

FREE CHAPTER OF

Introverse

one mistake

one message

one moment
in time

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Riffin Cave

EXCERPT

Indigo awoke in the morning, safely rolled in her blanket in front of the ashes of the fire. She breathed a sigh of relief, it had only been a dream. Their life on the road to Mannapura became routine. During the day she followed the men along the trail, joked, ate, and drank with them. But when the night came, she left them to meet with the strange man. This happened again and again.

Indigo would awaken and find herself away from the camp. She was guided to a remote place where she waited. The song of the Nemeratu never failed to herald the stranger's approach. He would appear near her out of the darkness, gently cup her hand with his and place earrings in her palm, or caress her cheek with silk ribbons before lovingly tying them in her hair, or kiss her forehead, her eyes, and her lips before placing a jeweled clasp carefully in her hair. He never spoke and Indigo never saw his face clearly, but after meeting with him, she was filled with the sense of belonging to someone who cherished her, never asked questions, and loved her without question.

Indigo stowed the treasures he gave her in the red leather drawstring bag where she kept Coral's mirror and Amber's journal. When she could find a moment alone, she'd open the bag and take everything out, looking and caressing each item before carefully replacing them. Each day, it troubled her less and less that the mirror failed to cast a reflection. And with each passing night, her desire to reach Mannapura faded a little more.

Reese stumbled upon Indigo one evening after they'd set up camp. The red bag had been emptied on a stump in the woods. She knelt next to it, the jeweled veil draped over her head. Eyes closed, she relived the rapturous memory of the first night the stranger had spread its gossamer beauty on the ground before her, as gently as a kiss.

Reese snatched the veil away from her and demanded, "Where did you get this!"

"I . . . I found it in the woods. I figured someone must've lost it, but it's so beautiful, I couldn't help myself." Indigo anxiously took in the dark expression that shadowed his handsome face, regret washed over her. "I'm sorry Reese. I guess I should've told you."

Her obvious distress took the edge off his outburst. Kneeling down in front of her, he gently took her by the arms. "I'm not angry. I'm just worried about you. You're tired every morning when you get up and your feet are covered with dirt and mud. Where do you go at night? You can tell me."

"I just need to be by myself sometimes. A quiet walk through the forest can be quite a relief from your constant jabbering and jokes," she smiled crookedly trying for sarcasm.

"And you find all of these things on your walks?" Incredulous, he contemplated the array spread out before him. "I just happen to come across them and I . . ."

"Take them?" Reese broke in. "That's not your style, Indigo."

She bristled at the accusation. "They're gifts. He gave them to me."

"He? Who's giving you these gifts?" Reese demanded.

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"I don't know . . . I don't even know his name." She couldn't explain it -- this longing she felt, this magnetic attraction to someone she barely knew -- she couldn't fight it. And didn't want to.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Indigo. I'm not letting you go anywhere tonight." Reese kicked the trinkets into the bushes and stalked away calling "Bax!"

Panic began to mount in her chest at the thought that Bax and Reese would stop her from seeing him. The tender tethers that bound her to the stranger that first night had now grown into a thick, strong bond that couldn't be broken. Her pulse quickened and her skin felt hot, the need to see him consumed her feverish mind. Could meeting this man be her destiny? Was he the one waiting behind the blue door? The one who could lift the burden of her guilt with unconditional love? She longed for a love that would extend beyond forgiveness, beyond pain -- a love that healed and soothed. This is what her mother wanted her to find all along. It must be. It had to be.

Indigo snatched up all the scattered treasures she could find in the bushes and shoved them to the red bag, cinching the drawstring tight. She tied it around her waist and raced into the woods, trusting he would show her the way as he had done so many times before.

But she was wrong. Eventually, she had to stop, out of breath, confusion muddled her thinking. There was no path or signs made of stones to follow. The thought of turning around and going back caused a sharp pain to form at the back of her neck. As she massaged her fingers into the sore spot, a sudden staccato flutter of wings overhead made her jump. He's here. But it was only a flock of starlings coming to roost in the broad branches of the nearby oaks. Her ears ached to hear the song of the Nemeratu. But, there was no soft footfall on the loam, no gift pressed in her palm.

He's not coming . . . and I'm totally lost out here. Anger burst its way through the fog in her mind, clearing away the turmoil that had taken over. What've I done? I've turned Reese against me -- for what? I wish he was here right now.

The familiar trill of the Nemeratu swirled through the thick night air. Her heart stood still as a chill pushed its way up her spine. A sweet agony of fear and anticipation washed over her, forcing Reese from her thoughts. Pushing herself slowly from the rough bark of the tree, she turned in a circle searching the darkness for a sign of him, only to discover a large nest cradled in the Y of a tree trunk several feet across from her. It was festooned with twigs, bits of torn cloth, dandynfluff, and dried Grynwyre vines, but no bird-like creature inhabited it, and if it did, it was much larger than she thought it would be. I've got to get out of here before they see me!

A scream shrilled behind her and something knocked her down, forcing her to the forest floor. She struggled to breathe as she tried to scramble to her feet. A large, heavy weight landed on her back. She collapsed beneath it, squirming as it began crawling its way up her spine toward her head. Indigo gulped in air and stretched her arms out in front of her, searching for something to grasp so she could pull herself free.

The creature stopped, pressing its weight heavily across the back of her shoulders. Something steely and sharp pierced the back of her neck, probing deep into her flesh. Indigo screamed as blood dripped down from her neck and formed a puddle on the ground beneath her. Her scream was cut short when the pain abruptly stopped. Her throat was useless, numb. She couldn't feel the ground her face was smashed up against. A bitter metallic taste flooded her mouth. Black stars began to float in her eyes -- she was blacking out.

The heavy weight suddenly lifted from her back. An ear splitting squeal erupted from behind, quickly followed by a heavy thud as she saw the Nemeratu hurled against the sharp scar of a stump.

The animal was hideous; a hairless moon shaped creature that reminded Indigo of a manta ray. The Nemeratu's silver eyes were frozen in death and a crescent of bone sharpened into three long points protruded from its miniscule mouth. The long points were covered with blood, her blood. The sight made the world tilt and she closed her eyes. Strong arms lifted her from the ground, gripping her tightly. Reese. Always there for me.

She circled her arms around his neck and laid her head against his chest, so thankful he'd followed her into the woods. When she was able to speak again, she would tell him how sorry she was for making him chase her and rescue her again. Opening her eyes, she looked up sheepishly to search his blue eyes for a sign of forgiveness.

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The face of the man she had met night after night gazed back at her. He was darkly handsome with shining gray eyes under dark, arched brows. His straight, thin nose pointed to a mouth set with determination. He carried her over the wooded landscape as if she were a feather. Indigo tried to speak, but could barely move her lips; the Nemeratu's bite, or whatever had robbed her of feeling in her face still had her in its powerful grip.

He hushed her attempts to speak and tightened his hold on her as he moved quickly through the forest. After they cleared the trees, he came to an abrupt stop before a high wall built with large stones, centuries of moss spread across the pitted surface. Turning sideways, he slipped easily through a break in the wall and silently covered the ground between the wall and the vague outline of a building that loomed out of the darkness.

A door opened splashing a rectangle of light onto the ground and he rushed through it into a kitchen where resting servants leaped up and scrambled to follow in his wake. He bounded up the stairs and whisked down long empty passages before climbing up another wide set of stairs. The servants trailed behind speaking in hushed tones. They passed dozens of closed doors along a seemingly endless hallway until he turned and entered a room where a fire crackled in the hearth and a bed was turned down. Gently, he placed her on the downy mattress and with a small wave of his hand, motioned for the servants to take care of her. He swiftly left the room closing the doors firmly behind him.

Dozens of questions buzzed in her head, but the numb feeling made speech impossible. Her wounds were cleaned and dressed by two maids who clucked their tongues in dismay at her condition, but offered no word of consolation or explanation. They silently prepared a steaming bath and laid out a clean white nightgown on the bed. After she was bathed, dressed and tucked into bed, a thin servant, her grim face peeking out from under her cap, set a tray holding a generous portion of soup and bread on Indigo's lap and bade her eat. When she had finished her meal, other servants entered, tidied up, and silently closed the double doors as their master had done.

Alone, thoughts circled her mind in a hazy whirlwind, but she could not latch onto one to think it through. Exhaustion took over. She was forced her to lie still as her eyes flicked over the room. A sleek wardrobe towered in one corner matching a trim vanity situated under a heavily curtained cathedral window, both were uncluttered and spotlessly clean. The ceiling angled sharply upward, supported by dark, heavy beams. The room was elegant and gracious, but seemed impersonal, cold, even though the fire in the grate warmed her. The softness of the mattress soothed her aching body.

Her eyelids, heavy with sleep, insisted on closing. Just as Indigo began to drift off, she heard the door open and footsteps enter the room. The scent of Sweetwater drifted over her, compelling her to open her eyes. He moved slowly, almost cautiously toward her and sat down on the bed next to her. Unable to speak, she smiled up at him and placed her hand in his as a sign of gratitude. He squeezed her hand and lifted it up to his lips, kissing it gently.

Smiling into her eyes, he said, "Welcome to Gartyn Manor. I am Cormac."

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