



Demon Daddy's Secret Daughter

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: She ran from me.

Vanished into the dark like I didn't deserve a goodbye.

Ronnie was mine—her body, her defiance, the fire in her eyes when I pinned her to the wall and made her beg.

Now I find her in some quiet village, hands in the dirt, pretending she doesn't remember what we were.

But she's not alone.

She's hiding something.

A child.

Mine.

She thought she could erase me. Replace me.

She forgot what I am.

I'm not a lover.

I'm not a memory.

I'm a storm with wings — and I don't forget betrayal.

She thinks she can keep my blood from me?

I'll tear through her world before I let that happen.

She was the mistake I let walk away once.

Now I've found her again.

And this time... I leave with everything that's mine.

Read on for enemies-to-lovers fire, secret baby stakes, and an alpha who doesn't understand mercy. She hid his daughter. Now she has to face the father. HEA Guaranteed.

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ARATON

The mountain roads on the way to New Solas are rugged and unforgiving, even to those with the advantage of wings. I've been forced to land three times already because of sudden wind gusts powerful enough to snap a xaphan's wing if they're not careful. The satchel full of Lord Ithuriel's correspondence weighs heavy against my hip, the brass clasp digging uncomfortably through my tunic. A particularly important parcel sits nestled inside, wrapped in gold-leaf paper that costs more than most humans make in a year.

Soimur disappears behind me as I soar past the last ridge of The Ridge, the silver spires of the city's noble district gleaming in the afternoon light. I'm anxious to reach New Solas before nightfall, when the lamps turn the city into a sea of gold light. The trip normally takes a single day of flying, but the winds have not been kind, and my supplies are running dangerously low.

I scan the horizon, wings beating steadily against the currents. There—nestled in the valley below, a small human settlement. Not much to look at—a cluster of stone buildings with thatched roofs, smoke curling from chimneys, the kind of place most xaphan wouldn't bother with. My lip curls slightly at the thought of mingling with humans, but my canteen is nearly empty, and I'd rather not arrive in New Solas looking haggard and thirsty.

I tuck my wings close and dive, controlling my descent with practiced ease. I land at the edge of the settlement, straightening my tunic and running a hand through my

windblown hair. No sense looking disheveled, even if it's just humans who'll see me.

The village is quiet but not deserted. I notice immediately how human gazes drop or slide away as I pass. A child stares openly until his mother snatches him inside with a harsh whisper. The tension is palpable but familiar—many human settlements beyond New Solas hold little love for our kind.

A weathered sign reading "Supplies & Sundries" catches my eye. Perfect. I roll my shoulders back and stride toward it, ignoring the whispers that follow. The shop door creaks as I push it open, a small bell announcing my arrival.

The interior is dim but well-stocked—shelves lined with preserved foods, tools, fabrics, and an impressive array of goods for such a modest establishment. No shopkeeper in sight, though. I flex my wings slightly, the dusky gray feathers catching what little light filters through the dusty windows.

"Be right with you," calls a female voice from the back room.

"Take your time," I answer, my voice carrying the natural resonance all xaphan possess. I trail my fingers along a shelf of jarred preserves, examining the neat handwritten labels.

The sound of something heavy being dropped echoes from the back room, followed by hurried footsteps. A moment later, a woman emerges through the curtained doorway. She stops dead, her gray eyes widening before narrowing to slits.

Her hair is the color of autumn leaves, deep auburn pulled back in a practical braid that doesn't quite contain the wild strands framing her face. She's striking in a way I wasn't expecting—all sharp angles and tension, like a bow drawn tight. Her sleeves are rolled to the elbows, revealing toned forearms dusted with freckles.

She sees me, and something in her posture changes—becomes tighter, more dangerous.

"Get out." Her voice is cold as mountain water.

I raise an eyebrow, amused rather than offended. "I've barely arrived."

"And now you can leave." She's coming around the counter now, moving with a purpose that's almost predatory. Closer, I can see a faint scar across her collarbone, peeking out from her simple linen shirt. "We don't serve your kind here."

"My kind?" I place a hand to my chest in mock offense. "You wound me, truly. And here I was, ready to pay double what your goods are worth."

"I don't want your money." She's only feet away now, close enough that I catch her scent—something earthy with hints of woodsmoke. "There's another village ten miles east. Try there."

A smile plays at my lips. Most humans stammer and bow in my presence, cowed by centuries of conditioning. This one looks ready to throw me out personally. "Does this hostile welcome extend to all travelers, or am I special?"

"Only to winged messengers of false gods who think gold buys them passage anywhere." Her eyes flash, and for a moment, I see something beyond anger—grief, perhaps, or a deeper hurt.

I lean forward slightly, enjoying how she stands her ground even as I breach her space. "You don't know the first thing about me."

"I know enough." She crosses her arms. "I know you work for someone important enough to afford those fancy clothes and that polished manner. I know you think

you're doing this backwater village a favor by gracing us with your presence."

"Actually," I step closer still, "I'm just thirsty." I let my gaze drift deliberately to her mouth before returning to her eyes, injecting the word with double meaning.

A flush creeps up her neck, anger and something else sparking in her eyes. "You can die of thirst for all I care."

"That seems extreme for someone you've just met." I reach out, quick as lightning, and catch a loose strand of her hair between my fingers. "What's your name, fierce one?"

She slaps my hand away, and the contact sends an unexpected jolt through me. "None of your business. Now get out of my shop before I throw you out."

I laugh, genuinely entertained. "I'd like to see you try."

"Ronnie!" A voice calls from outside. "Everything all right in there?"

Ah, Ronnie. It suits her—sharp and quick, like her tongue.

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"Fine, Tomas," she calls back, never taking her eyes off me. "Our visitor was just leaving."

I make an elaborate show of looking around the shop one more time. "Pity. I was hoping to contribute to the clearly thriving local economy." I lean in, lowering my voice. "But perhaps I'll return when you're feeling more... hospitable."

"Don't hold your breath." She steps back and points to the door. "Out."

I move to the doorway, pausing with my hand on the frame. "Until we meet again, Ronnie."

"We won't." Her jaw is set, but there's a tremor in her voice that betrays her.

I spread my wings slightly, letting sunlight catch the silver flecks scattered among the gray. "The universe has a way of bringing together those who leave an impression on each other." I wink. "And you, fierce one, have definitely left an impression."

The sun dips behind the mountains as I wait outside Ronnie's shop, leaning against the weathered stone wall. I've spent the afternoon familiarizing myself with this forgettable village, learning that the fiery shopkeeper is something of a local fixture—respected but solitary, known for her sharp tongue and sharper business sense.

Perfect. I do enjoy a challenge.

The shop door finally swings open as she steps out, locking it behind her. She's

changed from her work clothes into a simple dark tunic and pants, practical but doing nothing to hide the curves beneath. Her hair falls loose now, a curtain of deep auburn catching the last golden rays of sunset. The sight stirs something primal in me.

When she turns and spots me, her expression hardens instantly. "You've got to be kidding me."

I push off the wall with languid grace, wings shifting slightly behind me. "Evening, fierce one."

"Do you make a habit of stalking women who've rejected you?" She clutches her key tighter, knuckles whitening.

"Rejected?" I laugh, the sound rolling through the empty street. "You can't reject what wasn't offered. I merely wanted water earlier. Now I want something else."

Her eyes narrow as I step closer. "Stay away from me, xaphan."

"My name is Araton." I move closer still, enjoying how she refuses to back away despite the tension radiating from her body. "And I'm not going anywhere until I get what I came for."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"You." The word hangs between us, blunt and unapologetic.

She actually laughs, a harsh sound without humor. "I hate everything you represent. Everything you are."

I reach her now, close enough to see the rapid pulse at her throat, to count the freckles scattered across her nose. "I'm not after your heart, Ronnie." My voice drops lower,

edged with hunger. "You can hate me with every breath while I fuck you. In fact, I might prefer it that way."

Her breath catches, eyes widening as color floods her cheeks. "You're disgusting."

"And you're aroused." I reach up, tracing one finger along her jawline. "Your pupils are dilated. Your breathing's shallow. You haven't run, though you've had every chance."

"Don't touch me." But she doesn't move away.

Something shifts in me, patience giving way to a darker hunger. In one fluid movement, I crowd her against the wall of her shop, wings spreading slightly to block the view from the street. One hand braces beside her head while the other grips her hip, fingers digging into the flesh there.

"Tell me to leave," I growl, my face inches from hers. "Say the words like you mean them, and I'll go."

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, gray eyes blazing with conflict. "I hate you," she whispers instead.

"Not what I asked." My grip tightens and I press closer, letting her feel exactly what effect she's having on me. "Do you want me to leave, Ronnie?"

Her hands come up to my chest, neither pushing me away nor pulling me closer. They just rest there, burning through the thin fabric of my tunic. I can feel her trembling, torn between desire and what sounds like years of learned resentment.

"I should," she breathes. "Any sane person would."

"Sanity's overrated." I lower my head until my lips hover just above hers. "Last chance to send me away."

Instead of answering, she surges forward, closing the final distance between us. Her mouth crashes against mine, all fury and hunger and pent-up need. The kiss is nothing like the practiced, elegant affairs I'm accustomed to with xaphanwomen. This is raw, almost violent, her teeth catching my lower lip hard enough to sting.

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I growl into her mouth, lifting her against the wall. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively, and I can feel the heat of her through our clothes. She tastes like fire—wild and dangerous and impossibly addictive.

"Where?" I demand against her lips, already half-mad with wanting her.

"Upper floor," she gasps, breaking away long enough to gesture toward a side staircase. "Private entrance."

I carry her there, wings partially unfurled for balance as she clings to me, her mouth now working hungrily along my neck. The stairs creak beneath our combined weight, but I barely notice, too consumed by the feel of her in my arms, the scent of her skin.

She fumbles with a key when we reach her door, hands shaking. I press her against the wood, reclaiming her mouth while she struggles with the lock. When the door finally swings open, I carry her inside, kicking it shut behind us.

Her living quarters are sparse but clean—a single room with a bed against one wall, a small hearth, a table with two chairs. None of it matters. All I see is the bed and the woman in my arms looking at me with equal parts hatred and desire.

I am very glad I made this stop.

2

RONNIE

ONE YEAR LATER...

Islip from beneath Araton's arm, his skin still burning hot against mine. The wooden floor feels cool under my bare feet as I stand, deliberately keeping my back to him. My discarded clothes lie scattered—evidence of how quickly we tore them off each other hours ago.

"Leaving so soon?" His voice slides over me like warm honey, rich with that self-satisfied tone that makes me want to both slap him and climb back into bed. "The night's barely begun, fierce one."

I snatch my shirt from the floor, pulling it over my head. "The night began and ended exactly as it was supposed to." My hair tumbles down my back as I yank it free from the collar, feeling his eyes tracking every movement. "You got what you came for."

"And you didn't?" He laughs, the sound rumbling through my small bedroom.

I turn just enough to glare at him, hating how magnificent he looks sprawled across my sheets. He's propped against my pillows, all bronze skin and lean muscle, those dusky gray-blue wings draped carelessly over the edge of the bed. Silver flecks catch the lamplight, making the feathers shimmer like stars. His short black hair is more tousled than usual, thanks to my fingers running through it when I?—

No. I cut off that thought before it fully forms.

"Look at you," Araton purrs, golden eyes gleaming as they trail down my bare legs. "Standing there trying to hate me while your body still trembles from what I just did to it."

"Don't flatter yourself." I hunt for my pants, avoiding his gaze. "It's a physical reaction. Nothing more."

"Keep telling yourself that." He stretches languidly, wings extending slightly before settling back against his shoulders. "Maybe one day you'll actually believe it."

I locate my pants beneath the small table and tug them on, feeling a twinge between my thighs—a reminder of how thoroughly he claimed me. Again. Just like every month for the past year when he mysteriously finds a reason to pass through my village.

"Don't you have important messages to deliver for your precious lord?" I tie the drawstring at my waist with short, sharp movements. "I'm sure Lord Ithuriel wonders why his courier takes such lengthy detours."

Araton sits up, sheet pooling at his hips. That dimple appears in his right cheek—the genuine one, not the practiced charm he displays to get what he wants. "Are you asking about my work, Ronnie? How domestic. Should I tell you about my day next?"

"I'd rather drink poison." I toss his pants at his face. He catches them with irritating ease. "Put these on and go."

"You wound me." He places a hand over his heart, golden eyes wide with mock hurt. "After everything we shared tonight."

"We shared nothing but bodily fluids," I snap, though my voice lacks the conviction I wish it held. "Same as every other time."

He rises, gloriously naked and unashamed, wings arching slightly behind him. "For someone who claims to hate me, you certainly remember to clean your sheets before I arrive each month."

Heat floods my face. I hate that he noticed. Hate that I care enough to do it. "Don't

read into things that aren't there."

"I read exactly what is there." He steps closer, forcing me to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. Not looking down. Definitely not looking down. "The hatred in your eyes when you see me. The way you fight it until you can't anymore. The way you surrender?—"

"I never surrender." I press a hand against his chest to stop his advance. His skin burns against my palm like a brand.

"No?" His hand covers mine, keeping it trapped against the solid wall of his chest. I can feel his heartbeat, steady and strong. "What would you call it when you're writhing beneath me, begging me not to stop?"

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"Temporary insanity." I yank my hand away.

That dimple deepens as he grins. "Monthly temporary insanity. Like clockwork."

I turn away, focusing on straightening the items on my small dresser that got knocked askew during our... encounter. "Don't you have somewhere important to be? Some noble's correspondence to deliver? Some other woman to torment?"

His reflection appears in my small mirror as he moves behind me, still magnificently nude. Those golden eyes meet mine in the glass. "There's only one woman I enjoy tormenting."

"Lucky me," I mutter, but something twists in my chest at his words. Not jealousy. Definitely not jealousy.

His hands settle on my hips, thumbs tracing small circles that almost have me caving again. "Admit it, Ronnie. You wait for me. You watch for me."

I swallow hard. "I tolerate you."

"You want me." His lips brush the sensitive spot just below my ear. "Almost as much as I want you."

I close my eyes, hating my body's instant response to him. Hating myself for this weakness. Twelve months of this dance, and I still haven't found the strength to turn him away when he appears at my door with that hungry look in his eyes.

"Get dressed," I whisper, the command lacking all force. "Please."

His sigh stirs my hair, but he steps back. "As you wish, fierce one."

I watch Araton dress with practiced efficiency, his movements fluid and graceful even in such a mundane task. His wings twitch and shift as he pulls his shirt over his head, the fabric specially designed with slits to accommodate them. I've always wondered how the xaphan manage clothing around those massive appendages, but I'd rather die than ask him and reveal my curiosity.

"You're staring," he says without looking up, fastening the toggles at his collar.

"I'm waiting for you to leave." I fold my arms across my chest, leaning against the doorframe.

He secures the leather bracers on his forearms—courier's equipment, with small pockets for emergency messages—and finally looks up at me with that infuriating smile. "One of these days, you'll admit you enjoy my company."

"One of these days, zarryn will fly."

"Always so prickly." He crosses the room in three long strides, standing close enough that I can smell the lingering scent of sex on his skin mingled with something uniquely him—like summer storms and burnt sugar. "It's one of your more endearing qualities."

I tilt my chin up defiantly. "Get out, Araton."

Instead of moving away, he cups my face in one hand, his thumb brushing my cheekbone with unexpected tenderness. The gesture catches me off guard, making my breath hitch traitorously in my throat.

"Until next time, fierce one." His voice dips lower, intimate in a way that feels more invasive than when he was inside me. His lips brush mine in a feather-light kiss that's nothing like the devouring hunger from earlier.

I stand frozen, unwilling to reciprocate but unable to pull away. When he steps back, his golden eyes hold something I refuse to interpret.

"Next time," I repeat flatly, opening the door in pointed dismissal. "Safe travels or whatever."

Araton pauses in the doorway, wings folding tight against his back to fit through. The moonlight catches the silver flecks in his feathers, making them glimmer like scattered stars.

"I'll be passing back through in three weeks. Official business in New Solas." He says it casually, as though he's not giving me a timeline to anticipate his return. As though we both don't know exactly what will happen when he reappears at my door.

"I won't hold my breath."

His right cheek dimples. "Liar."

Then he's gone, wings extending as he steps into the night. He doesn't immediately take flight—xaphan rarely do in human villages, a courtesy or perhaps an acknowledgment of how it makes us uncomfortable—but I know he'll be airborne the moment he clears the last houses.

I close the door harder than necessary and press my forehead against the rough wood. The silence in my small home feels abruptly oppressive.

"Damn him," I whisper to nobody.

My bedroom still smells like him. Like us. The sheets are a tangled mess, and I know I should strip them now, wash away the evidence of my weakness. Instead, I sink onto the edge of the bed and run my fingers over the indentation his head left on my pillow.

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Three weeks. He's never told me before when he'd return. Always just appeared, his arrival a surprise I pretended not to welcome.

Something squeezes in my chest—a feeling I refuse to name. This arrangement was supposed to be simple. Physical release with a man who wouldn't get attached, wouldn't expect more from me than I was willing to give. A xaphan who'd never want a human for anything beyond occasional pleasure.

So why does my small house feel so empty every time he leaves?

I lie back on the sheets, staring at the ceiling beams. Is this what my life has become? Waiting for scraps of attention from a xaphan courier who passes through my village only when duty requires it? A few hours of passion once a month, then days of silence until he deigns to return?

The worst part is knowing I'll welcome him back. Every time. Like a starving woman grateful for crumbs.

"Is this all I get to have?" My whisper hangs in the air, unanswered.

No family. Few friends. A small supply shop that barely keeps me fed. And Araton—who isn't mine, will never be mine. Who comes and goes like the phases of the moon, predictable yet untouchable.

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, fighting the hot pressure building behind them. I won't cry. Not over him. Not over this arrangement I willingly entered into.

The hollowness expands inside me anyway, familiar and unwelcome. A little empty. A little lonely. A little heartbroken.

3

RONNIE

I wake up to a familiar churning in my stomach, the fifth morning in a row. Stumbling from my bed, I barely make it to the bucket in the corner of my bedroom before the meager contents of my stomach vacate in an undignified rush.

"Goddess above," I mutter, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. Nothing's staying down—not the dry toast I forced myself to eat last night, not even the meadowmint tea I hoped would settle my rebellious insides.

The wooden floorboards creak beneath my knees as I push myself upright, ignoring how the room spins. This sickness came on suddenly, with no warning, and shows no signs of relenting. I splash water on my face from the small basin, avoiding my reflection in the mirror above it. I already know what I'll see—skin paler than usual, making my freckles stand out like splattered mud, dark circles shadowing my gray eyes.

I need to open the shop. People depend on my supplies, and I'm the only merchant for miles who stocks certain essentials. I can't afford a day of rest, not when the trading routes have been disrupted by the increased xaphan presence in the region. The irony of that thought isn't lost on me.

The walk downstairs to my small shopfront feels like scaling a mountain. I unlock the front door with trembling hands, flipping the hand-carved sign to announce I'm open for business. Morning sunlight slants through the windows, illuminating dust motes dancing in the air and shelves lined with practical necessities—preserved foods,

medicines, tools, lantern oil, and the various odds and ends that keep a village functioning.

My first customer arrives just as I finish arranging a new shipment of dreelk leaves. Mrs. Hemming, with her perpetual frown and sharp eyes that miss nothing.

"Morning, Rosalind." She's the only one who still uses my full name, a reminder of my aunt who raised me with indifferent hands but rigid formalities.

"Mrs. Hemming." I nod, fighting the wave of nausea that rises when I catch a whiff of her floral perfume. "What can I get for you?"

She sets her basket on the counter. "Quillnash, if you've any fresh. And that tincture for my husband's joints."

I turn to fetch the items, hoping my unsteadiness isn't obvious. The shelves seem to swim before my eyes as I reach for the bottle of joint remedy.

"You look terrible," Mrs. Hemming declares, never one to soften her observations. "Pale as death warmed over."

"Just tired." I set her purchases on the counter, concentrating on not swaying. "Trade route delays have me working late."

She sniffs, unconvinced. "Working late, or entertaining that xaphan who visits you?"

Heat flares in my cheeks despite my weakness. Of course people notice. In a village this small, nothing stays secret.

"That'll be twelve lummi." I deliberately ignore her implication.

Mrs. Hemming counts out the coins with deliberate slowness. "You're ill, girl. Anyone with eyes can see it."

"I'm fine." I push her purchases toward her, desperate for her to leave before I embarrass myself by vomiting in front of her.

The doorbell chimes as she finally exits, but before I can gather myself, it rings again. Kai Willowbark enters, her arms filled with bundles of herbs. As our village healer, she's always gathering something for her remedies.

"Morning, Ronnie," she greets, her voice warm and melodic. Unlike most, Kai never judges. Perhaps because she's seen people at their worst—in sickness, in pain, in death. "I've brought those brimbark stalks you wanted to stock."

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"Thank you." I gesture to the counter, not trusting myself to walk over. "Just set them there."

Kai pauses, her head tilting as her gaze sweeps over me. At forty-something, she wears her silver-streaked dark hair in a long braid, and her brown eyes miss nothing. Those eyes narrow now as she studies me.

"You're sick," she says simply, setting down her bundles and crossing to me in three quick strides. Her cool hand presses against my forehead. "No fever, but you're clammy. How long?"

"It's nothing," I insist, stepping back from her touch. "A passing thing."

"Five days isn't passing." The voice comes from the doorway where Tomas, the carpenter's son, stands with sawdust still clinging to his clothes. He's one of my only friends—though his disapproval of Araton has started to drive a wedge between us. "She's been green around the gills since last week. Been watching her rush outside to heave when she thinks nobody's looking."

I glare at him. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Just came for nails," Tomas says, unbothered by my anger. "And maybe to make sure you don't collapse on your customers."

Kai's expression grows more concerned. "Five days of vomiting? Any other symptoms?"

"I'm fine." I move to straighten a display of lantern oil, hoping physical activity will distract them. "Just something I ate disagreeing with me."

"For five days?" Kai follows me, undeterred. "Exhaustion? Dizziness?"

I sigh, recognizing the healer's tenacity. "Maybe a little."

"She nearly fainted yesterday bringing in a crate," adds Eloise, our elderly seamstress, who apparently entered while I was distracted by my misery. "Had to sit with her head between her knees for ten minutes."

"Thank you for the privacy," I mutter, mortified as more customers filter in, all suddenly experts on my health.

"Let me examine you," Kai says, her voice dropping to a level only I can hear. "Whatever it is, it's not improving on its own."

"I can't close the shop," I protest weakly.

"I'll mind it," offers Eloise. "Done it before when you traveled for supplies."

Trapped by their concern, I finally nod. Kai guides me to the small storeroom at the back of the shop, her arm steady around my waist. The irony isn't lost on me—I've spent a lifetime avoiding dependence on others, yet here I am, too weak to argue.

"Sit," she commands, closing the door behind us. The small space is crowded with crates and barrels, but there's a stool in the corner where I sometimes rest between restocking shelves.

I perch on it, feeling oddly vulnerable as Kai kneels before me, her experienced hands checking my pulse at the wrist.

"When did this start exactly?" she asks, fingers moving to press gently beneath my jaw, checking for swollen glands.

"About a week ago. Just woke up queasy." I swallow hard as another wave of nausea rolls through me. "Thought it would pass."

Kai's hands move to my abdomen, pressing gently. "Any pain here?"

"No. Just the nausea and dizziness." I close my eyes as she continues her examination. "And exhaustion. I can barely keep my eyes open past sundown."

"Hmm." Her fingers press more deliberately now, moving lower on my abdomen. "And when was your last bleeding?"

The question catches me off guard. I open my mouth to answer, then close it. I try to remember, counting backwards through the weeks. A cold realization washes over me.

"I... I'm not sure," I admit, my voice barely audible even to my own ears. "With the trade disruptions and extra inventory work, I haven't been keeping track."

Kai says nothing, but her eyes meet mine with a look that sends ice through my veins.

"It can't be that," I whisper, panic rising. "It's impossible."

Even as I say the words, I know they're a lie. Nothing is impossible, especially not with a xaphan who visits monthly like clockwork—whose heat I welcomed into my body without precaution, believing that we couldn't...right? Their magic surely wouldn't be suited for a human body.

"Let me finish examining you before we jump to conclusions," Kai says, her voice

calm and professional. But I can see it in her eyes—the same suspicion that's now screaming in my mind.

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Kai's hands move with practiced efficiency, checking my lymph nodes, listening to my heart with a small wooden amplifier pressed to my chest. Each silent nod, each thoughtful hum from her throat, only tightens the knot of dread forming in my stomach.

"Take a deep breath for me," she instructs, her weathered hands warm against my back.

I comply, my mind racing ahead of her diagnosis. The missed cycles I'd attributed to stress. The exhaustion I'd blamed on long hours. The nausea I'd convinced myself was just a stubborn stomach ailment.

"Ronnie." Kai sits back on her heels, her brown eyes gentle but unflinching. "I need to ask you a more direct question about your relationship with the xaphan."

My jaw tightens. "His name is Araton."

"With Araton, then." She doesn't flinch at my defensiveness. "When was the last time you were... intimate?"

The heat crawls up my neck despite my best efforts. "A week ago. He comes through on the same route each month."

"And before that?"

"The month before. And the month before that." I look away, focusing on a crack in the storeroom wall. "It's been going on for about a year."

Kai nods, processing this information with clinical detachment. "And there's been no one else?"

The question stings more than it should. My eyes snap back to hers. "No."

"I had to ask." Her voice softens, but her gaze remains steady. "Based on all the symptoms and what I can feel... Ronnie, you're pregnant. About three months along, I'd estimate."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I've known it was coming—have suspected it since she first began her examination—but hearing it spoken aloud makes it real in a way I wasn't prepared for.

"That's not possible," I whisper, even as my hand instinctively moves to my still-flat abdomen. "Humans and xaphan can't?—"

"Oh, they can." Kai rises, her knees cracking slightly. She's seen everything in her years as our village healer, but even she can't keep the concern from her eyes. "They just usually choose not to."

My mind flashes to the villagers outside, to Mrs. Hemming's judgmental stare, to the whispers that have followed me since Araton first stepped into my shop with that insufferable smirk and golden eyes that seemed to see right through me. The village barely tolerates my monthly "visitor" as it is. A half-xaphan child would be?—

I can't even complete the thought.

"You're certain it's his?" Kai asks, her voice carefully neutral.

The question lands like a slap. My gray eyes narrow, and I feel the familiar anger rising—the defensive wall I've built since childhood.

"Yes, I'm certain it's his," I snap, standing too quickly and grabbing the wall as dizziness sweeps over me. "Contrary to what this village thinks, I'm not spreading my legs for just anyone who passes through."

Kai doesn't react to my crudeness. "I meant no offense. I only ask because if there were any... human possibility, the situation might be less complicated."

The bitter laugh escapes before I can stop it. "When has my life ever been uncomplicated?"

She gives me a small, sad smile. "Fair point."

I sink back onto the stool, suddenly exhausted beyond measure. The shop feels miles away, though it's just beyond the thin storeroom door. Out there is a world that has never quite accepted me—the sharp-tongued orphan who keeps to herself and now apparently beds xaphan. What will they say when my belly swells with the evidence?

"What am I going to do?" I whisper, hating the vulnerability in my voice, the tremble in my hands.

Kai doesn't offer platitudes or easy solutions. Instead, she kneels again, taking my cold hands in her warm ones. "First, you need to take better care of yourself. Proper food, rest. I'll mix you something for the nausea that's safe for the baby."

The baby. The words make it even more real.

"And then?" I ask, meeting her gaze.

"Then you decide what comes next." Her grip tightens slightly. "But whatever you decide, you don't have to face it alone."

Alone. It's all I've ever been. Even with Araton's monthly visits, I've kept him at arm's length, refusing to acknowledge what happens between us as anything more than physical release. I've never allowed myself to need anyone.

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Now my body harbors irrefutable evidence of connection—proof that no matter how high I build my walls, I'm not truly separate from the world around me.

4

ARATON

The sunlight filtering through New Solas' crystal spires transforms ordinary light into a kaleidoscope of color across the marble floor. I move through Lord Valterian's grand reception hall with practiced ease, weaving between clusters of Aerasak's elite like I was born to these circles. In many ways, I was—just never quite belonging to them.

"Velrien." Lord Valterian himself nods as I pass, his wings folded neatly against his back in the formal manner of old xaphan families. "Your message to House Davariel was well received."

I return the nod, offering the precise depth of bow required—enough to show respect without seeming subservient. "Lord Ithuriel will be pleased to hear it. The trade route expansion benefits us all, particularly with the new tariff arrangements."

"Indeed." His eyes flick over my shoulder, where his daughter hovers by the refreshment table, pretending not to watch our exchange. "Seraphina has been asking after you."

Of course she has. "Lady Seraphina honors me with her attention," I respond smoothly, the diplomatic words flowing as naturally as breathing. What I don't say:

that her attention is as unwanted as it is persistent.

Valterian's lips twitch, seeing through the polite deflection. "She's wearing new jewels tonight. Bloodstones from the far reaches of The Ridge. Perhaps you might compliment them."

The invitation—or rather, command—couldn't be clearer. I incline my head once more. "I would be remiss not to acknowledge such fine taste."

As Valterian strides away, satisfied with my acquiescence, I flex my wings slightly, the silver flecks catching light as I adjust their position against my back. The formal robes of New Solas nobility are designed to showcase our wings, with openings that frame them rather than conceal. My own attire, while rich enough to move comfortably among the elite, carries subtle markers of my lesser status—the embroidery stopping short of the shoulders, the slightly less vibrant blue of the fabric.

None of that matters when I speak. Words have always been my true currency, and in New Solas, they spend remarkably well.

I make my way to Seraphina, aware of the eyes tracking my movements. Three noblewomen near the eastern archway turn their heads in perfect unison as I pass, their whispers following like perfume. I've heard the things they say—how my voice alone can draw blood to the surface, how my smile promises pleasures undiscovered.

How everyone wants to bed me when I'm only thinking of one person.

I offer them a brief nod of acknowledgment, just enough to send a flush crawling up the youngest one's neck.

"Lord Velrien." Seraphina practically purrs the title I don't officially hold but everyone uses anyway. She extends her hand, a cascade of silver bracelets tinkling

with the movement. "I feared you might miss tonight's gathering."

"And miss the opportunity to pay respects to your esteemed father? Never." I take her hand, brushing my lips over her knuckles with calculated brevity. Her wings flutter slightly—a response she can't control, and one that would mortify her if she realized how transparent it makes her desire.

"Your bloodstones are exquisite," I continue, releasing her hand before she can trap mine. "The craftsmanship rivals the best I've seen in Soimur."

She preens, deliberately angling her neck so the stones catch the light. "They're from a new source Lord Ithuriel may find interesting. The yield is remarkable."

Business and seduction, always hand in hand in New Solas. I tilt my head, allowing interest to show in my expression while keeping my posture neutral. "Tell me more."

This is the dance—give them enough rope to believe they're leading you where they want to go, while actually guiding them precisely where you intend. By the time Seraphina finishes describing the mining operation—valuable intelligence for Lord Ithuriel—she believes it was her idea to confide in me.

"You always understand the value of these things," she murmurs, stepping closer than propriety allows. "Others see only pretty trinkets."

"Beauty has many forms." I reach for a crystal goblet of amber liquid from a passing server, using the motion to create distance between us. "As does value."

Her wings extend slightly—an unconscious display meant to attract. "Perhaps we might discuss both in more private surroundings. Father has opened the eastern gardens for tonight's guests."

The invitation hangs between us, perfumed with intent. In her mind, I'm already accepting, already following her between the neatly trimmed nimond hedges to some secluded alcovewhere she'll press those bloodstone-adorned fingers against my chest.

Instead, I smile—the particular smile that suggests intimacy while promising nothing. "Another time, perhaps. Lord Ithuriel has tasked me with speaking to at least four houses tonight regarding the summit preparations."

Disappointment flashes across her features before she masks it with practiced indifference. "Duty first, as always. How admirable."

I salute her with my goblet. "The burden of service."

As I move away, I catch my reflection in one of the polished quartz columns. The golden eyes that stare back at me reveal nothing of my thoughts, nothing of the strange restlessness that's been weighing my steps through these gilded halls. Nothing of how, despite all the wings fluttering in my presence, my mind keeps drifting to a pair of defiant gray eyes in a village a day's flight from here.

Three more noblewomen attempt to corner me before I reach Lord Kassian of House Meriden. One "accidentally" brushes her wing against mine—an intimacy that would scandalize the older generation—while another simply states that her private quarters offer the finest view of the crystal falls, should I wish to see them.

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I deflect them all with smiles and compliments that leave the impression of possibilities without ever promising fulfillment. It's a skill I've honed over years of diplomatic service, this ability to make people believe they have a chance at possessing me.

All except one stubborn shopkeeper who looks at me like I'm something stuck to the bottom of her boot—right until she's pulling me into her bed.

"Araton!" Lord Kassian booms, breaking into my thoughts. "Just the xaphan I've been waiting for. Come, share a drink and tell me this proposal of Ithuriel's isn't as outrageous as I've heard."

I straighten, directing my full attention to the matter at hand. This is why I'm here, after all. Not to think about auburn hair tangled in my fingers or the surprising softness of lips that speak such sharp words.

"Lord Kassian." I bow precisely, measuring my smile to exactly the warmth required. "I believe you'll find the proposal less outrageous than inspired, once you understand the full scope."

And just like that, I'm back in the game I play so well, crafting phrases that will carry Lord Ithuriel's ambitions forward on wings of my making.

I leave Lord Valterian's estate as the twin moons begin their climb into the night sky, bathing New Solas in silver-blue light that makes the crystal spires gleam like massive ice formations. My wings unfurl with a satisfying stretch after hours of the formal half-fold required in noble company. A few quick beats lift me above the

sprawling garden walls, giving me a momentary bird's eye view of the city I traverse each month.

From this height, New Solas is a gleaming jewel—all elegance and order in concentric circles radiating outward from the central temple. The human districts in the west look like smudges of charcoal against the pristine architecture of the xaphan quarters. Even from here, I can sense the invisible boundaries separating those worlds.

I drop down to street level near the merchant quarter, preferring to walk rather than fly through the narrow, bustling alleyways. Unlike the sterile perfection of the noble district, this part of New Solas pulses with life—a cacophony of voices haggling over prices, exotic scents wafting from foodstalls, street performers drawing crowds with displays of minor elemental magic.

The shop owners recognize me, some calling out greetings while others simply nod in acknowledgment of my regular passage. I've maintained these relationships carefully over the years, knowing that information from common merchants often proves more valuable than whatever secrets the nobility thinks they're keeping.

"Lord Velrien!" A shopkeeper waves enthusiastically from her stall of imported fabrics. "The silks from Vesnios arrived yesterday. The exact shade of blue you inquired about."

I'm halfway to her stall before I catch myself. Blue—the precise color of storm clouds gathering on the horizon. The color that reminded me of?—

Ronnie's eyes.

I'd asked about the fabric weeks ago, thinking... what? That I might have something made for her? A ridiculous notion. She'd probably use the silk to clean her shop

windows.

"Another time, Merial," I call, changing course with a forced smile.

What in Solas' name is wrong with me? This is the third time today my thoughts have circled back to that prickly shopkeeper. Her face keeps appearing in my mind—not soft with pleasure as it is in our encounters, but sharp with that stubborn defiance that both irks and fascinates me.

A glint of color catches my eye, drawing me to a stall I've never patronized before. The vendor, an older xaphan with dappled gray wings that speak of mixed bloodlines, arranges delicate jewelry on a velvet cloth.

"Something caught your interest, sir?" she asks, eyes darting to my wings—assessing my status—before settling on my face.

My fingers hover over a bracelet of intricately woven metal threads interspersed with tiny beads in shades of amber and deep blue. It reminds me of sunlight filtering through Ronnie's windows, catching the highlights in her auburn hair.

"This piece," I say, surprising myself. "The craftsmanship is exceptional."

The vendor beams. "Handwoven in the style of the old kingdoms. Those beads are carved from mountain crystals—they change color slightly depending on the wearer's mood."

I pick up the bracelet, testing its weight. It's substantial without being heavy, delicate without being fragile. Like her.

"She must be special," the vendor says with a knowing smile.

"She's... not what you're thinking." My denial comes too quickly, but it's true. Ronnie isn't a lover in any romantic sense of the word. She's an arrangement. A diversion. A physical compatibility that happens to exceed any I've experienced before.

And yet here I stand, contemplating jewelry for a woman who would sooner spit in my face than accept a gift from me.

"She'd hate this," I murmur, yet I don't set it down. Instead, I find myself imagining the bracelet against her pale wrist, a flash of color as she moves through her shop, restocking shelves with that efficient grace I've spent too many hours watching.

When did I start noticing these things? The way she turns pages in her ledger with a quick flick of her fingers. How she always smells faintly of meadowmint tea. The small crease between her eyebrows when she's calculating numbers.

"If she hates pretty things, she might appreciate their value instead," the vendor suggests, misreading my hesitation. "These beads fetch a good price in western markets."

I almost laugh. Ronnie would see right through that approach. She has an uncanny ability to discern my intentions, stripping away my carefully constructed charm to see the calculations beneath.

It's... refreshing, in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

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"I'll take it," I decide, reaching for my coin purse. "And I'd like it wrapped, if you would."

As the vendor carefully packages the bracelet, I force myself to examine this strange impulse. In the year I've been visiting Ronnie's village, I've never brought her anything besides my company and the pleasure we take from each other's bodies. Why start now?

I haven't bedded another since our arrangement began—not from any sense of commitment, but simply because no one else has interested me enough to pursue. The courtiers and nobles with their coy games and transparent manipulations seem tedious after Ronnie's blunt honesty.

Is that it? Have I simply grown fond of having one person in my life who doesn't want anything from me beyond the physical?

Friend isn't the right word for what she is to me. Friends don't slam doors in each other's faces half the time. Friends don't pretend the other doesn't exist until clothes start coming off.

And yet, there's something there—something beyond mere physical compatibility that keeps drawing me back to her shop each month with increasing anticipation.

Whatever it is, I know better than to name it. Ronnie has made it abundantly clear she despises what I am, even as she desires what I can do. That contradiction is part of her appeal—the fire in her eyes when she tells me to leave, even as her body arches toward mine.

RONNIE

Morning light filters through the cracks in my shutters, stabbing directly into my eyes like some kind of divine punishment. I groan and roll away from it, only for my stomach to immediately clench in protest. Not again. I barely make it to the washbasin before emptying what little remains in my stomach from last night's dinner.

"Fuck," I whisper, pressing my forehead against the cool wooden edge of the basin.

After several deep breaths, I splash water on my face and rinse my mouth, avoiding my own reflection in the small mirror hanging above. I already know what I'll see—the pallor that's taken up residence beneath my freckles, the shadows under my eyes that speak of restless nights.

I press a hand to my still-flat abdomen, trying to wrap my mind around the reality. There's a life growing inside me. Half-human, half-xaphan. The thought sends another wave of nausea through me that has nothing to do with morning sickness.

"Get it together, Ronnie," I mutter to myself, pushing away from the basin to dress for the day.

My shop won't open itself, and the new shipment of dried herbs from the southern villages needs cataloging. Life doesn't stop just because yours has fundamentally changed overnight.

I tug a loose cotton shirt over my head, cinch it with a belt at my waist, and step into my most comfortable work trousers. The familiarity of the routine steadies me, even as my thoughts race in chaotic circles.

A baby. Araton's baby.

My hand trembles as I braid my auburn hair, twisting it into a low knot at the nape of my neck. Wayward strands already escape to frame my face, but I don't bother fixing them. It's not like I have anyone to impress in this village.

Except for one insufferably handsome xaphan who appears on my doorstep every month like some kind of twisted clockwork, with his golden eyes and that goddamn dimple that only appears when he's genuinely amused and not just playing charming.

I yank my boots on with more force than necessary. Araton can't know. Not ever. The second he finds out, he'll swoop in with his wings and his smooth words, trying to take over. I can already hear him—"This changes things, fierce one."

The nickname makes me wince even in my imagination. Especially as I remember the day we met.

I shake off the memory and grab my apron from its peg by the door, securing it around my waist as I descend the narrow stairs that connect my living quarters to the shop below.

The morning sunlight paints golden rectangles across the wooden floor. Dust motes dance in the beams, highlighting shelves stocked with everything from practical necessities to exotic imports. It's not much, but it's mine—built from nothing after Aunt Mae passed and left me with little more than the clothes on my back and a lifetime of indifferent care.

I run my fingers along the countertop, the wood smooth from years of use. My shop has been my salvation, my independence, my entire life for the past five years.

And now all of it—every scrap of security I've carved out for myself—feels

threatened by the life growing inside me.

"We'll be fine," I tell my still-flat stomach, surprised by the fierceness in my voice. "Just you and me."

But what if Araton finds out? What if he decides he wants this child? Xaphan are possessive by nature, especially over their offspring. Would he try to take the baby away? Or worse, insist that I come with him to his world of crystal spires and gossamer wings, where humans are barely better than well-treated pets?

My hands clench into fists, nails biting into my palms. "Not happening," I whisper to the empty shop.

This is it—the push I've needed for months now. Every time Araton leaves, I swear it's the last time. No more opening my door, no more falling into bed with him, no more watching the sky for a glimpse of dusky gray wings flecked with silver. And yet, when he returns, all my resolve crumbles beneath the weight of whatever this thing is between us.

Not this time. This time, I have something more important than my own weakness to consider.

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I move to the shop door, sliding back the heavy wooden bolt and flipping the sign to "Open," just as I have every morning for years. But today feels different. Today marks the beginning of something new—a life where Araton Velrien has no place.

When he arrives next week, the door will stay locked. The shutters will remain closed. And whatever ridiculous attachment I've developed to our monthly arrangement will have to die, for the sake of the child I'm determined to protect.

Even from its own father.

I flip through my ledger, but the numbers blur together. Between the constant nausea and exhaustion, focusing on inventory has become nearly impossible. The bell above the door jingles, startling me from my daze.

"Morning, Miss Wynn." Mr. Orett, the village baker, steps in with his usual friendly nod. "Got any more of that dreelk powder? The wife's joints are acting up again with this damp weather."

I force a smile, moving toward the herb shelves. "Just restocked yesterday. How much do you need?"

My fingers brush against the glass jars lined neatly in rows, their contents ranging from common healing herbs to rarer imports. The dreelk powder—ground from dried leaves that grow only in the eastern valleys—sits in a small amber bottle. As I measure it into a paper packet, another wave of nausea hits me, and I grip the counter's edge.

"You alright there, Miss Wynn?" Mr. Orett's bushy eyebrows knit together in concern.

"Just fine. Didn't sleep well." The lie comes easily now after weeks of practice.

He doesn't look convinced but knows better than to pry. I've cultivated a certain reputation in this village—efficient, fair, and absolutely private. It's served me well until now.

After he leaves, I lean against the counter, taking deep breaths through my nose. The shop smells of dried herbs, leather, and the beeswax candles I make during quiet afternoons. Normally, the scent soothes me. Today, it makes my stomach churn.

The calendar on the wall catches my eye—marked with delivery schedules and payment due dates. But there's one unmarked day that looms larger than all the rest. Three days from now, when a certain xaphan courier will make his monthly appearance.

I press my palms against my eyes until I see stars. The absolute worst part is that some traitorous part of me still looks forward to seeing him. Even now, with everything at stake.

"Pathetic," I mutter to myself, straightening up and moving to sort through a new shipment of quillnash that arrived yesterday. The vibrant vegetable has become popular as both food and medicine, and I've built a steady trade supplying it to several households.

As I work, my mind wanders again to Araton. His knowing smirk when he steps through my door. The way his golden eyes darken when I give as good as I get in our verbal sparring. How those massive wings of his curl forward instinctively when we're together, like he's shielding us from the world.

The fragile quillnash stem snaps in my grip. I toss the broken pieces aside with more force than necessary.

This has to stop. I know what xaphan are like. I've heard the stories all my life—how they see humans as amusing diversions at best, possessions at worst. My own parents disappeared on a trading trip to New Solas, the xaphan stronghold. Just "disappeared." No explanations, no bodies returned.

And here I am, carrying a half-xaphan child.

The realization hits me like a physical blow. What if the baby has wings? What if it has powers? How would I explain that in a village where seeing a xaphan is rare enough to become the subject of gossip for weeks?

I finish my work in a daze, mechanically helping the few customers who wander in, counting their lummi into the lockbox, and finally closing up shop as the afternoon light begins to fade.

When I finally push open my door and climb the stairs to my quarters, I stand in the middle of the small room, seeing it as if for the first time. The narrow bed where Araton and I?—

I cut that thought off abruptly. The rickety wardrobe holding my few clothes. The small table where I eat my solitary meals.

This place has been my sanctuary. My haven. But now it feels like a trap.

I yank my travel bag from under the bed, the one I use for sourcing trips to neighboring villages. The leather is worn but sturdy, like me. Without allowing myself to think too much, I begin to pack.

"This is ridiculous," I say to the empty room, even as I carefully fold my sturdiest clothes and tuck them away. "You're running away like a coward."

But I'm not running from Araton—not really. I'm running from what will happen if he finds out. From the possibility of losing my child to a world that would never accept me as anything more than its mother.

I pack my small box of savings—nodals I've squirreled away over years of careful living. Not enough to start over in comfort, but enough to get me somewhere new. Somewhere Araton won't find me.

My hand hovers over the small wooden carving of a lunox he brought me from one of his trips. Its white body and blue-tipped face catch the last rays of sunlight streaming through my window.

"Sentimental fool," I whisper, but I pack it anyway.

I just keep packing up my entire life, trying to ignore the waves of emotion that it sends through me.

6

RONNIE

The journey south carves itself into my bones with each jolting step of my overburdened sapela. The stubborn beast brays in protest as we navigate yet another rocky incline, its spindly legs trembling beneath our combined weight. I lean forward, running a hand down its coarse gray neck.

"I know, I know. I'm not exactly thrilled either," I mutter, adjusting the wide-brimmed hat that shields my face from both sun and potential aerial observers.

Three days on the road, and the muscles in my thighs burn constantly from gripping the saddle. My back aches from sleeping on hard ground, and the morning sickness has only intensified with travel. Each dawn finds me retching behind whatever scrubby bush offers the barest privacy.

We follow game trails and overgrown merchant paths, anything to avoid the main roads that might lead to—or from—New Solas. The gleaming xaphan city looms in my mind like a beacon, though I've positioned it firmly behind us to the east. When the wind shifts, I imagine I can smell its perfumed air, hear the distant chime of its crystal spires.

"Stop it," I hiss to myself, urging the sapela around a bend in the trail.

The forest thickens here, ancient trees stretching skyward, their canopies creating a dappled sanctuary from prying eyes above. Still, every gap in the leaves has me

tensing, scanning for the telltale flutter of wings.

A twig snaps somewhere to my right. I jerk the sapela to a halt so abruptly the poor beast nearly sits on its haunches. My hand flies to the knife at my belt, heart thundering against my ribs like a trapped bird.

Nothing emerges but a small lunox, its white body nearly glowing in the shadowy underbrush, blue-tipped face curious as it regards us before darting away.

I release a shaky breath, the tension leaving my body in an almost painful wave. The wooden carving in my pack seems to burn against my spine, a reminder I can't seem to discard despite my better judgment.

"You're being ridiculous," I tell myself, nudging the sapela forward again. "He's not going to waste his time chasing after someone like you."

The words taste bitter even as I say them. Because that's the truth of it, isn't it? I'm nothing but a diversion to Araton—a human curiosity he visits between delivering messages for his lord. The child growing inside me changes nothing about what I am to him. What I could never be.

What I never wanted to be, I have to remind myself.

The sapela stumbles on a loose rock, and I curse as we nearly topple over. The beast lets out a pitiful sound, more exhausted whine than bray.

"Just a little further," I promise, though I have no idea if it's true.

My destination is nebulous—someplace south, someplace small, someplace where xaphan rarely tread. I've heard rumorsof villages nestled in the valleys beyond the Ridge, where humans have carved out lives independent of xaphan influence. Places

where a woman with a small child wouldn't draw too much attention.

As long as the child looks human enough.

That thought sends another jolt of panic through me. What if the baby has wings? Golden eyes? What if it can manipulate air, bend others to its will with a whispered word like its father?

The sapela senses my distress, shifting nervously beneath me. I force myself to breathe deeply, to focus on the path ahead rather than the countless what-ifs that plague my every waking moment.

A flash of movement overhead sends me ducking instinctively, pressing myself tight against the sapela's neck. I peer up through the leaves, heart in my throat, only to see a Black Pitter bird darting between branches. Its ebony wings cut through the air with deadly precision as it pursues some unseen prey.

Not him. Never him.

I straighten slowly, my cheeks burning with a mixture of fear and embarrassment. This constant vigilance is wearing me down, fraying the edges of my already tenuous composure.

"Get it together, Ronnie," I mutter, wiping sweat from my brow with a dusty sleeve.

The sun creeps higher, turning the forest into a stifling oven despite the shade. My water skin runs dangerously low, and the sapela's pace slows to a stubborn plod that no amount of coaxing will hasten.

We need to find water soon. And proper shelter for the night. As much as I want to put as much distance between myself and my old life as possible, I can't risk my

health—or that of my unborn child—by pushing too hard.

The thought still feels foreign, incongruous. Me, a mother. Sometimes I press my hand against my still-flat abdomen and try to feel something, some connection to this tiny interloper who's upended my entire existence. But there's nothing yet—no movement, no mysterious maternal bond, just the constant nausea and fatigue that serve as unwelcome reminders.

A week south of New Solas, the Ridge Mountains finally slip behind me, their jagged peaks no longer a constant reminder of all I've left behind. The sapela has long since given up protesting our journey, resigned to the long miles and my occasional stops to be sick in the bushes.

Ahead, a village appears first as a wisp of chimney smoke above the tree line, then as the gentle toll of a bell carried on the breeze. I straighten in the saddle, my spine cracking in protest. When the trees finally part to reveal a clutch of stone buildings nestled in a verdant valley, I nearly weep with relief.

"Real food," I murmur, patting the sapela's neck. "A real bed maybe?"

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The beast snorts, clearly more interested in the prospect of rest than my wistful planning.

This village, much like the one I left, isn't much to look at—a handful of shops, homes with vegetable gardens, a smithy, and what appears to be a small temple to some local deity. Perfect. The kind of place travelers pass through, not to. The kind of place where a woman alone might go unremarked upon.

I dismount at the village stable, wincing as my feet touch solid ground. The stable boy—a lanky teenager with a spray of freckles—takes the sapela's reins with a curious glance at my travel-worn appearance.

"Just passing through," I say before he can ask, pressing a few extra lummi into his palm. "Extra feed for her, please. She's earned it."

The boy nods, pocketing the coins with a gap-toothed smile. "Marda's place makes the best stew in the valley," he offers, nodding toward a building with cheerful yellow shutters. "If you're hungry, miss."

My stomach growls at the mere mention of food, though it immediately clenches in that familiar warning way. I've learned to eat when I can, between bouts of sickness.

"Thanks," I mumble, shouldering my pack.

The restaurant—if it can be called that—is warm and dim inside, smelling of herbs and fresh-baked bread. My mouth waters as I push through the door, a small bell jingling to announce my arrival.

A few locals look up from their meals, but their gazes slide away just as quickly. A trio of men argue good-naturedly over some village politics at a corner table. An old man dozes by the hearth, a half-empty mug of tea forgotten at his elbow.

"Be with you in a moment!" calls a voice from somewhere behind a swinging door.

I choose a table near the back, positioned so I can see everyone as my anxiety mounts. My fingers drum against the worn wooden tabletop as I scan the room, cataloging possible threats, escape routes?—

"What can I get for you?"

I startle, hand instinctively going to the knife at my belt before I register the woman standing beside my table. She's around my age, maybe a few years older, with warm brown skin and curly hair pulled back in a scarf. Her hazel-green eyes crinkle at the corners when she smiles, and she carries a basket of bread that makes my empty stomach contract painfully.

"Just... whatever's hot," I manage, suddenly aware of how grimy I feel. "And water, please."

The woman sets down the bread basket without asking.

"On the house," she says, her gaze lingering on me in a way that makes me want to shrink into my travel cloak. "You look like you've come a long way."

I tear off a piece of bread, hoping she'll leave if I start eating. "Just passing through."

Instead of leaving, she leans slightly closer, lowering her voice. "Are you in need of help?"

The bread turns to ash in my mouth. I swallow hard, forcing my expression to remain neutral even as panic flutters in my chest. "I'm fine," I say, too sharply. "Just hungry."

She holds my gaze for a beat too long, then nods. "Of course. Well, I'm Harmony, if you need anything. I'll get your stew."

She's halfway across the room when it hits—that sudden, violent lurch in my gut that's become all too familiar. I clap a hand over my mouth, shoving back my chair with a scrape that draws several startled looks.

The back door. I bolt for it, nearly colliding with Harmony as she returns with a steaming bowl.

"Excuse me," I gasp, pushing past her and flinging myself outside just in time.

There's a small garden plot behind the restaurant, and I barely make it to the edge before emptying what little was in my stomach onto the soil. Wave after wave of nausea has me doubled over, eyes watering, cursing Araton's name between heaves.

When it finally passes, I stay hunched over, trembling and hating the weakness in my limbs. A soft hand touches my back, and I flinch away instinctively.

"Here," Harmony says, offering a damp cloth. "For your face."

I straighten, swiping the cloth across my mouth with as much dignity as I can muster. "Sorry about your garden."

Her mouth quirks in a half-smile. "The zynthra could use the fertilizer."

I try to laugh, but it comes out more like a strangled cough. "I should go."

"You should sit down before you fall down," she counters, firm but kind. "How far along are you?"

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The question hits me like a physical blow. I stare at her, my denial dying on my lips as she raises an eyebrow.

"I've seen morning sickness before," she says, her voice gentle now. "Though yours seems... intense."

"About three months. Maybe a little more," I hear myself say, the admission slipping out before I can stop it. "But I'm fine. I just need to rest and then I'll be on my way."

Harmony studies me, her gaze far too perceptive. "I can help," she says simply. "If you'll let me."

Something in her voice—the absence of judgment, perhaps, or the quiet certainty—breaks through the walls I've carefully constructed. My shoulders slump, exhaustion suddenly weighing on me like a physical thing.

"Why would you help me?" I ask, voice barely audible. "You don't even know me."

She shrugs, a simple gesture that somehow conveys volumes. "Because someone once helped me when I needed it most."

I stare at her for a long moment, the silence stretching between us, filled with the sounds of the village—distant conversation, the sound of work, the rhythmic clang of the smith's hammer.

Finally, I nod, a jerky movement that feels like surrender and salvation all at once.

ARATON

I arrive at Ronnie's house as dusk settles over the village, excitement humming beneath my skin like a physical force. The small wooden building sits exactly where I left it a month ago, though the summer wildflowers have climbed higher along the stone foundation, little rebellious bursts of color against weathered gray.

The gift box weighs practically nothing in my pocket, but I'm acutely aware of its presence as I approach her door. The bracelet inside cost more than a month's worth of courier fees—an extravagance I can't entirely justify to myself, except that the moment I saw it, I thought of her. The way sunlight catches in her auburn hair when she doesn't think I'm looking. The defiant lift of her chin just before she tells me to get the fuck out of her bed.

Anticipation quickens my steps. Our pattern is always the same—I arrive, she pretends to hate it, we fall into bed together, repeat. But this time feels different. I've caught myself thinking about her at the strangest moments over the past weeks—during formal dinners at Lord Ithuriel's estate, in the middle of negotiations with New Solas merchants, while flying over the Ridge Mountains.

I knock on Ronnie's door, the familiar three-tap rhythm that's become our unspoken signal.

Nothing.

I try again, louder this time, wings shifting restlessly behind me. The house remains silent – no footsteps, no caustic greeting, no reluctant slide of the bolt.

"Ronnie?" I call out, pressing my ear to the rough-hewn wood.

The absence of sound unnerves me more than any hostile reception. Ronnie's always here when I arrive—it's part of our unspoken arrangement. I come on the same day each month, and she pretends she hasn't been counting down the days.

I step back, scanning the small building. The shutters are drawn tight, unusual for early evening. No lamp glow seeps through the cracks. The small garden patch looks neglected, weeds sprouting between rows of drooping dreelek.

"Where are you, fierce one?" I mutter, my wings flaring with unexpected tension.

The shop. Of course. She must be working late, probably lost track of time tallying inventory or haggling with some merchant over prices. The thought settles me. That's exactly like Ronnie—practical to her bones, putting business before pleasure.

I walk around to the front of the building, where I don't often go anymore. She's told me not to, to avoid the stares of the other humans, but today, I will have to break that request.

But as I come up to the front, I see it too is closed. But it's not just that. The shop has clearly been closed for days—the windows carry a fine layer of dust, and a small pile of undelivered packages sits abandoned by the door.

"Looking for Rosalind?" a voice calls from across the street.

I turn to see the male—Tomas—that always seemed to be around her watching me. I bite down on my anger, hoping he has answers I need.

"Yes," I say, forcing charm into my voice, into the air between us. "Do you know where she is?"

His jaw works. "She's not there."

He doesn't look like he's going to be helpful. I can see she's not there.

"Did she mention taking a trip? Visiting someone?" I press, closing the distance between us.

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He shrugs one shoulder and looks away. "How am I supposed to know?"

I can feel my composure slipping, the easy charm giving way to something sharper. "You were around her a lot."

His eyes snap to mine with the harsh tone. "If she wanted you to know, she would have told you."

Sucking in a deep breath, I force my wings to relax, to fold neatly against my back instead of flaring with agitation. The gift box seems to burn a hole in my pocket.

Swallowing back the urge to show this guy how little he is compared to me, I give a sharp jerk of my head. "If you see her, let her know I came by."

I stalk off, knowing he won't.

But at the back of her building, I stand there like an idiot, staring at the locked door of the entrance that leads up to Ronnie's room as twilight deepens around me. The village is settling into evening quiet—lamps being lit in windows, the distant sound of someone playing a stringed instrument, the smell of cooking fires carried on the breeze. Everything continuing as normal while my carefully established routine crumbles.

"She can't just be gone," I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

I should leave. Return to Soimur and Lord Ithuriel with my messages delivered and forget about the fierce human woman with auburn hair who so expertly keeps me at

arm's length. This thing between us was never meant to last—it wasn't even supposed to start. She was just another human in just another village, someone to charm for information and supplies. Then somehow she became the one person who could see through my practiced smile, who never fell for my carefully calculated charm.

And I've been coming back every month like a starving man to a feast.

My wings stretch and settle against my back, betraying my agitation. I scan the village square, as if Ronnie might suddenly appear, arms crossed and lips pursed in that way that always makes me want to kiss her until she's breathless.

My eyes flick to the door again. I could get inside easily enough—the lock on her back door is flimsy, designed to keep out ordinary thieves, not a determined xaphan. I could look for clues to where she's gone, why she left without a word...

The thought brings me up short. Since when am I the type to break into a woman's house because she didn't wait around for me? This is exactly the kind of complication I've spent my life avoiding.

Still, I don't leave. In the gathering darkness, it looks abandoned, lonely somehow. I run my fingers along the doorframe, feeling the rough wood beneath my fingertips. The gift box in my pocket seems heavier now, a tangible reminder of expectations I shouldn't have developed.

"She's not there," a woman's voice calls from behind me.

I turn to find an older human woman watching me from the path, her silver-streaked hair pulled back in a practical knot. She carries a basket of what looks like herbs, and the faint scent of healing tinctures surrounds her—the village healer, then.

"I can see that," I reply, letting a hint of impatience color my tone. How many people

are going to fucking tell me that. Her eyes widen slightly at my voice—humans always seem surprised when we don't sound as ethereal as they expect. "Do you know where she went?"

The healer approaches cautiously, studying me with shrewd eyes that miss nothing—not the tension in my shoulders, the restless shifting of my dusky gray wings, or the way my fingers keep brushing against my pocket.

"You must be him," she says finally.

My eyebrow arches of its own accord. "Him?"

"The xaphan she never mentioned by name." The healer's mouth curves in the ghost of a smile. "The one she pretended wasn't important."

Something warm and uncomfortable unfurls in my chest. I smother it quickly.

"Where is she?" I ask, forcing lightness into my voice.

The healer's expression turns sympathetic, which is somehow worse than suspicion. "She's gone, young man. Left the village days ago."

"Left?" I repeat stupidly. "Where to?"

"She didn't say." The healer shifts her basket to her other arm. "Just sold what she couldn't carry, locked up her house and shop, and went. Guess she needed something different."

The information hits harder than it should. Ronnie, gone. No goodbye, no explanation. Just... gone.

"I see," I manage, my voice cooler than I feel. "Well, that's... unexpected."

The healer gives me a look that sees too much. "Was it, though? Whatever you two had going, it didn't seem built to last."

I can't argue with that, though the blunt assessment stings. Our arrangement had been about convenience and attraction, not permanence. I have no claim to Ronnie, no right to be standing here feeling this hollow ache beneath my ribs.

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"No," I finally admit, my hand closing around the gift box in my pocket. "It wasn't."

8

RONNIE

I have no idea why I'm following this woman. My head throbs with each step like someone's pounding nails into my temples, and my stomach still rolls with nausea. Yet here I am, trailing a complete stranger through the back of some village restaurant like a lost animal.

"Just through here," the woman—Harmony, she'd introduced herself—gestures toward a small alcove behind the kitchen. Her voice is warm but not cloying, practical rather than pitying. I appreciate that. Pity I could do without.

The space she leads me to has a small cot and a basin of clean water. It's simple, sparse, but meticulously kept. Like everything else I've seen in this place.

"Sit," Harmony says, reaching for a nearby cloth. She dips it in the water and wrings it out with practiced efficiency. "You look like you're about to topple over, and I don't fancy scraping you off the floor."

I almost smile at that. Almost.

"I'm fine," I mutter, though I sink onto the cot anyway. My legs feel like water, and the room hasn't quite stopped tilting.

Harmony passes me the damp cloth. "Sure you are. And I'm the Queen of the Westlands." She turns to a small cabinet and begins rummaging through glass jars filled with dried plants.

She selects a jar filled with something that looks like dried leaves. When I don't say anything, her eyes flick back up to me.

"Look, you don't need to explain anything to me. But just know I would understand." Harmony pours hot water from a kettle into a mug, adding pinches of the dried plants. The scent that rises is earthy and soothing. "Drink this. It'll help with the nausea."

I take the mug, wrapping my fingers around its warmth. "I still don't see why you're helping me." I guess I have a really twisted way of saying thank you.

She shrugs, settling on a stool across from me. "Because you needed it."

I snort. "Nobody does things just to be kind."

"Maybe not where you're from." She tucks a loose curl behind her ear. "But here in Saufort, we look after people."

I'm about to argue when the door to the kitchen swings open, bringing a gust of conversation and clinking dishware. I tense, shoulders hunching instinctively.

"Mama! Mama!"

A tiny bullet of energy bursts into our sanctuary—a little girl with wild curls and golden-brown skin. She skids to a halt when she sees me, her enormous silver eyes widening further.

"Hello," she says solemnly, then immediately turns back to Harmony. "Mama, Papa

and I were on a walk, and look!" She lifts her hand and a small ball of iridescent fire forms in her palm. "Look what I can do!"

My eyes flick between the child and Harmony, trying to process everything that's happening. But before I can think too much about it, another figure fills the doorway.

And my entire world stops.

A xaphan.

Massive gray wings fold against his tall frame as he ducks under the door frame. He's all lean strength and sharp angles—high cheekbones, strong jaw, eyes like quicksilver. His white-blond hair falls haphazardly around his temples, giving him a deceptively boyish look despite the dangerous aura that surrounds him.

"Brooke, I said wait for—" His words cut off when he spots me, those silver eyes narrowing slightly.

Every muscle in my body goes rigid. Xaphan. Here. In this quiet village. My hand flies to my dagger on instinct.

"Adellum," Harmony stands, her voice so normal it's jarring. "This is Ronnie. She's not feeling well."

The xaphan—Adellum—nods once in acknowledgment, but his attention shifts immediately back to Harmony. There's something in the way he looks at her—possessive, protective, like she's the center of his universe.

"Brooke was too excited to wait," he says, his voice deep and smooth. "And we were nearby. I hope we aren't interrupting."

The little girl—Brooke—tugs at Harmony's apron. "Isn't it cool, Mama?"

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"Very, my little sunshine," Harmony says, smoothing a hand over those wild curls.

My chest tightens as I watch them—a family. A human woman, a xaphan man, and their...

I look closer at the girl. No wings. But those eyes—unmistakably xaphan. Half-human, half-xaphan.

Just like the child growing inside me.

The realization hits me like a physical blow. My hand returns to my stomach, this time consciously.

"Are you okay?" Harmony asks, noticing my expression.

Words bubble up from somewhere deep inside me, words I never thought I'd say aloud to anyone.

"The father is xaphan," I blurt out, my voice barely above a whisper. "My baby's father is xaphan."

Understanding dawns on Harmony's face like the slow break of daylight. Her eyes widen slightly, then soften at the edges. She glances at Adellum, something unspoken passing between them before returning her attention to me.

"I see," she says quietly.

The xaphan's silver gaze flicks to my belly, then back to my face with unsettling intensity. I can practically feel him calculating, assessing. My fingers twitch toward my dagger again.

"Brooke, sweetheart." Harmony kneels before her daughter. "Why don't you and Papa go wait for me at home? I need to talk with my friend for a bit."

"Is she sick?" Brooke asks, those uncanny silver eyes fixing on me. "I can help! I'm learning healing from Ansel."

"Not today, little spark." Adellum's voice is surprisingly gentle as he extends his hand to his daughter. "Your mother needs some privacy."

The girl pouts momentarily before placing her tiny hand in her father's. "Okay. But I want to help next time."

"We'll see," Harmony agrees, kissing the top of her head.

I watch, transfixed, as the massive winged xaphan leads the little girl away. His wings shift slightly to shield her as they pass through the busy kitchen, a protective gesture that makes something twist painfully in my chest.

When they're gone, Harmony returns to her stool, her expression carefully neutral. "Is that why you're traveling alone? Because of the father?"

I stare into my cooling tea, suddenly finding it difficult to swallow. "He doesn't know."

"And you don't want him to."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "No."

She doesn't press immediately, giving me space to collect myself. The silence stretches between us, not uncomfortable but heavy with unspoken understanding.

"The father..." she finally ventures. "Is he...?"

"A smug, arrogant, self-satisfied bastard?" I laugh without humor. "Yes."

"That wasn't what I was going to ask."

I look up, meeting her steady gaze. "What then?"

"Dangerous," she says simply.

The word hangs in the air between us. Is Araton dangerous? My mind floods with images of him—the golden gleam of his eyes when he's aroused, the casual strength in his hands, the calculating intelligence behind every charming smile. The way he looks at me sometimes, like he can see straight through to the parts of myself I try hardest to hide.

"He wouldn't hurt me," I say, surprising myself with how certain I sound. "Not physically, anyway."

"But you're still running."

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I take a deep breath, trying to organize my churning thoughts. "He works for a very powerful lord in Soimur. He's not just any xaphan—he's connected, respected. If he knew about this baby..." My voice falters.

"You think he'd take the child from you," Harmony finishes.

I nod, my throat tight. "I'm nothing to him. Just a human he visits when he's passing through. A convenient lay."

Even as I say the words, something inside me rebels against them. The way Araton kisses me goodbye each time, lingering a moment too long. The way he sometimes made me feel like he wanted to stay. The lunox carving tucked into my pack, carved from blue-veined white stone, its face tipped with azure that reminds me of the skies over my village at dawn.

"He doesn't love me." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears. "But a half-xaphan child? That would be a prize worth claiming."

Harmony reaches across the space between us, her calloused fingers closing over mine. "Listen to me, Ronnie. I understand what you're afraid of. Better than you might think." She glances toward the door where Adellum and Brooke disappeared. "I've been where you are."

"With him?" I can't keep the incredulity from my voice.

"In a way. Scared, pregnant, alone." Her grip tightens on mine. "You're not alone anymore. I'll help you. We'll all help you."

"Why would you do that?" I ask, still suspicious despite the desperation clawing at my insides. "You could wipe your hands of the trouble."

"Because someone helped me once," she says simply. "And now I'm helping you. That's how it works in Saufort."

I don't trust her—not completely. But as the nausea finally begins to subside and the panic in my chest loosens its grip, I find myself nodding.

"I don't regret leaving," I say firmly, more to convince myself than her. "It was the right choice."

Yet even as I say it, a traitorous, tiny part of me aches at the thought I'll never again see Araton's crooked smile when he appears at my door. Never feel the heat of his skin against mine, or the way he tangles his fingers in my hair when he kisses me. Never hear that low laugh when I say something that genuinely amuses him.

It's just the sex I'll miss, I tell myself firmly. Just the physical release. Nothing more.

I don't talk about him after that. Not his name, not what he looks like, not the way he calls me "fierce one" in that rumbling voice of his. Not the way I know he will have found out I'm gone by now and I don't know if he even cared.

I don't talk about any of it. Some secrets are safer kept buried.

9

ARATON

I shouldn't be here.

The thought circles my mind like a black pitter as I land on the outskirts of this miserable little village—the one I'd visited a dozen times before, each time for the same reason. Each time forher.

My wings fold against my back with an irritated snap as I take in the familiar cluster of stone buildings and thatched roofs. Nothing has changed in the month since I discovered Ronnie was gone. The same crooked sign swings outside the tavern. The same three children chase each other through the dusty streets. The same acrid smell of human fear rises in the air as they catch sight of me.

They should be afraid. My mood hasn't improved since my last visit.

"Told you he'd be back," someone mutters as I stride down the main road toward Ronnie's shop. I'm not shocked to see Tomas, watching me, his eyes tracking my progress with open hostility.

I ignore him. I ignore all of them. My focus narrows to the wooden building ahead, its windows still shuttered, door still locked. Just like last time. Just like she left it.

"She isn't there."

I turn to find Tomas has come up behind me, his eyes narrowed on me. Rage lines his body, and I'm not sure why the fucker keeps bothering me.

"I can see that," I reply, my voice carefully controlled. "I merely wished to verify it for myself."

"Verify?" He spits on the ground near my boots. "You mean you came to sniff around where you're not wanted. Again."

My jaw tightens. The urge to wrap my fingers around his scrawny throat flickers

through me—a dangerous impulse I immediately suppress. Lord Ithuriel wouldn't appreciate his courier murdering village healers, no matter how satisfying it might be.

"I have business with Rosalind," I say instead, using her full name, the one she hates.

"When she returns?—"

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"She's not coming back." Tomas cuts me off, his voice sharp with certainty. "Not with you still turning up here like some cursed shadow."

Something hot and uncomfortable twists in my chest. "You don't know that."

"I do know that." His eyes narrow, something knowing in their depths. "She ran from this place. From you."

The twist in my chest becomes a stab. Ronnie ran from me? The fierce, unflinching woman who stood her ground against everything? Who faced me down that first day with fire in her eyes and a dagger in her hand?

"That's ridiculous," I scoff, though doubt creeps through me like poison. "She had no reason to?—"

"No reason?" Tomas barks a harsh laugh. "You xaphan truly are arrogant bastards. You think you can just swoop in, take what you want, and leave nothing broken behind?"

My wings flare slightly, an involuntary response to the insult. "I never took anything that wasn't freely given."

"And what did you give in return, hmm?" His voice drops lower, accusatory. "Besides a few pretty trinkets and empty promises?"

The bracelet I bought her in New Solas feels suddenly heavy in my pocket. I've carried it with me for weeks now, unable to leave it behind, unable to give it to

anyone else. The delicate metalwork catches the sunlight as I pull it out, the amber and blue beads shifting color as they pass between my fingers.

"I never made her any promises," I say quietly, and it's the truth. We had an arrangement, nothing more. A moment of pleasure when my courier duties brought me to her village. A brief escape from the loneliness that clings to us both.

"That's exactly the problem." Tomas shakes his head, disgust evident in every line of his face. "Now get out of here before I call the village guard."

I almost laugh at that. What could their pathetic human guards do against me? But I swallow the bitter amusement, tucking the bracelet back into my pocket.

"Just tell me one thing," I say, and I hate how something like pleading has crept into my voice. "Did she say where she was going?" If anyone knows, it's him.

For a brief moment, something like pity flashes in his eyes. "No. She just packed what she could carry and left. Didn't say goodbye to anyone."

The information settles like a stone in my stomach. That sounds like Ronnie—practical to a fault, cutting ties with surgical precision.

"I see."

A crowd has gathered now, villagers watching our exchange with wary fascination. Among them, a burly man with a smith's apron steps forward, a heavy hammer clutched in his fist. Behind him, two others—farmers by the look of them—grasp pitchforks with white-knuckled intensity.

"You heard the boy," the smith growls. "We don't want your kind here."

I let my gaze sweep over them, slow and deliberate. These humans with their pathetic weapons, thinking they could stand against me. I could call the wind to scatter them like leaves, whisper words that would turn them against each other, snap their necks before they could blink.

But what would be the point?

"Mykind," I repeat softly, letting cold disdain drip from the words. "And what kind is that, exactly? The kind your Rosalind invited into her bed month after month? The kind she?—"

The smith lunges forward, hammer raised. I sidestep easily, the weapon whistling past my ear.

"Don't you dare speak about her that way," he snarls.

I laugh, the sound hollow and sharp as broken glass. "What way? Truthfully?"

"Get out!" A woman shouts from the back of the crowd. Others take up the call, their voices rising in an ugly chorus. "Get out! Get out!"

Something ugly and heated rises in my chest—a mixture of frustration, anger, and beneath it all, a desperate confusion I refuse to acknowledge.

"Where is she?" I demand, my voice rising over theirs. "Someone here must know. I just want to talk to her."

"Talk to her?" Tomas scoffs. "After what you did?"

"I did nothing," I snarl, my control slipping. The wind around us picks up, responding to my agitation. Dust swirls at my feet, loose thatch rustling ominously on nearby

roofs. "Nothing she didn't want."

The villagers fall silent, eyeing the unnatural wind with growing terror. The smith backs up a step, but keeps his hammer raised.

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"Leave our village," he says, his voice steadier than his hands. "And don't come back. Whatever was between you and Ronnie is over."

Over. The word echoes through me, hollow and final.

Why does it hurt? This was nothing—she was nothing—just a pleasant diversion on my regular travels. A fierce, beautiful human with sharp eyes and a sharper tongue who happened to be exceptional in bed. Nothing more.

So why am I standing here, surrounded by hostile villagers, with something like desperation clawing at my insides?

I take to the air in a rush of wings, leaving the village behind me. The wind streams through my hair as I soar upward, my fury propelling me higher until the cluster of buildings shrinks to insignificance below. Just like the humans who live there—insignificant, small-minded creatures with their pitchforks and their judgments.

My hands clench into fists as I bank toward the east, following the familiar route to New Solas. The mountain peaks shimmer on the horizon, their snow-capped summits catching the afternoon light. I've made this journey so many times I could fly it blindfolded. Each month, my lord sends me to carry messages, to charm information from reluctant sources, to be the handsome face of his house.

And each month, I've found myself drifting east first, making that small detour to a village that held no importance except for one particular shop with its particular owner.

"Fuck," I mutter to the empty sky, the word lost in the rush of air around me.

Why am I so bothered by this? Humans come and go. They're ephemeral creatures—here today, gone tomorrow. It shouldn't matter that she's disappeared. It shouldn't sting like rejection. It shouldn't feel like loss.

I drop lower, skimming over a dense forest where the trees blur into a carpet of green beneath me. My wings adjust automatically, riding the thermals that rise from the sun-warmed earth. The physical sensation grounds me, reminds me who—what—I am.

Xaphan. Messenger of Solas. Not some lovesick fool pining after a sharp-tongued human woman.

Yet her absence gnaws at me, a persistent ache I can't seem to shake. It's been a month since I found her shop shuttered, her small apartment above it cleared of her belongings. A month of telling myself I don't care, that I'm merely curious. A month of carrying that damn bracelet in my pocket, its weight a constant reminder of my own foolishness.

I'd bought it on impulse in New Solas, passing a jeweler's stall in the market. The delicate metalwork had caught my eye, the amber and blue beads reminding me of how sunlight filtered through her windows, catching in her auburn hair. I'd imagined how it would look against her pale skin, how her lips would purse as she pretended not to be pleased.

"Pathetic," I growl, pushing myself faster, higher, as if I could outfly these thoughts.

I haven't been with anyone else since I met her. Not for lack of opportunity—there are plenty in New Solas who would welcome a night with me, xaphan or not. Something about the thought turns my stomach, though. The idea of another's hands,

another's lips, another's body beneath mine feels... wrong.

I catch myself mid-thought, shocked by my own sentimentality. This isn't me. I don't get attached. I don't yearn. I certainly don't miss humans who clearly want nothing to do with me.

Yet here I am, carrying her bracelet like a token, returning to her empty shop like a ghost haunting its own grave.

The Ridge looms ahead, the mountain range that marks the border between the human territories and New Solas. I adjust my course, angling upward to clear the highest peaks. The air grows colder, thinner, but my wings are strong enough to handle the altitude. Unlike human wings—flimsy, delicate things that snap at the slightest pressure—my gray-blue wings are built for power, for endurance.

I catch an updraft and rise sharply, the sudden acceleration sending a rush of adrenaline through me. This is what I should be focusing on. The freedom of flight, the mission ahead, the favor of my lord. Not the emptiness in a human village, not the silence of a shop that once held argumentative banter and breathless sighs.

Not the memory of her gray eyes, sharp and knowing, watching me from across her small bed.

I shake my head violently, trying to dislodge the images. What is wrong with me? I've never been this fixated before. It was just sex—incredible, mind-blowing sex, but still just physical pleasure. Nothing more.

Then why am I carrying her bracelet? Why do I keep returning to that village? Why does the thought of another woman's touch repel me?

The questions circle like predators, waiting for weakness, waiting for admission. I

refuse to give it to them. Instead, I focus on the landscape passing beneath me, the glitter of New Solas appearing on the horizon, its golden spires catching the sunlight like beacons.

I need to get her out of my system, that's all. Find someone else. Move on.

My stomach twists at the thought, a visceral rejection that surprises me with its intensity. But I ignore that, too.

10

RONNIE

The pain rips through my body, white-hot and merciless. I arch my back against my bed, fingers clawing the sheets as another contraction crashes over me. My hair plasters to my forehead, drenched in sweat.

"I can't—" The words choke in my throat as the pain recedes momentarily, leaving me gasping. "I can't do this."

Harmony's face hovers above mine, her features calm despite the chaos unfolding. Those hazel-green eyes hold mine steady, refusing to let me drift away on waves of panic.

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"You can. You are." Her calloused hands wipe my brow with a cool cloth. "Women have been doing this since the dawn of time. Your body knows what to do, Ronnie."

"What does my body know about birthing a—" I bite back the words as another contraction builds. Xaphan baby. Half-xaphan baby. Araton's baby. The image of golden eyes flashes unbidden through my mind, and I want to scream at myself for thinking of him now.

The pain crests again, and this time I don't hold back. My cry echoes through the small cottage I've been staying in, raw and primal.

"That's it," Harmony encourages, moving to check between my legs. "The baby's close. I can see the head. On the next one, you push with everything you've got."

Terror twists inside me, sharper than even the physical agony. What if the baby looks just like him? What if it has full wings, not just the tiny ones of mixed children? What if it has his smile, his laugh, his infuriating confidence?

What if I can't love it?

"Ronnie!" Harmony's voice snaps me back. "Focus. Push now!"

My body takes over. I bear down, gritting my teeth against the searing pressure. Something inside me tears and stretches beyond what I thought possible. The pain becomes my entire world—concentrated, impossible.

"Again!" Harmony commands.

I push, a guttural sound wrenching from somewhere deep in my chest. Through the haze, I glimpse Harmony's steady hands positioned to receive my child.

"Head's out. One more big push for the shoulders."

My strength wavers. I shake my head, tears mingling with sweat. "I can't."

Harmony's eyes flash. "You didn't cross half the continent, fight through this pregnancy alone, just to give up now. This baby needs you to finish what you started. Push!"

The rebuke lands like a slap. With the last of my reserves, I bear down once more.

The release is sudden—a slippery, sliding sensation followed by an absence of pressure so profound I nearly sob with relief. For one breath-stopping moment, silence fills the room.

Then—a cry. High and indignant, declaring its arrival to the world.

"A girl," Harmony announces, her voice thick with emotion. "You have a daughter, Ronnie."

My heart stutters. A daughter. Not an it. Not a reminder. A daughter.

Harmony works quickly, wiping the baby clean before placing the tiny, squirming bundle on my chest. I look down, afraid of what I'll see, afraid of what I'll feel.

Wide golden eyes—Araton's eyes—stare up at me from a round face. Her skin is several shades lighter than mine, with a warm, buttery glow that seems to come from within. Thick black curls, still damp, spiral wildly from her head.

And from her shoulder blades protrude two tiny, downy nubs—the beginnings of wings.

"They're just starting to form," Harmony murmurs, noticing my fixed stare. "They'll grow slowly. Half-xaphan children usually develop their wings over years, not months like full-blooded ones."

My fingers hover over the tiny protrusions, trembling. I expected to feel revulsion or fear. Instead, something fierce and protective surges through me.

"She's perfect," I whisper, surprising myself with the truth of it.

The baby's face scrunches, and she lets out another indignant cry. Without thinking, I shift her to my breast. She latches immediately, her tiny fingers splaying across my skin.

"What will you call her?" Harmony asks, watching us with a soft smile as she cleans up.

Names dance through my mind—my mother's, my grandmother's, names from stories I'd heard as a child. But looking at this fierce little creature, only one fits.

"Camille Wynn," I say. "Millie."

As if approving, Millie's grip tightens on my finger. In that moment, the world narrows to just us two—her tiny, perfect form and my battered body cradling her. The months of fear and running, the constant dread of being found, the uncertainty of what I'd feel when I finally saw her—it all fades against this single truth: she is mine.

And gods help anyone who tries to take her from me.

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The first morning I wake to Millie's soft cries instead of her piercing wails feels like a victory. I scoop her from the cradle Joss carved—a delicate thing with thalivern etched along the edges—and cradle her against my chest.

"Good morning, my pretty girl," I whisper as her golden eyes blink up at me.

Those eyes. So like his it makes my chest ache. When she fixes them on me with that intense, unblinking stare, I see him completely. The same way her tiny fingers curl with surprising strength around mine reminds me of how his hands would grasp mine in those rare moments of tenderness.

"You hungry?" I stroke the downy nubs on her back. They've grown in the three months since her birth—soft silver-tinged down now covering what will someday be proper wings. Not as large as a full-blooded xaphan's would be, but wings nonetheless.

Marda arrives with fresh bread and a pot of broth before I've even finished feeding Millie.

"Don't get up," she commands, bustling in with all the authority of her ample frame. Her silver-streaked dark hair is tied back in a practical knot, and flour still dusts her forearms. "You look like you actually slept last night."

"Almost four hours straight," I confirm, adjusting Millie against my shoulder.

Marda sets down her basket and immediately reaches for my daughter. I hand her over, watching how naturally the older woman cradles her, cooing nonsense that

makes Millie's face light up.

"Look at those curls getting wilder by the day." Marda twirls one of Millie's black ringlets around her finger. "Just like her mama's, but darker."

Her father's color, my texture. I swallow hard.

"Has she been moving her wings more?" Marda asks, peering at the tiny protrusions.

"She flexes them when she's excited. It's... cute." The admission feels like a betrayal of my former self—the woman who would have sneered at anything xaphan.

Marda gives me a knowing look over Millie's head. "Children have a way of changing what we think we know."

A knock at the door interrupts my response. Harmony enters, Brooke darting past her legs to reach Millie first.

"Gentle," Harmony reminds her daughter as Brooke leans over Marda's arms to inspect the baby.

"She's bigger," Brooke announces, her silver eyes—so like Adellum's—wide with wonder. "Can I touch her wings?"

"Carefully," I find myself saying, when once I might have snapped at such a request.

Brooke's tiny fingers brush over the silvery down with reverence. "They're softer than Papa's."

"Baby feathers," Harmony explains, setting a basket of fresh vegetables on my table. "Like how your hair was different when you were tiny."

Brooke nods solemnly, accepting this wisdom, then reaches into her pocket. "I made this for Millie." She produces a small clay figure—crude but recognizably a winged baby.

My throat tightens unexpectedly. "It's beautiful, Brooke. Thank you."

"Uncle Joss helped with the wings," she admits, but beams at the praise.

Later, after they've gone, I sit by the window watching Millie sleep. The clay figure rests beside her on the table. The afternoon sun catches on her curls, turning them almost blue-black. Araton's exact shade.

"She deserves to know you," I whisper, tracing the perfect curve of her cheek. "And you deserve to know her."

The thought terrifies me—imagining Araton's face when he sees her, imagining him wanting to take her away. Would he? The Araton I knew was enigmatic, impossible to read beneath his charm. We never spoke of anything real, anything that mattered. Just bodies moving together, desire without substance.

But these wings on our daughter make it impossible to pretend he doesn't matter. And her eyes... They nearly undo me every time.

"She has your smile," Adellum says one evening, weeks later, when he stops by with a rattle he's carved for Millie. I'm startled—not by his presence, which has become commonplace as Harmony brings him along to check on us—but by his observation.

"You think?" I watch as Millie gurgles up at him, fascinated by his massive gray wings.

"Definitely. That little curl at the corner when she's about to laugh—pure Ronnie."

He demonstrates, mimicking what he means, and I'm struck by the easy fondness in this xaphan's expression as he gazes at my half-xaphan child.

"I think she looks like her father," I manage, the words sticking in my throat.

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Adellum shrugs those powerful shoulders. "She has parts of both of you."

I don't know why, but his simple acceptance cracks something open in me. "I don't know what I'm doing," I confess abruptly. "I hated xaphan my entire life, and now I'm raising one."

"Half," he corrects mildly. "And you're doing just fine."

"How can you know that?"

Adellum's silver eyes—so like Brooke's—settle on me. "Because you look at her the way I look at my daughter. Like she's the universe condensed into something you can hold."

His words are so true that they settle in my chest, healing a part of me that was so broken and afraid. I didn't know if I would hate her because of her father...

But I could never love anyone more than my little girl.

11

RONNIE

THREE YEARS LATER...

I slide the wooden bolt across the shop door with a satisfying thud, officially closing Wynn's Trade & Tinctures for the evening. It took some time to get my shop set up

here, but the ritual still brings me a quiet thrill of ownership. Mine. My shelves laden with glass bottles of tinctures, my wooden counter worn smooth from countless transactions, my life carved from nothing but stubbornness and spite.

And something else now, too. Something warmer.

The late afternoon light filters through the single window, catching dust motes and turning them to gold. I run my fingertips along the row of medicine jars I finished this morning—sleep tonics infused with dreamleaf and crushed moonberries, their contents a deep purple against the clear glass. Next to them sit salves for burns, fever reducers, and my most popular item: a cream that soothes the aches in old joints when winter digs in deep.

"Another day without a single complaint about the arthritis balm," I murmur to myself, allowing a small smile as I count the day's earnings. Twenty-seven lummi, three nodals, and a beautifully woven basket traded by a traveler passing through—not bad for a Tuesday. I tuck the coins into the leather pouch at my hip, already calculating how much I can set aside for Millie's future.

My daughter. The thought of her sends warmth spreading through my chest, still surprising me after three years. My fierce, wild little girl with her impossible curls and golden eyes.

I finish my closing routine—checking the back window is latched, making sure the fire's completely out in the small hearth, gathering the day's soiled cloths for washing. My gaze catches on the corner where Millie's toys are neatly stacked—carved wooden animals, a soft cloth doll from Marda, and drawings pinned to the wall at toddler height. The latest shows what she calls a "lunox"—though it looks more like a furry blob with a triangle head.

The clay figurine Brooke made for her sits on a little shelf I installed just for Millie's

treasures. Beside it rests the lunox carving from Araton that I couldn't bear to leave behind.

Araton.

Even thinking his name sends a complicated jolt through my body—anger and longing and fear all tangled into one sharp emotion I can't name. Sometimes I catch myself scanning the horizon, expecting to see that familiar silhouette with its massive golden-tipped wings. What would I even say to him if he found us? What right does he have to Millie after all this time?

What right did I have to keep her existence from him?

I shake my head sharply, banishing the thought as I grab my shawl from its hook. This is exactly why I left—to avoid the complication of him. To protect what's mine.

Outside, the village hums with early evening activity. The cobblestone path winds between stone cottages with thatched roofs, smoke curling from chimneys into the dusky sky. Gardens overflow with late summer wildflowers and herbs, adding their scent to the ever-present aroma of baking bread from Marda's restaurant.

"Evening, Ronnie!" Old Tal calls from his porch, where he's whittling something that might be a bird or might be a sea monster. With Tal, you never can tell until he's finished.

I lift my hand in greeting, fighting the instinct to duck my head and hurry past. Three years in Saufort and I'm still learning to accept simple neighborliness.

"Any word on those blackwater seeds?" he asks, his gnarled fingers never pausing in their work. "My joints've been singing storm songs all day."

"Trader should be through next week. I'll set some aside for you."

He nods appreciatively. "Give that girl of yours a squeeze from me."

That girl. My girl. The centerpiece around which everything in my life now orbits.

I continue down the path, nodding to familiar faces—Tamsin hanging laundry behind her house, Eira tending her prize zynthra plants, Joss hammering away at something in his workshop. This place that once felt like a temporary hideout has somehow become home.

The back garden of Harmony's house comes into view as I round the final bend in the path. A chorus of high-pitched laughter floats through the air, and my heart lightens at the sound.

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Brooke and Millie dart between rows of brimbark stalks, playing some elaborate game of their own invention. At seven, Brooke is all gangly limbs and perpetual motion, her pale blonde curls bouncing wildly as she runs. My daughter follows her like a devoted shadow, those tiny silver-tipped wings fluttering with excitement.

"I'm the water spirit!" Brooke declares, making elaborate gestures with her fingers that send tiny golden sparks dancing through the air. "You have to catch me before I turn the whole garden into a pond!"

Millie's face scrunches in fierce concentration, her caramel skin flushed with exertion. "No fair! Your legs are bigger!" But there's pure joy in her protest as she pumps her little arms, those downy wings giving an occasional experimental flap. They're still too small to lift her, but they respond to her emotions—quivering when she's excited, drooping when she's tired.

I pause at the garden gate, savoring the moment before they notice me. Millie's black curls have escaped their braids completely, forming a wild halo around her face. Those luminous gold eyes—so like her father's—are crinkled with laughter. My chest tightens. She's so beautiful it hurts sometimes.

"Mama!" Millie spots me and abandons the chase, wings fluttering as she races toward me. I crouch down to catch her as she barrels into my arms, solid and warm and smelling of dirt and sweet grass.

"Been terrorizing the garden again?" I ask, brushing soil from her cheek.

"We're protecting it," she corrects with all the seriousness a three-year-old can

muster. "From evil shadow monsters."

"Very brave of you." I press my lips to her forehead, feeling that familiar surge of fierce love. "Where's your Uncle Adellum?"

"Studio," Brooke reports, skidding to a stop beside us. "He's painting something huge." She stretches her arms wide to demonstrate. "Said we could come in when the light changes."

"That means sunset," Millie translates, clearly proud of this knowledge. "When everything turns gold."

The back door of the farmhouse swings open, and Harmony emerges onto the porch, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I thought I heard you," she calls, her smile warm. "Just in time—the meadowmint tea's ready."

We make our way inside, the girls racing ahead while I climb the steps at a more dignified pace.

"Rough day?" Harmony asks quietly as I reach her, her eyes scanning my face with that uncanny perception that still catches me off guard sometimes.

I shrug. "Just the usual. Old memories."

She gives my arm a gentle squeeze—understanding without pressing. Three years, and not once has she asked me directly about Millie's father, even though the evidence of his xaphan heritage sprouts from our daughter's back in delicate, undeniable wings. Not since that first conversation where I admitted so little.

The kitchen envelops us in warmth and the sweet herbal scent of the tea. Mouthwatering aromas rise from a pot bubbling on the hearth—some kind of stew with root vegetables and herbs.

"Adellum caught a pair of riverfish this morning," Harmony explains, pouring steaming amber liquid into mismatched cups. "Big ones, too. Enough to share if you'd like to stay for dinner."

"Thanks, but I've got stew at home." The disappointment that flashes across Millie's face makes me add, "But maybe tomorrow?"

The back door opens again, and Adellum ducks through, having to fold his massive gray wings close to his body to fit. Even after three and a half years, the sight of him still triggers an instinctive flicker of tension in my spine—something primal and defensive at the sight of a male xaphan. But it fades faster now, replaced by something closer to gratitude.

Paint spatters his hands and forearms, a smudge of blue across one sharp cheekbone. He greets us with a nod, then crouches down to Millie's eye level.

"Show your mother what you learned today," he says, his voice a low rumble.

Millie steps into the middle of the kitchen, her tiny face a mask of concentration. She inhales deeply, then extends her wings as far as they'll go—perhaps two feet from tip to tip, still downy and delicate. Slowly, deliberately, she flexes the muscles in her back, and the wings begin to tremble. Then, with a soft whispering sound, they fold neatly against her spine, tucking into a compact shape.

"Did you see?" Her eyes are wide with pride. "I can fold them all by myself now! For when we go to the marketplace and I need to wear my cloak."

I glance at Adellum, a silent thank you in my eyes. He's spent hours teaching Millie to control her wings, answering questions I never could about what it means to have them. I'm thankful he'll be here as her magic comes in.

"Very impressive," I tell her, meaning it. "That's going to be so useful."

She beams, then turns to show Brooke something in the toybox by the hearth. I step closer to Adellum.

"Thank you," I murmur. "I wouldn't know how to?—"

He waves away my gratitude. "She's quick to learn. Smart, like her mother."

A comfortable silence falls between us. For all his intensity, Adellum never pushes for information I'm not ready to give. He's just... there. Steady. The way I imagine a brother might be, if I'd ever had one.

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Eventually, Millie's yawns become too frequent to ignore. I gather her up, bundle her into her little cloak despite her sleepy protests that she's not tired, and we say our goodbyes.

"See you tomorrow?" Harmony asks, squeezing my hand.

"Of course."

Outside, the western sky bleeds orange and pink as Millie's weight grows heavier in my arms. Our little house waits at the edge of the village, smoke curling from the chimney where my stew simmers.

"Home, Mama," Millie mumbles against my neck, her wings twitching slightly beneath her cloak as she drifts toward sleep.

"Yes, my pretty girl," I whisper, my throat suddenly tight. "We're going home."

12

ARATON

The sky bleeds crimson as I finish securing the last of my belongings to the saddle. Years of accumulated life packed into leather saddlebags—pitiful, really. My zarryn shifts impatiently beneath the weight, pawing at the cobblestones with one silver hoof. The beast senses my mood, as they always do.

"Easy," I murmur, running a hand along its shaggy neck.

Behind me, Ithuriel's estate rises like a monument to everything I'm leaving behind. Gray stone walls, elegant spires, meticulously manicured gardens—a fortress of nobility that once represented opportunity. Now it's just stone and mortar, empty without the presence that gave it meaning.

Lord Ithuriel. Dead three weeks now. The illness took him quickly, at least. Small mercies.

"Lord Velrien."

I turn to find Saresh approaching, her slim figure elegantly draped in the dark blue mourning colors of House Ithuriel. As the late lord's personal secretary, she's been working tirelessly to manage the transition of power.

"Just Araton now," I correct her, adjusting a strap unnecessarily. "The 'lord' was always honorary anyway."

She reaches into the folds of her robe, withdrawing a small wooden box. "Lady Ithuriel insisted you take this."

I accept it with a nod, thumbing open the clasp. Inside rests a signet ring bearing House Ithuriel's crest—an eagle clutching a sword. My throat tightens.

"Tell her it's unnecessary."

"She said you'd say that." A rare smile flickers across Saresh's severe features. "She also said to remind you that Ithuriel considered you the son he never had. The ring isn't charity—it's recognition."

I close the box with a sharp snap, tucking it into my inner pocket before my face can betray me. Twenty-three years of carefully constructed charm, of never letting

anyone see beneath the polished exterior, and here I am, undone by a piece of metal.

"The new Lord Ithuriel has asked me to remind you that his offer stands," Sareh continues. "Chief diplomatic advisor would suit your talents well."

"His nephew is capable." I secure the final strap. "He doesn't need me watching over his shoulder."

"The Houses of Evarith and Dornaal have also sent inquiries regarding your availability."

I can't resist a smile. "Those birds circle quickly."

"Your reputation precedes you."

And there's the crux of it. My reputation. The charming, silver-tongued negotiator who can talk his way through any diplomatic crisis. The man who secured three key trade agreements for Soimur through nothing but charisma and calculated risks. Lord Ithuriel's secret weapon.

That reputation feels like someone else's skin stretched over my bones now.

"My answer remains the same." I check the saddle one final time. "I appreciate the interest, but I need... space."

"Space," Sareh repeats, skepticism etched in the arch of her eyebrow. "You've never struck me as a man who enjoys solitude, Araton."

I spread my wings slightly, letting the dying sunlight catch the silver flecks scattered among the dusky gray feathers. They itch for flight, for open sky, for something I can't articulate.

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"Perhaps you don't know me as well as you think, Saresh."

She studies me with those shrewd eyes that have watched me charm ambassadors and intimidate rivals for nearly a decade. "Perhaps not. Though I do know it's been three years since you've shown genuine interest in the company of others. Since your mysterious monthly trips to the east suddenly ceased."

My shoulders tense. "Careful."

"You disappeared for weeks after your last trip. Returned looking like you'd lost something vital." She steps closer. "Ithuriel worried about you."

"Then it's fortunate he's not here to worry anymore."

The words come out sharper than intended. Saresh doesn't flinch—she's weathered far worse from far more important people than me.

"Safe travels, Araton Velrien." She extends her hand in formal farewell. "May you find whatever you're looking for."

I clasp her arm briefly. "Give my regards to the household."

With practiced grace, I swing into the saddle, settling my wings comfortably against my back. The zarryn snorts, eager to be moving. I am too.

The estate staff have gathered in the courtyard—a testament to Ithuriel's leadership that they would bid farewell to someone like me. Cooks who sneaked me extra

pastries during late-night strategy sessions. Stable hands who always ensured my zarryn was ready for those monthly journeys southeast. Guards who sparred with me in the practice yards.

I offer them a salute and my most charming smile—the one that never quite reaches my eyes these days.

"Don't burn the place down without me, you heathens."

Their laughter follows me as I nudge the zarryn forward, through the ornate gates and onto the road that leads away from Soimur. Away from politics and power plays and the exhausting performance of being exactly what everyone needs me to be.

I pushmy zarryn harder as we crest another rocky hill, the wind whipping through my hair. Three months of wandering has worn the edges off my grief but left something hollow in its place. The southern plains stretch before me, tall grass waving like an endless golden sea under a cerulean sky. Beautiful, in its way—so unlike Soimur's jagged architecture and cold stone.

"What do you think?" I ask the zarryn, who snorts in response. The beast has been my only consistent companion since leaving the north. "Not impressed? You're getting spoiled."

Mornings like this, I could almost convince myself this wandering has a purpose. That I'm not just running from shadows and memories. The road curves toward a small trading post in the distance, smoke curling lazily from a handful of chimneys. Another nameless stop, another bed I won't remember.

My wings flex instinctively against my back, itching for flight. I haven't properly stretched them in days. Tonight, perhaps, when there's no one around to gawk or whisper.

A small caravan passes, heading north. The merchants eye my fine clothes, my obviously expensive zarryn. I give them my diplomat's smile—warm, disarming, completely empty.

"Fine day for travel," one calls out.

I tip my head in acknowledgment without slowing. Conversation is the last thing I want, though there was a timewhen I would have charmed them all by nightfall, gleaning information or favor or whatever else Ithuriel needed.

What do you need now?

The question haunts me like a specter. For twenty-three years, my needs were shaped by duty, by ambition, by the careful cultivation of influence. Now the map unfurls with no marked destination, and I feel strangely untethered.

My zarryn's ears twitch suddenly, focusing on something in the trees beyond the road. I reach for the blade at my hip before realizing it's just a pair of lunoxes, their white bodies barely visible against the underbrush. One turns, its blue-tipped face catching the sunlight.

Something twists painfully inside me.

"It's beautiful," she breathed, turning the small carved lunox over in her calloused hands. "They're real?"

"In the northern forests," I confirmed, unable to look away from the wonder in her gray eyes. "I thought you might like it."

She set it on her windowsill, where dawn's light would catch it. "Don't get used to bringing me gifts, xaphan. I'm not collecting trinkets."

But she kept it. Every month, there it was—proof that something of me remained when I was gone.

I shake the memory away with a muttered curse. This is exactly what I'm trying to escape. Three years, and she still appears like a vengeful spirit when I least expect it. Ronnie, with her sharp tongue and sharper eyes. Ronnie, who never fell for the charm that disarmed diplomats and nobles alike. Ronnie, who simply... vanished.

The trading post grows closer, and I force my thoughts elsewhere. I need supplies. Food. Perhaps some better maps of the southern territories. I try to summon interest in the upcoming villages and towns marked on my current charts, the historical sites and natural wonders. I should care about these things.

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Instead, I find myself counting the miles between here and her village. Calculating how long a journey east would take, even though I know she's not there.

Because I kept checking.

"Pathetic," I mutter to myself, dismounting as I reach the trading post's stable. The zarryn huffs in agreement.

Inside the post, I move methodically through my tasks. Maps. Supplies. Information about road conditions south. The proprietor, a leathery old human with more wrinkles than teeth, eyes my wings with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

"Heading to Carradon?" she asks as she wraps dried meat in waxed paper.

"Perhaps. Is it worth seeing?"

"Got them giant crystal towers. Whole city's built 'round some ancient magic." She shrugs. "Fancy folk like yourself might appreciate it."

I've been called worse things than fancy. "And beyond Carradon?"

"Saufort's another three days' ride. Nothing special, just a market town. Good place to resupply 'fore heading into the deep south."

I nod as I keep counting. "Saufort?"

"Aye. Been there?"

"No." I push the coins in his direction. "Thanks for the information."

I mentally catalog the two names, thinking I might need them. The continent feels smaller with each passing day, potential reminders lurking at every crossroad. I finish my transaction and return to my zarryn, securing the new supplies with precise movements that don't match the chaos inside my head.

South. I'm going south because it's somewhere I haven't been. Because it's as far from memories as I can get. Because I can't seem to stop running from feelings I never wanted in the first place.

I look at the map one last time before folding it away. South. Just south.

Not east. Never east again.

13

ARATON

Twilight bleeds across the southern sky like an infected wound, all violent purples and sickly yellows. The sun's dying light catches on my zarryn's silver coat as she bends her neck to drink from the stream. Water splashes over smooth stones, its gentle babble the only sound besides the animal's thirsty gulps.

I roll my shoulders, stretching my wings to their full span. Six feet of feathered gray-blue expanse on each side—cramped from being tucked against my back all day. The muscles burn pleasantly as I work out the stiffness.

"Take your time," I murmur to the zarryn, who ignores me completely, focused entirely on slaking her thirst.

My map places us two days from Carradon, though I've made no firm decision to go there. The crystal towers hold no particular appeal. Nothing does, if I'm honest with myself—a rarity I typically avoid.

The path I've been following all day winds through a copse of silver-barked trees, their leaves hanging still in the windless evening. Beyond them, farmland stretches toward a settlement—just visible as a collection of thatched roofs and chimney smoke rising like ghostly fingers against the darkening sky.

I should avoid it. Villages mean curious eyes, questions I don't want to answer, and the perpetual cycle of charm and deflection that's become so exhausting lately.

The zarryn lifts her head, water dripping from her muzzle. She stares past me toward the village, ears twitching forward with interest. Something about her alertness sends a peculiar sensation down my spine—not quite unease, not quite anticipation.

"What is it?" I ask needlessly. She stomps one hoof, tugging slightly against her lead rope.

Curiosity gets the better of me. I secure the zarryn to a nearby branch and move silently through the grove of trees, my footfalls muffled by years of diplomatic training. The skill of moving unnoticed serves as well in court intrigue as it does in avoiding unwanted conversation on the road.

The tree line ends abruptly, giving way to cultivated land. Rows of vegetables stretch in neat formation, punctuated by trellises where flowering vines climb toward the fading light. And there, near the edge of what must be the village's communal garden, kneels a figure.

I narrow my eyes, keeping to the shadow of a particularly broad tree. There's nothing particularly remarkable about someone tending a garden at dusk, yet something about

the scene hooks beneath my ribs and tugs.

The figure—a woman, I think, though distance makes it hard to be certain—bends over the plants with a sort of careful reverence. Her hair falls forward, obscuring her face as she works, pulling weeds or harvesting—I can't quite tell. There's something fluid in her movements, a practiced efficiency I find oddly compelling.

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"Get ahold of yourself," I mutter under my breath. "Next you'll be waxing poetic about her fucking gardening technique."

Still, I don't leave.

Instead, I edge closer, staying within the cover of trees. Something about her silhouette against the sunset strikes a chord of recognition that I immediately dismiss as impossible. My mind playing tricks, conjuring ghosts from wishful thinking.

She straightens suddenly, rolling her shoulders in a stretch that reminds me how my own muscles ache. The woman brushes dirt from her hands, then reaches for a basket beside her. I still can't see her face, just the slope of her back and the way she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear with an unconscious grace.

A prickling sensation crawls up my neck. My wings shift restlessly against my back.

This is ridiculous. I'm staring at a stranger gardening because I've spent too many weeks alone with only a zarryn for company. I should return to the stream, mount up, and ride through the night. Put this village behind me like all the others.

Yet my feet remain rooted to the forest floor.

Logic screams that I'm seeing things that aren't there, hearing echoes of memories rather than reality. The continent is vast. The chances of stumbling across one specific person after three years of absence are so minuscule they don't bear consideration.

And yet...

I step forward, just beyond the treeline's protection. The dying sunlight catches my wings, setting the silver flecks alight like scattered stars. If she turns now, she'll see me—a dark figure at the forest's edge, staring like some lovesick fool.

Or perhaps like the ghost I half-believe myself to be.

But then the world stops turning. A single moment that stretches into eternity as she turns, her profile cutting against the darkening sky. It's her—all of her—exactly as my traitorous memory has preserved her. Ronnie. Not some phantom conjured by a lonely mind, but flesh and blood and fury incarnate, standing twenty paces away in a stranger's garden.

My wings go rigid against my back.

Ronnie's delicate collarbone peeks from the neckline of her simple linen dress, and I can trace from memory the thin scar that marks it. Her auburn hair, longer than I remember, falls in thick waves past her shoulders, catching the dying light like liquid copper. She's tied half of it back in a practical knot, a style I've watched her fashion a dozen times while lying in her bed, pretending not to notice how the muscles in her arms flexed as she worked.

The basket sits next to her, heavy with whatever she's harvested. Zynthra, maybe, or dreehk—I can't see from here and it doesn't matter. What matters is the casual confidence in her stance, the way she surveys her work with those sharp gray eyes that never missed a thing. Eyes that saw straight through every charm I ever tried to deploy against her defenses.

"Ronnie," I whisper, the name a curse and a prayer on my lips.

She doesn't hear me. How could she? I'm still hidden mostly by shadows, frozen like a stalking predator at the forest's edge. My heart hammers wildly against my ribs, a caged thing desperate for escape. I press a hand against my chest, surprised to find it trembling.

Three years. Three fucking years since I went to visit her and found her missing. Since I stood outside her abandoned home, holding a bracelet that cost me more than she would have accepted, feeling for the first time in my life like I'd been outmaneuvered. Outplayed. Like the ground had shifted beneath my feet when I wasn't paying attention.

Three years I've spent convincing myself it didn't matter.

She keeps working as I watch her, and the familiar curve of her back ignites something molten and dangerous in my core. The heat of it rushes through my veins, burning away the shock and leaving something far more combustible in its wake. Anger. No—rage. Pure, undiluted, and directed at the woman who walked away without a backward glance.

My hands clench into fists at my sides. My wings unfurl slightly, responding to the sudden flood of adrenaline coursing through my system. The rational part of my brain—the part that kept me alive through court intrigues and political machinations—whispers caution. But another voice, darker and more primal, silences it.

She left. No word, no warning. She simply vanished, as if our encounters had meant nothing. As if I was something to be discarded when inconvenient. The bracelet burns in my memory—a foolish token I'd meant to give her, evidence of my own weakness.

She straightens up, moving to another section of the garden with the easy grace that used to drive me wild. Still does, apparently, because even through my anger, desire

coils like a serpent in my belly. Her shoulders roll back slightly—that persistent tension she always carried—and my fingers twitch with the ghost-memory of working those knots free.

The muscles in my cheeks ache from how hard I'm clenching my jaw.

I should confront her. Demand answers. Make her explain why she ran, why here, why now. The unfairness of finding her by accident when I'd spent months searching burns like acid in my throat.

Yet I remain rooted to this spot, watching her check the sky—calculating the remaining daylight, no doubt. Always practical, my Ronnie. Except she was never mine, was she? That was the unspoken agreement between us. No attachments, no promises, just a collision of bodies whenever I passed through.

But if that was true, why did her disappearance feel like having my wings clipped? And why, seeing her now, does it feel like plummeting from a great height with nothing to break my fall?

14

RONNIE

Dusk settles around me like a well-worn shawl as I pull the last bunch of meadowmint from the garden's eastern corner. The fragrant herbs release their scent with each tug—sharp, clean, and comforting. Perfect for the tea Millie loves before bedtime.

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"Tomorrow I'll harvest the brimbark," I mutter to myself, mentally cataloguing the garden's offerings. The sturdy stalks will fetch a decent price at market, especially with the summer festival approaching.

I straighten, arching my back to relieve the tension that's settled between my shoulder blades. The basket at my hip grows heavier with each addition—zynthra roots for stew, dreelk leaves for salad, and now the meadowmint bundled neatly on top. My fingers are stained green and brown, earth embedded beneath my nails despite my best efforts.

Night creeps toward the village faster than I anticipated. I need to get inside, check on Millie. My daughter sleeps soundly now, tucked into her small bed in our loft, wings tucked against her tiny back.

I scan the garden once more, ensuring I've left nothing behind. The neat rows of vegetables stretch into the growing darkness, a testament to hard work and new beginnings. Three years of starting over, of building something that belongs solely to us. But now I have a shop and a nice home with a flourishing garden. The work has paid off.

The treeline beyond the garden stands sentinel, ancient silver-barked trees reaching toward the violet sky. Something about their shadows tonight feels... watching. I shake off the sensation. Paranoia serves no purpose here in Saufort, where we've found nothing but kindness.

"Time to make that tea," I murmur, turning toward home.

The path from garden to cottage is short, just twenty paces of packed earth. My small house stands solid against the darkening sky, windows glowing with warm lamplight. Home. The word still feels foreign on my tongue, too fragile to trust completely.

I'm almost to the door when it happens.

A rush of air, a shadow moving faster than thought, and suddenly my back slams against the cottage wall. The basket tumbles from my grasp, herbs scattering across the ground like abandoned promises. Panic floods my system—primal, immediate, overwhelming.

My first instinct is to fight. I thrash against the hold, but my wrists are pinned above my head by a single large hand. A body presses against mine—male, tall, powerfully built—trapping me against the rough-hewn wood. I can't see his face in the darkness, just the silhouette of broad shoulders blocking out what little light remains.

"Let me go," I hiss through clenched teeth, terror and rage battling for dominance in my voice. "I'll scream, and this whole village will?—"

"Did you think it would be that easy to get away from me, fierce one?"

That voice. Velvet-wrapped steel, dropping to a whisper against my ear. My blood turns to ice in my veins, then boils in the next heartbeat.

Araton.

Recognition hits me with the force of a physical blow. The particular breadth of his shoulders. The subtle scent that's uniquely his—mountain air and something spiced I could never identify. The brush of feathers against my bare arms as his wings shift behind him.

"No," I breathe, the word half denial, half disbelief.

"Yes," he counters, mouth too close to my ear. "Surprise, sweetheart."

Fear claws up my throat—not of him, exactly, but of what his presence means. Of what's at stake. Of Millie, sleeping peacefully inside, oblivious to her father's arrival.

"Get off me," I snarl, renewing my struggle.

His laugh is low and dark. "Still fighting me at every turn. Some things never change." He pushes me harder into the wall so I can't even turn to look at him. "Others do. Like loyalty. Like honesty. Like fucking disappearing without a word."

Anger bleeds through his tone, a razor edge that wasn't there in our past encounters. This isn't the smooth-talking courier who visited my shop monthly. This is something rawer, something dangerous.

"You have no right," I manage, my voice steadier than the trembling in my limbs would suggest.

"No right?" His fingers tighten on my wrists. "I have every right to know why my favorite little slut vanished into thin air."

The crude words send an unwelcome heat spiraling through me. My body—the traitor—responds to his proximity, to the dangerous edge in his voice.

"I was never yours," I whisper, the lie bitter on my tongue.

His body presses harder against mine, pinning me more thoroughly. I feel every hard plane of him, from the solid muscle of his chest to the unmistakable evidence of his arousal against my ass.

"Your pretty mouth says one thing," he murmurs, lips brushing the shell of my ear, "but your body has always told me the truth. Remember how wet you'd get for me? How desperately you'd beg when I had my fingers inside you?"

Shame and desire collide within me, creating something molten and unstable. My cheeks burn with it, my skin too tight to contain the conflicting emotions.

"You left marks on my skin for days," he continues, voice dropping to that register that always melted my resistance. "Such a good girl when you were coming around my cock, weren't you? But such a fucking coward when it came to anything else."

My breath catches painfully. Every crude word strikes with precision—hitting the places within me that remember exactly what his touch felt like, exactly how completely I surrendered every time.

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"I hate you," I whisper, the words lacking any real conviction.

His laugh ghosts across my skin. "Hate me all you want, but don't lie to me. Not again."

My heart hammers against my ribs like a caged bird. Three years of running, three years of building walls around us, and he's dismantled everything with just his voice in the darkness.

"I don't owe you anything," I hiss, still struggling against his grip.

His laugh is a dark rumble against my neck. "Oh, but you do." His free hand slides down my side, mapping the contours of my body through the thin fabric of my work dress. "Three years of your sweet cunt, for starters."

Gods, the memories that those words bring back send an unwelcome jolt of heat between my thighs. I hate this—hate how my body responds to him even as my mind screams in protest.

"Get your hands off me," I snap, even as his palm skims the curve of my hip.

"Not yet," Araton murmurs, and I feel the fabric of my skirt begin to bunch as he slowly draws it upward. "Not until I collect what you've kept from me."

The night air kisses my thighs as my dress rises inch by agonizing inch. My skin prickles with goosebumps—from fear or anticipation, I can't tell anymore. His breathing grows heavier against my ear.

"You owe me years worth of pleasure, fierce one." His voice drops to that velvet whisper that used to make me melt against him in my old shop. "And I always collect what I'm owed."

My dress reaches my hips now, and I'm acutely aware of how exposed I am—how vulnerable. His hand slides over the curve of my bare thigh, and I bite my lip to suppress a whimper.

"Stop," I say, but the word lacks conviction.

"Your mouth says stop," Araton counters, "but your body..." His fingertips trail higher, brushing against the edge of my undergarments. "Your body remembers who it belongs to."

"I belong to no one," I manage to say, even as my legs tremble with the effort of staying upright.

His laugh ghosts across my skin. "Still lying to yourself, I see."

Before I can respond, his hand slips beneath the thin fabric and finds me—wet, traitorous, ready. I gasp at the contact, arching involuntarily against him.

"Just as I thought," Araton says, satisfaction dripping from every syllable as his middle finger slides through my folds. "Are you always this wet for people you claim to hate?"

My cheeks burn with humiliation and arousal. I want to deny it, to maintain some shred of dignity, but my body betrays me with every passing second. His finger circles my entrance, teasing but not entering, and I have to bite back a groan.

"If you want something," I bite out, "just get on with it."

He jerks my wrist up, bowing my back further. "So impatient," he chides, sliding one long finger inside me with agonizing slowness. "But I've waited three years for this. I think I'll take my time."

My head falls against the cottage wall as he begins to move his finger in and out, setting a leisurely pace that makes me want to scream. When he adds a second finger, I can't hold back a moan.

"That's it," he encourages, his thumb finding and circling the bundle of nerves that makes my knees buckle. "Let me hear how much you've missed this."

"I haven't," I lie, even as my hips rock against his hand.

"No?" His fingers curl inside me, hitting a spot that makes me see stars. "Your greedy little cunt says otherwise. It's squeezing my fingers so tight... always so desperate for me."

His praise washes over me, degrading and exalting all at once. I hate how it affects me—how it makes me wetter, more desperate. The pressure builds low in my belly as he increases his pace, driving me toward the edge with practiced precision.

"You're prettier when you beg for it," Araton says, his voice rough with desire. "Go on, let me hear you."

I clench my jaw, determined to deny him this victory at least. His fingers thrust deeper, harder, and I feel myself teetering on the brink of release.

"I won't," I gasp.

"Then you don't get to come," he replies simply.

And just like that, his hand is gone. The sudden emptiness is almost painful, my body clenching around nothing. I cry out in frustration, unable to stop myself.

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"Fucking bastard," I curse, trembling with unsatisfied need.

"Such a filthy mouth," Araton taunts, his own breathing ragged. "Tell me what you want, Ronnie. Say it."

Pride wages war with desire, a battle that's all too familiar when it comes to this man. Three years of distance, and we're right back where we started—me fighting myself more than him.

Because I know when it comes to Araton, if I really did ask him to stop, he would. But he knows I want this. He knows I want the fight just as much as the fuck.

"Fine," I finally snap, my resistance crumbling under the weight of my own body's demands. "I want you. Satisfied?"

His laugh is triumphant in the darkness. "Not yet," he purrs. "But I will be. And so will you, pretty little slut. So will you."

My body trembles as I sag against the wall of my cottage. I don't know how to react because I do want him. I just shouldn't.

"Maybe I'm not even him," Araton whispers against my ear, his breath hot on my skin. "Maybe I'm just a stranger who saw a pretty little whore alone in her garden."

The suggestion sends an unwelcome thrill through me. My body responds with a rush of wetness that I hate myself for. My hands press against the wall, useless as he keeps me pinned.

"Would you let just anyone fuck this sweet cunt?" The question comes with the unmistakable sound of him unlacing his pants with his free hand, fabric rustling in the darkness behind me. "Is that what you've been doing these past three years? Spreading your legs for every man who passes through?"

I try to protest, but his hand clamps over my mouth, reducing my words to muffled sounds that even I can't decipher.

"I don't think so," he continues, answering his own question. "This pussy remembers me. It's fucking dripping for me."

The head of his cock nudges against my entrance, thick and hot. My body trembles in anticipation, betraying every denial I've constructed over the years.

"Lift your ass up," he commands, the hand around my wrists dropping to grip my hip with bruising force. My hands drop to the wall, trying to hold myself up.

When I hesitate, he slides his hand from my hip to the back of my neck, pressing me more firmly against the wall. "Now."

I comply, arching my back and tilting my hips toward him, silently cursing my own weakness. His groan of approval vibrates through me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, grateful for the darkness that hides my shame.

"Good girl," Araton praises, the words dripping with condescension that somehow still makes me clench with need. "Always so obedient when you're about to get filled with cock."

Without further warning, he thrusts inside me—one brutal, merciless stroke that seats him fully. The sudden intrusion forces a cry from my throat, muffled by his palm. The stretch burns in the most delicious way, my body accommodating his size inch

by excruciating inch.

"Fuck," he hisses, his hips flush against my ass. "Still so fucking tight. Still perfect."

He doesn't give me time to adjust. His hips withdraw and slam forward again, setting a punishing pace that has my body rocking against the wall with each thrust. My fingers scrabble uselessly against the wood, seeking purchase, finding none.

"This what you needed?" Araton's voice is rough with exertion, each word punctuated by the slap of flesh against flesh. "Some stranger in the dark, using your pretty cunt?"

I shouldn't like the way he's talking to me. I shouldn't find it arousing when he degrades me this way. But my body doesn't care about shoulds—it responds with increasing wetness, with clenching muscles that grip him tighter with every thrust.

His hand leaves my mouth to reach around and roughly palm my breast through my dress. "Answer me," he demands, pinching my nipple hard enough to make me gasp.

"No," I pant, the denial more for myself than for him. "It's not—I don't?—"

"Liar," he snarls, driving into me harder. The force of it drives the air from my lungs. "Your cunt's gripping me like it's afraid I'll leave again. So fucking needy."

My forehead presses against the wall as pleasure builds, coiling tighter with each brutal thrust. His pace doesn't falter—relentless, merciless, exactly how I remember.

"I bet you touch yourself thinking about me," Araton continues, his words filthy and precisely aimed. "Fingers buried in this sweet pussy, pretending it's my cock stretching you open."

The truth of it burns through me. In the darkest hours, when loneliness threatened to

consume me, I'd surrendered to memories of him—his touch, his taste, the fullness of him inside me. I'd hate myself afterward, but in those moments, I'd been desperate for even the ghost of him.

"I haven't—" I try to lie, but he cuts me off with a particularly deep thrust that hits something inside me that makes stars burst behind my eyes.

"Still lying," he growls, his voice darker now. "Even with my cock buried inside you, you can't be honest." His hand slides from my breast down between my legs, finding my clit with unerring accuracy. "Let's see if I can fuck the truth out of you."

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His fingers work my clit in tight, knowing circles while his cock maintains that brutal rhythm. The dual assault is overwhelming, pleasure building so quickly I can barely breathe through it.

"That's it," he encourages as my inner walls begin to clench around him. "Squeeze my cock. Show me how much you've missed it."

"I hate you," I gasp, even as my body tightens around him, seeking more of the pleasure only he has ever given me. It's like I have to cling to the words.

His laugh is dark and knowing. "Hate me all you want while you come on my cock like the good little slut you are."

The crude praise pushes me over the edge. Pleasure crashes through me in waves, my body convulsing around him as I cry out, uncaring now who might hear. My vision blurs, my knees threatening to buckle as the orgasm tears through me with unforgiving intensity.

Araton groans behind me, his rhythm faltering as my inner walls pulse around him. "Fuck," he curses, his fingers digging into my hip hard enough to leave marks. "Taking my cock so well. Still the best pussy I've ever had."

His thrusts grow erratic, deeper, harder. I feel the moment he tenses behind me, his body going rigid as he buries himself to the hilt and spills inside me with a guttural groan that seems ripped from his very core. The sound of it—primal and unguarded—sends another aftershock of pleasure through me.

For a moment, we stay frozen together, his forehead pressed against my shoulder blade, our bodies still joined. Reality begins to seep back in slowly, bringing with it the cool night air on my heated skin, the distant sounds of the village, the knowledge of what I've just allowed to happen.

Slowly, he pulls out, and I rest my head against the wall, trying to gather my strength. Slowly I turn, ready to face him at last, to confront the man who's haunted me for three years.

But there's nothing behind me but empty air and lengthening shadows.

15

ARATON

The forest swallows me whole as I retreat from Ronnie's cottage, my body still thrumming with the aftershocks of pleasure. My zarryn snorts impatiently, pawing at the needle covered ground when I approach, silver coat gleaming under fractured moonlight filtering through the canopy. I run my hand along its shaggy neck, feeling the twin tails swish against my legs.

"Patience," I mutter, though I'm in no position to preach it.

I just took Ronnie against the wall of her home like a man possessed. Like a stranger. Like someone I barely recognize.

Swinging onto the zarryn's back, I guide it deeper into the forest, needing distance to think. The creature moves with surprising grace for its size, navigating between ancient trees with practiced ease. My wings flex unconsciously behind me, adjusting to accommodate the movement.

What in the fuck was I thinking?

Three years of wondering, of searching, of that gnawing emptiness that I refused to acknowledge—and I reduced our reunion to a vengeful fuck against a wall. I didn't even see her face properly in the darkness.

"Real charming, Velrien," I scoff at myself, letting the zarryn choose its path as we wind further into the thickening trees.

The forest air feels cool against my heated skin, carrying scents of herbs and earth. It should be calming, but my mind races faster than my mount ever could. I flex my fingers, still feeling the ghost of Ronnie's softness, the way she trembled and yielded despite her defiance.

That defiance. Gods, how I've missed it.

No one challenges me the way she does. No one else makes me feel so fucking alive, so driven to conquer, to possess. Three years, and the fire between us hasn't dimmed in the slightest. If anything, it's grown more dangerous, more consuming.

The zarryn finds a small clearing and I dismount, needing to move on my own two feet. My wings spread fully, stretching to their impressive span—nearly fifteen feet of dusky gray-blue feathers flecked with silver. The muscles along my back relax as I give them a powerful flap, stirring the night air around me.

She ran from me. Left without a word, without explanation. The rage I've nursed for three years bubbles up again, hot and demanding. I've built an impressive life, carved out respect and position through wit and strategy rather than inheritance, yet she reduced me to a snarling beast with nothing but her presence.

"Fucking unacceptable," I growl to the empty forest, pacing the clearing's perimeter.

Yet here I am, prowling through these woods instead of continuing my journey south. Here I am, still caught in her orbit after all this time.

I pause, running a hand through my short-cropped black hair, feeling it stand in its perpetually tousled state. The realization hits me with startling clarity: I'm not ready to let her go. Not again. Maybe not ever.

A slow smile spreads across my face, tugging at the dimple in my right cheek that only appears when the emotion is genuine. I know exactly what I'm going to do.

I'm going to stay.

Not just stay—I'm going to reacquaint myself with Ronnie properly. Remind her of the chemistry that crackles between us whenever we're within ten paces of each other. Remind her body who it belongs to, even if her stubborn mind refuses to admit it.

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The game is just beginning.

"What do you think?" I ask the zarryn, who huffs disinterestedly in response, more concerned with the patch of grass it's currently sampling. "Should we find accommodations in this quaint little village?"

It had been fun in the beginning, those monthly visits to her shop. The way her gray eyes would spark with irritation when I entered. The way she'd snap and snarl, all while her body betrayed her with subtle signs of arousal that my heightened senses never missed. I'd push and prod and charm until that iron will of hers bent just enough for us both to get what we wanted.

Then I'd leave, and spend the next month thinking about her far more than I should have.

"Time to start fresh," I decide, mounting the zarryn once more. "Show her what happens when she tries to take what's mine."

The possessiveness in my voice surprises even me. I've never been one to claim ownership of anyone. Women have always been a pleasant diversion—a night or two of mutual pleasure before we part ways, no strings, no complications.

But Ronnie... Ronnie was never just a diversion. I just wasn't ready to admit it until she disappeared.

As we make our way back toward the village, a plan forms. I'll find lodging, establish myself. Perhaps introduce myself to the locals, learn the rhythms of this place she's

chosen to hide in. And then I'll begin my siege—slow, deliberate, calculated to drive her absolutely mad with want and frustration.

Just like old times, only better. This time, I won't be leaving after a night of satisfaction.

This time, I'm playing for keeps.

I spend the night in a modest inn at the edge of the village, paying extra for discretion and a private room where my wings won't draw attention. The innkeeper—a stout woman with shrewd eyes—asks no questions when I place three novae on her counter.

Morning breaks with golden light spilling through shabby curtains. I wake restless, my body still humming with unresolved tension despite last night's encounter. The taste of Ronnie lingers on my tongue—spice and sweetness I've craved for three years.

I dress quickly, choosing a simple dark tunic that accommodates my wings. My reflection in the small mirror shows a face sharper than I remember, golden eyes glinting with determination. I've spent too long being diplomatic, charming my way through court for a master who's now dead. Time to be direct.

The village is already bustling when I step outside. It's smaller than I expected—picturesque with its stone buildings and flower-lined paths. I keep to the shadows of buildings, my wings tucked close. No need to announce my presence just yet.

I follow the winding cobblestone street, memorizing each turn while searching for any sign of Ronnie. The air smells of baking bread and river mist, laced with wild herbs from nearby fields. The village feels... content. Settled. This peaceful existence

seems at odds with the fiery woman I know.

A melody of laughter draws my attention to the village square. I halt, pressing myself against the wall of a nearby building.

There she is.

Ronnie steps into the morning light, her deep auburn hair caught in a loose braid that hangs over one shoulder. She looks... different. Softer somehow, despite the same lean, wiry strength in her arms. The sunlight catches the constellation of freckles across her nose and shoulders. She's wearing a simple dress that hugs her curves—curves I rediscovered last night.

But she's not alone.

My blood freezes as a tall male figure approaches her—a fucking xaphan with massive gray wings that brush the ground as he walks. He towers over Ronnie, lean but powerful with short white-blond hair and sharp features. Even from this distance, I can see his pale silver eyes catch the light as he says something that makes Ronnie's lips curve into a smile.

A smile I've been dying to coax from her. I mostly get her snarls.

"What the fuck?" I mutter, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

The knife twists deeper when a small child darts between them, all wild black curls and bubbling laughter. A little girl, no more than three years old. My breath catches in my throat when I see the tiny, downy wings sprouting from her back—silver-tinged and unmistakable.

Something visceral and ugly claws at my insides. Three years. She left me three years

ago.

The timing fits perfectly.

The xaphan reaches down, scooping the child into his arms with practiced ease. She giggles, pressing her tiny palms against his face as he pretends to bite at her fingers. It's the casual intimacy of family.

A family that includes Ronnie.

"Stop!" the child squeals, loud enough for me to hear across the square. "Down! I can do it myself!"

The xaphan sets her down with exaggerated care, and she promptly runs circles around Ronnie, who catches her mid-spin and tickles her sides. The sound of their combined laughter feels like shards of glass in my ears.

Is this why she ran? To be with another xaphan? One with pure silver eyes and noble bearing, not a mongrel courier with wings the color of storm clouds?

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I lean against the rough stone wall, letting it scrape against my wings as I struggle to contain the fury building inside me. The logical part of my mind recognizes I have no claim on Ronnie—we never had anything beyond those heated nights. But logic has no place in the storm raging through my chest.

The little girl breaks free from Ronnie's grasp and spins with her arms outstretched, her tiny wings fluttering with the motion. Something about her face catches my attention—the shape of her eyes, the curve of her smile. There's something hauntingly familiar that I can't place.

I watch as Ronnie checks the position of the sun, says something to the xaphan, and kisses the child on top of her head. Then she's moving, heading down a side street while the other two continue in the opposite direction.

Without conscious thought, I follow her, keeping to the shadows. My mind races with questions, theories, and a possessive rage I've never felt before.

Three years of emptiness suddenly make sense. Three years of searching, only to find her building a life with someone else—another xaphan, no less.

I need answers. I need to know why she left. Why she chose him.

And most importantly—I need to know about that child with the silver-dusted wings.

Morning light bathes my small garden in golden warmth as I press a kiss to Millie's unruly curls. "Be good for Uncle Ady," I murmur against her hair, breathing in her scent of sunshine and wild herbs.

"I'm always good," she protests, luminous gold eyes—so like her father's—widening with indignation.

Adellum's lips quirk into that almost-smile he wears around Millie. "We'll paint today, little spark," he says, his massive gray wings shifting slightly as he takes her tiny hand in his. "Perhaps a lunox this time?"

"Blue face!" Millie squeals, her downy wings fluttering with excitement.

I watch them walk away, my chest tight with familiar contradictions—gratitude for Adellum's unwavering presence in our lives, and dread of what lies ahead at my shop. Last night's encounter left me raw, exposed. The phantom press of hands against my hips, the heat of Araton's breath on my neck?—

I shake my head, forcing those thoughts away as I make my way through the winding paths of Saufort to my store. The villagers nod and smile as I pass, unaware of the tempest raging beneath my skin. When did their acceptance become so precious to me? When did this place become home?

The stone-fronted building of Wynn's Trade & Tinctures welcomes me with its familiar solidity. Inside, shelves of neatly labeled jars line the walls—each one a testament to the life I've built without him. The scent wraps around me like a protective charm as I move through my morning ritual. Unshuttering windows, dusting counters, checking inventory.

My fingers trace the edge of the tall apothecary cabinet behind the counter, a gift from Harmony when I opened the shop. Everything here represents a choice I made, a

deliberate step away from the monthly madness that defined my relationship with Araton.

The corner where Millie's drawings hang catches my eye—bright splashes of color depicting our little family. Me with too-red hair, Harmony with exaggerated wings, Adellum towering like a friendly giant. My heart constricts. What would happen if Araton saw these? If he realized?—

The bell above the door chimes, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. Wiping my hands on my apron, I call out, "I'll be right there."

I emerge from behind a shelf of tinctures and freeze. Time collapses between us.

Araton fills the doorway, golden eyes catching the morning light. His broad shoulders and lean frame are just as I remember, perhaps more defined now. The short-cropped black hair still has that perpetually tousled look, as if invisible fingers have been running through it. His wings—those magnificent dusky gray-blue appendages flecked with silver—are half-folded behind him, too large for my modest shop.

"Good morning, fierce one," he says, voice low and rich with amusement.

My chest tightens. Three years, and he still calls me that ridiculous nickname.

"What are you doing here?" I demand, gripping the edge of a shelf to steady myself. Last night rushes back—the intensity, the mindless pleasure. But in daylight, there's nowhere to hide from the consequences of my weakness.

Araton's lips curve into that infuriating smirk. A dimple appears in his right cheek—the genuine one, not the practiced charm he uses on others.

"This feels familiar, doesn't it?" His eyes sweep the shop, taking in every detail with

calculated precision. "You, bristling like an angry lunox behind your counter. Me, crossing your threshold uninvited." He takes another step inside, the door swinging shut behind him. "Reminds me of how we first met."

Irritation flares hot beneath my skin. "That arrangement is over," I snap, moving behind the counter to put something solid between us. "I'm not interested in you showing up in my new town, in my life."

"Your new town," he echoes, tracing a finger along a shelf of dried herbs. "Your new life. Very cozy." His eyes find mine, humor fading into something sharper. "Did it ever occur to you that I might have been interested in what you were running from?"

Fear slices through me—cold and precise. Does he suspect? Does he know about Millie?

"It doesn't matter," I say, forcing steel into my voice. "We had an agreement. Once a month, no strings, no expectations. That ended when I left."

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"When you disappeared," he corrects, moving closer to the counter. The scent of him—spiced wind and sunwarmed stones—threatens to undo me. "Without a word."

I lift my chin. "I don't owe you explanations."

He laughs then, a sound both dark and delighted that sends a treacherous shiver down my spine. "You know what I've discovered, Ronnie?" He leans forward, palms flat on the counter between us. "I don't particularly care what you think you're interested in."

Panic floods my system, drowning rational thought. If he stays in Saufort, he'll see Millie. He'll notice her eyes—golden like his. The shape of her smile. The way her brow furrows when she's concentrating, just like his does when he's calculating his next move.

"There's nothing for you here," I say, desperation making my voice brittle.

His eyes narrow, studying me with unnerving intensity. "I think there's more here than you want me to know about," he says softly. "Much more."

His words hang between us, sharp as glass. I can't breathe, can't think past the thundering in my chest. What does he suspect? What has he seen?

"I don't know what you're talking about," I manage, my voice steadier than I feel.

Araton's eyes darken, the gold in them hardening to amber. He pushes away from the counter with fluid grace, his wings shifting against his back as he begins a predatory circle of my shop.

"Three years is a long time, Ronnie," he says, fingers trailing along my shelves, examining labels of herbs and tinctures. "Did you find what you were running toward? Or just what you were running from?"

I grip the edge of the counter until my knuckles turn white. Every instinct screams to throw him out, to protect what's mine, but confrontation will only feed his suspicions.

"My life isn't your business anymore."

He snorts, the sound devoid of humor. "No? Then whose business is it?" His voice drops dangerously low. "Tell me something, fierce one. Do you let any xaphan into your bed these days? Or am I special?"

The question blindsides me, sending ice through my veins. "What?"

"I saw him," he snarls, turning toward me with such sudden venom that I take a step back. "The one with the gray wings. I saw you go to him this morning—" He stops abruptly, jaw working beneath his bronze skin.

My mind races to catch up. Adellum. He saw Adellum with Millie. Relief and terror crash through me in equal measure—he doesn't realize, not yet, but he's dangerously close to the truth.

"So that's what this is about?" I force a brittle laugh, playing for time. "You're jealous?"

The dimple disappears as his smile turns cruel. "Not jealous. Curious." He approaches the counter again, leaning forward until I can see flecks of deeper bronze in his golden eyes. "Did you leave me to play happy family with another xaphan? How deliciously ironic, considering how much you claimed to hate us."

I see my opening—the assumption I can use to shield Millie. My mouth goes dry, but I forge ahead.

"People change," I say, the lie burning my tongue. "Adellum is... different."

Something dangerous flickers across Araton's face. The air in the shop seems to thin, a subtle manipulation of his elemental magic that makes my lungs work harder.

"Different," he repeats, the word like acid. "And the child? Those silver wings—" He cuts himself off, nostrils flaring. "You wasted no time replacing me."

I swallow hard, hating myself for the deception but desperate to protect my daughter. "That's right."

Araton's eyes narrow to slits, his jaw clenching so tightly I can see a muscle jump beneath his skin. For a heartbeat, I fear he'll see through me—that he'll recognize his own eyes in Millie's, that he'll somehow sense the connection to his own blood.

"How charming," he says finally, voice like silk over steel. "The defiant human who swore she'd never be with a xaphan found herself another winged companion. Was it the novelty, Ronnie? Did you miss the sensation of feathers against your skin?"

Each word cuts deeper than the last. I want to scream the truth, to wipe that contempt from his face, but Millie's safety comes first. Always.

"Get out," I whisper, trembling with the effort to remain composed.

"Gladly." He straightens, wings flaring slightly behind him in a display of agitation I remember all too well. "But know this—I'm not leaving Saufort. Not yet." His eyes lock with mine, something raw and unfamiliar bleeding into his expression.

He turns in one fluid motion, striding toward the door. The bell chimes discordantly as he yanks it open, sunlight catching the silver flecks in his wings.

"Enjoy your little fantasy, fierce one," he says, not looking back. "We both know how good you are at running when things get real. But I'm much better at hunting."

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The door slams behind him, rattling the bottles on my shelves. I sink to the floor behind my counter, legs no longer able to support me, harsh breaths tearing from my lungs.

I've bought time, but at what cost? The lie sits heavy in my stomach. Sooner or later, he'll learn the truth—and when he does, I'll lose everything.

17

ARATON

Islam the door of the apothecary shop so hard the hinges rattle. Fury pulses through my veins like liquid fire, every muscle in my body coiled tight. The morning sun feels like a mockery, too bright and cheerful for the tempest raging inside me.

Villagers glance my way, then quickly avert their eyes—the wise reaction when a xaphan looks ready to tear something apart with his bare hands. My wings flare slightly behind me, the feathers bristling with agitation I can't control.

What the fuck am I doing here?

Three years of wondering where she went, why she disappeared. Three years of trying to convince myself it didn't matter, that she was just a human woman with a sharp tongue and sharper wit who made my monthly diplomatic travels more interesting.

And now I find her playing house with another xaphan? A child with silver wings?

My stomach twists with an emotion I refuse to name. It isn't jealousy—it can't be jealousy. Ronnie was never mine to lose. We fucked. We argued. Sometimes we laughed. That was all.

I stride through the village, my boots hitting the packed dirt with unnecessary force. The faces around me blur—humans mostly, with a handful of other beings mixed in. No one seems particularly alarmed by my presence. Unlike the northern villages, where my arrival would cause shuttered windows and hushed whispers, these people barely register me.

Because of him. The gray-winged xaphan she's chosen.

My hands clench into fists, nails digging crescents into my palms. The child's face flashes in my mind—round cheeks, those downy silver wings, unruly black curls. She looked happy, holding his massive hand, chattering away as they walked.

Something shifts in my chest, an uncomfortable pressure I can't identify. Why should I care? Ronnie made her choice. She ran from me, built this quaint little life in this village, found another xaphan to warm her bed and?—

I stop abruptly, a snarl building in my throat. A nearby merchant flinches, dropping the basket he was arranging.

"Sorry," I mutter, the word unfamiliar on my tongue.

I force myself to keep moving, weaving through the morning market until I reach the modest inn at the edge of the village. The innkeeper barely glances up as I enter, too busy tallying her accounts to pay me any mind. The privacy costs extra, but gold speaks just as clearly in Saufort as it does in Soimur.

My room is spartan but clean—a single bed, a washstand, a small table beneath a

window that faces the forest. I pace the confined space, my wings brushing the walls with each turn. The room suddenly feels like a cage, too small to contain the restless energy surging through my body.

"Damn her," I mutter, yanking open the window. The scent of wild herbs floods the room, but it does nothing to calm the storm inside me.

I should leave. Pack my meager belongings, get on my zarryn, and continue south as I planned. There's nothing for me here except memories I never wanted and a woman who clearly moved on without a backward glance.

Instead, I find myself back outside, striding toward the dense forest that borders the village. The trees grow tall here, ancient sentinels with sprawling branches perfect for a xaphan's wings. I break into a run as I hit the tree line, the physical exertion a welcome distraction from the thoughts plaguing me.

The forest embraces me with cool shadows and the whisper of leaves. I dodge between trunks, leap over fallen logs, push myself harder until my lungs burn and sweat slicks my skin. When I finally stop, I'm deep enough that the sounds of the village have faded entirely, replaced by birdsong and the gentle rustle of wind through branches.

My breathing gradually slows as I tilt my face toward patches of sky visible through the canopy. Here, among the ancient trees, I can finally admit the truth to myself.

With Ronnie, for the first time in my life, I felt something real with her. Not the calculated charm I use as a diplomatic tool, not the casual connections that fade when convenient. She challenged me, infuriated me, saw through my practiced smiles to the calculating mind beneath.

And I let her go without a fight. I tried to move on.

And couldn't.

The realization leaves me hollow. I sink down against the broad trunk of a tree, spreading my wings slightly against the rough bark. The forest around me teems with life—a contrast to the emptiness expanding inside my chest.

Why am I still here? What do I hope to accomplish by taunting her, by disrupting the life she's built without me?

The answer comes unbidden: because when I'm near her, even fighting, even wounded by her rejection, I feel alive again. The numbness that's been my constant companion since she disappeared recedes, replaced by the sharp edge of emotion—anger, desire, frustration. Anything is better than the hollow existence I've been drifting through.

I stand abruptly, brushing dirt from my clothes. The forest stretches before me, inviting further exploration, promising temporary escape from decisions I'm not ready to make.

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For now, I'll walk. I'll breathe. I'll try to make sense of the chaos Ronnie Wynn has once again introduced into my carefully ordered life.

And tomorrow? Tomorrow I'll see her again, if only to watch those gray eyes flash with anger. To remind myself that some fires are worth getting burned by.

I walk deeper into the forest, letting instinct guide me through the maze of ancient trees. The canopy above thickens, dappling the forest floor with shifting patterns of light and shadow. My thoughts circle like hungry predators—always returning to Ronnie, to the life she's built without me, to the sharp sting of being discarded so completely.

The trees begin to thin, and I slow my pace as the unmistakable sound of children's laughter filters through the branches. I approach cautiously, my footsteps silent on the moss-covered ground. The forest opens into a small clearing bathed in golden afternoon light.

And there they are.

The xaphan from earlier sits cross-legged in the center of the clearing, his massive gray wings folded loosely against his back. Sunlight catches in his white-blond hair, creating an almost-halo effect that does nothing to soften his sharp features. He's watching the children with an intensity that seems at odds with the gentle smile playing at his lips.

The little girl with the downy silver wings darts around him, her black curls bouncing with each exuberant step. She's holding something tight in her small fist—a cluster of

wildflowers, their purple blooms crushed in her enthusiastic grip.

"Uncle Ady! Look what I found!" She thrusts the mangled bouquet toward him, beaming with pride.

Uncle.

The word hits me like a physical blow. Not father. Uncle.

The tall xaphan—Adellum, or Uncle Ady apparently—takes the flowers with exaggerated reverence. "These are magnificent. The finest blooms in all the forest." His voice is deep, almost musical, with an accent I can't quite place.

I shift my position slightly, trying to get a better look at her face without revealing my presence. As she turns, laughing at something the other child has said, I see her profile clearly for the first time.

The breath freezes in my lungs.

She has my eyes. Not the brilliant silver of the other xaphan, not Ronnie's stormy gray, but my own burnished gold. And that's not all—the shape of her chin, the high arch of her cheekbrows, the distinctive curve of her ears that's unique to high-born xaphan lines...

My mind races, calculating dates, possibilities, implications.

Three years. The child looks to be around three years old.

Three years ago, I was visiting Ronnie monthly. Three years ago, she vanished without a trace.

The other child—older, perhaps seven or eight—has no wings, but shares the same pale blond hair as the xaphan. She's crouched by a fallen log, apparently inspecting something beneath it.

"Brooke, don't put your hands in there," the xaphan warns, his tone firm but kind. "We don't know what might bite."

"It won't bite me," the girl responds with absolute certainty. "I can feel it. It's just scared."

The xaphan sighs, a sound of fond exasperation. "At least let me see what 'it' is before you adopt it and bring it home to your mother."

Each new piece of information reorganizes the picture in my mind, fitting together in a pattern I should have seen immediately. The older girl looks like the xaphan in many ways. And the younger one...

She calls him uncle, not father.

The implications hit me with the force of a physical blow. If Ronnie became pregnant before she disappeared, if she ran because of that pregnancy, if the timing aligns with my visits...

My gaze fixes on the little girl again. She's spinning now, arms outstretched, her tiny wings fluttering with the motion. Joy radiates from her like physical light. Something fierce and protective surges through me, an emotion so foreign and overwhelming I have to brace myself against a tree trunk.

"Uncle Ady, watch me fly!" The little girl leaps from a small rock, her downy wings spread wide but utterly incapable of actual flight. The xaphan moves with startling speed, catching her before she hits the ground.

"Not yet, little spark," he says, settling her on his shoulders. "Soon enough those wings will carry you to the clouds, but for now, this is as high as you go."

She giggles, patting his head with proprietary affection. "Higher! I want to touch the sky!"

The fondness in his expression is unmistakable as he rises to his full height, extending his arms so she can reach toward the patches of blue visible through the canopy. There's nothing sinister in his manner, nothing possessive beyond the natural protectiveness one would show to a beloved child.

Not her father. Her uncle.

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Which means Ronnie must have been lying to me.

18

RONNIE

The soft earth crumbles between my fingers, cool and damp against my skin as I work it around the tender roots of a zynthra plant. Gardening has always been my escape—the one place where problems simplify into things I can fix with my own two hands. Need water? I water. Need sun? I move the pot. Need better soil? I mix a new batch.

If only the rest of life were that straightforward.

The evening air carries the first hints of autumn crispness, though summer still dominates the days. Millie is with Harmony for her afternoon lessons—something about colors and numbers that has my daughter bouncing with excitement. The thought brings a smile to my lips. For all my fears about raising her in this world, she's thriving—curious, fearless, and surrounded by people who love her.

I pat the soil around the zynthra firmly, satisfied with its placement among the dreelk and brimbark I've already transplanted. My garden plot isn't large, but it's mine—a corner of the world I've carved out through sweat and determination, just like everything else in my life. It keeps my shelves stocked and my hands busy.

A shadow falls across my work, blotting out the golden evening light. I don't need to look up to know who it is. The air itself seems to shift when he's near, charged with

something I refuse to name.

"What do you want, Araton?" I keep my voice flat, continuing to press soil around the plant's base. My hands have begun to tremble, so I press them deeper into the earth to hide it.

"Is she mine?"

The question drops like a stone into still water, sending ripples of shock through my body. Three simple words that collapse the careful walls I've spent three years building. My blood runs cold, fingers freezing in the dirt.

I rise quickly to my feet, brushing soil from my hands with more force than necessary. Every instinct screams at me to run, to grab Millie and disappear again. But where would I go? How far would I get?

"What are you talking about?" My voice comes out steadier than I feel, a small victory.

Araton's golden eyes narrow, flecks of amber catching the dying sunlight. "Is she mine?" Each word is precisely formed, dangerously soft.

"Is who yours?" The defensive question sounds hollow even to my own ears. A pathetic delay tactic, and we both know it.

In two swift strides, he's crossed the space between us. My back hits the wall of my home, the rough surface digging into my shoulder blades. Araton braces his palms on either side of my head, caging me with his body, his wings flaring slightly behind him. The silver-flecked feathers catch the light, so similar to the downy wings growing from my daughter's back.

I've seen Araton angry before—playfully irritated when I'd kick him out of my bed, genuinely annoyed when I'd challenge his pompous declarations. But this—this is something else entirely. Raw fury radiates from him like physical heat, his jawclenched so tight I can see the muscle working beneath his bronze skin.

"I saw your little girl, but she called the xaphan 'Uncle,'" His voice drops lower, a dangerous rumble that vibrates through the scant inches between us. "She has my wings. My features. My eyes." He leans closer, his face mere inches from mine. "Is. She. Mine?"

My heart hammers against my ribcage like a trapped animal. Fear coils in my stomach—not for myself, but for Millie. What will he do with this knowledge? Take her away? Force his way into our lives? Demand rights I've never been prepared to give?

But beneath the fear, something else unfurls—a small seed of guilt that's been dormant for three years, finally breaking through the hard shell I've built around it. I see the raw hurt beneath his anger, the confusion, the betrayal. For all his smooth charm and calculated diplomacy, Araton has never been good at hiding his true emotions from me.

"Answer me, Ronnie." His voice cracks slightly on my name, revealing more vulnerability than I suspect he intended.

I swallow hard, searching his face. The fierce one, he used to call me. I don't feel fierce now—I feel cornered, exposed, the secret I've guarded so carefully suddenly laid bare between us.

"You can't take her from me," I whisper, the words escaping before I can stop them. All the fight drains from my body like water through cupped hands, leaving me hollow and trembling against the wall.

Araton jerks back as if I've slapped him, his golden eyes widening with genuine shock. The fury in his expression shifts to something more complex—disbelief, hurt, perhaps even a flash of offense.

"Take her from—?" He shakes his head sharply. "Is that what you think of me? That I have any intention of tearing a child from her mother?" His voice has lost the dangerous edge, replaced by something raw and wounded. He takes another step back, those magnificent wings folding tightly against his body, a defensive gesture I recognize from our past encounters.

"Unlike you, Ronnie, who clearly had no qualms about hiding her from her father."

The words slice through me, precise and devastating. There's no theatrical rage behind them, just a quiet, cutting truth that leaves me bleeding inside. I've spent three years justifying my choices, building fortress walls of righteousness around my decision. With those simple words, he's found the weakness in my defense.

I swallow hard, tasting something bitter at the back of my throat. "Yes." The confession comes out rough. "Millie is yours."

Araton pushes away from me completely, running his hand through his perpetually tousled black hair. I've seen him make that gesture before, usually when dealing with something difficult. It's a tell—one of the few genuine reactions he allows himself when his careful composure cracks.

He paces a short line in front of my garden, his movements unnervingly graceful despite his obvious agitation. The fading sunlight catches on the silver flecks in his dusky wings, making them shimmer with each step. It's strange seeing him like this—Araton, who always had a smooth quip ready, who flirted and charmed his way through every situation, who never let me see beyond the mask of casual indifference he wore like armor.

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"Three years," he mutters, more to himself than to me. He stops abruptly, turning to face me with an expression I've never seen on him before—vulnerable, wounded, stripped of all his usual calculated charm. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The question hangs between us, deceptively simple yet impossibly complex. My reasons felt so certain when I'd packed my meager belongings in the dead of night—when I'd imagined him taking our child to Soimur, raising her among the xaphanelite while I was left behind. Now, faced with his genuine shock and hurt, they feel flimsy, built on assumptions and ancient fears rather than anything he'd actually done.

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Araton watches me struggle, and something shifts in his expression—a dawning realization that transforms his features into something harder, colder.

"She's the reason you left, isn't she?" His voice has dropped to barely above a whisper. "You found out you were pregnant and you ran."

My throat tightens. I manage a stiff nod, unable to form the words that might explain or defend my choice.

Araton goes completely still, the way he does when processing deeply unwelcome information. The dimple in his right cheek—the one that appears only during his rare genuine smiles—is nowhere to be seen. Instead, a muscle works in his jaw as he stares at a point somewhere over my shoulder.

"Three years," he says again, the words hollow. "Three years of her life. Gone."

For a moment, he looks like he might say more—his chest rises with a sharp intake of breath, his lips parting slightly. But instead, he turns away, refusing to meet my gaze. The bronze skin of his neck is taut with tension, his shoulders rigid beneath his traveling clothes.

Without another word, he stalks off, his long strides carrying him quickly away from my garden, my home, my careful life. The last rays of sunlight catch the edges of his wings as he disappears around the corner, throwing shadows that stretch toward me like accusatory fingers.

I slide down the rough wall until I'm sitting in the dirt beside my carefully tended plants, my hands shaking as I press them against my face. The scent of earth clings to my fingers, grounding and familiar when everything else feels like it's crumbling around me.

19

RONNIE

I barely sleep that night, tossing in sheets that feel suddenly too constricting. Every time I close my eyes, I see Araton's face—the shock, the hurt, the barely restrained fury transforming his handsome features. My stomach twists with the memory, guilt and fear tangling into a knot I can't untangle.

By morning, my head throbs and my eyes burn. I move through our morning routine in a fog, helping Millie into her favorite blue dress while she chatters excitedly about helping Uncle Adellum arrange his special rocks today. Her tiny silver wings flutter occasionally with excitement, catching the morning light that streams through our bedroom window.

"Mama, we match!" Millie giggles, pointing at my hair and then to the ribbons in

hers. I'd braided her thick black curls back with scraps of fabric in a deep auburn shade close to my own hair color, a small compromise when she'd insisted on looking like me today.

"Yes we do, baby." I force a smile, though my chest aches. She has my stubbornness, my curls—but those wings, those golden eyes, the shape of her smile when she's trying to charm her way into an extra sweet from Harmony's kitchen... those are all Araton.

How have I never seen it before? Or did I simply refuse to acknowledge it, even to myself?

We leave our small cottage hand-in-hand, Millie skipping every third step. The morning air is crisp, carrying the scent of baking bread from the village center. Normally, I'd breathe deeply, letting the familiar smells center me, but today my senses feel heightened, alert. My gaze darts to every corner, every shadow. Is Araton still in the village? What will he do now?

"Mama, you're squeezing too tight," Millie protests, tugging at her hand in mine.

"Sorry, love." I loosen my grip immediately, guilt stabbing through me. I'm scaring her with my anxiety.

We round the corner to Adellum and Brooke's cottage, the familiar blue door a welcome sight. But as we approach the stone step leading to their porch, something catches my eye—a small wooden box sitting squarely in the center of the doorway.

I freeze, instinctively pulling Millie behind me. The box is simple but finely crafted, the wood polished to a warm glow. On top of it is my name.

"What's that, Mama?" Millie peeks around my leg, curiosity overriding any

hesitation.

"I don't know." I approach cautiously, my heart pounding. There's no danger in Saufort—I know this logically—but years of survival instincts don't fade easily. I crouch beside the box, examining it without touching. Smooth wooden edges, a simple brass clasp. Nothing threatening, yet my fingers tremble as I reach for it.

The lid opens silently on well-oiled hinges. Inside, nestled in a bed of soft dark cloth, lie two bracelets—one clearly sized for an adult, the other tiny enough for a child's wrist. My breath catches in my throat.

The larger bracelet is intricately woven metal threads interspersed with tiny beads in shades of amber and deep blue. Between each bead sits a small gemstone that catches the morning light, throwing tiny rainbows against the wooden porch. The smaller bracelet is an exact replica, scaled down to fit a child's delicate wrist.

"Pretty!" Millie gasps, pushing past my protective arm to snatch the smaller bracelet from the box. Before I can stop her, she's slipped it over her hand, admiring how it dangles loosely around her thin wrist. "Mama, look! It's like the color of your hair, and—" her little finger points to the blue beads, "—these are like Uncle Adellum's wings!"

My throat tightens as I stare at the larger bracelet remaining in the box. It's beautiful and expensive and so many of the colors fill me with different memories.

"Mama, you wear yours too!" Millie tugs at my sleeve, her expression earnest. "Then we can match again!"

Those golden eyes—Araton's eyes—gaze up at me with such innocent excitement that I can't bring myself to refuse. With numb fingers, I lift the bracelet from its cloth bed. It feels heavier than it should, weighted with unspoken meaning.

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"Please, Mama?" Millie bounces on her toes, her tiny wings fluttering with excitement.

I slide the bracelet over my hand, feeling the cool metal settle against my skin. It fits perfectly, as if crafted specifically for me. The beads shift slightly, catching the sunlight, and for a moment they seem to glow from within—amber like Araton's eyes, dark blue like the evening sky we'd once watched from my bed, his wing draped casually over my shoulder.

"We match!" Millie squeals, holding her wrist next to mine. Her delight is so pure, so uncomplicated. She has no idea of the message contained in these matching bands, no concept of the history that led to this moment.

I stare at our joined wrists, the identical bracelets catching the morning light. What is Araton trying to say? Is this some kind of claim? A peace offering? A reminder of what I kept from him? The weight of it sits heavy on my wrist, a physical manifestation of the conversation we still need to have.

"Yes, baby, we match," I manage through the tightness in my throat.

I quickly drop Millie off with a kiss to the top of her head and a hello to Adellum. And then I'm gone, unable to keep the emotion off my face.

I barely make it through the short walk from Adellum's cottage to my shop, my mind spinning and my new bracelet seeming to burn against my skin. Millie had been delighted to show her "sparkly treasure" to Brooke, who immediately demanded one of her own. Adellum had caught my eye over their heads, raised an eyebrow in silent

question, but I'd merely shaken my head. Not now. I couldn't explain what I didn't understand myself.

The morning fog has lifted by the time I reach my store, golden sunlight washing over the stone front of Wynn's Trade & Tinctures. I fish my keys from my pocket, the familiar weight grounding me, and unlock the heavy wooden door. The hinges creak—I keep meaning to oil them, but part of me likes the warning system. No one enters without me hearing it.

Except, apparently, when they're waiting for me to arrive.

I freeze in the doorway, keys still dangling from my fingers. Araton sits behind my counter, long legs stretched out before him, wings folded neatly behind his broad shoulders. Morning light streams through the eastern window, catching in his black hair and illuminating the sharp angles of his face. He's draped himself across my space like he owns it, his golden eyes watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

My heart hammers against my ribs. "Breaking and entering. Lovely."

"The window latch is embarrassingly simple." He gestures toward the small side window that I leave cracked on warm days for ventilation. "You should fix that."

I step fully inside, letting the door swing shut behind me with a decisive thud. The familiar smells of dried herbs and tinctures envelop me, but they fail to provide their usual comfort. "I'll add it to my list of concerns, right after 'uninvited xaphan invading my shop.'"

His eyes drop to my wrist, where the bracelet catches the light. Something in his expression shifts—a loosening around his eyes, the faintest curl at the corner of his mouth.

"You're wearing it."

I resist the urge to hide my arm behind my back. "Millie wanted us to match," I say defensively.

"Millie," he repeats, and the name on his lips makes me turn. His face has softened in a way I've never witnessed before—the hard lines of his jaw relaxed, his eyes almost vulnerable. For a heartbeat, he looks nothing like the arrogant, commanding xaphan I've known. "Her name is Millie."

The realization hits me like a physical blow. He hadn't known our daughter's name until this moment. Three years of her life, and he's just now learning what to call her. The weight of what I've done—what I've taken from both of them—settles on my shoulders.

"My middle name is Camille," I find myself saying. "I named her Millie after me."

He rises from behind my counter—a fluid, graceful movement that reminds me of how inhuman he is. How different. His wings shift slightly as he straightens to his full height.

"Why did you leave the bracelets?" I ask, before he can speak again, before he can say her name in that soft way that makes my chest hurt.

Araton doesn't answer my question. Instead, he steps closer, his golden eyes never leaving mine. "I want to get to know my daughter, Ronnie."

There it is. The words I've dreaded for three years. My throat tightens, and I grip the edge of my counter so hard my knuckles turn white. "We have a life here, Araton. A good life that I've built for her. For us."

"I'm not trying to take her from you." His voice holds none of the anger from yesterday, replaced by something steadier, more determined. "I just want to know her. To be part of her life."

"As what? The father who visits once a month when his schedule allows? The xaphan who drops expensive gifts and then disappears again?" The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

His jaw tightens, a muscle ticking beneath his bronze skin. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it?"

"You never gave me the chance to be anything else." His wings flex slightly—not threatening, but a sign of his agitation. "You ran, Ronnie. You took my child and you ran."

The truth of his words stings. I look away, unable to meet that golden gaze any longer. Beyond him, through the shop window, I can see Saufort coming to life—Old Tal settling onto his porch with his whittling, Tam's grandson running with a basket of fresh rolls. My village. Our home.

"What do you want from me?" I finally ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

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"Time." Araton takes another step closer, close enough that I can smell the familiar scent of him—sandalwood and mountain air. "Time with Millie. Time to figure out what kind of father I can be to her."

It's everything I feared and somehow less terrible than I imagined. He's not demanding custody or threatening to take her away. Just... time.

I look up at him, at the face that haunts my dreams and nightmares both. "Okay," I hear myself say, the word feeling foreign on my tongue. "Okay."

20

RONNIE

The afternoon sun slants through the trees as I lock up my shop, the key turning heavily in the old iron lock. My nerves are frayed from Araton's presence, his eyes following my every movement throughout the day. He kept his distance—physically, at least—setting up outside my shop beneath the low-hanging awning with an uncanny patience that reminded me of a predator waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"Time to pick up Millie?" he asks, straightening from where he'd been leaning against the wall. The casual observer might miss the tension coiled beneath his relaxed posture, but I don't. His wings shift minutely, betraying his anticipation.

"Yes." I slip the keys into my pocket, avoiding his gaze. "She stays with Adellum during the day."

He falls into step beside me, too close and yet somehow not close enough. The heat of his body radiates between us, a phantom touch that makes my skin prickle with awareness. We walk in silence through the village, but it's anything but peaceful—the air crackles with unspoken words, with three years of absence and secrets.

When we reach Harmony's home, my steps slow involuntarily. The comfortable two story home with its neatly tended garden and smoke curling from the chimney has always represented safety to me. Today, it feels like I'm leading danger straight to its door.

"This is it," I say unnecessarily.

Araton studies the farmhouse, his golden eyes taking in every detail—the windchimes made of polished stones and copper wire that hang from the eaves, the clay pots of herbs lining the steps, the brightly painted door. His expression gives nothing away.

"It's... homey," he finally says.

Before I can respond, the door swings open, and Millie bursts out like a tiny whirlwind, her black curls bouncing and her small silver wings fluttering with excitement.

"Mama!" She races down the path, then skids to a stop when she notices Araton. Her golden eyes—so like his—widen with undisguised curiosity. "Who's that?"

Harmony appears in the doorway behind her, wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron. Her eyes immediately lock onto Araton, then flick to me with quiet concern. I give her a slight nod, hoping she understands that this is happening with my consent, if not my enthusiasm.

"This is..." My mouth goes dry. Three years of keeping this secret, and now the words

won't come.

Araton doesn't wait for me to find my voice. He crouches down to Millie's level, his massive wings folding elegantly behind him to maintain his balance. In this position, with his imposing height diminished, the resemblance between them becomes startlingly clear—the same golden eyes, the same dimple that appears in his right cheek as he offers her a hesitant smile.

"Hello, Millie," he says, his voice gentler than I've ever heard it. "My name is Araton. I'm your father."

The world seems to hold its breath. Millie tilts her head, studying him with that peculiar intensity she sometimes gets. I step forward automatically, protective instincts surging, but force myself to stop. This moment isn't about me.

"You have wings like me," Millie finally says, her voice small but not afraid.

"I do." Araton extends one wing slightly, the dusky gray feathers glinting with silver highlights in the afternoon light. "Yours are beautiful. Like starlight."

Millie's face breaks into a radiant smile, and she spins around, trying to look at her own wings. "Mama says they're special. Uncle Adellum has blue ones, but nobody else has silver like me."

"That's because you're very special," Araton says, and the raw emotion in his voice makes my throat tighten.

Harmony moves toward us, her steps measured and cautious. "I should head back inside," she says, her hazel eyes meeting mine with silent support. "Unless you need me to stay?"

I shake my head, grateful for her understanding. "We're fine. Thank you for today."

"Always," she says with a warm smile for Millie, then slips back inside, leaving us in our little triangle of tension and possibility.

Millie has already turned her attention back to Araton, her initial shyness evaporating like morning dew. "Are you staying with us? Can you teach me to fly? Mama says I'm too little still, but Uncle Adellum says I might be able to soon, and—" She breaks off suddenly, her golden eyes widening. "Is that why we have matching bracelets?"

She thrusts out her small wrist, displaying the miniature version of the bracelet I now wear. Araton's eyes soften as he looks at it resting against her brown skin.

"Yes," he says simply. "Because we're connected."

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"Can I show you my rocks?" Millie asks suddenly, already grabbing his hand without waiting for an answer. "Uncle Adellum helps me find the sparkly ones. I have a blue one that looks just like the sky when it rains!"

Araton looks up at me, silently asking permission. For a heartbeat, I'm transported back to that first night in my shop, when those same golden eyes had asked an entirely different question. I'd given in then too, against my better judgment.

"Go ahead," I say softly, stepping back to give them space.

The relief and gratitude that flashes across Araton's face is so raw it makes my chest ache. As I watch him being led away by our daughter's tiny, insistent hand, a tangle of emotions knots itself in my stomach—happiness that Millie isn't afraid, relief that Araton is treating her with such gentle reverence, and an undercurrent of guilt that threatens to pull me under.

I was so sure I was right to leave, to protect Millie from a father who might not want her or might take her from me. Now, watching them together—their matching golden eyes, their identical expressions of wonder—I'm no longer certain of anything.

Araton was very serious about being in Millie's life. He sees her daily, and he seems enamored.

The first week of their new arrangement, I stand in my doorway, arms crossed over my chest like armor, watching Araton walk away with Millie skipping beside him. Her small silver wings flutter with each bounce, catching sunlight. My daughter's hand disappears inside his much larger one.

"We're going to catch thalivern by the river," she informs me with the gravity of someone announcing a diplomatic mission.

"Don't let her near the water alone," I call after them, hating the tremble in my voice.

Araton turns, the sun catching the gold in his eyes. "I'd sooner cut off my wings than let harm come to her."

I believe him, which terrifies me more than doubt ever could.

When they return that evening, Millie's curls are tangled with flower petals and her clothes bear the cheerful stains of adventure. The sight of her perched on Araton's broad shoulders, those silver-flecked gray wings curving protectively around her smaller ones, creates a lump in my throat I can't swallow past.

"Mama! We found FIVE thalivern and Papa can make his voice sound like a black pitter bird and I climbed a tree and?—"

"Bath first," I interrupt, struggling to keep my expression neutral at her casual use of "Papa."

Araton sets her down with careful hands. "I'll see you tomorrow, sweetheart."

He turns to leave, but Millie grabs his pant leg. "But you didn't tell Mama about the burigo that jumped on your head!"

That night, he stays for dinner.

By the second week, I find myself unconsciously setting a third plate at our small table. Millie chatters through dinner, her golden eyes bright with stories, while Araton listens with an intensity that makes my chest ache. He never interrupts her,

never dismisses her nonsensical tangents. I'd expected arrogance from him—the same smug confidence he'd always worn like a second skin—but with Millie, he's different. Softer around the edges.

"And then Uncle Ady said I could help with his painting tomorrow if I wanted, but Papa said we're going to look for special rocks for my collection, so maybe the next day?"

I glance up and catch Araton watching me over Millie's head, his expression unreadable. When our eyes meet, something electric passes between us—that same dangerous current that's always hummed beneath our interactions.

"Uncle Ady won't mind waiting," I say, finally breaking away from his gaze.

Later, after dinner, I find myself lingering in the kitchen longer than necessary, wiping down already-clean counters while Araton reads to Millie in the living room. His deep voice carries through the house, rising and falling with the story. When I finally join them, Millie is half-asleep on his lap, her tiny wings twitching with dreams.

"She's out," he whispers.

I should take her to bed, should usher him out the door with a polite but firm goodnight. Instead, I sit across from him, watching how carefully he cradles our daughter.

"You're good with her," I admit reluctantly.

Something flashes across his face—pain, anger, gratitude—too fast to identify. "I had three years to make up for."

The accusation lands like a slap, but I don't flinch. "I did what I thought was best."

"For her? Or for you?"

He carries Millie to bed before I can answer, his wings brushing the doorframe as he navigates the narrow hallway. When he returns, I expect him to leave, but he sits across from me again, the space between us charged with unsaid things.

"Teach me," he says quietly.

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"What?"

"Teach me what she likes for breakfast. What stories make her laugh. Which songs help her sleep. Teach me three years of being her father."

That night, he stays until midnight.

By the third week, I find myself watching the sun's position in the sky, counting the hours until Araton brings Millie home. They've established traditions already—she runs to him with pebbles she's found that match his wing colors; he pretends each one is a priceless treasure. They have inside jokes I don't understand, silly songs with made-up words.

The jealousy I expected never materializes. Instead, there's a warmth in my chest when they're together, a completeness I hadn't realized was missing.

"Mama, can Papa stay for storytime again?" Millie asks one evening, her voice muffled against my neck as I carry her up to bed.

"If he wants to."

"He wants to," she says with the absolute certainty of childhood.

After she's asleep, we sit on my small porch, a respectful distance between us that somehow feels more intimate than touch. The night is velvet-dark around us, the air heavy with summer heat and unspoken possibilities.

"Why did you really come south?" I ask, breaking the fragile silence.

Araton's wings shift slightly—a tell I've begun to recognize when he's considering his words carefully. "I told myself it was for a change. New opportunities."

"And the truth?"

He turns toward me, moonlight catching on the sharp planes of his face. "I never stopped looking for you, fierce one."

The old nickname sends a shiver through me. I glance away, afraid of what he might see in my eyes. "I never thought you'd want... this. A child. Responsibility."

"You never gave me the chance to want it." His voice holds no accusation now, just quiet certainty. "But I do want it."

And I don't dare let myself hope he means more than his daughter.

21

ARATON

I never expected love to feel like this—a tether anchoring me to earth after years of drifting. Every time Millie's tiny hand slips into mine, I feel something crack open inside my chest, a warmth spreading through hollow spaces I didn't know existed.

"Papa, look!" She points to a row of smooth river stones she's arranged across her bedroom floor. "I made a pattern like you showed me. See? Gray, white, blue, gray, white, blue!"

I crouch beside her, wings folding carefully to avoid knocking over her treasured

collection. "That's perfect, sweetheart. You have a gift for patterns."

Her golden eyes—my eyes—sparkle with pride as she beams up at me. "Can we practice flying today?"

The question makes my chest tighten. Her wings are still too small, too delicate for true flight, but I can't bring myself to disappoint her. "How about we practice wing strength instead? Those muscles need to be strong before you can take off."

She nods seriously, already positioning herself on tiptoes, her silver-flecked wings spreading with determination. I guide her through the same exercises my father taught me, modified for her tiny frame—gentle stretches, controlled flutters, movements designed to build the muscles that will eventually hold her aloft.

"Like this?" She strains, her face scrunched in concentration as her wings quiver with effort.

"Exactly like that." I demonstrate the movement, my larger wings creating a slight breeze that ruffles her black curls.

My daughter. The thought still staggers me. For centuries, I've sought my place—climbing from minor courier to trusted advisor, building connections across territories, earning respect through wit and cunning. But nothing has ever felt as right as this—teaching Millie how to strengthen her wings in the dappled sunlight of her bedroom.

Later, she insists on showing me every corner of Saufort. Her small legs work double-time to keep pace with mine as she points out landmarks with the gravity of an official tour guide.

"That's where Miss Harmony works," she explains, gesturing to a small restaurant

with weathered wooden tables spilling onto a patio. "She makes the best sweetcakes in the whole world. And that's where Uncle Adellum sometimes sells his paintings." She points to the village square where vendors set up stalls on market days. "And over there is where Mama goes to get special plants sometimes."

I absorb every detail, mentally mapping this place that shaped my daughter's first years. The village is smaller than I initially thought, intimate in a way that explains the easy familiarity Millie has with everyone we pass. Shop owners wave, women carrying baskets stop to ruffle her hair, elderly men nod respectfully. I even catch a few curious glances aimed at me—not hostile, just watchful.

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"And over there is Mama's shop!" Millie's excitement peaks as she points to the building I've become intimately familiar with over the past weeks.

We cross the street, and I catch a glimpse of Ronnie through the window, her auburn hair falling forward as she measures something into a small jar. She tucks a strand behind her ear with practiced precision, her movements economical and focused.

My wings shift restlessly, an involuntary response I can't seem to control around her anymore.

"Can we go see her?" Millie tugs at my hand, oblivious to the complicated emotions churning beneath my composed exterior.

"Of course." I allow myself to be pulled toward the shop, telling myself it's solely for Millie's benefit. A lie I'm becoming less convinced by each day.

The small bell above the door announces our arrival. Ronnie looks up, and for a heartbeat, something soft and unguarded flickers across her face before she schools her expression.

"Mama! I showed Papa the whole village and told him about the time the river got too high and Uncle Ady had to carry me on his shoulders!"

"Did you now?" Ronnie's lips curve into a smile, and I catch myself tracking the movement. "I hope you didn't talk his ear off."

"I enjoy her stories," I say, meeting Ronnie's gaze over our daughter's head. "She's a

remarkable guide. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree when it comes to knowing exactly what people need."

The compliment lands softly between us. Ronnie's cheeks flush slightly, her gray eyes widening just enough that I know she caught my meaning. Her shop is meticulously organized in the same precise way she used to arrange her supplies in her old storefront—everything in its place, nothing wasted.

"Mama, can Papa stay for dinner again?" Millie asks, already pulling herbs from the lower shelves she's allowed to touch.

"If he'd like to," Ronnie answers, her eyes still on mine.

"I'd like to," I reply honestly.

That evening, after a meal of roasted root vegetables and fresh bread that Ronnie baked herself, we put Millie to bed together. I watch as Ronnie tucks the blankets around our daughter, smoothing back wild curls from her forehead with a tenderness that makes my throat tight.

"Tell me about the stars again, Papa," Millie mumbles sleepily.

I sit on the edge of her bed, careful not to disturb her nearly-asleep form. "The stars are ancient beings who watch over us from the heavens. They collect our stories and weave them into constellations..."

By the time I finish, her breathing has deepened into sleep, small silver wings twitching occasionally with her dreams. Ronnie stands in the doorway, arms crossed, watching us with an expression I can't quite decipher.

When we retreat to the main room, silence settles between us—not uncomfortable,

but charged with potential.

"I noticed your herb garden could use some attention," I say finally, the words coming out before I've fully formed the thought. "I could help, if you'd like."

Ronnie tilts her head, studying me with those perceptive gray eyes. "You know about herb gardens now?"

"I know about many things." I allow a smile to curve my lips. "And what I don't know, I learn quickly."

To my surprise, she doesn't hesitate or push back as she once would have. Instead, she nods toward the back door. "It does need work. The zynthra is overtaking everything."

The night air carries the scent of meadowmint and rich soil as we step into the small garden behind her shop. Moonlight catches on the silver threads in my wings as I kneel beside her, careful to keep them folded tight so they don't disturb the delicate plants.

"Show me what needs doing," I say quietly.

The moonlight silvers the edges of the herbs, casting delicate shadows across Ronnie's garden. She kneels beside a patch of zynthra, her movements precise and practiced as she parts the vibrant leaves with calloused fingers. I watch her hands—strong, capable hands that have built a life here, that have raised our daughter.

"These ones," she says, guiding my attention to particular stems. "See how the leaves have this slight curl at the edges? And the color is deeper, more vibrant? That's when they're perfect for harvesting."

I lean closer, inhaling the sharp, earthy scent. "And these others?"

"Too young." She shakes her head. "Give them another week. The stems need to be firmer."

Her shoulder brushes against mine as she shifts to check another plant. Neither of us pulls away. This newfound comfort between us feels fragile, precious—a tentative bridge replacing the burning intensity that once defined our encounters.

We work in companionable silence, me following her lead as she shows me which plants to trim, which to leave. The rhythm is soothing—her murmured instructions, the soft sounds of our breathing, the occasional rustle of my wings adjusting to accommodate our movements.

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Finally, I gather my courage. The question has been burning inside me for weeks.

"Ronnie," I say softly, keeping my eyes on the dreelek leaves I'm carefully trimming. "Why didn't you tell me about Millie?"

Her hands freeze mid-motion. I can feel tension radiating from her body, see the slight rise of her shoulders as she inhales sharply. I hurry to continue before she can retreat behind her walls.

"I'm not blaming you," I clarify, setting down the shears and turning to face her fully. "Clearly, you did everything right. Our daughter is..." I search for words adequate to describe the miracle that is Millie. "She's wonderful. Perfect. You've given her an incredible life here."

Ronnie's expression softens marginally, the moonlight catching in her gray eyes as she finally meets my gaze. Something vulnerable flickers there before she looks away, back to the plants.

"I was afraid," she admits, her voice barely audible. "Afraid you'd want to take her. And what can a human do to stop a xaphan from taking what they want?"

Her words strike me like a physical blow. I sit back on my heels, wings drawing tight against my spine in shock. "You thought I would—" I struggle to keep my voice level. "Ronnie, I know we were never serious, but did you really think I'm the type of man who would tear a child from her mother?"

She yanks a weed from the soil with unnecessary force. "What was I supposed to

think? I didn't know what kind of man you were beyond getting into my bed."

The words sting, but I can't deny their truth. Our relationship had been defined by those heated encounters, by the intensity we found in each other's bodies while keeping our hearts carefully guarded.

"You're a good father," she continues, her tone softening slightly. "Better than I expected. But how long do you plan on staying around? You have a life elsewhere. Responsibilities. Connections."

"I don't plan on going anywhere." The words emerge from somewhere deep inside me, a truth I hadn't fully acknowledged until this moment. "This is where I want to be."

She swallows hard, her throat working as she absorbs my words. After a long moment, she nods, just once, before returning to her task with renewed focus.

We continue working in silence, but it's different now—weighted with unspoken possibilities. I find myself replaying her words, examining every interaction we've ever had through this new lens of understanding.

Had she really believed I would be so callous? So cruel? And why does that assumption hurt so much?

The realization hits me with startling clarity: I've always had feelings for her. From that first encounter in her shop, when she stood fearless and defiant before me. Through every monthly visit, every heated night, every morning I left before sunrise—part of me had already begun to belong to her.

Had she truly not seen it? Or had I hidden it so well that even I hadn't recognized its depth until now, kneeling beside her in this moonlit garden with our daughter

sleeping peacefully inside?

I glance at Ronnie's profile, struck by how the silver light traces the determined line of her jaw, the slight furrow of concentration between her brows. She's beautiful in her focus, in her quiet strength.

And I'm terrified by how much I suddenly want her to see me—not just as Millie's father or as the xaphan who visits her bed, but as a man who might be worthy of her trust.

22

RONNIE

I've never been good at gatherings. Give me solitude and hard work over forced conversation any day. But watching Harmony bustle around my kitchen like she belongs here—which, in many ways, she does—settles something in my chest. She's arranging wildflowers in a chipped ceramic vase while Adellum hangs back, those massive gray wings carefully folded against his powerful frame as he helps Brooke carry in bread still warm from their oven.

"You didn't have to bring anything," I mutter for the third time, stirring the thick stew that bubbles on my cooking hearth.

Harmony's laugh filters through the room, light and free. "And you didn't have to invite us, but here we are." She tucks a wayward curl behind my ear with familiar ease. "The bread is Adellum's doing. You know how he gets when he's anxious about something."

"I'm not anxious," Adellum protests, setting the loaf down. "I'm appropriately concerned about whether this stew will be enough for seven people, three of whom

have wings."

I roll my eyes. "There's enough food to feed half the village."

"Only if half the village doesn't include my mate," Harmony teases. "Or have you forgotten how much he eats?"

The warmth of their banter wraps around me, even as I fight the instinct to withdraw. This easygoing domesticity is still foreign territory—this chosen family that somehow claimed me despite my best efforts to keep everyone at arm's length.

A sharp knock at the door sends a jolt through my body.

"I'll get it!" Millie shrieks, her tiny feet pattering across the wooden floorboards as she races to the entrance. I've barely opened my mouth to caution her about opening doors when I hear the telltale creak of hinges.

"Papa!" Her delighted squeal fills the house.

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I take a deep breath, setting down my wooden spoon carefully to avoid betraying the tiny tremor in my hand. When I turn, Araton stands in my doorway, his broad shoulders nearly filling the frame, golden eyes finding mine instantly over Millie's head as she tugs him inside by the hand.

"I invited him," I explain unnecessarily to the room, my voice sounding strange in my own ears. "For dinner."

Something flickers across Araton's face—surprise, maybe pleasure—before he schools his expression. "I brought wine," he says, producing a bottle with his free hand. "From the northern vineyards."

"Uncle Ady!" Millie releases Araton to fling herself at Adellum, who scoops her up with practiced ease. "Papa brought fancy juice!"

Adellum chuckles, the sound rumbling from his chest. "So I see." He nods to Araton, surprisingly cordial. I suppose they've interacted a lot because of Millie, though. "Velrien."

"Vey." Araton returns the greeting with equal civility, his wings adjusting slightly behind him—a subtle tell I've learned means he's more nervous than he lets on.

The realization that I can read him now, that I've catalogued his small habits and expressions without meaning to, sends a wave of heat through my body.

"Is dinner ready?" Brooke pipes up, appearing from where she'd been exploring my small collection of dried herbs. "I'm starving."

"Nearly," I manage. "Why don't you all sit down?"

The next hour passes in a blur of filling bowls, breaking bread, and watching Millie demonstrate to everyone how she can make her small wings flutter fast enough to create a breeze that blows her curls back from her forehead.

"Papa's teaching me!" she announces proudly. "Soon I'll fly higher than the house!"

"Not quite that high yet, sweetheart," Araton corrects gently, but his eyes shine with undisguised pride.

I find myself lingering on that expression, on the way his entire demeanor softens when he looks at our daughter. The jagged, distrustful part of me that expected him to eventually lose interest has grown quiet lately, buried beneath evidence to the contrary.

Across the table, Harmony catches my eye and gives me a knowing smile that makes me flush to my roots.

"Why doesn't your Papa live here?" Brooke's innocent question lands like a stone in still water, creating immediate ripples of tension.

"Brooke," Harmony murmurs, a warning in her tone.

But Millie, curse her inquisitive nature, perks up instantly. "Yeah! Why doesn't Papa live with us, Mama?" Her golden eyes—so like her father's—fix on me with uncomfortable intensity. "Uncle Ady lives with Brooke and Aunt Mony."

The table falls silent. I swallow hard, frantically searching for words that won't come. How do I explain adult complications to a child? How do I say that her father and I were never in love, that we barely knew each other beyond heated nights that left

marks on my soul I'm still trying to understand?

"Well," I begin, my voice faltering. "Sometimes mamas and papas live in different houses, but they both still love their little ones very much." I feel Araton's gaze on me like a physical touch but can't bring myself to meet it.

"But wouldn't it be better if Papa was here all the time?" Millie insists, her little face screwed up in confusion. "Then he could read me stories every night, not just sometimes."

"I—" I feel heat climbing my neck, words failing me completely.

"What about cookies?" Adellum interjects smoothly, rising to his impressive height. "I think we've still got room for dessert. Why don't you two come help me set them out?"

Brooke jumps up eagerly, but Millie hesitates, clearly not ready to abandon her line of questioning.

"But first, why don't you and Brooke go work on your sparkles," Adellum adds with a meaningful look at Millie. "Then you can come show us."

That does it. Millie's face lights up, the previous conversation forgotten in her excitement to see the iridescent winged creatures. "Hurry, Brooke!" She slides from her seat and grabs her friend's hand, pulling her toward her room.

The silence they leave in their wake is deafening.

Harmony clears her throat. "I'm so sorry about that," she says, her hazel eyes warm with empathy. "Brooke has been asking us about everything lately. The phase is apparently contagious."

"It's fine," I say automatically, though my face still burns.

"Children have no filter," Araton adds calmly, as though we hadn't just narrowly escaped a conversation that would have forced us to define something I'm not ready to name. "It's part of their charm."

Unexpected laughter bubbles up from my chest, loosening the knot of tension there. "Charm is one word for it."

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Harmony chuckles, reaching for her wine glass. "Wait until she starts asking where babies come from. Brooke had Adellum stuttering like a schoolboy last week."

"I was not," he grumbles, though he looks away.

The image of the composed, intimidating Adellum floundering under a child's questioning breaks through the last of my discomfort. I laugh outright, and when I catch Araton's eye, I'm surprised to find him smiling—a genuine smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes and makes something flutter in my stomach that has nothing to do with embarrassment.

I grab a stack of plates, eager for something to do with my hands. I can't handle the onslaught of emotions right now when I'm already feeling flustered.

"I'll take care of these," Araton says, rising from his seat. His wings shift behind him, the motion graceful despite their size. His forearm brushes mine as he reaches for the bowl, and the fleeting contact sends an unwanted jolt through me.

"I can handle washing up after my own dinner," I mutter.

"I'm sure you can handle anything," he counters, that familiar half-smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "But you don't always have to."

Before I can formulate a properly cutting response, Harmony interjects. "Those sweetberries I planted for you last spring should be perfect by now. Wouldn't they be wonderful with the cookie plate?"

"Fine," I sigh, grateful for the excuse to escape. "I'll go pick some."

The evening air wraps around me like a cool balm as I slip out the back door. Night has just begun to settle over the village, painting everything in soft blues and purples. I take a deep breath, letting the tension drain from my shoulders.

My little garden thrives at the rear of the house—a triumph considering how terrible I was at growing anything when I first arrived. The sweetberry bushes cluster at the far end, laden with dark fruit that glows faintly in the dimming light.

I'm halfway across the yard when I hear it—a tiny, terrified whimper.

My head snaps up. There, at the edge of my garden where it borders the wild grasses, stands Millie. Her small silvery wings are pressed flat against her back in fear, her little body frozen.

Ten paces beyond her, a hulking shape moves through the tall grass with sinuous grace.

For one horrifying moment, I can't breathe.

It's a thassir—massive, muscled body crouched low to the ground, its sleek coat the color of midnight with bioluminescent markings pulsing along its flanks. I've only seen them in market drawings before; they're supposed to stay in the deep forests, not prowl the edges of villages. Its six amber eyes blink in sequence, locked on my daughter as it creeps forward on silent paws.

"Millie," I whisper, trying to keep my voice steady despite the terror gripping my throat. "Don't move, baby."

Her tear-streaked face turns slightly toward me. "Mama," she chokes out, barely

audible. "I wanted to see the thaliverns..."

The thassir's head swivels, those eerie eyes now fixed on me. Its upper lip curls back to reveal double rows of teeth that gleam wetly in the fading light.

With dread-filled clarity, I realize the creature stands directly between me and my child.

"Hey!" I shout, waving my arms and taking a deliberate step to the side and moving more toward the woods. I need to get it distracted from the house—and my daughter. "Over here, you overgrown kilmar!"

The beast rumbles low in its throat, a sound that vibrates through the ground beneath my feet. It takes a measured steptoward me, then hesitates, glancing back at Millie—the easier prey.

The back door creaks open.

"Ronnie, do you need help with—" Araton's words die as he takes in the scene before him.

Our eyes lock across the yard, and in that instant, a silent understanding passes between us. My chest constricts with a terror more profound than anything I've ever known—not fear for myself, but for the tiny life we created.

"Get her," I command, my voice surprisingly steady. "Inside. Now."

Without hesitation, I snatch up a broken branch from the ground and slam it against a nearby tree. "Come on, you bastard! Fresh meat right here!"

The thassir's six eyes blink in rapid succession. It snarls, momentarily confused by

the new threat.

"NOW, ARATON!" I scream, moving farther away, drawing the predator's attention.

In my peripheral vision, I see him move—a blur of speed as his powerful wings extend. He lunges for Millie, scooping her against his chest. She cries out, reaching for me over his shoulder.

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"Mama!"

"Take her inside!" My voice cracks as the thassir turns toward the movement, muscles bunching under its midnight hide. "GO!"

The moment Araton clutches our daughter safely to his chest, I sprint in the opposite direction, toward the forest edge. The thassir hesitates only a split second before abandoning its previous prey and giving chase to the easier target.

I can hear its massive paws thumping against the earth behind me, feel its hot breath closing the distance. I push harder, veering toward the denser trees where its bulk might be a disadvantage.

There's no time to look back, no time to see if Millie is safely inside. There's just the thundering of my heart, the burn in my lungs, and the singular thought pounding through my mind:

My daughter is safe. My daughter is safe. My daughter is safe.

23

ARATON

Millie's weight in my arms feels both too light and impossibly heavy as I burst through the door, my wings knocking against the frame in my haste. Her tiny body trembles against my chest, her tears leaving wet patches on my shirt. Every muscle in my body screams to turn around, to go after Ronnie, but the precious cargo clutching

at me anchors me to reason.

"Papa, Mama's still out there!" Millie sobs, her golden eyes—my eyes—wide with terror. "The big monster?—"

"I know, sweetheart." My voice sounds alien to my own ears, stripped of its usual confidence. I set her down with more force than intended, my hands shaking. "Stay here."

Harmony rushes forward, her face drained of color. "What's happening?"

"Thassir," I manage, the word clawing its way out of my throat. "Forest edge. Ronnie drew it away from Millie."

The silent understanding that passes between us needs no elaboration. Harmony immediately pulls Millie into her arms while Adellum moves to block the door, his massive gray wings expanding protectively.

"I went to see the pretty thaliverns," Millie hiccups, her small silver wings quivering against her back. "I'm not supposed to go outside alone but I wanted?—"

"We'll talk about that later," I cut her off, unable to focus on her explanation. Every second feels like an eternity, every moment I stand here is another moment Ronnie faces that beast alone.

Fear like I've never known courses through me, turning my blood to ice. My mind floods with images of Ronnie—her fierce gray eyes closed forever, her sharp tongue silenced, those freckles I've memorized splashed with crimson. The possibility nearly brings me to my knees.

"Keep them inside," I command, already backing toward the door. "Both of them."

Adellum nods, his silver eyes unusually somber. "We will. Go."

I don't wait for further permission. The night air hits me like a physical force as I launch myself from the doorway, wings snapping open to catch the breeze. I rise swiftly above the house, scanning the darkness for any sign of movement.

The forest edge looms as a solid black wall against the dimming purple sky. Where did she go? Which direction? Panic threatens to overwhelm my training, my carefully cultivated composure crumbling like sand. I've faced dignitaries who could have ordered my execution with a smile on my face, but the thought of losing Ronnie—stubborn, infuriating, magnificent Ronnie—unravels me completely.

A flash of movement catches my eye—something large displacing the tall grass at the forest boundary. Without hesitation, I tilt my wings and dive.

The wind whistles past my face as I push my wings to their limit, driving myself forward with desperate speed. "RONNIE!" Her name tears from my throat, raw and primal, as I approach the treeline.

No answer comes.

I land hard at the forest edge, my eyes frantically adjusting to the deeper darkness beneath the canopy. The undergrowth shows signs of disturbance—broken branches, trampled ferns. I follow the trail, my heart thundering so loudly I fear it might drown out any sounds that could lead me to her.

"Ronnie!" I call again, pushing deeper into the woods. My wings catch on low branches, but I barely register the sting. "Answer me, fierce one!"

The forest feels like a living entity closing in around me, branches reaching like grasping fingers, shadows deepening with each step. Is this how it ends? After

everything—after finding her again, discovering our daughter, these tentative steps toward something I've never dared name—will she be taken from me by some random predator?

I refuse to accept it. Something dark and possessive rises in my chest, a feeling I've never allowed myself to acknowledge fully until this moment.

"She is mine," I growl into the darkness, as if the forest itself might listen. "Do you hear me? She belongs with me."

A distant crash sounds to my left—the unmistakable noise of something large moving through the underbrush. I pivot instantly, wings tucking tight against my back as I sprint between tree trunks, leaping over fallen logs. The forest floor is treacherous in the darkness, roots threatening to snag my feet, but I push forward, driven by pure desperation.

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Another crash, closer now. Then a sound that freezes my blood—the distinctive snarl of a thassir followed by a human cry of pain.

Ronnie.

I've never moved faster in my life, drawing on every ounce of strength in my body. I burst through a thicket into a small clearing just in time to see the massive shape of the thassir lunging toward a figure pressed against the base of a massive tree.

Ronnie stands with her back against the trunk, clutching a broken branch like a weapon, her auburn hair wild around her face. Even cornered, even facing death, she looks ready to fight with everything she has. The sight of her—alive, defiant—nearly buckles my knees with relief.

But there's no time for gratitude. The thassir crouches, its six amber eyes blinking in that unsettling sequence as it prepares to pounce.

I don't think. I don't plan. I simply act.

I hurl myself between Ronnie and the beast, my wings flaring wide to make myself appear larger. The thassir recoils for just a heartbeat—enough time for me to position myself defensively. Its massive form towers above me, all rippling muscle beneath dark, mottled fur. Its six amber eyes blink in that unnerving sequential pattern, assessing me as a new threat.

"Stay behind me," I growl to Ronnie without looking back. I can sense her there—the warmth of her, the rapid tempo of her breathing.

The thassir's upper lip curls back to reveal rows of jagged teeth, each one longer than my finger. The beast shifts its weight, haunches bunching for attack. I mirror its movements, calculating angles, searching for weakness. I've hunted thassir before, but never unarmed, never with stakes this high.

It lunges—a blur of claws and teeth. I sidestep and thrust my forearm against its throat, using its momentum to drive it sideways into a tree trunk. The impact sends shockwaves through the forest floor. The beast recovers faster than I anticipate, twisting with unnatural flexibility to snap at my wing.

Pain lances through me as teeth graze my primary feathers. I slam my fist into the creature's sensitive snout, earning a high-pitched howl that vibrates through my bones.

"Run!" I shout to Ronnie as I wrestle with the beast, my fingers digging into its thick fur, searching for vulnerable points. "Get out of here!"

"I can't leave you!" Her voice cracks with terror, yet I hear her step forward rather than back.

Gods, this stubborn, impossible woman. Even now, she defies me.

The thassir thrashes beneath my grip, nearly dislodging me. Its claws rake across my side, tearing fabric and skin. Hot pain blooms along my ribs, but I barely register it through the flood of combat focus.

"Ronnie!" I twist to look at her, catching a glimpse of her face—pale in the darkness, jaw set with determination. "Run. Now. I will find you."

"But—"

"I promise." I pour every ounce of command into my voice. "I will always find you."

Something in my tone finally reaches her. With a strangled sound of protest, she turns and flees, crashing through the underbrush. The thassir's attention follows her movement, its body tensing to give chase. I drive my knee into its flank, reclaiming its focus and garnering more of its claws.

"No," I snarl into its face, baring my own teeth. "She's mine."

Once I'm certain Ronnie is far enough away, I stop holding back. With her gone, I don't have to restrain my magic or my strength. I press my palm against the thassir's throat, channeling a current of air magic directly into its windpipe. The beast convulses, claws scrabbling frantically at my chest and arms.

I lean in close, feeling its hot breath against my face. "You should have chosen another hunting ground."

With a vicious twist of my wrist, I compress the air inside its lungs until they rupture. The thassir's body goes rigid, then limp. Its six eyes blink once more, out of sequence, before glazing over.

I shove the carcass away, rising to my feet. Blood trickles down my side, but the wounds are superficial. They'll heal quickly. Adrenaline courses through my veins, making my vision sharper, my senses heightened. The forest around me pulses with new clarity—every rustling leaf, every shifting shadow.

And somewhere among those shadows is Ronnie.

I inhale deeply, catching the faintest trace of her scent on the night air. My wings unfurl instinctively, stretching to their full span despite the cramped confines of the forest. The predatory instinct that helped me kill the thassir hasn't receded—it merely

shifts targets.

Find her. Hunt her. Claim her.

The thought sends an electric thrill down my spine. I launch into motion, following her trail through the trees. Her path is erratic—panicked—crashing through undergrowth with no thought for stealth. So easy to track. So completely at my mercy.

Something primal stirs in my chest as I pick up speed. This isn't the poised, careful pursuit of a courier or diplomat. This is something far older, something written into my blood. The chase. The capture.

I leap over fallen logs, weaving between tree trunks. Each step brings me closer to her, and anticipation builds like a gathering storm. I imagine finding her—breathless, disheveled, those defiant gray eyes wide when she realizes I've caught her. I'll show her exactly what happens when she runs from me, when she tries to hide from me.

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The memory of her pressed against the wall of her cottage flashes through my mind. How she yielded beneath my hands even as she fought me with words. How perfectly she fit against me.

My pace quickens, wings tucked tight against my back for speed. The forest thins ahead, and I catch a glimpse of movement—a flash of auburn against the night. There. My prey. My Ronnie.

The hunt surges through me, hot and demanding. I close the distance with predatory focus, my blood singing with the promise of capture.

24

RONNIE

My lungs burn with each desperate breath as I crash through the underbrush, branches whipping against my face and arms. The darkness swallows everything but the immediate ground before me, and I stumble over roots and stones that seem to reach up from the earth specifically to trip me.

"Keep moving," I gasp to myself, pushing my tired legs forward. "Don't stop."

The forest is alive around me—chittering, rustling, watching. Each sound makes me flinch, imagining those six amber eyes blinking in that hideous pattern, that massive form lunging from the shadows. Nothing prepared me for facing one up close, for the stench of its breath or the strange clicking sounds it made deep in its throat.

I wouldn't have stood a chance if Araton hadn't appeared.

Araton.

His name pulses through my mind with each frantic heartbeat. The image of him throwing himself between me and the beast, wings spread wide and magnificent, plays on repeat behind my eyes. The raw command in his voice when he'd ordered me to run. The promise.

"I will always find you."

A shiver that has nothing to do with fear races down my spine. I shouldn't be thinking about how those words affected me. I shouldn't be remembering the heat in his golden eyes, or how the muscles in his back flexed as he wrestled with the beast, or how something primal and feminine inside me responded to his protective display.

But I am.

I slow my pace slightly, straining to hear any sounds of combat behind me. The forest has gone eerily quiet—no snarls, no crashes, no cries of pain. Either Araton has killed the beast... or it has killed him.

My stomach drops at the second possibility, a cold dread washing through me. No. Not him. Not now, when Millie has just found her father, when I've just started to...

To what? Let him in? Trust him? Want him?

All of the above, whispers a traitorous voice in my head.

I shake the thought away, focusing instead on the path ahead. The trees are thinning, moonlight filtering through the canopy in silver patches. I should stop running. If the

thassir is dead, I'm only exhausting myself needlessly. If Araton is searching for me, I should make it easier for him to find me.

But something keeps me moving, keeps my feet flying over the forest floor. Something that has nothing to do with the thassir and everything to do with the man pursuing me.

Because he is pursuing me. I know it with a certainty that settles deep in my bones.

The image of Araton tracking me through the forest sends a thrill of something dangerously close to excitement coursing through my veins. I remember how he looked that night he found me in the garden—wild with possession, golden eyes blazing, backing me against the wall with predatory focus. How thoroughly he claimed me, punishing and passionate all at once.

We haven't shared my bed since that night. Why is that all I can think about now, with danger barely behind me and my daughter waiting anxiously at home?

Because you're running from the wrong thing, that same inner voice whispers. Always have been.

I push harder, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The forest floor slopes gently upward, and I follow it, seeking higher ground. My legs tremble with exertion, but I ignore their protests.

A twig snaps somewhere behind me—too deliberate to be the wind, too subtle to be the thassir. My pulse quickens. He's found my trail. He's hunting me.

The thought should terrify me. Instead, heat pools low in my belly, a shameful excitement I can't quite suppress. I blame it on the adrenaline, on the fear, on anything but the truth—that part of me wants to be caught.

"Stupid," I mutter to myself, pushing a sweat-soaked strand of auburn hair from my face. "Focus, Ronnie."

I reach the top of the small rise and pause, gulping in air. The forest spreads out below, silver-touched in the moonlight. I should be able to spot him if he's following, should be able to?—

Another sound, closer now. The hair on my arms rises.

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He's toying with me. Making just enough noise to let me know he's there, but not enough to reveal his position. The bastard.

"I know you're there," I call, my voice steadier than I expected. "If you're going to stalk me like some beast, at least have the decency to show yourself."

Only silence answers me, but I sense his presence like a physical touch on my skin. He's watching. Waiting. The knowledge prickles along my spine, a delicious tension building between my shoulder blades where I imagine his eyes are fixed.

I shouldn't find this arousing. I shouldn't be standing here, heart racing, body humming with anticipation. I should be practical, sensible Ronnie who doesn't have time for games or danger or desire.

But tonight, with the moon high and my blood singing from narrowly escaped death, I am not that Ronnie.

I pivot to run again, but a sudden rush of air displaces behind me—then strong arms lock around my waist, spinning me around with dizzying force. A startled gasp escapes my lips, but it dissolves into something closer to a sigh when I see who's caught me.

Araton.

His wings are partially extended, creating a dark canopy above us. Moonlight catches on the silver flecks scattered through his dusky gray-blue feathers, making them shimmer like stars against a twilight sky. There's blood smeared across his bronze

skin—some streaking his bare forearm, more splashed across his jaw and throat. His clothing is torn in places, revealing glimpses of taut muscle beneath.

But he's grinning. Gods help me, that insufferable, gorgeous grin with the dimple cutting into his right cheek—the real smile, the one that reaches his golden eyes and sets them ablaze.

"Look what I caught," he purrs, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through my body where he holds me against him. His hands span my waist possessively, thumbs pressing into my hipbones through the thin fabric of my dress. "A wild thing, running through my forest."

"Your forest?" I arch an eyebrow, fighting to keep my voice steady despite the excitement coursing through my veins. "I wasn't aware you'd claimed these woods, xaphan."

His eyes darken at the challenge in my tone. "I claim what's mine."

The simple declaration sends a bolt of heat straight to my core. I should bristle at his arrogance, should push against his chest and remind him I belong to no one. That's what practical, guarded Ronnie would do.

Instead, I find myself leaning closer, drawn to his warmth and the scent of him—sweat and blood and something distinctly male that makes my mouth water.

"You're bleeding," I say, reaching up to brush my fingers along a gash on his shoulder.

"The thassir objected to being killed." His smile turns predatory, eyes tracking my every movement. "But I needed to find you."

"And now you have." The words come out breathier than intended, betraying my arousal.

His nostrils flare slightly, and I know he can sense my desire—the quickening of my pulse, the flush spreading across my skin, the subtle shift in my scent. A hunter attuned to his prey.

"You ran from me." There's an accusation in his voice, but also wonder, as though he's both irritated and impressed.

"You told me to." I tilt my chin up, meeting his molten gaze head-on. "Or have you forgotten shouting at me to run while you wrestled that beast?"

His hands tighten momentarily on my waist. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

And I do know. He's not talking about tonight. He's talking about three years ago, when I slipped away without a trace, taking his child with me. When I ran from the intensity of what was building between us, from the vulnerability I couldn't bear to face.

But tonight, with the moon high and death so recently cheated, I find myself unwilling to resurrect old hurts. Not when his body is pressed against mine, hard and vital and alive. Not when his wings curl around us, creating an intimate space that feels separate from the world.

I trace a finger along his jawline, collecting a smear of blood. "Now that you've caught me, what are you going to do with me?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with possibilities. His eyes go positively molten, pupils expanding until only a thin ring of gold remains. His wings ruffle

slightly, the feathers making a soft susurrant in the stillness of the forest.

One hand slides up my spine to tangle in my hair, sending a cascade of shivers across my skin. He pulls, just enough to tilt my head back, exposing my throat to him. I should feel vulnerable, but all I feel is a desperate, clawing hunger.

"Eat you, of course," he growls against my ear.

25

ARATON

A mixture of the thassir's blood and my own is still hot on my skin, its death throes echoing in my mind as I hold Ronnie against me. My body thrums with leftover adrenaline, every sense heightened to painful clarity. I can hear her heartbeat, smell the intoxicating mix of fear and arousal coming off her in waves, feel the slight tremor in her limbs where she presses against me.

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When I saw that beast lunging for her, something primal shattered inside me. Not just protective instinct, but possessive rage—a visceral understanding that this woman is mine to protect, mine to pleasure, mine to keep safe.

"Eat you, of course," I growl against the shell of her ear, gratified by the full-body shiver that runs through her. My wings curl tighter around us, blocking out the rest of the world until there's nothing but her and me and the silver-dappled darkness.

I don't give her time to respond. In one fluid motion, I drop to my knees before her, my hands sliding down to grip her thighs. She gasps, fingers instinctively tangling in my hair as I push up her dress with indecent haste, bunching the fabric around her waist.

"Araton—" Her voice breaks on my name, uncertain but heavy with want.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?" I murmur against her inner thigh, letting my breath warm her skin. "How much you enjoyed being chased? Being hunted?"

My fingers hook into the thin fabric of her underclothes, and with one sharp motion, I tear them away. The sound of ripping cloth is obscene in the quiet forest. Her sharp intake of breath makes me smile against her skin.

"Fuck," I breathe, looking up at her from between her thighs. In the moonlight filtering through my feathers, I can see how wet she is, slick and ready. "Look at you. Absolutely soaked."

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, face flushed with equal parts embarrassment and

desire. She tries to close her legs, but my shoulders keep them parted.

"If I'd known being prey got you this wet," I tell her, voice rough with desire, "I would've hunted you a long time ago, fierce one."

I don't wait for her reply. I lean forward and taste her with one long, deliberate stroke of my tongue, savoring the salt-sweet flavor that is uniquely Ronnie. Her fingers tighten painfully in my hair, her hips jerking forward involuntarily.

"So eager," I murmur against her sensitive flesh. "Such a pretty little slut for me."

The crude word makes her whimper, her body tensing. I glance up, catching the conflict in her gray eyes—the desire warring with her need to maintain control. I've always loved that about her, how fiercely she guards herself, how magnificent she is when she finally surrenders.

I slide one hand up to press against her abdomen, holding her in place as my tongue circles her clit with deliberate precision. "No running now," I warn her. "I caught you fair and square."

Her head falls back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. "Araton, please?—"

"Please what?" I pause my ministrations, earning a frustrated whine. "Please stop? Please give you what you need? Please make you come so hard you forget why you ever ran from me in the first place?"

She doesn't answer with words, just rolls her hips against my mouth in desperate, shameless hunger. It's all the invitation I need.

I devour her like a starving man, alternating between teasing licks and forceful suction that has her trembling, knees threatening to buckle. Her taste is

intoxicating—sweeter than ammerinth, more addictive than any substance on Aerasak. I could stay here for hours, worshipping her with my tongue, listening to the beautiful symphony of her gasps and moans.

"You taste divine," I growl against her, sliding two fingers inside her slick heat while my tongue continues its relentless attack on her clit. "My beautiful, filthy girl—getting this wet from being hunted through the forest."

She's close already—I can feel it in the way her inner walls clench around my fingers, in the frantic rhythm of her hips. I curl my fingers upward, finding that spot that makes her see stars, and suck her clit between my lips.

"Let go," I command. "Be a good little slut and come all over my face."

The degradation mixed with praise pushes her over the edge. She screams—a raw, primal sound that echoes through the forest—as her orgasm tears through her. Her body convulses, thighs clamping around my head, wetness flooding my tongue and chin.

I don't relent, working her through each wave, drinking down everything she has to give me. My own arousal is painful, cock straining against my trousers, but I ignore it. This moment isn't about me—it's about reclaiming what's mine, about showing her exactly what she's been missing by keeping me at arm's length.

When her tremors finally subside, I pull back just enough to look up at her. Her eyes are half-lidded, face flushed with pleasure, chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath. I've never seen anything more beautiful.

I rise to my feet, still holding her gaze. Her eyes are glazed with pleasure, pupils blown wide in the darkness between my wings. Something in the way she looks at me—vulnerable, wanting—makes my chest tighten painfully.

Her legs are barely supporting her weight as she reaches for me. The fierce girl who snarls and snaps is nowhere to be seen, replaced by this soft, trembling creature. She pulls my face to hers, and when our lips meet, the taste of her still lingering on my tongue, I groan into her mouth.

The kiss is messy, desperate. Her teeth catch my bottom lip, and I taste the metallic hint of blood. Her slender fingers fumble with my trousers, working at the laces with clumsy urgency. The back of my mind registers that this is the first time she's ever initiated more between us—the first time she's ever shown that she wants me beyond the moment I push her over the edge.

Something possessive and primal surges through me. I snap.

My hand shoots out, circling both her wrists in a tight grip. In one swift motion, I pin them above her head against the rough bark of the tree. Her gasp fills my mouth.

"Not this time," I growl against her lips. "You don't get to be in charge."

Her body goes taut, caught between struggling and surrender. "Araton?—"

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"Three years." The words burn in my throat. Something about tonight has scraped open those barely healed wounds and I need to cut out the hurt. I need to cauterize them instead of ignoring it. And right now, I want to bleed for her and get it all out. "Three fucking years, Ronnie. You ran from me, hid my child, built a life without me." My free hand yanks at my laces, freeing my painfully hard cock. "And now you think you can just take what you want?"

"Please," she whimpers, and the sound of her begging nearly undoes me. Her hips cant forward, seeking friction. "I need you."

"You've always needed me." I grip her thigh, hitching it up over my hip. "You just never had the courage to admit it."

With one hand still pinning her wrists, I lift her, her legs automatically wrapping around my waist. The head of my cock slides through her slickness, teasing her entrance. She's absolutely drenched, her arousal coating me, making me dizzy with want.

"I'll take my apology out on this perfect body," I tell her, voice rough with desire. "Make you feel every day you kept from me."

In one brutal thrust, I bury myself to the hilt inside her. The sensation is overwhelming—her tight heat gripping me, her broken cry filling the night air. I have to pause, forehead pressed against hers, wings trembling with the effort of restraint. She feels like sin and salvation wrapped into one, like coming home after a lifetime of wandering.

"Fuck, that's it," I groan, starting to move in deep, punishing strokes. "Take it like the pretty little slut you are."

Her head falls back against the tree trunk, throat working as she swallows a moan. "Araton, gods?—"

"Is this what you wanted when you ran?" I snap my hips forward, driving deeper. "To be hunted down and fucked against a tree like a wanton little whore?"

Her inner walls clench around me at the degradation, and I smile against her neck. Always so proper, my Ronnie, but she melts when I talk filthy to her.

"You're fucking magnificent," I praise, biting at the junction of her neck and shoulder. "Taking my cock so well, so wet and eager for me."

Each thrust drives a breathy gasp from her lips. The scent of sex and sweat fills the space between my wings, making my head swim. I adjust my grip, changing the angle, and her next cry tells me I've found that perfect spot inside her. I make sure to hit it with every stroke, watching her face contort with pleasure.

"That's right, fierce one," I murmur, my rhythm becoming more erratic as heat builds at the base of my spine. "I'm going to fill this sweet cunt up, remind you who you belong to."

Her eyes fly open, locking with mine. "I'm close," she gasps. "So close?—"

"Come around my cock," I command, releasing her wrists to grip her hips with both hands, driving into her with renewed force. "Now."

She shatters gorgeously, back arching, nails digging into my shoulders hard enough to draw blood. Her inner muscles convulse around me in tight, rhythmic pulses, and

the sight of her—head thrown back in abandon, my name on her lips—sends me tumbling over the edge with her.

I bury myself deep one final time, groaning as I empty inside her. The world contracts to nothing but sensation—her body clenching around mine, her heartbeat thundering against my chest, the sweet smell of her hair filling my nostrils.

For a moment, we remain locked together, panting heavily, the forest silent except for the sound of our labored breathing. Her head drops to my shoulder, face pressed against my neck. I can feel the wetness of tears on her skin, though whether from the intensity of her release or something deeper, I can't tell.

26

RONNIE

My knees don't quite work as I fumble with my dress, pulling it down over my hips. The cool night air raises goosebumps along my skin where it's still damp with sweat. My underclothes are destroyed beyond repair, so I leave them crumpled on the forest floor—a casualty of Araton's impatience.

The forest feels different now. Less dangerous but more complicated. My body still hums with aftershocks of pleasure, a deep satisfaction settling into my muscles, but my mind is a storm of conflicting emotions.

"Stream's this way," I murmur, not quite meeting his golden eyes. I can feel his gaze on me like a physical weight as he tucks his shirt back in and straightens his clothing.

The blood has dried on his forearms and chest in dark rivulets, looking almost black in the moonlight. The reality of what happened crashes back—how close I'd come to being mauled, how Araton had appeared like some avenging deity from the shadows,

his wings spread wide as he tore through the beast to protect me.

To protect me. The thought lodges in my chest like a splinter.

We walk through the trees in silence, following the gentle downward slope toward where the stream cuts through the forest floor. My body aches pleasantly, a reminder of how completely I'd surrendered to him. Again. Just like every time before.

But this time felt different. This wasn't our usual pattern of me pushing him away immediately after. He said things... things that sounded almost like he'd missed me. Like he'd wanted more than just my body.

I shake my head slightly. No. I can't afford those kinds of delusions.

The stream comes into view, water glinting silver in the moonlight. It's shallow but clear, running cold even in summer. Araton crouches at the edge, plunging his arms in without hesitation. The blood clouds around his skin before being swept away by the current.

"You're quiet," he says without looking up, his voice carefully neutral.

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"So are you." I sink down onto a flat rock nearby, trying to ignore how my body still tingles from his touch.

"I just killed something and then fucked you against a tree." He glances at me, one eyebrow raised. "Forgive me if I'm processing."

His bluntness makes me snort despite myself. That's something I've always... appreciated about him. He doesn't dress things up. Doesn't pretend.

Which is why I know better than to imagine he wants anything more from me.

I watch as he removes his shirt completely, scrubbing away the blood on him. Water droplets catch in the dark hair that trails down his abdomen, and I force myself to look away. His wings flex behind him, graceful and powerful, the silver flecks catching moonlight.

"Can't have Millie seeing me like this," he says, voice softer now. "She'd have nightmares."

The mention of our daughter tightens my chest. "She would. She's sensitive to scary things." I pause. "She gets that from you, I think."

Araton looks up, surprise flashing across his features. "From me?"

I shrug, uncomfortable with having revealed the observation. "She feels things deeply. Like you do." Though he tries to hide it beneath charm and swagger.

He doesn't respond, just continues methodically cleaning the blood from his skin. I turn my attention to the stream, watching how it parts around stones and fallen branches, always finding a way forward.

I'm afraid I'm getting attached to him.

The thought ambushes me, unwelcome but undeniable. These past weeks with him in our lives—seeing him with Millie, watching how completely he adores her, how he looks at me sometimes when he thinks I'm not paying attention—it's doing something dangerous to the walls I've built.

But I know better, don't I? Men like Araton don't settle. They don't want prickly shopkeepers with trust issues. They want adventure and conquest. And what happens when he grows bored? When the thrill of the new family wears off?

It would destroy Millie if he left. It would destroy me too, if I let myself care too much.

And yet... the way he looked at me tonight. The desperate edge to his voice when he spoke of the years I kept from him. Like I'd taken something precious.

"We should head back," he says, jarring me from my thoughts. "Harmony will be wondering what's taking so long." He shakes water from his arms and wings, droplets scattering like tiny diamonds in the moonlight.

I nod, rising to my feet. My body feels heavy with exhaustion and unspoken words.

As we walk back toward my home, I steal glances at his profile. His jaw is set in that stubborn line I've come to recognize, but there's something vulnerable in the set of his shoulders. He seems lost in thought, and I wonder what calculations are running behind those clever golden eyes.

Does he regret what just happened between us? Is he planning his next move, or his eventual departure?

The lights of my home come into view through the trees, warm and beckoning. Inside is our daughter, our strange little family that isn't really a family at all. Just three people connected by blood and circumstance, navigating uncharted territory.

I want him. Not just his body, not just what he can give Millie. I want his laughter, his stories, his steady presence beside me. I want to fall asleep to the sound of his breathing and wake to his face.

The realization is terrifying.

Because I don't believe for a second that he wants the same.

I shove that thought down as we step through my door just as Millie barrels around the corner, her curls flying wild behind her, silver-tinged downy wings fluttering in agitation. Her face is blotchy and wet with tears.

"Mama!" she cries, launching herself at my legs with such force I nearly stumble.

I scoop her up immediately, my heart twisting at the way she buries her face in my neck, tiny body shaking with sobs. "Hey, hey, sweet girl," I murmur, pressing my lips to her forehead. "I'm right here."

"We heard a—a monster scream!" Millie hiccups against my collarbone. "And you were gone too long and—and Uncle Ady said not to worry but I was scared!"

Her wings flutter against my arms, soft and warm. I meet Harmony's eyes over Millie's head. She's standing by the hearth, her gentle face lined with concern. Behind her, Brooke and Adellum hover awkwardly near the kitchen doorway.

"I'm fine, see?" I pull back just enough to let Millie examine my face. "Your Papa protected me."

Her golden eyes—so like Araton's it sometimes steals my breath—shift to her father.

"You fought a monster?"

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Araton steps closer, his hand coming to rest on her small back between her nascent wings. "Just a thassir that got too curious," he says, his voice deliberately light. "Nothing your fierce mama and I couldn't handle together."

Something warm and dangerous unfurls in my chest at his words. Together. It sounds too right.

"I was brave," Millie declares, tears already subsiding. "I only cried a little bit."

"The bravest," I agree, pressing my nose against her soft cheek. She smells like honey and the herbs Harmony always has hanging in her kitchen. "But it's late, and little warriors need their sleep."

Millie's lower lip juts out. "I'm not sleepy."

Araton reaches for her, neatly extracting her from my arms. "Tell you what, sweetheart," he says, using the nickname he's given her. "Let me tuck you in with a story while your mama says goodnight to everyone."

Her protests die as she latches onto his neck, one tiny hand patting his face. "Tell me about the time you flew through the lightning storm," she demands, already transitioning from terror to excitement.

I watch them disappear down the hallway, Araton's broad shoulders and powerful wings making him look like some kind of guardian spirit carrying our child to safety. It does something to me, seeing them together, hearing his voice drop to that soft tone he only uses with her.

"Well," Harmony says, her eyebrows raised. "Looks like we missed quite the adventure."

I shake my head, running a hand through my tangled hair. "Just bad luck. Nothing serious."

"We should head home," Adellum says, adjusting his spectacles. "Glad you're both safe."

I walk them to the door, grateful for their help with Millie but eager for them to leave so I can decompress. Too many emotions churn inside me—lingering arousal, fear from the thassir, confusion about Araton, and the constant, nagging anxiety that I'm letting myself get too comfortable with this arrangement.

Brooke follows Adellum out with a quick hug, already on to pestering her father with more questions. But Harmony lingers at the threshold, her hazel-green eyes searching my face. The small birthmark behind her ear peeks out from beneath her loosening headscarf.

"Araton was terrified," she says quietly. "When he came in to put Millie down. He was so panicked that you were going to get hurt."

I snort, crossing my arms over my chest. "He just helped me for Millie's sake."

Harmony shakes her head, a soft smile playing at her lips. "Ronnie, he practically flew out that door. I've never seen someone move so fast." She squeezes my forearm. "That man is in love with you."

The words hit like a physical blow. I step back, shaking my head. "No. He's here for Millie." I force the words out, needing to believe them. "That's all this is."

Harmony gives me that patient smile, the one she uses when I'm being particularly stubborn. "That might be what you think," she says, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "But you're wrong."

She slips out the door before I can argue, leaving me staring into the night, her words echoing in my head like a dangerous promise.

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ARATON

Millie has mastered the art of resistance, a skill I suspect she inherited directly from her mother. Her small body thrashes against the sheets as I attempt to tuck her in for the third time.

"Just one more story," she pleads, those wide golden eyes—my eyes—staring up with calculated manipulation that shouldn't be possible in a three-year-old.

"That's what you said after the last one, sweetheart." I smooth her wild curls away from her forehead. Her skin is warm under my touch, her tiny silver-flecked wings peeking out from the special slits in her nightgown.

"But I'm not tired!" She punctuates this with a yawn so enormous it nearly swallows her little face. I know she's just worked up after worrying about her mother, but she needs to sleep.

"That yawn tells a different tale." I tap the tip of her nose with my finger. "Besides, your mama will have my head if I keep you up any longer."

My ears catch the soft tread of footsteps on the stairs. Ronnie appears in the doorway, something shuttered and unreadable in her expression. The sight of her makes my

chest tighten. Her hair is still slightly damp from washing up, and she's changed into a simple linen nightdress with a thick cardigan pulled over it. The bruise forming on her arm is a stark reminder of how close I came to losing her tonight.

"Is a certain someone giving you trouble?" She leans against the doorframe, arms crossed.

"Mama, Papa was telling me about the lightning storm and how he almost got his wings singed off!"

"Was he now?" Ronnie arches an eyebrow in my direction. "Sounds terrifying."

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"It was!" Millie sits up, wings fluttering with excitement. "But he did a...a dive...um...?"

"A diving roll," I supply, gently pushing her back against the pillows.

"Yeah! And he went whoosh!" Her small hands make a swooping motion. "Under the lightning!"

"Quite the adventurer, your father." There's something tight in Ronnie's voice, something that makes me wonder if she's thinking about my inevitable departure—the one I've been postponing without admitting why.

"I think that's enough excitement for one night, especially after all the monster business." I pull the blanket up to Millie's chin and press a kiss to her forehead. The scent of her—soap and childhood and innocence—fills my lungs. When did this tiny creature become so essential to my existence?

Millie yawns again, her small body finally surrendering to exhaustion. "Will you both be here when I wake up?"

The question hangs in the air between Ronnie and me like a physical thing. I feel her eyes on my profile, waiting for my answer.

"I'll be here, sweetheart," I promise, the words coming easily. Too easily. "Now close those eyes."

She struggles briefly against sleep, but her eyelids grow heavy. I stroke her hair until

her breathing evens out, marveling at how something so small could hold such power over me. My daughter. My blood. My heart walking around outside my body.

When I'm certain she's asleep, I rise from the edge of the bed and turn to find Ronnie watching us, something soft and vulnerable flickering across her expression before she masks it.

"She finally surrendered," I whisper, following Ronnie into the hallway and quietly pulling Millie's door halfway closed.

"She fights sleep like it's her sworn enemy." Ronnie's voice is low, her arms wrapped around herself in that protective gesture I've come to recognize—her way of holding herself together when she feels exposed.

We stand in the narrow hallway, the silence between us thick with unspoken words. The events of the night press against my skin like a physical weight—the terror of hearing that thassir's scream, the primal rage that overtook me when I thought of Ronnie hurt or worse, the desperate way I claimed her body afterward.

"I should probably go," I say finally, though the words feel like gravel in my throat. "I've imposed enough for one day."

Her eyes snap to mine, something flaring in their gray depths. "Stay."

Such a simple word. One syllable. But it hits me like a physical blow.

"You want me to stay?" I search her face, looking for hesitation or regret.

"I'd rather you did." She lifts her chin slightly, a hint of her characteristic defiance showing through. "If you want to."

"I want to." The words come too quickly, betraying the depth of my eagerness.

She nods once, then turns and walks down the hallway. After a moment's hesitation, I follow, my wings adjusting instinctively to avoid knocking against the walls. She leads me to a door at the end of the corridor and pushes it open, stepping inside.

Her bedroom. Territory I've never been permitted to enter before.

The space is distinctly Ronnie—practical, unadorned, yet somehow deeply intimate. A simple wooden bed with a patchwork quilt. A dresser with a cracked mirror. A chair by the window with what looks like Millie's clothing folded over the back. Herbs hanging from the ceiling beams fill the air with their earthy scent.

"It looks exactly like your room in the last village," I say, trying to lighten the tension with a smile. "Right down to the herbs drying overhead."

I turn, expecting to see her roll her eyes or make some sarcastic remark. Instead, she's standing with her back against the closed door, studying me with unnerving intensity.

"What?" I ask, suddenly feeling exposed under her gaze.

She swallows, her throat working visibly. "Why did you save me?"

The question catches me off guard. "What do you mean?"

"If Millie was safe," she says, her voice steady despite the vulnerability in her eyes, "why did you come save me?"

I cross the room in two strides, my wings rustling with agitation behind me. Ronnie's question echoes in my mind like a slap. How could she not know? How could she possibly think I wouldn't move mountains to keep her safe?

"Do you really think I wouldn't care if you were hurt?" My voice comes out rougher than intended as I cup her face between my hands. Her skin is warm beneath my palms, her pulse fluttering like a captured bird against my fingertips.

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For a moment, she resists—that stubborn tilt to her chin that both infuriates and captivates me—before something breaks. She sinks into my touch with a sigh that seems to come from somewhere deep inside her.

"I didn't think you cared," she whispers, gray eyes fixed on mine with a vulnerability that steals my breath. "Not about me."

The confession hits me like a physical blow. I take a half-step back, my hands still framing her face, wings extending slightly in sheer disbelief.

"What are you talking about?"

Her lips press into a thin line, a hint of the old defiance returning. "I thought you were only around for Millie. That I was just... an obligation that came with her."

"An obligation?" The word tastes sour on my tongue. "Is that what you think this is? What I am?"

"What was I supposed to think?" Her voice cracks slightly. "You never said?—"

"I love Millie," I cut her off, needing her to understand. "She could be my whole world."

Pain flashes across Ronnie's features, and she tries to pull away, but I hold firm.

"But I didn't stay for dinner or make surprise trips to your store or help you in that disaster you call a garden because of Millie." I trace the curve of her cheekbone with

my thumb. "Can you really not see how much you mean to me, fierce one?"

She tries to look away, her lashes lowering to hide the emotion in her eyes. I release her face only to grab her wrist, lifting it between us. The bracelet gleams against her skin—amber and blue catching the lamplight, the metal threads woven together like our lives have become.

"I bought this for you before I came to see you and found out you were gone." My voice drops, the memory of that empty apartment still sharp enough to cut. "I searched for you for months."

Her fingers curl inward, but she doesn't pull her arm away. "Why did you keep it all that time?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with all the things we've never said. I run my thumb over the delicate beads, remembering how they'd reminded me of sunlight in her hair.

"For a while, I wasn't sure," I admit, the confession scraping my throat raw. "But now I know it's because I could never let you go, and that was all I had left of you."

Her eyes widen, something like hope flickering in their depths before fear chases it away. She looks terrified and confused, like a wild thing caught in a trap. I pull her closer until I can feel the rapid rise and fall of her chest against mine, my wings curving forward instinctively to cocoon us both.

"Can you not see that I am in love with you?" The words fall from my lips like stones dropped into still water, creating ripples I know we can never take back.

Tears brim in her eyes, catching on her lashes before one escapes to trail down her cheek. "It's hard to, when I've been trying to hide the fact that I fell in love with you."

The confession knocks the air from my lungs. Before I can recover, she rises up on her toes and presses her mouth to mine.

The kiss is different from any we've shared before—not frantic with lust or tinged with anger, but achingly tender. My hands slide into her hair, cradling her head as I deepen the kiss, pouring three years of longing and regret into it. She tastes like mint tea and something uniquely Ronnie that I've craved every day we've been apart.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, pulling me closer as the kiss turns hungry. I back her against the door, my body pressing into hers, feeling the soft curves I've memorized with my hands now yielding against me. My wings unfold fully, instinctively creating a silver-blue canopy around us, shutting out the world.

"Araton," she breathes against my lips, her hands sliding beneath my shirt to trace the muscles of my back. The feel of her fingertips against my skin ignites something primal in me.

I lift her in one smooth movement, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the bed. The patchwork quilt is soft beneath us as I lay her down, following her down to cover her body with mine. My wings arch above us, the sensitive undersides brushing against her arms as I brace myself over her.

"I've wanted this for so long," I murmur against her throat, tasting the salt of her skin. "Wanted you." And I hope she knows that I mean her heart, her soul, her trust.

Her love.

Her hands pull at my clothing with newfound urgency, and I help her, stripping away layers until there's nothing between us but skin and breath and the truth we've finally spoken aloud.

"Say it again," she whispers, her eyes locked on mine as I hover above her.

I lower myself until our foreheads touch, until our breath mingles and I can see nothing but those gray eyes that have haunted me for years.

"I love you," I tell her, the words no longer a secret I've kept even from myself. "I love you, Ronnie."

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RONNIE

I wake slowly, surrounded by unfamiliar warmth. The weight of an arm curves over my waist, solid and secure. A large wing drapes across my body like a silk blanket, the silvery-blue feathers catching the morning light filtering through the curtains.

For a heartbeat, panic rises—I never allow this. Never let anyone stay. Never let myself be held like something precious.

But this isn't just anyone. It's Araton.

His chest rises and falls against my back, each breath stirring my hair. The skin-to-skin contact sends pleasant shivers across my body as memories of the night before flood back—not just the physical union, but the words we finally spoke aloud. The walls I've spent years fortifying, crumbled by three simple words from his lips.

I should feel exposed. Vulnerable. Terrified.

Instead, I feel... safe.

I shift slightly, and his arm tightens around me. Not restraining, but reassuring—like he's afraid I might vanish if he loosens his hold. The thought brings an unexpected ache to my chest.

"You're awake," he murmurs, his voice rough with sleep. His lips brush the nape of my neck, sending a cascade of goosebumps down my spine. "But you haven't bolted yet. I'm impressed."

I roll over to face him, our noses almost touching. This close, I can see flecks of darker gold around his pupils, like sunlight through honey. I've never allowed myself to look this closely before.

"Maybe I'm tired of running," I whisper, surprising myself with the honesty.

His face softens, that dimple appearing in his right cheek—the genuine smile, not the calculated one he uses to charm. I reach up to touch it, marveling that I'm allowed this intimacy now.

"I've been a fool, haven't I?" The admission scrapes my throat raw, but he deserves to hear it.

"We both have." His hand slides up my bare back, tracing the ridge of my spine with a gentleness that makes my heart stutter. "But you've had good reason to be cautious."

His eyes darken briefly, and I know he's remembering what I told him about my parents a few weeks ago, about the fear that's driven so many of my choices. His wing adjusts to cocoon us more completely, as if he could shield me from the past with mere feathers.

Morning light dances across his bronze skin, highlighting the contours of his shoulders, the lean strength of his arms. I've always appreciated his physical beauty, but now I find myself wondering how I never recognized the deeper beauty—the heart he keeps hidden beneath wit and charm, the loyalty he offers without condition.

The question rises to my lips before I can think better of it. "Why don't Millie's parents live together?"

His chest rumbles with a low chuckle, vibrating against my palms where they rest against him. "Because they're both too stubborn to admit when they've fallen in love."

The words hang between us, fragile and perfect. I swallow hard, forcing myself past decades of self-protection. "And now that they have?"

His eyes lock with mine, all traces of teasing gone. Something fierce and tender blazes in their golden depths as his hand comes up to cup my cheek.

"Now," he says, his thumb tracing the curve of my bottom lip, "I'll gladly live with the girls I love most."

My throat tightens, the emotion too big to contain. For so long, I've handled everything alone—set up my shop, raised Millie, built walls around my heart. The prospect of sharing that burden, of trusting someone else with the most vulnerable parts of me, should be terrifying.

Instead, as I look into Araton's eyes, I feel like I've finally found my way home after years of wandering lost.

"I'd like that," I whisper against his palm. "For Millie to have both her parents under one roof."

"Just for Millie?" His eyebrow arches, that familiar teasing glint returning.

I pinch his side, delighting in his startled laugh. "You know it's not just for her."

He rolls suddenly, pinning me beneath him, his wings spreading wide above us like a canopy. The weight of him is comforting rather than confining, and I wind my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

"Say it again," he demands softly, his forehead resting against mine. "I need to hear it in the daylight, to know it wasn't just words spoken in the dark."

A lifetime of guardedness makes my tongue hesitate, but the love shining in his eyes gives me courage. "I love you, Araton. Gods help me, I tried not to, but I do."

His smile could outshine the sun.

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I let him kiss me, deep and slow. He rolls us so that we're curled around each other, locked together. Eventually, I have to pull away.

"We should probably get up," I murmur against his lips as he chases after me, though I make no move to actually do so.

"Mmm. Probably." His voice rumbles beneath my ear, but his wing only tightens around me. "Though I'm quite comfortable right here."

I prop myself up on one elbow, taking in the sight of him—tousled black hair even more disheveled than usual, golden eyes warm with affection, that devastating dimple appearing as he smiles up at me. The bronze expanse of his chest rises and falls with each breath, and I can't resist running my fingers across it, marveling that I'm allowed this intimacy now.

"Millie will be up soon," I say, though my traitorous body leans into his touch as his hand slides up my back. "And if she comes looking for me..."

He sighs dramatically, his wing unfurling. "Ever the practical one, fierce one."

The endearment once irritated me. Now it warms me from the inside out.

We dress in comfortable silence, exchanging glances that promise more time together later. I find myself smiling at nothing, at everything—at the way he fumbles with the ties of his shirt because he's too busy watching me, at how his wings flutter slightly when our fingers brush.

"I'll go wake Millie," I tell him, pausing at the bedroom door. "You could... start breakfast? If you want?"

The question feels monumental somehow—the first step toward a new life, toward making room for him in our daily routine. His eyes crinkle at the corners as he nods.

"I make excellent oat cakes," he says, brushing a kiss against my temple as he passes. "Though I've been told my brewing skills leave something to be desired."

I head down the hall to Millie's room, each creak of the wooden boards familiar and comforting. Her door stands slightly ajar, spilling morning light across the threshold. Inside, my daughter sleeps in a tangle of blankets and dark curls, one tiny silver-feathered wing draped over her face.

My heart swells as I perch on the edge of her bed. Three years of loving this perfect, impossible creature, of building a life for her, of waking to her smile every morning. And now, I'm offering her the father she deserves, the one who loves her as fiercely as I do.

"Millie," I whisper, smoothing a wayward curl from her forehead. "Time to get up, pretty girl."

Her wing twitches, then flicks back to reveal sleepy golden eyes—so like her father's that it makes my breath catch. She blinks, focusing on me with that sweet, drowsy smile that turns my insides to pudding.

"Morning, Mama," she mumbles, reaching up with both arms for our customary hug. I gather her close, breathing in the scent of her—sunshine and meadowmint soap and something uniquely Millie.

"Someone special is downstairs," I tell her, helping her sit up. "I think he's making breakfast."

Her eyes widen, suddenly fully awake. "Papa?"

I nod, and her entire face lights up with joy so pure it makes my chest ache. She scrambles out of bed, nearly tripping over her blankets in her haste.

"Can I wear my blue dress?" she asks, already yanking open drawers. "The one with the birds? Papa says it makes my wings look pretty."

Watching her excitement, I wonder how I ever thought keeping them apart was the right choice. I help her dress, then comb through her unruly curls as she chatters about showing Araton her new drawings and the thalivern she spotted in the garden yesterday.

By the time we make it downstairs, the smell of cinnamon and baking oats fills the air. Araton stands at the hearth, his wings tucked neatly against his back as he flips a perfectly golden oat cake in the pan. He's rolled his sleeves past his elbows, exposing the lean muscles of his forearms, dusted with a fine layer of flour.

"PAPA!" Millie shouts, breaking away from me to launch herself across the kitchen.

Araton turns just in time, his face splitting into a grin that makes my heart flip over in my chest. He crouches down, arms spread wide to catch our daughter as she barrels into him.

"There's my expert little flyer," he laughs, scooping her up and spinning her around. His wings spread slightly for balance, enveloping her in a silken cocoon of silver-blue feathers. "Did you sleep well?"

Millie's small arms wrap around his neck, her own tiny wings fluttering with excitement. "What are you doing here, Papa? Did you bring me something? Are you staying for breakfast? Can we go to the meadow today?"

Araton chuckles, the sound rich and warm as he balances her on his hip. "Actually," he says, his eyes finding mine over Millie's head, filled with a tender question, "I was wondering if it would be alright if I lived here with you and your mama."

Millie gasps, her golden eyes going impossibly wide. "Forever and ever?"

"Forever and ever," he confirms, holding out his free arm toward me in silent invitation. I walk into his embrace and he kisses the top of my head, and everything feels so perfect.

Because it finally is.