



Demon Daddy's Hidden Son (Demon Daddies #7)

Author: *Celeste King*

Category: Fantasy

Description: She was mine long before she knew it.

A fierce little human with dirt under her nails, defiance in her spine, and a gift for magic that rivaled my own. I freed her from indenture—not to keep her, but to give her a choice.

She chose me.

Then she vanished.

One mountain delivery. No return. No body. Just silence.

For two years I tore the world apart. Looking. Grieving. Rage and ritual, obsession and ruin—until I found her.

Alive. In a forgotten village.

Raising my son with another man's hands on her waist.

She doesn't remember me. Doesn't remember our home, our fire, the nights she begged me not to stop. But our son has my wings. My eyes. My power.

And I won't walk away from either of them.

I already lost her once.

I won't lose her again.

Read on for hidden babies, memory loss, winged possessive obsession, and an ethereal architect who would rather burn heaven down than let anyone else raise his heir. HEA Guaranteed!

Total Pages (Source): 32

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

The morning light filters through the tall windows of the estate's eastern wing, casting geometric patterns across the polished stone floor.

I pause in my inspection of the main hall, watching dust motes dance in the ethereal glow that seems to emanate from the walls themselves.

Everything here pulses with quiet magic—Domiel's signature woven into every arch, every carefully placed stone.

My bare feet make no sound as I move through the corridors. The servants know better than to disturb the morning routine. This time belongs to me, to the careful orchestration of a household that's become as familiar as my own heartbeat.

The receiving hall holds three packages this morning, their magical seals still intact.

I run my fingers along the edges, feeling for temperature changes or ward fluctuations.

Old habits. The middle parcel hums with contained energy—runestone, probably high-grade from the Quarry District.

The other two feel inert. Decorative pieces, maybe, or components waiting for Domiel's touch to awaken them.

Two years ago, I would have been the one delivering these packages.

The memory rises unbidden as I lift the first crate.

Different hands then—scarred from harsher work, always slightly trembling from exhaustion.

Different eyes, too. Always watching for the overseer's switch, for the moment someone would notice I'd paused too long or handled something with insufficient reverence.

I'd stood in this very hall once, contract marks still fresh on my wrist, arms aching from carrying a particularly volatile shipment of ward crystals.

The other delivery workers had warned me about this place—about the ethereal architect who lived here, how particular he was, how he could spot flawed material from across a room.

"Set them down gently," I'd whispered to myself, the same mantra I used at every high-end estate. "Don't make eye contact. Finish quickly."

But then he'd appeared at the top of the curved staircase, and everything I'd been taught about keeping my head down had crumbled.

Tall, broad-shouldered, moving with that peculiar xaphan grace that made common movement look like choreography. Dark gold hair caught the light as he descended, and when those silver-blue eyes fixed on me, I'd forgotten how to breathe properly.

"You're new," he'd said, not unkindly. Just... observing.

I'd managed a nod, not trusting my voice. But my hands—my hands had kept working, sorting the crystals by resonance frequency without thinking. It was instinct by then, reading the subtle differences in magical signature that even trained mages

sometimes missed.

He'd watched me work. Actually watched , not the way overseers did—looking for mistakes to punish—but with genuine curiosity.

"You can feel the variance in the third crystal," he'd said after a moment.

It wasn't a question, but I'd answered anyway. "The matrix is slightly unstable. Still usable, but it'll need compensation in the binding ward."

The silence that followed had stretched long enough for panic to set in. Had I overstepped? Spoken out of turn? But when I'd finally dared to look up, something in his expression had shifted.

"What's your name?"

"Kaleen." The word had escaped before I could think better of it.

"Kaleen." He'd tested it, like he was tasting something rare. "I'll request you specifically for future deliveries."

Request me specifically. As if I were a person, not just a pair of hands attached to an indenture contract.

I shake off the memory and continue my morning rounds, but the ghost of that first meeting clings to me like morning mist. The garden needs attention—the thalivern flowers have opened overnight, their iridescent wings catching every stray beam of sunlight.

I kneel among them, feeling the cool earth beneath my knees, and remember other mornings when my hands belonged to someone else entirely.

The stoneweaving syndicate had owned every hour of my time, every careful movement, every breath I took near their precious materials.

Twelve hours a day in the sorting rooms, checking shipments, loading carriages, delivering to estates like this one where people lived in beauty I could only glimpse in passing.

My fingers work automatically now, deadheading spent blooms and checking soil moisture. This garden is mine to tend, mine to shape. The irony isn't lost on me—I have more freedom in choosing to stay than I ever had in being forced to leave.

The thalivern petals feel like silk between my fingers as I work through the morning garden routine.

Domiel's old cloak hangs loose around my shoulders—deep blue wool that still carries traces of his scent even after countless washings.

The fabric pools around my knees as I kneel, soft and familiar as a second skin.

He'd wordlessly draped it around me one morning months ago, watching me shiver in the pre-dawn chill as I tended the early bloomers.

No grand gesture, no declaration. Just quiet observation followed by quiet care.

The cloak had become mine the way everything else in this house had—gradually, naturally, like water finding its level. But that's how he always was.

Quiet. Watching me. Full of care.

I brush soil from my hands and gather the deadheaded blooms in the cloak's deep pockets. Inside, the house waits with its carefully orchestrated routines, each one a

small rebellion against the chaos that defined my old life.

The home workshop calls first. Three stories up, tucked into the estate's highest tower, it's where Domiel loses himself in calculations and crystalline matrices that would make most mages weep with envy.

Even when he's at a client site like today, the space holds his presence—tools arranged with military precision, half-finished ward designs pinned to every available surface, the lingering ozone scent of worked magic.

I move through the organized chaos with practiced efficiency.

The resonance hammers need cleaning—their copper heads dulled from yesterday's session with a particularly stubborn piece of quartz.

I run a soft cloth along each surface, checking for hairline cracks that could throw off their frequency.

Domiel's hands are too valuable to risk on flawed tools.

His sketching charcoal sits scattered across the main workbench, along with three empty teacups and a plate that holds nothing but crumbs. The man could design wards that would make the praexa themselves take notice, but remembering to eat? That requires intervention.

I stack the dishes and straighten his papers without reading them—some habits from the syndicate days die hard. Privacy was a luxury we couldn't afford then, but here it's a gift I give freely. His work belongs to him until he chooses to share it.

The kitchen knows my footsteps. I've walked these stone floors so often now that my bare feet have memorized every slight irregularity, every place where the magical

resonance runs just a fraction warmer.

The larder holds fresh brimbark and zynthra from yesterday's market run, along with a wheel of sharp cheese that will pair well with the dark bread cooling on the windowsill.

I start checking that we'll have everything we need for dinner. Most days I cook. We do have help around the house, but I like taking care as much as I can in an estate this size.

I find quiet contentment in these moments. They are simple. Easy. The life that he gave me. All because Domiel took notice of me. All because over weeks and months he talked to me, coaxed me out of my shell, and over time...

He fell in love with me.

He bought me out of the indentured contract well over a year ago, but I'm still here. I manage his household because otherwise, it would be a mess. But truly, I will always stay by his side.

Some might think I'm foolish. A human woman in love with xaphan?

But Domiel will always be everything to me.

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DOMIEL

The morning light streams through the crystal-paned windows of the Vaelthorne estate's upper gallery, casting prismatic rainbows across my drafting table.

Each beam splits and refracts through the enchanted glass, creating a kaleidoscope that would be beautiful if I had time to appreciate it.

Instead, I lean closer to the parchment spread before me, squinting at calculations that refuse to balance.

The stabilizer matrix for this floating manor should be straightforward—I've designed dozens of them over the years.

But Lord Vaelthorne wants his estate to hover three hundred feet above the cliffs, not the standard hundred and fifty.

The additional height throws everything off.

Weight distribution, wind shear compensation, the magical resonance needed to maintain structural integrity at that altitude.

My fingers trace over the ink lines, following the intricate patterns of force and counterforce. The sigil work is precise, each symbol flowing into the next with mathematical elegance. But there's a gap in the center, a missing piece that makes the whole design incomplete.

I reach for the vial of powdered starcystal and sprinkle a small amount across the parchment.

The crystal dust settles into the inked lines, glowing faintly as it responds to the magical resonance embedded in the design.

Most of the matrix lights up in steady blue-white radiance, but that central section remains dark.

"Damn," I mutter, sitting back in my chair.

The binding lattice. Of course it would come down to the one component I can't synthesize or substitute.

The ethereal anchors for a structure this ambitious require a genuine moonshard lattice—the kind that only forms in specific geological conditions, where underground water sources meet deposits of raw celestial ore.

On this continent, there's exactly one quarry that produces it, and it's two days northwest of here by zarryn.

I run my hands through my hair, feeling the metal clasps that hold it back dig into my fingers.

The Vaelthorne contract has a completion deadline that's already breathing down my neck.

Lady Vaelthorne wants to host the Autumn Conclave at her floating estate, which means I have exactly eighteen days to finish the stabilizer matrix, oversee the installation, and complete the final bindings.

Eighteen days. For a project that should take twenty-five.

The commission fee is substantial enough to fund my workshop for the next year, but that's not what's driving the knot of tension in my shoulders. I don't take contracts I can't complete. My reputation—everything I've built in Soimur—depends on delivering exactly what I promise, when I promise it.

I pull out a fresh sheet of parchment and start sketching alternate configurations. Maybe I can distribute the load differently, use multiple smaller lattices instead of one central anchor. The calculations flow from my fingertips, symbols and numbers filling the page in precise columns.

But even as I work, part of my mind drifts to the estate I left behind this morning.

To warm amber eyes and the way Kaleen's mouth curves when she's trying not to smile.

She would have been moving through the morning routines when I departed—checking deliveries, tending the garden, probably shaking her head at the chaos I left in my workshop.

The thought of her brings an unexpected steadiness to my hands.

She has a way of grounding me that I've never experienced before, like an anchor point in the middle of the most complex design.

When the work threatens to consume me entirely, her presence reminds me there's something beyond calculations and crystal matrices.

I can picture her now, probably organizing the mess of papers I abandoned on my workbench, stacking my forgotten teacups with that particular brand of exasperated

affection she reserves for my worst habits.

She won't read my designs—she never does, respecting the privacy of work even when curiosity must kill her—but she'll make sure everything is clean and ready for when I return.

I remember a time before her where my work could have consumed me. But now, Kaleen is worth more to me than anything else. I'm lucky she delivered to me that day two years ago.

The alternative stabilizer design takes shape beneath my fingers, but it's not elegant. Three separate anchor points instead of one central lattice, which means three times the complexity in the binding rituals. More room for error, more components that could fail. It would work, but barely.

I set down my stylus and stare at the calculations. This isn't good enough. Not for a project of this magnitude, not for the reputation I've spent years building. The Vaelthorne estate deserves better than a hastily improvised solution.

The morning light shifts as clouds pass overhead, throwing shadows across my calculations. I need that moonshard lattice, and I need it within the next five days if there's any hope of meeting the deadline. I can't go, so I guess I'll need to find a courier that can and quickly.

The zarryn's hooves clatter against the cobblestone as I guide her through the estate gates, the familiar sound echoing off the pale stone walls.

The sun hangs low on the horizon, painting everything in shades of amber and gold that remind me of Kaleen's eyes.

My shoulders ache from hunching over calculations all day, and the weight of the

unsolved problem presses against my skull like a physical thing.

The stable boy takes the reins with practiced efficiency, but I barely acknowledge him.

My mind is still tangled in matrices and binding ratios, in the elegant solution that continues to elude me.

Three anchor points instead of one. Functional, but graceless.

Like building a cathedral out of scrap metal.

I follow the winding path through the garden, past the carefully tended beds of nightblooming flowers and the small fountain that tinkles peacefully in the evening air. The sound usually soothes me, but tonight it feels distant, muffled by the churning thoughts I can't seem to silence.

Then I see her, and everything else falls away.

Kaleen sits on the sun-warmed stone steps leading to the eastern terrace, her legs curled beneath her and a book balanced on her knees.

The fading light catches the rich chestnut waves of her hair where it's escaped from her braid, creating a soft halo around her face.

She's changed from her work clothes into a flowing dress of deep green that brings out the gold flecks in her eyes.

Those eyes find mine as I approach, and her expression shifts from contentment to concern in the space of a heartbeat. She closes the book without marking her place, setting it aside as she unfolds gracefully from the steps.

"You look like you've been wrestling with demons all day." Her voice carries that particular blend of warmth and wry observation that never fails to ground me. "And losing."

I attempt a smile, but it feels strained even to me. "Just the usual battles with impossible physics and unrealistic deadlines."

She moves closer, close enough that I can see the faint lines of concern creasing her forehead.

Her hand lifts toward my face, then stops just short of touching, as if she's asking permission.

I lean into the almost-caress, and her fingers trace the edge of the scar at my temple with a gentle touch.

"What's wrong? Really?"

The question cuts through all my careful defenses. Not because it's sharp, but because it's gentle. Because she asks like my answer matters to her in ways that go beyond curiosity or politeness. Like whatever burden I'm carrying, she's willing to help me bear it.

I catch her hand in mine, pressing her palm against my cheek for a moment before pulling it away. Her skin is soft and warm, callused in places from honest work, and wearing the delicate gold bracelet I had made to cover the faded brand on her wrist.

"The Vaelthorne project." The words come easier than I expected. "I need a specialized binding lattice for the stabilizer matrix. Moonshard grade, and there's only one quarry that produces it. Two days northwest, in the foothills near Kaerion."

Understanding floods her features. "Your deadline."

"Eighteen days. If I take the time to travel... Well, the deadline is already tighter than I like?—"

"And you'll miss it." She finishes the thought, then steps back slightly, her mind already working through possibilities.

I can see it in the way her eyes focus somewhere past my shoulder, in the subtle shift of her posture that means she's calculating angles and options. "What about your usual couriers?"

I asked around on my way home with no luck. "All contracted elsewhere. Autumn construction season."

She's quiet for a long moment, and I watch her thoughts play across her face like clouds passing over the sun. When she looks back at me, her expression is determined.

"I could go."

The words hit me like ice water. "Absolutely not."

"Why not? I know magical materials better than most of your couriers. I've handled every variety of runestone and crystal matrix your workshop has ever used. I can identify quality moonshard lattice, negotiate fair pricing?—"

"Kaleen." My voice comes out sharper than I intend, and she stops mid-sentence. I soften it, reaching for her hands again. "You've never traveled that distance alone. The roads between here and Kaerion aren't exactly safe for anyone, let alone..."

"Let alone a human woman?" There's steel beneath the silk of her voice now, the quiet strength that first caught my attention in the stoneworking yards. "I spent years managing dangerous deliveries for the syndicate, Domiel. I'm not some delicate flower who wilts at the first sign of hardship."

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That's not what I meant, and she knows it. But the thought of her out there alone, facing whatever dangers the mountain roads might hold, makes something cold and protective unfurl in my chest. She's the most capable person I know, but she's also the most precious thing in my world.

"I know you're not delicate." I step closer, close enough to see the flecks of gold in her amber eyes. "That's not what this is about."

"Then what is it about?"

The honest question deserves an honest answer, even if it means admitting something I've never said aloud. "It's about the fact that losing this contract would be inconvenient, but losing you would destroy me."

Something shifts in her expression, the steel softening without disappearing entirely. She studies my face for a long moment, reading the truth written there.

"The quarry isn't that dangerous, is it? Just remote."

I want to lie, to manufacture hazards that don't exist just to keep her close. But she's asking for honesty, and she deserves it. "No. Remote and tedious, but not dangerous. The quarry master is reputable, the roads are well-traveled during the day."

She nods slowly. "Then let me help you."

The simple offer carries weight that goes far beyond the practical. This isn't just about solving my deadline problem. It's about trust, about partnership, about the choice to

share burdens that we could technically handle alone.

I look at her standing there in the fading light, chin lifted with quiet determination, amber eyes steady on mine. Beautiful and stubborn and absolutely certain of what she's offering. My chest tightens with love and gratitude and something that might be fear.

"We'll discuss it," I finally say, which isn't agreement but isn't refusal either.

She smiles then, the first real smile I've seen from her since I returned. "We will. But first, you need food and rest. When was the last time you ate something that wasn't stale bread and cold tea?"

I try to remember and come up empty. "This morning? Yesterday? Time moves differently when I'm working."

"Of course it does." She takes my hand, tugging me toward the house. "Come on. I made that stew you like, with the herbs from the garden. We can figure out the rest after you've remembered you're mortal."

I let her lead me inside, where the soft glow of magelights creates pools of warmth against the gathering darkness. The familiar scents of home—herbs from the garden, the subtle spices Kaleen favors, the clean smell of well-maintained stone—wrap around me like a blessing.

Later, after dinner and wine and conversation that carefully skirts around the topic of mountain roads and quarries, we find ourselves on the rooftop terrace. The night air carries the promise of autumn, crisp and clean, and the stars spread overhead like scattered diamonds against black silk.

Kaleen stands at the stone railing, looking out over the city lights that twinkle in the

distance.

The wind plays with her hair, lifting the loose strands that frame her face.

She's changed into a soft robe that flows around her like water, and the starlight catches on the gold necklace at her throat—the one I commissioned with her name engraved in flowing script.

I move behind her, my hands settling on her waist as I pull her back against my chest. She leans into me with a sigh that sounds like coming home, her head tilting to rest against my shoulder.

"The stars are bright tonight," she murmurs, her voice soft in the darkness.

"Not as bright as you." The words are out before I can stop them, honest and raw in a way that still catches me off-guard sometimes.

She turns in my arms, her hands coming up to rest on my chest. In the starlight, her skin seems to glow with its own inner radiance, and her eyes hold depths that rival the night sky itself.

"Domiel." My name on her lips sounds like a prayer.

I frame her face with my hands, thumbs brushing over the soft curves of her cheekbones. "I love you." The words carry weight tonight, urgency. "More than I've ever loved anything. More than I knew was possible."

"I know." Her smile is soft and sure. "I love you too."

I lean down and kiss her then, pouring everything I can't quite say into the connection between us.

The kiss starts gentle, almost hesitant, but deepens as she responds with equal fervor.

Her hands fist in the fabric of my shirt, pulling me closer, and I'm lost in the taste of her, the warmth of her mouth, the way she fits against me like she was made for this moment.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, I rest my forehead against hers. The stars wheel overhead, eternal and distant, but here in this small circle of warmth and love, everything feels immediate and precious.

"Whatever happens with this project," I whisper against her lips, "this is what matters. You and me. This."

She kisses me again, softer this time, full of promise and understanding. "Always," she breathes. "No matter how far apart we might be, this is always home."

The words settle deep in my chest, a comfort against the uncertainty that the days might bring.

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KALEEN

The late afternoon sun slants through the workshop windows, casting long shadows across the stone floor as I arrange Domiel's scattered papers into neat stacks.

Ink stains mar several sheets where his stylus has dripped, and empty teacups sit abandoned between rolls of parchment like ceramic sentinels guarding his work.

He's been gone since before dawn, riding back to the Vaelthorne estate to attempt another solution to his stabilizer matrix problem.

I've spent the day trying to occupy myself with household tasks, but my thoughts keep drifting to mountain roads and quarries, to the tension that's been radiating from his shoulders like heat from forge-heated metal.

The sound of zarryn hooves on cobblestone draws my attention to the window.

Domiel guides his mount through the gates with mechanical precision, his posture telling the story before I even see his face.

His shoulders curve inward like he's protecting himself from an invisible blow, and his head tilts at that particular angle that means he's been staring at calculations until his neck seized.

I set down the stack of papers and move toward the main entrance, reaching it just as he pushes through the door.

Dark gold hair escapes from its metal clasps in disheveled waves, and there are fresh ink stains on his fingers that climb halfway up his forearms. The sharp angles of his face look carved from exhaustion, silver-blue eyes dulled with the particular frustration that comes from battering against an immovable problem.

"Any progress?" I keep my voice light, though we both know the answer from the way he moves.

"None." He sheds his riding cloak with jerky movements, hanging it on the hook beside the door without his usual care.

"The alternate anchor configuration might work, but it's inelegant.

Risky. The kind of solution that gets reviewed by the architectural council and deemed 'adequate but concerning. '"

I watch him scrub ink-stained hands through his hair, leaving faint smudges along his temple. The scar there catches the light, a thin white line that speaks of old accidents and hard-learned lessons. "Come sit. You look ready to collapse."

"I need to review the binding calculations again. There has to be something I'm missing, some way to?—"

"Domiel." I step into his path, close enough that he has to stop moving or collide with me. "Sit. Five minutes won't destroy your deadline."

For a moment, I think he'll argue. His jaw works like he's chewing words too sharp to speak aloud. Then the fight goes out of him all at once, shoulders sagging as he allows me to guide him to the low couch near the window.

He sinks into the cushions with a sound that's part sigh, part groan.

I settle beside him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his skin, and begin working the knots from his shoulders with practiced fingers.

He melts under my touch, head falling forward to give me better access to the tension gathered at the base of his neck.

"We've lost a day," I say quietly, kneading at a particularly stubborn knot. "Tomorrow will be two. How much time do we have before this becomes impossible instead of just difficult?"

His muscles tense again under my hands. "We?"

"Don't." I press harder, earning a sharp intake of breath. "Don't pretend this is just your problem when we both know I'm the only viable solution."

"I looked into other options today." His voice carries the weight of defeat.

"Asked every courier service in the city, contacted the transport guilds.

Nobody can guarantee a round trip to Kaerion and back in less than five days.

Most are quoting seven to ten. And that was the few that could go—most untrustworthy since the others are already bought. "

I continue working at his shoulders, giving him space to arrive at the conclusion we both know is inevitable. The silence stretches between us, filled only by the distant sounds of the city and his gradually steadying breathing.

"There's another option." The words come reluctantly, like he's pulling them from somewhere deep and painful. "I could request an extension on the Vaelthorne contract. Explain the supply complications, negotiate new terms."

My hands still on his shoulders. "But?"

"But Lady Vaelthorne specifically chose my services because I don't miss deadlines.

It's the foundation of my reputation in Soimur.

" He sits up slightly, turning to meet my eyes.

"If I request an extension on a project this significant, word will spread.

Other families will start questioning my reliability. "

And then I remember something he seems to have forgotten. "Not only that, but don't you have your renewal meeting with the city?"

His expression grows grimmer. "Day after tomorrow. My ethereal architecture license comes up for review every three years. And they examine not just my technical competency, but my professional standing. Client satisfaction surveys, completion records, testimonials from the families I've served."

I understand now why this deadline has him wound tighter than a crossbow string.

It's not just about one contract, no matter how lucrative.

It's about everything he's built here, the reputation that allows him to choose his projects and command the fees that keep this estate running.

The work that gives him purpose and identity beyond his birth and breeding.

"The alternative is going yourself?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"I could leave immediately after the renewal meeting. Push the zarryn hard, make the round trip in four days if the weather holds." He rubs his palms against his knees, a nervous gesture that tells me exactly how much he dislikes this plan. "It would still be cutting it close, but possible."

"Except you'd be exhausted, working with materials you've never personally selected, and binding the final matrix with barely any margin for error." I shift to face him fully, studying the sharp planes of his face in the slanted afternoon light. "That's not elegant either. That's desperate."

He flinches slightly at the word, but doesn't argue. Because we both know I'm right. The Domiel I know, the one who builds homes that stand for centuries and wards that never fail, doesn't work desperate. He works with precision and patience and absolute confidence in every component.

"Domiel, let me go for you." I hate seeing him this overworked.

"Kaleen—"

"I can identify quality moonshard better than most of your regular couriers. You've seen me sort crystal matrices, handle volatile runestone. I know what to look for, how to test for structural flaws and resonance inconsistencies."

I watch him process this, see the war between logic and protection playing across his features. His hands clench and unclench against his knees, ink stains dark against his bronze skin.

"Two days there. Buy the lattice. And I'll turn around and come right back." I keep my voice steady, practical. "I could leave at first light tomorrow and return by evening on the third day at that rate. You'd have your binding lattice with a day to spare before you desperately need it."

"The roads?—"

"Are well-traveled during daylight hours, especially during construction season.

I'm not planning to camp in the wilderness or take shortcuts through bandit territory.

" I lean closer, close enough to see the gold flecks scattered through his silver-blue eyes.

"This isn't a dangerous rescue mission, Domiel. It's a business trip."

He's quiet for a long moment, staring past my shoulder at something I can't see. When he looks at me again, there's a vulnerability in his expression that makes my chest tight.

"I've never been apart from you for three days," he admits quietly. "Not since you chose to stay."

The words hit deeper than I expected. Because he's right.

In all the months since he bought my contract and I decided to remain, we've built a life that rarely requires separation.

His work keeps him in the city, my world has become centered around this estate and him.

The longest we've been apart is a single night when he was required to attend a formal dinner I couldn't accompany him to.

"I'll miss you too." I reach for his hands, threading my fingers through his despite the ink stains. "But I'll come back. This isn't me leaving, it's me helping you solve a

problem so we can continue building what we have here."

His thumb traces over my knuckles, following the line of the delicate gold bracelet that covers old scars. "If something happened to you..."

"Nothing will happen to me." I squeeze his hands. "I'm good at this, remember? Taking care of business, managing difficult situations, coming home safe at the end of the day." I lift his hand to my lips, pressing a soft kiss to his ink-stained knuckles. "You can't leave, Domiel. We both know it."

He knows I'm right. I can see it in the way his shoulders settle, the reluctant acceptance that flickers across his features.

Domiel built his career on reliability, on being the ethereal architect who never compromises, never cuts corners, never puts clients in the position of wondering if their investment was wise.

"I'll be careful," I continue, keeping my voice steady and sure.

"No unnecessary risks, no shortcuts through questionable territory.

Straight roads during daylight hours, established inns at night.

I'll test every piece of lattice before I buy it, negotiate a fair price, and come home with exactly what you need. "

His free hand comes up to cup my cheek, thumb brushing across my skin with that particular gentleness he reserves for quiet moments between us. "And if the quarry master tries to overcharge you? If the weather turns? If?—"

"Then I handle it." I lean into his touch, letting him see the confidence in my eyes.

"The same way I handled supply negotiations for the syndicate, the same way I managed volatile shipments and difficult clients before you ever knew my name. This is what I'm good at, remember?"

The fight goes out of him all at once, that internal war between logic and protection finally resolving into reluctant acceptance. His wings shift restlessly behind him, white and gray feathers catching the light from the window.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" The words come out rough, tinged with frustration that has nothing to do with me and everything to do with circumstances beyond his control.

I shake my head slowly. "No. You don't."

For a moment, we just look at each other. The late afternoon sun streams through the windows, painting everything in shades of gold and amber. I can see the exact moment he stops fighting the inevitable, the precise instant when his shoulders relax and his breathing deepens.

Then he's kissing me.

Not the gentle, questioning kiss of uncertainty, but the fierce, claiming kiss of a man who needs to mark this moment, to seal something between us before letting go.

His mouth moves against mine with hungry precision, one hand tangled in my hair while the other spans my waist. I taste the salt of his frustration, the sweetness of surrender, the dark edge of possession that always lurks beneath his careful control.

A surprised squeal escapes me as he breaks the kiss just long enough to sweep me up in his arms. The world tilts sideways as he lifts me like I weigh nothing, powerful arms supporting my back and knees while his wings spread slightly for balance.

"Domiel!" I laugh despite the breathless way my heart pounds, arms looping around his neck as he carries me from the sitting room. "What are you?—"

"Making the most of tonight." His voice carries that low, rough quality that sends heat spiraling through my chest. "Since you're so determined to leave me tomorrow."

The familiar hallways blur past as he navigates toward our bedroom with sure steps, muscles shifting under his shirt with each stride.

I can feel the controlled strength in the way he holds me, the careful balance between gentleness and power that's so essentially him.

His scent surrounds me—ink and stone dust and something indefinably warm that I've never been able to name.

"I'm coming back," I remind him, though my voice comes out breathier than intended.

"I know." He nudges our bedroom door open with his shoulder, carrying me across the threshold like I'm something precious to be protected. "But that doesn't mean I have to like letting you go."

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DOMIEL

I set her down carefully beside our bed, hands lingering at her waist as if I can somehow anchor her here through touch alone.

The late afternoon light slants through the tall windows, painting amber streaks across the stone floor and catching the warm brown of her hair.

She's looking at me with those knowing amber eyes, reading every flicker of emotion I'm trying to keep controlled.

The truth burns in my chest like hot metal: since the moment I first saw her sorting volatile runestone with steady hands and sharper wit, I've wanted nothing more than to keep her safe.

To build walls around this life we've created, to ensure nothing and no one can threaten what we have.

The thought of her riding mountain roads alone, negotiating with quarry masters I've never met, sleeping in inns where I can't watch over her—it makes something primitive and protective rear up in my chest.

But logic wars with instinct, and logic wins. Barely.

"I hate this," I say quietly, fingers tracing the line of her jaw. "I hate that I can't protect you from this. That I can't solve this problem without putting you at risk."

"It's not a risk." Her hands find the front of my shirt, fingers working at the buttons with practiced ease. "It's a solution. There's a difference."

I catch her hands, stilling them. "Is there?"

The question hangs between us like incense smoke, heavy and complex.

Because we both know the real issue isn't the road to Kaerion or the quarry master's reputation.

It's the fact that for the first time since she chose to stay, our carefully constructed world requires separation.

Requires me to let her walk away and trust that she'll come back.

I put that trust into her hands once when I gave her her own contract. When I told her to make her own choice. And she chose me.

That doesn't mean I never fear she'll regret it.

"Yes," she says simply, and I hear the certainty in her voice that's gotten us through every other impossible situation. "There is."

I release her hands and she resumes unbuttoning my shirt, fingers brushing against my skin with each loosened button. The familiar touch sends warmth spreading through my chest, chasing away some of the cold fear that's been coiled there since this morning.

"Besides," she continues, pushing the fabric off my shoulders, "you're not letting me do anything. I'm choosing to help you because that's what we do. We solve problems together."

The shirt falls to the floor and her hands spread across my chest, palms warm against my skin.

I close my eyes and focus on the sensation, on the way she touches me like I'm something worth treasuring.

When I open them again, she's studying my face with that particular intensity that means she's reading thoughts I haven't spoken aloud.

"You're thinking too much," she murmurs, reaching for the clasps in my hair.

The metal pieces fall away under her fingers, and my hair tumbles loose around my shoulders. She combs through the strands with gentle fingers, working out the tangles left by wind and worry. The simple intimacy of it makes my chest tight.

"Come on." I take her hand, threading our fingers together. "Let's get clean."

I lead her toward the bathing chamber, a space I designed with the same careful attention I give to all my architectural work.

The shower area is carved from a single piece of moonstone, its pale surface shot through with veins of silver that catch and amplify light.

Brass fixtures gleam against the stone, and the floor is inlaid with tiny chips of crystal that warm under bare feet.

She turns in my arms as we reach the shower, hands working at the ties of her dress while I watch.

The fabric slides away from her shoulders like water, pooling at her feet in soft folds.

The sight of her never loses its power to stop my thoughts completely—the gentle curves of her body, the way late sunlight gilds her brown skin, the faint scar near her collarbone that speaks of survival and strength.

My hands settle at her waist, thumbs tracing the familiar territory of her ribs. "Beautiful," I murmur, the word rough with want and something deeper than desire.

She reaches for my belt, fingers steady despite the way her breathing has changed. "Your turn."

The leather falls away under her hands, followed by the rest of my clothes until we're both bare in the golden light.

I pull magical energy from the crystal matrices embedded in the walls, feeling the familiar tingle as power flows through the carved channels.

The water begins to warm, steam curling upward as heated droplets cascade from the specially designed nozzles.

I lift her again, this time skin against skin, and she wraps her legs around my waist with trusting ease.

Her arms loop around my neck as I carry her under the warm spray, water streaming over both of us in heated rivers.

She tips her head back, letting the water run through her dark hair, and the trust in the gesture—the way she gives herself over to my strength completely—makes something fierce and protective surge in my chest.

"I don't want you to go," I admit against the curve of her neck, voice barely audible over the sound of falling water.

"I know." Her fingers trace the scar at my temple, touch gentle as thalivern wings.
"But I am going. And I'm coming back. Those are the only two facts that matter."

The water runs between us, washing away the ink stains and dust of the day, but nothing can rinse away the need burning under my skin. The need to mark this moment, to claim something that will last beyond tomorrow morning when she rides away from me.

The water cascades around us as I press her against the smooth moonstone wall, her legs still wrapped around my waist. Her wet hair clings to her shoulders, droplets catching the crystal light embedded in the stone.

The way she looks at me—amber eyes dark with want, lips parted as steam curls between us—makes my control fracture.

"Dom," she breathes, and the sound of my name on her lips undoes me completely.

My mouth finds hers, hungry and demanding.

She responds with equal fervor, her hands tangling in my wet hair as she pulls me closer.

The kiss deepens until we're consuming each other, years of quiet intimacy giving way to something raw and desperate.

I can taste the fear on her tongue—not of me, never of me, but of tomorrow, of separation, of the unknown that waits beyond our sanctuary.

"I need you," I growl against her lips, voice rough with desire and something deeper.
"Need to feel you, all of you."

Her response is a soft whimper that makes heat pool low in my belly. I trail my mouth down the column of her throat, tasting water and skin and the essence that's purely her. She arches into me, nails scoring light marks across my shoulders.

"Please," she gasps, the word barely audible over the sound of falling water. "Don't make me wait."

The desperation in her voice mirrors my own. I shift my grip, one hand braced against the wall while the other supports her weight. She's slick and ready for me, and the knowledge that she wants this as much as I do sends fire racing through my veins.

"Look at me," I command softly, waiting until her amber eyes meet mine. "I want to see every expression when I take you."

She nods, breath coming in short pants as I position myself. The first touch makes us both gasp, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to maintain control. When I open them again, she's watching me with an intensity that steals my breath.

Slowly, deliberately, I slide into her welcoming heat.

Her head falls back against the stone, a broken moan escaping her lips as I fill her completely.

The sensation is overwhelming—the tight clasp of her body, the way she trembles in my arms, the absolute trust in her face as she gives herself to me.

"Gods, you feel perfect," I breathe, forehead pressed against hers as we both adjust to the connection. "So perfect for me. Always so perfect."

"Move," she whispers, hips shifting restlessly. "Please, I need?—"

I silence her with another kiss as I begin to move, slow and deep at first. Each thrust pulls soft sounds from her throat that drive me closer to the edge. The water streams around us, creating a curtain that cuts us off from the world beyond this moment.

"That's it," I murmur against her ear, pace gradually increasing. "Take all of me. You're so beautiful like this, falling apart in my arms."

Her responses become more desperate, more needy. She clings to me like I'm her anchor in a storm, and maybe I am. Maybe we both are, holding each other together against the fear of what tomorrow might bring.

"Harder," she gasps, and the plea breaks what's left of my restraint.

I drive into her with more force, the sound of our bodies connecting mixing with her increasingly breathless moans. The moonstone wall is cool against my palm as I brace us, muscles straining with the effort to give her everything she needs while keeping her safe in my arms.

"You're mine," I growl, the words torn from somewhere deep in my chest. "No matter where you go, no matter how far, you're mine."

"Yes," she sobs, voice breaking on the word. "Yours. Always yours."

The affirmation pushes me closer to the precipice. I can feel her body tightening around me, see the telltale flush spreading across her chest. She's close, so close, and I need to bring her over the edge with me.

"Come for me," I command, voice rough with desperate need. "Let me feel you fall apart."

I lean forward, kissing her neck before biting gently as I thrust deeper into her. Her

body tightens as she moans, and I grind my hips against hers with each drive to give her the friction she needs.

"Yes," she moans. "Dom, just like that."

Her hips roll to meet mine, my movements turning frantic, and just as she clamps down around me, screaming out my name, I come, filling her. I press Kaleen tighter against the wall, shallowly thrusting a few more times into her as her body shudders through her orgasm.

Once I have my bearings again, I lift my head and gently kiss her lips. "I love you," I tell her, though the words never feel like enough.

This woman is the other half of my soul and while I never want to push her, to ask for more than she is willing to give, I want to tie her life to mine. I want her to be with me in life and death. I'm not sure she ever comprehends how much I love her, need her, want her.

But then she cups my face, her eyes meeting mine with so much emotion. "I love you. I will until the sun fails to rise."

It's what she always says to me, like she knows when I need to hear it most. And right now, I really need it.

Because, regardless of logic, I can't stand the idea of being away from her.

But it's just three days...right?

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DOMIEL

M orning light streams through the high windows of our room, casting golden reflections off the polished stone floor.

The crystal matrices I embedded in the walls catch the early sun and fracture it into dancing prisms that scatter across the ceiling.

Usually, the sight brings me satisfaction—evidence of precise engineering married to beauty. Today, it feels like mockery.

Kaleen moves through the space with practiced efficiency, her bare feet silent on the warm stone.

She's already dressed in sturdy travel clothes: dark leather boots that lace to mid-calf, fitted brown trousers that won't catch in a saddle, and a deep green tunic that brings out the gold flecks in her amber eyes.

The sight of her packed and ready makes something cold settle in my stomach.

I remain sprawled across our bed, sheets tangled around my waist, watching her with the desperate focus of a man trying to memorize every detail.

The way her thick chestnut hair catches the light as she bends to check her satchel.

The unconscious grace in her movements as she folds spare clothes with quick, economical motions.

The determined set of her jaw that tells me arguing further would be pointless.

"You don't have to watch me pack like I'm heading to my execution," she says without looking up, but I catch the slight smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Don't I?" The words come out rougher than intended. I scrub a hand through my loose hair, trying to shake off the weight of foreboding that's settled on my chest like a stone. "Because that's exactly what this feels like."

She straightens, fixing me with that steady amber gaze that's gotten us through every crisis we've faced together. "It's three days, Dom. I've survived worse than mountain roads and quarry masters."

The casual reference to her past—to the years of indenture I couldn't protect her from—sends a fresh spike of anger through me.

Not at her, never at her, but at the circumstances that taught her such resilience in the first place.

At myself for being in a position where I have to rely on that hard-won strength.

"Come here," I say, extending one hand toward her.

She approaches the bed with that particular combination of wariness and affection she reserves for my more protective moments. When she's close enough, I catch her wrist and pull her down onto the mattress beside me, ignoring her small sound of protest.

"Dom, I need to?—"

"Check the map for the fifth time? Adjust your supplies again?"

" I gather her against my chest, burying my face in the warm curve of her neck.

She still smells like the soap we shared last night, mixed with something that's purely her—warm skin and determination and the faint sweetness that clings to her hair.

"The sun's barely up. You have time."

Her body relaxes into mine despite her protests, familiar curves fitting against my harder angles like we were designed for each other. Maybe we were. Maybe the gods took pity on a lonely ethereal architect and sent him a woman who could see past gilded wings to the man beneath.

"I've memorized every detail of that route," she murmurs against my shoulder.

"Two days north through Kaerion's mountain passes, then I'll go straight to the quarry.

I'll have the moonshard lattice by evening on the second day and be back here before sunset on the third.

I won't stay anywhere longer than I need to. "

The methodical recitation should reassure me. Instead, it emphasizes how far she'll be traveling, how many things could go wrong, how many hours I'll spend wondering if she's safe while trapped in meetings I can't escape.

I tighten my arms around her, pressing my lips to the pulse point below her ear. "I hate every part of this plan except the part where you come home to me."

"That's the only part that matters." Her fingers trace patterns across my bare chest, touch gentle but grounding. "Everything else is just details."

She shifts to look at me, propping herself up on one elbow. The movement causes her hair to fall in silky waves over her shoulder, and I can't resist threading my fingers through the dark strands. Her expression grows serious as she studies my face.

"You're scared," she observes, no judgment in her tone. Just fact.

"Terrified," I admit. There's no point in lying to her.

She reads me too well, knows all the ways I try to hide vulnerability behind logic and control.

"I've built my entire life around creating safe spaces, protecting what matters most. And now the thing that matters most to me wants to ride into unknown territory where I can't watch over her. "

"Dom." Her palm cups my jaw, thumb stroking over the scar at my temple. "Fear isn't going to change what needs to happen. But trust might make it bearable."

The words hit deeper than any argument could. Because she's right, as she always is about these things. This isn't about the quarry or the deadline or even the moonshard lattice. This is about trust—trusting her competence, her judgment, her promise to return.

"I do trust you," I say quietly. "It's everything else I don't trust."

She leans down to brush her lips against mine, the kiss soft and reassuring. "Then trust that I'm too stubborn to let 'everything else' keep me from coming home to you."

The kiss lingers between us, sweet and aching familiar, before she pulls away with obvious reluctance.

Her amber eyes hold mine for a long moment, and I see my own reluctance reflected there—the same desperate desire to freeze this moment, to keep her safe in the circle of my arms where nothing can touch her.

But duty calls, as it always does.

She slides from the bed with fluid grace, and I force myself to release her though every instinct screams against it. The loss of her warmth feels like a physical blow, cold air rushing in to fill the space where she belonged.

"I should get moving if I want to reach Silverbrook before dark," she says, shouldering her travel pack.

The leather is well-worn but sturdy, packed with supplies we selected together last night when I could get my hands off of her—dried provisions, spare clothes, coin for lodging, and the sealed letter of authorization I'd written to ensure the quarry master would release the moonshard lattice to her.

I rise from the bed, not bothering with clothes as I follow her through our chambers.

The morning light streaming through the tall windows catches the subtle bronze of my skin, making it gleam like polished metal.

My wings remain folded tight against my back, silver-blue primaries tucked neatly beneath the gray-flecked coverts.

When I'm agitated, they have a tendency to flare, and the last thing I want is to make this harder for her by displaying my anxiety like a warning banner.

She pauses at the chamber door, turning back to face me with that steady confidence that first caught my attention in a dusty quarry yard. "Promise me something."

"Anything."

"Don't spend the next three days redesigning the wards out of nervous energy." Her mouth curves in a knowing smile. "I'd like to come home to a house that still remembers me."

The gentle teasing draws a reluctant smile from me despite the knot of tension in my chest. She knows me too well—knows that when I'm anxious, I tend to pour that energy into my work, sometimes to obsessive degrees.

The wards that protect our estate are already perfectly calibrated, but in my current state, I might tinker with them until they no longer recognize her magical signature.

"I'll try to resist the urge," I promise, catching her hand and bringing it to my lips.

Her knuckles are callused from years of hard work, each small scar a testament to her strength.

I press a kiss to each one, tasting salt and the faint mineral scent that clings to her skin from handling magical stone.

She allows the indulgence for a moment before gently extracting her hand. "Good. Now stop looking at me like I'm walking into the void. It's making me want to stay, and we both know I can't."

The words are meant to lighten the mood, but they land with the weight of truth. I can see the same reluctance in her eyes that's clawing at my insides, the same desire to forget duty and responsibility and remain wrapped in the safety of what we've built together.

But she's right. The Vaelthorne commission can't wait, and my licensing meeting is

tomorrow afternoon.

If I miss it, months of work could be wasted, and our carefully constructed life could crumble.

The city council doesn't grant second chances to ethereal architects who fail to maintain their credentials.

After I tug on some clothes, I follow her through the hallway, past the sitting room with its precisely placed furniture and the dining area where we share quiet meals by lamplight.

Every surface bears some mark of my craft—protective sigils carved into doorframes, light crystals embedded in the walls, wards that keep the temperature perfectly balanced and unwanted influences at bay.

This house is a masterwork of magical engineering, but without her presence to give it meaning, it feels as cold and empty as a tomb.

The main door opens with a whisper of well-oiled hinges, revealing the courtyard beyond.

Morning mist clings to the carefully tended gardens where she grows herbs for cooking and healing.

The zarryn she's hired waits near the gate, silver coat gleaming in the early light, both tails switching with typical mountain-bred impatience.

The creature's temperamental nature shows in the way it sidesteps and tosses its shaggy head, but the handler maintains a firm grip on the lead rope.

I step out into the doorway, bare feet finding the warm stone of the threshold.

The morning air carries the scent of dew and growing things, mixed with the metallic tang that always lingers around zarryn.

My wings press more tightly against my back as I watch her approach the creature with easy confidence, speaking in low, soothing tones that calm its nervous energy.

She swings up onto the zarryn's back with practiced ease, settling into the saddle like she was born to it. The sight sends another spike of unease through me—she looks so small on the creature's broad back, so vulnerable despite her obvious competence.

"Three days," she calls out, gathering the reins in capable hands. "I'll be back before you know it."

She guides the zarryn away from the gate, but instead of turning immediately toward the road, she urges it into a slow walk that keeps her facing me.

That brilliant smile spreads across her face—the one that transforms her entire countenance from merely beautiful to absolutely radiant—and she raises one hand in a playful wave.

"Don't look so grim," she laughs, walking the zarryn backward down the path with the kind of easy skill that speaks to years of experience. "You'll give yourself premature gray streaks, and I happen to like your hair the color it is."

Despite everything, her teasing draws a genuine smile from me. She has that effect—an ability to find light even in my darkest moods, to pull me back from the edge of worry through sheer force of her presence.

I remain in the doorway, one hand gripping the stone frame hard enough that my

knuckles show white. The sensation grounds me, keeps me from doing something foolish like demanding she take guards or insisting I abandon everything to ride with her.

She continues backing the zarryn away, never breaking eye contact, that smile never wavering.

The morning sun catches the rich brown of her hair where it escapes her braid, turning it to burnished copper.

Her green travel tunic brings out the warm undertones in her skin, and for a moment she looks like some woodland spirit sent to torment me with beauty I can see but not touch.

The distance between us grows with each step the zarryn takes, but she maintains that playful backward progress, determined to keep me in sight as long as possible. The gesture is so perfectly her—refusing to simply leave, instead drawing out our goodbye until the very last moment.

When she finally reaches the bend in the road, she blows me a kiss with theatrical flourish before turning the zarryn toward the mountain pass. I watch until her figure disappears beyond the line of trees, swallowed by shadow and distance, the sound of hoofbeats fading to silence.

The absence hits me like a physical blow. The carefully controlled unease I've been managing since we planned this trip erupts into something sharper, more desperate. It's as if half of my soul just rode away on a temperamental mountain creature, leaving me incomplete and aching.

I remain frozen in the doorway long after she's gone, staring at the empty road like I can will her back into sight through sheer force of longing.

The morning mist continues to rise from the gardens, and somewhere in the distance a black pitter calls to its mate.

Life goes on around me, but all I can focus on is the hollow space where her presence used to be.

Three days suddenly feels like an eternity.

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KALEEN

The zarryn's hooves find their rhythm on the winding forest trail, each step carrying me further from Domiel's worried expression and deeper into the mist-shrouded mountains of Kaerion.

I settle into the steady gait, letting my body move with the creature's natural motion while my mind wanders between the task ahead and the man I've left behind.

The morning air bites at my exposed skin, sharp with the promise of altitude and weather change.

Tendrils of mist curl between the towering pines, their silver-green needles heavy with dew that catches the filtered sunlight like scattered diamonds.

The forest feels ancient here, untouched by the careful cultivation of city life, and I breathe deeply of air that tastes of earth and growing things and wild spaces.

My zarryn—a sturdy mare the stable master assured me was "mountain-broken and sensible"—tosses her shaggy head occasionally but maintains her pace without complaint.

Both silver tails flick at imaginary insects, and her ears swivel constantly, alert to every sound in the surrounding woods.

Smart creature. These mountains demand respect, even from those bred to traverse them.

The trail winds steadily upward, carved into the mountainside by generations of traders and quarry workers.

It's wide enough for a loaded cart but narrow enough that I keep well away from the edge where the ground drops away into misty valleys far below.

The sound of my passage echoes off the rock faces—the steady clip of hooves, the creak of leather, the soft jingle of my pack's metal fittings.

Hours pass in peaceful solitude. I stop twice to rest the zarryn and stretch my own muscles, sharing water from my travel flask and dried jerky from my provisions. The creature accepts both offerings graciously, her temperamental reputation apparently not extending to well-deserved breaks.

I make it to Silverbrook with no issues, as well as booking a room at the end.

Muscle memory takes over tasks I learned during my hardest years as I get ready to settle for the night.

Unsaddle the zarryn. Check her hooves and coat for any signs of strain or injury.

Block the door so I can sleep without anyone coming after me.

The night passes quietly except for the usual forest sounds—the hoot of hunting birds, the distant howl of something wild and lonely, the whisper of wind through pine boughs.

I sleep deeply despite being alone in unfamiliar territory, exhaustion from the day's travel overriding any nervousness about my solitary state.

Morning comes gray and misty, the sun struggling to penetrate the low-hanging

clouds that cling to the mountainsides like gossamer veils.

I break camp quickly, eager to reach the quarry before midday.

The sooner I can complete this transaction, the sooner I can begin the journey home to Domiel's anxious embrace.

The trail climbs more steeply now, winding through narrow passes where the trees thin and give way to exposed rock faces.

The air grows sharper, thinner, carrying scents I don't recognize—mineral-rich stone, alpine flowers, and something else.

Something wild and predatory that makes the hair on my arms stand up despite the morning's chill.

My zarryn notices it too. Her ears pin back against her skull, and her step quickens without any urging from me.

She tosses her head nervously, both tails lashing with agitation rather than the lazy swishing of yesterday's peaceful travel.

When I try to calm her with gentle words and steady hands on the reins, she fights the bit for the first time since we started this journey.

"Easy, girl," I murmur, but my own voice carries a tension I can't quite suppress. "What's got you spooked?"

The answer comes as a low rumble from somewhere behind us—not quite a growl, not quite a roar, but something that vibrates through the mountain air with predatory intent.

My blood turns to ice water in my veins as I recognize the sound.

Something large. Something hungry. Something that's been following us.

I don't look back. Every instinct screams against giving whatever's stalking us the satisfaction of seeing my fear, and besides, I need to focus on the treacherous trail ahead.

Instead, I lean forward in the saddle and give the zarryn her head, trusting her mountain-bred instincts to carry us both to safety.

She needs no further encouragement. The moment she feels the slack in the reins, she breaks into a reckless gallop that sends loose stones skittering over the cliff edge.

Her hooves find purchase on surfaces that seem too narrow, too unstable to support our combined weight, but she doesn't slow.

Behind us, the rumbling grows louder, joined by other voices—a pack, then, hunting together with the coordination that makes mountain predators so deadly.

The trail curves sharply around an outcropping of granite, and for a heart-stopping moment I'm suspended over empty air as my zarryn leaps a gap I didn't see coming.

We land hard on the far side, the impact jarring through my bones, but she recovers quickly and plunges onward through the morning mist.

Something crashes through the underbrush to our left—massive, moving fast, paralleling our desperate flight.

Through the swirling fog I catch glimpses of dark fur and yellow eyes, hear the scratch of claws on stone as our pursuer keeps pace with terrifying ease.

It's hunting us, driving us toward something.

That realization sends fresh terror racing through my system because predators that coordinate their attacks are infinitely more dangerous than solitary hunters.

My zarryn's breathing comes in harsh gasps now, foam flecking her silver coat as she pushes herself beyond safe limits.

But she doesn't slow, doesn't hesitate, even when the trail narrows to a ledge barely wider than her body.

I press myself low against her neck, making myself as small as possible, feeling the terrible emptiness of open space just inches from my right knee.

The attack comes without warning.

Something huge and dark launches itself from the rocks above, landing squarely on my zarryn's hindquarters with enough force to drive her stumbling sideways. She screams—a sound of pain and terror that cuts through me like a blade—and her rear legs skid toward the edge of the trail.

I have a split second to see massive jaws lined with finger-length teeth, to smell the rank musk of a predator that hasn't bathed in blood for too long, before my zarryn bucks violently in an attempt to dislodge her attacker.

The motion sends me flying from the saddle like a stone from a sling. For a moment that stretches into eternity, I'm weightless, suspended in mist and terror, watching the ground rush up to meet me with implacable certainty.

My head strikes something hard and unyielding—a jutting piece of granite worn smooth by countless storms. White-hot pain explodes behind my eyes, followed

immediately by a darkness so complete it swallows sound, sensation, and consciousness itself.

The last thing I register before the void claims me is the echo of my zarryn's terrified scream, fading into silence as black closes over my mind.

Pain splits through my skull like a white-hot blade, dragging me from the merciful darkness into a world that tilts and spins with every heartbeat.

I press my palm against my temple and feel something wet and sticky—blood, matted into my hair and crusted along my scalp.

The metallic taste coats my tongue, sharp and nauseating.

Where am I?

The question echoes in the hollow spaces of my mind, finding no answer. I'm lying on cold stone, mist swirling around me like ghostly fingers. Trees tower overhead, their branches lost in gray fog that seems to muffle all sound except the steady drip of moisture from pine needles.

I struggle to sit up, my body protesting with aches I don't understand.

My clothes are torn, dirt ground into the fabric.

One sleeve hangs in tatters, revealing scratches along my forearm that sting when the damp air touches them.

But the wounds feel old somehow, partially healed. How long have I been here?

Think. Remember something.

But when I reach for memories, I find only fragments—the taste of fear, the sound of something snarling, the sensation of falling through empty space. Nothing concrete. Nothing that explains why I'm alone on a mountain trail with blood in my hair and terror lodged in my chest like a living thing.

Nothing that tells me...anything.

I'm tossed among the trees, far from any path, but I know I can't stay here. This is dangerous. So I force myself to my feet and use the sun to track north. I don't have a good reason behind it, but it at least gives me direction.

After some time of walking, I spot a small break in the dense forest. A narrow path winds downward through the trees, carved into the mountainside by countless feet. My legs shake when I try to stand, forcing me to lean against a moss-covered boulder until the world stops spinning.

One step. Then another. The trail slopes steeply downward, and I follow it because moving feels better than staying still with only the whispers of wind and my own ragged breathing for company.

Time becomes meaningless as I stumble through the mist. The sun, when I can glimpse it through the canopy, seems low in the sky, painting everything in shades of gray and amber. My stomach cramps with hunger, though the thought of food makes bile rise in my throat.

"Help." The word comes out as barely a whisper, lost immediately in the vastness of the forest. I try again, louder. "Someone help me."

Only echoes answer.

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The trail eventually levels out, winding through dense stands of trees whose trunks disappear into the mist like ancient pillars holding up the sky. My head pounds with each step, but I keep moving because stopping means facing the emptiness where my memories should be.

Smoke. The scent reaches me before I see its source—woodsmoke tinged with something savory that makes my empty stomach clench with sudden, desperate hunger. I follow the smell like a lifeline, pushing through undergrowth that catches at my torn clothing.

The village emerges from the fog gradually, as if the mist is reluctant to reveal its secrets.

Houses carved from dark stone and weathered timber nestle into the hillsides, their sod roofs sprouting with wildflowers and moss.

Warm light glows from windows fitted with what looks like colored glass, casting pools of blue and green radiance onto the muddy paths between buildings.

A river runs along the village's edge, so still and pale it mirrors the sky perfectly. The sight of it makes something twist in my chest—not quite a memory, but the ghost of one.

"Saints and spirits." The voice comes from behind me, rough with surprise. "Girl, what happened to you?"

I turn too quickly and nearly fall as dizziness washes over me.

A woman stands in the doorway of what might be a shop or cottage, her iron-gray hair braided down her back and pale green eyes sharp with concern.

She's thin but sturdy, built like someone who's weathered decades of hard work without complaint.

"I don't—" My voice cracks. "I can't remember."

She steps closer, her gaze taking in my torn clothes and bloodied scalp with the practiced efficiency of someone accustomed to crisis. "Fleeing something, are you?"

The assumption settles over me like an uncomfortable cloak. Am I fleeing? The word feels wrong, but I can't explain why.

"Come on then." She doesn't wait for an answer, just takes my arm with gentle firmness and guides me toward her door. "No use standing out here catching your death. I'm Marnai. Elder Marnai, if you want to be formal, but that can wait until you're not bleeding on my threshold."

The cottage interior smells like herbs and woodsmoke, with bundles of dried plants hanging from the rafters and shelves lined with jars containing things I can't identify.

Marnai guides me to a chair beside a stone hearth where flames dance behind a metal grate, casting dancing shadows on the walls.

"Tolle!" she calls toward what must be another room. "Get yourself out here. We've got someone who needs tending."

Heavy footsteps announce the arrival of a broad-shouldered man with ruddy skin and graying beard. He smells like cloves and pine sap, and his hands are stained green from whatever work he was doing. His eyes fix on my bloodied head with the

intensity of someone evaluating damage.

"Scalp wound," he grunts, moving closer to examine the injury. "Not deep, but head wounds bleed like the devil himself. When did this happen?"

"I don't know." The admission tastes like failure. "I don't remember."

Tolle and Marnai exchange glances loaded with meaning I can't decipher. He disappears into the back room and returns with a basin of water, clean cloths, and a collection of small bottles that clink softly as he sets them on the table.

"Hold still." His hands are surprisingly gentle as he cleans the blood from my hair, his touch clinical but not unkind. "Might sting a bit."

The antiseptic burns, but the pain is clean and immediate—easier to bear than the throbbing confusion in my skull. While he works, Marnai bustles around the kitchen area, ladling something that smells like heaven into a wooden bowl.

"What's your name, child?" she asks, setting the bowl in front of me along with a spoon and a piece of bread still warm from the oven.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes. The question hits the same blank wall as all the others, leaving me staring at two strangers who are showing me more kindness than I can remember receiving from anyone.

Marnai's expression softens. "That's all right. Happens sometimes with head injuries. But let's see if we can't find some clues."

She reaches for something at my throat, and I flinch away instinctively before realizing she's only touching a chain around my neck. When did I put that on? I have no memory of it, but her fingers work at a clasp I can't see.

"There's an inscription." She holds up a pendant, angling it toward the firelight.
"Kaleen. Pretty name for a pretty girl."

Kaleen. The word resonates through me, not quite memory but a sense of rightness, like a key turning in a lock I didn't know was there.

"Kaleen," I repeat, testing how it feels in my mouth. It fits.

"Well then, Kaleen." Marnai settles the necklace back around my throat with gentle hands. "Eat your soup before it gets cold. Tolle's broth could raise the dead, and you look like you need raising."

The soup is rich with vegetables I can't name and seasoned with herbs that taste like comfort itself. Each spoonful sends warmth spreading through my chest, easing some of the bone-deep chill I hadn't fully noticed until now.

"Are you the only one?" Tolle asks as he applies something that smells sharply medicinal to my scalp. "Or should we be watching for others?"

Others. The word brings a flutter of—something. Fear? Hope? I can't tell.

"I don't know." It's becoming my standard response to everything, and the frustration makes my eyes burn. "I woke up alone in the forest. I don't remember anything before that."

Marnai nods as if this explains everything. "Well, you're safe now. Veylowe doesn't get many visitors, but we take care of our own."

Veylowe. Another word that means nothing to me, though the way she says it suggests home and safety and belonging—things I'm not sure I've ever had.

Over the following days, more villagers drift through Marnai's cottage to catch glimpses of the stranger who appeared from the mountain mist. They bring offerings—fresh bread from someone who must be a baker, soft wool blankets that smell like lavender, healing tonics that numb the persistent ache in my head.

A woman named Derri arrives on the third day with ink-stained fingers and kind eyes, carrying a leather-bound book under one arm. She asks gentle questions about what I remember, writing down my fragmentary answers with careful script.

"Sometimes memories come back gradually," she says, not looking up from her writing. "Like a dam that's been damaged—just a trickle at first, then more."

But the trickle never comes. Days pass in a haze of carefully crafted routine.

I help Marnai with small tasks around the cottage, learning the rhythms of village life without ever feeling like I truly belong to them.

The other villagers are kind but cautious, watching me with the wariness of people who've learned to be suspicious of strangers.

It's Derri who notices the changes in my body before I do.

"You're looking peaked," she mentions one morning as I help her sort through supplies for the village school. "More tired than someone your age should be after a head injury that's mostly healed."

I pause in my counting of slate pencils, suddenly aware of the bone-deep exhaustion that's been plaguing me for days.

And the nausea that strikes at random moments, usually when someone's cooking something that should smell appetizing.

And the way my clothes have started feeling tight across my chest and waist, though Marnai's generous meals should account for that.

"It's probably just?—"

"When was your last bleeding?" Derri's question is gentle but direct, the kind of practical inquiry from one woman to another that cuts through polite pretense.

My last... The question hits that familiar wall of nothingness, but this time there's something else. A flutter of awareness, like recognition at the edge of consciousness.

"I don't remember."

But even as I say it, my hand drifts to my stomach of its own accord. The gesture feels familiar, protective. Like something I've done before.

Derri sets down her pen and really looks at me for the first time in days. Her gaze is knowing, experienced—the look of a woman who's delivered enough babies to recognize the signs without needing confirmation.

"Oh, child." Her voice carries a weight of understanding that makes my chest tighten with something between hope and terror. "You don't know, do you?"

"Don't know what?" But I do know, somewhere beneath the damaged surface of my mind. The knowledge sits in my body like a secret I've been keeping from myself.

"You're with child. Have been for months, by the look of things."

The words hit me like a physical blow, sending me stumbling backward until my legs encounter a chair and I collapse into it. Pregnant. The concept seems impossible and inevitable all at once, explaining so many things I hadn't understood about my body's

recent changes.

But if I'm pregnant, that means?—

"Where's the father?" The question tears out of me with desperate urgency. "There has to be someone. I wouldn't have—I couldn't have?—"

Memories slam into me without warning. Not clear images, but emotional echoes. The sensation of being held. Of feeling safe. Of loving someone so completely that their absence leaves a hollow ache in my chest.

Someone who mattered. Someone I've lost.

My hands shake as I press them to my stomach, feeling for the first time the subtle roundness that my torn clothes had been hiding. Beneath my palms, something flutters—so faint I might be imagining it.

"How long?" My voice sounds strange, disconnected from my body. "How far along?"

Derri's expression is carefully neutral, the look of someone delivering news that could go either way. "Hard to say without proper examination, but... four months. Maybe five."

Four months. Does that mean I knew? Before whatever happened on the mountain, before the blood and the emptiness and the fear, did I know about this baby? Plan for it, prepare for it? Maybe even wanted it?

I'm not sure.

But now the knowledge brings only terror—sharp and crystalline and utterly

consuming.

I don't remember the father. Don't remember deciding to have a child or feeling joy at the prospect. Don't remember anything that would help me understand what this means or what I'm supposed to do now.

A sob builds in my chest, part grief and part panic. Someone loved me enough to give me this child. Someone who might be searching for me right now, wondering what happened to his woman and his baby. But I can't remember his face, can't even remember his name.

"Shh." Marnai appears at my side as if summoned by my distress, her weathered hands gentle on my shoulders. "Easy, child. Everything's going to be all right."

"How can it be all right?" The words come out broken, desperate. "I don't remember anything. I don't know who I am or where I came from or who—" My voice cracks on the impossibility of it all. "What kind of mother forgets the father of her child?"

"The kind who's been through trauma." Marnai's tone brooks no argument. "Head injuries are tricky things. But you're safe here, and that baby's safe here. That's what matters right now."

Safe. The word should be comforting, but instead it feels like a cage. Safe means staying in this village that feels like borrowed clothes—pleasant enough, but never quite fitting right. Safe means accepting that the life I had before, the person I was before, might be gone forever.

But as another flutter moves beneath my hands—stronger this time, unmistakably real—I realize that whatever I've lost, I'm not entirely alone. This child is a piece of my previous life, a connection to whoever I used to be.

Even if I can't remember him, somewhere out there is a man who helped create this life. A man who might be looking for us both.

The thought brings a mixture of hope and terror so intense it makes me dizzy. What if he doesn't find us? What if he does, but I don't recognize him? What if I've forgotten him completely, but he still loves the woman I used to be?

"One day at a time," Derri says softly, as if she can read the chaos in my expression. "Memory or no memory, your body knows what to do. Trust that."

I want to trust something, but faith feels like a luxury I can't afford when everything I am exists in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

Still, as the fire crackles in Marnai's hearth and the baby moves again under my trembling hands, I try to find some small piece of solid ground to stand on.

My name is Kaleen. I'm pregnant. I'm alive.

For now, that has to be enough.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

DOMIEL

The first day crawls by like a wounded animal.

I force myself through the motions—sketching ward patterns for the Vaelthorne commission, checking measurements against the architectural plans spread across my drafting table.

But every line I draw wavers slightly, my usually steady hand betraying the restless energy that's been building since Kaleen's zarryn disappeared around the bend in the road.

The house feels wrong without her. Too quiet.

Too empty. The spaces she normally occupies—the kitchen where she hums while preparing meals, the garden where she tends her herbs, the reading nook by the southern window—all echo with absence.

Even my workshop, typically a sanctuary of focused creation, feels hollow.

The half-finished ward stones sit accusingly on their pedestals, their incomplete matrices mocking my inability to concentrate.

I miss her laugh. The way she teases me when I get too absorbed in my work. The sound of her voice calling my name from another room. Miss the weight of her beside me in bed, the way she fits against my chest like she was carved specifically for that purpose.

One day. She's been gone one day, and I'm already unraveling.

By evening, I've accomplished nothing of value. The ward sketches are garbage—uneven, poorly calibrated, the kind of amateur work that would get my license revoked if anyone saw them. I crumple the parchment and throw it into the fire, watching months of careful planning curl into ash.

The second day brings my licensing meeting with the city magisters.

I dress in my formal robes—deep blue silk embroidered with silver threading that catches the light like captured starfire.

The kind of garment that announces status and competence to anyone who sees it.

My reflection in the mirror looks appropriately dignified, but my silver-blue eyes betray the sleepless night behind me.

The meeting goes better than expected. Magister Veleth reviews my recent projects with approval—the Thornwick estate's protective matrices, the Silverhall manor's light-weaving chambers, the delicate ward work that keeps the Blackstone family's volatile collection of magical artifacts properly contained.

"Exceptional work, as always," she says, stamping the renewal seal onto my license documents. "The city is fortunate to have someone of your caliber maintaining our most prestigious properties."

I accept the compliments with appropriate humility, but inside I'm burning to tell Kaleen about this victory.

She was the one who calmed my nerves before the meeting, who reminded me that my work speaks for itself.

She should be the first to know that another three years of commissions is secured, that the anxieties we discussed are finally put to rest.

But the house greets me with the same oppressive silence as before. Sure, there are some servants around but I don't crave company. I crave Kaleen.

I pour myself a glass of Amerinth—something I never do in daylight—and sit in Kaleen's favorite chair, trying to imagine her reaction to the news. Her smile. The way she'd kiss me in celebration before insisting we toast with something better than the harsh purple liquor burning down my throat.

The alcohol doesn't help. Nothing helps.

The third day arrives heavy with anticipation. She should return tonight, tired from the road but triumphant with the moonshard lattice that will complete the Vaelthorne project. I spend the morning cleaning the house—a task usually left to the staff, but I need the distraction.

Every surface gets polished to gleaming perfection.

Fresh flowers from the garden fill vases in every room.

I even attempt to cook her favorite meal, though my efforts in the kitchen produce something that barely qualifies as edible.

Which is why I never cook, but I miss her so much that the kitchen feels like she is near.

As afternoon fades to evening, I position myself on the front terrace where I can see the road winding up from the valley.

Every distant sound makes my heart race—the call of a blackpitter bird, the rustle of wind through the aracin blossoms, the distant rumble of supply wagons heading toward the city.

But none of the sounds resolve into the rhythmic hoofbeats I'm desperate to hear.

Sunset paints the sky in shades of copper and gold. The first stars appear. Still no sign of her.

By midnight, worry has settled in my chest like a physical weight.

She's never been late. Not once in all the years I've known her.

Even during her most challenging deliveries for the syndicate, she always returned when promised.

It's part of who she is—reliable, dependable, someone whose word means something.

The fourth day breaks gray and cheerless, matching my mood.

I abandon any pretense of work and spend the hours pacing the halls of my estate like a caged predator.

The Vaelthorne commission deadline looms, but I can't bring myself to care about ward matrices and binding patterns when Kaleen is somewhere in the mountains, possibly hurt, possibly?—

I don't let myself finish that thought.

By week's end, I'm a shell of myself. Unshaven, hollow-eyed, surviving on Amerinth and whatever scraps of food I remember to consume.

The house staff whispers when they think I can't hear, their voices carrying concern and confusion in equal measure.

I've never been the type of employer who shares personal struggles with servants, but my deterioration is impossible to hide.

On the seventh day, I write a letter to Lord Vaelthorne explaining that his commission will be delayed indefinitely due to unforeseen circumstances. Let him rage. Let him threaten my reputation, demand compensation, hire someone else entirely. None of it matters without Kaleen.

I pack traveling supplies with methodical precision—food that won't spoil, changes of clothes, healing potions, enough nodals to hire every courier and tracker in the northern territories if necessary.

My wings ache from days of anxious tension, the muscles between my shoulder blades knotted tight enough to make flight painful. But I'll walk to Kaerion if I have to.

The road she took winds through three separate villages before reaching the quarry site. I start with the closest—Silverbrook, a modest trading post where travelers often stop to rest and resupply. The innkeeper remembers her.

"Pretty human girl with brown hair? Aye, she came through five days past. Bought grain for her zarryn and asked about the mountain roads. Seemed to know where she was headed."

Five days past. That matches her timeline perfectly, which means whatever happened occurred after she left Silverbrook. The knowledge provides a starting point but no comfort.

The next village is Millhaven, smaller than Silverbrook but still large enough to support an inn and trading post. Here the trail goes cold.

No one remembers seeing Kaleen, though that doesn't necessarily mean anything.

A single traveler could easily pass through without drawing much attention, especially if she was focused on making good time.

I light candles in the village temple—small flames that dance before carved images of the nine divine aspects. The offering is supposed to guide lost souls home, though I'm not sure if I'm praying for Kaleen's safe return or begging forgiveness for letting her leave in the first place.

The mountain roads between Millhaven and the final village—Thornrest—are treacherous even in good weather.

Narrow trails carved into cliffsides, unstable scree slopes that can shift without warning, predators that hunt the unwary.

I've traveled these paths before on commission work, but always with armed guards and careful preparation.

The thought of Kaleen facing these dangers alone makes my stomach churn with sick dread.

Thornrest yields nothing. The villagers are helpful but certain—no human woman has passed through their settlement in recent days. If Kaleen reached this far, she would have been noticed. Their isolation makes strangers memorable.

Which means something happened between Silverbrook and Millhaven, in the wild stretches where help could be hours or days away.

I hire a local guide—a grizzled mountain man who knows every trail and hidden path in the region. We spend three days combing the route, searching for any sign of her passage. What we find makes my blood turn to ice.

Zarryn tracks, clear and fresh, following the main trail until they suddenly veer toward the cliff edge. Scuff marks in the earth that speak of struggle. Dark stains on the rocks that could be blood if I let myself think about what that means.

And at the base of a steep ravine, partially hidden by undergrowth—pieces of a zarryn's tack. Torn leather. Broken buckles. The metal fittings bent and scored by what look like claw marks.

No body. Neither human nor zarryn. But the evidence tells a story I don't want to accept.

"Mountain kilmars," the guide says grimly, examining the damaged tack. "Pack hunters. Smart enough to coordinate attacks, strong enough to bring down a zarryn if they catch it in the wrong place."

The words hit me like physical blows. I sink to my knees beside the ravine, staring at the torn leather that represents the last tangible connection to the woman I love. She's gone. The world has taken her from me just as I always feared it might, and I have no one to blame but myself.

I should never have let her go. Should have missed the licensing meeting, hired a dozen couriers, abandoned the Vaelthorne commission entirely rather than risk her safety.

But my pride, my reputation, my damned sense of responsibility to clients who will forget my name within a month—all of it seemed more important than keeping her safe.

The guilt is going to destroy me.

But not as much as losing her will.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

The first contraction hits me like a lightning strike just before dawn, doubling me over as I tend to the small fire in my cottage.

For weeks, my belly has been tight and heavy, making even simple tasks feel monumental.

But this—this is different. Sharp. Insistent.

A force I can't negotiate with or push aside.

I ache for someone's presence as it does.

Who? I'm not sure. They are just a shadow in my dreams, a phantom with silver-blue eyes who feels real but can't be.

I can't even remember much more than that.

The midwife says pregnancy can make memories strange, that my mind might be creating comfort where none exists.

Another wave of pain crashes through me, and I grip the wooden chair until my knuckles turn white.

The fire pops and hisses, casting dancing shadows on the stone walls of the cottage Callen built for me when my condition became obvious.

A refuge. A place where the village's questions can't follow quite so eagerly.

I manage three stumbling steps toward the door before the next contraction drops me to my knees. This baby wants out, and it wants out now.

"Help." The word comes out strangled, barely audible over my ragged breathing. But Veylowe is a small village where sound carries, especially in the pre-dawn quiet. Within moments, I hear footsteps on the path outside.

Derri bursts through my door without ceremony, her dark curls escaping from a hastily-tied braid and her healer's bag already in hand. She takes one look at me crouched on the floor and immediately shifts into the calm efficiency that makes her Veylowe's most trusted midwife.

"There we are," she murmurs, helping me to my feet with gentle but firm hands. "Let's get you to bed, love. This little one's decided today's the day."

The next hour passes in a blur of mounting pain and quiet preparation.

Derri sends someone—probably young Pez—to fetch the other women.

Soon my cottage fills with familiar faces: Marnai with her iron-gray braids and steady presence, Brisa carrying an armload of clean linens and herbal remedies, even stern Tolle hovering near the doorway with his bag of emergency supplies.

They move around me like a well-rehearsed dance, these women who have delivered half the children in Veylowe.

Brisa boils water and prepares herbal teas.

Marnai positions herself at my head, offering sips of meadowmint tea between

contractions and murmuring encouraging words.

Derri examines me with practiced hands, her expression focused but reassuring.

"Everything looks good," she announces. "Baby's positioned well. You're strong, Kaleen. Your body knows what to do."

I want to believe her. But as the labor intensifies, primal fear claws at me.

Not just the normal terror of childbirth, but something deeper.

The persistent feeling that I don't belong here, that I'm playing a role in someone else's life.

That this baby growing inside me is connected to mysteries I can't unravel.

The pain builds in waves, each one stronger than the last. I lose track of time, of everything except the relentless pressure and the encouraging voices around me. Somewhere in the haze, I hear Derri telling me to push, her hands steady and sure as she guides my baby into the world.

And then—suddenly, miraculously—relief. The absence of pressure so complete it leaves me gasping. A thin, angry wail fills the cottage, and my heart simultaneously breaks and heals at the sound.

"A son," Derri announces, her voice warm with satisfaction. "A beautiful, perfect son."

She places him on my chest, this tiny creature who's been sharing my body for months. He's slippery and red-faced, his dark hair plastered to his skull, his tiny fists already waving in indignation at this cold, bright world. But his eyes?—

His eyes are the most startling silver-blue I've ever seen, flecked with gold like captured starlight. They're ancient eyes in an infant face, wise and familiar in a way that makes my breath catch.

"He's perfect," I whisper, tears in my eyes. And he is. But that ache grows stronger as I look at him. Those silver-blue eyes...

The women exchange glances over my head. I catch the look—sharp, knowing, carefully neutral. Brisa's bangles jingle softly as she leans forward to get a better view of my son, and I see her expression shift from wonder to something more complicated.

Derri's hands are gentle as she cleans the baby, but I notice how she pauses at his back, her fingertips tracing small bumps along his shoulder blades that I can barely see. Tiny protrusions, no bigger than pearl buttons, but distinctly there.

Wing buds.

The realization hits me like ice water. My son—this beautiful, perfect child—has the beginnings of wings. Which means his father was xaphan. Which means I was with...a xaphan? But humans are never with xaphan.

I'm clearly not the only one thinking that, but Marnai's weathered hand finds my shoulder, her grip firm and reassuring. "Rest now," she says quietly. "What matters is that you're both healthy."

But I see the questions in their eyes, the assumptions forming like storm clouds. They think I was some nobleman's plaything, discarded when I became inconvenient. Or a human woman who ran from her xaphan master when pregnancy made her burden instead of pleasure.

They're probably right. The alternative—that I loved someone, that I was loved in return—feels too fragile to hope for. Too much like the dreams that haunt my sleep, full of silver-blue eyes and gentle touches and names that feel more real than my own reflection.

I pull my son closer, marveling at his tiny features, the way his fingers curve around my thumb with surprising strength. Whatever brought me to Veylowe, whatever circumstances led to his conception, this moment is mine. This love is real, even if nothing else makes sense.

The women busy themselves with the practical matters of afterbirth and recovery, their voices a comforting murmur in the background. None of them ask the questions I can see brewing behind their careful expressions. They simply accept what is—a mother and child who need care, protection, belonging.

In Veylowe, sometimes that's enough.

Three weeks into motherhood, I discover that Braylon has inherited more than just his father's eyes. He possesses an uncanny ability to sense my growing desperation and respond with increasingly frantic wails that pierce through Veylowe's morning quiet like a blade.

Today's expedition to the village market was supposed to be simple—purchase some dried dreelek and zynthra for soup, maybe let the other mothers admire my son's unusual beauty while pretending not to notice their whispered speculation about his parentage.

Instead, I'm standing beside the well in the village center, bouncing a red-faced, screaming infant whose cries could wake the dead.

"Shh, little one," I murmur, shifting him to my other shoulder for the dozenth time.

His tiny body is rigid with fury, his silver-blue eyes squeezed shut as he expresses his displeasure with this cold, bright world. "Please, Braylon. What do you need?"

The other villagers give us a wide berth, their sympathetic but helpless glances doing nothing to ease the knot of frustration building in my chest. I've tried feeding him, changing his wrappings, singing the lullabies Brisa taught me.

Nothing works. The crying just escalates, bouncing off the stone cottages and echoing through the narrow streets like an accusation.

My arms ache from holding him. My head throbs with exhaustion.

The persistent fog of memory loss that's plagued me since my arrival in Veylowe seems thicker when I'm this tired, making even simple decisions feel overwhelming.

Should I go home? Try walking him around the village again?

Admit defeat and seek help from one of the older mothers?

"I could help."

The voice is gentle, steady, and completely unexpected.

I turn to find Lake Thorne approaching with the careful, unhurried movements of someone accustomed to skittish creatures.

He's broad-shouldered and solid in the way that suggests real work rather than posturing, his sandy brown hair tousled by the morning breeze.

Freckles dust his fair skin like scattered stars, and his mossy green eyes hold a kindness that doesn't demand anything in return.

I know Lake by reputation—Jorren's eldest son, the one who fixes broken cart wheels and delivers firewood to the elderly without being asked.

He's quiet, reliable, the type of man who shows up when needed and disappears when the crisis passes.

But I've barely spoken to him beyond polite nods at the market.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," I admit, my voice cracking with exhaustion. "He's been fed, he's clean, he's warm. But he won't stop crying."

Lake steps closer, his calloused hands steady as he reaches for Braylon. "May I?"

I hesitate for a heartbeat—some primitive maternal instinct warning against letting anyone else hold my child. But desperation wins over caution, and I carefully transfer Braylon to Lake's arms.

The change is immediate and startling. Lake cradles my son against his chest with the easy confidence of someone who's soothed countless upset children. His large hands support Braylon's head and back perfectly, and he begins a gentle swaying motion that's more rhythm than rocking.

"There now," he murmurs, his voice dropping to a low, rumbling frequency that seems to cut through Braylon's hysteria. "Easy, little man. Nobody's going anywhere."

Braylon's cries stutter, then gradually subside to hiccupping whimpers. His tiny fists uncurl, and those startling silver-blue eyes blink open to stare up at Lake's face with the solemn attention of a scholar studying ancient texts.

"How did you—?" I start, then stop, too amazed to finish the question.

Lake's mouth quirks in a small smile. "Sometimes they just need a different voice.

Different heartbeat." He continues the gentle swaying, and I watch my son's face relax into the peaceful expression I've been desperately trying to achieve for the past hour.

"I've got four younger siblings. Learned early that there's no shame in tag-teaming a fussy baby. "

Relief floods through me so completely that my knees nearly buckle.

For weeks, I've felt like I'm failing at the most basic maternal instincts, that my missing memories have somehow stripped away the knowledge I need to care for my own child.

Watching Lake calm Braylon with such effortless skill should make me feel inadequate. Instead, it feels like salvation.

"He likes you," I observe, noting how Braylon's gaze tracks Lake's movements with unusual focus.

"Smart kid. Knows quality when he sees it." Lake's deadpan delivery makes me laugh despite my exhaustion. "Want to try walking him around the square? Sometimes the movement helps settle them when they're overstimulated."

We fall into step together, Lake maintaining that gentle sway as we circle the village well.

Braylon remains blissfully quiet, his small head tucked against Lake's shoulder like he's found the perfect resting spot.

Other villagers nod approvingly as we pass—the sight of a crying baby being soothed always earns goodwill in a place like Veylowe.

"You're good at this," I tell Lake, meaning it. There's something deeply reassuring about his presence, the way he handles my son with casual expertise while asking nothing in return.

He shrugs, a flush of pink creeping up his neck. "Just practice. You're doing fine, Kaleen. The first few months are hard for everyone."

The way he says it—without pity or judgment, just matter-of-fact acceptance—makes something tight in my chest loosen. I've grown so accustomed to the weight of others' curiosity about my past, their careful questions and meaningful glances, that Lake's simple kindness feels revolutionary.

We complete another circuit of the square before Braylon finally surrenders to sleep, his tiny body going limp with the boneless abandon of an exhausted infant. Lake transfers him back to my arms with the same gentle care, making sure I have a secure hold before releasing his support.

"Thank you," I whisper, afraid to speak too loudly and wake my sleeping son. "I was starting to think I was a terrible mother."

Lake's green eyes meet mine, serious and steady. "You're not. Sometimes we all need help carrying the load."

And that is so true for me right now.

Deep in the back of my mind, though, I swear there is a part of me screaming that I have someone. But all these months later, I still don't know who.

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KALEEN

By Braylon's first spring, Lake has worn a path between his family's cottage and mine.

What began as occasional visits to help with a fussy baby evolves into something more permanent, more necessary.

He appears at my door with firewood when the nights are cold, stays to help with evening feedings when Braylon's teething makes him inconsolable, and somehow never quite leaves.

I don't ask him to stay. But I don't ask him to go, either.

Lake moves through our small space with the careful consideration of someone who knows he's a guest pretending to be family.

He keeps his few belongings in a neat pile by the door, never presuming to claim drawer space or a permanent spot for his boots.

When he sleeps beside me—which happens more often as the months blur together—he maintains a respectful distance, never reaching across the invisible line that divides the narrow bed.

Braylon adores him. My son's first real smile blooms across his face when Lake enters the room, his tiny hands grasping for those calloused fingers with determined focus.

Lake teaches him to stack wooden blocks, makes silly faces that send Braylon into fits of delighted giggling, and carries him around the village on broad shoulders like a conquering prince surveying his domain.

"Look at those eyes," Marnai comments one afternoon as she watches Lake bounce Braylon on his knee. "Like captured starlight. He'll be a heartbreaker when he grows up."

Braylon's silver-blue gaze is extraordinary, growing more pronounced as he ages.

The gold flecks spark in sunlight, creating an otherworldly beauty that draws stares wherever we go.

But it's the intelligence behind those eyes that unsettles me.

He watches the world with ancient wisdom, as if he's remembering rather than learning.

The wing buds develop slowly, tiny protrusions that most villagers mistake for birth marks or unusual shoulder blades.

Only the women who attended his birth know their true nature, and they keep that knowledge carefully guarded.

Lake discovers them during a bath when Braylon is eight months old, his fingers tracing the small bumps with scientific curiosity.

"His father was xaphan," I tell him quietly, waiting for judgment or questions I can't answer.

Lake simply nods, continuing to wash Braylon's back with gentle efficiency. "Figured

as much. Explains the eyes. And why he's so damn smart for someone who can't even walk yet."

That easy acceptance becomes typical of Lake.

He doesn't pry into my past or demand explanations I can't provide.

When villagers ask pointed questions about Braylon's parentage, Lake deflects with the smooth skill of someone protecting something precious.

He becomes our shield against curiosity, our anchor in a world that feels perpetually unstable.

By Braylon's first birthday, Lake has essentially moved in.

His clothes hang beside mine on the wooden pegs near the door.

His tools occupy a corner of the cottage where he repairs broken household items with methodical patience.

His presence fills the spaces between Braylon's laughter and my evening tea, creating something that resembles domestic contentment.

I convince myself this is enough. This careful affection, this comfortable routine.

Lake is good—genuinely, thoroughly good in ways that make me feel selfish for wanting more.

He brings me flowers from the meadow, fixes the leaky roof without complaint, and never mentions the times that I wake from dreams of someone else that leave me rattled.

When he kisses me for the first time—gentle, questioning, hopeful—I kiss him back because it feels like the right thing to do. Because he deserves someone who can love him completely, even if I can only offer fractured pieces of myself.

Our physical relationship develops with the same careful progression as everything else between us.

Lake never pushes, never demands more than I freely give.

But when Lake holds me, his heartbeat steady against my cheek, and I feel like I'm playacting at intimacy.

Going through motions perfected by someone else, someone who existed before the accident stole my memories and left me grasping for meaning in a life that never quite fits.

But in my dreams, I burn.

In sleep, faceless hands map my skin with possessive reverence.

A voice whispers my name like a prayer, like a claim, like something sacred and profane.

Wings—powerful, ethereal wings—shelter me in darkness while lips trace paths of fire along my throat.

I wake gasping, my body thrumming with desire and loss so acute it feels like physical pain.

The dream man has no face, no name I can remember upon waking. But his presence feels more real than anything in my conscious world. More real than Lake's gentle

touches or even Braylon's sweet laughter or the cottage walls that supposedly contain my entire existence.

Some mornings I catch myself staring out the window toward the eastern mountains, searching for something I can't identify. A figure in the distance. Wings against the sky. Answers to questions that lodge in my throat like swallowed screams.

Braylon grows tall and curious, his dark hair catching gold in sunlight and his remarkable eyes missing nothing. And he is far too in tune with emotions—especially mine. No eighteen month old should be.

"Mama sad," he announces one morning, his small hand patting my cheek with devastating accuracy.

I am sad. Despite Lake's devotion and Braylon's joy and the life we've built in Veylowe, I carry a grief I can't name or heal. A persistent ache that no amount of present happiness can cure.

Lake pretends not to notice my morning tears, the way I sometimes stop mid-conversation to stare at nothing, how I flinch when he touches me unexpectedly. He loves me with patient determination, waiting for the day I might love him back with the same intensity.

That day never comes.

Two years pass since I first came to Veylowe. Seasons blur together in a cycle of small joys and persistent emptiness. Lake spends almost every night with us, mostly moving in. He tells me he loves me. He definitely loves Braylon.

But at night, as Lake sleeps beside me, I stare at the ceiling and wonder who I'm betraying each time I let him close—him, or the phantom in my dreams who still

feels like the other half of my soul.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

DOMIEL

I become destruction in search of salvation.

The mirror in my chambers reflects a stranger—hollow cheeks carved from sleepless nights, silver-blue eyes rimmed red from wind and exhaustion.

My dark gold hair hangs loose, unkempt, the metal clasps abandoned somewhere between the third village and the seventh false lead.

The scar at my temple throbs with phantom pain, matching the ache that's taken permanent residence in my chest.

My wings feel heavier now. Not from disuse—I fly constantly, covering impossible distances in pursuit of whispers and rumors—but from the weight of carrying hope through two endless years.

The white and gray feathers have lost their luster, dulled by dust and desperate searches through places that swallow light.

The estate staff treats me like a ghost haunting familiar halls.

They scatter when my boots echo across marble floors, their eyes filled with the kind of pity that makes my hands clench into fists.

Mrs. Althren, my head housekeeper, leaves meals outside my study door like offerings to a temperamental god.

I find them hours later, cold and untouched, because the thought of sustaining this body feels like betrayal when Kaleen's might be broken somewhere beyond my reach.

"Master Domiel," she ventures one evening as I stride toward the entrance hall, my traveling pack slung across shoulders that have grown sharper from weight loss. "Perhaps a night's rest?—"

"No."

The word cuts through air like blade through silk. I don't slow my pace, don't acknowledge the way her face crumples with concern. Sleep means dreams, and dreams mean waking. Waking means remembering all over again that she's gone.

The road calls with promises of possibility. Every horizon might hide answers. Every settlement could shelter the woman whose absence has carved me hollow.

I've interrogated records in dusty archives until my eyes burned and clerks fled from my intensity.

Parish registers, merchant logs, healer records—anything that might contain trace of a human woman found injured or seeking aid.

My questions become demands. My requests transform into barely controlled threats backed by the full weight of xaphan nobility.

"A woman," I tell the trembling clerk in Kaerion's capital registry. "Human. Brown hair, amber eyes, about this tall." My hand shakes as I measure her height against my chest, muscle memory betraying me with perfect accuracy. "She would have been hurt. Confused. Someone would have helped her."

"Sir, we've checked every?—"

"Check again."

My voice carries the chill of mountain wind, the promise of winter storms. The clerk's hands fumble through pages already worn thin from previous searches, desperate to escape my presence.

The rogue mages demand payment in favors and nodals for their whispered intelligence.

I empty coffers accumulated over decades of careful work, trading prosperity for possibility.

A hedge witch in Marlhaven claims to have seen a human woman with golden eyes working in a bakery three towns over.

I arrive to find a girl of sixteen with brown eyes and a cough, nothing more.

Informants feed on my desperation like carrion birds on fresh death.

They spin tales of mysterious women appearing in distant villages, weaving lies from my obvious hunger for hope.

I chase each lead with the single-minded focus of a predator, only to find disappointment waiting at the journey's end.

Two years of this. Two years of becoming something cold and sharp and relentless.

My colleagues whisper about my decline when they think I can't hear. "Poor Domiel," they murmur over wine and crystallized fruits at social gatherings I no longer attend. "He's lost his mind along with his woman."

They're wrong. I haven't lost my mind.

I've simply reorganized it around a single truth: Kaleen is alive.

The alternative is unacceptable. Impossible.

The bond between us—forged in quiet conversations and sealed in desperate love—would have broken if death had claimed her.

I would have felt it like a severed wing, like light extinguished forever.

Instead, I feel her absence like a phantom limb that aches but hasn't been amputated.

She's out there. Breathing. Existing in some corner of the world I haven't yet searched.

The certainty sustains me through days that blur together in endless motion. Village after village, question after question, hope after crushing hope. I've grown lean from travel, harder from disappointment, quieter from the gradual erosion of everything that wasn't essential to finding her.

But the nights—the nights are different.

When exhaustion finally claims me in whatever inn or roadside camp serves as temporary shelter, I dream—even though I try to resist. And in dreams, she returns.

Kaleen . Whole and warm and laughing at something I've whispered against her ear. Her amber eyes spark with that familiar mix of affection and exasperation that meant home, meant safety, meant everything I'd built my carefully ordered life around.

In dreams, I hold her again. Feel the silk of her chestnut hair between my fingers, the

steady rhythm of her heartbeat against my chest. She fits against me like the missing piece of some cosmic puzzle, her curves perfectly aligned with the hollow spaces I'd never known existed before her.

"Where have you been?" I ask, and she smiles that secret smile reserved for moments when the world narrows to just us.

"Right here," she whispers, her lips moving against my throat. "Always right here."

We make love in dreams with the desperate intensity of reunion. I map every inch of skin I've memorized, trace each beloved scar and freckle with reverent attention. She arches beneath me, gasps my name like prayer, holds me close enough to share breath and heartbeat and soul.

In dreams, nothing is broken. Nothing is lost. We exist in the space between seconds where love is infinite and separation is impossible.

But dreams end.

I wake on floors of unfamiliar inns or beneath alien stars, and reality crashes over me like ice water. The space beside me is empty. The air lacks her scent. My arms embrace nothing but shadow and wishful thinking.

Each awakening kills me. Each return to consciousness tears the wound fresh and deep, until I'm certain my heart will simply stop from the repeated trauma of loss.

But it doesn't stop. It keeps beating, keeps pumping blood through a body that feels increasingly foreign, keeps sustaining a life that has no purpose beyond finding the woman who made it worth living.

So I rise. Pack my things. Take to the sky or road or whatever path might lead closer

to answers.

And begin another day of searching for the other half of my soul.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

DOMIEL

The mist clings to everything here like forgotten prayers, threading between ancient trees that tower overhead like silent sentinels. But I keep coming back to this place, between Millhaven and Silverbrook, where zarryn tracks lead from the cliff.

It's been days of me wandering through the forest, off the path. I just know I must be missing something here. She has to be somewhere .

I almost miss the village entirely—just a glimpse of stone and timber through the fog, half-swallowed by the earth itself. But something pulls at me, a recognition I can't name. It's deeper into the forest than I think she would have gone, but I'll leave no stone unturned.

I land at the village edge, my boots touching down on moss-slick stone.

The impact sends a tremor through my exhausted wings, and I fold them tight against my back as I walk deeper into this place that feels older than memory.

Veylowe, according to the weathered sign barely visible through the mist. The air tastes of woodsmoke and winter berries, of secrets kept and stories untold.

Lanterns burn low with rune-glass flames, casting blue and green shadows that dance across buildings carved from dark stone and old timber.

Everything here breathes with the kind of quiet that comes from generations of choosing to remain hidden.

My presence feels like violation, like light thrust into a space that treasures darkness.

Then I see her.

The world stops.

Kaleen. My Kaleen. Walking through the mist with a wicker basket balanced against her hip, her chestnut hair caught in a loose braid that hangs over one shoulder.

She moves with that same graceful confidence I remember, her amber eyes focused on the herbs she's collecting from someone's carefully tended garden.

The gold flecks in her irises catch the strange light, familiar as home and devastating as loss.

She's alive. Whole. Here .

Two years of searching, and she's here. In this forgotten place wrapped in fog and silence, living some life I know nothing about. The relief hits me like a physical force, buckling my knees for a heartbeat before training takes over and locks my muscles in place.

But something's wrong. The way she holds herself—cautious where she was once bold, careful where she was fearless.

Her clothes are simple homespun instead of the fine fabrics I draped her in.

And there's something about her posture that speaks of uncertainty, of someone who's learned to question the ground beneath her feet.

I take a step forward, then another. My boots crunch softly on fallen leaves, and the

sound carries in the stillness.

She looks up.

Our eyes meet across twenty feet of mist-drunk air, and her face goes white as fresh snow.

The basket slips from nerveless fingers, herbs scattering across the damp ground in a cascade of green and brown.

Her lips part on a sharp intake of breath, her hand rising instinctively to press against her throat.

For a moment that stretches like eternity, we simply stare. I drink in every detail—the way her skin has gained color from outdoor work, the faint lines around her eyes that speak of laughter I wasn't there to witness. She's beautiful. Changed, but beautiful. Mine .

But her expression—gods, her expression. Not relief. Not joy. Fear. Uncertainty and worry that makes my chest tighten until breathing becomes effort.

Movement at the edges of my vision breaks the spell.

Faces emerge from doorways and around corners, drawn by whatever instinct small communities develop for sensing outsiders.

An elderly woman with iron-gray braids and pale green eyes.

A broad-shouldered man who smells like herbs and pine sap.

A soft-featured woman with ink-stained fingers who clutches a leather-bound book

against her chest like armor.

Their expressions shift from curiosity to wariness to something darker as they take in my wings, my height, the unmistakable bearing that marks me as xaphan nobility. This is a human place, I realize. A refuge. The kind of settlement that exists specifically to escape notice from my kind.

"Kaleen." Her name falls from my lips like prayer, like a plea. I take another step forward, ignoring the way the villagers shift closer to her in protective formation. "I've been looking for you. For two years, I've been?—"

"Looking for me?" She shakes her head, the movement sharp and decisive. "I don't—" Her voice catches, clears, tries again. "I don't know who you are."

The words hit harder than any physical blow I've ever taken.

Harder than the time training accident that left the scar at my temple.

Harder than watching my father's wings lose their luster as he aged.

They slice through me with surgical precision, finding every vulnerable place and tearing them wide.

"Kaleen, it's me. It's Domiel." I keep my voice gentle despite the chaos rioting through my chest, the way my hands shake before I clench them into fists. "You know me."

My entire heart begs her to run to me. To shake off whatever this is.

But Kaleen keeps staring at me without recognition and it threatens to break me in half.

She just stares at me, blank, empty. Like she really has no clue who I am. The elderly woman—clearly someone with authority here—moves to flank her, those pale green eyes sharp with suspicion.

"She doesn't remember you," the woman says, her voice carrying decades of command. "Whatever you think you know about our Kaleen, stranger, you're mistaken."

Our Kaleen. The possessive cuts deep, a reminder that while I've spent two years searching, she's been here. Building connections. Making a place in a world that doesn't include me.

"She's not yours," I say, and the words come out rougher than intended. Dangerous. "She's mine."

The shift in atmosphere is immediate. The herb-scented man takes a step forward, his hands curling into fists. The woman with the book moves closer to Kaleen's other side. Even the mist seems to thicken, as if the village itself rejected my claim.

But it's the expression on Kaleen's face that destroys me.

Not recognition. Not even the flicker of familiarity I've been praying for.

Just uncertainty, mixed with a little fear.

She looks at me like I could be a threat—one I've never been to her.

Like I'm exactly the kind of xaphan monster these people have spent generations hiding from.

"I don't know you," she repeats, but her voice wavers. Like she's struggling with it. "I

don't remember you."

But as I look into her eyes, I can't accept that. She has to.

She just has to.

I spent two years searching for the woman that owns my soul and now?—

She has to remember me.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

The crowd's voices rise around us like storm winds, overlapping and urgent.

"Get away from her!"

"Xaphan don't belong here!"

"Kaleen, step back!"

But their shouts feel distant, muffled, like hearing voices through deep water.

All I can focus on is this stranger who claims to know me.

This impossibly tall figure with wings that catch the rune-light like spun silver, whose dark eyes bore into mine with an intensity that makes my chest tight.

There's something about the way he says my name— Kaleen —like it belongs in his mouth.

Like he's said it a thousand times before.

The nagging sensation in the back of my mind grows stronger, insistent as a knock at a door I'm afraid to open. Not quite memory, but something deeper. Recognition without understanding, like glimpsing your own reflection in unfamiliar glass.

Especially as I look at his eyes. From this distance, they are bright. Maybe silver.

Maybe even the silver-blue that haunts my dreams.

"Enough." I raise my voice, cutting through the villagers' protective fury. My hands shake, so I press them flat against my thighs, willing steadiness I don't feel. "Let me just talk to him."

Marnai's sharp eyes narrow on me. "Kaleen, you don't need to?—"

"I can handle this." The words come out calmer than I feel, each syllable carefully controlled. I've learned over two years how to project confidence even when uncertainty claws at my throat. "Please. Give us space."

Tolle steps forward, his broad frame radiating aggression. "That xaphan could?—"

"Could what? Harm me in front of the entire village?" I meet his gaze steadily, even as my pulse hammers against my ribs. "I'll be fine. Just... watch from a distance if you must."

The crowd exchanges glances, reluctance written in every line of their bodies.

These people who took me in when I had nothing, who helped me build a life from the scattered pieces of whatever came before.

They don't trust easily, especially when it comes to xaphan, and their protective instincts are deeply ingrained.

But they know me well enough to recognize when I've made up my mind.

Marnai nods once, sharp and decisive. "Around the corner, then. No farther."

"Of course." I force my lips into something resembling a smile, though it feels brittle

as winter ice.

The stranger—Domiel, he said his name was—hasn't moved during this exchange.

He stands perfectly still, those dark eyes tracking every word, every gesture.

There's something predatory in his patience, like a hunter who knows exactly when to strike.

But underneath that controlled exterior, I catch glimpses of something else. Desperation, maybe. Pain.

Why would a xaphan like him be in pain over me?

I turn without another word, my basket forgotten in the scattered herbs at my feet.

My legs feel unsteady as I walk toward my cottage, each step deliberate and measured.

The modest stone dwelling feels smaller suddenly, inadequate under his scrutiny.

It's nothing compared to whatever grand estate a xaphan of his obvious status must call home.

The thought comes unbidden, unwelcome. How do I know he has status? How do I know anything about xaphan estates?

The nagging sensation intensifies as I round the corner of my home, leading him away from the crowd's protective circle.

Here, shielded by stone walls and the thick mist that clings to everything in Veylowe,

the world narrows to just the two of us.

The weight of his presence behind me is almost physical, like standing too close to a fire.

When I turn to face him, my hands betray me with their trembling. I clasp them behind my back, lifting my chin in a gesture I hope projects more confidence than I feel.

"You said you've been looking for me for two years." My voice comes out steadier than expected, though my chest aches with each word. Because that fact at least makes sense. I've been here for two years. "Why?"

He's close enough now that I can see the exhaustion carved into his angular features, the way his dark hair falls across his forehead in unruly waves.

There's a scar at his temple, thin and white against his pale skin.

His clothes speak of wealth and quality, but they're travel-worn, wrinkled from countless nights sleeping rough.

This is not a xaphan who came here on a whim. This is someone who has been searching, just as he claimed.

But it's his eyes that undo me. Bright and intense, yes, but there's something in them that makes my breath catch. Pain. Longing. And underneath it all, a tenderness that feels impossibly familiar.

They are silver-blue.

Why does looking at him make my chest ache like something vital has been carved

away? Is he the man from my dreams?

Those bright eyes move over my face like he's memorizing every detail—the way my hair catches the misted light, the nervous press of my lips, the way I hold myself just slightly apart from him.

There's something almost reverent in his scrutiny, like he's looking at something precious he thought was lost forever.

The silence stretches between us, heavy with unspoken words. I want to fill it, to demand answers, to push him away from whatever pain I see flickering in his expression.

But something holds me back. Maybe it's the way he looks at me—not with the possessive hunger I've heard xaphan show toward their human servants, but with something deeper. Something that makes my stomach flutter with recognition I can't name.

When he finally speaks, his voice is so quietly broken it barely reaches me above the whisper of wind through the trees.

"You really don't know who I am."

It's not a question. It's a statement weighted with two years of hope slowly crumbling into dust. The devastation in his tone hits me like a physical blow, and I find myself taking a half-step toward him before I catch myself.

My teeth find my lower lip, worrying the soft flesh as I struggle to find words that won't add to whatever wounds I've already opened. "I'm sorry." The words taste inadequate, bitter as dreelk leaves. "I... were you my...?"

I can't bring myself to finish the question, but the meaning hangs between us anyway.

Master. The word that explains everything about why a xaphan would travel so far to find one lost human.

Why he'd spend two years searching. I've seen the scars on my own wrist. The faded mark of indenture that tells its own story about who I must have been before Veylowe.

But something shifts in his expression when I don't finish—a flash of something that might be pain or anger or both. He blinks once, slowly, and when he opens his eyes again, there's a careful blankness there that somehow hurts worse than the devastation.

"You were never my property."

The words are quiet but firm, carrying a weight that makes my chest tighten inexplicably.

He straightens slightly, and for the first time since he appeared in the square, some of that predatory stillness falls away.

What remains is exhaustion and a politeness that feels forced, like armor hastily donned.

"My name is Domiel Saevrix." His voice carries the cadence of formal introduction, though it cracks slightly on his surname. "You lived with me. Freely. Happily, I thought."

Lived with him. Not worked for him or served him, but lived . The distinction should matter, but all I feel is the sharp ache in my temples that always comes when I try to

push past the wall in my memory. Like pressing against broken glass—painful and ultimately futile.

I close my eyes briefly, willing something to surface. Anything. A face, a voice, a moment that might explain why this stranger's presence makes my skin feel too tight, why my body wants to step closer even as my mind screams warnings.

But there's nothing. Just the same void that's haunted me for two years, and the growing pain behind my eyes that tells me I'm pushing too hard again.

When I open my eyes, he's still watching me with that careful blankness, but I catch the way his hands clench at his sides. The barely controlled tension in his shoulders. Whatever we were to each other, my lack of recognition is tearing him apart.

Before I can find words—apology or explanation or anything—the sound of running footsteps cuts through the misted quiet. Small feet pounding against packed earth, heading straight for us.

"Mama!"

Braylon's voice rings clear and bright through the afternoon air. I turn toward the sound with a smile already tugging at my lips, the tension in my shoulders easing automatically at his call. My boy, racing toward me with his dark hair flying and those unusual pale eyes bright with excitement.

But when I glance back at Domiel, he's gone completely still.

Not the careful stillness from before, but something deeper. Absolute. Predatory. His entire body has locked into perfect immobility, and those eyes are fixed on my approaching son with an intensity that raises every protective instinct I possess.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

My heart slams against my ribs as I watch Braylon race toward us, his small feet splashing through puddles with careless joy. Behind him, Lake's taller frame follows at a more measured pace, that familiar easy smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

But all I can see is the way Domiel has gone completely motionless beside me. The way those eyes track my son's approach with laser focus, drinking in every detail. And suddenly, with a clarity that makes my knees weak, I see what he sees.

The resemblance.

Braylon's face is still round with childhood softness, but the bone structure underneath—the sharp cheekbones, the determined set of his jaw, even the way his brow furrows in concentration—it's all there in Domiel's face.

Older, sharper, but unmistakably similar.

And those eyes. Braylon's pale silver gaze with its amber rings suddenly makes terrible sense when I see it reflected in this stranger's stare.

Silver-blue eyes.

How had I not realized before?

My mouth goes dry. The nagging sensation in my skull transforms into something rawer, more urgent. Not recognition exactly, but the horrible understanding that I'm

standing at the edge of something that will shatter the life I've carefully built.

And a part of me—a large part if I'm being honest—wants that.

"Mama!" Braylon throws himself against my legs with the full enthusiasm of eighteen months, his small arms wrapping around my thighs. The top of his head barely reaches my hip, dark hair sticking up in impossible directions from whatever adventure he's been on. "Mama! Up! UP!"

His words wash over me, but I don't move. I can't do anything but stare between my son and the xaphan who claims to know me. The xaphan who's looking at Braylon like he's seeing a ghost.

"Braylon." My voice comes out strained, barely above a whisper. I smooth his wild hair with trembling fingers, needing the familiar comfort of his solid warmth against my legs. I need to take him inside, but I haven't moved.

"Hey there, little man." Lake's voice cuts through my stammered direction as he approaches, rough palm settling warm and familiar against my back. "You wore me out chasing after you."

The kiss he presses to my skin is soft, casual, the kind of absent affection that speaks to routine. To intimacy built over months of shared mornings and quiet evenings. It should comfort me. Should ground me in the reality of the life I know, the man who's been nothing but steady and kind.

Instead, the moment Lake's lips touch my temple, the air around us shifts.

Domiel's careful stillness explodes into something far more dangerous.

The controlled mask he's been wearing since I failed to recognize him cracks

completely, revealing something primitive and territorial underneath.

His dark eyes fix on the point where Lake's mouth meets my skin, and the temperature seems to drop ten degrees.

Those white and gray wings spread slightly—not fully, but enough to make him appear larger, more imposing. More threatening. The subtle glow that emanates from his bronze skin dims to something darker, more ominous, like storm clouds gathering before lightning strikes.

"Don't." The word falls from his lips quiet and sharp as a blade. Not quite a command, but close enough that every instinct I have screams danger.

Lake's hand stills against my back, though he doesn't pull away.

His mossy green eyes narrow as he takes in Domiel's aggressive posture, the way those powerful wings cast shadows across the misted ground.

I feel the shift in his body language—the subtle straightening of his shoulders, the protective way he angles himself slightly in front of both Braylon and me.

"And you are?" Lake's voice carries the steady competence that's gotten us through countless difficult moments over the past year. No fear, just quiet assessment of a potential threat.

But Domiel doesn't answer. He can't answer, maybe, because he's staring at Lake's hand on me like it's a personal insult. Like the casual intimacy between us is physically painful for him to witness.

The silence stretches taut between them, heavy with masculine tension and unspoken challenges. I can feel Braylon's small body pressed against my legs, his chatter dying

as even his young mind picks up on the danger crackling through the air.

My heart hammers wildly as pieces of a puzzle I never knew existed start sliding into place. The way Domiel looked at me. The way he's looking at Braylon now—not with surprise at finding a half-xaphan child in a human village, but with something deeper. More personal.

The way his wings spread wider when Lake touches me, like he wants to physically insert himself between us.

"Lake." I somehow find my voice, though it comes out hoarse and unsteady. "This is Domiel. He says... he says he knows me. From before."

The words taste strange in my mouth, inadequate for the magnitude of what I'm beginning to understand. Lake's expression shifts, protective concern giving way to something more complex. He knows about the blank spaces in my memory, knows I came to Veylowe with nothing but questions and fear.

But he doesn't know about the dreams that sometimes wake me in the middle of the night. Dreams of wings and warm bronze skin and a voice that whispers my name like a prayer. Dreams that leave me aching with loss for something I can't remember, can't name.

Dreams that suddenly feel less like fantasy and more like memory.

Domiel's gaze moves from Lake to my face, searching for something, what I'm not sure.

But what I see in his eyes makes my chest constrict with an emotion I can't name.

Not just pain, but devastation. The kind of raw anguish that comes from watching

someone you love look through you like you're a stranger.

And underneath it all, barely leashed fury at the scene playing out before him. At Lake's casual claim to touches that Domiel clearly believes belong to him.

She's not yours. She's mine.

"Lake." My voice comes out steadier than I feel, though my hands shake as I gently untangle Braylon's arms from around my legs. "Could you... could you take Braylon inside? Please?"

Lake's mossy green eyes flick between me and Domiel, taking in the xaphan's predatory stillness, the way those dark wings remain partially spread in unmistakable threat. His jaw tightens, but he doesn't argue. That's Lake—always reading the room, always knowing when to push and when to step back.

"Come on, little man." Lake scoops Braylon up with practiced ease, settling my son against his broad chest. Braylon's small hands immediately fist in Lake's worn tunic, those pale silver eyes—so striking, so unusual—peering over Lake's shoulder at Domiel with unguarded curiosity.

"Let's see if we can find some of those honey cakes your mama hid. "

"Cakes!" Braylon's delighted giggle cuts through the tension like sunlight through storm clouds. He waves one chubby fist at me, then at Domiel, apparently deciding this tall stranger with the magnificent wings is just another part of his adventure. "Bye-bye, Mama! Bye-bye!"

The innocent words hit Domiel like a physical blow. I watch his face crumple for just a moment—raw pain flashing across those sharp features before he schools his expression back to careful neutrality.

Lake carries my boy toward the cottage, but not before pressing another kiss to my temple—deliberately slow, deliberately possessive. The message is clear even if the gesture is gentle. This is my family. This is my place.

The moment they disappear through the cottage door, Domiel's carefully maintained control explodes.

"Who was that?" His voice is low and dangerous, edged with barely leashed fury. Those dark eyes burn as they track the path Lake took, wings spreading wider until they cast long shadows across the misty ground. "Who just took my son inside?"

The words hit me like a physical blow, stealing the breath from my lungs. My son. Not a question, not a suggestion. A statement of absolute certainty that makes my knees weak and my head spin.

I already realized how similar they look, but the way he doesn't seem to even doubt... What am I missing?

"Your son?" The words tumble out of me, disbelief and something dangerously close to hope tangling in my chest. "You're saying... you're saying Braylon is...?"

"Mine." The word falls between us with the weight of absolute truth. Domiel takes a step closer, and I catch that scent again—cedar and storms and something indefinably otherworldly. "Ours. He's our son, Kaleen."

The certainty in his voice makes my breath stutter, makes something deep in my chest unfurl like recognition. But I can't trust it. Can't trust the way my heart wants to leap at his words, the way my body seems to know him even when my mind remains frustratingly blank.

I shake my head, backing away from the intensity in his dark stare. "I don't... I can't

remember..."

"Look at him." Domiel's voice turns urgent, desperate. "Really look at him, Kaleen. Those eyes, that bone structure. He's growing wings, for Solas's sake—tiny ones, just like mine were at his age."

The words slam into me with crushing force, and suddenly the constant ache behind my eyes transforms into something sharper, more vicious. Like claws raking across the inside of my skull, trying to tear through layers of fog and confusion to reach something buried beneath.

Images flash—fragmented, painful, impossible to hold onto. Bronze skin gleaming in candlelight. Strong hands cradling my face. A voice whispering my name with desperate tenderness. The phantom sensation of wings wrapping around me, protective and warm and achingly familiar.

"I..." The pain builds, nauseating in its intensity. My vision blurs at the edges, and I press the heels of my palms against my temples as if I can somehow push the agony away. "I can't... it hurts..."

The world tilts sideways, and I double over slightly, gasping for breath as my skull feels like it might crack open from the pressure. Distantly, I'm aware of making some kind of wounded sound—half sob, half whimper—as my body betrays me.

"Kaleen." Domiel's voice changes completely, fury melting into concern so profound it cuts through the haze of pain. "Kaleen, breathe. Look at me."

I feel him move closer, feel the warm presence of him just inches away, but he doesn't touch me.

Doesn't crowd me when I'm clearly struggling.

The restraint in that simple gesture—the way he holds himself back when every line of his body screams that he wants to reach for me—speaks to a knowledge of me that goes bone-deep.

"Go inside." His voice is gentle now, carefully modulated to not add to my distress. Those magnificent wings fold back against his shoulders, making him appear smaller, less threatening. "You're pushing too hard. We'll... we'll talk again soon."

The kindness in his tone nearly undoes me. This stranger who claims to know me, who says my son is his son, who looked ready to tear Lake apart with his bare hands—he's backing down because I'm in pain. Because he can see that forcing this conversation will only hurt me more.

"Domiel, I?—"

"Go." But there's no harshness in the command, only infinite patience. Only the voice of someone who's learned to wait, even when waiting feels like dying. "I'm not going anywhere, Kaleen. I'll be here when you're ready."

My body vibrates with the need to stay and talk to him, to finally understand . But I'm barely holding it together and it's so much to process so I force myself to turn and walk away when everything in me is screaming to stay.

And I can't make sense of that either.

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DOMIEL

I watch her disappear through the cottage door, my chest constricting with every step that takes her further from me.

Two years. Two fucking years of searching every village, every trade route, every gods-damned path she might have taken.

And now I've found her, only to discover she doesn't know me at all.

The rain starts again as I make my way up the hillside that overlooks Veylowe, settling beneath an ancient tree whose sprawling branches provide some shelter.

From here, I can see the warm glow spilling from her cottage windows, can watch the shadows moving behind the curtains.

Can torture myself with glimpses of the life she's built without me.

Without any memory of us.

My wings fold tight against my back as I sink down against the tree trunk, the rough bark biting through my shirt.

The cold seeps through my clothes, through my skin, but I barely notice.

All I can think about is the way she looked at me—polite confusion where there should have been recognition.

Wariness where there should have been joy.

And that bastard's hands on her. The casual intimacy of his kiss, the protective way he angled himself between us. Like he has any right to touch what's mine.

My son.

The knowledge hits me again like a physical blow, stealing what's left of my breath. I have a son. Braylon—that beautiful, bright-eyed boy with my bone structure and Kaleen's stubborn chin. He treated that human male like family. Like the father he believes him to be.

My hands clench into fists, silver rings biting into my fingers as fury and grief war within my chest. That should be me.

I should have been there when Braylon took his first steps, spoke his first words.

Should have been there to hold Kaleen through the long nights of pregnancy, to feel our son's first kicks beneath her skin.

I never even knew she was pregnant.

And now, some faceless human has stepped into my place. Has claimed my family while I've spent two years going slowly insane with worry and loss.

The rain intensifies, turning the ground beneath me to mud, but I don't move.

Can't move. Every instinct I have screams to march back down that hill, to tear that cottage apart until I find answers.

To demand Kaleen remember me, remember us, remember the love that nearly

destroyed me when I lost it.

But the pain in her eyes when she tried to remember—that genuine agony as she pressed her palms to her temples—that stops me cold. Whatever happened to her, whatever stole her memories, it left damage. Pushing too hard will only hurt her more.

And I'd rather die than hurt her.

A movement in the cottage window draws my attention, and my breath catches.

Kaleen's silhouette appears, backlit by the warm glow of lamplight.

She's holding Braylon, rocking him gently as she moves about the room.

Even from this distance, I can see the tender way she cradles him, the love in every careful gesture.

She's a mother. My fierce, brilliant Kaleen is a mother, and she's magnificent at it.

The human appears beside her, and I watch him slide an arm around her waist, pulling her back against his chest as they both look down at our son. The casual domesticity of it makes my vision blur with rage and something dangerously close to despair.

This is what she knows. This quiet life with this steady man who probably never leaves her wondering where she stands, never disappears for weeks on end because of work deadlines. Someone uncomplicated, dependable.

Everything I'm not.

My wings rustle against the tree trunk as I shift position, trying to ease the hollow ache in my chest. The movement sends water cascading from the branches above, soaking through my already-damp shirt.

I should leave. Should find an inn in the village, get dry, plan my next move with some semblance of rationality.

But I can't. Can't put any more distance between myself and the family I've been searching for. Can't risk waking up to find this has all been some cruel dream, that Kaleen is still lost and Braylon is still unknown to me.

The cottage door opens, and the human steps out onto the covered porch. Even through the rain and darkness, I can feel his eyes scanning the hillside. Looking for me. His posture radiates protective tension, the careful alertness of a man guarding what he considers his.

Let him look. Let him understand that I'm not going anywhere.

After several minutes, he disappears back inside, but I catch the deliberate way he secures the door, the extra attention he pays to the window latches. He knows I'm out here. Knows I'm a threat to the life he's built with my woman and my son.

He's not wrong.

Hours pass. The rain tapers off to a fine mist, then stops altogether, leaving the night air crisp and clean.

Stars emerge between the breaking clouds, and the village settles into sleep around me.

One by one, the cottage windows go dark until only a single lamp glows in what I

assume is Kaleen's bedroom.

I imagine her in there, brushing out that beautiful chestnut hair I used to love running my fingers through.

Changing into whatever she wears to sleep now—probably something practical and worn, nothing like the silk nightgowns I used to buy her.

Does she still sleep on her left side? Still steal all the blankets in her sleep?

Does she dream of me the way I've dreamed of her every night for two years?

The bedroom light flickers and goes out, plunging the cottage into complete darkness. But I don't move from my vigil. Can't move when every breath brings me the faint scent of woodsmoke from her chimney, when every shift of the wind carries whispers of the life happening just beyond my reach.

Dawn feels like a lifetime away, but I'll wait. I've gotten good at waiting these past two years. Good at patience born of desperation, at hope that refuses to die no matter how much evidence suggests it should.

I found them. Against all odds, against every rational expectation, I found my family.

Now I just need to figure out how to get them back.

The morning light cuts through the mist like a blade, illuminating the village below as it stirs to life.

I haven't moved from my position beneath the tree, my clothes still damp from the night's rain, my body stiff from hours of motionless watching.

But the discomfort means nothing when I see her cottage door open and Kaleen emerge.

She moves with the same fluid grace I remember, her chestnut hair caught in a loose braid that swings against her shoulder blades.

The morning sun catches the gold threads woven through the brown, and for a moment, I forget to breathe.

She's wearing a simple green dress that brings out the amber flecks in her eyes, practical boots that suggest a life of honest work.

She glances up the hillside once—a quick, nervous sweep that makes my chest tighten—before heading toward the village center. I watch until she disappears between the buildings, her silhouette swallowed by the maze of stone cottages and morning shadows.

The human took Braylon somewhere earlier, and that has been slowly driving me mad, too.

My hands clench against the tree bark as I force myself to remain still, to wait.

Every instinct screams to follow her, to corner her somewhere private and demand answers to the thousands of questions burning through my mind.

But startling her in public, surrounded by villagers who clearly consider her one of their own, would only make things worse.

So I wait. Watch the smoke curl from chimneys, listen to the distant sounds of a village waking up.

Children's laughter carries on the morning breeze, and I wonder if one of those voices belongs to my son.

If he's playing somewhere below while I sit here like a stalker, afraid to claim what should have been mine all along.

An hour passes. Maybe two. Then I see her returning, alone as I'd hoped. She moves more slowly now, a basket balanced on her hip, her head slightly bowed as if lost in thought. Or perhaps troubled by memories she can't quite grasp.

I wait until she's nearly at her cottage door before I stand, stepping out from beneath the tree's sheltering branches. The movement sends a cascade of water droplets from the leaves above, and the sound makes her freeze mid-step.

She turns slowly, and I see the exact moment recognition hits—not of me, but of the inevitability she's been trying to avoid. Her shoulders square, chin lifting with that familiar stubborn tilt that used to drive me crazy during our arguments about her safety.

"I need to talk to you." My voice carries easily across the distance between us, rougher than I intended. Two years of calling her name into empty spaces has worn it raw.

Kaleen sets the basket down on her doorstep, her movements careful and deliberate. When she straightens, her amber eyes meet mine with a steadiness that makes my throat tight. "I figured as much. You've been up there all night."

"You knew?"

"Lake saw you." She crosses her arms over her chest, the gesture both defensive and aching familiar. "Hard to miss a xaphan with wings brooding on a hillside."

The casual way she says the human's name—Lake—makes my jaw clench. But I force myself to focus on what matters. "I want to know about my son."

Something flickers across her face at that—pain, maybe, or confusion. She glances toward the cottage, and I catch the subtle movement of a curtain in one of the windows. Someone's watching us.

"His name is Braylon." Her voice softens, and the love in it hits me like a physical blow. "He's eighteen months old. Learns new words every day, though most of them are questions. 'What's that? Why? Where?'" A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "He never stops moving unless he's asleep."

"What else?" The words scrape out of me, desperate and raw.

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She tilts her head, studying me with those warm amber eyes that used to see straight through every wall I'd ever built.

"He likes stories. Especially ones about flying creatures.

He laughs when I make the sound effects for thalivern wings.

" Her arms uncross, hands falling to her sides.

"He's gentle with small things—insects, flowers, the village cats.

But he's fearless about climbing and jumping and getting into places he shouldn't. "

My vision blurs slightly. I can picture him—this brave, curious boy who carries pieces of both of us in his bones. "Does he... does he ask about his father?"

The question hangs between us like broken glass. Kaleen's eyes drop to the ground, and when she speaks, her voice is barely above a whisper. "I'm sure he thinks Lake is."

The word punches through me, stealing what's left of my breath. My son calls another man father while I've spent two years not even knowing he existed.

"I want to meet him." The words tear out of me before I can stop them.

"I swear to you, Kaleen, I never hurt you.

Never would have hurt you. And I didn't—" My voice cracks, the careful composure I've maintained for two years finally fracturing.

"I didn't know about him. If I had known, nothing in any of the seven hells could have kept me away. "

Nothing kept me away when I thought it was just her. Now, I have so much more to lose and this is all killing me.

She's watching me again, those perceptive eyes cataloging every break in my voice, every tell that reveals how close to shattering I am. The silence stretches between us, filled with the weight of everything we can't say. Everything she can't remember.

"You really didn't know?" The question is soft, almost tentative.

"No." The word comes out hoarse. "I searched for you for two years. Every village, every trade route, every path you might have taken. I never stopped looking, never stopped believing I'd find you." I take a step closer, then stop when I see her tense. "Please. Let me meet our son."

Her expression shifts, something almost like recognition flickering across her features before it's gone again. She looks toward the cottage once more, and I catch the subtle shake of her head—a warning to whoever's watching from behind those curtains.

"He's at lessons right now," she says finally, her voice carefully neutral. "With Derri. She teaches the village children .

The fact that my son is learning to read sends an unexpected warmth through my chest. "How far?"

"Not far. But Domiel..." She pauses, and the way she says my name—hesitant but not

unfamiliar—makes something twist deep in my ribcage. "He doesn't know you. And Lake has been... he's been the only father Braylon's ever known. I don't want to make this too hard on him."

The reminder hits like a blade between my ribs, but I force myself to nod. "I understand."

She studies me for a long moment, those amber eyes searching for something I'm not sure I can give her. Trust, maybe. Or proof that I won't shatter the careful life she's built from the pieces of her broken memories.

"All right," she says quietly. "But we do this my way."

I'd agree to anything right now. Anything that gets me closer to the son I never knew existed.

The walk through Veylowe feels endless and far too short at the same time. Kaleen moves beside me with that familiar purposeful stride, but I catch the way her fingers twist together when she thinks I'm not looking. The nervous energy she's trying to hide behind composed silence.

Villagers slow their morning tasks to stare as we pass, their eyes lingering on my wings, my height, the silver rings that mark me as nobility.

A few murmur greetings to Kaleen, but their gazes remain wary when they settle on me.

These people know her story—know she arrived here with no memories and a half-xaphan child growing in her belly.

They've clearly drawn their own conclusions about what that means.

If only they knew how wrong they are.

The cottage where lessons are held sits near the village center, smoke rising from its chimney in lazy spirals. Through the open windows, I can hear a woman's voice reading aloud, punctuated by the occasional burst of childish laughter.

One of those laughs—bright and fearless—stops me dead in my tracks.

"That's him," Kaleen says softly, and I realize she's been watching my face. "He laughs like you."

The observation hits me harder than it should.

Until two years ago, I rarely laughed at all.

But with Kaleen, laughter had come as easily as breathing.

The idea that my son carries even that small piece of our happiness makes my throat tight.

And the fact that she somehow knows what that sounds like... It gives me hope I shouldn't feel.

Kaleen knocks softly on the cottage door, and it opens to reveal a woman with dark curls and warm brown eyes. Derri, I assume. Her gaze flicks between us, taking in my wings, my obvious tension, before settling on Kaleen with gentle concern.

"Everything all right, Kaleen?"

"Fine. I just need to collect Braylon a bit early today."

Derri nods, though her eyes remain curious as she steps aside to let us enter.

The cottage interior is warmly lit, lined with books and children's drawings pinned to the walls.

A small group of children sits in a circle on woven mats, their faces turned up toward a book Derri was obviously reading from.

And there, among them, is my son.

My breath catches. He's even more beautiful up close—all dark gold hair and silver eyes with amber rings that catch the lamplight.

His small wings, barely more than downy feathered bumps, shift restlessly as he turns at the sound of our entrance.

When he sees Kaleen, his entire face lights up with pure joy.

"Mama!"

He scrambles to his feet, small legs carrying him across the room in an unsteady but determined run.

Kaleen scoops him up easily, settling him on her hip with the practiced grace of someone who's done this thousands of times.

The easy affection between them—the way he immediately curls into her neck, the gentle way she smooths down his rumpled hair—makes my chest feel hollow and full at the same time.

This is what I missed. This trust, this love, this perfect bond between mother and

child.

Kaleen ushers us both outside, and I feel unnecessarily nervous as she tilts her head toward him.

"Braylon," Kaleen's voice is soft but clear, drawing his attention. "I want you to meet someone."

His silver gaze swings to me, and I see my own eyes reflected in miniature. For a moment, he simply stares, his head tilted in that curious way children have when they're processing something new. Then, without warning, he reaches out one small hand toward me.

"Wings," he says, the word clear despite his young age.

"Yes," I manage, my voice rougher than I intended. "I have wings."

Kaleen glances at me, something unreadable in her expression. "This is Domiel, sweetheart. He's... he's your..."

She falters, and I see her struggle with how to explain something she doesn't fully understand herself. But Braylon doesn't seem to need the explanation. He's still reaching for me, those silver eyes bright with curiosity rather than fear.

"Down!"

Kaleen hesitates, looking to me for confirmation. When I nod, she sets him gently on his feet. He stands there for a moment, studying me with an intensity that's both heartbreaking and humbling. Then, as if some invisible thread pulls him forward, he takes one step toward me. Then another.

I drop to my knees without thinking, bringing myself down to his level. My hands shake as I rest them on my thighs, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid to do anything that might break this fragile moment.

Braylon walks straight into my arms.

The trust in that simple gesture cracks something open in my chest that's been frozen for two years. He's so small, so perfect, fitting against me like he's always belonged there. His downy wings flutter against my palms as I carefully, reverently, close my arms around him.

"Hello, little one," I whisper against the soft gold of his hair.

He pulls back just enough to look at my face, those familiar eyes studying me with solemn attention. Then, with the matter-of-fact acceptance that only children possess, he settles more firmly against my chest.

For the first time in two years, I feel something that isn't hope or grief or desperate longing.

I feel joy.

Pure, uncomplicated joy at holding my son in my arms. At breathing in the sweet scent of his hair, feeling the solid warmth of his small body, watching those silver eyes—my eyes—brighten with curiosity rather than fear.

"Hi," he says, his voice muffled against my shirt.

I can't help the way his tiny voice twists me up.

I glance up at Kaleen, who's watching us with an expression I can't entirely read.

Pain, maybe. Or recognition struggling against the blank spaces in her memory.

Braylon shifts in my arms, his small hand coming up to trace one of the silver rings on my finger. "Pretty," he murmurs, then looks back at my face with those too-perceptive eyes. "Play?"

The question hits me like a physical blow. How do I explain to a child that I've spent two years searching for him? That I'd rather die than leave him again?

"I'd love to play with you," I say carefully, glancing at Kaleen for permission I'm not sure I have any right to ask for. Or she has any to deny.

Braylon follows my gaze, then looks back at me with the serious expression of someone making an important decision. "Mama?" His voice carries the particular tone children use when they're about to ask for something they want very badly. "Play?"

And my heart fucking soars when she nods.

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KALEEN

A few days pass in a careful dance of boundaries and tentative trust. Domiel doesn't push—doesn't demand more time than I'm willing to give, doesn't ask questions I can't answer.

He simply shows up each morning at the edge of the village, patient as stone, waiting for whatever scraps of his son's life I'm prepared to share.

And Braylon... Braylon takes to him like he's been waiting his whole short life for this particular person to appear.

I watch them now from the cottage doorstep, my hands wrapped around a cooling cup of meadowmint tea that's gone bitter from neglect.

They're crouched together beside the old stump that serves as Braylon's favorite climbing challenge, their dark gold heads bent over something Domiel is showing him.

Small blocks of wood, I think, carved with symbols I don't recognize but that make Braylon's eyes widen with fascination.

"Look, Mama!" Braylon's voice carries across the yard, bright with excitement. He holds up one of the blocks, his small fingers struggling with its weight. "Magic!"

It's not magic—at least, not the kind that sparks and burns. But when Domiel arranges the blocks in a specific pattern, they seem to hum with some inner energy

that makes the air shimmer slightly. Braylon claps his hands together, those silver eyes with their amber rings reflecting pure delight.

The sound of his laughter does something dangerous to my chest. Makes it tight and warm in a way that has nothing to do with the morning sun.

Domiel's mouth curves into something that might generously be called a smile, though it's softer than anything I've seen from him before.

Gentler. The sharp edges that seem carved into his features blur when he looks at our son, as if Braylon's joy has the power to reshape even the hardest lines of his face.

"Your turn," Domiel says, his voice pitched low but carrying clearly in the still air. He nudges another block toward Braylon with one long finger. "Can you put it here?"

Braylon's face scrunches in concentration as he studies the pattern.

His tongue pokes out slightly—a habit that makes my heart clench because I know, somehow, that it means he's thinking hard.

After a moment of careful deliberation, he places the block with the focused precision of someone far older than eighteen months.

The blocks pulse once with gentle light, and Braylon squeals with triumph, launching himself at Domiel with the fearless affection that defines everything about my son's approach to the world.

Domiel catches him easily, those powerful arms closing around Braylon's small frame with a care that borders on reverence. For a moment, they're perfectly still—father and son silhouetted against the morning light, dark gold heads pressed together, and something in my chest fractures just a little.

This should feel familiar. Should feel like coming home instead of watching strangers discover each other.

But it doesn't. And the guilt of that sits heavy in my throat like swallowed stones.

"Again!" Braylon demands, wriggling in Domiel's arms until he's set back on his feet. "More!"

"Patience," Domiel murmurs, but he's already reaching for another set of blocks. The word carries an accent I can't place, vowels shaped by a language that isn't quite human. "The best magic requires patience."

There's something in his tone—a depth that suggests he's speaking from hard-won experience. As if patience is something he's had to learn rather than something that came naturally.

Braylon considers this with the gravity of someone weighing profound wisdom. Then he nods solemnly. "Patience," he repeats, the word massacred by his little tone.

But Domiel just nods. "That's right. It means we wait. We don't rush."

They settle back into their quiet work, and I find myself studying the way Domiel moves.

Everything about him is controlled, measured—from the precise placement of his hands to the deliberate cadence of his words.

But underneath that careful composure, there's something almost hungry in the way he watches Braylon.

As if he's trying to memorize every expression, every gesture, every fleeting moment

of connection.

Like a man who's afraid it might all disappear again.

The thought hits me harder than it should. Makes me wonder what kind of life he's lived that would make him hold even joy so carefully, as if it's something that might be stolen away without warning.

Lake appears at my elbow, his presence solid and comforting as he settles onto the step beside me.

His arm slides around my shoulders in a gesture so familiar it barely registers, though I notice the way Domiel's head turns sharply at the movement.

The way those silver-blue eyes track Lake's every touch with an intensity that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

"He's good with him," Lake says quietly, his voice carefully neutral.

I nod, not trusting my voice. Because he is good with Braylon—patient where I sometimes lose my temper, calm where I worry, confident in ways that seem to settle something restless in our son's spirit.

"Mama, Lake, look!" Braylon's voice cuts through the strange tension threading between the three adults. He's pointing at the blocks, which now pulse with steady, gentle light in a pattern that looks almost like a heartbeat. "Pretty!"

It's obvious Domiel doesn't like how excited Braylon is to see Lake.

I see his shoulders tense, see something sharp and pained flash across his features before that careful mask slides back into place.

But his hands don't falter as he helps Braylon arrange the next set of blocks, his voice steady when he praises our son's careful work.

Lake's arm tightens around me, a subtle reminder of where my loyalties are supposed to lie. But all I can focus on is the way Domiel's jaw clenches when Braylon uses that title, the way his silver rings catch the light as his hands curl once into fists before deliberately relaxing.

This man—this stranger who claims I once belonged to him—is breaking apart by inches, and some traitorous part of me wants to comfort him.

I want to smooth the sharp lines from his face and tell him that everything will be all right, even though I have no right to make such promises. No memory of ever having the power to heal whatever wounds he carries.

But watching him with Braylon, seeing the careful tenderness in every gesture, the reverent way he says our son's name—it stirs something in me that feels old and deep and frighteningly certain.

Something that whispers this is right, this is how it should be, even as my rational mind insists it can't be true.

Because if it were true, if this beautiful, broken man really was the missing piece of my shattered memories, then what does that make the life I've built here?

What does that make the quiet contentment I've found with Lake, the simple peace of a world where nobody expects more than I can give?

The questions circle in my mind like hungry carrion birds, picking at the edges of a certainty I thought was unshakeable.

And all the while, Domiel and Braylon continue their careful work, building patterns of light and magic that seem far too much like the foundation for something I'm not sure I'm brave enough to want.

The cottage feels smaller than usual after I retrieve Braylon from his evening with Domiel. My son is drowsy and pliant, his small body warm against my chest as I carry him inside, but his eyes stay fixed on the doorway as if he's already counting the hours until morning brings his father back.

Lake follows us in, his footsteps heavier than usual on the wooden floor.

There's a tension in his shoulders that's been building for days—a tightness that speaks of words held back, patience wearing thin.

He helps me navigate Braylon's bedtime routine with the practiced ease of someone who's done this countless times, but his usual gentle humor is absent.

Instead, he moves through the motions with mechanical precision, his mossy green eyes distant and troubled.

Braylon fights sleep longer than usual, his small hands reaching toward the window as if he can summon Domiel back through sheer force of will. When I finally settle him in his small bed, tucking the worn quilt around his shoulders, he whispers something that makes my chest tighten.

"Papa magic," he murmurs, his voice thick with approaching sleep. "Pretty lights."

We explained to him that Domiel was his papa, and he has clung to that word. Papa, Papa, Papa. It goes with almost every word he says now.

I smooth his dark hair back from his forehead, those familiar gold glints catching the

lamplight. "Sleep now, little one."

But even as his breathing evens out, I catch Lake watching from the doorway, his expression unreadable in the flickering shadows. The silence stretches between us as we retreat to the main room, heavy with all the things neither of us wants to say.

Lake moves to the hearth, feeding logs to the dying fire with more force than necessary.

The flames leap higher, casting dancing shadows across his broad frame and highlighting the tension in every line of his body.

His sandy brown hair is more tousled than usual, as if he's been running his hands through it, and the freckles across his face stand out starkly against skin that's gone pale with worry.

"We need to talk," he says finally, his voice rougher than usual.

I settle into one of the two worn chairs by the fire, pulling my shawl tighter around my shoulders.

The fabric is soft, familiar—something Lake's mother knitted for me during my first winter in Veylowe.

A gesture of acceptance, of belonging. But tonight it feels like armor, a barrier between me and whatever conversation Lake has been building toward.

"I know what you're going to say."

He turns from the fire, those green eyes searching my face with an intensity that makes me want to look away. "Do you? Because I don't think you understand what's

happening here, Kaleen. What's at risk."

His hands clench at his sides, the long scar down his forearm standing out white against his sun-bronzed skin.

Lake isn't a man given to grand gestures or dramatic speeches—when he speaks, it's because he has something worth saying.

But tonight, there's a desperation in his voice that I've never heard before.

"He's xaphan," Lake continues, the words coming faster now, as if he's afraid he'll lose his nerve. "Winged, magical, powerful. And you're just... you're letting him waltz back into your life like the past two years meant nothing."

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up a hand, cutting me off.

"I've watched you with him, Kaleen. Seen the way you look at him when you think no one's paying attention.

And I get it—he's Braylon's father, he's got that otherworldly thing going on that probably made your heart race back when you knew him.

But what happens when he gets bored? When whatever business brought him here is finished and he decides to move on? "

Lake's voice cracks slightly on the last words, revealing the hurt beneath his anger. He sinks into the chair across from me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his broad hands clasped so tightly his knuckles have gone white.

"You don't remember him, Kaleen. You don't remember why you were running when you ended up here. Maybe there's a good reason for that. Maybe your mind is

protecting you from something you're better off forgetting."

The words hit me like physical blows, each one precisely aimed at the doubts I've been trying to ignore.

Because he's right—I don't remember. Don't know what kind of relationship Domiel and I had, what drove me away from him in the first place.

The few fragments of memory that stir when I look at him are frustratingly vague—impressions of warmth and safety that could just as easily be wishful thinking.

But even as my rational mind acknowledges the truth in Lake's concerns, something deeper rebels against his words.

Something that recognizes the careful way Domiel moves around me, as if I'm made of spun glass.

The reverence in his voice when he speaks my name.

The way he looks at me sometimes—like I'm a miracle he never expected to see again.

"He hasn't tried to take Braylon," I say quietly. "Hasn't made any demands or threats. He just... wants to know his son."

Lake's laugh is bitter, humorless. "For now. But what about tomorrow? Next week? What happens when he decides that knowing isn't enough, that he wants custody? You think a human woman with no memories and no legal standing is going to be able to fight a xaphan lord for her child?"

The fear in his voice is genuine, born of love and protectiveness and a deep, abiding terror of loss. Lake has built his life around the quiet certainty of belonging somewhere, of being needed. The idea of that stability being ripped away is clearly torture for him.

But as I watch the firelight play across his familiar features—the broad, honest face that's been my anchor for two years—I can't shake the feeling that I'm the one who's drowning.

Because Lake is wrong about one thing. When I look at Domiel, it's not my heart that races with remembered attraction or the flutter of new fascination.

It's something deeper, more fundamental.

Something that whispers home in a voice I've been hearing in dreams for two years without understanding what it meant.

"I hear what you're saying," I tell him, my voice carefully measured. "And I understand why you're worried. But I can't make decisions based on fear of what might happen."

Lake's jaw tightens, his green eyes flashing with frustration. "Then make them based on what you know. You know me, Kaleen. You know I love you, love Braylon. You know I'd never hurt either of you, never abandon you. Can you say the same about him?"

The question hangs between us like a blade, sharp and unforgiving. And the terrible truth is that I can't answer it—not with the certainty Lake needs, not with the logic he deserves.

Because what I know about Domiel could fit in a thimble. But what I feel when he's

near... that's something else entirely. Something that makes the careful life I've built here feel suddenly fragile, like a house of cards waiting for the right wind to bring it all tumbling down.

Because Domiel... He feels like home.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

The first time I linger, it's purely practical.

Braylon has fallen asleep against Domiel's shoulder while they worked on some intricate wooden puzzle that hums with gentle magic, and I can't bring myself to wake him.

The afternoon light slants through the trees at the edge of the village, catching the gold threads in both their hair and making them look like they're carved from the same precious metal.

"He's tired himself out," Domiel murmurs, his voice pitched low to avoid disturbing our son.

His large hand rests protectively on Braylon's back, those long fingers spanning nearly the entire width of his small torso.

"The magic work takes concentration. More than most children his age can sustain. "

I settle onto the grass beside them, close enough that I catch the faint scent of stone dust and something indefinably warm that seems to cling to Domiel's skin. "He's always been focused when something catches his interest. Almost stubborn about it."

Something flickers across Domiel's features—surprise, maybe, or recognition. "Where do you think he gets that from?"

The question could be innocent, but there's weight behind it.

An implication that he knows the answer, knows me well enough to see my own traits reflected in our son.

I find myself studying his profile as he gazes down at Braylon, noting the sharp line of his jaw, the way his silver-blue eyes soften when they rest on our child.

"I don't know," I admit quietly. "There's a lot about myself I don't know."

Domiel's gaze shifts to me then, and the intensity of it makes my breath catch.

Those pale eyes seem to see straight through every careful wall I've built around my missing memories.

"You were always like that. Once you decided something was worth your attention, you pursued it with single-minded determination.

It's one of the things that—" He stops abruptly, jaw clenching as if he's bitten back words he didn't mean to speak.

"One of the things that what?"

But he just shakes his head, attention returning to Braylon's sleeping form. "It doesn't matter. That was before."

The dismissal stings more than it should. Makes me want to push, to demand answers to questions I'm not sure I'm ready to hear. But something in his expression—a careful blankness that feels deliberately constructed—warns me off.

So instead, I ask about the puzzle pieces scattered around us, about the magic that

makes them respond to Braylon's touch.

Domiel explains with the patience of a natural teacher, his hands moving as he describes how young xaphan children learn to channel their abilities through focused play.

His voice is rich and precise, shaped by that faint accent that does strange things to my nerves.

When Braylon finally stirs, blinking sleepy silver eyes in the golden afternoon light, I realize we've been talking for over an hour. The conversation flows so easily between us that I forget to guard my words, forget to maintain the careful distance I've been trying to preserve.

It becomes a pattern after that. Each day, when I come to collect Braylon, I find reasons to stay.

Just for a few minutes at first. Then longer.

Domiel never pushes, never suggests I linger, but he doesn't seem surprised when I settle beside them on the grass or accept his quiet invitations to walk while Braylon explores.

"Tell me about the village," he says one evening as we stroll along the edge of the forest. Braylon has discovered a patch of late-blooming aracin blossoms and is carefully examining each one with the intense focus that marks all his explorations. "What's it like, living here?"

I find myself describing Veylowe in ways I never have before—not just the practical details of daily life, but the deeper rhythms that govern our small community.

The way everyone knows everyone else's business but pretends not to.

How the baker's wife always has too many loaves and distributes them to families with more children than income.

The quiet contentment of a place where nothing much changes and most people prefer it that way.

"It sounds peaceful," Domiel says, and there's something almost wistful in his voice. "Safe."

"It is." I glance at him, noting the way his wings shift restlessly behind him even when the rest of his body remains perfectly still. "Is that... not something you're used to?"

His mouth curves in what might charitably be called a smile, though it's edged with something too sharp to be humor.

"Peace is a luxury most of my kind can't afford.

There's always a deadline, always another project that needs completing before the magical matrices destabilize or some noble family decides their ethereal architect isn't meeting expectations. "

The words are delivered with casual precision, but I catch the undercurrent of exhaustion beneath them. The bone-deep weariness of someone who's spent years carrying burdens too heavy for any one person to bear.

Without thinking, I reach out and touch his arm. His skin is warm beneath the fine fabric of his shirt, solid and real in a way that makes something deep in my chest flutter to life. "That sounds lonely."

Domiel goes very still under my touch, those silver-blue eyes fixing on my face with an intensity that steals my breath. For a moment, the careful mask he wears slips, revealing something raw and hungry and desperately hopeful.

"It was," he says quietly. "Until it wasn't."

The words hang between us like a confession, heavy with meanings I can't quite grasp.

My hand is still on his arm, and I can feel his pulse beneath my fingertips—steady, strong, slightly too fast. The late sunlight catches the gold threads in his dark hair, and I have the strangest urge to brush them back from his face.

The thought is so unexpected, so completely inappropriate given my relationship with Lake, that I snatch my hand back as if burned. Heat floods my cheeks, and I quickly turn my attention back to Braylon, who's now attempting to coax one of the aracin blossoms to follow him like a pet.

But I can still feel Domiel watching me, can sense the weight of his attention like a physical thing. And when I risk a glance in his direction, the careful emptiness has returned to his features, though something still burns behind his eyes.

The walk back to the cottage feels both too long and not nearly long enough.

I find myself cataloguing small details about Domiel that I've somehow failed to notice before—the way he adjusts his pace to match mine without seeming to think about it, how his wings curve slightly forward when he laughs at something Braylon does, the unconscious elegance of his movements even when he's just walking across uneven ground.

Lake is waiting when we return, his broad frame silhouetted in the cottage doorway.

His smile is warm when he greets us, but I catch the way his green eyes track from me to Domiel and back again.

The way they linger on the space between us, as if he's trying to measure some invisible distance that might tell him whether his fears are justified.

"Good day?" he asks as I hand Braylon over for his evening bath.

"Yes." The word comes out slightly breathless, though I can't say why. "Braylon's been practicing with those wooden blocks again. He's getting remarkably good at arranging them."

Lake nods, but his attention has already shifted to Domiel, who hovers at the edge of our small garden with the careful stillness of someone who knows he's not entirely welcome but isn't quite ready to leave.

"You're not staying for dinner?" Lake's question is politely neutral, but there's steel underneath it. A quiet reminder of boundaries, of who belongs here and who doesn't.

Domiel's silver rings catch the light as his hands clench once at his sides. "No. I should return to my inn."

He turns to go, then pauses, his gaze finding mine across the small space that suddenly feels vast. "Tomorrow?"

The single word is a question, a request, a prayer all at once. And despite every rational reason I should maintain distance, despite Lake's growing concern and the voice in my head that whispers I'm playing with fire, I hear myself answer.

"Tomorrow."

The night brings dreams that leave me gasping awake in the pre-dawn darkness, my heart hammering against my ribs and Lake's arm heavy across my waist. But for once, the man who haunts my sleep isn't faceless.

I see flashes of silver-blue eyes bright with laughter, catch fragments of a voice I recognize saying words I can't quite remember.

You're magnificent when you're angry, you know that?

Come here.

I love the way you think.

The memories—if that's what they are—feel like stepping into someone else's story. But they're vivid enough to make my skin burn, real enough that I find myself reaching across the bed for someone who isn't there before I remember where I am. Who I'm supposed to be with.

Lake stirs beside me, his breathing deep and even.

We've been sharing a bed for over a year, but lately, he's been finding reasons to stay later at his family's farm.

Helping with repairs that could wait, tending to livestock that his brothers manage perfectly well without him.

The space between us in the narrow bed feels deliberate now, careful in a way it never has before.

I slip from beneath his arm and pad silently to the window, pulling the curtain aside to peer out at the sleeping village. Somewhere out there, Domiel lies awake in his

rented room at the inn. I wonder if he dreams too, if the fragments of memory that torment me visit him with equal persistence.

The thought makes my chest tight with something that might be longing.

By morning, Lake has already left for his family's farm, a hastily scrawled note the only evidence he was here at all.

The emptiness of the cottage feels different now—less like solitude and more like abandonment.

Braylon chatters through breakfast, his excitement about seeing his father again so obvious I can't help but smile.

But underneath his joy, I'm aware of my own anticipation building like storm pressure in my bones.

The thought of seeing Domiel again, of settling beside him on the grass and letting conversation flow between us like water finding its level.

.. It makes me walk faster than usual toward our meeting place.

When I see him waiting under the old tree at the village's edge, something in my chest unclenches. He's arranged the wooden blocks in a new pattern, one that pulses with soft blue-white light, and Braylon abandons my hand to run toward him with delighted squeals.

"Papa! Magic!"

Domiel sweeps him up with easy strength, and I catch the flash of genuine happiness that transforms his serious features. It's like watching the sun break through storm

clouds—sudden, brilliant, and unexpectedly beautiful.

"Good morning," he says to me, his voice carrying that faint accent that does impossible things to my equilibrium. "Sleep well?"

The question is innocent enough, but something in his tone suggests he already knows the answer. That he, too, spent the night wrestling with dreams and half-remembered pieces of a story neither of us can quite recall.

"Well enough." The lie comes easily, but I catch him watching me with those too-perceptive eyes as if he can see straight through to the truth.

And maybe he can. Because when I settle onto the grass beside them, close enough that our knees almost touch, he doesn't look surprised. Just quietly pleased, like a man who's been hoping for something he was afraid to ask for.

I tell myself it's just for Braylon's sake. That my son deserves to know his father, to have whatever stability this strange situation can provide.

But when Domiel laughs at something I say—really laughs, not the careful approximation he usually offers—I catch myself brushing a strand of hair behind my ear and smiling in a way that has nothing to do with maternal duty.

And for the first time since he appeared in Veylowe, I don't try to stop myself.

DOMIEL

The change is subtle at first—so slight I almost convince myself I'm imagining it.

But I've spent years cataloguing every microexpression that crosses Kaleen's face, memorizing the exact shade of gold that flickers in her amber eyes when something amuses her.

I know when she's merely being polite and when genuine interest sparks behind her carefully neutral mask.

Today, when she settles beside me on the grass, there's no hesitation in the movement. No careful calculation of distance. Her shoulder brushes mine as she reaches past me to hand Braylon one of the wooden puzzle pieces, and she doesn't immediately pull away.

"You've been practicing," she observes, watching our son manipulate the glowing blocks with increasing confidence. Her voice carries that warm approval I remember from before—the tone she used when she was genuinely impressed rather than simply making conversation.

"He learns quickly." I adjust my position so Braylon can lean more comfortably against my chest, and catch the way Kaleen's gaze lingers on the easy intimacy of the gesture.

"His magical sensitivity is remarkable for his age.

Most xaphan children don't show this level of control until they're at least three. "

The pride in my voice is unmistakable, and I see her lips curve in response. Not the careful smile she offers when she's being diplomatic, but something softer. More real.

"He gets his stubbornness from somewhere," she says, and there's teasing warmth beneath the words that makes my chest tight with memory.

You say that like it's a bad thing, I want to tell her. You say that like you don't remember how your own determination could move mountains when you set your mind to something.

But I've learned to swallow those responses, to let her rediscover pieces of herself without the weight of my expectations pressing down on her shoulders.

Instead, I content myself with the steady rhythm of Braylon's breathing against my ribs and the increasingly frequent moments when Kaleen forgets to maintain her careful distance.

The next morning, I wake before dawn with a plan forming in my mind.

The village baker opens his shop early, and I remember how Kaleen used to break into genuine smiles over fresh bread still warm from the oven.

It's a small thing, insignificant in the grand scheme of everything we've lost and everything I'm trying to rebuild.

But I've learned that small things matter when you're walking on ground that could shatter at any moment.

The bread is still steaming when I find her at our usual meeting spot, Braylon already

absorbed in arranging yesterday's puzzle pieces in new configurations.

She looks up as I approach, and I catch the flash of curiosity that crosses her features when she notices the cloth-wrapped bundle in my hands.

"Morning bread," I explain, settling beside them with deliberate casualness. "I asked the baker to add nimond beans to the dough. Gives it a subtle sweetness."

I unwrap the loaf carefully, the scent of warm grain and honey filling the space between us. Kaleen's eyes widen slightly, and for a moment her breathing catches in a way that suggests recognition without understanding.

"That smells incredible." She accepts the piece I tear off for her, and when she takes that first bite, her expression shifts into something close to bliss. "God, when was the last time I had bread like this?"

The question hangs in the air between us, loaded with implications neither of us addresses directly. Because the answer is two years ago, when she used to steal warm rolls from my kitchen while I worked and leave crumbs scattered across my drafting table like edible prayers.

Instead of answering, I tear off another piece and hand it to Braylon, who immediately begins methodically removing all the crusts before eating the soft center. The familiar gesture makes my throat tight—I've seen Kaleen do the same. With those honey cakes she loves.

"He has very specific preferences," I murmur, and catch Kaleen watching our interaction with something that might be longing.

"He always has. Even as a baby, he knew exactly what he wanted and would fuss until he got it." She pauses, her gaze growing distant. "Sometimes I wonder if that's

instinctive or if it's something he inherited."

The words are carefully neutral, but I hear the question underneath them.

The quiet plea for information about the pieces of her life she can't retrieve on her own.

And I want to tell her everything—how she used to rearrange my entire workshop when something bothered her, how she never settled for approximations when precision was possible, how her exacting standards made everything better, including me.

But direct answers make her retreat into careful politeness, so instead I let my actions speak. Like the stone I slip from my pocket three days later—a piece of white quartz shot through with veins of silver that catches light like captured starfire.

I found it in the cliffsides above the village, and something about its perfect clarity reminded me of the way she used to examine raw materials at the syndicate, her fingers somehow sensing flaws and strengths that even magical assessment missed.

"Thought you might appreciate this." I place it on the grass between us, close enough that she can reach it without having to ask. "The formation is unusual. See how the silver traces follow natural fracture lines but never actually break the crystal's integrity?"

Kaleen picks up the stone with careful fingers, turning it to catch the afternoon light. Her touch is reverent in a way that speaks to knowledge she doesn't consciously remember, and I watch color rise in her cheeks as she traces the silver veins with her thumb.

"It's beautiful." Her voice has gone soft with wonder. "The way the metal seems to

strengthen the crystal instead of weakening it... I've never seen anything like this."

You have, I want to tell her. You've seen dozens of pieces like this, sorted through hundreds of stones with exactly that same expression of concentrated appreciation. You taught me that the most beautiful materials are the ones that seem contradictory but actually achieve perfect balance.

Instead, I watch her examine the quartz with growing fascination, cataloguing every shift in her expression like a man collecting treasures. When she finally looks up at me, her amber eyes are bright with genuine pleasure.

"Thank you. I don't know why, but holding it feels..." She trails off, shaking her head as if trying to capture thoughts that slip away like smoke.

"Familiar?" I suggest gently.

"Yes." The word comes out breathless, almost surprised. "How did you know?"

Because I know you, I think. Because I remember exactly how your hands move when you're examining something that speaks to your soul. Because two years of separation haven't erased a single detail of who you are when you think no one is watching.

Out loud, I simply say, "Lucky guess."

She keeps the stone, turning it over in her palm as we talk and watch Braylon practice his fledgling magic.

And when she thinks I'm not looking, I catch her holding it up to the light with that same expression of quiet reverence I remember from before.

Like she's rediscovering a part of herself she didn't know was missing.

The next week brings a dozen similar moments—small gestures that chip away at the walls between us without ever demanding more than she's ready to give.

I bring her meadowmint tea when the afternoon grows cold, remembering how she used to claim it helped her think more clearly.

I share observations about Braylon's development that make her laugh in spite of herself.

I keep my voice low and my movements careful, letting her set the pace of every interaction while I memorize each incremental shift toward something that resembles trust.

And gradually, I begin to see glimpses of the woman I fell in love with.

In the way she argues with me about Braylon's education, forgetting to be diplomatic when passion overtakes caution.

In the unconscious grace of her movements when she thinks no one is watching.

In the warmth that creeps into her voice when she's genuinely amused rather than just being polite.

But it's the quiet moments that undo me completely.

When she settles close enough that I can catch the scent of her hair, still the same mixture of sunlight and something indefinably sweet that used to drive me to distraction.

When she laughs at something Braylon does and the sound is so familiar it makes my chest ache with recognition.

When she watches me lift our son onto my shoulders and her expression softens into something that might be approval, or admiration, or the faint beginning of something deeper.

Those moments, I hoard them. Because they're proof that whatever else has been stripped away, the fundamental connection between us remains. Bruised and buried and tangled with complications, but still there. Still real.

Still worth fighting for, no matter how long the battle takes.

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

I feel split down the middle these days, like I'm two different women trying to inhabit the same skin.

There's the Kaleen who learned to survive in Veylowe—careful, grateful, making do with what little she could remember.

And then there's this other woman, the one who stirs restlessly beneath my ribs whenever Domiel looks at me with those silver-blue eyes that seem to see straight through to my bones.

Lake notices the change, I think. He's been spending more nights at his parents' house lately, claiming his father needs help or that his mother asked him to fix something. Excuses that we both know aren't quite lies but aren't quite truth either.

"I should head back," he says tonight, already reaching for his coat before we've even finished our quiet dinner. His mossy green eyes don't quite meet mine. "Early morning tomorrow."

I don't ask him to stay. The words that used to come easily— you don't have to go, it's still early —stick in my throat like stones.

Because the truth is, I'm relieved when he leaves.

Relieved not to feel his careful concern pressing against my shoulders like a weight I can't carry anymore.

I don't even remember the last time he slept next to me.

"Give your parents my regards," I tell him instead, and he nods without looking back.

After he's gone, I sit in my small kitchen and wonder when everything shifted. When Lake's steady presence began to feel like an ill-fitting coat instead of the warm comfort it used to be. When I started counting the hours until I could see Domiel again without feeling guilty about it.

The next evening, I find myself walking toward their usual spot before I've consciously decided to go.

Braylon spots me first and comes running with his arms outstretched, chattering about the new magic trick Domiel taught him today.

Something about making light dance between his fingers like captured thalivern.

"Show her," Domiel says, and there's pride in his voice that makes my chest warm. He settles onto the grass beside me as Braylon concentrates, his small face scrunched with effort until tiny points of silver light begin to flicker around his hands.

"That's incredible," I breathe, and Braylon beams with the particular joy that only comes from impressing the people you love most.

Domiel watches our son with such careful attention, such genuine delight, that I find myself studying the sharp line of his profile. The way his dark gold hair catches the evening light. The unconscious grace in how he moves, even sitting still.

"He's getting stronger," Domiel murmurs, and when he turns to look at me, something passes between us. Something warm and electric that makes me forget to breathe properly.

We stay until the sun begins to set, talking about everything and nothing.

Domiel tells me stories about ethereal architecture that make me lean forward despite myself, fascinated by concepts I shouldn't understand but somehow do.

He makes me laugh—really laugh, the kind that starts deep in my belly and bubbles up until my whole body shakes with it.

I can't remember the last time Lake made me laugh like that. The thought arrives unbidden and makes guilt twist in my stomach.

When Braylon's eyelids start to droop, Domiel glances at the darkening sky. "Let me walk you home."

It's not a question, exactly, but his voice is careful. Respectful of whatever boundaries I might need to maintain. I should probably say no. Should probably gather Braylon myself and make polite excuses about being perfectly capable of walking the short distance to my cottage alone.

Instead, I hear myself saying, "I'd like that."

Domiel scoops up our sleepy son with practiced ease, settling him against his broad chest. Braylon's small fingers curl into his father's shirt, and something about the picture they make together—dark gold head bent protectively over brown curls—makes my throat tight with emotion I can't name.

We walk slowly, in no hurry to break the spell of evening quiet between us.

The village is settling into night around us, windows glowing with warm lamplight and the scent of dinnertime fires drifting on the cool air.

Domiel's wing occasionally brushes my shoulder as we navigate the narrow path, and each accidental touch sends little shivers racing down my spine.

At my door, I expect him to hand off Braylon and leave. Instead, he waits while I push the door open, then follows me inside without invitation. Like he belongs here. Like this small, simple cottage could somehow contain someone as extraordinary as him.

I watch him carry our son to the small bedroom, moving with quiet confidence through my space.

He lays Braylon down with infinite gentleness, smoothing the covers and murmuring something too soft for me to catch.

When he turns back to me, his expression is tender in a way that makes my pulse stumble.

We walk back toward the front door together, but he stops just inside the threshold. The space between us feels charged suddenly, heavy with unspoken words.

"Kaleen," he says softly, and my name on his lips sounds like a prayer. "Do you have any of your old memories? Anything at all?"

I should lie. Should give him the same careful answer I've given everyone for two years—that I remember nothing before waking in these woods. But something about the vulnerability in his voice, the way he's looking at me like I might break at any moment, makes honesty spill out instead.

"No memories," I admit quietly. "But... feelings. Like there's this whole other life just out of reach, and sometimes when I'm with you, it feels like trying to remember a dream." My voice drops to barely above a whisper. "Like something important that

I've lost."

His silver-blue eyes darken, searching my face with an intensity that should probably frighten me. Instead, it makes heat pool low in my belly, makes me want to step closer instead of backing away.

"What kind of feelings?" The question is barely audible.

"Like I'm supposed to know you," I breathe. "Like this—" I gesture vaguely between us, "—should make sense."

Something shifts in his expression then, some carefully maintained control beginning to slip. He reaches up slowly, giving me time to pull away, and brushes a strand of hair back from my face. His fingers are warm against my skin, callused in a way that speaks of skilled work with his hands.

I should step back. Should remember Lake, remember all the reasons why this is complicated and dangerous and wrong. Instead, I find myself leaning into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed as his thumb traces the line of my cheekbone.

"Kaleen." My name again, rougher this time.

When I open my eyes, he's closer. Close enough that I can see the flecks of silver in his blue irises, close enough that his breath warms my skin. He's watching me with something that looks like hunger held carefully in check, waiting for permission I don't know how to give but desperately want to.

"What about this?" He shifts just a touch closer. "Does this make sense, too?"

I nod, my throat tight, my body trembling with want in a way I have never felt before.

Slowly, so slowly I could stop him at any moment, he leans forward. His hand slides to cup the back of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair, and then his lips brush against mine.

The kiss is gentle at first. Questioning. But when I don't pull away—when I can't pull away because something inside me is screaming yes, this, finally—it deepens into something honest and hungry and right in a way that makes my knees weak.

And then something clicks .

Not memory, exactly, but recognition. Like my body remembers what my mind has forgotten. Like every part of me has been waiting for this moment without knowing why. Heat floods through me, swift and overwhelming, and my hands shake as I grip the front of his shirt to keep myself upright.

When we finally break apart, I'm breathing hard and my whole world feels different. Tilted. Like I've been walking around with one foot in the wrong life and finally found my balance.

Domiel's forehead rests against mine, his breathing unsteady. "I should go," he murmurs, but his hands haven't released me.

I nod, not trusting my voice. Not trusting myself not to ask him to stay.

When he finally steps back, the loss of his warmth feels like a physical ache.

But as I watch him disappear into the darkness beyond my doorway, my hands are still shaking.

Not from fear or uncertainty, but from the bone-deep knowledge that for the first time in two years, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

DOMIEL

I watch Braylon's face scrunch in concentration as he tries to coax another wisp of light from his fingertips.

His silver eyes—so much like mine, yet warmed by the amber rings he inherited from his mother—narrow with the particular intensity only an eighteen-month-old can muster when the world refuses to bend to his will.

"Like this, little one." I cup my hands and let silver light pool between my palms, steady and bright. "Feel it first, then shape it."

He mimics my posture with the serious dedication that never fails to make my chest tight with pride. A few sparks dance across his small fingers before flickering out, and he huffs in frustration.

"Again," he demands, the word clear despite his age. Everything about Braylon develops faster than it should—his speech, his magic, his understanding. Half-xaphan children always do, but watching it happen to my son fills me with wonder and protective fear in equal measure.

I can feel Kaleen before I see her. It's something I've never been able to explain, this awareness of her presence that settles into my bones like warmth from a hearthfire.

When I turn, she's walking toward us with that careful grace I remember from before—back when she used to move through my estate like she belonged there, which she did.

Which she always will, even if she doesn't remember yet.

The evening light catches the gold in her chestnut hair, and I have to force myself not to stare too openly.

She still hasn't regained the confident boldness she used to wear like armor, but there's something different lately.

The way she looks at me has shifted from wary confusion to something softer.

Something that makes hope twist dangerous and sharp beneath my ribs.

I know she's still afraid. Still uncertain about all the things she can't remember but somehow feels echoing in the spaces between her thoughts.

But I can feel her reaching for me—even if she doesn't realize it yet.

In the way she unconsciously steps closer when we talk.

How her breathing changes when our hands accidentally brush.

The small moments when her guard drops and I catch glimpses of the woman who used to challenge me with sharp wit and kiss me breathless against my workroom door.

Lake's been scarce lately. I rarely see him around anymore, and when I do, he keeps his distance with the particular tension of a man who knows he's losing something but doesn't know how to fight for it.

Good. I won't pretend to feel sorry for him when what's happening here is as inevitable as sunrise.

Kaleen was never his, even when she thought she was.

"Mama!" Braylon's delighted shriek cuts through my thoughts as he launches himself toward Kaleen. She scoops him up with practiced ease, and the picture they make together—her warm brown skin against his lighter bronze, both of them laughing—hits me like a physical blow.

This is my family. Has always been my family, even when half of it was stolen from me.

"How was your lesson?" she asks, settling onto the grass beside us. Close enough that I can smell the faint scent of the flowers she tends in her garden, mixed with something uniquely her that makes my pulse quicken.

"Magic, Mama!" Braylon announces proudly, then immediately tries to demonstrate. The resulting sparks are unsteady but bright enough to make Kaleen's eyes widen with genuine amazement.

"That's incredible," she breathes, and the wonder in her voice makes something warm unfurl in my chest. She's never been impressed by displays of power—wealth, status, magical ability—but watching our son discover his gifts through my teaching moves her in a way that tells me more than words ever could.

We spend the next hour like this, the three of us together as the sun begins its descent.

I keep things light, safe, slow. No pushing, no demands for memories she can't access.

Just presence. Just being here, proving that this version of us works too.

That even without her past, we fit together like pieces of the same complicated

puzzle.

When Braylon starts rubbing his eyes with small fists, signaling the approach of bedtime, Kaleen glances at the darkening sky with something that looks almost like reluctance.

"We should head back," she says, but doesn't move to gather him immediately.

I nod, already mentally preparing for another night of watching them walk away. Another evening of returning to the small room I've rented in the village, staring at the ceiling and fighting the urge to pace the distance to her cottage just to be closer to the two people who mean everything to me.

But then she turns to look at me directly, and something in her expression makes my breath catch.

"Would you..." she starts, then stops. Takes a breath like she's gathering courage. "Would you like to join us for dinner?"

The words hit me with more force than any complex magical working. This is the first time—the first real invitation to step inside her life instead of hovering at its edges. To sit at her table, in her space, like I have a right to be there.

"I'd like that very much," I manage, proud of how steady my voice sounds when my pulse is hammering against my throat.

The walk to her cottage feels different this time.

Not the careful distance of recent weeks, but something easier.

More natural. Braylon chatters between us as we navigate the village paths, and when

Kaleen laughs at something he says, she doesn't pull away when I brush her arm to point out where he's dropped his small wooden zarryn toy.

Inside her home—modest but warm, filled with the quiet signs of a life carefully built from nothing—she moves with efficient grace while I settle Braylon at the small wooden table.

The domesticity of it shouldn't affect me this much, but watching her ladle stew into simple bowls while our son babbles about his day makes my chest tight with longing.

"It's nothing fancy," she says, setting a bowl in front of me with movements that seem almost shy.

"It's perfect." The words come out rougher than I intend, weighted with meaning I hope she can hear beneath the surface.

Dinner unfolds like something from the life I lost two years ago, except softer somehow.

More precious for being freely given instead of expected.

Kaleen doesn't pull away when I reach across the small table to steady Braylon's cup.

Doesn't flinch when our knees bump in the tight space.

And when I catch her watching me with those amber-brown eyes—really watching, like she's trying to solve a puzzle she didn't know existed—she doesn't look away.

The fire in the simple hearth casts warm light across her face, highlighting the strong line of her jaw and the way her lips curve when Braylon says something particularly endearing.

This close, I can see the faint scar near her collarbone that I remember tracing with my lips in the quiet hours before dawn.

The calluses on her hands from work that shaped her long before I knew her name.

She's still my Kaleen, even changed. Still the woman who made me believe I could be more than just precise angles and carefully controlled power. Who taught me that love doesn't weaken—it transforms, makes everything sharper and more vital and impossibly bright.

After Kaleen clears the dishes, I settle into the worn wooden chair near the fire with Braylon curled against my chest. The weight of him—solid and warm and mine—still catches me off guard sometimes.

Two years of searching, of imagining this exact moment, and the reality somehow exceeds every desperate fantasy.

"Story," he mumbles against my shirt, tiny fist curling into the fabric like an anchor.

I reach for the small leather-bound book Kaleen keeps on the side table—tales of brave knights and distant lands that bear no resemblance to the complex realities of our world.

Simple stories for a child who won't stay simple much longer.

Half-xaphan children grow fast, and already I can see the sharp intelligence in his silver-amber eyes that will make him dangerous if he's not careful.

"Once upon a time," I begin, letting my voice drop to the cadence that always settles him, "there was a knight who could command the very stars..."

From the corner of my eye, I watch Kaleen move about the small cottage.

She's putting things away with the quiet efficiency I remember—every motion precise and purposeful, nothing wasted.

But there's something different tonight.

A softness in the way she glances over at us that makes my pulse quicken.

Before, in the life she can't remember, she used to watch me like this when I'd work late into the night—not worried, exactly, but attentive.

Like she was cataloging the small details of my presence for some collection she kept locked away in her heart.

The memory of that focused attention, that choosing to see me fully, had sustained me through months of fruitless searching.

Braylon's breathing grows deeper as I turn another page.

His head grows heavier against my shoulder, and I adjust my hold to keep him comfortable while continuing the story in increasingly softer tones.

This is something I never had—bedtime stories, a father's voice weaving safe worlds from simple words.

My own childhood had been lessons in control and duty, preparation for a life measured in architectural precision and divine service.

But here, with my son's small body relaxed completely in my trust, something fundamental shifts in my understanding of what strength actually means.

It's not just the ability to bend light and stone to your will.

It's this—being steady enough that someone small and vulnerable can fall asleep against you without fear.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

"The knight gathered starlight in his hands," I read quietly, "and wove it into armor that would protect all the people he loved most."

When I glance up, Kaleen has stopped her quiet movements.

She stands near the kitchen area, dish towel forgotten in her hands, watching us with an expression that makes my breath catch.

There's something unguarded in her face—longing mixed with wonder, like she's seeing something she didn't know she wanted until this moment.

The firelight catches the gold threads in her chestnut hair, and I have to fight the urge to reach for her.

To pull her into this circle of warmth and safety and make it complete.

She looks softened by the gentle light, younger somehow, and I catch a glimpse of how she might have been before life taught her to armor herself in competence and careful distance.

Braylon's breathing evens out completely, and I close the book with careful movements. His small fingers remain fisted in my shirt, even in sleep trusting that I won't let him fall. The weight of that trust, the simple faith of it, makes something fierce and protective rise in my chest.

"He's getting so big," Kaleen whispers, finally moving closer. She perches on the arm of my chair, near enough that her warmth radiates against my side. "Sometimes I look

at him and can't believe..."

She trails off, but I know what she's not saying. Can't believe this beautiful, impossible child is hers. Can't believe she created something so perfect from circumstances she can't even remember. Can't believe how naturally love came, even without the foundation of memory to build it on.

"He's extraordinary," I murmur, meaning it completely. "Just like his mother."

She ducks her head at that, color rising in her cheeks. But she doesn't pull away when I shift slightly, making room for her to lean closer. Instead, she reaches out to brush a strand of dark hair from Braylon's forehead, her touch gentle and sure.

"I should put him to bed," she says, but makes no immediate move to take him from my arms.

"In a moment." The words come out rougher than intended, weighted with reluctance to break this perfect tableau. "Let me just..."

I don't finish the sentence, but she seems to understand.

This is the first time since I found her that we've felt like a family—not fragments trying to reassemble, but something whole and right and exactly as it should be.

I want to memorize every detail: the way the firelight plays across her face, how Braylon's small hand curls against my chest, the scent of her skin when she leans close enough to share my air.

Finally, when Braylon shifts and mumbles in his sleep, she stands and carefully lifts him from my arms. Her movements are practiced, maternal, and watching her carry our son toward the small bedroom makes my chest tight with emotions I can barely

name.

I stand as well, suddenly uncertain now that the spell of the evening is breaking.

The cottage feels smaller with the three of us moving about, more intimate, and I'm hyperaware of every sound—the whisper of her feet on the wooden floor, the soft murmur of her voice as she settles Braylon in his bed, the quiet creak of floorboards as she returns to the main room.

"Thank you," she says when she emerges, voice barely above a whisper. "For dinner, for the story, for..." She gestures helplessly, and I understand. For being patient. For not demanding more than she can give. For letting this happen slowly, naturally, without the weight of a past she can't access.

"Thank you for inviting me." I step closer, drawn by something in her expression that looks almost like yearning. "It's been..."

"Perfect," she finishes softly, and the word hangs between us like a promise.

We stand there for a moment, neither moving toward the door nor away from each other.

The fire has burned low, casting everything in warm amber light that makes her skin glow like precious metal.

I can see the rapid flutter of her pulse at her throat, the way her lips part slightly as if she's about to say something important.

Instead, I step closer. Close enough to see the darker flecks of gold in her brown eyes, to catch the faint intake of her breath when I lift my hand to her face.

"Kaleen," I say, her name a question and a plea and a declaration all at once. And she nods, like she knows what I'm asking.

When I lean down to kiss her goodnight—the same careful, respectful brush of lips I offered before—something shifts. Instead of the brief contact I expect, she steps closer. Her hands come up to rest against my chest, and when I start to pull back, she follows.

The kiss deepens, becomes something real and hungry and full of promise.

She tastes like the meadowmint tea she served with dinner and something sweeter—something that's purely her.

Her fingers curl into the fabric of my shirt, holding me close, and when a soft sound escapes her throat, I feel it like lightning in my blood.

This isn't the careful politeness of recent days or the tentative exploration of someone trying to remember. This is want —immediate and undeniable and directed at me. At who I am now, in this moment, not who I might have been in a life she can't recall.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. Her forehead rests against mine, and her eyes are darker than I've seen them since I found her again.

"I don't understand what's happening," she whispers, voice shaky with honesty. "But I...I like being around you Domiel."

The words hit me like a physical blow, knocking the breath from my lungs. After two years of searching, of hoping, of fearing I'd lost her forever, this feels like resurrection. Like the first real breath after drowning.

For the first time since I found her again, this doesn't feel like an echo of what we

used to be. This feels like a beginning.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

KALEEN

The morning air carries the scent of damp earth and growing things as I make my way back from the garden, my basket heavy with fresh dandelions and early zucchini shoots.

The familiar weight of routine should comfort me, but there's something different about today—a restless energy that's been building since last night, since that kiss that felt like waking up from a dream I didn't know I was having.

Braylon left with Domiel after breakfast, chattering excitedly about learning to make his light-sparks dance—or at least I think that's what he was saying. His vocabulary is more limited than the amount he talks.

Watching them together—my son's small hand clasped trustingly in those long, elegant fingers—had made my chest tight with an emotion I couldn't name. Not quite memory, but something deeper. Something that felt like recognition at a level below conscious thought.

I'm still lost in that feeling when I round the corner toward my cottage and see him.

Lake stands near my front door, a quiet silhouette against the backdrop of morning shadows. His sandy brown hair catches the filtered sunlight, and there's something in his posture—the way his shoulders are set, the careful stillness of his hands—that makes my stomach drop with sudden dread.

He looks up when he hears my footsteps, and the expression on his freckled face is

gentle but resolute. Like someone who's reached a difficult decision and found peace with it, even if it hurts.

"Kaleen." His voice carries that particular quiet I've come to associate with serious conversations. "Can we talk?"

My gut churns, a sick twist of guilt and anticipation that makes me want to turn and walk back toward the garden. But I've never been one to run from difficult things, even when I can't remember learning that particular brand of courage.

"Yes." The word comes out steadier than I feel. "Of course."

I lead him inside, setting my basket on the small kitchen counter with movements that feel too precise, too controlled. The cottage seems smaller with both of us in it, the air thick with unspoken truths that we've both been carefully avoiding for weeks now.

Lake settles into the chair by the window—not his usual spot by the fire, I realize with a pang. He's already creating distance, preparing for whatever this conversation needs to be.

"How's Braylon doing?" he asks first, because of course he does. Even now, even in this moment that feels like an ending, he's thinking of my son. Of the child he's helped raise for more than a year, who calls him by name and reaches for him when nightmares strike.

"He's good." I perch on the edge of the other chair, hands clasped in my lap. "Growing so fast. Learning new things every day."

Lake nods, a small smile flickering across his features. "He's a bright one. Always has been." A pause. "And having Domiel around? How's that been for you?"

The question hangs in the air between us like a blade, sharp and unavoidable.

I can feel his mossy green eyes on my face, steady and patient, but I can't bring myself to meet them.

Instead, I stare at my hands—at the calluses that speak of work and survival, at the faint tan lines where my gold bracelet usually sits.

"It's been..." I start, then stop. How do you explain that being near someone feels like coming home to a place you never knew you'd left? That every conversation, every shared glance, every moment spent in the same space as Domiel feels like puzzle pieces sliding into alignment?

"Different," I finally manage. "Good different. For Braylon, I mean. He deserves to know his father."

The words feel inadequate, a careful sidestepping of the real truth. But Lake has always been able to read between the lines where I'm concerned. He leans back in his chair, something shifting in his expression that might be resignation or relief.

"And for you?" His voice remains gentle, but there's steel underneath—not angry steel, but the kind that comes from facing hard truths head-on. "What does it mean for you, Kaleen?"

I finally look up at him then, taking in the familiar planes of his face. The scatter of freckles across his nose, the way his hair never quite behaves no matter how many times he combs it back. The quiet strength that's been my anchor for so long, steady and reliable as sunrise.

Lake's a good man. Better than good—he's kind and patient and devoted in a way that should make any woman grateful. He showed up when I had nothing, helped me

build a life from scattered pieces, never asked for more than I could give even when I knew he wanted to.

But looking at him now, I can't escape the truth that's been building in my chest like pressure behind a dam. Being with Lake has always felt like settling. Like choosing safety over something wilder and more dangerous and infinitely more right.

"Is this the end? For us, I mean?" he asks quietly, and the simple directness of it nearly undoes me. No accusations, no demands for explanations I can't give. Just the question we've both been dancing around since Domiel walked back into my life.

The guilt hits me like a physical blow. This man loved me when I was broken and lost, helped me become someone who could love my son fiercely and build a home from nothing. He deserved better than to watch me slowly pull away as someone else claimed space in my heart I didn't even know was empty.

"I didn't mean for it to go this way," I whisper, throat tight with unshed tears. "I never wanted to hurt you, Lake. You've been so good to me, to Braylon. You were there when?—"

"When you had nothing," he finishes gently. "I know. And I don't regret any of it, Kaleen. Not one day, not one moment."

He stands then, moving to the window to look out at the village beyond. His broad shoulders are relaxed, but there's something final in his posture that makes my chest ache.

"I always felt like I never had all of you," he says without turning around. "Like there was another piece of you somewhere out there, something I couldn't touch or understand. I told myself it was just the memories you'd lost, that maybe in time..."

He trails off, shaking his head. When he turns back to face me, his mossy green eyes are clear and sad but not bitter.

"I'm glad you found it," he says simply. "Whatever that missing piece was. You deserve to be whole."

The words hit me harder than anger would have. Harder than accusations or demands for explanation. Because they're generous and true and everything I should have expected from someone who knows me well enough to love the broken parts without trying to fix them.

"Lake—"

"It's alright." He moves toward the door, pausing only to look back at me one more time. "Take care of yourself, Kaleen. And take care of that boy. He's lucky to have you."

Then he's gone, leaving me alone in the sudden quiet of my cottage with the weight of endings and beginnings pressing against my ribs like something alive.

I should feel guilty. Should feel the sharp bite of loss for a good man and a stable life. And part of me does—a sad, tender part that will always be grateful for what Lake gave me when I needed it most.

But underneath the guilt, underneath the sadness, there's something else rising in my chest. Something that feels dangerously like relief.

Like freedom.

Like the first real breath I've taken in longer than I can remember.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

DOMIEL

I spot her long before she reaches the clearing where Braylon and I have spent the afternoon working on light-weaving exercises.

She's walking slower than usual, her movements carrying a weight that has nothing to do with physical exhaustion.

Even from this distance, I can see the careful way she holds herself—like someone trying to appear normal while processing something that's knocked her off balance.

Braylon hasn't noticed yet. He's too focused on the tiny golden spark dancing between his cupped palms, his face scrunched in concentration as he tries to make it hold its shape without my guidance.

The sight of him—dark hair catching the late afternoon light, those unusual amber-ringed eyes so serious with effort—never fails to tighten something in my chest. My son. Our son.

But it's Kaleen who draws my attention now, the subtle wrongness in her demeanor setting every protective instinct I possess on high alert.

"Well done," I murmur to Braylon as his light-spark finally stabilizes into a perfect sphere. "Hold it steady now. Feel how the energy wants to flow."

He nods eagerly, but I'm already rising from where we've been sitting cross-legged in the grass, brushing dirt from my pants as I move to intercept Kaleen before she

reaches us.

Whatever's put that distant look in her amber eyes, I want to know about it before she has to put on a brave face for our son.

"Mama!" Braylon calls out when he finally spots her, his concentration breaking. The light-spark flickers and dies, but he doesn't seem to care. He scrambles to his feet, already chattering about his magical progress as he runs toward her.

Kaleen catches him in a hug that looks normal enough on the surface, but I can see the way her shoulders tense, the slight delay before she settles into the embrace. Something's happened. Something significant enough to shake the careful equilibrium she's built around her life here.

"How did the lesson go?" she asks, and her voice sounds steady. Almost normal. But there's an undertone there—a fragility she's working to hide—that makes my jaw clench with the need to identify and eliminate whatever's caused it.

"Light!" Braylon announces proudly. "Light! Papa magic!"

Papa. The word hits me the same way it has every time he's said it over these past weeks—a fierce, possessive satisfaction that goes bone-deep. But today I'm too focused on the careful blankness in Kaleen's expression to fully savor it.

"We've been working on shaping the magic. He's doing very well," I supply, watching her.

"That's wonderful, sweetheart," she tells him, and the gentle warmth in her voice when she addresses Braylon is completely genuine. Whatever's troubling her, it has nothing to do with our son.

Braylon turns and starts playing with his magic again, and the silence that stretches between us is heavy with unspoken words. Kaleen's gaze watches our son, but I can tell her attention is elsewhere—turned inward to whatever conversation or realization has left her looking so carefully composed.

I move closer, close enough to catch the faint scent of gardens and honest work that always clings to her skin. Close enough to see the way she's holding her jaw, the subtle tension in the line of her neck.

"What happened?" The words come out rougher than I intended, edged with a protective fury I can't quite contain. If someone in this village has hurt her, has said something or done something to put that lost expression in her eyes...

She looks up at me then, and for a moment her careful composure cracks. I catch a glimpse of something raw and uncertain underneath—not pain, exactly, but the kind of vulnerability that comes from standing at a crossroads without a clear map forward.

"Nothing happened," she says automatically, then seems to catch herself. Her amber eyes dart away from mine, focusing on some point beyond my shoulder. "That's not... that's not true. Something did happen. This morning."

The words hang between us, tentative and loaded with meaning. I wait, every muscle in my body coiled with the effort of holding myself still when what I want to do is reach for her, pull her against my chest until whatever's troubling her bleeds away into nothing.

"Lake and I talked," she says finally, the words coming out in a rush like she's afraid she'll lose her nerve if she doesn't say them quickly. "We... things are over between us."

The words hit me like a physical blow—not of pain, but of fierce, overwhelming triumph.

The surge of satisfaction that rockets through me is so intense it's almost violent, a primal claiming that makes my hands flex with the need to touch her, to mark her as mine in ways that go far beyond the merely physical.

But underneath the triumph, threading through it like silver wire, is something softer. Something that recognizes the careful way she's holding herself, the slight tremor in her voice that speaks of someone who's just taken a leap without knowing where she'll land.

She's scared. Terrified, even, though she'd never admit it out loud. Afraid of losing the life she's built here, the security she's created for herself and Braylon. Afraid of making a mistake that could shatter the careful peace she's found in this quiet village.

And beneath all of that—something that makes my chest tight with a tenderness so fierce it borders on pain—she's afraid of wanting something she's not sure she deserves to have. Should have.

I understand that fear. Have lived with its twin for two years, the constant ache of wanting something that seemed forever out of reach.

But where my fear was born of loss, hers comes from the terrifying prospect of choosing something new.

Of stepping away from safety toward something that could either complete her or destroy the fragile foundation she's built.

"Are you alright?" I ask, and the words come out gentler than they have any right to. Not the demanding tone of someone who's just gotten what he wanted, but the careful

question of someone who knows that victories can be as complicated as defeats.

She nods, but there's a hesitation in the movement that tells me it's more hope than certainty. "It was right," she says, and her voice grows stronger as she says it. "It was time. I think... I think we both knew it."

The honesty in those words—the willingness to acknowledge what we've all been carefully dancing around for weeks—sends another wave of satisfaction through me.

But I tamp it down, force myself to remain still and patient even though every instinct I possess is screaming at me to claim this moment, to press my advantage while her defenses are down.

Not yet. Not when she's looking at me like someone who's just taken a step toward a cliff edge and isn't sure if she's about to fly or fall.

"Good," I say simply, because anything more would be too much pressure, too much too fast. "You deserve to be happy, Kaleen."

Something shifts in her expression then—surprise, maybe, or gratitude that I'm not pushing for more than she's ready to give. The careful distance she's been maintaining wavers, just slightly, like a wall with a hairline crack that might spread given the right pressure.

But I won't be the one to apply that pressure. Not today. Today is for letting her process, for giving her the space to realize that ending things with Lake wasn't a mistake—it was the first step toward something that could be extraordinary.

Braylon turns then, trying to express something I can't understand as he crashes into the space between us. The moment fractures, but that's alright. There will be other moments. Other opportunities to show her that choosing me—choosing us— isn't a

risk she's taking alone.

"Ready to go home?" she asks our son, and the word 'home' carries a weight that makes me wonder if she's starting to question exactly where that might be.

"Let me walk you," I offer, and she, thankfully, doesn't turn me down.

I fall into step beside them as we make our way back toward the village, keeping my movements casual even though every nerve ending is hypersensitive to her presence.

The way she breathes, the rhythm of her footsteps, the occasional brush of her arm against mine when the path narrows—all of it registers with the intensity of someone who's been starved and is finally being offered sustenance.

The walk back to her cottage passes in comfortable near-silence, Braylon chattering occasionally and pointing about, us talking to him like we understand more than three words.

Kaleen responds with appropriate murmurs, but I can feel her attention drifting, processing whatever internal shift has occurred since this morning.

When we reach her front door, she sets Braylon down and he rushes inside to pick up toys.

But Kaleen hovers in the doorway, where she can still see him as she turns to face me with an expression I can't quite read.

There's gratitude there, and something that might be affection.

But underneath it all is that same careful uncertainty, the look of someone standing at the edge of something vast and unknown.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "For today. For being patient with him. With... everything."

The words are simple enough, but they carry layers of meaning that make my chest tight. She's thanking me for more than just the afternoon spent teaching our son to weave light. She's thanking me for not pushing, for not demanding answers to questions she's still figuring out how to ask.

But patience has its limits, and mine are stretched thin by the way the evening light catches the gold flecks in her eyes, by the soft curve of her mouth that I remember with perfect clarity despite two years of separation.

I step closer, close enough that she has to tilt her head back to look at me. Close enough that I can see the way her pupils dilate slightly, the way her breathing shifts just a fraction faster.

"Kaleen," I murmur, her name a rough prayer on my lips. It's how I always ask her, mostly because whispering her name is so natural to me. To say it to her and not yell it in anguish is such a relief I can't stop.

She doesn't step back. Doesn't look away. If anything, she seems to lean into my presence, like a flower turning toward sunlight.

I cup her face in my hands, thumbs tracing the elegant lines of her cheekbones, and watch her eyes flutter closed at the contact.

She's so beautiful it makes my chest ache—not just the external beauty that first caught my attention, but the strength and warmth and fierce devotion that makes her who she is.

When I kiss her, it's with the reverence of someone handling something precious and

fragile. Soft at first, barely more than a whisper of contact, giving her every opportunity to pull away if she wants to.

But she doesn't pull away. Instead, she melts into me with a soft sound that might be relief or surrender or simple recognition. Her hands come up to rest against my chest, not pushing me away but anchoring herself as she kisses me back with a sweetness that makes my knees threaten to buckle.

This is the third time I've kissed her since finding her again. The third time I've felt that spark of connection that goes deeper than memory or desire—something fundamental and unshakeable that tells me this woman was meant to be mine.

When we finally break apart, she's breathing hard, her amber eyes dark with something that might be want or fear or both. For a moment, we just stand there in the growing dusk, foreheads nearly touching, sharing the same space and the same air.

She doesn't invite me in. I don't ask her to. Some things can't be rushed, no matter how much I want to gather her against me and never let her go again.

But as I step back, as I bid her goodnight and force myself to walk away instead of claiming this moment the way every instinct demands, I carry with me the memory of how she kissed me back. The way she leaned into my touch like she was coming home.

It's enough. For now, it's enough.

But not for long.

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DOMIEL

I establish a routine without announcing it, the way water finds its path through stone—inevitable but unhurried.

Each evening, as the sun begins its descent behind the village's modest rooftops, I find myself at Kaleen's door.

Not asking for an invitation, not pushing for promises I know she's not ready to make. Just... present.

The first few nights, she hesitates before opening the door wider, her amber eyes searching my face as if looking for some hidden agenda.

But I keep my hands loose at my sides, my expression carefully neutral, and wait for her to decide.

Each time, after a moment that stretches like pulled wire, she steps back.

"Stay for dinner?" she asks on the fourth night, and the words come out almost casual. But I catch the slight tremor in her voice, the way her fingers worry at the fabric of her skirt.

"If you'll have me," I reply simply, because anything more would be pressure she doesn't need.

The cottage feels smaller with my presence filling it, my wings automatically folding

tight against my back to avoid knocking over the carefully arranged simplicity of her life here.

Everything is functional, clean, worn smooth by use but cared for with quiet pride.

It's so different from the ethereal luxury of my estate in Soimur, yet somehow it suits her just as well—this stripped-down honesty, this focus on what matters.

Braylon toddles over immediately, his small hands reaching up toward me with the complete trust that still catches me off-guard every time.

"Papa! Up!"

The word hits me like it always does—a fierce claiming that goes straight to some primitive part of my brain.

I lift him easily, settling him against my hip as he babbles something that might be about his day or the wooden toy clutched in his fist. His vocabulary is still limited, maybe fifteen words on a good day, but he communicates with his whole body—pointing, tugging, making little sounds of delight when I understand what he wants.

Kaleen moves around the kitchen with practiced efficiency, but I notice how she steals glances at us when she thinks I'm not looking. There's something almost hungry in her expression, like she's memorizing the sight of father and son together.

"The table needs fixing," she mentions after we've eaten her simple but perfect stew—dreelk and tuskram with herbs that remind me of Sunday mornings in another life. "One of the legs is wobbly."

It's not really an invitation, but it's not not an invitation either. "I can look at it," I

offer, keeping my tone carefully neutral.

The table is more than wobbly—it's barely holding together, held in place by strategic positioning and what appears to be sheer stubbornness. I run my hands over the worn wood, cataloging the damage. The joints have worked loose over time, and one leg has a crack running nearly its full length.

"This needs more than a quick fix," I tell her, already calculating what materials I'll need. "But I can reinforce it properly. Make it solid again."

She nods, then seems to catch herself. "I can pay?—"

"No." The word comes out sharper than I intended, edged with an offense I can't quite hide. Does she really think I'd take payment for something like this? For the simple pleasure of fixing something she uses every day, of making her life a little easier?

Her eyes widen slightly at my tone, and I force myself to soften. "It's not about payment, Kaleen. It's just... let me do this. Please."

Something shifts in her expression—not quite trust, but maybe the beginning of it. She nods again, this time without the careful distance she's been maintaining.

I return the next evening with proper wood glue and reinforcement brackets, tools that feel familiar and comforting in my hands. Braylon "helps" by handing me screws and getting underfoot, chattering in his limited vocabulary about everything and nothing.

"Hammer!" he announces proudly when I pick up the tool, one of his newer words.

"That's right. Good eye."

Kaleen sits nearby, mending a shirt by lamplight, but I can feel her attention on me as I work. There's something hypnotic about the familiar rhythm of repair work—measuring, cutting, fitting pieces together until they form something stronger than they were alone.

"You're good at this," she observes when I flip the table right-side up and test its stability. Rock solid now, built to last another decade at least.

"Practice," I say simply, though we both know it's more than that. This kind of precision, this attention to detail—it doesn't come from casual experience.

Over the following weeks, I find other things that need fixing. A loose board on the front step that could trip someone in the dark. A window that sticks when she tries to open it for air. The garden gate that hangs crooked and scrapes the ground.

Each repair gives me a reason to stay a little longer, to exist in her space without asking for more than she's willing to give. And slowly—so slowly I'm not sure she notices it happening—Kaleen begins to relax around me.

It starts with small things. She stops tensing when I move too close. She asks me to reach something from a high shelf instead of struggling with a chair. She laughs at something I say—really laughs, not the polite amusement she's been offering—and the sound hits me like sunlight after winter.

"Tell him about the thalivern garden," she says one evening after dinner, settling back in her chair with the contentment of someone who's had a good meal and pleasant company. "He keeps pointing at them and making excited noises."

Braylon is indeed pointing at an illustration in one of the few books he owns, his face bright with curiosity. "Fly! Fly!"

I gather him onto my lap, feeling the solid weight of him against my chest. "Those are thalivern," I tell him, pointing at the colorful wings in the drawing. "They live in special gardens where everything smells like flowers and sunshine."

His eyes go wide with the wonder that only small children can manage. "Pretty!" He loves that word.

"Very pretty. There's a garden in Soimur where thousands of them live. The flowers are as tall as Papa, and when the thalivern fly, they look like rainbows dancing in the air."

I describe the ethereal gardens I helped design years ago, where colored light pools in crystal fountains and the very air shimmers with magic.

Where thalivern feed on nectar that glows like starlight, their wings catching and refracting the ethereal illumination until the whole garden seems to pulse with gentle radiance.

Braylon listens with rapt attention, occasionally interjecting with "Wow!" or "More!" when I pause. But it's Kaleen's reaction that captures most of my focus.

She's leaning forward slightly, her amber eyes bright with something that might be recognition.

Not memory, exactly, but something deeper—a response to beauty that bypasses conscious thought and speaks directly to the soul.

It's the same expression she used to get when I described my work, back when we would lie in bed after making love and I would tell her about the projects I was designing.

"The flowers sing at sunset," I continue, watching her face. "Different notes depending on their color. Purple ones sound like bells, golden ones like flutes. When the wind blows through them, it's like listening to an entire orchestra made of light and petals."

Her breath catches slightly, so quietly I almost miss it. But I've spent months cataloguing every small shift in her expression, every tell that reveals what she's thinking. She likes this story. More than likes it—it resonates with something essential in her nature.

"Flowers!" Braylon announces, clapping his hands together. "Sing!"

"That's right, little one. They sing." I press a kiss to the top of his head, breathing in the sweet scent of his hair. "Maybe someday Papa will take you to see them."

The words slip out before I can stop them, heavier with implication than I intended. Kaleen's eyes meet mine over Braylon's head, and I see the question there—the careful hope she's trying not to let herself feel.

Someday. The word hangs between us like a bridge not quite built, like a promise not quite made. But for the first time since I found her again, it feels like a possibility rather than a dream.

The shift happens gradually, like morning light bleeding through the forest canopy. What began as careful visits becomes something more natural—the three of us moving together through the rhythms of daily life as if we've always been this way.

"There," Kaleen says, pointing toward a cluster of silver-barked trees deeper in the woods surrounding Veylowe. "Braylon loves the hollow tree. He pretends it's a cave."

We're walking the forest paths that wind behind her cottage, Braylon toddling

between us with the determined concentration only an eighteen-month-old can manage.

His small legs work overtime to keep up, but he refuses any offer to be carried—too fascinated by every fallen branch and interesting rock to slow down.

The woods here are different from the ethereal groves near Soimur.

Wilder, older, with moss-thick trunks that seem to hold centuries of secrets.

Shafts of afternoon sunlight filter through the canopy in golden columns, illuminating dancing motes of pollen and the occasional flash of a lunox darting between the undergrowth.

"Cave!" Braylon shouts when he spots the hollow tree, his whole body vibrating with excitement. He makes a beeline for it, his unsteady gait making me want to hover protectively behind him. But Kaleen catches my arm with gentle fingers.

"He's fine," she says, and her touch sends warmth racing up my arm. "He's done this a dozen times."

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I force myself to stay put, watching as our son disappears into the hollow with delighted giggles echoing back to us. The sound makes something deep in my chest unclench—he's happy here, safe and loved and free to explore his world without fear.

"How did you find this place?" I ask, settling beside her on a fallen log that makes a natural bench.

"Wandering, mostly." Her voice carries that distant quality it gets when she skirts too close to the edges of her missing memories. "The first few weeks after... after I got here, I couldn't sleep much. I'd walk the woods at night until I was tired enough to rest without dreams."

Without dreams of me, she doesn't say, but I hear it anyway. I wonder if she knows how often I ended those same months staring at the ceiling of our bedroom in Soimur, wings spread across the space where she should have been, counting the hours until I could resume searching.

Braylon emerges from the hollow with a triumphant "Papa! Mama! Look!" clutching what appears to be a perfectly ordinary stone but holds it like he's discovered treasure.

"Very nice, little one," I tell him seriously, because his finds are always worth celebrating. "Is it smooth?"

He nods vigorously and toddles over to press it into my palm for inspection. The stone is indeed smooth, worn by countless seasons of rain and wind until it fits perfectly against my thumb. "This is a good one," I pronounce. "Very smooth

indeed."

Kaleen laughs—real laughter, bright and unguarded—and the sound hits me with the force of recognition so strong it's almost physical pain.

That laugh. I've heard it echo through our kitchen in Soimur, seen it light up her face when she found me cursing at a particularly stubborn ward matrix, felt it vibrate against my chest when she'd curl against me after we'd made love.

"He has quite the collection now," she says, watching Braylon examine his stone with scientific intensity. "Smooth ones, speckled ones, ones with interesting shapes. He lines them up by his bed every night before sleep."

The domestic detail catches me off-guard with its sweetness. Our son, methodically arranging his treasures like a tiny curator building his own museum of wonder.

"Like his father," I murmur without thinking, remembering my own childhood obsession with collecting runestones and crystal fragments.

Kaleen glances at me with raised eyebrows. "Was that what you collected as a child?"

"Stones with magical properties. My mother despaired of my room—every surface covered with rocks I was convinced held some secret power." I smile at the memory. "Most of them were just pretty quartz, but I found a few genuine pieces. Drove my tutors crazy trying to classify them properly."

"And did they? Hold secret power?"

"Some did. Not much, but enough to make the searching worthwhile." I watch Braylon toddle toward another interesting specimen. "The tiniest spark of magic can be significant if you know how to recognize it."

Something in my tone makes her study my face more carefully. "You're not talking about stones anymore."

I'm not. I'm talking about moments like this, when she forgets to maintain her careful distance and lets me see glimpses of who she really is underneath the cautious stranger she's become.

The way she tilts her head when she's thinking.

How she unconsciously mirrors Braylon's expressions of concentration.

The grace in her movements even when she's just walking through the woods.

"No," I admit quietly. "I'm not."

Our eyes hold for a heartbeat longer than casual conversation warrants. Then Braylon needs help climbing over a fallen branch, and the moment passes into something easier—the shared task of guiding our child through his exploration.

Later, back at the cottage, we work together in the kitchen while Braylon plays with wooden blocks on the floor nearby.

Kaleen moves around me with unconscious familiarity now, reaching for spices when I'm chopping vegetables, handing me the pot I need before I ask for it.

It's choreography we learned in another life, muscle memory that survived when conscious memory failed.

"Mind the brimbark," she says, nudging my elbow gently when I get too enthusiastic with my knife work. "Unless you like your stew with splinters."

"I've cooked before," I protest mildly, but I adjust my technique. The truth is, I rarely cooked in Soimur—we had servants for such things, and my focus was always on my work. But here, in this small kitchen with its simple tools and worn counters, cooking feels like meditation. Like coming home.

She hums under her breath as she tends the fire, something wordless and probably unconscious. It's another memory that hits me sideways—she used to do that while working in our garden, completely absorbed in her tasks and unaware of the small music she made.

"Mama sing!" Braylon announces from the floor, looking up from his blocks with bright expectation.

"Was I singing?" Kaleen asks, pausing with her wooden spoon halfway to her mouth for tasting.

"Humming," I correct gently. "You do it when you're content."

She blinks at me with surprise, as if she's just discovered something about herself she hadn't known. "I do?"

"Always have," I say, then catch myself before I can elaborate.

Before I can tell her about Saturday mornings in our kitchen when she'd make tea and hum while planning her day, or how that sound was often the first thing I'd hear when waking—Kaleen in the garden below our bedroom, already dressed and tending to new growth while the rest of the world still slept.

But instead of the wariness I expect, she just nods thoughtfully. "I'll have to pay attention to that."

After dinner, we sit in the front room while Braylon plays at our feet, building towers with his blocks only to knock them down with delighted shrieks. The fire crackles softly in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the walls and warming the cottage against the evening chill.

Kaleen has claimed the worn armchair that clearly belongs to her, but she's pulled it closer to where I sit on the small sofa.

Close enough that when she extends her feet toward the fire, her ankle nearly brushes my leg.

She's relaxed in a way I haven't seen before—shoulders loose, guard completely down, that faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

She's beautiful like this. Not the ethereal, untouchable beauty that first caught my attention in Soimur, but something warmer and more immediate.

The golden firelight catches the amber flecks in her eyes and turns her skin to honey.

Her hair has escaped its braid in soft wisps that frame her face, and when she laughs at Braylon's architectural efforts, her whole face transforms.

This is what I've been fighting to get back to—not just her presence, but this ease between us. This simple pleasure in each other's company without agenda or expectation. The comfortable silence punctuated by our son's happy babbling and the quiet sounds of a home at peace.

"Tower!" Braylon declares, pointing at his latest creation with obvious pride.

"Very tall," Kaleen agrees solemnly. "The tallest yet."

He beams at the praise, then immediately sets about knocking it down again.

The crash of blocks makes him giggle with pure joy, and watching him, I feel something I haven't experienced in two years—complete, uncomplicated happiness.

My family, together in our own small bubble of warmth and light. Everything else can wait.

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KALEEN

The days blur together in the most wonderful way, each one bleeding seamlessly into the next until I can't remember what evenings felt like before Domiel filled them.

My cottage has never felt so alive—Braylon's delighted shrieks echoing off the walls as his father teaches him to stack blocks in impossible configurations, the low rumble of Domiel's voice explaining things with the same patience whether he's addressing our eighteen-month-old or me.

"Papa, look!" Braylon toddles over with his arms full of his precious stone collection, dumping them at Domiel's feet like an offering. "Pretty!"

"Very pretty," Domiel agrees, settling cross-legged on the floor with fluid grace that makes his wings adjust automatically for balance. He examines each stone with the same serious attention he'd give to precious gems. "This one has gold flecks. And this one—feel how smooth it is."

Watching them together does something to me that I can't quite name.

Braylon chatters away in that half-language only he understands, pointing and babbling while Domiel responds as if every word makes perfect sense.

There's something so natural about the way they fit together—the careful way Domiel modulates his voice for small ears, how he anticipates when Braylon needs help before our son even realizes it himself.

"Da-da-da-ba-pa!" Braylon announces, patting Domiel's knee emphatically.

"Is that so?" Domiel's mouth twitches with suppressed laughter. "That sounds very important."

I find myself studying them from across the room, memorizing the sight of father and son absorbed in each other's company.

There's something warming in my chest that I didn't even realize had gone cold—like a hearth fire being rekindled after years of ash.

This is what family looks like, I think.

This easy companionship, this unquestioned belonging.

Domiel never pushes. That's what amazes me most about these weeks we've been spending together.

He simply... exists in my space, filling it with his quiet presence without demanding anything in return.

When I'm overwhelmed by something I can't remember, he doesn't press for details.

When Braylon gets cranky before naptime, Domiel simply lifts him and walks the cottage in slow circles until our son's breathing evens out against his shoulder.

He seems to know exactly when to step closer and when to give me room to breathe.

Like tonight, when I'm struggling with the heavy pot over the fire and he appears behind me without a word, his hands covering mine on the handle to help me lift it safely.

His chest brushes against my back for just a moment—warm and solid—before he steps away again.

"Careful," he murmurs, close enough that his breath stirs the escaped wisps of my hair. "It's heavier than it looks."

These little touches happen more frequently now.

His fingers brushing mine when we pass dishes at dinner, the weight of his palm settling briefly at the small of my back when I reach for something on a high shelf.

Each contact sends something like lightning crackling through me—unfamiliar and yet so absolutely right that it makes me wonder if my body remembers things my mind has forgotten.

Sometimes I catch myself leaning into those touches before I can stop myself.

Or lingering when his hand covers mine for just a heartbeat longer than necessary.

There's something building between us, some tension that isn't quite tension—more like the feeling of storm clouds gathering on a clear day, electricity in the air that promises rain.

"Was I always like this?" I ask one evening after Braylon has finally surrendered to sleep. We're sitting by the hearth, the fire crackling softly between us while outside the wind picks up. "Before... before I lost everything. Was I always so..."

I trail off, not sure how to finish. Cautious? Careful? Afraid of wanting too much?

Domiel considers the question with the thoughtfulness he brings to everything.

The firelight turns his hair to burnished gold and makes his eyes look almost silver.

"You were brave," he says finally. "Braver than you thought you were.

Strong enough to challenge me when I was being an ass, gentle enough to see beauty in broken things. "

"Broken things?"

His mouth curves in something that's not quite a smile. "Me, mostly."

I study his face, searching for some hint of what that means.

But Domiel has always been careful with his words around me, never saying more than he thinks I'm ready to hear.

It's maddening sometimes, this sense that there are entire conversations happening just beneath the surface of what we actually say to each other.

"It hurts," I admit quietly, surprised by my own honesty. "Not remembering. Feeling like there's this whole other person who lived in my body and made choices I can't access. Like I'm a stranger wearing someone else's life."

The admission hangs between us, heavier than I intended. I expect him to offer platitudes or try to fix it somehow—that seems like the kind of man he is, someone who solves problems with methodical precision.

Instead, he just looks at me with those impossibly bright silver-blue eyes, and something in his expression softens. "Maybe we can make new ones," he says simply.

The words hit me like a physical thing. Not a promise to help me recover what's lost,

not false reassurance that my memories will return someday. Just... the possibility of beginning again. Of building something fresh from where we are right now.

"New memories?" I whisper.

"New everything, if that's what you want."

There's something in his voice—not quite hope, but not resignation either. Like he's offering me a choice without expecting any particular answer. Like whatever I decide will be enough for him, even if it's not what he's hoping for.

The fire pops and settles, sending sparks dancing up the chimney. Outside, the wind rattles the windows with October's promise of winter coming. But here in this small circle of warmth, with Domiel's patient presence filling the space across from me, everything feels possible.

I find myself leaning forward before I'm conscious of the decision. The space between us suddenly feels charged, like the air before lightning strikes. His eyes widen slightly as I close the distance, one hand bracing against his knee for balance.

"Kaleen," he breathes, my name a question and a prayer all at once. Just like he always does, and I've grown to love hearing the way he says my name.

I answer by pressing my lips to his.

The kiss is soft at first, tentative—me testing this new territory, seeing how it feels to take what I want instead of waiting for it to be offered. We've kissed before but never because I started it.

But the moment our mouths meet, something ignites. His lips are warm and taste faintly of the meadowmint tea we shared after dinner, and when he responds to my

kiss with careful hunger, my entire body comes alive.

His hand comes up to cup my jaw, thumb stroking across my cheekbone with reverent gentleness.

There's something almost worshipful in the touch, like he's afraid I might disappear if he's not careful enough.

But I don't want careful anymore. I want this fire that's building in my chest, this rightness that goes deeper than memory.

I thread my fingers through his hair—softer than I expected, thick and warm—and feel him shudder against my mouth.

The small sound he makes sends heat spiraling through me, and I realize this is what I've been missing.

Not just touch, but this particular touch.

This man, this mouth, this chemistry that feels like coming home to something I never knew I'd lost.

And I'm done holding back.

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KALEEN

When I break away from the kiss, we're both breathing hard. Domiel's silver-blue eyes are dark with want, his pupils blown wide in the firelight. The careful control he always maintains has cracked, revealing something raw and hungry underneath.

"Kaleen," he whispers, and there's a tremor in his voice that makes my pulse race.

I don't want to think anymore. Don't want to hold myself at arm's length from the only thing that's felt real since I woke up in this village with no past. My hands frame his face, feeling the slight roughness of stubble beneath my palms, the heat of his skin.

"I'm tired of being careful," I tell him, surprised by how steady my own voice sounds when everything inside me feels like it's vibrating. "Tired of pretending I don't want this."

His breath catches. Those long lashes flutter as his eyes search my face, looking for any hint of uncertainty. But there isn't any. For the first time since I lost my memories, I know exactly what I want.

I shift forward, rising up onto my knees, and before he can say anything else, I'm settling into his lap.

His hands immediately come up to steady me at my waist, fingers splaying wide across my ribs.

The touch sends heat spiraling through me, my body responding with an intensity that should probably frighten me but only makes me want more.

"What are you—" he starts, but I silence him with another kiss, deeper this time. I can feel the careful leash on his control starting to fray as I press closer, my breasts flattening against his chest.

His wings rustle behind him, the sound oddly intimate in the quiet cottage.

I've always been fascinated by them—the way they shift and adjust with his emotions, how they spread wide when he's playing with Braylon or fold tight against his back when he's concentrating.

Now they're trembling slightly, betraying the effect I'm having on him.

My hands slide up to tangle in his hair again, that dark gold silk slipping between my fingers.

When I graze my nails lightly against his scalp, he makes a low sound in his throat that vibrates against my mouth.

The noise does something to me, awakening some primal satisfaction at having drawn that response from him.

I trail my fingers down to the nape of his neck, finding the sensitive spot where his hairline meets skin.

He shudders when I stroke there, his grip on my waist tightening.

But when my hands drift lower, following the strong line of his shoulders to where his wings attach to his back, the reaction is immediate and intense.

The moment my fingertips brush against the base of his wings, he jerks like I've touched him with lightning. A groan tears from his throat—deep and helpless and so familiar it makes my chest ache with recognition I can't quite grasp.

"Fuck," he gasps, and his hands move to capture my wrists. Not roughly, but firmly enough to stop my exploration. "Kaleen, what are you doing?"

The question comes out strained, like he's fighting for control of his own voice. His pupils are so dilated now that only a thin ring of silver-blue remains, and I can feel the tremor in his hands where they circle my wrists.

I hold his gaze, letting him see the certainty in my eyes. "I'm tired of holding back," I tell him again, and this time I lean forward until my lips brush against the shell of his ear. "I want you, Domiel. I want this."

The confession seems to hit him like a physical blow. His breathing becomes ragged, and I can feel the rapid beat of his heart against my chest. For a moment, neither of us moves. The air between us crackles with tension so thick I can almost taste it.

"Are you sure?" The words come out rough, like they're being dragged from somewhere deep in his chest. His hands slide from my wrists to cup my face, thumbs stroking across my cheekbones with infinite tenderness. "I need you to be sure, because if we do this..."

He doesn't finish the sentence, but I can hear the weight of everything he's not saying. This changes things. This makes whatever's building between us real and undeniable.

I lean into his touch, turning my head to press a kiss to his palm. The gesture is answer enough, but I give him the words anyway because he needs to hear them.

"I haven't been more sure of anything in so long," I whisper against his skin.

Something fundamental shifts in his expression at my words. The last of his restraint crumbles, replaced by something fierce and possessive that makes my breath catch. Without breaking eye contact, he rises smoothly to his feet with me still in his arms, as if I weigh nothing at all.

My hands instinctively grip his shoulders for balance, marveling at the easy strength in his lean frame.

He carries me toward my bedroom, his wings folding tight against his back to avoid brushing the doorframe.

The cottage suddenly feels too small, too quiet except for the sound of our breathing and the soft whisper of his feet on the wooden floor.

He sets me down beside my bed with infinite care, his hands lingering at my waist as if he's reluctant to let go. The firelight from the main room barely reaches here, leaving us in shadows that somehow make everything feel more intimate, more private.

He lifts his hand, and I watch as magic weaves between his fingers. It fills the doorway, and for some reason, I like watching the power that ebbs from him.

"It keeps the sound in this room. Now," he murmurs, his voice rough with want. "Let me see you." His fingers find the hem of my tunic, but he doesn't move to lift it. Instead, he waits, giving me one last chance to change my mind.

I answer by raising my arms above my head, and the simple gesture seems to unleash something in him.

He draws the fabric up and over my head with reverent slowness, his knuckles trailing fire across my skin.

When the tunic falls forgotten to the floor, his gaze travels over me like a physical touch.

"Beautiful," he breathes, and the awe in his voice makes heat pool low in my belly. "So fucking beautiful."

His hands map the curve of my shoulders, the line of my collarbone, the swell of my breasts. Each touch is deliberate, worshipful, like he's memorizing every inch of me. When his thumbs brush across my nipples through the thin fabric of my bra, I arch into the touch with a soft gasp.

"That's it," he murmurs against my throat, pressing hot kisses to the sensitive skin there. "Let me hear you."

He removes the rest of my clothing with the same maddening care, his mouth following the path of his hands.

Each newly exposed piece of skin receives attention—a kiss to the inside of my wrist, teeth grazing the curve of my hip, his tongue tracing the line of my ribs.

By the time I'm completely bare before him, I'm trembling with need.

"Look at you," he says, stepping back just enough to take me in. His silver-blue eyes are molten with desire. "Perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect."

The praise sends liquid heat rushing through my veins. I reach for him, needing to touch him the way he's been touching me, but he catches my hands gently.

"Not yet," he says, guiding me back until my legs hit the edge of the bed. "Let me worship you first."

He eases me down onto the soft mattress, his hands sliding up my thighs as he settles between them. The first touch of his mouth against my most sensitive skin tears a cry from my throat. He groans in response, the vibration sending shockwaves through me.

"So sweet," he murmurs against me. "Better than I remembered. Better than my dreams."

His words barely register through the haze of sensation as he works me with lips and tongue and teeth.

He seems to know exactly how to touch me, where to focus his attention, building the pressure inside me with maddening precision.

When I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, he makes that low, hungry sound again.

"Please," I gasp, my hips lifting of their own accord. "Domiel, please?—"

"What do you need?" he asks, lifting his head just enough to meet my eyes. His lips are slick, his breathing ragged. "Tell me what you want."

"You," I say without hesitation. "I need you inside me. Please, I can't—I need?—"

He rises over me then, finally beginning to shed his own clothes. I watch through heavy-lidded eyes as he reveals the lean muscle of his chest, the defined lines of his abdomen, the impressive length of him that makes my mouth go dry with anticipation.

When he settles between my thighs again, the head of him pressing against my entrance, we both freeze. The moment feels suspended, heavy with significance.

"You're sure?" he asks one more time, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

Instead of answering with words, I lift my hips, taking just the tip of him inside. We both groan at the contact, and his control finally snaps.

"Fuck, Kaleen," he gasps as he slides into me inch by slow inch. "You feel incredible. So tight, so perfect. Made for me."

The stretch is exquisite, filling an emptiness I hadn't even realized I carried. When he's fully seated inside me, we both go still, breathing hard. His forehead drops to mine, silver-blue eyes locked with mine in the dim light.

"Move," I whisper, and he obeys.

The rhythm he sets is slow and deep, each thrust deliberate and controlled. But as the pleasure builds, as my soft cries fill the air between us, that control begins to fray.

"That's it, beautiful," he growls against my ear. "Take everything I give you. You're so good, so fucking good for me."

His praise unravels me completely. I cling to his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as he drives into me with increasing urgency. The coil of tension in my core winds tighter and tighter until I'm sobbing with need.

"Come for me," he commands, his voice rough and breathless. "Let go, Kaleen. I want to feel you fall apart."

The words push me over the edge. My release crashes through me like a wave, stealing my breath and making me cry out his name. He follows moments later, his own climax tearing a hoarse shout from his throat as he buries himself deep inside

me.

We collapse together, both of us breathing hard and trembling. His arms wrap around me, pulling me close as aftershocks ripple through us both.

I'm not sure I've ever felt better.

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KALEEN

We lie tangled together in the aftermath, our breathing slowly returning to normal.

The blankets are twisted around us, creating a warm cocoon that feels separate from the rest of the world.

Domiel's arms encircle me, one hand tracing lazy patterns across my bare shoulder while the other rests at the small of my back.

The firelight from the main room casts shifting shadows on the bedroom walls, and I can hear the soft whistle of wind outside. But here, wrapped in his warmth with his heartbeat steady beneath my ear, everything feels perfectly still.

"Domiel," I whisper, just to feel his name on my lips. It comes out soft and content, a sound of pure satisfaction.

His response is immediate—a gentle kiss pressed to the crown of my head, his lips lingering in my hair. The gesture is so tender it makes my chest tighten with emotion I can't quite name.

I shift slightly, tilting my head up to look at him.

In the dim light, his features are all sharp angles and gentle curves.

His silver-blue eyes are soft now, the fierce hunger from before replaced by something warmer, deeper.

The careful mask he usually wears has been completely abandoned, leaving him open and vulnerable in a way that steals my breath.

"Can you tell me about us?" The words come out quieter than I intended, but he hears them clearly enough. "Before, I mean. About who we were together."

Something flickers across his expression—surprise, maybe, or uncertainty. His hand stills against my skin.

"Kaleen—"

"I wasn't ready before," I say quickly, meeting his gaze steadily. I know I've shied away from when he mentions things and he's been careful. But I am so godsdamned tired of careful. "But I am now. I want to know everything."

For a long moment, he just looks at me, those perceptive eyes searching my face like he's trying to read something written there. Then he takes a breath, and I feel the subtle shift as he makes his decision.

"You used to work for a stoneweaving syndicate," he begins, his voice low and careful.

"You were working under an indentured contract, sorting magical materials for one of my projects.

The first time I saw you, you were delivering to my house, sorting the pieces with such expertise I was stunned.

But not as much as I was by your beauty. "

His fingers resume their gentle movement across my shoulder, and I wonder if he

even realizes he's doing it.

"You looked up when I approached you, and I swear the world stopped moving.

" A hint of wonder creeps into his tone, like he's still amazed by the memory.

"You didn't bow or avert your eyes the way most humans did around xaphan.

You just looked at me like you were trying to figure out whether I was worth your time. "

Something deep in my chest responds to his words—not a memory exactly, but an echo of feeling. Like hearing a song I'd forgotten I once knew.

"I started to request you to deliver my items. And over time, you grew even bolder.

I'd always watch you when you came in, unable to take my eyes off you, and one day, you asked me why I was staring," he continues, and there's the ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"No one had ever called me on that before.

Most people were too intimidated or too polite. "

"What did you say?"

"That I was wondering if you'd noticed the stone you were handling was starting to resonate.

" His thumb traces along my collarbone. "You looked down at it, then back at me, and said 'I know exactly what this stone is doing.

The question is whether you trust me enough to let me finish sorting it before it destabilizes your whole shipment. "

The pride in his voice makes something warm unfurl in my chest. Even without remembering, I can picture the scene—can almost feel the defiance that must have driven me to speak that way to someone so clearly above my station.

"So I had you start coming every week. Most of the time, I didn't even need what I was ordering, but I didn't know how else to see you."

His hand slides up to cup my cheek, thumb brushing across my skin with infinite tenderness.

"We talked during those visits. About everything and nothing. You challenged every assumption I'd ever made about the world, about myself. Made me laugh when I'd forgotten I could. You were brilliant and stubborn and so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at you sometimes."

The ache in his voice tells me there's more to this story, something painful he's building toward. I wait, giving him the space to continue at his own pace.

"Your contract had three years left on it," he says finally. "I couldn't stand the thought of you bound to that life, treated like property. So I bought out the remainder and had the papers drawn up for your freedom."

My breath catches. "You freed me?"

"I gave you the contract itself. Your freedom, legally documented. No conditions, no expectations." His eyes search mine. "I told you that you could go anywhere you wanted, do anything you chose. Be free."

"But I stayed," I say, somehow knowing it's true even before he nods.

"You stayed." His voice drops to barely above a whisper. "Not because you had to, but because you wanted to. Because we'd already started falling for each other, even if neither of us had said it out loud yet."

The emotions he's describing hit me like physical blows—recognition without true memory, feelings that resonate somewhere deep in my bones. I can feel the truth of it even if I can't grasp the actual experiences.

"How long were we together?"

"Two years before you went to Kaerion." Pain flashes across his features. "Two years of the best life I'd ever known. You moved into my estate officially as my household manager, but really you were so much more. My partner in everything. The other half of my soul."

His admission hangs between us, heavy with longing and loss. I can see the cost of those two years of searching in the lines around his eyes, the careful way he holds himself even now like he's afraid I might disappear again.

"Tell me about falling in love," I whisper.

This time his smile is real, transforming his entire face.

"It happened slowly, then all at once. You'd bring me tea while I worked late, and somehow those few minutes became the best part of my day.

You'd argue with me about my designs, push me to be better, remind me that beauty without function was just vanity. "

His fingers tangle in my hair, the gesture achingly familiar despite my lack of memory.

"The first time you fell asleep reading in my study, curled up in the chair by the fire, I knew I was lost. I think I knew the first day I met you, actually, but that was when I finally admitted it.

I watched you sleep for an hour, just cataloging the way the light fell across your face, the sound of your breathing.

When you woke up and caught me staring, you didn't seem embarrassed.

You just smiled and asked if I'd figured out whatever I was working on. "

"When did you know you loved me?"

The question comes out barely audible, but his response is immediate and unwavering.

"The moment I saw you. And I never stopped."

The simple certainty in his voice breaks something open inside me. I feel tears prick at my eyes, overwhelmed by the weight of a love I can't remember but can somehow feel echoing through every cell of my body.

"Did I love you?" The words come out small and uncertain, like I'm afraid of the answer.

He swallows hard, his throat working visibly. When he speaks, his voice is rough with emotion.

"Yes. Very much."

I lift myself up on my elbow, looking down at him in the dim light. His silver-blue eyes are bright with unshed tears, his expression vulnerable in a way that makes my heart clench.

And I feel it. I feel everything he says, even if I can't remember it. I feel that our souls are intertwined and he was meant for me. I feel he was the one I was looking for this whole time.

Tonight, I'm feeling brave. I suppose I'm feeling like myself. And I decide not to hold back.

"I might not remember everything," I tell him, my voice steady despite the emotion threatening to overwhelm me. "I might not remember the woman who fell in love with you before. But we did make new memories. And I've fallen in love with you again."

Emotion flares in his eyes, so intense it takes my breath away. He looks like he's barely breathing, like my words have stolen the air from his lungs.

Leaning down, I bring my lips close to his ear, letting my breath ghost across his skin.

"I love you," I whisper against his ear, and then I'm kissing him. Soft and gentle at first, then deeper as he responds with desperate hunger.

His arms come around me, pulling me tight against him like I'm everything he's ever wanted, everything he's ever needed. And maybe to him, I am.

When we break apart, his hands frame my face, thumbs brushing away tears I hadn't

realized were falling.

"I love you too," he breathes. "More than I have words for. More than I thought possible."

And I feel that, too. Deep into my soul.

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DOMIEL

Three mornings later, I wake to the soft sound of Kaleen shifting beside me. Dawn light filters through the small window, painting everything in pale gold. She's been quiet these past few days, thoughtful in a way that makes me wonder what's turning over in her mind.

I'm content to lie here watching her, memorizing the way the light catches in her chestnut hair and the peaceful curve of her lips. These stolen moments feel precious, fragile things I want to preserve forever.

Then she turns toward me, those warm amber eyes already alert and focused. There's something different in her expression this morning—a clarity that wasn't there before.

"Domiel," she says, her voice soft but certain. "Did we have a home together? Before?"

The question catches me off guard, though I suppose I should have expected it eventually. "Yes. We did."

She's quiet for a long moment, her fingers tracing absent patterns on the blanket between us. I can practically see the thoughts moving behind her eyes.

"I think..." she begins, then stops. Takes a breath and starts again. "I think I want to go back there. To our home."

Something fierce and bright flares in my chest—hope mixed with desperate relief.

But I force myself to stay calm, to make sure this is truly what she wants.

"Are you certain?" I ask carefully. "Kaleen, you don't have to?—"

"I'm sure." Her interruption is gentle but firm. "I never felt at home here, Domiel. Not really. It's been better since you came, so much better, but I think this place was only ever meant to be temporary."

The conviction in her voice makes my heart race. She's not just saying what she thinks I want to hear—I can see the truth of it written across her features.

"The cottage, the village, even the people here... they've been kind to me, but they never felt like mine. Does that make sense?"

"It does." My voice comes out rougher than intended. "Perfect sense."

She smiles then, bright and beautiful, and I have to kiss her. Just once, soft and quick, because the alternative is crushing her against me and never letting go.

When I pull back, she's still smiling. "How long will it take to get there?"

"A few days by carriage. Maybe a week if we take it slow."

"Then we should start preparing." There's excitement in her voice now, eagerness that makes her whole face light up. "I want to see our home."

Our home. The words hit me like a physical blow, sweet and devastating all at once.

I leave for the nearest trading city that morning, taking one of the village zarryn to make the journey faster.

The creature is as temperamental as its breed is known for, snorting and tossing its silver-maned head every time I adjust the reins.

But it's quick, and I need speed more than comfort right now.

The city is a bustling trade hub perched where three mountain roads converge. I find what I need at a transportation yard on the outskirts—a sturdy travel carriage with reinforced wheels and weather-resistant panels, plus a pair of zarryn bred for long-distance hauling.

The beasts are magnificent creatures, their silver coats gleaming in the afternoon sun and their dual tails switching with barely contained energy. The handler warns me they're moody, but they're also the strongest and fastest he has available.

"They'll get you where you need to go," he says, pocketing the handful of nodals I've given him. "Just don't expect them to be happy about it."

The negotiations take most of the day, but by evening I'm heading back to Veylowe with our transportation secured. The zarryn follow behind, their harness bells chiming softly with each step.

I return to find Kaleen has already begun packing.

She moves through the small cottage with methodical efficiency, sorting through the few possessions she's accumulated during her time here.

Most of it stays behind—simple village clothes, worn household items, things that belong to this life she's ready to leave.

"I kept this," she says, holding up a small wooden toy horse that I recognize as Braylon's favorite. "And a few of his clothes that still fit."

Our son is sitting on the floor nearby, playing with blocks that Callen carved for him. He seems oblivious to the significance of the packing, focused entirely on building an elaborate tower that defies all architectural logic.

"Papa fly?" he asks suddenly, looking up at me with those distinctive pale silver eyes ringed in amber.

"Soon," I tell him, ruffling his dark hair with its telltale gold glints. "We're going to take a trip first."

He considers this gravely, then returns to his blocks. At eighteen months, Braylon accepts change with the easy adaptability of the very young. As long as Kaleen and I are with him, he's content.

That night, as we lie together in the narrow bed one last time, Kaleen traces the line of my jaw with gentle fingers.

"Are you happy?" she asks. "About leaving, I mean. Going back."

"More than happy," I murmur against her palm. "I've been waiting two years to take you both home."

Her smile in response is radiant, full of anticipation and something that looks remarkably like joy.

The morning of our departure dawns clear and bright.

The zarryn stamp impatiently as I secure the last of our things in the carriage, their breath forming silver clouds in the cool air.

The vehicle is well-appointed but practical—cushioned seats, storage compartments,

and heavy curtains to block wind and weather.

One by one, the villagers gather to say goodbye. Marnai comes first, her iron-gray braids neat despite the early hour. She embraces Kaleen with surprising warmth, whispering something I can't hear that makes Kaleen's eyes bright with unshed tears.

Tolle appears next, gruff and uncomfortable as always but carrying a small pouch of herbs "for the journey." He nods curtly at me, still clearly uncertain about my presence but no longer actively hostile.

Derri arrives with a leather-bound journal, pressing it into Kaleen's hands. "Stories," she says simply. "Ones I thought you might want to remember."

Even Jorren Thorne shows up, though he keeps his distance from me and focuses his attention entirely on Kaleen and Braylon.

The few words he speaks are kind but stiff, like a man fulfilling an obligation he's not entirely comfortable with.

Though I suppose for a little while, Kaleen and Braylon were a part of his family with how close his son was to them.

But it's Pez and Nomi who affect Braylon most. The siblings appear at the last minute, both looking unusually subdued. Braylon immediately abandons the wooden blocks he's been playing with and toddles toward them with outstretched arms.

"Up!" he demands, and Nomi obliges, lifting him easily despite her slight frame.

"You be good for your mama and papa," she tells him seriously, her usual knife-edge wariness softened into something almost tender. "And don't forget us, yeah?"

Pez reaches over to ruffle Braylon's hair, his gap-toothed grin more subdued than usual. "We'll miss you, little prince."

Braylon wraps his small arms around both of them in turn, babbling something that might be words of farewell or might just be happy sounds. When Nomi finally sets him down, he looks between the villagers with bright curiosity but no apparent distress.

I watch Kaleen as she makes her rounds, accepting hugs and well-wishes with genuine warmth.

But there's no hesitation in her movements, no backward looks filled with regret.

She moves through these farewells with the grace of someone completing a necessary ritual, not someone leaving her heart behind.

When Lake finally appears, walking slowly from the direction of his father's brewery, I tense despite myself. But Kaleen's greeting is friendly without being intimate—the kind of warmth she'd show any good friend.

"Take care of yourself," she tells him, and there's real affection in her voice. But it's the affection of fondness, not love. "Thank you for everything you've done for us."

He nods, his expression carefully neutral. "Safe travels, Kaleen. You too, little man," he adds, reaching down to touch Braylon's cheek gently.

The moment is bittersweet but not painful. Whatever complicated feelings might exist between them have been resolved, or at least set aside. Lake steps back with dignity intact, and I find myself respecting him for it.

Finally, it's time to go. I help Kaleen into the carriage, then lift Braylon up beside her.

He immediately presses his face to the window, fascinated by this new adventure.

As I take the reins and signal the zarryn forward, I glance back at Kaleen one more time.

She's looking out the window too, but her expression isn't one of loss or longing.

Instead, she looks eager, excited, like someone finally heading toward something they've been searching for without knowing it.

The wheels begin to turn, carrying us away from Veylowe and toward the life we built together once before—the life I'm desperate to rebuild with her now.

The familiar silhouette of my estate emerges from the mountain mist like something conjured from memory itself.

Carved from dark stone and nestled into the hillside, it rises in elegant terraces that follow the natural curve of the land.

Crystalline windows catch the afternoon light, throwing fractured rainbows across the weathered walls.

The zarryn sense home before we do, their pace quickening as we approach the wrought-iron gates. They swing open at my approach—the recognition wards still remember me after two years of absence. The sound of metal on stone echoes through the courtyard like a welcoming song.

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Kaleen sits forward, her amber eyes taking in every detail.

The fountain in the center courtyard still runs, its water dancing over carved runes that pulse with soft blue light.

The climbing vines I trained along the eastern wall have grown wild in my absence, their silver-edged leaves creating patterns I never planned but somehow love.

"It's beautiful," she breathes, and something tight in my chest finally loosens.

Braylon presses his face to the carriage window, babbling excitedly at the sight of so much space to explore. When I help them down from the carriage, he immediately totters toward the fountain, drawn by the musical splash of water.

But it's Kaleen who captures my attention.

She stands in the courtyard, turning slowly to take it all in.

Her expression isn't one of recognition—that flicker of remembrance I've been hoping for doesn't come.

Instead, there's something deeper. Peace.

Like she's finally found a place where she can breathe fully.

"Show me," she says simply, and I understand she means everything.

I lead them through the heavy doors into the main hall.

The space soars overhead, supported by stone arches that seem to grow from the walls themselves.

Tapestries in deep blues and silvers hang between tall windows, and the runic symbols I've carved into the doorframes still glow faintly—protective wards that have kept this place safe in my absence.

Kaleen moves through the halls like she's walking through a half-remembered dream. Her fingers trail along the stone walls, brushing over carvings I made years ago. She pauses at a window seat I built specifically for her, her head tilting as if she's listening to something I can't hear.

"This feels..." she starts, then stops, searching for words.

"Right?" I suggest.

She nods, that radiant smile spreading across her face. "Right."

The kitchen makes her laugh—a sound that fills every corner with warmth. The massive hearth dominates one wall, with iron hooks for hanging pots and shelves lined with preserved herbs. A long table sits in the center, scarred from years of use and marked with ring stains from countless mugs of tea.

"You cook?" she asks, amusement dancing in her eyes.

"Badly," I admit. "You always took pity on me and made sure I didn't starve. You loved to cook in here."

She runs her hands over the table's surface, and I watch her face for any sign of memory. Nothing comes, but she doesn't seem troubled by its absence.

Braylon explores with the fearless enthusiasm of a toddler, his small hands reaching for everything within grasp. I follow behind him, moving anything breakable to higher shelves and making mental notes of rooms that will need childproofing.

But it's when I lead them to the garden that Kaleen truly comes alive.

The space spreads out behind the house in carefully planned chaos—herb beds that flow into flower gardens, fruit trees heavy with late-season offerings, and stone paths that wind between raised planters.

Wild roses climb the garden walls, their blooms deep red against the gray stone.

A small grove of silver-leafed trees creates shade near the back wall, their branches hung with crystal chimes that sing softly in the mountain breeze.

Kaleen moves into the space like she's entering a sanctuary.

She touches everything—the velvet petals of aracin blossoms, the rough bark of the fruit trees, the smooth stones that edge the herb beds.

When she reaches the grove where we've made love under starlight more times than I can count, she stops and closes her eyes.

"This is my favorite place," she says with absolute certainty, though she can't possibly remember why.

"Mine too," I murmur, watching as she settles onto the stone bench I carved from a single piece of mountain granite.

Braylon toddles after a thalivern, its four iridescent wings catching the light as it dances between the flowers. His delighted squeals echo off the garden walls, a sound this place has been missing for too long.

That evening, I show Kaleen the room I've kept exactly as she left it.

Her clothes still hang in the wardrobe—silk dresses in jewel tones, practical work clothes, delicate undergarments that make my hands shake to touch.

The jewelry I've given her over the years lies carefully arranged in a wooden box on the dressing table: rings with protective sigils, a necklace of blue-fire stones, the gold cuff she wore to cover her indentured brand.

She examines each piece with wonder, holding a pair of silver earrings up to the light. "You kept everything."

"I couldn't bear to change anything. This place felt like a tomb without you."

She turns to face me fully, the earrings still dangling from her fingers. "Well, I'm here now. We both are."

The words hit me like absolution.

Later, after I've put Braylon to bed in the nursery I prepared for him years ago and never got to use, Kaleen and I sit before the great hearth in the main hall.

The fire crackles between us, throwing dancing shadows on the stone walls.

She's curled against my side, her head on my shoulder, like she's done it a thousand times before.

"Tell me about us," she says softly. "The things we did here."

So I tell her about the morning she got lost in the herb garden, insisting for hours that the paths had moved overnight and the whole place was haunted by mischievous spirits. How she finally emerged, twigs in her hair and dirt on her dress, completely

convinced she'd discovered some ancient magic.

"You made me walk every path with you to prove they hadn't changed," I say, stroking her chestnut hair. "Took us three hours to map the entire garden."

Braylon sits on the thick rug at our feet, playing with wooden blocks and listening with wide, fascinated eyes. He doesn't understand the words, but he seems to sense the importance of these stories, these pieces of a life that shaped who he is.

I tell her about the time she decided to reorganize my library and accidentally triggered a protection ward that turned all the books blue for a week.

About the winter evening we discovered we both sang horribly but danced beautifully, spinning around the main hall until we collapsed laughing on the stone floor.

With each story, she settles deeper against my side. Not with recognition, but with rightness. Like these tales are becoming hers again not through memory but through choice.

"I like who I was with you," she says eventually, her voice drowsy and content.

"You're still her," I murmur into her hair. "Just... different. Better, maybe."

She tilts her head to look at me, those amber eyes serious in the firelight. "How can I be better without my memories?"

"Because you chose this. Chose us. Before, you stayed because you had nowhere else to go. Even if you did love me, that was still part of it. Now you're here because it's where you want to be."

Her smile blooms slow and brilliant. "Then this is exactly where I'm meant to be."

Outside, the mountain wind whispers through the crystal chimes, and for the first time in two years, my home feels complete.

And I will never let it go again.