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## Chrysalis

### Part I – Passion

Hawwa stared into the mirror and watched as the inches of her skin were hidden away by the gold-accented white dress. The loose, billowing fabrics of the Nedean taste hid away the he round slope of her hips. She pulled the dress up to her shoulders, runner her hands over her nipples as they too were hidden beneath a swath of fabric.

The clothes of Nede were still new to her, fitting for the warm, coastal climate, but utterly lacking of the decadence and decorum she was used to in Eleh. The warm coastal breeze lilted in through the floor to ceiling windows and carried with it the smell of the ocean, so different from the hot sandy airs of Eleh.

There was a knock on her door. “Enter,” Hawwah called in the direction of the door, not taking her eyes off of her reflection in the mirror. The door opened behind her. Hawwa stared into the mirror as it reflected the door opening and Valenti entering.

He came to ask her how she was holding up, away from her home and family. He was earnest in his questioning. He even asked what flowers she wanted for the wedding. She answered, looking at him through the mirror, convinced that it would show everything that his words wouldn’t. He seemed to lack understanding—knowing. It just wasn’t there, though she couldn’t pinpoint why she felt this way, and she couldn’t trust her eyes to tell her, but a reflection. The mages of her mother’s court always said that reflections tell more than the eyes.

And in the reflection she saw everything that her eyes saw. She saw the muscles of his arms and thighs flex, the breeze ruffle through his coarse curly hair. She also saw the heat emanating from his bones, heat that young men embody and that ripe fruit exudes.

She had seen that heat in more young men than she cared to think about. They locked eyes in the mirror and Hawwa knew that he saw her. The circumstance was clear to him, but she was not. He did not take in her body and seemed to not care what adornments she wore so long as she was comfortable.

As he left she turned to him and said, “Thank you for coming to see me. I will sacrifice to Passion tonight. I hope that you will join me.”

He seemed to hesitate. She wasn’t sure what to make of it without the mirror to translate for her. “She’s not a god I feel a particular gravitation towards,” he said. “But I’ll gladly join you in sacrifice.”

## Part II – Light

The setting sun illuminated the Temple of Light, which rested on the eastern edge of Nede. The temple was built of shimmering granite brought from the north, and as the sun set behind the immense structure, the walls glittered, giving an ethereal glow to the castle. This time of day was the most magical in Nede, as a warm breeze flitted down the city and toward the sea. And the blessing glow of the sun and temple gave the Nedeans a pensive escape.

Valenti was worshipping at the Temple of Light when he was informed of Hawwa’s disappearance. He was not able to process the information immediately, drunk on the heady atmosphere that infected the city.

As his mind broke the surface of the heady meditation, he became confused. “What do you mean Princess Hawwa is missing? Where has she gone? Who last saw her?” he said.

“I was not informed, my lord,” replied the messenger. “Your father simply instructed me to escort you back to the castle,” she said.

Prince Valenti followed the messenger out of the temple. Valenti walked with purpose and duty. He was responsible for Hawwa as long as she was his betrothed.

As they neared the royal alcazar, the visuals of where Hawwa was not made him increasingly aware of the gravity of the situation. The Queen of Eleh would not take the kidnapping and possible death of her daughter lightly. This whole thing could ruin their relations with Eleh and dismantle the work he has done on behalf of Nede to forge those bonds.

“Summon Italo. I can find my father on my own,” Valenti told the messenger as they passed through the entrance of the castle. “Be quick,” Valenti added as the pressures of the situation weighed on him.

The messenger bowed and left. Valenti made his way to the library, hoping that he would not need to be alone with his father for too long.

The king was seated in the library, still and statuesque, ever the dramatic. “Hello, father,” Valenti said. “I’ve been informed of the situation at hand, but not the details. What can be done?”

His father’s movement were slow, the minute progression exaggerated by the warm breeze entering through the open window. “Hawwa is missing. The city is being patrolled for any sign of her, but no one has seen her for three days,” he said, his face creased with concern. “I fear she may be in danger.”

“We must find her alive,” Valenti agreed. “This scandal could prove catastrophic for our trade with Eleh and their allied cities,” he was impatient and irritated at having everything disturbed so spectacularly. “I will go search for her myself,” Valenti said. “I am responsible for her and this union,” he continued, thinking of all that was at stake.

“You will not,” replied the king in a booming voice. “There I already one life in danger here. I will have no danger befall you as well. The guards will take care of this,” he said. He turned to Valenti, “I forbid you from going.”

It was to this seething silence that Italo entered the library. “I’m sorry to disturb anything, you highness,” he addressed the king, “but I was summoned here.”

“Your timing is perfect, my boy,” the king said. “You are aware of the dilemma, yes?”

“I was the one to report her absence to the head officer, my lord,” Italo said.

“So you were,” the king concurred. “Valenti is intent on going after the kidnappers, but it’s unwise to be so rash,” the king said gesturing to Valenti who had moved closer to the window to stare out into the dusky night. “I trust that you will talk with him,” the king said, leaving the room with a swiftness that countered his movements up to that moment.

Italo moved to stand beside Valenti. They were perfect compliments, Italo’s tall frame and light Western features highlighted Valenti’s dark visage. “What’s bothering you, Valenti,” Italo said after a beat of silence.

“I *cannot* sit around just waiting for someone to find her,” he said with a huff of frustration. “I needed this to go smoothly and now that stupid girl has gone missing. And if she’s dead then that’s on my hands.”

Italo could feel the miasma of panic emanating from Valenti and coalescing with the heady night air to become a suffocating frustration. He placed his hand on Valeti’s lover back to

calm him. “She will arrive safely. I agree with the king,” he said. “It’s in the best interest for you to keep safe.” He could feel Valenti relaxing under his hand. “Besides,” he added, “you know you won’t do anything as long as the king lives.”

“No,” he agreed. “I’ll obey him so long as he breathes”

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The king’s death came as a shock to Nede and the court. With the abduction of the Elehean princess and the death of the king, Valenti was pressed down by the burden and panic. He did not know what he did to anger the gods, but he would have to mend it.

“It’s obvious,” Italo said. “Light must be upset,” he looked Valenti directly in the face when he added, “never has this city ever been ruled by a man who knew so little of triumph. This must be your call to action.”

This revelation angered and inspired Valenti. Never had he shirked in his responsibilities. He valued his citizens, he sacrificed regularly, he promoted trade. He valued the power of Nede above everything else and was a devout worshipper of Light.

Without stopping to think, he went to sacrifice to Light, and immediately left with the city with his sword and provisions, and entered the northern forests. The forest was known to be filled with vagrants, and so it was the most obvious place to begin his search.

He walked a day and a half. The forest was bright and lush. The air heavier than that of Nede. It tasted of fermenting fruit and rotting leaves and fresh water. Valenti found himself drunk on the wine-like air, and wandered almost aimlessly by the middle of the second day. He stopped at a river. He needed something to clear his head, so he stripped and immersed himself in the frigid mountain water.

When he broke the surface for a third time, he came face to face with a small person. He noted immediately that this person was not human. He was one of the river people that inhabited the forest. He was lean, and tall with only a strip of blue fabric covering his nether regions. His skin was a shade of unnatural pink and seemed to be as delicate as a ripe peach. His curly hair rivaled that of Valenti and seemed to refract every bit of light that touched it. No human could boast such beauty. Valenti's goal is what kept him from being further intoxicated by the man before him.

"Who are you," Valenti demanded.

"My name is Xio," said the man. "I have watched as you stumble through these forests and have come to you to offer assistance," he finished.

"What purpose do you have in helping me," Valenti asked, curious and wary.

The nymph gave a smile that was all teeth, "the view is certainly an acceptable payment."

Valenti had heard of the nymph people. They did not often mean malice or harm towards humans. And if this beautiful young man could lead him to his destination, then he had very little to lose.

"I need to find a girl," Valenti informed Xio.

"You need many things, young prince, but a girl certainly not," replied the nymph with a tut. "And it's not a girl that you're looking for in these forests either, but a woman." Valenti felt as if this little creature was scolding him. "Be aware of what you need and what you seek, young prince. Come, I can help you find both," the nymph said before turning and walking into the foliage.

Valenti realized that the Xio meant to begin immediately. He scrambled to grab his clothing and sword, running after Xio as naked as the day he was born.

Valenti found himself incapable of falling for the allure of Xio. Every inch of his skin was alight with heat. The vine in the air increased his passion and tormented him. Apart from glances and a few smiles, Xio made no move to interact with Valenti. Instead Xio led him through the forest in a pace so quick Valenti felt as if he were chasing Xio through the branches. The chase exhilarated him. He almost forgot what he came to the forest for.

But Xio eventually stopped. Valenti didn't notice why at first, but the small villa became apparent eventually. There was a grim expression on Xio's face. He turned to Valenti and held out a small circular object. "It's best you not be seen once entering. Eat this and your flesh will not be seen," he said as he gave the wrapped leaf bundle to Valenti.

Valenti did as instructed and slowly his being was seemingly erased, unseen and invisible. He was still marveling at the change when he felt a set of hands run across the skin of his chest. He could smell the rich sweetness of Xio's skin as he undressed Valenti. Xio's hands lingered on Valenti as the only marker of his physical presence was removed. Xio pulled himself flush to Valenti and stood on the tips of his toes to whisper in Valenti's ear, "You will not like what you see." Xio did not explain, but instead pulled away into the forest.

Valenti braced himself for whatever he may face, without clothing, or armor, or weapon. And as he reached the first room he was met with a bare, sweaty ass. He watched as Italo's hips thrust into the girl's. And as Hawwa clawed at his back and arms. He watched as her bronze skin was given the privilege of meeting Italo's. In his blind rage and jealousy he threw a vase in the direction of the bed. It smashed into the back of Italo's head.

Hawwa threw the unconscious body off of her and jumped to her feet. Italo took to leave, but the noise alerted Hawwa to his position. She jumped at him, managing to land a kick to his torso, and as if a blooming bruise, that bit of his skin was once again visible, the back of a foot

perfectly outlined on his chest. Hawwa grabbed a dagger from a table and started her attack again. But Valenti was better prepared. He managed to dodge, block and hit, but Hawwa was the better fighter. With another well aimed kick to the face, Hawwa knocked Valenti down. She climbed on top of him and with her legs held him down. She held the dagger to his throat was—where she estimated it should be—and looked into his one visible eye.

### Part III – Destroyer and Creator

I was stunned at the turn of events. My chest heaved and her sweat dropped onto my face. Her skin smelled of sex. There was angry passion in her eyes as he looked down at me.

“Leave,” She said. “Don’t look for us. I’m not going to be a tool for your needs.”

I couldn’t say anything. She removed the dagger from my throat and lifted her naked body from mine. I was dismissed. I stared at Italo’s body on the bed, surrounded by glass shards. Fractured and lovely and not mine.

I left.

And Xio was waiting for me. He led me into the forest, to a small shrine with a statue that was as terrifying as it was beautiful. Destroyer Creator stared down at me. I looked to Xio. And we slept on the forest floor, entangled. He said he would show me what I needed, he told me I would not like it. He did not say that it would be so beautiful.