood,” he rasped. “I should...” Vaguely, he gestured toward the bathroom.

I forced myself to nod, my cheeks blazing. “Right.”

He lingered by the door, a shadow carving out his cheekbones. “I don’t think Kaladin will try something again, and the sun is out, but...” He tangled his fingers in his hair,

heaving a sigh. “Don’t go far from me.”

Don’t go far from me. The words were a gentle pull into the past. Ever since that day we got separated playing in the Dragonfly Forest, we used these words like a secret code. A greeting. A goodbye. A veiled I love you . Now, surrounded by enemies, it seemed impossible to find true comfort in them.

“Hector?” I ventured warily. “What did you say to Espen earlier?”

Hector’s eyes became steady once more. “That he should talk to his son.”

Confusion sloshed in my exhausted mind. “You think Roan killed Camilla?”

“I know when I see a man willing to do anything for the person he loves,” he said.

“But Roan was not in the room when I got poisoned.”

“I still believe it was Camilla who poisoned you,” Hector clarified. “She did it to break me, to prove me incapable of choosing between the duty I have to uphold vampire law and the duty I have to my heart. I think she and Kaladin have been in contact for years now, waiting for the shift in power. Camilla was no fragile, heartbroken girl. She used Kaladin. She used everyone. She wanted the Castle and she would have manipulated the gods themselves if that meant she could have it. And then, of course, there is what Dahlia said about Camilla spewing all kinds of lies about the Valkhars to Espen. She didn’t want Dahlia and Dain to get married because the families would have grown closer. It would have been a matter of time before Espen found out what Camilla and Kaladin were planning. Espen... he can be hard to deal with at times, but he was fiercely loyal to my mother. He would have exposed Camilla if it meant keeping the peace between us.”

I considered it for a moment, following the same tangled thread as Hector, but

somewhere deep inside me I had the sense that something much greater than a simple grab for power was at play here. I couldn't shake off this feeling of wrongness. It seemed to crawl out of every room, seep out of every wall, haunt the Castle day and night. The Castle that should have protected us but hadn't. Or perhaps couldn't.

The magic stirred in my veins, forcing my mind to poke at something I couldn't quite bring into focus. I didn't feel like I was on the verge of having a vision. I felt like I was on the precipice of some life-altering revelation. But just as the scene, the hunch, whatever that sinking feeling was, breached the threshold of my consciousness, it slipped away from me, an eel floundering underwater.

The frustration must have been evident on my face, for Hector's expression twisted with concern. "What is it? Another vision?"

I shook my head. "Go," I rasped, tipping my chin at his bloodied hands. "The longer it stays on you, the harder it will be to scrub off."

Light braced his eyes. Unexpected. Sizzling. Alluring as a flame. "Would you like to assist me, Dorothea?"

I glared at him, crossing my arms across my chest. "Don't be charming. I'm still mad at you."

He softened at that, his eyes like ambers melting into mine. "I'm sorry," he said, and this time I knew he meant it. "I keep making the same mistake."

"What mistake?"

"You think it's pride, and perhaps it is, but mostly, I'm afraid to be vulnerable." He exhaled, letting his weight fall against the doorframe in a sort of surrender. "I always push you away when I need you the most so you don't see me break."

This was nothing I didn't already know. Still, to hear the words spoken aloud made me want to confess my own sins, take my part of the blame, no matter how hard or painful it was.

I steeled myself, gathering courage. "Every time things got hard, I ran away. I ran from my parents to you, from you to Thaloria, and every single day from myself. I used to think that if I kept running, I couldn't fail at being me. I don't want to be this girl anymore. I don't want to wander aimlessly through life looking for myself. That's why I wanted to stay here so much. That's why I suggested this ridiculous ruse. I promised myself that I would not leave this time. That I would stay by your side no matter the cost."

I didn't feel as exposed as I'd expected saying all of this. My confession didn't strip me down but strengthened me the way only truth could strengthen things, like a sandstone getting clarified under fire.

Hector took an uncertain step toward me. "Thea..."

"Just go. We can talk later," I said, brushing my damp palms over the folds of my skirt only for them to come away smeared with dirt. "And make it quick. I have to wash too."

Suddenly, a giant brass bathtub popped by the fireside. Curls of steam rose sleepily from the foamy surface, filling the room with a gentle scent of lavender. Next to it, a large silver tray materialized atop a pink footstool, holding a stack of fluffy towels, a crystal jar of bath salts, a bowl with several pastel-colored bar soaps, and a fresh rose swimming inside a small vase. After a moment, a table rolled itself into the room and settled next to the bathtub, crammed with all kinds of sweet and salty treats, pots of hot chocolate and tea, as well as my forgotten copy of the latest Lorn Verlion with a bookmark wedged amid its pages.

I let out a contented sigh and thanked both Hector and the Castle for their generosity.

“Knock on the door when you’re done,” said Hector, his fingers already working through whatever remained of the crisscross drawstrings at his collar. “Unlike you, I respect people’s privacy.”

I swiveled on my heel, huffing. “ That was an accident. How am I supposed to know you wander around the Castle naked when no one is around?”

“Well,” he drawled, cracking the bathroom door open. “Now you know.”

Thea

An hour later, every inch of my body was clean and silky smooth, my appetite was wonderfully satiated, and I was five chapters into Lord Verlion— and elated to discover that three of those chapters were absolute filth.

Murders, poisonings, and attempted usurpations were forgotten, and life simply slipped back into its usual rhythms, for that was what life did best. It regained its shape. Even after loss. Even after tragedy.

As I flicked purple bubbles with my fingertips, I thought how I'd always been happiest like this, in my solitude, basking in stories and daydreams that sometimes felt like secret prayers. It was partly why I loved being with Hector. He always respected my need for inwardness after a day of adventure, and oftentimes we would spend our nights doing nothing at all but simply existing near each other. In a way, I was more myself when I was with him than when I was alone.

I set my book aside and sank deeper into the tub, thinking of him lounging in his own enchanted bath in the next room. I imagined the morning light streaming through the small window and painting his strong neck gold. Then the slope of his back and the narrow curve of his hipbones, drawing downward. I wanted to shut my eyes, imagine the rest. The heat of his skin. The parting of his lips. I knew exactly how pleasure would look on him. Everything else would be a mystery, something to tremble about, but this image I could hold in the frame of my mind just so.

But then my eyes strayed toward the ornate clock atop the mantel, discovering that more than an hour had passed already.

Grudgingly, I pulled myself out of the water, patted my body dry with a towel, and slipped into a fresh nightdress—courtesy of the Castle—before settling down at the dressing table to run oil through my curls.

I was nearly done when Hector's deep rasp startled me out of my little ritual. "You forgot to knock."

I jumped on my seat, a hand pressed upon my thundering chest. "For the love of the stars, you almost gave me a heart attack."

He was leaning against the doorframe, wearing nothing but a towel around his hips. His damp hair fell messily over his eyes, and his skin glistened with water, light-dazzled droplets clinging to the crescents of his arms, the sculpted lines of his abdomen, the narrowing muscle that disappeared beneath the white cloth. His body was all solid strength like that, but his face was the exact opposite—tenderness and melting heat.

"Stop looking at me like that," he said. The mere sound of his voice, low and rough with tension, was enough to fill my body with expectation.

"Like what?"

"You know like what."

"I can't," I whispered, knowing well what these words would do to him. "I don't want to."

A moment passed, nervous and electric.

Hector straightened, and the muscles of his arms curved, moons waxing and waning as he moved. His eyes on mine were golden stars and bonfire smoke. "Tell me to turn

around.”

Another white-hot rush of anticipation. “No.”

“Tell me to lock the door behind me,” he pressed, his expression growing hopeless, desperate.

“No,” I repeated, steadier now.

He took a step, a single step, toward me. “Tell me no.”

This time I didn’t say anything. Nothing at all.

Then I blinked, and Hector appeared right before me, lifting me from the chair with an arm around my waist. He put me down on my bare feet and stared into my eyes until I learned what it was to be seen. Seen past my flesh and bones. Seen for the heart in my chest, the passion of my soul.

He cupped my face, and the room fell away. There was only him. Time stopped spending seconds. The only spent things in the world were our breaths.

“Then tell me yes,” he said. “Tell me you want this. If I have you, I will have you all. Everything you are, everything you will be. Every inch of your body. Every thought that slips your mind. Every ounce of love you have to give. And if you can’t tell me that, then tell me to wait. I’d rather wait an eternity to have you all than to have only a piece of you now.” His forehead dropped on mine, his fingers painting soft lines along the sides of my face. “It will kill me if you regret this.”

I knew it would. I knew what this would mean to him. This was exactly why I wanted it. I’d spent my whole life thinking I’d have to find myself before committing to someone else, and although this was true to a certain level, I was also starting to



understand that this journey of self-discovery was going to be a continuous one. We weren't projects with a beginning and an end but an ever-growing collection of memories. Life changed, and we changed with it, and I couldn't think of another person I wanted to spend a life changing with more than Hector. There had only ever been Hector.

I drew back a little, just enough to be able to look into his eyes. "I will never regret you. Following you to the Castle that day was the best decision I've ever made. You can tell me the most horrible things, you can turn me away right now, and every night I will still wish the stars are shining brighter where you are. You are my everything. I will never, ever regret you."

Breathless, he took my hand and placed it upon his bare chest, right over the frantic drumming of his heart. "Do you feel this? It's so devoted to you I can barely call it my own anymore."

My limbs started feeling heavy, aching to be touched by him. "Kiss me," I breathed.

With the force of the wind itself, Hector pressed me against the wall, curling his fingers into the neckline of my nightdress and making me painfully aware of my lack of undergarments beneath. Then he leaned in, his thigh tangling between my own, the flame of his mouth crackling right before mine. And just as I readied myself for the kiss, he pulled back and made me chase it.

"Kiss you where? Here?" he drawled, unlacing my neckline, ribbon by ribbon, until he was able to lower his mouth to my bare breastbone. His breath warmed my skin, his lips parting to learn the taste of me. Slowly, as though he wanted to prolong the sensation, his hands slipped inside the unfurled fabric and pressed right under the curve of my breasts. I had to bite down on my lip to suppress a moan. I will die if you don't kiss me now, I almost said. Instead I closed my eyes and savored the miracle of his hands on my body.

“Or maybe here?” he suggested, his mouth kissing a slow, wet path up my collarbone, stirring desires in me I hadn’t known myself capable of craving. Things I’d read in books. Things I’d asked the stars for.

A low grunt escaped him when he reached the base of my throat. The rough sound reverberated through me, melting into an ache between my thighs.

“Here, perhaps,” he murmured against my flushed skin. His fingers were still pressing on that spot under my breasts; only now, they were bolder, his thumbs tracing circles over them.

The nightdress slipped from my shoulders, gathering around my waist. I arched into his touch, surrendering myself to him with a needful sigh. I could feel him everywhere. Even in the places he had not touched yet.

Then his eyes wafted up and met mine. “Where, Dorothea?”

I licked my lips, and just as I began to utter the words, he threaded his fingers through my hair, bent my head back across his palm, and kissed me.

He kissed me, and it was like lightning striking the ground. Harsh, brilliant, uncanny—a surging tide of warmth that made my soul yield. He kissed me with all of his body, all of his strength, with the intensity of a million stars, making up for all the years our lips hadn’t been kissing.

I could not think; I could not do anything but take him in, each breath, each silent moan, the unhesitant movements of his lips on mine. My mouth opened for him like a dayflower in the sun, my arms coming up to close around his neck, my bare breasts pressing against the firmness of his chest, my hips softening, falling into alignment with his. I had never felt more right in my life. That was the only word in my mind as I felt his tongue flicking, tasting, discovering my mouth for the very first time. Right.

Everything was right again. The Castle was alive. Our fates were as well-entangled as our limbs. The destiny of stars was no longer to collapse.

Needing to see his expression, I cracked my eyes open.

He was already watching me. “Are you okay?” he asked. “You’re shaking.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I don’t mean to.”

“We can stop if this is too strange for you. I don’t want you to feel pressured because of what I said—”

“It is strange. But not in the way you think.” I touched my fingers to the swollen curve of his mouth, mesmerized. “I’ve known your lips for so long. Now they’re new to me.”

“Kiss me again then,” he said. “Kiss me until there is no part of me unknown by you.”

I gave his top lip a gentle lick before passing my tongue over the length of his fangs. I felt them graze against the corner of my mouth and shivered.

“Do you like that?” he asked.

Even the tips of my ears were burning. “More than I should.”

He cupped the side of my face, his thumb at my jawbone, and tilted back my head so he could drag his fangs along my exposed throat. “And this?”

“I think I like everything you do.”

His mouth moved over mine again, his tongue easing between my lips. The kiss deepened. His hands roamed lower on my body, trailing past the slope of my waist to squeeze the curve of my backside. He nudged my pelvis forward so I could feel his hardness underneath the towel. A terrible emptiness pulsed between my thighs. My limbs turned to honey, summer-hot and pliable. Our gazes locked, and the way he looked now, dark and untethered, I knew I looked the same.

“Stop?” he panted, the rise and fall of his chest quickening against mine.

I shook my head in a fury, twisting my fingers into his damp hair. I guided his face back to mine, recapturing his lips in yet another sloppy kiss, all while he coaxed my dress down my thighs until it was a pool of cotton at our feet.

My hands slipped lower on his body, eager to trace the refined path from his chest to his abdomen. With a little tug, I freed him from the towel, and the bare pressure of his erection against my stomach undid me.

I had to have him. Now. Forever. Forevermore.

“Bed,” I sighed, pressing a hundred maddened kisses along the column of his throat. He moaned, his head falling back, giving me better access, his hands on my waist as firm as I was shaking. I was riddled with nervousness. I did not know what he’d like. I knew so many things about him, but now we were strangers. And I wanted to learn. I wanted to know his rhythm, see his breath catch, feel the release of his yearning on the pad of my palm, the inside of my thighs.

“No,” he groaned at the ceiling.

I stopped breathing. “No?”

“I will not make love to you in a house full of enemies,” he said.

I slid a hand over his hard length and squeezed. His eyes rolled back. For a perfect, petal-soft second, I thought he died. “But I need you,” I whispered.

The words were like a spell. He had no choice but to yield.

“I’ll give you all you need,” he rasped, his knee parting my own. His hand glided down my abdomen and slipped between my thighs. I almost found release just from the slight pressure of his thumb, the slow drag of his fingertips along my wetness.

My face caved into the crook of his neck, but he cupped my throat and nudged me back against the wall. “Don’t hide your face. Let me see you.”

And so we watched each other come undone, my hips rocking to the rhythm of his fingers. They were relentless, and I was restless. Like iron on fire, I was melted down and desperate for more. I thought of nothing else. Just more .

I must have said it aloud. “The rest will have to wait,” he hummed in my ear.

“I’ll be quiet,” I whispered, my fingers tracing the chiseled line of his hip.

Before I could close my fingers around him, he seized both of my wrists in one hand and pinned them on the wall above my head. “If I take you now, you won’t be able to keep quiet.” As if to prove it, he let a single finger inside me, wringing an outcry of pleasure from my lips. “I won’t be able to keep quiet either,” he admitted, the pressure of his hand increasing, following my quickening gasps. “When we do this, we’ll be alone and have hours, days, nights ahead of us.”

I lost my mind after that. His thrusts grew harder, turning me into a mess of inarticulate murmurs. I almost begged him to take me then, for tomorrow had never been very kind to us.

“Promise me nothing will ruin this,” I sighed, so close to release that the words were more sound than letters strung together. “Promise me, and I’ll believe you.”

“I promise,” he chanted between kisses. “I promise.”

The ache between my thighs expanded up to my abdomen, tightening and coiling and gathering. His other hand came around my jaw, keeping my head straight and my eyes on him as this lightning-striking-the-ground sense stole over my body once more. I pulsed around his fingers, my release quiet and unhurried, blissful as my empty head.

I was left boneless, light as air.

Hector’s face softened too, despite his hardness, which was pressing up against my bare stomach, heavy with unspent need. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, his fingers still tracing circles between my thighs. “Sometimes it hurts looking at you. Like my heart will burst if I don’t look away.”

“Don’t look away,” was all I said.

He obeyed. His eyes never left mine as he sank to his knees before me, gripped my left leg, and threw it over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I gasped. “I just had—”

“I need to taste it.”

Blood rushed to my face. “Is that something vampires do?”

“It’s something you and I do.”

Then he buried his face between my thighs and showed me what it was to be hungry.

Waves of inexpressible pleasure flooded me at every lick, every trace, every swirl of his tongue along the center of me. Gazing down at his flushed cheekbones, I took the silky strands of his hair between my fingers and kept him on the exact spot I needed him.

He had never looked more beautiful. The gods, I thought, had made his face for this exact purpose. To be used like this by me. To yield to the ocean of my pleasure. To be pulled under. To drown. Until his only conscious thought was of my taste on his tongue. His only lifeline. I knew he would agree if I told him this, for he did not come up for air. He did not pause to ask me how I liked it. He just had me.

One ripple of release rolled into another, and I soared once more, chanting his name with my fingers still tangled in his soft hair.

Before I was able to fully return to myself, leaning slack and dreamy against the wall, Hector pulled away, his intoxicated expression shifting to a frustrated scowl. "Someone's at the door," he bristled and then vanished, moving so fast around the room that I could only see the blurry outline of his figure darting from one corner to another.

I felt a tug around my waist and found myself standing in my nightdress while Hector lingered by the door, fully clad, his hand on the doorknob.

Sorry , he mouthed.

I smiled like a drunken idiot. I was too happy. Too stupidly, ineffably happy to even wonder who could be awake at this sun-dazed hour.

Hector

Ronan was leaning against the wall opposite the bedroom, somber, weary, and glaring at me.

The moment I shut the door behind me, he wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Glad to see you’re entertaining yourselves while the rest of us are busy burying my aunt.”

I hated that he could smell her on me, smell the exact depth and complexity of her pleasure mingling with my own unspent desire. This was why I’d promised myself I’d wait, so we could have this precious moment undisturbed and to ourselves alone. But as always, I’d been unable to resist her.

She touched me, and the world fell away. There was just her and my heart that kept missing beats and my hands that could not bring her close enough. And then I tasted her, and I found myself starving. I’d been starving for her for so long, languishing in snowstorms of fascination, that I still had trouble believing this had happened at all. That what I felt on my fingertips was the satin softness of her skin, that the honeyed taste on my tongue was of her pleasure, that the sweet reverberations in my ears were the sounds of her wanting me.

I didn’t think people could belong to other people, but no part of me felt like mine anymore.

It was a struggle to concentrate, to keep my expression dispassionate and surreptitious. Even my voice betrayed me when I finally spoke, “I assumed you were going to return her East.”



“She had no such preferences,” Roan said curtly, his eyes pinned on an indistinct distance. “We buried her by the cherry trees before the sun came up.”

“You did not ask me to attend.”

A line of apprehension carved between his brows. “They said I shouldn’t disturb you. They’re... scared of you, Hector.”

I gave him a hard, remorseless look. “They should be. They tried to hurt my wife, frame me for murder, and steal my home. If I were them, I would be terrified to even sleep within these walls.”

It took Roan several moments to meet my gaze in the pale semidarkness of the corridor. The tapers on the candelabras were sparsely lit, and there was an odd, bone-piercing chill out here. Odd indeed, for if the Castle was linked to my emotional state, the whole floor ought to be broiling right now. I had the strange sense ever since the incident with Thea that the Castle’s magic was slipping from my hold. It obeyed me still, dutiful and resilient as a king’s general, yet I felt distanced from it somehow, which scared me more than I cared to admit, for my whole life I’d been an Aventine before I’d been Hector. I scarcely knew who I was without it.

Roan cleared his throat, deciding not to comment on my rather menacing statement. “I require your help.” I cocked a brow, and he continued more warily. “Tieran needs more blood.”

So that was why he was here. The Castle was out of blood, and the sun was high and dazzling in the sky.

I gave Roan a sympathetic nod. “Go get some rest. I’ll get him more blood—”

“You must know, I didn’t do it,” Roan blurted out in one ragged breath. “I didn’t kill

Camilla.”

My hand fell from the doorknob, tension shooting up my spine. At the end of the corridor where the largest of the mirrors trickled with water, I could have sworn an invisible presence watched me tentatively, waiting with bated breath to see what I would do.

Shaking the strange notion from my head, I turned to Roan again, and this time I made sure my face betrayed nothing, not a hint of the suspicion that coiled in my gut.

Yes, Roan had given me his oath, but I no longer believed that to be anything other than a well-devised part of a much larger plan. After all, how could I accuse of murder the only man that had willingly given me his loyalty? For all I knew, he’d encouraged Camilla to poison Thea, pretending to be on her side, just so he would give me the appearance of a motive. Camilla wouldn’t have suspected him, for she had never even respected him. Stoic little Roan, she used to call him. Stoic little Roan, who always smiled amicably and fixed her mistakes, and who believed everything could be solved with a firm handshake and a brief exchange of words.

When Roan realized I was not going to respond, let alone give him the peace of mind he’d come here for, he pressed closer. From this distance I could see the bruised and pierced side of his neck, and I wondered how much of his blood he’d had to give to Tieran before he summoned the courage to ask for my help.

“There is a reason I swore to stand by your side, Hector,” he ventured in a measured but tenacious manner. “I do believe you’ll become a great ruler. Not despite your humanity but because of it. I know I haven’t always been accepting of your kind, but my years with Tieran opened my eyes to a side of humanity that was utterly unknown to me. This is why I fell in love with him. He’s so perfectly, wonderfully human. Even now, even like this.” His voice became strained, his composure slipping from him like a handful of water. “I wouldn’t do this to him. I wouldn’t make him suffer

like this.”

Unease crept under my skin, for the words rang too genuine, too vulnerable. I’d been certain Roan would do anything for Tieran, even murder his own aunt. But what if anything didn’t mean killing the reason his husband was suffering but instead allowing her to exist just so he wouldn’t suffer any worse?

If that was true, if Roan hadn’t done this... Then who? Dahlia? Was she really capable of such brutality?

“I can’t believe I’m not the only one awake at this ungodly hour,” Arawn’s exhausted groan sounded from across the pathway, his disheveled form separating from the shadows.

“And what are you doing up at this ungodly hour?” I shot back.

“Hoping to find some blood in the kitchen,” he grumbled, stifling a tremendous yawn. “How is it possible we’re out already?”

“Sorry,” exhaled Roan. “Tieran needed it.”

“I’m going hunting right now,” I reassured them, drifting further and further away from the dreamscape of my moments with Thea. “How is Dain?”

Arawn merely shrugged. “His pride got the worst of it.” Leaning in, he gave me a conspiratorial little wink. “Besides, he has Dahlia to lick his wounds.”

Roan smacked the back of Arawn’s head.

“That fucking hurt,” bristled Arawn.

“And that is my sister you’re talking about,” growled Roan.

“Wanker.”

“Dimwit.”

I sighed at the ceiling, inwardly praying to whoever god was willing to listen. “I can’t believe we’re the future of vampire society.”

???

Back at the bedroom, it was a different world. Bright, clear, ineffably lovely. Dorothea had drawn back the curtains, and the eager spring sun was soaking the overlapping rugs in unsteady golden pools. The Castle was floating a bit higher than usual, and the view out of the dewed glass was a cotton-candy daydream.

When she turned, an instant pang of desire went through me. The sunlight caught her face, her neck, the top of her breastbone before it disappeared beneath the white cotton of her nightdress. Everything about her was gleaming and reflecting as if she were celestial, a girl made of nothing but magic and reveries. The rest of the room stood transfigured in relation to her.

“Is everything alright?” she asked sleepily.

“I have to go hunting.”

She nodded, trudging toward the bed with half-lidded eyes. “I’ll try to get some sleep before the ceremony.”

I caught her wrist just as her knee dipped into the mattress. “Are we okay? No regrets?”

Her smile was a drowsy sunrise, slowly lighting up the valley of her face. She got on her toes and pressed a kiss to my lips. Brief. Soft. Yet it ignited a fire in my bones. Now all I wanted was to splay her on this bed, kiss vows up her thighs, and have the fullness of her breasts in my hands again.

“No regrets,” she promised, and I believed she meant it.

She looked... content. More than I'd seen her be in a long, long time. There weren't any words good enough to describe what her happiness did to me, only that it made me feel reassured and healed in channels of my heart that had stood scraped raw for years now.

As she climbed onto the bed, the nightdress clung to the curve of her hips, gliding over and between her thighs in a way that made me inwardly groan. I'd been with women before. One woman, to be precise—a comfortable and clandestine affair that only existed when I happened to be in Kartha, which ended permanently and unobtrusively after my parents' death. But that was beside the point. The point was that I should be able to show a bit more restraint in a situation like this. If only my good reason and sober composure didn't evaporate into thin air every time I breathed near this girl.

“I was wondering,” Thea prompted as she settled between the row of pillows.

“Yes?” I encouraged.

She looked at me curiously. “What happens next?”

I shook my head, chuckling. “That is a very funny thing for a seer to ask.”

“I know,” she admitted, her gaze growing bleary, far-off. “I just wish I had the answer.”

I thought for a moment. I thought the way Mother would, allowing this small part of me that was undeniably hers to rise to the surface, a surface that was not perfect or unmarked by any means, but at least a brighter place than this pit of sorrow and regret that had opened up inside me ever since I lost them. It was strange trying to think like her, but it was also comforting. A revelation, even. I was no longer afraid to confront her absence or admit that my need for her guidance hadn't died with her.

In moments like this, I wished I could talk to the Castle. Really talk to it, not just watch it bring to fruition my every desire and command. But the Castle was quiet, quieter than usual, its grief ancient and unyielding compared to my own mortal one.

I was beginning to understand why so many places in the world stood haunted and why so many morbid stories followed them even centuries after the tragedies that had befallen them. People had the ability to change and therefore the ability to heal. Places were eternal. And so were their wounds.

In the end, no voices of wisdom reached me from the great beyond. There was only me. Imperfect. Scarred. A heart full of human hope. And for the first time in my life, this didn't seem too terrible of a fate.

"I don't think there is a next, Dorothea," I finally said. "I think there is only now."

Thea

As it was getting close to dusk, I sailed down to the kitchen and started on the ceremonial wine. Hector's ascension to vampire society wasn't going to be the celebration we had hoped for, but I still wanted to bring back some normalcy into our lives, a touch of sweetness amid the trial and death of the past few days.

The wine simmered with cloves, cinnamon, orange peels, and two cups of blueberries for half an hour before it was time to stir a generous amount of honey into the mixture. I left it on the stove a few more minutes, then let it cool so I could strain it. The kitchen was warm and sweet-smelling now, and the dusk outside was a sunburst of periwinkle and peach.

The flickering candles by the window, the smell of the wine, the coziness of the kitchen... I almost felt like I was back in Thalloria, at Nepheli's balmy apartment in the city, where we would curl up after our classes to have something to eat and discuss our day.

Since her wedding was in less than six weeks, I would probably never get to see that apartment again. The thought came with a surge of melancholia. I had no idea what the next chapter of my life was going to look like. I wished I could have a vision, a peek into the future, but no matter how much I concentrated or called upon my powers, there was nothing but a vast whiteness, a void waiting to be filled. Perhaps destiny, much like Hector, was trying to teach me the value of now.

I left the wine on the counter and went upstairs to the treasure room, looking for something appropriate to wear. Instead, I found Hector, dressed in a fine white tunic

and formal black trousers. His one hand was adorned with his golden wristlet, the other with the signet ring Esperida had gifted him at his sixteenth birthday. A ring I knew he'd never worn before today.

He was bent over an open trunk, staring at something intensely. When I was close enough, I wrapped my hand around his waist and stole a peek over the crescent of his bicep.

It was a dress, long and white as snow. The sleeveless bodice was bejeweled with pearls, the back decorated with a jumble of crisscross ribbons. The skirts were of gauzy silk, gathering and unfurling around the hem like sea foam. Each wispy layer was embroidered with shimmering white roses, a whole garden of them, no less magnificent than the ones decorating the halls of the Castle.

"It's beautiful," I sighed, almost too scared to take it in my hands, as Hector offered it to me.

"I found it in Elora," he said, his tone strangely sullen. "I thought it would look good on you, although I know you prefer red to white."

Bewildered, I gazed around the precious room, the wilderness of textures and colors and sparkles springing out of every corner like something out of a fairy story. A dragon's lair or a sprite's treasure cove, perhaps. And slowly, too slowly, I realized what this room really was.

"Hector," I asked, clutching the dress to my chest, "did you get all these for me?"

He was quiet for a moment, running his fingers over the mahogany dresser before him in that unhurried, thoughtful manner of his. "I kept buying you wedding presents," he whispered. "But nothing was ever good enough to send. To express how sorry I was for the way I acted back then."



“You were not that bad,” I argued, setting the dress aside.

“I was selfish and immature.”

“Well, you were eighteen. I wasn’t exactly the embodiment of maturity either.”

He took hold of my nape, his warm fingers threading through my curls. “You were always better than me. You still are the best of me.”

The room fell away. There was only the lush curve of his mouth that I wanted so maddeningly to taste again. As though he read my thoughts, he used his lips to nudge mine apart, playing with our proximity. For a moment, he didn’t do anything but breathe my breath, feel what I felt. Tingles of anticipation crawled up my arms. And then... Then someone knocked upon the door.

Hector groaned. “I swear the gods of time hate me.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Is my torment amusing to you, Lady Aventine?” he grumbled.

I loved that he still called me Lady Aventine, for it didn’t feel like a taunt anymore.

“You’re being dramatic, as per usual,” I chimed.

He seized my wrist and guided my hand down between us so I could feel his hardness over his trousers. My cheeks warmed as he stirred, growing heavier against my palm. “Does this feel like I’m being dramatic to you? Because I get like this every time you deign to breathe near me.”

Slowly, I began stroking him over the taut fabric, watching his mouth open to a

soundless cry. “You weren’t like this when we were younger.”

He swallowed hard, his eyes rolling shut. “I was just better at hiding it.”

“Were you?” I teased, applying a bit more pressure. His hips lifted to my touch. In that moment, I could have done anything to him, and he would have let me. “Tell me then. Did you ever touch yourself thinking about me?”

“I always think about you.”

He was so undone it was nothing for me to push him back against the wall. I forced his stance to widen, settling myself between his legs, my hand moving faster between us, gliding up and down his length. “So the first time you finished, I was the reason?”

“Yes,” he sighed, his head lolling against the wall.

I got to my toes and pressed my mouth to the exposed column of his throat, felt it bob with the tip of my tongue. “Good,” I hummed, removing my hand from him just to make him shiver with need. “You were the reason for me too.”

Hector glared at me—or tried to, at least. “You’re a demon.”

Another knock came at the door, more insistent this time.

I almost asked him to ignore it. I wanted to keep on touching him, keep on making him mine, but Hector had always been the most reasonable between us and was already untangling himself from me.

He released a sharp breath between his teeth, adjusted himself over his trousers, and roamed past the labyrinth of drawers and chests to open the door.

Espen's dignified face came into view, and I felt myself straighten, reclaiming my composure.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said in a quiet, somber tone. "Kaladin and I would like to have a word with you. Make amends, if that's still an option."

Hector bowed his head courteously. "Of course."

Noticing his flushed nape, I touched a hand to my mouth. I made him like this, I thought with the pleasure of an adolescent girl. Hector Aventine, powerless for all his power.

I was already lost in my mind, listing all the things I planned on doing to him later tonight when, all of a sudden, Espen veered to face me, his sharp-edged attention dissolving both my smile and my filthy reveries. "Can I ask you something, Thea?"

"Sure," I croaked.

"Why did you come back?"

The question was unexpected but easy. "To be with my husband."

Espen's dark brows drew closer, doubt flaring in his honey-speckled eyes. "Weren't you afraid?"

I laughed at that. "Of course I was. I'm only a human."

He thought for a moment, and my eyes darted to Hector, who seemed as baffled by this exchange as I was. "You know," Espen said, "vampires are absolute creatures. You can't know us in fragments. To understand a part of us, you have to understand the whole. Perhaps humans are like that too."

“I guess we both have a lot to learn,” I mused.

He smiled a little as he turned again, wrists crossed behind his back. “Hmm. It’s nice that I still have things to learn. Makes me feel young.”

???

The corridor outside our bedroom no longer looked like it had escaped out of a nightmare. The roses along the ceiling were once again in bloom, the chandeliers were dazzling, and the pale tapers on the candelabras were twinkling like tiny stars.

My own appearance had undergone significant improvement as well. My reflection upon the intervening mirrors verged on unrecognizable, and I found myself slowing down to admire the way the pearls on my bodice caught the light and the way my curls swayed against the satin laces at my back.

“The gods really do have their favorites, don’t they?” Arawn whistled, coming out of his bedroom just as I was about to pass it.

I curtsied, making a show of my sparkling skirts. “Well, thank you, Lord Celestine. You cut quite the arresting figure yourself.”

Arawn grinned like a demon, despite the clear apology in his eyes. “Does that mean I’m forgiven? You know, for the whole knocking you out and taking you away from the Castle without your consent thing?”

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?” I countered. “You know, for the whole knocking you out and abandoning you in the forest an hour before dawn under the care of an exiled sprite thing?”

His dashing smile broadened, his arms opening at his side. “Come here, you little

rascal.”

I hugged him tight around the waist, and he was careful not to mess up the swoop of my curls by setting his hands on my shoulders.

“If Hector finds us embracing like this, do you think he might have my head?” he wondered.

I pulled back a little, passing my gloved fingers over my lips. “Certainly not,” I decided. “He might have your balls, though.”

Arawn bristled under his breath. “How is this any better?”

I chuckled, reaching up to fix his slightly crooked... cravat.

A swift, thin chill swept through the corridor, the most terrible coldness swishing over my bones.

“How strange,” I whispered as I ran my fingers over the burgundy piece of silk, following its subtle pattern of the same color thread.

“What is it, darling?” asked Arawn, his face shadowing with worry.

“Your cravat. It looks very familiar.”

His hands on my shoulders tightened. “My gods, Thea, you look faint.” Quickly he pushed his bedroom door open and ushered me inside. “Come. Come sit down for a moment. Have you eaten anything today?”

His room was similar to ours, elegant and warm. But I was so cold . I was shaking from head to toe, my teeth chattering. Befuddled, I wrapped my arms around my

midriff and dragged myself before the fireplace. Unlike ours, the mantel was bare of pretty little knickknacks. There was only a slender, silver vial glinting orange in the firelight.

The coldness set deeper inside me, ice spreading through my stomach. My mind strained, twisted to bring something it didn't want into focus.

The cravat, the vial...

The sword was leaning next to the fireplace, with its wide hilt and curvy blade.

I picked it up in a trance, watching my distorted, firelit reflection upon its polished surface—polished save a tiny dot of red just around the blade's edge.

“Thea, put this down. You're going to hurt yourself.”

I veered furiously, my fingers clamping around the sword's hilt.

Arawn, still standing by the door, stared back at me, a crease between his brows.

It was a horrible, impossible thing to think, but so many horrible, impossible things had happened lately my mind did not hesitate to wonder. Where were Calix and Esther? What was the name of the place they'd gone to after Hector appointed Arawn Lord of the North? Why couldn't I remember?

And then another quick, disturbing thought. The words welled up my throat like bile. “What really happened to Margaret?”

Arawn's face changed, a shadow moving across his darting eyes, making them still. His lips curled back slightly, and for the first time, I noticed his fangs. How long they were. How white. How lethal.

“I drank her up,” he said and locked the door behind him.

Thea

The air was sodden with horror. It seeped into my skin and wreathed between my bones, making me still. I had no idea how long I stood there, numb and desolate, cut off from my thoughts completely.

“You know,” said Arawn after an eternity of him watching me through cold, calculating eyes. “I tried to save you. Time and time again, I tried to get you out of here.”

The words rang through me like a wraith’s call, distant and bereft of meaning, their only purpose to ensnare me.

I felt the sting of tears in my eyes, a raw ache in my throat, but I was so disconnected from myself that no sob escaped me in the end, only a shuddering breath.

“You poisoned me,” I whispered. “When I went to the door to welcome the Ravenors into the room, you put the nightshade in the teapot. You poisoned me.”

His voice came so loud compared to my own that it was a shock to my senses. I flinched back against the mantel, the heat of the flames licking the back of my calves.

“To scare you. To chase you out of here. To knock some sense into that thick skull of yours.”

“You killed Camilla,” I choked out, the sword clattering in my fist.



Arawn squared his shoulders, reaching to fix the cuffs of his shirt with the unperturbed serenity of Death himself. “I had to. She saw me slip the nightshade into the teapot. Not that she cared.” His passionless blue eyes snapped on mine, twin blades stabbing through my heart. “That viper cornered me instead and tried to blackmail me into an alliance with her and Kaladin. To overthrow Hector. So later that night, I sneaked into her bedroom and cut off her head.”

“You could have gone to Hector... You could have... I don’t understand... Why? Why would you do something so...”

“So... what?” Arawn prodded, his fair brows raised. As he swayed toward my direction, I flung the sword before me, filled with this terrible, boundless fear. Not for the things he’d done. But for the things he meant to do.

Arawn moved past me, and standing before the window, he gazed out into the vast, new-moon night, his steady breathing fogging the windowpane. “I needed them all in here and you out there. Safe. As you should be.” He turned to me again slowly. Slowly . Like a predator being careful as to not startle its prey. “The last thing I wanted was for you to get caught up in this, to have to hurt another innocent.”

I shook my head, floundering in bouts of numb shock and blazing rage. “This? What is this ?”

For a second I saw the bleak future in his eyes.

No, not a future .

In his dull, passionless gaze, there was no tomorrow at all.

“The basket you found in the kitchen?” he ventured calmly. “Mother did not arrange it. I did. I was going to make the ceremonial wine, you see. A Thalorian custom, of

course, and a token of appreciation for my new sovereign.”

I listened with rising dismay, unable to make any sense of what he was trying to imply. “The blueberries?”

His whole face darkened, his eyes shifting into the indigo of midnight. “Only the first layer was blueberries.”

Dread like I’d never known before welled up in my chest and choked me. Sobs racked my insides, for there was only one kind of berry that, in its ripe state, was almost identical to a blueberry. “Gods. I made... I made...”

“You made a fine juniper wine for us, Thea. And now, you’re going to sit here like a good girl and let us enjoy it. Don’t worry, I’ll find some excuse to tell Hector. Perhaps you forgot to drink your water again.”

A white-hot blade of fury cut through my despair, and when he aimed for the door, I cast myself upon him like a curse, brandishing the blade. The image of what he was planning to do rose to the surface of my consciousness, stark and horribly familiar. I had already seen it happen in a dream that was not a dream. Everyone—dead. Gathered around the dining table with their mouths stained purple, their bodies limp.

“Why?” I snarled through clenched teeth, tightening my precarious hold on the sword. “Why would you want to kill your own people?”

The words ignited a burning rage in his eyes. A rage that had him right before me in an instant, sucking the air out of the room.

I wielded the blade, slashing the air, but Arawn was too fast, his hands a mere diaphanous blur. He stole the weapon for me only to throw it far across the room, metal clattering on marble. Then he lunged at me, banding an arm around my waist

and closing a fist around my jaw, his fingers digging painfully into the hollows of my cheeks. “We are not people ,” he growled in my face. “When are you going to understand it? We are curses. We are the darkness of this world, and we need to be vanquished.”

The opposing forces of what he’d done and what he was still planning to do assailed me all at once. He didn’t just want to kill them. He wanted to die with them. Whether the ceremony would happen for Hector or Dain did not matter to him, only the outcome, the seizure of this opportunity.

We’ll find accommodations in the city. After you’ve settled somewhere safe, I’ll return to the Castle.

Yes, he would have returned to the Castle, not to stand by Hector but to finish what he started. He just wanted me out of the way so he didn’t have to do to me what he’d done to Margaret.

Margaret’s sweet face hovered as a true ghost over the edge of my memories. Her blonde curls, her kind brown eyes, the slightly embarrassed quality of her smile. A quiet girl. A nice girl. A girl who trusted easily.

The grief in my chest was raw, primitive, her name growing into a sickened prayer in my mind.

“You bit her,” I cried, writhing in the narrowing prison of his arms. Swift gusts of pain swept through me. I felt my flesh bruising, my bones groaning beneath. “You didn’t mean to kill her. You lost control, didn’t you?”

His rage peaked, peeling back the last shreds of his composure. “Of course I did!” he roared, spinning me around so fast that for a second everything around the room became dazzlingly white.

When the rapid movement stopped, we were standing before the full-length mirror, its glossy facade trickling with water. Arawn loomed behind me, twisting my wrists at the base of my spine. His face came up next to mine, wild and demonic in the unsteady glass, his eyes as red as the blood in my veins. “Look at me,” he hissed, and the more I resisted, the closer his mouth seemed to draw to my throat. I could feel the burn of his fangs already. “Look at this. This is what I really am, what vampires really are. An urge. An appetite. And your dear Hector is no different. He doesn’t love you. He’s not devoted to you. He’s obsessed with you.” He tilted his head, burying his face in my neck. “Your scent. Your taste.”

“Stop,” I snarled, taking advantage of his hunger-dazed state to wrench myself free.

A look of despair glazed over his face as he dashed forward to recapture my wrists. “Listen to me, Thea. You are blood to him. Nothing more. I’m not your enemy here. I’m trying to save you. I’m trying to save everyone from us. If I do this, no one will fall victim to our curse again. No one will suffer as she did.”

Everyone, he said, and a sinking feeling stole over the whole of me. Everyone.

With a pang of horror, I realized just how far his agony and self-loathing had ventured. He’d done a terrible, irreversible evil to the person he loved the most, and now everyone was going to pay the price of that sin, his revenge so tremendously complete that the entire world would stand altered. That was what he was really after. The eradication of the vampire curse, starting with its leading pillars.

“Arawn,” I wheezed, calling on a reasonable tone unfit to the unreason of his mind. “Think of the children. The children are innocent. They’ve lost their aunt already—”

“No one is innocent! None of them!” he exploded, squeezing me so tightly against him I could no longer breathe inside the cage of my corset. “They are nothing but monsters in the making. Why can’t you see that?”

He spiraled on and on, less a creature of a frayed sanity than a man who truly believed he was about to do the honorable thing. I stopped listening. My eyes darted to the door, my thoughts racing faster than my galloping heart.

I wasn't sure how far his conviction ran. He was planning to die tonight, so there was nothing he was afraid to lose. If I screamed for help, would he kill me in an instant, consequences be damned? If I tried to escape through the mirror, would he simply drag me back, snap my neck, and go downstairs to finish what he started?

I knew I had to be careful. I knew I had to manipulate my way out of here. But he was Arawn . He was Arawn, and my heart still hoped to find the words that would reach through him.

"Please," I beseeched, shaking all over. "Arawn, please, you won't achieve anything by doing this. There are thousands of vampires out there."

"But everyone who keeps them in order is within these walls," he said steadily, the gleam of calculation the only lucid spark in his eyes.

"You want vampires to fall into anarchy, revert to their old ways," I understood with a fresh rush of horror. "You want the vampire hunters to go after them again. Until they're all gone."

"They should have never allowed us to come out of the darkness to begin with," said Arawn in a quiet, controlled voice as if to soothe me, as if I was being the irrational one. "There is a reason we can't survive the light, why the goddess cursed us so. But you see, Esperida spun this pretty little fairytale that we're not all evil because we can love . Isn't that, after all, the only thing that redeems evil?" He laughed bitterly. "We do not love, Thea. We obsess. We lust. We hunger. And we wait. And when our victim is vulnerable enough, we do what vampires do best. We take."

“Gods,” I sobbed as one terrible realization struck me after the other. “Your parents... they’re not on vacation, are they?”

“It would be hypocritical of me to let them live, don’t you think?” Arawn muttered, his fair lashes falling heavy upon the network of purple veins below his eyes.

And finally— finally— I understood.

During these past few days, I had watched Arawn eat food and drink cup after cup of wine but not blood. Never blood. There was only one thing that could drive a vampire to this level of insanity, and that was not grief. It was not guilt. And it was not hatred.

It was hunger .

Shakily, I reached up and closed his face between my palms. His skin was frail and clammy beneath my fingers, like an insect’s wings. Hector had been right. We’d been so absorbed in our own problems that we’d missed all the signs. And now it was too late. Now we had lost him.

“Arawn,” I panted, “please, listen to me for a moment. You’re not well. You don’t really want to do this. You’re just in pain.”

His crimson eyes shot up to mine. They were huge, unblinking in their fury. “I deserve it.”

“No,” I gasped. “No, you need to drink some blood. The hunger is making you like this.”

He pushed me off him hard enough that I was knocked breathless, pain humming across my collarbone. “ Blood is what made me like this!” he roared, his voice so resonant it seemed to spiral through me. “I will not drink another drop of that

sickness. No more. Tonight we die. Tonight I free the world from the curse that is the vampire.”

He started for the door, but I latched myself onto him, forcing him to face me. “This won’t bring her back. Listen to me, she wouldn’t want you to destroy yourself like this. She loved you so much. She told me. She loved you.”

Suddenly, Arawn stopped resisting, and I stopped pulling. Everything in the room fell still. Even my thundering heartbeats crashed to a halt.

When his eyes found mine again, they were soft and tearful, shifting to their usual pale blue. He cupped my cheek softly. “Don’t make me do this,” he whispered. It was a tender whisper, but like a premonition, I felt the veiled threat in it.

My lips parted, my lungs gathering air, but before I could scream for help, his fist closed around my throat and silenced me.

The shock of his hands on me was worse than the pain, the sensation of breath being taken from my body. Even as I watched the stone of his face darkening over me, I could not believe that they were his hands that were killing me. I might have thrashed and kicked and clawed at his wrist. I might have tried to lie to save my life. I will sit here as you asked. I will do whatever you want. But I didn’t. I was too scorched with shame, too immobilized with guilt for not seeing what had been in front of me all along.

My vision blurred, shifted. An eerie, white light swooped down and dazzled over my head. I wanted to resist it, turn my face from it, and lean into the dark, but something deep inside me, a bright spark of magic, told me to surrender to it instead, and for the first time in my life, I listened. I bared myself to the strange light, dropping all my shields of ego and vanity and small mortal fears. It wrapped around me, pulling me like a pair of hands away from Arawn and into its opal embrace.

I felt cold and damp and weightless as air, moving through an indefinable passage of water. Then the light ceased.

Now I was in the dark. Now my only thought was: Hector .



Thea

Esperida Aventine was floating against the seamless backdrop of a celestial cavern, a place beyond sound and movement where all was stillness and clarity.

In the absolute darkness, it hurt to look at her, for she was a single star, brilliant and pure white from the strands of her hair to her billowy dress, undulating like a cloud around her bare feet.

For a long while, I could only squint at her, shading my eyes with my hands until I realized that I, too, had turned into a wisp of translucence, the shape of my fingertips traced with silver light.

An outcry of every emotion a body was capable of feeling escaped me and echoed around the bleak nothingness that enveloped us. I wanted to break down sobbing, only I didn't think it was possible in my new incorporeal form.

"I... I missed you so much," I stammered, and before I knew it, Esperida was surging forward, her phantom body embracing mine.

To my further astonishment, I felt her as though she were flesh and bone, our mutual intangibility made solid upon contact. But there was strangeness to it too. She was cold as ice to the touch and didn't smell like herself. She used to wear this perfume, an unexpected scent, peppery and a little masculine. Now she was like a handful of stardust, her barely-there essence slipping between my fingers.

"Oh sweet child," she sighed, dotting my forehead with kisses. "I missed you too."

Both of you. More than you know.”

“Am I dead?” The question left me with a ragged sigh, my chest cracking open. I touched my fingers to my throat, where I should be feeling the throb of Arawn’s hands. But there was only the dull memory of his maddened face hovering over mine. In terms of physical agony, I was as unfeeling as a block of wood.

Esperida laughed. “Of course not, silly. This is not where your story ends. It is only where it changes .”

I stared at her, too dazed to form complete judgments just yet. “But I see you... I feel you...”

“That is your magic, Thea. That is what you do. You see things. You feel things. Things that others cannot.” Her expression grew stern as she hooked two fingers under my chin. “And then you doubt your own eyes. Your own instincts.” She shook her head. “Not anymore.”

“Not anymore,” I promised, for I didn’t think it was wise to argue with a ghost.

A ghost.

“It was you!” I exclaimed. “You were the light in the mirrors. You were watching us...” As my lips formed the words, a sequence of moments flickered before my eyes: the glimpses of white light, the constant sense of being watched, the hands that had pulled me out of Arawn’s hold and into the mirror. It had all been her. “You saved me.”

Esperida smiled brightly. There were not good enough words to describe her smile, the untamed wildness of it, the way it made you feel special and blessed just to have witnessed it. “No, sweetheart,” she hummed. “You saved yourself. I can’t touch

living things. I can't touch anything that exists out there. If I could, I would have stopped Arawn from the beginning. I can't even stray far from the mirrors. They are the in-between that I belong to now. But you allowed me to touch you. Your magic did, for it too is a thing between worlds."

I gazed around at the shapeless, endless gloom, more baffled than ever. "I thought the mirrors were portals."

"They are."

"But this is not a room in the Castle."

"No, it's not," she agreed, gently urging me to turn around and see that the other side of the path was not as bleak as the one I was looking at.

The darkness broke into fragments like the ground breaks over new roots, and white veins of light seeped through, growing larger and wider the closer they curled around the iridescent oval shape floating in the midpoint of it all.

"This," Esperida sang in my ear, "is the Castle's heart."

Awestruck, I whirled to meet her colorless eyes. They sparkled like pearls in the dim.

"You see," she began, ushering me forward, "our two souls, the Castle's and mine, bonded a very long time ago, and ever since I died, the Castle hasn't been feeling very well. I was supposed to cross to the other side with Eron, but the Castle didn't let me. It keeps me here with it. My soul, at least. It spends almost all of its energy trying to retain our bond. That is why its magic falters and even fails at times. That is why it's not protecting you the way it should. It protects me instead. It refuses to let me go."

I recalled all the wondrous outbursts of magic the Castle had graced us with the past few days and how it had all reverted to its original somber state. It still obeyed Hector's commands, for they too were bonded, but its volition, its sparkle and soul, were still devoted to Esperida alone.

And now she was looking at me the way I was supposed to be looking at her. As if I were a savior. As if I were her last and only hope. "What... What can I do?"

Relief braced the opal of her face. She squeezed my hands in hers. "I want you to talk to it. I want you to take my place. To become the new Lady of the Castle. It's the only way to save them and free me. If the magic of the Castle gets restored, it will help you stop Arawn before it is too late."

"Can't you help me?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. There isn't much I can do anymore, and the portals are too unpredictable. You can easily get stuck in a loop of going in and out of here. If you want to reach Arawn in time, you'll need the Castle's magic on your side."

Prickles of panic trailed up my arms. I staggered out of her reach. "But... why me? Why not Hector?"

She gestured at the twinkling oval-shaped object that was supposed to be the Castle's very cause of sentience. "This is not something everyone can see."

I blinked slowly, revelation washing over me. "Were you able to see its heart, to be in this space before you died?"

Her smile broadened. "No. Do you see now? Do you see how special your gift is?"

During my first week at Thaloria's Academy of Magical Arts, I knelt before the high priestess as all first-years did and was told that my magic, the magic I'd spent a lifetime trying to harness, was to see things .

How disappointed, how wretchedly dejected I'd been to learn that I was not on the verge of becoming something greater than myself, that I was not there to escape my destiny, but to surrender to it. What a curse, I'd thought, to see what is to come and not be able to change it.

But what if I could change it? What if Hector was right, after all? What if destiny was really just another word for life and what you made of it?

Steadily, with my lungs filled with breath, I drifted toward the pulsing light, the heart of the Castle. Up close, it was less of an oval and more of a ball of energy burning into needle-thin beams of silver light.

Just like a star.

"Hello... Castle?" I ventured hesitantly, for there was really no stranger thing than accepting the strangeness of the world, the things that existed beyond the boundaries of our understanding.

Its voice was grand, depthless. It came from everywhere and nowhere. It came from inside me. "Hello, prophet girl."

I stared at the star-shaped heart, drowning in waves of pure amazement. "Oh, I'm no prophet."

There was a thoughtful respite, then a sigh of gentle resignation. "Why do mortals do this?"

“Do what?”

“Doubt yourselves,” the Castle nearly huffed. “Do you not see what destiny wants you to see? Do you not feel the gods of fortune guide your hands? Do you not hear the stars when they whisper their sacred stardust words? You hear me, after all. I am a star, too.”

“I... I thought you were a castle now.”

“Before I was a castle, before I was stone and glass and structure, I was magic—intention and possibility—and before I was magic, I was a star. You see, nothing is only one thing, and nothing is always the same thing. Change, I’m afraid, is inevitable.”

I gave the Castle a quizzical look. “Then why are you resisting it? You give very good advice. You ought to follow it every now and then.”

To my surprise, the Castle laughed, and it was a glorious, larger-than-life sound. “Ah, she’s a clever one.”

“What you’re doing is harming a lot of people, you know,” I said, solemnly now.

“How so?”

“Esperida needs to rest. And Hector needs you . Something terrible is going to happen here tonight, and you have to stop it.”

“And what about you, prophet girl? Do you not have the power to stop it?”

“I... You’re right,” I admitted with a heavy heart. “Destiny did warn me. The gods of fortune did show me their favor. But I didn’t listen to them. I was so afraid to make

the wrong choice I ended up doing nothing at all. And now I fear they'll forsake me."

If the Castle had a face, I had a feeling it would be grimacing now, perhaps raising its brows in exasperation. "Did you fail to listen to them, or did you fail to listen to yourself?"

The answer was clearer than ever. Still, the words felt odd upon my lips, the admission too fresh, too tender. "I am my magic, and my magic is me. So I suppose I failed us both."

"I am a lot like that too," said the Castle in a strange, plaintive tone. "Inseparable from my magic, I mean. It tires me sometimes. And other times I don't want to be myself at all." There was a pause in which I felt the Castle's very essence haloing over me. It was warm and sun-bright, and it filled me with hope. "It's nice to find people who understand what that's like."

"You're lonely," I realized. "That's why you're not letting her go."

"I was lonely," said the Castle. "For a long, long time I was terribly, humanly lonely. Then she came, and everything changed."

"Things have to change again now."

"I know."

"You won't be alone, though," I reassured it. "Hector will be here. He's a part of Esperida. That's why you grant all of his wishes, no? And... and I will be here, too."

The accusation came like thunder. "You left us before."

"I will not leave you again," I promised.

“I do not take prisoners, prophet girl.”

“I will not stay out of obligation—”

“Then why? To prove yourself worthy of owning me?”

I sucked in a breath, summoning my courage. “Living things cannot be owned. I do not own the wildflower when I pluck it from the soil. I do not own the wave when I swim in the sea. I do not own you when I walk through your halls. These are gifts, and I can only love them. I love this place. I love you . And I love Hector.” My voice broke, broke like my heart did at the faintest possibility of losing him tonight. I could not let it happen. I would not let it. “I haven’t told him yet. I need to tell him now.”

A path of black and white marble lit up next to me. The gleaming squares were surrounded by mirrors of different shapes and sizes. Some were large and straight as walls, others were curving overhead, enclosing the checkered trail until it seized before a larger, gold-framed mirror, the oval glass rippling with water.

“Then go,” urged the Castle. “Tell him. Save him.”

“Will you let Esperida go? Will you be with me now? I might need your help.”

“You don’t need me, prophet girl. You can win this battle on your own.”

I drew closer, close enough to see the star inside the heart of the Castle, pulsing with a life of its own. “You’re my friend,” I whispered to it like releasing a secret wish out into the universe. “I don’t have to need you to want you to be by my side.”

The star, the heart, the Castle, all the things it was and all the things it would be, broke out beaming, and as the radiance forced my eyes shut, my other eyes showed me what was going to happen if I didn’t go against destiny now.



“I should check on her,” Hector was saying, striding past the flush table of the dining room where they were all gathered, their candlelit faces glowing with impatience.

Arawn caught Hector’s wrist. “We all know how much you love your wife, Aventine, but for the love of the sky, can we get this over with?”

A twinge of panic pulled me out of the vision. I staggered to keep my balance, my chest shaking. “We have to hurry.”

The Castle cast its light down the checkered path, dazzling the marble. “This mirror will lead you straight to the dining room. I will stall them as much as I can. But you have to be the one to reveal this truth.”

“Why me?”

“Because this is not my story, Dorothea Valentia. It is yours,” said the Castle. “And you should never let other people write your story.”

I nodded firmly, making a silent vow both to the Castle and to myself. Then I gathered my skirts and rushed toward the mirror, checking over my shoulder for Esperida.

She reappeared beside me with a bright flare. “Please,” she implored, “tell Hector I’m sorry. Tell him that had I known I’d have him, I would have never taken the Vow. I would have never left him alone. Back then, Eron and I were so happy we were terrified to speak the word tomorrow, much less imagine the family and friends we would make along the way. And he was so fragile, so helpless. I’ve seen humans die from a cold. I wanted to bind myself to him. To be with him forever. I could not see the selfishness of it then. ”

“Esperida,” I breathed, recalling all the times Hector had pulled me out of cold drafts

and grumbled to me about eating properly and lost his mind over the silliest scrapes—over a drop of poison. “Hector knows.”

“Tell him anyway,” she said, then with another flash of light spurred me forward. “Go. Go to him. Don’t worry about me.”

“Will I see you again?”

Her lips thinned, her eyes drifting downward. She didn’t have to say it. I knew the answer already. The Castle would let her go, and she would finally be with Eron, and I would never see Esperida Aventine again.

My eyes stung with phantom tears. “Goodbye,” I whispered.

She hugged me to her chest one final time. “Let’s not say goodbye. Promise to find me again. In another life.”

I laughed sadly against her shoulder. “I promise.”

I stayed to watch Esperida drift back toward the Castle’s heart, both of them glowing with the same silver fire until they became interchangeable. Until they became one.

Then I ran. I ran as fast as my body was able, grabbing my fate with my own two hands, ripping and pulling and molding the path before me. I stumbled but did not falter. I feared but did not stop. It gave me strength to know that even my mistakes were mine and mine alone. I was agency embodied. I was my own god of fortune. I was my own destiny.

Hector

The Castle had gone mad. Utterly, inexplicably mad.

One moment we were all standing around the table, listening to Arawn explain how Thea was not feeling very well, and the next we were being restrained. The ceiling cracked open, and great, thick vines swooped down and seized us all in place, and the more we fought, the larger and fiercer they grew, thorns poking out of their dark green flesh. My sword, faithful as a soldier, tried cutting through the rapidly increasing brambles, but as swift as the blade's brandishes were, they were no match for the Castle's star-fast magic.

Everyone was screaming and thrashing, demanding from me to explain what in the world was going on. But I had no answer. I couldn't even speak. I could only stare at the grand, gold-framed mirror on the other side of the room. Its rippling waters glowed from the inside, reflecting an eerie white light that grew darker as it magnified.

Then the mirror burst open, water splashing everywhere. Thea fell headlong into the room, drenched to the bone and shaking all over. Her appearance was as saturated as a flame bobbing up in absolute darkness, yet I could only see the trail of indigo bruises circling her throat. Everything inside me twisted and, at the same time, stood perfectly still.

I thought I screamed her name, but the crowd roar in my ears was too loud and my heart too erratic to be certain of anything other than my own sick astonishment.

She reeled past the clawing brambles, and only when she reached the table, almost crashing to her knees before it, did the vines evaporate, misting into thin air. Her hand jutted out and tipped the ceremonial chalice over, dark red wine flooding the linen and trickling down the edge of the table like spilled blood.

“Juniper,” she gasped, tears rolling down her cheeks. “It’s juniper.”

I lunged for her, but Arawn— Arawn —was closer. He sprang forward with bloodshot eyes and curled lips and tore at her throat. Her scream lasted less than a second, but I knew I would hear it ringing in my ears till my very last day.

Consumed by bewildered rage, I ripped Arawn off her, the cleaving sound of his arm reverberating in the room. I wanted to do worse. I wanted to tear through him until there was no part of him unbroken. But Thea was falling, and in that moment, I could only see her. I caught her just before she hit the floor, cradling her head in one hand and her waist with the other. A thin stream of blood glided down her throat, staining red the pearls of her bodice. But her expression was solid, almost relieved when our eyes met. “It’s only a scratch. I’m fine,” she croaked, then wrapped her arms around my neck, yielding her body to mine.

For a second, no one spoke. No one even moved. Then Dain dashed behind Arawn, swift as a shadow. There was a fierce crack and a spatter of blood. The split pupils of Arawn’s eyes rolled upward, fading into white. Then he fell to the floor, more blood gushing from the back of his head and crawling across the carpet.

I don’t understand , I thought, my heart sinking empty.

Hector

The sun still rose that morning, brilliant and uncaring for our small mortal torments, and the Castle was kind enough to draw all the curtains shut without my command.

Tieran, after having to throw me out of my own bedroom so he could examine and bandage Thea's throat without my constant intervention, was still upstairs tending to her while the others paced outside, nervous but relieved, thinking that this madness was over. But this madness was far from over, for I was staring at its face.

Roan and Dain were guarding each of the two exits of the destroyed dining room, but Arawn, standing in the middle, was only looking at me, his eyes red-rimmed and enormous. I felt numb under the weight of their fury as I set a cup of blood at the table closest to him. The darkness of his actions was still trapped behind the veil of my denial. I could not believe the things he'd done, the things he'd meant to do. I did not want to.

"Drink," I rasped, a million how-could-yous sawing the back of my throat.

Arawn let out a bitter laugh. "You want me to feed? Aren't you going to kill me, sovereign?"

I should kill him. For the crimes he'd committed and attempted to commit against vampirekind, the punishment could only be death. If he were anyone else, I would have done it without a second thought. Slowly and painfully too. I would have made an example out of him for putting his hands on Thea alone.

But he was not anyone else. He was Arawn. He was the boy I grew up calling a friend. And there was not enough justice I could deal in this world to exonerate me of my own guilt for all the things I didn't do to help him when he needed me the most.

I'd been so blind, so selfish.

Now I was clinging to slivers of foolish hope.

"You will feed," I told him, my voice raw from all the screams I didn't let out. "And we will talk. And if you don't want to talk to me, Tieran knows a physician in Elora who specializes in—"

"Madness?" said Arawn mockingly.

"We all know you're not mad, Arawn. Your actions have been nothing but lucid and calculated. This isn't insanity. It isn't even grief. This is an obsessive ideation. Vampires have them when they don't feed—"

Suddenly, he surged forward, a wraith in full speed, only for Dain to tear through the room, wedge himself between us, and shove him back with a jut of his arm.

Arawn's physical state had fallen into such dissolution that this was all it took to make him topple on the floor. "I am not the obsessed one," he roared. "You are." Dragging himself to the cup I'd brought him, he shattered it under his bare hand. "I will not feed. I will not put another drop of this sickness in my body." I saw the flesh of his palm leaping open to take the glass shards in. The cuts seeped for a long time before his skin began its knitting. Then he pushed the shards deeper, slitting himself anew. "I will be free."

I cannot bear this anymore, I thought to myself as the scent of his blood, frail and decaying, blanketed the room. Loss after loss after loss. When will it be enough?

When I have nothing? When I have no one? When I don't recognize what's left of me anymore?

But then I thought of Thea and how she always persevered through the darkest of times. I thought of the Castle that, even in its most devastated state, didn't fail to fill our lives with wonder and magic. And I thought of my parents, whose love had been invariably tender and infinitely pure not in spite of who they were but because of it.

I didn't want to let my parents' story become an exception, an impossibility in a cruel, fickle world. I wanted my life to be filled with love, and I wanted to share it with as many people as possible.

I told myself I was doing this out of love now. But gods knew there was nothing lovely about it.

"Arawn," I said with more patience than I knew I had in me, "if I free you, will you come with me to Elora? It doesn't matter how long it will take. I will be there. I will not fail you."

A heart-rending darkness glazed over Arawn's face. His gaze grew bleary, his mouth slack. "It felt so good to kill her," he sighed in a sort of ecstasy. "Her blood. Her agony. She was life itself, and I drank her. I've never felt such clarity before. I've never seen myself clearer. When you finally tear through Thea's throat, I hope it feels just as wonderful."

"You fucking bastard," Roan snarled, reeling forward, but Dain grabbed him around the shoulders before he could tear through Arawn's throat. I didn't think I would ever see Dain Valkhar wait for my command. But here he was, looking at me with expectation in his eyes. What do we do now? What do we do with him?

Perhaps Arawn wanted me to kill him. Perhaps he wanted to put an end to this as

much as I did. I could try to convince myself it was his hunger talking, that he didn't mean any of it, but I knew the truth. We all did.

This was not a vampire's hunger.

This was a vampire's bloodlust.

I started for the door, not wanting to let my rage get the best of me and repeat the mistake I'd made with the Ravenors. I'll talk to Thea first, I thought, my heart heavy as stone. Together we can decide what the best course of action is.

I was almost out of the room when Arawn's whisper crawled through the air the way a faded memory crawls into the forefront of your mind when you least expect it. "Nothing can redeem me, Hector. Not even you."

Then there was a sound. A swift, swishing noise like fabric brushing against wood. Roan and Dain hissed, rushing to escape the room as it leaked sunlight.

Sunlight.

Golden. Dazzling. Relentless.

I veered to find Arawn standing before the giant window, his body radiant, bathed in morning light for the first time in his life. "Is that all?" He laughed quietly, and as he turned to look at me, his face half-gone in black dust, he was no longer this deranged, bloodthirsty murderer who sought vengeance on the entire vampire kind. He was my friend again. He was just... Arawn. "I really thought the fucker would be more glorious."

I'd heard stories of vampires going up in flames at the first rays of the sun, stories that claim the goddess's curse lay in the light itself, which revealed the true nature of



our kind: creatures of the night.

In the end, it was no demonic fire that took him. Everything he was, everything he could have been, transformed into a pile of black and white dust.

The world stopped. Sound. Shape. Color. It all stopped. There were only Arawn's sunlit ashes on the floor. And for a long, long time, that was the only thing I knew.

Thea

The ceremony was brief, wordless, and somber as a funeral. There were no speeches, no plans for the future, no wishes of prosperity for the new sovereign of the vampire world. There was only silence.

The whole event was already lost in the labyrinth of my memories. Their tall bodies and gemstone faces, their slit wrists, the blood in the bronze chalice, the sound of Hector's throat swallowing, taking their essence into his body—all seemed like a scene I'd read in a book rather than something I'd lived. Had I really stood amongst these creatures? Had I really smelled the ripeness of their blood in the air?

The Valkhars left the Castle immediately after they gave Hector their oath, their exit as unremarkable and defeated as daunting and blustering had been their entrance. Then the Ravenors followed. Roan promised to visit us as soon as Tieran recovered. Tieran gave me a salve for my throat and apologized for the way he spoke to me that day. Dahlia and Alexandria asked if they could write to me sometime, and Collette and Espen pulled me aside and expressed their eternal gratitude for saving all of their lives.

I didn't feel like a savior. I felt shattered into a million pieces, left here in the Castle with only the shell of the man I loved.

Days came and passed in a sepulchral daze. Hector hardly ate, rarely spoke, and almost never came to bed. Some nights, when I couldn't sleep either, I would find him in his study, sitting in his old leather armchair that faced the window. He would stare out into the cold black void, expressionless and motionless as the dead, and

when I would call his name, he would only mutter , “Go to bed, Thea,” without ever turning to meet my gaze.

His sadness paralyzed me. I didn’t know what else to do but stay here by his side as I, too, worked through my grief. The sky arched anew a dozen times above us, but in my mind I was still stuck in that ruined room with its vine manacles and spilled juniper, watching Arawn’s eyes rolling white.

I could be doing something as mundane as reading a book or brewing my breakfast tea, and suddenly this pressure would build deep in my chest, and I would have to crouch down, gasping, and cup my knees until the Castle would flicker a light or send a cool breeze, and I would be able to breathe again. I knew it was trying to remind me that it was still here, its profound wounds finally healing, and that if something as ancient and unyielding as the Castle could learn to move forward, then so could I.

Every day I burned the frayed edges of my seams so I would not unravel. But whenever my eyes met with Hector’s, I was filled with despair all over again.

He looked so... haunted. Permanently, irreversibly haunted.

I don’t think he wanted to take revenge on vampire kind, was the first thing he said to me after we were left alone. I think he wanted to take revenge on himself.

I was starting to fear that Hector was taking revenge on himself too for not being able to help Arawn. Until, one day, one unremarkable, ordinary day, life did what life did best. It moved on.

It was a cold, gloomy morning, the unrelieved horizon stretching infinitely over the Castle. I was sitting at the dressing table, getting myself ready for the day, when Hector came in to wash and dress. As he grabbed his boots, I asked him if he was going hunting, and he surprised me by revealing that he had a standing appointment

with his solicitor in the city.

“I won’t be long,” he reassured me in that calm, soft-spoken tone he sometimes used when his mind was not entirely devoted to the conversation. “I should be back by dinner.”

“Shall I come with you?” I asked anxiously, watching him pull on his long, black coat.

“Only if you wish to see the city. I’m afraid the meeting with Rothbard will be horribly dull to you. I will stop by the post office on my way back, though. Your parents must be worried sick by now.” He turned briskly as if to say goodbye, but upon meeting my eyes, he paused, brows knitting. “Are you okay, Thea?”

My heart was an anchor at my feet. I wanted to stand up and go to him, but the distance seemed immeasurable. “I don’t know, Hector. Are we okay?”

He lowered his head, the blades of his cheekbones paling. “I’ve been terrible to you, I know. I can only hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me.”

I was empty of words. Each second seemed to pass with an eternal pause. Rain started drumming against the windowpane. I could hear the sound of each fat drop as if it were the blood in my veins. “I don’t want to lose you again,” I whispered.

Sunburst eyes shot up and met mine. I blinked and found him kneeling on the floor before me, his arms wrapping around my bent knees, his face pressing into the folds of my skirt. It pained me to see him like this, but I also felt relief just for breathing so close to him.

“You won’t lose me,” he said, his shoulders shaking as if his whole body was fighting back tears. “There is no force but Death that can take me away from you.

And even him I promise to fight.”

Tremulously, I threaded my fingers through his hair. “I feel so far away from you.”

His head lifted. Tears flooded his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. In ten years, I’d never seen him cry like that. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, his voice like shattered glass. “You don’t know how sorry I am. I feel like I’m trying to fight a war I’ve already lost.”

I didn’t think he was apologizing to me anymore, and that was what hurt me the most—hurt me in channels of my heart that had remained intact even at the darkest of times. I had to watch him suffer and dwindle away day after day for something that had been completely out of his control.

“This life,” I ventured hesitantly, “we’re living it for the first time too. We’re bound not to understand everything, not to see everything.”

He was inconsolable. “I miss them so much, Thea,” he sobbed. “And Arawn... He was in so much pain, and I didn’t do anything... It was right in front of me, and I...”

Heart shattering, I stumbled in corners of my mind, searching for the words that could explain the individual loneliness that separated one living creature from another, which was a lot like sunlight splashed across a bright yellow expanse. Something that, to everyone watching from afar, was undetectable. A shadow barely there.

“Hector,” I said gently, “it is impossible to know the depth of someone’s sadness unless they wish to share it with you. And even then it’s hard work. Most times we fail to understand our own and end up hurting the people we love the most because of it.”

When his tears dried and his breath slowed, he leaned in, cupped my cheek, and

pressed a kiss upon my lips, catching me in the soft warmth of his mouth. “Thea,” he exhaled. “I promise to always share my sadness with you.”

The feeling in my chest was bittersweet. A hopeful kind of melancholy. I closed my eyes, touched my forehead to his, and vowed, “I promise to always share my sadness with you.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“Saving my life. In every way a life can be saved.”

“You saved my life too, you know,” I said.

He sighed resignedly. “I’m pretty sure I’ve only ever brought you trouble.”

“Yes, but I became stronger for it.”

We were not absolved of grief. We were not giddy with happiness or drunk with love. But we were together. And right now that was more than enough.

Thea

As promised, Hector returned an hour before dinner. Without so much as a word, he sailed up to his study and spent a minute or so shuffling through the drawers of his desk while I lingered by the door, curious, confused, and a little frustrated.

“So what was the meeting about?” I asked.

At last, he bent over his desk and signed at the bottom of a mysterious document. His hands were steady, full of conviction as he folded the paper down the middle and slipped it inside an envelope. Then, with a short exhale, he leaned against the edge of the desk and finally met my gaze.

“I think we should move,” he announced.

My bewilderment peaked. “The Castle?”

“Ourselves. To Thaloria. So you can finish your studies, and I can fix whatever damage Arawn has done there. I’ll assume his duties and appoint someone new Lord of Lumia. Roan, most likely. He and Tieran certainly deserve the honor.” He glanced over his shoulder at the still unsealed envelope atop his desk. “A property I’ve wished to acquire in the past has become available.”

“A property,” I echoed, unsurpassably dumbfounded.

“A cottage,” he clarified. “Like the one we always talked about. It only has three bedrooms, but the garden is beautiful, and it is a short hour from the Academy. A

mere minute if I were to get you there.”

I felt my insides clutch in dismay as I began to understand what he was actually saying. “But the Castle...”

“I think it’s time the Castle became something else.”

“Hector,” I sighed, stumbling into the room, “I know you’re in pain, I’m in pain too, but we cannot abandon the Castle.”

Hector, to my further astonishment, laughed . I’d almost forgotten the sound of it. Rich and low and a little rough, like the rustle of autumn leaves.

“Of course we won’t abandon it.” Closing the distance, he cupped my face with his palms. “The Castle will always, always be with us, wherever that might be. But the Castle is also a sacred space. A place of knowledge, of magic and wisdom, and I think we should share that with the world. It taught my mother everything she needed to learn. It showed her a world of infinite possibility. And it can do that for others too. Not just creatures of the night but anyone who feels just as alone and lost as she felt when she found it.”

Perhaps it was the beauty of his vision, the hopefulness of his smile, or his warm fingers tracing gentle lines over my cheeks, but suddenly, all of my worries dissolved like mist in the sun. I felt polished, green as new grass. To this day, I still believe having a purpose is one of the greatest blessings of life.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, yearning for his closeness. “A school.”

“A sanctuary.”

“You will teach, like you’ve always wanted.”



“I will... assist. When my assistance is required.”

“Perhaps the Queen will make me one of her emissaries.”

“Emissary?” Hector challenged. “With your magical talent, you can become the most fearsome and sought-after seer in the history of the Asteria Realm. Temples will be raised in your honor. I will make sure of it.”

I chuckled, holding the starry image of the Castle’s heart in my mind. I pictured it pulsing wildly, reshaping and reforming itself. “And the Castle will never be alone again.”

Hector’s smile was brighter than my hope. “Exactly.”

I got on my toes, dangling my lips a breath from his. “I can’t believe you arranged all of this behind my back. I don’t know if I ought to be impressed or mad at you.”

He shook his head. “I just didn’t want to overwhelm you. I’ve been so absent these past few weeks...”

“You were grieving. You needed time.”

“You were grieving too, and I made you worry, and I hate myself for it. From now on, I’ll take care of everything, okay?” he said, pressing a tiny kiss at the tip of my nose.

I let my fingers wander up the valley of his back until I was met with resistance, my wristlet tangling on one of the two buttons that cinched the waist of his coat. It surprised me. I’d grown so used to wearing it, I had stopped feeling its weight.

As I drew back, my eyes slipped to Hector’s wrist. His coat sleeves were set perfectly

at the top of his hands, so I couldn't see if he was still wearing his.

"I should probably take it off now," I murmured, running a finger along the cool, glossy band and feeling stupidly disheartened at the thought of being separated from it.

Hector hooked two fingers under my chin, tilting up my head. He had that look on his face. That dark, sleepy-eyed look he always had when he was on the cusp of kissing me. "Don't take it off," he whispered, lowering his mouth to my jaw. My heart exploded as I waited for the sweet shock of his lips on mine. "In fact, it's the only thing I don't want you to take off."

He whirled us around, and the backs of my thighs pressed against the edge of the desk, his hands roaming over my body with the same urgency and sparkle of discovery as the first time we touched. Every squeeze, every trace, every tug sent a new pang of want through me, making my fingers shake as they tore over his coat. I wanted nothing between us. No clothes. No space. Not even air. Except for the one he breathed into me as he caught my lips with his. Quick, messy kisses dotted over my mouth, my jaw, my throat, all while his hands worked through the layers of my clothes until I felt the living warmth of the room dancing across my bare shoulders.

He let my dress fall down my hips but did not relieve me of my underclothes. Instead, he pressed closer, molding his body to mine, his fingers in my hair keeping my neck wide open. His kisses fell over me like stars, hot and dazzling.

When he found the hem of my chemise, he did not lift it up but let his hand slip under to trace the edge of my undergarment. For a few tantalizing moments, the sensation of the silky fabric gliding down my damp thighs was the only thing I knew. I was still. Breathless. Brimmed with anticipation. Then the liquid fire of his touch knocked me off balance. We fell back against the desk. He stepped between my parted knees, bracing his palms on the wooden surface around my thighs.

“Do you want to slow down?” he asked, breathing hard in that tiny sliver of space from his mouth to mine.

My legs inched up the sides of his hips and nudged him closer so I could feel the heaviness of his hardness against the melting softness of my body. “Not unless you want to.”

He nearly laughed. “If you only knew how much I want this. How much I need you.” His mouth descended over the base of my throat, and his fangs scraped my skin, then soothed it over with the slow lapping of his tongue. “Only when I’m with you do I recognize myself. Only when you touch me do I no longer wonder where I belong. I know I’m yours and yours alone.”

Moon-struck, I cupped his face and echoed, “Yours and yours alone.”

The words were cast like a spell—a spell that had him instantly undone, lifting me up in his arms and dashing out of the room. The world around us spun into a whirlwind of colors before he put me down on my feet again, my windblown chemise swishing around my ankles.

The bedroom was warm and dark save for the few streaks of moonlight shining through the window. It was a spring moon. Full and pink. I would never forget it.

When my eyes darted to the bed, the most unexpected prickle of fear mixed with my desire. Not of him, but of the moment itself. We waited so long for this. Suddenly, I was terrified to ruin it.

“Now?” I asked, anxious and at the same time shaking with eagerness.

Hector began unlacing the collar of his shirt, and as his eyes held mine, my desire grew stronger than my apprehension. I realized how silly it was to be afraid of

making love to him. He and I made love every time our eyes touched.

“Now would be preferable,” he said, letting the garment fall to the floor, “but as always, I’m open to your schedule.”

Emboldened, I went to help him with his trousers. “Such an obliging friend you are, Lord Aventine.”

He wound an arm around my waist, and I went spinning, my back colliding with his chest. I let my head fall against the curve of his shoulder and felt his fingers dance between my thighs. “Do you get this wet for all of your friends, Lady Aventine?”

“You’re special,” I sighed. “Despite your foul mouth.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he drawled. “Please, allow me to put my mouth to better use.”

His hands dipped low on my waist, and my feet were in the air again. He carried me to the bed, then stripped out of the last of his clothes. I waited for him, open like a dayflower in the sun, but he hesitated by the bedpost as if he too was harboring a sprout of nervousness.

Standing there, fully undressed, he looked ethereal, verging on divine. The silver beams illuminated his body alone—the crescents of his arms, the sculpted valley of his chest and abdomen, the base of his hardness. The rest was shadow. The only thing I could make of his face was the otherworldly gleam of his eyes, watching me, wanting me with the passion of a god, something ancient and immortal. Something that could remain in this state of burning worship forever.

He climbed onto the bed with his unmatched grace, bringing his body over mine. His fingers skimmed my ankles, taking the hem of my chemise with them. Up my calves, my knees, my damp thighs. Up my waist and over my head until we both lay the

same. Naked, moonlit, and yielding with desire.

He braced one hand on the bed next to my head, and with the other took mine and guided it to his chest. “I think my heart is going to break,” he murmured.

Breathless, I mirrored the motion, nudging his hand to my galloping breastbone. “I know what you mean.”

His fingers escaped mine, restless, curious. He traced every line and curve of my breasts only to rediscover them with his mouth a moment later. He kissed me low, and lower, and at the first hot sweep of his tongue between my thighs, I was lost. I was sensation only. Wet. Taut. Ecstatic. Something tightened and expanded inside me. Something gathered and built.

“Please,” I whimpered.

With a flick of his tongue, he glanced up. “Please what?”

“More.”

“More of this? Or more of me?”

“You.”

He hummed against my skin in an almost thoughtful manner. My eyes opened, searching for him, but he was a mere shadow in the dim. “I want you to say it,” he said. I felt his unsteady breath against my skin as he uttered these words. I felt the longing in them. I felt everything he felt.

“I want you,” I breathed out. “Always. Forever.”

He crawled over me, peppering my skin with kisses along the way, until his body covered mine completely. Finally, his hands fell on either side of my face. I could see him perfectly now. The way the moonlight fitted the line of his cheek. The way his eyes had grown fully black with only the tiniest glimpses of gold peering through the darkness.

The muscles of his abdomen pulled taut as my hands slid down his sides. I wrapped my fingers around him and felt him stir, ripen. His skin was petal-soft, his eyelids were silver, his scent like rain and thunder. I stroked him over and over until I found the exact rhythm he liked. Then I just watched his pleasure, his breath quickening, his lips parting for a hoarse cry. He shifted his hips, pressing himself further into my palm. I shuddered, imagining it was me he was thrusting into, and as though he read my mind, he replaced my hand with his and stroked himself against me, spreading my wetness up and down his length.

We went on like this, making each other half-insane until the wait became unbearable. Before we knew it, half of him disappeared inside me. My breath hitched at the sudden fullness, but the rest of me melted down to nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Hector panted, shaking as he tried to keep himself still. “I meant to ask—”

“Don’t stop,” I sighed, locking my ankles behind his back.

A low, inarticulate sound leapt from him. I took it in my body with the same ease I’d taken him. “Yes?”

“Yes.”

He took hold of my thighs and wielded them open and down, down until my knees touched the mattress. The depth of our connection shifted from pleasurable to divine.

That first thrust, that moment of one part intimacy and one part surrender, was a thing of destiny. I knew he did not believe in such things, but gods, there had to be something fateful about the way our bodies connected.

“Hector,” I cried, my eyes falling shut.

We stayed like this for a moment, wonderfully intertwined, our bodies aching with love, our souls a single existence within the tiny universe of the Castle.

“Thea,” he rasped. “Look at us.”

I did. First at us, then at him.

He was in ecstasy. Skin flushed. Mouth open. A droplet of sweat trickling down his brow bone. “Feels good?”

“Good is not a good enough word for this,” I sighed as I pulled my body up so our lips could touch. “But I want...”

“Tell me,” he urged when I lost my breath, his mouth moving right up against mine. “Ask me anything.”

“Tonight, call me Lady Aventine.”

I felt what these words did to him. I felt the last of his restraint slipping. “Lady Aventine,” he whispered as he began to move in earnest. My vision blurred, the cohesion between thought and stimulation tilting. Each hard thrust was like a promise. Lady Aventine. Lady Aventine.

His dark eyes burned suns in my heart. I was filled with light and warmth and pleasure. And in that moment, I knew I would never run away from him again. That

for the rest of my life, I would only ever run to him.

It was less of a release than an eruptive second of connection, for it happened at the exact same moment, at the exact same outcry and breath and chant of each other's names. For a while I only soared, luxuriating in the warm safety of his arms, the sweet pressure of our entangled limbs, until I found my voice again, "Hector?"

He unburied his face from the crook of my neck and gazed down at me in an amorous, acquiescent way. "Yes?"

I tried shifting beneath him, but he was as immovable as a mountain. And still inside me. Still wanting me. "You're hard."

"I'm not done with you," he said, his lips rediscovering the path from my earlobe to my clavicle. "Far from it."

My body felt tender, rose-petal thin. Still, I arched into his mouth. "But didn't you just... finish?"

His fangs dragged over my throat as if to remind me that he was no ordinary man. "I know no end to desiring you, Dorothea," he said, and want rose in my blood once more. "But if you wish me to stop—"

"I said no such thing," I protested, feeling myself clench around him, pulling him deeper.

In a flash of movement, he flipped me onto my stomach. I gasped into the pillow as he lowered his body to mine. The pressure of his chest against my back was the most wonderful weight I'd felt in my life. I never wanted to be relieved by it.

Slowly, he brushed the mass of my curls to the side, then guided my arms up, letting



them stretch over my head and under the pillows until my fingers touched the intricate carvings of the headboard. “Hold on to this,” he hummed, dragging tingles along my spine, first with his fingers, then with his lips. I heard his breath turn labored as his mouth found the nape of my neck, his kisses growing desperate.

I know no end to desiring you, Dorothea. He’d ruined me with these words. Now, all I could think about was the enormity of his desire. How much I wanted to explore it. How much I wanted to challenge it.

“Do you want to bite me?” I asked.

A rough sound rumbled deep in his throat. I felt his fangs drawing nearer. “Do you want me to bite you?”

I recalled what it’d felt like to have that single drop of venom in my body. How it had trickled through my veins and grown into an ocean of the most ineffable euphoria. I couldn’t help but wonder how it would feel to have both him and his venom inside me at the same time.

“Will you draw blood?” I asked.

Hector shifted his weight so we could look at each other. “I will never drink from you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want you to always know that I love you for you and not your blood.”

We were still for a moment, basking in that living silence. I wondered if in his mind he could only see me now, the way I could only see him.

“You know I love you too, right?” I said.

I heard the smile in his voice before his lips formed it. “I know. But it’s nice to hear it every now and then.”

He slipped over me again, parting my thighs with his knees before angling his hips in a way that allowed me to feel the full weight of his hardness as it slipped back inside me.

My breath split into a moan, my fingers curling into the carvings of the headboard. He kept me pinned under him for a torturously long moment without doing anything at all but feeling me feel him. “I will ask you again,” he rasped. His hand threaded through my hair and pulled back my head, making me moan from the sudden shock of pleasure. “Do you want me to bite you?”

“Yes,” I relented. “Please. Yes.”

I had the urge to bury my face in the pillows, to hide the vastness of my desire from him, but his fingers were firm on the underside of my jaw. He bent me further back until my neck was completely open to him. “Close your eyes,” he whispered. “Let go. I got you.”

Thrill and a comfortable sense of surrender buzzed through me. I felt safe and reassured as his mouth clamped down on that tenderest spot. The prickle of his fangs was swift, but the influence of his venom was swifter, sparkling like magic in my blood.

I could only recall one other moment of my life in which I’d felt such effortless, wondrous abandon. I was twelve years old and lost in an enchanted forest, but I was not afraid, for a girl lost in the woods was a feral, fearsome creature. I wandered around for a while until I stumbled upon a shrub of red roses. How magnificent they

were in size and color amid the dark witchery of the changed autumn trees. I could not resist them. I bent over the shrub and tried to pluck one out only for the thorns to clutch my cloak and sting my unprotected hands. I was trapped and started to panic until a boy appeared—pale, strange, pretty as a star. He grumbled something about my carelessness, but I did not listen. Above, the clouds released the sun, and the forest was bathed in the most ethereal yellow light. Everything sparkled. Everything opened. My heart was filled with uncanny joy for how beautiful the world was, how simple and magical and unexpected.

Only the sun had ever come this close to bringing me such bliss. Only the sun.

Thea

The sky had grown purple with dawn when I decided that I could not delay this any longer. I had to tell him, and I had to tell him now before he returned to the bed and all of my thoughts scattered again.

I gathered the sheets around my naked body, stretching my limbs after hours of learning and relearning his form. Our lovemaking was a lot like our conversations, effortless and meandering. Even in my own mind it was impossible to articulate the ease with which we'd done the most obscene things to each other.

Hector was standing over the table by the window, indulging in a cup of warmed blood. A tray with a mouthwatering array of food had materialized by the fireside, where the huge armchair was draped in blankets and pillows. The whole room smelled of butter, fresh bread, and creamy milk tea. And him.

"Hector?" I ventured warily. "I must tell you something. Something that might upset you."

He grimaced, but there was humor in it. "Well, this is exactly what every man wants to hear after what we've just done."

"This isn't about—"

"I mean, you could have at least waited for the sun to rise—"

"Will you stop for a moment—"

“To be discarded in the same night as—”

“Hector!” I grumbled, throwing my hands up in the air.

The sheet fell away, exposing my breasts, and Hector’s mischievous little smirk turned triumphant. “You were saying?”

I glared at him. “Stop this. And come here. Right now.”

“Yes, please, summon me like a pet. I don’t mind at all,” he drawled as he settled down next to me.

I let out a groan, my head dropping on the wall of his chest. “Why are you being so disagreeable this early in the morning?”

He curled a hand at the nape of my neck, guiding my eyes back to him. “I’m just really happy. I didn’t think I’d feel like this again.”

“Hmm,” I cooed pleasantly. “While on the subject, your mother is haunting the Castle.”

Poor man almost fell off the bed. “What?”

My nod was as rueful as ghastly was my amusement. “Yes, you see, I went to the heart of the Castle—and no, you do not possess the magical arsenal to do so yourself—and discovered that your mother has been haunting us for quite some time now. The Castle refused to free her soul, which I’m afraid is literally and mystically bound to it. Although I do believe it released her right before I came out of the mirror.”

Hector’s complexion turned from starlit-pale to nausea-green. “Well, I certainly hope

so considering what we've just done."

I burst out laughing as he grabbed the sheet in a panic and tried to cover my chest with it. "This isn't funny. I don't want my mother seeing this."

"I'm sure that if she were still here, she would have looked the other way," I consoled.

Hector shook his head furiously, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Did she say anything at least?"

"She said that if she knew that she was going to have you, she wouldn't have taken the Vow."

For a moment, Hector was seized by that stillness that was his alone. The stillness of old, unwavering things, of mountains and sea rocks. Then a whisper, "I know."

"That's what I told her too."

Slowly, like the gloomy sunrise outside, the smile returned to his face. He wound his arms around my waist and pulled me to him until I was straddling his hips with my thighs and our lips were only a grain of sand apart. I loved the way our limbs slid against each other, finding all the paths we had already explored but still felt new.

"So you can see ghosts now," he prodded, watching me through dark, half-lidded eyes.

"If the ghosts want me to see them," I guessed, stifling a sigh as his mouth landed on the curve of my shoulder. "I'm hoping my professors at the Academy will be able to enlighten me on the subject. Perhaps I will have to take a few necromancy courses." His fangs scraped my neck, and I chuckled at the canopy. "Or perhaps you can teach

me.”

He pulled back, one brow raised. “Me?”

“Since you’re such an experienced neck-romancer.”

Hector rolled his eyes, muttering wryly under his breath, “Neck-romancer jokes. Very original. And not terrifying at all.”

I shot him a haughty little look. “Is the vampire sovereign scared of ghosts?”

“I’m scared that ghosts might be haunting my wife,” he grumbled good-naturedly, but as soon as he registered what he said, his whole body stiffened. I, on the other hand, was nearly shimmering and floating through the ceiling with happiness. “Sorry. I know we’re not really—”

“We should be,” I blurted out.

His brows shot up. “We should?”

“Not right away, though,” I clarified. “We have to discuss the matter of your immortality first.”

“You know very well that I have no desire to live forever. I’ve been drinking the potion ever since I turned twenty. I will age as you.”

“I also have to concentrate on my studies.”

Hector squinted at me, reading me like an open book. “You’re just afraid to tell your parents, aren’t you?”

I scowled at him. “You know me too damned well.”

Smirking, he pinched my lower lip between two fingers. “What a foul mouth you have, Lady Aventine,” he teased as I’d done earlier today. Or had it been yesterday? Time always seemed to bend in new ways in his presence.

“Well,” I said, pushing at his chest until he was lying back on the bed. He shivered as I drew back all the covers so I could watch him rise with desire. I bent, my hair cascading over him, ebony on granite. Then I bent even lower and painted kisses down his stomach. “Allow me to put it to better use.”

And, oh, I did.



Hector

For the life of me, I could not understand where the Dreaming Palace had gotten its name from, for there was nothing dreamy, sleepy, or remotely relaxing about it.

It was magical, certainly—this was the Faraway North, after all—but unlike the Castle with its slow rhythms and fragments of the universe, the Palace's magic was a game of optics, of elaborate tricks and phantasmagoric illusions.

The rooms were ever-changing, bursting out into new scenery when you least expected it. Outside, ivied pavilions emerged in the hearts of elaborate hedge mazes, and silver fountains ran with waters the color of dittany. Everything and everyone was restless and excited, like a hive of bees buzzing over one thing or another, which was partly why I was suffering from my first-ever headache. The other half of the blame lay with the heir to this extravagant wonderland. Apollo Zayra of Thaloria.

The man would not stop questioning me about everything I was, everything I did, everything I intended to do in the near and distant future, and, gods give me patience, my intentions for Thea.

As a matter of fact, I'd been given less grief from Thea's father, and he was already the king of disdainful side glances and thinly veiled insults.

But at least Thea was happy.

She'd been practically beaming with joy ever since the Castle brought us North. Here, in the beautiful, wonderstruck rooms of the Palace, surrounded by endless

merriment and thrill, she was in her true element. I was confident now that moving to Thalloria had been the right choice for us.

Nepheli was just as Thea had described. Clever-eyed, soft-mouthed, charmingly observant. She was also infinitely loving towards Thea, and for that alone I liked her the best. Her choice of husband could have been a little better, but, oh well, nobody was perfect.

“You have to admit, it is a bit strange to wear the wristlet when you haven’t even proposed to the girl,” Apollo went on and on and on .

The girls had seated us on a bench at the edge of a cloud-painted room that was teeming with tables laden with various flower arrangements, colorful parades of cakes, and fountains of flavored wines. The pink marble floor lay littered with chests overflowing with fabrics and all sorts of sparkly adornments that, after an hour and a half of their glittering, had succeeded in making even my vampire eyes burn.

Occasionally, they would ask our opinion about something or other only to ignore it and continue fawning over their original choice, despite having reassured us that there were no right answers. Of course, there were right answers. Apollo was just terrible at them because the man was practically colorblind. And then they dared to compare us to bats.

If all wedding preparations were as painstaking and exuberant as this one, perhaps eloping was not such a terrible idea after all. It wasn’t like I had anyone to invite to the ceremony anyway. For all intents and purposes and for the sake of vampire society, Thea and I were already married.

“Like I said,” I gritted out. “I’ll propose to her soon.”

Apollo, who was famed to be the most charming and handsome man in the entire Faraway North but seemed like an insufferable, pompous wanker to me, narrowed his

grey eyes and crossed his unreasonably massive arms before his chest as if to underline his suspicion. “When is soon, exactly?”

“ Soon meaning a furthest point in time, or alternatively, none of your damned business,” I bristled.

Apollo’s smirk verged on demonic. “Careful, Aventine. I know sixty-three ways to kill you.”

I reciprocated the smile, ensuring my fangs were in full display. “You need sixty-three ways to kill me, Zayra? I need only one.”

“Aw, look at you grinning at each other,” Thea crooned as she and Nepheli strolled over to us, arm in arm.

When they reached us, Nepheli tucked the silver strands of her hair behind her ears, revealing a pair of teardrop-shaped earrings. “Pink or blue?” she asked Apollo, and as he cast that infernal grin upon her, the girl’s cheeks burned the brightest shade of red.

“Pink,” decided Apollo, although he wasn’t looking at her earrings at all.

Nepheli chewed at the corner of her lip, her brows knitting. “Are you sure? Pink is not really my color.”

“Every color is your color,” argued Apollo.

“I think the colors would disagree,” clipped Nepheli.

Apollo stood to take her chin between his fingers. “Darling, if a color gives you trouble, you tell me, and I’ll beat it to death.” That last remark came with a very pointed glance in my direction. It took more self-restraint than I knew I had in me not to bare my fangs again.

“You’re impossible,” sighed Nepheli, disentangling herself from him.

Apollo, insouciant as a satyr on a banquet, sauntered after her with his hands in his pockets. “You mean impossibly charming, right?”

Finally.

Blessed silence.

“You’re bored,” Thea accused, taking a seat on my lap.

I wound an arm around her midriff and brought her further back so she’d be more comfortable. “No, this is... fun.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’m not. I’m having fun watching you have fun.”

That she accepted, leaning in to press a chaste kiss on my cheek. “Sorry if it’s taking forever.”

But now that I had her here, time was moving fast again, and forever seemed like a single moment.

“Forever is fine with me,” I murmured against her skin, running my fingers through her soft, unbound curls.

Then she was back with Nepheli, laughing over a cup of peach-colored wine. As she stood there, bathed in the bright morning light, so ethereal she was more apparition than flesh and bones, I couldn’t help but think of the divine, the stray chance that some mystic force between the stars had willed Dorothea into my life.

I never believed in destiny. What a ridiculous, self-deprecating notion it was. Random disasters and random blessings, miracles and misfortunes, uncertainties and unseen patterns, all converging on the same indefinable point without the hope that a different choice might have changed everything.

I'd always thought we were nothing but a collection of choices, whether arbitrary or intentional, and that the first serious one I'd ever made was to love her. I didn't fall in love with her. I chose it, my eyes wide open, deciding every wrong and right step along the way. And I could almost see it now—our whole lives: a complex of choices ricocheting into the present.

No, I did not believe in destiny. But, gods knew, I believed in her.