



Court of Twisted Angels (Cruel Beautiful Angels of Aerasak #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: All my life I was told to stay far from the beautiful monsters

And now Im forced to love one.

My mother is dying, and the trials are my only hope.

Wings and riches await the victor if anyone survives.

Once I get to the arena and see what's in store for me...

I'm not sure I will.

Then I meet Azrael.

He offers to train me, to help me survive.

I shouldn't trust him.

I definitely shouldn't want him.

But there's something in the way he looks at me

He's hiding dark secrets.

And I'm falling for every single lie.

They say love conquers all

What happens when love might kill you?

I entered the trials ready to die for my family.

I never expected to risk my heart for my enemy.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:59 am

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KYRIE

The packed dirt streets kick up clouds with each step as I slip through the slums of my little town - if I can even call it that. This far north of New Solas, it's really just dilapidated buildings sprinkled between the trees and leading up to the northern mountains.

Wooden vendor stalls line the cramped alleyways, their weathered awnings providing little shelter from the scorching sun. The scent of desperation mingles with spices and sweat as I weave between the masses of people, all of us just trying to exist in the xaphan's world.

A broken piece of mirror catches my eye from one of the merchant's displays - likely salvaged from the wealthy districts. My reflection fragments across its surface: auburn hair tangled from the dusty wind, deep green eyes that have seen too much. But it's the raised, angry flesh curving around the right side of my neck that draws my attention.

The memory crashes over me like ice water. Suddenly, I'm thrown back three years to the abandoned marketplace closer to the white washed city of New Solas.

I scavenge for supplies, looking for anything that we can use to survive when I hear cackling behind me. My whole body tenses, and I slowly turn to see a xaphan standing up the alley, his eyes on me.

I always knew they were cruel, but the way he's looking at me right now confirms that.

He steps forward slowly, wings spread wide and crackling with electricity. "Well, what do we have here?"

His voice drips with malice and I swallow hard, shrinking back. "I- I'm not trying to cause any trouble."

"No?" He cocks his head, a grin spreading across his face that has my stomach turning. "Too bad." He lifts a hand, the air turning charged. "Trouble was exactly what I was looking for."

The lightning had carved through my flesh like a molten blade, searing from my lower back up to my neck. I still remember the ozone smell, the way my skin had bubbled and split. The healers said I was lucky to survive.

My fingers trace the gnarled tissue. Unlike the clean, precise scars left by steel, magic wounds heal chaotically. The scar tissue spreads like branches of lightning frozen beneath my skin, a permanent reminder of that day. Of what the xaphan are capable of.

Around me, the crowd continues to surge through the narrow streets, slowly pulling me from the memory. A child darts past, kicking up another cloud of dust. The merchant who owns the mirror barks at me to buy something or move along.

But for a moment longer, I stay frozen, lost in the fractured reflection and the phantom sensation of wings casting shadows over me, of power crackling through the air and tearing me apart.

A commotion erupts from around the corner - raised voices cutting through the

market's usual din and dragging me forward once again. I push away from the mirror stall, drawn by the growing crowd near the central square.

"Another trial!" someone shouts. "They're holding another wing trial!"

My heart skips. The words ripple through the gathered masses like a wave. The trials are brutal spectacles that the xaphan use to dangle false hope before us. They say that you can earn your wings and a new status. Most who enter never return.

I edge closer, shoulder past a cluster of wide-eyed teenagers. A town crier stands atop an old wooden crate, unfurling an ornate scroll trimmed in gold leaf - the unmistakable mark of New Solas.

"By decree of the Praexa Council," he projects over the crowd, "a new wing trial shall commence this week." Murmurs sweep through the gathering. "All eligible humans may present themselves as candidates."

This week. The last trial was barely half a year ago. They usually wait years between, until the crowds' bloodlust starts to stir again.

"Furthermore," the crier continues, "in addition to receiving their wings, the victor shall be granted a reward of one thousand novas."

The crowd erupts. A thousand novas could feed an entire family for years. Could buy medicine from even the most exclusive apothecaries in New Solas. Medicine that could save my mother.

The thought hits me like a physical blow. I stumble back from the pressing bodies, suddenly unable to breathe. The trial is suicide - I've watched too many friends leave for those golden gates never to return. Wings mean nothing if you're dead.

But Mother grows weaker each day. The healers say without proper treatment, she has months at most. And the only cure lies behind New Solas's pristine walls, available exclusively to the xaphan and their chosen few.

I turn away from the feverish crowd, their excited chatter fading as I wind through the market's cramped passages toward home. But the crier's words echo in my mind, a thousand novas glittering like stars against the darkness of my thoughts.

The door creaks as I enter our small wooden home on the outskirts of the settlement. Sunlight filters through gaps in the roof's worn shingles, dust motes dancing in the beams. The scent of medicinal herbs - yarrow and meadowmint - mingles with woodsmoke from the small hearth.

"Mother?" I call softly, setting my market basket on the rough-hewn table.

A weak cough answers from behind the faded curtain separating our sleeping area. My heart clenches as I push it aside. Mother lies propped against threadbare pillows, her once-vibrant auburn hair now dull and limp around her too-pale face. Dark circles shadow her eyes, but she still manages a smile.

"You're back early, love." Her voice rasps like dry leaves.

I pour water from the clay pitcher into a cup, helping her drink. "The market was busy today." I don't mention the trial announcement. Not yet.

My twin blades catch the light where they rest against the wall - gifts from an old weapons master who saw potential in the angry girl who came to him after the attack. The steel is worn but well-maintained, the leather wrappings on the hilts smooth from years of practice.

Mother's breath hitches, another coughing fit wracking her frame. I steady her until it

passes, pretending not to notice the flecks of blood on her handkerchief. The rare blood-wasting disease eating away at her grows worse by the day. The local healers can only ease her pain - the true cure lies in New Solas's sealed apothecaries, in delicate crystal vials that cost more than we'll see in a lifetime.

Unless...

My gaze drifts to the blades again. Thousands of hours spent training in hidden clearings, learning to move like shadow, to strike like lightning. All because I swore never to be helpless before a xaphan again.

Now those skills might be the only thing standing between my mother and death.

I dampen a cloth in the ceramic basin, wringing out the excess water before gently placing it across Mother's burning forehead. The water carries hints of healing herbs - meadowmint and moonflower - but their magic is weak, barely enough to ease her discomfort.

Real healing requires the crystalline elixirs of New Solas, their bottles glowing with concentrated magical essence. Here in the outer settlements, we make do with simple remedies and desperate prayers.

"The fever's rising again." Father's voice comes from the doorway, rough with exhaustion. He hasn't slept properly in days, spending his nights in the rickety chair beside Mother's bed. The worry has carved deep lines around his eyes, aging him beyond his years.

Mother's breath rattles in her chest, each inhale a struggle. Her skin burns beneath my touch despite the cool cloth. "I'm fine," she whispers, but the words catch on another cough. "Just need... rest."

I adjust the threadbare blanket around her shoulders, pretending not to notice how it hangs loose where it once fit snugly. The disease consumes her from within, stealing her strength day by day. Even the spark of magic that once danced in her fingertips when she worked her small healing charms has dimmed to almost nothing.

"Of course you are." I force brightness into my voice, though my chest aches. "You'll be up and tending your herb garden again before we know it."

Her smile is weak but genuine. "My brave girl. Always trying to protect everyone."

The words pierce like daggers. I haven't protected her from this. Haven't found a way to access the medicines locked away behind New Solas's golden walls. Haven't done anything except watch helplessly as she wastes away.

And even now, I haven't told her of the solution that has been offered. All because I'm a coward.

Father's hand squeezes my shoulder, but I feel the tremor in his grip. We both know the truth - without real treatment, Mother's time grows shorter with each passing day. The thought settles like ice in my stomach, crystallizing into resolve.

I wait until evening, when the sun's harsh glare softens to amber light filtering through our home's worn shutters. My siblings are asleep in the next room, their quiet breathing a steady rhythm against the cricket song outside. When it's just me and my parents in their room, I know it's time.

"I'm entering the trials." The words spill out before I can lose my nerve.

Father's weathered hands still on the blade he's sharpening. The rhythmic scrape of stone against steel falls silent. Mother's eyes flutter open, fever-bright in the lantern light.

"Absolutely not." Father's voice cracks like thunder. "We've seen what happens in those arenas. The xaphan's idea of entertainment-

"They're offering a thousand novas," I cut in. "Plus wings. With that kind of status, I could walk into any apothecary in New Solas. Buy whatever medicines we need."

"At what cost?" His fingers clench around the whetstone. "Your life?"

"I've trained for this." I gesture to my blades, their runes gleaming dully in the lamplight. "Three years learning to fight. I can even channel a little. The old weapon master said I have a gift."

"Kyrie..." Mother's voice is barely a whisper, but it draws us both like moths to flame. "My love, no amount of medicine is worth risking you."

"You're dying." The truth tears from my throat, raw and jagged. "The healers say months, at most. And I refuse to just watch it happen when there's a chance-

"A fool's chance," Father interjects. "Those trials are designed to kill. The xaphan change the rules on a whim, throw contestants against impossible odds for their own amusement."

"Then I'll beat them at their own game." I force myself to sound sure when the thought of being at the mercy of the xaphan has me shaking. "I'm not the same girl who got caught off guard in that marketplace. I'm stronger now. Smarter."

Father bows his head, shoulders slumping. The silence stretches, broken only by Mother's labored breathing and the soft crackle of my flames.

Finally, he looks up. Moonlight catches the tears in his eyes, but his voice is steady. "You're just like your mother. When you set your mind to something..." He swallows

hard. "Promise me you'll be careful. Promise me you'll come back."

"I promise." I cross to kneel beside his chair. "I'll win. For all of us."

Mother's thin fingers find mine, squeezing with what little strength remains. "My brave, foolish girl."

But that's all that's said. So I kiss them each goodnight and go to pack, knowing it will be my last night here.

Dawn bleeds across the horizon in shades of amber and rose as I shoulder my worn leather pack. The weight of my twin blades against my back is familiar, comforting.

Our entire settlement has gathered to see off those brave - or desperate - enough to enter the trials. The zarryns stamp their hooves against the packed earth, their silver coats gleaming in the early light. Steam rises from their nostrils in the cool morning air as they wait, harnessed to wooden transport carts, twin tails twitching with impatience.

Mother leans heavily against Father, wrapped in her thickest shawl despite the warming day. My younger siblings cling to her skirts - Mira with tears streaming down her face, Tam trying to look brave but failing to hide his trembling chin.

"Take this." Mother presses something into my palm - her healing crystal, its magic nearly depleted but still holding a faint warmth. "For luck."

I close my fingers around it, throat tight. "I'll bring back something stronger. I promise."

Father pulls me into a fierce embrace. "Remember your training. Trust your instincts." His voice roughens. "And come home to us."

The transport master calls for boarding. I climb into the nearest cart, wood creaking beneath my boots. Other contestants file in - some wearing determined expressions, others looking shell-shocked, as if they can't quite believe what they're doing. We all share the same desperate hope in our eyes.

The zarryns leap forward at the master's whistle, powerful muscles rippling beneath their silvery hides. Their hooves strike sparks against the stones as we begin our journey toward the gleaming spires of New Solas.

I watch my family grow smaller, keeping my eyes fixed on them until they blur into the crowd, then fade entirely into the distance. The healing crystal pulses against my palm, its weak magic mixing with my own fierce determination. Every step of the zarryns' steady gait carries me closer to either salvation or destruction.

Mother's life depends on which one I find in New Solas's golden arena.

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AZRAEL

I stand before the cursed artifact in my study, its malevolent aura pulsing through the room like a twisted heartbeat. The crystalline structure floats inches above its obsidian pedestal, casting an eerie blue glow across the ancient tomes and scrolls lining the walls.

My fingers trace the edge of my desk, the polished mahogany smooth beneath my touch. Outside the arched windows, the twin moons cast their pale light across the grounds of the estate, illuminating the carefully tended gardens where healing herbs grow in abundance - useless against our family's affliction.

The artifact spins slowly, mocking me with each rotation. Its jagged edges catch the moonlight, refracting it into sharp daggers across the ceiling. What was meant to be our family's greatest triumph has become our destruction, turning our noble xaphan bloodline into a cautionary tale whispered in dark corners.

"Master Azrael." A servant materializes at the doorway, head bowed. "Your father's condition has worsened."

I clench my jaw, the muscles in my face tightening. "How bad?"

"The healers say his wings are beginning to fade. The feathers..." He hesitates. "They're turning to ash at the slightest touch."

Another symptom of our curse. Soon, like the others before him, father will be gone. The curse eats away at us, and it won't be long before our entire bloodline has succumbed to it, dragging our once great name down.

"I'll come see him soon."

The servant takes the dismissal and leaves. I spend a few more moments studying the artifact, knowing if I wait too much longer Castiel himself will come drag me to the council chambers.

Sighing, I turn away from the artifact, striding down the torch-lit corridors of our ancestral manor. My footsteps echo against marble floors as I make my way to the room where my most trusted circle awaits.

The heavy oak doors creak open to reveal five figures seated around an ancient table carved with celestial runes. Candlelight flickers across their faces - scholars and mages who've dedicated years to breaking our curse.

"The sacred gemstones." I press my palms against the table's smooth surface. "What have you discovered?"

Castiel, our chief archivist, unfurls a weathered scroll across the table. His silver wings twitch as he traces the intricate diagrams with a gnarled finger. "I've found ancient texts that speak of their power to cleanse cursed artifacts. They call them the Tears of Solas."

"And their location?" My wings flex involuntarily, sending shadows dancing across the walls.

"The trials." Gavreel, our spymaster, leans forward. His white hair gleams in the candlelight. "The Praexa have scattered them throughout the challenges. They mean

to make sport of our desperate search."

"Explain." Ice creeps into my voice.

"Other noble houses seek the stones as well. The Praexa have placed them within different stages of the trials." He pauses. "They wish to watch us tear each other apart for their entertainment because, apparently, the humans are doing it well enough."

"Which houses?"

"House Meridian claims the first stone lies within the darkness of the initiation chamber. House Voss pursues another in the storm arena. The others..." He shakes his head. "How many there are and the locations remain unclear, but I would consider that there will be one or more in each trail."

Rage burns through my veins, but I keep my expression neutral. The Praexa would turn our salvation into a spectacle, forcing us to compete against our own kind while humans die for their amusement.

"Then we have no choice." I straighten, letting my authority fill the room. "I will go to the trials myself."

"My lord," Castiel protests, "The risks-"

"Are nothing compared to watching our bloodline wither." I cut him off. "Prepare what we need. The next trials begin in three days."

"There's something else." Gavreel's wings rustle as he shifts in his seat. His golden eyes dart to the other council members before settling on me. "The trials have... changed."

"Changed?" I lean back, studying his face.

"A human." His lip curls. "One actually earned her wings at the last one."

Laughter erupts around the table. Castiel nearly chokes on his wine. Even I can't suppress a smirk at such an absurd claim.

"Impossible." I wave my hand through the air. "No human has ever completed the trials. They're nothing more than entertainment for the masses."

"I thought the same." Gavreel produces a scroll from his robes. "But I have proof. The Praexa themselves confirmed it. They're using her victory to draw more humans in."

"Humans have grown wary." Castiel strokes his beard. "Word spreads through their pathetic settlements that the trials are rigged. Numbers have dwindled at recent events."

"The Praexa are offering novas now." Gavreel's quill scratches against parchment as he makes notes. "Enough to feed a human family for years. But that's not all - they've added more challenges. My sources say these will be the most brutal trials yet."

"How so?" I drum my fingers against the table.

"There will be an initiation trial and then four trials to follow. They are using every bit of magic to rip apart humans and xaphan alike." His lips curl in a grimace. "They will be nearly impossible to train for and even harder to survive, even with magic."

The council chamber falls silent. Even the candles seem to dim.

"They mean to create a true spectacle." Gavreel rolls up his scroll. "One worthy of

drawing both desperate humans and noble houses. The Praexa grow bored with simple death - they want to witness suffering."

I rise from my chair, pacing before the ancient fireplace. The flames cast my shadow large against the wall, my wings spread wide in the flickering light. The Praexa's game grows more complex, but it changes nothing. I will find a way into their trials, claim the stones, and save my bloodline - no matter how many humans or noble houses stand in my way.

I pause at one of the windows of the chamber, overlooking the sprawling expanse of New Solas. Golden spires pierce the violet sky, their crystalline surfaces catching the light of the twin moons. Magic pulses through the city's ley lines, visible only to those trained to see them - rivers of power flowing beneath the streets like molten gold.

Below, xaphan nobles glide between towers on pristine wings, flashes of white in the air that are so like my own. I push open the window, listening to the market squares as they buzz with activity of merchants hawking their wares from stalls draped in rich fabrics. The scent of incense and spell-work drifts up even to this height, carried by winds that dance between the architecture.

In the western quarter, humans scurry through narrow streets like bugs, their drab clothes a stark contrast to the city's splendor. Torch light flickers in their windows - they can't afford the spelled crystals that illuminate the noble districts. Their desperation is almost palpable, even from here. Each one dreaming of wings they'll never earn.

I trace the path of a zarryn-drawn carriage as it winds through the lower streets, carting in preparations for the trials. The beasts' tufted hide gleams like polished silver, their twin tails twitching with each step.

"The first contestants arrive tomorrow." Gavreel appears beside me, silent as shadow.
"They'll be housed in the preparation chambers beneath the arena."

"Good." I flex my wings, watching moonlight play across the feathers. "Let them wear themselves down in training. Every failed attempt, every death, brings us closer to understanding the structure of the new trials."

"And the gemstones?"

"We watch. We wait. These fools will map the hazards for us, reveal the stones' locations through their failures." I gesture toward the massive arena rising from the city's heart, its enchanted barriers shimmering like heat waves. "Their bodies will mark the path to our salvation."

A cold smile curves my lips as I imagine the coming spectacle. Let the Praexa have their entertainment. Let the humans chase their impossible dreams. Their suffering will serve a greater purpose - the restoration of my bloodline.

KYRIE

The golden spires of New Solas pierce the clouds like daggers thrust into the sky. My hands tremble as I pass through the city gates, forcing myself to breathe against the tightness in my chest. The scar on my neck burns with phantom pain.

It was something I tried to ignore, thinking I could duck into the arena and hide away from the xaphan. If I just don't look at the stands of the arena, I could pretend they weren't there, right? But then the carriages dropped us at the edge of the city and the driver told us to walk. So, I'm forced into a city where they are everywhere.

A xaphan guard swoops overhead, wings spread wide in an elegant arc. I flinch, ducking into the shadow of a nearby archway. The memory crashes over me - his cruel smile, that terrible burning?—

No. Focus on the present.

The marketplace sprawls before me in a riot of color and sound. Merchant stalls overflow with exotic wares: crystalline vials of liquid sunlight, feathers that dance on invisible winds, fruits that shimmer like jewels. The scent of incense and spices fills the air, mingling with the crisp mountain breeze that sweeps down from The Ridge.

"Fresh bread! Straight from the earthfire ovens!" A human vendor's call draws my attention. At least there are other humans here, though they're vastly outnumbered.

My gaze catches on a xaphan noble gliding past, their pure white wings folded neatly against their back. The sight sends ice through my veins. I press myself against a wall, stone cool against my palms.

A group of lower-class xaphan hurry by, their mottled gray wings a stark contrast to the noble's pristine ones. They pay me no mind, too focused on their own business. Still, each beat of their wings makes my heart stutter.

Zarryn-drawn carriages clatter along the cobblestone streets, their golden wheels catching the light. The beasts' tufted hides ripple as they move, looking far too majestic for their temperament. A street performer conjures thalivern made of light, delighting a crowd of children as it takes flight.

The grandeur of it all would be breathtaking if I could just stop my hands from shaking. If I could forget the memories that are haunting me. But with each flash of white wings and gorgeous golden faces, I want to bolt.

But Mother's pale face flashes in my mind, and I straighten my spine. I have to do this. Have to prove myself in their trials.

No matter how many winged reminders of my nightmares I have to face.

Finally, I make it through the streets. The registration hall looms ahead, its crystal dome refracting sunlight into rainbow patterns across marble floors. I join the line of humans shuffling through massive golden doors, each etched with scenes of winged figures in triumph. My stomach turns at the propaganda.

"Did you hear about last year's second trial?" A muscled man ahead of me whispers to his companion. "They had to learn to channel magic. It ripped some of them apart before the trial even started."

"That's nothing," his friend responds, rolling up his sleeve to reveal a network of lightning-shaped scars. "I faced one of the Praexa that make the games two years ago. He tested out some ideas on a group of us. The storms they make? They're alive. Hunting you."

I clench my jaw, focusing on the steady click of my boots against stone rather than their stories. The line inches forward through a series of archways filled with shimmering magical barriers. Each one tingles as I pass through – probably scanning for weapons or existing enchantments.

A xaphan attendant with dove-gray wings gestures me toward one of dozens of ornate writing desks. The quill glows with its own light, hovering expectantly over a piece of parchment that seems to ripple like water.

"Name and origin?" His voice carries that typical xaphan musical lilt that sets my teeth on edge.

"Kyrie Kael. Northwestern settlements." I force the words past the tightness in my throat.

The quill dances across the page of its own accord. "Medical history?"

My scar burns. "Nothing relevant."

More scratching of the quill. Around me, other hopefuls answer similar questions, their voices a mix of determination and barely concealed fear. A woman nearby breaks down sobbing when asked about her family, escorted away by guards with rust-colored wings.

"Place your hand here." The attendant indicates a crystal embedded in the desk's surface. It pulses with inner light as my palm meets its cool surface. "This measures

your magical potential."

The crystal flares bright green, then dims. The attendant's eyebrows rise slightly – the first break in his bored expression. He marks something on the parchment with a flourish, but I don't know what it means.

"Proceed to the waiting quarters to prepare for initiation tomorrow. Next!"

I move aside, my heart hammering against my ribs. The registration parchment vanishes in a flash of golden light, whisked away to whatever archives the xaphan keep of their human entertainment. I'm surprised they even keep the record

The waiting chamber opens into a vast dormitory, its vaulted ceiling supported by twisted columns that seem to grow from the floor like crystal trees. Magical orbs of light drift lazily through the air, casting ever-shifting shadows across rows of wooden bunks.

"Top or bottom?" A girl with close-cropped black hair points to an empty bunk. Her arms are corded with muscle, but there's kindness in her eyes.

"Top." I hoist myself up, the wooden frame creaking under my weight. The mattress is stuffed with something that smells faintly of lavender.

"I'm Andra." She settles below me, pulling a worn leather pack onto her lap. "I've been dying to come to the trials but never thought I'd get the chance to."

Other competitors filter in, claiming bunks and forming small clusters. A burly man demonstrates defensive hand positions to a group of wide-eyed newcomers. Two women practice channeling magic, small spheres of light dancing between their palms.

"Here." Andra passes up a cloth-wrapped bundle. Inside, I find dried meat and bread studded with nuts. "The food they provide is meant to build our strength, but it's laced with enchantments. Makes you more susceptible to their magic. Bring your own when you can."

The dormitory fills with conversations – some talking about the upcoming trials, others giving tips they've heard or telling stories. I absorb every detail, even as my fingers trace the scar on my neck. The memory of my own worst day lurks at the edges of my mind, waiting for the preliminary exam to drag it into the light.

"You've got that look," Andra says quietly. "The one that says you're here because you have to be, not because you want to be."

I meet her gaze. "Don't we all have something worth fighting for?"

She nods, understanding passing between us. Around us, the air hums with nervous energy and whispered strategies, all of us preparing for trials designed to break us.

A xaphan official with steel-gray wings sweeps into the dormitory, silencing conversations with his presence. His boots click against the hard floor as he unrolls a scroll that shimmers with golden light.

"Listen well, candidates. Tomorrow's initiation will determine who among you is worthy to even attempt the trials."

Murmurs ripple through the room. Andra's breath catches below me.

"You will face the Void Chamber - a pocket dimension of absolute darkness where your senses will be stripped away. Navigate through magical threats using only your innate abilities. Those who survive must defeat the final guardian to earn their place in training."

My fingers dig into the wooden frame of the bunk. More than half the room won't make it past tomorrow.

"The reward remains substantial." His wings flex, catching the light. "Wings of your own, status within New Solas, and, of course, one thousand novas."

The dormitory erupts in whispers. A man near the door clutches a pendant, lips moving in silent prayer. Two women grasp hands, their faces pale.

"Look around," Andra's voice is barely audible. "There must be three hundred people here. More than I've ever seen at a trial gathering."

She's right. Every bunk is filled, with some contestants even sleeping on meditation cushions in the corners. The promise of wealth drew them like moths to flame.

"You'll be collected for initiation tomorrow," the official continues. "Those who hesitate will be consumed by the darkness. Those who falter will be drained of life force. Choose wisely if you wish to proceed."

Because we all know the rules. You can leave with shame before the trials start. Or you can die in the arena.

Magic ripples through the air as he exits, leaving behind a heavy silence. Someone starts to weep softly in the far corner.

"They're culling the weak ones early this time," a gruff voice says from nearby. "Smart. Makes for better entertainment later."

I stare at the ceiling, trying not to think about how many bodies will litter the Void Chamber by tomorrow's end. Mother's face floats in my mind - pale, drawn with pain. The medicine she needs is worth any risk.

The dormitory settles into an uneasy quiet, broken only by whispered prayers and the occasional sob. Tomorrow, we face the darkness. Tomorrow, we learn if we're even worthy to die in their real trials.

AZRAEL

The evening sun casts long shadows across the ancient trial grounds as I approach on foot. My wings remain tucked close, their pristine white feathers a stark reminder of my noble bloodline - and the curse that threatens to destroy it all.

The arena looms before me, its towering spires of polished obsidian reaching toward the crimson sky like grasping fingers. Magic thrums through the very foundation, raw power crackling along elaborate runes etched into the stone. The air itself feels charged, heavy with anticipation.

Something's different today. I pause at the western archway, noting the unusual gathering of xaphan near the contestant holding areas. Their wings twitch with barely contained tension - grays, browns, and the occasional flash of gold marking their social status. They cluster in small groups, heads bent close, voices too low to carry.

"Lord Azrael." A guard bows deeply as I pass, his mottled gray wings folding tight against his back.

I acknowledge him with the barest nod, my attention fixed on the subtle shimmer of protective wards along the arena's inner walls. The magical barriers ripple like heat waves, stronger than I've ever seen them. Someone's reinforced the containment spells - recently.

More xaphan mill about the upper viewing galleries, their robes catching the dying

light. A flash of gold draws my eye to a praexa's triple wings, the holy warrior deep in conversation with several others of his rank. Their presence at a mere trial screening is... concerning.

My boots click against the polished stone as I make my way deeper into the structure. The familiar scent of ozone and incense mingles with something else - anticipation, perhaps. Or fear.

The gathered xaphan track my movement with quick, darting glances before looking away. Their whispered conversations fade to silence as I pass.

They know something. The question is what - and how it relates to the gemstones I seek. I flex my fingers, feeling the curse's familiar burn beneath my skin. Time grows short, both for me and my bloodline. It's already starting to eat away at me, though I try to deny it.

A cluster of lower-ranked xaphan parts before me like startled birds, their dull-colored wings rustling. The sound reminds me of autumn leaves skittering across marble courtyards back home - before the curse began withering our gardens.

"...the gemstones' resonance with ancient magic..." The fragment of conversation catches my attention. I slow my pace, maintaining my cold facade while straining to hear more.

Two xaphan scholars huddle near a carved column, their heads bent over a weathered tome. The older one traces glowing sigils in the air as he speaks. "The artifacts' power is unprecedented. Even the Praexa are taking notice."

My fingers twitch at my sides. So others know of the gems' potential. My council was right that they would draw out humans and xaphan alike.

"Three candidates already died trying to claim them." A warrior-class xaphan joins their discussion, her steel-gray wings reflecting the magical torchlight. "The trials grow more lethal by the day."

The scholar closes his book with a sharp snap. "The stones respond to desperation. They feed on it. Each failed attempt only makes them more potent."

I drift closer to another group, this one gathered around a scrying pool. The enchanted water ripples with images of previous trials - broken bodies and shattered wings.

A Praexa's voice rises above the murmurs. "The artifacts choose their wielder. Many seek their power, but few understand the price."

The curse pulses beneath my skin like molten lead. I know the price of failure all too well.

"Did you hear?" A young noble whispers to her companion. "House Validus sent their heir. And the Blackthorn twins. Even the desert clans are sending champions."

Ice forms in my veins. The most powerful houses in New Solas, all converging on these trials. Each with their own desperate agenda, their own curse to break or power to claim. Though none of us care about the trials, we will all be here to manipulate them, to use the humans as best as we can.

The magical wards along the walls pulse stronger, as if responding to the mounting tension. Above, more Praexa gather in the viewing galleries, their golden wings catching the last rays of sunlight. Their presence turns this from a mere trial into something far more dangerous.

I've walked into a war, not a competition. And these gems I seek are the prize everyone is willing to kill for.

A shoulder slams into mine, hard enough to make me step back. The contact burns like acid through my ceremonial robes - a deliberate challenge.

"Watch yourself, cursed one." Theron sneers up at me, his pure white wings flaring wide. Crystal fragments dance between his fingers, sparking with barely contained power. "Your kind shouldn't be anywhere near these trials."

My magic surges in response, crackling along my skin like lightning. "Bold words from someone who can't even maintain basic spatial awareness."

"You dare?" His wings snap forward, buffeting me with a gust of wind that sends nearby scrolls scattering. "Your bloodline is tainted. The stones will never answer to corrupted blood."

The curse beneath my skin pulses harder, feeding off my rising anger. I channel it outward, letting frost crystallize along my fingertips. "Test that theory."

Theron strikes first, hurling shards of spelled crystal. I deflect them with a sweep of my wing, the fragments shattering against my feathers. Magic crackles through the air as onlookers scramble back.

"Your father was a fool to think he could contain their power." He weaves light into burning whips. "Your entire house deserves its fate."

The words hit harder than his magic. I lunge forward, frost spreading across the rocky floor with each step. My fist connects with his jaw as wind magic amplifies the blow. He staggers back, blood staining his perfect teeth.

Theron retaliates with a blast of pure light that sears my vision. I counter blind, letting instinct guide my defensive sweep. Ice meets light in an explosive clash that rocks the entire chamber.

"Enough!" A Praexa's command cuts through the chaos. Golden wings descend between us as guards rush forward.

I retreat before they can reach me, using the lingering chaos as cover. The confrontation has drawn too much attention - and cost me valuable time to investigate the gems. But Theron's words echo in my mind: Your father was a fool to think he could contain their power.

He knows about my father's connection to the cursed artifact, to the power that has started to undo us. We have tried to keep that information buried, and I grit my teeth knowing that bastard Theron knows a secret I'd rather not get out.

But that knowledge will have to wait. For now, I need to move quickly before the Praexa decide I'm too much of a liability to allow to be near the trials at all.

I turn to leave, frost still crackling at my fingertips, when a flash of deep auburn catches my eye. The crowd of xaphan parts, revealing a human woman moving through their midst with unexpected poise.

Her hair falls in waves down her back, catching the dying sunlight like liquid copper. But it's her eyes that hold me transfixed - emerald green and blazing with determination as she makes her way toward the quarters where the humans are being sequestered, a water skin and bundle of food clutch to her chest.

She carries herself differently than the other humans who've come seeking wings. She doesn't look desperate to appease them, but every time a xaphan gets within arm's distance, she gracefully steps away, always keeping distance from them.

A jagged scar curves around her neck, disappearing beneath the simple cloth of her tunic - a mark that should mar her beauty but somehow only enhances it. I want to trace it, know how she got it, and I don't understand that.

Magic ripples around her in subtle waves, not the raw power of a xaphan, but something else entirely. Something wild and untamed, like storm winds through mountain passes. It feels like she's a conduit, stored of magic and untapped.

I find myself tracking her progress across the chamber, noting how she navigates the space with practiced awareness. There are twin blades affixed to her back, and a part of me wants to see her pull them out, to see what she can unleash. Because she does not seem like any other human to me.

The curse beneath my skin pulses, but for once the pain feels distant, secondary to the pull of watching this fascinating creature. She turns slightly, and for a brief moment our eyes meet across the chamber. No fear, no submission - just pure, unwavering intensity that sends an unexpected jolt through my entire being.

And then she is gone, and I am stuck, stunned, as I wonder what the fuck just happened.

KYRIE

The arena's stone walls tower above me, ancient runes etched into their weathered surface pulsing with an ethereal blue glow. Throngs of competitors crowd the entrance courtyard, their voices echoing off the high ceiling in a cacophony of different languages and dialects. The scent of incense and magic hangs thick in the air, mixing with the metallic tang of ceremonial weapons.

I grip the worn leather strap of the sheath slung across my back, weaving through clusters of humans and xaphan alike. The latter are impossible to miss - their wings folded against their backs in various shades of gray and white, some speckled like common pigeons while others gleam with pristine perfection. A few lower-ranked xaphan hover near the ceiling, their wings stirring the banners that hang from iron brackets.

My scarred neck tingles as I pass beneath them. Every instinct screams to keep my head down, to blend into the shadows like I learned growing up in the outskirts. But I force myself to stand tall. I didn't come this far to cower now.

I do everything I can to stay out of their reach, though. I originally didn't want to leave the room after I ventured out for food - I have no option but to eat theirs - but the room was empty once I was finished eating and my curiosity got the better of me. So, I decided to size up my conversation.

A gust of wind sends the banners snapping, and I stumble forward, colliding with

what feels like a wall of solid muscle. My hands press against a chest covered in a fine silk tunic, and I freeze. Looking up, my breath catches in my throat.

Ice-blue eyes pierce into mine, set in a face that could have been carved from marble. His wings, pure white and massive, arch above his broad shoulders. Not a single feather bears even a hint of color or pattern - the mark of xaphan nobility.

"Watch where you're going, human." His voice carries the cultured accent of New Solas' upper districts, but he doesn't look at me with disdain. He looks at me with...curiosity.

My fingers curl against his chest before I snatch them back. The scar on my neck burns with phantom pain, memories of another xaphan's cruel touch flooding back. But I force my chin up, meeting that frozen gaze.

"Maybe you should watch where you're standing."

His lips curve into something between a smile that knocks the breath out of me. The temperature around us seems to drop several degrees, magic crackling in the air.

"Interesting. Most humans would be begging for forgiveness by now." He takes a calculated step forward, those pristine wings casting me in shadow, and I don't dare move. I don't want him to see how uncomfortable it makes me. "I am Azrael, one of the trial trainers. And you are?"

My heart hammers against my ribs. A trainer? Of all the xaphan to literally run into... But there's something else in his gaze beyond the expected disdain - a flash of intrigue that makes my skin prickle.

"Kyrie," I manage, forcing my voice steady despite the way my scar throbs with each pulse of magic emanating from him.

"A lovely name." He circles me slowly, his boots silent on the stone floor. "It suits me."

A few nearby competitors edge away, creating a bubble of space around us. The incense smoke curls between us like living tendrils.

"Thank you," I breathe.

"You know..." He muses, with that same smile that has my heart stuttering. "I could show you the training grounds." His words carry a dangerous sort of charm. "The meditation chambers. The elemental focuses. Things most candidates never see before they..." He trails off meaningfully.

Die, I finish silently. Before they die in horrible ways for xaphan entertainment.

But access to restricted areas? Knowledge other competitors won't have? The strategic part of my brain latches onto the opportunity, even as every instinct screams to run.

"Why would you offer that?" I ask, watching him carefully.

"Let's call it... professional curiosity." His wings shift, catching the light from the glowing runes. "I find myself intrigued by a human who shows such..." His eyes rake over me. "Spirit."

I know he's manipulating me. Using my desperate need for any advantage to serve his own agenda. But if I'm going to survive these trials - if I'm going to save my mother - I need every edge I can get.

"Lead the way then."

Azrael's footsteps echo through winding stone corridors, his wings occasionally brushing against the crystalline sconces that line the walls. Blue flames dance within them, casting shifting shadows across the ancient murals depicting past trials. I keep a careful distance from him, noting every doorway and intersection we pass, but he seems to creep closer as we walk.

"The meditation chambers allow candidates to attune themselves to different magical frequencies." His voice bounces off the walls as we descend a spiral staircase. "Though most humans lack the sensitivity to properly utilize them."

The air grows thicker with magic, making my skin tingle. "And I suppose xaphan master them instantly?"

"Naturally." He glances back, those ice-blue eyes glinting. "Though I sense you might prove... different."

My scar pulses at his words. The last xaphan who noticed me - who presumably thought I was different - left me bleeding in an alley. Yet something about Azrael's presence draws me in like his the only fire on a cold winter night. I'm out of options as I'm suckered in, just to stay alive.

We enter a circular chamber lined with floating orbs of light. Each pulses with a different elemental energy - fire, water, air, earth. The magic here is so dense it feels like walking through syrup.

"Most candidates rush straight to offensive magic." Azrael gestures to a crimson orb crackling with flames. "They forget that survival often requires..." His wing brushes my shoulder as he moves past, sending shivers down my spine. But this time...not from disgust. "...a more delicate touch."

I step toward a pale blue orb swirling with air magic, trying to ignore how my heart

paces at his proximity. "Is that what you're doing? Taking a delicate touch with the human candidate?"

His laugh is low and dangerous. "I assure you, my intentions are anything but delicate."

The honesty in his voice makes me turn. He stands closer than I expected, those perfect features cast in shadows and light. I should be terrified. Should be running. Instead, I find myself studying the way his wings shift with each breath, how his power seems to reach for me like a warm caress.

"Then what are your intentions?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

His eyes narrow, something ancient and predatory stirring in their depths. "That depends entirely on whether you survive the initiation."

The reminder of the upcoming trial pulls me back to reality. "I should rest before tomorrow." I step away from him, as if the distance will help me think clearer. "The initiation won't wait for tired candidates."

Azrael inclines his head, those perfect wings shifting like fresh snow. "Indeed. Though few sleep well the night before." His eyes lock with mine one final time before he turns, disappearing into the shadows of the corridor.

The walk back to my waiting chamber feels longer without his presence. Torchlight flickers across the stone walls, and occasional bursts of laughter or sobbing echo from other rooms. There seem to be four waiting rooms, stuffed full of humans and not enough beds.

The heavy wooden door creaks as I push it open and slip inside. I climb to my top bed, ignoring the others, and collapsing on my stomach so I can stare out the window

across from me.

The xaphan city sprawls below like a jeweled tapestry. Crystalline spires rise into the violet sky, their surfaces reflecting the light of two moons. Magic-fueled lanterns float between buildings, carried by currents of enchanted wind. The air ripples with protective wards, their patterns visible as shimmering veils of gold and silver.

In the western quarter, where human settlements crouch in the shadow of xaphan grandeur, smoke rises from countless chimneys. It makes me think of my family, probably gathered around our tiny hearth. Mom in her sickbed, Dad trying to hide his worry, the twins pestering him with questions about when I'll return.

If I return.

A group of xaphan glide past my window, their wings catching the moonlight. Their laughter drifts through the glass, carefree and cruel. To them, tomorrow is just another show - humans dancing for their entertainment, dying for their amusement.

The scar on my neck throbs in time with the pulse of the city's magical barriers. Everything I hate is here in this glittering prison of a city, yet it's also the only place that holds hope for Mother's cure.

The moons climb higher, casting triple shadows across my small room. I should try to sleep, but my mind keeps returning to ice-blue eyes and wings white as fresh snow.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:59 am

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AZRAEL

The massive columns cast long shadows across the empty corridor as I make my way through the eastern side of the arena - well, the tunnels below it. My footsteps echo against the stone floor, thoughts of auburn hair and defiant green eyes still lingering in my mind.

A flash of white wings appears around the corner. Theron stands before me, his pristine feathers marking him as one of New Solas' elite - just as mine do. His lips curl into a sneer.

"Well, if it isn't the disgraced heir himself." He adjusts the ornate sword at his hip. "Still chasing after trinkets to save your pathetic bloodline?"

Ice forms in my veins. "Careful, Theron. Even tainted blood runs hot when provoked." As I have proven. But clearly, he's itching for another fight, and so am I.

"Is that a threat?" Lightning crackles between his fingers, the air charging with static. "Your family's fall from grace must have addled your mind if you think you can challenge me."

"Challenge implies equal standing." I summon a cold wind that whips through the corridor, scattering loose papers and extinguishing the wall sconces. "We both know you're beneath me."

His wings flare wide, golden feathers bristling. "Beneath you? Your wings are starting to look a little gray now, Azrael. The curse eating away at your power is visible for all to see."

"Yet here I stand, while you skulk through halls hunting like a common thief." My own wings unfurl, and resist the urge to look, to see if they really do look gray. "Tell me, does it pain you to know that even cursed, I'm still more powerful than you'll ever be?"

"We'll see about that." The lightning dancing across his skin intensifies, casting his face in harsh blue light. "Only one of us will claim the prize. And once I find it, I'll ensure your family's legacy ends in the dust where it belongs."

The temperature plummets as frost spreads across the marble beneath my feet. "Make another threat against my family, Theron, and you'll discover exactly how much power I have left."

The crackle of our combined powers draws whispers from around the corner. A group of lesser xaphans peer at our standoff, their wings rustling nervously.

"Your posturing has drawn an audience." I force my wings to fold back, though ice still coats my fingertips. "How fitting for someone who values appearance over substance."

Theron's lightning dims, but his smirk widens. "Speaking of substance..." He pulls a worn piece of parchment from his jacket. "While you waste time with threats, I've been making actual progress."

The paper catches the remaining torchlight, revealing the edge of an ancient map. My heart pounds against my ribs as I recognize the distinctive markings of pre-war cartography.

"Too bad you don't know where to look." He traces a finger along faded lines. "One of your precious gems lies buried in tomorrow's initiation. I wonder how long until the trials claim what's left of your bloodline?"

The watching crowd grows larger. A Praexa's golden wardrobe glints at the far end of the hall. Getting caught fighting again would jeopardize everything.

"The trails hold more dangers than just the traps set, Theron." I step back, letting shadows mask my expression. "Hope you've learned to watch your back."

"Unlike your family, I don't need to hide in darkness." He tucks the map away with a flourish. "The gems will be mine before these trials are even over. Perhaps I'll send you a sketch of it, something to remember it by when your body turns to ash."

The Praexa's footsteps grow closer. I retreat further into the shadows, my mind already racing with plans. I need a way to get into the trials themselves, a way to find the gems without drawing too much attention. I don't need the whole arena watching and laughing at me when I dive in among the humans - so I'll need another plan.

"Your theatrics bore me." I turn away, my voice carrying just enough for him to hear. "Enjoy your chase with the humans."

But as I stride down the darkened corridor, my hands clench into fists. He's given me exactly what I need - and exactly what I fear. The race for the gems has truly begun, and time grows shorter with each passing moment.

I slip through a hidden archway into one of the arena's abandoned training alcoves. Ancient tapestries line crumbling stone walls, their once-vibrant threads now faded to ghostly echoes of battles long past. My wings brush against cold granite as I pace the confined space.

Theron's map changes everything. The smug bastard might be lying, but I can't take that chance. Not with my family's lives hanging by a thread.

A gust of wind sweeps through gaps in the stonework, making the tapestries dance. I channel a spark of power, conjuring a small flame in my palm. The light reveals intricate etchings carved into the floor - old ward symbols from when this space served as a meditation chamber for warrior-priests.

"Think." I extinguish the flame, dragging fingers through my hair. But I have nothing, and I know that it would be better for me to go home before someone catches me here, looking more distraught than I'd want them to see.

My wings ache as I fold them tight against my back, the curse's corruption spreading another inch along the feathers. I refuse to acknowledge that they may be looking less than pristine.

I press my palm against the wall as I start toward the exit of the arena, feeling the pulse of ancient magic flowing through the city's foundations. Somewhere in this labyrinth of stone and secrets lies the key to saving my bloodline. I've played the dutiful trainer long enough - it's time to use this position for its true purpose.

The twin moons cast silvery light across New Solas' golden spires as I slip out of the arena and into the upper district. My boots click against the polished stone pathways between towering marble buildings. Crystalline lanterns flicker to life as darkness descends, their enchanted flames casting dancing shadows across ornate archways.

A cool breeze carries the scent of night-blooming jasmine from hanging gardens above. My wings twitch with the urge to take flight, to soar above the city's gleaming domes, but I force them still. I don't know what kind of strain flying would put on them.

The street curves past an open courtyard where a fountain sparkles, its waters enchanted to flow upward in defiant streams. It makes auburn hair and fierce green eyes flash through my mind. Kyrie. I'm curious to see what kind of strength lays behind that calm exterior.

"Focus," I mutter, shaking my head.

The girl is merely a means to an end - if she even makes it past tomorrow. The fact that her fierce spirit stirs something in me is irrelevant. I'll need to use her eventually and that's the only reason I approached her tonight.

A zarryn-drawn carriage clatters past, its ethereal steeds' hooves striking sparks against the cobblestones. The wealthy passengers inside pay no attention to a lone xaphan walking home in the growing dark.

My family's mansion lies ahead, its once-proud spires now dulled by neglect. Vines creep up the weathered walls, their leaves tinged with unnatural black - another sign of the curse's spread.

I pause at the gates, studying the corruption slowly consuming my ancestral home. Using Kyrie is logical. She's already involved, already has committed to the trials. I'm not forcing her in there myself. And I have a feeling that there is something different about her that will help her get through this alive.

The fact that I can't stop thinking about the fire in her eyes when she faced me down is... problematic. But irrelevant. I have no time for distractions, not with Theron already moving against me.

KYRIE

I refuse to let my composure crack as we are led to the arena. The initiation looms ahead of us, and so many of the candidates are already talking, crying, anxiously worrying.

But I'm silent.

We filter into the arena, the noise here unbearable. I refuse to look up, to see the many xaphan, demons, gorgons, and other creatures that have come to watch us die. I'm not even sure how they'll see what's happening when we're in the void, but I don't waste time thinking about it.

Instead, I stare straight ahead at the portal that the crier from yesterday is waiting next to. Two Praexa are standing next to him, the orchestrators of the games. What I wouldn't give to sink a blade into one of them.

But I don't dare. Not as I'm ushered forward, people disappearing before me with their direction. When it's my turn, I take in a deep breath but I don't hesitate.

"Step through," the crier says with a sinister smile. "And may Solas be with you."

The air shifts, crackling with ancient magic as I step through the shimmering portal. My heart pounds against my ribs, each beat a reminder of why I'm here - for Mother, for the medicine she desperately needs.

One moment I'm standing in the gleaming arena of New Solas, surrounded by sneering xaphan faces. The next - nothing.

My breath catches. The darkness isn't just an absence of light - it's a living thing, pressing against my skin, seeping into my bones. I try to call out, but no sound reaches my ears. My lips move, yet I can't even feel them.

"Hello?" I attempt to whisper, but the word dissolves before it forms. The void swallows everything.

I lift my hand - or I think I do. There's no sensation, no confirmation that my body still exists. Panic claws at my throat. I never prepared for this complete sensory deprivation. I was ready to fight with my blades, but even the ground beneath my feet feels like an illusion.

Magic pulses around me in waves. Not the pure, crystalline energy of the xaphan, but something darker, more primal. It slithers across what I think is my skin, probing for weaknesses, testing my resolve.

I take a step forward - or backward? Direction has no meaning here. The magic grows stronger, more insistent. A tendril of power brushes against my consciousness, and pain explodes through my body. My life force drains away where it touched, leaving behind an aching emptiness.

These must be the threats they warned about - invisible, intangible predators feeding on human essence. I try to steady myself, to focus on my core. But how do you center yourself when you can't feel your own body?

Another surge of magic approaches. Without sight or touch to guide me, I rely on the only sense remaining - my awareness of the magical currents themselves. They flow like water, creating subtle patterns in the void. The predator's energy disrupts these

patterns, leaving ripples in the darkness.

I shift away from the disturbance, but in this realm of nothingness, even that simple movement threatens to unravel my sanity.

I force my breathing to slow, drawing from years of combat training in the outskirts of my little village. The void may steal my sight, but I still have other senses. I close my useless eyes and let my other faculties take over.

The magic pulses change. A subtle current brushes past my left ear - different from the predatory tendrils. This feels more like the gentle whisper of wind through the mountain passes of The Ridge. I turn toward it, extending my hands into the nothingness.

My fingertips tingle as they pass through varying temperatures. Cold spots drift by like pockets of winter air, while warm patches remind me of the healing springs near our village. These thermal changes form patterns - paths through the darkness.

Another predatory surge approaches. The air pressure drops, creating a vacuum that tugs at my clothes. I sidestep, letting muscle memory guide my movements. The deadly magic passes harmlessly by, its hungry tendrils grasping at empty space.

My feet register minute vibrations through whatever surface I'm standing on. Each pulse of magic sends ripples through the void, like stones dropped in a still pond. I track these disturbances, building a mental map of safe zones and danger areas.

Years of sparring with swords and the occasional dagger has honed my spatial awareness. This void is different - more absolute - but the principles remain the same. Listen. Feel. React.

A change in air pressure alerts me to movement above. I drop and roll, feeling

magical energy crackle where my head had been. The predator's attack leaves behind a residue of power that makes my skin crawl. These aren't mindless forces - they're hunting me with purpose.

I press forward, tracking the subtle variations in the magical currents. Some flows feel ancient and deep, like the foundations of Aerasak itself. Others are sharp and new, cutting through the darkness like freshly forged blades. Between these rivers of power, I find paths of relative calm.

The ground lurches beneath my feet, sending my stomach into my throat. My muscles react before my mind can process - I drop into a crouch, letting my body roll forward. The whistle of steel cutting air passes inches from my neck, and I feel the rush of displaced magic in its wake.

"What the fuck?" I mutter, though the words seem to get lost when they leave my lips.

A blade materializes from the darkness, its edge gleaming with an otherworldly blue light. The metal seems to drink in the surrounding void, making it appear almost alive. I push off with my back foot, spinning away as the weapon arcs down where I'd been crouching.

Magic crackles around me, raising the fine hairs on my arms. The void shifts, reality bending as the ground starts to crack and separate. A chasm yawns open, the edges crumbling away into nothingness. I can feel it more than anything, though it's a disorienting sensation.

The blade swings again, forcing me toward the widening gap. I take two quick steps back, my heart hammering against my ribs. The edge of the chasm creeps closer, pieces of stone dropping into infinite blackness. No time to find another path. No room to retreat.

Drawing in a sharp breath, I gather my strength and sprint forward. The blade whistles past again as I launch myself into the air. For one terrifying moment, I'm suspended over the void, nothing but emptiness below. The magical currents swirl around me, some trying to push me down, others lifting me up like invisible wings.

My fingers stretch out, searching for purchase. The rough stone of the far edge scrapes against my palms. I grab hold, my shoulders screaming as they absorb the impact. My legs dangle in empty space as pieces of rock break away under my grip. Now that there is nothing beneath my feet, I can tell the distinct difference.

Sweat trickles down my spine as I crawl up onto the rock, refusing to slow. Instead, I push forward through the void. Each step feels heavier than the last, my muscles burning from constant tension. The magical currents grow more chaotic, swirling in unpredictable patterns that set my teeth on edge.

A whisper of movement brushes past my consciousness - different from the magical predators. This presence feels solid, alive. My hand drops to the twin blades at my hips, fingers curling around familiar leather-wrapped hilts.

The attack comes without warning. A body slams into mine from the side, driving the air from my lungs. We hit the ground hard, rolling across the invisible surface. My attacker's weight pins me down, but years of training kick in. I buck my hips, creating space to bring my knee up between us.

Steel flashes in the darkness. I twist away, feeling the blade slice across my shoulder. Hot blood trickles down my arm. Drawing my twin blades, I spring back to my feet.

Another strike comes at my head. I cross my blades, catching the attack. The impact sends shockwaves up my arms. My opponent's strength is incredible, inhuman. Magic crackles between our locked weapons.

Pain explodes in my side - a second blade I didn't sense. I stumble backward, warm blood soaking my tunic. The void spins around me as my attacker presses their advantage. Their blade whips past my face, cutting strands of hair.

I drop low, letting instinct guide my movements. My right blade finds flesh, drawing a hiss from my opponent. Their magic flares in response, sending waves of burning energy through my body.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I drive forward. Our weapons clash in a deadly dance, neither of us able to see clearly in the absolute darkness. Blood loss makes my head spin, but I force myself to focus on the subtle shifts in air pressure that betray my opponent's movements.

My left blade slides between their ribs. Their magic surges one final time, wild and uncontrolled. The ground beneath my feet dissolves like sand washing away in a tide.

I fall. The void rushes past as gravity claims me, my opponent's body disappearing into the darkness above. My stomach lurches into my throat as I plummet through nothingness, unable to tell up from down in the absolute darkness.

The impact knocks the remaining air from my lungs as I slam onto solid ground. My knees buckle, hands splaying against cool marble to catch myself. Sensation floods back - the weight of my clothes, the sting of cuts, the throb of bruises forming beneath my skin.

Light pierces my vision in fragments, like shards of stained glass piecing themselves back together. The grand arena of New Solas materializes around me, its white stone pillars stretching toward a twilight sky. Golden magic still crackles in the air, remnants of the trial's power dissipating like morning mist.

My chest heaves as I draw in desperate breaths. The twin blades at my hips pulse

with residual energy, their steel singing with echoes of the void. Blood trickles down my arm, staining the pristine floor beneath me.

The crowd's murmurs fade into focus. Hundreds of xaphan fill the viewing galleries, their wings creating a tapestry of whites and golds against the darkening sky. Their whispers carry on the evening breeze - surprise, speculation, perhaps even respect.

Movement draws my gaze up at the edge of the arena. Azrael stands motionless, his black hair stark against his white tunic and pants, as he waits on an obsidian platform. Those ice-blue eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that makes my skin prickle. His wings - pure white, which makes him being a trainer all too surprising - remain perfectly still, not betraying a single emotion.

The weight of his stare pins me in place. There's something in his expression I can't decipher - not quite approval, not quite disdain. His jaw clenches slightly as his gaze tracks over my injuries, lingering on the blood seeping through my tunic.

Magic still dances between us, invisible currents that make the air feel thick and heavy. The power radiating from him is different from the void's savage energy - controlled, refined, but no less dangerous. His presence commands attention, demanding acknowledgment even in silence.

I force myself to stand straighter despite my body's protests. His expression remains unreadable, but something shifts in those cold eyes - a flash of... interest? Curiosity? It's gone before I can be sure, leaving me wondering if I imagined it.

I stumble to the edge of the arena where a small group of xaphan are watching. "What is your name?" one asks.

"Kyrie," I pant, still so disoriented. "Kyrie Kael."

"Congratulations, Kyrie," another says with a malicious grin. "You are now a contestant in the wing trials."

AZRAEL

The polished obsidian beneath my boots gleams with an otherworldly sheen as I stand at the edge of the viewing platform. Below, a vast expanse of magical darkness churns like a living thing, its inky tendrils reaching upward before dissipating into wisps. The darkness isn't just absence of light—it's a tangible force that devours illumination, crushing the senses of those trapped within.

While the contestants can't see down there, the void splays out like a body of water in the arena for the rest of us to be able to view easily. It allows me to watch as a blade is thrown through the void, followed by an agonized scream that echoes off the arena's towering walls. Another contestant eliminated. Their life force drains away, feeding the very darkness that claimed them.

"Pathetic." I grip the platform's crystalline railing, my knuckles white.

These humans throw their lives away for a chance at wings, at ascending beyond their mundane existence. They don't understand the price of power, the weight of the gift they so desperately seek.

Someone else must have a conduit because I see purple spark start to sputter in another section. The void responds by intensifying, condensing around the magical barrier until it shatters like glass. The contestant's terrified whimpers carry through the chamber before falling silent.

My wings flex unconsciously, as I keep scanning, looking for any hint of the gemstones in this portion of the trails. Maybe I can slip in after the initiation is over, snag it without really being seen.

The edge of the arena is lined with torches. The flames burn with an eternal magic that even the void below cannot touch. Ancient runes carved into the platform's edge pulse with containment spells, keeping the darkness from spilling over into our sacred spaces.

A determined contestant manages to forge ahead, their blade - probably imbued - cutting a path through the shadows. For a moment, hope flares in their movements - until the void-wraiths materialize. These spectral hunters, born from the darkness itself, circle their prey with predatory grace. The human's magic flares brighter, desperate now.

I lean forward, watching dispassionately as the wraiths close in. The void swallows another scream, another failure, another fool who dared to dream of wings.

But then a flicker of movement catches my eye - and I see Kyrie. She's at the center of the void, facing off the last guardian. Her auburn hair whips around her face as she dodges the wraith's ethereal claws. Instead of fighting the creature head-on like the others, she rolls beneath its strike, her movements fluid and precise.

The void surges toward her, but she's already moving. I watch in fascination as she uses those twin blades like they are an extension of herself, combatting an enemy she can't even see. It's impressive as she slides a blade through the wraith's ribs and it implodes.

"Clever girl." The words escape before I can stop them. Most contestants rely on brute force or defensive magic, but this one... she's different. She uses the arena itself to her advantage, timing her movements with the void's natural ebb and flow.

When the void starts to disappear beneath her feet, ready to drop her to the arena's floor, my chest tightens. It's an odd reaction since I know that this means she's survived, but I hold back a wince when I watch her slam to the ground, now released from the void.

She stands tall despite her obvious exhaustion, blood trickling along her skin, her clothes singed and torn. Yet there's a fierce pride in her stance that commands respect.

I find myself leaning forward, studying Kyrie with newfound interest. This human has more than just survival instinct—she has vision, adaptability, and most importantly, the wisdom to know when not to fight.

It's exactly what I need and the plan I started last night is ready to be moved into place.

I descend the obsidian staircase toward the organizers' booth, my wings folded close against my back. The crystalline structure gleams with embedded runes of power, their azure glow reflecting off the polished surfaces.

Inside, three Praexa sit behind an ornate desk carved from ancient silverwood, their own wings creating a backdrop of white and gold feathers.

"Lord Azrael." The central figure inclines his head, silver rings in his hair chiming softly. "What brings you to our station?"

I rest my hand on the desk's surface, letting my family's signet ring catch the light. "The human who completed the void trial, has she been assigned a trainer yet?"

"Kyrie Kael." The female organizer to the right unfurls a scroll of enchanted parchment, the words shifting and reforming beneath her touch. "From the slums up

north. No formal magical training, though she's shown remarkable aptitude in basic energy manipulation." She looks at me and shakes her head. "No trainer yet assigned."

"Untrained?" My wings twitch with interest. "Yet she managed to navigate the void wraiths with more skill than seasoned practitioners."

The third organizer, his face half-hidden beneath an ornate hood, speaks in measured tones. "She's clearly trained in combat."

I nod, thinking. "And her motivation for entering the trials?"

"The usual. Dreams of wings, elevation from poverty." The central figure's lips curl in a dismissive smile. "Though she specifically inquired about access to restricted medicines."

"Interesting." I straighten. "Get me her complete file. Including the details from today's trial."

The organizers exchange glances, their wings rustling with uncertainty. I slide a small pouch of celestial silver across the desk, the enchanted metal singing against the wood.

"Of course, Lord Azrael." The hooded figure quickly tucks the payment away. "We'll have it delivered by nightfall."

My mind races as I look to where Kyrie is limping away from the arena and back toward the human's quarters. Raw talent like hers is rare - especially among the untrained masses that populate the copper district. Most humans who enter the trials have at least some basic magic whether it's a conduit or an imbued weapon, yet she navigated the void's dangers on instinct alone.

Which means she might be more powerful than most expect. Strong enough to feel and capture the gemstones I need.

My family's curse grows stronger with each passing day, and these stones may hold the key to breaking it. But tracking them requires someone who can move unnoticed through the shadows, someone who I can train and keep close, who won't want them when they are found. And with them being in the trails...

I need someone human.

Below, maintenance mages reset the trial arena, their spells weaving new patterns into the void. Fresh runes ignite along the obsidian walls, ready to trap the next batch of hopefuls. The wraiths reform, their ethereal forms dancing through the darkness like smoke.

My wings shift restlessly as I consider the possibilities. An untrained human would be perfect - especially if I could entice her with something as easy as medicine. And this one has already proven her adaptability, her instinct for survival. With proper guidance, that potential could be shaped, honed into something truly formidable.

I trace a finger along my family's signet ring, feeling the cursed magic that pulses within. The stones' power could cleanse this taint, restore my bloodline's honor. And I think I found just the right way to have the stone obtained in the trials without having the whole of New Solas watch me debase myself by jumping in myself.

My plan begins to crystallize. I'll offer to train her personally—an honor no human could refuse. And while she learns to harness her power, I'll mold her into the perfect tool for my search.

I look back to the Praexa. "Assign her to me."

They blink, staring up at me. The central one furrows his brow. "You want to train her?"

The hooded one next to him howls with laughter. "Of course he does. He's a bored noble and what's more fun than tormenting a human in the trials."

Their words make my stomach twist, but I let a cruel smile spread across my face. "Exactly."

"We'll mark it down," the hooded one says, and I nod in thanks, turning away.

I stalk through the rocky corridors of the trial grounds, my boots clicking against the polished floor. Magical orbs float overhead, casting a soft golden glow that reflects off the faceted walls. My wings rustle with each step, the silver feathers a constant reminder of my noble birth—and the curse that threatens to strip it all away.

A decorative mirror catches my attention, its surface enchanted to never tarnish. I pause, studying my reflection in the ancient glass. Dark circles shadow my ice-blue eyes, more pronounced than they were last month.

The curse's progression shows in subtle ways—the slight pallor of my skin, the dull sheen of my once-lustrous wings, the faint tremor in my hands that I must constantly suppress.

Behind me, the Praexa's laughter echoes down the hall, but they don't see the desperation hidden beneath my carefully maintained facade, the way the curse eats away at my family's power day by day.

Finding those stones isn't just about restoring honor anymore - it's about survival. And that human girl, with her raw talent and unconventional methods, might be my last chance to save everything.

KYRIE

The wind howls around me, a haunting melody that matches the thunder of my pulse. Below, an endless expanse of emerald treetops stretches toward the horizon, their leaves dancing in waves like a distant sea. The wooden platform creaks beneath my feet, weathered boards worn smooth by countless aspirants before me.

I grip the railing, my knuckles white against the ancient wood. The height steals my breath – we must be at least five hundred feet up. Magic shimmers in the air, visible as faint purple wisps that curl and twist through the gaps between the planks. These enchantments are all that keep the massive structure aloft, defying nature's laws as casually as breathing.

"This was a stupid idea," I mutter.

My auburn hair whips across my vision, and I push it back with trembling fingers. The only thing that keeps me up on the dizzying training platform is the constant reminder of why I'm here. Of who needs me to succeed.

But the platform sways slightly, and my stomach lurches. Dawn breaks over the distant mountains, painting the sky in shades of rose and gold, but I barely notice its beauty. Instead, my eyes keep dragging back to that terrible drop.

The enchanted crystals embedded in the platform's edge pulse with a soft blue light, marking the designated takeoff point. Other platforms float in the distance, connected

by nothing but air and magic, their silhouettes dark against the morning sky. Somewhere in that aerial maze lies my goal – if I can find the courage to take this first step.

I draw in another shaky breath, tasting magic on my tongue – sharp and metallic, like lightning about to strike. My worn leather boots scrape against the wood as I edge closer to the precipice.

The training wings connected to my back feel impossibly heavy, their joints pressing into my shoulder blades. They were conjured, and they feel like they won't respond to me. One wrong move, one miscalculation, and all my dreams of saving Mother will end here, broken on the forest floor below.

"Quite the view, isn't it?"

The deep voice cuts through my thoughts like a blade. I spin around, my heart leaping into my throat. I'm shocked to see Azrael stands a mere few feet away, his presence commanding the small platform.

Tall and imposing, with jet-black hair pulled back and eyes like shards of winter ice. His wings – real, permanent wings, not the conjured training ones I wear – stretch out behind him, their white feathers shining almost golden in the dawn light.

My brain screams at me to back away, but like that first night, I don't feel debilitating fear around him. Though the scar tissue along my neck and back burns with phantom pain, a stark reminder of my last encounter with his kind.

"I...suppose it is," I answer. "What are you doing up here?"

"I've been watching you." His boots whisper against the wooden planks as he moves closer. "Your form needs work. The way you tense like you expect the training wings

to just work instead of properly using them will get you killed on your first jump."

Magic crackles in the air between us, his power radiating off him in waves that make my skin prickle. He gestures to my wings with an elegant hand.

"I could train you." The words fall casual as rainfall, but his ice-blue eyes lock onto mine with predatory intensity. "Personal instruction. One-on-one."

I force myself to breathe, to push past the memory of claws and teeth and burning pain. "Why would a xaphan noble want to train a human?"

His lips curve into a stunning smile. "Let's call it... professional curiosity." He winks, and I'm surprised by the flutter in my stomach from it. It's the same thing he said to me that first night.

My brain tries to piece together what that means, but I come up short. He doesn't seem like he wants me to fail, like he wants to laugh at my expense, but I can't be sure.

The rising sun casts shadows across his angular features, highlighting the dangerous beauty of his face. "So what do you say, little bird? Ready to learn how to really fly?"

The magical barrier surrounding the platform ripples with his proximity, purple energy dancing like aurora lights in the space between us. My heart pounds against my ribs, each beat screaming danger.

But Mother's face floats in my mind, pale and drawn with sickness, and I know I can't afford to let fear rule me. Not now. Not with her life hanging in the balance.

I swallow hard, weighing my options. Every instinct screams to refuse, but the reality is brutal – most humans who attempt the trials fail. Die. And I can't afford to fail.

"Fine." The word tastes like ash in my mouth. "Show me."

His smile widens, revealing teeth too white, too perfect. "Excellent. First, loosen your death grip on those straps. The wings need to feel like an extension of your body, something I know you are familiar with." His eyes flick to my blades

I try to relax my fingers, but they've locked around the leather straps crossing my chest. The wings feel heavier as he circles behind me, and I fight the urge to spin and keep him in sight. My scar throbs with each step he takes.

"Breathe." His voice comes from directly behind me now. "Feel the magic current in the air. It flows like a river – invisible to human eyes, but you can sense it. That current is what will keep you aloft, not just these training wings."

Magic tingles against my skin as he manipulates the energy around us. The purple wisps thicken, forming visible streams that twist through the air like ribbons caught in a breeze.

"Close your eyes."

"I'd rather not."

"Trust has to start somewhere, little bird." His hands hover near my shoulders, not quite touching. "The magic responds to intent as much as skill. Your fear is blocking the flow."

Cursing silently, I let my eyes drift shut. The magical current grows stronger, wrapping around me like silk. The wooden platform seems to fade beneath my feet, leaving me suspended in that ethereal stream.

"Now spread your wings. Slowly. Feel how they catch the current."

I extend the conjured wings, their joints clicking softly. Without sight, every sensation intensifies – the bite of the wind, the hum of magic, the weight of his presence behind me. The wings feel lighter somehow, more responsive.

"Better." His approval sends an unwanted shiver down my spine. "But your shoulders are still rigid as stone. The wings need to move with you, not against you."

His presence fades as I soar higher, carried by currents of magic that dance beneath my wings. The morning sun bathes New Solas in golden light, its crystalline spires glittering like diamonds against the cloudless sky. Below, the ancient forest stretches endlessly, its canopy rippling in waves of deep emerald.

I bank left, following the purple streams of magic that twist through the air like ribbons. The training wings respond smoothly, like they really are a part of me. For a moment, everything feels perfect – weightless, free, powerful.

Then I look down.

The world tilts sideways. My stomach lurches as the distance between me and the ground suddenly becomes too real, too vast. The magical current I'd been riding slips away like water through fingers, leaving me struggling to stay aloft. My chest constricts, each breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Keep moving!" The xaphan's voice cuts through my panic, but I can't make my wings respond. They lock up, the wings stopping as terror freezes my muscles.

The forest floor spins beneath me, trees blurring into a nauseating whirl of green and shadow. Magic crackles around me, but I can't focus enough to grasp it. Panic grabs me as memories flood back – claws tearing, wings beating, pain searing across my back.

My training wings shudder. The right one catches wrong in the wind, throwing me into more of a spiral. Purple wisps of magic stream past, just out of reach. The ground rushes up, then sky, then ground again as I tumble through the air.

"Focus on the current!" he shouts, but the words scatter in the wind. My heart pounds so hard I think it might burst. The scar tissue along my neck and back screams with phantom pain, and I can't tell what's memory and what's now.

Nothing in my body will respond. Every instinct screams at me to curl into a ball, to protect myself, but that will only make the spin worse. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision as the lack of oxygen takes its toll. The forest below keeps spinning, spinning, spinning...

Strong arms wrap around me, solid and steady against the chaos of my spiral. Magic crackles where we touch, his power a tangible force that cuts through my panic like sunlight through storm clouds. My back presses against his chest, and I feel the thunder of his heartbeat even through the warm tunics that are meant to keep out the chill.

"Breathe with me." His voice rumbles close to my ear, surprisingly gentle for a creature I've only known to bring pain. "Feel the rhythm of my wings. Match it."

The powerful sweep of his feathers creates a cocoon around us, blocking out the dizzying view of ground and sky. Purple streams of magic weave between the white feathers, forming a protective barrier that slows our descent.

"That's it. Small breaths." His arms adjust, one hand splaying across my sternum while the other steadies my waist. "Focus on the magic current. It's still there, waiting. You can feel it."

My racing heart begins to slow, falling into sync with the steady beat of his wings.

The ones on my back start to relax, responding to his guidance as he helps me extend them properly.

"The fear is natural," he murmurs, his breath stirring my hair. "But you can't let it control you. Feel how the current flows – like water around stone. Don't fight it. Move with it."

Magic swirls around us in visible streams now, and I realize he's manipulating the energy to show me its pattern. The purple ribbons dance and weave, creating paths I can actually see. My breathing steadies further as I watch their hypnotic flow.

"There you are, little bird." His voice holds a note of approval as my wings finally catch the current properly. "Stay with me. We'll take this slowly."

The magic current flows steadier now, a visible river of purple light that carries us through the dawn-painted sky. But awareness creeps back like ice through my veins – I'm wrapped in the arms of a xaphan. The same creatures who scarred me. Who keep my people in poverty. Who watch humans die in their trials for entertainment.

My muscles tense. The wings feel like they pull at my back as I shift, trying to put distance between us. His arms loosen immediately, allowing me to drift a few feet away, though he maintains a hovering presence close enough to catch me if I falter again.

"I don't need your help anymore." The words come out sharper than intended, brittle with remembered pain. The scar tissue along my neck burns, a physical reminder of why I shouldn't trust him.

But my body betrays me, missing the steady anchor of his presence. The magical current feels more elusive now, slipping through my grasp like smoke. My body wobbles uncertainly as I try to maintain altitude alone.

His ice-blue eyes study me, unblinking. "Pride will get you killed faster than fear in these trials."

Purple energy dances between us, responding to his power. The dawn light catches his wings, sending ripples of color across the light feathers. He's beautiful in the way all xaphan are beautiful – deadly and distant as winter stars.

Yet moments ago, those same wings had sheltered me from panic. Those hands, capable of such destruction, had steadied me with surprising gentleness. The contradiction twists in my chest like a knife.

"I can't trust you." The words taste like truth and ashes. "No matter how helpful you seem."

His lips curve into that dangerous almost-smile. "I'm not asking for trust, little bird. Only cooperation."

The magic streams coil around us both, purple light reflecting in his winter-pale eyes. My heart pounds an uneven rhythm, caught between instinctive fear and something else – something I refuse to name.

I'm here to survive. And I won't let this xaphan stop me from that.

10

AZRAEL

Through narrowed eyes, I track the little bird's movements as she weaves between shimmering barriers of pure magic. Her auburn hair whips behind her like a battle standard, determination etched into every line of her face. The other candidates fumble and hesitate, but she moves with purpose.

"Faster." My voice cuts through the chamber. "Your enemies won't wait while you dance around."

She shoots me a venomous glare but picks up her pace. The magical barriers pulse with increasing intensity, their ethereal light casting strange shadows across the stone walls. Several crystalline orbs hover at different heights, each one a potential stepping stone - or a deadly trap.

"Three steps left, then jump." I bark out the command, watching her muscles tense. "Now."

She follows my instruction perfectly, launching herself into the air just as a wave of crackling energy sweeps beneath her feet. Her landing is graceful, practiced. Too practiced.

"Again," I say as she comes up to a stop before me. "This time blindfolded."

The other instructors exchange concerned glances, but I ignore them. She's stronger

than they realize. I've seen it in the way she carries herself, in the steel behind those green eyes.

I tie a length of black silk to cover her vision, and I reset the course with a wave of my hand. The magical barriers shift and realign, their patterns more treacherous than before. Crystal orbs pulse with deadly intent, the barriers set to react to her. I want to see if she can feel them like she did in the void.

"Five paces forward," I command. "Feel for the traps."

She hesitates for only a heartbeat before moving. Her steps are measured, precise. The void trap whistles as she passes, hungry for a misstep that never comes.

"Good." I fight a smile as I watch her. "Keep going."

An arc of pure energy sizzles over her head as she drops and rolls. The scent of ozone fills the air, magic crackling against ancient stone. Other candidates press against the far wall, their faces pale with fear or awe - I care little which.

"Up. And stop hesitating."

This time she leaps, her hand finding the crystal orb with uncanny accuracy. Raw power courses through the chamber as she channels the magic to stabilize herself. Impressive. Most humans would have been thrown back by now.

But I'm not done testing her limits. Not by far.

Her next move leaves me breathless. The little bird twists through a complex lattice of magical energy, her body arcing between three pulsing barriers that would have incinerated a lesser candidate. Magic ripples around her in waves of azure and gold, responding to her innate power in ways I've never seen from a human before.

Pride swells in my chest, foreign and unwelcome. My fingers tighten on the ornate railing of the observation platform, its cold metal grounding me against these... feelings. What am I doing? This human is nothing but a means to an end, another stepping stone toward breaking my family's curse.

And yet, I want to see her do well.

"Thread the needle," I command, my voice rougher than intended. "Feel for the obstacles."

She moves like liquid shadow, navigating the deadly maze with a grace that speaks of something beyond mere training. The air grows thick with magical residue, making it harder to breathe.

Or perhaps that's just the effect she has on me.

Ridiculous.

I force my thoughts back to the mission, to generations of my noble bloodline wasting away under this curse. I cannot afford distractions, no matter how captivating they might be.

This time when she finishes, I take the blindfold off of her. "You didn't quite impress me," I lie, desperate to maintain distance. "I want to see you do it again."

I send her back to the platform where all the traps and barriers now move, all follow and track her. Let's see how well she does when the magic is focused on her.

Unsurprisingly, she executes a perfect pivot between two void traps, her magic harmonizing with the ancient wards in a display that sends shivers down my spine. Raw power dances across her skin like starlight, and for a moment - just a moment - I

forget about curses and artifacts and family obligations.

"Enough." I lower my hand, and the magical barriers dissolve into mist.

She turns to me, chest heaving from exertion. Sweat gleams on her skin, and residual magic crackles in the air around her like lightning before a storm. The other candidates whisper among themselves, their voices echoing off the chamber's ancient walls.

"Your performance was..." I pause, searching for words that won't reveal too much. "Acceptable. Your control over void magic shows promise."

I step forward, extending my hand toward her shoulder - almost without thought. I want to touch her, to praise her, and I don't even know why.

The moment my fingers near her skin, she jerks backward. Those green eyes wide with terror, like a wounded animal facing down a predator. Her chest heaves as she shifts into a defensive position and it all happens so fast that I'm shocked.

The rejection hits harder than any physical blow. My hand falls to my side, fingers curling into a fist.

But now it all makes sense. Why she stepped away from every xaphan who came too close to her. How she didn't want me to touch her when we were flying - even when I caught her she was out of my arms right after.

My eyes drift to the scar on her neck. I knew instantly it was from magic, and now I must assume it was from a xaphan. The curse pulses against my chest, as if laughing at my moment of weakness.

"Kyrie-"

She shakes her head. "Just don't..." She heaves another breath but straightens. "Don't touch me."

I swallow hard, nodding. "Got it. No touching."

It shouldn't hurt me that she says that like I'm her enemy, like she can't trust me. Because she can't. And I need to remember that.

I find myself hovering around the arena now instead of going home. Even though Kyrie has left to shower and rest, I'm still walking the tunnels.

The moons cast shadows through towering windows, their light catching on the crystalline formations that grow from the ceiling. My wings ache from holding them rigid all day - a reminder of my weakening bloodline.

Voices drift from the council chamber ahead. Not the usual political discourse, but something more furtive. I press against a column, its cool surface grounding me as I listen.

"Theron has found a map," one of the trainers says. "But the trials don't match up. I wonder if the Praexa have planted it."

Another scoffs. "Why would they?"

"Why would they put them in the trials at all?" A third chimes in. "Because they are bored and want to watch the houses fight."

I pull back as they argue, thinking over what they said. Does Theron really have the wrong map? The thought fills me with hope, and I turn, rushing home now that I have this information.

Ancient wards shimmer as I pass through the estate's gates, recognizing my bloodline despite its tainted state. Golden fountains line the path to the main house, their waters tinged with magical essence that once glowed bright as starlight. Now they flow dim, another sign of our family's decay.

The moment I push open my study door, the scent of medicinal herbs hits me - sharp and bitter. Gavreel stands by the hearth, his light gray wings drooping. Shadows dance across his face from the magical flames that never need tending. His presence here, uninvited and at this hour, can only mean one thing.

"How bad?" The words scrape past my throat.

Gavreel flips a blade in his hand - a habit he's had since we were children. "The healers tried a new enchantment today. Your father's wings..." He swallows hard. "The primary feathers began falling out during the attempt."

Ice spreads through my veins. Wing decay is the final stage before death claims its victim. I've seen it before, in the portraits of ancestors who succumbed to our curse. Their once-magnificent wings reduced to skeletal remnants, magic leaching from every quill until nothing remained but dust.

"The council believes we have weeks, at most." Vale's voice cracks. "The void crystals in his chambers - they're supposed to slow the progression, but they're failing. Even the ancient healing runes aren't responding anymore."

"I'll find the stones." My voice carries the weight of centuries of noble blood, even as that same blood runs corrupted through my veins. "I...think I have found a way to have the trials searched for them."

Vale's wings rustle with uncertainty. "The Praexa will want to make a spectacle of you. They won't want you to be able to plan to extract them easily."

I wave away his concern, moving to the arched window that spans floor to ceiling. New Solas spreads before me like a tapestry woven from starlight and dreams.

"The stones will be mine," I say, but the words taste hollow. In the distance, the arena rises at the center, almost like it's beckoning back. And yet... I can only think of one reason I want to return. And she has auburn hair and green eyes.

My reflection stares back at me from the window - proud wings already showing hints of gray at the edges despite me trying to ignore it, ice-blue eyes haunted by generations of failure. The curse thrums in time with my heartbeat, a mocking reminder of everything at stake.

A flock of messenger birds sweeps past, their wings trailing streams of spelled light as they carry communications between the noble houses. Their effortless flight makes my own wings ache with envy. How long before they too begin to decay?

How much longer do we have?

KYRIE

Lightning splinters across bruised clouds, casting an eerie glow over the floating arena for the first trial. My fingers trace the rough stone archway marking the entrance, ancient runes pulsing beneath my touch. The gathered crowd's whispers fade to silence as thunder rolls overhead.

Magic saturates the air, making my skin tingle and the fine hairs on my arms stand on end. The storm above isn't natural - I can taste the metallic tang of spelled weather on my tongue. Debris whips past the entrance - chunks of stone, splintered wood, even what looks like part of a tree, all caught in the magical maelstrom.

"Last chance to back out." A xaphan guard's wings gleam silver in another flash of lightning. His perfect features twist into a smirk that doesn't reach his cold eyes.

I straighten my worn leather vest, checking the straps of my twin blades one final time. "Not happening."

The arena stretches impossibly wide before me, floating platforms scattered throughout at different heights. Some spin slowly, others jerk back and forth in irregular patterns. Between them, magical currents surge visible as ribbons of crackling energy.

My stomach lurches as I spot the first checkpoint - a glowing crystal pedestal balanced on a tiny platform, probably half a mile away. Getting there means

navigating through what looks like a wall of swirling debris and storm magic.

"Begin on the horn." The guard steps back, unfurling his wings. The jealousy that stabs through me at the sight only strengthens my resolve.

I roll my shoulders and crouch into a ready stance, focusing on the nearest platform. The wind howls through the entrance, carrying the sharp scent of ozone. Another lightning bolt illuminates the arena, followed instantly by deafening thunder that vibrates in my chest.

This is what I've trained for. What I need to do for my family. For Mother. The thought of her growing weaker each day hardens my determination into steel.

The horn sounds, its deep note echoing across the arena. I spring forward into chaos.

The first jump is always the worst. Wind tears at my clothes as I launch myself from the entrance, my heart hammering against my ribs. Time seems to slow as I sail through empty space toward the nearest platform, the storm trying to tear me off the path.

Azrael's voice echoes in my mind. Lead with your core. Feel what you intend.

The platform rushes up to meet me. I roll into the landing, absorbing the impact just like he showed me. My boots scrape against rough stone as I spring back up, already scanning for the next jump.

Magic currents ripple through the air like heat waves, visible only because of the debris they carry. I time my next leap carefully, watching the flow patterns Azrael taught me to recognize. There - a momentary lull in the chaos.

I push off hard, twisting my body to catch an upward current. The surge of power lifts

me higher than a normal jump could reach. For a breathtaking moment, I'm flying. Not with wings like the xaphan, but close enough to taste that freedom.

A chunk of broken masonry hurtles past my face. I kick off it mid-air, using the collision to change direction. The move sends me spinning toward another platform, this one rotating slowly. My landing is less graceful, but I manage to grab the edge and pull myself up.

Each jump becomes easier as muscle memory takes over. The techniques Azrael drilled into me flow naturally now - reading the currents, using debris as stepping stones, letting the magic in the air guide my movements. He said my best asset was using the arena to my advantage, so that's what I plan to do. What started as terrifying begins to feel like a deadly dance.

I catch another updraft, riding it between two colliding platforms. Lightning crackles around me, close enough that my hair stands on end. But I don't flinch. The storm's magic harmonizes with my own, lending me speed and strength I didn't know I possessed.

A flash of blue catches my eye - not lightning, but something crystalline that pulses with its own inner light. It looks like a gemstone. I've heard everyone whispering about them, especially the xaphan, and while I don't know much about them, if there's a chance for me to get a leg up, I'll take it.

I pivot mid-jump, angling toward the shimmer. The nearest platform sits twenty feet below it, spinning like a top. Not ideal, but I've handled worse. Magic pulses around me as I prepare for the leap.

"Just like practice," I mutter, timing my jump with the platform's rotation. The wind whips my hair into my face, but I keep my eyes locked on that hypnotic blue glow. It hovers tantalizingly close, suspended in a pocket of still air while chaos rages around

it.

My boots hit the spinning platform. I bend my knees, ready to spring upward - but something's wrong. The magical currents shift, twisting into new patterns I don't recognize. A wall of wind slams into me from the side, raw power crackling through it like lightning.

The impact lifts me off my feet. My stomach lurches as I'm thrown sideways, tumbling through empty space. Magic floods my system as I desperately try to get my bearings, almost like the storm itself is a solid enemy. The blue crystal vanishes from view as I spin, replaced by flashes of storm-dark sky and distant platforms.

My shoulder clips something hard - probably debris caught in the same current. Pain shoots down my arm. The wind howls in my ears, drowning out everything else as it carries me further from my intended path.

This is bad. Really bad. The magical current has me in its grip like a leaf in a hurricane. Each second carries me further off course, burning precious time I can't afford to lose. My mom's face flashes through my mind - pale, drawn, getting weaker every day. I grit my teeth and start fighting my way back to stable air, twisting and kicking off debris as best I can.

The magical current finally releases me near a cluster of smaller platforms. I grab onto a jutting piece of stone, my shoulder screaming in protest. The rough surface cuts into my palms, but I hold tight until the world stops spinning.

"I can do this," I snarl at the magic storm.

Then I see the final platform in the distance, a beacon of white light cutting through the magical storm. I pull myself onto the narrow ledge, testing my injured shoulder. It hurts, but I can move it. That's all that matters right now.

The wind picks up again, carrying the acrid smell of burnt stone. Lightning arcs between platforms, leaving scorched trails in its wake. I time my next jump carefully, waiting for the electrical discharge to pass. My boots scrape against crumbling rock as I launch myself forward.

Each platform brings new challenges. Some are slick with magical residue that makes my feet slide. Others vibrate with unstable energy, threatening to shake apart at any moment. I navigate them all, pushing through despite my aching muscles and throbbing shoulder.

A section of wooden beam spins toward my head. I duck and roll, feeling splinters rain against my magical barrier. The movement sends fresh pain shooting down my arm. Sweat stings my eyes as I force myself back up, scanning for the next safe landing spot.

The checkpoint's crystal grows larger with each calculated leap. Its pure light cuts through the storm's chaos like a blade, drawing me forward. I can almost feel its energy calling to me, resonating with what little magic I have left.

A piece of slate catches me in the ribs, forcing the air from my lungs. But I keep moving. Each step brings me closer to my goal, closer to saving Mother. The thought drives me forward when my body wants to quit.

My boots slam onto the final platform, sending shockwaves up my trembling legs. The crystal pulses before me, its pure light a stark contrast to the storm-wracked arena. My chest heaves as I press my palm against the pedestal, claiming completion of the first trial section.

"I did it," I breathe.

Magic surges through the crystal at my touch, healing the hits I took. The sensation

reminds me of plunging into an icy stream - sharp, clarifying, overwhelming. It forms a barrier around me, deflecting the debris that still whips through the air, and then I'm transported to the arena floor with the other victors.

The crowd's roar reaches me even over the howling wind. Faces blur together in the viewing galleries - all kinds of creatures out there, some cheering, others scowling at my success. But I find myself searching for one particular face among them.

Lightning splits the sky, illuminating the ranked seats in stark relief. There - a flash of black hair and ice-blue eyes. Azrael stands apart from the other spectators, his wings folded tight against his back. Unlike the rest of the crowd, his expression remains carefully neutral.

Our eyes lock across the distance. The intensity of his gaze hits me like a physical force, making my breath catch. Relief floods through me at the sight of him. He got me here. He made sure I was ready.

For a moment, all I want to do is go to him. The thought hits me so quickly that I'm shocked and the anxiety follows right after. I've been feeling more and more conflicted about Azrael because my body seems to be at war on whether or not I can let my guard down around him.

His wings spread slightly, the pure white feathers catching another flash of lightning. Such a stark contrast to his dark clothing and harder expression. Power radiates from him even at this distance, reminding me that for all his help, he's still one of them. Still xaphan. Still dangerous.

And I shove down the rest of the confusing feelings surging through me as the first trial comes to an end. At least I made it through this one.

AZRAEL

The arena's stone walls cast long shadows in the dim light of the magical orbs floating overhead. My wings snap against my back as I pace the secluded alcove, each step echoing off the ancient stonework. The sound of the crowds exiting filters through the archways, celebrating another day of trials while remaining blissfully ignorant of the Praexa's true intentions.

"Fucking bastards." My fist connects with the wall, sending a ripple of pain through my knuckles. The conversation I overheard in the on my way out of the arena replays through my mind.

"Some of the humans show too much promise," one Praexa had said. "We can't have them thinking success is possible. Increase the gravity fields in the next trial. Double the poison concentration."

"But sir, that would mean certain death-"

"Exactly."

A servant scurries past the alcove, their wings spread slightly behind their back in deference. They catch sight of me and quickly avert their gaze, hurrying faster. My reputation precedes me, as always.

The magical wards etched into the arena's foundation pulse with a steady rhythm,

their blue light casting eerie patterns across the floor. Each symbol represents another layer of control, another way to manipulate the trials and ensure no human ever succeeds.

My wings twitch again, the feathers rustling with my growing agitation. The little bird has no idea what awaits her in the next trial. She's already survived longer than most, showcasing just how smart she is. It's precisely that skill that's made her one of the targets.

I trace one of the ward symbols with my finger, feeling the magic spark against my skin. The Praexa's tampering will turn an already deadly trial into an impossible challenge. The enhanced gravity alone would crush most contestants. Combined with the toxic atmosphere...

My boots scrape against the stone as I consider my options. Kyrie needs to survive - not because I give a damn about her life, but because she's proven herself capable of navigating the trials and I need to use her. The stone from the first trial still sits unclaimed, pulsing with ancient magic amid the storm-wracked arena.

I slam my palm against the wall. Teaching her to collect the stones would solve two problems at once. She'd stay alive, and I'd get closer to breaking my family's curse. The magic within those artifacts calls to my blood, a constant reminder of what's at stake.

A memory flashes - her determined face as she dodged lightning bolts in the first trial, that innate grace as she wove between debris. Raw talent, untrained but potent. With proper guidance, she could learn to sense the stones' energy, to harness their power to give her more of an edge. There are no rules in the trials - not really.

The wards pulse faster now, their rhythm matching my racing thoughts. Revealing what I'm after is a risk. But my family's curse grows stronger each day, eating away

at our essence. I've already lost two siblings to its corruption.

My wings unfurl involuntarily, spanning the width of the alcove as frustration courses through me. The little bird's death would mean starting over, finding another candidate capable of surviving long enough to retrieve the stones. Time I don't have.

The choice crystallizes. I'll train her in secret, show her how to detect the artifacts' unique magical signature. And somehow, I'll convince her to tell no one. She's not after the stones anyway - and I can promise her whatever else she does want.

The sharp click of boots against stone makes me turn. Theron emerges from the shadows, his pure white wings catching the blue glow of the wards. That perpetual smirk twists his features as he leans against the archway.

"Brooding in dark corners again, Azrael? How predictably dramatic."

My wings bristle, feathers spreading in an instinctive display of aggression. "Shouldn't you be preening for your adoring fans?"

"I hear you are training one of the humans." He pushes off the wall, magic crackling between his fingers. "The great Lord Azrael, concerning himself with a mere mortal. Unless..." His eyes narrow. "You're after something else entirely."

The temperature drops as my power rises to meet his challenge. Frost creeps across the stone beneath my feet. "Watch yourself, Theron."

"Still bitter about your family's fall from grace?" His wings flare wide, blocking the archway. "Maybe I'll seek the human out myself. See what's so special about he-"

My magic explodes outward, slamming him against the wall. Ice crystals form around his throat as I pin him there. "Finish that sentence. I dare you."

A small crowd of servants and guards gathers at the edges of our confrontation, their whispers echoing off the stone. Theron's magic pushes back against mine, golden light cutting through the frost.

"You're slipping, Azrael." He breaks free of my hold, straightening his formal robes. "The curse must be taking its toll. Soon you'll be nothing but a cautionary tale - the noble house that dared reach beyond their station."

My vision bleeds red. The magical wards pulse erratically, responding to our clashing energies. A guard steps forward to intervene but freezes when both Theron and I turn our glares upon him.

"Keep pushing, Theron. See what happens when I stop playing by the rules."

With that, I push out of the alcove. I need a moment away to breathe, to think, and I head back toward my home.

The family estate's marble halls echo with my footsteps as I climb the winding staircase to my father's chambers. Guilt gnaws on me when I think about how long it's been since I was up here. Magical orbs cast a warm glow across the ancient tapestries depicting our lineage - each scene a reminder of what we've lost.

I pause at the doorway. The sight hits me like a physical blow. Father lies motionless in the massive four-poster bed, his once-magnificent wings now dull and brittle. The curse's corruption spreads like black veins beneath his skin, a stark contrast to the natural luminescence all xaphan possess.

"My son." His voice cracks, barely above a whisper. The effort of speaking causes his wings to tremor.

I cross to his bedside, past the scattered healing crystals and empty potion vials that

litter every surface. Their magic has long since faded, useless against our bloodline's affliction. The air feels thick with lingering spells - evidence of our healers' futile attempts to slow the curse's progression.

"I hear...you are at...the arena these days?" He struggles to focus his gaze, those once-piercing golden eyes now clouded and dim.

"Yes." I grip the ornate bedpost, my knuckles white. The wood creaks beneath my fingers. "I've found someone who might help us retrieve the stones."

A coughing fit wracks his body. Dark energy pulses beneath his skin with each spasm, the curse feeding off his weakened state. His wings twitch helplessly against the silk sheets.

"Be careful, Azrael." Blood tints his lips as he speaks. "The other houses-"

"The other houses can be damned." The temperature plummets as my control slips. Frost spreads across the windowpanes. "They all mock us, and when I break this curse, I'll put them in their place."

Father's hand trembles as he reaches for mine. His touch burns cold - another symptom of the curse's progression. The same corruption that killed my siblings now eats away at him, turning our celestial nature against itself.

My wings snap open, knocking over a stand of healing crystals. They shatter against the floor, their magic dissipating in useless sparks. The sound matches the breaking of something inside me as I watch another piece of my father's strength fade away.

I stay with him a while longer until he is asleep and my body is burning to do something. So, like I have been every day when I get restless, I go back to the arena.

I find Kyrie in the training grounds, her auburn hair dampened with sweat as she practices defensive positions. Her body moves with such grace as she whips her swords, her stance admirable.

"You did well today," I call out, and she spins to face me. I watch the emotions that flicker across her face - the shock, fear, and what looks like a tinge of excitement.

"I survived." She pushes her auburn hair out of her face and my fingers itch to reach for the strand she missed. But I'm not to touch her, something that's becoming harder to remember. "Now I need to focus on the next."

"Speaking of the next..." I come a little closer, stopping a distance away that will leave her comfortable. "I saw something during this trial that I didn't expect."

"The gemstone?"

I pause. I thought I saw her going after it, but I don't know how much she knows. "Yes. I hear they'll be in each trial."

"I've heard whispers of them." Her green eyes lock onto mine, sharp with interest. I should have expected as much. She's very observant. "What kind of power do they hold?"

"The kind that could help you survive." I shift casually closer, just wanting to be near her. The need for it is as frustrating as my curse. "I'm not sure where they'll be, but you need to take any stones you find." The words taste bitter. "They'll enhance your natural abilities, give you an edge."

"Won't everyone be going after them?" She looks unconvinced.

I shrug. "Won't everyone be trying to survive?" I cock a brow. "This could help you.

And then after the trials, I can put the stones back where they belong and help you get what you're really after - medicine."

Her eyes light up and my heart twists. I'm just using her, and it feels so fucking wrong all the sudden. "You would do that?"

I jerk my chin in an almost noncommittal nod. "Of course."

I hate the way that this plan is starting to make me feel like I...care. But for the life of me, I can't squash it.

KYRIE

The morning sun filters through the dense canopy above the hidden grove where Azrael and I have claimed as our training ground. Ancient stone pillars, half-crumbled and wrapped in vines, mark the boundaries of what must have once been a temple courtyard.

"Again." Azrael's voice is tough but not mean. "Your form is still too rigid."

I draw in a deep breath, channeling energy as he taught me. He found me what he calls a conduit, a cool band that wraps around my palm and has latent magic in it. He's been using it to teach me how to channel magic, though there are a lot of limitations.

The familiar tingle of magic spreads through my limbs, making my fingertips spark with faint blue light. Across from me, Azrael's own magic manifests as a brilliant white aura.

"Remember what I showed you." He moves in perfect synchronization with me, our bare feet sliding across the moss-covered stones. "Let it flow naturally, like water."

My movements mirror his - a complex dance of offensive and defensive stances designed to strengthen our magical connection. With each passing day, the patterns become more familiar, though his grace still far surpasses mine.

A bead of sweat rolls down my temple as we execute a particularly challenging sequence. Our energies intertwine, creating shimmering ribbons of light that weave between us. The air crackles with raw power.

"Better." His ice-blue eyes track my every move. "Now channel it outward."

I extend my arm, palm facing the ancient stone target we'd set up. The magic pulses, wanting to burst free, but I hold it steady as Azrael taught me. His energy mingles with mine, amplifying it until the air around us hums.

"Release."

Our combined power shoots forward in a brilliant stream of blue-white light, striking the stone with devastating force. The impact sends tremors through the ground, scattering fallen leaves and loose pebbles.

"Your control is improving, little bird." Azrael lowers his hands, the glow around him fading. "But you're still holding back."

"I don't..." I sigh. "I'm afraid of using too much magic."

"That's exactly why we train." He moves behind me, his frame just hovering as he shifts behind me. "The more you practice together, the better you'll know your limits."

I can feel his presence wrapped around me, warm and steady. Where once him being this close would make me tense, ready to bolt, now I find myself leaning into his guidance.

"Watch carefully." Azrael traces a complex sigil in the air, leaving trails of silvery light. "This enchantment requires precision. One wrong line and the whole spell

collapses."

I study the pattern as it hangs suspended before us - intricate swirls and sharp angles forming a design that reminds me of frost on a winter morning. The magic pulses with a gentle rhythm, like a heartbeat.

"Now you try." His voice softens, losing its usual edge. He steps closer, his chest nearly touching my back as he does it again so I can mimic him, follow him through it. "Feel how the energy wants to flow."

The familiar spark of magic dances across my skin as we trace the sigil together. The closeness should make me uncomfortable - every instinct honed from years of mistrust screaming to put distance between myself and this xaphan. But something has shifted.

"Good." His breath stirs my hair. "Now hold that energy - don't let it dissipate."

The sigil glows brighter as I pour more power into it. Azrael's own magic wraps around mine, supporting and strengthening rather than overwhelming. Where our energies meet, the light shifts to a deep purple, beautiful and mesmerizing.

"You're learning quickly." There's a note of approval in his voice that makes my chest warm with pride.

I've been enjoying learning magic. He's also taught me how to use my blades to channel the magic that they hold, and I've been able to sense magic more and more. He says it will help me when it comes to locating the stones in the trials, as well as sensing the traps and barriers set up.

His patience surprises me. The cold, calculating warrior who first agreed to train me seems transformed in these quiet moments. His touch remains gentle as he adjusts my

elbow, correcting my form with small, precise movements.

"The key is balance," he murmurs. "Too much force and the spell shatters. Too little and it never takes shape."

I nod, maintaining my focus on the glowing sigil even as I become increasingly aware of his solid presence behind me. For the first time since we began training, I feel truly safe in his company.

The sigil flares with unstable energy, its pattern distorting as my concentration wavers. Sweat drips down my temple, muscles trembling from maintaining the complex magical weave for so long.

"Focus," Azrael guides me. "You know what you want it to look like, what you want it to do. Keep that in your mind and force the magic to bend to you."

I grit my teeth, trying to correct the imbalance, but the magic surges wildly. The purple light intensifies, spinning out of control. My knees buckle under the strain.

Strong arms catch me before I hit the stone floor. The sigil shatters in a shower of sparks, sending ripples of power through the air that make my skin tingle. I find myself pressed to Azrael's chest, his wings instinctively curved forward to shield us both and his arms holding me dipped back.

Our faces are so close I can see flecks of silver in his ice-blue eyes. His breath fans across my cheek, warm against my cooling skin. Time seems to slow, the world narrowing to just this moment - the solid strength of his arms around me, the faint glow of residual magic dancing between us.

"I-" The words catch in my throat as his gaze drops to my lips.

The air grows heavy with more than just magical energy. Every point of contact between us burns like fire, yet I can't bring myself to pull away. His wings shift slightly, the pure white feathers catching the filtered sunlight in a way that creates a halo effect around us.

One of his hands moves to steady my waist, fingers splaying across my lower back. The touch sends a jolt through me that has nothing to do with magic. My own hands rest against his chest, and beneath my palm I can feel his heart beating as rapidly as mine.

"Kyrie." My name comes out as barely more than a whisper, rough with something I've never heard in his voice before.

The tension crackles between us like lightning before a storm, charged with possibility and unspoken words. Ancient magic swirls in lazy patterns around our feet, responding to the intensity of the moment.

Without conscious thought, I close the remaining distance between us. I can't lie and say I haven't been attracted to him. He's gorgeous, even more so than most xaphan, but I also have never felt so comfortable around anyone. This yearning has been building and right now, it's ripping away my doubt as I wrap my arms around his neck.

Our lips meet, and the world explodes into pure sensation. His mouth is warm and demanding against mine, one hand sliding up my back while the other cradles my head. Magic crackles around us, responding to the surge of emotions - ribbons of purple light dancing through the air.

Azrael's wings curl tighter, cocooning us in a shelter of soft white feathers that shimmer with their own inner light. The magical energy between us pulses stronger, creating a feedback loop of power that makes my skin tingle and my heart race. Each

point where our bodies touch feels electrified.

He tastes like lightning and starlight, something ancient and powerful that makes my head spin. His fingers thread through my hair, angling my face to deepen the kiss. I clutch at his shoulders, feeling the solid strength beneath my hands as he pulls me closer.

Time loses all meaning in this moment. There is only the press of his lips against mine, the steady beat of his heart under my palm, the soft brush of his wings against my skin.

I pull back first, the magic-charged air between us crackling as our lips part. My heart pounds against my ribs like a caged bird seeking freedom. Azrael's wings slowly unfurl, letting in streams of light that break the intimate cocoon we'd created.

The reality of my situation hits me like a blast of winter wind. I was just kissing a xaphan. One who is training me to go through trials meant to kill me. One who might lead to my death. One who I don't know if I can really trust.

What the fuck was I thinking?

"I can't." My voice cracks. I step back, breaking contact with his warmth. The loss of his touch leaves me cold despite the warmth of the day. "This isn't- I'm not-"

Azrael watches me with those piercing ice-blue eyes, his expression unreadable. His wings shift, catching the light in ways that make my chest ache with their beauty. But I've learned firsthand that the most beautiful things are the most deadly.

My fingers brush my lips, still tingling from his kiss. The gesture draws his gaze, and the intensity there makes my stomach flip. Desire wars with duty, leaving me dizzy and unsure. The magic in my blood responds to my emotional state, creating small

whirlwinds of fallen leaves around my feet.

"The trials," I manage to say, taking another step back. "I need to focus on the trials. On getting the medicine. I can't afford distractions."

Azrael nods, swallowing hard. For a moment, I can see it there on his face. I think he knows that's not the reason, but he doesn't call me out on it. He only steps back, his wings pinching in. "I think that's enough for today."

Then, he's gone.

I bolt upright in bed, sweat-soaked sheets tangled around my legs. The nightmare clings like water, refusing to fade even as moonlight streams through my window. In my mind, white wings still flash with deadly grace, steel glinting in the sun as the xaphan's blade arcs toward me.

The phantom pain burns across my back, tracing the path of my scar. I press my hand against my racing heart, trying to steady my breathing. The small crystal lights on my ceiling flicker to life, responding to me as I move.

I was reliving that day. It feels like I'm always reliving that day. The memory haunts me, feeling worse now that I slipped up with Azrael. I let myself give into this desire that I can't even believe I have when I shouldn't trust me.

He's a fucking trainer here for gods' sake!

"I- I'm not trying to cause any trouble."

"No? Too bad." Electricity crackles through the air. "Trouble was exactly what I was looking for."

I kick free of the sheets, pacing my small room to try to rid myself of the memory still clinging to me. The rock is cool beneath my bare feet. Outside, night birds call to each other across the human quarter, their songs a poor imitation of the ethereal music that drifts down from New Solas's golden spires.

After the initiation, we were given free reign to find our own rooms. I was lucky enough to find a small one tucked away in the back corner, claiming it to be only my own. I barricade the door each night and I manage to get decent sleep when I don't feel like I'm going to be attacked by the others.

My fingers trace the rough-hewn stones of my bedroom wall, focusing on their solid reality to ground myself. But even this simple touch brings back memories of this morning's training - of Azrael's hands guiding mine, his wings creating a shelter of white feathers around us.

How can I reconcile these two truths? The xaphan who scarred me, who saw me as less than nothing, and Azrael with his patient instruction and gentle touches. Both beautiful, both deadly, both capable of destroying everything I hold dear.

The kiss replays in my mind, electric and dangerous. It felt...Fuck, I'd never felt anything like it. I could have drowned in him. Even now I crave him. But the memory tangles with the nightmare - white wings and steel, pain and pleasure, trust and terror.

I sink onto the edge of my bed, burying my face in my hands. The moonlight casts wing-like shadows on the wall as it spills from the side of the massive windows, making my heart stutter. Even now, years later, the sight of wings can send ice through my veins. Yet today I willingly stepped into Azrael's embrace, let his wings enfold me.

"What am I doing?" I whisper to the empty room.

And just like me, it has no answer.

AZRAEL

The wind whips through the ancient trees, their twisted branches creaking and groaning like souls trapped in eternal torment. My wings itch to unfold, to chase after her diminishing form as Kyrie steps into the darkness of the second trial.

Magic ripples across the barrier between arena and forest - an invisible wall that keeps spectators safe while contestants face their demons within. The air crackles with power, tasting of ozone and fear.

"Steady." I grind the word between my teeth, fingers digging into my palms. Blood wells beneath my nails, but I hold my position at the observation point. I'm not supposed to intervene. But after that fucking... I fight every instinct screaming to follow her.

The forest shifts and writhes, its very essence unstable. Trees melt into mist only to reform yards away. Paths appear and vanish like serpents in grass. Above, storm clouds gather and disperse in an endless dance, casting strange shadows across the arena floor.

I told Kyrie not to use the conduit unless absolutely necessary. She's not trained enough, despite our sessions all week, and I don't want others to see what she can do if we can help it. It will put a target on her back.

Kyrie's auburn hair catches the last rays of light before she disappears into the gloom.

My enhanced vision tracks her determined stride, the set of her shoulders betraying none of the terror I know churns in her gut. She's different from the others - stronger, more focused. It makes watching her enter this hell all the more difficult.

"Little bird." The words escape before I can stop them.

My wings rustle, responding to my agitation. The urge to spread them, to tear through the barrier over the forest that keeps it separate from the arena and snatch her from danger, pounds through my blood like a war drum.

But I remain frozen, watching as the forest begins its cruel work. Already the illusions take shape - shadowy forms that dance at the edge of vision, whispers that carry on non-existent winds.

I've seen what this trial does to contestants. How it breaks them, twists their minds until they're nothing but hollow shells stumbling through their own nightmares.

The magical barrier ripples again, distorting my view of where Kyrie vanished. My jaw clenches so tight I taste copper. This is the price of my position, of the game we play. I can only watch as she faces her demons alone.

I shouldn't care. But now that I've had a taste of her, I'm so far past 'shouldn't' I can't even fucking find it.

I track Kyrie's progress. My fingers dance across its surface, weaving subtle alterations into the forest's magic. A deadly chasm begins to form in her path - with a twist of my wrist, I redirect its manifestation twenty paces to her left.

"Watch your step, little bird."

She pauses at a fork between two identical paths. The left leads to a grove of soul-

stealing trees, their branches already reaching for her with hungry tendrils. I send a cold breeze down the right path, making the leaves whisper and dance. She takes the hint, turning away from certain death.

My breath catches as a shadow beast materializes behind her - all teeth and claws and murderous intent. Before it can strike, I layer an illusion of morning light across that section of forest. The creature hisses and retreats into the darkness where it belongs.

Sweat beads on my forehead. Each manipulation risks detection by the Praexa. If they catch me interfering... Well, honestly I'd love to see them try and stop me. I have no doubt that Kyrie could handle whatever they throw at her, but I can't stomach watching her have to.

Not when she has me.

Kyrie approaches a clearing filled with beautiful crystalline flowers. Their petals gleam with poisonous allure - one touch would stop her heart. I conjure the scent of decay, just strong enough to make her wrinkle her nose and change course.

"Good girl."

My wings strain as she heads down another path and vines come bursting from the ground. She stumbles, nearly falling into a patch of flesh-eating mist. With a subtle gesture, I shift the wind patterns, dispersing the deadly fog moments before it can touch her skin.

I start to hear some mutters around me, commenting on her uncanny luck. I keep my expression neutral, though my heart pounds with each near miss. Every intervention only draws more attention to her, attention I don't want, but I can't stop. Not when her life hangs by such a delicate thread.

She presses forward, that stubborn determination never wavering. I flex my fingers, preparing for the next necessary deception. The forest has only begun its assault, and I'll be damned if I let it claim her.

As she turns a corner into a wide clearing, I watch as the forest weaves its cruelest illusion yet. The trees part like a curtain, revealing a weathered cottage that materializes from the mist. She stumbles to a stop and I know exactly what it is - it's pulling this scene directly from Kyrie's memories.

Eleanor Kael lies on a simple wooden bed, her skin ashen and drawn tight over bone. The magical projection captures every detail - the threadbare blanket, the empty medicine bottles, the flickering candlelight casting shadows on hollow cheeks.

Kyrie freezes mid-step, her eyes going wide. The tension through her body puts me on edge, but this is not a battle I can fight for her.

"Mother?" Her whisper carries through the magical link, raw with emotion.

The illusion of her mother reaches out with trembling fingers. "My sweet girl... I'm so cold."

Kyrie takes a half-step forward before catching herself. Her fists clench at her sides, knuckles white with strain. "You're not real."

"Please..." The phantom woman's breath rattles in her chest. "It hurts so much. Just stay with me until..."

Blood trickles down Kyrie's palm where her nails break skin. She shakes her head, auburn hair whipping around her face. "No. My mother is alive. She's waiting for me."

The illusion twists, her mother's face contorting in agony. "You abandoned me for these trials. Left me to die alone."

"Stop it." Kyrie's voice cracks, but her spine straightens. "I'm here because of her. To save her."

Pride burns in my chest as she forces herself to turn away. The phantom woman wails, the sound piercing enough to make lesser contestants fall to their knees. But my little bird keeps walking, each step precise and measured despite the tears streaming down her face.

The illusion reaches for her with grasping hands, the cottage melting and reforming around her like a cage of memory and guilt. Yet Kyrie pushes through, her determination burning brighter than the forest's dark magic.

"I'm coming home, Mother," she whispers. "With real medicine this time. I promise."

The cottage dissolves into mist behind her, but I catch the ghost of a smile through her tears. She's passed this test, though the cost shows in every line of her body.

She's finally made it nearly to the end when I see her stop by an ancient tree - its bark gleams obsidian in the ethereal light, branches stretching toward a blood-red sky. She studies it, and then she moves closer.

If I wasn't watching her so well, I wouldn't notice that flash of magic on her palm, the way her hand pushes through the park. But I do. And I see the flare of red - the signature of a gemstone - just before she closes her fist around it.

My head whips around, but no one else seems to have noticed. Probably because no one else is watching her like I am.

When I turn back, Kyrie is moving forward, rushing through the last few obstacles to the exit of the forest. Her hands are fisted as she starts to run, and I know that she is probably trying to get the magic signature out of the forest before someone else - or something else - realizes she has it.

Suddenly, another contestant leaps out in front of her. She nearly goes colliding into him, and the cruel smile on his face makes my blood boil. He's taunting her, edging her back toward the mist that I redirect from her to keep her from getting burned.

But he's too busy being cocky to notice when Kyrie sweeps his feet out from under him. She quickly leaps over him, not wasting time with a fight, and finishes the last distance to the end.

Triumph surges through me as she bursts out of the trees. "You've done it," I murmur. She's actually done it.

Then reality crashes back like a physical blow. The gemstone. One of the few that I need to break my family's curse. And there it sits, in the hands of the one person I can't bring myself to harm.

The curse whispers through my blood, demanding action. My family's salvation lies within her grasp. I just have to have her find the last few and then she will turn the gemstones over to me.

That thought gives me both hope and guilt. She doesn't know what she possesses, what I intend to take from her. But she doesn't need to. She can still have what she's after anyway.

I turn, heading down to the arena floor through the tunnels. It doesn't take me long before I catch up to where Kyrie is. She doesn't notice my approach, turned away as she tries to look at the stone and block anyone else from seeing it with her body.

"Well done, little bird." My voice comes out rougher than intended.

She startles, nearly dropping the gem. Those green eyes lock onto mine, bright with triumph despite her fatigue. "I did it." A breathless laugh escapes her. "I actually did it."

The stone's power calls to my blood, an ancient song of salvation and redemption. A part of me wants to take it now, to see if one gemstone will be enough. But I know that it won't - even if I want to try.

But then she smiles, and something in my chest twists painfully.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" She holds the stone up, letting its light dance across her features. "I've never seen anything like it."

I force my hands to remain at my sides. "It is. But remember, there are many out there after these stones. Keep them hidden."

She nods, closing her fist around it. "I'll do whatever it takes to get out of here alive."

Before, I would have just ripped the stone away from her, I would have slaughtered anyone who had one in their possession. But now...

Now, I'll also do whatever it takes to get her out of here alive.

15

KYRIE

My muscles scream in protest as I shift on the thin straw mattress, the coarse fabric of my blanket scratching against fresh bruises and cuts. The wooden bed frame creaks beneath me, a familiar sound in this tiny room I call home. Moonlight filters through the warped glass of my window, casting strange shadows on the rough stone walls.

I close my eyes, but the horrors from the second trial flash across my mind - those twisted illusions of Mother, pale and lifeless, reaching for me with accusatory fingers. The magic-induced visions knew exactly where to strike, playing on my deepest fears of failing her, of watching her waste away while I chase this impossible dream.

A wave of nausea hits as I remember the sensation of running through that shape-shifting forest, the ground constantly moving beneath my feet, trees bending and warping into grotesque shapes. The magic had seeped into my bones, making reality blur until I couldn't trust my own senses. Even now, hours later, sparks of residual magic crawl across my skin like insects.

"You can't give up," I whisper to myself, pressing my palm against the scar on my neck. The raised tissue serves as a reminder of what the xaphan are capable of, of why I need to prove them wrong. But doubt gnaws at my resolve as I think that it will only get harder from here.

Two more trials. Just two more.

The sound of bells tolling in the distance makes me flinch. New Solas, that shining city in the sky, celebrating another day while we suffer. Their crystal spires catch the last rays of sunset, mocking us with their beauty. The same beauty they promise through these trials, through the wings they dangle before us like bait before a trap.

A sharp knock at my door breaks through my dark thoughts. Before I can respond, it swings open with a creak. The morning light catches on his white wings as Azrael fills the doorway, his presence making my small room feel even more cramped.

"You look terrible, little bird." His ice-blue eyes scan my injuries with clinical detachment.

"Didn't realize this was a beauty contest." I struggle to sit up straighter, refusing to show weakness. "Did you come to drag me to training?" I shift again, suppressing a wince. "I hate to say I don't think I can make it there."

He steps inside, closing the door behind him. His wings fold tight against his back, but still brush the ceiling. "I came to ensure our most promising candidate hasn't completely fallen apart."

Something in his tone - a hint of genuine concern beneath the usual cold facade - makes my carefully constructed walls crack.

"I saw her dying." The words spill out before I can stop them. "In the forest. Over and over. My mother - the magic knew exactly how to break me." My fingers clutch the empty medicine vial. "She's getting worse. The healers in the human quarters can't help anymore, and the only medicine that works..." I gesture bitterly toward the glittering spires of New Solas visible through my window.

Azrael remains silent, but moves closer. The air grows thick with his presence, that strange mix of power and grace all xaphan possess.

"I didn't enter the trials for wings or glory." I force myself to meet his gaze. "I entered because the reward could buy enough medicine to save her. Because becoming one of you means access to the healing houses in the upper city." My voice cracks. "But after today, seeing those visions... I'm not sure I'm strong enough."

"The second trial is designed to break you," he says, his voice unusually soft. "To use your deepest fears against you."

"It worked." I laugh, the sound hollow. "I saw so many die already. Every year so many die thinking that this is their one chance. And here I am, thinking I can somehow be different."

I bite my lip, realizing how much I've revealed. The usual sharp-edged defenses I maintain around the xaphan have crumbled like ancient stone.

Yet, like always, it's different being in Azrael's presence. Something about him is comforting, and I find myself wanting him all over again, even if I shouldn't.

He crosses the room, each step deliberate. My brain screams not to trust him, but the usual instinctive fear doesn't come. Instead, I remain still as he reaches for my hand.

His fingers brush mine, sending tingles of residual magic dancing where our skin meets. His touch is cooler than a human's, like mountain spring water on a hot day. The contrast makes my own magic spark and swirl beneath my skin, responding to his presence.

"Your fears give you strength, little bird." His thumb traces circles on my palm, the gesture oddly soothing. "They drive you forward when others would retreat."

The sunlight flickers across his features, softening the usual sharp angles of his face. This close, I can see flecks of silver in his ice-blue eyes, like stars scattered across a

frozen lake. His wings shift slightly, creating shadows that dance across my walls. And I don't flinch from the sight. His, I actually watch, almost wanting to reach out and touch them.

"I've watched countless humans attempt these trials," he continues, his voice low and rich like honey over gravel. "None have shown your resilience."

I study his face, searching for signs of the cruelty I've come to expect from his kind. But it's not there. His eyes, though still that striking ice-blue, hold a warmth I've never noticed before.

"Why are you here?" My voice comes out barely above a whisper. "Really?"

His wings shift, moving like a wall of warmth behind me. One brushes against my arm - soft as silk, yet strong as steel. The touch sends a rush through me, not of disgust or fear but...It's nice. Pleasant. It draws me in even further.

"Perhaps..." He pauses, his thumb still tracing patterns on my palm that leave trails of silvery light. "Perhaps the xaphan are not as infallible as you think. We all have wants, families, just like you."

The admission hangs in the air between us, weighted with implications I dare not fully consider. My scar tingles, a reminder of past violence, but I don't let that pull me away.

For just this moment, I let myself believe. Let myself see him not as one of them, but as something else entirely. Someone who might understand why I fight so hard, why I keep pushing forward despite the odds stacked against me.

But then I remember that he isn't like me. He doesn't have the odds stacked against him. He is free to dream and not be mocked for it.

Shifting, I pull my hand away from his, and he lets it go. His face stays perfectly neutral, and I'm still not sure how to read Azrael.

What am I doing? Mother lies in her bed across town, each breath a battle, while I sit here letting myself be enchanted by one of them. By the very beings who deny her the medicine that could save her.

My throat burns as memories flood back - not the magic-induced visions from the trial, but real ones. Mother's hands, once strong enough to work the gardens, now skeletal and trembling as she tries to lift a cup of tea. Her voice, growing weaker with each passing day. The hollow look in my siblings' eyes as they watch her fade.

"Azrael... I-" The words scratch my throat. I push myself off the bed, ignoring how my muscles scream in protest.

Azrael remains perfectly still, his wings casting long shadows in the moonlight. Their pristine white feathers mock me with their perfection, with everything they represent. Everything that's kept beyond our reach.

The words die in my throat as another wave of guilt crashes over me. Not just for Mother, but for the warmth spreading through my chest whenever he's near. For the way I'm starting to warm to him. For wanting something I have no right to want no matter how I want to deny it.

I turn to look out the window. My fingernails dig into the weathered wood of the windowsill. Behind me, I feel his presence like a physical weight, making it hard to breathe for entirely different reasons than the brutal training.

"I need to rest." The words come out hoarse, barely audible. "The trials were more taxing than I realized."

For a moment, the air is still. He doesn't move, doesn't speak, and I wonder if he'll refuse to leave. if I want him to. Maybe I need him to push me to face what we both really want because I'm too much of a coward to do so on my own.

But he doesn't.

"Of course." His voice carries no judgment, yet something in its softness cuts deeper than any harsh word could. The rustle of his wings fills the silence as he moves toward the door.

His steps land softly against the stone floor. Each sound marks another increment of distance growing between us, not just in feet and inches, but in all the ways that matter. In all the ways I can't allow myself to bridge.

The door hinges protest as he pulls it open. Cool air rushes in, carrying the distant sounds of others who are up and going about their day. How lucky they are not to feel as turmoiled as I do right now.

I don't turn around, but I feel the moment he pauses in the doorway. His magic pulses once, like a goodbye, before he steps through. The door closes with a soft click that echoes in my chest like thunder.

Only then do I let myself move, sinking back onto my bed. I curl up, feeling a cold settle into my bones that has nothing to do with the temperature...

And everything to do with the absence of a xaphan that I can't seem to stop myself from wanting.

AZRAEL

I stand at the ancient observation deck carved from living crystal, my wings rigid against my back as Kyrie steps into the third trial's elemental chambers. The crystalline dome above casts fractals of light across the polished stone floor, each beam tinted with traces of magical residue from centuries of trials.

My fingers curl around the ornate railing. The metal, cold and unyielding, bears the same elaborate spirals and runes that adorn all xaphan architecture. Below, the elemental chambers stretch out like a labyrinth - each section pulsing with raw elemental power.

Fire writhes in contained infernos. Water crashes against invisible barriers. Earth rumbles with tectonic force. Air howls through void-touched tunnels.

Each one is ready to destroy the person that comes in contact with it, like the elements themselves are alive.

"You can do this, little bird," I mutter under my breath, watching her small form navigate the entrance chamber.

The conduit I gave her glints on her palm - a mere trinket compared to what she faces. But she's been practicing and I knew it would be most useful in this trial. She's even gotten used to having it on at all times, using magic more regularly like it's second nature to her.

I see the way the Praexa, trainers, and overseers sneer and laugh at the humans. But they don't know what drives her. Don't understand the fierce determination I've witnessed during our training sessions. The way she manipulates magic with an instinct that defies her human limitations.

The chamber seals behind her with a resonant boom that echoes through the observation deck. My jaw clenches as the first elemental guardian materializes - a towering construct of living flame that moves with deadly grace. Around me, the other observers lean forward, eager for bloodsport. Their wings rustle with anticipation of another human failure.

My own wings betray me again, spreading slightly before I force them still. The feathers quiver with suppressed tension. I shouldn't care. Or maybe I should stop trying to convince myself of that. The latter would be more likely to happen.

I track Kyrie's movements as she faces the fire guardian, my breath catching as she rolls beneath a searing arc of flame. The conduit on her palm pulses with stored magic - magic I helped her harness through countless nights of training.

She doesn't conjure a shield like most would attempt. Instead, she redirects the guardian's attacks, using its own power against it with a finesse that makes my chest tight.

"Impressive. For a human." A sneering voice cuts through my focus. Praexa Malachai steps beside me, his triple set of pure white wings casting shadows across the observation deck. "Though she'll break like the rest."

I don't respond, keeping my eyes fixed on Kyrie as she clears the fire chamber. The next guardian rises from depths that would crush a normal being - a creature of crushing water and ice that towers above her small frame.

My wings flex as she faces it head-on. The chamber floods, but she doesn't panic. The conduit gleams as she channels magic through it, creating pockets of breathable air. She moves like she's dancing, each step precise and measured. It's nothing like the frantic scrambling of previous contestants.

"She understands the elements," I say, more to myself than anyone else. "Doesn't fight against them."

Below, Kyrie navigates through the crushing pressure, using the water's momentum rather than resisting it. The guardian launches spears of ice. She twists, letting them pass close enough to slice strands of her auburn hair. Each movement is calculated, conserving energy while pressing forward.

Pride swells in my chest, followed by a spike of fear as a wall of pressurized water slams into her. But she emerges, teeth gritted, eyes blazing with that fierce determination that first caught my attention. The conduit channels a burst of magic that splits the next wave, creating a path forward.

The other observers mutter in disappointment when she reaches the chamber's exit, still standing. Still fighting. My little bird, soaring through trials meant to break her wings before they can grow.

I grip the railing harder as Kyrie enters the final chamber, my knuckles white against the metal. The air crackles with raw power - earth, fire, water, and air swirling together in a maelstrom of pure elemental force. The final guardian emerges, a being of crystallized magic that towers three stories high, its form constantly shifting between states.

"Careful" I whisper, watching her assess the threat.

The conduit pulses steadily on her palm as she circles the chamber's edge. She's tired

- I can see it in the slight tremor of her shoulders, the way her breaths come quick and sharp.

The guardian strikes without warning. A lance of condensed elements tears through the air. Kyrie dives, but not fast enough. The magic catches her side, ripping through flesh and muscle. Her scream echoes through the chamber, cutting straight into my chest. Blood sprays across the stone floor in an arc of crimson.

My wings snap open fully, every feather bristling with the need to dive in and shield her. Somehow, I manage not to move.

She's on her knees, one hand pressed to the wound while the other still grips the conduit. The guardian looms over her, gathering power for another strike.

"Get up," I growl, my fingers crushing the railing. The metal groans beneath my grip. "Get up, Kyrie."

The guardian's next attack comes as a wave of molten stone wrapped in lightning. Kyrie tries to roll away, but her injury slows her. The magic catches her full force, throwing her against the chamber wall. I swear I hear a fucking bone crack. See her body crumple to the ground.

I bare my teeth, watching Kyrie struggle to rise. Blood runs down her face. The conduit flickers weakly. But her eyes - those fierce green eyes - still burn with defiance as she faces the guardian again.

Every muscle in my body screams to act. But I force my wings back against my spine, each feather screaming in protest. The metal railing warps beneath my grip as Kyrie stumbles to her feet, blood darkening her tunic.

Magic crackles through the chamber, raw power that sets my teeth on edge. The

guardian towers over her, its crystalline form refracting light in dizzying patterns across the stone walls.

I'm careful to keep my face carved in stone. My wings and knuckles give me away, but I could just be as enthralled in the anticipation as the other xaphan. Or at least that's what I want them to think.

They can't know how my chest constricts watching Kyrie dodge another blast of elemental fury. Can't see how each drop of her blood that hits the floor feels like acid in my veins. I'm supposed to be her trainer, nothing more. A xaphan teaching a human basic magic manipulation - a task far beneath my station, but necessary for my own ends.

The guardian unleashes a torrent of ice shards. Kyrie raises the conduit, channeling what little magic remains to deflect the worst of it. Still, several crystals slice through her arms, adding to the growing collection of wounds. Her determination burns bright as ever, but her body betrays her with each labored breath.

My wings twitch again, and I dig my nails into my palms until they draw blood. The pain helps ground me, reminds me of my purpose. This human means nothing. She's a means to an end, a pawn in breaking my family's curse. Her life or death shouldn't matter.

But when she screams - a sound of pure agony as the guardian's magic tears through her shoulder - my resolve starts to crack. For a heartbeat, I almost leap in. But I grit my teeth and stay perfectly still.

I watch, muscles coiled tight, as Kyrie faces the guardian one final time. Blood drips steadily from her wounds, but she shows no signs of backing down.

The guardian towers over her, its crystalline form shifting through elements like

water through glass. Fire becomes ice becomes lightning becomes stone. Raw power crackles through the chamber, making my feathers stand on end.

Then Kyrie does something unexpected. Instead of fighting back, she closes her eyes. The conduit's glow dims to almost nothing. The guardian launches a final assault - a maelstrom of combined elements that should tear her apart.

But she doesn't move. Doesn't try to dodge or shield herself. The magic hits her... and flows around her like water splitting around a stone.

She's not fighting it - she's letting it pass through her, redirecting its natural flow just as I taught her. The guardian's power dissipates, leaving her standing in its wake.

My breath catches as she opens her eyes and takes one step forward. Another. The guardian's form begins to destabilize, its elements separating and returning to their natural state.

Kyrie reaches out with her bloodied hand and touches its core. The crystalline being shatters into thousands of glittering shards that rain down around her.

The chamber falls silent. Even the other xaphan observers have stopped their sneering commentary. I release a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, the tension draining from my wings so suddenly they droop slightly before I can catch myself.

She's done it. Despite the wounds, despite the overwhelming odds, my little bird has survived the third trial. Pride swells in my chest before I can suppress it.

Below, Kyrie sways on her feet, finally allowing exhaustion to show on her face. Blood continues to seep from her injuries, but her eyes find mine through the crystalline dome. A small, fierce smile crosses her lips before a door opens behind her and she limps out. It closes, locking the other contestants in to face the same fate,

but I don't care about them.

I'm already turning, striding from the observation deck as I head beneath the arena. My footsteps echo against polished stone as I take the ancient spiraling staircase down, passing elaborate tapestries depicting past trials.

My wings flex unconsciously as I approach her door, carved with the traditional symbols of protection and warding that I taught her. The blood trail ends here. Without hesitation, I push it open.

Kyrie sits on the edge of her bed, attempting to wrap a bandage around her torn shoulder. Her tunic lies discarded on the floor, soaked through with blood and water. Raw wounds crisscross her skin, angry red against pale flesh. The conduit on her palm still pulses weakly, responding to the ambient magic in the room.

"Stubborn little bird," I growl, crossing the space between us in two strides. "Where's the healer?"

"Sent her away." Her voice comes rough, exhausted. "Don't need-"

"Shut up." I grab the bandage from her trembling fingers. My wings curve forward instinctively, creating a barrier between her and the door. "You're going to bleed out at this rate."

She tries to pull away but sways, catching herself on the bed's ornate headboard. The movement reveals the full extent of her injuries - deep gashes along her ribs, burns across her back, bruises blooming like dark flowers on her skin. Each mark makes my jaw clench tighter.

"I did it though." That fierce smile returns, despite the pain etched in her features. "I only have one trial left."

"Hold still." I press my palm against her worst wound, letting healing magic flow from my fingertips into torn flesh. She hisses but doesn't flinch away. "You nearly got yourself killed."

"But I didn't." Her green eyes meet mine, still burning with that indomitable spirit that makes my chest ache. "I survived. Just like you taught me."

And that sends an ache through me that I don't expect.

KYRIE

"Stay still." The command rumbles from deep in Azrael's chest as he kneels beside the mattress. The light from his palms intensifies, casting dancing shadows across the stone walls.

The healing magic wraps around me like warm silk, seeping into my burns and bruises. My breath catches at the sensation - so different from the harsh, clinical feel of the arena's healing wards. This magic carries warmth, life, a gentle strength that makes my own conduit band hum in response.

Azrael's wings shift, the white feathers rustling as he leans closer. The light from his hands illuminates the subtle patterns in his wings. My mind is starting to go fuzzy, and I reach forward, running my finger over a feather. Azrael sucks in a breath but doesn't pull away, and I marvel over the softness of it.

"The last chamber nearly killed you." His fingers trace the air above a particularly nasty burn on my arm, the golden light intensifying. "But how you defeated the final guardian...it was impressive."

The healing magic continues its work, knitting together torn muscle and soothing away the bone-deep ache from the crushing pressure of the air chamber. Even the raw feeling in my throat begins to fade.

I want to argue, to remind him why I can't quit, but the gentle pulse of his magic is

making it hard to keep my eyes open. The last thing I see before exhaustion claims me is the fierce concentration on his face, haloed by that ethereal golden light.

My eyes flutter open, drawn by the intensity of his magic coursing through me. Azrael's face hovers inches from mine as he works, those piercing blue eyes focused on a burn along my collarbone. His fingers trace the air above my skin, leaving trails of golden light in their wake. Each pulse of magic feels more and more like he cares, more intimate. And it's making me react in ways I shouldn't.

"Your heartbeat's erratic." His voice drops lower, rougher. The healing light dims as his gaze locks with mine.

The air grows thick, heavy with unspoken words. My conduit band thrums against my palm, resonating with the raw power emanating from him. The tiny room seems to shrink, the space between us charged like the moments before lightning strikes.

"Azrael..." His name comes out barely above a whisper. The golden light from his hands flickers, casting dancing shadows across the sharp planes of his face.

His fingers pause above a half-healed burn on my shoulder. The magic pulses brighter for a moment, then fades entirely as his hand drops to cup my jaw. His touch burns hotter than any trial fire, sending sparks of awareness racing through my body.

"You could have died today." The words rumble from deep in his chest. His thumb traces the edge of my jaw, feather-light yet leaving trails of fire in its wake.

I can't look away from those ice-blue eyes, now dark with an emotion I'm afraid to name. The distance between us shrinks by inches, the air crackling with magical energy that makes my conduit sing. His wings curl forward, creating a canopy that blocks out everything but him.

My fingers curl into the fabric of his tunic, drawing him closer. Magic crackles between us like lightning before a storm. It's so tense it feels like it's pressing us closer, and I know I'm not strong enough to resist.

When our lips meet, raw power surges through my conduit band. The metal heats against my palm, resonating with Azrael's magic until I can't tell where his power ends and the stored energy begins. His mouth claims mine with fierce intensity, stealing what little breath the trials left me with.

The kiss tastes of starlight and thunder, of ancient magic that makes my head spin. His hand slides from my jaw to tangle in my hair, tilting my head back as he deepens the kiss. My body arches into his touch, ignoring the lingering aches from the elemental chambers.

Azrael's wings tremble, sending cascades of shadow rippling through the obsidian feathers. The air grows thick with magic, golden sparks dancing in my peripheral vision. Each brush of his lips sends waves of electricity coursing through my veins, more intoxicating than any healing ward.

His other hand grips my waist, fingers splaying across my exposed back. Heat radiates from his touch, chasing away the chill that's tickled my skin since I pulled my shirt off. I gasp against his mouth as another surge of power courses through my conduit, making the band glow with borrowed light.

The kiss deepens, becoming desperate, consuming. My fingers slide up to trace the sharp line of his jaw, feeling the tension there as he fights for control.

I reach for his tunic, pulling it up and over his head. I drag my hands down his magnificent body, taking in his sculpted torso. When my hands come to his pants, I reach for the laces.

Azrael's hands grip my hips, a low growl rumbling from his chest. "Kyrie, are you sure about this?"

"I could have died today," I whisper, my fingers tracing the lines of his chest, feeling the raw power coiled beneath his skin. "I'm done holding back, Azrael."

His mouth claims mine again, hungry and demanding. There's no gentleness this time, only a feverish need that matches my own. His fingers tangle in my hair, tilting my head back as his tongue explores every inch of my mouth.

I tug at his pants, desperation making my hands clumsy. He breaks away just long enough to kick them off, then his body presses against mine, hot and hard. His wings rustle, giving away his excitement.

My clothes follow, torn off in a flurry of urgency. His hands roam my body, tracing the curve of my waist, the line of my scar. Each touch sends shocks of pleasure coursing through me, igniting something primal deep within.

"Tell me if it's too much," he growls, positioning himself between my legs. I can feel him, huge and hard, pressing against me.

He pushes into me slowly, allowing my body time to adjust. I moan, gripping his shoulders as he fills me inch by inch. It's almost too much, but I want all of him. Need all of him.

"More," I gasp, digging my nails into his back. He responds with a thrust, burying himself deeper inside me. His magic pulses around us, golden light flickering across our skin.

Every movement sends waves of pleasure crashing through me. His hips move in a rhythm that's both torturous and divine. I meet each thrust, our bodies intertwining,

slick with sweat and glowing with magic.

"You feel incredible," he groans, his lips brushing against my neck. His teeth graze my skin, heightening my pleasure. The sensation of his mouth on me, his body moving within me, it's overwhelming.

His magic continues to heal and strengthen me, every touch, every kiss infused with power. It's like nothing I've ever felt before, a connection that transcends the physical. With each thrust, each caress, we're bound tighter together.

The room fills with the sounds of our lovemaking - the rustle of his wings, the soft moans escaping my lips, the harsh breaths he takes as he drives deeper and deeper into me. There's a primal intensity to it all, a raw need that neither of us can deny.

"Azrael," I whisper, my voice hoarse with desire. His eyes lock onto mine, ice-blue and burning with intensity. In that moment, there's nothing else but us. No trials, no curses, just this incredible connection that defies all odds.

He fucks me slowly, deliberately, each movement designed to draw out every ounce of pleasure. His hands explore my body, tracing lines of fire across my skin.

"Kyrie," he murmurs, his voice rough with emotion. And in that single word, I hear everything he can't say. The longing, the need, the promise. It's all there, wrapped up in my name.

I moan again, arching into him, taking everything he has to give. Azrael's pace quickens, each thrust driving deeper, pushing me closer to the edge. Magic crackles in the air, the rhythm of our bodies syncing with the pulsing golden light that surrounds us. The world narrows down to just him, just me, just this raw, electric connection.

"Azrael, yes, please, " I gasp, fingers digging into his shoulders. The pressure builds, coiling tight in my core. His wings beat the air, casting shadows that dance across our sweat-slicked skin.

He leans down, capturing my mouth in a fierce kiss. "Let go, little bird," he growls against my lips. The command sends a shiver down my spine, and I shatter.

Pleasure explodes through me, waves of ecstasy so intense they steal my breath. My vision whites out, the room filling with the golden glow of Azrael's magic. I can feel it pulsing through my conduit, resonating with my own power, amplifying every sensation.

Azrael grunts, his body tensing. He pulls out, spilling hot across my stomach. The sight of him, head thrown back, muscles taut, sends another jolt of desire through me. There's something primal, raw, about watching him come undone because of me.

His chest heaves, breath coming hard and fast. He looks down at me, ice-blue eyes burning with intensity. Then he leans forward, kissing me slow and deep.

"I've been wanting to do that," he murmurs, his lips brushing mine, "since I first tasted you." His voice is low, rough, and it starts an ache up between my legs again.

I can taste the magic on his tongue, feel the power humming beneath his skin. My body aches with pleasure, every nerve ending alive and electric. I reach up, tracing the line of his jaw, feeling the tension there.

"And what do you want now?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. My fingers trail down his chest, tracing the lines of his sculpted body.

He captures my hand, pressing a kiss to the conduit band around my palm. The metal hums with latent magic, resonating with the power that still pulses around us.

"Now," he says, his voice a low rumble, "I want to watch you come undone again." His fingers trace patterns across my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

His hand slides down, fingers dipping between my thighs. I gasp, arching into his touch. The sensitivity is almost too much, but he doesn't relent. He circles my clit, slow and deliberate, drawing out a moan from deep within me.

"Azrael," I whisper, my voice catching. The pleasure builds again, slower this time, but no less intense. His fingers move expertly, tracing patterns that drive me wild.

He leans down, capturing my mouth in another kiss. His tongue explores, teasing, tasting. I can feel the magic pulsing between us, the connection growing stronger with each touch, each kiss.

"Come for me, little bird," he murmurs against my lips. The command sends a shiver down my spine, and I'm helpless to resist. Pleasure crashes through me, waves of ecstasy that leave me breathless and shaking.

He holds me through it, his body a steady anchor in the storm. And for once, I don't think about my past or what I should be doing, I don't let logic or reason leak in. I just savor this moment with him.

Since I know I won't have it for long.

18

KYRIE

S unlight streams through the open courtyard that I have grown used to training in. My muscles burn from hours of repetitive movements, practicing the forms needed to channel magic through my conduit. The band around my palm pulses weakly, nearly drained from constant use. Something I'll need Azrael to remedy. Or I can bring it among other things with magic to imbue it again.

Around me, other trial participants move through their own exercises. A woman with braided silver hair conjures ice crystals that shatter against practice dummies. Two brothers duel with enchanted wooden swords, their movements so fast I can hardly follow.

It seems after the third trial yesterday, they are wanting to give more humans an advantage. Like me. They want a real fight at the end.

If they get a victor at all.

But my attention keeps drifting to the empty space where Azrael usually stands, critiquing my form with those piercing blue eyes. The memory of last night burns hot in my mind - his touch, his wings curling around me, the way his magic felt coursing through me. And I swear I have never come so hard in my life, but holy fuck - he knows what he's doing.

I slam my palm against the training dummy harder than necessary, channeling a burst

of borrowed magic that leaves scorch marks on the enchanted wood. The effort drains my conduit completely, the metal band growing cold against my skin.

"Damn him." The words come out as a snarl. A nearby trainee glances over, then quickly looks away when he catches my expression.

I grab my water skin and storm farther away from the others, tipping my head back to look up at the sky. The great spires of New Solas pierce the clouds above, their white stone gleaming in the sunlight.

Somewhere up there, in those pristine towers, Azrael is probably going about his day like nothing happened. Like I haven't become part of his routine.

My fingers trace the scar on my neck as I watch a group of xaphan nobles glide between the towers, their wings catching the light. Of course he wouldn't show up. What was I thinking?

He finally got what he wanted from me, right? I was good entertainment, a good fuck, and now I've been abandoned for the final trial. He probably doesn't think I'll survive it.

The conduit band feels heavy on my palm, a constant reminder of everything that separates us. Even with this magical aid, I'm still just a human playing at channeling power that comes naturally to his kind.

Heat builds behind my eyes but I refuse to let the tears fall. I've survived worse than a xaphan's rejection. I have to focus on what matters - completing these trials, earning my wings, saving my mother. I can't let one night of weakness derail everything I've worked for.

I need to get out of here, I realize. I need to do...something. So I take off for the

tunnels beneath the arena, which should be empty with everyone at training.

My muscles protest with each step as I slip through the darkened corridors of the arena complex. The third trial left me with bruises layered upon bruises, and my lungs still burn from breathing the poisoned air near the peak. But the movement and pain helps redirect my mind.

Magical orbs cast pools of silvery light at regular intervals along the stone walls, their glow dimming and brightening in a slow pulse that mimics breathing. My feet make no sound on the worn stones - a skill learned from years in the slums.

I pause at an intersection, running my fingers along the wall's intricate carvings. Ancient xaphan script flows like water across the stone, telling stories of past glory that I can't read. The conduit band tingles against my palm, responding to the latent magic woven into the building itself.

A flash of white catches my eye - a feather drifting on the air currents. My heart jumps before I can stop it. The feather's too dark to be his - more dove gray than pure white. Still, I follow its path down the corridor like it's going to tell me why he isn't here.

Why I finally trusted someone and this is what I got.

The smart thing would be turning back. But I've never been good at smart when it comes to him. Besides, the burning in my muscles has faded to a dull ache, replaced by the familiar tension of hunting something I shouldn't.

The corridor opens into a circular chamber with a domed ceiling that sparkles like the night sky. More magical orbs float at different heights, casting shifting shadows that make the space feel alive. Multiple doorways branch off from here - and I know it leads to the trainer's quarters.

The feather finally falls right at the base of a heavy tapestry depicting the founding of New Solas, and I reach out to brush the threads that shimmer with embedded magic that makes the woven xaphan wings appear to flutter. A draft whispers from behind the fabric, stirring the edges. Frowning, I press my palm against the wall and feel the unmistakable seam of a doorway.

I press around the seam, and it doesn't take long for me to figure out how to open the doorway. With a soft grinding sound, a section of wall swings inward. The magic here is so dense and thick, the conduit in my hand hums against me as it is recharged. My breath catches - the chamber beyond stretches far deeper than should be possible given the arena's layout.

Magical orbs float near the ceiling, their glow muted as if struggling against the weight of years. The air tastes of dust and parchment and something else - a metallic tang that makes my teeth ache.

Maps cover one wall, their edges curling with age. They show places I've never seen - vast cities with impossible architecture, mountain ranges that spiral into the clouds, forests where the trees grow sideways.

Leather-bound texts fill the shelves, their spines marked with symbols rather than words. Some pulse with contained power, others seem to whisper as I pass. A few are chained shut with links that shine like liquid starlight.

My fingers drift over stacks of brittle parchment, each one covered in elaborate xaphan script that seems to shimmer in the dim light. The conduit band tingles against my palm, responding to traces of magic embedded in the ancient ink.

A rolled scroll catches my attention, sealed with golden wax bearing the symbol of the wing trials. Heart pounding, I ease it open, careful not to tear the delicate material. The parchment unfolds to reveal an intricate map unlike any I've seen

before.

Crystalline lines trace pathways through what appears to be a massive labyrinth, but the passages shift and realign as I watch, like living things. Tiny notes in flowing script mark various points - some glow with a fierce red light, others pulse with cool blue energy. In the center, a detailed illustration shows a towering structure that seems to pierce the very sky.

My breath catches as I recognize the previous trial. I pick up another roll and find the outline of my initiation. The third I pick up looks similar, but these configurations are different - more complex, more deadly. The magical storms depicted here dwarf anything we've faced before. The structure is massive - likely impossible to scale without wings.

It must be my final trial.

There are also marks on it, and I can tell what they are supposed to designate. But I will spend time studying it later. I'm not leaving this behind.

Besides, what's the worst that could happen? They kill me? They're already trying and I'm not going to give up an advantage I can have.

"What's one more crime?" I whisper to the shadows.

Quickly, I pull one of my swords out of my sheaths and tuck the rolled map into it. I'll have to carry my sword, but it will look less suspicious than me carrying the map out of here.

Magic tingles across my skin as I ease the entrance shut behind me. The tapestry settles back into place, its woven wings still fluttering in an enchanted breeze. In the corridor beyond, the magical orbs pulse their steady rhythm, giving no sign that their

light ever revealed a thief in the night.

I slip through the corridors, feeling excited about this discovery. I have a gemstone and a map, and those two combine feel monumental right now.

But at the reminder of the gemstone, Azrael's face floats in my mind - those piercing blue eyes that see too much, the curve of his mouth when he almost smiles during our training sessions. Even though he's not here right now, he's gotten me this far. The thought of keeping secrets from him twists something deep in my chest.

But then I remember the scar that curves around my neck, left by another xaphan who looked just as beautiful, just as trustworthy. I trace the raised flesh, feeling the phantom burn of that ancient wound. The xaphan see humans as entertainment, as prey to be hunted through their trials for sport. Even Azrael, for all his careful instruction, serves their cruel games.

The scroll's knowledge burns in my mind. With its secrets, I might survive what's coming. I might win my wings, save my mother, change everything.

But sharing it with Azrael could mean losing my only advantage. Or worse - he might turn me in, prove that any trust between us was nothing but another cruel illusion.

Magic whispers through the conduit band, responding to my turmoil. The metal grows warm against my palm, reminding me of his touch when he first showed me how to channel power through it. Teacher, protector, possible betrayer - he is all these things... and more.

I just have to ignore that more. Ignore the way I long for him. How having him fill me did not ease the need but ignite it. That is not more important than getting through this last trial.

"I can't risk it," I whisper to the empty corridor. Not yet. Not until I know for certain where his loyalties truly lie. The trials are coming, and I need every advantage I can get.

AZRAEL

The moon is high when I finally make it to the arena. I've spent all day at the estate, first tending to my father, whose health has deteriorated dramatically. The healers fear he has two weeks left at best, and I can only hope to get the gemstones before then.

Then, I was dragged into council meetings. Gavreel even teased me about being here, playing trainer, when I had an estate to run in my father's absence. The whole day was draining - partially annoying - and now, I am finally here.

I hate that I've been gone all day. A day I should have been watching her, studying her movements, finding the perfect moment to?—

No. I can't think about that now.

I slip inside with ease. There is no security when it comes to the tunnels and quarters beneath the arena. There is nothing but a door, and while I hate that, too, there is little I can do about it. I

The arena's training halls empty as night descends, contestants dragging themselves to their assigned chambers. I keep my footsteps silent against stone floors worn smooth by centuries of use as I approach Kyrie's door.

I carefully nudge it open, and while she's shoved some furniture in front of it, I'm able

to use my magic to move it silently. I slip inside, wings folding tight against my back as I approach her

Kyrie lies curled on her side, one hand tucked beneath her pillow—likely gripping a weapon. Smart girl. Her auburn hair spills across the pillow, and even in sleep, tension lines her face. The scar on her neck catches the lantern light, a reminder of why she should hate my kind.

I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't watch her chest rise and fall with each breath. Shouldn't remember the taste of her skin, the way she arched against me, the sound of my name on her lips.

My wings rustle, betraying my unease. This wasn't part of the plan. Getting close to her? Yes. Gaining her trust? Necessary. But I never meant to take her to bed, to learn how perfectly she fits against me, to discover the fierce joy in her laugh when I?—

I drag a hand down my face. All around us, similar scenes play out. The arena breeds desperation, and desperation breeds connection. Humans and xaphan alike seek comfort in the dark, knowing tomorrow might bring death. It's nothing special.

But when she'd looked at me after, green eyes bright with challenge rather than submission, something shifted. Something dangerous.

The curse pulses through my blood, a constant reminder of my purpose. I can't afford distractions. Can't let myself forget why I'm here, what's at stake. My family's survival depends on using her, on taking what she doesn't even know she has.

But at the same time... I find myself far too attached to this human. I think a part of me already knows there is no going back.

Kyrie stirs, mumbling something in her sleep. Her fingers clench around whatever

weapon she's hiding, and despite everything, my lips curve. Always ready for a fight, my little bird.

My gaze shifts around the room, taking in the space. I'm not ready to leave, just because she's asleep, but that's when I spot something odd in the corner.

There's a spot at the bottom of the wall where it looks like someone has chipped away at the rock. It's been crudely moved, almost like something is behind it.

Kneeling, I work my fingers beneath the edge. The rocks shift with barely a whisper, revealing a hollow space behind it. Inside lies the gemstone – and a carefully folded piece of parchment, the edges worn from handling. My chest swells with a mix of pride and wariness as I unfold it.

It's a detailed map of the arena - and what looks to be a trial. If I were to guess, it's the next trial.

"Clever little bird." The words slip out before I can catch them.

Because while the xaphan would see this as stolen property, it is a brilliant thing to have. I'm not sure how she got it, but it could ensure she makes it through the last trial.

Then I see smaller markings, and my breath stutters in my chest. I recognize what they are. It's the rest of the gemstones. They will all be in the final trial, probably to distract the contestants and stir up more competitions. But now I know exactly where they are and how I can get them.

How I can break my family's curse.

Behind me, Kyrie shifts in her sleep, the blanket sliding to reveal the conduit band

wrapped around her palm - the one I gave her, taught her to use. The one that let her sense the gemstones' locations easier and got one out of the trials already.

I didn't know then that her natural affinity for magic would make her such a perfect tool. Didn't know she'd map out exactly what I needed to save my family.

Didn't know I'd grow to care.

My jaw clenches as I look at her sleeping form. Trust is rare in the arena, yet she gave me hers freely. Showed me her strength, her determination, her heart. And I'm about to shatter it all.

But I have no choice. My family's survival hangs by a thread, and I won't let them fall into oblivion. Not when salvation lies within reach.

Even if it means betraying the one person who saw past my cursed bloodline and chose to believe in me anyway.

Just as quietly as I came in, I slip back out, tucking the map and gemstone into the inside pocket of my overcoat. I don't encounter anyone all the way back, and as soon as I'm out of the arena, I do something I rarely do these days - I launch into the sky.

Magic ripples around me as I cut through the night air, my wings catching thermal currents that spiral up from the heated crystal towers. Each powerful stroke carries me higher, past the floating gardens where night-blooming flowers release their luminescent spores into the darkness.

The city sprawls beneath me like a tapestry of starlight. Golden wards shimmer between buildings, ancient protection spells that have guarded our realm for centuries.

Prayer bells toll from the Temple District, their pure notes carrying on the wind. Below, zarryn hooves click against cobblestone streets as the beasts draw late-night carriages through the thoroughfares.

My family's estate rises from in front of me, once proud towers now dulled by the curse's creeping influence. Where other mansions gleam with preserved magic, ours stands like a shadow among stars. The curse seeps into the very stone, turning pristine white marble to weathered gray.

I land on the western balcony, my boots silent against the flagstones. Guards nod as I pass - fewer now than in our glory days, but still loyal despite our fallen status. Their wings show similar signs of corruption, gray patches spreading through once-pure feathers.

The curse pulses through my blood, stronger here where it first took root. Each beat of my heart echoes with dark magic, a constant reminder of time slipping away. But now, with Kyrie's map pressed against my chest, hope wars with the guilt threatening to consume me.

My wings ache from the swift flight, the curse making even simple magic more taxing. But I push forward, through carved doors and down halls where portraits of my ancestors watch with judging eyes. Their wings, painted in pure gold and white, mock what we've become.

But I have a way to fix it all.

20

KYRIE

The flickering light from the orbs casts dancing shadows across my small room in the contestant quarters. Tomorrow marks the final trial, and my heart pounds at the thought.

I never did ask where Azrael was that day he disappeared. But he's been here every day after for the last week, helping me prepare. I haven't told him about the map, and each night he's walked me back to my room and been here until I fell asleep. I've yet to study it again, though I did so much that first day that I know I have it memorized.

Still, I finally managed to get away from him, telling him I had to go to the showers. I moved fast and slipped out the opposite entrance of where I went in so he couldn't escort me back here.

Now alone, I go to the corner of my room and shift the rock out of the way. I shift closer, sliding my hand inside - but I find nothing.

"No, no, no." I drop to my knees, trying to look inside, but it is empty

My hands shake as I tear through the room, upending the wooden chest containing my meager belongings. Tunics and training clothes scatter across the floor. The map should be here, along with the gemstone—my only advantages for tomorrow's deadly climb.

Cool night air seeps through cracks in the stone walls as I check every hiding spot. Behind loose stones, inside the legs of my rickety bed frame, within the folds of my extra blanket. Nothing.

"Think, Kyrie." I press my palm against the conduit band, drawing on its stored magic to illuminate the darkest corners. The soft blue glow reveals only dust and cobwebs.

That map was going to help me get through this trial. And the gemstone would have boosted my magic. Now they are both gone.

My bare feet pad across the cold floor as I check the window ledge one last time. Outside, the spires of New Solas pierce the night sky, their ethereal light a constant reminder of what I'm fighting for. What I need to win to save my mother.

A sound in the hallway makes me freeze. Footsteps? I press myself against the wall, listening. The steps fade away, but doubt gnaws at my gut. Someone must have taken them. Another contestant? Or worse - the xaphan themselves. Have I been caught? And that's what this is?

I slide down the wall, my fingers tracing the scar on my neck. Without those items, my chances of surviving the final trial just dropped from slim to nearly impossible.

A creak pierces the silence, and I tense as my door as it swings open, revealing Azrael's towering figure. His white wings catch the moonlight streaming through my window, but something's off in his usually stern expression.

"You gave me the slip," he murmurs, watching me warily.

His ice-blue eyes dart to the scattered contents of my room before meeting mine. There—a flicker of something I've never seen in him before. Guilt?

I launch to my feet, my conduit band humming with stored magic. It hits me, why he didn't want me alone. "It was you. You took them."

"Little bird—" He steps into my room, closing the door behind him.

"Don't." I advance on him, jabbing a finger at his chest. "The map. The gemstone. Where are they?"

His jaw tightens. "You don't understand?—"

"Then explain it to me." Magic crackles along my arm, making the candlelight flicker. "Because from where I'm standing, you just sabotaged my only chance of surviving tomorrow."

Azrael's wings shift, a telltale sign of discomfort I've learned to read over our training sessions. He reaches for me, but I step back.

"The map..." He runs a hand through his black hair, loosening strands from his neat tie. "It said where all the gemstones are."

"Good!" I throw my hands up. "Then why wouldn't you want me to know that?"

"Because I needed that information."

"So you decided to steal my only advantages?" Heat rises in my chest. "Rather than tell me?"

He stiffens. "It's not like you told me about the map."

I grit my teeth. "I didn't have to. I found it. I choose who reads it. I didn't expect you to be a thief." My voice breaks. "My mother is dying, Azrael. I need those wings. I

need that reward."

He takes another step closer, and this time I don't retreat. "And I need you alive, little bird."

His words hit me like a physical blow. The tenderness in his voice clashes with his actions, feeding the betrayal burning in my chest.

"Need me alive?" I laugh, harsh and bitter. "You're my instructor, Azrael. Nothing more."

"No." His wings spread wider, nearly spanning my small room. "Kyrie, you know it's more than that."

I cough out a laugh, growing angrier. "Why would you take the map?" I glare up at him. "Just tell me that."

He lets out a soft sigh and then says the last thing I'm expecting. "I'm not really a trainer."

My brows furrow. "What?"

"I come from a noble bloodline, one that has been cursed." His wings shift and that's when I notice for the first time there's gray on them. "My family is cursed to deteriorate. We are all dying and those gemstones - the one you found and the ones on the map - are the only way to stop it."

So he took it to save himself. He took it because he cared more about saving his life than mine and instead of trusting me to get them out, he wanted to be sure he knew where they were.

Magic surges through my conduit band, responding to my fury. "So all those training sessions, teaching me to channel magic—what was that? Just making sure I'd survive long enough to help you find it?"

"At first." He reaches for me again, but blue sparks leap between us. "But then?—"

"Then what?" I advance on him, forcing him back a step. "You realized the pathetic human might actually be useful?"

"I realized I couldn't watch you die!" His voice booms through the room, rattling the window. "I took the map because I knew you'd get through the trial, but I needed to find a way to get the gemstones. I can help save you but there's only one thing that will keep me alive."

"And I could have gotten it for you!" The magic explodes from my band, shattering the orbs and plunging us into darkness. "Now, I might die and you might not get the stones. Or did you find a way to get them that doesn't involve using me?"

He shifts, not looking at me and it only angers me further. I want to understand - because the map could have benefitted us both. But in the end, there is nothing to understand. He wanted the information more than he wanted me to have it.

And I was no different. I hid the map from him, just in case. And when he found it, he stole it away.

I guess that goes to show just little trust we really had in each other.

"My mother needs that medicine," I seethe. "My family is counting on me. But you wouldn't understand that, would you? Noble-born Azrael, playing with human lives for his own gain."

His wings rustle in the darkness. When he speaks, his voice is raw. "My father is bedridden. My siblings have died. Every day, the curse eats away at us. I understand more than you know."

"Then give me back my advantages." I step closer, close enough to feel the heat radiating from him.

He looks at me, almost so sad that it breaks my own heart. "I can't," he whispers. "I gave the gemstone to my healers. And the map would be no use to you now. You have a trial in hours." He shakes his head. "I did not do this to hurt you, I swear. I just didn't see any other way?—"

"You had no right!" My fists connect with his chest, each impact punctuated by the crackle of magic from my conduit band. "I trusted you! All those hours teaching me to harness magic, to survive - was any of it real?"

I know he hears what I'm really asking - everything between us, was it real? Was the kiss, the night in my bed, the way we finally opened up to each other, was it real?

Because right now, I feel like I was played for a fool.

Azrael catches my wrists, but I wrench away. The moonlight streaming through my window illuminates the pain in his eyes, making my chest ache worse.

"I would have helped you!" My voice cracks as tears spill down my cheeks. "If you'd just told me about the gemstones, about your family - I understand desperate choices, Azrael. I'm making one tomorrow!"

"Kyrie—"

"No!" Magic surges through my band, casting wild blue shadows across the walls.

"You didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth. Instead, you manipulated me, used our training sessions to—to what? Keep me compliant? Make sure I'd be useful when the time came?"

His wings curl forward, trying to shield us both, but I shove against them. The soft feathers bend under my palms as more tears fall.

"I believed in you." The words taste like ash. "When I thought I could never trust a xaphan, I trusted you. I thought you were different." My fist strikes his chest again. "But you're exactly what they said—a manipulative, cruel?—"

"Little bird, please?—"

"Don't call me that!" I slam both hands against him, channeling magic through my conduit band. Blue energy crackles between us. "You don't get to use that name anymore. Not after—" A sob breaks free. "Not after making me feel like this ."

The magic pulses brighter, reflecting off his ice-blue eyes as I continue to strike his chest. Each hit is weaker than the last as grief overtakes anger.

"I would have understood," I whisper, my forehead falling against his chest. "I would have helped you find it. Why couldn't you just trust me?"

"I-" He shakes his head. Even he seems uncertain now. "It's not like that."

His words only enrage me.

"Get away from me!" My voice rises, echoing off the stone walls. The conduit band burns against my palm as magic surges through it, helping me push him back

"Kyrie." He catches my wrists, his grip gentle but firm. "Let me explain?—"

"Don't touch me!" The magic explodes outward, knocking over my wooden chest. It crashes against the wall with a thunderous bang.

"Little bird, please." His voice drops to a whisper. "We can fix th?—"

"Stop calling me that!" I wrench away from him, my fury building like a storm. "I'm not your little anything. I'm just another human you can use for your precious noble quest, right?"

His wings curl forward, trying to contain my outburst. "That's not?—"

"Get out." I shove him toward the door, channeling more magic through my band. Blue energy crackles along my arms, illuminating his pained expression. "I don't need your pity or your lies or whatever game you're playing."

"This isn't a game?—"

"No?" Another push, harder this time. His wings brush against the doorframe. "Then what is it? What do you get out of training me, out of making me think—" My voice breaks. "Making me think you cared?"

Footsteps sound in the hallway. Voices murmur, growing closer.

"Out!" I give him one final shove, pouring my hurt and betrayal into the magic. It propels him through the doorway. "Stay away from me, Azrael. I mean it."

His hand catches the doorframe. "Kyrie?—"

I slam the door in his face, cutting off whatever excuse he was about to offer. The wood trembles under my palm as I lean against it, letting the tears finally fall.

I slide down against the door, my legs giving out as the magic fades from my conduit band. The stone floor bites cold through my thin clothes, but I barely notice. My chest aches with each breath, like I've been struck by lightning.

Rising on shaky legs, I stumble to the scattered contents of my room. My fingers find the rough fabric of my training clothes. I lay them out methodically: the reinforced leather vest, the tight-fitting pants designed for climbing, the sturdy boots with their spelled soles. Each piece represents hours of preparation with... him.

The orb is still broken, but I don't need it. I channel magic through my band, creating just enough light to work by. The spelled thread I'd been saving for emergencies will have to do. I weave it through my boots and vest, reinforcing the enchantments already there.

"I don't need his help." The words taste bitter as I check my gear. "I don't need anyone's help."

But as I braid my hair back tight against my skull, my hands shake. The map had shown me what I was up against - though he was right about one thing. It's a massive tower and that map wasn't going to tell me anything useful. The gemstone would have bought me precious minutes of clean air.

No. I square my shoulders, facing my reflection in the window glass. The determined woman staring back has survived worse. Has climbed The Ridge in winter. Has survived a xaphan attack and living in the slums.

My anger crystallizes into something harder, colder. Something I can use.

The tower won't kill me. And neither will Azrael's betrayal.

KYRIE

I step into the arena, my boots crunching on crystalline sand that sparkles with residual magic from previous trials. The morning air tastes metallic, charged with power that makes my conduit band hum against my palm. Above me, the tower pierces the sky - all gleaming obsidian and jagged edges that catch the light of the sun.

This is it. My last trial.

There's only two dozen or so left of us from the original nearly three hundred. And the xaphan anticipate none of us making it out of here alive.

Xaphan nobles fill the floating observation platforms, their pristine wings creating a canvas of white against the purple-tinged clouds. Their excited chatter drifts down, mixing with the low thrum of protective wards that encase the arena.

"Final contestant, approach the marker." A voice booms across the grounds, magically enhanced to reach every corner.

I keep my chin lifted high as I walk forward. Other contestants line the arena's edge—the ones who survived the previous trials. Some nurse injuries, others whisper prayers. None meet my eyes as we all wait in our places spread out in the arena around the tower.

The base of the tower stretches wider than twenty village houses. Ancient runes pulse along its surface, creating patterns that shift and change like living things. This close, I can feel the weight of its magic pressing down, testing, probing for weakness.

A gust of wind whips my braid, carrying the scent of ozone and something else—something deadly. My conduit band grows warm as it detects the poison in the air. Without the gemstone, I'll have to rely on short bursts of magical shielding, timing them perfectly between the gravity surges.

The marker glows at my feet—a circle of white light etched into black stone. Around its edge, words appear. Rise or Fall, the Tower decides.

I take my position, chin high, shoulders back. Let them watch. Let them think they know how this ends. The sun casts my shadow long across the arena floor, stretching toward the tower that will either grant me wings or claim my life.

A sound erupts through the arena and we all take off. I press my foot against the tower's surface, testing its grip. The stone feels alive beneath my boots, thrumming with ancient power. One wrong step and I'll become one of the broken bodies that are already starting to litter the ground below.

Magic pulses through the obsidian in waves. Each surge drags at my limbs like chains, trying to pull me down. I activate my conduit band, channeling a thin shield of energy around my body. Warmth spreads across my palm, fighting against the crushing force.

Ten steps up. My thighs burn. Twenty steps. Sweat trickles down my spine, soaking through my shirt. The higher I climb, the heavier my own body becomes. It's like carrying a sack of grain that doubles in weight with every movement.

A flash of gold catches my eye—a Praexa watching from his floating platform, his

triple wings spread wide in casual display. His lips curl into a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

I grit my teeth and push on. The tower's magic seeps into my bones, making them ache. Each breath requires more effort than the last. My lungs strain against the increasing pressure, fighting for air that grows thinner by the second.

"Keep moving," I whisper to myself, the words coming out in short gasps. "For Mother."

The conduit band flares hot against my skin, warning me of another gravity surge. I brace myself, fingers digging into tiny cracks in the stone. The force hits like a physical blow, threatening to tear me from the tower's face. My shoulders scream as I hold on, waiting for the wave to pass.

Blood pounds in my ears. The ground below - now forty feet down - seems to ripple and twist. The tower's magic plays tricks with perception, making distance stretch and warp. I dare not look up. Better to focus on each individual step, each small victory against the crushing weight that wants to drag me to my death.

My muscles tremble with exhaustion, but I force myself higher. The pendant bounces against my chest with each movement, a constant reminder of why I'm here. Of who needs me to succeed.

A flash of crimson light erupts from the runes beside me. I twist away as flames burst from the tower's surface, so close the heat singes my eyebrows. My conduit band pulses in warning - more traps triggering around me.

"Not today," I mutter, pressing myself flat against the obsidian as crystalline spears of ice materialize above my head. They crash where I stood moments before, shattering into deadly shards that glitter like diamonds in the sunlight.

The tower's surface shifts beneath my fingers, ancient stone restructuring itself into new patterns. I leap right as a section dissolves into liquid fire, my hands finding purchase on a jutting piece of rock. The muscles in my arms scream from the enhanced gravity.

Magic crackles through the air - raw power that makes my teeth ache and sets my hair on end. A bolt of pure energy slices through the space where my head was a heartbeat ago. The smell of scorched stone fills my nose.

My conduit band grows hot against my palm as I channel its power into quick bursts of shields, deflecting smaller projectiles that spray from the tower's face. Each use drains more of its stored energy. I'll have nothing left for the summit if I'm not careful.

Ice crystals form in spiraling patterns around me, their razor edges catching the light. I recognize the pattern from Azrael's teachings - a cascading trap designed to box in its target. The first crystal shoots forward like an arrow. I drop three feet, catching myself on a narrow ledge as more ice spears crisscross above me.

A deep rumble vibrates through the stone. The tower's next attack comes from below—a wave of crackling energy racing up its surface. There's nowhere to dodge. I press my conduit band against the obsidian and pull hard on its remaining power, creating a thin barrier between me and the surge.

The magic slams into my shield like a physical blow. My arms shake with the effort of holding on as the wave passes, leaving spots dancing in my vision. The band cools against my skin, its power dangerously low.

The air thins with each foot I climb, becoming sharp and brittle in my lungs. My chest heaves as I struggle to pull in enough oxygen. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision, transforming the ancient runes into blurred streaks of light.

I press my forehead against the cool obsidian, trying to steady myself. The tower's magic pulses through the stone, a steady rhythm that matches the thunder of my heartbeat. My conduit band flickers weakly, its stored power nearly depleted.

"I. Can. Do. This," I rasp, the word barely a whisper in the thin atmosphere.

Poisonous vapors curl around me like hungry serpents, their sickly green tendrils seeking any gap in my magical defenses. I channel the last dregs of power from my conduit into a barrier, watching as the deadly mist dissipates against it. The band grows cold against my palm—empty now, useless until it can recharge.

My fingers tremble as I reach for the next handhold. The runes pulse faster, their light casting strange shadows across my skin. Each breath burns like I'm swallowing glass. The thin air makes my head swim, turning simple movements into monumental tasks.

I remember Azrael's lessons about managing energy flow, about finding the spaces between magic rather than fighting against it. My hands move across the tower's surface, seeking the natural channels where power flows less intensely. There - a slight difference in the stone's texture, a path where the crushing weight feels marginally lighter.

Blood roars in my ears. The observation platforms have become tiny specks below, the xaphan nobles' wings mere flashes of white against the purple sky. I force my eyes to stay fixed on the stone before me, fighting the vertigo that threatens to tear me from the tower's face.

Another wave of dizziness hits, stronger this time. The world tilts sideways. I dig my fingers into a crack in the obsidian, pressing my body against the tower as I wait for my vision to clear. The air feels like soup in my lungs, thick and insufficient.

A shadow falls across my face. Before I can react, boots slam into my shoulders. The

impact drives me against the tower's surface, knocking precious air from my lungs.

Through blurred vision, I make out Dax - the mercenary from the second trial. His face twists with desperation as his hands close around my throat.

"Only room for one at the top." His fingers dig into my windpipe.

I drive my knee up, catching him in the ribs. He grunts but doesn't let go. We grapple on the narrow ledge, the enhanced gravity making each movement feel like fighting through mud. His conduit band glows bright blue—still charged with power while mine sits cold and useless against my palm.

Magic crackles between us as he channels a burst of energy. Pain explodes across my chest. The force sends me sliding toward the edge. My fingers catch a groove in the stone, halting my descent as my legs dangle over empty air.

Dax looms above me, drawing more power from his conduit. "Nothing personal, sweetheart. But I've got people counting on me too."

I swing my body sideways as he releases another blast. The magic sears past my ear, leaving the taste of burnt copper on my tongue. Using the momentum, I hook my foot around his ankle. He stumbles, his concentration breaking.

We roll across the ledge, trading desperate blows. His elbow catches my jaw. I slam my forehead into his nose. Blood sprays between us, instantly crystallizing in the thin air. The tower's magic pulses stronger, responding to our violence.

His hands find my throat again. Spots dance in my vision as he squeezes. The gravity pulls at us both, threatening to drag us to our deaths. I grab his conduit band, yanking hard.

Raw magic explodes outward. The blast throws us apart. And it sends me in the wrong direction. I took a gamble, and I fucking lost.

The force tears me from my precarious hold, sending me spinning into empty air. My stomach lurches as gravity takes hold.

The world slows to a crawl. Purple clouds drift by like ink in water. Sunlight catches on my mother's pendant as it floats up from my chest, the silver chain stretched taut. Crystal shards from the tower's traps glitter around me like fallen stars.

Wind whips my braid into a copper banner above my head. The cold bites through my sweat-soaked clothes. My conduit band sits useless and cold against my palm - no power left to save me. Below, the arena floor spreads out in a massive mosaic of black stone and glittering sand.

My thoughts turn to Azrael. His ice-blue eyes, usually so cold, softening when he called me "little bird." The way his wings would curl forward unconsciously when he stepped close during our training sessions. His rare half-smile when I mastered a particularly difficult technique.

Images of Mother lying sick in our tiny home flash through my mind. Of promises I made and now can't keep. The ground rushes up to meet me, my reflection growing clearer in the polished black stone.

I close my eyes, not wanting to see the end. The wind howls in my ears, carrying the scent of magic and ozone. My heart pounds out its final beats as I plummet toward certain death.

22

AZRAEL

I fucked up.

I know I did. When I saw the map, I didn't think. I just knew my father was on death's doorstep, and I couldn't wait any longer. I needed to see if one gemstone could at least slow down his decay, if the map would allow me to get the others now.

Gavreel couldn't find them, though. Even with the map. The best I could do is try to use my magic to push them to Kyrie today - well, that was the plan before she found out about my betrayal.

I did mean it when I said I didn't think the map would help her. It's a massive tower, and there were no secrets there that the map could have told her.

But I still know I fucked up.

I should have told her I saw the map. I should have told her why I needed those gemstones. I should have done something besides lie and manipulate her but just like she didn't trust me - evident by the way she hid the map - I don't know how to trust anyone but myself.

We are both out here fighting for our families and we couldn't expect the other to give up their cause. So we gave each other no option.

And I hate myself a little bit for it.

If I could have taken her from the trials, I would have just gotten her mother's medicine. But she can't leave once she enters unless she wins or dies. And I really do need those gemstones.

There are so many ways I could have gone about this better. But I didn't. Instead, I'm stuck here with my mistakes.

The wind whips through my hair as I stand at the observation platform, my wings pulled tight against my back. In front of me, the massive tower stretches up, and I have to crane my head back to watch as contestants grapple, being thrown to the ground by the magic, the poisonous air, gravity, and each other

My hands grip the railing, knuckles white. My little bird moves with surprising grace through the storm-wracked arena, dodging debris and magical projectiles. She's lasted longer than most humans, determination evident in every calculated movement.

But that luck runs out. The same boy from the second trials grabs her, grappling with her, and when she tries to fight back, she is blasted away from his body - and sent falling off the tower.

My body moves before my mind processes what I'm doing. Wings snap open, magic surging through my veins as I dive from the platform. The wind tears at my clothes, but I cut through it, streamlining my descent. Council rules and appearances be damned.

She's falling, tumbling through the air. Her eyes are closed, squeezed shut, and I already know it's not out of fear of death. It's the disappointment that she did not finish, that she did not save her mother.

I reach for her, magic crackling around us as I break through the trial's protective wards. The impact of catching her sends us spinning, but I wrap my wings around us both, creating a cocoon of protection as we hurtle toward the ground. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, face pressed against my chest.

"I've got you, little bird," I growl, pulling up hard, wings straining against the magical storm still raging around us.

Her body feels too light, too fragile in my arms as I land hard on the arena floor. The magical storm still rages overhead, but I curve my wings to create a shield against the biting wind and crackling energy.

"Kyrie." I brush matted hair from her face. Blood trickles from a gash above her temple, and her skin holds a gray pallor that turns my insides to ice. Her chest barely moves - each shallow breath a desperate fight.

Magic pulses through my hands as I scan her injuries. Internal bleeding. Cracked ribs. The poisoned air has gotten to her and barbs from the wind traps have left angry purple welts across her exposed skin. But worst of all, I can practically feel her life slipping away, growing dimmer by the second.

"Don't you dare." My voice comes out rough, primal. I press my palm to her chest, channeling healing energy into her broken body. But it's not enough. The trial's magic interferes, pushing back against my attempts to save her.

Her eyelids flutter, revealing a sliver of green. "Az..." The word comes out as barely a whisper.

"Save your strength." I cradle her closer, my wings tightening around us both. The conduit on her palm sparks weakly, its magic nearly depleted. She'd pushed herself too hard, used too much power trying to survive this cursed trial.

Another scan shows her heart rate slowing. No. Terror claws at my chest - an unfamiliar, unwelcome sensation. I can't lose her. Not like this. Not to these barbaric games my people created for their own twisted entertainment.

I press my forehead to hers, pouring more magic into her failing body. The effort makes my vision blur, but I don't stop. Her skin feels cold against mine, her breathing growing more labored with each passing second.

"Stay with me, little bird." My words come out as a plea rather than a command. "You're stronger than this. Fight."

But her only response is the weakening flutter of her pulse beneath my fingers.

I gather her limp form closer, wings snapping open as I launch us into the air. The closest temple lies north of the arena, its golden spires piercing the clouds. But I'll never make it. Every beat of my wings sends pain shooting through my shoulders - I've drained too much power trying to heal her.

The wind fights me as I climb higher, Kyrie's breathing growing shallower against my chest. Her skin has taken on an ashen hue, life force flickering like a dying ember.

I look out among the crowd, and relief hits me when I see the robes of someone who can save her. I land hard just in front of the spectators, but I don't care about any of them but one.

"Nashai!" My voice is panicked as I stare at the robed woman. "I need your help."

The ancient Praexa stands, her three sets of golden wings casting dancing light across the stone walls. Her white robes ripple with contained power, eyes blazing as she takes in the scene before her.

"I cannot heal her," she says simply.

"No, but you can bond us." I cradle Kyrie closer, feeling her pulse grow weaker. "I need you to do it. Now."

The Nashai's eyes narrow. "You would tether your soul to this mortal? The consequences-"

"I don't care about consequences." Magic crackles around us as my control slips. "She dies, I die. That's my choice."

The Praexa studies us for a long moment, her ancient power pressing against my shields. Finally, she raises her hands, golden light spilling from her fingertips. "This binding cannot be undone," she warns, her hands hovering. "Your souls will be forever intertwined. Her fate becomes yours."

"Do it." My voice cracks on the words. "Please."

The Praexa begins the incantation, her wings spreading wide as she guides the magic. Golden threads of power weave between Kyrie and me, burning like fire where they touch skin.

My hand tightens around Kyrie's cold fingers as the first threads of magic pierce my chest. Pain explodes through my body - white-hot and all-consuming. Every nerve ignites as the binding magic burrows deep into my soul. I grit my teeth, wings trembling with the effort to remain standing.

I never thought it would be painful, but maybe when I'm dragging a dying soul back to life, it shouldn't surprise me.

The golden threads weave between us, creating an intricate lattice of light that

connects our bodies. Each strand burns as it settles into place, marking my essence with an unbreakable seal. I feel the exact moment the magic reaches my core - a sensation like molten metal being poured directly into my heart.

Through the haze of agony, I sense something new stirring. A presence, weak but growing stronger. Kyrie's consciousness brushes against mine, her soul responding to the binding. The connection deepens with each passing second, until I can no longer tell where my essence ends and hers begins.

The magic crescendos, and I feel my soul stretch, expand, reshape itself to accommodate this new connection. It's excruciating and exhilarating all at once. Beneath my palm, Kyrie's heart begins to beat stronger. Her life force, now permanently tethered to mine, pulls from my strength. Color returns to her cheeks as the binding solidifies, creating an unbreakable bridge between our souls.

A mark burns itself into my chest, directly over my heart - an intricate pattern of interwoven lines that matches the one appearing on Kyrie's skin. The physical manifestation of our bond, a visible reminder of the choice I've made.

The binding magic fades, leaving behind an ache in my chest and the constant awareness of another soul connected to mine. I gather Kyrie's still-unconscious form in my arms, wings spreading wide as I take flight once more.

Even though it is just a drop to the arena floor, it feels different now to move, to exist. Every beat of my wings sends ripples of sensation through our newly forged bond. Her presence in my mind is like a warm ember, growing stronger with each passing moment as my magic flows into her depleted body.

I land softly on the ground, kneeling with her in my arms. My hand finds its way to her cheek, thumb brushing across skin that's already losing its deathly pallor. Through our connection, I feel the exact moment my power begins to truly merge

with hers.

Golden light dances beneath her skin, following the paths of her veins like liquid sunlight. The angry purple welts from the poisoned wind traps fade to nothing. Her breathing deepens, becomes stronger. The bond pulses between us, a steady rhythm that matches the beating of our hearts.

"Come on, little bird," I murmur. "Please come back to me."

KYRIE

I jolt awake with a violent gasp, my body arching off rough wooden floorboards. The world spins, fragments of memories crashing through my mind like shattered glass. Pain radiates from my chest where Azrael's magic entered me, but it's different now - a steady pulse that thrums beneath my skin, foreign yet familiar.

My fingers tremble as I press them against my sternum. Warmth radiates outward, nothing like the icy burn of before. This feels... alive. Like drinking sunlight, or catching lightning in a bottle. The magic courses through my veins in steady waves, making my skin tingle and my breath catch.

"Gods above." I push myself to sitting, watching in wonder as faint blue wisps dance across my fingertips. The magic responds to my thoughts, curling and weaving between my fingers. My conduit - the metal band wrapped around my palm - pulses in sync with each beat of my heart.

I flex my fingers, watching the blue light ripple and flow. This must be how the xaphan feel all the time - connected to something vast and ancient and powerful.

But there's an edge to it, a wildness that makes my heart race. This isn't my magic. It's his. Azrael's power thrums through my body like a second heartbeat, dangerous and intoxicating.

"Little bird." His voice cuts through my wonder. "Breathe."

I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath, too caught up in the sensation of raw power coursing through my veins. The magic flares at the sound of his voice, recognizing its true master.

I push myself to standing, legs trembling but steadier than before. Azrael's magic pulses through me like liquid starlight, and though part of me wants to scream at him for forcing this power into my body without permission, I can't deny how it heightens every sense.

"The trial." My voice comes out stronger than expected. "How much time do I have left?"

"You're still breathing so the trial is still going." He steps closer, and the magic inside me surges in response. "Show me what you can do with it, little bird."

The massive tower looms before us, its surface etched with ancient runes that glow faintly in the dim light. I press my palm against the cool stone, and the magic responds instantly - not just flowing through my conduit now, but singing in my blood.

Where before I'd struggled to find handholds, now I can sense the very structure of the rock. Each crystal, each mineral vein, each tiny imperfection becomes a map beneath my fingers. I pull myself up, and my body moves with an alien grace that takes my breath away.

"Holy shit." The words escape in a whisper as I scale higher, faster than I've ever climbed before. The crushing weight of the enhanced gravity still bears down, but Azrael's power forms a barrier around me, letting me slip through the pressure like a fish through water.

Twenty feet up. Thirty. The poisonous atmosphere that had burned my lungs now

parts around me, the magic creating a bubble of clean air. My muscles burn with effort, but it's a good pain - the kind that proves I'm still alive, still fighting.

I reach for another handhold, and the blue light dancing across my skin illuminates patches of crystal embedded in the wall. They resonate with the borrowed power inside me, creating stepping stones of pure energy that only I can see.

This is nothing like the crude climbing I'd done before. This is dancing with the stone itself, letting the magic guide my movements in a deadly vertical ballet. And though I hate to admit it, I understand now what Azrael meant when he said the map wouldn't help me. It didn't. But he did.

And in those moments when I thought I was going to die, I finally let go of my anger and understood. Azrael wanted to help his family, the same as I did. So he did what he had to. He never thought he was hurting me, and I can see now he would do anything to keep me safe.

Later, I'll have time to process it all. But right now, I'm going to revel in being bonded to a xaphan - something I never thought I'd say.

A shadow falls across the glowing crystals above me. I barely twist aside as a blast of sickly green magic shatters the stone where my head had been. Fragments rain down as I press myself flat against the wall, heart thundering.

"You should've died in the forest." Dax's voice drips with malice. Through the swirling toxic mist, I glimpse his form silhouetted against the distant peak. "But it seems you keep clinging. Let me fix that oversight."

Another burst of magic hurtles toward me. This time, instead of dodging, I let Azrael's power surge through my conduit. Blue light explodes from my palm, meeting the green head-on. The magics clash in a shower of sparks that illuminate the

entire tower face.

"How-" His shock gives me the opening I need. I launch myself sideways, catching a jutting crystal formation. The enhanced gravity tries to tear me down, but the borrowed power keeps me anchored.

"You're not the only one with tricks." I channel magic into the crystals beneath my fingers. They respond instantly, growing and spreading like frost across glass. My attacker scrambles backward as crystal spears erupt from the wall around him.

He snarls and throws up a barrier of crackling energy. "Stolen power won't save you."

His words barely register. I'm too focused on the way the magic flows through stone and crystal, mapping every flaw and weakness in the tower's structure. There - a massive crystal vein running diagonally beneath his position.

I slam my palm against the wall and pour everything I have into it. The crystal vein explodes upward in a shower of razor-sharp shards. His barrier shatters. Blood sprays as fragments tear through his leg and side.

His scream of pain cuts off as he loses his grip. For a moment, he hangs suspended in the poisonous air. Our eyes meet. Then gravity claims him, yanking him down into the swirling depths below.

The toxic mist thins as I near the summit, revealing a sight that steals what little breath remains in my burning lungs. The spire's peak isn't stone at all - it's a crown of crystalline formations that pulse with their own inner light. Each faceted surface catches and amplifies the magic flowing through the tower, creating a dazzling aurora of power that stretches toward the stars.

At the center, three massive gems hover in a triangular formation. Their surfaces

ripple like liquid metal, colors shifting between deep sapphire and molten gold. The same energy that flows through my conduit resonates within them, but a thousand times stronger. These aren't just decorative crystals - they're the heart of the tower itself.

I press my palm against the nearest one, and Azrael's magic surges in response. I recognize it instantly. It's just like the red one from the second trial.

These are the gemstones Azrael's been after.

Understanding hits like a physical blow. These gems aren't just power sources - they're keys. Keys that could potentially break the curse destroying his bloodline. The realization of what I have to do makes my stomach twist.

Without hesitation, I wedge my fingers beneath the first gem's housing. The metal burns cold against my skin as I channel magic through my conduit, searching for weak points in the ancient bindings.

One by one, the strands of silver unravel under my touch. The gem comes free with a sound like breaking glass, its surface now swirling with angry red patterns.

The tower shudders. Warning pulses of magic ripple through the air as I pry loose the second and third gems. Each one feels heavier than it should, as if weighted down by centuries of accumulated power and memory.

I cradle the three gems against my chest, their combined energy making my heart race and my vision blur. The spire's magic begins to fluctuate wildly around me, the very air crackling with unstable power. I've just done something irreversible, and I pray I haven't doomed us all in the process.

The tower gives one final groan before the stone beneath my feet crumbles. I clutch

the gems tight against my chest as gravity claims me, the enhanced weight of the trial's magic dragging me down like iron chains.

But something's different this time.

Azrael's power surges through my blood, no longer content to remain dormant. It spreads through my body in waves of tingling warmth, transforming the crushing pressure into gossamer threads that slip harmlessly past. The toxic atmosphere parts around me like a curtain, leaving me suspended in a pocket of clean, sweet air.

My stomach swoops as I slow my descent, the magic creating invisible currents that catch and cradle my body. The sensation steals my breath - like diving into warm water, but without the weight. Without the constraints. The borrowed power lifts me higher, defying the tower's enchanted gravity with ease.

It's almost what it felt like that day training with Azrael, with the wings. This absolute freedom, this perfect harmony between body and sky. The magic sings through every fiber of my being, transforming the terrifying plunge into something beautiful. Something sacred.

Chunks of crystal and stone rain down around me as the tower continues to collapse. But I'm dancing between the debris now, letting the power guide my movements in a deadly aerial ballet. Each dodge and spin comes naturally, as if I've done this my entire life.

The ground rushes up to meet me, but there's no fear now. Only exhilaration as Azrael's magic carries me safely through the chaos of the crumbling spire.

My feet touch the ground with impossible grace, Azrael's magic cushioning my landing. The three gemstones pulse against my chest in sync with my racing heart, their swirling colors casting ethereal patterns across my skin. Debris from the fallen

tower rains down around me, but the borrowed power deflects it effortlessly, creating a shimmering dome of protection.

The arena falls silent. Thousands of faces stare down from the floating observation platforms, magnificent wings and horns of various races catching the late afternoon sun. Their perfect features twist with disbelief as they process what they've just witnessed - a human not only surviving the trials, but claiming the tower's heart itself.

A child's voice breaks the spell. "She flew!" The words echo across the stone amphitheater, bouncing off ancient pillars carved with scenes of past trials.

The crowd erupts. Wings snap open in displays of gold, white, and silver as the xaphan rise from their seats. Their cheers roll like thunder across the arena, mixing with the crystalline chiming of magic bells that mark a trial's completion. Even the Praexa in their private viewing boxes lean forward, their multiple sets of wings shifting with interest.

I stand tall despite my exhaustion, letting them see the blue light still dancing across my skin. Let them see what their "lesser creature" has accomplished. The gemstones warm against my chest as if in approval, their ancient power humming through my bones.

A human has completed the trials. Their perfect system lies in ruins around me, along with their tower of impossible challenges. The magic thrumming through my veins feels like victory itself - wild and bright and utterly untameable.

AZRAEL

The crowd's roar drowns out my heartbeat as Kyrie stands victorious in the arena. Golden light streams through the crystal dome above, casting her in an ethereal glow. Blood and dirt streak her face, her auburn hair wild around her shoulders, yet she's never looked more magnificent.

"The trials are complete. We have a victor." High Praexa Nathaniel's voice booms across the amphitheater, his three sets of pure white wings spread wide. "Kyrie Kael has succeeded where countless others have fallen."

My hands grip the ornate stone railing of the nobles' viewing box. Pride swells in my chest – I helped create this moment, trained her for months in secret. Yet bile rises in my throat. She doesn't know the true price of these wings, what becoming one of us really means.

The other Praexas gather around her, their wings creating a circle of white and gold feathers. Magic crackles in the air, ancient runes lighting up along the arena floor.

"The wing ceremony will commence with the rising of the full moon," Nathaniel declares. "Let it be known that in twenty-eight days, we shall welcome our second human victor into our ranks."

Twenty-eight days. My chest constricts. Twenty-eight days until they bind her soul to New Solas forever. Until they twist her into something she never wanted to become.

Kyrie's gaze finds mine across the arena. Her green eyes shine with triumph, with trust. My little bird, so fierce, so determined. She's won her freedom, her mother's cure, a better life.

No longer caring about who watches, my wings spread and I push off the ground, landing beside her. I'm not sure how she feels about me, and we definitely need to talk about the soul bonding.

"Do you want to go?"

She looks at me and nods, and I follow after her into the corridors. She walks beside me, head high despite her exhaustion. The same fierce determination that got her through the trials radiates from every step. Her fingers brush against the conduit band I gave her. I wonder if she realizes she doesn't need it anymore.

The silence stretches between us with so many unspoken words. I'm not even sure what to say, knowing now that I have truly betrayed her trust and tied her to me despite how she felt.

But I had to. I hope she sees that.

"I'm going to shower," she says when we reach her room. I nod, uncertain of where that leaves me. She grabs her clothes and then gives me a loaded look. "Will you be here when I get back?"

"Do you want me here?" I don't tell her I can't go far now.

"Yes."

"Then I'll be here."

Kyrie nods, and I watch as she goes. She isn't gone long, just long enough for me to think, to weigh the words I need to say.

She's so beautiful. That's all I can think when she comes back in, her hair falling in waves and her skin glowing. I have to swallow hard, my emotions feeling too hard to ignore right now.

"You were amazing," I breathe.

She turns to me, and there's a small smile on her face. That's a good start. "Thank you." She bites down on her bottom lip and goes back toward her bed. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Yes, you could have."

She shakes her head, crossing the room to me. "No, Azrael, I couldn't." She reaches for my hand and I let her take it. "And I want you to have these."

She presses something into my palm. The world stops. Three crystalline gems rest in my hand, their surfaces catching the light like frozen starfire. The spire stones. The gemstones I've been after.

I stare at the stones, then at her. The raw power thrumming through them could break my family's curse, restore our grace. Now I understand how she brought that tower down.

My free hand moves of its own accord, cupping her cheek. She leans into the touch, eyes fluttering closed for a moment. The gesture breaks something in my chest.

"Little bird..." The nickname catches in my throat. "You didn't have to-"

"You're welcome." She steps back, swaying slightly with exhaustion. "I can save my family now, and I want you to save yours."

I close my fingers around the spire stones, tucking them into a hidden pocket of my tunic. The weight of them burns against my chest, but not as much as the truth I must speak.

"There's something you need to know." The words taste like ash. Gods, I hope she forgives me for this. "To save you...I had us soul bound."

Kyrie tilts in that curious way of hers. "What do you mean?"

"When you fell, you were nearly killed." I force myself to meet her gaze. "And I...couldn't let that happen. So I had the Nashai soul bind us. It's something that is usually only between xaphan, and it can't be undone. It means...we can't get too far from each other. That our fates, our lives, are tied."

I watch her face carefully. I'm not sure what she remembers, and I fear that this will upset her.

But her features soften.

"Azrael." Kyrie steps closer, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "When I chose to come here, all I wanted was to save my mom. I didn't care about wings, I didn't even want to be near xaphan...and then I met you."

I bet she regrets that.

"And you showed me how different things could be." My heart dares to hope, dares to flip at her words. "I know that you had them soul bond us - and I'm okay with that. I'm really grateful that you saved me. But more than anything, I'm glad I'm bonded

with you because... I love you, Azrael."

The words hit me like a physical force. Magic surges through my veins, responding to the sudden rush of emotion. My wings snap open, their feathers trembling, casting shadows across her face.

"What?" The word comes out rough, stripped of my usual careful control.

"I love you." Her hand reaches up, hovering near my face but not quite touching. "Not because you trained me. Not because you're helping save my mother. Because you saw me – really saw me – when everyone else looked through me." She takes in a deep breath. "Because you were patient with the girl who was terrified of you and you were kind to the human that others saw as less than. Because of who you are deep down."

"Little bird..." My voice cracks. I catch her hovering hand in mine, pressing it against my cheek. Her skin is warm, calloused from months of training. Real. "You don't know what you're saying. The things I've done-"

"I know enough." Her other hand presses over my heart. The touch sends electricity through my body. "I know you're worth loving."

Something breaks inside me – a wall built over centuries of duty and shame. I pull her closer, until I can feel her heartbeat against my chest. My wings curl forward instinctively, creating a dark cocoon around us both.

For the first time since my family's fall from grace, since the curse began eating away at our bloodline, I feel something dangerous bloom in my chest.

Hope.

AZRAEL

My hands tremble as I cup her face, thumbs brushing her cheeks. Magic crackles between us, the spire stones pulsing against my chest in rhythm with my racing heart. The truth I've been fighting breaks free, like a dam finally giving way to the flood.

"I love you too, little bird. Gods help me, I've tried not to." The words pour out, each one lifting a weight I didn't know I carried. "Every time you smiled during training, every moment you refused to give up – you carved yourself into my soul piece by piece."

Her fingers trace the curse mark on my chest, sending waves of electricity through my body. My wings shudder, their obsidian feathers brushing against her skin.

"I watched you fight today, watched you bleed, and it felt like every wound was carved into my own flesh." I press my forehead to hers, breathing in her scent of steel and magic and life. "The thought of anything happening to you, of me losing you in any way – it's been killing me."

The conduit band on her palm glows brighter, responding to the surge of emotion. Tendrils of magic weave around us, gold and shadow intertwining in the space between our bodies.

"You made me feel whole again," I whisper against her skin. "Not cursed, not fallen, just... alive. For the first time in so long, I want more than duty and redemption. I

want you."

Magic swirls faster around us as my control slips, manifesting my feelings in waves of power that make the crystal orbs flare and dim. My wings curl tighter, creating an intimate darkness where nothing exists but us.

"I love your fierce heart," the words spill out like a prayer. "Your stubborn spirit. The way you look at impossible things and decide to conquer them anyway. I love you, Kyrie, and I should have told you every day since I realized it."

Our lips clash, a storm of pent-up desire unleashed. Kyrie's fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, her mouth hot and insistent. I wrap my arms around her, lifting her off the ground, and carry her to the bed. She gasps as I lay her down, her auburn hair fanning out against the sheets.

I kiss her jaw, her throat, feeling her pulse race under my lips. She sips up for me to pull off her tunic, and my eyes roam her skin. My hands glide down her body, tracing every curve, every scar. I unfasten her pants, and she lifts her hips to help me slip off her pants.

"Azrael," she whispers, her voice a mix of anticipation and vulnerability.

"Trust me, little bird," I murmur against her skin, trailing kisses down her stomach. I hook my fingers into her undergarments, tugging them down, baring her to me.

I kneel between her legs, looking up at her. Her eyes are wide, pupils blown with desire. Holding her gaze, I lower my mouth, tasting her for the first time. A groan rips from my chest. She's sweet and musky, a heady mix that goes straight to my head.

"Fuck, Kyrie," I growl, my voice vibrating against her. "You taste incredible."

She moans, her back arching off the bed. I grip her hips, holding her steady as I explore her with my tongue. I trace her folds, circling her clit, feeling her tremble beneath me. Magic pulses through her, the conduit band glowing soft and golden, casting shadows that dance on the walls.

I feast on her, losing myself in her taste, her scent, her sounds. Her breath hitches, her fingers clenching in my hair. I can feel her climax building, her magic responding to the pleasure, wrapping around us like a living thing.

"Azrael, please," she gasps, her body tensing.

"Let go, little bird," I command, my voice rough with need. "Come for me."

Her orgasm hits her hard. She cries out, her body convulsing, magic bursting from her in waves. I ride out her climax with her, licking and sucking, groaning as she comes all over my face.

She falls back against the bed, panting, her body limp. I press a gentle kiss to her inner thigh before moving back up her body. She looks up at me, her eyes glazed, a soft smile on her lips.

Kyrie's fingers dig into my shoulders as I kiss my way up her body, tasting her skin. She arches against me, her breath hitching when I linger on the scar curving around her neck. I want to memorize every line, every contour of her.

She tugs at my shirt, impatient. I reach back and pull it off, tossing it aside. Her hands are on me then, tracing the ridges of my stomach, the curves of my chest. She pauses at the mark over my heart, the curse sigil dark and ugly. I cover her hand with mine, feeling the conduit band warm against my palm.

"Don't," she whispers, looking up at me. "It's part of you."

I nod, swallowing hard, and guide her hand down to my lacings. She understands, undoes them quickly. I kick off my pants, kneeling between her thighs. Her eyes widen as she takes me in, but there's no fear, only desire.

I lean down, capturing her mouth in a slow, deep kiss. She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me closer. I reach between us, guiding myself to her entrance.

She's hot and wet, ready for me. I ease in, inch by inch, watching her face for any sign of discomfort. She gasps, her nails biting into my skin, but she doesn't tell me to stop.

"Fuck, Kyrie," I growl, burying my face in her neck. "You feel incredible."

She's tight, so tight it's almost painful. But the pleasure, gods, the pleasure is unlike anything I've ever felt. Even though we've had sex before, the bond makes it that much more intense.

I start to move, a slow rhythm that stretches her open for me. Her breath comes in short gasps, her body arching to meet mine.

Her hand reaches up, tracing the edge of my wing. I freeze, a jolt of pure pleasure shooting through me. "Shit," I hiss, looking down at her.

She grins, mischief in her eyes, and does it again. "Azrael," she whispers, her voice husky with desire. "Fuck me. Show me how much you want me."

I grip her hips, a low growl rumbling in my chest. "Careful what you ask for, little bird," I warn, my voice barely recognizable. "I've fuck you like you are mine and I want to make sure you know."

She lifts her hips, taking me deeper, challenging me. "I am. So take me," she dares,

her eyes locked onto mine.

And I do. I fuck her slow and deep, each thrust a claim, a promise. Magic crackles around us, the air thick with it. Every touch, every kiss, every gasp feeds it, builds it, until it's a living thing, binding us together.

Her fingers trace the curve of my wing again, and I lean into the touch, the pleasure almost too much to bear. I grip her thigh, lifting her leg over my shoulder, opening her up to me completely. She cries out, her head thrown back, her body trembling.

"Azrael," she gasps, her voice ragged. "Please."

I lean down, capturing her mouth in a fierce kiss. "Please what, little bird?" I murmur against her lips.

"More," she begs, her eyes glazed with desire. "I need more."

I scoop Kyrie up, her body flush against mine, and flip us so she's straddling my lap. My back hits the cold stone wall, but the chill is nothing compared to the heat between us. This position settles me deeper into her, her pussy clenching hard around me.

I grip her hips, guiding her, thrusting up into her from beneath. She tilts her head back, a moan escaping her lips.

"Fuck, Azrael," she gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders. The sensation is different now, more intense. The soul bond pulses with every thrust, amplifying each sensation.

"Ride me, little bird," I growl, my voice rough with desire. She starts to move, tentative at first, then faster, harder. Her hips roll against mine, taking me deeper.

Magic swirls around us, the air crackling with energy. The bond between us flares, a golden tether connecting our chests. I can feel her pleasure, her need, echoing through me. It's intoxicating, overwhelming.

"You feel that?" I ask, my breath ragged. "That's us, Kyrie. That's our bond."

She nods, her eyes glazed with pleasure. "It's... it's incredible," she pants, her body moving in sync with mine.

I grip her tighter, my thrusts matching her rhythm. The room blurs around us, the only sound our ragged breaths and the slap of flesh against flesh. The bond between us throbs, growing stronger, more intense.

"Azrael," she moans, her body tensing. She's close, so fucking close. I can feel it, her pleasure building, ready to explode.

"Come with me, Kyrie," I command, my voice hoarse. "Come now."

She cries out, her body convulsing. I feel her climax, a wave of pure, unadulterated pleasure crashing through the bond. It triggers my own release, a violent explosion of sensation that rips through me. I groan, burying my face in her neck, riding out the storm together.

The bond between us flares bright, our emotions intertwining, amplifying each other. It's intense, overwhelming, a connection deeper than anything I've ever felt. As we come down, our breaths slowing, our hearts pounding in sync, I know nothing will ever be the same.

She collapses against me, her body trembling. I hold her close, my arms wrapped around her, protecting her, cherishing her. Our bond pulses softly, a gentle reminder of the connection we share.

I couldn't ask for anything better.

KYRIE

The silk sheets whisper against my skin as I shift in the enormous four-poster bed. Even after the last few days of recovery at Azrael's estate, I still can't get used to this level of luxury.

Crystal chandeliers drip from gilded ceilings like frozen waterfalls, their magical flames dancing without heat or smoke. The walls shimmer with enchanted murals - scenes of angelic battles and celestial gardens that move and change throughout the day.

It'll be a good rest of the month until I get my wings and can return with my mother's medicine.

I drag myself to the window seat, wincing at the lingering pain in my muscles. Below, perfectly manicured gardens stretch toward the horizon. Floating orbs of light drift between towering silver-leafed trees, their branches swaying despite the absence of wind. Fountains spray streams of water that twist into impossible shapes - dragons, phoenixes, unicorns - before dissolving back into rainbow-tinted mist.

"You should be resting, little bird." Azrael's deep voice startles me. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest.

"I've been resting for days." My fingers trace the cool marble windowsill. "Where I come from, we can't afford to lay about all day."

"Where you come from doesn't have healing springs infused with ancient magic." He crosses the room in long strides. "Or servants who spend hours weaving restoration spells into your bedsheets. And still, I say rest."

I glance at the ornate tapestries adorning the walls, their threads gleaming with embedded enchantments. Even the air here feels different - thick with power that makes my skin tingle. Back home, we were lucky to have basic protection wards around our doors.

"Your family must have ruled for generations to accumulate all this." I gesture at the room's grandeur - the imported rugs that never collect dust, the enchanted mirror that adjusts its reflection to show your best angles.

"We did." His jaw tightens. "Once."

A servant glides in, her feet barely touching the ground as she carries a tray of healing potions. The bottles glow with swirling colors - deep purple for pain, bright blue for tissue regeneration, golden for strength restoration. Another reminder of the vast gulf between my world and his.

I force myself to swallow the bitter concoctions, each one probably worth more than my family's entire house. The thought of home sends a familiar ache through my chest, sharper than any physical pain.

"Since you are up and feeling better..." Azrael wraps his arms around me from behind. "Do you want to meet my father?"

I spin around, looking up at him. "Will he be up for it?"

He nods. "He's doing okay today."

I slide a hand up his chest, leaning into him. "Then I would love to."

The walk to Azrael's father's chambers feels endless. Enchanted torches line the hallway, their blue flames casting dancing shadows on the marble floors. With each step, the air grows heavier, thick with the stench of decay that even the strongest cleansing spells can't mask.

"Father." Azrael's voice loses its usual edge as we enter. "I've brought someone to meet you."

Lord Lucian lies on a massive bed draped in black silk. His wings - once magnificent according to the portraits I passed - now hang in tatters, the feathers grayed and brittle. Dark veins spider across his pale skin, pulsing with sickly green light. The curse's manifestation.

"Forgive me for not rising." His words come out as a whisper. "The magic drains more of me each day."

I clutch the doorframe as understanding slams into me. The map Azrael stole from me during the wing trial, the gemstone he took from me - they weren't acts of cruelty. They were of desperation. I thought I'd already come to terms with it but it hit me so acutely now.

"You'd do anything for your family." My voice shakes. "Just like me."

Azrael nods, his shoulders rigid. "But I would never endanger you. I hope you know that, Kyrie. I did what I did for my family - but also because I knew that it wouldn't bring you harm."

Lord Lucian coughs, and the sound echoes with supernatural resonance. The shadows in the room writhe and twist, responding to his pain. A healing priestess hurries

forward with glowing potions, but he waves her away.

"My son carries a heavy burden." Lord Lucian's eyes find mine, still sharp despite his deteriorating body. "Our bloodline fades. The curse ensures each generation suffers more than the last."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, though the words feel inadequate. "I didn't understand before."

He shifts, gesturing as best he can to the chair beside his bed. "You couldn't have." He gives me a small smile. "Now, come. Sit. I want to get to know you."

We talk for an hour before he gets too tired to keep going. Once he starts to fall asleep, Azrael helps me from my chair, giving his father one last look as we walk away.

"You know," I say as we start down the hallway. "I would have helped you if I had known the extent of it."

He sighs, looking down at me. "I know I should've gone about it differently. It was more of a desperation thing."

"I get that." I twine my hand with his. "So did the stones work?"

He shrugs. "I haven't been able to perform the ceremony yet."

I stop moving. "But why not?"

"Because I need you to do it." I raise my brows. "My magic is split between us now, so I need us both."

I start tugging at him immediately. "Why didn't you say so sooner?" He pulls me

down a corridor I passed because truthfully I have no clue where I'm going. "Let's do it now."

He stops, cupping my face. "You feel well enough?"

"I feel fine."

Azrael's eyes evaluate me as if looking for a lie. Then he nods. "Okay. Then let's go."

Azrael's study smells of ancient parchment and burning sage. Crystalline shelves stretch to the ceiling, filled with artifacts that pulse with otherworldly energy. The gemstones we collected rest on a pedestal of black marble, their surfaces catching the light from enchanted candles that float overhead.

"The alignment must be precise." Azrael traces glowing sigils into the air. They hang suspended, casting eerie shadows across the room. "Each stone represents an element of the curse."

I position the crystals according to the diagrams in the spellbooks spread before us. My hands shake as I place the final stone - the one Azrael took from me during the trials. Its surface ripples like liquid mercury.

"Channel the energy through your conduit." Azrael's fingers brush my palm where the metallic band wraps around it. "Let it flow naturally, like water finding its path."

Power surges through the conduit, making my skin buzz. The sensation reminds me of climbing trees back home - working with something alive and ancient rather than controlling it. The stones begin to hum in harmony, their light pulsing in rhythm with my heartbeat.

"Good." Azrael places his hands over mine. His magic floods the circle, raw and

potent. The stones lift into the air, spinning faster as their energies intertwine.

My legs buckle from the strain of maintaining the connection. Sweat drips down my back as I fight to keep the power flowing smoothly. One wrong move could shatter the delicate balance we've created.

The stones' light intensifies until it's almost blinding. Ancient words appear in the air around us, written in fire. Azrael reads them aloud, his voice resonating with otherworldly power. Each syllable sends shockwaves through the room, rattling the artifacts on their shelves.

"Don't let go," he commands as the magic reaches a crescendo. The curse manifests as writhing shadows that try to break our circle. "Focus on the flow, little bird. Like you're navigating a storm."

I grit my teeth and push through the exhaustion. The conduit burns against my skin, but I maintain my grip on the energy current. Together, we weave the spell that will begin unraveling generations of darkness.

I trace my fingers along the spines of ancient books in Azrael's library, breathing in the scent of leather and parchment. Magical lights dance between the towering shelves, casting warm pools of gold across the floor. Through the arched windows, I watch zarryn graze in the meadow below, their silvery manes catching the late afternoon sun.

"Lost in thought?" Azrael's arms slip around my waist.

"Just... processing everything." I lean back against his chest. "Weeks ago I was scraping by in the slums, dreaming of wings while watching the xaphan soar overhead. Now here I am."

"Here you are." His lips brush my ear. "One of two humans to survive the trials."

I turn to face him, studying the sharp angles of his face - features that once seemed so cold now warm with affection. "You're different too. That first day, when you I bumped into you-"

"I thought you were just another desperate human." His thumb traces my jawline. "I never imagined you'd change everything."

We settle onto a plush window seat, enchanted cushions adjusting to cradle us perfectly. Outside, the magical gardens shift and transform as evening approaches, flowers closing while luminescent night blooms unfurl their petals.

"Tell me about your childhood," I say, playing with his fingers. "Before the curse."

"I used to race the wind." A rare smile crosses his face. "My wings were strongest in summer storms. Father would take me up above the clouds where lightning danced."

The mention of wings makes my shoulder blades tingle. Soon I'll have my own, earned through blood and determination rather than birthright. But the victory feels hollow without my family to share it.

"We'll get them the medicine they need," Azrael says, reading my expression. "Your mother will recover. Your siblings will never know hunger again."

I nod, throat tight with emotion. In the quiet moments like this, away from the politics and power plays of New Solas, I see the man beneath the cold exterior - the one who risked everything to save his family, who taught me to channel magic through my conduit with infinite patience, who looks at me now like I'm something precious rather than beneath him.

His fingers thread through my hair, and I close my eyes as he draws me closer. The magical flames in the library dim in response to his mood, casting us in soft shadows. Here, in this peaceful moment, I can finally admit to myself how completely I've fallen for him.

And I couldn't be happier now.

All that's left is to get my wings. Tomorrow, I'll have them, and that will fundamentally change me in a way I never wanted. But I'm not afraid like I thought I'd be.

"Are you nervous about the ceremony?"

"No." The lie tastes bitter. My heart hammers against my ribs like a caged bird. I've survived the trials, mastered the conduit's magic, helped break an ancient curse. Yet this final step terrifies me more than all of those combined.

The wing ceremony itself is shrouded in mystery. Even Azrael won't tell me exactly what happens, only that the process involves powerful magic that will forever alter my body and soul. The few texts I've found mention searing pain as bones reshape and muscles form. Some candidates don't survive the transformation.

"You shouldn't be," he whispers. "I'll be right there with you. The whole time."

I grin at him. "That's all I need."

KYRIE

I stand before the ornate mirror, its enchanted surface shifting and rippling like liquid mercury. The reflection shows a stranger draped in ceremonial silks that catch the dawn light streaming through the crystal windows. Precious gems and metallic threads weave through the fabric, forming ancient runes that pulse with protective magic. The deep blue material flows like water, creating patterns that remind me of wind currents and storm clouds.

My auburn hair has been intricately braided with strands of enchanted silver, tiny crystals woven throughout that harmonize with my conduit's energy. They chime softly with each movement, a melody of power and possibility. The jagged scar that curves around my neck seems less harsh now, transformed by the ceremonial markings painted across my skin in shimmering gold ink.

Enchanted cosmetics highlight my features in ways no ordinary pigments could - my green eyes now seem to hold actual starlight, and my skin glows with an ethereal luminescence. The effect is both beautiful and unsettling, as though I'm already becoming something more than human.

The chamber itself adds to the otherworldly atmosphere. Floating orbs of light drift around me like curious spirits, their glow reflecting off the polished marble floors. Incense burns in ancient braziers, the smoke forming shapes of wings before dissolving into the air. Through the arched windows, I can see the ceremonial spires reaching toward the dawn sky, their crystalline surfaces already humming with

gathered power.

My fingers trace the conduit wrapped around my palm, its familiar metal warm against my skin. Soon I won't need it. The thought makes my stomach twist, but I force myself to stand straight. The girl who once stole scraps from the market seems like a distant memory now, replaced by this creature of silk and starlight who stands on the brink of transformation.

A bell tolls somewhere in the citadel, its deep resonance making the magical artifacts in the room vibrate in sympathy. It's time. I take one last look at my reflection - at this version of myself that exists in the space between human and xaphan, between past and future.

Then the doors open behind me, and I turn to see Azrael. "You ready?"

I nod and he walks over to me. Cupping my face, he plants a kiss to my lips. "Then let's go."

It doesn't take long at all to get to the temple. As I step through towering golden doors that part silently at my approach, I can't help but take it all in.

The Grand Temple of Solas stretches before me, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadows despite the hundreds of floating light orbs that drift like stars. Crystal columns rise on either side of the central aisle, each one thrumming with contained power that makes my conduit vibrate in response.

The assembled xaphan stand in tiered rows, their wings creating a rippling sea of white and gold that fills the massive chamber. My footsteps echo against marble floors inlaid with precious metals forming intricate patterns that seem to shift and flow with each step. Incense burns in hovering censers, the smoke weaving through the air in deliberate patterns that form and dissolve into shapes of ancient runes.

The weight of their stares presses against me like a physical force. Some regard me with open disdain, their perfect features twisted in subtle sneers. Others watch with clinical detachment, as though I'm some curious specimen in an experiment. A few show genuine interest, particularly those with mottled gray wings who stand in the lower tiers.

At the front of the temple, three Praexa stand on a raised dais, their multiple sets of golden wings spread wide enough to nearly touch the walls. The center one wears robes that seem woven from pure light, while his companions are dressed in ceremonial armor that gleams like polished stars.

Magic saturates the air so thickly I can taste it - sharp and electric on my tongue. The runes painted on my skin begin to glow in response, creating patterns of light that dance across the silk of my ceremonial robes.

A low hum builds in the air as I approach the dais, the assembled xaphan beginning to sing in perfect harmony. The sound vibrates through my bones, making the crystals in my hair chime in response. Their voices weave together in an ancient language that speaks of transformation and rebirth, of bridges between earth and sky.

The center Praexa steps forward, his golden wings catching the light in mesmerizing patterns. His voice carries through the temple without effort, each word resonating with power.

"Since the dawn of creation, Solas has blessed those who prove worthy with divine transformation. Today, we witness another seeking to bridge the gap between mortal and divine."

My heart pounds so hard I fear the entire assembly can hear it. The Praexa's eyes lock onto mine, piercing through any pretense of calm.

"Approach the altar, Kyrie Kael."

I force my legs to move, each step feeling like I'm wading through thick honey. The magical current grows stronger as I near the dais, making my conduit pulse with answering energy.

"Stand within the circle."

Ancient runes carved into the marble floor begin to glow as I step inside them. The light spreads outward, forming intricate patterns that spiral and weave around my feet. Magic rises like visible heat waves, distorting the air.

The three Praexa raise their hands in unison. Their wings spread wider, golden feathers catching the light of a thousand floating orbs. The chanting grows louder, more intense, until it feels like the very stones are singing.

Raw power slams into me. My back arches as white-hot energy courses through my veins. The ceremonial runes painted on my skin ignite, turning from gold to brilliant white.

Something shifts beneath my skin, a burning pressure that starts between my shoulder blades and spreads outward. My bones feel like they're being reshaped, muscles and tendons stretching in ways they were never meant to. I grit my teeth against the pain, tasting blood where I've bitten my cheek.

The magic whirls faster, creating a vortex of pure energy around me. Through the haze of agony, I see the runes on the floor rising into the air like ribbons of light, wrapping around my body in constricting bands. Each one that touches my skin sears itself into my flesh, adding to the overwhelming sensation of being unmade and reformed.

Through the haze of magic and pain, I feel Azrael's presence beside me. His hand finds mine, strong and steady, a lifeline in the storm of power that threatens to tear me apart. The runes continue their dance around us, weaving patterns of ancient magic that pulse in time with my racing heart.

"Hold on, little bird." His voice cuts through the roaring in my ears. "Let the magic flow through you, don't fight it."

I grip his hand tighter as another wave of energy crashes over me. The pressure between my shoulder blades intensifies, building to an excruciating crescendo. My spine feels like molten metal, reshaping itself beneath my skin. Every nerve ending screams in protest as new muscles and tendons form, stretching and growing in ways nature never intended.

"I can't—" The words catch in my throat as fresh agony rips through me.

"You can." Azrael's fingers intertwine with mine, his own magic flowing into me through the connection. It mingles with the ceremonial power, cool and controlled against the wild surge of transformation magic. "Remember why you're here."

Mother's face flashes through my mind, giving me strength. The magical vortex spins faster, the runes burning brighter until they're almost blinding. Something shifts beneath my skin – a terrible tearing sensation followed by a burst of pure energy that arcs through my entire body.

My back splits open. I scream as new limbs push through, unfurling like flowers blooming in fast motion. The sensation is foreign, terrifying, exhilarating – having parts of me that never existed before suddenly spring into being. Feathers materialize from pure magic, each one sending a fresh shock of sensation through my transformed nervous system.

The wings spread wide, responding to instincts I didn't know I possessed. They're massive, spanning at least twelve feet, their feathers a deep iridescent blue that shifts to purple in the light. Power courses through them, different from anything I've felt before – wild and free and completely natural, as though they've been part of me all along.

I gasp as new awareness floods my senses. I can feel air currents I never noticed before, understand wind patterns on an instinctive level. The magic settles into my changed body, no longer fighting against mortal limitations but flowing freely through enhanced channels.

The vortex of magic slowly dissipates, leaving the temple in hushed silence. My new wings quiver with each breath, sending ripples of sensation through unfamiliar muscles. Azrael's hand remains steady in mine as the Praexa step forward, their golden wings casting ethereal shadows across the marble floor.

"Rise, Kyrie Kael," the center Praexa commands. "Show your gift from Solas to the assembly."

I straighten, my legs trembling but holding. The wings respond to my thoughts, spreading wide in a smooth motion that feels as natural as breathing. Gasps echo through the temple as light catches the feathers – pure white like fresh snow, each one tipped with gold that seems to glow from within. They're smaller than Azrael's but perfectly proportioned to my frame, the feathers arranged in precise layers that ripple with every minute movement.

Magic still courses through them, making the golden tips shimmer and dance. When I flex them experimentally, they catch the light from the floating orbs and scatter it in prismatic patterns across the temple walls. Each feather feels like an extension of my nervous system, sensitive to the slightest change in air pressure.

"Magnificent," Azrael murmurs, his ice-blue eyes fixed on my wings. His fingers trace one of the golden-tipped feathers, sending a shiver down my spine. "They suit you, little bird."

The Praexa raise their hands in unison, and pure light washes over my wings. It seeps into the feathers, binding the transformation permanently to my soul. The sensation is like warm honey flowing through my veins, settling into every new muscle and bone.

My wings arch higher, responding to the surge of power. The gold tips blaze brighter, and for a moment I can feel every current of air in the temple, every eddy and flow of wind between the crystal columns. The awareness is intoxicating – no wonder the xaphan move with such grace and confidence. They're connected to the very air itself.

AZRAEL

The market district bustles with its usual morning chaos - merchants hawking their wares, the clip-clop of zarryn hooves on cobblestone, the shimmer of magic dancing between vendor stalls.

I keep a few paces behind Kyrie as she weaves through the crowd, her newly earned wings catching the golden sunlight. The iridescent feathers shift from blue to lilac with each graceful movement.

"Watch where you're going, human-" A merchant starts to snarl, then stops abruptly as Kyrie's wings come into view. His scowl transforms into a deferential nod. "My apologies, my lady."

A smirk tugs at my lips. Little bird's learning to spread her wings.

She navigates the twisting alleyways with growing assurance, her steps light and purposeful. The transformation from the hesitant human who first entered New Solas to this confident figure before me is striking. Xaphans who would have sneered at her mere weeks ago now step aside, some even offering respectful bows.

"The apothecary should be just ahead." Kyrie pauses at an intersection, her wings rustling softly. "Past the fountain with the crystal thaliverns."

Magic streams from the fountain in gossamer ribbons, taking the form of translucent

thaliverns that dance through the air. Their wings catch the light, sending rainbow prisms skittering across the white stone buildings.

"You're drawing quite the audience," I murmur as we pass a group of young xaphan nobles. Their whispers follow us, a mix of curiosity and admiration.

"Let them look." Kyrie's chin lifts slightly. "I earned these wings."

The pride in her voice stirs something in my chest. She has more than earned them - fought for them, bled for them. The memory of her determination during the trials still burns bright.

We reach the apothecary, its windows filled with bottles of swirling, luminescent potions. Crystal chimes sing softly in the breeze, their notes carrying hints of healing magic. Kyrie pushes open the door, the confidence in her stride never wavering.

Inside the apothecary, shelves stretch toward vaulted ceilings, filled with glass vials that pulse with magical essence. The clerk - a thin-faced xaphan with dove-gray wings - barely glances up from his ledger.

"Documentation?" His quill scratches against parchment.

Kyrie produces the scroll bearing her trial certification. The clerk's eyes widen at the gold seal, then narrow as he takes in her human features.

"This requires additional verification from-"

I step forward, unfurling my wings to their full span. The dark feathers cast shadows across his desk. "I'll vouch for her status. Or shall we summon Praexa Malivar to confirm?"

The clerk's face pales. "That won't be necessary, Lord Azrael." His hands shake as he reaches for a crystal bell, ringing it three times. "The medicine will be prepared immediately."

As we wait, a noble woman enters, her pure white wings marking her high status. She starts to sweep past Kyrie, then freezes mid-step. The conflict plays across her features - the instinct to dismiss a human warring with the sight of those wings.

"Welcome," she finally manages, the words clearly bitter on her tongue.

Kyrie inclines her head, just slightly. "Thank you."

The clerk returns with a wooden box inlaid with healing runes. "The prescribed duration is marked on each vial. You'll need to file renewal forms with the Central Registry-"

"I've already submitted them." I place a sealed document on his desk. "Approved by the Western District Council."

His mouth opens, then closes. The power of my family's name still carries weight, curse or no curse.

"Of course, my lord." He stamps the box with an enchanted seal. "Everything appears to be in order."

Outside, golden light streams through enchanted archways that span between buildings. A group of young xaphan initiates whisper and point at Kyrie's wings, their expressions a mix of awe and uncertainty. The old order is changing, one small crack at a time.

Kyrie cradles the wooden box against her chest, her fingers tracing the healing runes

carved into its surface. The magic pulses beneath her touch, soft blue light seeping between her fingers. Her wings quiver - a telltale sign of emotion she hasn't yet learned to control.

Through our bond, her relief floods my senses. Pure, overwhelming joy tinged with desperate hope. The feeling catches in my throat, unfamiliar and raw. Her emotions have a way of slipping past my carefully constructed walls, settling into spaces I thought long frozen.

"We should check the seals," I say, leading her to a quiet alcove away from the market's bustle. Stone archways decorated with twisting vines of enchanted silver provide shelter from prying eyes.

She opens the box with reverent care. Inside, nestled in crushed velvet, twelve crystal vials gleam with swirling amber liquid. Each one represents a month of life for her mother - precious time bought with blood and determination.

"The magic's pure." I run my fingers over the nearest vial, testing its potency. "Strong healing properties, properly balanced with stabilizing elements."

Kyrie lifts one, holding it up to catch the light filtering through the enchanted vines above. The liquid inside spirals and dances, responding to her presence. Even without magic of her own, she has an innate understanding of its flow that still surprises me.

Her gratitude pulses through our bond again, stronger this time. It spreads like warmth through my chest, melting ice I didn't realize had formed. These human emotions - so intense, so unguarded - should repulse me. Instead, I find myself drawing closer, letting her joy chase away the shadows of my family's curse.

"Little bird." My voice comes out rougher than intended. "You earned this. Every drop."

She closes the box, securing its magical locks with practiced ease. Her wings brush against mine - an unconscious gesture of trust that sends a shiver down my spine. The feathers shimmer a soft blue in the dappled light, a constant reminder of how far she's come.

I watch as Kyrie secures the medicine box in her leather satchel, her movements precise and deliberate. The marketplace hums around us, but my focus remains fixed on the graceful arc of her wings - wings I once thought she'd never earn. Wings that changed everything.

Our first meeting floods back - her fierce defiance as she stood before me in the trials arena, refusing to back down when I snarled at her. I'd seen her as nothing more than another human seeking glory, destined to fail like all the others. How wrong I'd been.

Through each trial, she'd proven herself. Not with raw power or magical talent, but with an instinct for survival that bordered on supernatural. Where others tried to match the xaphan's might, she'd adapted, using the very magic meant to destroy her as a tool for advancement.

The bond between us formed slowly, reluctantly - like ice melting under persistent sunlight. Each shared moment, each secret revealed, each brush of wings against wings had carved away at the walls I'd built around myself. The curse that plagues my bloodline should have driven me to maintain that distance. Instead, her unwavering spirit drew me closer.

Now our souls intertwine in ways that defy the natural order. I feel her joy, her fear, her determination as if they were my own. The magic that flows through my veins resonates with her presence, stronger and clearer than any connection I've known.

"The zarryn should be ready at the western gates," I say, offering my arm as we navigate through the thinning crowd. Her hand settles in the crook of my elbow, a

familiar weight that grounds me. "The journey to your village will take three days, following the coast."

Magic swirls around us - in the enchanted lanterns that line the streets, in the protective wards that shimmer like gossamer curtains between buildings, in the very air we breathe. Yet nothing compares to the raw power of our bond, a force that transcends the ancient barriers between our races.

Her fingers tighten slightly on my arm as we pass beneath an archway of living crystal, its surface rippling with stored spells. Even now, after everything, parts of New Solas still fill her with wonder.

KYRIE

The cobblestones beneath my feet have worn smoother since I left, or perhaps my stride has changed. Lantern flames dance in brass fixtures along the narrow street, their magical glow casting long shadows across weathered buildings. The vial of medicine weighs heavy in my pocket, its contents gleaming with an iridescent sheen.

Aerasak's outer district stretches before me, a maze of crooked buildings with clay-tiled roofs that lean into each other like tired old men. Wooden beams creak overhead where laundry lines stretch between windows, sheets and tunics swaying in the evening breeze. The scent of fresh bread from Madame Loire's bakery mingles with woodsmoke and the ever-present tang of iron from the forges.

A group of children dash past, their bare feet pattering against stone as they chase a glowing orb - a simple magic toy crafted from spare conduit fragments. Their laughter echoes off the walls, reminding me of easier days.

"Kyrie? By the gods, is that you?"

Old man Thaddeus peers out from his workshop, his leather apron stained with dyes from the fabrics he mends. The conduit bracelet on his wrist glows faintly as he works, threading magic through torn garments.

"Can't stay to chat, Thaddeus. Mother needs her medicine."

"Of course, of course. But child, you look..." His voice trails off as I pass.

I know what he sees - the wings at my back. It must be a lot for the people of my small village.

I wish Azrael was here, but he'll be here in a few days. I insisted that I come see my family first, to heal my mother. She won't want to be on death's doorstep when she meets him. It took a lot of convincing for him to agree.

Our family home comes into view at the end of Thistle Lane. It's smaller than I remember, the stone walls weathered and the wooden shutters hanging crooked. Herbs still grow in mother's window boxes, though they're wilting now without her care. The protection ward above our door pulses with a weak blue light, nearly spent from lack of maintenance.

My hand trembles as I reach for the iron door handle. The box of medicine is clutched in my hand, a reminder of everything I endured to obtain it. Home feels different now - like a childhood dress that no longer fits quite right.

I push open the door, ducking beneath the low wooden beam. The scent of meadowmint tea wafts from the kitchen, along with hushed voices that fall silent at my entrance.

"I'm home," I call out, my voice rougher than it used to be.

Footsteps shuffle across creaking floorboards. My younger sister Mira appears first, a cup of steaming tea slipping from her fingers to shatter on the floor. Her green eyes - so like mine once were - go wide as saucers.

"Kyrie?" she whispers.

The wings at my back shift, iridescent feathers catching the lamplight in shades of blue and lilac. They're still new, still tender where they emerged from my shoulder blades. I have to angle them carefully to fit through the narrow doorway.

My father appears next, his weathered face pale beneath his beard. The conduit band on his wrist flickers erratically, responding to his shock. He reaches for the doorframe to steady himself.

"Sweet gods above," he breathes.

"Where's Mother?" I ask, pulling out the vial of medicine. The crystalline liquid inside catches the light, throwing rainbow patterns across the wall.

"Here, my love." Her voice comes weak from the bedroom. I move toward it, my wings folding tight against my back, but my father steps between us.

"What happened to you?" His eyes trace the silvery scars that spiral up my arms, the strange metallic sheen that now ripples through my auburn hair. "Your eyes..."

I catch my reflection in the tarnished mirror by the door - eyes that now swirl with threads of gold, mixing with forest green they once were. The transformation had been gradual during the trials, each challenge leaving its mark.

"Let me pass," I say softly. "Mother needs her medicine."

Mira reaches out to touch my wing but pulls back at the last moment, as if afraid they might burn her. The fear in her eyes cuts deeper than any trial wound.

"I'm still me," I tell them, but even I hear the change in my voice - the echo of power that now threads through every word.

I kneel beside Mother's bed, my wings carefully tucked against my back to avoid knocking over the collection of herb-filled clay pots on the bedside table. The sheets rustle as she turns toward me, her face gaunt and pale in the glow of the enchanted crystals Father keeps lit day and night.

"The medicine," I whisper, uncorking the vial. The liquid inside ripples with swirls of silver and blue, casting strange patterns across Mother's sunken cheeks. My hands shake as I slip an arm beneath her shoulders, helping her sit up against the worn pillows.

"Your wings..." She reaches out with trembling fingers.

"Later. Drink first."

The glass is cool against her cracked lips as I tip it carefully. Each precious drop gleams as it falls, and I watch her throat work as she swallows. The medicine from New Solas carries its own magic - I can feel it humming against my palm through the vial, resonating with my conduit band.

Father paces by the window, his footsteps creaking on the ancient floorboards. Mira hovers in the doorway, clutching her shawl tight around her shoulders. The protection ward above Mother's bed flickers weakly, its blue light pulsing in time with her labored breathing.

Mother's eyes drift closed as the last drops pass her lips. I set the empty vial aside, watching intently for any change. The silence in the room feels heavy enough to touch.

Seconds stretch into minutes. The herb bundles hanging from the ceiling beams cast strange shadows in the crystal light. Mother's breathing remains shallow, her skin still carrying that sickly grey pallor. My wings twitch with nervous energy, sending

ripples through the air that make the crystal lights dance.

"How long?" Father's voice barely carries across the room.

"The apothecary said..." I swallow hard, remembering the xaphan's cold smile as he handed over the medicine. "He said we would know within days if it worked."

Mother's fingers tighten around mine. We wait.

The next morning, Mother's skin feels cooler under my touch as I change her compress. The fever that's plagued her for months has begun to retreat. Tiny sparks of magic dance between her fingers as her natural connection to the elements starts flowing again.

"The tea," she whispers, pointing to the ceramic pot steeping on the windowsill. Meadowmint leaves swirl in the golden liquid, releasing their healing properties into the water. I pour her a cup, supporting her head as she drinks.

"Your wings catch the light so beautifully," she murmurs between sips. "Like moonbeams on water."

I flex them unconsciously, sending ripples of silver light across the bedroom walls. The motion dislodges a dried lavender bundle hanging from the ceiling beam. Its purple blossoms scatter across the quilt, filling the air with their soothing scent.

By the third day, Mother sits up on her own. She stays awake for hours, talking to us, and the whole family sits to hear me recount the trials.

"Help me to the garden," she says on the fourth morning. I steady her as she walks, her steps growing stronger with each passing hour. The protection ward above our door pulses brighter as we pass beneath it, responding to her renewed energy.

In the small courtyard behind our house, Mother's herb garden has started to revive. The withered plants straighten and unfurl their leaves as she approaches, responding to her presence like flowers turning toward the sun. She kneels carefully in the soil, pressing her palms against the earth. Magic flows from her fingers into the roots, and fresh green shoots push through the dirt.

"The plants remember," she says, smiling as mint and thyme spread new tendrils across the garden bed. "They just needed a reminder to grow."

I watch her work, my wings curved protectively around us both. The weight of worry that's sat heavy in my chest for so long finally begins to lift, like morning mist burning away in sunlight.

By the fifth day, she is up each morning and more than eager to meet my soul bound today. I am all too eager to see him, starting to feel sick from being away from him for so long. The thought almost makes me laugh, but it's true.

I smooth my dress nervously as Azrael ducks through our low doorway, his magnificent white wings folding tight against his back. The golden threads in his formal xaphan attire catch the light from our humble crystal lamps, making him seem to glow.

"Mother, Father... this is Azrael." My voice wavers slightly. "He helped me through the trials." I swallow hard. "Now, we are soul bound."

Father's brow furrows as he takes Azrael in. Mother sets down her cup of meadowmint tea, her keen eyes taking in every detail of the imposing xaphan who fills our small sitting room.

"You're the one who trained my daughter?" Father's voice carries an edge.

Azrael inclines his head, somehow managing to look regal even in our cramped space. "I saw her potential. Her determination to save you," he nods to Mother, "impressed me."

"And what do you want in return?" Father's hand strays to the protection ward carved into our doorframe.

"Father-" I start, but Azrael's cool voice cuts through.

"Nothing." His ice-blue eyes meet Father's steadily. "I fell in love with Kyrie. Now, all I want is to see her safe and happy."

Mother rises slowly from her chair, still regaining her strength. She approaches Azrael without fear, studying his wings, then mine. "They match," she observes softly. "Like moonlight and starlight."

"A rare occurrence," Azrael admits. "When a human earns their wings, they usually take on common colors. But Kyrie..." His voice softens when he says my name. "She proved exceptional in many ways."

Mira emerges from the kitchen with a fresh pot of tea, nearly dropping it when she sees how Azrael's wings brush our ceiling. But she recovers quickly, pouring him a cup with trembling hands.

"Thank you." His formal manner gentles as he accepts the cup. Mira's eyes go wide at being addressed directly by a xaphan.

"So, Azrael?" Mother asks, settling back in her chair. "Tell us about you. I want to hear all about your family and how you met Kyrie."

I tense, but Azrael's hand finds mine, his touch steady and grounding. His wing shifts

to brush against mine - a gesture of support that sends tingles down my spine.

And with him, I remember I never have to do anything alone again.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:59 am

I guide our zarryn-drawn carriage through the winding path of the estate, watching Kyrie's face for any hint of her reaction. The afternoon sun catches in her auburn hair, creating a halo effect that reminds me why humans once thought we were divine beings.

The estate sprawls before us - acres of carefully tended gardens with crystalline fountains that catch and reflect magical light in rainbow patterns. Ancient trees line the cobblestone path, their branches heavy with silver-tinged leaves that chime softly in the breeze.

"Almost there, little bird." I squeeze her hand as the carriage crests the final hill.

Her sharp intake of breath is exactly what I hoped for. The manor house rises before us, its white stone walls gleaming. Delicate spires reach toward the sky, connected by graceful archways embedded with protection runes that pulse with a subtle blue glow. A grand staircase sweeps up to massive double doors carved with our family's insignia.

"This is... ours?" Kyrie presses closer to the carriage window.

"Every inch." I direct her attention to a smaller but equally elegant house nestled in a grove of flowering trees about a quarter mile away. "And that's for your family. Close enough for visits, but..."

"Far enough for privacy." A smile plays at the corners of her mouth.

The carriage stops at the base of the stairs. I help Kyrie down, savoring the way she

takes in every detail - the hanging gardens cascading from the balconies, the enchanted butterflies that leave trails of starlight in their wake, the way the very air here feels charged with ancient magic.

"The grounds extend past that silver lake." I point to the glittering water visible through a break in the trees. "There's a private training yard behind the house, and the library takes up most of the east wing."

Kyrie turns to me, her green eyes bright with wonder. "It's perfect."

I pull her close, breathing in the scent of her hair. The house may be grand, but it's her presence that will make it home. After generations of darkness, my family's estate will finally know light again.

I lead Kyrie into the ancient stone circle behind the manor, where twelve crystalline pillars rise from the earth like frozen flames. Moonlight filters through the canopy of silver-leaved trees, casting ethereal patterns across the ground. The Praexa stands at the center, her ceremonial robes shimmering with embedded starlight, while our families stand nearby.

"Are you ready, little bird?" I brush my thumb across Kyrie's knuckles. Since we didn't get a proper soul bonding - with her being unconscious and all - we decided we wanted a redo. Especially with both our families now healed.

She squeezes my hand in response, her eyes fixed on the intricate runes etched into the ground. They pulse with a soft blue light as we step into the circle together.

The Praexa raises her staff, and ribbons of golden light spiral around us. "Join hands," she instructs, her voice carrying the weight of centuries of tradition.

I face Kyrie, taking both her hands in mine. The magic intensifies, wrapping around our joined fingers like threads of liquid sunlight.

"By the ancient laws of our people," the Praexa intones, "and the power vested in me by the Council of New Solas, I bind these souls as one."

The runes beneath our feet flare bright, and I feel the first tendrils of the bond forming - a warm current of energy flowing between us. Kyrie gasps as our auras merge, her green eyes wide with wonder.

"Speak your vows," the Praexa commands.

"I, Azrael, bind my soul to yours." My voice remains steady despite the surge of emotion in my chest. "Through darkness and light, through triumph and trial, until the stars fade from the sky."

"I, Kyrie, bind my soul to yours." Her voice trembles slightly, but her gaze never wavers from mine. "Through darkness and light, through triumph and trial, until the stars fade from the sky."

The magic crescendos, lifting us inches off the ground as golden light erupts from the pillars surrounding us. I feel her - all of her - through the newly forged bond. Her joy, her fears, her fierce love. The connection runs deeper than blood or magic, binding us together in ways that transcend the physical realm.

When the light fades, we remain suspended in that perfect moment, our souls intertwined as completely as our fingers. Sariel and Raphael step forward, offering the traditional blessing in ancient xaphan, their voices harmonizing with the lingering magic in the air.

I lead Kyrie to our private balcony, its white marble rails adorned with luminous vines that curl and pulse with stored sunlight. Below us, New Solas spreads like a tapestry of gold and silver, magical lanterns dotting the ancient streets in patterns that mirror the constellations above. The spires of the Grand Temple pierce the clouds, their crystalline surfaces catching the last rays of sunset and scattering them across

the city in prismatic waves.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I unfurl my wings, the white feathers catching starlight as I wrap them around her. The warmth of her body seeps into me as she leans back against my chest.

A flock of star-wrens soars past, their ethereal songs echoing off the castle walls. In the distance, zarryn-drawn carriages wind through the cobblestone streets, their bells chiming softly in the evening air. The scent of night-blooming jasmine drifts up from the gardens below, mingling with the distinct tang of magic that always hangs in the air here.

Kyrie traces the carved runes in the balcony's stonework with her fingertips. Tiny sparks of magic follow her touch, responding to the fresh bond we share. "I never thought I'd see the city from this angle."

I rest my chin on her head, breathing in the subtle scent of her hair. The newly forged soul-bond thrums between us, a constant reminder that we're now irreversibly connected. Through it, I feel the mix of wonder and trepidation in her heart, matching my own emotions perfectly.

A chorus of temple bells rings out across the city, their deep tones reverberating through the evening air. The sound makes my wings quiver, and I draw Kyrie closer, sheltering her from the cool breeze that carries the metallic tang of approaching rain.

"The view is even better during storms," I murmur against her hair. "Lightning dances between the towers, and the protection wards light up like rivers of blue fire in the sky."

She turns in my embrace, her green eyes reflecting the magical lights of the city below. The soul-bond pulses stronger, and for a moment, I can see New Solas through her eyes - not just its beauty, but its promise, its dangers, its mysteries. All

the challenges that await us seem less daunting with her at my side.

And that's where she'll stay. Forever with me.