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**Pronunciation Guide** 

Acknowledgments

About the Author

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# Dedicated to you,

The smallest voices can make the biggest change



You are the brightest star



# **AUTHORNOTE**

Please read with car. While not corthemes, this book touches on subject matter as follows: domestic violence situation, emotional manipulation, grief and loss, explicit sexual scenes, fantasy violence and goicidal ideation, overcoming addiction.

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## **PROLOGUE**

e'd learned that dying, no matter how slow and painful the seconds before a final breath, was nothing compared to taking infinite more without the one he loved.

No—love was too mundane a word for the split in his soul she cleaved in her wake.

For two hundred years he'd watched the same constellation as though it were the only one in existence. Now it had begun to fade. A fraction every week that no other would notice. To him it became a countdown.

He faintly adjusted the magnification of the telescope so as not to miss a flicker, his sight mapping the twelve points. Always the same order. He didn't even know he'd adopted the pattern.

Even in the fading light she was magnificent.

Yet he didn't plan to be here when the earth quaked for her return. Years, perhaps decades, still from now. He didn't plan to remain the reason those cracks continued when she came back.

Knowing this was the last time, he lingered a little longer. Then he sighed, stored the final sight, and pulled away.

Sitting on the low ledge of the open archway window, he lifted the glass of liquor he held, clinking it against the metal telescope. "I tried to find a way. It's been as hopeless as it was back then," he said. Over the years he'd become so detached that no emotion plagued him now. "But I'm also glad you won't get to see all that I've become. Your disappointment might just be the thing to break me."

The alcohol burned down his throat as he tipped back the contents of the glass. His tight grip shattered it, but he didn't feel the slices through his palm. There was nothing that could hurt him anymore.

"I never got the chance to ask you what you saw." A fist tightened in his chest, but the agony was all he had to remember how real she was since time tried to blur the images. "How you saw past it all and for a fleeting moment made me believe there was something *good* in me. I'm sorry you were wrong."

Standing, he slung on his black cloak, steps crunching through glass shards as if they were all that was left of his old existence.

"At least I won't be able to hurt you anymore."



They all cowered at the hooded shadow that passed them. Shrinking back, bowing their heads, avoiding his stare as he swept through the castle halls.

The black glittering marble of the floors, broken only by white pillars and the occasional sculpture, appeared sinister with the figure who occupied the space now. Before, there was beauty in these halls. But what was once the darkness of dreams and a clear night sky was now the kind of death.

The people he swept by whispered a name—one that had attached itself to him not by choice, but by the sin he represented. The god he was all but a mortal form of.

In the throne room, the ruler had been expecting him.

He saw the leathery, taloned wings of the guard the king was in conversation with before he was dismissed. A nightcrawler. Perhaps the worst of the three vampire curses, nightcrawlers couldn't touch the daylight.

The hooded male spoke his intent. "We agreed one century. I have given two. Now I have come for what you owe me." His voice was as cold as ice and as dark as night.

The king wore a crown, but it was as good as a child's costume. An image with hollow authority. At least without *him*. But he'd given far more time in service than they'd bargained for.

"If what they prophesize is true, we must find her first. The celestials are already being sighted on this side of the veil, testing our defenses.

Magick will weaken again, and we can stop the return of this war before it has a chance—"

"No," he growled. It rattled through him. Rage so sharp and lethal it shifted midnight to black and leaked cold shadows through the room.

The king observed them cautiously.

"If you want to keep that throne against them, and keep the vampires believing in your reign, you'll have to do it yourself."

He didn't enjoy the idea of leaving now. In fact, that was too light for the feeling that tore him to his very core at the image of her facing it all without him. Until he remembered he was the cause of everything that had shattered his world—*hers*—many centuries ago. To be without him was the only way she stood a chance.

"What will you do...if you manage to make it back at all? It is a world you do not know. One that may cast you out permanently before you can discover a thing."

He didn't care. None of that frightened him. He didn't care if instead he became trapped in a void of nothing. It was better than being the reason they would not win the war about to rise again.

"You have become legendary. You would give it all up?"

"Tell me where to go," he said through gritted teeth. His mind was made up. It had been two centuries ago. He would turn on the whole damn world before he gave another.

Choking filled the room as he slipped into the minds of every guard, cutting off their ability to breathe.

"If you keep me here, I swear I will kill you. I never wanted that crown, but I will take it."

"Very well," the king said, eyes of disappointment and resentment locking with his.

He had long since hardened to the beads of rejection.

"If this is to be farewell, I would like to show you the way." The king turned, and the hooded male let go of the guards, who gasped for their stolen air. "Follow me."



didn't think I'd be so reluctant to greet death as the man I watched die. From above, I was a mere spectator to his pleas for his children, his wife, and the job he wished to spend the rest of his years working for the one who stood to claim his life.

He didn't know I was there.

Every time I watched a man on his knees, I couldn't help my need to observe from the high rafters, wondering if I'd relate to his pleas if my own breaths were numbered. With my fragmented memories only spanning five years, I had little to attach my purpose to.

It was as if Hektor Goldfell heard no cries as he gave a nod to the brute of a man pinning the victim down with a single large hand on his shoulder. He wouldn't spill blood—not in this room. He wouldn't disturb the bustling nighttime entertainment in the main room of his establishment with this man's death.

I pinched my lips at the sickening twist of his neck, fortunately not hearing the crack over the chatter and low music before his body slumped. It churned my stomach all the same.

As though he'd exerted himself, Hektor slumped into the nearest booth, flicking his chin so the few locks of red hair weren't touching his eyes anymore. When two beautiful women slipped in either side of him, I averted my eyes, lying down on the wooden beam only a little wider than my spine. My glittering silver hair spilled over the sides, along with the sheer material of my skirt, which floated in the air. But I didn't fear anyone finding me here. They never looked up.

My fingers brushed the ornate black hilt of my dagger idly. I wasn't permitted to dance or entertain like the women below, but I still enjoyed the lightweight elegance of their wares.

Skillfully I got back to my feet, perhaps childishly copying one of the ladies trying out the art of theft among the newest group of esteemed card players. Distraction came in her fluid movements. I crossed over the wooden rafters, light on my toes, twirling like she did, and studied her movements, pretending it was I who attracted the men's lusty eyes, their gazes preoccupied enough to miss her hand purposely placed on one's shoulder to divert his attention from her other hand dipping into his pocket.

I couldn't see what she stole, but her blue irises gleamed triumph.

She twisted and perched on the edge of the table, arching her back as she lay so as not to disturb their game. I reclined backward until my hands felt the wood, legs rotating in the air, and my next blink canceled out the dizzy sweep as I straightened again. Then I leaned back against the vertical support with a sigh, casting my gaze away from the busy candlelit room to the gloom of my vantage point. Cloaked in shadow, I felt no more than an insect caught in a spider's web. It was hard to believe we were in the same room.

Sometimes I wished the guests would see me just once, even if I disappeared in their next blink since I was a prize only to be known by one man.

My eyes found Hektor, who hadn't moved at all, but the women were now spilling themselves over him. His deep green irises were the one set I'd never want to be found by up here.

Within these grand walls he kept me safe from the horrors outside. The *vampires*. Different species of them who consumed blood or souls and kept the humans afraid.

But they, like us, were under the control of the king.

The main room was bustling with talk of the Libertatem, a centennial trial hosted by the wicked ruler in the Central Kingdom of Vesitire. Five humans, the Selected, from the surrounding kingdoms would be sent off in the coming days to compete for one hundred years of safety from vampire attacks.

As I remained confined within these four elaborate walls with rarely any opportunity to venture beyond them, I didn't know as much of the outside

world as I yearned to. All I could do was pluck kernels of insight from my frequent eavesdropping during these envious nights of beauty, gambling, and seduction.

The recent discussions buzzed within me, and I spent hours here listening in.

Four more days.

A clock ticked each minute in my mind, counting down to the Libertatem send-off, an opportunity slipping through my fingers like sand and a grip on my heart squeezing tight at the thought of my longest friend leaving as the Selected of Alisus.

My memory only spanned as far back as to remember Hektor's hold on me, but not the thing that had chased me into his comparatively safe arms. He'd brought me here and told everyone the story of how I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for him. Now, five years later, from what I'd been told, I was around the age of twenty-three, and he'd never let me forget that debt.

My hand hovered over the two long scars that ran from under my jaw to the hollow of my neck. Though I couldn't recall the face, nor the moment it had happened, phantom jolts of searing pain erupted whenever I thought of it. Or when I fixated too long on the raised skin in the mirror, attempting to find a memory beyond that moment. Another mystery perhaps owed to what I'd fled from.

What remained a despair I could never voice was that I would never know who I was before Hektor.

"You're safe now, Astraea," he had said.

Those first words I would always remember. Hektor hadn't just found me, but also my name, which once heard I knew was mine.

In that respect he possessed both my lives.

I didn't know why, of all the company surrounding him now, he took favor in me. I surely wasn't the only one to bring comfort to his nights. I'd watched women of all beauty give him their convincing affection. Those from fair skin to dark skin, of natural hair color or hair enhanced with Starlight Matter—magick that spoke their wealth. Right now, a woman with glowing brown skin slipped a hand over his chest, in under the material he always wore with the first few buttons undone. Her long, dark hair appeared dipped in fluorescent rose paint. Another with a porcelain complexion and catlike yellow eyes hooked a slender leg over his lap.

I looked away. No matter how often I watched his nightly affairs, it never erased the question of why I wasn't enough. Why he cared to keep me at all.

Or I'd find myself asking why I chose to stay.

But that answer came easily: I had nowhere else to go. And while he indulged himself in others, he came to me with an affection I consumed greedily and craved deeply.

Love was a drug laced with its own cure.

A new figure emerged into the room, wavy strands of dark blond hair falling loose from his half-tie to frame his face. While he ordered a drink and leaned casually at the bar, he cast his sight up by habit. I didn't shrink away from being caught by Zathrian's ocean-blue eyes. I thought I'd face punishment from Hektor the first time Zath noticed me up here so long ago, but he'd never spoken of my frequent eavesdropping.

I matched his subtle smirk as he lifted a glass to his lips. Hektor rarely trusted anyone, but Zath had quickly climbed his ranks to became one of his closest men over the past year. I'd watched many come and go, mostly leaving his service by death, and Zath was the only one to have ever paid me notice. I considered him a friend.

Zathrian's head jerked, a subtle signal, as Hektor removed the woman's leg and shuffled out of the booth. My breath hitched, and just as he was intercepted by some men in fine wares, I began to make my way back to my rooms in case they became his destination.

The manor boasted far more of them than necessary. Hektor's establishment was a well-known venue for the elite. Men and woman with enough coin to kill their problems rather than face them. He didn't host just one thing; Hektor Goldfell directed the most discreet but deadly network of spies and assassins in all of Alisus, the southern realm of Solanis. Some of them I envied more than the dancers. Seeing their leather wears and glinting weapons never failed to intrigue me.

The dagger I owned, another secret, Hektor would never suspect I knew how to wield to some life-saving capacity. If he were to find out who I met with when he was not in town, I knew the consequence would come in the form of an ornate iron key sealing me inside tighter walls until our trust could be mended again. The rough cadence of his voice pricked the hairs on my nape as I glided through the main halls like a ghost. *When did my room become so far away?* These winding halls were mocking me.

Swiping up a sheer blue face covering, I tied it over my mouth and nose. The ladies wore them sometimes, a beautiful accessory to add mystery and intrigue to their performances. The masks didn't conceal much, but it wasn't for Hektor I added the extra measure; I did so for the small chance my stealth might falter and I'd run into any of the guests.

His voice kept advancing, and he would know me from any angle should he turn the next corner. My pulse raced with my steps. I wouldn't make it to the end before then. I did something I'd never done before, but it would cause no harm.

The doors that lined each side of the halls were marked with a star. Purple for occupied, white for vacant. These rooms were for private entertainment, strictly for dancing, though for any further desires patrons could rent a different room to follow.

Spying the first white star, I had no other option. I slipped inside, swiftly closing the door and leaning my forehead against it. My chest rose and fell hard as I strained to listen for Hektor's voice to pass, but everything beyond the door was canceled out and all that filled my hearing was gentle notes. A soft song in the large, low-lit room. But I couldn't find the source when I turned.

My next breath caught, and I kept deathly still as though my presence could be denied.

I wasn't alone.

Yet I'd been certain of the white star that couldn't be mistaken while under enchantment.

I saw him then. Or at least part of him. A form near blended into the darkness he sat cloaked in. He didn't look at me, and I could hardly see a face from the shadow casting over his eyes. His cup of wine bore all his attention, lazy fingers swirling around the rim as if he'd yet to notice my intrusion at all.

Or had been expecting it.

No—not me. But someone.

I took careful steps into the space, and with one deep inhale I headed over to the side of the room, mind racing with what to do. Though I dare

not glance his way, my skin ignited with scattered pinpricks of attention that made me believe he'd finally sought me out.

He had to be watching me.

My pulse beat hard in my chest as I felt a featherlight caress across my shoulders that drew forth a gasp. When I looked, no one was there. The man remained exactly where he was, and I was wrong to have thought he cared about my being here.

In my irritation I picked up the decanter. The slosh of water filling my cup was all that disturbed the music. Still, I couldn't find the players of the song that felt like an embrace, something about it familiar and soothing. Personal even.

I took a long drink, hoping the water would stay and not dry out my throat again as soon as I placed the cup back down.

*Is he waiting for me to begin?* 

The steps I could take I played out subconsciously, tempting my body to enact them as I'd done to no audience but shadow. That was all this man was. I could pretend to be dancing along the precarious rafters as a silly imitation to those gifted in the skill. The worst to come of it would be no payment if I didn't meet his expectation. I didn't need that.

Nerves turned to thrill as a surge of electricity touched the tip of my spine when the song changed. As if it had been picked to ignite the pleasures of my body alone and guide a dance I would craft myself.

One night. How often had I dreamed of having one night to release that kind of expression?

I thought his eyes were upon me with the vibrating awareness. I wondered what color they were. It shouldn't matter, but I skipped through green, blue, brown... None felt right for the shallow fire that rippled over me.

The song became elevated, an acoustic rhythm running straight through me. The pitch changed direction as if I were standing in the middle of an orchestra with instruments taking their turn around me. My feet glided toward the center of the room, only responding as the music coaxed.

I had nothing to lose and a moment of carefree performance to gain. Not only for him, but myself.

So I danced.

My movements push and pulled, with gravity flowing the light materials of my skirts and what was draped around my shoulders, attached to my wrists. The air cooled my skin, wrapping around the few inches of bare midriff that heated when I stepped light and twirled slow. I felt myself dancing through the darkness between stars. Each time they touched me I erupted with exhilaration, not ever wanting to stop.

I looked up and found the starry sky blinking back at me through the glass roof. Something about the night always awakened me more than the daytime.

When my gaze fell back down, I remembered the stars weren't my only spectators.

His fingers stopped circling his wine, and though I still couldn't see his face, the music gave me a surge of confidence to edge closer to him. Until I forgot his presence once more.

My leg eased up sideways, my body curved, and my hand curled around my ankle, testing my flexibility, as the song grew to a climax. Then the notes flared, coming down like a flurry, and I let go, my leg hooking to spin my body in time.

I felt alive. Free. This kind of exhilaration topped my untold proclivity for fighting, though both gave similar thrills.

I didn't know when I'd come closer to the stranger, but in my high of adrenaline intrigue seized me, and before I knew it, I was right before him. But he didn't look up.

My hand reached for his chin...

So fast I couldn't make a sound, a grip lashed around my wrist, disorienting me for a second before I blinked back to clarity as I was spun around. The new impression against my back snapped my awareness to my newly compromised position.

His hold pinning my wrist to my shoulder loosened.

My heart thrummed wildly, unknowing of what to do. To my error I'd overstepped. I couldn't call out like any of the other women in danger—if Hektor were to find me here...

"You are not what I expected."

I took a moment to breathe against the silvery gravel of his voice. His fingers shot sparks across my skin as they trailed down the length of my

arm, occasionally slowing as though he were taking in every one of my silver markings.

"Oh?" It was all I could muster as fear of an oddly spirited kind tightened my throat.

"You move as if you make the music that calls to you."

I wasn't sure if it was a compliment, nor why I didn't expect the commentary on my performance, but it heated my cheeks. "I hope it was to your satisfaction."

My breath stuttered when his fingers combed through my hair, tipping the wavy silk tresses to expose my shoulder.

"Very much so," he said, and I shivered with the brush of his fingers that began on my scar. Like a phantom touch. "But more importantly, I hope it was to yours. It seems freedom becomes you when you dance, and I have to wonder what it is that makes you feel caged."

I couldn't understand his words though they stroked something within me. I stiffened at where his attention was fixed—on the long, unruly imperfection Hektor claimed ruined me. He said he loved me with it though most would not.

"Who did this to you?" His tone grated with bitter-cold notes.

I thought I saw tendrils of black smoke snaking around the edges of my vision, but I couldn't move, unsure of where the anger rippling through me had come from. "I don't know." My reply snapped me back to our situation. Sense had become blanketed by the enchantment of his skin on mine, but reservation prevailed. He had no right—should have no care—to know any of my history.

His other hand found the cut of my skirt, and while it tingled, his roaming faltered. By the time he found the small sheath empty I whirled.

He was too fast. Once again, my action was trapped by his quick intervention. He fixed his eyes on the lethal point he'd intercepted from being lodged through his ribs and then trailed down the wavy purple length, over the cross guard crafted into beautiful black wings.

Only when his eyes lifted to mine did my firm stance slacken. I stared into irises alive like molten ore, glittering a golden amber that reminded me new dawns were a beautiful thing. Everything I'd seen, from coin to jewels, was now an impersonation of what treasure should look like, and more importantly, the value it held.

"A stormstone dagger," he observed with approval.

My mouth turned paper-dry with my galloping heart, all too aware of our proximity and the way he towered over me. I tried to pull my arm, but he held me still. I locked those golden eyes with challenge, unsure of where my bravery had come from but seizing it nonetheless.

"Let me go, or I'll scream and flood the room with guards."

His mouth grew in a slow curl, dimpling one cheek. When his other hand reached up, I jerked again until my muscles locked still. The tie of the sheer material covering the lower half of my face came undone, drifting to the floor as one less barrier between us.

"I don't think you'll do that."

My lips parted, but no words came. How could he know? My gaze traveled along his defined cheekbones until...

I gasped, yanking away with enough of an electric shock that he released me, and I stumbled a few steps back. "You're..." I couldn't speak it, blinking again as though I would be wrong, but it didn't change.

The delicate points of his ears.

"Does that frighten you?"

The only beings I'd known to have such an attribute were the vampires. This manor had become my shield from the viciousness of *his kind*. Hektor didn't allow them within his establishment, and I never knew how he kept them out when they were creatures that took what they wanted without morals.

"Are you going to hurt me?"

"You think I want your soul or your blood. I'll admit, one is highly tempting to hold, the other to taste. But what if I told you I'm not what you think I am?"

"I would ask what it is about me that makes you take me for a fool."

"Your lack of perception."

"Excuse me?"

He stalked toward me, slipping one hand into his pocket and drawing my attention to his attire. He wore an impeccably tailored lapel jacket, all black with fine gold embroidery to complement his eyes. Pressed pants tucked into expensive boots. Everything about him was dipped in shadow, giving the illusion they moved for him. As I trailed my eyes back up, gold markings on his neck caught my attention through his open top, inspiring an urge to get closer and discover what it was.

I hadn't realized I'd been trying to keep some distance between us until I met a stone pillar.

"I can feel your soul. And I can show it to you if you'd like."

I didn't get the chance to respond as he reached for me. I gave a shallow cry when his palm pressed between my shoulder blades, drawing me tightly to him, but I was helpless to move when my back curved at the tug of something he pulled from my chest. The world became bright and wondrous as I stared into a pulsing sphere of silver and twinkling stars. It whispered, though not with words; it radiated with an inviting warmth my fingers reached for, a prickling starting in the tips to beat through every inch of me.

"Consuming it, that is not my existence."

As though his hand had surged into the depths of me, I gasped when that sphere of otherworldly energy pummeled back, winking out the hypnotic light. I took a second to blink, breathing hard until the lingering pressure reminded me he had yet to release me. I couldn't describe how those few seconds felt. What he'd done to me could have been a masterful trick of allurement, and I'd become ensnared by it.

"You just—" I could hardly breathe, hardly think.

His hand remained on my chest, lifting only to trace the points of my markings. I remained flush in his hold like prey finding twisted beauty in its capture. But I didn't feel the hard pressure of him as I expected.

"You didn't take any of it?" I dared to ask. I didn't feel any different. No—that was a lie, though the fluttering in my stomach and my racing pulse I considered favorable over having years of my life stolen.

"No."

"Did you want to?"

When those amber eyes flicked to me, they almost rivaled the rush of adrenaline from his trick. "I have no use for your soul outside your body, Starlight. A few fractions further and you would be dead, not knowing how to guard it."

I couldn't believe my own inquisition under the circumstances. "Humans can protect themselves?"