

[50% Sample]

FRACTURE

BY

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MERCY

"I loved you the moment I saw you."

"Really? I can't say the same. I despised you the first moment I saw you."

"I can't deny that I wouldn't have run you through with my sword, but I still loved you all the same."

"I never knew you were capable of such pretty sonnets, my lord."

"Would you really have taken my head?"

"Yes."

"And now? Would you take my head?"

"No, I'd leave you with your head. I'd take your heart instead."

* * * *

Memory nagged, threatening to erode her purpose. She pushed it away.

My mercy. For once you are at MY mercy. So, what will I give you? My dagger or my hatred?

The ruthless words never fell from the woman's pale, dry lips, but they roared in spurned rage deep within her brittle heart. Poised over the sleeping male, she trembled from the primal desire to plunge the serrated blade in her small hand into the smooth, cobalt chest below.

Why do you have two hearts when I only have one? her throat begged to shriek as she leaned closer. *Is that why you were able to do this to me? Is it?!*

Falling beneath the blackness consuming her soul, she fantasized butchering both hearts beyond salvation. Already she could feel the black liquid within his worthless organ reach up to shower her in one last act of bitter passion. If her pink tongue were to slip forth from her tightly pressed mouth, she would be able to taste the acridness of her lover's mortality. Her lips parted as she saw herself orchestrate the same carnage to his heart's twin.

You would be gone and I would be free.

The crazed wildness receded. Grimacing, she swallowed several times. The taste of vomit burned her throat and coated her tongue with traces of bile.

Whether you're dead or not, I'm free now anyway.

Her heart hammered in fury. She trembled with the need to destroy the one who destroyed her with purposeful deceit, willful arrogance, and casual cruelty.

All it would take would be two, one for each heart, and he'd be gone.

She let out a low moan of frenzied grief as her fist tightened painfully. If this was the way it was going to end, then she should not have let her weakness for this man win against ambition. She should have been stronger.

* * * *

"If there is any doubt within your mind, let me dispel it, Princess. You are MY prisoner."

The prince had dismissed all but two guards for their first official meeting since her humiliating defeat at his sword. Perhaps she shouldn't have appreciated this small concession to her pride, but she did. Knowing the entire court would not be witness to her last disgrace helped her keep her composure. It was a kindness she hadn't expected.

"I am completely aware, my lord." Her voice was low, but respectful. The desire to rub her wrists nearly overpowered her, but she maintained her rigid stance.

His regal attention fell to the cuffs encircling her wrists, almost as if he knew her private struggle. His golden eyes gleamed unnaturally as he asked softly, "Are you really?"

Lifting her chin, she answered, "We shall see, won't we?"

* * * *

A tortured gaze pinned her naked lover's exquisite face with the black stare of one betrayed.

Look at me! Wake up and look at what you've made me become!

However, the condemned man refused her poisoned call with casual disregard. He ignored the fallen princess' silent command, never knowing she held him in her dubious mercy. His lids remained closed, golden eyes hidden, while his broad chest moved rhythmically in oblivious repose.

Even now, her faithless prince denied her the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

Two tears slipped free from their azure cage and rolled down the young woman's rounded cheeks. Dropping her head, she felt her blond hair escape from its careless coil and spill across her bare shoulders. Beneath her unblinking stare, the golden waterfall shimmered mockingly in the pale light.

"Your hair is as beautiful as mine," was what he had told her the first time they had met in primitive combat. Opening the locked doors of her memories' failures, she could still hear the cries of the dying and wounded. The cavernous room faded from sight, melding into a series of war-torn ridges and hills.

* * * *

The brutality of the prince's attack fueled her body to tear through all pain and fatigue. It continued long past the point it would have crashed from agonizing numbness into the ground. She took strength from the call in her blood and all those who were sacrificing their lives for freedom.

But the day had been long and she was succumbing to exhaustion. Her throat felt stripped of sound after spending hours screaming out commands.

Waves of black-clad shadows had come relentlessly, starting from the moon's first light, and still her soldiers had persevered. But their bodies were wearing down, just like hers. Even though they held the ridge, she knew it was only a matter of time before they were driven closer to the palace. When she was moments away from shouting, "Retreat!" all noise and motion stopped.

Across a mesh of bodies, living and dead, she saw him.

He stood boldly in the center of crimson carnage, beckoning her by stance alone to come over. Pushing past allies and foe, she charged towards the prince and soon found herself only a short distance away, sword in hand.

He gave her a welcoming smile, even as his body stood poised for war. “Your hair is as beautiful as mine,” he stated before slashing down with his murderous blade.

* * * *

Even now she couldn't recall exactly how long they battled on that barren hill, but she remembered clearly what had happened next.

* * * *

For one perfect moment, she held her bloodstained weapon against his exposed neck. The thrill of defeating him had been an addictive rush, sharper than the agony pounding from the wounds covering her entire body. In full view of every living man left on the plain, she was prepared to give him no quarter, no mercy. However, before she could unmask her triumph, the prince spoke.

Not to plead for clemency or even to curse her name.

“Your hair—it truly is as beautiful as mine,” he whispered before sending her flying back with a brutal kick to the chest.

* * * *

The mental door slammed shut.

Once more she found herself crouched over the sleeping male who had shattered all illusions of pride, first that day and then now. Her terrifying wrath was deserting her again. Her hand wavered, pleading piteously to secret its deadly burden.

“Never!” her mind screamed.

“Please!” her heart cried.

Why am I still hesitating? I'm so stupid! So stupid!

The poisoned knowledge ate away at her, but she couldn't deny the sickening truth.

I love him so much!

Two more traitorous tears spawned several until her naked body shook from the force of silent sobs. Poised over the slumbering form of her faithless lord, the woman bitterly remembered what life had been like before she fell prey to this disease rotting her mind.

Once, she had been proud.

Once, she had been without equal.

Once, she had held her head high, secure in the unshakable knowledge that none could be above her.

However, today she had discovered there was at least one who was superior to her.

And it had killed her.

* * * *

She drew her mount to harried stop to keep from running down a man standing foolishly in the path. Before she could vent her opinion of him, her bright eyes widened in shock.

“My lady!”

She had not seen the Captain of the Guard in nearly two years, but other than a few strands of gray, he was the same as she remembered.

“You can come home now, my lady.”

“Home?” she repeated, wondering with pity if her planet’s defeat had broken his reason. “I am home.”

The man shook his head in disbelief. “Haven’t you heard? His highness has chosen a queen.”

The violet sky faded from view as her world threatened to turn black. “Queen?” she whispered in a thin voice.

Apparently her captain took his princess' tone to be one of joyous disbelief. His grin blinded. "Your imprisonment is over! You are free to come back to your people!"

Out on a lone path, in a place far from home, she died and became someone else.

* * * *

Her trembling fist tightened about the dagger's handle. She felt as if her bones would snap beneath the pressure.

Damn you! Why did you betray me? Is it because I'm no longer a challenge to your conceit?

* * * *

"Touch me," he commanded softly in full view of his entire court.

Without looking away from the charters in her hand, she refused him as one would a bothersome child. "No."

If she had sought to provoke anger in him, she would've been sorely disappointed. His exotic eyes were alight with laughter, not fury. Laughter and interest.

"I can make you," he whispered in a throaty growl, shifting closer to her chair.

"I can also slit your throat if you dare," she warned pleasantly as she set her papers down. While denied the use of any traditional weapon for the past six months, the writing instrument next to her hand took on an entirely different purpose.

One not lost on the amused prince.

"You enjoy this, don't you?" he accused with dark laughter. "You enjoy seeing how far you can push my generosity."

Hearing the delight in his voice inspired her boldness. "I'd rather enjoy your generosity from afar."

Immediately, the laughter died from his expression. Something else crept in—something that had been growing from the first moment he pressed his blade against her unguarded heart.

She refused to squirm beneath his gaze. However, despite her impeccable composure, she felt her stomach tighten. Her limbs grew heavy with anticipation. It was not the first time she had suffered this exquisite sensation, but it was one possessing her more often.

Especially when the prince looked at her as he was now.

“One day your tongue will sweeten for me. Mark my words, Princess. One day you will be the one begging for my touch...my love.”

* * * *

His arrogance had proven true. Her worthless heart had fallen for his and now she was reaping the consequences for her stupidity. She lowered the dagger until it hovered mere inches above his broad chest. This pain was killing her! Killing her as sure as her blade would kill the monster sleeping peacefully beneath her bare limbs.

This is something I WILL NOT forgive. I may have lost my pride, but this is my chance to take it back. I am a warrior like all who have come before me. I will avenge my honor.

Shallow gasps of air blew past her bloodless lips. Nausea threatened to rush up her throat once more.

Honor? When did I become someone who'd kill a man like this? Especially one who cannot defend himself! I dare call this honorable?

Her lovely face twisted in another grimace, making her as ugly as she felt on the inside. Whereas SHE was now repulsive with jealousy and grief, HE remained as elusively beautiful as the first moment she saw him three years before.

His arched brows were still the color of pure moonlight. Waves of indigo and silver fell straight from his regal crown, adorning the bed with locks of the softest hair. His body, lean and strong, towered over most, including her. His aristocratic face bore few scars, a testament to prowess and enhanced genetics. If open, his eyes would flash as brightly as the jewels adorning her dagger. Beneath his lips, four small fangs separated by two rows of gleaming white teeth matched hers.

In all, he was perfect poison to her eyes.

She reached out with tender scorn. Her fingertips danced across his relaxed brow.

We were good together. At least that's what I thought.

Her muscles suddenly protested from holding their fixed position. She ignored the physical discomfort and forced her mind to swim through the happier memories crowding her soul.

If only for one last time.

They had been inseparable, especially after she had accepted him into her bed. Despite her status of Tribute, the prince had immediately elevated her to Advisor. The new position kept her by his side day and night. Perhaps it was payment for his pleasure—she still did not know. He had denied it, of course, and foolishly she had chosen to believe him. Now she saw differently.

Most likely it was a boon to keep his pet happily on the chain.

She may have become a pet, but she was a valuable one of purpose. This present disgrace could not alter that particular truth. Her fierce intelligence had never been discounted. Nor her ability to successfully balance the good of the throne with the needs of its people, conquered or not, be denied.

I speak for those who can't speak for themselves. I don't let the power of a crown cloud my mind. I care for all who are my responsibility. I protect them.

She fought for mercy to those who fell under the empire's ambition. She struggled tirelessly to change an entire system, striving to transform it into one that took all under notice—not just those in power. Therefore her compassion was legendary, reaching out across the present boundaries of victory and defeat to inspire awe in the hearts of those who saw her.

"There she is! It's the lord's princess! Like a goddess from the old world she is!"

Her lips turned at the corners in a pained smile. If she was a goddess, then this prince was surely a god from ancient lore, possessive enough to keep her by his side, fickle enough to stray from hers.

"His highness has chosen a queen."

The dagger lowered with mocking gentleness while her eyes grew darker with bitterness. It slid forth to glide across his lips, its touch as tender as a lover's sweetest caress.

Already, have you shared what is mine with HER?

The tormented imaginings of his mouth touching another instantly drove her to the brink of despair. She yanked her blade away. Once more it returned to its macabre position. Desperately her mind visited the glories of the past, needing to find the strength to finish this.

A warrior in her own right, she had been the ruler of an entire planet and species. She, the last living heiress of her royal house, had been born to rule and to protect. Carrying the blood of vengeance, honor, and loyalty within her veins, she had defended her planet from all who dared to take it. Failing that, she had worked relentlessly to improve the terms of her people's settlement and succeeded. She was worth far more than any who would take her place.

"His highness has chosen a queen."

And she loved him.

Not his intoxicating power, his comely face, or even his addictive passion—him.

A torrent of bitter tears streamed down her crumpled face. The prince had taken her heart and left her with nothing. But she would show him more mercy than he deserved, far more than he had given her. Securing her dangerous hold with two hands, she raised the dagger high above her head.

Without warning, his eyes opened, all traces of sleep gone. His gaze took in her position along with the vicious weapon in her hands.

"Aurora."

Her name, softly spoken, undid all her frenzied control and planning. With a guttural curse, Aurora slammed her dagger less than an inch from his vulnerable body. The wicked blade sunk in to the hilt, vibrating with thwarted purpose. Before he could flinch, she released the dagger and slapped his stricken face repeatedly while screaming, "DAMN YOU, LUCIEN! I HATE YOU! BETRAYER! DO YOU HEAR ME? I HATE YOU!"

He bore her abuse, not attempting to block any of her blows. Stoically, the prince accepted her punishment, but his eyes never left hers.

And it was the regret in Lucien's subdued gaze that damaged her spirit before incinerating her spurned rage.

She sat back on her heels. The room wavered and clouded as her eyes drowned beneath the weight of more tears. Covering her red face, Aurora let loose a low, feral moan of agony. Her tears quickened, as did her breathing. She had thought her pain could not be any deeper, but she was wrong.

His quiet acceptance proved the truth.

"His highness has chosen a queen."

Lucien's dark hand touched her thigh. "You know."

Her choked silence answered his question.

"When did you find out?" He paused and his tone changed. "HOW did you find out?"

Aurora heard the suppressed anger and helplessness in his voice. His frustration fueled her own. Dropping her hands, she shoved his touch away. "That is all you ask me, Lucien? How I found out?" She narrowed her watery gaze and spat, "What about forgiveness, your highness? What about apologies? Are those denied me?"

"No. I...I'm..."

His halting attempts disgusted Aurora. With a shriek of hatred, she leapt off him. His very touch made her sick.

Lucien saw her actions for what they were and cried out in alarm, "Wait! Aurora, please!"

Her faithless heart thudded in answer to his blatant panic. Unwillingly, her body stayed at the foot of their bed. Shoulders hunched tautly, she waited. The rustle of linens whispered in her ears. The scent of his body came closer. She clenched her fists and screwed her eyes shut as the agony in her heart continued to breed.

This shouldn't have happened. I should've never been so blind. I should've seen it coming. All those absences, his insatiable hunger once he came back...I should've known!

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Her scorn was unmistakable. "What exactly are you sorry for, Lucien? Are you sorry for lying to me? Are you sorry for humiliating me? Are you sorry for betraying me? What are you sorry for?" His heavy silence stretched on, grating her tenuous control. "Answer me!"

"I'm sorry that I hurt you."

A small gasp of excruciating anguish rushed past her raw lips. His quiet admission ripped her soul to shreds and made hidden nightmares come to macabre life. There could be no mistaking the sincerity of his words. Knowing what his betrayal would do to her, knowing how it would wound her, Lucien had still made the decision to place another in his bed, in his heart.

He never loved me. He never, EVER loved me.

As if he had heard her tortured thoughts, he cried out in a guilty rush. "This won't change anything between us, Aurora! You will still be my Advisor and we can still be together. My marriage will mean nothing! Do you hear me? It won't change *us*."

Fingers of ice reached out and seized Aurora's heart. Already she could feel her ardor for Lucien freezing. Not disappearing, never that, but eternal passion began enfolding itself into a small, tight ball of sorrow.

"No." Turning towards him, she noted his pallor with a clinical eye. His beautiful skin had paled dreadfully. Now it nearly matched the light hue of her eyes. "This changes everything. It can never be the same. You have chosen a queen. I will not interfere with that bond." Her voice sounded foreign, that of a stranger.

"There isn't a bond, Aurora. My decisions are not based like those of your people!" Lucien pointed out in aggravation. "This union will be an alliance, not of hearts, but of peace." At her continued silence, he cried in supplication, "Don't you see? This is because of you!"

“Me?”

“You taught me mercy, Aurora. You showed me how to gain an empire through peace—not bloodshed.”

“So this is my fault, Lucien?” Her words were even in tone and inflection, hinting at the ice rapidly encasing her core.

His exquisite face twisted with guilt and sorrow. “No, that’s not what I mean.” He started and stopped several times before finding his damning words. “I laid waste to your planet, to your people, all because I saw only what I wanted. Not what it would do to the people who would be mine as well. I...I’m going to live through your mercy. I’m going to take the road of peace.”

Aurora’s eyes became two pools of dead space. “Mercy. You will show mercy to her and her people...mercy you denied mine then and deny me now.”

His golden gaze dimmed. They shimmered with the tainted light of a traitor. “My hearts are yours, Aurora. That won’t change. Nothing will change! You will still be by my side. You will still be in this bed.”

This is how it ends.

Aurora pinned him with her frozen stare. “Until you need her to fill it.” Lucien’s guilty flush roused a sentiment of loathing before it too fell beneath the ice. “I will not be your whore.”

“Aurora, don’t.” He hesitatingly placed his slender hand on her damp cheek. “You can’t,” Lucien pleaded.

“I can.” Her detached voice mimicked her body perfectly.

“No!” he growled in sudden rage. Familiar violence spewed as a result of passion. Grabbing her, he shook Aurora once. “You are still under my house! You still belong to me!”

“I belong to no one. You made sure of that, your highness.”

Lucien's selfish fury disappeared beneath the force of Aurora's efficient statement. Dropping her arm, he observed the marks his fingers made on her fair skin and cringed. "Forgive me, Aurora. Forgive me...please."

The remote stare boring into his blistered and burned, but she knew he would not look away. Morbidly Aurora noted how in emotional death her power had grown greater than before. She observed herself in his eyes. The face so infinitely dear to him had become one of a lifeless stranger and it killed him.

Aurora witnessed Lucien's ache, his need to reach out, to lay his head on her lap, to touch her, to kiss her, to feel her. However, in spite of Aurora's nudity, a mantle of regal contempt shielded her charms from his unworthy regard. And she saw clearly how Lucien recognized it. He knew it was all because of his faithlessness, his supreme selfishness.

If only I could be satisfied with your misery, Lucien. If only it were enough. But I can't feel anything anymore. Not for you, not for me.

Aurora knew Lucien sensed her change as well. The moment he had seen her blade gleaming as brightly as the fires of hell in her eyes, he had known. He had known no matter what happened from that moment on, he had lost. The battle, which began three years before, ended this night, on this bed, and he had lost.

Apparently the enormity of his ignorance decimated all useless illusion of pride. "Forgive me," he implored once more. Reaching out, he enveloped her hands in his, half expecting her to snatch them away. When she remained fixed in her rigid position, Lucien drew false hope. She could almost pity him.

Almost.

"I'm sorry, Aurora. I know I shouldn't have deceived you! I knew it would hurt you. I knew it! But I-I...don't you see? This union will make our worlds stronger! Safer! Our people, yours and mine, will be safe from any threat of invasion." The reasons must have rung hollow, even to his own prejudiced ears. "Aurora, please...say something."

Silence greeted him with a vicious smile. His pleas had not thawed her icy reserve.

As a result, Lucien's voice grew thick and heavy. "I was scared. I was scared of losing you. I was SO scared. I don't want to lose you now."

Her stare drove him mad and it reflected in his frenzied speech. "Hate me, scream at me, hit me—whatever you want—but please, please, forgive me! I've never begged anyone for anything, but I'm begging you now, Aurora! Please!"

Her cerulean orbs remained fixed on his, unmoved and apathetic. The life Lucien had always admired and adored was gone.

Awkwardly sitting before her, he dropped her hands and waited. The moments stretched into minutes and his terror became a palpable force. Once Aurora would have been moved to soothe his fears, to take them away, but that time was gone.

Mercy has truly favored me. I don't feel anything for him, for me. But I still feel something for my people. They are all I have left. They are who I'll live for.

"Tomorrow, I'm leaving for home."

Lucien's mouth quivered. His hand reached for her feebly, only to fall back into his lap.

"Before I go, you will publicly release me from the previous terms of surrender. My people will no longer be considered slaves of the throne. They will be acknowledged as allies of the empire. I will be put back on *my* throne as ruler. Your soldiers will be removed."

Aurora's wintry tone brooked no room for negotiation.

Lucien's composure fled him as the finality of her words settled in the sudden silence. "Aurora...no. Not like this. No...you can't—"

"I most certainly can and I will." Her voice wavered slightly before regaining its icy composure. "Lucien, if you have any love for me at all, you will do this. You will not force me to live with you both. You will not make me your whore. You will not further shame me." Aurora's striking eyes flashed once before settling to their normal hue. "Unless your love was a lie too."

A guttural groan filled the chamber as Lucien exposed the true depth of his loss.
“Aurora...”

Without expression, she stared down at the proud sovereign who wept uncontrollably. Aurora’s pain mirrored Lucien’s but her tears were gone. The ability to show her misery had disappeared, leaving behind a solid shell.

One hiding the bleeding soul of a woman betrayed.

Too late she realized Lucien held her dagger in his hand. Aurora wondered if he was going to try to kill her.

His disheveled hair fell across his tear-streaked face as he placed her hand around his. Drawing the lethal dagger to his naked chest, he shouted, “Do it! Take one as yours!”

Dispassionately, Aurora listened to Lucien’s shattered entreaty amidst his incoherent cries. “Keep them both. I don’t need either. For you to betray me like this...” Her composed words trailed off as she slid away from his broken figure.

“Aurora!”

Her feet jerked to a stop. Mercy abandoned its disciple without warning. Aurora’s shell cracked, letting a piece of her butchered heart relive its cruel agony.

“His highness has chosen a queen.”

“This won’t change anything between us, Aurora! You will still be my Advisor and we can still be together. My marriage will mean nothing! Do you hear me? It won’t change US.”

“This union will make our worlds stronger!”

“I don’t want to lose you now.”

“Lucien,” she whispered.

“A-Aurora, I love you,” he sobbed from behind her. “You have to believe me...I swear...I love you.”

The fissure in her ice-covered shield grew larger. Her face twisted in agony. "You may have two hearts but in the end you really have none."

His indrawn breath echoed loudly in the desolate chamber.

Aurora reached down and lifted her robe off the foot of the bed. Slipping it on, she walked with careful steps to the door. Her hand grasped the cold handle and she felt a weight press against her chest. The fracture became a gaping hole.

I'll never be here with him again. It really is over.

She could have walked out, keeping the true depth of her wound secret. But she would not. Lucien had taken her heart and no matter what happened to her after this night, it would remain in his poisoned care.

"You have none except for one...because you have mine. I still love you, Lucien."

A wet gurgle followed those poignant words. Without looking behind her, Aurora knew her dagger finally found its mark.

* * * *

"I loved you the moment I saw you."

"Really?" She turned her head and brushed a languid kiss against his neck. "I can't say the same. I despised you the first moment I saw you." Her fingers played with his silken hair, letting the beautiful silver and indigo strands fall through her slim fingers.

Lucien's body rumbled with laughter. "I can't deny that I wouldn't have run you through with my sword, but I still loved you all the same." His hands pulled her closer to take the sting out of his frank admission.

"I never knew you were capable of such pretty sonnets, my lord," Aurora stated dryly. Laying her head on his shoulder, she closed her eyes.

"Would you really have taken my head?" he whispered in her ear a few moments later.

"Yes." She wondered where her prince would take this game of confessions.

*“And now?” Lucien shifted them so that they lay at eye-level with one another.
“Would you take my head?”*

Aurora smiled serenely. With a gentle hand she traced the exotic planes of his face. “No, I’d leave you with your head. I’d take your heart instead.”

* * * *

Goodbye.

Opening the heavy door, she slipped out. Two sentries stood directly in front of her. Although they stared ahead with military blankness, Aurora knew they had heard nearly everything. Once she would have experienced shame. But not anymore. Adopting an authoritative voice, she cried, “Hurry! His Highness has need of you.”

The pounding of their booted feet rushing past did nothing to mask Lucien’s hysterical roar.

“AURORA!!”

Straightening her shoulders, Aurora walked down the dark corridor leading away from Lucien, away from love, and away from mercy.

FATE

I'm leaving. I guess this is my goodbye. I can't say I'll miss you...I can't say I won't. Will you wish me luck? Maybe I'd be asking too much, huh? If it's any consolation, I won't forget you...I guess because I can't. Even though I'd rather pretend you never existed, I won't forget you.

I won't ever forget your curse.

I won't ever forget your evil.

I won't ever forget how you nearly destroyed my family.

But most of all—I won't ever forget your face.

* * * *

The creased picture in his hand trembled slightly as the plane approached its final descent. His farewell to the original still hung with decay in his mind. *Not even gone a day and I can't help but look at the bitch.* With an inaudible sigh, he tucked the memento back into his coat pocket.

An indecipherable smile crossed his lips. He was supposed to have cut all ties with his old life. Instead, while thousands of miles away from home, she was with him. *Stupid. Should've thrown this out in Munich.* Through the layers of cloth separating them, he felt her coal eyes staring straight into his heart. He imagined the ruby lips curving into a mocking grin.

I hate you. You know that, right? As soon as I land, I'll throw you out yet. Just watch.

Focusing on the compressed world around him, he closed his eyes and waited for this airborne ordeal to end. He regretted his focus a moment later. Muttered prayers assaulted his ears while the smell of human flesh overwhelmed his delicate senses. Belatedly, he remembered why he'd chosen to live in his own world for half a day.

During the majority of the flight he had been stuck between two bodies reeking of fear. It was still enough to turn his stomach. Smelling their stench once more, he threw up his own prayer.

Almost over. Thank you, God.

As the plane touched ground, nervousness, hysteria, and terror bombarded him. A strong hand whipped out and clutched his arm.

“I-I’m sorry!” the middle-aged woman on his right babbled. “I can’t help it. I have to hold onto someone when I land. It’s my good luck charm. It’s crazy...I know!”

A dark brow rose in mild surprise. She had been silent during the entire trip and now chose to claw at his arm. Amusement warmed his verdant gaze. “Good luck? Let’s hope your streak doesn’t end today.”

She gave no notice of his morbid statement. “I hate flying,” she whispered. “I just h-hate it!”

The stranger’s loathing touched him, reminding him of his own. “Then why do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Fly?”

The plane rolled to a clean stop. A tremulous smile hovered about the woman’s pale lips. “Finally!” She let out a cleansing breath before releasing his sleeve. “Thank you.”

He nodded and assumed she forgot his question in her excitement. Patiently waiting for his section’s turn to depart, he shoved feelings of hatred aside.

If I haven’t figured it out myself, I doubt a human could.

“I do it because it’s worth it.”

“What?” He kept his gaze trained ahead, but his curious mind focused on her answer.

“Even though I hate the way flying makes me feel, I accept it as the price I have to pay to do what I want.”

The familiar picture lay like an ugly brand against his chest. A sudden urge to rip it into a thousand pieces shot through him. “What is it you want to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is worth paying this price?” Calm and easy, his voice didn’t betray his absolute attention. He discounted the crush of bodies around them and pinpointed on her. He needed to hear the answer—needed it with irrational fervor.

Tell me. Help me understand.

“What’s worth making you feel this way?”

“Being free.” She stood up and looked down at him. Wistful longing touched her blue eyes briefly before she turned away.

He recognized the hesitant desire, not by sight, but through smell. Lust crowded out her disgusting fear scent. He knew she was ashamed of her desire, seeing him only as a young man. *If you only knew, mon coeur. I’ve lived longer than you and your mother combined.*

He had many flaws—vanity was not one of them. Neither was modesty. When she braved looking at him, he knew what she saw. Tall, slim, blond, green-eyed living temptation would fit the description nicely.

Now it was his turn.

Middle-aged female. Graying hair. Plump body. His discreet perusal sharpened. Beautiful neck. Delicate ears. Small waist.

To human eyes you were exquisite once. You still are—at least to me.

Carnal hunger snapped its jaws. Inwardly he smiled. He would taste the sweetness of her flesh before the day was over.

You don’t have a chance. But then again you don’t want it, do you?

With a small bow, he allowed her to pass by.

She flushed at his gallantry and murmured, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Ensuring his place behind her, his feet shuffled across the worn carpet. Others immediately fell in place after him. Like grateful sheep, they all scurried off what might've been their tin funeral pyre. Now that it was over, even he couldn't deny sharing the same sentiment.

Lucky us. We all escaped a slow, burning death. At least this time.

Memories of fire flared suddenly in his mind. His prey's back wavered as the weight of his past crashed into him. As if sensing his torment, the picture charred his flesh.

* * * *

"In one night, she nearly brought this house down to its knees. One night!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Stephan took the blame, but I know it wasn't him! It was HER!"

"I know."

"Fire burned for three days, gutting everything. Three days! In the end, we salvaged nothing. Nothing!"

"It's different now. I'm different."

"Different? Hah! How different will you be if you see her again? Remember what I say. Her flesh is more putrid than death. Her smile only courts rot. Poison is what lays between her soiled thighs."

"Yes, Mother."

"Do not dishonor us again, boy! Do you hear me? Never again!"

* * * *

The litany tramped in his mind. It was just one of the many his mother favored. Granted she was crazed, undoubtedly due to the strain of being the mother of a mythical soul, but that didn't mean her ranting had no effect on him.

Heavy reminders of shame were driving him to the brink. He lifted his trembling hand and held it against his coat pocket.

I hate fire. I fucking hate it. Almost as much as I hate you.

The artificial hallway connecting the plane to the airport loomed ahead. He dropped his hand, belatedly realizing the twisted comfort he sought from the snapshot.

I don't have to think about that anymore. It doesn't matter. Fire, slaughter, history...none of it can touch me here.

He was free.

This country represented a new start—one where his shoulders were unburdened by sin. It was a land where he could be someone else.

A man with no past has an unlimited future. I am that man.

Hope washed away the flames scorching his psyche. His chosen woman for the day looked back in farewell. Standing to the side of the entryway, she smiled briefly. “Goodbye and thank you...”

His hesitation was nominal, going unnoticed. “Michael.”

“Michael. Thank you for letting me use your arm.”

“No problem. Glad I could help.” Passengers shouldered past them, eager to join their loved ones. Knowing that for the first time in his life no one would be waiting for him inspired equal parts dread and excitement. While eager to sample the delights of freedom, he yearned for momentary companionship.

Apparently so did she, if her lingering was any indication.

Noticing her faltering stance, he asked solicitously, “Am I holding you up? Is someone waiting for you?”

She shook her head. “No. You?”

“No. I'm new to the city.”

She opened her mouth and snapped it shut abruptly. Holding out her hand, she laughed. "I'm sorry. Here I've been talking to you for minutes and I never introduced myself. My name is Linda."

Entranced by the lovely change in her face, he accepted her introduction and hand. "Pleased to meet you, Linda."

"Same goes to you, Michael."

Although hours-old sweat clung to her body, he felt himself drowning happily in her natural scent. She really would smell quite intoxicating after a shower. Never one to hold back impulse, especially when it came to his hungers, he asked, "I'm sorry if this is too forward, but would you like to have dinner with me?" His mouth widened into a genuine smile. "I want to hear more about freedom."

A look of bemusement crossed her face. "Where are you from? Your accent is beautiful."

"Europe. Eastern to be exact, but I've spent many years in France."

"France! I love France!"

She began walking and he fell in step with her. Their conversation flowed naturally and with much animation. He was glad to have chosen her, even if he did feel a little like a pervert.

She's so much younger than me. Ah, well. So be it.

Linda never did answer yes to his initial request, but as the evening wore on, she couldn't stop screaming it.

* * * *

The night lay on his shoulders like a shroud. He sat on a brick wall, allowing his feet to dangle comfortably. No one gave him notice, but he saw everyone and everything. Although it was after three in the morning, the world around him pulsed with nocturnal bliss. Rivers of yellow and red flowed down their concrete beds while low laughter buzzed in his ear.

It's true. This city never sleeps. I think this werewolf is going to like New York very much.

Rolling his neck, he let out a small groan. His relaxed body reveled in physical satiation. Any man who held the first blush of youth as the only pleasure to experience was a fool. Linda had been quite talented and giving in her passion—as he knew she would be.

Full belly, sated appetite, and pleasant company. What a wonderful way to mark the first night of his new life.

New life, huh?

His mind sifted through the present and clung obsessively to bits of the past. And just like that, he picked up the familiar pebble of constant agony—as usual.

It's my curse—a fairytale with no happy ending.

If he'd shared what he really was with Linda, would she have laughed in his face? He shook his head and a cynical sneer twisted his mouth. That dear human would most likely have run from the room screaming. Still, the possibilities teased his mind. How does one explain something so unbelievable?

You start it like all harmless stories start—once upon a time.

He closed his eyes, effectively cutting off the modern era's sights and sounds.

Once upon a time there was a wolf prince who lived in the most beautiful castle in all the world. Everyone and everything in the land belonged to him and he was happy. Yet no matter how much he had, he wanted more. More riches, more women, more power...more.

More. More. More.

Maybe it was because he wasn't satisfied with simply being a werewolf prince and future king. After all, he had once been a god with unlimited power. A god named Lazai. How could he be satisfied with simply serving his line when he had been responsible for creating it?

Ah, but that is another story for another time, my dear listener.

The years passed much the same as the one before it. However, one night the prince heard of a mythical maiden and everything changed. This Half-Blood was supposed to be born just for him. The spoiled werewolf liked that. What he didn't like was that she was going to be more powerful than him.

He didn't like it at all.

But being the clever sovereign he was, the prince was sure that when he found her, he would make her love him. If she loved him then her power would be his too.

Time passed and one night he found her. He found her and took her to his beautiful castle. He gave her everything she could ever want and more because he thought she was like him.

He was wrong. Unfortunately for him, he would find that out much too late...

But in the beginning, the world was perfect because he had her. Or at least it was almost perfect. The prince still needed the maiden's love. He used charm, he used force, sometimes calculated indifference, but in the end all his intrigues couldn't save him.

It was the prince who fell desperately in love.

He loved her more than he loved anything else. More than riches. More than other women. More than power.

The wolf prince loved her so much he wanted to give his princess the world.

In the end, she hated her prince so much she took the world away from him.

But all was not lost for the wolf prince. He came back in another body, at another time. He came back to reclaim all which had been lost. She hadn't won. But she would be back.

And when she did, he would be ready.

At least, that's what he prayed for each night.

"Adria..."

The whisper tumbled from his throat like a condemned man's plea. Shifting his body, he heard the rustle against cloth. He opened his eyes and suffered the empty pleasures of the world around him. He wished he could drown in it even as his heart clenched with tremendous pain.

"Adria..." Swallowing down a rush of emotion, he felt his fingers slide past black wool before closing on cherished paper.

I'll throw you away—just watch. I'll do it.

His silent vow crumbled like ash. With a flick of his fingers, she was there. His jade gaze darkened to emerald. Stomach clenching tightly, he stared at his doom.

I will turn my back on you...but not tonight.

In response, her delicate, dark beauty reached across time to ensnare him. Just as it did nearly a century before.

"Adria."

* * * *

The scarred, double-doors creaked in protest. He dismissed his feeling of guilt and pushed forward. Slipping through, he heard them slam shut with restrained violence. He winced, hoping the racket would not be heard upstairs. Listening for the sound of intruders, he relaxed as the silence remained unbroken.

Nobody heard. Good.

He turned his sharp gaze forward. The cavernous dungeon stretched on interminably, but he knew where to find her. Steps sure and eyes alert, he strode by crates of history and conquest. Hidden riches did not interest him. One thing and one thing only had the power to lure him here.

I have to see her. I have to see what she looks like.

When he reached the empty back wall, he wondered if perhaps his informant was wrong.

She's not here. Damn it!

Searching from one end of the dungeon to the other, he encountered rats, layers of dust, and an occasional piece of rubbish—but nothing else. She remained as elusive as an apparition. Frustrated, he rested his head against the centuries-old wall.

Maybe I AM just chasing a ghost.

Unwanted coincidence followed his thought when wretched groans suddenly filled the air. He spun around. His gleaming gaze searched for the source of wailing. The hair on his neck stood up and his heart began thumping in fear. He was no fool. He understood that just like he and his kind existed, so did those on the other side.

Is this why I'm forbidden to go here? Is this some demon's domain?

Poised between facing terror or succumbing to it, he strained his adolescent senses to their limits.

What is that noise? It's driving me crazy!

Just before he gave into the urge to turn tail and run, the awful groaning ceased—leaving the sound of rubble crashing like glass against stone.

And that was when he saw it.

A narrow piece of the wall had slid back, exposing a hidden black cavern. Cautiously, he stepped towards it. Even in the darkness he could see it was a room, one barely big enough for two men to stand in. Thoughts of being trapped in this secret place raced across his mind.

No one even knows I'm here. How will they find me?

When he swallowed, the acrid taste of panic left a sour taste in his mouth.

You can't back out now.

He straightened his shoulders and walked into the tiny room. He couldn't have come this far just to allow stupid weakness to stop him. Lingering fears of unforgiving demons vanished when glints of muted gold teased his gaze. Excitement lapped away at his control.

Is this it?

Not wanting to fight the darkness anymore, he slipped his hand into his pocket. His fingers found and pulled out a candle and match. The flare of flame erupted, awe washed over him, and he was lost.

Ebony collided with emerald.

He felt the strength flow right out of his legs. There was no doubt in his mind. It was HER. Sinking to the floor, he drank in the sight of her ethereal magnificence.

Delicate features united to create perfect, feminine beauty. Fine, porcelain skin glimmered like an exquisite pearl. Graceful brows arched over thickly lashed coal eyes. Crimson lips lifted in a precious smile. Long, black tresses tumbled down a velvet-covered back. Small, lovely breasts swelled above an embroidered neckline.

But it was her eyes that held him captive.

His entire being lay exposed to her eternal stare. Peering into those dark orbs, he knew he was looking into Fate. The candle fell out of his limp hand and sputtered out.

I never knew...I never imagined...

He had been told she was nothing short of a half-breed witch who brought shame to their noble house.

He had been told that it was her fault he'd become so weak.

He had been told to hate her.

Some part of him did loathe her long before he could recognize the emotion. Yet sitting here in the mimicry of her presence, all he could feel were the tears rolling down his face.

“Why did you betray me, Adria? Why?”

** * * **

Decades had passed since then. None ever found out where and how he'd spent that night. However, when he had emerged from her hidden room, he had known he was damned. He knew that as long as he drew breath, he'd be cursed. The fever Adria struck his soul with had no cure and he was doomed to suffer it silently.

Just as he had a lifetime before.

“Why, Adria?” His hoarse whisper exposed the bleeding pain running beneath his skin. “Why would you turn against us? Against me?”

Throughout the years he pounced on every piece of information that would bring him closer to the past. Mythology and history vied to decimate the other, but in the end he still had no answers to his question.

The portrait kept her secrets...as it had for centuries.

Some legends claimed a piece of Adria’s soul was painted into the canvas in hopes of keeping her away from their noble, lupine bloodline forever. If true, he was sure when they painted hers, they also took a piece of his as well.

Is this what I have to look forward to for the next five hundred years? Moping over a past I can’t remember and fearing a future yet to come?

Feet pounding on littered pavement broke his bitter reverie. The smell of cigarettes and alcohol assaulted his nose. Looking into the distance, he lost favor with skyscrapers and concrete insomnia. Forgetfulness and freedom wouldn’t be found here.

Decision made, he hopped off the wall. Shoving Adria’s image into his pocket, he lifted his arm and hailed a cab. Once he arrived at the airport, he would pick another city. If that one didn’t suit him, he’d go somewhere else. Eventually he would find the perfect place.

Maybe then the answers would come to him.

And maybe, just maybe, he would find he no longer cared.

* * * *

A year’s gone by and I’m still looking.

Leaning against a pillar, he wondered why he bothered falling into the tourist trap of outlet malls. With a self-deprecating shrug, he tossed his empty cup into the nearby trash bin.

Oh, well. I need a new pair of running shoes. Might as well get them at discount.

Strolling along the crowded avenues, he slipped his hand into his pants pocket. Out of habit, his fingers caressed the photo's frayed edge. Soon he was going to need to take another one. Bits of paper were flaking off and several creases were starting to distort Adria's face. For nearly sixty years it'd been on some part of his body. Even so, he couldn't imagine separating from it—although everyday he swore he would.

You and I have seen this world change so much, haven't we?

He had taken this picture right before the break of World War II. During his house's exodus, he'd almost given the order for Adria's portrait to be exhumed from its resting place. However, the safety of his vassals was the only thing that had held him back.

We barely had time to leave with hides in tact. There was no way we could've made it carrying her.

Skillfully dodging a family with two toddlers in tow, he felt a smile creep into his serious expression. Thoughts of one day having his own children warmed his heart, effectively banishing ugly memories into the past where they belonged. He imagined the mother of his future sons and daughters. Undoubtedly she'd be petite again, hardly bigger than a child. Her flawless dark beauty might take on another nationality, but would still be a perfect foil against his golden coloring. When he pictured looking into her eyes, he knew he would see the lunar sky looking back.

But what will I see reflected? Lies? Cunning? Disgust? It sure as hell won't be love.

Adria's hatred of him was inevitable, he supposed. After all, they were bound tightly to the wheel of incarnation without hope of escape. Just as he had returned, one day, centuries from now, Adria would as well. Letting out a weary sigh, he anticipated the future with dread and longing.

Perhaps I'll have mastered my frailty by then. I better hope I do. I can't fall for her like I did then. I just can't.

He had almost made it to the shoe store when he glanced across the walkway. If he had looked a second earlier or later, he would've escaped Fate's snare a little longer.

As it was, a harmless glance demolished his world and nothing would ever be the same again.

The moon exploded in his stunned mind and left a blazing sun in its place. He stumbled to a graceless stop. His hand fell away and the picture fluttered out of his grip. Milling crowds flowed by, threatening to take the objects of his fascination away. Glancing between the fallen photo and the living girl steadily drifting farther, he made his choice.

For the first time, he left Adria behind.

Regret and guilt made their mark before happiness burned away all edges of grief from his psyche. Like a bewitched creature, he strode towards her. The predator within lifted his head and howled in triumph.

You were born for me. You're mine.

He gave no thought to his unconscious arrogance, never connecting how eerily it echoed his predecessor's beliefs from centuries before.

Filtering out hundreds of scents, his body trembled upon finding hers. Helpless in his obsession, he trailed her from one end of the mall to the other. For a brief moment, he got close enough to feel the wind blow wisps of her hair across his skin. Just that bit of contact nearly drove him over the edge. He reined in his feral side, careful to keep his lids lowered, and allowed his steps to lag.

The one time I need them...I should've worn my sunglasses.

If anyone caught sight of his infatuated stare, they would've seen jade and gold fighting for dominance. His wolverine blood rose dangerously close to the surface and it wasn't even a full moon yet.

Who is she? Just looking at her makes me feel like my brain is on fire. It should be a bad thing, but it feels too good to be bad.

If he could've purposely picked someone as different from Adria as this girl was, he still couldn't have fathomed how powerful the effect on him would be.

Adria represented all that lay beneath the moon.

This girl could only symbolize the righteous glories of the sun.

Her beautifully curled tresses lay about her bare shoulders like a mantle of gold. His fingers yearned to sink within the precious mass. It reminded him of an expensive porcelain doll's mane. He had never seen hair like hers on a living being.

Maybe it's because I never looked. All I could see was black. Stupid me.

She was probably no older than seventeen and it reflected in her deliciously round cheeks. Though young, she definitely could never be mistaken for a child. Her body was far too curvaceous to be considered juvenile. As she walked, flashes of firm thighs peeked from beneath her powder blue babydoll dress.

It made him imagine them spread widely in passion.

The crowds shifted, pulling her out of his sight. Being the hunter he was, he found her quickly. Like a man succumbing to fever, he studied every bit of her appearance. Whenever she smiled, he thought he was going to die from longing.

But what moved him to exquisite agony wasn't her pert nose or plump lips. Age destroyed youth too easily for simple beauty to ensnare him like this. No, it was something stronger, something only Death could destroy.

I love her. I don't know why, but it's true. My heart loves her.

A part of him felt insane for following this girl like a smitten puppy. Then madness left when she happened to glance over her shoulder. Molten gold framed by thick, sooty lashes reached out and grabbed his soul. No girl or woman should have eyes like hers.

I'd give up everything just to have her see me with those eyes.

His feral nature won. Before he knew it, he found himself in front of her. All false identities disappeared. Without conscious thought, he told her his real name. "My name is Mikhail DeMontier. What's yours?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he nearly followed them with a long string of curses. There was no subtlety in his approach. It was direct. Too direct. If she had any sense of self-preservation, she would dismiss him with a withering glare and he would

deserve it. Silent, pained laughter lightened his jade orbs as he waited for her death strike.

“Katherine Merror.”

She surprised them both by answering, if her small frown was any clue.

Determined to erase his previous lack of charm, he replied sincerely, “Katherine. It’s a good name. I like it.” Once again his natural charisma failed to appear, leaving a blunt, arrogant male in its wake.

“Well, it’s nice to know you approve of my name.”

A pang of sadness darkened his eyes. Her soft voice was sharp, bordering on sarcastic. However, it wasn’t her reply that troubled him.

Adria.

His hand had slipped instinctively into his pocket and encountered nothing. The keeper of his heart and thoughts rose up in ghostly condemnation. Years of accusations, of bearing the burden of a life he couldn’t remember but lived, of being the sole recipient of blame drove him out of his ancestral home. He had come to this country looking for freedom. The past year has seen him drifting from one city to another. No matter where he stayed, what new sights he absorbed, glorious, beautiful freedom remained elusive.

Now he knew why.

His body may have been free, but his mind was still trapped beneath centuries of guilt. An ocean and thousands of miles didn’t have the power to absolve him. If he hadn’t come to this mall today, nothing ever would. Eventually, time would pass. He would’ve accepted his fate by the incarnation’s side. He would’ve believed it his burden and curse.

But then he saw her. Katherine Merror.

Beautiful Katherine of the golden eyes.

He saw her and was reborn.

Not as god, prince, or disgraced reminder, but as a man.

He saw his one chance and wanted it so badly. For the first time in his present life, he didn't have to be anything other than a regular, ordinary man. Katherine would never have to know how old he really was, nor would she need to know the truth behind his wolverine heritage. He could hide it. He knew he could and would.

Decision made in less than a moment, he asked, "Would you like to get something to eat with me?" His heart was light and filled with grace.

Thank you, Katherine. Thank you. If you accept me, I'll spend the rest of your days thanking you for this wonderful gift.

She looked at him strangely. Her eyes dropped beneath his. "I don't know you." Her answer was slow, but not a denial.

His mouth split in a wolfish grin. "I know. That's why you should let me buy you something to eat."

Katherine looked back up. Her spectacular eyes clouded with an enigmatic emotion before clearing. She pointed in the direction of the Food Court. "Okay, Mikhail."

Fire leapt in his heart. He laughed in pure happiness. She merely looked at him once before walking ahead.

* * * *

The mall avenues were nearly empty. So was the parking lot. Dusk settled in the sky and the stars were claiming their ageless positions. The retail cornucopia was closing its bounty for the night.

With hands in pockets, he walked back to where it started. His bright gaze looked across the walkway. He saw two men locking their store doors.

Still didn't get any shoes.

A bubble of laughter tickled his lips.

No, I didn't get any shoes but I got something a whole lot better.

Katherine's shyness endeared her further to his heart. It had been a challenge but eventually she warmed to him. By the end of their casual dinner, he had gotten her phone number and a promise.

Breakfast buffet. 8:00 am. Across the street from the outlet mall. I can't wait.

A slight breeze wafted through, bringing the familiar rustle to his ears. He stood still and heard it again. His steps found the scrap of paper. Bending down, his fingers plucked it from the grass.

Adria's stare seared him. He stared back. Then he smiled.

He lifted his hand and watched as the wind spirited her image away.

Goodbye, Adria. I won't ever understand what happened but it's okay. I hope wherever you are, you're in peace.

I won't forget your face. It's still true. I'll remember you as you were until the day I die. But there's someone else. Someone I love.

So I don't need this memento.

Just as I loved you when I first saw you, I love her. It's not the same. It's better. It's beautiful, pure, without hatred. She doesn't love me yet, but that's okay. I love her enough to wait.

I'm ditching the fairytale. I want real life. I want real life with Katherine. I want to be with her when she grows old. I want it all with her. It won't last forever. I know that.

I'm sure we'll be together again, Adria. Maybe it will be better between us by then. Maybe...

Anyway, thank you. If it weren't for you, I would never have come here. I never would've met her. Thank you and goodbye, Adria.

He watched until the wind carried the picture over a hill. Although he waited for a twinge of regret, it never came. With a happy heart, he turned away.

He once may have been a god named Lazai. He once may have been a prince named Nikolaus. But he was someone else this time. He was Mikhail DeMontier and he was free.

Free.

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