

My name is Kulsuhm Yussuf, I am a UK-based creative writer currently studying and about to graduate with a bachelor's in Creative Writing. My Final Major Project combines traditional prose with world-building and fantasy aspects. It is a collaborative piece with an artist/ animator exploring how the same world can breathe differently across two media.

I'm a writer who loves the creative side of things, horror, fantasy, empowerment, and what if? Genres are my go-to! I'm always searching for a way to delve deeper into a new world, exploring my imagination, and I'm glad to bring you along for it, too.

Solar Eclipse is a mythical royal elven fantasy that blends themes of romance, mystery, and political thriller! Join our two main characters, Bonnie and Arkaine, as they discover the true side of the world they live in. Questioning everything they've ever been told about it.

# Solar Eclipse

Within a storm of rain and leaves.

A deep twilight hue painted the sky of the Lunar sector, unease rolling through the manor grounds, crickets chirped in the grass, and birds soared languidly through the morning air. Something moved behind the clouds, even with the aroma of peace.

Something akin to a broken branch in a mist of full-leafed trees, an itch behind a dog's ear, a shadow brushing against the foot of the stone steps, an undeniable foreboding, brooding quietly, underneath the earth.

The air smelled damp, though there were no signs of rain, not a drop of dew on the grass below and beyond the Aurelius Manor's sprawling grounds.

The gothic manor stood at the crest of a long stone staircase, its dark facade rising in carved arches and tall narrow windows, the heavy oak doors set beneath an elegant archway, etched with the Lunar sigil of a star spearing an upturned crescent moon. Crimson roses climbed the walls in a tangled profusion, thorned vines and ivy curling through the window frames and reaching over the stone as though trying to take over the house itself.

Clothes hung from lines strung between sturdy columns, framed by wrought-iron rails, glittered in the lanterns' glow. Large blue iron lamps hung from the sides of the columns, washing the stone in a soft, ghostly light.

The fabrics that hung on the line swayed, already dry and warm in the soft breeze, next to Bonnie, a Solar elf who married Lunar's heir by the arrangement of the two sector rulers to bring alliance to their world.

Drawn to her alone, the light reflected against the sheer and silk fabrics of her clothing.

She'd only wanted to grab her glittering gold shawl off the laundry line, her light pink curls slipping loose from their pinned style as she reached for it. Instead, she had been pulled under by one of those hazy spells that came without warning. The clothes on the line waved in the wind, droplets of water dotting the stone balcony.

The scent of rose water, pine, and the sandalwood-and-wheat mixture the maids would use to wash the clothes tickled her nose, comforting and calming all at once, though it did nothing to thaw her mental dilemma.

The world had loosened around the edges. She no longer knew whether she was standing or kneeling. The blue lantern light had gone strange, swelling and dimming, as though submerged underwater.

Then came the pull.

It always began as a pressure behind her eyes, a gathering weight at the base of her skull, and then the slipping. Her breath went shallow. Her limbs were heavy and her thoughts no longer her own. There was pressure on her mind, as if something had placed its weight on her head, bringing forth a series of fractured images. Roots twisting into dark water. A shattered crown and a repetition of words she couldn't make out clearly.

Once it finally receded, she stared down at the stone floor, raking through her mind. What could it mean? What could it be hinting at? Whatever it was, it was urgent; tomorrow was the eleventh of the new calendar month, the Summer cycle just beginning. The solstice is always prime time for a significant prophetic message.

She blinked, trying to clear the cloudiness of her mind, pulling herself away from the airy consciousness she usually fell into during times like this. Since she was young, the haunting of the oracle had claimed her. Sweeping her into a pathline that only she could follow, and only she could learn. What few could afford to know.

That was the blessing of the Gods, the pride of Solar, how it felt to be touched by the sun, and to be afforded a luxury the world envied her for: knowledge, her biggest responsibility, and her longest shadow.

The sound of hurried footsteps clambering up the stairs startled her from her thoughts. Joanne's expression was a mixture of relief and irritation.

"My lady! Have you been up here all morning?" Joanne found her and helped her off the stone floor. "Was his grace hiding up there with you?"

"He isn't in his office?" She frowned as Joanne started guiding her down the steps.

Joanne paused beneath the curved stone entrance, her head ducking and turning as she looked out for the royal duke of the manor. "I had assumed he was with you..."

Bonnie shook her head, "I haven't seen a glimpse of him all morning."

Joanne nodded before, taking a look at her bare feet. "Where are your shoes?"

By the time she stepped back into the main section of the manor after sitting on the balcony, an hour had passed. She assumed it had only been ten minutes since she had gotten dressed and left her bedroom for the laundry section. The oracle's trance had carried her far from reality.

The halls were a mess of staff racing around, trying to pack their luggage and get their supplies ready as soon as possible. Joanne had informed her that the stay would last around three days and four nights, more than Arkaine could ever possibly handle with the Duke of Floris.

Their discord was more personal than a posturing issue; she'd noticed the last time Fenrys had visited their manor for her oracular consultancy that Arkaine did not like the Duke of Floris, and Fenrys returned that feeling tenfold.

They stopped for a moment in the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Joanne took hold of her hand, squeezing it gently, "My lady... Bonnie." She looked like she had something weighing on her mind. "If you do find him in there, could you try to be a little more understanding? Try to listen to what he isn't saying. Remember that stubbornness doesn't always lack reason." She then pushed her out of the hall, closer to the door with a smile, calling out quickly. "You'll catch more flies with honey, dear." Bonnie watched as she turned away, disappearing into the long stretch of walls and doors.

It wasn't until she almost tripped over a vine covered in thorns that she realised she had already walked to his door. Dark tendrils clung to the oak and crept across the stone, half withered, their leaves brittle where rot had begun to take hold. At her feet, fragments had fallen to the floor, carrying the faint scent of a burning forest that followed Arkaine around.

She pushed open the large carved oak doors to his bedroom, not bothering to knock. If he truly was hiding in his room, in one of his moods, it wasn't guaranteed that he would answer regardless of who was behind it.

His room bore the same affliction. Cracks split through the stone floor, cutting across the gold nautical rose embedded at its centre, while dead vines traced the walls as though slowly reclaiming them. A green flame moved in the hearth, casting light over the commissioned gilded portrait of the two of them.

Above the mantel and overhead, the ceiling shimmered with a living constellation, stars charmed to mirror the true night sky, turning slowly during their courses, celestial and impossibly alive above a chamber touched by decay.

She focused more on the bed, where a lump of blankets hid behind the canopy, and tiptoed across the cracks, “Arkaine. I see you hiding under there.” She pulled the canopy open, patting at where she assumed his head would be, “I know you heard me come in.”

The lump of blankets shifted, “Nothing truly gets past you, does it?” Arkaine sighed, slipping out of the bed and brushing back the canopy fabric, “I was trying to get a last-minute nap in.”

Bonnie raised an eyebrow, glancing at the man in front of her, from his long, mid-length dark hair, slightly mussed after hiding under his covers, to his ears that pointed straight out, then dipped down, the opposite of her own, which pointed towards the sky. His skin was tan but pale from the absence of sun in his sector.

Ruby red almond-shaped eyes, and an almost unreadable expression in the curve of his lips, maybe nerves, maybe a hint of playfulness, a charming, almost deceiving gaze, but she'd caught him in a lie, an obvious one at that. Had she not married him, or had a weaker will, she would have felt inclined to play along, “A nap... after just getting dressed, yes?”

Arkaine straightened his posture, getting ready to make what she assumed to be another excuse. She looked over his clothing as he smoothed the wrinkles from his formal blue-and-gold ensemble, a navy pinstriped vest, over a long-sleeved shirt with a high collar and puffy sleeves,... his biggest consistency, his gloves,

“Managing a Manor and a title can be stressful, my dear, I wish only to rest my eyes and weary soul.” He sighed with dramatic wistfulness.

She pursed her lips; she would not laugh, she refused to laugh. No matter how humorous his wit, she wouldn't let such a dumb joke slide; there was still a large elephant in the room, "I'm sure this sudden bout of tiredness has nothing to do with Floris and its current royal duke?" She didn't need to see it to know that he bristled inwardly at her words.

"As if I would be so easily affected, I'm merely tired, I told you. Honestly, maybe we should dismiss the calling and stay here, far, far away from Floris and a generous distance from Fenrys himself."

She snorted at that, "Yes, let us ignore a political calling from a land we are currently in trade with, see where it finds our people."

He swooned, placing his palm flat against his chest. "A woman with my own ideals..." he turned to his drawer and unclasped the black velvet case box that sat atop the oak, his hands hesitating as he picked up the jagged crown formed from a slab of gold. She admired the elegant design, sweeping symmetrical spires that curved like a wreath or circlet, but it lacked the gems of a regular royal headpiece; it still held the same presence and mimicked the sharp edges of a crown of thorns.

He held it in his hands gently, as if he was cradling a piece of himself that he didn't own, turning to her with a false grin, "I wasn't bluffing. Why don't we refuse the summons? Take a break for ourselves, I know you've been wanting to inspect our decaying grounds, we could take a tour..."

Just like that, the small smile on her face began to fade. Right now, she didn't need him to make promises to avoid the responsibility at the end. Even though the dark forests of the

Lunar were somewhere she'd longed to, *begged* to explore, she wouldn't let him use that curiosity now, not after his past refusals.

"Arkaine, as much as you know I'd love to, we have an obligation."

His fingers tightened around his crown, his false grin finally settling into his regular neutral expression.

"Ah, yes, obligation, I forget how thrilling it is to be obligated to attend a council summons, obligated to perform, much like a jester in a room that I'm unwelcome in."

"Arkaine, you aren't unwelcome. We were invited for a reason; there's no need to feel otherwise."

"You act as if you aren't aware of Duke Fenrys' personality; he holds no respect for others, despite having taken the same classes in etiquette. May I also add that the lack of respect seems pointedly directed at me."

"I understand that Fenrys can be—"

"Not *can be* Bonnie, darling. He is. He is utterly insufferable!"

Bonnie sighed, folding her arms, "Arkaine, this isn't about whether you like each other; this is about the council."

"When it comes to him, that is never the case," he replied. "Everything that he does is for some sort of show, one that you consistently seem to support."

"I'm not supporting him," She said, her tone sharpening now. "I'm asking you to do what's right. Once summoned by the council, we are needed, regardless of the grudge you wish to hold."

"It is more than just a grudge!" He snapped. "Bonnie, that man is a thorn in my side and an even bigger pain in my ass."

"And you think avoiding this will fix that?"

Arkaine hesitated, but it was too late; Bonnie's irritation had already reached its peak.

"To think," She stepped back, creating a distance between them. "You would rather mope in here than even try to get along with Fenrys for a day. Even an hour."

Arkaine bristled again, shooting back, "I have tried."

"Clearly not hard enough."

He flinched, his expression tightening.

"I'm tired of this," she went on. "Either you get yourself and your will straight about your leadership, or you waste away here on your own."

"Oh?" He chuckled humourlessly. "So I suppose you just know it all, don't you, Bonnie? How to lead, what to do. You have the formula, right?"

"Arkaine.." She frowned deeply. "That's not what I said."

“No, you made it quite clear what you want.”

He took a step closer, a frustrated look in his eyes, dulling the ruby tone. “Why don't you take the role?” He continued, “Better yet, invite Fenrys to join you, since he's apparently so layered and virtuous, so hardworking.”

Her heart froze a little. “You can stew in your contempt all you like. I won't be a part of it.”

Without waiting for his reply, she turned sharply on her heel. The lace hem of her blue dress swished against the cracked stone floor as she crossed the room in long, determined strides. The green flame in the fireplace flickered across her face, highlighting the tight set of her jaw and the fire in her amber eyes.

Arkaine opened his mouth, “Bonnie...” Ready to protest, but she didn't look back. She swung open the heavy oak doors and stepped into the hallway, boots echoing, the door slamming shut behind her, her offence made clear.

She nearly collided with Joanne as she stormed through the hall, a scowl fixed firmly across her features, the heat of the argument still clinging to every step.

Joanne pushed back the brim of her hat, startled, before quickly moving to catch up with her. She took in Bonnie's expression, her downcast gaze, the rigid set of her shoulders, the tightness in her jaw, and her own softened immediately.

“My Lady, did the talk not go as planned?” She asked, placing a hand on Bonnie's shoulder. Bonnie let out a breath, one sharper than she had intended, her lips pressing into a thin line, before she forced them into something resembling a smile, one that Joanne knew all too well.

“He’s being insufferably stubborn,” she muttered. “I can’t stand it at all.”

Joanne winced in understanding, giving her shoulder a small, reassuring squeeze.

“Then perhaps,” she said lightly, “you should head to the carriage before him. Give him a moment to come to his senses, I’m sure he’ll follow once he has had some time to think.”

“Yes... You’re right. We’ve already kept everyone waiting long enough,” she paused and then added quietly. “I apologise.”

She straightened up, smoothing out the front of her blue dress as she gathered herself.

“I’ll go on ahead.”

Joanne nodded, her tone soft, “I will be right behind you in the staff carriage. Try not to let it sit too heavily, My Lady.”

Bonnie didn’t wait another second. Turning away from Joanne, she made her way down the rich blue carpet, through the long stretch of the corridor.

The manor was still alive with movement. Servants crossed between halls with arms full of folded garments and supplies, trunks dragged across polished stone, their voices overlapping in hushed urgency as final preparations were made. The panic in the air had settled, forming something efficient, and the scent of polished wood and linen lingered, mingling with the faint, ever-present scent of damp earth.

By the time she reached the front of the manor, the large engraved front doors were open, showcasing the steps that led to the organised courtyard, rose buds and bluebells framing the sides of the steps, their colours soft, yet faintly luminescent as they glowed against the stone. She descended, watching the servants pile the last remnants of their luggage into the two carriages that stood just at the entrance.

The carriage stood in deep violet and blue tones, its panels traced with stars and golden flecks. Ironwork curled along the roof in delicate loops; the glowing crescent sigil of Lunar pulsed softly against the door. It rested on golden-rimmed wheels, crystal lanterns swaying beneath the eaves, casting blue lights across the stones, though no horses stood harnessed to it; as they weren't needed.

It was charmed, guided by intent. Once inside, a destination spoken aloud was enough to set them in motion, the magic seeking out the mana signature of the chosen sector and following its trace without fault.

The interior was warm, the blue velvet-lined seats stitched through with fine golden thread. She sat near the forcefield, her chin resting on her fist as she stared out into the silhouette of the Lunar forests, her mind focused elsewhere, her husband's reluctance to leave, along with the cryptic summoning, her thoughts refused to settle.

The door opened, and Arkaine took a seat, leaving a wide berth between them. Instead of pressing closer to her as usual, it felt awkward, the silence gathering uneasily in her chest.

The carriage shifts into motion beneath them, steady and quiet, the path ahead guided by an unseen pull.

She didn't look at him, keeping her eyes on the window beside her and occasionally ahead to the larger window. He adjusts the cuff of his glove, smoothing it down.

Her jaw tightened slightly, though her expression remained composed; the tension had started to fill the carriage, like the fog curling around the trees' trunks outside.

"Well..." Arkaine shifts in his seat, as if considering something, his fingers tapping lightly against his knee for a moment.

"This is certainly the most romantic departure we've had in a while."

She ignores his joke, fighting the urge to roll her eyes, leaning towards the window, lifting her hand just enough to offer a wave to the servants' carriage as it passes. She knew that Joanne wouldn't see it, but she needed to avoid the way Arkaine's smile faltered— lest she feel too bad to ignore him properly.

The silence this time is more unsettling, and regardless of her ire, she found herself watching the forest go by, the luminous crystals growing through the grass, some embedded in the tree trunks, glittering and sparkling like light through glass.

As they went further down the path, she noticed that a few of the trees were tangled in vines, their thorns sharp and jagged, a familiar sign of rot, much like the ones that covered the walls and doors of Arkaine's bedroom. An unusual sight in the normally flourishing landscape, she filed it to herself, pushing her thoughts to the back of her mind.

Time passed, and she finally caved underneath her ebbing guilt. With a soft, reluctant sigh, she spoke up.

“Arkaine,” she said at last, her voice quieter, though no less firm, “I truly need you to take this seriously.”

He glances over at her, his expression unreadable, but he doesn't interrupt.

“I understand that you may feel a certain way towards Fenrys,” she continues, turning to face him slightly, her knees pressing against his, “I do, I know how he can be.”

She let her olive branch sit for a moment.

“However, I can't help but feel as though the situation in Floris is more dire than we think. My readings have been unclear.”

Arkaine's gaze drops briefly before shifting back to the window.

“It is our duty as part of the council to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of our people. Our responsibility is to rule,” she goes on, her words steadier now, “regardless of the sector, or personal... feelings.”

The silence stretches once more after her words, though the atmosphere is less brittle now.

“I'm aware,” he answers, his voice quiet as he speaks again, “I apologise, I... was being quite stubborn.”

Bonnie sighed, and the weight that had been settling in her chest finally eased.

"I'm aware," She replies, a faint hint of humour slipping through, as she repeats his words back to him.

After clearing the air, Bonnie couldn't help but let a small smile creep up onto her face. She fidgeted slightly before speaking again.

"Have you ever tried Floris' native dish?"

Arkaine glanced at her, brow lifting. "Should I be concerned?" There was a flicker of suspicion in his eyes.

"The mossball," she replied lightly. "It's quite the dish, sticky rice and moss, with other fillings if you so choose."

She couldn't help the quiet snicker that slipped out at the expression that followed, thinly veiled disgust at the thought of eating the spore-bearing plant.

"That.. uh," his brows knitted together. "Sounds delightful," the sarcasm sat heavy on his tongue.

The carriage carried on, their conversation drifting into something easier, until the sky shifted.

Rain fell, breaking without warning, thunder rolling through the air as droplets struck the curved carriage surface, blurring the world beyond into streaks of grey and green, soaking the mossy grass and gravel. The forest thinned as they travelled, the path widening and changing.

By the time they reached the great stone archway, marking the entrance to Floris, the storm had settled into a steady downpour.

The outer ring of the sector greeted them as it always had, homes woven into nature itself, ivy curling around wooden frames, flowers spilling from windowsills, soft lantern lights glowing faintly in the rain. Elves moved about their businesses, heads ducked beneath cloaks and shawls, the quiet hum of life continuing despite the weather.

“Well,” Arkaine leaned back slightly, something smug tugging at his tone, “this is far less catastrophic than we were led to believe. I’d say our dear Fenrys may have overstretched things.”

Bonnie didn’t respond. Her gaze lingered on the streets, lips pressing together as unease settled quietly in her chest. Something wasn’t right; she could feel it. Had Fenrys truly been overreacting?

The carriage turned, and the shift was immediate; something was wrong with the streets ahead.

Bodies lay scattered across the ground as though something had torn through the district without warning. Some had been carefully covered with white sheets, the fabric already soaked through by the rain, clinging to the shapes beneath. Others hadn't been touched at all.

Figures moved between them, healers, attendants and alchemists, recognisable by the red armbands marked with a serpent devouring its own tail.

The sick were worse.

Bonnie's breath caught sharply in her throat. Their skin had turned pale, almost grey, stretched thin against bone. Hair clung in damp, brittle strands. Black bile spilt from their mouths, thick and tar-like, trailing down their chins...

No. Not trailing. Dripping.

Because... Their lips, her stomach turned violently. Their lips were breaking down, the flesh softening, splitting and rotting, as though something beneath the surface was eating them alive.

"What in the world...?"

Her hand flew to her mouth, a sharp gasp forcing its way through her fingers as her body reacted before her mind could catch up. Goosebumps prickled across her skin, a crawling, itching sensation spreading deep in her chest, revulsion, and something far worse, absolute, undeniable, terror.

Beside her, Arkaine had gone completely still, his hands trembling in his lap.

Bonnie glanced at him, her breathing still uneven. His eyes hadn't left the scene outside, his posture rigid, shoulders drawn just slightly inward. She gazed down at his clenched fists, the leather of his gloves creasing faintly as his fingers tightened.

"Arkaine?" She asked quietly, but he didn't answer immediately, and for a moment, she didn't know if he had heard her at all.

“I see it.”

His words came out flat, even, and she watched him, her eyes filled with concern as the carriage lurched; her attention on the streets once more.

Once they finally pulled up to Fittonia Palace, the rain had picked up again.

Theodore and Joanne rushed forward the moment their carriage stopped. Ushering both Arkaine and Bonnie out and into the large stony hallway of the grand palace. The plants that crept through the cracks in the walls and floor shuddered beneath the downpour, leaves trembling under the weight of the water.

The stoned path beneath her feet was slick. Bonnie nearly lost her footing on the way inside, her balance slipping just enough to send a jolt of panic through her chest before her hand caught onto Joanne’s arm.

“My lady— careful,” Joanne muttered, guiding her along.

Further ahead stood an arched wooden entryway, where a brunette servant rested against the wall, bowing lowly in greeting.

By the time they crossed the threshold, Bonnie was half-soaked, the sudden warmth of the interior doing little to banish the hollow ache of lingering terror.

If there is one word that she would use to describe her relationship with the Nature sector and its duke, it would be simple.

Complicated.

Fenrys had always been that way. Brilliant, undeniably so, and painfully aware of it. The kind of man who had never needed to soften his words, never been made to. He spoke as he pleased, sharp and unfiltered, carrying himself with a sort of pride that bordered on arrogance. A peacock of a man, pampered his entire life.

And yet, he had always invited her, season after season, without fail. Each letter was delivered precisely on time.

She had known it would happen again this year. Had known that she would eventually have to find a way to decline, had been *trying* to, in truth, though. She hadn't quite managed it before Arkaine had informed her that the invitation had already been extended. But to both of them.

A towel was pressed gently against her hair, pulling her from her thoughts. She flinched slightly at the contact before relaxing, allowing Joanne to dab away the rainwater that had soaked through her curls and the bodice of her dress.

"I should have checked the weather charts," Bonnie murmured under her breath, a quiet frustration slipping through as she rubbed her arms, trying to chase away the cold.

Goosebumps still lined her skin, dotted faintly with stray spur seeds stuck in the fabric.

Joanne and Theodore moved ahead of them, setting their belongings down and taking inventory of the room.

Bonnie stepped further inside, her gaze sweeping across the space. She had stayed countless times here before, always in the same guest chamber, and some of her things remained, forgotten from her last trip.

A plush wooden bed sat tucked into the corner, beside the tall oak-framed windows, which opened onto a balcony overlooking the palace's gardens and the rolling hillside beyond. The view was as lovely as she remembered from her weekends away. The room itself was cosy, but small.

Much too small.

She eyed the bed; it couldn't possibly fit her and Arkaine together.

A frown tugged at her lips.

"This room..." She began, almost to herself, before turning slightly towards Arkaine. "It isn't big enough."

Her eyes flicked back to the bed, and then to him again.

"I'll ask Fenrys to arrange another one."

Arkaine was already looking at it, and from the look in his eyes, it seemed as though they'd both come to the same conclusion: that this hadn't been an oversight.

After several attempts to reason with the servant assigned to the guest wing, the brown-haired elf only shook his head, offering a polite, almost rehearsed smile.

“I was instructed only to show you to your assigned rooms, Your majesties,” he said evenly, “I do not have further authority to make any further arrangements. His royal highness has asked that order be maintained... meaning that assigned rooming stays assigned.”

Arkaine's fists had clenched slightly at his sides. He exhaled slowly, forcing the tension from his shoulders as he turned his head just enough to meet Bonnie's eyes for a moment. He gave a small, restrained shake of his head.

The servant didn't notice, or chose not to.

He turned on his heel without another word, leading them away from the warmth of the guest wing and further down the corridor. The halls grew quieter the further they walked, the distant noise from the other sector leaders in their rooms, rustling and unpacking, fading into a dull hush, the polished stone giving way to something duller, less tended to.

The air shifted too, losing the faint floral notes of the upper floor, replaced instead with something sour, bitter. The scent of manure drifted in faintly from pastures beyond the palace walls.

By the time they reached the lower level, even the lantern lights had started to flicker.

The servant stopped at last, pushing open a narrow door that sat between two support columns.

“This will be your room, Your Grace.”

Arkaine stepped inside and stilled. The space was barely a room at all.

Cramped, low-ceilinged, with walls that almost touched either side of the narrow bed, its frame both plain and unadorned, the mattress was thin enough to make itself almost unfelt under the sheets even at a glance. A single chair sat in the corner beside a small, worn table and nothing else; even the window panes had the texture and look of a fogged mirror, too opaque to see through.

It was comparable, at best, to a servant's quarters. Most accurately? A broom closet.

Under the cloak of the evening, Arkaine found himself growing restless; the confines of the room pressed in on him, the low ceiling and narrow walls beginning to suffocate him, rather than merely being inconvenient. The air was stale and heavy, as if the space had not been opened for days, perhaps longer. Even the faint glow from the lantern outside struggled to reach through the fogged glass, leaving the corners of the room in a dull, stagnant gloom of faint orange.

He needed an excuse to leave; he needed to leave as soon as possible, more than that, he needed to speak to Bonnie. The longer he remained here, the more the room assignment gnawed at him; the oversight was definitely deliberate. An insult thinly veiled behind falsities.

He had a title, the same as the rest of them, yet...

The unspoken thought hung heavily on his chest, something bitter curling at its edges. He dragged a hand down the front of his coat as though he could smooth the feeling away. It lingered regardless, quiet and persistent.

The room offered no reprieve. No distractions. Only the fraying presence of his own thoughts, circling back, again and again, to the same place.

The streets, grey skin stretched thin, bile blackened mouths, rot.

He stared down at his gloved hands, looking away before the images could venture deeper.

The door opened with careful precision, the handle guided silently beneath his palm as he slipped into the corridor beyond, easing it shut with equal care.

The cold settled first, seeping through the stone beneath his feet and lingering in the air around him like it had a weight to it. It pressed in quietly, dulling the warmth that should have lived within the palace walls. Darkness followed close behind it, stretching long through the halls, pooling in the corners that the lanterns refused to reach.

The air felt thinner here. It carried the faint scent of damp stone and something green and earthy, clinging to the palace's wooden structure. The distant sound of rain filtered through the walls, soft at first, then sharper when the wind shifted, tapping faintly against the large arched windows.

His steps were measured, quiet. His hands brushed lightly along the stone wall as he walked, grounding himself in something solid.

He shouldn't be out here.

But the room they gave to him, that narrow, suffocating space, still clung to him like a second skin. It had not been a mistake, he knew that much. Fenrys had always been precise, malicious.

And this... this was deliberate.

His jaw tightened slightly at the thought, his teeth grinding together, though the irritation that had come so easily earlier that day had dulled into something quieter, a little more internal. The image of the streets outside flickered uninvited to the front of his mind, bodies lined under rain-soaked sheets, the sick slumped where they could no longer stand.

He exhaled silently. This was not about Fenrys, not entirely.

Bonnie had been right; something was wrong with Floris. That much was clear now, far clearer than it had been when they first crossed into the sector.

His pace slowed slightly as the corridor opened ahead. The palace shifted here, the structure changing the further he moved from the lower wing; the walls were less adorned, narrower, the creeping greenery that had decorated the upper halls thinning into sparse, brittle strands that clung weakly to the stone. Decaying vines that reminded him of his own bedroom back in Lunar.

The lanterns here burned lower, their light dim and unsteady. He frowned faintly; the signs he had been seeing were odd. Floris was not a place that struggled to grow; agriculture was traded worldwide from their one thousand-acre farms, luxurious greenhouses and elusive wild groves hidden beyond the palace borders, where medicinal flora and sacred species

were said to thrive and flourish. Growth was the lifeblood of the sector, woven into its economy, its magic and even its pride.

For vines to wither against stone, for leaves to crisp and cling in brittle strands where they should have flourished, it did not feel natural. Arkaine's gaze lingered on the dying tendrils a moment longer, unease turning in his stomach.

Then, he heard voices.

Low at first, almost indistinguishable from the hush of the storm outside, as though the palace itself was murmuring through its walls. He stilled, staring down at his shadow across the floor, the moonlight stretching it long and warped over the stone.

The sound came again, clearer this time, slipping down the corridor in fragments. Not servants, not the idle talk of guards changing posts. There was an urgency to it, a stammer that he could feel in his own throat.

Arkaine moved without thinking, each step softened against stone. He stopped at the turn where the corridor bent into a darker wing, where a small door sat slightly ajar. The voices gathered there.

"...it has worsened..."

"...the bile is spreading to the lungs..."

"...if the lower districts aren't quarantined—"

*Alchemists.*

He knew the tone before he saw the red bands on their sleeves, clinical, detached. He edged closer to the corner, his shoulder brushing against the stone, and looked into the room.

Two figures stood beneath a lantern, hunched over, cloaks covering the backs of their heads, speaking in hushed tones over parchment. Between them sat a tray of instruments that gleamed dully in the low light. Glass vials and silver tools stained dark at the tips.

Before them stood a slender, lithe figure, dressed in dark blue shorts, an electric blue tunic, and a darker overcoat, its tails falling just below the mid-length of his boots; the peacock sigil of his family was worked through every layer of his clothing. A large braid of peacock plumes draped over one shoulder, his posture tense as he received the alchemist's warnings. His ears pointed and thinned at the tips. Beneath the lanterns' glow, his visible green eye caught sharply, like cut grass, his green hair hidden in the shadows. Yet, what made Arkaine bristle was the bandana bound across his brow, concealing the all-seeing third eye of judgment.

Then, Fenrys' visible eye shifted, slow and deliberate, fixed on the door, locking onto the darkness where Arkaine hid.