



Demon Daddy's Baby Girl

(Demon Daddies #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I ran from the demon who branded me. I didn't mean to run into the one who'd burn the world to keep us safe.

Eight months pregnant. Starving. Hunted.

Kaelith Shadowfall says my baby belongs to him. That I do too.

But I'd rather die in a gutter than let that monster lay another claim on either of us.

When I collapse in the alleys of Ikoth, I expect to die.

Instead, I wake up in the arms of a demon built like war—scarred, silent, and deadly.

Rolfo doesn't ask why I'm running.

Doesn't care where I've been.

Only cares that I'm safe. That my daughter is warm, fed, protected.

He holds her like she's precious. Looks at me like I might be too.

I shouldn't want him. But gods, I do.

Because Rolfo doesn't care about danger. Only cares about me.

And if Kaelith dares to come near us again?

He won't just kill him. He'll make him watch while I moan his name.

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AURELIE

I press my hand against the rough stone wall, trying to slow the dizzy blur that threatens to pull me under. The alleyway spins—or maybe I'm the one spinning—and I clutch my swollen belly with my free hand.

"Just a little farther," I whisper to my child, the words catching in my dry throat. "We're going to make it."

I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince more—the baby or myself.

The red glow of Ikoth's permanent sunset paints everything in shades of blood and rust. It's fitting for a city ruled by demons whose honor codes allow them to own beings like me. Eight months pregnant, and I've been running from Kaelith Shadowfall for almost half that time.

A wave of nausea hits me as I push away from the wall. My legs tremble beneath the weight of my body and the child I carry. I've been surviving on scraps, sleeping in abandoned buildings and alleyways. The hem of my once-fine dress is now tattered and filthy, the fabric stretched tight over my growing stomach.

"Out of the way, human."

I barely have time to press myself flat against the wall before a demon brushes past, massive horns jutting from his temples, skin the color of scorched earth. He doesn't

even look at me—just another piece of human trash cluttering his path.

That's good. Invisibility means survival.

My hand instinctively moves to cover the stretch marks beneath my clothes. The marks Kaelith once traced with possessive fingers while whispering that both the child and I belonged to him—his property, his possession. Never his love. Never his equal.

"You won't find us," I murmur, forcing myself forward. "I won't let you."

The street opens into a marketplace teeming with demon merchants and their customers. The air hangs heavy with the scent of spices and meat cooking over open flames. My stomach clenches with hunger, but I have nothing to trade. The few lummi coins I managed to steal before fleeing are hidden in a small pouch sewn into my undergarments—insurance for when things get truly desperate.

A female demon with elegant curved horns eyes me from behind her stall of gleaming fabrics. Her gaze flickers to my stomach, then narrows.

"Looking for something, little mother?" Her voice carries the melodic lilt common to demons from the eastern region of Ikoth.

I lower my eyes instinctively. "No, matron. Just passing through."

"Hmm." She tilts her head, earrings of black metal catching the crimson light. "And whose get do you carry? Your master lets you wander alone in such condition?"

My throat tightens. Any wrong word could be my undoing. If word reached Kaelith?—

"My master is merciful," I manage, the lie bitter on my tongue. "I run errands for his household."

"Without an escort?" Her skepticism is razor-sharp.

I force a smile, channeling the subservient mask I perfected over years of captivity. "He trusts me to return." Another lie. Kaelith had never trusted me—he simply never imagined I would dare to flee.

Until I did.

The marketplace blurs again, and this time I can't hide my stumble. I catch myself against a wooden post, the rough splinters digging into my palm.

The demon merchant's eyes narrow further, suspicion etched into every line of her face. I need to leave—now.

"Apologies. I mustn't delay." I bow my head in feigned deference and shuffle away as quickly as my swollen body allows.

Pain lances through my lower back, a sharp cramping that nearly doubles me over. Not now. Not here. I bite my lip until I taste blood, forcing myself to keep moving through the bustling marketplace.

"Fresh killmar meat! Caught this morning!" A burly merchant's voice booms over the crowd.

"Finest silks from the eastern shores!" Another calls.

Their voices blend into a disorienting cacophony that matches the pounding in my head. When was the last time I ate? Drank? The world tilts dangerously, and I grasp a

wooden stall for support.

"Hey! Hands off the merchandise!" A demon vendor slaps my hand away from his display of glimmering trinkets.

"Sorry—I didn't mean—" My words slur together, and the suspicious glares around me multiply.

I need out. I need air. The walls of brightly colored fabrics and bodies seem to close in on me, and the scents of food I cannot afford turn my empty stomach. With one hand protectively over my belly, I push through the crowd, aiming for a narrow alley that might lead away from this chaos.

"You there! Human!"

My heart stutters. I don't look back to see who called—can't risk it. My feet move faster, carrying me away from the marketplace and into the blessed shadows of a side street. The sounds of commerce fade slightly, replaced by the distant rumble of carriage wheels on cobblestones.

"We're almost safe," I whisper to my child, pressing my palm against a sharp kick. "Just a little longer."

But my body betrays me. My knees buckle, and I stumble against the rough stone wall. Dark spots dance across my vision. I've pushed too hard, too long. My hand searches for something to hold, finding only air as I slide down the wall.

"Can't... stop here." My voice breaks on a sob. "Need to... keep going."

My head lists to one side, too heavy to hold upright. Through blurry vision, I survey the narrow passage. No windows overlook this particular stretch, no doors open onto

it. Just stone walls and packed dirt beneath me. Not the worst place to die, perhaps, but a terrible place to bring life into the world.

Because that's what's happening, isn't it? The wetness I feel between my legs—my water has broken.

"No," I whisper, panic rising like bile in my throat. "Not here. Not now. Please."

I try to push myself up, but my arms tremble and give way beneath me. My body has nothing left to give. Eight months of pregnancy, three months of running, and who knows how many days of starvation have taken their toll.

"I'm so sorry, little one." Tears track down my filthy cheeks as I curl protectively around my belly. "I tried. I tried so hard to get us away."

Another cramp rips through me, stronger than before. I bite back a scream, knowing it would only draw unwanted attention. My fingers dig into the dirt beneath me.

"Please." I'm not sure who I'm begging—the Seven, the universe, my own failing body. "Please don't let him find us."

Because if Kaelith finds me, I know what awaits. He'll take our child—our daughter, I'm somehow certain—and discard me like the broken possession he's always considered me to be. Or worse, keep me alive just to make me suffer for daring to flee.

The sky above shifts, the eternal crimson deepening as night approaches. The shadows lengthen, and with them, my fear grows. I won't survive another night on these streets—not like this, not in labor.

My eyelids grow impossibly heavy. The pain recedes into a dull throb as my

consciousness begins to slip. In the distance, I hear footsteps. Heavy. Deliberate. Coming closer.

Fear spikes through me, jolting me momentarily from the fog of exhaustion. I should hide. Should crawl deeper into the shadows. Should do something—anything—to protect my child.

But my body won't respond. My limbs lie useless, my mind slowly surrendering to the darkness that promises, if nothing else, a temporary escape from pain.

The footsteps grow louder. My eyes flutter closed.

"Kaelith," I whisper, the name both a curse and a prayer. "Don't let it be you."

The darkness claims me before I can see who approaches.

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ROLFO

I patrol the quieter side streets of the main city square with practiced efficiency, silver eyes scanning every corner and shadow. My boots scuff against the uneven cobblestones as I adjust the weight of my uniform—black leather armor emblazoned with the guard's insignia, heavier in the day's oppressive heat. The red sky casts everything in a perpetual crimson twilight, even at midday.

The market district thins out here, where the respectable shops give way to cramped apartments and questionable establishments. Most citizens know better than to cause trouble on my route. I've cultivated that reputation carefully.

My hand rests casually on the hilt of my sword as I round the corner past a shuttered apothecary. Nothing unusual catches my attention—just the typical street scene of a few merchants packing their unsold wares, a drunk sleeping it off in a doorway, a couple of lunox fighting over scraps.

Until I see her.

At first glance, she's just another bundle of rags in the shadow of an alley tucked between two buildings. Probably another drunk or addict. Maybe a corpse—wouldn't be the first I've found this month. But something about the shape makes me pause mid-stride.

"Demons below," I mutter, moving closer.

It's a woman. Young. Curled on her side, one arm thrust out as though she'd been crawling toward the street. Her dress—little more than a rag—rides up to reveal legs streaked with dirt and scratches. Her other arm cradles a swollen belly.

She's pregnant. Very pregnant.

I crouch beside her, scanning for immediate dangers before focusing on her fully. Deep auburn hair, matted and filthy, plasters against her temples. Her bare feet are bloody and caked with grime. Her breathing comes in ragged, shallow gasps.

"Hey. Can you hear me?"

No response. Not even a flicker of her eyelids. But her chest rises and falls in an uneven rhythm.

I press my fingers to her neck, feeling a thready pulse beneath skin that burns too hot. She's running a dangerous fever. Dehydrated too, from the look of her cracked lips.

Something twists in my chest—an ugly, forgotten feeling I've spent years burying. My sister Mara's face flashes in my mind.

"Not again," I growl.

I look closer at the woman's exposed upper arm. There it is—the mark. A brand of ownership. Some noble's property. A runaway slave, then. And in labor, judging by the wetness beneath her dress.

"You picked a damned spot to collapse, woman," I say, though she can't hear me.

It would be simpler to call for a transport to the public infirmary. Let the healers deal with her. That's protocol. That's what's expected of the city guard.

But the infirmary would report a runaway slave immediately. They'd return her to her owner once the baby was delivered. If she survived at all.

I glance around the empty alleyway. No witnesses.

"Fuck protocol."

Her scent is familiar. Human, but threaded with something else—demon blood clinging faintly in the air. I inhale deeply, my heightened senses picking apart the layers. Fear. Exhaustion. The metallic tang of blood. Beneath it all, the unmistakable sweetness of a half-breed child growing inside her.

She's been claimed, mistreated, likely hunted. Desperate enough to collapse in a back alley rather than risk being seen. Just like Ada had been when Dezoth first found her—wild-eyed, clutching her child, expecting death rather than shelter.

I glance around once more, confirming we're alone before making my decision.

"Come on. Let's get you somewhere safe."

With practiced efficiency, I sheath my sword and slip one arm beneath her knees, the other supporting her back. Her body is featherlight against my chest despite the swell of her belly. Too thin. She's been starving herself to keep the baby fed.

I lift her carefully, adjusting my grip to cradle her properly. The woman doesn't wake, her head lolling against my shoulder, breath hot and rapid against my neck. Her skin burns through the thin fabric of her dress.

"That's a fever that'll kill you if we don't get it down," I mutter, more to myself than to her.

My fingers brush against something tacky on the back of her dress. Blood. Fresh. The labor's already started.

"Shit."

I hesitate only briefly before heading home, instinctively choosing the route with the fewest eyes. Down the service alley behind the taverns, through the abandoned courtyard with the dry fountain, past the crumbling shrine to forgotten gods. The weight in my arms feels oddly right, like something I've been meant to carry.

A distant part of my mind recognizes the dangerous territory I'm entering. Harboring a runaway is punishable by flogging. Harboring a pregnant one carrying noble blood could mean execution. The rational part of me—the part that's kept me alive for decades in the guard—screams to turn back.

I ignore it.

The woman whimpers in my arms as I navigate a particularly narrow passage, her face contorting in pain even through unconsciousness.

"Easy now," I whisper, softening my voice to a gentleness I rarely use. "Almost there."

A group of young demons rounds the corner ahead. Guards off-duty, faces flushed with amethyst. I duck quickly into a shadowed doorway, pressing my back against the cold stone. The pregnant woman shivers against me.

"Hold still," I breathe into her matted hair. "Just a moment longer."

The guards pass, laughing about something crude. None of them glance my way. I count to ten before stepping back into the street.

The rest of the journey passes in tense silence. When I finally reach my home—a modest stone building backed against the outer wall of the city—I shift her weight to unlock the door, slipping inside the darkened interior with practiced stealth.

"Welcome home," I tell her as I kick the door shut behind us, knowing she can't hear me. "It's not much, but it's safe."

Something about this feels inevitable, like the universe correcting an old wrong. I gently lay her on my bed, her small form nearly swallowed by the large frame built for my demon height.

I lay her gently on the guest bed I have, her small form nearly disappearing against the dark sheets. She seems impossibly fragile beneath my hands, like something made of hollow bones and desperate hope. The fever still radiates from her skin as I carefully adjust a pillow beneath her head.

A damp curl clings to her temple. I brush it away with a hesitant fingertip, surprised at the softness of her hair despite its matted condition. Her lips are cracked and dry, skin pulled tight across her cheekbones. Even in sleep, pain etches lines around her eyes.

"You're safe now," I murmur, though I doubt she hears me.

I straighten, glancing around my sparse bedroom. The space wasn't designed for comfort—just function. A bed built for a demon's frame, a trunk for clothes, a weapons rack, and a small table bearing a single lamp. Nothing that would help a human woman in labor.

"Water," I mutter to myself. "She needs water."

In the kitchen, I fill a clay pitcher and grab a cup. My hands feel clumsy suddenly,

too big for such delicate work. I've dragged wounded men twice my size from battlefields, but this—this feels more precarious somehow.

When I return, she hasn't moved. I place the water on the bedside table, within reach if she wakes. Her eyelids flutter as though chasing dreams, but remain closed.

I stand there, uncertain what to do next. The logical part of my mind catalogs her condition with clinical precision: dehydration, fever, early stages of labor, exhaustion, malnutrition. Each problem has a solution. Each solution requires help I don't have.

My gaze drops to the slave brand on her upper arm. Some house noble's mark—one I don't immediately recognize. Whoever owned her would want her back. The child too, especially if it carries demon blood.

"No one's taking you," I growl, surprising myself with the ferocity in my voice.

A strange tightness pulls at my chest as I watch her shallow breathing. She's so small beneath the layers of filth and exhaustion. Pregnant and alone in a city that would sell her for coin without a second thought.

I pace to the window, pulling the heavy curtains closed. Then to the door, checking that it's locked. Back to the bedside, adjusting the blanket I've draped over her. My movements feel purposeless but I can't seem to stop.

"What am I doing?" I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

Harboring a runaway slave. Bringing her into my home. Risking everything I've built in the guard. For what? A stranger who reminds me of a sister long dead? A chance to ease an old guilt?

The woman moans softly in her sleep, one hand drifting to her swollen belly. The

gesture is protective, instinctive. Even unconscious, she shields her child.

"You're braver than you look," I tell her.

I need to clean her wounds. Check how far along the labor is. Find something to bring down the fever. But the thought of touching her while she's unconscious feels wrong somehow.

I back away, leaving the bedroom door cracked open. In the narrow hallway, I resume my pacing, counting the steps between the bedroom and the front door. Twelve exactly. Close enough to hear if she calls out. Far enough to give her space if she wakes frightened.

My silver eyes adjust easily to the dim light as dusk deepens outside. I listen intently for any change in her breathing, any sign of distress. My body refuses to relax, muscles tense as though preparing for battle.

"She needs a healer," I mutter, knowing it's true and impossible. A healer would report her immediately.

I slide down the wall, sitting on the floor with my back against rough stone, legs stretched out across the hallway. From here, I can see a sliver of the bed through the cracked door. Just enough to make out the rise and fall of the blanket as she breathes.

I don't know why I'm so drawn to protect her—but I am. The certainty settles into my bones like an old, familiar weight. Something about her pulls at instincts I'd thought long buried. And I'm not walking away.

So I better call for help and hope it doesn't go wrong.

AURELIE

Pain wakes me like a slap—cramping low in my abdomen, a shuddering throb that pulls a groan from my lips. It's not the dull ache I've grown accustomed to over these past months, but something sharper, more insistent. Something with purpose.

"No," I whisper to the empty room, my voice hoarse and unfamiliar. "Please, not yet."

I try to sit up, but my body protests, weak and trembling. My limbs feel disconnected, floating away from me like driftwood on a current. A film of sweat coats my skin, and heat radiates from within despite the cool air. My head pounds in rhythm with my racing heart.

The room is dim, too quiet. No guards. No chains. No harsh voice commanding me to silence.

Panic sets in as I scan my surroundings. This isn't a cell. It's not the street where I've been sleeping these past weeks, curled around my swollen belly beneath shop awnings. The bed is warm beneath me, and the sheets are clean—actual sheets, not filthy rags or damp cobblestones.

"Where am I?" My words dissolve into the silence.

I squint through the gloom. A small window lets in just enough moonlight to outline simple furnishings: a wooden chair, a table, the bed I'm lying in. My hands clutch at

the blanket covering me, fingers tracing the unfamiliar softness.

Freedom or another cage? My body doesn't care either way. It clenches again—another contraction that steals my breath and bends me forward. When it passes, I notice a pitcher on the bedside table.

Water. My cracked lips part at the sight. How long has it been since I had clean water? Days? The thought alone makes my throat constrict with need.

I reach for it, my joints aching with the effort, and pour shakily into a waiting cup. The water splashes over my trembling hands, cool and precious. I bring the cup to my mouth and drink greedily, dribbling some down my chin in my haste. It tastes sweeter than any amaranth I've ever stolen sips of, more satisfying than anything I can remember.

"Slow," I caution myself between gulps. "You'll be sick."

But my body refuses wisdom. I drink until the cup is empty, then pour again with steadier hands. The water hits my empty stomach like a stone dropping into a well. For a moment, I fear it will come back up, but the nausea passes, leaving behind blessed relief.

My body clenches again—another contraction, stronger than the last. I cry out, unable to hold back the sound as pain radiates through me. The cup falls from my hand, rolling across the floor.

"No. Not now. Not alone."

Fear grips me tighter than the pain. I've been preparing for this moment for months, whispering to my unborn child each night, promising protection I wasn't sure I could provide. Now the moment has arrived, and I am utterly unprepared.

"I can't do this," I whisper, as if my child might somehow hear and decide to wait. "I don't know how."

My hand rests protectively on my belly, feeling the tightness beneath my skin. The movement inside has changed—no longer the playful nudges and rolls, but something more determined. My child is coming, ready or not.

I push damp hair from my face, feeling the heat of fever on my skin. My thoughts swim, disconnected and hazy. How did I get here? Who brought me to this place? The last I remember is stumbling through the streets, the pain in my back spreading slowly around to my front, my vision blurring as I searched for somewhere, anywhere to hide.

Another contraction grips me, this one stealing even my ability to breathe. I curl forward, clutching at my abdomen, riding the wave until it recedes enough for me to gasp for air.

The tears come then, hot and unwelcome. I've survived Kaelith's cruelty. I've survived weeks on the streets of a city that cares nothing for a pregnant runaway. But this—bringing my child into the world alone, weak and feverish—this might be the thing that breaks me.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to my unborn child. "I tried to give you better than this."

My child can't be born here. I don't even know where "here" is.

I drag my feet over the edge of the bed, toes barely grazing the cool floorboards. My entire body protests, muscles trembling as I push myself to stand. My clothes cling to my sweat-soaked skin as I take one tentative step, then another.

"Just... need to... find out," I whisper, steadying myself against the wall.

A sliver of light catches my attention—a door, slightly ajar. The possibility of answers, or escape, pulls me forward. Each step is a negotiation between determination and pain. I keep one hand pressed against my belly, the other trailing along the wall for support.

The floorboard creaks beneath my weight just as I reach the door. My fingers brush the wooden frame, and suddenly the door swings open.

I stumble back, a gasp catching in my throat.

A demon fills the doorway, massive and imposing. Silver eyes flash in the dim light, catching mine like twin moons. My heart stutters, every instinct screaming danger.

He doesn't move. Doesn't lunge or leer or grab. He simply stands there, his expression shifting from surprise to something unreadable.

"You're awake," he says, his voice a low rumble that reminds me of distant thunder.

I take another step back, my hand pressing protective circles against my belly. Fourteen years under Kaelith's ownership taught me what demons want. What they take.

"Who are you?" My voice sounds pathetically thin.

The demon remains in the doorway, making no move to approach. His jet-black hair falls messily around his face, partially obscuring a scar that cuts through his right eyebrow. Despite his intimidating size, he holds himself with a strange restraint, like someone accustomed to being perceived as a threat.

"My name's Rolfo," he answers, his words clipped but not unkind. "I found you collapsed near the markets. So... I brought you here—to my home."

A contraction rips through me before I can respond, more vicious than the last. I gasp, my knees buckling beneath me as white-hot pain radiates from my core. My vision blurs, the room tilting sideways as I sink toward the floor.

Strong arms catch me before I hit the ground. The demon—Rolfo—moves with surprising speed, his grip firm but careful as he lifts me.

"Shit," he mutters, the word barely audible as he carries me back to the bed. "You shouldn't be up. You're already burning with fever."

I struggle weakly against his hold, instinct overriding reason. "Don't touch me."

"Stay still," he says, ignoring my protest as he lowers me onto the mattress. "Help is on the way."

His silver eyes scan my face, and I'm startled by the concern I see there. Not calculation or cruelty—genuine worry.

"Why?" I manage between ragged breaths. "Why help me?"

Rolfo steps back once I'm settled, moving to pour more water. The distance he puts between us feels deliberate, as if he understands my fear.

"Drink this," he offers, extending the cup without coming closer. "As for why—" His jaw tightens, gaze flicking to my swollen belly. "Let's just say I have no interest in seeing a woman treated like you have been."

I hesitate before taking the cup, searching his face for deceit. Demons lie. Demons hurt. That's all I've known. But the raw honesty in his expression makes me reach for the water.

"My baby's coming," I whisper, wincing as another contraction builds. "I can't—I don't have anywhere to go."

Rolfo crosses his arms, his broad shoulders blocking most of the doorway. Despite his intimidating presence, his voice softens.

"You do now." He shifts his weight, looking almost uncomfortable with his own kindness. "No one's going to hurt you here. Or the little one."

The contraction peaks, and I cry out, clutching the sheets. When I can breathe again, I find him watching me, assessing me. But it's still filled with emotions I can't process.

Footsteps sound behind Rolfo, light and purposeful. The demon shifts aside, revealing a human woman in the doorway. She's slender but moves with quiet confidence, her honey-blonde braid swinging against her shoulder as she approaches. Sharp, assessing eyes take in my condition, but there's no judgment in them—only calm determination.

"You found her just in time," she says to Rolfo, her voice steady as she carries a small basket to the bedside.

She kneels beside me, reaching out slowly like I'm a frightened animal she doesn't want to startle. Her fingers wrap gently around my wrist, counting my pulse. Her other hand presses against my forehead, cool against my burning skin.

"I'm Ada," she says simply, meeting my gaze. "I'm a friend of Rolfo's, here to help. I've been through this before. You're safe here. We're going to help you."

Her voice is a balm, washing over me in waves of unexpected comfort. I cling to it like a lifeline, this stranger's certainty anchoring me when everything else feels unmoored. She smells of fresh herbs and something earthy—garden soil, perhaps.

Her hands are worker's hands, with small calluses and neatly trimmed nails.

"You can't know that," I whisper, another contraction building. "You don't know who's looking for me."

Ada's expression doesn't waver. "I know enough." She pulls back the blanket to examine me properly, her movements efficient but gentle. "How far apart are the pains coming?"

I struggle to think through the fog of fear and fever. "I don't know. Close. Closer than before."

She nods, reaching for a cloth to dab my forehead. "Your body knows what to do, even if your mind is frightened. I'll help you through it." She glances over her shoulder. "Rolfo, bring more clean water and fresh linens."

I follow her gaze to where the demon lingers in the doorway, his massive frame making the room seem smaller. Despite his intimidating appearance, there's something almost vulnerable in his posture—shoulders slightly hunched, hands opening and closing at his sides. He nods at Ada's instruction, clearly uneasy but determined to help.

"Is he—" I start to ask, but another contraction tears through me, stealing my words and replacing them with a low, animal sound.

Ada holds my hand through it, her grip firm. "Breathe through your nose, out through your mouth. That's it."

When the pain recedes, I notice Rolfo has disappeared to fetch what Ada requested. "Why is a demon helping me?" I manage between pants.

Ada's eyes soften slightly, her mouth curving in what might be a smile. "Rolfo has his reasons. He's not like the others you've known."

"I've never known a demon who didn't want something." The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

"I understand that well enough." Ada begins unpacking her basket—clean cloths, small bottles of various liquids, a knife so sharp it gleams in the dim light. "Do you have a name?"

Rolfo returns, arms full of linens and a steaming basin of water. He sets everything down within Ada's reach, his movements careful, as if afraid his strength might break something. Our eyes meet briefly as he straightens and I'm struck by the raw sincerity in his gaze.

"Aurelie," I answer, but my eyes are on him. "My name is Aurelie."

"If you need anything else..." he says to Ada, his deep voice trailing off uncertainly.

"We'll manage," Ada assures him. "But stay close."

He nods, retreating to the doorway but not leaving completely. Something about his vigilance makes me feel unexpectedly secure, like he's standing guard rather than blocking my escape.

"Ada," I gasp as another wave of pain builds, "I can't do this. I'm not strong enough."

Her warm hands cup my face, forcing me to focus on her. "You already are doing it. You escaped. You survived. This child has survived because of you." Her eyes, brown and steadfast, hold mine. "And now you're not alone."

Something inside me shifts at her words. Not the baby—something deeper, in a part of me I thought had withered and died under Kaelith's ownership. I'm not sure what this feeling is, only that it feels real—more real than anything has in a very long time.

"I'm scared," I admit, the words barely audible.

Ada nods, not dismissing my fear but acknowledging it. "Fear kept you alive. Now let hope carry you the rest of the way."

ROLFO

I pace the hallway like a caged kilmar, each step calculated yet tense. Seven paces one direction, turn, seven paces back. The floorboards protest under my boots, but I barely register the sound over the groans coming from the bedroom.

Every pained sound from Aurelie tears through me like a blade between the ribs. It shouldn't. I barely know her—this broken woman I found huddled in an alley just hours ago. Yet here she is, fighting for her life in my spare bedroom while I wear tracks in my floor.

I nod, my jaw clenched so tight my teeth might crack. Through the open doorway, I glimpse Aurelie as Ada helps her onto her side, arranging pillows to support her swollen belly.

"Just breathe through it," Ada murmurs, her voice a gentle stream against Aurelie's ragged gasps. "That's it. Focus on my voice."

Aurelie's skin is moon-pale against the dark bedsheets, but her hazel eyes are focused, determined. A fighter, even at the brink.

My fists clench at my sides, nails digging half-moons into my palms. The restless energy builds under my skin until I could tear this house apart with my bare hands. I need to do something, not stand here listening to her pain while memories of Mara's final moments superimpose themselves over Aurelie's struggle.

A sharp knock at the door cuts through my thoughts.

I cross the room in four long strides and yank it open, already knowing who stands on the other side. Dezoth doesn't wait for an invitation, pushing past me with practiced authority, his golden eyes scanning every corner of my home.

"You've picked up another one," he mutters, nostrils flaring slightly as he catches Aurelie's scent. His obsidian hair is pulled back with that ridiculous silver cord he always wears, not a strand out of place despite the long day I know he's had. His lips twitch. "Not that I can blame you."

"She was pregnant. Bleeding. What was I supposed to do?" The words come out clipped, defensive.

Dezoth raises a brow. "I'm assuming she's escaped?"

"I think so. The mark on her arm is clear enough."

He nods, rubbing at his jaw. "Then it's a good thing you found her."

Possessiveness claws at my chest. "He won't get her."

"Then we'll protect her." Dezoth studies me for a moment, something shifting behind those predatory eyes. "I'll circle the perimeter. Can't be too careful." He moves toward the door, all efficient purpose. "Get your weapons ready. I'll check for signs they've tracked her here."

I grab my blade from its hook by the door and follow him out onto the porch. The night air carries traces of smoke and spice from the market square, but nothing that shouldn't be there. No unfamiliar scents, no movement in the shadows.

We circle my modest property in silence, checking the fence line, the small gate, the trees beyond. Nothing disturbs the quiet night except distant sounds from the city proper.

"Clear," Dezoth says finally, sheathing his own blade with a practiced motion. He gives a small, approving grunt. "She's lucky it was you who found her."

I don't respond. Lucky isn't what I feel, standing here with the weight of responsibility settling over me like a shroud. This isn't just about offering shelter anymore. This is about standing between a vulnerable woman and whatever forces might come hunting her.

I feel like I'm standing on a precipice, the ground crumbling beneath my feet, with no way back and no clear path forward.

I slip back inside, my movements deliberately slow and quiet as I cross the threshold. The air feels different now—heavier, charged with the electric anticipation of new life struggling to enter the world. I hover in the doorway of the bedroom, unwilling to intrude but equally unable to turn away.

Aurelie's gaze finds mine across the room. Her hazel eyes, bright with pain and glossy with unshed tears, lock onto me with surprising clarity. Unlike so many humans who cower at the sight of my silver, reflective eyes, she doesn't flinch away. Instead, she seems to study me with equal parts caution and... something else. Something that makes my chest tighten in a way I haven't felt in years.

Ada moves with practiced efficiency around the bed, her honey-blond braid swinging as she arranges clean cloths and a basin of water on the bedside table. The quiet confidence in her movements speaks of experience I hadn't expected from her.

"You're doing wonderfully," she murmurs to Aurelie, dabbing at the young woman's

forehead with a damp cloth. "This little one is certainly determined to meet you today."

Aurelie's laugh is barely more than an exhale, but it transforms her face momentarily, revealing the woman she might have been without all the fear and pain etched into her features. "Stubborn. Like me."

The sound hits me in the gut with unexpected force. I lean against the doorframe, crossing my arms over my chest to hide the way my hands have started to tremble.

"Perimeter's clear," I announce, my voice rougher than intended. "Dezoth's keeping watch outside."

Ada glances up, her warm brown eyes taking my measure. "Good. We'll need that peace for what's coming." She returns her attention to Aurelie, speaking softly. "Our silver-eyed guardian here probably looks terrifying, but he's got the gentlest hands of any demon I've met. Fixed my Rose's favorite doll last night with those big claws of his."

Another small laugh escapes Aurelie before it collapses into a groan as a contraction takes hold. Her fingers twist in the bedsheets, knuckles white with strain.

I take an instinctive step forward before catching myself, unsure of my place here. "Need anything?" The words come out gruff, awkward.

"Just your intimidating presence at the door," Ada replies without looking up. "Makes us feel safer knowing you're there."

Safer. The word echoes in my mind. When was the last time anyone felt safer because of me? Guards inspire fear, not comfort. Yet these women, these humans who have every reason to distrust my kind, seem to draw some strange reassurance

from my presence.

Aurelie's eyes find mine again when the pain subsides. "Thank you," she whispers, her voice barely audible. "For finding me."

The simple gratitude hits harder than any physical blow I've taken in combat. I give a short nod, unable to form a proper response around the tightness in my throat.

"He's not much for words," Ada tells her with a conspiratorial smile. "But I think he's grown rather fond of collecting strays." She wrings out another cloth and places it on Aurelie's forehead. "He's been good to me and my daughter since Dezoth found us the same way, half-starved and desperate."

"Someone should teach you the meaning of 'classified information,'" I growl, but there's no heat behind it. "I have a reputation to maintain."

"As what? The most terrifying softie in the guard?" Ada's retort earns another small laugh from Aurelie.

I feel my lips twitch despite myself. "Keep it up and I'll stop fixing your daughter's toys."

"You wouldn't dare. She has you wrapped around her little finger."

I don't deny it. Rose had somehow burrowed under my defenses with her gap-toothed smile and endless questions about my weapons.

Aurelie watches our exchange, something shifting in her expression. The wariness doesn't vanish—I wouldn't expect it to after whatever torment she's escaped from—but something in her posture eases slightly. Her breathing steadies between contractions.

She's starting to believe I mean no harm. It's a fragile, tentative trust—one I refuse to break.

I settle more firmly against the doorframe, a silent sentinel. "I'll be right here," I say quietly. "For as long as you need."

AURELIE

It's been hours of pain coming and going. Ada is coaxing me through it, but my body can't keep taking this. I'm already weak, starved. She has gotten water in me and used tinctures that have broken my fever. But even with that, I'm struggling to hold on much longer when it feels like I'm being ripped apart.

"Breathe," Ada reminds me, her voice gentle but firm. "That's it. In through your nose, out through your mouth."

I try to follow her instructions, but another contraction builds—this one worse than the last. My fingers twist in the threadbare sheets beneath me, knuckles white with strain. The pain crescendos, and I bite down on my lip to keep from screaming.

"Don't hold it in," Ada scolds, pressing her palms against my lower back. "You'll exhaust yourself faster."

The pressure of her hands grounds me, gives me something to focus on besides the agony tearing through my abdomen. Sweat drips from my hairline, plastering auburn strands to my forehead and neck. The small room is stifling despite the open window.

And Rolfo is still standing in the doorway. He fetches fresh water and cloths when Ada asks for it, but otherwise, he hasn't moved. His presence feels steady.

"I can't—" My words cut off as another wave crashes over me. This time I don't hold

back the cry that claws its way up my throat.

"That's it." Ada nods, satisfaction in her warm brown eyes. "Work with the pain, not against it."

Easy for her to say. She isn't the one being torn in two.

Between contractions, memories flash unbidden—Kaelith's cruel smile when he discovered I was pregnant, his threats about what would become of the child, the terrifying night I fled with nothing but the clothes on my back. Each recollection makes my heart race faster, adding fear to the already overwhelming sensations.

"Stop spiraling," Ada says sharply, somehow reading my thoughts. "Your baby needs you present."

My baby. The reason I'm fighting so hard. The reason I ran.

My eyes drift again to the demon watching over me and I hope this won't be another mistake. But staring into his silver eyes, I feel far too at ease.

"Tell me again," I pant as the pain momentarily subsides, "about the herbs you used for your daughter when she was colicky."

Ada's expression softens. She moves to dampen a cloth in the basin of water beside the bed, then presses it to my forehead. "Dreelk and brimbark steeped together with a touch of meadowmint. Works every time."

"I'll need to remember that," I whisper, trying to believe in a future where such knowledge will be useful.

"You will," she says firmly. "Both of you will be?—"

Her reassurance shatters as another contraction hits, more powerful than any before. I arch off the thin mattress, a guttural sound escaping me that I barely recognize as my own voice.

"That's it, Aurelie. You're doing this." Ada's hands are on my hips now, applying counter-pressure. "You're strong."

"I'm not," I gasp when I can speak again. "He broke me. He?—"

"Look at me." Ada's tone brooks no argument. I force my eyes open, finding her face hovering above mine, fierce determination etched in every line. "He didn't break you. You're here. You escaped. You're fighting for your child. Those aren't the actions of a broken woman."

I feel Rolfo's eyes boring into me as she says it.

The next contraction begins building before I can respond. I feel it coming like a storm on the horizon, gathering strength.

"I'm scared," I admit, the words barely audible.

Ada takes my hand, lets me squeeze until I'm certain her fingers will snap. She doesn't flinch.

"Fear is how we know what matters," she says. "Channel it. Use it."

I cry out as the pain peaks, but there's something different this time—not surrender but defiance. Every muscle in my body screams in protest, but I push back against the pain.

"Good," Ada murmurs. "That's good, Aurelie."

When the contraction passes, I collapse against the sweat-soaked pillow. My entire body trembles with exhaustion. "I don't know how much longer I can do this."

Ada checks my progress, her movements efficient but gentle. "Not much longer now. You're close."

"You said that hours ago." A watery laugh escapes me, surprising us both.

"And I was right then too." She offers a rare smile, wiping my face with the damp cloth again. "Time works differently in birth. It stretches and contracts like your body."

I close my eyes, trying to gather what little strength remains. "Tell me about your daughter again. Tell me something good."

Ada's hands continue their work, preparing for what's to come, but her voice softens. "Rose has her father's laugh. Sometimes I hear it when she doesn't know I'm listening, and for a moment, it's like he's still here."

The tenderness in her voice gives me courage. If she survived losing the one she loved and still found joy in their child, perhaps I can too. I can forget who fathered her and just love my child.

Another wave of agony crashes over me, stronger than all the ones before. My vision swims, reality fragmenting at the edges as my body pushes beyond what I thought possible. I'm vaguely aware of movement in the room, of Ada's steady voice calling out instructions, but everything feels distant, as if I'm underwater.

"Aurelie, I need you to focus." Ada's voice cuts through the haze. "Your baby is coming. I can see the head."

The words register dimly. My baby. Coming. After months of terror and running, of nightmares where Kaelith finds us both, the moment is finally here.

"Open your eyes," a deeper voice commands, closer than before.

I force my heavy eyelids up to find Rolfo kneeling beside the bed, his silver eyes intense and focused. When did he move from the doorway? His presence has shifted from sentinel to something more immediate, more involved. Ada must have beckoned him closer.

"You're doing it," he says, his gruff voice softened to something almost gentle. "Keep going."

His hands hover uncertainly near mine, like he wants to offer comfort but doesn't know how. I grab one of them, needing something to anchor me as another contraction builds. His skin is hot against my palm, demon-warm, and I cling to him as the pain crests.

"Push now," Ada instructs. "Hard as you can."

I bear down with what little strength remains. The pressure building between my legs is unbearable, a burning stretch that tears a primal sound from my throat. Through half-lidded eyes, I see Rolfo's face, the stunned wonder there.

"The head is crowning," Ada announces. "One more push, Aurelie."

But my body feels hollow, emptied of all reserves. My grip on Rolfo's hand loosens as darkness edges my vision.

"Stay with us," Rolfo growls, squeezing my fingers. His other hand brushes sweat-soaked hair from my forehead with surprising tenderness. "Don't you dare fade now."

Something in his tone rouses me—not just concern, but an unexpected fierceness, as if my survival matters to him personally. I drag in a ragged breath and summon the last dregs of my strength.

"Now!" Ada commands.

I push with everything I have left, a strangled cry tearing from my raw throat. The pressure peaks, then suddenly releases in a rush of fluid and sensation. A tiny, indignant wail fills the room.

"A girl," Ada says, her voice thick with emotion. "A perfect little girl."

I collapse against the pillows, consciousness flickering like a candle flame in the wind. Through the gray haze, I see Ada working efficiently, wrapping my daughter—my daughter just like I had thought—in a clean cloth.

"Rolfo," Ada says, nodding toward something beside the bed. "Cut the cord."

His hands are trembling as he takes the knife Ada offers. Despite his intimidating size and warrior's build, he handles the task with unexpected delicacy, severing the physical connection between my body and my child's.

"She's so small," he murmurs, staring at the squalling bundle Ada now cradles.

I want to reach for her, but my arms feel leaden, my entire body hollow and spent. Still, a fierce, protective love surges through me as Ada places my daughter on my chest. She's impossibly tiny, her skin mottled and red, face scrunched in furious protest at being thrust into this cold, bright world.

But she's beautiful. Perfect. Mine.

"Sephy," I whisper, my voice thread-thin but determined. My finger traces the curve of her cheek, marveling at the silky softness of her skin. "Her name is Serephine."

Rolfo leans closer, his silver eyes fixed on the tiny infant. "Serephine," he repeats, testing the name on his tongue.

"A good name," Ada says, still working between my legs to deliver the afterbirth. "Strong."

Sephy's cries soften as I hold her against my skin. Her tiny fist uncurls, five perfect fingers splayed against my bare chest. In this moment, despite the exhaustion dragging at me, despite knowing Kaelith still hunts us both, I feel a fierce joy unlike anything I've known before.

"Hello, little one," I whisper, pressing my lips to her downy head with its wisps of silvery-blond hair. "We made it."

The room falls quiet except for Sephy's occasional newborn sounds—those small, vulnerable whimpers and sighs that somehow fill the entire space. I'm drifting between consciousness and something deeper, my body utterly spent. Every muscle aches, every breath requires effort, but I fight to keep my eyes open, unwilling to miss a single moment with my daughter.

"You should sleep," Ada says, her hands still moving efficiently as she cleans up. "Your body needs rest to recover."

I want to argue, but exhaustion makes my thoughts fuzzy, disconnected. Before I can form a response, I see Ada gesture to Rolfo.

"Rolfo step back while I clean Aurelie up a bit," she says.

Panic flutters in my chest. "No, I can?—"

"You can barely keep your eyes open," Ada cuts me off, her tone kind but firm. "Just for a moment. She'll be right here."

Reluctantly, I watch as he takes a step back, still looking so hesitant in the way he holds her that

"Like this," Ada murmurs, showing Rolfo how to support Sephy's head as she transfers my daughter to his massive hands.

He takes her with such hesitation that I almost laugh despite my exhaustion. This fierce demon warrior—a man who probably has more blood on his hands than I want to imagine—looks positively terrified of this tiny, helpless infant.

"I'll break her," he mutters, his silver eyes wide with concern.

"You won't," Ada assures him, adjusting his grip. "There. See? She fits perfectly."

And somehow, she does. Sephy looks impossibly small cradled against Rolfo's broad chest, her entire body not much bigger than his palms. He holds her stiffly at first, muscles tense as if bracing for an attack rather than holding a newborn.

"Relax your arms a little," Ada instructs as she turns back to me with a damp cloth. "Babies can sense tension."

While Ada helps me clean up, changing the soiled sheets beneath me with practiced efficiency, I watch Rolfo with my daughter. Gradually, the rigid set of his shoulders eases. His expression transforms from one of guarded wariness to something I can't quite name—wonder, perhaps, or awe.

Sephy squirms slightly in his grasp, her tiny face scrunching. For a moment, panic flashes across his features.

"What did I do?" he asks, looking between Ada and me.

"Nothing," I murmur, my voice hoarse. "That's just what babies do."

His attention returns to Sephy, studying her with an intensity that would be unnerving if it weren't so gentle. His rough fingertip traces the curve of her cheek with such delicacy it makes my heart clench.

"She has a mark," he says softly. "Here." His finger hovers over her chest, not quite touching.

"What kind of mark?" I try to sit up, ignoring the protest of my aching body.

"Stay still," Ada chides, pressing a hand to my shoulder. "I'll look in a moment."

But Rolfo is already shaking his head. "It's not bad. Just a birthmark. Crescent shape." His lips twitch into what might almost be a smile. "Like a moon."

Relief washes through me, followed quickly by a fresh wave of exhaustion. Ada finishes her ministrations, helping me into a clean dress she must have brought before stepping back.

"There. That should feel better."

It does, marginally. I still feel as though I've been trampled by a herd of rono, but at least I'm clean. My eyelids grow heavier with each passing second, but I fight to stay awake, unwilling to take my gaze from my daughter.

Rolfo cradles Sephy awkwardly, staring at the infant as if she might disappear. I watch him, barely able to keep my eyes open. His silver eyes soften in a way I wouldn't have thought possible for such a hardened warrior. There's a tenderness there, a vulnerability that seems at odds with everything else about him.

Slowly, he moves closer to the bed, careful not to jostle Sephy. "She should be with her mother," he says, his deep voice rumbling softly.

He sets Sephy in my arms with surprising care, helping me adjust the blankets around her tiny form. Our hands brush during the transfer, and the unexpected warmth of his skin against mine sends a jolt through my exhausted body. For a brief moment, his fingers linger over mine, steadying them as I cradle Sephy's head.

He doesn't speak—he doesn't have to. The gentle pressure of his hand, the soft silver of his eyes, communicate more than words could. There's a promise there, unspoken but clear.

"Thank you," I whisper, unsure if I'm thanking him for returning Sephy to me or for something larger, something neither of us has put into words.

Rolfo nods, retreating a step from the bedside. His eyes remain fixed on Sephy, something protective hardening his features.

"She has your eyes," he observes quietly. "Shape, at least. Color's different."

I glance down at Sephy, whose eyes have briefly fluttered open—that newborn, unfocused gaze taking in nothing but sensing everything. "Pale violet," I murmur. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Means she's special," Ada comments from across the room where she's sorting through her herbs. "Children with unusual eyes often are."

Rolfo's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly at Ada's words, but his expression remains gentle when he looks back at Sephy. "Get some rest," he says to me. "We'll be here."

We. Such a simple word, yet it floods me with an emotion I can't name—something between relief and terror. I've been alone for so long, carrying this burden by myself, that the thought of having someone else to share it seems almost too much to hope for.

AURELIE

M orning light filters into the room, casting gentle shadows across the bed where I lie with Sephy nestled against my chest. My muscles ache with an unfamiliar hollowness, my body still raw and empty after bringing her into the world. Every small movement sends ripples of discomfort through me, but I wouldn't trade the weight of her tiny form against my skin for anything.

The door creaks open and I tense instantly, my arms tightening around Sephy before I can even process the thought. My heart leaps into my throat, muscles coiling with the instinct to flee—but it's only Ada slipping in, a steaming bowl in her hands and a soft smile on her tired face.

"You're awake," she whispers, careful not to disturb Sephy who sleeps with her tiny lips parted, silvery-blond wisps of hair catching the sunlight. "I brought broth."

I nod, still stiff despite recognizing her. Four months of running has carved wariness into my bones. Even here, in this moment of relative safety, my body doesn't remember how to truly relax.

Ada approaches slowly, setting the bowl on the small table beside the bed. Steam curls upward, carrying the scent of dreelek and brimbark. My stomach gives an involuntary growl.

"You need to eat," Ada says, not a suggestion but a gentle command. She helps me

shift into a more upright position, arranging pillows behind my back with practiced efficiency. Her movements are quick but careful, minimizing my discomfort with an expertise that speaks of having done this many times before. I can only imagine what it was like for her and her daughter.

I accept the bowl with a nod of thanks, balancing it carefully while keeping Sephy secure against me with my other arm. The first sip of broth spreads warmth through my hollow center.

"Where's Rolfo?" I ask, surprised by the question even as it leaves my lips. I shouldn't care where the demon is, shouldn't feel this strange absence at his not being here.

Ada sits at the foot of the bed, her hands automatically reaching for a small pile of cloths. She begins folding them with methodical precision, her fingers working while her eyes stay fixed on Sephy and me.

"Securing the perimeter," she answers, her tone casual but her eyes sharp. "He does it every morning, if he's anything like Dezoth. Old habits." I've learned she's married to the City Guard Captain, a close friend of Rolfo's.

I take another sip of broth before asking, "How long have you known him?"

"Long enough to trust him with my daughter's life," she says simply. The statement hangs between us, weighted with meaning. Ada doesn't strike me as someone who gives trust easily. "He's the only one Dezoth would trust near me, too." Which is evident by the way she stayed last night so I wouldn't feel so alone.

Sephy stirs against me, her tiny face scrunching before relaxing again. I marvel at her delicate features—the perfect bow of her lips, the gentle curve of her cheek, the way her eyelashes cast tiny shadows.

"She's beautiful," Ada murmurs, pausing in her folding to look at my daughter with a softness that momentarily transforms her face, smoothing the lines of wariness that match my own.

"She is," I agree, my voice cracking slightly. "I keep worrying this is all a dream. That I'll wake up back in his house, still..." I trail off, unable to finish the thought.

Ada's hands resume their methodical folding, creating neat squares from the soft cloths. "That feeling fades," she says. "Eventually."

"Does it?" I can't keep the doubt from my voice.

She meets my eyes, her warm brown gaze steady and unflinching. "The fear never disappears completely. But it becomes... manageable. Something you carry rather than something that carries you."

I consider her words while sipping more broth, letting the nourishment seep into my depleted body. "How did you do it? Raise a child while running?"

Ada's lips twist into something between a smile and a grimace. "One day at a time. Some days, one hour at a time." She sets aside a folded cloth and reaches for another. "But I had help. Not at first, but eventually."

"Dezoth?"

She nods. "Among others. There are people—humans and demons alike—who understand what it means to need a fresh start."

I glance down at Sephy, at her impossibly small hands with their perfect fingernails. "I never thought I'd be grateful to a demon."

"Life has a way of challenging our certainties," Ada says. The calmness of her presence speaks more than her words, offering a quiet reassurance that seeps into me like the broth's warmth.

The silence between us grows comfortable as I finish eating. Ada continues folding, the repetitive motion somehow soothing to watch. Outside, birds—black pitters, perhaps—call to each other, their songs filtering through the window along with the gentle breeze.

Later, sunlight streams through the window, painting gold lines across my bed as I doze in and out of consciousness. Sephy sleeps in a makeshift cradle fashioned from a drawer lined with fresh linens—Ada's handiwork. My body still aches, but some faint whisper of strength has returned, enough that restlessness now battles with exhaustion.

I push myself up, wincing as my body protests. The room stops spinning after a moment, and I take a deep breath before swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. The wooden floor feels cool beneath my bare feet.

Looking around properly for the first time, I study Rolfo's home with curious eyes. The room is sparse—a bed, a small table, a wooden chair in the corner—but surprisingly tidy. No dust gathers in corners; the sheets smell of sunlight and herbs. Not what I expected from a demon bachelor's quarters.

Taking a tentative step, I steady myself against the wall. My legs tremble like a newborn zarryn's, but they hold. Another step. Then another.

I pause at a framed drawing hanging on the wall—childish scrawls of color depicting what might be people standing in front of a house. The figures hold hands: one tall, one small. A child's drawing, preserved and displayed with care. Rose's, perhaps? The thought stops me. Why would a demon guard keep a human child's drawing?

Making my way into the main living space, I find it just as orderly. Clean dishes stacked neatly. Bookshelves with well-worn spines. A pair of boots by the door, placed just so. Everything has its place. Nothing extravagant, nothing wasted. It's... lived-in. Comfortable even.

My gaze drifts to the kitchen window, and through it, I catch sight of Rolfo in the yard. His broad back faces me, shoulders flexing as he swings an axe, splitting logs with practiced efficiency. The muscles in his arms bunch and release with each swing, his movements economical, purposeful. And for a moment I feel a flash of...appreciation. He's handsome in a way I never would let myself see before.

He sets aside the split wood, then moves to repair a section of fence, his large hands surprisingly deft as they work with the tools.

"He's been at it since dawn."

I startle, turning too quickly. My knees buckle, but Ada's there instantly, steadying me with a firm grip.

"Careful now," she murmurs, leading me to a chair at the kitchen table. "You shouldn't be up yet."

"I couldn't lie still anymore." My voice sounds strange to my own ears—raspy from disuse and screaming through labor.

Ada nods, understanding in her eyes. She pours water from a pitcher into a cup and places it before me. "Small sips," she instructs, then takes the seat opposite.

I obey, grateful for the cool liquid. Outside, Rolfo continues working, unaware of our observation. There's something hypnotic about watching him—this creature of such obvious power engaged in such mundane tasks.

"Not what you expected?" Ada asks, following my gaze.

I shake my head slightly. "Nothing about this is what I expected."

For a moment, we sit in silence, watching Rolfo through the window. He finishes with the fence and steps back, surveying his work with critical eyes before nodding to himself in satisfaction. There's something almost endearing about the gesture.

"I know what it's like," Ada says suddenly, her voice soft. "To wake each morning and wonder if you're truly free. To flinch at shadows and footsteps. To wait for the nightmare to return."

I meet her eyes, finding no pity there—only recognition. "Does it ever stop?"

"The fear?" She considers this, gaze drifting back to the window. "It changes. Becomes less cutting. Some days you might forget it entirely." A small smile touches her lips. "And then your shift focuses to something else."

The way she glances toward Rolfo is significant, weighted with history I don't yet understand.

"He seems..." I struggle to find words that don't sound naive.

"Dangerous? He is." Ada's honesty is refreshing. "But not to those under his protection."

The back door opens, and Rolfo steps inside, bringing with him the scent of fresh air and wood. He pauses when he sees me, surprise flickering across his features before he schools them back to careful neutrality.

"You shouldn't be up," he says, his deep voice rumbling in his chest. There's no anger

in it, just factual observation.

"So I've been told." Something about his presence makes me want to draw myself up straighter despite my weakness.

He crosses to the sink, washing his hands with brisk efficiency. "Hungry?"

The question is so practical, so ordinary, that it catches me off-guard. "I... yes."

He nods, as if this is the only acceptable answer. "Ada makes a zynthra soup that does wonders." His eyes flick to her. "If you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not." Ada rises, moving to the cooking area with the familiarity of someone who's done so many times before.

Rolfo dries his hands, then turns to face me fully. "You can stay as long as you need." The statement is delivered matter-of-factly, leaving no room for argument. "Until you're strong enough to decide what comes next."

I should resist, should question his motives, should fear this arrangement. But my body thrums with exhaustion, my daughter sleeps peacefully in the next room, and for the first time in years, I've woken without dread coiling in my stomach.

"Thank you," I manage, the words inadequate but all I have to offer. I nod, swallowing back the questions and suspicions that hover on my tongue.

I'm in no condition to do anything but accept this sanctuary, temporary as it might be. And though the thought should terrify me—being at the mercy of yet another demon—I find myself too tired to sustain the fear.

I only hope my trust won't get us both killed.

Night falls, bringing with it the unfamiliar sounds of Rolfo's home—the soft creaking of wood settling, the distant call of nocturnal creatures, the gentle whisper of wind through trees. The room is bathed in shadows, broken only by silvery moonlight streaming through the half-open curtains. I lie awake, my body exhausted but my mind racing endlessly.

Across the room, Rolfo sleeps upright in a chair that seems too small for his large frame. His arms are folded across his broad chest, chin tucked down, silver eyes hidden behind closed lids. Even in sleep, there's something vigilant about his posture—like a predator resting but never truly defenseless. The moonlight catches on the scar across his right eyebrow, making it appear almost white against his skin.

Ada sleeps on a cot near my bed, her honey-blond braid loosened from the day's activities, her breathing deep and even. Her face in repose looks younger, the ever-present wariness momentarily erased by exhaustion.

And between us all, Sephy sleeps in her makeshift cradle, tiny chest rising and falling with each breath, silvery-blond curls splayed against the pillow. I keep my hand resting lightly on her back, needing the physical connection, the constant reassurance of her warmth, her realness.

The ceiling above me bears water stains in patterns that remind me of clouds—or perhaps beasts. My mind traces their outlines, reconstructing them into familiar shapes then dissolving them again. Anything to keep thoughts of Kaelith at bay, to prevent myself from imagining his rage upon discovering my absence.

Four months carrying his child while planning my escape. Another four of running before collapsing in an alleyway where Rolfo found me. Now here, in this strange limbo—not quite free, not quite safe, but somehow... protected.

Sephy stirs beneath my palm, her tiny body tensing before she makes a soft mewling

sound that might transform into a cry. Before I can even push myself upright, Rolfo's eyes snap open, instantly alert. He crosses the room in two silent strides, looming over the cradle with surprising grace for someone his size.

My heart leaps into my throat—an instinctual reaction I can't suppress. But instead of reaching for my daughter, he pauses, his mercury eyes finding mine in the darkness.

"May I?" His voice is barely a rumble.

The question startles me. Permission—something I've rarely been granted, much less asked for. I nod, unable to form words around the tightness in my throat.

With movements so gentle they seem impossible from hands that could so easily destroy, he adjusts Sephy's swaddling cloth, which has come loose around her arms. His fingers look massive next to her tiny form, yet he handles her with a precision that speaks of practice or instinct—perhaps both.

Sephy settles immediately, releasing a tiny sigh before slipping back into deeper sleep. Rolfo watches her for a moment longer, something unreadable passing across his face.

"Her coloring," he says quietly, "mixed blood marks her."

"I know." The words taste bitter. It's what made her valuable to Kaelith—a half-demon child, a possession to control. "It's why he'll never stop looking."

Rolfo's eyes lift to mine, something fierce flashing in their depths. "Let him look."

Three simple words, delivered with such absolute certainty that for a moment, I almost believe them. Almost believe that this demon guard with his scarred hands and silent movements could stand between us and the world.

"You make it sound so simple," I whisper, conscious of Ada's sleeping form nearby.

"Protection isn't complicated." He straightens, moonlight catching the angles of his face. "The reasons behind it might be. But the act itself is instinct."

He returns to his chair, folding himself back into the same position, though his eyes remain on me a moment longer.

"Why?" The question escapes before I can contain it. He never really answered it before and I find myself wanting to understand this demon. "Why help us?"

His expression doesn't change, but something shifts in his posture—a subtle tensing of shoulders. "Sleep, Aurelie. Your body needs it."

The deflection is obvious, but I'm too exhausted to push. Instead, I settle deeper into the pillows, my hand still resting on Sephy's back. Her heartbeat pulses against my palm, small but steady.

I don't expect to sleep, but somehow, knowing Rolfo sits sentinel, my eyelids grow heavier. The last thing I see before darkness claims me is his silhouette, rigid and watchful, in the corner of the room.

When next I open my eyes, Sephy is stirring again, this time with the unmistakable hunger cry I've quickly learned to recognize. Moonlight still bathes the room, but its angle has shifted—hours have passed. I reach for her automatically, muscles protesting as I lift her from the cradle.

Rolfo is awake instantly, just as before. This time, he doesn't approach, merely watches as I settle Sephy against my breast. There's nothing uncomfortable in his gaze—just vigilance, and something that might be respect.

"You should have slept in shifts," I murmur, nodding toward Ada who remains deeply asleep. "There's no need for both of you to lose rest."

"Old habits," he answers, voice low. "Besides, she has a child to care for. She needs the sleep more than I do."

I study him over Sephy's head, trying to reconcile this considerate thought with the fearsome demon guard who killed three men barehanded to protect us just days ago. The contradiction should make me uneasy. Instead, it makes him... real. Complex in ways I wasn't prepared for.

Sephy feeds contentedly in the silence that follows, unaware of the silent negotiations happening above her head. Outside, the sounds of night creatures continue their steady chorus. Inside, four souls breathe together in tentative harmony.

I'll stay because I must. Because Sephy deserves safety. Because running with a newborn would be suicide.

But my walls remain standing—high and fortified by years of survival. And for now, that's how they'll stay.

AURELIE

M orning slips into evening, and as the red sky darkens to crimson, Ada gathers her things. Four days she's stayed, a constant presence between Rolfo and me, a buffer of feminine energy and shared understanding. Now she stands at the door, honey-blond braid freshly plaited, warm brown eyes filled with something between concern and encouragement.

"You're sure you'll be alright?" She asks for the third time, her small bag clutched in work-roughened hands. "I can stay another night if?—"

"We'll be fine." I force confidence into my voice, though panic flutters beneath my ribs at the thought of her absence. "You need to see Rose. It's not fair to keep you away."

Her face softens at the mention of her daughter. "She understands. Better than most."

"Go home, Ada." I cradle Sephy against my shoulder, still marveling at how her tiny weight fits so perfectly in the crook of my arm. "We've imposed enough."

"It's not an imposition if it's offered freely." Her eyes flick briefly to where Rolfo stands in the kitchen doorway, his broad frame nearly filling it. "And it was."

I nod, unable to argue the point without seeming ungrateful. Four days of meals prepared, wounds tended, fears soothed—all without expectation or demand. It's a

debt I don't know how to repay, to either of them.

"I'll come tomorrow," Ada promises, reaching out to brush a wisp of silvery-blond hair from Sephy's forehead. "With fresh herbs for your tea."

"Thank you." The words feel insufficient, but they're all I have to offer.

With final reassurances exchanged, she slips out into the evening. The door closes behind her with soft finality, leaving me alone with Rolfo and Sephy in a silence that suddenly feels vast.

Rolfo clears his throat, silver eyes fixed somewhere over my shoulder. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," I admit, grateful for the practical question.

He nods, gesturing toward the table. "Sit. I'll heat what Ada left."

I obey, sinking into a chair with Sephy still nestled against me. My body has begun to heal, the raw emptiness slowly mending, but exhaustion remains a constant companion. From the kitchen, I hear the clatter of dishes, the soft hiss of the stovetop coming to life. Domestic sounds that seem at odds with the man making them—a demon whose hands I've seen covered in blood, whose shoulders bear the weight of armor and duty.

Sephy stirs against me, making small, discontented noises that might soon become cries. I shift her position, murmuring as I've learned she responds to, and she settles momentarily. The simple interaction steadies me, a reminder that regardless of my surroundings or circumstances, this bond remains solid and real.

Rolfo returns with a bowl of steaming stew—zynthra and dreelk, rich with herbs I

can't name. He sets it before me, then hesitates, eyes darting to Sephy.

Before I can say anything, he steps back, retreating to the far side of the table. "If you need anything, I'll be in the workshop."

Before I can respond, he strides from the room, leaving his own meal untouched. The quiet that follows his departure feels heavier than before, laden with unspoken things.

I eat slowly, mechanically, my thoughts circling. With Ada gone, the reality of my situation presses in—I am alone with a demon I barely know, dependent on his goodwill, with a newborn who requires constant care. The vulnerability of it all makes my skin crawl, old instincts screaming for walls, for distance, for any illusion of control.

Yet where else could I go? What alternatives exist for a woman marked as property, a runaway with a half-demon child? The streets nearly killed us both. Returning to Kaelith is unthinkable.

For now, at least, Rolfo's home is the closest thing to safety we have.

Night falls fully as I finish eating. Sephy has grown fussier, her small face scrunching with displeasure despite my attempts to soothe her. I stand, swaying gently, walking the small circuit of kitchen to living room and back again. The motion calms her somewhat, but fatigue weighs my steps, my still-healing body protesting the exertion.

Eventually, I retire to the bedroom, settling Sephy in her makeshift cradle while I prepare for sleep. Without Ada's presence, the room feels larger, emptier. The silence thicker.

Sleep comes fitfully, interrupted by Sephy's needs and my own restless thoughts. Each time I drift toward unconsciousness, some small noise jolts me awake—a creak

of the house settling, the whisper of wind through trees, the distant cry of night creatures.

The night is thick with silence. This time, I wake to the sound of a soft whimper—Sephy. My arms reach out instinctively for the cradle, but the bassy hum of a lullaby stops me. Unfamiliar, low, rumbling from a chest deeper than mine. Not Ada's gentle tones.

My heart seizes. I slide from the bed, bare feet silent on the wooden floor as I've learned to move through countless nights of captivity and escape. The humming continues, wordless but melodic, a soothing sound that contrasts sharply with my racing pulse.

I follow it to the living room, where I stop at the doorway, breath catching in my throat.

Rolfo sits in a chair, bare-chested, his large hands cupping Sephy against his shoulder as he rocks slowly. One massive palm supports her tiny head, the other spans nearly her entire back. His silver eyes are half-closed, face unguarded in the dim light, lips moving slightly with the continuing melody.

The sight is too much. My knees weaken. I grip the doorframe to stay standing.

In the soft glow of a single lamp, the scars across his ribs stand out in pale relief against his skin—old wounds, long healed but never faded. Battle marks, perhaps, or something else entirely. They map a history I know nothing about, speaking of pain endured and survived.

Sephy looks impossibly small against him, a delicate bundle of newborn vulnerability resting against barely contained power. Yet his hold is gentle, his movements careful—reverent, almost. There's a tenderness in his posture that contradicts

everything I've learned to expect from demons of his status and strength.

Tears come before I can stop them, hot and sudden, surprising me with their intensity. I press my knuckles against my mouth to silence any sound, but a small gasp escapes anyway. I've never seen a man hold a child like that—like Sephy is something precious rather than a possession, something to be cherished rather than controlled.

My whole life has been filled with roughness, commands, possession. Never gentleness. Never warmth. Kaelith's hands were tools of pain and domination, never comfort. Even the rare instances when he was pleased with me, his touch had been proprietary, not tender.

But Rolfo—this demon guardsman with scars etched across his body like a map of violence—cradles my daughter as if she might break, as if she matters.

At my involuntary sound, Rolfo looks up, his silver eyes finding mine in the shadowed doorway. His expression softens, not with pity but with something I can't name. He doesn't speak. Just nods toward the couch next to him, a simple invitation without expectation.

I move forward, every step like walking through fog, unreal and weightless. My legs still ache from childbirth, my body still tender and unfamiliar, but I cross the distance between us as if drawn by an invisible thread. The floorboards creak slightly beneath my weight, marking my progress through the stillness.

The couch cushion dips as I sink onto it, careful to keep space between us. We sit in silence, the only sound Sephy's soft, even breathing. Her tiny chest rises and falls with each inhalation, her silvery-blond curls catching the lamplight. Against Rolfo's dark skin, she looks impossibly pale, impossibly fragile.

After several minutes, Rolfo carefully transfers her to lie on the couch next to me, his

hands lingering a moment before pulling away. The motion is practiced, fluid—as though he's done this countless times before, though I know that can't be true. His fingers brush against my arm in the process, the briefest contact, yet it sends a jolt through me that has nothing to do with fear.

He glances at me, and our eyes meet—so much unsaid in that moment. Questions I don't know how to ask. Answers I'm not sure I want to hear. Why did you take us in? What do you want from us? How long until this sanctuary dissolves?

I don't look away. He doesn't either.

His silver eyes reflect the lamplight, revealing depths I hadn't noticed before—flecks of darker gray near the pupil, a band of lighter silver at the outer edge. They're not cold eyes, despite their metallic color. They hold warmth, and exhaustion, and something that might be loneliness.

"She was crying," he says finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "Didn't want to wake you."

"Thank you." The words come easier this time, less burdened by the weight of debt.

He shrugs, a slight lift of one broad shoulder. "Sleep is precious with a newborn. Ada told me."

"She would know," I say, thinking of her stories of her own daughter. How many nights had Ada walked floors like these, cradling her daughter while running from demons who would use them both?

Eventually, I lean my head against the high back of the chair, the tension in my shoulders slowly unwinding. The day's exhaustion crashes over me in waves, pulling me toward sleep despite my best efforts to resist. Rolfo mirrors my position, his own

head tilting back, throat exposed in a display of vulnerability I never expected to see from a demon.

"You can sleep," he murmurs. "I'll keep watch."

Such simple words, yet they twist something deep inside my chest. I've spent months looking over my shoulder, starting at shadows, sleeping in fits and bursts with one eye always open. The promise of someone else standing guard is almost too much to bear.

I don't press for answers this time. The room is still but full—full of unspoken histories, of tentative trust, of the steady rhythm of our breathing gradually synchronizing in the quiet.

When I wake again, it's to sunlight on my face, painting the inside of my eyelids red-gold. Sephy sleeps beside me, tucked safely between my body and the back of the couch. Rolfo is gone from the chair, leaving only the lingering impression of his presence behind.

ROLFO

I pace back and forth in the kitchen, one eye on the stew that bubbles quietly over the hearth. Steam rises in lazy spirals, carrying the scent of herbs throughout my modest home. My spoon scrapes the bottom of the pot with each careful stir. The routine is calming, but my attention keeps drifting toward the closed bedroom door.

My ears, sharper than any human's, pick up the soft coos and whispers exchanged between mother and child. It's been two weeks since Ada first helped bring Sephy into this world, right here under my roof. Even though she's not staying here anymore, she has been stopping by each morning, checking on both mother and child, teaching Aurelie things I wouldn't know the first thing about.

This morning's visit seemed to go well. Ada left with that small, knowing smile that makes me feel like she can see right through me. Aurelie took Sephy back to bed afterward, and they've been there for hours.

Not that I'm counting.

I wipe down the countertop for the third time, moving the cloth in precise circles. The surface was clean an hour ago, but the motion gives my hands something to do. Next are the dishes—each one dried with careful attention, stacked with military precision. My home hasn't been this tidy since... Well, ever.

It's not nervousness driving me. It's focus. The same kind I use when tracking a mark

or securing a perimeter. Only this time, the objective is keeping them safe, comfortable. Making this place something close to a home.

The click of the bedroom door latch snaps my attention up. Aurelie emerges, her steps silent across the wooden floor. Her robe is tied tightly at her waist, her auburn hair loose around her shoulders and a little messy from sleep she hasn't shaken. Sephy is nestled against her chest, tiny mouth working at her breast.

I freeze, dish towel suspended mid-air.

It's not discomfort that stops me. It's something closer to awe. The sight before me isn't one of fragility but of fierce resilience. This woman who escaped a monster, who survived against impossible odds, who's fighting for her child's future. There's a quiet power in how she stands there, still recovering yet utterly unbroken.

"The stew is almost ready," I say, my voice coming out lower, rougher than intended.

Aurelie nods, hesitating at the edge of the kitchen. "It smells good."

I motion to the chair at the small table. "Sit. You shouldn't be standing so long."

She moves carefully, adjusting Sephy as she sits. I notice her wince slightly—Ada mentioned the lingering soreness would take time to fade.

Without asking, I grab an extra pillow from the bench by the window, offering it to her. "For your arm. It helps with... the weight."

Aurelie stares at the pillow, then at me, a question in those hazel eyes. After a moment, she accepts it, tucking it under her arm where Sephy rests.

"Thank you," she says, not with words but with the slight relaxation of her shoulders,

the momentary flicker of something softer in her expression.

I retreat to the workbench in the corner of the room, picking up a broken stool I've been meaning to fix. The rhythmic scrape of tools against wood fills the silence. It's comfortable enough—me working, her feeding Sephy, both of us existing in the same space without the need to fill it with empty words.

Sephy suddenly unlatches, her tiny face scrunching up in discontent. A high-pitched wail builds, and Aurelie shifts, looking momentarily overwhelmed.

Without thinking, I set down my tools and move to the hearth, where I already have water warming. I soak a clean cloth, testing the temperature against my wrist before bringing it over.

"Here," I offer, holding it out. "Ada says it helps to clean her face between feedings."

Aurelie looks up at me, brow furrowed, more confused than afraid. "You were listening to her instructions?"

I shrug, suddenly self-conscious under her scrutiny. "Hard not to in a house this size."

She takes the cloth, gently wiping Sephy's face. The baby's cries soften to hiccuping whimpers.

"You're... not what I expected," Aurelie says carefully, eyes fixed on Sephy rather than me.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know." She adjusts her robe, covering herself as Sephy settles. "Not someone who heats water for baby cloths and remembers Ada's instructions."

I give her a soft smile, something I rarely do. The corners of my mouth feel stiff with disuse, but it comes easier than expected. There's something about her honest assessment that disarms me. I'm not used to being seen as anything but the fearsome Steelclaw, the guardian who tracks down rogues and makes examples of them.

"Expectations rarely match reality," I say, turning back to stir the stew. "Food's ready."

I ladle the thick mixture into bowls, making sure hers has more vegetables and meat than mine. She'll need the strength. Sephy finishes feeding, and without asking, I extend my arms.

"I can lay her down while you eat."

Aurelie hesitates, but only for a moment. I've held her enough now, but Aurelie still doesn't give her up easily, even to Ada. Not that I blame her. Trust doesn't come easily to either of us.

"Your food will get cold," I add, keeping my voice neutral. Not pressing, just offering.

Forcing herself to relax a little, she carefully transfers the tiny bundle into my arms. I cradle Sephy with practiced ease—no longer feeling quite so fearsome over the small one.

Sephy settles against my chest, her tiny fist curling around my finger. Her eyes—violet with silver flecks, unmistakably marked by her demon heritage—flutter closed. She trusts me instinctively, in a way her mother can't yet.

I carry her to the makeshift crib Ada fashioned from a drawer, setting her down with care. She's so small that my hands look monstrous next to her, but they move with

unexpected gentleness.

We eat in silence, but it's not uncomfortable. The stew is hearty—dreelek leaves and zynthra root with spiced broth. Nothing fancy, but filling. Aurelie eats slowly at first, then with increasing hunger, as if her body is finally remembering what it needs.

"This is good," she says between bites, surprise coloring her voice.

I grunt in acknowledgment. "Hard to mess up stew."

"You'd be surprised. Master Kaelith had six cooks, and none could—" She stops abruptly, her spoon frozen halfway to her mouth.

The air between us thickens. It's the first time she's mentioned him by name. I keep eating, letting the moment pass without comment. Some demons like to be called "Master"—especially the nobles. Makes them feel powerful. Important.

Makes me sick.

After we finish, she stands carefully, glancing toward the door. "Is it... would it be all right if I sat outside? Just for a little while?"

The question pulls at something in my chest. The fact that she has to ask permission to feel the afternoon sun on her face.

"It's your home now too," I say simply. "You don't need my permission."

Her eyes meet mine, searching. Finding what, I'm not sure. But after a moment, she nods and gathers Sephy from the crib, securing her in the wrap Ada showed her how to tie—fabric crisscrossing her body to hold the baby close to her heart.

I watch through the window as she settles on a chair on the porch. The evening sun bathes her in golden-red light, catching in her auburn hair. She tilts her face upward, eyes closing as the warmth touches her skin. Something about the sight draws me outside.

I grab a woolen blanket from the chest beside the door—nights get cool quickly here—and step onto the porch. Without a word, I drape it over her legs, careful not to disturb Sephy.

Aurelie startles slightly, then relaxes. "Thank you."

I settle a few feet away, giving her space. From my pocket, I pull out a small block of wood and my carving knife. The blade gleams as it slices through the pale surface, curls of wood falling to the porch floor.

"What are you making?" she asks after several minutes of silence.

I turn the half-formed shape in my hands. "Not sure yet. Sometimes the wood decides."

She nods as if this makes perfect sense, then closes her eyes again. The rhythmic sound of my knife against wood fills the quiet. In the distance, a black pitter bird calls to its mate.

I notice it gradually—the way her shoulders lower, her breathing deepens. The permanent tension she's carried since I found her in that alley begins to ease. For the first time in what must be months, her guard lowers, if only slightly.

I keep carving, pretending not to notice. But I catalog each sign of her relaxation, storing it away like something precious.

ROLFO

I rise before dawn, moving silently through the house like a shadow. Even on my day off, old habits die hard. The first thing I do is check the perimeter—a quick patrol of windows and doors, testing latches, peering through curtains at the empty street outside. The rituals of security are as natural as breathing.

Sephy's cries pull me from my rounds. They're soft at first, then build with determination. Before Aurelie can stir, I'm at the drawer-turned-cradle, lifting the tiny bundle with hands that have broken bones but somehow know exactly how to support her delicate head.

"Easy there, little one," I murmur, my voice so low it's barely audible. "Your mother needs sleep."

Sephy's violet eyes find mine in the dim light, her cries quieting to curious gurgles. For someone so small, she has an intensity about her—like she's memorizing my face, deciding whether I'm worthy of trust.

I carry her to the kitchen, warming milk according to Ada's precise instructions. The small vial of herbs sits nearby—a drop in the milk helps with digestion, Ada insists. I measure it with the concentration of a man defusing a bomb.

Aurelie appears in the doorway just as I settle into my chair with Sephy cradled in one arm, bottle ready in my other hand.

"I could have—" she starts, then hesitates.

"You were sleeping," I say simply. "First time in days. Go back to bed."

She doesn't move, watching as Sephy eagerly accepts the bottle. Her auburn hair falls in messy waves around her face, and there's a crease on her cheek from the pillow. Something in my chest tightens at the sight.

"I can take her," she offers, but I hear the exhaustion behind the words.

"I got her." I nod toward her room. "Few more hours won't hurt. Big day ahead."

Curiosity flickers across her face, but she doesn't ask. Trust comes slowly between us, built in these small moments of consideration. After a moment's hesitation, she retreats to her room, the door clicking softly behind her.

Once Sephy is fed and changed, I place her back in her makeshift crib, watching until her eyes flutter closed. I eye the temporary bedding, knowing she deserves better. Then I get to work.

My tools are laid out on the floor of my study—my former study. The room is small but gets good morning light. Perfect for a nursery. I've been planning this for days, sketching designs when Aurelie is asleep, gathering materials in the early hours before she wakes.

The obsidian wood is my prized possession—rare, with deep black-purple grain that seems to shift in the light. I've had it for years, saving it for something special. Something worthy.

The saw bites into the wood with precise strokes. I lose myself in the rhythm of it—measuring twice, cutting once. The frame takes shape under my hands: a cradle

with gently curving sides, strong enough to last generations but delicate enough for a child as small as Sephy.

Sweat beads on my forehead as the morning stretches into afternoon. The sounds of hammering echo through the small house. Each nail is driven with calculated force—enough to secure, not enough to split the precious wood.

I sand each piece meticulously, rubbing the grain with hands calloused from years of hard work. The wood warms under my touch, revealing deeper colors with each pass of the sandpaper. I become so absorbed in my task that I don't hear Aurelie until she speaks from the doorway.

"What are you making?"

I look up, suddenly self-conscious. Sawdust clings to my clothes and hair. The half-assembled cradle sits before me, its purpose unmistakable.

"She needs a proper place to sleep," I say gruffly. "That drawer won't do much longer."

Aurelie steps closer, her fingers hovering over the smooth curve of the headboard. "It's beautiful."

Pride mingles with embarrassment at her praise. I'm not used to creating things of beauty—my hands are better suited to weapons, to fighting, to hunting down those who break our laws.

"The wood," she says, tracing the dark grain. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Obsidian wood. From the northern forests." I run my palm over the surface. "Hard to come by these days."

"And you're using it for Sephy's crib?"

I shrug, uncomfortable with the question's implications. "Been saving it. Seemed right."

She doesn't press further, but her eyes linger on my hands as they return to their work. I feel her watching as I fit each spindle with meticulous care, testing the strength of each joint before moving to the next.

"The market opens soon," she says finally. "For the mattress and blankets. I could go?—"

"I'll get them," I interrupt, perhaps too quickly. The thought of her venturing out alone, where Kaelith's spies might lurk, sends a cold spike through me. "Still some work to do here first."

"You've been working since dawn," she observes, leaning against the doorframe. "It's not a task anyone assigned you."

I look up at her, meeting those hazel eyes that see more than I'm comfortable with. "Not everything worth doing comes from orders, Aurelie."

The next morning, I wake earlier than usual, anxious to finish my work. The cradle is complete, polished to a shine after Aurelie retired for the night. I've moved a small oak dresser into the room as well, along with a cushioned rocking chair I bought from a neighbor years ago and never used. The mattress from the market fits perfectly in the cradle—soft but firm, covered with the linen I selected after an hour of indecision. The blankets are light but warm, suitable for the changing seasons.

I stand back, surveying the transformed space. No longer my study—something else entirely. The bookshelves remain, now holding a different promise. Stories to be read

aloud someday, knowledge to be shared.

My fingers trace the carvings I added to the cradle's headboard—a scattering of stars and a few small birds in flight. Nothing elaborate, just simple shapes etched into the wood with my smallest knife. I don't know why I added them. Just felt right.

Sephy's morning cries announce the day has begun in earnest. I hear Aurelie stirring, her soft footsteps padding toward the drawer where Sephy has slept these past days. I retreat to the kitchen, busying myself with breakfast preparations.

Minutes later, Aurelie appears in the doorway to the nursery. Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes wide as she takes in the transformation. I watch from the hallway, pretending to be passing by.

"Rolfo..." she whispers, stepping fully into the room.

I shrug, uncomfortable under her gaze. "Finished it last night."

She moves to the cradle, her hand brushing along the polished edge. Her fingers find the carvings, tracing the outline of a bird with something like wonder.

"You did all this in one day?"

"Wasn't much else to do," I mumble, though we both know it's a lie. My duties as a guardsman keep me busy enough. This was a choice.

She opens the small dresser, finding the tiny clothes I purchased folded neatly inside. Nothing fancy—practical garments in soft fabrics, things that will grow with Sephy for a while at least.

"The chair," she says, running her palm over its curved arm. "For feeding her?"

I nod, my throat suddenly tight. I hadn't vocalized the purpose, even to myself. Just knew she needed somewhere comfortable to sit with the baby.

Aurelie returns to the cradle, lifting Sephy from the temporary bedding she's known since birth. With careful movements, she lowers her daughter into the new cradle, adjusting the blankets around her tiny form.

"Look, little one," she whispers. "Your own bed. Not a drawer anymore."

Sephy blinks up at us, her violet eyes curious. She doesn't cry at the new surroundings, just wiggles her arms free from the blanket and reaches upward.

"She likes it," Aurelie says softly.

"The wood is warm," I explain, stepping closer. "Holds heat well. Should be comfortable for her."

Aurelie turns to me, and I'm startled by the moisture in her eyes. "Thank you. This is... it's more than I ever expected."

"It's nothing," I insist, looking away. "Just a bed."

"It's not nothing." Her voice is firm now. "You used your prized wood. You carved stars and birds. You bought clothes and blankets. This isn't 'nothing,' Rolfo."

I shift my weight, uncomfortable with her gratitude. "She needed it."

Aurelie watches me for a long moment, seeing more than I wish to reveal. Finally, she smiles—a rare, genuine smile that transforms her face. "Yes. She did."

I find myself drawn to the cradle, watching as Sephy's eyes grow heavy, her tiny

body relaxing into the new mattress. Something pulls tight in my chest—a feeling I can't name.

"She'll sleep better here," I say quietly. "Safe."

"Yes," Aurelie agrees, her shoulder brushing mine as we both lean over the cradle. "She will."

I turn to leave, but I notice that Aurelie hesitates. Turning around, I lean against the door frame, my forearm braced above my head as I watch Aurelie move back to the impossibly small garments I purchased. She handles each piece with reverence, smoothing invisible wrinkles, aligning tiny seams with careful fingers. Something settles in my chest at the sight—a feeling of rightness I've rarely experienced.

"These are perfect," she murmurs, holding up a soft cotton sleeper in pale yellow. "How did you know what size to get?"

I shrug, uncomfortable with the question. "Guessed."

The truth is I'd spent nearly an hour at the merchant's stall, comparing sizes against the memory of Sephy's tiny form, ignoring the knowing smiles of the vendor as I deliberated over colors and fabrics.

"Well, your guesses were good." Aurelie's smile reaches her eyes—a rare occurrence that transforms her face. "Should we try this one on her?"

Sephy hasn't gone to sleep yet, her violet eyes tracking our movements. But I don't want to bother her when she's already laying down.

"She seems happy enough as she is," I say, but Aurelie's already gathering the baby up.

"Babies need clothes, Rolfo. Even happy ones." There's a lightness in her voice I haven't heard before. "Besides, don't you want to see how she looks in what you picked out?"

I grunt noncommittally, but find myself moving closer, watching as Aurelie expertly maneuvers tiny limbs into even tinier sleeves. Sephy protests with a whimper that might become a full cry, but Aurelie hums softly, a melody I don't recognize. The sound calms both the baby and something restless inside me.

"There," she says finally, lifting Sephy up for my inspection. "What do you think?"

The yellow fabric makes Sephy's eyes appear even more violet, her wispy silver-blond curls standing out in stark contrast. She kicks experimentally, testing the new sensation of cloth against her skin, then focuses intently on my face.

"Looks good," I manage, though the words feel inadequate. "Suits her."

Aurelie's smile broadens. "I think she approves too. Look at her—she knows she's pretty."

As if understanding the compliment, Sephy makes a gurgling sound, her tiny mouth curving just slightly upward.

"Smart kid," I mutter, turning away to hide the unexpected surge of something dangerously close to affection. "Shelf won't put itself up."

I busy myself with the wooden planks I've cut to fit between the wall studs—simple shelves for the small collection of infant necessities that seems to grow daily. The rhythmic work of measuring, drilling, and securing the brackets gives my hands purpose while my mind circles around the strange new reality I find myself in.

Behind me, Aurelie continues chattering to Sephy, her voice soft and melodic. "See that grumpy man with the drill? He acts all tough, but he bought you yellow because he thought you'd look pretty in it. And he was right, wasn't he?"

I don't correct her assumption, though the truth is more practical—yellow was neutral, neither too feminine nor masculine, unlikely to stain as badly as white. But something about her version feels right, so I let it stand.

The afternoon passes in comfortable industry. I finish the shelves and move on to securing the window latch—an unnecessary precaution given we're on the second floor, but old habits die hard. Aurelie organizes the baby supplies, arranging them on the new shelves with the precision of someone unaccustomed to having possessions of their own.

As evening approaches, she hangs a tiny crocheted blanket over the edge of the cradle—a gift from Ada, vibrant with colors that remind me of spring. The simple gesture transforms the space, making it feel less like a room I've repurposed and more like a place where a child will grow. My handiwork forms the bones, but her touches bring it to life.

"It feels real now," she says softly, standing back to survey our work. "Like a real nursery."

I follow her gaze around the room—the obsidian wood cradle with its carved stars and birds, the oak dresser filled with tiny clothes, the rocking chair angled to catch the morning light, the shelves now lined with necessities and small comforts. Not extravagant, but solid. Secure.

"It is real," I answer simply.

That night, after a quiet dinner and Sephy's evening feeding, I find Aurelie lingering

in the doorway of the nursery, watching her daughter sleep in her new cradle. Her posture speaks of exhaustion—shoulders slightly curved, weight shifted to one hip as if standing upright requires too much effort.

"She's settled," I say quietly, coming to stand beside her. "Seems to like the new arrangements."

"She does." Aurelie's voice contains both relief and something heavier. "I just... I keep thinking I should watch her. Make sure she's breathing."

I understand the fear beneath her words. "First night in a new bed. Natural to worry."

"Every night," she corrects softly. "I worry every night."

The admission hangs between us, raw and honest. I've seen enough in my years as a guardsman to know the weight of constant vigilance—how it wears on the soul, how it steals sleep and peace.

"My room's closer than yours," I point out. "I'll hear if she gets fussy. You need rest, Aurelie."

She turns to face me, her hazel eyes searching mine. "You've done so much already."

"Not asking for gratitude." I keep my voice low, conscious of the sleeping infant. "Practical matter. You're still healing. Need sleep to heal properly."

Her eyes roam my face, and for a moment, the air seems to prickle between us. I feel an ache to reach out and push her stray strand back, to touch her, but I hold back. Instead I wait until she ducks her head and turns, softly whispering goodnight before she disappears down the hall.

And I stand for far too long watching her daughter sleep. To soothe my own worry because I'm getting far too attached to a baby that isn't mine.

Even if I might want her to be.

10

ROLFO

I wake to the sound of Sephy's cries slicing through the predawn darkness. My body moves before my mind fully registers what's happening—feet hitting the floor, hand already reaching for the door. The transition from sleep to full alertness takes less than a heartbeat, an old guardian reflex I've never been able to shake.

Her wails grow more insistent as I cross the hallway in three long strides. The nursery door is already open, and I find Aurelie inside, her face drawn with worry as she clutches Sephy to her chest. The baby's cries have a different quality tonight—sharper, more distressed.

"She won't settle," Aurelie says, voice taut with fatigue and concern. Dark shadows hang beneath her eyes. "I've tried everything."

I move closer, observing the flush on Sephy's normally pale cheeks, the way her tiny fists ball up in frustration. "How long has she been like this?"

"Almost an hour." Aurelie rocks back and forth, her movements growing desperate. "I fed her, changed her, rocked her... nothing helps."

I extend my hands wordlessly. Aurelie hesitates, just for a moment, before passing Sephy to me. The weight of her—so light yet somehow so substantial—settles against my forearm. Her skin feels too warm through the thin fabric of her sleeper.

"She's running a fever," I mutter, placing my palm against her forehead. Not dangerously high, but enough to make her uncomfortable. Enough to worry.

I cradle her against my chest, feeling her tiny heart hammering against mine. The cries quiet momentarily as she registers the change in who's holding her, but then resume with renewed vigor.

"Let's try something else," I say, heading toward the main room. "Ada left some mint balm. Might help."

We move through the darkened house, Sephy's cries echoing off the walls. I keep my voice low, a constant stream of nonsense meant to soothe.

"Easy there, little warrior. You're giving your mother gray hairs before her time. That's not very considerate of you, is it?" I murmur against the top of her head. "The fiercest fighters know when to rest."

The mint balm does nothing. The rocking only seems to agitate her more. Even my humming—rough and off-key as it is—fails to produce the usual calming effect. Aurelie watches from the doorway, her fingers twisting anxiously in the hem of her nightdress.

"Maybe we should send for Ada," she suggests, voice tight with worry.

I shake my head. "I don't think there's much she can do." I glance down at Sephy's flushed face. "But if her fever climbs more we will."

But there's something in her cries that cuts through my usual pragmatism. Something that makes me want to fix it, to ease whatever discomfort has her so distressed.

An old memory surfaces—something I'd seen years ago, during a mission in the

eastern territories. A warrior father with his sick child, skin to skin, the most basic kind of comfort.

Without overthinking it, I pull my shirt over my head in one fluid motion and adjust Sephy against my bare chest. Her skin is feverish against mine, but her cries hitch slightly at the contact.

Aurelie's eyes widen. "What are you?—"

"Body heat," I explain, positioning Sephy so her head rests against my collarbone. "And heartbeat. Reminds them they're safe."

I begin to pace slow circles around the room, bouncing slightly with each step. Sephy's cries gradually soften to whimpers, her tiny body molding against mine.

"My sister told me that," I elaborate, though Aurelie hasn't asked. "She would've been a great mother."

If her baby hadn't died during the birth.

Aurelie sinks onto the couch, drawing her knees up to her chest. "I didn't know you had a sister," she says softly.

"Don't." The word comes out rougher than intended. "Not anymore."

Sephy stirs against me, threatening to start crying again, and I resume my slow, steady pacing. Left foot, right foot, slight bounce, turn. A rhythm as old as parenthood.

"Sleep," I tell Aurelie, noticing her eyelids drooping despite her concern. "I've got her."

"I should stay up too," she protests, but her body betrays her with a heavy yawn.

"Pointless for both of us to wear tracks in the floor."

She curls up on the couch instead, pulling the throw blanket over herself, eyes still fixed on Sephy and me. "Wake me if her fever gets worse."

"Will do," I promise, continuing my steady circuit around the room.

Sephy alternates between fitful sleep and fussing throughout the night. She sleeps for twenty minutes, then wakes crying for thirty. I don't sit, don't stop moving. The constant motion seems to soothe her, and I've endured far worse discomforts than a night on my feet.

I hum sometimes—old battle songs stripped of their lyrics, slowed down to lullabies. I tell her stories of stars and distant cities, my voice pitched low, more vibration than sound. I promise her things I have no business promising—that she'll never know fear or hunger, that she'll grow up strong and free, that no one will ever use her or discard her.

My legs grow numb, then painful, then numb again. I ignore it. The weight of her against my chest becomes an anchor, the only thing that matters. Her fever ebbs and flows like the tide, her breath hot against my skin.

In the darkest part of the night, when even the nocturnal creatures have gone quiet, she looks up at me with those violet eyes—bright with fever but somehow lucid. Like she's memorizing my face, deciding something important.

"You're a stubborn one," I whisper to her. "Good. You'll need that."

Hours pass, measured only by the changing shadows on the wall. I lose track of time,

focused only on the steady rhythm of movement. Left foot, right foot, slight bounce, turn. When Sephy's breathing finally deepens and her body relaxes fully against mine, I don't dare stop.

Dawn creeps in through the windows, painting the room in pale gold light. I'm still standing, knees locked to keep myself upright, when Aurelie stirs on the couch. She blinks awake, disoriented for a moment before her eyes find us.

"You're still up," she says, voice husky with sleep. "You've been standing all night?"

I shrug the shoulder not supporting Sephy's head. "She's sleeping now."

Aurelie rises, crossing to us with tentative steps. She places her palm gently against Sephy's forehead, then releases a shaky breath. "Her fever's broken."

The relief in her eyes mirrors something in my chest that I'm not ready to examine too closely. I continue swaying gently, the motion now as natural as breathing.

"You should have woken me," Aurelie chides softly. "Let me take turns."

"Wasn't necessary." My voice comes out rougher than intended, scraped raw from hours of low murmuring. "She knows your scent, your heartbeat. She would've woken fully if I'd handed her off."

Aurelie's gaze shifts from Sephy to my face, lingering there with an expression I can't quite decipher. "Thank you," she whispers.

I nod once, uncomfortable with her gratitude. Thanks isn't needed for doing what's necessary. For doing what's right.

Aurelie steps toward me, her movements fluid with that new mother's grace, eyes

fixed on Sephy.

"She looks deep enough in sleep now," she whispers, arms extending. "And she'll need to feed soon anyway."

I hesitate—not from reluctance to surrender the baby, but from the strange fear that the moment I let go, Sephy's fever might return. Ridiculous. I know better than to believe in such superstitions.

As I transfer Sephy to her mother's waiting arms, our hands brush—her fingers cool against my overheated skin. The contact, brief as it is, sends an unexpected jolt through my system. I attribute it to exhaustion, nothing more.

"Careful," I murmur, though Aurelie needs no instruction on handling her own child. "She's finally settled."

Aurelie cradles Sephy with practiced ease, her movements gentle but confident. "You did well with her," she says, her voice barely audible. "She trusts you."

I watch as she crosses to the crib I built, the dark purple-black wood gleaming softly in the morning light. She lays Sephy down with infinite care, tucking the blanket around her tiny form, her hand lingering a moment longer than necessary on the baby's chest—feeling the rise and fall, reassuring herself.

The night catches up with me all at once. My legs, locked in position for hours, suddenly refuse to hold my weight. I make it to the couch before my knees buckle, dropping onto the cushions with none of my usual control. Every muscle aches with the peculiar hollow pain of extended vigilance.

Aurelie turns at the sound of my collapse, concern flashing across her features. Without a word, she disappears into the kitchen, returning moments later with a glass

of water. She extends it toward me, and I take it, our fingers not quite touching this time.

The water is cool and sweet, washing away the grit in my throat. I drain the glass in three long swallows while Aurelie settles beside me on the couch. Not at the opposite end, maintaining the careful distance she's kept since arriving, but close enough that our shoulders touch. The contact is light—barely there—but in the quiet of early morning, it feels significant.

Neither of us speaks. The silence isn't uncomfortable, but weighted with something I can't name. Or perhaps don't want to.

I lean my head back, eyes closing briefly against the intrusion of morning sun through the windows. My body wants sleep, but my mind remains alert, hyperaware of Aurelie's proximity, of the subtle scent of meadowmint that clings to her hair, of the steady rhythm of her breathing.

"I don't want you to think I expect you to do all of this," she says finally, her voice breaking the silence. "You shouldn't have stayed up all night with her on your own."

I open my eyes, staring at the ceiling. "You needed the rest."

"And you don't?" A hint of challenge enters her tone.

I turn my head slightly to look at her. The morning light catches the auburn in her hair, bringing out copper highlights I hadn't noticed before. "I'm used to it."

"Going without sleep?"

"Standing guard."

Something shifts in her expression—understanding, perhaps. Or recognition. She knows what it is to remain vigilant, to prioritize another's safety above your own comfort. She's been doing it for months.

"Still," she says, quieter now, "you're not alone in this anymore."

The words hang between us, carrying more weight than their simple meaning suggests. I'm not sure how to respond, so I don't. Instead, I close my eyes again, feeling the solid warmth of her shoulder against mine, the surprising comfort of her presence.

The house settles around us, creaking softly with the warming day. Sephy's breathing remains deep and even from her crib. For the first time since bringing Aurelie and Sephy home, the atmosphere feels different—less like a temporary arrangement and more like... something else. Something I'm not ready to name.

Trust, maybe. The fragile beginning of it, at least.

Or perhaps something more.

Whatever it is, it settles between us like a third presence in the room—unspoken but undeniable. And for this moment, with exhaustion pulling at my limbs and Aurelie's shoulder warm against mine, I allow myself not to question it.

AURELIE

The patter of rain against glass fills the nursery with its calming rhythm as I fold the impossibly small blankets Rolfo provided for Sephy. Each soft square of fabric gets careful attention under my fingers—corners matched perfectly, edges pressed flat. These simple tasks ground me when my mind threatens to spiral with worry.

Despite everything that Rolfo has done, some days old fears and worries come creeping in. Years of learning to never trust anyone, to never let my guard down comes creeping back in, and right now, I'm having one of those days where I feel far too on edge.

Sephy sleeps peacefully in her cradle, her silver-blond curls catching what little light filters through the rain-streaked window. Her tiny chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm that I still find myself counting sometimes, just to make sure. Four days old and already she's become my entire world.

I tuck a finished blanket into the stack on the small oak dresser, smoothing my hand over the pile. The fabric is softer than anything I've ever owned. Most of my belongings during my time with Kaelith were practical, utilitarian—nothing meant for comfort or joy.

The floorboard creaks behind me, and I spin around, heart leaping into my throat—an instinct I can't seem to shake. But it's only Rolfo, leaning his broad frame against the door jamb, arms crossed over his chest. Unlike the other times someone has watched

me from a doorway, there's no hunger in his mercury-slitted eyes, just quiet thoughtfulness.

"How long have you been standing there?" I whisper, careful not to wake Sephy.

He doesn't answer immediately, just holds my gaze with that steady silver stare. Where most would look away when caught staring, Rolfo doesn't. Instead, he pushes off from the doorframe and crosses the room in two long strides. Up close, the scent of rain clings to him—he must have been outside earlier.

"Long enough to see you've folded those same blankets three times now." His voice is low, rumbling, but gentle in a way that still surprises me coming from someone his size.

I glance down at my hands, only now realizing they're trembling slightly from exhaustion.

"Have I?" I try to laugh it off, but it comes out thin and unconvincing. "I just want everything to be perfect for her."

Rolfo's rough fingers close gently around my wrist, stopping my hands from reaching for another blanket. His touch is careful, barely there, as if he knows how easily I startle.

"Come on," he says, guiding me toward the door with the lightest pressure. "You need a break."

"But I need to?—"

"Whatever it is, it can wait." He gestures toward Sephy. "She's not going anywhere for a while."

I hesitate, glancing back at my sleeping daughter. I've barely let her out of my sight since she was born.

"She's safe here," Rolfo adds, reading my thoughts with unnerving accuracy. "You both are."

The words hit me with unexpected force. I follow him into the hallway, leaving the nursery door cracked so I can hear if Sephy wakes.

"I don't know how to do this," I confess, the words spilling out of me. "I've never had..."

"Had what?" he prompts when I trail off.

"A safe place to land." My voice cracks on the last word. "Somewhere I can just... breathe without looking over my shoulder."

Rolfo's expression softens, the hard lines of his face rearranging into something I'm still getting used to—concern without expectation.

"You do now." He says it definitively, as if stating an obvious fact rather than making a promise. "For as long as you need it."

His silver eyes hold mine, unflinching and honest. There's no hidden meaning to decode, no trap to anticipate. Just the simple truth of his words hanging between us.

"Why?" I ask, the question that's been burning in me since I woke up in his home. "Why help us?"

Rolfo's jaw tightens momentarily, a flash of something darker crossing his features before he controls it.

"Because I couldn't—" He stops, recalibrates. "Because you deserve better than what happened to you. Both of you do."

Rolfo leads me into the main room, his large hand still barely touching my elbow as if afraid I'll bolt. I want to tell him I'm done running—my body still aches from months of desperate flight—but the words stick in my throat. The room glows with amber light from the fireplace, dancing shadows across the worn furniture that feels more like home than any gilded cage I've known.

Outside, thunder cracks across the sky like a whip—a sound that makes me flinch despite myself. Rolfo notices but doesn't comment as he gestures for me to take the overstuffed chair nearest the fire.

"Sit. I'll make tea."

Before I can protest, he's moved to the kitchen space. I pull my legs up beneath me, wrapping my arms around myself. The dress I'm wearing is one Ada brought over—simple, comfortable, the soft gray fabric falling to my ankles. I rub the material between my fingers, grounding myself in its texture while watching Rolfo move with surprising grace for someone his size.

He returns with two steaming mugs, handing me one before settling his massive frame onto the couch across from me. The cushions sink beneath his weight, but he somehow manages to look both relaxed and alert—a warrior at rest but never truly off guard. His silver eyes catch the firelight, making them look almost molten.

"Storm's getting worse," he observes, his gaze shifting to the window where rain lashes against the glass like tiny desperate fists.

"I like it," I admit softly. "The rain, I mean. Where—" I swallow hard. "Where he kept me, there were no windows."

Rolfo's knuckles whiten around his mug, but his face remains neutral. I've noticed this about him—the way he controls his reactions to my scattered revelations about life with Kaelith. Never pity, just a contained rage on my behalf that somehow doesn't frighten me.

We sit in silence for a while, the crackling fire and drumming rain filling the space between us. There's a tension in the air that has nothing to do with my past and everything to do with his proximity. I'm not blind—Rolfo is handsome in a rugged, dangerous way that should send me running. Instead, I find myself noticing the curve of his jaw, the breadth of his shoulders, the way his black hair falls across his forehead when he's focused on something.

But attraction is a luxury I can't afford. Not with Kaelith still searching, not with Sephy depending on me, not with the scars still fresh beneath my skin.

Lightning flashes, illuminating the room in stark white for an instant. In that flash, I catch something in Rolfo's expression—a naked vulnerability quickly masked by the returning shadows.

He sets his mug down with deliberate care. "You said you didn't know I had a sister. I never talk about her."

I'm not sure what memories have brought her back up, but I have to admit I am curious. So I lean forward, listening.

His voice is tight but steady. "Her name was Mara."

Was . The past tense hits me like a physical blow. Even though I knew she was gone, there's so much pain in the words.

"She was younger than me by six years. Bright, stubborn." A ghost of a smile touches

his lips before vanishing. "Like you, in some ways."

My fingers find the hem of my dress, twisting the fabric as I listen.

"A noble took a liking to her. Like Kaelith did with you." His jaw works beneath his skin. "Used her, got her pregnant. But her body wasn't handling it well. By the time I found out..." His voice drops, becoming a rough whisper. "Their baby died in childbirth, and he left her on my doorstep, abandoned her when she couldn't give him what he wanted. I was too late to save her."

His jaw works, and I feel the need to lean forward to touch him, comfort him. But I don't. Even if his pain reaches into my chest and wraps around my heart. Even if I've been growing close to this demon when I know I shouldn't.

Even if I can't stop staring at how handsome he is and marveling over how kind and caring and thoughtful when I should never get this close to a demon.

The confession hangs between us, heavy as lead. My throat works, struggling to find words adequate for such grief.

"I've been trying to make up for that failure ever since," he continues, silver eyes meeting mine, unflinching despite the pain radiating from them. "Not a day goes by when I don't think about her."

"Is that why you wanted to help me?" My heart pounds against my ribs, understanding blooming like blood in water.

His large hands spread open, palms up in a gesture of raw honesty. "I couldn't save her. But you and Sephy?—"

Thunder crashes again, closer this time, but I barely notice. Everything suddenly

makes sense—his immediate help, his fierce protectiveness, the nightmares I sometimes hear from his room down the hall.

The confession hangs between us, raw and painful and honest in a way that cracks something open inside me. For the first time since I arrived here, I feel a rush of certainty—that this connection isn't just my imagination, that the safety I've found here isn't temporary or conditional.

I set my mug down on the small table beside me, my hands trembling. Without its warmth to focus on, my fingers knot together in my lap. He gave me a truth so I should give him one of my own.

"Kaelith claimed me when I was nine." The words scrape my throat like glass, but I force them out. Once the first sentence breaks free, the rest follow in a flood. "Not... not like that, not at first. I was just a servant to fetch his things, clean his chambers."

Rolfo's expression doesn't change, but his eyes—those mercury eyes that miss nothing—darken slightly.

"When I turned fourteen, everything changed. He—" My voice falters, the memories crowding in like shadows. "He started using me. Said I'd been bred for his pleasure, that I should be grateful he waited at all."

The fire pops, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. Outside, the rain intensifies, a curtain of sound that feels like protection—no one could hear my confession but the man sitting across from me.

"For years, I just... endured it. What else could I do? He kept me locked in his chambers unless I was serving at special functions. There were enchantments on every door, every window." I swallow hard, tasting bile. "When I became pregnant, I thought he'd be furious. Instead, he seemed... pleased. Started talking about how

powerful his blood was, how valuable a half-demon child would be."

Lightning flashes again, illuminating Rolfo's face. His jaw is tight, a muscle working in his cheek, but his eyes remain fixed on mine—not with pity, but with a burning focus that somehow gives me courage to continue.

"Then I overheard him with one of his advisors. He was planning to take Sephy once she was born and..." The words stick in my throat. "And dispose of me. I wasn't worth keeping once I'd fulfilled my purpose."

Rolfo's hand clenches into a fist on his knee. "Bastard," he growls, the word rumbling from deep in his chest.

"That night, I stole a blade from his collection." My fingers trace an invisible line across my palm, remembering the cold weight of the metal. "I didn't have a plan. Just desperation. When the guards came to bring me my evening meal, I..." I close my eyes, seeing again the shock on their faces, the blood, my own hands shaking but never hesitating. "I cut through three of them. I'd never hurt anyone before, but suddenly I was... I was someone else."

The burning in my eyes surprises me—I thought I'd cried all my tears long ago.

"I ran as far as I could. I was trying to get off the continent, but it's hard to get passage when you have no money. So I was stuck moving from city to city, hiding in shadows, stealing food when I could. Until that night when I collapsed and you found me."

Rain streams down the windows like tears. I can't look at Rolfo anymore, afraid of what I'll see in his face now that he knows the full truth of what I am—what I've done.

Instead of the disgust I expect, I feel the couch shift as he moves. Suddenly he's kneeling before me, his large frame somehow not imposing despite his proximity. Slowly, deliberately, he takes my hand in his. His palm is rough with calluses, warm against my perpetually cold fingers. His thumb traces gentle circles over my knuckles.

"You did what you had to do." His voice is soft but fierce. "To protect your daughter. To survive."

I look up then, meeting his gaze through the blur of unshed tears. The intimacy of the moment steals my breath—his face level with mine, the gentleness of his touch at odds with the power I know he possesses.

"I killed people," I whisper.

"You saved yourself," he counters. "And Sephy."

His thumb continues its rhythmic motion across my hand, each circle seeming to erase a small piece of the shame I've carried. For the first time since my escape, I feel the wall I've built around myself beginning to crumble—not with fear, but with relief.

"I've spent every day since looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to find me." My voice steadies, drawing strength from Rolfo's unwavering presence. "He won't stop looking. Kaelith doesn't forgive, and he never forgets what he thinks belongs to him."

Rolfo's fingers tighten slightly around mine, protective.

"Let him try," he says, the words simple but weighted with promise.

Another crack of thunder shakes the house, but I don't flinch this time. In this

moment, with rain drumming against the roof and Rolfo's hand anchoring mine, I feel something I'd forgotten existed—not just safety, but connection. Something raw and real stretching between us, built on shared grief and understanding.

ROLFO

I'm standing by the window, Sephy tucked in the crook of my arm, when I hear the distinctive creak of my front door. My hand instinctively reaches toward the blade at my hip before the familiar scent hits me—rain-soaked leather and that distinct metallic polish Dezoth uses on his equipment.

"Didn't expect for you to come by today" I say without turning, my attention focused on the tiny bundle against my chest. Sephy's breathing is steady, her silver-blond wisps tickling my bare forearm.

The door closes with a soft click. Boot steps approach, measured and deliberate as always.

"Reports came in about unusual activity near the merchant district." Dezoth's voice fills the room, deep and controlled. "Thought I'd check if you'd heard anything before I headed there."

I turn finally, finding him standing ramrod straight just beyond the threshold to my living room. Rain glistens on his obsidian hair, drops still clinging to the shoulders of his guard-issue coat. Even off-duty, he carries himself like he's perpetually on parade—shoulders squared, chin slightly elevated. Only his golden eyes betray anything beyond duty, flicking down to the infant in my arms.

"Nothing on my end," I shrug. "Aurelie's resting, so I've been here all day."

Dezoth has been keeping an eye out for anyone looking for Aurelie, and I've appreciated his discretion through this.

"She seems healthy," he observes, taking a half-step closer. "Ada says she's doing well."

Something shifts in his expression, a softening so subtle most wouldn't catch it. But I've worked alongside Dezoth long enough to read the microscopic changes in his demeanor. There's a story there—one he's never shared fully, though rumors circle the barracks about a human woman from his past.

I nod, feeling oddly protective in a way that feels foreign yet instinctual. Sephy stirs against me, making that soft cooing sound that does strange things to my chest. He may be great with Rose, but he's never been around an infant before.

"Would you like to hold her?" The question surprises even me. Dezoth isn't exactly known for his warm and cuddly personality. In fact, I've seen him make new recruits nearly piss themselves with just a look. But I've also seen him host sparkle tea parties with his little girl.

He hesitates, golden eyes unreadable. Then he extends his hands, the ritual markings on his forearms shifting as he removes his gloves and tucks them into his belt.

"She's not as fragile as she looks," I say, carefully transferring her small form into his waiting hands.

Dezoth accepts her with surprising gentleness, large hands cradling her tiny body with practiced ease. He rocks her once, twice, his expression transforming in a way I've never witnessed before. The hard lines around his eyes soften, and something almost like longing flashes across his features before disappearing behind his usual mask.

"She has demon blood," he murmurs, one finger ghosting over her delicate cheek. "Strong, from the feel of it."

"That's what Ada says. Thinks her father must be high-ranking."

Dezoth's eyes narrow slightly. "High enough to come looking for them both."

I nod, watching him with the baby. And I see it in the way he holds her, in the careful movement as he adjusts her blanket. No one holds an infant like that without practice or memory.

But I remember how Dezoth lost a child. How he knows the pain and grief I harbor and still he took in Ada and Rose. He was always meant to be a father and now he has a sweet daughter who covers everything in glitter.

Sephy squirms in his arms, tiny fists emerging from her swaddling. One catches on Dezoth's silver cord, tugging it loose. His hair falls forward, partially obscuring his face as he looks down at her.

"She has your number already," I say, the corner of my mouth lifting.

"Smart girl." Something that might almost be a smile touches his lips. "Takes after her mother in that regard."

The mention of Aurelie makes me glance toward the hallway where she sleeps. Ever since the other night when we admitted our pasts, there's been a new level of understanding between us.

And more tension than I can handle. I've felt protective over Aurelie since I found her. But more and more often, I find myself wanting to touch her, even finding reasons to. She's beautiful in a way I can't stop thinking about, and guilt often fills me

when I do. That's not why she's here.

"How long do you plan to keep them here?" Dezoth asks, his voice lowered. His words only remind me how wrong my thoughts are.

"As long as they need."

Dezoth gives me a knowing look. One that reminds me how he said the same thing about the woman who is now his mate.

"I think we should step outside," I say quietly, nodding toward the door. "Don't want to wake her if she's still sleeping."

Dezoth follows my lead without question, transferring Sephy back to my arms with careful movements. The weight of her in my arms settles something in me—a feeling I'm still getting used to.

On the porch, the afternoon air hangs heavy with moisture from the earlier rain. I lean against the railing, cradling Sephy while looking out toward the dense line of trees that marks the edge of my property. Their dark silhouettes stand like sentinels against the permanently red sky of Ikoth.

"Her master was Kaelith Shadowfall," I say, my voice low despite being outside. The name tastes foul on my tongue. "Aurelie's been his... property since she was nine. Started using her when she turned fourteen."

Dezoth's jaw tightens, golden eyes narrowing to predatory slits. "The son of Councilor Shadowfall." Not a question.

"The same. High commander of the southern defense forces."

"I've crossed paths with him. He's... politically connected."

I run a thumb gently over Sephy's cheek as she sleeps, marveling at how someone so small could weigh so heavily on my conscience. "He was going to kill Aurelie. Take Sephy and dispose of her." The words taste like ash on my tongue.

"And you think that he still plans that?"

"I think now we know he has resources and is coming after them." I turn to face Dezoth fully. "He has his men posing as concerned relatives, searching the human quarters. Three days ago, they extended the search to the merchant district."

"Moving outward in a spiral pattern," Dezoth observes. "Systematic. Military."

"He knows what he's doing. Worse, he has friends in every level of command." I shift my weight, feeling the aged wood creak beneath my boots. "If he finds her?—"

"He'll hurt them both." Dezoth's eyes flick down to Sephy.

"Demon blood. She'd be a prize, not just property." The thought makes my grip tighten instinctively before I force myself to relax. "Powerful bloodlines have been known to manifest early in mixed offspring."

Dezoth turns to face the forest, placing his hands on the railing. His ritual markings catch the dim light—symbols of mastery, of status. Status that could be useful.

"I've been watching his movements," he says after a pause. "His unit rotates to border duty in three days. He'll be gone for a standard cycle—twenty days."

I raise an eyebrow. "You've been tracking him?"

"I track all potential threats." His tone makes it clear this is nothing special, but I know better. Dezoth doesn't waste time on meaningless surveillance.

"I can't hide them forever. Sooner or later, he'll expand the search this far."

Dezoth's knuckles whiten against the railing. "Then we make sure he doesn't."

The words hang between us—not a promise or bravado, but a simple statement of fact. Like a weather report or duty assignment. His certainty startles me.

"You hardly know them," I say, watching his profile.

"I know you." He turns, meeting my eyes with that unnerving directness he's known for. "That's enough."

Something tight in my chest loosens at his words. I've spent my life surrounded by cruelty and indifference, and yet somehow I've found myself in the company of demons who understand loyalty. Who understand me.

We head back inside, the conversation settling between us with the weight of a blood oath. Sephy stirs in my arms, tiny eyelids fluttering but not opening.

I step into the main room and freeze. Aurelie stands in the kitchen doorway, hair loose around her shoulders, wearing one of my old shirts that hangs past her knees. She looks better than she did even yesterday—some color returning to her cheeks, her hazel eyes more alert.

Dezoth notices her too, his posture shifting subtly. Not threatening, but not relaxed either. They've never formally met.

"You must be Captain Blackwood," she says, voice soft but steady. "Ada mentioned

you."

I cross to her, suddenly aware of the contrast—Sephy in my arms, Dezoth's intimidating presence behind me, and Aurelie looking both fragile and fierce in the doorway.

"Dezoth came to check on things," I explain, transferring Sephy to her with an almost reluctant gentleness.

Aurelie takes her daughter, eyes never leaving Dezoth. I recognize the look—the calculation of threat, the assessment of danger. It's how prey animals watch predators, determining if flight is necessary.

Dezoth inclines his head in greeting. "Miss Morvain."

Her eyes widen slightly at the use of her surname.

"Ada has told me about you and your daughter. I want to assure you that we all just want to help you."

Dezoth turns to me then, and something passes between us—a look that says more than words could manage. I recognize it from battlefields and alleyway skirmishes, from the moments when your life depends on another's loyalty. There's no speech. No lecture. Just that look—a silent agreement between old soldiers.

If this is my path now, he will stand by me. As simple and complicated as that.

"I should return to my duties," he says, already moving toward the door. "My sister mentioned bringing Rose by tomorrow. She's been asking about the baby."

After he's gone, Aurelie looks at me, questions filling her eyes.

"Demons looking out for demons," I say with a half-smile. "Family means more than blood around here."

AURELIE

My nipples feel like they're on fire, the pain radiating across my chest in angry waves. Every tiny movement Sephy makes at my breast sends fresh agony through me. The midday sun filters through the gauzy curtains of my bedroom—Rolfo's guest room, I remind myself—casting everything in a soft, hazy light that feels at odds with the sharp reality of my discomfort.

"Breathe through it," Ada murmurs, kneeling beside the bed. Her honey-blond braid hangs over one shoulder as she carefully adjusts the damp compress against my inflamed skin.

I wince, biting back tears that threaten to spill. "I didn't know it would hurt this much," I whisper, trying not to disturb Sephy who has finally, mercifully fallen asleep after her feeding. "No one ever told me."

Ada's warm brown eyes meet mine, understanding reflected in their depths. "No one tells women many things about motherhood." Her fingers are cool and gentle as they work. "It's like a secret society you only get to join once you're already trapped inside."

I manage a weak laugh that turns into a grimace. "Some welcome party."

"The pain won't last forever," Ada says, reaching into a small satchel she brought. "Though I know that's little comfort when you're in the middle of it."

The weeks since Sephy's birth have been a blur of contradictions—overwhelming joy and crushing exhaustion, fierce love and raw, physical pain. The latter has been a humbling surprise. I'd endured Kaelith's abuse for years, thought myself familiar with all varieties of suffering, but this is different—a pain tied to nurturing life rather than surviving cruelty.

"I brought something that should help." Ada pulls out a small clay pot sealed with beeswax. Her movements are efficient but never rushed, carrying the quiet dignity I've come to associate with her. "An herbal salve I make myself. Marshleaf and goldroot with queen's honey."

When she removes the compress, the air hitting my skin makes me hiss between clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry," she says, her face creasing with empathy. "This will feel cool at first, then warm."

I nod, gripping the edge of the blanket as she carefully applies the salve. It smells earthy and sweet, with something minty cutting through. The immediate cooling sensation is blissful, and I exhale slowly.

"Where did you learn to make this?" I ask, desperate for conversation to distract from my discomfort.

Ada's lips curve slightly. "My mother taught me some, but mostly I learned while running." Her fingers move with practiced precision. "When medicine is too expensive or too dangerous to buy openly, you learn to find it in the woods, in the weeds that grow between cobblestones."

I study her face, the quiet strength there. Though we've known each other only weeks, I feel a kinship with this woman who is also running, also protecting a child.

"Thank you," I whisper, reaching out to squeeze her hand with mine. "For everything. For helping bring Sephy into the world. For teaching me... when I have no idea what I'm doing."

Ada returns the pressure of my fingers. "We're all just figuring it out as we go." She tucks a strand of my auburn hair behind my ear with a gentleness that makes my throat tighten. "Besides, you're doing beautifully."

"It doesn't feel beautiful," I confess, glancing down at my sleeping daughter, her tiny face peaceful against my breast. "It feels terrifying. Every day I wake up afraid—that he'll find us, that I'll fail her somehow."

"Fear means you care," Ada says simply. "But you don't have to do this alone. That's what I'm here to remind you."

The salve begins warming now, spreading relief through my abused skin. Ada helps me shift Sephy to her makeshift cradle, then shows me how to apply soft cloths between my skin and my clothing.

"The first weeks are the hardest," she assures me, her hands steady and sure. "Your body is healing from birth, learning to feed her, all while you're not sleeping."

"Did it hurt like this for you? With Rose?" I ask.

A shadow passes across Ada's face. "Yes. But differently. I was..." She pauses, searching for words. "I was on the run the whole time."

The unspoken understanding passes between us—the knowledge of what it means to be owned, to have your body claimed by another. I reach for her hand again, a silent acknowledgment.

"You're free now," I say softly. "We both are."

Ada's smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. "We're getting there."

Once Ada finishes with the salve, I feel almost human again. The relief spreads through my chest like a cool breath, and I find myself able to straighten my shoulders without wincing for the first time in days.

"Thank you," I say, gingerly adjusting my loose shirt. "I was beginning to think I'd never find comfort again."

Ada tucks the small pot of salve into my hands. "Keep this. Apply it after each feeding." She glances toward the window where sunlight streams in vibrant red hues—the eternal crimson sky of Ikoth casting its glow across the room. "The air today is less humid than usual. Would you like to sit outside for a while? Fresh air helps heal both body and spirit."

The suggestion startles me. Since arriving at Rolfo's home, I've barely left this room, much less ventured outdoors. Fear prickles at the base of my spine—Kaelith's spies could be anywhere.

Ada seems to read my hesitation. "The back porch. It's private, fenced in. Rose and I sit there often when we visit."

The idea of walls on three sides and a fence offers enough security that I find myself nodding. "Sephy's finally asleep. I suppose a few minutes couldn't hurt."

"I'll make tea," Ada says, already moving toward the door. "Do you need help?"

I shake my head, my pride still intact despite everything else I've lost. "I can manage." My chest is sore but I get around fine.

By the time I make it to the back porch—Sephy peacefully sleeping down the hall where I left both doors open so I can hear her—Ada has already arranged cushions on the wide bench that overlooks the small yard. Steam rises from an earthenware pot, and the scent of meadowmint fills the air.

"Here," she says, offering a worn quilt. "The breeze can be deceptive."

I settle myself cross-legged on the bench, tucking the blanket around my legs. The quilt smells of woodsmoke and something else—something distinctly Rolfo. I try not to dwell on the comforting nature of that scent.

Ada pours tea into two chipped cups. "It's not fancy, but it's hot."

"Fancy is overrated," I say, accepting the cup. The warmth seeps into my palms. "I'd rather have honest than ornate."

We sit in companionable silence for a moment, watching the strange, purplish vines that crawl up the fence post sway in the breeze. A thalivern flutters past, its four iridescent wings catching the crimson sunlight.

"Did you hear that little snuffling sound Sephy made in her sleep last night?" I find myself asking, surprised by my own desire to speak of something so small, so normal. "It was like a tiny dreaming kilmar."

Ada's face softens. "Rose used to make a similar sound. Like she was having important conversations in her dreams."

"What does she dream about now?" I ask.

"Flowers, mostly. And stories." Ada's smile is gentle, maternal in a way that makes my chest ache with recognition. "She collects them—both the flowers and the

stories."

"I'd like to meet her sometime." The words slip out before I can stop them, revealing a hope I hadn't admitted even to myself—that we might stay, that this fragile safety might hold.

"She'd like that too. She's been asking about 'the baby and the lady' I keep going to see." Ada sips her tea, eyes crinkling. "She's good with secrets. She knows not to mention you outside our conversations."

I nod, grateful. "Smart girl."

"Survival makes children grow up quickly," Ada says, a thread of old sorrow weaving through her words.

"Too quickly," I agree, glancing at Sephy's bassinet. "I keep wondering what kind of world I've brought her into."

"The only one we have," Ada replies pragmatically. "And we make it better by surviving in it. By finding moments like this."

We talk then—not of men or demons or the traumas that drove us to this porch. Instead, we speak of tiny joys: the way Sephy's fingers curl around mine when she feeds, how Rose insists on naming every plant in Ada's small garden, the taste of fresh bread from the market stall that Ada swears makes the best goddess hearts in the city.

It's a slow-building intimacy, this conversation. A sisterhood forming not through blood, but through survival. Through the shared language of women who have seen darkness and still choose to notice beauty.

The shadows lengthen across the porch, and Ada stands reluctantly. "I should go. Rose will be waiting, and Rolfo mentioned he'd be back from his patrol soon."

I walk her to the front door, Sephy nestled against my shoulder, half-afraid this tenuous connection will vanish once she leaves.

At the threshold, Ada turns and does something unexpected—she pulls me into a hug. I stiffen, the physical contact so foreign it feels almost like an assault. But then, as her arms remain gentle and steady around me, I exhale and lean in, allowing myself this moment of human connection.

"You can trust him," Ada says quietly as she pulls away. "Rolfo. He doesn't say much, but he means everything he does."

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asks, already stepping into the dying light of day.

"Please," I manage.

I stand in the doorway long after she's gone, looking down at Sephy in my arms, my heart tangled in a hundred threads I don't know how to undo. Trust. Such a small word for such an impossible thing.

AURELIE

I jolt from deep sleep to full alert at the first wail. My body responds before my mind catches up—maternal instinct overriding exhaustion. The high-pitched cry pierces the quiet night, slicing through the darkness like a knife.

"I'm coming, Sephy," I mumble, throwing the covers off and stumbling toward the nursery, my feet clumsy with sleep.

But when I reach the doorway, I freeze. Rolfo's broad silhouette is already bent over the cradle, his movements gentle despite his size. He lifts Sephy with a care that contradicts everything I've ever known about demon men.

It's not the first time I've found him in here tending to her, but each time, it melts something in my chest. Each time I watch them together, it lowers my walls a little further.

"There we go, little one," he murmurs, voice low and soothing. "I know, I know. It's terrible being hungry, isn't it?"

I press myself against the doorframe, watching as he cradles my daughter against his chest. She looks impossibly tiny in his arms, her silvery-blond curls catching the faint glow from the hearth. Her cries soften to hiccuping whimpers as Rolfo moves across the room with practiced ease.

"Let's get you something to eat," he continues, speaking to her as though she understands every word. "Your mama needs rest. Growing a person is hard work, you know."

My hand drifts to my still-tender abdomen at his words. He doesn't know I'm here, watching this midnight ritual unfold. There's something intimate and vulnerable about seeing this massive, scarred demon guardsman tending to my infant with such tenderness.

Rolfo retrieves a bottle from beside the hearth, where he must have been warming it. He tests a drop against his wrist, nods once in satisfaction, then settles into the rocking chair. The chair I've sat in countless times these past weeks, struggling to find my footing as a mother.

"There you go," he whispers as Sephy latches onto the bottle. "That's the way."

The creak of the rocking chair fills the silence as Sephy drinks greedily. Rolfo hums something tuneless and low, a rumble more than a melody. My daughter's tiny hand reaches up, finding his finger and wrapping around it with that surprising strength newborns possess.

The ache that blooms in my chest has nothing to do with milk. It spreads through me, hot and painful and sweet all at once. I press my fingers to my lips to hold in whatever sound wants to escape.

I shouldn't want this. Shouldn't let myself imagine what it would be like if this were real—if we were truly a family rather than a convenient arrangement born of desperation. But in the soft glow of the hearth light, with Sephy's tiny hand wrapped around his massive finger, the fantasy is too seductive to resist.

Later, I sit at the kitchen table, turning the empty bottle in my hands. The glass is still

warm, a reminder of everything I cannot have. Across the room, Rolfo crouches beside the cradle I've moved to the main room for the night. His massive frame seems to fold in on itself as he leans close to whisper something to my sleeping daughter.

"What are you telling her?" I ask, surprising myself with the question.

He glances up, those mercury eyes catching the light. "Ancient demon lullabies. Very scary stuff." The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Nothing that would frighten a brave little warrior like her, though."

"She's barely three weeks old."

"Never too early to learn courage." He rises to his full height, stretching his back. "Or that she's safe."

Ada's voice echoes in my head: He means everything he does. The thought terrifies me almost as much as the realization that I've been staring at him too long, memorizing the lines of his face in the dim light.

I force myself to look away. "We'll be out of your hair soon," I whisper, more to convince myself than him. "I just need a little more strength, then we'll keep moving."

"Aurelie—"

"I have to," I cut him off, clutching the bottle like a shield. "It's not safe to stay in one place. It's not safe to—" Want this. Want you. I swallow the words before they can escape.

"Not safe to what?" He steps closer, and the air between us seems to thin.

"To forget what I'm running from," I finish, meeting his gaze despite the danger. "Kaelith won't stop looking. He never stops."

Rolfo's expression darkens. "Let him come."

"You don't know him."

"I know men like him." His voice hardens. "Men who think ownership gives them rights to another's soul."

I shake my head, setting the bottle down with a decisive click. "No one knows men like Kaelith. That's why they don't survive him."

The silence that follows feels heavy, pressing down on my shoulders like a physical weight. Sephy makes a soft sound in her sleep, drawing both our gazes to her perfect, peaceful face. My daughter—the one good thing to come from years of horror. I can't risk her. Can't risk what might happen if Kaelith finds us here.

Rolfo's mercury eyes flick back to me, studying me with that unnerving intensity that seems to strip away my defenses. The hearth fire casts half his face in shadow, highlighting the scar that bisects his eyebrow.

"Are you still planning to go?" he asks, his voice gentler than I've ever heard it. None of his usual gruffness remains—just genuine concern that makes my chest ache. "I'd understand," he adds after a moment. "If you did."

His question hangs between us. Simple words that carry impossible weight.

I open my mouth, but something catches in my throat. My fingers twist in the fabric of my nightdress, trying to anchor myself against the storm of conflicting emotions. Safety versus freedom. Risk versus certainty.

What if I stay? What if I let myself believe this could be real? What if I trust him and he's just like all the rest? What if I trust him and Kaelith finds us anyway?

I can't form the words. Can't commit to either path. The silence grows, becoming its own answer.

Rolfo nods slowly, as if my speechlessness tells him everything he needs to know. His shoulders square, his jaw sets, and for just a moment, I glimpse something pained and raw in his expression before his guardsman's mask slides back into place.

"Get some rest," he says, his voice rougher than before. "Morning comes early."

He moves past me, his massive frame carefully avoiding contact with mine in the narrow space. The heat of him radiates as he passes—that distinctive scent of leather and something smoky and uniquely him filling my senses for just a heartbeat before it's gone.

I stand frozen, watching him retreat down the hallway toward his bedroom. The soft click of his door closing echoes with finality.

My legs give way and I sink into the kitchen chair, trembling. Sephy sleeps on, oblivious to the chaos inside me. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold together the pieces that feel like they're breaking apart.

I don't want to go.

The realization hits me with the force of a physical blow. I don't want to leave this little house with its handmade nursery and creaky rocking chair. I don't want to run anymore. I want to stay here, where my daughter smiles in her sleep and a demon guardsman hums lullabies in the darkness.

"What's happening to me?" I whisper to the empty kitchen, pressing my palms against my eyes. Hot tears leak between my fingers despite my best efforts. Six months of running, of never letting myself want anything except survival, and now my traitorous heart decides to want the most dangerous thing of all.

I want him—this scarred, growling demon with gentle hands and silver eyes. This man who carved a crib from black-purple wood and learned to change diapers and warm bottles. Who stands between Sephy and the world like nothing could move him.

How am I supposed to trust this feeling? Every decision I've made since I was nine years old has been about survival. I don't know how to want things. I don't know how to trust that wanting won't destroy me.

My fingers brush over the mark on my upper arm through the thin fabric of my nightdress—Kaelith's brand, a permanent reminder that I belonged to someone else. That I was property, not a person.

The scar tissue feels rough beneath my fingertips. A map of everything I'm running from. Everything I fear becoming again.

15

ROLFO

I move methodically through the market square, watching. Always watching. It's what I do best—seeing things others miss. The morning crowd pulses around me, demons haggling over fresh dreelek and spiced meats, merchants calling their wares. I nod at Thorn, the fruit vendor who tips me off to pickpockets, and sidestep a group of matrons comparing fabric swatches from the eastern merchants.

The crowd parts briefly, and that's when I spot them.

Two figures in dark cloaks moving against the flow of traffic. Their hoods are pulled low, but I catch the gleam of obsidian horns beneath the fabric. My veteran eyes immediately catalog the weapons—too many for casual carry. The slight bulge at the hip where a crossbow rests. The twin daggers barely concealed at each thigh. The outline of throwing stars strapped to their forearms.

Bounty hunters.

My muscles tense automatically. I've spent enough years in the shadows to recognize predators when I see them. I drift closer, keeping my movements casual, just another guard on patrol. They've stopped a merchant—Grayvis, who sells herbs and tinctures.

"Human female," one says, his voice a low growl. "Auburn hair. Hazel eyes. Would've been heavily pregnant a few weeks back."

The cold that floods my veins has nothing to do with the morning air. They're looking for Aurelie.

Grayvis shakes his head. "Haven't seen any humans in months."

I duck behind a vendor's stall, keeping them in my sightline.

"What about a baby?" the second hunter asks. "Human infant, newborn. Seen one of those?"

Sephy. My hands curl into fists, claws digging into my palms. The pain centers me, keeps the rage at bay. If these bottom-feeders think they're getting anywhere near Aurelie or her daughter, they'll leave this market in pieces.

They move to the next merchant, asking the same questions. Kaelith must have put out the contract. The thought of that pompous bastard makes my blood boil. I've heard stories about him—none good.

I need backup. Not because I couldn't handle these two myself, but because I need this done officially. Clean. No loose ends that could lead back to Aurelie.

I slip through the crowd toward the guard headquarters at the edge of the market. Dezoth will be there. He might be a cold bastard most days, but he runs the most disciplined unit in the city, and we've worked together enough times for me to trust his discretion.

The headquarters buzzes with activity when I push through the doors. Guards coming off night shift, others preparing for patrol. I spot Dezoth immediately, his imposing frame bent over a map, silver cord glinting in his black hair.

"Captain," I say, approaching his table. "Got a situation in the market."

His golden eyes flick up, pupils narrowing as they adjust to the interior light. "Steelclaw." His voice is clipped, efficient. "What kind of situation?"

"Bounty hunters. Two of them. Armed heavily and asking about a human woman and infant. Outside their jurisdiction, making civilians uncomfortable."

I don't mention Aurelie by name. Don't need to. The slight stiffening in Dezoth's shoulders tells me he understands the implication.

"Show me," he says, straightening to his full height, a good couple inches taller than me.

We move through the streets with purpose. Guards part to let Dezoth through—the effect of earned respect. The market comes into view, and I spot the hunters still working their way through the stalls.

"There," I nod toward them. "The pair in cloaks."

Dezoth's eyes narrow. "Wait here."

"I will not," I growl.

His mouth twitches—the closest thing to amusement I've ever seen from him. "Fine. Flank right."

We approach the hunters from opposite sides. They sense Dezoth first—his authority radiates like heat. The shorter one turns, hand instinctively moving toward a weapon before freezing when he recognizes the captain's insignia.

"Gentlemen," Dezoth says, voice cold as mountain ice. "You appear to be heavily armed for a simple shopping trip."

"Official business," the taller one grunts.

"Not in my district, it isn't." Dezoth steps closer, towering over them. "I know every authorized bounty in Sarziroch. Yours isn't one of them."

"We have a contract?—"

"From outside the city," Dezoth cuts him off. "Which means you need clearance from the city guard before pursuing it here. Do you have such clearance?"

The hunters exchange glances. I position myself to block their escape route, letting my hand rest casually on my blade.

"Thought not," Dezoth continues. "You have one hour to leave the city or surrender your weapons and apply for proper authorization. Your choice."

The shorter hunter steps forward. "This is just a simple retrieval of stolen property?—"

My growl cuts through the air before I can stop it. People aren't property.

Dezoth gives me a sharp look before turning back to the hunters. "One hour. Starting now." The finality in his tone leaves no room for argument.

The hunters glare but back down, slinking away through the crowd. I watch them until they're out of sight.

"Come," Dezoth says, turning toward a quiet alley off the main square.

When we're alone, he faces me directly. "These are connected to your... house guest, I take it?"

I nod, tension still riding my shoulders. "Kaelith's men, has to be."

"I suspected as much." Dezoth crosses his arms. "Don't worry. They won't get anywhere near her or the child."

Dezoth's gaze lingers on the marketplace where the bounty hunters disappeared. "I'll have the city gates watched. They won't make it far if they ignore our warning."

"And Kaelith?" I ask, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

"Lord Shadowfall is... politically complicated." Dezoth's face gives away nothing, but I catch the subtle shift in his posture. "He sits on the royal council. We must tread carefully."

"I'd rather tread on his throat," I mutter.

A ghost of a smile crosses Dezoth's face. "Your subtlety remains unmatched, Steelclaw." He straightens his uniform. "I'll handle the official report. You should... attend to your household."

The implication is clear. Get back to Aurelie. Make sure she's safe.

"Appreciated," I nod, already turning to leave.

"Rolfo." His voice stops me. "Whatever you're involved in... be careful."

I don't respond, just offer a curt nod before disappearing into the crowd.

The sun has long since set when I finally make my way home. I've spent the day checking every possible avenue of approach to my house, marking security weaknesses, watching for anyone paying too much attention. My senses remain on

high alert, skin prickling with every shadow that moves in the periphery of my vision.

Standing outside my own door, I listen. All quiet. The scents are familiar—no strangers have been here. I unlock the door silently and move inside, scanning every corner before letting my shoulders relax even slightly.

The house is dim, lit only by the dying embers in the fireplace. My ears pick up Sephy's gentle breathing from the nursery—the even rhythm of deep sleep. I follow the sound of another heartbeat to the living room.

Aurelie lies curled on the couch, one arm tucked beneath her head, the other dangling over the edge. Her auburn hair spills across the cushion like liquid fire. She's stunning, that familiar rush of attraction automatically crushed beneath guilt.

Even in sleep, there's a slight furrow between her brows. She never fully relaxes, this one. Can't blame her.

I move silently across the room, crouching beside the couch. Up close, I can see the slight hollows beneath her eyes, the way her fingers twitch in her sleep. Fighting demons even now. I know what that's like.

Carefully, I brush my knuckle over her fingertips, unable to help myself when I'm always aching to touch her, a featherlight touch meant to wake her gently.

Her reaction is anything but gentle.

Aurelie bolts upright with a piercing scream, her body flailing wildly. Her eyes are open but seeing something else entirely, something horrific from the terror on her face.

"Blood," she gasps, rubbing frantically at her hands. "Hands—my hands—they're

covered?—"

I catch her wrists, keeping my grip firm but gentle. "Aurelie. It's Rolfo. You're safe. You're in my home."

Her eyes dart frantically, not seeing me yet, still trapped in whatever nightmare has its claws in her.

"Look at me," I say, lowering my voice to the soft rumble that seems to calm Sephy. "Find my eyes. I'm right here."

Her breathing hitches, then slowly steadies as recognition dawns. "Rolfo?"

The relief in her voice when she says my name tugs at something deep in my chest.

"Yes. You were dreaming." I release her wrists, giving her space. "You're safe."

She looks down at her hands, still rubbing them together. "I can feel it. The blood. I can't get it off."

Whatever haunts her dreams, it's as real to her as I am. I don't hesitate. I stand, lifting her into my arms in one smooth motion. I try not to notice how perfect she feels in my arms. She weighs nothing, this fierce survivor, this wounded warrior.

"What are you—?" she starts.

"Trust me," I murmur, carrying her down the hall to the washroom.

I set her gently on the edge of the bath and turn the copper taps, filling the tub with warm water. Steam rises between us as I kneel before her, taking her trembling hands in mine.

"The mind believes what it feels," I explain softly, dipping a soft cloth into the water. "So we give it something else to feel."

I wash each of her hands methodically, the cloth moving in slow circles over her palms, between her fingers, across her wrists. All the while, I murmur in the old tongue, ancient words my mother once used to chase away my childhood fears—words about safety, about peace, about the passing of shadows.

Slowly, the rigidity eases from her spine. Her hands stop trembling. Her breathing deepens.

"Better?" I ask, still holding her hands in the warm water.

She nods, not meeting my eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I?—"

"Never apologize for surviving," I cut her off gently. "Whatever you did to escape him, whatever you had to do—it kept you alive. It kept Sephy safe."

Her head drops forward until her forehead rests against my shoulder. I freeze, uncertain, then cautiously bring up a hand to rest between her shoulder blades. She's trembling again, but differently now—silent sobs that shake her entire frame.

I hold her, saying nothing, offering the only comfort I know how to give—presence. Steadiness. A port in the storm.

Later—I don't know how much later—we end up on the nursery floor beside Sephy's cradle. Aurelie's head rests on my chest, her breathing finally even. My arm curves protectively around her shoulders. I stare at the ceiling, listening to the twin rhythms of their heartbeats, these two humans who have somehow breached every defense I've built over decades.

Sleep comes slowly, creeping in at the edges of consciousness. But for the first time in years, I don't fight it. For tonight at least, everything that matters in the world is within the circle of my arms, safe and sound.

16

ROLFO

I can't sleep. My mind keeps replaying those bounty hunters in the market. Every time I close my eyes, I see their cloaked figures circling closer to this house—to Aurelie and Sephy. The thought has me jerking up every few minutes, casting protections and prowling the house to make sure they are safe.

Dawn breaks, painting my bedroom ceiling with soft golden light. I've made a decision during these restless hours. I roll out of bed, muscles stiff from tension rather than sleep. My bare feet make no sound on the floorboards as I check the nursery first.

Sephy sleeps peacefully, her tiny hands curled into fists above her head. Silver-blond curls frame her face like a halo. Something in my chest softens at the sight of her. How quickly I've grown attached to this little one. I reach down, my large hand hovering over her small form before I gently adjust her blanket.

The scent of meadowmint tea reaches me before I enter the kitchen. Aurelie stands at the counter, her back to me, auburn hair flowing loose down her back. She's wearing one of my old shirts again, the fabric hanging nearly to her knees. Something primal stirs in me at the sight—her wearing my clothes, in my kitchen, moving through the space as if she belongs here.

"Morning," I say, keeping my voice low.

She startles slightly but doesn't drop the mug. Progress. A week ago, she would have jumped a foot in the air.

"You're up early," she says, turning to face me.

The morning light catches the gold flecks in her hazel eyes. There are still shadows beneath them, but fewer than before. She's healing, slowly. She would be fine by now if she wasn't starved and feverish when I found her. But her body had so much more to recover from.

"Couldn't sleep," I admit, moving to pour myself some tea. "You?"

"Same." She cradles her mug between her palms. "Sephy actually slept through the night, but I kept waking up anyway."

I take a sip, studying her over the rim of my cup. Her shoulders are tense, her eyes constantly darting to the windows, the doors. She's still afraid. Still doesn't feel safe.

"I want to teach you something today," I say, setting my mug down. "If you're willing."

Her brow furrows. "Teach me what?"

"How to fight."

Her eyes widen. "I'm not... I don't think I could ever?—"

"Not to hurt others," I clarify quickly. "To protect yourself. And Sephy."

She sets her mug down, fingers tapping nervously against the ceramic. "I'm not strong like you."

"Strength isn't everything." I lean against the counter, giving her space. "It's about leverage, balance, knowing where to strike. Even someone small can incapacitate someone larger, if they know how."

She considers this, her teeth worrying at her bottom lip. The sight distracts me momentarily, my eyes lingering on her mouth before I force them away.

"Would it... help?" she asks finally. "If something happened?"

The uncertainty in her voice tears at me. She shouldn't have to ask these questions. Shouldn't have to fear what lurks around every corner.

"Yes," I say firmly. "And sometimes, just knowing you can defend yourself changes how you move through the world."

She meets my eyes then, something resolute forming in her gaze. "Alright. Show me."

The morning unfolds in golden tranquility. We set up in the backyard, private and enclosed by the tall wooden fence I built years ago. I position Sephy's portable bassinet in the shade of the porch, where she continues to sleep soundly.

I line up a row of empty jars and sticks along the edge of the yard, makeshift targets for later. Aurelie stands awkwardly in the middle of the grass, her arms wrapped around herself, uncertainty written in every line of her body.

"First," I say, moving to stand beside her, "stance is everything. Your feet need to be solid."

I demonstrate, positioning my feet shoulder-width apart, weight balanced evenly.

"Like this?" She mimics me, but her balance is off.

"Almost."

I hesitate, then gently place my hands on her hips to adjust her position. The contact burns through me, even through the fabric of her dress. I feel her tense beneath my touch, but she doesn't pull away.

"Feet a little wider," I murmur, my voice embarrassingly rough. "There. Feel how your weight is centered now?"

She nods, a flush spreading across her cheeks. "It feels... steadier."

"Good. Now, make a fist."

She curls her fingers inward, thumb tucked inside.

"Not like that," I say, reaching for her hand. "You'll break your thumb that way."

I uncurl her fingers and reshape them, positioning her thumb outside her fist. Her hand is so small in mine, soft and warm. My callused fingers dwarf hers, and I'm suddenly painfully aware of every place our skin touches.

"Wrist straight," I continue, forcing my voice to remain steady. "You want the force to travel through your arm, not bend back and hurt you."

She attempts a practice punch and winces immediately. "Ow."

"You're turning your wrist at the last second." I move behind her, aligning my arm with hers to demonstrate the proper form. "Like this."

My chest presses against her back, her body fitting perfectly against mine. Her scent fills my senses—meadowmint and something uniquely her, something that makes my heart pound against my ribs. I'm too close. This is too much.

I want all of it and I hate myself for it.

She follows my movement, punching the air with better form. "Like that?"

"Better," I manage, stepping back before I do something stupid like bury my face in her hair. "Again."

She practices the motion several more times, growing more confident with each attempt. There's something mesmerizing about watching her—this woman who's been treated as property learning to claim her power.

"Now try hitting one of those targets," I suggest, nodding toward the jars.

She approaches cautiously, assumes the stance I taught her, and swings. Her fist connects with the jar, sending it tumbling off the post. A startled laugh escapes her—a sound so rare and beautiful it catches me off guard.

"I did it!" Her face glows with genuine delight, and something in my chest constricts painfully.

"You did," I agree, unable to keep the warmth from my voice. "Try another one."

She moves to the next jar, swinging with more confidence. This time when she connects, she doesn't wince or pull back. Progress.

"Good," I say, and mean it. "Your form is improving already."

She turns to me, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. "This feels... I don't know. Different than I expected."

"How so?"

"I thought learning to fight would make me feel more afraid. More aware of the danger." She flexes her fingers, examining her knuckles. "But it's the opposite. It's like... reclaiming something."

Understanding washes through me. This isn't about turning her into a fighter—it was never about that. It's about giving her back what was stolen: control over her own body, her own safety.

"That's exactly what it should feel like," I tell her. "The goal isn't violence. It's choice. The power to decide what happens to you, as much as anyone can."

Her eyes shine with unshed tears, but they're different from the ones I've seen before. These aren't born of fear or pain.

"Thank you," she whispers.

The morning light catches in her hair, turning it to living flame. Sweat glistens on her collarbone where my shirt has slipped to reveal her skin. She's breathtaking—and completely oblivious to the effect she has on me.

I want her. The realization isn't new, but the intensity of it stuns me anew. I want to pull her against me, to taste her lips, to show her that touch can be gentle, respectful, wanted. The desire burns through me like Amerinth, and shame follows quick on its heels.

She's vulnerable. Traumatized. Seeking safety, not whatever confused tangle of

protection and desire I'm offering. I have no right to want her this way. No right to imagine her hands on me instead of those targets.

I clear my throat and step back, putting necessary distance between us. "Ready to try something a little more challenging?"

I walk Aurelie through a few more defensive moves—how to break a hold on her wrist, where to strike if someone grabs her from behind. By mid-morning, she's sweaty and breathing hard, but there's a new confidence to her movements that makes pride swell in my chest.

"That's enough for today," I say, noting how she's starting to favor her right side. "You're doing well, but we don't want to push too hard."

Sephy stirs in her bassinet, making those small grunting sounds that precede full-blown cries. Aurelie immediately moves toward her, motherly instinct overriding everything else.

"She probably needs changing," she says, lifting the baby into her arms. "And it's laundry day."

I nod, glad for the distraction from how her shirt clings to her skin with sweat. "I'll help."

An hour later, the backyard clothesline sways with freshly washed linens. The breeze catches them, making them billow like sails. It's a strangely domestic scene—one I never thought I'd be part of. My life before was solitary, focused on work and survival. Now there are baby clothes and soft blankets dancing in the wind beside my shirts.

Aurelie works methodically, shaking out tiny garments before hanging them. Sephy

lies in a basket beside her, gurgling happily at the patterns of light and shadow playing across her face. She's wearing only a diaper, her chubby legs kicking at the air.

I exit the back door carrying a stack of folded towels I'd taken from the previous load. "Where do you want these?"

"Just on the table is fine," Aurelie calls over her shoulder, not turning.

I move toward the small outdoor table we use for folding, when suddenly a rogue gust whips a drying sheet directly into my face. The fabric wraps around my head like a shroud, blinding me. I stumble, arms flailing, and drop one of the towels into the dirt.

"Mother—" I bite off the curse, remembering Sephy's presence just in time.

Just as I extract myself from the sheet, a tiny sneeze erupts from the basket. I look down to find Sephy staring up at me with wide violet eyes, a string of drool connecting her gummy smile to my now-damp shirt sleeve. Perfect timing.

"Betrayed," I mutter dryly, eyeing the infant with mock suspicion. "By my smallest housemate, no less."

The sound that breaks from Aurelie's throat startles us both—a full, unrestrained laugh that rings through the yard. It's musical, unrehearsed, and completely genuine. I turn to stare at her, towels forgotten.

Her head is thrown back, auburn hair catching the light. One hand presses against her stomach as if to contain her mirth. Her entire face has transformed—eyes crinkled at the corners, dimples appearing in her cheeks that I've never seen before. She looks younger. Unburdened.

Beautiful.

When she finally catches her breath, she meets my gaze. Something shifts in her expression as she studies me—surprise, maybe, at what she sees.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious.

"Nothing, it's just..." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and I swear I see something in her eyes as she studies me—something like longing, though I'm sure it is only wishful thinking. "I've never seen you smile like that before."

I hadn't realized I was smiling. "Like what?"

"Like you're not carrying the weight of everything." She lifts Sephy from the basket, cradling her against her chest. "You looked... happy."

The word hangs between us. Happy. Such a simple thing, yet it feels foreign on my tongue. When was the last time I felt that?

"Maybe I am," I admit quietly, picking up the dropped towel and dusting it off. "Right now, at least."

Her smile softens, turns intimate in a way that makes my chest ache. "Good. You deserve that."

She can't possibly know how those words land—like a blow and a caress simultaneously. No one has ever concerned themselves with what I deserve.

Later, I'm in the kitchen preparing dinner—nothing fancy, just a stew with dreelk and zynthra from the market. I've managed to acquire flour for bread, a luxury I rarely bother with when it's just me. But Aurelie mentioned once how much she missed

fresh bread, and the memory of her face when she said it was enough to send me searching through the market stalls.

I'm concentrating on kneading the dough when I hear her enter the kitchen, Sephy strapped to her chest in the sling I fashioned from an old shirt. The baby has fallen asleep, soft snores emanating from her tiny form. I can feel Aurelie's presence behind me, but she stays silent.

When I finally turn, curious, I find her pressed against the counter, lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

"What?" I ask, looking down at myself. Did I spill something?

A small giggle escapes her, quickly muffled by her hand. "You, um... you have flour..."

She gestures vaguely at her face. I reach up, feeling the telltale powder coating my cheek and forehead. Probably my nose too, based on her expression.

"Baking is messy business," I defend, trying to maintain my dignity while feeling increasingly ridiculous.

She loses the battle with her laughter then, shoulders shaking. "I'm sorry," she gasps. "You just look so... so..."

"Dignified?" I suggest dryly.

"Like a pastry ghost," she finishes, eyes dancing.

I shake my head, but I know that if I keep getting to hear her laugh, I'll do anything.

And maybe that should be concerning, but when it comes to these two, I'm starting to accept I'm already a goner.

AURELIE

The darkness crawls gently across Rolfo's house, pooling in the corners before spreading outward, consuming the daylight. I click on the nursery lamp, its soft glow creating a pocket of warmth that holds the night at bay.

Sephy fusses against my shoulder, her tiny lips pursed in drowsy protest. Her silvery-blond curls tickle my chin as I rock her, but her eyelids have grown heavy, fluttering like thalivern wings fighting against sleep.

"Someone's ready for her crib," I whisper, pressing my lips to her forehead.

Behind me, Rolfo's footsteps approach—quiet for such a large man, a hunter's tread that never fully disappears even in the safety of his own home.

"I can take her," he offers, his deep voice barely above a murmur.

I turn to find him watching us, silver eyes reflecting the lamplight. Something in his gaze makes my skin warm.

"She likes when you put her down," I admit, carefully transferring my daughter to his waiting arms.

His massive hands cradle Sephy with surprising tenderness, dwarfing her tiny form. She settles instantly against his broad chest, giving a contented sigh that melts

something inside me. Without hesitation, his deep voice drops into a humming melody—something ancient and wordless that vibrates through the quiet room.

I step back toward the doorway, leaning against the frame. This unlikely tableau—my daughter cradled against this scarred, powerful demon—has become the most natural sight in my world. This man who collected me from the gutter, who has asked nothing in return for his protection, who crafted a nursery with his bare hands.

Rolfo moves to the handmade crib, lowering Sephy with practiced care. His fingers trail along her cheek before tucking the small blanket around her. The purple-black wood of the crib gleams in the lamplight, polished smooth by his patient hands.

"Sleep well, little one," he whispers.

When he turns, he startles slightly, finding me still watching from the doorway. Our eyes lock across the dim room. Something electric passes between us, a current I've felt building for weeks. His silver eyes darken, pupils expanding in the low light.

I push away from the doorframe, my bare feet silent on the wooden floor as I cross to him. My pulse hammers in my throat, but my steps don't falter. I've faced monsters and survived. This—reaching for something I want—shouldn't terrify me so, yet my hands tremble as I lift them to his chest.

His breath catches, sharp and sudden. I rise onto my toes, one hand sliding up to his shoulder for balance. His skin radiates heat through the thin fabric of his shirt.

"Aurelie," he breathes, my name a question.

I answer by pressing my lips to his.

The kiss is soft, hesitant. A test of boundaries I've kept rigid since arriving. His lips

remain still beneath mine for a heartbeat, then another. Just as doubt begins to creep in, his large hand comes up to cup my face with impossible gentleness.

He steps backward, guiding us both from the nursery, his other hand finding the small of my back. In the hallway, illuminated only by ambient light spilling from other rooms, he pulls back. The loss of contact leaves me cold.

"You don't have to," he starts, voice rough with restraint. His fingers hover near my cheek without touching, as if afraid I'll shatter. "This isn't payment for anything. You owe me nothing."

I reach for his hand, intertwining our fingers, and guide it back to my face. His palm is calloused but warm against my skin.

"I want to," I tell him, my voice steady despite the riot in my chest. "I want...you."

His silver eyes search mine, looking for uncertainty or hesitation. I meet his gaze unwavering, letting him see the truth there. This is my choice—perhaps the first real choice I've made in years.

His hand finds mine, warm and steady as his fingers thread through mine. The simple touch ignites something primal within me—desire long suppressed beneath layers of fear and survival. Rolfo walks backward, leading me toward my bedroom—no, not my bedroom. His guest room. Yet in these weeks, it's become mine, filled with small traces of my existence. A hairbrush on the dresser. A shawl draped over the chair. The scent of the meadowmint tea I drink each night before bed.

His eyes never leave mine, silver pools reflecting questions, seeking permission with each step. I don't look away. Not even when my heart hammers against my ribs like a caged animal seeking freedom.

"You can change your mind," he murmurs as we cross the threshold. "At any point."

I shake my head. "I won't."

My back meets the edge of the bed, and I sit, drawing him down with me. The mattress dips beneath his weight. In the dim light filtering through the curtains, his features soften. The sharp angles of his face, usually set in stoic determination, now hold a vulnerability I've never witnessed.

"I'm not sure I deserve this," he whispers, his hand hovering above my cheek.

"You deserve everything," I counter, placing my palm against his chest where his heart beats strong and fast.

I lean forward, initiating our second kiss. This time, there's no hesitation from either of us. His lips move against mine, tender at first, then with growing hunger. His hand finally meets my face, calloused fingers cradling my jaw as if I'm made of glass.

I deepen the kiss, parting my lips in invitation. He responds with a low sound—half growl, half sigh—that vibrates through me. My fingers find the hem of his shirt, slipping beneath to touch the warm skin of his abdomen. Muscles tense beneath my touch.

"May I?" His fingers hover at the ties of my nightdress.

I nod, lifting my arms to help as he slowly draws the fabric upward. Cool air kisses my skin as the nightdress slides away, leaving me exposed in nothing but simple undergarments. A flicker of self-consciousness ripples through me. My body bears the marks of motherhood—stretch marks silvering my hips and breasts, the softness of my belly.

His eyes darken as they roam over me, not with disappointment but with reverence. "You're beautiful," he breathes, and the wonder in his voice makes me believe him.

Wanting to see him, I tug at his shirt. "Your turn."

He strips it off in one fluid motion, revealing a canvas of scars across his torso—stories written in flesh. He's gorgeous, all cut lines and signs of strength. I trace a particularly jagged line along his ribs, feeling the raised tissue beneath my fingertips.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"Not anymore." He captures my exploring hand, bringing it to his lips. "Nothing hurts when you touch me."

He lowers me to the bed, his body a warm weight above mine as he reclaims my mouth. His kiss deepens, and I open to him, tasting the sweetness of the amaranth he had with dinner. My hands map the planes of his back, the powerful muscles shifting beneath scarred skin.

His lips leave mine to trail down my neck, gentle kisses that send shivers cascading through me. When he reaches the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, I gasp, arching into him.

"Tell me what feels good," he murmurs against my skin. "I want to know every part of you."

"This," I breathe as his hand cups my breast through thin fabric. "Everything."

He removes my undergarments with careful reverence, each new inch of skin exposed met with gentle exploration. His silver eyes darken with desire, but his touch

remains worshipful. When he finally settles between my thighs, his breath hot against my center, he glances up, seeking permission once more.

I thread my fingers through his jet-black hair. "Please."

The first touch of his mouth against me draws a sound I barely recognize as my own. A keening, desperate noise that seems to please him as his silver eyes flick up to meet mine. His tongue traces patterns that make my toes curl, my back arch off the bed, my fingers clutching desperately at the sheets beneath me.

One large hand splays across my hip, keeping me steady as I writhe beneath his ministrations, pinning me gently but firmly to the mattress. His other hand joins his mouth, a finger slowly pressing inside me, then another, curling to find the spot that makes stars burst behind my eyes.

I gasp his name, trembling as he works me with a devotion I've never known before, thorough and attentive to every response of my body. Where I'd only known pain before, he brings pleasure so intense it feels like flying.

"Rolfo," I gasp, clutching at his shoulders. "I?—"

"Let go," he encourages, his voice a rumble against sensitive flesh. "I've got you."

I fracture beneath him, pleasure crashing through me in waves that leave me trembling. He works me through it, gentle but relentless, until I'm boneless and panting.

When he moves up my body, his expression is one of awe. "You're magnificent," he whispers, kissing me softly.

Afterward, we lie tangled in soft blankets, my head pillowed on his chest. His

heartbeat thuds steadily beneath my ear, a rhythm more soothing than any lullaby. His hand traces lazy patterns along my spine, raising pleasant shivers in its wake.

"Are you cold?" he asks, pulling the blanket higher around us.

"No," I murmur, pressing closer to his warmth. "I'm perfect."

For the first time since fleeing Kaelith, I feel whole. Not broken or used or scarred beyond repair, but wanted. Cherished. In Rolfo's arms, I am not a possession but a person deserving of tenderness.

I close my eyes, my body heavy with contentment. Not because I'm hiding from the world or from myself, but because for the first time in years, I feel safe enough to truly rest.

18

AURELIE

I wake before the dawn, my body programmed by years of servitude to rise with the first hint of light. But today, there's no fear propelling me from sleep—just the pleasant weight of Rolfo's arm draped across my waist, his breath warm against my neck.

For several heartbeats, I allow myself to simply exist in this cocoon of warmth. His hand splays protectively over my abdomen, large enough to span from hip to rib. I trace the scars on his forearm with feather-light touches, memorizing each ridge and valley.

He stirs behind me, pulling me closer until my back presses fully against his chest. "Morning," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep.

"Good morning," I whisper, surprised by how natural this feels—waking in his arms, sharing the first moments of day.

From the nursery, Sephy's soft cooing reaches us. Not crying yet, just announcing her presence to the world. Rolfo presses a kiss to my shoulder before pulling away.

"I'll get her," he offers.

I roll over, catching his wrist before he can leave. "Thank you." The words feel inadequate for everything I want to express—not just for retrieving my daughter, but

for all he's given us. Safety. Home. A chance at something I never thought possible.

His silver eyes soften as he leans down, pressing his lips to mine in a tender kiss that makes my toes curl beneath the blankets.

"For what?" he asks against my mouth.

"Everything."

Later, with morning chores complete and Sephy fed, Rolfo suggests a walk to a nearby glade. "The wildflowers are in bloom," he explains while securing a soft sling across his broad chest. "She should see them while they last."

I watch him carefully tuck Sephy into the sling, her tiny form nestled against his massive frame. Those hands that can crush bone and wield weapons with deadly precision adjust the fabric with such tenderness it makes my heart swell. She looks up at him with complete trust, her violet eyes blinking slowly.

"There we go, little one," he murmurs to her. "All set for an adventure."

The domesticity of it strikes me with unexpected force. This warrior demon, cooing softly to my infant daughter, preparing her for a morning walk as naturally as if he'd been doing it his entire life.

"What?" Rolfo catches me staring.

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. "Just... you're good with her."

He shrugs, but I catch the pleased glint in his eyes. "She makes it easy."

The path to the glade meanders through a sparse copse of trees behind Rolfo's home.

The morning air carries a sweet fragrance—blooming flowers mixed with the earthy scent of soil warmed by sunlight. I slip off my sandals halfway there, wanting to feel the soft grass beneath my feet.

"You'll hurt yourself," Rolfo cautions, eyeing a patch of rocks ahead.

I wiggle my toes in the dewy grass. "My feet are tougher than they look."

"Like the rest of you," he replies with a smile that transforms his entire face, softening the hard angles and battle-honed vigilance.

The hollow we reach opens before us like a secret—a natural depression in the land filled with wildflowers of every shade. Waves of color ripple in the gentle breeze—purples, yellows, whites, and blues. My breath catches at the unexpected beauty.

"It's protected on all sides," Rolfo explains, his free hand resting protectively on Sephy's back. "Safe. The flowers only last a few weeks each season."

I walk ahead, trailing my fingers through tall stems, feeling the different textures against my palm. Soft petals, sturdy stalks, feathery wisps—all dancing in the morning light. The freedom of it—of simply walking without fear, of exploring something beautiful—fills me with quiet joy.

A small stream cuts through one corner of the glade, water bubbling over smooth stones. I kneel beside it, cupping the cool water in my hands. The simple pleasure of it makes me smile.

"What are you thinking?" Rolfo calls from where he stands, giving me space while keeping watch.

I glance back over my shoulder. The sunlight catches his black hair, highlighting strands of silver I hadn't noticed before. Sephy's tiny fingers clench the fabric of his shirt, her head turned to track the movement of a thalivern. They make a picture I want to keep forever—strength and innocence, protection and vulnerability.

"I'm thinking that I never imagined this," I admit, letting the water trickle through my fingers. "Any of it."

I stand, brushing droplets from my hands. The sunlight warms my face and catches in my hair. For a moment, I close my eyes and simply breathe—taking in the scents of wildflowers, clean water, and fertile earth.

When I open them again, Rolfo is watching me with an intensity that sends warmth cascading through my body. His silver eyes track me with undisguised hunger, though he remains rooted in place, giving me the freedom to explore on my own terms.

"What?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious under his gaze.

"You look..." He pauses, searching for words. "Alive. Free."

The simple observation brings unexpected tears to my eyes. That's exactly how I feel—truly alive for perhaps the first time. Not merely surviving, but experiencing life with all its sensations and possibilities.

I walk back to him, my bare feet making no sound on the soft grass. He stands motionless, a guardian sentinel with our child against his heart. Something in my chest tugs painfully at the sight—a longing so profound it steals my breath.

This is the life I never thought I'd have. Not just safety or shelter, but this—a man who looks at me like I'm something precious, who holds my daughter with such care,

who wants me for myself and not what I can give him.

I stop before him, close enough to feel his warmth but not quite touching. "I never thought I could want again," I confess, my voice barely above a whisper. "After him, I thought that part of me was dead."

Rolfo's free hand lifts, hovering near my cheek without touching, giving me the choice. "And now?"

I lean into his palm, closing the distance between us. "Now I want everything."

I step closer to Rolfo, drawn by something deeper than desire. In the dappled light of the glade, with Sephy nestled against his chest, he looks like something from a dream I never dared to have.

"Everything?" he asks, his voice rough with emotion. His hand cups my cheek with a gentleness that belies his strength.

"Everything," I confirm, standing on tiptoe to press my lips to his.

The kiss is different from our earlier ones—not desperate or hungry, but tender. Affirming. His arm wraps around me, drawing me close until I'm pressed against both him and Sephy, our daughter sandwiched safely between us.

Sephy makes a soft gurgling sound, her tiny hand reaching up to pat my chin. I laugh against Rolfo's mouth, pulling back to look down at her. Her violet eyes are wide and curious, taking in our faces with that solemn expression that makes her seem older than her few weeks.

"I think she approves," Rolfo murmurs, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

I stroke her wispy silver-blond curls. "She's known what she wanted from the beginning. Wiser than her mother."

"Or maybe she just knows what she deserves." His words hang between us, loaded with meaning. "A family who chooses her. Who chooses each other."

Family. The word lodges in my throat, sweet and terrifying all at once. For so long, I've been alone—first in servitude, then in escape. Even carrying Sephy, I was isolated, fighting for us both against the world. The idea of belonging somewhere, to someone, by choice rather than force—it overwhelms me.

"Hey," Rolfo says softly, noticing my expression. "One day at a time, alright?"

I nod, grateful for his understanding. That's the miracle of him—he sees me, truly sees me, without demands or expectations.

"The sun's getting higher," I observe, looking at the shadows shortening around us. "We should head back before it gets too warm for her."

Rolfo nods, adjusting the sling to ensure Sephy is comfortable. We move slowly back through the glade, taking our time, savoring the morning and this newfound peace between us.

"I've been thinking," I venture as we navigate the narrow path back toward home.

"That sounds dangerous," he teases, ducking beneath a low-hanging branch.

I roll my eyes but can't suppress my smile. "I want to contribute more. Around the house, I mean. I can cook, and Ada's been teaching me about local plants for medicine."

"You don't have to earn your place, Aurelie," he says, suddenly serious. "You and Sephy, you're not—" He stops, searching for words.

"Not your burden?" I finish for him.

"Not my servant," he corrects. "I want you to heal."

My heart twists at the way he always puts me first.

"Still," I persist, needing him to understand. "I want to. Not because I feel obligated, but because I want to for you. With you."

His silver eyes darken with emotion. "You can do whatever you want, Aurelie. I'll always make sure you have that option."

We walk in companionable silence after that, the path narrowing until we have to move single file. As it widens again, our hands brush accidentally—his knuckles against my palm, a whisper of contact that sends electricity up my arm.

Our hands brush again, and this time I know it's deliberate on his part. He doesn't grab, doesn't assume, just offers the possibility. The choice remains mine. It's always like that with him, and I love that.

I think it's why I've started to fall for him. Because that's exactly what is happening. Even if I shouldn't—though I can't think of a reason why not anymore.

I look at his profile as we walk—the strong line of his jaw, the scar across his eyebrow, the unexpected gentleness in his mercury eyes as he checks on Sephy. This demon who found me dying in an alley. Who cut my daughter's cord. Who built her a nursery and rocked her through colicky nights.

This demon who looks at me like I'm something precious instead of something to be used.

Our fingers brush a third time, and I make my decision. I thread my fingers through his, feeling the calluses on his palms, the strength in his grip as he enfolds my hand in his.

We walk like that, hand in hand, hearts speaking what words cannot. No grand declarations needed. No promises made. Just the quiet acknowledgment that this—whatever it is growing between us—matters.

ROLFO

I move through the house like a shadow, quieter than most men my size have any right to be. It's a skill that's served me well in my work, but tonight it's about something simpler—checking on the smallest resident of my home.

The floorboards know me well enough not to creak as I approach the doorway to the nursery. The pale glow of the moonstone night lamp casts soft illumination across the handcrafted crib I'd spent weeks perfecting. I lean against the doorframe, just watching the gentle rise and fall of Sephy's tiny chest.

Even after weeks, it still strikes me as odd—this fierce protective instinct I have for a child who shares no blood with me. Her silver-blond curls catch the light as she shifts slightly, one tiny fist raised above her head in peaceful surrender to sleep.

I check the wards I've placed around the room—invisible lines of protection that would alert me to any threat long before it reached her. They hum with quiet power, undisturbed.

"Sleep well, little one," I whisper, so softly it's barely a breath.

Something pulls me back to check once more, though nothing's changed in the minute since I last looked. Old habits from too many nights standing guard, perhaps. Or something deeper I'm not ready to name.

"She's still sleeping, I promise."

The voice behind me sends a jolt through my spine that I haven't felt since my early days on patrol. I turn to find Aurelie leaning against the doorframe, her hair loose around her shoulders, catching the faint light from the windows. She's wearing one of my old shirts that I'd given her—it hangs to her thighs, making her look even smaller than she is.

"Force of habit," I reply, my voice rougher than intended in the quiet of the night.

Aurelie's eyes, those hazel depths with flecks of gold that seem to catch even the faintest light, meet mine. There's something different in them tonight—a clarity, a decision made.

"She's been sleeping through the night now." A simple observation that feels charged with something unspoken. "Almost like she knows we need the rest."

I can't help my small smile. "Smart kid."

The silence between us stretches, not uncomfortable but expectant. Aurelie pushes away from the doorframe and crosses to me, her bare feet silent against the floor. I should step back, create distance, remember all the reasons this is complicated.

I don't move an inch.

"Rolfo." Just my name on her lips, but it carries the weight of weeks of tension, of things unsaid.

"You should get some sleep," I offer weakly, even as every instinct tells me to reach for her.

Her smile then—gods, that smile will be the death of me. Soft, sleepy, but with an edge of determination that I've come to recognize when she's made up her mind about something.

"I don't want to sleep." Her hand reaches up, fingertips grazing my jaw with a touch so light I might have imagined it if not for the trail of fire it leaves on my skin.

Then she's on her toes, and her mouth finds mine. This isn't the hesitant exploration of before. This is Aurelie claiming something she wants, her lips pressed against mine with purpose.

I freeze for just a heartbeat before my body remembers how to respond. Her hands are at my shirt, pulling at the fabric with surprising strength.

"Are you sure?" I manage to whisper against her mouth.

"I've spent years not being allowed to choose," she breathes back, her fingers splaying across my chest. "This is my choice, Rolfo. You are my choice."

Something primal and possessive roars to life inside me. In one fluid motion, I scoop her into my arms. She weighs almost nothing, this fierce survivor who's somehow found her way into my home, my life.

"My room," I growl, more statement than question.

She nods, arms wrapping around my neck, face pressed against my throat. "Your room."

I carry her down the hallway, hyperaware of every point where her body touches mine. The warmth of her pressed against my chest, the tickle of her breath against my neck, the lingering scent of meadowmint from her evening tea.

My bedroom door is partially open. I nudge it with my foot, carrying her across the threshold like something precious. The moonlight spills through the window, painting silver streaks across my simple bed.

When I set her down, her arms don't release my neck. Instead, she pulls me down with her, our bodies meeting on the bed that has felt too large, too empty for longer than I care to admit.

"I want this," she whispers, her eyes never leaving mine. "I want you."

There's no hesitation now, not as her eager fingers tug at my shirt. I help her, pulling it over my head in one fluid motion. Her hands are immediately on my chest, tracing the ridges of old scars with a tenderness that makes my breath catch.

"Your turn," I murmur against her lips, and she lifts her arms in silent permission.

I peel away the nightshirt that's been driving me mad for weeks, my knuckles grazing the soft skin of her sides. The moonlight bathes her in silver, highlighting every curve, every mark that tells the story of what she's survived.

Her body bears the evidence of Sephy's birth—stretch marks silvering her belly, her breasts fuller than they might have been before. To me, they're not imperfections but badges of her strength, her resilience.

"You're beautiful," I whisper, meaning every syllable.

A flush spreads across her chest, up her neck to her cheeks. "Even with all these marks?"

"Especially with them." I lower my head, pressing my lips to the raised line that curves across her hip. "Every one of these tells me you're a survivor." My mouth

moves to another mark on her ribs. "That you're strong." I trail kisses up to the burn scar below her breast. "That you endured."

Her breath hitches. "Rolfo..."

I move lower, my hands gently spreading her thighs. The mark of ownership on her upper arm catches my eye, making something primal surge through me. I'll replace every memory of pain with pleasure. Every moment of fear with safety.

I kiss my way down her stomach, feeling her muscles tense beneath my lips. When I reach the apex of her thighs, I look up, meeting her wide-eyed gaze.

"Let me worship you," I growl, not truly a question but still waiting for her assent.

Her head falls back against the pillow, a breathless "Yes" escaping her lips.

I take my time, exploring her with my mouth, learning what makes her fingers tighten in my hair, what draws those soft, surprised moans from her throat. Her taste is intoxicating, her responses addictive. Each arch of her back, each shuddering breath is a victory.

"Please," she gasps, her hips rising to meet me. "I need you... all of you."

I rise above her, positioning myself between her thighs. "Look at me, Aurelie."

Her eyes find mine, hazy with desire but clear with certainty. I push forward slowly, watching her face as I enter her, gauging every flicker of expression.

"You feel..." Words fail me as her heat envelops me. It's so fucking perfect.

Her nails dig into my shoulders. "Don't stop," she breathes.

I establish a rhythm, slow and deliberate at first, learning the contours of her body from the inside. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper, demanding more. Who am I to deny her anything? She's been through so much, yet here she is, trusting me with her body, with her pleasure.

"Is this good?" I ask against her throat, increasing my pace. Her breath hitches, and I can feel her heart racing against my chest.

"Yes," she gasps, her hands mapping the muscles of my back, clinging to me like I'm her lifeline. "So good."

I shift my angle, searching for that spot that will make her see stars. When I find it, a sharp cry escapes her lips, and her nails dig deeper into my skin. Found it.

I target that spot with each thrust, watching in awe as pleasure transforms her face. Gone is the caution, the wariness that normally haunts her eyes. There is only Aurelie, uninhibited and radiant, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted. She's never been more beautiful than she is in this moment, trusting me, wanting me.

"Rolfo," she chants my name like it's sacred. "Rolfo, I'm close."

"Let go," I encourage, fighting my own building release. "I've got you."

Her body tenses beneath mine, back arching off the bed as she breaks apart. A soft, desperate cry escapes her lips, and her nails dig deeper into my skin, anchoring herself to me.

The sight of her—head thrown back, lips parted, trembling—pushes me over the edge. My hips stutter against hers, every muscle taut as I follow her into that blissful oblivion. Our bodies and breath united in that perfect moment, the world fades away until there's nothing left but us.

Afterward, I gather her against me, cradling her head on my chest. Her hair spills across my skin like liquid fire in the moonlight. My fingers trace lazy patterns on her shoulder as our breathing gradually slows.

"That was..." she trails off.

"Yeah," I agree, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

Her hand rests over my heart, fingers spreading as if to measure its beat. I cover her hand with mine, marveling at how small it is compared to my own.

I watch her eyelids grow heavy, fighting sleep to stay in this moment. Her breathing eventually slows, her body going slack against mine. Only then do I allow myself to say what's been building inside me.

"I'm not letting anyone take you." My whisper fills the quiet room. It's not a threat. It's a promise carved into my soul, as binding as any oath I've ever sworn. "Not you. Not Sephy. Not ever."

AURELIE

I stretch my fingers against the wicker basket handle, its rough texture grounding me. The market buzzes with life I've only glimpsed in snatches during the past few months. Today, though—today I'm not hiding. Today I'm just another face in the crowd, and the sensation feels foreign but welcome.

Even if Rolfo was pretty adamant about me staying out of the market—which was unlike him. But he promised to never take away my choices or force me so in the end, he just promised to accompany me.

"Look," I nod toward bright banners crisscrossing overhead, dyed in colors so vibrant they seem almost defiant against the permanent crimson sky of Ikoth. "I've never seen the market like this before."

Rolfo's mercury eyes scan the crowd, always alert, but when he glances down at me, something in them softens. "Harvest festival. Only happens once a year."

Sephy coos against his broad chest, tiny fists grabbing at his shirt. The sight of my daughter nestled so comfortably against him still takes my breath away sometimes. Her pale violet eyes—so unlike my hazel ones—peer out curiously at the world. She's bundled in a soft blanket Rolfo found somewhere, her silvery-blond curls peeking out beneath.

"She likes it." I reach up to touch her cheek, and she immediately wraps her tiny

fingers around mine. "All the colors, the sounds."

"Takes after her mother, then," Rolfo says, his low voice barely audible above the crowd. "Always watching, taking everything in."

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I busy myself with adjusting my basket. There's something in his tone lately that I don't know how to respond to. Something that I feel but can't process yet—despite the way he has me sharing his bed because it's what I want.

The musicians strike up a lively tune somewhere ahead, the beat infectious. Smiling faces pass us by—demons of all kinds, celebrating something older than any of them. They pay us no mind. Here, I'm not property. Not someone's escaped possession. Just a woman walking with... with what? My protector? My friend? Something more that neither of us has dared name?

"Want to try this?" Rolfo gestures toward a stall selling steaming cups of something that smells like spiced nimond.

"Yes," I say, perhaps too eagerly.

The vendor, a blue-skinned woman with eyes like liquid gold, hands us two cups. "For the little one, when she's older," she says with a wink, dropping a sweet wrapped in wax paper into my basket.

"Thank you," I murmur, still unused to casual kindness from strangers.

We continue forward, the crowd thickening as we approach what must be the central square. I stay close, fingers lightly holding onto Rolfo's coat. The leather is worn soft at the edges, just like the man himself—rough exterior, unexpected gentleness beneath.

A stall to my right catches my eye—glass beads that catch the light, throwing rainbows against the dark stone buildings. Just for a moment, I pause, drawn by their simple beauty.

"These are lovely," I say to the merchant, picking up a strand of beads in deep amber that remind me of autumn on worlds I've never seen.

The merchant launches into a story about how they're made, each one blown individually over open flame. I listen, momentarily captivated, my fingers tracing their smooth surfaces.

"What do you think of—" I turn, question dying on my lips.

Rolfo is gone.

My heart stops, then hammers against my ribs. Sephy is gone too. The space where they stood moments before now filled with unfamiliar bodies, pressing, moving.

"Excuse me," I say, voice thin as I push back toward where we were standing. "Excuse me, please."

The crowd seems to swell suddenly, bodies pressing from all sides. Banners that seemed festive moments ago now wave like warnings. The music turns discordant in my ears.

"Rolfo!" I call, rising to my tiptoes, scanning above heads. His height should make him visible, but there are too many people, too much movement. "Rolfo!"

My fingers clutch the basket handle so hard it might snap. Panic rises, thick and choking. Without him, without Sephy in my arms—I'm exposed. Vulnerable. The scar on my arm where Kaelith marked me seems to burn anew.

"My daughter," I say to someone, anyone. "My daughter?—"

But no one stops. No one listens. I'm invisible again, but not in the way that keeps me safe.

I spin in place, desperately searching each face, each form. Where could they have gone? Did something happen? Did someone take them—take Sephy?

Or did Rolfo simply decide this arrangement had run its course?

No. He wouldn't. Not with Sephy.

The thought of my daughter—my miracle, my reason—lost in this crowd, or worse, sends ice through my veins.

"Rolfo!" I call again, louder, not caring who hears, who might recognize me. "ROLFO!"

I spin wildly, my heart hammering against my ribs as I scan the sea of faces. Nothing. No Rolfo. No Sephy. Just strangers pressing in from all sides, their celebrations continuing as my world collapses.

"Please," I beg, grabbing the arm of a passing demon woman. "Have you seen a tall demon with black hair? Carrying a baby?"

She shrugs me off with a scowl, and I stumble backward. My basket slips from my fingers, clattering to the ground. No one notices. No one cares.

The crowd shifts, opening momentarily, and I catch a glimpse of an alleyway to my right. Something pulls me toward it—instinct, desperation, I don't know. I push through bodies, mumbling apologies that fall on deaf ears.

"Rolfo!" I call one last time, voice cracking.

The alley is darker, cooler, the festival noise dulling as I step between buildings. I catch my breath, trying to think clearly, when a shadow detaches from the wall. Something in me recognizes him before my eyes do—like prey sensing a predator.

My blood freezes in my veins.

Kaelith stands before me in simple clothes, not his usual finery—dark trousers and a plain shirt, his ice-blond hair tucked beneath a cap. But the disguise is meaningless. I'd know him anywhere. Those pale gold eyes with their fiery inner ring. That slight curl at the corner of his mouth. The way he holds himself, like the world belongs to him.

Like I belong to him.

"Aurelie," he says, my name on his lips a violation. "What a happy coincidence."

I back away, my throat closing up. "Stay back," I manage.

He laughs, and it's the same laugh that once echoed through his chambers while I cowered. "Is that any way to greet your master? After all this time?"

"You're not my master." The words come out stronger than I feel. "I don't belong to you."

"Don't you?" His fingers twitch, almost lazy.

Pain explodes in my limbs. It's like being submerged in fire, like every nerve ending is being pulled apart. I try to scream, but my voice dies in my throat. Magic—his magic—coils around my chest, my wrists, invisible but suffocating. My feet leave the

ground as the spell tightens.

I struggle against it, muscles straining, but my body won't obey. I'm paralyzed, suspended in his magical grip, helpless.

The world blurs through tears of pain and terror. All I can think is: Sephy. My baby. She needs me.

Kaelith steps closer, his face swimming into focus. He reaches out, brushes a strand of hair from my face with mock tenderness.

"I missed you," he murmurs, his breath hot against my cheek. "Did you think you could hide forever? That I wouldn't reclaim what's mine?"

I try to spit at him, but my body won't respond. The magic constricts tighter, and blackness edges my vision.

"Your little... adventure," he continues, tracing a finger down my arm to where his mark burns beneath my sleeve, "has been inconvenient. But it ends now."

The shadows around us deepen, stretching unnaturally. They crawl up my legs, my torso, cool and slick like oil. Kaelith's chaos magic—the kind demons rarely share with outsiders. The kind he used to punish me when I displeased him.

"Don't worry about the child," he says, and my heart seizes at the mention of Sephy. "I'll find her too. A daughter of my blood belongs with me, not in some gutter with whatever filth has been harboring you."

A strangled sound escapes me—the only protest my body allows.

"Shh," he soothes, as the shadows engulf us both. "It's time to go home."

The alley, the festival, the world—it all disappears as the shadow magic consumes us. I'm aware only of Kaelith's grip on my arm, the pain of his spellbinding me, and the roar of festival-goers just feet away who can't see what's happening in the darkness.

No one sees us vanish. No one hears my silent screams. The celebration continues, oblivious, as I'm swallowed by shadow and the nightmare I thought I'd escaped.

ROLFO

I push through the crowd, my heart thundering against my ribs with each step. The market's usual buzz fades into a distant hum as panic takes over. Sephy wails against my chest, her tiny fists balled up in distress as I cradle her with one arm.

"Aurelie!" My voice cracks as I shout. "Aurelie!"

Merchants turn to stare, some frowning at the disruption, others backing away at the sight of a frantic demon guardsman. I don't give a shit what they think. My silver eyes scan every corner, every shadow.

"Sir, is everything alright?" A spice merchant reaches out as I pass.

I brush past him without answering, checking between stalls, peering down the narrow alleyway behind the pottery vendor. The weight of Sephy against my chest is both comfort and terror—she's safe with me, but her mother is gone.

"Aurelie!" I roar again, loud enough that several patrons scatter.

Sephy's cries intensify, her little face scrunched up and reddening. I adjust her against my shoulder, patting her back while still moving forward.

"It's okay, little one," I murmur against her silver-blond curls. "We'll find your mother."

But the words sound hollow even to my own ears. I'd sworn to protect them both. After everything Aurelie had been through, she'd finally started to trust me, to feel safe. And now...

I swing down another side street, scanning the darker corners where the market's edge dissolves into the city proper. My free hand instinctively hovers near my blade.

"Rolfo! Steelclaw!"

I whip around to see Marken, one of the younger guardsmen, pushing through the crowd toward me. His uniform is disheveled, face flushed like he's been running.

"What?" I demand, not slowing my pace as he falls in beside me.

"I saw her—the human woman who stays with you."

I grab his shoulder, fingers digging in. "Where?"

Marken winces but meets my gaze. "Eastern quarter, near the old temple. She was—" He swallows hard. "There was a demon lord with her. Tall, aristocratic. He was using shadow magic."

The blood in my veins turns to ice. "Did you see his face? His insignia?"

"Black and silver. Curved horns with gold tips. He had her by the arm, and she wasn't fighting, but her face—" Marken's expression darkens. "She looked terrified, Rolfo."

Kaelith. The name burns through my mind like acid. I've never seen the bastard up close, but the description matches what I know of the Shadowfall household colors.

"When?" I bark, already calculating the fastest route.

"Not ten minutes ago. They were heading toward the nobles' district."

Sephy howls louder, as if understanding the conversation. Her tiny body trembles against mine, and I tuck her closer, wrapping my cloak around her.

"She knows," I mutter, more to myself than Marken. "She senses it."

Marken's eyes widen as he looks at the baby. "What will you do?"

What will I do? The question hammers through me along with a thousand images of what that monster might do to Aurelie. The same monster who'd claimed her at nine years old. Who'd treated her as property. Who'd impregnated her against her will.

Sephy's cries soften to whimpers against my chest. Her violet eyes, still shimmering with tears, lock onto mine with an intensity that startles me.

"I know, little one," I whisper. "I'll bring her back to us. I promise."

But I can't risk this little girl who holds my heart in her palms. Both she and her mother have claimed pieces of my soul . Which means I need to keep them both safe.

Without answering, I already know where I need to go. I race through the streets, clutching Sephy to my chest, her frightened cries growing hoarser with each passing minute. The crowds part before me—whether from respect for my uniform or fear of my expression, I don't care. My thoughts spiral into increasingly violent scenarios of what Kaelith might be doing to Aurelie.

"It's okay, sweet girl," I whisper against Sephy's silvery curls. "We'll find her."

But the words taste hollow and desperate on my tongue. I've failed her. Failed them both.

Dezoth's home appears ahead—a stark, imposing structure of black stone with silver filigree around the windows. No household staff to navigate, thankfully. Just the straight-backed, golden-eyed bastard I need right now.

I hammer on his door with my free hand, not bothering with the knocker. Sephy's wails escalate, as if she can sense my rising panic.

The door flies open, and Dezoth stands there, irritation quickly morphing to alert concern. His obsidian hair is pulled back in its usual silver cord, his training leathers suggesting I've interrupted his workout.

"Steelclaw? What?—"

I push past him, unable to stand still. "Aurelie's gone. Kaelith has her."

His golden eyes narrow to dangerous slits. "How?"

"Market. I was with the spice vendor. I didn't even realize that we got separated." My voice breaks. "I turned around and she was gone. Marken saw her being taken—eastern quarter, shadow magic."

Dezoth closes the door with deliberate calm that contrasts with the tension radiating from him. "He came here himself?"

"He must have known she would be there," I answer, pacing in tight circles as Sephy's crying softens to hiccupping sobs.

"I'm assuming he took her with him." He moves to a carved wooden cabinet, pulling out maps of the city. "His main estate is in the Obsidian District."

My free hand forms a fist. "We need to get there. Now."

"And do what, exactly?" Dezoth's voice remains measured, infuriatingly practical. "Storm the heavily guarded compound of one of Ikoth's oldest noble families?"

"If that's what it takes."

"You'll die before reaching her." He spreads the map across a dark wooden table. "And that helps her how?"

"I can't just—" I fight to control my voice as Sephy whimpers against me. "He'll kill her. Or worse."

Dezoth's eyes flash. "Not if we're smart. I know people in his household. Guards who owe me favors."

A sliver of hope cuts through my despair. "You'll help me?"

"I've seen how you look at her." His words hold no judgment, just fact. "And I know what Shadowfall does to his possessions."

A knock at the door interrupts us. Dezoth tenses, hand moving to the blade at his hip, but the door swings open to reveal Ada, her honey-blond braid coming undone, face flushed from running.

"Rose told me—" Her warm brown eyes fix on Sephy, then on me. "Aurelie?"

I can't speak. Just shake my head.

Ada crosses the room with determined steps, holding her arms out. "Let me take her."

I hesitate, then gently transfer Sephy to Ada's waiting embrace. The moment she settles against Ada's chest, Sephy's crying softens further.

"She needs her mother," I choke out, the words scraping my throat raw.

Ada reaches up, her calloused palm cupping my cheek. Her touch is firm, grounding.
"Then bring her back."

The simple directive hits like a physical blow. Ada's eyes, usually warm, now burn with fierce conviction.

"If you love them— fight for them."

The word "love" hangs between us, undeniable. I've known it for weeks, tried to ignore it, told myself it was inappropriate, impossible. But now, with Aurelie in danger, the feeling blazes through me like wildfire.

I nod once, jaw set. "I will."

Turning back to Dezoth, I find him studying me with new intensity. "Show me where this bastard lives. Storming it might be a bad idea, but I can slip in easily."

Dezoth meets my eyes, mercury against gold. "Give me an hour to contact my sources. We'll know which wing they're keeping her in before we set foot on the property."

I glance at Sephy, now quieter in Ada's arms though her violet eyes remain fixed on me. The crescent birthmark on her chest glows faintly beneath her swaddling clothes.

"An hour," I agree, though every minute feels like agony. "Then I'm going to bring her home."

AURELIE

The carriage jostles so violently my teeth rattle, each bump in the shadowed forest path sending fresh waves of pain through my already aching body. The shadow-threaded cuffs bite into my wrists, weaving their dark magic through my veins, making every attempt to move agony. Blood trickles down my palms where the enchanted bindings have rubbed my skin raw.

I refuse to cry.

Across from me sits Kaelith Shadowfall, his eyes never leaving my face. The glamour he wears in public has melted away now that we're alone, revealing what he truly is—what I've always known him to be. His sleek black horns curl elegantly from his temples, catching what little moonlight filters through the carriage windows. His eyes, molten gold with that burning inner ring, drink in my discomfort like fine wine.

"You've caused me quite a lot of trouble, little pet." His voice is silk over steel. "Imagine my surprise when my trackers finally located you—playing house with another demon, no less." He reaches forward, and I flinch back instinctively. His smile widens. "Did you think I wouldn't find you? That I wouldn't claim what's mine?"

"I'm not yours." The words come out muffled through the enchanted gag, but the venom in them is clear.

"Still so spirited." He sighs with mock disappointment. "We'll remedy that soon enough."

The carriage crests a hill, and my stomach drops as I see it—the Shadowfall estate rising from the mist like a ghost conjured from my worst nightmares. Ivy climbs the dark stone walls in choking tendrils, and spires pierce the perpetually red sky. Nothing has changed. The windows still glow with that sickly amber light, and the gates still bear the emblem I've spent months trying to forget.

When the carriage stops, Kaelith doesn't wait for his servants. He drags me out himself, his grip crushing my upper arm exactly where his ownership mark burns my skin.

"Welcome home, Aurelie," he whispers in my ear as he forces me up the grand staircase.

The servants we pass avert their eyes. None will help me. None ever did.

He takes me higher and higher, up winding stairs I've never been allowed to climb before. The tower. Where he keeps things he wants to punish slowly.

"I had this prepared specially," Kaelith explains, as if showing me an honored guest chamber. He throws open the heavy door and shoves me inside.

The room is circular, stone walls covered in ritual markings that pulse with malevolent light. I recognize some of the symbols—binding runes, strength-dampeners, pain enhancers. This isn't just a prison cell; it's a torture chamber designed specifically for me.

"Do you like what I've done with it?" His voice is light, conversational. "I needed something that would hold you properly this time."

When I don't respond, his face darkens. The boot comes fast—a sharp kick to my ribs that leaves me gasping on the floor. The pain radiates through my abdomen, and I curl around it instinctively, thinking of Sephy, grateful she's safe with Rolfo. For now.

"You'll learn to answer when spoken to." Kaelith straightens his immaculate jacket. "You seem to have forgotten your training."

My arms shake with rage and helplessness as I push myself to my knees. I think of Sephy's tiny fingers, of Rolfo's warm eyes, of the life I glimpsed for just a moment—and something inside me hardens.

"I will n-never be what I was," I manage, tasting blood from where I've bitten my tongue.

He approaches slowly, kneeling beside where I sit huddled against the wall. With exaggerated gentleness, he brushes a lock of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear.

"You'll be mine again," he says softly, his voice almost tender. "Just like before."

I gather all my hatred, my fear, my defiance into a single act—and spit at his feet.

"Never."

Kaelith merely smiles and draws a small silver key from his pocket, removing the gag but leaving the cuffs. "We'll see."

He leaves me then, locking the door with an enchantment I know no ordinary key will break.

Hours pass and my body starts to give out. Even though I try to fight it, I fall into a fitful sleep. I dream of Sephy, her tiny body trembling with sobs that shred my heart like claws. Her silver-blond curls are matted with tears, her violet eyes searching desperately for me in a darkness that grows deeper by the second. I reach for her, but my arms aren't long enough, they never are.

Rolfo appears behind her, his broad shoulders curved protectively as he lifts her with those scarred, gentle hands. The same hands that built her crib, that caught her when she entered this world. He cradles her against his chest, whispering words I cannot hear, and her crying softens. His mercury eyes find mine across the void, filled with a promise I desperately want to believe.

"I'll find you," his lips form the words, but no sound reaches me.

Then the darkness between us thickens, roiling like smoke, taking the shape of horns and claws and that terrible, familiar smile?—

I wake screaming, the sound tearing from my throat before I can stop it. My body jackknifes upward, hands flying out to grab Sephy, to protect her—but they catch only air. The shadow-cuffs burn against my skin as reality crashes back.

The circular room. The ritual markings. The cold stone beneath me.

Alone.

My breath comes in ragged gasps that echo off the walls. Sweat dampens my hair, plastering the auburn strands against my temples and neck. I push myself up to sitting, wincing as my bruised ribs protest. The light filtering through the single narrow window tells me it's morning, though the sky over Ikoth is perpetually crimson.

"Sephy," I whisper her name like a talisman. "At least he didn't get you."

I close my eyes and picture her safe in Rolfo's arms. The gruff demon who found me in that alley, who cut my daughter's umbilical cord with shaking hands, who transformed his study into a nursery filled with more love than I believed possible. The man who touched me like I was something precious instead of something owned.

A bitter laugh escapes me. "And I thought I couldn't trust a demon."

The silence that follows my words is thick, suffocating—a living thing pressing against my skin, reminding me that no one will answer. No infant's coo. No deep, rumbling response. Just emptiness and the faint hum of the magical wards inscribed on every surface.

I drag myself to my feet, ignoring the pain, and approach the window. It's too narrow to escape through, positioned too high on the tower wall for anyone to climb in—or out. From here, I can see the sprawling grounds of the Shadowfall estate, the hedges trimmed into perfect geometric shapes, the gardens where rare flowers bloom year-round thanks to expensive enchantments.

A beautiful prison.

I press my forehead against the cool stone beside the window. "Sephy, my sweet girl, I'm so sorry."

But under my whispered apology, another feeling stirs in my chest. It blooms slowly, like the aracin blossoms that grow on Bilgonith's beaches—fragile-looking but remarkably resilient. Fear lives here in this tower, in every corner of this estate—but so does fury. A fury I've kept banked and hidden for years.

My fingers trace the ownership mark burned into my upper arm, the scar tissue raised

beneath my fingertips. The mark Kaelith believes gives him the right to treat me like property. To take my child. To steal my freedom.

"No," I whisper, the word stronger than before. "I am not what he made me."

I think of Rolfo's hands cupping my face, his silver eyes serious as he told me, "You survived him once. You're stronger than you believe."

The silence in the tower room is complete. No servants pass by the door. No birds sing outside the window. Nothing but the beating of my heart, steady and determined despite everything.

But under it, that whisper of rebellion grows louder with each breath I take. I may be captive again, but I am not the same frightened girl who fled this place. I am a mother. I have known kindness. I have tasted freedom.

Fear lives here—but so does fury. And one day soon, it will rise.

ROLFO

I slide off the zarryn's back, my hand lingering briefly on its silver coat. The beast snorts, tossing its shaggy head as if it knows what's coming. Smart animal. I secure it to a thorny brimbark tree at the forest's edge, far enough from Shadowfall estate that no patrolling guards will spot it.

"Stay," I mutter, more to myself than the zarryn. Every muscle in my body screams to charge forward, to tear through Kaelith's walls with my bare hands. But that won't save her.

The forest surrounding Kaelith's estate is unnaturally dense. Branches twist together like arthritic fingers, creating a canopy so thick the perpetual red sky of Ikoth barely seeps through. I know these woods. Dark magic pulses through the soil here, a deterrent for those who might wander too close to Shadowfall's domain.

I move forward, ducking under a low-hanging branch. The terrain shifts beneath my feet—an illusion designed to disorient. One step feels like walking uphill, the next like sinking into mud. I focus on my breathing, on the steady rhythm that's kept me alive through countless missions.

"Not today," I growl as the path ahead seems to vanish entirely. I've dealt with these tricks before. Closing my eyes, I trust my other senses—the smell of sulfur growing stronger to the east, the faint hum of protective wards ahead.

When I open my eyes again, I see it. The illusion peels away like a scab, revealing what lies beneath: Shadowfall estate. Ivy strangles dark stone walls, and spires pierce the crimson sky like accusatory fingers. Windows glow with sickly amber light, and the gates bear the emblem I've come to hate more than almost anything in this world.

My hand moves to the blade at my hip. Cold, reassuring weight. Custom-forged from metals that can cut through demon flesh more efficiently than standard steel. I didn't come unprepared.

I circle the perimeter, staying low in the undergrowth. Two guards at the main gate, three patrolling the walls. Predictable. Kaelith's arrogance extends to his security—he doesn't expect anyone would dare breach his sanctuary.

A gap in the patrol. I scale the wall in seconds, muscle memory from years of similar maneuvers. Over the top, drop silently to the other side. I land in a crouch, scanning for movement. Nothing.

The first sentry rounds the corner moments later, whistling some old demon war tune. He doesn't even have time to register surprise before my hand clamps over his mouth, blade sliding between his ribs. I lower him silently to the ground, continuing forward.

Inside the servant's entrance, the smell hits me—spice and sulfur, Kaelith's signature scent. My nostrils flare, and something primal rises in my chest. The mercury in my eyes shifts, pupils narrowing to slits in the dimness.

A demon guard looks up as I enter the hallway. "Hey, you're not?—"

I'm across the space before he can finish, my blade opening his throat mid-sentence. His body drops with a dull thud. I step over it without a second glance.

Two more at the end of the corridor. One reaches for an alarm bell. I throw my

dagger, pinning his hand to the wall. His partner turns, eyes widening, mouth opening to shout a warning. I'm on him in an instant, snapping his neck with a clean twist. The sound—like breaking a dry branch—echoes in the empty hallway.

The one pinned to the wall struggles, tries to free himself. "Lord Kaelith will?—"

His words end in a gurgle as I drive my blade up under his chin.

I retrieve my dagger, wiping the black ichor on the dead guard's uniform. Every moment that passes is another moment Aurelie suffers at Kaelith's hands. The thought sends fresh heat coursing through my veins.

I move deeper into the estate, navigating by instinct and fragments of intelligence I've gathered over the years. Servants scatter at my approach—they know better than to challenge a demon with blood in his eyes.

A guard captain emerges from a side room, flanked by two of his men. He doesn't hesitate, instantly recognizing the threat.

"Intruder! To arms!"

His call ends abruptly as I drive forward, shouldering him into the wall. His subordinates draw weapons. Too slow. I break the first one's arm at the elbow, the bone cracking audibly, before slashing across the second's hamstring. The captain struggles against my grip, clawing at my face.

"Where is she?" I growl, pressing my forearm against his throat.

"Who—" he chokes out.

"The human. Kaelith's captive."

Recognition flickers in his eyes. "He'll never let you liv?—"

I snap his neck before the last word fully leaves his mouth. No witnesses. No mercy. Not today.

Every guard I encounter meets the same fate—swift, silent death. I don't speak. Don't think beyond the next kill, the next corridor, the next step toward her. Blood spatters my clothes, none of it mine. I barely notice.

I follow the direction of where all the guards are stationed, knowing they will lead me to her. I climb up into darkness, air heavy with the stench of rot and something else—old magic, the kind that festers like an infected wound. My boots barely make a sound as I climb, one hand trailing along the damp stone wall, the other gripping my blade.

Guards should be stationed here, but the corridor is empty—a detail that sets my teeth on edge. Either Kaelith is arrogant enough to think no one would get this far, or it's a trap. Neither option improves my mood.

As I reach the top, a faint glow illuminates the passageway. Not torchlight—something colder. I recognize the signature immediately: shadow magic, Kaelith's specialty. The hair on my arms stands on end.

Four doors line the corridor, black iron doors sealed with arcane locks. Three stand empty, their doors ajar. The fourth pulses with sickly light that seeps from beneath the door.

I approach cautiously, pressing my ear against the cold metal. A whimper, so faint I almost miss it, freezes the blood in my veins. Aurelie .

The door's enchantment is complex—a multilayered spell designed to keep the

prisoner in and everyone else out. I pull Dezoth's talisman from my pocket, a small obsidian triangle etched with counterspell runes. The artifact thrums in my palm, recognizing the magic it was created to dismantle.

"Hold on," I whisper, pressing the talisman against the lock. The stone flares hot, nearly scorching my skin, but I don't pull away. The enchantment resists, clinging to the door like a living thing.

I press harder, channeling my rage, my desperation into the stone. "Open, damn you."

The lock gives way with a sound like ice cracking, and the door swings inward.

The room is circular, stone walls covered in ritual markings that pulse with malevolent light. I take in some of the symbols—binding runes, strength-dampeners, pain enhancers. This isn't just a prison cell; it's a torture chamber designed specifically for her.

And there, in the center of it all, is Aurelie.

She's curled on the cold stone floor, her auburn hair matted with blood, face bruised, lip split. Her wrists are bound by shadow-chains anchored to the floor, magical restraints that burn the flesh they touch. The sight knocks the air from my lungs.

"Aurelie." My voice breaks on her name, a sound more animal than demon.

She lifts her head slowly, disbelieving. Eyes that once sparkled like sunlight through amber now dull with pain and fear. Her gaze finds mine, and something flickers behind the haze.

"Rolfo?" Her voice is sandpaper, barely audible. "You're not real."

I cross to her in three strides, dropping to my knees beside her. "I'm real. I'm here." My hands hover over her restraints, afraid to cause more pain. "Hold on. I'll get these off."

I press Dezoth's talisman to the shadow-chains, my hand shaking with rage so intense I can barely focus. The runes flare, fighting against Kaelith's magic.

"He said—" she swallows hard, winces. "He said you wouldn't come. That nobody would."

"He lied." The chains finally shatter under the talisman's power, dissolving into wisps of dark smoke. The moment her cuffs fall away, she slumps forward, and I catch her, cradling her as if holding something sacred. My arms wrap around her trembling form, careful of injuries I can't yet see. "I'm here," I murmur against her hair. "I'm here."

Her fingers curl weakly into my shirt. "Sephy?"

"Safe. With Dezoth." I brush hair from her face, cataloging every bruise, every cut, stoking the fire of vengeance building in my chest. "No one will touch her."

Aurelie exhales, tension bleeding from her body. "He was going to kill me. After he—" Her voice breaks.

"Don't," I whisper. "Don't think about it now. You're safe."

She looks up at me, eyes clearing slightly. "How did you find me?"

"I would have torn apart all of Ikoth." The words come out rougher than intended, raw with feeling I don't bother to hide. "There was never any other option."

24

AURELIE

Rolfo's warmth envelops me, his heartbeat thundering against my ear. His hand cradles the back of my head, fingers gentle despite the blood coating them. As much as I want to melt into him, though, I know we need to move.

He must sense it, too, because he pulls back to search my face. "Can you stand? We need to move quickly."

I nod against his chest, gathering what little strength remains in my battered body. After the initial hits he landed, he came back to inflict more damage, exacerbated by the spells of the room. But the wounds Kaelith inflicted throb dully beneath crusted blood, but the pain feels distant compared to the relief flooding through me.

"I can make it," I whisper, though my legs wobble as Rolfo helps me to my feet.

His silver eyes scan my face, searching for lies. "Lean on me. We're getting out of here together."

The cell door hangs open, the corridor oddly empty. I feel on edge, but I lean into Rolfo as we start out of the room.

We've barely made it three steps into the hallway when the air shifts, growing dense and sulfurous. A chill races down my spine as shadows congeal at the far end of the corridor.

Kaelith materializes like a nightmare, his ice-blond hair matted with blood, elegant robes soaked crimson in places. I don't see a wound on him, though, so I imagine they are punishments to the guards that Rolfo left alive. His pale gold eyes burn with murderous fury as they lock onto us.

"You dare take what's mine?" he hisses, voice cutting through the air like a blade.

Rolfo shifts, placing himself partially between Kaelith and me. With graceful precision, he draws his weapon, the black blade gleaming in the dim light.

"She was never yours," Rolfo says, each word like stone.

I step up beside Rolfo, refusing to cower behind him despite the way my heart hammers against my ribs. My breath comes ragged, but I stand straight, feeling blood trickle down my temple and along my collarbone.

"Aurelie," Rolfo whispers without taking his eyes off Kaelith, "run when you see an opening."

"No," I say, loud enough for Kaelith to hear. "I'm done running."

Kaelith's face contorts. "Always so defiant. I should have broken that out of you years ago." His hands begin to glow with venomous green energy. "No matter. I'll simply have to start again with our daughter."

The mention of Sephy ignites something primal within me. "You will never touch her."

Kaelith lunges forward with inhuman speed, magic crackling from his fingertips. Rolfo meets him halfway, blade singing through the air.

The fight erupts in violent chaos. Kaelith's magic is wild and unpredictable, tendrils of shadow lashing out like whips. One catches Rolfo across the chest, tearing through fabric and flesh. He grunts but doesn't falter, countering with precision strikes that would have felled any normal opponent.

I scramble for anything to use as a weapon, finding a broken piece of metal from the cell door. When Kaelith focuses on Rolfo, I dart forward, driving my makeshift weapon into his side. He roars, backhanding me with such force that I slam into the wall, vision blurring.

"I'll deal with you soon enough," Kaelith snarls, turning back to Rolfo.

I push myself up, tasting blood. "You've been 'dealing with me' since I was a child," I spit. "Look where that's gotten you."

Rolfo uses Kaelith's momentary distraction to drive his blade deep into the demon's shoulder. Kaelith howls, retaliating with a burst of magic that sends Rolfo skidding across the floor.

I'm knocked down again when Kaelith sweeps his good arm, magic pulsing from his fingertips. The stone beneath my palms is slick with blood—whose, I can't tell anymore. My body screams in protest as I force myself back to my feet.

Rolfo is bleeding heavily from a gash across his ribs, but his eyes remain clear and focused. We exchange a glance, understanding passing between us without words. When Kaelith advances, we move in tandem, attacking from opposite sides.

The demon is powerful, but he can't focus on both of us at once. For each blow he lands, we deliver two in return. His elegant movements grow ragged, his breathing labored.

With a desperate surge, Rolfo feints left then drives forward, tackling Kaelith to the ground. They grapple viciously, Kaelith's magic sputtering as Rolfo pins his arms.

"Aurelie, now!" Rolfo shouts, muscles straining to hold the thrashing demon.

My eyes land on a jagged blade that must have belonged to one of the guards. I snatch it up, the weight of it heavy in my hand. Kneeling beside them, I meet Kaelith's eyes—those pale gold orbs that haunted my nightmares for years. They widen in disbelief as I raise the blade.

"You never owned me," I say, driving the jagged metal through his heart with every ounce of strength I have left. I twist the blade, watching the life drain from his eyes, feeling nothing but cold relief wash over me.

When the light leaves Kaelith's eyes, I remain frozen, blade still embedded in his chest. The weight of years—of ownership, pain, and fear—lifts from me with each drop of his blood that pools beneath us. My hands shake uncontrollably, sticky and hot with crimson.

Rolfo's voice breaks through the fog. "Aurelie."

I blink, reality rushing back. The corridor smells of sulfur and copper, and distant shouts echo from elsewhere in the mansion. My gaze snaps to his, sudden urgency flooding through me.

"We need to go!" I scramble to my feet, wincing as pain shoots through my ribs. "The guards will come. There will be more."

Rolfo rises in one fluid motion despite his wounds, silver eyes scanning the hallway. "This way."

I take one unsteady step, then another, my bare feet slipping in blood. From some distant part of the estate, I hear the thundering of boots, the raised voices of Kaelith's personal guard discovering their fallen comrades.

"Faster," I rasp, pushing myself toward the stairway that leads down to the main level. Every muscle screams in protest. The image of Sephy's face flashes in my mind, giving me strength to push forward.

Before I can take another step, strong arms sweep beneath me. Rolfo lifts me against his chest in one smooth movement, cradling me as though I weigh nothing.

"I'm faster," he says simply, his heartbeat steady against my ear.

I don't protest—can't, really—as he takes the stairs two at a time, his movements sure despite carrying me. I curl my fingers into the torn fabric of his shirt, holding tight as we descend.

The grand hallway of Shadowfall Estate stretches before us, a monument to Kaelith's twisted dominance. Tapestries depicting ancient demon conquests line walls I once polished on hands and knees. Crystal chandeliers I once dusted throw fractured light across marble floors I scrubbed until my fingers bled.

Rolfo doesn't hesitate. He charges through the main hall toward the servants' exit, a path I know intimately from years of silent, obedient passage.

"Left at the next corridor," I whisper against his neck. "There's a side door the guards rarely watch."

He follows without question, trusting me. The weight of that trust settles in my chest, warm and unfamiliar.

As we pass a row of oil lamps, Rolfo reaches out with one hand, knocking them from their perches without breaking stride. The flames spill across antique carpets and climb up heavy drapes.

"Hold tight," he murmurs, and I feel the shift in his body—the subtle gathering of power.

He exhales sharply, and the scattered flames respond, leaping higher, spreading faster than natural fire should. The heat swells behind us as Rolfo's magic feeds the blaze, coaxing it into a roaring inferno that devours everything in its path.

We burst through the side door into the cool night air. I gasp, filling my lungs deeply for what feels like the first time in days. The stars wheel overhead, impossibly bright.

Behind us, orange light spills from windows as the estate burns. The home that had been my prison for so many years disappearing in cleansing fire.

"Fitting," I whisper.

Rolfo doesn't slow, carrying me across the grounds toward where his zarryn waits, tethered to an ancient tree. The silver-coated beast snorts nervously at our approach, its twin tails lashing at the scent of blood and smoke.

"Easy," Rolfo soothes, approaching steadily despite our battered state.

He swings up onto the zarryn's back with me still cradled against his chest, arranging me carefully across his lap rather than setting me down. I should protest—should insist I can ride on my own—but the solid warmth of his body against mine quiets any objection.

We thunder away from the burning estate, the night wind cool against my face.

Neither of us speaks; there's nothing left to say that matters in this moment. All that exists is the rhythmic gallop of the zarryn, the steady beat of Rolfo's heart beneath my ear, and the knowledge that Sephy waits for us.

The sky gradually lightens, night giving way to dawn. Golden light breaks across the horizon, painting the world anew. I watch it through half-lidded eyes, feeling each breath drawing me closer to home—to my daughter—to a life I never dared imagine was possible.

ROLFO

I help Aurelie dismount from the zarryn, my hands lingering at her waist longer than necessary. She's weak, trembling slightly despite her attempts to hide it. There's bruising across her cheekbone and a cut at her lip that makes my blood boil all over again. I don't even know what I'll find later, but I'm determined to ease her pain. The beast beneath us snorts and paws at the ground, agitated from the scent of smoke that still clings to our clothes.

"Easy," I murmur, stroking the creature's silver mane before turning back to Aurelie. I need to return the zarryn, but later. I'll take her into the city later.

She sways slightly, and I steady her with a firm hand against the small of her back. Her auburn hair hangs in tangled waves over her shoulders, and dried blood stains on her sleeve. But she's here. Alive. Safe.

My chest tightens with an unfamiliar ache as I look at her—this fierce, broken woman who killed her own tormentor barely hours ago. The realization crashes into me with the force of a tidal wave: I love her. Not just desire. Not just protection. Love.

"We're home," I tell her softly, the words feeling strange and right in equal measure.

Aurelie nods, her hazel eyes lifting to the modest house before us. There's something vulnerable in her expression that makes me want to gather her against my chest and

never let go.

"Can you walk?" I ask, already prepared to carry her if needed.

"I've got it." Her voice is hoarse but determined. Always so damn stubborn.

The front door flies open before we reach it. Ada stands frozen in the threshold, her brown eyes wide and disbelieving. Her honey-blonde braid has come partially undone, suggesting hours of anxious pacing.

"Aurelie," she breathes, the single word carrying the weight of a thousand fears.

Ada rushes forward, her usual grace abandoned as she crosses the distance between them. Tears spill freely down her cheeks as she carefully, so carefully, pulls Aurelie into an embrace that avoids the worst of her injuries.

"You're home," Ada whispers, voice thick with emotion.

I step back, giving them space while remaining close enough to catch Aurelie if her strength fails. The exhaustion is evident in the slump of her shoulders, but something else radiates from her—a fierce, unbending pride at what she's accomplished.

Aurelie doesn't answer Ada's whispered relief. Her attention shifts to where her friend is holding Sephy, tiny hands reaching toward her mother.

Aurelie makes a sound—half laugh, half sob—as she pulls away from Ada and reaches for her daughter. Her knees buckle slightly, and I move instinctively forward, but she catches herself, determined to stand on her own feet as she takes Sephy into her arms.

"Sephy," she murmurs, pressing her face against the silvery-blonde curls. "My

Sephy."

The baby coos, tiny fingers patting at the bruises on her mother's face with surprising gentleness, as if she understands.

"She wouldn't sleep," Ada says quietly, wiping tears from her cheeks. "It's like she knew something was wrong."

I nod, throat too tight for words. The bond between mother and child had always mystified me, but watching Aurelie rock Sephy, whispering her name over and over like a prayer—it strikes something primal and protective in my chest.

"Serephine," Aurelie breathes against the baby's temple. "My little moon."

Ada's eyes meet mine over Aurelie's shoulder, a silent question passing between us. I give her a small nod—yes, it's done. Kaelith will never hurt them again.

Relief softens Ada's features. She touches Aurelie's arm gently. "You need rest and healing herbs. I've prepared some tinctures."

"Thank you," Aurelie whispers, still focused on Sephy. "For everything."

Ada squeezes her arm once more, then turns to me. "Take care of them," she murmurs, quiet enough that only I can hear.

"Always," I promise, the word carrying more weight than I'd ever thought possible.

With a final glance at mother and child, Ada slips toward the door. "I'll come check on you tomorrow," she calls softly, and then she's gone, the door clicking shut behind her.

I step back, watching them with a gaze that feels like prayer. My body is locked rigid, afraid to shatter the moment with any sudden movement. The evening light filters through the window, casting a soft glow over Aurelie and Sephy, highlighting the curves of their faces. I've never been a religious man, but this—this feels sacred.

Sephy coos, pressing her face into her mother's chest, tiny fingers clutching at Aurelie's collar. Her silvery-blond curls catch the light, almost luminescent against Aurelie's darker clothes. The contrast between Aurelie's battle-worn appearance and Sephy's innocent perfection makes my chest tighten.

Aurelie glances up, catching my gaze. Tears wet her lashes, turning her hazel eyes into pools of amber and gold. Something passes between us—something beyond words—and she holds out a hand toward me. The gesture is simple, profound.

I come forward without hesitation, my knees hitting the floor beside her chair. Our eyes lock, and I see everything in hers—the pain, the triumph, the uncertainty. She places Sephy between us, adjusting her so the baby lies partly on my knee, partly on hers.

For a single heartbeat, all three of us are touching. My calloused hand brushes Aurelie's smaller one, both of us supporting Sephy's small body. The connection vibrates through me like a struck chord.

"You came for me," Aurelie whispers, voice cracking on the final word.

"I will always come for you." The words leave my mouth with absolute conviction.
"Both of you."

She touches my face, her fingertips tracing the scar across my eyebrow. "I need to wash away... everything." Her eyes drop to her bloodstained clothes.

I nod, understanding what she can't fully express. "Go. I've got her."

Aurelie leans forward, presses her lips to Sephy's forehead, then hesitates. For a heartbeat, I think she might kiss me too. Instead, she rests her forehead against mine, breathing the same air.

"Thank you," she whispers, then rises with a wince she tries to hide.

I watch her disappear into the bathroom before looking down at Sephy in my arms. Her violet eyes, flecked with silver, stare up at me with impossible wisdom.

"Your mother is the strongest person I've ever known," I tell her, adjusting her weight in my arms. Her tiny hand wraps around my finger with surprising strength. "But don't tell her I said that. She's stubborn enough already."

Sephy makes a gurgling sound that almost seems like agreement, and I can't help the smile that breaks across my face. The tension in my shoulders eases slightly as I rock her, savoring the fact that I have both my girls back.

My girls. The thought stops me cold. When did they become mine? When did I become theirs?

I remember the look in Aurelie's eyes when she struck the final blow against Kaelith. Cold fury mixed with righteous vengeance, her small frame becoming somehow larger in that moment of justice. She hadn't hesitated—not when it mattered most. The shadow magic had swirled around her, but she'd pushed through it, driven by something deeper than fear.

I remember her silence in the woods afterward, cradled in my arms as we escaped the burning estate. Her body had trembled, but whether from exhaustion or emotion, I couldn't tell. She'd pressed her face against my chest, fingers curling into my shirt,

and said nothing for miles.

Now, as I sit here holding her daughter—a daughter I've begun to love as my own—I'm terrified. Terrified that now she's free, she won't stay. That I'm just a chapter in her escape, a temporary shelter before she builds a life elsewhere. Somewhere without demons. Somewhere without the constant reminder of what she's been through.

"What if she leaves, little moon?" I murmur to Sephy, using Aurelie's nickname for her. "What then?"

Sephy blinks up at me, face scrunching momentarily before relaxing again. No answers there.

The sound of water running in the bathroom reminds me that whatever comes next, right now, they're here. Safe. Alive. And for this moment, that has to be enough.

ROLFO

I find myself frozen in the doorway, watching her silhouette in the dim nursery. Aurelie stands over the crib, her fingertips gently trailing the curve of Sephy's cheek. The baby's breathing has evened out, tiny chest rising and falling in peaceful slumber. It's taken three baths, a change of clothes, and more whispered reassurances than I can count to get us all clean. To wash away the evidence, if not the memory.

"Sleep well, my little moon," Aurelie murmurs, her voice carrying the melody of an unsung lullaby.

I shift my weight, the floorboard beneath me creaking slightly. She doesn't startle—just turns her head, acknowledging my presence without fear. Something twists in my chest at that simple gesture of trust.

Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders, still damp from her bath, curling at the ends where it touches the borrowed nightgown. Steam rises from her skin like mist over mountain lakes. I've never seen anything so beautiful.

"You should rest," I say, keeping my voice low to avoid disturbing Sephy. The words come out rougher than intended, scraped raw by the day's events.

Aurelie's eyes find mine across the shadowed room. I expect to see exhaustion there—and I do—but there's something else. A quiet determination, a newfound certainty that wasn't there before. Maybe she feels a weight lifted without the threat

of Kaelith pressing on her.

"I don't want to be alone," she admits, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her sleeve. Not nervous—just processing. "Not tonight."

I nod, understanding completely. After battle, solitude is its own kind of torture. I'm not sure I could have let her walk away from me tonight.

She crosses the room toward me, her bare feet silent against the wooden floor. A faint scent of lavender follows her—the soap she'd used to scrub Kaelith's touch from her skin.

"Sephy's finally asleep," she says, glancing back at the crib. "She fought it so hard. Like she was afraid I'd disappear again."

"I know the feeling," I reply, earning a ghost of a smile. My heart pounds, begging me to tell her how I feel, to get her to promise to never leave.

Aurelie looks down, a tendril of damp hair falling across her face. My fingers itch to brush it back, but I stay perfectly still, afraid to break whatever spell has descended upon us.

"Your hand," she says suddenly, reaching for my wrist.

I look down, surprised to see blood crusted around my knuckles. Despite having bathed myself, the skin had cracked open again at some point, and I'd missed it in the chaos of getting them both settled. "It's nothing."

She clicks her tongue, her small fingers circling my larger wrist. "Typical. You take care of everyone but yourself."

There's no accusation in her tone—just a gentle observation that feels more intimate than it should.

Aurelie leads me back down the hallway to the bathroom, where she silently fills the basin with warm water. I watch, transfixed, as she dips a clean cloth into the water and brings it to my hand. Her touch is methodical but gentle, cleaning away the dried blood with careful precision.

When she finishes, I follow her back to the nursery, where she checks on Sephy one more time. Her hand lingers on the crib rail, unwilling to leave even as exhaustion threatens to topple her.

"She's safe," I promise from the doorway. "We both are. Because of you."

Aurelie's shoulders relax slightly at my words. She bends to place one final kiss on Sephy's forehead before stepping back, her eyes never leaving the sleeping infant.

I lean against the doorframe, watching her, memorizing every detail of this moment. The curve of her neck as she bends over the crib. The way her borrowed nightgown pools slightly at her feet. The gentle strength in her movements, even now, at the edge of collapse.

She finally turns to me, her face etched with bone-deep weariness. Not afraid—not uncertain. Just tired in a way sleep alone can't fix. Her eyes meet mine, a decision made.

"Come to bed," she says softly.

Two simple words that change everything between us. Not a request or an invitation—a decision. Her voice holds no trace of hesitation, only quiet certainty.

I push myself from the doorframe and follow her down the hallway.

I follow Aurelie into the bedroom, my bedroom—the one I've slept in alone for years. Tonight, it looks different somehow. The light casts a warm amber glow across the walls, turning the space into something else entirely. Not just mine anymore.

She slides beneath the blankets without hesitation, her movements deliberate despite her exhaustion. I hover at the edge, suddenly uncertain. After everything we've been through today, this feels like the most dangerous threshold to cross.

"I don't bite," she murmurs, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. The joke breaks the tension, and I exhale a laugh that feels like my first real breath in hours.

I lower myself onto the bed beside her, leaving space between us. Not because I want to, but because I need to. The day has stripped everything bare, and I'm too raw to pretend anymore. If I touch her now, I might break completely.

The mattress dips beneath our combined weight, gravity tugging us slightly toward each other. The sheets smell like pine and woodsmoke—like me—but now there's the faint trace of lavender mingling with it. Our scents together. It does something primitive to my insides.

We lie curled under the blankets, knees brushing. For a while, neither speaks. The quiet is gentle, punctuated only by our breathing gradually falling into synchronization. Her eyes are wide open, staring at some middle distance, processing the day we've survived.

Then she says, "I thought I'd die there." Her voice is steady, matter-of-fact. Not seeking pity—simply acknowledging a truth she had accepted. "When he had me in that cell, I made peace with it. I just kept praying someone would save Sephy."

I turn toward her, breathing her in. The admission cuts through me like a blade. "I almost lost you," I answer. My voice drops to a rough whisper. "When I couldn't find you in the market, it was like... like the ground disappeared beneath me."

My fingers curl into the sheets between us, anchoring myself to something solid. The terror of those moments hits me again—the blind panic, the rage, the desperate need to find her. To fix what I'd failed to protect.

"I've lost people before," I continue, the words coming from somewhere deep and untouched. "But nothing felt like that. Nothing."

Aurelie's eyes find mine in the dim light. She doesn't look away, doesn't flinch from what she sees there. Instead, she waits, patient and steady, like she knows I'm struggling toward something important.

And then, finally, I whisper what's been clawing inside me since the day I found her collapsed in that alley. "I love you." The words hang between us, simple and enormous. "I love Sephy. I want to be her father."

My voice cracks, but I push through it. "I want to be your mate. Please stay."

I've never begged for anything in my life. Never needed to. But I'd kneel for this—for her—without hesitation.

Aurelie's hand finds mine beneath the covers. Her grip is firm, warm. The calluses on her palm speak of work and survival, of a strength that has nothing to do with physical power. "I don't want to leave," she says simply. No grand declarations. Just truth. "You're the first place that's felt safe."

Her thumb traces small circles against the back of my hand. "When I saw you in that cell doorway, covered in blood and looking at me like... like I was worth burning

down the world for... I knew."

She shifts closer, eliminating the careful distance between us. "I love you too, Rolfo. And Sephy—" Her voice softens with the baby's name. "She's loved you from the beginning. Even before I was brave enough to."

My chest caves inward with a quiet sob, but I don't cry. I've spent decades building walls around these parts of myself, convinced they were weaknesses. Instead, I just hold her tighter, pulling her against me until I can feel her heartbeat against my ribs.

"We're staying," she whispers against my collarbone. A promise. "We're home."

I kiss her shoulder, breathing in the scent of her skin. She nestles closer, fitting herself against me like she was made to be there.

We fall asleep tangled up in everything we didn't think we'd survive, her breath warming my chest and my arm wrapped protectively around her waist. For the first time in my life, I understand what it means to be found.

AURELIE

The morning light filters through the curtains, casting a gentle golden glow across Rolfo's pale sheets. I've been awake for several minutes already, watching the rise and fall of his chest, memorizing the contours of his face in repose. Everything feels different this morning—clearer, as though the world has shifted into perfect focus.

Sephy sleeps peacefully in the nursery across the hall. The house is wrapped in that special kind of morning quiet that feels almost sacred. I never thought I could have this—this moment of complete safety and contentment.

Rolfo stirs beside me, his eyelids fluttering. Before he's fully awake, I reach out, brushing my thumb across the rough stubble along his jaw. He leans into my touch instinctively, like a plant seeking sunlight. The silver of his eyes catches the morning light as they open, focusing on me with wonder.

"You're still here," he whispers, his voice rough with sleep.

I smile, feeling a surge of warmth at his vulnerability. "Where else would I be?"

His large hand covers mine, pressing my palm more firmly against his cheek. "I half convinced myself I dreamed last night."

"You mean when I told you I loved you?" The words come easier now, in the gentle morning light. The first time had been harder—spoken in darkness, in the aftermath

of everything with Kaelith. But now, in the quiet morning, they feel like the most natural thing in the world.

"Yes." His mercury eyes search mine. "Did you mean it?"

Instead of answering with words, I lean forward and press my lips to his. This kiss is different from the desperate ones we've shared before. It's not born from fear or relief or raw need. It's a choice—deliberate and unhurried. A quiet claiming.

Rolfo gasps softly against my mouth, his hands coming up to frame my face with a reverence that makes my heart ache. When we part, his eyes remain closed for a beat longer, as though he's trying to preserve the moment.

"I meant it," I whisper against his lips. "I love you, Rolfo."

His eyes open, and the vulnerability there steals my breath. "I never thought—" he starts, then swallows hard. "Aurelie, you deserve so much more than?—"

I press my fingers to his lips, silencing him. "Don't. Don't tell me what I deserve. For once in my life, I'm choosing. Do you understand? I'm choosing you."

The tension in his body shifts as he props himself up on one elbow, looking down at me with an intensity that sends heat curling through my body. His hand moves to trace the line of my collarbone, his touch feather-light.

"Say it again," he commands softly, his voice dropping to that low register that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

I meet his gaze without hesitation. "I love you."

Something breaks in his expression—some final restraint giving way. His kiss is

deeper this time, his hand sliding into my hair, cradling my head as he presses me back against the pillows. I wind my arms around his neck, drawing him closer until I can feel the solid weight of him against me.

"I love you," he murmurs against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. "Aurelie, I love you more than I thought possible."

The words trigger something in me—a final barrier falling away. I've given him my heart, my trust, but there's more I want to give. My hands trace the planes of his back, feeling the shift of muscle beneath warm skin.

And suddenly, I can't stand another second between us, keeping us apart. I want to be surrounded by him, filled by him, consumed by him. I want everything Rolfo has to give.

I trace the curve of Rolfo's jaw with my fingertips, my breath catching as he leans into the touch. His eyes hold mine, silver pools reflecting the soft glow of dawn. There's a question in his gaze, a silent offering. I nod, my heart thrumming in my chest.

His hands move to the hem of my nightshirt, lifting it slowly, his calloused fingers brushing against my skin with a tenderness that makes me ache. I feel exposed, but not vulnerable—not with him. His eyes sweep over me, drinking in every inch like I'm something sacred. He doesn't rush. Every movement is deliberate, reverent.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs, his voice rough, like the words are being pulled from deep within him. His hands slide up my sides, leaving trails of warmth in their wake. I shiver, not from the cold but from the way he looks at me—like I'm the only thing that matters in this world.

I reach for the laces of his tunic, my fingers trembling slightly as I work to undo

them. He watches me, his breath hitching as I push the fabric off his shoulders. His chest is broad, scarred—a map of his battles and survival. I press my palm against his heart, feeling the steady beat beneath my hand. His skin is warm, alive.

“Aurelie,” he whispers, his voice breaking. His hand covers mine, holding it there.

I don’t speak. I can’t. Instead, I lean forward, pressing my lips to the scar that runs across his collarbone. His breath catches, and his fingers thread through my hair, holding me close. I kiss each mark, each imperfection, as though I can erase the pain they represent.

When I pull back, his eyes are dark, his pupils blown wide with something more than desire. His hands move to my thighs, gently parting them as he settles between my legs. His lips follow the curve of my hip, trailing kisses along the faint stretch marks that curve around my body.

“These—” His voice is soft, almost reverent. “These are proof of your strength. Of everything you’ve survived.”

I swallow hard, my throat tight. No one has ever looked at me like this—like my scars are not something to hide but something to honor. His lips brush against the faded burn on my lower back, and I tremble, my fingers digging into the sheets.

“Rolfo,” I whisper, my voice shaking.

He looks up at me, his eyes searching mine. “Do you know what you do to me?” he asks, his voice low, raw. “You undo me, Aurelie. Every damn time.”

I reach for him, pulling him up until our bodies are pressed together, skin against skin. His breath hitches as I guide his hand to my hip, anchoring him there.

“I want you,” I say, the words slipping out before I can second-guess them.

His eyes darken, and he lowers himself over me, his weight comforting, grounding. “You have me,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against mine. “You’ve always had me.”

When he enters me, it’s slow, deliberate. My breath catches, and I wrap my arms around him, holding on as though he’s the only thing keeping me tethered to this earth. His forehead presses against mine, our breath mingling, our hearts beating in sync.

“Look at me,” he whispers, his voice ragged.

I open my eyes, meeting his gaze. His silver eyes are a storm, filled with something I can’t name—something that makes my chest ache. We move together, our rhythm steady, unhurried. Every stroke is a promise, every touch a confession.

This isn’t about survival or desperation. It’s about trust. About finding home in each other.

“Aurelie,” he breathes, my name a prayer on his lips.

“Rolfo,” I whisper back, my fingers tracing the curve of his neck, the line of his jaw.

His hand tangles in my hair, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that’s tender and hungry all at once. I’m drowning in him, in the way he makes me feel—cherished, wanted, loved .

I push against Rolfo’s chest, my palms flat against the solid planes of muscle. His silver eyes widen in surprise for a fraction of a second before darkening as he understands what I’m asking.

He lets out a low, rumbling growl from deep in his chest as he rolls onto his back, his hands sliding to my hips to steady me. The shift in power sends a thrill through me, and I rise up on my knees, hovering over him, feeling the heat of his body beneath me.

His chest rises and falls with heavy breaths, his gaze locked on mine, a storm raging in those mercury depths. There's something raw and untamed in the way he looks at me now, like I've stripped away the last of his control. His hands tighten on my hips, his fingers digging into my skin.

"Aurelie," he rasps, his voice rough, almost pleading.

I lower myself slowly, feeling him stretch me with an intensity that makes my breath hitch. His eyes never leave mine, and I watch as his jaw clenches, his teeth grinding together as though he's trying to hold himself back. The way he looks at me—like I'm everything he's ever wanted—makes my heart race, and a warmth spreads through my chest that has nothing to do with the heat pooling between my legs.

I begin to move, rocking my hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm. His hands slide up my sides, his touch sending shivers through me. He groans deeply, the sound vibrating through my body as I lean forward, bracing my hands on his chest. His heart pounds beneath my palms, a steady, frantic beat that matches my own.

"Fuck, Aurelie," he growls, his grip tightening on my hips as I pick up the pace. His head falls back against the pillows, his eyes closing for a moment before they snap open, locking on mine again. The intensity in his gaze is almost unbearable, like he's seeing straight through to the very core of me.

I feel every inch of him as I ride him, the friction sending sparks of pleasure through my body. My breath comes in shallow gasps, and my muscles tighten and release with each movement. His hands move back to my hips, his fingers digging into my

skin as though he's trying to keep me tethered to him.

"You feel so good," he murmurs, his voice rough, strained.

His words send a jolt of heat through me, and my rhythm falters for a moment. He grunts, his hips bucking up to meet mine, driving deeper into me. I moan, my head falling back as pleasure builds within me, coiling tighter and tighter.

"Rolfo," I whisper, my voice trembling. "Don't stop."

His hands move to my thighs, gripping them tightly as he helps me move, his hips driving up into me with a force that makes me cry out. My fingers curl against his chest, my nails digging into his skin. His eyes are dark, filled with a hunger that matches my own, and the sight of him—his body beneath me, his muscles taut with restraint—sends a wave of heat crashing through me.

"I'm close," he growls, his voice barely more than a whisper. His hands slide up my body, cupping my face, his thumbs brushing against my cheeks. "Let go, Aurelie. Let me feel you."

I nod, my breath coming in ragged gasps as I feel the tension within me reaching its peak. My body tightens around him, and I cry out as pleasure bursts through me, overwhelming and all-consuming. Rolfo groans, his hands moving to my hips as he slams me down onto him, driving into me with a force that sends me over the edge again.

His arms wrap around me, holding me tightly against him, his breathing ragged against my ear. His hand moves to the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Aurelie," he murmurs, his voice soft, almost reverent. "You're mine. Always mine."

I don't respond, unable to find the words. Instead, I press my face into the crook of his neck, breathing in the warm, spicy scent of his skin. My heartbeat slows, matching the steady rhythm of his, and I feel a sense of peace settle over me—a quiet contentment that I've never known before.

His hand moves to my back, tracing lazy circles against my skin. The silence between us is comfortable, filled with unspoken words and the weight of everything we've shared. His touch is gentle now, almost hesitant, as though he's afraid I'll disappear if he holds on too tightly.

"I love you," he whispers, his voice barely audible against the stillness of the room.

The words send a warmth through me, and I press a kiss to his neck, my lips brushing against his skin. "I love you too," I murmur, my voice soft, but filled with conviction.

He exhales sharply, his arms tightening around me, and I feel the tension in his body ease. His hand moves to my face, tilting my chin up so that our eyes meet. His silver gaze is filled with something I can't name—something tender and raw that makes my chest ache.

"You're everything to me," he says, his voice rough, filled with emotion. "Everything."

I don't have the words to respond, so I kiss him instead, pouring everything I feel into the touch of my lips against his. His hand tangles in my hair, and he deepens the kiss, his tongue brushing against mine with a slow, deliberate intensity. My body responds instinctively, arching against his, and he groans softly, his hips shifting beneath me.

His hands move to my thighs, gripping them tightly as he helps me move, his hips driving up into me with a force that makes me cry out. My fingers curl against his chest, my nails digging into his skin. His eyes are dark, filled with a hunger that

matches my own, and the sight of him—his body beneath me, his muscles taut with restraint—sends a wave of heat crashing through me.

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His hands move to my thighs, gripping them tightly as he helps me move, his hips driving up into me with a force that makes me cry out. My fingers curl against his chest, my nails digging into his skin. His eyes are dark, filled with a hunger that matches my own, and the sight of him—his body beneath me, his muscles taut with restraint—sends a wave of heat crashing through me.

I’m close again, teetering on the edge of bliss, and I can feel Rolfo losing control beneath me, his movements becoming more erratic, his grip on my hips tightening. He groans, his head falling back against the pillows, his eyes closing for a moment before they snap open, locking on mine.

“Aurelie,” he growls, his voice strained. “I can’t?—”

“Let go,” I whisper, my voice trembling as I lean forward, pressing my lips to his. “I want you to fill me.”

His body stiffens beneath me, his hips slamming into me with a force that sends me over the edge again. I cry out, my body tightening around him as he fills me, his release warm and deep within me. I collapse against his chest, my body trembling as the aftershocks of pleasure ripple through me.

He holds me tightly, his arms wrapping around me as though he’s afraid I’ll disappear if he lets go. His breathing is ragged against my ear, his heart pounding beneath my cheek.

“You’re mine,” he murmurs, his voice soft, almost reverent. “Always mine.”

And that's all I want to be.

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I stand back, leaning against the stone wall of Dezoth's garden, watching the scene unfold with a feeling I'm still not entirely used to—contentment. The garden buzzes with the unmistakable energy of late spring—sunshine warming the earth, the sweet scent of blooming aracin blossoms drifting over from the ornamental beds that Ada has transformed over these past months.

Rose's laughter cuts through the air as she darts across the lush grass, her honey-blond curls bouncing with each step. She's grown taller since I first met her, her movements more confident as she chases after a thalivern. The creature's iridescent wings catch the sunlight, flashing blue-green as it dances just beyond her reach.

"I'm gonna catch you!" Rose declares, her violet eyes—so much like Sephy's—wide with determination. She lunges forward, hands cupped, but the thalivern drifts higher, causing Rose to tumble forward onto the grass.

For a moment, I tense, ready to move, but before I can, she's already scrambling back to her feet, undeterred.

"They're tricky," Dezoth says from his position at the edge of the trees. His arms are folded across his chest in what would normally be an imposing stance, but the rare smile softening his usually stern features transforms him. "Try approaching more slowly."

Rose nods seriously at his advice, her tiny face scrunching in concentration as she changes tactics, creeping forward with exaggerated stealth that has Ada stifling a laugh from her spot in the shade.

I let my eyes drift to where Ada sits beneath the sprawling branches of an old nymphwood tree. Sephy is on a blanket beside her, my little girl now eight months old and determined to master the art of crawling. She rocks back and forth on her hands and knees, her silvery-blond curls catching the dappled sunlight that filters through the leaves.

"That's it, sweet one," Ada encourages softly, her warm brown eyes watching with the patient attention she gives to all growing things, whether plants or children. "You can do it."

Sephy makes a sound somewhere between a grunt and a giggle, pushing herself forward a few inches before flopping onto her belly. But instead of frustration, she looks up at Ada with that serene smile that still hits me like a punch to the gut every time. How can something so small hold so much power over me?

"She's stubborn," I call over, unable to keep the pride from my voice. "Gets that from her mother."

Ada raises an eyebrow. "And not from you at all, I suppose?"

I feel my lips twitch. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Dezoth snorts from his position, which earns him a glare from me that holds no real heat. It's still strange seeing him like this—the intimidating captain of the Elite Guard, leaning against a tree, watching children play in his garden. But the past months have changed all of us.

Rose suddenly lets out a triumphant squeal. "Uncle Rolfo! Look!" By some miracle, she's managed to get the thalivern to land on her outstretched finger. She stands frozen, hardly daring to breathe as the creature slowly opens and closes its gossamer wings.

"That's incredible!" I answer back.

"Perfect stillness," Dezoth says, his deep voice gentle as he moves carefully to crouch beside her. "That's how you earn their trust."

The look of wonder on Rose's face is something I'll never tire of seeing. After everything she and Ada went through, these moments of pure childhood joy feel like victories.

Sephy, not to be outdone by her older companion, suddenly surges forward with unexpected determination, managing to move forward a few inches on her hands and knees before reaching Ada's leg and grabbing onto the fabric of her dress with a triumphant babble.

"Would you look at that," Ada laughs, scooping Sephy up and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Someone's decided today's the day."

"She's going to be trouble once she's mobile," I say, making my way across the grass to join them.

"Going to be?" Ada teases, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "As if she isn't already, with you wrapped around her tiny finger."

I can't deny it. From the moment I cut Sephy's cord in that desperate night that feels both yesterday and a lifetime ago, I've been completely hers.

I settle back against the trunk of the tree, pulling Aurelie closer to me. She nestles into my side like she was made to fit there, her feet tucked under her on the blanket, head resting against my shoulder.

My arm wraps around her shoulders—a gesture that once felt foreign but now seems as natural as breathing. Her hand finds mine, her slender fingers tracing absent

patterns across my calloused palm as she listens to Rose, who has abandoned her father for now.

"And then the flower talked back to me!" Rose declares with absolute conviction, her violet eyes wide with sincerity as she spins her tale. "It said, 'Good morning, Rose! You smell nice too!'"

Aurelie laughs, the sound soft and melodic. It still hits me sometimes—how different she sounds now compared to when I first found her. Back then, her voice was barely a whisper, frayed at the edges with fear and exhaustion. Now it rings clear and true, uninhibited.

"Is that so?" Aurelie responds, her eyebrow arching playfully. "And what did you say to this chatty flower?"

"I said 'thank you' because that's polite," Rose answers with perfect four-year-old logic. "Papa says manners are important."

Dezoth, who's been pretending not to listen while he inspects a newly planted bush, straightens slightly at the mention of his name. "They are," he confirms solemnly, though I catch the ghost of a smile on his usually stern face.

I can't stop looking at Aurelie. The sunlight catches in her auburn hair, bringing out threads of copper and gold. There are little lines at the corners of her eyes when she smiles—tiny maps of happiness that weren't there months ago. Every time I see them, something in my chest tightens and expands all at once.

Sephy makes a determined sound from her spot on the blanket, drawing Aurelie's attention. With practiced ease, Aurelie reaches over to brush our daughter's silvery-blond curls back from her face.

"You almost had it, little moon," she murmurs, using the nickname that came to her

the first night Sephy slept through the darkness without crying. "Try again."

There's something mesmerizing about watching Aurelie mother our daughter—our daughter, though she came into the world through pain I couldn't prevent. The way she touches Sephy, speaks to her, anticipates her needs—it's the most natural thing in the world, yet I find myself struck by the wonder of it nearly every day.

I squeeze Aurelie's hand, overwhelmed by a feeling I once wouldn't have recognized. She turns to look at me, her hazel eyes meeting mine with a question in them.

I don't say anything. I don't need to. The understanding that passes between us is beyond words—a shared knowledge of exactly how much we risked to be sitting here in this garden, in this pocket of peace we carved out of fear and fire. It's ours. Against all odds, it's ours.

I bring her hand to my lips and press a kiss against her knuckles, my thumb brushing over the spot where Kaelith's mark used to be—now just a faint scar, fading more each day.

"What was that for?" she asks, her voice hushed.

"Because I can," I answer simply. Because there was a time when I thought I'd never get to, when I tore through that estate with nothing but fury and desperation driving me forward.

In the distance, Sephy makes a sudden breakthrough, propelling herself forward with newfound coordination. She manages to crawl the short distance to where Rose sits, collapsing against the older girl's lap with a triumphant gurgle. Rose's face lights up.

"She did it! She came to me!" Rose exclaims, carefully patting Sephy's head as if she might break. Both children dissolve into giggles—Rose's bright and clear, Sephy's a bubbling sound that never fails to make my heart clench.

Aurelie leans deeper against my shoulder, her body relaxing fully into mine. "Look at them," she whispers, and I hear everything she doesn't say in those three words. The wonder. The disbelief. The gratitude.

"I see them," I murmur back, tightening my arm around her. "I see all of you."

We made it. All of us. Against everything that tried to stop us, we made it here.