

“Have tea with me.”

It’s so easy with him. The quiet over the kitchen is reluctant, and slow to break. Valentine looks well-rested, despite the early hour. I haven’t looked at myself in a mirror since yesterday morning and by now I’m too scared to. When the stove and the kettle are both going, I sit at the table in the same seat as before and content myself with watching the sun move across the tiled floor from the living room windows.

“Did you walk back alone?” Valentine asks, halfway through pouring our tea. “From the Getaway?”

The Getaway; I guess that’s a good name for where we were. Sivir had never told me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I probably should have just waited until this morning, but I-”

My gaze gets stuck in the wood grain of the table. All I can see are the patterns of Sivir’s silver hair in the ocean, the offer he’d given me swirling around him so temptingly and yet terrifyingly. Had I been tempted? I don’t think so. I’d been afraid. That touch of ocean on my toe, the weight on my ankle in the rabbit island, that knife’s edge, was fantastically unknowable. But the familiarity of that flavour—escape—is what threw me off.

The whole garden is already an escape for me. What does it mean to escape an escape except to go back to what you were running from?

“Sivir wanted me to go into the ocean with him,” I say, finally, as Valentine puts our two mugs on the table and sits down. “He wanted me to leave part of myself behind.”

The sun paints his eyes like honey. He dips his gaze into his tea, blows on the surface, but doesn’t drink.

“It’s not all a bad deal, at first glance,” he says. He turns halfway in his chair, crosses his legs, and looks out over the kitchen as he speaks. “Cutting out the worst parts of you, letting someone else take the wheel. It’s a privilege.”

He says the word privilege like a lie, and I understand immediately. I hope I’m not making too many assumptions about what Valentine means when he speaks, and yet it truly feels like we’re on the same wavelength. Unlike Sivir, who can say one thing but clearly mean another, Valentine says something and means just that, and the truth seems to sink into me by absorption.

“You said Sivir is your selfishness,” I say. “Would you take it back from him, if you could?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” I argue.

“It’s a hypothetical.”

“Humour me?”

“Why would I re-teach myself selfishness?” he asks, but the smile he casts me isn’t fully there. The answer is obvious, but perhaps it’s the selfish part of me saying that looking out for yourself is not all bad, that survival is allowed, that desire is natural.

“Please don’t misunderstand me; I care so deeply for you and for others,” Valentine says during my silence. “It’s just that none of it is in my own interest.”

It’s just as tragic as he sounds saying it. I still can’t imagine selflessness to be a curse, but the way Valentine wears it, I nearly understand. I don’t know how I could love someone without personal satisfaction playing some part of it. I’ve never tried. But I don’t think he’s ever tried to regain what he lost, either.

“What if I wanted it to be in your interest?” I say, and Valentine gives me a wary look.

“What if I wanted you to care for me for you, and not just for me?”

*Hypothetically*, I think about adding, but I don't. I could tell him that the *you* and the *me* in this scenario are catch-alls. I could do better hiding the truth of how I feel about him. As undeserving as my feelings for him are, it feels more undeserving to downplay it. It'd be the same pretending I did with Sivor, but the other way around; a way of protecting myself from getting too close to anything real, to anyone who could truly, properly break my heart by virtue of being a better person than me.

“Then I'd have to let you down gently,” Valentine says.

I'm not satisfied.

“I don't want to leave here feeling like nothing's changed,” I say. “I want to read your book, Valentine.”

The syllables trip me up. It's the first time I've said his name, at least to his face. I force myself to hold his eyes and not glance down at the chain resting around his neck, the one holding the key.

“You can start today,” he says. “Do you have work?”

“No,” I say, surprised at how fast he agreed. “It's a long weekend for me because of—because of Sivor. I just have to visit Lyla this afternoon.”

“Right,” Valentine says, and I don't miss the subtle furrow in his brow at being reminded of Sivor. “Then I'll get the book and make some breakfast.”

He pauses. The conversation has run thin and terse.

“I'm sorry,” I say, “that I showed up out of nowhere and hit you with all of this so early.”

“It’s-” he cuts himself off. It seemed like a fast reply for him. I’m worried at first that he’ll tell me once again not to apologize, but he nods instead. “Thank you. It’s alright. I apologize for being so stubborn.”

“It’s okay. Tell me about your book,” I ask, and then I get up and take our mugs to the sink. “Give me a preface while I wash these.”

I can practically hear him hesitating, but his chair creaks as he settles back into it. I turn his rusted faucets, rinse the sponge, and wash out the mugs and the reusable sachets of their tea. His little compost tin smells like it’s filled completely with tea dregs rather than any rotting food.

“It isn’t an easy thing to introduce,” Valentine says behind me, and I let his voice surround me where I stand. I like listening to him; I like feeling like I live here. Even if it’s just for the summer, I’ll savor every moment.

“I wrote it as an escape from myself. Evidently, it worked,” he says, though not in a joking tone. “It worked so well I didn’t notice until it was too far gone, and my own character introduced himself.”

“What?” I say, stopping the tap to make sure I hear him properly.

“Sivir,” Valentine clarifies. “Figment is the term you were told. There were problems with *character* as time went on. As he continued to exist without me. You’ll see; you’ve seen.”

I wish I had paid attention when Valentine first brought out the book, the last time I was here. I’m regretting it now, but keep it quiet, not wanting my guilt to pass to Valentine by contagion.

“I was a different person when I wrote those pages. I know you’ll see that. I hope it’s obvious.”

With the mugs and the sachets clean and in the drying rack, I turn the tap off and turn to lean against the counter. He's watching me not worriedly but with a small smile—one that seems sympathetic to the different person he was before, like it's nothing more now than a slightly embarrassing fact of life. It reminds me of Stella's generous outlook on her first life. For her it made sense, and for Valentine it makes sense; at just over thirty, it still feels like every two years I look back on myself and wonder who the hell I was and how I can distance myself from past me as much as possible. If that sort of constant cringe at yourself truly never ends, it explains a lot about Valentine. He's not just an enigma. Whatever charisma and consideration he exudes, he clearly worked for.

I wish he could work for the rest, just the same.

“Okay,” I agree, “it won't make me think anything different of you.”

“Well,” Valentine says, glancing off to his right. “There's only one way to find out.”

He stands decidedly, pressing off his knees, and standing together in the kitchen like that I feel small again. The space doesn't seem like it's used to two people, and neither does Valentine.

“Where would you like to read?” he asks, gesturing to the back door, then the hall. “The patio, the living room, you didn't spend much time there before did you?”

Without asking, he leads me across the hall. I'd woken up there on his couch after blacking out in the study, but left shortly after. Now that he brings me in, I get a full sense of the room's charm; two mirrored loveseats in different cross-hatch patterns, a great window looking out to the front garden covered in summer blooms, and the floor and walls awash in the green of a series of cypress shining in rows through windows on the far wall. A soft Norfolk pine takes up

the innermost corner, and a few other happy houseplants—a bird of paradise, a hoyo, an asparagus fern—fill all empty space.

I walk to the farthest window and look out. The view provides a near-perfect vista of the hill leading down to the terrace, and in the distance, the staff mansion. I can see my round window and balcony, its little chair. After only a couple of nights away, I miss it.

“There’s me,” I say.

I end up choosing the patio to read on because even though it’s a cool morning for summer, the perfect quiet and stillness of the day is enticing. Valentine brings me more tea, a blanket in case I get cold, and finally, the book.

He excuses himself to make breakfast. I thank him and wait a moment listening to him work behind me in the kitchen. Pots and pans and cupboards create a quiet, busy noise from the kitchen; he chops vegetables. A pot simmers. Sparrows in the bush.

I start reading.

When I was here before, I had skimmed the first page about a man inheriting his grandparents’ house and making a garden out of its lawn. I had thought that man to be representative of Valentine and his experience, and I kept imagining him, but at the beginning of the second page, the man is finally called by his name:

Sivir.

I look over my shoulder at the open door to the kitchen, then keep reading, eyes glued to the page.

The Sivir in the book isn’t entirely unlike the one I know, but he’s exaggerated. He’s sharp, well-dressed, and much-loved by everyone he knows; the neighbours are smitten with his garden and with him. He opens the land to the public, enjoys frequent whirlwind romances with

various men, who differ in their circumstances, career, and social standing, but are all nonetheless beautiful, and all head over heels for Sivir, which is difficult for me to fully grasp, as the Sivir in the book is just as much of a sarcastic, self-adoring asshole as the one I know.

But then I'm not one to speak.

Sivir hires a few gardeners. I keep waiting for mention of any closer family, but find none; although he received the house through his grandparents, his parents are not mentioned, nor any potential siblings or even old acquaintances. He has friends in a local group, tight-knit, beatnik, and eccentric. They gather for wine, talk literature and politics, and occasionally sleep with each other, none of which is described in any detail.

The garden grows. The pages grow long with descriptions of natural settings, ones that are intimately familiar. Sivir writes a book; a murder mystery. Sets a record-breaking deal. Attends a fancy party. Uses the money to hire a manager for the garden, a soft-spoken, successful local gardener, Paul.

Paul is beautiful, of course. Sivir is endeared by his down-to-earth personality, the dirt under his nails, his freckled cheeks, his flowing hair. Sivir brings him into his life, his palace, and other worldly treasures and material things, while Paul shows him the beauty in the natural world all around them, which Sivir, despite spending so long cultivating it, had begun to forget. The writing turns a bit cliché.

“Breakfast is ready,” Valentine says. I startle, not having realised he’s standing right beside me. He leans down beside me, throwing a kitchen towel over his shoulder as he does so. “You’re a fast reader.”

Page 30. I dog-ear it and check what’s left.

“You’ll be done in no time.”

“Is it actually finished?” I ask, standing and bringing the blanket and my mug with me.

Valentine takes the stack of paper from my other hand and tucks it under his arm. “You’ll see.”

Inside, two heaping bowls of chili over rice topped with a fried egg are set on the kitchen table. It looks like a handful of jewels in rust. The whole house smells of oregano and pepper, making me instantly hungry.

Valentine pulls my chair out and sits after me.

“While it’s hot,” Valentine says, but he still waits for me to take my first bite before tucking in himself. I stare at the table and have another bite. I forget myself until he speaks again.

“How is it?”

“Delicious,” I say, quickly, upset that I had forgotten to speak before. “It’s the best I’ve had. I didn’t know you were such a good cook.”

“I’ve had ample time to practise,” Valentine says, and I wait for him to smile to let myself relax. “It’s alright. I can joke about it.”

We eat a little more in the quiet. Honeysuckle branches etch along the wall outside in the wind. Finches beep and chirp from the boxwood. I finish my bowl embarrassingly fast and immediately feel an upset stomach as a result, which only increases my general sense of unease at the reminder of Valentine’s age. Especially with the book.

“So I know Sibir isn’t you,” I begin, “but you gave me a warning about your personality back then.”

“The character isn’t me, no,” Valentine says, leaning back in his chair once he’s finished his bowl. I watch too closely as he uses his thumb to clear a bit of sauce from his bottom lip. “He

had parts of me and still does. I wrote to escape from the realities of my actual life, which at the time were very different from what he—the character —experienced. Naturally.”

“But you- you are charming and well-dressed, and-” I stammer for the right words, trying to derail a conversation in which Valentine seems to be doing a disservice to his character. “I think you... I think you’re easily likable.”

Valentine’s eyes stay on the table as I speak, then lift to me when I’m done fumbling.

“Thank you,” he says. “It’s taken some work.”

“Change takes work,” I say, sounding wiser than I am. Valentine sits up straighter, his attention piqued.

“Are you speaking from experience?” he asks. “Have you changed yourself?”

I pretend I just noticed the empty chili bowls, take both, and head to the sink. Valentine turns in his chair, following my movement.

“Don’t avoid the question,” he teases. “I find it admirable. Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I reply tentatively as I rinse the empty chili bowls. I’m thinking over our pre-breakfast conversation. It wasn’t so long ago, but under the dim light of the morning, it already feels like yesterday. I don’t want to bring it up again; I could tell it was a sore spot; but perhaps I could at least serve as some inspiration. “I guess I’m just embarrassed at who I was.”

And who I am.

“And who were you?”

I look out the window above the sink as if my answers are somewhere in the magnolia branches. I make eye contact with a robin instead. It stares for a moment, then continues preening.

“I was naïve,” I answer. “I thought I knew everything. I judged too quick, and jumped too soon.”

“There are worse sins, you know.”

“Like?”

“Like mine,” Valentine answers. “What Sivir represented in me was desire. Too much importance placed on material things, too much importance placed on beauty. Paul tries to bring him down to earth. In the book, they fuck each other. Two sides of a fence where the grass is greener on both sides. In reality, Sivir and I are the same person. And Paul isn’t real.”

My cheeks go hot at the sound of the word ‘fuck’ leaving his lips; natural and unnatural all at once. Valentine and Sivir being the same person, like two sides of a coin, feels impossible.

“That makes sense, based on what I know of Sivir,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood. Still sitting at the table, Valentine crosses one of his legs and holds his ankle, watching me as I move throughout the kitchen, trying to remember where he’d found things earlier.

“Then remember that what you know of Sivir isn’t exclusive to Sivir,” he reminds me. “You said it yourself. Change takes work. I only cheated it.”

“I don’t know,” I reply uselessly. “At least you jumped in headfirst. Change terrifies me.”

Valentine doesn’t reply, and when I venture a glance at him, his focus looks lost somewhere in the licking flames of the stove. It’s entirely too possible that in all my reassuring Valentine how easy it is for other people to be shitty, I’m not painting a very good picture of myself. If anyone were to motivate me to change, it would be him, but that might be too big of an ask. Work has to be work regardless of motivation. I’m past the point of blaming outside forces for my own failure rate; I have to be. But just saying so isn’t enough.

“Jumped in,” he repeats. I think about the water at the rock garden, at the rabbit island, at the ocean. I wonder if I should have phrased it differently. He never told me why he went in the water, to begin with, and now I can’t bring myself to ask.

“Since Sivor’s creation, I have worked. Worked to understand my new self. To become comfortable with a half-life. To wield selflessness like a weapon. It isn’t enough,” he says. “I am complete. Not in the sense of being well rounded; as in, reached an end.”

“Did Sivor tell you that?” I ask, sitting across from him.

Valentine tenses. He’s not one to give himself away so easily.

“He told me that while we were at the Getaway,” I continue, “and I wouldn’t hear it from him. Not from someone who isn’t even human. As far as I’m concerned, you’re just as messed up as the rest of us. No offense.”

Valentine’s shoulders go slack. “Human. I admit, I was worrying about that too.”

“I heard your heart,” I remind him. “Lyla’s is skipping beats and going quiet. Yours was—”

What to say that isn’t *perfect*?

“Strong,” I decide.

Valentine hums. Then, as if remembering himself, gives me an appreciative look, one that nonetheless can’t hide the myriad of ways he apparently doesn’t believe me.

“I have a request for you,” he says. “You don’t have to answer right now.”

*Anything*, I think.