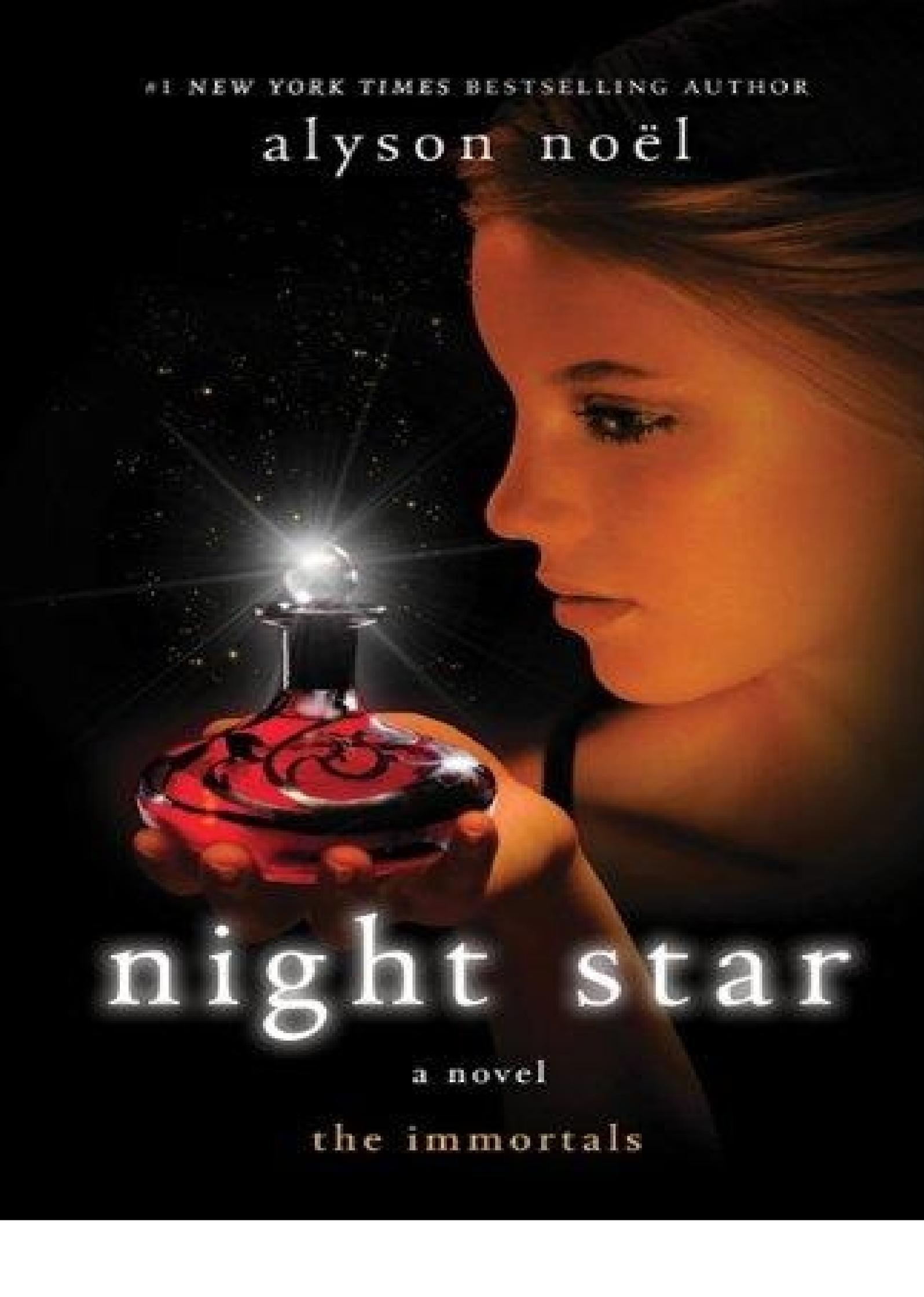


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

alyson Noël

A woman with long, light-colored hair is shown in profile, looking intently at a glowing red rose-shaped object she is holding in her hand. The object has a bright light emanating from its top, creating a starburst effect. The background is a dark, starry night sky. The overall mood is mysterious and magical.

night star

a novel

the immortals

Praise for the Immortals Series by Alyson Noël

“Alyson Noël surpassed all my expectations. Not only is *Blue Moon* an amazing sequel; it sets the bar for the rest of this series very, very high! When I reached the last page of this one, all I could say was ‘wow!’”

—*Teens Read To*

“Noël’s novel is absolutely amazing! Fans of her Immortals series will not be disappointed—Ever and Damen’s love is challenged like never before, and the story ends with a big, satisfying twist that will have readers begging for more. This long-awaited installment is incredible.”

—*Romantic Times* (Top Pick)

“It is the mark of a daring writer to defy expectations, and Alyson Noël does that to the power of ten in *Blue Moon*. I guarantee you will have no idea what’s coming in the second book of the series which Alyson Noël surprises you with a big, fat twist and leaves you wanting more, more, more.”

—*The Book Chicks*

“A mesmerizing tale of teenage angst, love, and sacrifice with plenty of crossover appeal...The startling but satisfying ending shows that Noël knows how to keep her audience hooked. Even the supernatural struggles are a captivating metaphor for teenage fears about love, relationships, and growing up.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“*Blue Moon* was incredible. If you thought *Evermore* was full of suspense and unknowns, just wait until you read *Blue Moon*.... The plot was insane, and I mean that in a good way. Noël took this novel in a direction I was never expecting, resulting in an emotional roller-coaster ride that I never wanted to end. Fabulous.”

—*The Story Sir*

“The YA paranormal genre has a flawless diamond among the gems with *Blue Moon*. I was moved to tears by a couple of scenes, especially near the end. Ms. Noël doesn’t back away from emotion; instead she has the ability to reach into your chest and twist your heart.”

—*Night Owl Roman*

“One of the best books I’ve read this year...With immortal lovers, trustworthy friends, betraying fortune tellers, and freaky identical twins, what more could you ask for? *Blue Moon* has me begging for *Shadowland*! I can’t wait for the next in the series.”

—*The YA Book Blog*

“Alyson Noël has many talents to share as a writer, and she proves it again and again with her amazing Immortals series. She writes with an intensity and a passion, her words weaving perfectly together to create an overwhelming experience for the senses and the heart.”

—*Teen Rea*

“Mystery + romance + supernatural + drama = definite appeal to teens.”

—*Orange Coast Magazine*

“The Immortals series is so unique; it’s like a breath of fresh air.... Noël knows how to pull you into her world with beautiful imagery and mesmerizing words. *Blue Moon* is a page-turner that will keep you reading until the last page. Just when you think you have the plot figured out, Alyson throws another twist, making it impossible to put this book down.”

—5 stars! *Fantastic Book Reviews*

“*Evermore* will thrill many teen fantasy-suspense readers, especially fans of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series.... Noël creates a cast of recognizably diverse teens in a realistic high school setting along with just the right tension to make Ever’s discovery of her own immortality—should she choose it—exciting and credible.”

—*Booklist*

“Beautiful main characters, tense budding romance, a dark secret, mysterious immortals—what more could you ask from this modern gothic romance?”

—*Justine Magazine*

“When I got a copy of *Evermore*, I sat down to read it, intending to only read a chapter or two. Instead I blazed through the first hundred pages before I knew it...and then I didn’t want to put the book down. Except I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer. So I picked it up the next morning and finished it. Now I can’t wait till July for the second book, to see what happens next.”

—*Blog Critics Magazine*

“Get ready for a wild ride that is filled with twisting paths and mystery, love and fantasy.... The writing style, story, and characters are a bit like Meyer’s and Marr’s popular books, but written with a new twist and voice. And after reading the book, you too will probably want your own Damen, even if it means making the ultimate sacrifice.”

—5/5 stars! *The Book Queue*

“Readers who enjoy the works of P. C. Cast and Stephenie Meyer will love this outstanding paranormal teen-lit thriller.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“I found myself unwilling to put the book down, even though I had to at some points, because I wanted to know what was going to happen.... Ever was so real and her emotions were so believable that it was a little creepy. It’s like Alyson Noël is actually a grieving, lovestruck teenager. She got Ever completely perfect. And by perfect, I mean delightfully flawed and deep.”

—*The Frenetic Reader*

“*Evermore* is a wonderful book that I believe would be a lovely addition to any library.... Definitely

book that fans of Stephenie Meyer and Melissa Marr should add to their collections. Definitely engaging and will catch your attention the minute you open to the first page!"

—*Mind of a Bibliophile*

"Alyson Noël creates a great picture of each and every character in the book. I am a fan of the Twilight series and I recommend this book to those who like the series as well. It is a very quick read, with a the interesting twist and turns."

—*Flamingnet Book Review*

"I loved this book. It really keeps your attention throughout the story, because the puzzle gets pieced together bit by bit, but you don't know exactly what happened until the end. The only thing that disappoints me is that the second book won't be published for a while. I would definitely recommend this to my friends."

—*Portsmouth Teen Book Review*

"This is the first installment of the Immortals series. Ms. Noël pens a well-detailed story that makes it easy for the reader to visualize both the characters and the world around them. *Evermore* has a familiar theme that attracts readers, but inside this book you'll find that the author has added some unique details that sets it apart."

—*Darque Review*

"*Evermore's* suspense, eerie mystery, and strange magic were interestingly entertaining.... I found Ever to be a character I could really respect.... Recommended."

—*The Bookworm*

"*Evermore* was a great way to lighten my reading load this winter and provided me with a creative magical story that I really enjoyed. This is the first in a series for Noël and I think she may have a lot on her hands.... *Evermore* has good and evil, likable characters, vivid descriptions, and a good story."

—*Planet Book*

"I fell into it easily, and loved the world Noël created.... The fact that Ever had psychic powers was truly interesting. They flowed neatly through the book and I felt Ever's pain. Trust me, this book was really good. I couldn't put it down. Alyson Noël created an amazing new world, and after this book I am so curious to see where it heads because honestly, I have no idea."

—*Reading Keeps You Sane*

"Ever is an easy character to like. I really felt for her because of all she lost and what she struggled with daily.... *Evermore* was a really fast, engaging read with some great characters. It is the first in the series, so I'm eager to see if we will learn more about Ever, Damen, and friends in the next one...it's sure to be a great read."

—*Ninja Review*

"The writing here is clear, the story well-defined, and narrator Ever has an engaging voice that teens should enjoy."

“*Evermore* is a fresh and original work that...branches out and explores new ground. Definitely recommended.”

—Cool Moms Rule

“I totally LOVE Alyson Noël’s *Evermore*....Noël has delivered a deliciously fresh new series that will be the next new thing that has every teen and even adults everywhere hooked and waiting for more. This is a keeper and a book that you have to go out and buy right now because if you don’t you will be missing out. People will be asking if you have been living under a rock if you don’t give *Evermore* a try, and that is just not acceptable.”

—Talk About My Favorite Author

alyson noël

Night Star

 st. martin's griffin  new york

For Bill Contardi-

Best. Agent. Ever

When it is darkest, men see the stars

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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“You’ll never beat me. You’ll never win this one, Ever. It’s impossible. You can’t do it. So why waste your time?”

I narrow my gaze and peer into her face—taking in her small, pale features, her dark clouded hair, the absence of light in her hate-filled gaze.

My teeth clenched tightly, voice low and measured, I say, “Don’t be so sure. You’re running a serious risk of overestimating yourself. In fact, you *are* overestimating yourself. I’m one hundred percent sure of it.”

She scoffs. Loudly, derisively, the sound of it echoing throughout the large empty room, bouncing off the plank wood floors to the bare white walls, meant to scare, or at the very least to intimidate and throw me off my game.

But it won’t work.

Can’t work.

I’m too focused for that.

All of my energy concentrated down to one single point, until everything else fades away and it’s just me, my readied fist, and Haven’s third chakra—also known as the solar plexus chakra—the home of anger, fear, hate, and the tendency toward putting too much emphasis on power, recognition, and revenge.

My gaze narrowed on its location like a bull’s-eye, right smack dab in the center of her leather-clad torso.

Knowing that one quick, well-directed jab is all it’ll take to reduce her to nothing more than a small bit of history.

A cautionary tale of power gone wrong.

Gone.

In an instant.

Leaving nothing behind but a pair of black stiletto boots and a small pile of dust—the only real reminder that she was ever here.

Even though I never wanted it to get to this point, even though I tried to work it out, tried to reason with her, to convince her to come to her senses so we could move toward some kind of understanding—cut some kind of deal—in the end, she refused to give up.

Refused to give in.

Refused to let go of her misguided quest for revenge.

Leaving me with no choice but to kill or be killed.

Leaving me with no doubt of how this one ends.

“You’re too weak.” She circles. Moving slowly, carefully, her gaze never once leaving mine. The stiletto heels of her boots assaulting the floor as she says, “You’re no match for me. Never were, never will be.” She stops and places her hands on her hips, head cocked to the side, allowing a stream of glossy dark waves to fall over her shoulder and hang well past her waist. “You could’ve let me die months ago. You already had your chance. But you chose to give me the elixir instead. And now you regret it? Because you don’t approve of what I’ve become?” She pauses long enough to roll her eyes. “Well too bad. You have only yourself to blame. You’re the one who made me this way. I mean, what

kind of creator kills her own creation, anyway?"

"I may have made you an immortal, but you took it from there," I say, the words firm, deliberate, ground out between clenched teeth, despite Damen having coached me to stay quiet, stay focused, make it swift and clean, and not unnecessarily engage her in any way.

Save your regrets for later, he said.

But the fact that we've found ourselves here means there is no *later* where Haven's concerned. And despite what it's come to, I'm still determined to get to her, to reach her, before it's too late.

"We don't have to do this." My gaze locks on hers, hoping to convince. "We can stop right here, right now. This doesn't have to go any further than it already has."

"Ha, you wish!" she sings, gleefully mocking. "I can see it in your eyes. You *can't* do it. No matter how much you think I deserve it, no matter how much you try to convince yourself of that, you're too soft. So what makes you think it'll be any different this time around?"

Because now you're dangerous—and not just to yourself, but to everyone else as well. This time is different, entirely different. As you're about to see...

Curling my fingers so tightly my knuckles instantly blanch, I steal a second to center myself, firm my balance, and replenish my light—just as Ava taught me to do—while keeping my hand low and steady, my gaze fixed on hers, my mind cleared of all extraneous thoughts, face cleared of all extraneous feelings—as Damen recently coached.

The key is to give nothing away, he claimed, to move quickly, with purpose. To get the deed done before she has the chance to ever see it coming—won't even realize what hit her 'til it's way past too late.

Until her body has disintegrated and her soul's moved on to that bleak, dreary place.

Refusing her even the slightest opportunity to make a move or fight back.

A lesson learned on a long-ago battlefield that I never thought would apply to my life.

But even though Damen warned me against it, I can't keep from apologizing. Can't stop the words *forgive me* from coursing from my mind to hers. Seeing her respond in the flash of pity that tempers her gaze before it's quickly diminished by the usual mix of hate and disdain.

Her fist rising—aiming for me—but it's too late. Mine's already in motion, moving forward, in full swing. Slamming right into her solar plexus, sending her reeling—spinning—shattering—headed straight into the infinite abyss.

The Shadowland.

The eternal home for lost souls.

Aware of my own sudden intake of breath as I watch how quickly she disintegrates. Fragmenting so easily it's hard to imagine she was ever once solid form.

My gut churning, heart crashing, mouth so dry and parched no words will come. My body reacting as though what just happened before me—the act I just committed—wasn't just a game of make-believe, but the horrifying real deal.

"You did well. You were right on target, right on your mark," Damen says, crossing the room in a fraction of an instant, his warm, strong arms sliding around me as he pulls me close to his chest. His voice lilting softly in my ear as he adds, "Though you seriously might want to lose the *forgive me* part until after she's gone. Trust me, I know you feel bad, Ever, and I can't say I blame you, but it's like we've discussed, in a case like this, it's either *you* or *her*. Only one can survive. And if you don't mind, I prefer it to be *you*." He runs the tip of his finger down the length of my cheek, tucking a stray chunk of long blond hair behind my ear, before he adds, "You can't afford to give her any sign of what's to come. So please, save the apology for after, okay?"

I nod and pull away, still fighting to steady my breath. Glancing over my shoulder at the pile of black leather and lace on the floor. All that remains of the Haven I manifested, before I blink it away.

and erase every trace.

~~Stretching my neck from side to side, and shaking out each of my limbs in a move that could be~~ taken as either letting off steam or preparing for more, Damen choosing to interpret it as the latter when he smiles and says, “So, another go then?”

But I just look at him and shake my head. I’m done for the day. Done with pretending to kill off the ghostly, soulless form of a former best friend.

It’s our last day of summer, our last day of freedom, and there are much better ways for us to spend it.

Taking in the sweep of longish, wavy dark hair that spills across his forehead and falls into those amazing brown eyes, before drifting over the bridge of his nose, the angle of his cheekbones, to the swell of his lips, where I pause long enough to remember how wonderful they feel against mine.

“Let’s go to the pavilion,” I say, my eyes eagerly searching his before moving on to his simple black tee, the silk cord bearing the cluster of crystals that hides underneath, all the way down to his faded denim jeans and the brown, rubber flip-flops on his feet. “Let’s go have *fun*,” I reiterate, taking a moment to close my eyes and manifest a whole new costume change for myself. Swapping out the T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers I wore to train in, for a replica of one of the more beautiful, low-cut corseted gowns I sometimes wore in my Parisian life.

And all it takes is one look at his clouded gaze to tell me it’s as good as done. The lure of the pavilion is pretty much impossible to resist.

It’s the only place where we can truly touch without the interference of the energy shield—where our skin can meet, and our DNA mingle, without any imminent danger to Damen’s soul.

The only place where we can disappear into another world that holds none of the dangers of the one that we live in.

And even though I no longer resent the limitations of our life here, no longer pay it much notice now that I know it’s a direct result of my making the *right* choice, the *only* choice, that my choosing to make Damen drink Roman’s elixir is the only reason he’s still with me today—the only thing that saved him from an eternity in the Shadowland—I’m happy to accept his touch in any form that comes.

But still, now that I know there’s a place where it gets so much better than this, I’m determined to get there, and now would be good.

“But what about practice? School starts tomorrow and I don’t want you to get caught off guard,” he says, obviously struggling to do what’s noble and right even though it’s clear that our trip to the pavilion is as good as done. “We have no idea what she’s planned, so we have to prepare for the worst. Besides, we haven’t even gotten to the Tai Chi yet, and I think we really need to. You’ll be amazed at the way it helps to balance out your energy—recharging it in a way that—”

“You know what else is good at *recharging* my energy?” I smile, allowing him no time to answer before my lips meet his, willing him to just say the word so we can go to a place where I can kiss him for real.

The warmth of his gaze filling me with a glorious swarm of the tingle and heat only he can provide. Pulling away as he says, “Fine. You win. But then you always do, don’t you?” He smiles, his gaze happily dancing with mine.

Grabbing hold of my hand and closing his eyes, as the two of us step through a shimmering veil of soft golden light.

We land in the middle of the field of tulips, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of gorgeous red blooms. Their soft red petals glinting in the ever-present, hazy glow, their long green stems swaying in the breeze Damen just manifested on his own.

The two of us lying on our backs as we gaze up at the sky, summoning a group of clouds overhead and shaping them into all manner of animals and objects simply by imagining it, before we clear it all away and head inside. Plopping side by side onto the large, white, *marshmallowy* couch, my body settling deep into the cushions as Damen reaches for the remote and snuggles beside me.

“So, where do we start?” he asks, brow lifted in a way that tells me he’s just as eager to begin as I am.

I curl my feet underneath me and rest my head on my palm, gazing flirtatiously when I say, “Hmmm...that’s a tough one. Tell me, what are my choices again?” My fingers creep under the hem of his shirt, knowing that soon, very soon, I can touch him for real.

“Well, there’s your Parisian life, which, as it just so happens you’re already dressed for.” He nods, motioning toward the deep neckline of my dress, his gaze lingering at the plunging décolletage before he meets my eyes again. “Then of course there’s the Puritan life, which, I have to be honest, really wasn’t one of my favorites...”

“Does it have anything to do with the clothing? All those dark, drab colors and high necklines?” I ask, remembering the ugly dresses I wore in those days, how uncomfortable they were, how the fabric scratched against my skin, and knowing it definitely isn’t one of my favorites either. “Because that’s the case, then you must’ve really liked me in my London life as the spoiled daughter of a wealthy land baron with an amazing wardrobe full of sparkly, low-cut dresses and gowns, and piles and piles of amazing shoes.” Knowing that’s definitely one of my faves, if for no other reason than the sheer simplicity of my everyday existence back then, where, for the most part, all of the dramas I faced were ones I instigated all on my own.

He looks at me, eyes grazing over my face as his hand smooths my cheek—that insistent energy veil stubbornly vibrating between us, but only until we pick a scene.

“Well, if you must know, I have to say that I’m most partial to Amsterdam. Back when I was the artist, and you were the muse, and—”

“—and I spent most of my time partially nude, covered only by my long red hair and the slightest slip of silk.” I shake my head and laugh, not the least bit surprised by his choice.

“But then I’m sure that’s not the *real* reason, is it? I’m sure that’s merely a coincidence, *right?* I mean, surely you were mostly interested in the artistic aspects of it more than anything else...”

I lean toward him, distracting him with a quick kiss to the cheek as I snatch the remote right out of his hand. Seeing the way his expression changes to one of mock outrage, as I enjoy myself with an impromptu game of keep-away.

“What’re you doing?” he asks, concern moving in as he makes a more serious attempt to seize the remote right back.

But I won’t give up. Nor will I give in. If for no other reason than the fact that every time we come here he’s in control of this thing, and for once, I’d like to be the one who gets to surprise him.

I hold it up high above my head, switching it from one hand to the other, determined to keep

well out of reach. Breathing a little heavier from the effort as I look at him and say, “Well, seeing how it’s so impossible for us to agree on a favorite, I figure I may as well just push a random button and see where we land...”

He looks at me, his face gone suddenly pale, his eyes grim. His whole expression, heck, his whole entire *demeanor* transformed in a way that’s so stricken, so serious, and, to be honest, such a complete overreaction to what the situation warrants, I’m *this* close to handing over the goods when I suddenly change my mind and click it instead.

Mumbling something about his typical male need to control the remote, as the screen springs to life with an image of—

Well—something I’ve never seen before.

“Ever!” He gasps, voice low, steady, but there’s no mistaking the urgency. “Ever, please, just give me the remote—I—”

He reaches for it again, but it’s too late, I’ve already slipped it under the cushion.

Already secured it from him.

Already seen the images that play out before me.

It’s—it’s the antebellum South. And while I’m not exactly sure where, I can tell by the houses, the way they’re constructed in a way I think is called Plantation Style—and by the way the atmosphere changes, the sky appearing hot, bright, and incredibly muggy in a way I’ve never seen or felt before in any of my other lives, that it’s the Deep South. Like an “establishment shot” in a movie—a picture that gives you clues you in to where you are in the story.

Then, just as quickly, we’re inside that same house. Focusing on a close-up of a girl who stands before a window she’s supposed to be cleaning—but is staring out of instead, her face soft and dreamy.

She’s tall for her age, narrow shouldered and slim. With gleaming dark skin and long lanky limbs that seem to go on for miles before ending in a pair of skinny ankles that peek out from the hem of her plain, cotton dress. A garment that’s so well worn it’s obviously been mended again and again. But it’s pressed and clean, just like the rest of her, and even though I can only view her in profile since she’s turned to the side, I see that her long dark hair spirals the back of her head in a complicated series of knots and braids.

Though it’s not until she turns, turns in a way where I can clearly see her face—that I look straight into those deep brown eyes and realize—

I’m looking at me!

I gasp—the sound of it echoing off the rounded white marble walls as I stare into a face so young and so beautiful, yet marred by an expression that’s saddened way beyond her/my years. And a moment later, when a much older white man appears, the meaning of it all soon becomes clear.

He is the master. I am his slave. And there is no time for daydreaming here.

“Ever, please,” Damen begs. “Just hand me the remote, now, before you see something you’ll regret—something you’ll never be able to erase from your mind.”

But I don’t hand it over.

I can’t do that just yet.

I’m compelled to watch this strange man I don’t recognize from any of my lives, take great pleasure in beating her—*me*—for the simple sin of dreaming of a better life.

I’m not there to hope, or dream, or anything of the sort. I’m not there to imagine faraway places or a love that will save me.

There is no saving me.

No better place.

No love will come.

This is how I live—this is how I will die.

~~*Freedom is not for my kind.*~~

And the sooner I get used to it, the better, he tells me—repeating himself with every lash of his whip.

“How come you never told me?” I whisper, my voice low, almost inaudible. So struck by the images before me, watching as I withstand the kind of beating I could never have imagined until now. Absorbing each and every blow with barely a shudder, with a vow of absolute silence and dignity I’d determined to uphold.

“As you can see, it’s not one of your romantic lives,” Damen says, voice hoarse with regret. “Parts of it—like the part you see now—are extremely unpleasant, and I haven’t had time to edit the one, or go over it in any way. That’s the only reason I’ve kept it from you. But as soon as I do, I promise to let you see it. Believe it or not, there were happy moments. It wasn’t always like this. But ever, *please*, do yourself a favor and turn it off before it gets any worse.”

“It gets worse?” I turn, my eyes clouded with tears for the helpless girl before me—the girl I used to be.

But he just nods, retrieves the remote from under the cushion, and promptly shuts it off. Leaving the two of us sitting there, quietly shaken by the horrors we viewed only a moment before. Determined to break the lingering silence, I say, “And the rest of my lives—all of those scenes that we like to revisit—are they edited too?”

He looks at me, brows merged with concern. “Yes. I thought I explained that the first time we came here. I never wanted you to see anything as upsetting as that. There’s no use reliving the trauma of things we can’t change.”

I shake my head and close my eyes, but it doesn’t do anything to stop the brutal images that continue to play in my mind. “I guess I didn’t realize it was *you* who edited it, I guess I thought *the place* somehow did it—like Summerland wouldn’t allow anything bad to creep in—or—*something*—”

I drop the thread, choosing to let it just dangle instead. Remembering that dark, rainy, creepy place I once stumbled upon, and knowing that like the yin and the yang, every dark has its light, including Summerland it seems.

“I built this place, Ever. Made it especially for you—for *us*. Which means I’m the one who edited the scenes.” He turns the remote back on, careful to choose a more pleasant view of the two of us sneaking away from a ball in full swing. A happy moment from the frivolous London life I’m so fond of—an obvious attempt to lighten the mood, to banish the dark we both just relived—but it doesn’t quite work. Once seen, those horrifying images are not so easily removed.

“There are many reasons we don’t remember our previous lives when we reincarnate—and what you just experienced is definitely one of them. Sometimes they’re just too painful to deal with—to hard to get over. Memories are haunting things. I should know, I’ve been haunted by more than a few of my own. For over six hundred years.”

But even though he motions toward the screen, motions toward a much happier version of my life, it’s no use. There’s no immediate cure for what I now know.

Up until that moment, I was sure that my life as the lowly, Parisian servant was as bad as it got. *But an actual slave?* I shake my head. I’d never even imagined such a thing—never saw that one coming. And, to be honest, the brutality of it took my breath away.

“The point of reincarnation is to experience as many different lives as possible,” Damen says, tuning in to my thoughts. “It’s how we learn the most important lessons of love and compassion—by *literally* walking in each other’s shoes—which, ultimately become our own.”

“I thought you said the point was to balance out our karma.” I frown, struggling to make sense of it all.

He nods, gaze patient and kind. “We develop our karma by the choices we make, by how quickly—or slowly—we learn what really matters in the world—how swiftly we can succumb to the real reason we’re here.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, my mind still adrift. “The *real* reason, I mean?”

“To love each other.” He shrugs. “No more, no less. It sounds simple enough, as though it should be rather easy to do. But one good look at our history, including the history you just saw, and I think it becomes clear what a difficult lesson that is for so many.”

“So, you were trying to shield me from this?” I ask, my curiosity starting to niggle at me. Part of me wanting to see more, to see how she/I got through it—and part of me knowing that anyone who learned to withstand a beating like that, with such silence and dignity, had already lived through far too many of them.

“Despite what you saw, I want you to know that there were bright spots for sure. You were so beautiful, so radiant, and once I managed to get you away from all that—”

“Wait—you *rescued* me?” I gaze at him, eyes wide, as though I’m looking upon my very own Prince Charming. “You had me *freed*?”

“In a manner of speaking...” He nods, but his gaze wavers, his voice goes tight, and it’s obvious he’s more than ready to move away from all this.

“And, were we...*happy*?” I ask, needing to hear it from him. “I mean, really and truly happy?”

He nods. Giving me a quick lowering and rising of his head, but it’s all that he gives.

“Until Drina killed me,” I say, filling in the parts he’s unwilling to share. It was always she who hastened my death, so why would a slave life be any different? Noting the way his face goes grim, and his hands begin to fidget, but still choosing to press ahead when I add, “So, tell me, how’d she do this time? Did she push me in front of a carriage—throw me off a cliff—drown me in a lake—or did she try something totally new and different?”

He meets my gaze, obviously preferring not to answer, but correctly assuming I won’t give up until I hear it from him, he says, “All you need to know is that she never repeated herself.” He sighs, face solemn and grave. “Probably because she enjoyed it too much, enjoyed thinking up inventive new ways.” He winces. “And I suppose she didn’t want me to get suspicious. But listen, Ever, even though what you saw was unbelievably tragic, in the end, I loved you, and you loved me, and it was wonderful and glorious for as long as it lasted.”

I look away, determined to absorb it, to take it all in. But it’s a lot. Too much for right now, that’s for sure.

“So, will you show me someday?” I face him again.

Seeing the promise in his gaze when he looks at me and says, “Yes, but first give me some time to edit it, okay?”

I nod, seeing the way his shoulders droop, the way his jaw loosens, and knowing that that was pretty much as hard for him as it was for me.

“But for now, what do you say no more surprises? Why don’t we go somewhere happier—better—*funner*, if you will?”

I sit there for a moment, feeling so alone with my thoughts it’s as though he’s not there.

Soon roused by the sound of his voice at my ear, saying, “Hey look, they’re getting to the good part—what do you say we become them?”

My gaze switches to the screen, where a very different version of me smiles radiantly. My glossy, dark hair sparkling with a collection of pins and jewels made specifically to match my beautiful, hand-sewn, emerald green dress. Seeing the way I hold myself with such confidence—sure of my beauty, my privilege, my right to dream all I want, to *obtain* all I want, to *claim* anyone I want—including this dark, handsome stranger I’ve only just met.

The one who makes the whole string of suitors I left back inside seem dreadfully dull comparison.

A version of *me* that's so opposite to the one I just saw a moment ago it hardly makes sense. And even though I'm determined to revisit that other *me* again soon, for now it can wait.

We came here to have a last bit of summer fun, and I'm going to make sure that we do.

Our hands clasped together, we rise from the couch and head for the screen, not stopping until we merge and meld, and become one with the scene.

My Parisian dress instantly replaced by an emerald green gown made especially for me, my lips nipping at the hard edge of Damen's jaw, flirting, teasing with the tip of my tongue, before spinning on my heel, lifting my skirts, and leading him deeper and deeper into the darkest part of the garden, a place where no one can find us—not my father, not the servants, not my suitors, not my friends...

Wanting nothing more than to kiss this dark and handsome stranger, who always seems to appear out of nowhere, who always seems to know what I'm thinking, who thrilled me with his tingle and heat from the very first look.

The very first moment he peered into my soul.

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