

*A
Hunger
Beneath
Her Smile*

By: Gwendolyn Doe

Prologue

Elianora had been two-hundred and ninety-three years when she first devoured a heart. It had tasted of copper and something sweeter underneath, and she had not hated it. She had licked her fingers clean before she thought to stop herself.

High Ladies did not hunger for such things.

“Elianora.” Her mother’s voice. “Are you listening to me?”

The cathedral returned to her in pieces: the gargoyles above, each one carved in the likeness of some dragon, their stone eyes catching the hearthlight in a way that made them seem to follow. No sun had ever entered here. No moon. Only the hearth on the dais, and the torches along the walls, and the shadows they threw that were longer and more alive than anything they illuminated.

“Every word,” Elianora said.

Behind her, Lucien made a sound.

“Still.” Thistle’s needle caught the light. The goblin’s grey fingers found the seam of the wedding gown and pinched. “I’ll not have you tearing this before Lord Calen’s even seen it on you.”

Elianora ran her tongue along her teeth.

“His golden hair,” she said. “How well it will look beside my red. What a portrait we’ll make for Santok.” Lucien’s sound became a laugh he swallowed badly.

Her mother said nothing. The inside of her cheek moved.

“Pardon me—”

The slap came at the small of her back, open-palmed. “Straight. A High Lady stands straight.”

Elianora straightened. The gargoyles watched.

“And smile. You are to be wed.”

“I am not unhappy. Only this room—”

“This room is perfectly adequate.”

“I meant only that the dark—”

“You mean only to embarrass us before we’ve even reached the altar.” The hearth popped. A log collapsed into itself. “You mean to give away Santok for the pleasure of your own wit.”

The cathedral had been a church once, built for Darastrix in some age when dragons were still worth praying to. The kingdom had grown up around it the way roots grow around stone—slowly, and without asking. Now the nave stretched back into a dark the hearth could not reach, and somewhere in that dark the old altar waited, cold and patient, as altars always were.

“I will not disgrace us,” Elianora murmured into the cavernous cathedral, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadows and the flicker of torch flames. The stone gargoyles perched along the walls seemed to leer at her, their hollow eyes accusing. She forced her shoulders back, repeating to herself: “I shall be the very portrait of perfection when Lord Calen crosses that threshold.”

A hushed chuckle drifted from behind. “You look ravishing, if that matters,” Lucien said, his baritone voice a comfort against the chill and their mother’s looming gaze. Elianora offered him a wan smile but did not trust her own reflection in the torchlight.

“I must not let my mind wander,” she whispered, more to steady the tremor in her chest than from any hope of success.

Her mother stepped forward, her dark-red hair gleaming like spilled blood in the hearth’s glow. “Your mind will not wander,” she repeated, voice low. Elianora’s throat tightened; her thoughts were already skittering away, as elusive as bats at dusk.

A metallic tang filled her mouth, and she swallowed sharply. The taste of blood pooled on her lips, trickling down her chin until she licked it back into her mouth. Only one more time, she promised herself. A heartbeat later, her mother’s palm struck her spine with a crack that echoed through the hall. “For the goddess’s sake, you are drooling.”

Elianora froze. She brushed at her sleeve, where crimson flecks marred the pale silk. A gargoyle huffed a disdainful hiss.

Lucien reached for her arm. “Surely no one will mind a mere stain?”

But Lady Anastasia—strict, unyielding—snatched the gown’s sleeve and scowled. “When does a Lady blot her own face with her arm?” Her question hung in the cold air.

“Never,” Elianora whispered, cheeks flaming.

Her mother pressed her chin, forcing her azure eyes up to meet those burning orbs of red. “Say it.”

“My mind was wandering,” Elianora confessed.

Behind her ribs, her heart pounded with guilt: the blood of her house had long been reviled, marked by ancient pacts with dragons and the shadow of the Azure War. It was Anastasia’s tireless battle that had cleansed their name among the elven courts. Elianora would not squander that redemption.

“I will not wander again,” she vowed, staring at a gargoyle whose stony head seemed to incline in approval.

A hollow rumble echoed through her belly. Lucien’s hand landed on her shoulder. “You are in command, Eli. Never forget.”

Before she could reply, Thistle lurched forward and yanked the lacing of her corset. Elianora gasped as her breasts heaved into the snug embrace of linen and lace. Her mother’s lips trembled into a smile as she dusted rose-pink powder across the swell of her cleavage. “Lord Calen will be well impressed.”

Elianora stood rigid, the off-white gown flaring around her hips like a pale flower in moonlight. In that moment, every crease and pleat was flawless. She looked perfect.

I am not perfect.

Her belly thundered its protest once more, and Elianora fought the urge to swipe the trembling drool from her lips.

“You’ll smother her,” Lucien warned, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword. The gesture a quiet statement of concern.

Their mother—Lady Anastasia—fixed him with a frosty glare. “A true Lady knows suffocation in every delicate form. Elianora is the very image of perfection. The less breath she draws, the more spotless

she appears.”

Elanora inclined her head, thin tendrils of hair dancing about her cheeks.

At her side, Thistle muttered an incantation of runes. Suddenly the wild coils of her hair were tamed into a single, glossy braid that cascaded down her back. She leaned toward the tarnished looking-glass and beheld a vision: herself as a savage lupine monster, maw dripping crimson, gore matted into her fur. In the next heartbeat, the beast dissolved, replaced once more by the poised and immaculate bride.

“Do not let your mind wander,” her mother intoned.

Elanora swallowed. “Yes,” she whispered.

Before another breath could pass, the cathedral’s great double doors thundered open. Torches guttered. A small goblin—skin sickly jade—scurried in, panting, eyes darting. “Lord Calen—”

All eyes snapped to the creature. Elanora pressed a gloved hand to her breast, heart hammering. “Is he well?”

“He is here to see you,” the goblin gasped.

Lady Anastasia’s lips curved in a cold half-smile. “Ill omens follow a bride who greets her groom at the last moment.”

The goblin trembled. “I—I warned him, my lady. But he marched on, heedless.”

At that instant, the doors swung wide once more, and Lord Calen strode in. Dirty-blond hair caught the flicker of torches; his green doublet was crusted with dark, congealed blood. Elanora’s pulse fluttered; her lips parted as he advanced.

“Lord Calen,” she murmured, quelling the storm in her mind with a practiced curtsy. “What a...pleasant surprise. Though some do say it is ill luck—”

He smiled, green eyes bright as poisoned emeralds. “Superstitions of the Blood Elves, my love. I ride still high from the hunt and could not bear to see you cloaked in calm. I needed to greet my bride in the flush of raw emotion.”

Elanora forced a gentle smile. “Of course, my lord.”

He let his hands drift to her waist, his fingers brushing the satin of her gown. “By the gods, you are ravishing.”

Her gaze fell to the filth under his nails—dark as spilled ink. “Yes, quite ravishing. Tell me, what beast met its end for such stains?”

“E—Elianora—” her mother began, but Calen waved her silence away.

“You ask fitting questions, dear heart. My party tracked a red wyvern to its roost. The creature’s wing-span was monstrous. Its head will hang in our hall as a trophy.”

Elianora inclined her head again, eyes tracing each dried drop on his doublet, the tears in his breeches, the fresh blood on his boots.

“Focus, child,” Lady Anastasia whispered.

Elianora blinked away her fascination. “Indeed.”

She licked her lips. “You should cleanse yourself before the ceremony.”

Calen’s brow lifted. “Naturally, my lady. Have I mentioned how divine you look? Forgive my chatter—I am simply elated by the hunt’s success, and I wished to share that fervor with you—”

Elianora drew a shuddering breath, pressing her hand to her chest. “I know a way to transfer that elation to me,” she said softly.

Calen’s smile faltered, brows knitting. “And how might that be?”

“Elianora—” her mother warned, stepping back.

But Calen merely chuckled. “You’re drooling, Eli,” he teased, reaching out to brush her chin with a gloved finger.

In a heartbeat, she seized his hand. Her fingers, stark white against his glove, closed with impossible strength. Calen froze, his bravado vanishing as the warmth seemed to drain from his face. The scent of his sudden panic was intoxicating.

“I would not,” she whispered.

The groom stumbled back. “Eli...are you well? You’re...making me uneasy.”

Her spine arched, vertebrae clicking into place with dreadful precision. “I know,” she said, low and terrible.

He lurched as though struck. Panic widened his eyes as she leaned forward, canines elongating into vicious points.

“What in Nine Hells—” he gasped, hand drifting to the hilt of his sword.

A guttural growl rolled from Elianora’s throat. Her form bent, bones cracking like wood as she dropped to her knees, her neck twisting with unnatural grace.

“Lord Calen,” her voice rumbled from some abyssal depth. “You need to run.”

1

To be Eaten or to not be Eaten */Elianora/*

In the underground Kingdom of Santok, red was the color of mourning. It blazed through the cavernous air, painted the folds of my dress and the pyre's flames, and marked my cheeks in twin banners of humiliation. I had burped Lord Calen's aftertaste before his entire funeral procession. Even now, heat crawled up my neck, mortifying and hungry.

He would have made a magnificent husband. He had made a magnificent meal. I could not decide which thought tasted more of loss.

"Smile, Elianora." Mother's command came cold as silver, slicing the air between us.

"It's a funeral." My eyes clung to the blaze, to Lord Calen's mother, whose sobs wrung the cavern raw and made my own rehearsed sorrow feel thin.

Still, the memory of his flavor melted across my tongue.

I pressed the craving down, hard.

"You need a new husband," Mother continued.

"More like a new appetite," I whispered, but the words fell lost beneath the roar of fire.

Mother's gaze snagged me with a look she reserved for the aftermath of disasters. "You will be flawless. You will be radiant, irresistible, and every eligible lord here will forget that you are—"

"Cursed?"

“Unlucky in love,” she finished, smoothing the seams of her gloves; always the architect, building truth from unyielding rules. “Lord Calen was mauled by a wolf on his hunting trip. That is what happened.”

Not untrue. Fey could not lie. But Mother could twist any edict into a masterpiece of implication.

So I smiled, teeth gritted, until it ached in my jaw. Lucien, beside me, held his composure until a tremor shook his shoulders; Mother jabbed his ribs with her elbow, still staring straight ahead.

“He was a fine man,” Lucien intoned, his hair catching the pyre’s light in the exact shade as mine. I mustered a gentle smile in reply, only to stiffen as Mother’s scrutiny flayed me clean. My hands closed to fists; red-black blood clung beneath my nails. I tasted it when I licked my lips, and nearly salivated. That blood once belonged to Lord Calen, whose flesh now curled and split in the fire’s embrace.

Mother turned, her voice freezing as she announced, “I’m off to speak with Lady Astrea. Stay out of mischief.”

Lucien’s palm settled on my shoulder. “It’s all right, Nora.”

Nothing about this was right, but I wanted to believe him. Still, the memory of tendon parting beneath my teeth, heat and salt and blood—it twisted delight down my spine, and I trembled with the force of it.

“We’ll learn to master this...curse,” Lucien promised, the words as gentle as an oath. “You have me. Always.”

I wrapped an arm around his waist, a twin brace against the world. “You’re a jewel, Lucien.”

A new touch landed light as ash on my shoulder: High Lady Vesperine, Calen's mother, her eyes swollen and glistening, her misery a red tide. For an instant I braced for a slap, punishment for what I'd done. Instead, Vesperine wilted, pressing her hands to her cheeks and gasping through sobs.

"Oh, sweet Elianora, it's so tragic," she choked. The sound scraped me. Lucien's eyes went wide; he tried to signal something, but I was already surrendering, awkwardly drawing Vesperine into my arms.

"A terrible loss," I said softly, voice smooth as ever. Fey did not apologize—not when the stains of guilt shone crimson on our claws.

Her weeping only grew, brown curls breaking loose to dust my cheek. I patted her back, shooting Lucien a silent plea for rescue, but he only nodded toward a servant gliding by with trays of water.

"Let me fetch you water," I offered, catching at the only helpful thing within reach.

She hiccupped, trembling. "You're so kind, Elianora. I feel so wretched."

"It's all right, Your Grace. We share this grief. Calen would wish us to endure."

At that, my stomach rumbled loud and low, the hunger surging. Vesperine's scent curled up from her skin: cloves and pine needles, a balm and a wound, and so very much like him.

"Oh, you poor creature. You haven't eaten in ages, have you?" Lady Vesperine's panic shimmered around the edges of her composure, her voice trembling. She could not know the hunger gnawing at my every thought. Guilt lanced sharp as glass through my ribs. She beckoned me toward a table, where mushrooms glistened slick in oil and moss salads tangled; skewers of ever-bat and spider legs still wriggled faintly, as if even now they clung to life. Lady Vesperine pressed eel slices to her tongue, tears streaming silent and relentless, while I reached with feigned gentleness to steady her quaking shoulders.

"Will you not eat, my dear?" she managed, voice stuttering on each syllable.

The hunger twisted, deeper this time. All these pale morsels, these tasteless things—I craved the pulse and heat of true flesh. Still, I managed a blade-sharp smile. “I lack an appetite, Your Grace.” She nodded, swallowing broken sobs.

Then, a hand at my shoulder, and firelight catching on Lucien’s too-white grin. “Mother wishes to see you. I’ll remain with Lady Vesperine,” he murmured, already shepherding the trembling woman away with a courtly bow.

I slipped through the swirl of bodies, drawn to Mother where she stood, her hair a darker wash of scarlet than mine, her skin nearly luminous in the pyrelight. She was not alone—a man held station beside her, taller than most, laughter tracing patterns in the air as he offered Mother a jeweled glass. My pulse hitched, memory scraping raw.

Like Lord Calen’s father, my own had been lost to fate not so long ago—all beyond my hand, for once.

He had gambled away hours and coin alike in Vernrum’s black market, thumbing his nose at destiny. Yet even a consort to the High Lady cannot outrun a reaper’s patience. We’d never been close. He embodied all the shadows Mother had demanded Lucien and I outgrow, sculpted instead into the Blood Elves Vernrum required.

“Mother, Lucien said you wished for me?” I slipped to her side, a gloved hand ghosting over her shoulder; both she and the stranger turned, eyes cool as arctic water. The warning in Mother’s gaze was needle-sharp—I dropped into a perfect curtsy.

The man’s smile was a practiced knife. “Oh, please,” he murmured. I let the mask drop over my face, lashes fluttering as he captured my hand.

“Elianora, meet Lord Evander, heir to the Star Elves,” Mother pronounced.

Don't shatter this, Elianora. The order echoed in my mind. My crimson gown threw fire from every curve as I rose. Lord Evander's gaze lingered; he pressed a kiss to my knuckles, feather-light.

I felt nothing. This ritual had played itself out too many times, betrothals blooming and fading like wilting flowers. What difference could Evander make? How long before court whispers curdled beneath our feet?

Still, the hunger in me wondered what he might taste like—a richer blood, perhaps, than any before.

I smiled, flawless. “A pleasure, my Lord. Tales of Starkk fascinate me. I understand the city never sleeps, its skies painted with endless aurora.”

Evander brushed midnight-dark hair from his brow, eyes kindling. “You know our customs, then? I admire a lady who studies.”

I matched his smirk, folding gloved hands. “Naturally, my Lord.”

Mother intervened. “We would be delighted to host Lord Evander in Vernrum for a fortnight. Our tradition, shared with honored guests.” Her words fell soft.

His eyes burned with calculation; we both knew why he stood here, amid funeral and rumor. He bowed, graceful. “I would be honored. Let me confer with my mother—I will confirm our arrangements.” In a breath, he vanished toward Lady Astrea, footfalls a whisper.

Mother's eyes sparked in the firelight, triumphant. “This is wonderful, Elianora.” She leaned close, voice pitched for me alone. “And I have even better news.”

The goblet trembled in my grasp, its stem slick beneath my unsteady fingers. Wine sloshed over the gold rim, pooling dark as old bruises at the base. I lifted it—not for the flavor, never for that, but for

the cold bite of metal against my lips, an anchor to keep me from splintering under the weight of what I'd done.

"What is it?" My voice husked out, raw.

She leaned close. "Lady Astrea was just telling me of a witch," she murmured, and something coiled in the air between us. "She's part of the Maiden coven. Apparently, her research touches on matters... quite relevant."

My chest hollowed, ribs drawing tight as a snare. "Mother," I hissed. "You didn't speak of my... condition."

A razor-thin curl of her lips. "Of course not." Her laugh scraped like glass. "The subject of lycanthropy arose on its own. There's been some unrest near Starkk; the lycans are restless, making trouble." She flicked her gloved hand, as if dismissing mere gossip. "Because of this, Lady Astrea is seeking a cure—a way to infiltrate, though I shan't trouble you with the particulars. The point stands: there may be a cure."

The words rattled through me—a single, hollow knock that emptied my chest of all but longing.

"A cure?"

I glimpsed it: dawns free of blood beneath my nails, nights washed clean of raw hunger. No more skulking in shadow, no more beast in my skin. Only Elianora, nothing monstrous left to bear.

"Indeed, my darling." Now her tone gentled, softer than I remembered since before the first shifting moon. "Our handmaid has already sent word to the witch. She will come soon."

For a moment, the world fractured along a seam of hope. My betrothed lay dead by my hand, yes. But this—a fissure in my prison, light bleeding through. A chance to be whole, to claw my way back to perfection. To become Elianora anew, not merely the creature that wore her face.

*Guildmistress**/Vivian/*

My dagger tore through the frosty air, breath bubbling in mist as I heaved, pivoting on my heel.

A flash of pink.

I spun into nothing.

Then the faint crunch of snow underfoot. I whipped around, braid lashing across my face, dagger leveled in defense.

Vex stood there, chest heaving, twin axes raised. My blade hovered at her throat. A smirk curved my lips. “Got you.”

Her rose-bright eyes blazed, horns angling back. “Indeed you did,” she said in that silky, infernal drawl.

I slid my dagger home, sheathing it at my thigh, hitching my cloak’s furs closer. “It is cold today,” I muttered.

We fell into step, trudging in silent rhythm toward the sanctum, just like every field exercise.

“It’s always cold in Ruhan.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, but colder than usual. Feels like something’s amiss.”

“Vampires are always so superstitious,” she teased, poking my side as we dodged skeletal branches and ice-coated roots.

“Says the Hellspawn,” I snorted.

Her pink skin glowed against the snow. I reached out, yanked her hood up and over her horns.

“How you ever stayed hidden as an assassin, I’ll never know.”

“Unlike you, I don’t announce myself,” Vex retorted.

We reached the sanctum's carved doors just as I lifted my hand to the jeweled plate—and they swung open before I could touch it. Vex shot me a sideways look. “One of us must be in trouble,” she murmured, pulling off her hood with a careful twist.

The Pale Hand's refuge was hewn into the mountain's heart. We threaded through narrow, torchlit corridors until they broadened into a high dome—stone pillars reaching toward unseen heights. The assassins lounging in the common chamber fell silent at our entrance.

“Vivian...” Ingram's voice cracked. I tapped Vex's shoulder, a silent farewell, then strode toward him.

He looked like he'd been torn from sleep—tousled black hair, red eyes flashing panic. “The Guildmistress wants to see you. Personally.”

Gooseflesh crept across my arms. Before I could think, I drew my dagger, pressing the tip to his throat. Several assassins recoiled, forming a tight circle. “Is this some kind of joke?” I hissed. “She never summons us.”

Dagella's voice cut through the tension. “It's not a joke, Vivian.”

I exhaled and sheathed my blade. “Where is she?”

“In the inner sanctum, by our temple of Lothara,” Ingram said, nodding down the echoing hall.

My teeth clenched. Lothara, goddess of shadows and deception, patron of assassins—her temple was the last stop for those the Guildmistress deemed unworthy.

My hand drifted to my dagger as I slid it into place. “Very well. I'll see you all... later.”

Without another word, I strode into the corridor, cloak swirling in the torchlight's flicker.

It was the longest, most hellish walk of my life. They say your life flashes before your eyes before you die—but all I saw was death. Every victim I'd drained of blood, every life I'd snuffed out. That was me. That was all I knew. And here I was, bound for slaughter before I'd even tasted living.

The corridor tightened as I pressed on—walls of jagged black stone forcing me to turn sideways. No torches flared in this dead place. Instead, pale strands of enchanted silk stretched across the ceiling,

quivering with a faint silver glow. They shivered as I passed, whispering the news of my coming deeper into the mountain.

The tunnel erupted into the temple of Lothara. The air grew warmer and colder at once, as if the mountain exhaled a cursed breath. A massive dome had been hewn from obsidian so dark it swallowed the silk's glow. Alcoves ringed the chamber, each cradling a statue of deception: a veiled maiden, a smiling mother, a dagger-wielding warrior hiding her blade. At the room's heart stood a polished black altar, crusted with centuries of offerings. Behind it, Lothara's eight-pointed mark was carved into stone, a single crimson gem pulsing like an unblinking eye.

Guildmistress Zhero waited beneath that gem. She clung to the wall like a living statue—her lower half a monstrous black spider, legs braced against the rock. Crimson sigils ran along her bulbous abdomen, echoing the jewel's shine. Above the waist, she looked almost elven—until you noticed the second pair of arms folded neatly beneath her chest and the cluster of tiny eyes glinting at her temples. Two main eyes tracked me. The rest scanned the shadows, the pillars, the sealed door, hunting for witnesses.

Fine strands of web draped from pillars and pooled around the altar like funeral veils. Bundles hung overhead—some too small to be bodies, others not. The door scraped shut behind me. My hand twitched for my dagger, but drawing iron here would only guarantee a slow, painful death.

I dropped to one knee and bowed. "Guildmistress."

Silence stretched. One of her legs tapped the wall—sending a shiver through every strand of silk. Then she descended, legs moving without a whisper. Horn-hung chains chimed as she approached. She halted before me, the hooked tip of a black leg yanking my chin upward.

Zhero's lips parted in a smile, slender fangs glinting. "Vivian," she purred, each syllable sticky. "I heard a rumor."

My pulse throbbed. "A rumor?"

Her other eyes roamed the chamber. "Or perhaps fact. It isn't easy to kill a dragon, you know?"

My brow rose. *Praise?*

“Some think it’s as simple as eliminating anyone else,” I mused.

She chuckled—a low sound rattling my ribs. “But us, Spiderfolk, are supposed to be the Pale Hand’s greatest assassins. Yet you’ve outdone all of us.” I bowed again. Her leg hooked beneath my chin, tilting my face upward. “Which dragon was it?”

“High Lord Fryrdim,” I said, meeting her gaze. “A red dragon.”

She hummed in satisfaction. “And you ventured to the Third Layer of Hell to finish this? Splendid.” Her many eyes glittered as she leaned close. “Now, tell me... what reward would you like?”

My freedom.

The words rose so quickly they nearly escaped my lips.

“Nothing, Guildmistress,” I murmured, voice steady. “I need nothing.”

“Ah...” Her three chitinous legs tapped a slow, deliberate rhythm on the stone floor: *click... click... click...* “What you truly crave is freedom.”

My heart stumbled against my ribs. I forced my features into an expression of placid calm.

“I—”

“There is no need to utter it aloud, my dear.” Zhero’s smile unfurled like a blade, a single fang gleaming in the torchlight. “The coin you claimed for slaying Fryrdim was nothing short of spectacular. Your debt teeters on the brink of repayment.”

A cold bead of sweat slid down my temple.

“Yes... so very close.” With a soft rasp, Zhero circled me. The serrated points of her legs left thin, echoing scratches on the flagstones. When she paused, she inclined her head, her many eyes studying me like a coven of witnesses. “Yet before I release you, there is one final service I require.”

“Anything,” I blurted, heart hammering. “Name it. I will kill whoever you command.”

Something almost tender flickered in her expression. “There is a lady in Santok soon to ascend as High Lady. Rumor clings to her like shadow: she has contracted a grievous case of lycanthropy, and her appetite for her betrotheds is... insatiable.”

“Betrotheds?”

“Three so far, devoured in turn.” A hint of amusement danced in her eyes. “But it remains a whisper, no more.”

“Of course,” I said, voice level. “Best to exterminate the threat before she tastes a fourth.”

“I knew you were clever.” Pride warmed my chest before I could still it.

Zhero’s arm slid to the belt at her narrow waist. From beneath her robes she drew a tightly rolled parchment, offering it between two clawed fingers. I uncurled it. The portrait that greeted me was achingly beautiful: pale skin carved by moonlight, lips set in determined lustre, hair tumbling in wild red waves like blood-stained flame.

I memorized every detail as though imprinting it on my soul.

“You, Vivian, are a witch of the Maiden Coven, housed here in Ruhan,” Zhero intoned. “High Lady Anastasia begs for a witch versed in lycanthropy—a healer who can save her daughter.”

“And while I feign that cure, I poison her,” I concluded softly.

“I care not by what means,” Zhero rasped. “An untraceable accident, a whispered lullaby in her sleep, the beast within finishing the deed—so long as her death cannot be traced to the Pale Hand.”

I lifted my gaze from the portrait. “Why?”

Her clicking legs stilled. Silence bloomed around us like a funeral shroud, only to be broken by her reawakened smile. “This mission is too vital for questions.”

I bowed my head. “I understand.”

“Good.” She resumed her slow circle. “Do not rush. Infiltrate her trust as a shadow slips through keyholes. Learn her habits, her little vanities, the secrets she guards beneath satin and iron. If you must coax her to fling herself from the battlements, so be it. Only ensure she dies.”

Her spined leg curled beneath my chin, tilting my face upward so our gazes met. “And once she is gone,” Zhero whispered, breath cold against my skin, “your freedom will be yours.”

I searched the dozens of gleaming eyes for deceit and found only my own reflection staring back.

“Simple as that?” I asked.

“Simple as that.” She melted into the temple’s shadows.

“Pack your belongings, Vivian. A carriage departs at dawn. You ride for Santok.”

I stared at the painted lady’s face—my intended victim—and felt the weight of my promise tighten around my throat.

3

No Heart Beneath Her Cloak

/Eliana/

No moon or sun ever pierced the vaults of Santok. I’d lived my whole life beneath this blank cavern and never glimpsed their distant light. Tonight, at Vernrum’s highest alcove—where Santok stutters on the brink of the surface—I stood closer than I’d ever dared dream.

Mother drummed her fingers on the weathered stone beside the spiraling bridge that led upward, to surface kingdoms and the Fey Wilds. Our guards ringed us in spiked armor that pulsed in the mushroom glow. Lanterns and braziers chased away shadows, but they could not chase away my hope.

Mother’s grip tightened at my waist. I twisted to her. “What is it?”

“There,” she whispered, pointing up the steep curve. A carriage glided into view, white and rimmed with sodden fur, droplets sizzling on stone as if snow had thawed in its wake. Towering stags pulled it, hooves clipped on the path. My fingers drummed a frantic rhythm against my hip.

This visitor would decide my fate. Only she could unleash the cure I craved to tame, the hunger that gnawed at my throat. A week’s journey from Whitmire to Vernrum had felt like an eternity—each day I’d risked feeding on someone’s life and losing my last shred of humanity. Lord Evander would arrive soon to begin our courtship.

I swallowed. The carriage halted. Despite the heat of Santok, the driver was swathed in fur. A cold whisper curled through the air as he climbed down and swung the door wide.

I braced for an old crone—wisdom etched in her orange-tinged hair, stooped shoulders bent by centuries. Instead, a vision slipped out: perfect bone and porcelain skin. Long blonde curls tumbled over a rose-colored cloak. My breath stuttered.

“High Lady Anastasia, Lady Elianora,” she said, voice liquid silk. She drew back her hood. Eyes—crimson and sharp—met mine. “I regret the circumstances, but it is my honor.”

Mother inclined her head. “Please rise. You are our honored guest.”

“I hail from the Maiden Coven of Ruhan. You may call me Vivian.” Her tone was soft, but it carried a blade’s precision.

Vivian. The name echoed. Too sweet. Too lethal.

“Our guards will secure your luggage,” Mother said. “Elianora will escort you through the forest to the palace.”

I forced a smile. Vivian’s eyes flicked to mine—a spark of recognition, as if she read the lies behind my calm. My pulse thrummed in my ears. Not from hunger, but something wilder.

“The palace lies down this path,” I offered my arm. “Through the mushroom wood. We’ll walk together—perhaps share a moment of light in this darkness.”

She hesitated, then nodded. The driver slipped away like a wraith. Vivian linked her arm in mine. Heat flared in my chest where her fingers brushed my sleeve. I sensed her chill through the layers of cloth, a frigid promise that made me shiver.

Vivian glanced at me. “Are you cold, my Lady?”

“No,” I snapped too fast. “Santok is never cold.”

“Then perhaps I am.” Her lips curved into a faint, knowing smile.

We left Mother and the guards behind. Giant mushrooms soared overhead, their caps dripping violet and sapphire luminescence. Silver moss crept over the black stone beneath our feet, glowing for a heartbeat before dying away again. Somewhere in the dark, water dripped in hollow, endless beats—our only audience as we walked side by side.

Vivian tilted her head back, eyes tracing the soaring caps of the mushrooms. Their fleshy umbrellas pressed against the cavern ceiling, each broad dome wide enough to hide a cottage beneath its rotting gills.

“I’d heard tales of Santok,” she murmured, voice hushed against the damp hush of the grotto, “but none spoke of this.”

“The mushrooms?”

She shook her head. “The beauty.”

I turned to her, bracing for mockery. Found only honest wonder.

“Most surface-dwellers reckon Santok little more than dirt, darkness, and creatures scuttling through its tunnels.”

“And are you?” Vivian asked.

“Am I what?”

“A creature who crawls through tunnels?”

A laugh threatened at my lips—my mother would have gasped at the irreverence. “Only on special occasions.”

Vivian’s smile widened, sharp points gleaming at her lips. My own grin slipped away, replaced by a familiar hollowness widening beneath my ribs. A small knot of hunger tightened in my gut, then flared like molten iron through my limbs. Vivian’s scent slipped beneath the earthy musk of mushrooms: winter wind, crushed rose petals, and something darker, metallic and fervent.

Blood.

My mouth watered.

I looked away, pressing my tongue against a fang until the pain bit back. *Not again.*

I’d eaten before leaving the palace—two plates of raw venison, and the bitter tonic our physicians swore would quell the tide. I should not crave anything now, least of all the healer come to save me.

Vivian’s fingers closed around my arm. “Are you unwell?”

“I’m perfectly well.”

“You’ve gone pale.”

“My complexion is always pale.”

“You’re trembling.”

I wrenched free and folded my hands behind me. “You’ve known me for less than five minutes—and already you assume what’s normal for me.”

Her brow rose. “I was under the impression I was summoned because what’s normal for you has become...a concern.”

Heat flared in my cheeks—though this was no response to her touch.

“We shouldn’t discuss that here.”

Vivian swept her gaze along the empty path. “I see no one.”

“The forest hears.” I inclined my head to the bioluminescent canopy. Pale tendrils dripped from the mushrooms like soggy hair, swaying despite the still air.

“Does it speak as well?” she asked.

“Only when it deems the message worth hearing.”

“Then I must strive to remain interesting.”

I turned back to the winding corridor. Pools of inky water lay at our feet, each mirror catching the glow above like captive stars. Vivian drank in every detail: each forked trail, every guard tower carved into the stone, every yawning tunnel swallowed by shadow. She was inquisitive for a healer. But witches were odd folk—perhaps the Maiden Coven trained them to examine every seam of a strange domain.

“How much were you told?” I asked.

“About Santok?”

“About me.”

Her expression flickered; amusement drained away so smoothly I wondered if it had ever been real.

“They said you were attacked months ago—left cursed with lycanthropy.”

“Cursed,” I echoed, bitterness coiling in my throat. “A lovely word.”

“They also said your previous healers failed.”

“Some failed. Others were useless.”

“And the difference?”

“Ignorance at the bedside,” I said softly. “Versus someone who offered more than pity.”

Vivian gave a low laugh—warm, unrestrained. It startled me, weaving tendrils of something almost...hopeful.

“That’s fair,” she said. “Did any find what triggers your change?”

“The moon, supposedly.”

“Supposedly?”

I tilted my chin toward the cavern’s ceiling. “No moon here.”

“Yet you still transform.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“How curious.”

“I assure you, it loses its charm when you wake drenched in someone else’s blood.”

Vivian halted. Regret coiled in my chest—Mother had warned me not to spill everything too soon. We didn’t truly know this woman, no matter how badly we needed her. One misplaced whisper could shatter my family’s rule and drown my hopes of becoming High Lady.

Vivian didn’t flinch. She simply studied me with those unnerving red eyes.

“Do you remember it?” she asked.

“Remember what?”

“Killing them.”

Visions flared: Lord Cyprian’s hollow stare. Lord Evander’s remains scattered across my bedchamber. Blood encrusted under my nails, stubborn through three days of scrubbing.

I forced my legs forward. “No.”

Not a complete lie. Snatches lingered—a scream wrenching free, the sick crack of bone, the metallic tang of blood on my tongue—and, worst of all, the thrill pulsing through me.

Vivian closed the distance. “That could be useful.”

“How is forgetting slaughter useful?” I demanded.

“It proves the creature doesn’t own you entirely. There’s a shred of yourself left.”

“There is no creature.”

Her gaze flickered to my trembling fists. “Then what do you call it?”

“A curse.”

“A curse is its own beast. It feeds, grows, learns exactly where to bite and presses in deeper.”

Her voice shed its playful edge, becoming distant, almost personal. I shuddered as the forest opened before us.

The palace rose from a white-stone column at the cavern’s heart. Hundreds of narrow windows pulsed with red witchlight. Bridges, thin as spider silk, arched from balconies to cliffs, vanishing over the abyss. Black crystal spires clawed at the cavern ceiling. Vivian stared, enthralled.

“Welcome to the Palace of Veins,” I said.

She let out a soft laugh. “An apt name for someone who’s sworn off eating people.”

I laughed, too—surprised by how sharp it sounded. She met my eyes, an unreadable flicker crossing her face.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“You’re watching me.”

“So are you.”

I resumed walking. “Your rooms are in the east wing, next to mine, so you can reach me quickly if—”

“If you feel like eating someone?” she finished calmly.

I glared.

“For medical purposes,” she clarified.

“Naturally.”

We climbed the steps beneath an arch shaped from ancient ribs. Two guards bowed, hooked swords at rest. The moment we passed between them, Vivian stumbled—so slight I might have missed it if I weren’t watching. Her fingers tightened around my wrist; a chill seeped through my glove.

“Vivian?” I whispered. She stared past me, nostrils flaring as if smelling something forbidden.

“What is it?” I pressed. She released my wrist and straightened.

“Nothing. The journey left me weaker than I thought.”

Inside, servants hauled trunks and trays through the grand hall. Guards stood sentinel. Beneath the carved staircase, a butcher’s boy delivered raw meat; blood seeped through the cloth, dripping onto the polished floor.

Vivian’s gaze locked on the crimson droplets. For a heartbeat, her eyes glowed brighter—then dimmed back to crimson. I glanced at my wrist where her fingers had been.

“Are you ill?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

“You looked pale.”

“Hungry.”

My stomach clenched. Before I could question her, Mother swept in, guards in tow. “Vivian,” she called, voice cold as dawn, “I hope my daughter has made you feel welcome.”

Vivian turned with a slow, deliberate smile. “She’s been most...attentive.”

A promise or a threat hid in her tone. I couldn’t decide which.

“Wonderful,” Mother said, fingers entwined. “Your chambers in the eastern wing await. You must be weary.”

“I manage,” Vivian replied.

“Then dine with us.”

My gaze flicked to the butcher's basket. "I would welcome it," Mother said.

"Or," I said softly, "we might begin."

Mother's brow rose.

"The examination," I clarified. "Surely that is why she's here?"

Vivian studied me, cool and still. "Impatient already?"

"I'm impatient to end this curse." My voice was steady.

Vivian nodded. "Of course."

Mother glanced between us. "Perhaps Vivian *does* need time to settle."

"I've had weeks in chains, waking to blood beneath my nails," I countered.

A hush fell. Mother's eyes narrowed. "Elianora."

I let the next words slip. "Lord Evander will arrive soon."

At his name, Mother's anger melted into dread. The Lord of the Astral Court must not meet the bride who devours men.

She turned to Vivian. "Tired still?"

"I'd prefer to see her now—before food or rest. Hunger may stir the beast."

A knot clenched in my throat. Mother cleared hers. "Use the sitting room. I will summon the physicians."

"Unnecessary," Vivian said.

Mother stiffened. "Our healers have tended her."

"And failed."

Silence draped the hall. A guard cleared his throat. I bit my lip to hold back a smile. Mother bristled. "They are the finest in Santok."

"I do not doubt it," Vivian purred. "But lycanthropy is not a common malady. Too many voices will only frighten the wolf."

"I am not a wolf," I snapped.

Vivian tilted her head. "Does the wolf mind what it's called?"

A low growl rose in my throat. Guards reached for silver. Mother seized my hand. “Elianora.”

Vivian’s eyes gleamed, detached curiosity like an insect under glass. Then she smiled. “Privacy.”

Mother hesitated, then nodded. “But the guards remain.”

“As you wish.”

She pressed my hands. “Call if you feel unwell.”

“I already am.” Regret stung my words.

Mother stepped back and signaled a servant. The guards opened the inner doors to the shadowed corridor.

I led Vivian up the broad staircase. She did not offer her arm; I missed the contact.

Portraits of High Ladies lined the walls, obsidian crowns rising like stalagmites from their brows.

One day, mine would join them—unless the Folk learned what I’d become and tore it down first.

Vivian paused before my grandmother’s portrait. “Your family cultivates intimidation.”

“We do.”

“Is that why they never smile?”

“You would not understand.”

Her lips curved, revealing those faintly pointed teeth—perhaps a trait of Ruhan witches. I turned away. At the corridor’s end, my sitting room doors stood open, two guards posted outside. I pushed them wide. Vivian entered first.

My mother had gutted the chamber of every conceivable weapon—no crystal vases left to shatter, no pokers by the hearth, and even the silver letter opener had vanished from my desk. Only a plush velvet settee and a handful of cushioned chairs huddled beneath the radiant crystal chandelier.

Vivian’s gaze skimmed over the emptiness. “Your mother is cautious.”

“Or terrified of me.”

“And do you fear yourself?”

I shut the doors with a soft click. “I was told you studied lycanthropy, not existential philosophy.”

She tilted her head. “Curses and philosophy share a cruel truth.”

“And that is?”

“They both resist simple answers.” She shrugged off a rose-tinted cloak and draped it over a nearby chair. Beneath it, a fitted black gown hugged her frame, the high collar secured by interlocking silver clasps from throat to waist. Leather pouches and a slender dagger dangled at her hip.

I couldn’t tear my eyes from the blade.

She met my stare. “For gathering herbs.”

“A strange shape for pruning petals.”

“In Ruhan, petals bite back.” She set a small leather case on the table and flipped it open, revealing glass vials, tied bundles of dried plants, polished silver instruments, and sharp, barbed needles.

My smirk faded. “And these?”

She smiled. “Depends on how cooperative you prove.”

“Perhaps I should fetch the guards.”

“To admit you fear a needle?”

“I fear nothing,” I snapped, tasting blood on my lip.

“Good. Sit.” No one had ever spoken to me that way—not a servant, not a royal physician, certainly not a guest. Yet I seated myself.

Vivian slid a chair so close our knees nearly touched. “When were you bitten?”

I tapped my lip. “A year ago.”

“By whom?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where?”

“Outside the city.”

Her eyes sharpened. “You left Vernrum.”

“I’m occasionally allowed beyond the palace walls.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

I crossed my arms. "My brother and I stopped at a tavern in the lower alcoves. I went ahead. Something struck me on the road."

"Why split from your brother?"

"He was occupied."

"With what?"

"Two men and an impressive amount of wine."

Vivian's lips twitched. "Your brother sounds delightful."

"He's a menace."

"Do you remember the attack?"

"I felt pursued, heard claws echoing in the tunnels, then pain."

"Did you see the wolf?"

"Only its eyes."

"What color?"

I hesitated. "White."

"White eyes?"

"They glowed in the dark."

She leaned forward. "And the wolf itself?"

"Black, I think. It happened too fast."

"Did it speak?"

I stared at her. "Wolves don't speak."

"Ordinary wolves don't infect elven nobility with lycanthropy."

A chill ran through me. "No. It did not speak."

Vivian eased back, unease flickering in her expression.

"What now?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"You can't interrogate me and then refuse to answer."

“I can when I’m the healer.”

“You haven’t healed anything.”

“And you haven’t shown me the bite.”

My hand rose to my shoulder. She waited. I stood and turned my back to her, fingers trembling at my gown’s clasp.

“Allow me,” she said softly.

“I can manage.”

“Of course you can.” Her footsteps slid forward behind me.

Vivian’s fingertips grazed my hand as she unclasped the gown. I pulled away and let her free one hook, then another, until the fabric fell loose around my throat. “There,” she murmured. “Sweep your hair aside.” I dragged my red curls to the right, baring the left side of my neck. For a long moment she said nothing.

“Well?” I pressed. Her cold touch flicked across the scar. Ice slithered through me. I sucked in a breath as the hunger writhed beneath my ribs, like a wolf straining at its cage.

Vivian traced one of the pale crescents left by those fangs. “Does that hurt?”

“No.”

Her fingers slid lower. “How about here?”

“No.”

She pressed the center of the mark. A flare of pain shot up my shoulder. I jerked back, whirling on her. She stood too close.

With her cloak gone, I smelled her clearly—frostbitten roses, that metallic tang from the woods—filling my lungs. My sharpened teeth bit into my lower lip. Vivian’s eyes fell to the bead of blood glistening there. Her expression shifted.

Just for a heartbeat I saw it: hunger stripping away her calm. She reached for me. I leaned back. Her hand froze midair.

“You’re bleeding,” she said.

“So I am.”

Her fingers clenched. “We should clean it.”

“It’s hardly a wound.”

“Even small wounds can harm.” Her voice tightened.

I wiped the blood with my thumb. She watched the motion like a predator.

“Are you certain you’re well?” I asked.

“Perfectly.”

“You look pale.”

“I am always pale.”

Her answer echoed the one I had given earlier. I narrowed my eyes. Vivian smiled, but her eyes stayed cold.

“Sit, my Lady.”

I didn’t move.

The wolf beneath my skin snarled at her command. Heat flooded my veins. Every sound in the palace sharpened: guards’ armor scraping stone, a maid humming as she dusted distant portraits, knives tapping wood in the kitchens below.

Then the heartbeats—dozens of them. The guards’ steady thud. The maid’s gentle flutter. The butcher’s boy’s nervous staccato. Every living pulse thrummed in my ears. Every pulse except Vivian’s.

She tilted her head. “What is it?”

I stared into her red eyes. The woman sent to heal me had no heartbeat.

*A Gilded Cage**/Vivian/*

Lady Elianora's eyes bore into me, ready to reignite a heart long turned to ash. She sat across the polished obsidian table, crimson hair tumbling over one shoulder in wild waves. Gone was the dark travel gown—now a dress shot through with gold embroidery—its sheen caught by the black crystal circlet nestled on her brow. There was no trace of the cowering woman from the sitting room, except in the way her gaze flicked to my chest with cold calculation.

I lifted my goblet, tipped the ruby wine, and swallowed slowly. Her eyes narrowed.

My gaze flicked around the dining hall. Six entrances yawned in the shadowed walls: two flanked Lady Anastasia, one swung open to the kitchens, and three vanished into dark corridors. Guards stood sentinel at four doorways. A fifth lay hidden behind a tapestry of ancient blood-elf triumph—the fabric's restless flutter betraying a draft beyond. The sixth doorway opened onto a tiny balcony suspended over the caverns below, impossible to reach without wings—or a brutal break of bones.

Palace security was tighter than I'd expected. Twelve soldiers in black, spike-fitted armor ringed the room, each gripping a hooked sword made for Santok's tight tunnels. Four more lurked just out of sight. Most watched me. Two watched Elianora, and they were the only ones I cared to note.

"To your recovery," High Lady Anastasia intoned, raising her goblet. Others followed suit.

Elianora's brother, Lord Lucien, lifted his wine with a halfhearted clang. "To fewer dead suitors," he drawled.

Elianora jabbed him under the table with her shoe. He yelped. "Your shoes have points."

"And you test my patience," she snapped.

Anastasia set down her goblet. "Lucien."

"What?" His smile was insolent. "We're all thinking it."

“I was not,” I said. Two pairs of red eyes spun to me. Honestly, I’d been savoring the thought of using the knife by Elianora’s plate. I offered a disarming smile.

Lucien leaned forward. “Is it true Ruhan witches keep hearts in jars?”

“I’ve seen several.”

His eyes went wide.

“Vivian,” Elianora warned, tone sharp.

“Yes, my Lady?”

“You didn’t answer.” Suspicion flashed across her face—shadows of something wilder danced behind her gaze.

Lucien’s grin went feral. “I like her.”

“You like anyone who fans your worst impulses,” Elianora retorted.

“Then I must adore you.”

Anastasia ignored them. All her attention bore down on me with the patient stillness of a stalking predator. “Our correspondence with the Maiden Coven noted your study of...unusual lycanthropy.”

“I study unusual deaths,” I replied.

Elianora paused her cutlery. The High Lady’s lips thinned. I let the silence press against us.

“Lycanthropy causes many deaths,” I continued. “Knowing how the cursed die is the first step toward learning how they might live.”

True enough. I knew fourteen tidy ways to kill a werewolf, each concocted in grisly detail.

Anastasia exhaled, easing back. Elianora remained tense. “And you think my daughter can be cured?”

“I’ve not conducted a full exam.”

“You examined me an hour,” Elianora shot back.

“I observed a scar and asked questions. If that counts as thorough in Santok, your healers must be worse than I feared.”

Lucien coughed, stifling laughter. Elianora kicked him again—this time I saw it coming.

She moved fast, though favoring her right leg—her left shoulder still a knot of pain from the bite. Her knife was in her left hand; her goblet to her right.

She would be easy to poison. A few drops of wolfsbane in her wine and her breath would slow, then stop. The court physicians, blinded by the curse, would never find a trace.

Moonroot would be more convincing. A pinch stills the wolf's howl. A handful boils the blood—fever, convulsions, death. A healer's tool. A mother's lament. My freedom.

I watched Elianora lift the goblet. Simple.

“Will it hurt her?” Lucien's voice had gone sharp.

“That depends.”

He blinked. “And if it does?”

“Then it isn't a cure.” I let him swallow that.

Lucien glanced at his sister—fear plain as daylight. Elianora barely moved. She still watched me. “Why can't I hear your heart?”

High Lady Anastasia froze. Guards tightened on hilts. There it was.

I set my goblet down slowly. “You hear every heart in this room?”

“I asked about yours.”

“And I asked about your hearing.”

Elianora's jaw clenched. “Don't dodge.”

“That's not an answer.”

Her fingers curled around her knife—a reckless move. A guard would cut her down before the blade flickered.

“I heard servants, guards, cooks below. But not you.” She traced the rim of her glass with a nail. “Why?”

“Perhaps your hearing isn't perfect.”

“It's damned good.”

“You've had it only a year.”

Her eyes flashed. “I know what I heard.”

Anastasia’s voice cut in, cool as steel. “You think our guest hides something, Elianora?”

I offered a small smile. “In this palace, secrets are currency.” Guards shifted. Lucien froze. Recognition flickered in Elianora’s gaze—careless of me.

Anastasia leaned forward. “Are you a threat to my daughter?”

Fey twist words until they bleed, but cannot force a lie. Truth tightened in my chest.

“I was invited to treat Lady Elianora’s condition,” I said. “I intend to do just that.” My promise was blood.

Anastasia held my gaze, then nodded once. “Then we understand one another.”

Elianora watched. Good.

Suspicion blinds. While she tracked my lips, she’d miss my hands.

A servant brought roasted cave fish. First to Elianora, per protocol. One guard’s eyes never left the dish; the other stayed on her. Not protection—preparation.

Elianora froze. “I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve barely eaten,” her mother said.

“I dined before Vivian arrived.”

“Hours ago.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Anastasia’s smile sharpened. “You need strength. Lord Evander arrives in three days.”

Elianora’s fork hovered. “I remember.”

“He must meet you at your best.”

“My third betrothed likely thought the same.”

Lucien flinched.

“Eat,” Anastasia commanded.

Elianora sighed, speared a piece of fish, and ate. The guards relaxed. Her throat worked. A second bite. A third. Her mother’s smile returned.

Interesting.

The rest of dinner passed under a thin veil of civility. Lucien quizzed me on Ruhan—how snow could swallow a body in an hour, and trees screamed when felled. I said nothing of the bones I'd sent to rest beneath that ice.

Anastasia turned to my cure. I promised small doses of herbs, to watch her sleep, appetite, temperament. All true. Small doses build trust. Observation reveals opportunity.

Elanora said almost nothing. She ate every bite her mother set before her, each chew slower than the last. When dessert arrived, the servants placed a dish of blood-red plums before her. Her mother counted each one as Elanora swallowed.

Afterward, two guards escorted her from the dining hall. One walked ahead, one behind. When she halted, they halted. When she glanced back, the rear guard's hand drifted to his sword hilt.

Elanora looked over her shoulder at me. "Try not to vanish during the night, Vivian."

"I have no intention of vanishing tonight."

Her eyes narrowed. *Clever girl.* Then the guards led her away.

I waited until the hall emptied, then asked a servant to show me to my rooms. The eastern wing was hushed. My chamber sat three doors from Elanora's sitting room, five from her bedchamber. A guard stood at each end of the corridor. No windows.

Behind the rooms ran a narrow servant's passage, hidden by a panel beside the hearth. Its old lock opened with the pin in my hair. Above the wardrobe, a ventilation shaft—wide enough for poison smoke, too narrow for a person. Outside my sitting room, a balcony connected to Elanora's by a stone ledge. Useful.

I dismissed the servant and opened my luggage. Folded gowns lay at the top. Beneath them, books on curses and transformations—gifts from a dead witch who no longer needed them. Under a false bottom, knives, poisons, lock-picks, garrotes, and a coil of spider-silk rope.

I drew out three vials. Wolfsbane—swift. Nightbloom—painless. Moonroot—perfect.

I set the moonroot on the table. Its dried leaves were silver and brittle, curling like claws. A lunar-curse remedy. A healer might prescribe it; a terrified mother might beg for it. I crushed two leaves with a stone pestle.

The first dose would bring fever. The second would burn stronger. By the fourth night, she'd struggle to breathe.

I tipped the silver powder into a vial, added water. It shimmered, then went clear. A knock sounded at my door. I slid the vial beneath an open book.

"Enter."

Elianora stepped inside alone. She wore a thin nightgown under a black robe. Her curls tumbled loose. Without her circlet, she looked younger—more a sleepless girl than the future High Lady.

"You shouldn't be here unguarded," I said.

She closed the door. "How do you know?"

"Your family favors guards."

"They favor caution."

"Is that what you call it?"

Her gaze flicked to my open luggage. I rested a hand on the book hiding the poison. "Come for another examination?"

"I've come for an answer."

"I've given you plenty."

"None about your heart."

"I have a heart." *It lies cold in my chest.*

Elianora stepped closer. "Does it beat?"

I smiled. "You already think you know."

"That's not denial."

"No."

Her eyes gleamed.

I pressed another fragment of truth into her palm without saying which question it answered.

She closed the gap, moving like a wolf; even her bare feet made no sound.

“What are you?” she asked.

“Your mother’s honored guest.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What are you, Vivian?”

“A woman who has traveled through nightmares and dawns to end your suffering.”

True enough—death ends all suffering.

Elanora studied my face. Fey blood hears the shape of truth but misses the secrets it hides.

“You choose your words like traps.”

“I did not realize care was a flaw.”

“It is,” she said, “when you use it to dodge every question.”

Her hand hovered over the open book. I let mine drop, covering the page before she could turn it.

Her gaze darted to my fingers.

“What are you hiding?”

“A cure unfinished.”

Silence swelled with that answer.

Elanora drew her hand away. “Will it lift the curse?”

“I do not yet know.”

I knew what a full dose would do. I didn’t know what a sliver would do to her blood.

“Comforting,” she muttered.

“You wanted honesty.”

“I want answers.”

“They’re the same.”

A heavy footfall echoed. Elanora stiffened. The door swung open without warning, and a dinner guard filled the frame. He looked at her, then me.

“My Lady,” he said, “you must return to your chamber.”

“I was with my healer.”

“The High Lady ordered you to return after the evening bell.”

“My mother cannot command when I sleep.”

The guard’s face was stone. “Your chamber, my Lady.”

Elianora’s hands curled, claws flexing beneath smooth skin. For a heartbeat, I expected her to snarl. Instead, she turned to me.

“We will finish this tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here.”

She slipped past him. He trailed her into the corridor. From my doorway, I watched as a second guard slid the bolt across her door. The metal rasped shut—a final verdict.

They noticed me at last. “Do you require anything?” one asked.

“I need her daily routine to plan her treatment.”

They exchanged a quick look.

“At the sixth bell she breaks fast in her chamber. Seventh, physicians examine her. Ninth, she walks the western garden. Midday, she attends council with the High Lady.”

“Unescorted?”

“No.”

“Leave the palace?”

“Only with permission.”

“Visitors?”

“With permission.”

“Kitchens?”

“No.”

“Library?”

“With an escort.”

“The city?”

“Not since the attack.”

Each answer another bar on her cage.

“And if she refuses?”

The guard glanced toward her locked door.

“We ensure her safety.”

Not hers—everyone else’s.

I returned to my room. By dawn, I knew when each guard’s shift would end.

When the second bell tolled, the northern corridor lay deserted for forty-three ragged breaths. By the fourth, a guard had abandoned his post to herd the kitchen staff upstairs. At the sixth, Elianora’s breakfast appeared beneath gleaming silver lids and was inspected twice before she could touch a single bite. Every meal was logged. Every door she crossed was recorded. The palace wasn’t safeguarding its heir. It was containing her.

Over the next two days, I carved out my own pattern. After breakfast, I haunted the library under the pretense of studying Santok’s medicinal fungi. I strolled the western gardens with Elianora, feigning interest in how exercise eased her symptoms. I prowled the kitchens, the bathhouses, the physicians’ quarters, and the mossy tunnels that funneled spring water to the eastern wing. I counted doors. I memorized locks. I learned which guards gambled, which drowned their sorrows in ale, and which trailed Elianora with trembling fear instead of loyalty. The eastern stairwell ended in a yawning ravine—one hard shove, and she’d plummet to her death. The bathhouse could be sealed from the outside; a heavy chain would pin her beneath scalding water. A shard of crystal railing in the western garden had begun to splinter—one misstep, and it would look like an accident. By the close of the second day, I’d uncovered seven ways to kill her.

Poison remained the simplest—but it required proximity. At the ninth bell, I found Elianora waiting beneath a grove of silver mushrooms in the western garden; two guards braced a few paces behind her. “You’re late,” she said.

“I arrived at exactly the hour I planned.”

Her lips curved. “That’s infuriating.”

“Intended,” I replied, and unlatched my case to reveal a vial of diluted moonroot.

Her calm fractured. “Is that the treatment?”

“Only the first step.”

“When will it work?”

“It may weaken the curse.”

“May?”

“Certainty is the luxury of the arrogant.” She reached for the vial; the guard behind her twitched.

Her gaze flicked from the liquid to my face. “Could it kill me?”

I swallowed. “In high enough doses.”

She turned the glass in her hand. “Is this a lethal dose?”

“Not yet.”

She studied me, then lifted the vial to her lips. The guard stepped forward. She froze. “What?”

“He must watch you drink it, my Lady.”

“I know.”

“The High Lady demands confirmation.”

“I said I know.” Still, he did not budge. She downed every drop. Only then did he step back. She wiped her lips on her sleeve. “Satisfied?”

I answered for both of them. “For now.” The moonroot would stir in her veins within the hour—her skin would flush, her limbs grow heavy, and if all went as planned, her heightened senses would dull. On the fifth day, her lungs would betray her. Freedom was not too far away.

Elianora handed me the empty vial. Our fingers brushed. Her skin burned; mine remained cold. She stared at our clasped hands—listening for a heartbeat that would never come. Then a bell rang through the palace. The guards snapped to attention.

“Time to return, my Lady.”

Elianora stared up at the glowing mushrooms. “We’ve only been here a few heartbeats.”

“Your walk is over.”

“I am the heir to this kingdom.”

“And the High Lady’s orders are absolute.” The wolf flickered in Elianora’s eyes. Her pupils dilated, her nails lengthened against her palms. Both guards drew hooked swords. I moved for my dagger—not to stab her, but to stop them.

Elianora exhaled; the faintest shudder ran beneath her composure, and the wildness in her eyes faded. “Very well,” she said.

A ripple traveled through the guards; silver lowered, slippers thudded softly in the grass. Elianora stepped forward into the cradle of their waiting blades, chin lifted, her spine a flawless bar of determination. At a distance, she wore her dignity as if it were spun of diamonds: the High Lady-to-be, poised and tranquil, returning to the glittering cage that claimed her.

I watched. Once, I studied cages as if preparing for an exam. Some were straightforward, iron-wrought and absolute. Others glinted with the sharpness of debt—a signature, a promise, the weight of obligation coiling around your throat. But the cruelest cages wore beauty as their shackles, their walls built of crystal corridors, their crowns bejeweled and heavy, their guards courteous as they bolted your doors behind you.

Elianora’s prison gleamed.

I glanced down at the vial in my palm, its contents undisturbed. To kill a prisoner should have been no more difficult than breathing; one swift and silent motion, and I would be done.

Yet there, in the hush before the palace gates, a different thought struck me. Since setting foot in Santok, I had believed myself alone in my longing.

But perhaps Elianora and I were both bound to the same empty promise.

Freedom.

*A Heart She Could Not Hear**/ Elianora /*

My future husband arrived with starlight burning beneath his skin, his gaze refusing to linger on me as he stepped to the base of the palace steps. Lord Evander slid from his carriage, posture precise, one hand poised behind his back. Tousled black hair grazed the collar of his sapphire coat, and the faintest constellation of silver shimmered along the angles of his cheeks.

The Astral Court had not stinted on escort: twelve guards marched in gleaming armor dark as the heart of a forest, each surface glossy enough to echo the mushroom-glow cast from the woods. Two servants trailed behind, cradling luggage; three more bore gifts for Mother and me, treasures bundled in velvet and silk.

A bow, low and practiced. “High Lady Anastasia.” Evander’s voice was cool. He was third-born, with two sisters standing between him and any claim to the Astral Court’s power—a fact that clarified his intent. He had crossed the kingdom for my title. Why else, when rumor crept like damp beneath every door, whispers curling about me?

Mother swept forward. “Lord Evander. Santok welcomes you.”

He pressed her hand with a courtier’s grace, then at last, at last, his eyes flicked to me. “Lady Elianora.”

I let my silver skirts fan in a low courtesy, as duty demanded. Had I denied Mother this moment, she would have transformed disappointment into legend. “My Lord.” The fabric swept wide, every pleat and fold meant to cloak the creature hunched inside my bones. Mother had powdered and combed me to perfection, hoping perhaps to smother my nature beneath layers of silk and scent.

Evander offered his hand; I took it. Beneath my fingers, his pulse hammered, slow and sure and desperate to be ignored. Hunger snaked through me. My stomach rumbled. Saliva gathered; I forced it down, breathing shallowly.

He raised my hand to his lips, mouth grazing my knuckles. “You are as beautiful as I remembered.” He smiled, all starlight and nothing else.

“You are too kind.” I matched his smile, but my cheeks did not flush—Mother’s stare sharpened, and her lips drew thin. “I hope your journey was comfortable,” I said, voice even.

“It was, my Lady.” Nothing more. Not a single wandering glance, nor a tremor of awe or desire. Lord Calen’s hands had fluttered at my waist, all but trembling at the vision I made; Lord Cyprian had battered my ears with poetry until I’d half a mind to devour him myself, the wolf’s appetite aside.

Relief should have followed that lack of wonder. Instead, a dull stone of disappointment settled inside my ribs. Of course I was monstrous. Of course affection would not bloom in such poisoned ground. Still—I had hoped, just for a moment, that love might stagger through the thorns.

Mother guided us inside, pace brisk. Above, courtiers lined the balconies, their chatter darting like startled swallows. Each syllable scraped my nerves raw; I winced. Vivian’s moonroot had dulled every sensation, but not today. I had awoken restored, senses cruelly keen.

A hundred heartbeats battered the air. Silk whispered along bare skin; someone’s throat clicked in a dry, greedy swallow. A chamber of living drums and perfumed blood, all of it forbidden. I could indulge, just once, and feast upon them; my secret would be ash. The temptation lapped closer than ever.

“Elianora?” Lucien’s concern pulled me back. “You look pale.”

I shook the heaviness from my head, mouth still thick with hunger. “I am pale.” I forced a laugh, hand still locked in Evander’s, though the touch did not comfort. His fingers curled tighter, meaning to steady me; it failed.

“Yes, more than usual.”

Mother’s glance was a sharp reprimand; I straightened, composing my features into the blank serenity she demanded. I slipped free of Evander’s hand. The pulse beneath his skin still beckoned, hot and restless, and if I lingered...

A sudden shiver down my arm—I turned, finding Vivian beside me.

I hadn’t heard her approach, not over the clamor. Relief cooled the back of my neck.

Vivian was a vision of autumn dusk: plum gown beneath a rose-pink cloak, blonde curls pinned back except for those artful strands that clung to her cheekbones. Her scarlet eyes seemed almost to drink the light.

“You’re staring, Elianora,” she murmured, voice lilting.

“So are you.” I measured her smile, remembering the hush where her heart should be.

She replied with featherlight mockery: “I’m simply observing my patient.” Her gaze flickered sideways to Evander, then back to me. “I didn’t expect your attention to be so... diverted. You look pale, Elianora.”

“I’m always pale.”

“So you remind us.” Vivian reached for my wrist; though I might have drawn back, I welcomed the chill of her fingers cool against my blood. The fever in my veins dulled beneath her touch, yet my heart beat faster for it, reckless. Vivian regarded me over the gentle press of her hand, scarlet eyes unwavering.

I looked to Evander, cutting off the question blooming in her eyes. “Perhaps your treatment is not working as intended.” That was the story Mother had seeded among Lord Evander and the rest of the painted courtiers: some lingering ailment, delicate and persistent.

Vivian shook her head. Her thumb pressed at the hollow of my wrist, close enough that the air between us spun taut, with Evander’s gaze sharp and silent at my side.

“It is only that the palace is crowded today,” I offered, voice pared thin.

Vivian tilted her head, as if sifting for a deeper answer, as if reading the tremor of my pulse beneath her thumb. “Your pulse was steadier before I came near.” Heat climbed my throat; I could feel it burning.

“Then perhaps you should step away,” I managed.

She did—all at once, a chill in the space where her hand had been, and the loss of her touch stung more than it should have.

At the head of the marble corridor, Mother halted. “Elianora.” The court turned, a hundred eyes electric and unyielding. My intended husband approached the entrance, and I had fallen behind, entangled with the woman meant to cure me.

I dipped my head in apology, the movement too sharp, and hurried forward. “Vivian was inquiring about my treatment’s effects,” I said, voice brushed with haste.

Mother’s gaze swept over me; then, with a flick, she pinned Vivian. “And?”

“Her skin is fevered, her pulse unquiet, and the press of Folk is straining her senses beyond necessity,” Vivian replied.

“I am fine,” I shot back.

“I never said you were not,” Vivian returned, her eyes thin, as if measuring every syllable. Evander stepped forward, interest flickering in the depths of his eyes.

“You’re the witch I’ve heard of—the one to cure Elianora?” He looked her over, not quite asking, not quite doubting.

“Yes. I am Vivian.” She did not curtsy, did not offer her hand.

Evander inclined his head. “Then you have my gratitude.”

Vivian met his eyes. “Lady Elianora is not yet cured.” Her correction cut soft, but Evander’s brow drew tight, as though the words themselves had scored him.

Mother gave a brittle little laugh. “Vivian possesses an unusual manner for a healer. I suppose it’s the way of witches in Ruhan.”

Vivian grinned. “So I am told.” The musicians seized the moment, pitching music into the air before Mother could dig deeper, and she drew Evander away toward the waiting ranks of nobles. I moved to follow, but Vivian caught me again—a hand at my wrist, colder this time, as if a warning laced her fingers.

“You’re trembling, Elianora.”

“I am not.” The denial flared between us. Vivian gentled her grip, but did not release me; her fingertips recorded every shiver, every mutiny of my body.

“The moonroot should have dulled your senses,” she pressed.

“It did.”

“And now?” Her eyebrows arched, a challenge.

The hall narrowed around me, sound and scent crowding in. I tried to sift a single voice from the tide, the pound of blood in my veins a drumbeat. Somewhere past the receiving chamber, a stomach protested with a hollow growl.

“I can hear someone’s stomach in the next room.”

Vivian bit her lower lip. “Any hunger?”

I wanted to say no, to sever the question there, but the word snagged. “Nothing I cannot control.”

“That is not what I asked.” She stepped closer, her cold presence folding around me, eclipsing the fever-dense air of the hall. She was so cold, Vivian; so silent.

“You should remain near me tonight,” Vivian said, her voice just for me. “For treatment.”

“Of course,” I whispered, words brittle. “What else could you possibly mean?”

“Nothing.”

She looked at me, steady, then withdrew her hand and disappeared.

Dinner came at the tenth bell. Mother had decorated the dining chamber for Lord Evander’s arrival: silver flowers rooted in the obsidian pillars, enchanted stars wheeling beneath a darkened vault, candles massed like a gathering of ghosts. Their smoke tangled above us, thickening every taste and scent.

Evander claimed the seat at my right. Vivian settled three chairs to my left: close enough to watch, too distant to touch. She watched me through the first course, and the second, and by the third I no longer bothered with stealing glances back.

Evander spoke mainly to Mother: iron mines in Vernrum, the tangle of trade roads shuttling toward Starkk, the measure of men Santok could muster in war. The court pulsed around us, a thousand scents and hungers, and through it all Vivian’s gaze marked me, pulse to pulse, as if reading something yet unspoken beneath my skin.

I knew our iron yields; I could recite the roads that drowned in the season of underground rain. The noble families—I knew them all, who had the blood and blades to tip a war. Evander heard it, let the silence draw out like a thread. “You are remarkably prepared,” he said, just as I finished outlining which tunnels could bear the weight of supply wagons and not fold under the pressure.

I answered with teeth behind a smile. “I have spent my entire life preparing to rule.” My nails carved crescents into my palms, but Vivian watched the twitch and tension of my hands.

Servants swept in. Gold platters bore the main course: slabs of venison, thick and barely touched by flame, surrounded by pale cave-grown vegetables. Blood fanned beneath the meat, flooding the bowl of mushrooms. The scent struck, swift and sudden. I straightened, bones rigid with restraint.

So many heartbeats—they clattered in my ears, raucous and relentless. Candlelight faltered with every drawn breath. Metal scraped porcelain. Mouths tore into flesh. With every fork pressed, blood spilled anew from the venison, pooling, soaking into mushroom flesh. I stared at my empty plate. When the servant set a quivering cut before me, I could not look away.

“Is it not to your liking?” Evander asked, eyes on the wine list.

“It is lovely.” Hunger unfurled, sly and ageless, as I grasped the knife. My fingers trembled, the quake barely contained.

Across from me, Vivian offered a single, sharp shake of her head. A warning.

“Perhaps Lady Elianora should eat something lighter,” Vivian said.

Mother did not yield. “Nonsense. Red meat will restore her strength.”

Saliva flooded my mouth. I pressed my tongue against a fang. Evander regarded me, gaze lingering on the heat that beaded along my brow. “Are you well?”

“Merely warm.” I smiled.

Mother’s hand found my knee beneath the table. “Elianora is perfectly well.” Her grip hardened as Vivian reclined.

I sought Vivian’s eyes, but a sudden cry shattered the surface of civility. Down the table—a servant, young, his hands too small for the platters, had dropped a carving knife. The blade snapped

against the gold and sliced deep across his palm. Blood welled, spilled bright over white fingers, and the world fell away.

Only red remained.

Its scent was a flood, sharp as flame. The servant's pulse battered through me, wild, panicked. Each beat forced more blood free, spilling onto linen and trembling hands. The wolf in me surged, hungry and so near the surface. My spine arched; pain licked my teeth as they pushed longer. The boy's eyes met mine. He knew. His fear was fire and thunder. Mother continued to speak, oblivious—or pretending to be. No one noticed.

Except Vivian. She was beside me, silent and sudden. One cold hand captured mine beneath the cloth, pressing my knife flat to the table. "Look at me," she murmured. I tried; I could not wrench my gaze from red, from the servant's bleeding hand.

Vivian leaned closer, into the narrow tunnel of my vision, her face eclipsing all else. "Look at me, Elianora." Her red eyes caught and commanded mine.

Behind her, the heartbeat thundered, calling. "I need to leave."

"Yes."

Mother's gaze caught ours. "What is it?"

Vivian rose, fingers still anchored to me. "I need to examine her privately."

"I feel quite unwell," I said, jaw clamped against the hunger.

Evander eyed my untouched meal. "She does appear pale."

Mother stood. "I will come with you."

"That would draw attention," Vivian replied.

Mother scanned the room. Already, courtiers watched, hungry for spectacle. Vivian smiled, effortless, as though nothing had slipped. "Allow Lady Elianora to leave with dignity. I will return her when I have finished."

Not a suggestion. An order. Mother hesitated, then sat. "Do what is necessary."

Vivian tucked my hand into the curve of her arm and swept me from the table. To a passing eye—and there were many, always watching in this place—we must have been nothing more than two women strolling the corridors of a palace. None could see the claws I drove through the velvet of her sleeve. None but Vivian could catch the wolf’s growl rumbling in the hollow of my throat.

We passed beneath the hollow-eyed gaze of the guards at the doors. “Lady Elianora requires privacy,” Vivian murmured, a brief veil of authority falling over her voice. The soldiers moved to follow.

She did not pause. “My treatment requires it as well.” The guards hesitated, then yielded to her pace.

At last, we slipped beyond the threshold, into the corridor’s hush. The dining chamber disappeared behind us, its warmth and color trailing like smoke. The moment we turned the first corner, my knees buckled. The wolf inside me still clawed for freedom.

Vivian caught me, arms strong about my waist, steady as stone. “Not here,” she whispered, voice a sharp hush against the thunder in my head.

“The servant,” I said, the taste of blood sharp behind my teeth.

“Someone else will tend to him.”

“I could smell him.” The scent haunted me, bright and hot.

“I know.”

“I wanted...” The rest failed me, jammed behind my teeth like splinters.

Vivian drew me into the narrow space behind the victory tapestry—a passage so tight it pressed us together. Shadows closed over us, the air cool and starved of light. My back found the stone wall. Vivian’s body caged me there, her silhouette all sharp lines and deliberate stillness, blocking the entrance from view.

Her hand, cold and unyielding, fixed at my waist; the other found the nape of my neck, twisting icy fingers in my hair. “Listen to me,” she said.

“I cannot hear you.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Your heart.” I tasted the emptiness in her, sudden and precise.

She went still, her silence vast. The palace beyond the curtain shuddered with life. Blood rushed in endless currents: in the guards at the doors, the servants belowstairs, the nobles laughing on velvet benches, the wounded boy whose pulse had nearly pulled me from my seat.

Vivian alone was a blank, a void at the center of the feast. No flutter of pulse, no warmth, no scent to chase. Nothing for the wolf to hunt. My claws dug deeper into her sleeve.

“Focus on me,” she urged, low.

Her gaze fell to my mouth. Even with hunger twisting me, heat coiled in my stomach.

“Tell me what you hear,” she said.

“You have no heartbeat.”

“And?”

“Your voice.”

“What else?”

“The brush of fabric when you breathe.” Her lashes flickered. I realized now: she breathed only when she wished.

“What else?” Relentless, calm.

“Your hand on my neck.” Her fingers tightened, cool pressure.

“What else?”

Nothing. I swallowed, shame burning in my throat. “Nothing.”

“Almost convincing.”

“I cannot think while you are touching me.”

A flicker of a smile. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” The admission a live wire between us.

Her thumb traced the line of my jaw, gentle, claiming. I should have feared her. I knew nothing of what she was: no heartbeat, no blood, movement quick as a blade’s whisper, eyes drawn to blood with a hunger kin to my own.

But Vivian's touch—the wolf inside me went silent, breath slow and sharp.

"Why me?" she asked, so quiet it barely crossed the space between us.

I opened my eyes. "Why you what?"

"Why does my presence calm you?"

"Because there is no blood moving inside you." My answer hung between us.

For a moment, the mask dropped—a flicker of pain, or longing; she let me see it before her body pressed close to mine. Her face hovered near, so near I could count the lashes fringing her red eyes. A single curl brushed my cheek.

"Can you control yourself?" The words fell against my lips.

I swallowed the animal ache.

"I have controlled myself for a year," I whispered.

Vivian stepped away, sudden, gaze wary, and offered me her arm. I took it, fingers trembling.

Down the hall we walked, the hush of guards trailing several paces behind. With every step from the dining chamber, the pull of heartbeat and blood receded, a tide letting go. At my door, Vivian released me. A guard's hand closed on the handle.

"One moment," I said.

He waited, silent.

I turned to Vivian. "Will you give me another treatment tomorrow?"

Her face veiled itself. "If tonight's reaction passes."

"And if it does not?"

Her eyes found mine, unblinking. "Then I will find another way."

"To cure me?"

Vivian's voice was steady as a blade. "To end your suffering."

That should have comforted me. Instead, cold slipped beneath my skin.

The guard opened my door. I crossed the threshold but looked back. Vivian lingered in the corridor, awash in red witchlight, more statue than shadow.

“You protected me tonight,” I said.

“I protected my work.” The truth curled in the air between us. Still, her hand found the sleeve I had mangled, fingers tracing my torn marks as though savoring them. The door thudded shut.

The bolt dropped into place. Alone in the dark, I listened to Vivian’s footfalls receding. I could still hear the guards, the servants, even Lord Evander’s laughter drifting up from distant corridors where he amused Mother. But for all my listening, straining, I could not find Vivian in the swirl of palace noise. Her nothingness should have frightened me.

Instead, I found myself aching for the silence to return.

6

No Sound

/The Wolf/

Wet earth beneath her paws. Rot in her nose. Water. Mold. Beetles. Old blood.

Her ears turned. Drip. Scratch. Flutter. A heartbeat.

Her head snapped toward the silver ferns.

The small body beneath them stopped moving. Its heart did not. It beat fast enough to tremble through the ground.

Her belly tightened. She lowered herself. Chest near the soil. Hind legs bent. Tail stiff behind her. The ferns shook.

She sprang. The rabbit fled. She chased.

Paws struck earth. Claws tore moss. Glowing stalks snapped against her shoulders. Spores burst around her muzzle, bitter on her tongue.

The rabbit darted beneath a root. She dug. Soil flew between her hind legs. Claws scraped stone. The rabbit squeezed deeper into the hole, its body hot and close. She shoved her muzzle inside. Her teeth snapped on fur.

The rabbit screamed. It kicked against her nose. She pulled.

Earth broke around its body. Her teeth closed over its back. She shook until the kicking stopped.

Warm blood filled her mouth. She carried it away from the hole. Her front paws held the body against the ground. She tore through its belly. Skin stretched between her teeth. Hot meat slid down her throat. Small bones cracked.

She swallowed until only fur, feet, and bitter organs remained. Then she licked the blood from the soil.

Her belly was not full.

Her nose lifted. Breath pulled scents into her mouth. Water. Mushrooms. Ash. Scaled things in the stream. Hooves.

Blood. Her ears rose. She left the rabbit.

The scent passed between thick mushroom stalks. She followed with her nose close to the ground. A hoof had broken the skin of the moss. Another had sunk into mud. Blood marked the edge of a pale leaf.

She licked it. Fresh. Her jaws opened. Saliva gathered beneath her tongue. She ran.

The forest flashed blue and green around her. Vines struck her face. Thorns caught her fur. She pushed through them.

The hoofbeats came from ahead. Heavy. Uneven. She ran faster.

The stag crashed through a cluster of thin mushrooms. Their caps shook and rang. It stumbled, caught itself, and kept running. She saw the wounded leg. Saw the blood darkening white fur.

Her body dropped lower. Her paws stretched farther. The space between them narrowed. She snapped at the stag's hind leg. Her teeth struck bone but did not close.

The stag kicked. The hoof hit her shoulder. She struck the ground, rolled through moss, and slammed against a root. Pain bit through her leg.

She rose. The stag ran.

She shook herself and followed. Pain made the leg weak. Hunger drove it forward.

Hooves pounded. Her paws answered.

The stag turned between two glowing trunks. She cut across the soft ground instead, following the hot stink of blood. It appeared ahead of her again. Closer. She lunged.

Her claws raked its flank. The stag cried out. Blood sprayed across her muzzle. She snapped at it again, but the stag tore free. It ran downhill. She chased.

The ground became wet beneath her paws. Mushrooms grew close together, their pale stalks brushing her sides. The stag broke them as it passed. She jumped over the pieces.

Its blood scent thickened. Near. Near. Then the hoofbeats stopped.

She slowed. Her ears turned forward. No crash of brush. No hard breathing. No heartbeat.

Her nose stayed low. The trail continued through two crooked trees. She followed it. One step. Another. The dripping behind her ceased. Her paw lifted.

No insects scratched beneath the ground. No wings stirred the glowing caps. No distant throats called through the cavern.

She sniffed.

Blood ahead. Rot behind. Something else between them. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed. Nothing beat.

Silence.

Her hackles rose. She followed.

*The Shape Beneath Her Skin**/Vivian/*

For hours now, the palace had quieted; not silence, never silence. Such places thrum with secrets even in their sleep. Every eleven minutes, sentries marched outside my door; beneath, a shifting chorus of servants flowed through shadowed passageways. Somewhere, water whispered in the pipes. Yet, the court slumbered, and that was enough.

I drew my hood tight, drowning my hair and face in black, then pushed open the window. The drop below should have shattered the legs of any lesser Fey, left them a tangle of ruin. Instead: bones folding, skin prickling taut, cloth dissolving into a darkness that swallowed all shape. I crumpled inward, arms narrowing to thin, tremulous wings. And a heartbeat later, I let go.

Diving into the cold, the wind sliced against me. I skimmed the palace walls, black roses hugging the stone, their flowers furled tight in a velvet semblance of sleep. Below, the eastern patrol drifted quietly past the tower, oblivious to the bat that danced overhead. I slipped the iron gates and vanished into the world of mushroom giants, their caps arching high above, before I spiraled down toward the hush beneath them.

There, at the forest's edge, I surrendered the bat's form. Wings shrank away, bones stretching; cold fur and wings becoming skin, hair, cloth. Shadows licked at my boots as I touched ground.

Hunger pressed at me, a dull ache sharpening behind my teeth. Hours earlier, as Lord Evander raised his glass to Elianora's future and the feast spun on, I heard the blood in every throat: Lady Anastasia's pulse slow and sour, Evander's maddeningly steady, Elianora's surging

wild each time I drew close. I had spent the meal counting the ways her wrist might yield; not from malice, nor even necessity, but from the bright, intoxicating scent of her.

The Pale Hand had provisioned just enough stabilized blood to make the passage to Santok; nothing for hesitation, nothing for delay. Zhero expected haste. Instead, I lingered, supplies dwindling, entangled by the wary trust of the woman I'd been sent to kill.

I loosed a breath and kept moving, feet guiding me to the bridge, across it and into Vernrum proper.

The city spilled downward through the great cavern, each crooked tier gouged into black stone. Along the rails, lanterns glimmered like red eyes, while pale, sprawling mushrooms knotted along eaves and twisted their stems around chimneys and balconies. Somewhere lower, music curled upward from streets thick with wine, dice, and need—the drinking houses and dens that outlasted the respectable city each night, pulsing with laughter and hunger.

I followed that siren-call, slipping deeper as the streets tightened. Heartbeats bracketed me on all sides; my fangs pressed against my lip, hunger ratcheting from ache to throb.

Control was not the absence of appetite; it was the artful choosing of what, and whom, hunger might touch.

There stood the Gilded Thorn, its doorway blinking with a pink heart-shaped lantern. The windows were draped in gold and a horned doorman, arms folded, gaze lingered on me as he dragged his eyes from my hood to my boots.

“Full tonight,” he said.

“I’m not looking for a room.”

“Lost, then?”

I let the hunger edge my words: “No. Hungry.”

His nostrils flared, and in that breath boredom flickered into understanding. He shifted aside; I passed through, the music a pulse in my bones. Inside, velvet couches overflowed with bodies. Some tangled together, seeking heat or comfort or transaction; others simply talked, desires smoldering beneath the surface.

Santok had been built by those who honored appetite, rumor said. Here, every hunger wore its own mask.

She approached me: shrouded in black so sheer it was almost part of the shadows, with a pair of delicate punctures at the pulse of her throat. “How much?” she asked, voice sliding silkily as she touched her neck, nails tracing the faint marks.

I drew down my hood, offering the frame of my face and the wildness of my hair. “Enough for several days.”

Her brows arched, surprise and calculation mingling. “That will cost you,” she purred, doubtless thinking me a pauper, not a killer. But killing paid in silver where skill was true.

I laid three silver coins in her palm, holding her gaze as she weighed them, hunger mirrored in the glint of her eyes. “Upstairs,” she commanded, and drew me past the velvet and the noise, up narrow steps to a small private room. There: a bed, a basin of clean water, a glass bottle, folded linen strips. Better precautions than many a guild house.

She closed the door, sweeping her long hair to one side, neck bared. “Throat costs more.”

“Wrist,” I said; the word clipped.

She looked faintly disappointed. “First time in Santok?”

“Yes.”

“Most vampires come for the show.”

“I came to feed.”

“Here I thought the cloak made you shy.”

“It means I’d rather not be recognized.”

Her mouth thinned. “You are no one I know.”

She perched herself at the edge of the bed and beckoned me closer with the simplest of gestures, wrist bared in a silent dare. Veins blued beneath skin raw and luminous, her pulse a measured cadence against the hush, not a tremor in evidence. No fever, no sourness of decay beneath her sweet, cloying perfume. I cradled her wrist in my palm. My fangs grazed the flesh—a breath, no more—

And then a scream cracked the night, raw and sudden as snapped bone. The woman yanked her arm away, nearly toppling from the bed as a second shriek cut short with a wet, grating finality. Below us, the sea of music stilled. For a single heartbeat, every revel and sin within the brothel went rigid with dread.

Then, “Wolf!” The word pierced the hush, and a shudder of panic swept through the walls.

Hunger died, replaced by instinct’s cold command. I was at the door before thought could intervene; outside, the passage burst with footfalls and shouts as people poured from the alley beyond. A cart had overturned in the chaos, its driver lost to terror. And there—in the uncertain flicker of pink lantern light—a shape, vast and swift, blurred every edge of certainty.

The doorman caught the wall with such force, his body crumpling beneath the impact, and did not rise. The woman’s curse chased me as I mounted the windowsill. “You already paid,” she spat. “No refunds.”

I didn’t look back. “Keep it.”

I dropped, landing amid the ruin of splintered wood and scattered fruit.

The wolf turned, uncoiling from shadow and blood—a beast built from nightmare and legend, its shoulders nearly grazing the upper windows. Its auburn pelt jutted in wild curls, lacquered with a sheen of gore that dragged the eye. Claws raked the cobbles, leaving furrowed scars that would not heal.

White eyes fastened on me, incandescent with fury. The head lowered, a snarl thick and guttural, the sound vibrating up through my bones.

Doors slammed. Shutters barred. All at once, the world fell away, leaving only myself and the wolf in the ruined artery of the alley.

I drew both daggers.

The wolf lunged.

Its paw swept down, a scythe of claws so near I felt the air shear my cloak. I ducked low, found the hollow behind its rib, and drove iron home; the blade shuddered against flesh and fur. The beast bellowed, head snapping back in wounded outrage.

It spun, preternatural, jaws rending the space beside my skull. I wrenched my dagger free and dove beneath the cart as a paw demolished the wheel overhead, splintering it to fragments.

Wood rained across my shoulders. The wolf wasted no pause—it rammed its snout beneath the cart; I slashed, catching the ridge of its nose, and it recoiled, blood arcing blue-black across the night.

The scent hit the stones, and I was lost—the fangs slid down, hunger baring its teeth in my marrow, sharpening the world to knife-points. I heard the doorman's dying stutter. The frightened, shallow breaths behind every barricaded door. The pulse of the wolf, wild and hot, beneath its skin.

I crawled free into the open. The wolf circled, herding me.

I had killed larger things. A mountain troll in Ruhan, its bones ground to pale dust. A basilisk beneath the marshes. A traitor from the guild who had turned into something with six arms and no face. All things yielded to blood when enough was spilled.

The wolf charged.

I was ready. I vaulted the cart, used its ruin as wings, and landed astride the beast's massive shoulders. My knees cinched tight round the sinewed neck. The wolf bucked, slamming me into stone.

A flare of agony down my spine—I clenched my dagger, blade poised at the pulsing throat.

The wolf hurled back, spine-bending; my head struck the wall, world spinning. My grip vanished and I fell.

A paw pinned me, claws sinking through fabric to the grit of the street. The wolf's weight drove the breath from my chest. Above me, jaws gaped wide, strings of spittle gleaming between teeth meant to tear giants in half.

I stabbed upward, blade finding the tender spot beneath the jaw.

Time stopped, held between breaths.

Its hot, blood-heavy exhale laved my face. It could have killed me. The beast had been swift enough to catch me, strength enough to shatter stone, rage enough to sunder the world.

But it hesitated. It stared not at the blade, but at my face.

Something flickered in those white eyes.

Recognition.

The name rose unbidden: "Elianora?"

An ear flicked.

Claws flexed, not in threat, but in restless question.

I did not move.

Up close, the details emerged through blood and tangled fur—a chain of gold snarled round her neck, a solitary pearl still clinging. Elianora wore pearls at dinner. The breath that washed over me carried the unmistakable tang of moonroot; mine, the tincture I had administered that morning, still coiling through her veins.

“No,” I breathed. The wolf shrank from the word—not from command, but from the horror that trembled inside it.

I had expected corruption.

That was the lesson in every medical text: lycanthropy as putrefaction, a mind stripped bare by animal need, a disease hollowing out its vessel until nothing remained but hunger and teeth. Those learned men had never seen this.

The wolf loomed over me, brimming with a power older than cities, terrible and exultant. Lantern-light caught in the fur along her shoulders, pink gleaming on every strand as if woven from silk and blood. The muzzle dripped. The claws had shattered stone. Her breath came like thunder.

But Elianora lived behind that monstrous mask. Not imprisoned.

Changed.

The court had blanketed her in silk and pearls, taught her to lower her gaze, to shape each word as if it came measured on a jeweler’s scale. Her mother dictated the fabric that brushed her skin, the silence she stood in, the man who would one day claim her hand.

The wolf bent its head for no one. It was not an absence but a revelation: all the forbidden chambers of Elianora’s heart, unmasked and muscled into being.

“Elianora,” I tried, softer this time. The syllables haunted the air.

The wolf’s weight shifted—a ripple through fur and sinew. I let the blade sink, foolishly. Zhero would have slit my throat for such a misstep.

She eyed the dagger’s descent, her paw still beside my ribs. But the claws retracted.

“There you are.” Ears lay flat. “You know me.”

A rumble vibrated through her chest. The wolf flashed her teeth. “Yes. You remain terrifying.” Her muzzle hovered above my cheek.

It would take a fool to reach for cold iron in that moment.

She drank in my scent, inhaling along jaw and neck, her nose pressed to the hollow where a pulse ought to have trembled. Nothing. She drew back, confusion softening the pale fire of her eyes.

“You noticed.”

A huff, edged and uncertain.

“Clever girl.”

A snarl in answer, curling back her lip.

“Lady,” I acknowledged, the word brittle. The growl rumbled lower. “Elianora.”

Her paw slipped from my chest. I pressed upward, slow and wary; wet heat traced the gash at the back of my head, the wound already stitching shut beneath my hair. The wolf’s gaze followed the scent, body bracing. “Not here.”

Claws scraped stone. Overhead, the clamor of boots and voices spilled from the upper street—the palace guard, straining toward the mouth of the alley.

Too many heartbeats beating at the darkness. Too much iron, too many eyes quick to see the heir of Santok smeared crimson. I offered my hand. “We need to leave,” I said.

Her gaze flicked to the lanterns, then returned to me. “If they find you like this, your mother will put you in chains.”

The naked truth of that struck something wild and wounded in her. The wolf reeled back.

“Come with me.” Still she hesitated. “Elianora.” I gentled my words, as if soothing a creature from the edge of a trap. “Come.” I turned away.

Every lesson the guild burned beneath my skin screamed at the madness of baring my back to a beast who could shear my head from my shoulders with a single bite. I walked toward the far mouth of the alley. Three steps, and then the scrape of claws shadowed me.

We bled from Vernrum through an ancient drainage tunnel beneath the western wall. The wolf barely fit, her shoulders rubbing stone, scattering dust and flickering sparks of luminous moss. I led us forward, following the ghost of water until the tunnel spilled us into the gloom of the mushroom forest.

Blue radiance sheeted the earth, and the wolf emerged at my heels.

Out from under the city’s grip, she seemed immense—a relic from when the world was wild. She threaded between mushroom stalks, white spores dusting her fur, starlit and unbound. For a breath, I forgot the blood ringing her muzzle. She was beautiful.

Not gentle. Not safe. Beautiful the way storms were beautiful, or a blade sharpened to catch the light.

She staggered.

“Elianora?”

Her forelegs gave way, her body crashing to earth hard enough to shake spores from the canopy above. A brutal, desperate whine broke from her chest. Her spine bowed, muscles convulsed—the change taking hold.

Bones shattered and reformed beneath her pelt. She writhed, claws tearing earth. Shoulders caved, auburn fur retreating in jagged lines to reveal vulnerable flesh. Even her snout collapsed in on itself, reshaping with sick, wet snaps. I dropped to my knees at her side.

“Elianora. Listen to me.”

The wolf convulsed, snapping against my hold. One paw slammed into my shoulder, sent me tumbling through the moss. But I returned to her side before she could do herself more harm.

“Your name is Elianora.”

Her jaws parted, caught between a whimper and a cry.

“You’re in the forest beyond Vernrum. You’re not alone.”

I pressed my hand to her neck. The fur seared hot beneath my palm.

“Breathe.”

Her gaze locked on mine, white eyes wild. The wolf sucked in a ragged breath. “Again.” Her ribs heaved, skin shifting under my hand. Bones twisted, narrowed; claws split, then vanished. The fur sloughed away until beneath my touch I found not beast but woman’s wrist.

Elianora screamed—a sound that tore through the glow and echoed among the branches.

I pulled her against me before her fracturing skull could meet the ground. Her spine arched, cording beneath her skin. I held her through it, one arm anchoring her waist, the other cupped beneath her neck. “Stay with me.”

Her fingers wrenched at my cloak. “Vivian,” she gasped.

“I am here.”

“My bones.”

“I know,” I said.

“Make it stop.”

“I cannot.”

She sobbed into my shoulder as the wolf faded, leaving only flesh and trembling ruin. At last, she fell still. Elianora sprawled naked in my arms, body slicked with blood not her own. Red hair pasted to her cheeks; slender hands marked where claws had punched through skin. Her breath came shallow and rapid against my throat.

I shrugged off my cloak, wrapped it around her. Her fingers clung to the wool.

“What did I do?” she whispered. My gaze flicked to the cold glow of distant Vernrum. The doorman might breathe still. Others, perhaps not.

“I don’t know everything that happened before I found you.”

She closed her eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes flew open. I touched the back of my skull; the wound had healed, closed over already.

“I recovered.”

She stared at the stain on my hand. “You should be afraid of me.”

Perhaps I should have. But I remembered the wolf looming over me, my life clamped in her jaws, and the sudden halt—the moment of recognition, the choice. I reached to brush blood-wet hair from her brow.

“I have met monsters,” I said. “They rarely stop when asked.”

Her mask crumbled. She sagged against me, too spent to hold her own weight. I tightened the cloak over her shoulders. Beneath the dim, cold glow of the mushrooms, nothing about her was monstrous; nothing tainted, nothing broken. The power hadn’t replaced Elianora. It had only stripped away the court’s lies.

I should have been thinking of the contract. Thinking of how simple it would be to end it, here, beyond palace eyes. A single blade at her throat; a body left in the luminous dark, and freedom before sunrise. Instead, I gathered her into my arms. Elianora's head lolled against my shoulder.

The hunger roused at her scent: blood, sharp as winter air.

I mastered it.

For the first time since I'd crossed into Santok, I saw the truth: the thing under her skin was not the real threat to my freedom.

It was the woman who had seen a vampire stained with her own blood and dared to trust her anyway.

8

Monstrous Monsters */Elianora/*

I surfaced to consciousness with soil caked beneath my fingernails—and Vivian, silent, beside my bed. For an instant the forest eluded me, settled at the rim of memory, but then her wrist caught my gaze: pale, slim, scored by fresh wounds.

“How much did you see?” My voice felt raw.

Vivian's book snapped shut. “All of it.”

Blankets drawn tight to my chin, I tried to reconstruct the night: the running, the red haze, the aftermath. She had borne witness to the wolf's hunger. She had seen it devour. She had seen the ruin I became when the moon's grip relented.

“Did I hurt you?” I forced the question, bruised and brittle.

Her reply landed with perfect precision: “Yes.”

The marks on her wrist leapt in my vision, shallow but insistent, a ledger of my failure.

“You should have left me there.”

Vivian only shrugged, idly tracing a half-moon on her nail with her thumb. “You would have found your way back.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I know.” She placed a cup of water on the table: measured, unrushed, as if this were an ordinary morning. No guards summoned. No careful distance as armor. The restraint, the lack of fear, burned more than accusation.

My shame thickened. “Was I afraid of you?”

Vivian held the question. “You attacked me.”

“The wolf attacks anything it might eat.”

“And yet,” her lip curled, wry, “you stopped yourself from eating me. Better to take a rabbit than a friend.” Vivian’s answering smile was quicksilver.

Laughter wasn’t easy. Memory crashed back, vivid and jagged: fur clotted in my teeth, the small animal going slack, its silence ringing in my ears. I ground my palms against my eyes, unwilling to meet her gaze. “Please do not tell me you found beauty in the monstrous creature.”

Vivian’s reply ghosted out, gentle and direct. “I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“At least one of us clings to dignity.”

A pause, then her voice again: “I do not think you vanish when you shift.”

I uncovered my face. “You watched a single night.”

“You could have ripped my throat. Yet, something held you back. It was you, Nora, wearing the wolf’s skin.”

Nora. The name twisted inside me, raw and uncertain. “I do not remember choosing.”

“That does not mean you did not choose.” She leaned nearer.

Our stares tangled, my own full of the question: “Is this meant to comfort me?”

“No,” she said. “It is simply what I observed.”

“I do not care to learn what I can be within the wolf.” The words clawed out, rougher than I intended. “I want a cure. I want to be rid of it.”

Her composure barely budged. “I know.”

“Then stop telling me it shapes me.”

Vivian took the rebuke as easily as water catching in a cup: “I will keep searching for a cure.” There was a strength in her simplicity that I could not argue, not with exhaustion pulling at every joint. I reached for the water, and my hands shook; droplets beaded down the glass and spattered my blanket.

Vivian’s hand hovered, then retreated as I steadied the cup alone. “Why can I never hear your heart?” The words tasted odd, foreign. “You have ducked that question since the moment you arrived.”

“I have.”

“Were you waiting for me to stop asking?”

“Yes.” She stared at me, unblinking, her cool composure coiled tight as a drawn thread.

I set my cup down then, deliberate, the ring of ceramic on wood slicing the hush between us. “I will not.”

Vivian’s gaze flicked sideways, toward the door. A guard’s footfalls sounded beyond the threshold; I caught the slow, animal thud of his pulse in the corridor, muffled by stone and distance. She did not speak until the footsteps receded.

“I am a vampire,” she said.

The words landed cold, even after all the times I’d fit them together in my head. Hearing them aloud unraveled something inside me, left my lungs hollow.

“The blood in the entrance hall,” I murmured. “And when I cut my lip.”

“Yes.”

“You were hungry.”

“Yes.”

Memory reeled me back—the flare in her eyes fastened hungrily on blood slicking my mouth, then those same hands, gentle as moonlight, steady against my jaw as she inspected the bite. “Have you wanted to feed on me?”

Vivian hesitated. An ache fluttered through me, uneasy, half-regretful.

“Yes,” she said. “But I have not. I would feed on anyone I could get close enough to.”

That stung in ways I couldn’t name; irritation ignited beneath my ribs, sharp and pointless. After so many sidesteps, though, I should have been grateful for even that scrap of honesty.

“Does Mother know?”

“No.”

“Does anyone here?” My voice a whisper.

“Only you.”

I studied her then: the red eyes, the chill of her touch, the stillness I’d mistaken for a witch’s composure. I should have been afraid. Instead, I saw her sitting here at my bedside after the wolf—admired the way she had not left.

“You could have told me sooner,” I said.

“I could have.”

“Why now?”

Vivian’s mouth twitched, something bitter straining there. “Before, I thought you might tell your mother.”

“I still might.”

“I know.”

Her candor dissolved my anger, left me groping for somewhere to anchor it. I glanced at the doorway; imagined the guard’s slow circuit, the silence that would follow if Vivian was cast out. “If she learns what you are, she will have the guards remove you.”

“Probably.”

“And then I am left with her physicians.”

Vivian said nothing. I picked at the dry grit beneath my fingernail, counting out the cost. “I will keep your secret.” She looked startled. “Not because you asked me to,” I added. “I want you to keep looking for a cure.”

“I will.” Her promise steadied between us. I reached for the water again, and this time her cool fingers skimmed mine as she passed the cup.

She had seen the wolf, and she had stayed. I had learned the secret of her still heart and asked her to stay. It was a fragile truce, nothing more. But perhaps monsters were less monstrous in each other’s company; perhaps that was enough, for now.