

THE
RIGHTEOUS



I seem to have loved you in numberless forms,
numberless times . . .
In life after life, in age after age, forever.
My spellbound heart has made
and remade the necklace of songs,
That you take as a gift, wear round your neck
in your many forms,
In life after life, in age after age, forever.

From "Unending Love"
by Rabindranath Tagore





Then I grew up, and the beauty
of succulent illusions fell away from me.

From The Beautiful and Damned
by F. Scott Fitzgerald



FULL OF VEXATION COME I.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM,

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



She lay as still as death.

It unnerved Arjun to see her like that. As if he were listening to the final strains of the Sonata *Pathétique*. Waiting for the music to fade to the rafters before falling to silence.

It didn't suit her. Odette Valmont was a triumph. An "Ode to Joy," not a dirge.

As usual, he stood apart from his chosen family, now more from habit than anything else. Arjun Desai liked remaining along the fringes. He could see and hear everything. Ensure he was never caught unawares.

The candlelit darkness around them reminded Arjun of a painting by a Dutch master. Remnants of Odette's perfume—the citrus of neroli oil and roses—clung to the ivory silk drapes of her bed on the top floor of the Hotel Dumaine.

Arjun's gaze drifted to the five immortals gathered around the still figure of the first vampire he'd considered a true sister. He recalled the moment he'd realized it, not long after he'd arrived to New Orleans over a year ago. She'd brought him a cup of tea. The smell of cardamom and ginger and cinnamon and milk had warmed through to his soul.

"I thought you might like some tea," Odette had said.

Arjun had looked at her, unable to conceal his surprise. "You know how to make chai?"

She'd grinned. "J'ai appris à en faire. I hope it makes you feel at home, mon cher." Then she'd vanished without another word.

The last person who had made him a cup of chai from a place of love was his father.

A single tear slid down the cheek of the vampire standing before Arjun, as if he could hear Arjun's thoughts. A tear of bright red blood. When they first met, this vampire had disturbed Arjun the most. An assassin hailing from the Far East, Shin Jaehyuk kept a collection of razor-sharp weapons—honed from iron, silver, and steel—in a black box beside the coffin he used for sleep. Crosshatched scars marred his pale skin, and his black hair was styled long to hide his features from view. A look meant to engender fear. One Arjun found highly effective.

"Is there nothing more we might do for her?" Jae asked.

The fey with the ghost-white complexion and the long queue of auburn hair straightened. He turned away from Odette. "I never said we have exhausted all possible solutions. I said I have done all my skills will allow. Even a blood drinker as unimaginative as you should know the difference, Shin Jaehyuk." His disdain was clipped.

"Then what else must be done?" Jae demanded as he rolled up the sleeves of his linen shirt, preparing for battle. "Why has Odette still not awakened?"

The fey's eyes thinned, making him look even less human.

Even more like the dangerous creature he was. More like the warrior who'd served for years as Nicodemus Saint Germain's personal guard. He said nothing, the silence around them thickening.

Arjun sighed as he leaned his shoulder against the gilded fluting of the marble column separating the bedchamber from Odette's dressing room, the ornate furniture designed in the style of the seventeenth-century court in Versailles. He understood why Jae was always gunning for a fight. It was the place the vampire felt most at ease. Most in his element. Just like Arjun lurking in the shadows.

Madeleine would put a stop to Jae's penchant for violence. Or Bastien, if he were still here. Bitterness clouded Arjun's thoughts. Sébastien Saint Germain—the vampire who had inherited the Court of the Lions' crown after the recent demise of his uncle Nicodemus—abandoned them two days ago, chasing after Celine Rousseau's jewel-colored skirts. He'd left behind an unforgivably cryptic note:

I will return.



The madarchod.

As Arjun had predicted, Madeleine blurred to Jae's side before wrapping her dark hand around his scarred palm. "Jae. Please," she beseeched. "We appreciate all you've done, Ifan." She dipped her head toward the fey.

"Appreciation is meaningless to me," Ifan said. "Honor your promise of payment in full for services rendered. That is all I require."

"If gold is all you desire, you shall have it," drawled Boone from the foot of the golden four-poster bed. "Mercenary till the end. Just like a goddamned fey." Even when he cursed, Boone sounded refined. Perhaps all wealthy young white men from Charleston were the same.

"Indeed," Ifan countered, an eyebrow crooking upward. "Why should the life of any blood drinker be worth more to me than my fee? My allegiance to your kind died with Nicodemus, and I have no use for gratitude." He placed a cork stopper in a dark blue vial as he spoke. "I have prevented Odette Valmont from succumbing to the final death, which was no mean feat, given the gaping wound to her throat. I have fulfilled my end of the bargain. My fee is due." With that, he began wiping his blood-stained copper tools with a length of bleached linen.

Boone crossed his tanned arms and pursed his lips to one side of his aquiline face. "How long will she remain like this?"

Ifan lifted a shoulder. "As long as she is undisturbed, she could remain as she is for decades to come, which is not much different from death, I suppose." A snide grin tugged at his lips. "I've heard that a vampire deprived of blood becomes a husk of itself after enough time passes . . . and often loses their mind in the process." His grin deepened. "That would likely rile this one's sensibilities beyond measure." The inhuman fey glanced from one gilded corner of the room to another. "Odette

Valmont was always such a vain creature. Perhaps you can keep her here. Another pretty piece of lifeless art. The Court of the Lions' very own masterpiece."

Jae all but snarled before he spoke. "*Tak-chuh*, you piece of—"

"I meant it as a compliment," Ifan said. "Beauty is the only thing worth living for."

Hortense stepped before him, her feet spread shoulder-width apart, her arms akimbo. "You cannot wake her?" She leaned closer, her dark eyes menacing, her French accent harsh. "Or you *will* not?" Though she bared her fangs at the fey, her jeweled fingers clutched tightly at a handkerchief stained with crimson tears.

They all loved Odette Valmont. Each of the blood-drinking demons Arjun considered family could not fathom a world without her. A lifeless Odette? It was like a sea without salt or a wine without taste.

"You may ask a million times in a million ways, Miss de Morny." Ifan matched Hortense, toe-to-toe. "The answer remains the same. I do not possess the skill to wake Odette Valmont."

"Then who does?" Her voice faded to a whisper.

Again, Ifan raised a shoulder. "Perhaps there is a healer in the Vale."

Hortense snorted, the sound filled with scorn. "Parfait! A healer residing in a realm to which vampires are prohibited from traveling. Idéal!"

"Not all of you are vampires," Ifan said. "Not all of you are prohibited."

A low groan split through the silence. Arjun couldn't prevent

it from escaping his lips. His head struck the marble column once, twice, his jaw set.

There was no question that he would do it. He would do whatever they asked if it meant saving Odette. She was his sister. They were his family. But that didn't mean that Arjun had to like what happened next.

Five sets of immortal eyes turned toward him, their gazes expectant.

"Hell and damnation," he swore under his breath, his English accent harsh.

Hortense spun toward Arjun in a flash, her umber skirts swishing with her movements. "You do not wish to save Odette? I thought ethereals like you—"

"Ma soeur," Madeleine interjected with a warning glance at her sister, "please be patient." She blurred to Arjun in a whirl of turquoise silk. "Arjun, I know you have lived among us for the least amount of time, but we have long considered you one of our own, and—"

"Madeleine," Arjun interrupted in a soft voice. "You don't have to ask. Of course I'll go to the Vale to find a healer for Odette."

She blinked once, the lines along the brown skin of her forehead smoothing. With a nod, she said, "I know you do not relish traveling to the place of your mother's birth. I'm aware it causes you great pain." Her features softened further. "Go with our gratitude. Whatever you need, you have but to ask."

"Make him promise he will not return without a healer," Ifan said. "Even cursed ethereals like Arjun Desai should be bound

by their promises. Halfbloods may lie, cheat, steal, or kill to do it, but their word is their bond.”

Anger surged through Arjun’s fists. But he held his emotions in check. Full-blooded fey like Ifan had been trying to provoke him from the day he set foot in the Vale as a boy of seven.

“A promise is unnecessary,” Jae said. “Our brother will not fail us.” He placed a hand on Arjun’s shoulder. Though it was meant to be reassuring, Arjun couldn’t help but wince at his touch. Fear was not an easy feeling to shed. Just like love.

“That remains to be seen.” Ifan rearranged his sleeves. “He is an ethereal, after all. It would be foolish to trust one on faith alone. Do what you will, but I cannot bear fools.”

Arjun shifted from the marble column and sent him a cool smile. “Apparently your mother could.”

A muscle rippled in Ifan’s pale jaw. He cast a threatening glance Arjun’s way. One Arjun gladly returned.

Boone’s laughter was soft. Weary. “One of us should go with you, Arjun.”

“No,” Arjun said. “They won’t tolerate a vampire in the Vale. It’s too much of a risk, for them and for you.”

“Bastien would have gone with you.” Sadness filled Madeleine’s face as she spoke.

“Perhaps it is not in our best interest to follow in the footsteps of Sébastien Saint Germain,” Hortense said, her eyes flashing.

All movement stilled in the darkness, save for the dancing candle flames. As if a sudden hush had descended around them. A hush of sorrow. A hush of rage.

Bastien had betrayed his family. Vanished in their hour of need. Left Odette to die.

No matter his excuse, it was unforgivable.

"If you ask your mother for her assistance, will she give it?" Madeleine studied Arjun, her back ramrod straight.

"It's unlikely," Arjun replied. "General Riya is the last fey in any realm who would provide assistance to a blood drinker, even when asked by her own son." Resignation set along his forehead. "I will do whatever I must to save Odette. She is family to me, every bit as much as each of you have become." His voice dropped further. "But the last time I crossed a tare into the Otherworld, I promised my service to a dwarf king in the Sylvan Wyld in exchange for our safe passage through the Winter Court. Once he realizes I have returned, I will be forced to honor it."

Ifan tsked as he continued cleaning his copper tools.

Madeleine inhaled with deliberation. "How much time do you think you have before the dwarf king discovers your whereabouts?"

"I promised I would return by the harvest moon. Perhaps less than two mortal months are left before then?" Arjun canted his head to one side. "Which is a mere week or so once I cross into the Otherworld. Time does not move the same there as it does here. I cannot imagine it would take long for word to reach the dwarf king after I am sighted in the Vale."

Boone sighed, his fingers raking through his head of cherubic curls. "A week or so? As in ten days? Twelve?"

"Ten at most," Arjun agreed after a moment of thought.

“Well then, enough of this talk,” Jae said. “Go.”

With a nod, Arjun reached for his jacket.

“What is the dwarf king’s name?” Hortense pressed. “C’est possible he can be persuaded to forgive your debt? Or at the very least, we could send someone else to serve in your stead, non?”

Ifan’s laughter was as cold and clear as a winter’s night.

“The dwarf king failed to offer a name,” Arjun said, sliding his arms into his caramel jacket sleeves. “And, alas, Ifan is correct. From what I know of the creatures in the Sylvan Wyld, he will be unlikely to forgive any debt, no matter the enticement. He’s a bearded spitfire with a terrified blue hobgoblin in his service. His court did not rise to rule the Ice Palace of Kur by showing anyone mercy.”

Hortense crossed her arms. “I can be very . . . persuasive.”

The beginnings of a smile ghosted across Arjun’s lips. “I don’t doubt it.”

Madeleine took him by the arm, her touch gentle. A sharp contrast to the bladed stare of her younger sister. “As the leader of this coven, I give you authority to entreat with those in the Vale by whatever means necessary so we may restore Odette from this deathlike sleep.” She squeezed his forearm. “Go now, with all haste.”

Arjun took her hand and felt her grip tighten, like a mother reassuring a child. At least, he surmised it was like that. His own mother had never been the reassuring sort.

“Arjun?” Jae sat on the edge of the jacquard divan at the foot of Odette’s bed and unsheathed one of the many daggers concealed in his long coat to begin sharpening it, the skirr of metal

against stone echoing through the darkness. “Leave the portal open to the Vale after you depart.”

“It is usually open to Rajasthan,” Arjun replied. “The secondary gate is concealed in a fountain on—”

“No.” He peered through his long black hair. “Not the usual, ordinary portal. I meant a direct tare to the Vale.”

Arjun faced Jae fully, his hazel eyes wide. “It’s dangerous to leave a portal like that open to another realm. A direct tare to the Vale is a direct tare to New Orleans. If it is not properly sealed behind me, any manner of creature from the Vale could travel through it unimpeded.”

Jae said, “If you are indeed confined to the Wyld in service to the dwarf king before you are able to secure a healer, we will need a direct tare so that we can do what must be done to heal Odette.” He continued honing his blade as he spoke.

Boone grunted in agreement. “If you’re worried that someone might abuse the magicked mirror, no one knows it’s here in New Orleans. Nicodemus made sure to keep its existence secret from any immortals outside our circle, and your flat is warded against any unwanted intruders.”

“There have been whispers that Nicodemus’ court possesses a hidden portal,” Arjun said. “I’ve heard them myself.”

“Whispers are not proof, and I pity the one foolish enough to wander into the Sylvan Vale sans l’invitation,” Hortense finished, the French words rolling from her tongue. “No matter how”—she gestured with her hands as if searching for something—“charmant those of the Vale are, I have no doubt they are just as cruel as our forebears in the Wyld.”

"It will not be left open for long," Jae finished as he twirled the newly sharpened dagger between his fingers. "Of that you may be assured."

After a time, Arjun nodded, though the decision did not sit well with him. "I'll leave the silver open. But I'm not merely worried about those in New Orleans taking advantage. As I mentioned, I'm mindful of the possibility that a creature of the Vale might use the mirror to make its way here."

"An acceptable risk on both accounts," Madeleine said as she sat alongside Jae in solidarity. "Go now, Arjun. Godspeed."

Arjun almost smiled. God? He doubted God had very much to do with a coven of blood drinkers, especially this one, nestled in the heart of a city like New Orleans, teeming with ghosts and ghouls and goblins.

The Damned. The Fallen. The Court of the Lions. They were known by many names, and none were blessed, to be sure. It wasn't the way of it, not in this world of whispered curses, glowing wards, and changelings armed with poisoned trinkets. Funny how—despite being so different from the fey in the Summer Court—vampires behaved in the same dramatic manner, theatrical to the end. Boone, with his so-called Southern charm; Hortense, her elegant hedonism; Madeleine, her calculated control; Jae, his murderous frown; and Odette . . .

He feared most of all what none of them would say. To say the words might give them life. Odette Valmont was the one who held them together. And if she was not whole, then they would never be whole again.

With a final glance at the members of his family, Arjun

straightened his lapel and took his leave from the top floor of the luxurious Hotel Dumaine, moving swiftly into the damp darkness of a New Orleans summer evening. Resolve lengthened each of his strides as the plan he'd begun concocting in his mind began to solidify. He knew where to begin.

Five days. He had five days in the Sylvan Vale to persuade one of its famed healers to travel back to the mortal world with him . . . to save a vampire. Their sworn enemy.

This was not a game of chess. Arjun could not waste time anticipating the thoughts and actions of capricious fey. His father's mortal blood put him at a disadvantage in a world that prided itself on the purity of one's lineage. Arjun often thought there were only two kinds of humans who were safe in the Vale: one who was foolish enough to marry a member of the fey gentry and one who was dead. Most halfbloods did not fare much better. From the age of seven, Arjun had lived in the Summer Court of the Sylvan Vale. He knew their rules. He'd played their games. And he would do as he'd always done from a childhood spent as the half-mortal boy with an indelible target painted on his back . . .

He would lie in wait, like a creature on the bottom of the sea. He would let them pick at him. Let them tear at his flesh and gnaw at his soul. He would smile and keep still.

And he would never allow them to see the rage burning in his soul.