



Monster's Secret Baby

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I gave him my heart. He gave me a daughter to protect — even from him.

I never should have fallen for his charming smile and sweet words.

But some flames are impossible to resist.

Even though he could never be with me.

So I took the shattered pieces of my heart and disappeared.
Unknowingly with our daughter.

For five years we had peace. Safety. A good life.

Then he found us.

Now I see Adellum for who he is. Arrogant. Selfish. A liar.

To the world, hes nobility and grace. To me, hes worse than any demon.

At least demons are honest about their cruelty.

Now Im trapped between protecting my daughter and facing the man who broke me.

But he doesnt realize—the woman who once loved him is gone.

And this time, I wont burn alone.

Read on for: a second chance romance where he never stopped loving her until it corrupted him. They say that time makes the heart grow fonder. But for him, it made the obsession spiral. He will never let her go, and once he learns about his daughter nothing will keep him away again.

Total Pages (Source): 28

HARMONY

I wake to a thin strip of dawn pushing through the gap in my curtains, my hands already protesting before my feet touch the floor. Yesterday's pruning has left my knuckles stiff, fingertips raw from wrestling with the thorned shrubs along the western wall. No matter. These hands have known worse.

My cottage sits at the farthest edge of Lord Arkan's estate—a stone afterthought nestled against the boundary wall, almost forgotten but perfect for me. One room with a hearth, a table barely big enough for two, a narrow bed tucked beneath the window, and shelves crammed with jars of dried herbs and seeds I've collected. The walls hold the night's chill, but I don't mind. I've learned to treasure the cold—it means shelter, something solid between me and the sky.

I splash water on my face from the basin, the shock of it chasing away the last cobwebs of sleep. My reflection catches in the small mirror above—hazel-green eyes blinking back at me, framed by unruly curls I quickly twist and tuck beneath a faded green scarf.

"Another day, another chance," I murmur to myself, an old habit from commune days when encouragement never came from outside.

The kettle whistles softly on the hearth. I pour hot water over dried meadowmint leaves, inhaling the sweet steam while I dress in my worn work tunic and linen pants, soft leather boots laced tight. The tea warms my insides as I stand in my doorway,

watching the mist curl around the gardens beyond.

I lock my door—not that anyone would venture this far to steal my meager possessions, but old habits die hard—and tuck the key beneath my collar, where it rests cool against my skin, near the small birthmark behind my right ear.

The estate sleeps still as I make my way along the gravel path, passing beneath arches heavy with morning dew. Dawn paints everything in gentle blues and silvers, my favorite time when the gardens belong only to me. No lords or ladies, no servants rushing about—just me and the growing things.

I retrieve my tools from the shed, filling my apron pockets with twine and small pruning shears. The larger gardens near the main house can wait. First, the kitchen herb garden needs my attention.

"Good morning, little ones," I whisper, kneeling beside the dreelek bed, running my fingers through the bitter greens. "Did you miss me yesterday? Grew quite wild, didn't you?"

I work my way through each bed systematically—zynthra roots need thinning, the brimbark stalks want staking. As I tie the asparagus-like stalks to their supports, I hum a tune from childhood, one of the few pleasant memories I carried from the commune.

"You're looking thirsty today," I tell the quillnash as I fill my watering can at the pump. The vibrant vegetables seem to lean toward me as I approach. "There you go. Drink up. The cooks will want you crisp for tonight's dinner."

A thalivern—iridescent wings catching the strengthening light—lands on my wrist as I work. I pause, careful not to startle it.

"Hello, beautiful. Checking my work?" I smile as it flutters off to investigate the aracin blossoms I transplanted last week from the northern beds. "They're taking well, aren't they? I told the head gardener they'd prefer morning light, but old Padrec thinks he knows better than the plants do."

My hands move with practiced efficiency, pulling weeds, collecting seed pods for drying, checking for pests or signs of blight. The sun climbs higher, warming my back as I work, my skin soaking in its touch like the plants around me.

"This is between us," I whisper to a struggling zynthra plant, carefully loosening the soil around its roots, "but I'm sneaking you some of my special compost mix tonight. Don't tell the others or they'll all want special treatment."

I stand, stretching my back, and survey my work. The herb garden looks orderly now, each plant given the space and care it needs. My little corner of control in a world that offers precious little of it. This patch of earth doesn't care about my orphan status or my common blood. Here, I'm judged only by what I nurture, what I help grow.

And what I've grown is mine in a way that transcends ownership. Lord Arkan may hold the deed to this land, but these plants know my touch, my voice. They respond to my care in ways they never would for him, no matter how many nodals change hands.

"Let's see what else needs tending today," I say to the garden at large, gathering my tools. "The roses were looking particularly dramatic yesterday. Probably demanding my attention by now."

I'm halfway through trellising the bluevine when the air changes. It's not a sound—not exactly—more like a disturbance in the garden's rhythm, the way prey animals go still before the predator appears.

My hands falter on the twine. I don't need to look up to know who approaches—my body recognizes him first, a traitorous awareness that starts in my spine and radiates outward.

"Keep working," I mutter to myself, focusing on the delicate blue flowers unfurling along the vine. "The plants don't care who's coming."

But my fingers have lost their earlier precision, fumbling with the knot as the distinctive clop of zarryn hooves grows louder on the gravel path. Two riders, by the sound. One will be Lord Arkan, returning from his morning ride, and the other?—

I can't help it. I look.

Two zarryn trot up the lane, their silver coats catching the mid-morning light. Lord Arkan sits straight-backed on the first, his wings neatly folded, immaculate as always. But it's the second rider who steals my attention.

Adellum.

He rides with casual confidence, one hand loosely holding the reins of his temperamental mount. The zarryn tosses its head, dual tails swishing irritably, but Adellum merely smiles—that half-smile that never fully commits, like he's sharing a private joke with himself. His massive soft gray wings shift slightly with the zarryn's movement, catching the light differently than Lord Arkan's dappled white ones.

Something tightens in my chest—a feeling too complicated to name.

I duck my head, returning to the bluevine with renewed focus, but my ears track their progress. They're nearly level with the kitchen garden now. I feel his gaze before I hear him speak.

"Arkan, your gardens are looking particularly vibrant this season," Adellum says, his voice carrying that musical quality all xaphan possess, but rougher around the edges. "Your gardener has quite the touch."

"Harmony's a treasure," Lord Arkan replies, and I keep my eyes firmly fixed on the plant before me. "Worth every lummi I pay her, which she reminds me of regularly."

They laugh, and I bite the inside of my cheek.

"Let's stable these beasts," Arkan continues. "I've had enough of Maelstrom's attitude for one morning. Your zarryn's a terrible influence on him."

"Cloudchaser reflects his rider," Adellum responds, that teasing lilt to his voice. "Besides, a little spirit keeps life interesting."

Their voices fade as they move toward the stables. I exhale, realizing I'd been holding my breath. Just as my shoulders begin to relax, a shadow falls across the bluevine.

"You've missed a spot."

I startle, nearly dropping my shears. Adellum stands not three feet away, arms crossed, studying the bluevine with exaggerated seriousness. His white-blond hair is tousled from the ride, falling in unruly wisps around his temples. Those silver eyes—unnervingly bright even in daylight—crinkle at the corners.

"I didn't miss anything," I say, trying to sound properly respectful. "I simply hadn't gotten to that section yet. Some of us work methodically."

"Methodically." He rolls the word around like he's tasting it. "Is that what you call avoiding looking at me?" He drops to a crouch beside me, close enough that I can smell him—like thunderstorms and cedar smoke. "I've been gone for nearly two

weeks, Harmony."

I risk meeting his gaze. "I noticed."

His full mouth quirks up at one corner. "Did you now? Here I thought you'd be too busy with your methodical gardening to count the days."

"Plants are excellent listeners. They never interrupt or make assumptions." I tie off another section of vine, ignoring the heat crawling up my neck. "Besides, Lord Arkan mentioned your absence at dinner last week."

"Ah." He reaches past me to touch a bluevine blossom, his bronze fingers gentle against the delicate petals. "And here I imagined you pining away, staring wistfully at the moon."

I snort before I can stop myself. "I'm afraid you've confused me with one of your admirers in the city. The ones who buy your paintings for obscene amounts of nodals."

"Obscene?" His grin widens. "I prefer to think of it as appropriate compensation for my genius."

"Your humility is truly your most attractive quality," I deadpan, but my lips twitch traitorously.

This is how it always is with Adellum—this easy banter that slips past my defenses. I remember the first time I saw him, over a year ago. I was helping in the kitchen, arms dusted to the elbows with flour, when Lord Arkan brought his guest through on an impromptu tour. Apparently, Adellum had just bought the neighboring estate. I'd tried to duck behind the pantry door, not wanting to be seen in such a state by Arkan's friend.

Instead, I'd crashed into a sack of flour, sending a white cloud exploding into the air. When the dust settled, Adellum was standing there, covered head to wing-tip in fine white powder, his silver eyes wide with surprise. Then he'd thrown his head back and laughed—a full, rich sound that transformed his sharp features into something almost boyish.

"I believe," he'd said once he could speak, "this is what the poets call a memorable first impression."

Now, watching him toy with the bluevine, I feel that same dizzy sensation I felt then—like the floor might not be where I left it.

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ADELLUM

I watch Arkan flick through ledgers that had been deposited while we were out, feigning interest as the conversation shifts to city politics. Sunlight slants through the study windows, catching the gold filigree on his desk. He's always been fond of displays—the polished marble floors, the commissioned art displayed just so.

"You're not listening, are you, Adellum?" Arkan chuckles, setting down his pen.

"Utterly captivated," I reply, straightening from where I've been leaning against a bookshelf. My wings adjust behind me, the gray feathers rustling against silk.

Arkan shakes his head. "I'm sure. I thought you'd at least want to know what you missed. Might inspire you."

"I have plenty of inspiration." My eyes drift to the window where I can see the only thing that ever acts as my muse. "I'd like to view your southeast garden before I leave. I hear the moonblossoms have started their seasonal shift."

Arkan's amber eyes glint with amusement. "Ah yes, the garden. Suddenly a dedicated horticulturist, are you?"

I don't dignify that with a response.

"Well, feel free to admire my... landscaping." He stands, smoothing his formal robes.

"Just remember what I've said about distracting my staff during working hours."

"I would never." The lie slides easily between us.

"Of course not." Arkan shifts through his documents. He knows of my interest in Harmony but luckily he doesn't mind—as long as I only steal her away during her off hours. "Some of us have meetings to attend. I trust you can see yourself out whenever you're... finished with the gardens."

I offer a shallow bow as he leaves, tension uncoiling from my shoulders the moment the door closes. These performances exhaust me—the carefully measured words, the false smiles, the weight of being Adellum Vey, the celebrated xaphan artist whose hands shape beauty while his life grows hollow.

Outside, I follow the stone path that winds toward the southeast gardens. The estate spreads in elegant terraces, a perfect example of New Solas' refined architecture—nothing out of place, nothing wild. Nothing like her.

I pause by a reflecting pool, letting my senses expand outward, searching. The gardens are sprawling, but I know where she'll be. I always know.

The late autumn air carries the scent of turned earth and crushed herbs as I round a hedge of precisely trimmed silverleaf. And there—there she is.

Harmony kneels in the soft dirt, basket beside her filled with clipped herbs, her hands moving with practiced efficiency among the plants. A smear of dark soil trails across one cheek like an artist's brushstroke. Her curls are bundled beneath a faded headscarf, though rebellious strands have escaped to frame her face. She hasn't seen me yet.

Something tight and hungry coils in my chest. A yearning so sharp it's almost painful.

I make no attempt to hide my presence, leaning against a pillar, wings settling behind me. My world is filled with polished things—bright lights, curated smiles, endless expectations—but Harmony is real. Wild in a way the grand city of New Solas could never polish away.

I wait, simply watching her work. The graceful movement of her hands, the little furrow that appears between her brows as she examines a damaged leaf. The way she hums under her breath, a melody that drifts and turns like something living.

She senses me before she sees me—her hands pause, her head tilting slightly. When she finally looks up, those hazel-green eyes find mine unerringly. Her lips curve into a smile she attempts to suppress.

"Lord Arkan must be terribly dull if you're out here watching someone pick herbs," she says, tugging a stubborn root from the soil.

"Terribly," I agree, pushing away from the pillar. I move toward her, slow and deliberate, giving her time to notice, to decide. "You've got dirt on your face."

"Do I?" Her hand rises to the wrong cheek. "Hazard of honest work. Something you wouldn't understand."

I kneel beside her, close enough that my wing brushes her arm. "Because I'm xaphan or because I'm an artist?"

"Both." Her eyes dance with mischief. "Winged creatures shouldn't get too close to the ground, and artists shouldn't understand anything practical."

I reach out, my thumb gently brushing across her cheek, removing the smudge. "Is that so?"

Her breath catches, just slightly. "That's what they say in the servants' quarters."

"And what do they say about gardeners who torment visiting dignitaries?"

Harmony's laugh is low, husky. "That we're trouble best avoided." Her eyes flick past me, checking for witnesses. "You shouldn't be here, Adellum. I'm working."

I lean closer, breathing in the scent of crushed herbs and sun-warmed skin. "When have I ever done what I should?"

Her lips press together, fighting a smile. "Never. That's the problem."

I watch her hands return to their task, the way her fingers move with such certainty. There's artistry in her work that few would recognize—the purposeful way she prunes each stem, how she knows precisely where to cut. I could watch her for hours, this quiet mastery so different from the loud, demanding art world I inhabit.

"You're staring again," she murmurs, not looking up.

"Yes." I make no attempt to deny it. Why pretend? I've spent a year's worth of stolen moments drinking in the sight of her, and it's never enough. I've never gotten my fill, never had enough taste, and I suspect I never will.

I've been quite obsessed with my little bird.

She glances up, and I feel that familiar pull—the dangerous current that draws me toward her. I know how I must look, my silver eyes fixed on her with an intensity that would frighten anyone else. But Harmony never flinches.

"Careful," she warns, voice soft. "Someone might see you looking at a human gardener like that."

I reach out, catching a curl that's escaped her scarf, twisting it around my finger.
"Like what?"

"Like you want to ruin me."

Heat floods through me at her words. She knows. Of course she knows. "Perhaps I do."

Harmony's pupils dilate, the gold flecks in her eyes catching the afternoon light.
"Xaphan lords don't ruin human gardeners. They elevate courtesans and marry well-connected daughters."

"I'm not a lord." I release her curl, fingers grazing the delicate skin of her neck.

"You might as well be." She turns back to her herbs, but her breathing has quickened.
"With your fancy parties and important friends. Half the nobility of New Solas clamoring for your art."

"Half the nobility can go fuck themselves."

That startles a laugh from her, bright and genuine. "You shouldn't say such things."

"Another thing I shouldn't do." I shift closer, wings curving around us, creating a private world amidst the public garden. "I've been away too long. Two whole weeks of patrons and collectors and sycophants. Not a single real conversation."

"Poor little rich artist," she teases, but her expression softens. "Trapped in glittering rooms with beautiful people who adore you."

"They don't know me." I brush my thumb across her lower lip, uncaring of who might see. "You do."

Her eyes darken. "Adellum?—"

"Meet me tonight." The words rush out before I can reconsider. "By the river, past the southern boundary. No one uses that path after dark."

She hesitates, glancing toward the main house. She doesn't know how little Arkan cares when I coax her down there, laying her out and taking her the way I'm always dying to. "I shouldn't."

She always says that. I swear Harmony is my moral compass, the only thing that reminds me that there are rules to our society—even if I don't follow them.

"But you will." I smile, knowing her—knowing us. "Sunset. I'll wait by the old willow, the one that dips into the water."

Harmony's cheeks flush, but she doesn't deny it. "I have duties, responsibilities?—"

"I'll wait all night if necessary." I lean forward, my lips a breath from her ear. "I've spent two weeks in rooms full of people, thinking only of you. Far too many nights in an empty bed, dreaming of your skin against mine."

Her breath catches. I know it means something to her for me to assure her—even if it's indirectly—that there is no one else even when I'm gone. And I like telling her she's mine. "You're impossible."

"Is that a yes?"

She meets my eyes, her own dancing with a mixture of exasperation and desire. "It's a 'you're going to get us both in trouble.'"

I grin, victorious. "That's not a no."

"It should be." She shoves at my chest, forcing space between us. "Go away. Some of us have actual work to complete before the day ends."

I rise to my feet, wings stretching before settling against my back. "Sunset," I remind her. "I'll bring wine."

"I hate wine," she lies, focusing intently on her herbs.

"Meadowmint tea, then."

The corners of her mouth twitch. "You're presuming I'll come."

"I'm hoping." I step back, reluctant to leave her even for a few hours. Because I know she'll be there. She's as drawn to me as I am to her, even if we play this little game.

"But either way, I'll be there. Waiting."

"Go create something beautiful," she says, finally looking up at me. "Instead of bothering hardworking people."

I start to walk away, then pause, looking back over my shoulder. "You already did that today," I say. "The bothering me part, not the creating beauty. Though you've done that too, just by existing."

Her laugh follows me as I stride away, wings lifting slightly with satisfaction. I know she'll come. We've established this ritual over months of careful meetings—this dance of resistance followed by surrender. There's honesty in it, a realness that's absent from every other corner of my life.

Tonight, by the river, I'll remember what it means to be alive rather than merely existing. With her.

ADELLUM

I leave Arkan's estate with reluctance, lingering at the wrought iron gates longer than necessary. My wings flex and stretch as I step onto the avenue leading back to the city center. New Solas spreads before me in terraced glory, white stone buildings climbing higher the closer they get to the city's heart. The spires pierce the sky like knives—elegant, deadly, reaching for something beyond their grasp.

Much like its inhabitants.

The walk home takes me through the Artisan Quarter, where galleries display works behind crystal windows. Several showcase my earlier pieces—the raw, honest ones created before fame polished away my edges. Before Sior decided which commissions I should accept, which noble houses deserved my attention, which parties would elevate my standing.

"Master Vey!" A shopkeeper calls, waving enthusiastically. "An honor to see you in the quarter!"

I offer a tight smile and nod but don't slow my pace. My thoughts remain tethered to a garden, to dirt-smudged hands, to eyes flecked with gold.

My building rises above the others on the avenue, its facade carved with intricate patterns that shimmer in afternoon light. The doorkeeper bows as I enter.

"Welcome home, sir. Master Vendrith arrived an hour ago. He's waiting in your studio."

Of course he is. Sior never wastes an opportunity to remind me of deadlines, obligations, expectations. I trudge up the spiral staircase, my wings dragging slightly against the smooth stone steps.

I pause outside my studio door, gathering the fragments of the mask I wear for Sior. The practiced smile, the focused ambition, the gratitude for his guidance. He helped me find a path after my parents passed, but I know he pushes me for a reason. He wants me to reach my potential, and I can't fault him for that.

My hand rests on the door handle. In the quiet moment before I enter, I allow myself to remember the scent of crushed herbs and warm skin.

Then I push the door open.

My studio, once my sanctuary, feels foreign now. Canvas after canvas stacks along the walls—commissions for noble houses, pieces promised for upcoming exhibitions, obligations to patrons. The space that once witnessed wild creation, nights of feverish inspiration, now feels stale. Suffocating.

Sior paces near the windows, his dark wings folded tightly against his back, a sign of his barely contained impatience. His olive skin looks sallow in the studio light, his black hair slicked back so severely it seems painted onto his skull.

"Finally." He stops pacing, his thin lips pressed into something approximating a smile. He's not affectionate, but he's the closest thing to family I have. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten where you lived."

"I was with Arkan." I move to the basin in the corner, washing paint from under my

nails—remnants from yesterday's work. "Discussing the winter exhibition."

"And what did he say?" Sior's eyes narrow, calculating behind the veneer of casualness.

I shrug. "The usual. He'll host. He'll invite his connections."

"Good, good." Sior picks up a half-finished canvas—a commission for some minor noble's summer residence—studying it with clinical detachment. "Did you see the invitation I left on your desk? The Praexa Morvant is hosting a solstice gala. Everyone will be there."

"Everyone always is." I dry my hands on a cloth, watching him inspect my work like it's merchandise to be assessed rather than art.

"This is strategy, Adellum." He sets the canvas down, moving to the next one. "Morvant has three unmarried daughters. All of good family, excellent connections."

My head snaps up. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Sior's face smooths into practiced patience. "You're thirty-three, Adellum. Your bachelor status makes you... less valuable to certain circles. A settled man with a family indicates stability, maturity. The right partnership could open doors."

Ice crystallizes in my veins. "I don't need doors opened by marriage."

"Don't you?" He moves toward my desk, fingers flicking through correspondence I've neglected. "The commission from House Tenrith fell through. They chose Varens instead."

"Varens' work is derivative garbage."

"Varens is married to a praexa's niece." Sior's voice cuts like glass. "Art isn't just about talent. It's about connections, perception, strategy."

My jaw clenches. "I'm not discussing this."

Because there's only one girl I want. One I'm not sure will ever let me have her so I take my stolen moments.

"You're being childish." He sorts papers into neat stacks. "The eldest Morvant daughter studied at the Conservatory. Plays three instruments. The middle one is quite beautiful, if that matters to you. The youngest?—"

"Stop." My wings flare slightly, betraying my irritation. "I'm not interested."

Sior pauses, studying me with those sharp, dark eyes. "Is there someone else?"

I turn away, moving to the windows overlooking the city. The afternoon light catches on distant towers, turning them to gold.

"Of course not," I lie, my mind drifting back to the gardens, to the way Harmony's mouth had parted slightly when I touched her cheek. The soft intake of breath, the gold flecks in her eyes catching the light. To so many soft kisses and intimate moments that I spend my days thinking about.

"Then there's no reason not to consider advantageous matches." Sior continues, his voice turning clinical, sharp. "Your next exhibition will be crucial. The High Caste has noticed you, but you need to secure your position. A strategic marriage?—"

I tune him out, staring across the New Solas skyline without really seeing it. Instead, I see Harmony kneeling in the garden, dirt under her nails, that small furrow between her brows as she concentrates. I recall the exact sound of her laugh when I surprised

her, the way warmth blooms in my chest when she looks at me.

"Are you listening?" Sior demands, his voice slicing through my thoughts.

I blink, pulling myself back to the present. "I was thinking about a new series."

"Forget new work for now. Focus on the commissions you've already accepted." Sior taps a calendar where he's marked deadlines in red ink. "Three pieces for the Allekian embassy by month's end. The altar triptych for the Temple of Light within fortnight. The?—"

"I'll handle it," I interrupt, suddenly desperate to be alone. "I always do."

After Sior leaves, silence fills the studio like a physical weight. I stand at the windows, watching the evening light transform New Solas into a city of gold and shadow. The spires catch the dying sun, blazing brilliant for a few heartbeats before surrendering to dusk.

I move through my apartment—spacious rooms filled with expensive furnishings chosen by someone else, artwork I created but no longer recognize as mine. The ceilings soar high to accommodate my wings, but the space feels confining, each room a gilded cage.

In my private studio—the smaller room where I create what I want, not what sells—I pull out a fresh canvas. The blank white surface stares back at me, waiting. I mix colors automatically, muscle memory guiding my hands while my thoughts spiral elsewhere.

Red ochre. Burnt umber. Viridian. I prepare my palette, but when the brush touches the canvas, the vision shatters. I try again. And again.

Nothing flows. The colors sit wrong, muddy and lifeless. Lines that should dance instead crawl and die. My brush strokes—usually confident, bold—turn tentative, then aggressive. Too harsh. Too soft. Nothing right.

"Fucking useless," I mutter, scraping paint from the canvas, only to smear it worse.

I add more red, trying to capture the exact shade of Harmony's lips when she bites them in concentration. It's wrong. I add yellow, hoping to mix the precise gold flecks in her eyes. It's flat, dead.

The face taking shape on my canvas is hers, but it's a ghost, a poor imitation. It captures nothing of her warmth, her quiet strength, the way she inhabits her skin without apology.

With a roar of frustration, I rip the canvas from its frame. The tearing sound is satisfying, primal. I hurl it across the room where it hits the wall with a wet slap and slides to the floor, leaving a smear of colors.

My chest heaves as I stand there, fists clenched. Paint stains my hands, my forearms. A streak of blue mars one of my wings.

"This is what they've reduced you to," I tell the empty room. "A commission machine. A status accessor. A fucking commodity."

This isn't art. This isn't why I picked up a brush as a child, why I spent nights without sleep, driven by visions I had to make real. This isn't what made me who I am.

I pace the length of the studio, wings rustling with agitation. My talent made me an asset. My success made me a target. Now nobles who couldn't identify true art if it slapped them across their pampered faces hang my work in their dining halls to impress guests.

And Sior wants me to marry into that world? To bind myself to someone who would see me as a status symbol?

I throw open the balcony doors and step out into the evening air. Below, New Solas glitters with magical lights as darkness falls. Beautiful, distant, cold.

"I don't want this," I whisper to the night.

What I want is simpler. Warmer. A garden with herbs and vegetables, growing things tended by hands that know how to nurture. A table with mismatched plates and honest conversation. A woman who sees me—not my wings, not my fame, not my market value.

Just me.

My throat tightens as I realize the truth that's been growing inside me for months. I want Harmony. Not just in stolen moments behind garden sheds or in secret corners of Lord Arkan's estate. I want her beside me, always.

And wanting her—choosing her—would mean walking away from everything I've built. The exhibitions. The commissions. The circle of patrons. Sior.

The thought should terrify me. Instead, as I stand on my balcony overlooking the city I once desperately wanted to conquer, I feel something like relief.

"I don't care," I say aloud, testing the weight of the words. They feel right. Solid. "I don't care about any of it."

The city lights blur as I focus on what matters. I want to create what moves me, not what sells. I want to love whom I choose, not forge alliances. I want to live, not perform.

I want her. The rest can burn.

HARMONY

I slip through the tall grass along the riverbank, my heartbeat drumming like summer thunder in my chest. The evening air carries the scent of sun-warmed earth and river water, mingling with the wildflowers I've woven into my hair.

Foolish, that's what I am. Absolutely foolish for coming. For wearing my faded blue dress—the one with twice-mended seams but a flattering cut that brings out the gold flecks in my eyes. For brushing my curls until they gleamed in the lamplight before tying them back with a scrap of ribbon I've been saving.

I tell myself I'm here only because standing him up would be unforgivably rude. That I'm merely being polite. That this means nothing.

Liar.

I pause at the edge of the trees, my bare toes curling into the soft earth. The setting sun casts everything in honey-gold light, transforming the ordinary into something magical.

And there he is—Adellum—sitting on a flat rock by the water, wings slightly folded behind him. He's set up a small easel, and his brush moves with confident strokes across the canvas, capturing the dying light as it shimmers across the river.

I allow myself a forbidden moment just to watch him. His white-blond hair falls

carelessly across his forehead, and he absently pushes it back with paint-smudged fingers.

He's rolled up his sleeves, revealing the strong lines of his forearms, dusky bronze skin catching the last rays of sunlight. His expression is one of complete absorption—brow slightly furrowed, jaw set in concentration, those silver eyes intense as they move between the canvas and the sunset before him.

Something twists in my chest, sharp and sweet and painful all at once. I've seen him in grand chambers wearing fine clothes, seen him laughing with Lord Arkan over expensive wine. But this—Adellum lost in creation, unaware of being watched—feels like glimpsing something sacred and private.

He dips his brush, tilts his head critically at his work, and suddenly smiles—that quick, crooked smile that makes the air catch in my lungs. The one that transformed his face the first time we met, turning him from intimidating to irresistible in an instant.

"Are you going to lurk in the shadows all evening, little bird, or will you join me?" he calls without looking up.

Heat floods my cheeks. "I wasn't lurking," I step from the trees' cover. "I was... appreciating the composition."

Adellum looks up then, his brush pausing mid-stroke. Those silver eyes sweep over me, lingering on my dress, my hair, my bare feet, and something in his gaze shifts, softens.

"The composition improves dramatically with you in it." He sets his brush down, wiping his hands on a cloth. "Though I'd have to start a new canvas entirely to do you justice."

"Flatterer." I approach, trying to ignore how my pulse jumps when he looks at me that way. "You don't need to waste your talents on me when you have this." I gesture to the sunset reflecting on the water, all crimson and gold ripples.

"Waste?" Adellum rises in one fluid motion, his wings adjusting naturally behind him. "Harmony Aven, sunsets happen every day. You, however—" He reaches out, hesitates, then gently tucks a stray curl behind my ear, his fingertips grazing my skin. "You are decidedly more rare."

I roll my eyes to hide how his touch affects me. "There are thousands of human women in New Solas."

"None who look at river weeds and see medicine. None who argue with Lord Arkan about the proper way to plant moon lilies." His mouth quirks. "None who throw bread rolls at famous artists."

"That was an accident! You startled me." I laugh despite myself, remembering just that instance. "And you deserved it, sneaking up on people like that."

"I've never been so delighted to be assaulted with baked goods." Adellum's wings shift slightly, catching the fading light. He gestures to the blanket spread beside his easel. "I brought wine. And those little cakes you pretend not to love."

My chest tightens at the thoughtfulness. It's these small things—remembering what I like, noticing the details—that make him dangerous to my heart.

"I only came because it would be rude not to," I say, even as I move to sit beside him.

Adellum's eyes crinkle at the corners, seeing through me completely. "Of course. Your impeccable manners are legendary."

I shake my head and take a seat next to him. I lean back on my elbows, watching the stars peek out one by one against the deepening indigo canvas above us. The blanket beneath us is one of Adellum's—finely woven, softer than anything I've owned, yet he tosses it onto the ground without a second thought.

"Careful with that cheese," I say, reaching over to break off a piece of the creamy white wedge he's brought. "It costs more than I make in three days."

"All the more reason to enjoy it." Adellum offers me a slice of crusty bread. "I think about you tending Lord Arkan's gardens all day. The least I can provide is decent food."

I accept the bread, our fingers brushing. "I like my work. The gardens are the only place I feel..." I search for the right word.

"Free?" he suggests.

"Mine," I correct him. "Something I've made, nurtured." I take a bite, savoring the contrast between the bread's chewiness and the cheese's silky richness. "Though Lord Arkan takes all the credit when visitors marvel at his moon lilies."

Adellum chuckles, pouring more wine into our single shared cup. "Arkan wouldn't know a moon lily from a weed if you didn't tell him the difference."

"Don't let him hear you say that." I accept the cup, sipping the tart liquid. It's bright and cool on my tongue, nothing like the watered-down ale served in the staff quarters.

Between bites, Adellum returns to his work, his hands swift and sure as he adds touches to his canvas. The light is nearly gone now, but he works confidently in the dim glow of the small magical lantern he's brought. He rarely uses magic, so unlike most xaphan. I watch his face—the intense concentration, the flicker of satisfaction

when a stroke pleases him.

"Stop squinting at me," I protest when I realize I'm the subject of his current focus. "The real view is over there." I gesture toward the river, where silver moonlight now dances across the rippling waters.

"I've painted that river a hundred times," Adellum murmurs, his eyes flicking between me and the canvas. "But you—the way you sit with your knees pulled up, the way you tuck your hair behind your ear when you're thinking..." His brush pauses. "You're a part of this place. Wild and soft and stubborn. I can never capture you properly."

My cheeks warm, and I'm grateful for the growing darkness. "You're just looking for a challenge since landscapes have become too easy for the great Adellum Vey."

He sets down his brush, eyes bright in the lantern light. "You've always been my muse, little bird. Since the first time I wandered into your gardens, when you lectured me about trampling your seedlings." His voice drops, rough with honesty. "You make me see things differently."

Something inside me trembles at his words. I pluck a blade of grass, twisting it between my fingers to have something to look at besides his face. "I'm just a gardener."

"No." Adellum shifts closer, his wing brushing my shoulder, light as a whisper. "You're the reason I can paint at all. Before you..." He hesitates, and I look up to find his gaze intent on me. "Before you, I was just making pretty pictures for Sior to sell. Now I remember why I started."

I flush under the weight of it, the rawness of being seen so completely. My mother's warnings echo: Never trust a xaphan—their beauty is designed to lure you in. They

can afford to play with human hearts; we cannot afford to lose them.

I know I should be careful. I know xaphan are dangerous in ways mortals can't afford to forget. But when he looks at me like that, I don't feel like prey. I feel like a miracle.

"You give me too much credit," I whisper.

Adellum reaches out, calloused fingertips tracing my jawline with feather-light precision. "You don't give yourself enough."

HARMONY

My cheeks warm under Adellum's intense gaze, my body reacting to his touch even after he drops his hands. The way he looks at me sometimes makes me feel like I'm the only person in his world—like I'm something worth memorizing, worth preserving on canvas. It's terrifying.

"You should finish your painting," I murmur, though my body betrays me, leaning infinitesimally toward him.

"It can wait." Adellum sets his brush down decisively. "The light's gone anyway." As if he doesn't have magic.

We fall into comfortable silence, the kind that once surprised me with him. For someone whose fame stems from his artistic voice, Adellum seems most at peace in quiet. He reclines on the blanket, one arm folded beneath his head, wings neatly tucked against his back—a habit I've noticed he maintains around humans who might be intimidated by their full span.

I never have been. I'm always mesmerized by them. I'm honestly mesmerized by all things Adellum, and that's the problem. I never should have let a xaphan get to me in a way he has.

I settle beside him, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his body but not quite touching. Above us, the night unfurls like black velvet scattered with

diamonds, each star a pinprick of perfect light. The moon hangs low and heavy, casting silver across the landscape.

"Name a constellation," Adellum challenges softly.

"You know I'm terrible at this game." I laugh, scanning the glittering expanse. "That one looks like... a spoon?"

"Ah yes, 'The Divine Spoon.' Very famous among celestial scholars." His voice drips with mock solemnity.

I elbow him gently. "Stop. Not all of us had fancy xaphan tutors teaching us the sky maps."

"I'll show you." Adellum shifts closer, his arm sliding beneath my shoulders as he points upward. "See there? That's the Hunter's Arrow. And just beside it?—"

"The Weeping Sister," I finish, surprising myself. "I do remember that one. My mother used to say she cried because she lost something precious."

Adellum's gaze shifts from the stars to my face. "What do you think she lost?"

"I don't know," I whisper. "Maybe her way home."

"Maybe a chance at having the things she wants most," he answers.

Something changes in the air between us—thickens, warms. Adellum's fingers find mine in the darkness, intertwining with gentle pressure. His breathing changes subtly, and I know he's going to kiss me before he moves.

For a man who could have anyone, he can't seem to keep his hands off of me. And for

a human that should know better, I never stop him.

He leans in, his lips finding mine with practiced familiarity. It's careful at first—reverent almost—as if he's memorizing the taste of me all over again despite months of stolen nights like this.

Each time we're together, he does this—begins with such tender restraint that it makes my heart ache. Like he's giving me every opportunity to change my mind, to safeguard myself from him.

"You smell like dreelek leaves and sunlight," he murmurs against my mouth. "Like green things growing."

A laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep inside me. "Is that a compliment or are you saying I need a bath?"

"Definitely a compliment." His smile curves against my lips. "You smell like life itself."

A shiver runs through me at his words, at the worship in his voice. My hands clutch at his coat involuntarily, fingers digging into the fine fabric.

Something in Adellum shifts, breaks. With a sound like hunger, his control fractures. His wings, usually kept carefully contained, suddenly unfurl to their full impressive span, arching high above us both. The sight of them—massive and powerful, catching moonlight along each feather—steals my breath.

He presses me down into the soft grass, his weight a delicious pressure. "Are you going to tell me we shouldn't be doing this?" he whispers, even as his mouth traces the line of my throat. "That we should stop."

"I don't want you to stop." I arch against him, feeling reckless and wild. "I never want you to stop."

His hands tremble slightly as they find the ties of my dress, unraveling them with reverent patience. "I want to see you," he breathes. "All of you. In the moonlight."

I'm nodding before his words are even out..

There's something sacred in how he peels my dress away, like it's a ritual he's been granted the privilege to perform. The cool night air kisses my skin as it's revealed inch by inch, chills rising in its wake. But I don't feel exposed or vulnerable—not with how he's looking at me.

"You're so beautiful it hurts," Adellum says, his voice rough with emotion. His fingertips trace my collarbone, feather-light. "Like someone gathered all the good things in this world and shaped them into you."

Adellum is the only one that's ever looked at me like this—like I'm precious, powerful, a thing to be kept rather than conquered. His hands map me with artist's precision, finding places I never knew could bring such pleasure.

"Your wings," I whisper, reaching up to touch where they join his back. "I love when you show them to me, when you don't hide."

His silver eyes, almost luminous in the darkness, search mine. "Only you," he confesses. "Only you get to see me like this."

My heart twists at his words, and I'm suddenly desperate to get even closer to him.

My fingers work at the intricate laces of Adellum's pants, my movements growing clumsy with desire. The moonlight catches on the planes of his face as he watches

me, his silver eyes gleaming with hunger and something deeper, something that makes my heart squeeze.

"Let me," he murmurs, catching my hands, pressing them to his bare chest where I can feel his heart thundering against my palms. "You're shaking, little bird."

"I always shake for you," I confess, the admission slipping out before I can trap it behind my teeth. "Every time feels like the first time."

A smile curves his beautiful mouth. "And the last," he adds, like a prayer, his voice rough. "Like we might never get another chance."

I stroke my hands down his chest, feeling the lean muscle jump beneath his bronze skin. "Then we should make the most of this one."

With a swift, graceful movement, Adellum tears his tunic over his head, discarding it somewhere in the grass. The sight of him steals my breath—all that power contained in his tall, lean frame, the defined muscles of his abdomen flexing as he moves. His wings, those magnificent gray wings, spread wide behind him like a storm cloud, feathers rustling in the night breeze.

"Come here," I whisper, reaching for him.

Adellum lowers himself over me, the weight of him pressing me into the soft grass. His hands cup my face with devastating gentleness, thumbs stroking my cheekbones as if I'm something infinitely precious. Then he's kissing me again, deep and slow, his tongue sliding against mine in a rhythm that makes heat pool low in my belly.

"Want you," he growls against my mouth. "Need you."

My body arches instinctively toward his, seeking more contact, more friction. "Then

take me."

His hands slide down to my hips, positioning me beneath him. I feel him, hard and ready against my entrance, and my body floods with liquid heat. When he pushes inside, slow and deliberate, I can't hold back the moan that escapes me. The stretch and fullness of him is exquisite, familiar yet somehow still astonishing.

"Harmony," he breathes my name like it's sacred. "Look at me."

I open my eyes to find him watching me with such intensity that it almost hurts. The moonlight silvers his white-blond hair, turns his wings to something otherworldly and beautiful. His jaw is tight with restraint, the muscles in his neck corded as he holds himself still within me.

"I need to see your eyes when I move inside you," he says, his voice ragged. "Need to watch what I do to you."

He begins to move then, rolling his hips in a rhythm that's achingly perfect. Each thrust sends sparks of pleasure through my body, building and building like a gathering storm. I wrap my legs around his waist, changing the angle, drawing him deeper.

"That's it," he encourages, his breath hot against my neck. "Take what you need from me."

His wings create a canopy above us, shutting out the world until there's nothing but Adellum, nothing but this moment, this connection. One of his hands slides between us, finding the sensitive bundle of nerves where our bodies join, circling with expert precision.

"Adellum," I gasp, my nails digging into the muscled planes of his back. "Don't stop."

Please don't stop."

"Couldn't stop if I wanted to," he confesses, his rhythm growing more urgent, more demanding. "You feel too good. Always so perfect for me."

The coil of pleasure tightens within me, winding tighter and tighter with each thrust. Adellum knows my body so well, knows exactly how to move, where to touch to drive me to the very edge of madness. His own breathing grows ragged, his movements more forceful.

"Come for me," he commands, his voice dark with need. "Let me feel you, little bird."

His words combined with the relentless rhythm of his body against mine sends me spiraling over the edge. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, making me cry out his name. My body tightens around him, pulling him deeper.

"That's it," he groans, his wings trembling with the effort of his restraint. "That's it, Harmony. So beautiful when you come undone for me."

A few more powerful thrusts and he follows me over the edge, his body shuddering above mine, within mine. His wings snap fully open in his release, the sound cutting through the night air. His forehead presses to mine, our breath mingling as we both struggle to return to ourselves.

For a moment, the only sounds are our ragged breathing and the distant songs of night insects. His weight presses me into the earth in the most delicious way, anchoring me when I feel like I might float away.

After a moment, he shifts us, tucking me against him and holding me close. His magic slides against my skin, keeping me warm enough in the cool night air. His

magnificent wings are still partially extended, creating a shelter from the world.

"That was..." I struggle to find words adequate enough.

"Mmm," Adellum agrees, his lips brushing my temple. "It always is, with you."

His fingers trace idle patterns on my hip, circling the slight dip where bone meets flesh. The touch isn't demanding anymore, just lazy and content, like a man savoring a particularly fine vintage of wine long after the glass is empty.

"Do you ever wonder," I whisper, tucking myself closer against his chest, "what would happen if someone found out about us?"

Adellum's hand stills momentarily before resuming its gentle exploration. "Is that what you think about after I've thoroughly taken you? The potential social scandal?"

I snort softly against his skin. "Not usually, no."

"Good." His lips find my forehead. "Because I'd rather you think about when I can take you again."

The levity in his voice makes me smile, even as a part of me aches with the reality we both know but rarely speak aloud. A xaphan artist of his stature and a human gardener. I might be fine, but Adellum's reputation would suffer. His manager, Sior, would be furious.

"What are you thinking about now, little bird?" Adellum's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts. "I can practically hear your thoughts trying to escape."

I trace the defined line of his collarbone, focusing on the way his dusky bronze skin looks almost gilded in the moonlight. "Just that I like this. Being with you. Like this."

"Naked under the stars?" His smile is audible.

"Safe," I correct softly. "I feel safe with you."

Something changes in the quality of his silence, a sudden stillness that feels weighted with emotion. When he speaks again, his voice has dropped to a reverent hush.

" Melivashanti cor elumae, navae solirae. "

The words slide over me like warm honey, unfamiliar yet somehow intimate. I don't know any other languages, yet the words sound like a caress when Adellum speaks it.

"What does that mean?" I ask, propping myself up on an elbow to see his face.

His silver eyes hold mine, luminous in the darkness, his sharp-cut features softened by something that looks dangerously close to tenderness. "It's an old xaphan saying. Something like... 'My heart opens when yours beats beside it.'"

My own heart stutters at the translation. "That's beautiful."

"It's more than that." His fingers brush a curl from my face. "It's what xaphan say when..." He pauses, seeming to search for words. "When they've found someone who feels like home."

Home. The word reverberates through me. I've never had one, not really. The human commune where I grew up was shelter and survival, but never home. Lord Arkan's estate is where I work, where I sleep, but it belongs to him. Even my little gardener's cottage on the grounds is merely a privilege extended by my employer, not truly mine.

But here, lying in Adellum's arms beneath an endless spray of stars, I feel it—that

elusive sense of belonging I've chased all my life.

"Say it again," I whisper, the request vulnerable in the night air between us.

Adellum's eyes darken. He props himself up, his body partially covering mine as he speaks the phrase again, this time directly against my lips. " Melivashanti cor elumae, navae solirae. "

The words vibrate from his mouth to mine, and though I don't understand them linguistically, I feel their meaning deep in my bones. It's a declaration, a promise, and it wavers on the edges of something deeper than I've allowed myself to hope for.

His wing curls around me, massive gray feathers forming a cocoon that blocks out everything but Adellum. The world narrows to just us—his heartbeat against mine, the scent of him surrounding me, the safety of his presence.

"I never thought..." I begin, then falter, suddenly shy despite our intimacy. Adellum gives me beautiful words when we are together, but I always have to leave. We always have to return to our lives after this and I have to remember that secret words whispered in the night mean nothing.

Even if my heart clings to them like they mean everything.

"Tell me," he encourages, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I never thought I'd find a place that felt like it couldn't be taken away from me." The confession feels raw, exposing a wound I usually keep bandaged.

Adellum's eyes flare with something fierce. "No one will take this from you, Harmony. No one will take you from me."

The conviction in his voice soothes the restless part of me that's always waiting for the other shoe to drop. For the first time, I let myself believe that maybe—just maybe—I've found something permanent. Something mine.

I nestle against Adellum's chest, his steady heartbeat a lullaby beneath my ear. His wing remains draped protectively over us, and his fingers resume their gentle stroking of my hip. The rhythm of his touch, combined with the profound sense of safety, begins to pull me toward sleep.

"Rest, little bird," he murmurs, pressing his lips to the crown of my head.

I surrender to exhaustion, my eyes growing heavy. As consciousness slips away, I feel—for the first time in my life—that I've found a place in the world that won't be taken from me.

I don't yet know how wrong I am.

ADELLUM

I stand at my easel, dragging ochre-stained fingers across the canvas when the door to my studio bursts open. The delicate thread of creative focus snaps, and I don't need to turn to know it's Sior. His presence fills the room like smoke—unpleasant but familiar.

"Three days, Adellum. Three days you've been locked in here." Sior's voice cuts through the silence, sharp as a blade. "Are you deliberately avoiding me?"

I continue working, adding a stroke of amber to catch imaginary sunlight. "I'm meeting a deadline. You're the one who insisted on the Praetor's commission, remember?"

"The Praetor can wait." He stalks across the room, wings tight against his back—never a good sign. When Sior feels truly agitated, his wings pull in like a predator preparing to strike.

I sigh, setting down my brush. "What's so urgent it couldn't wait until tomorrow's meeting?"

Sior circles me, his dark eyes assessing. His fingers steeple together, ink-stained at the tips from contracts and ledgers. "We need to discuss your future. Your real future."

"My real future is right here." I gesture to the half-finished canvas. "Creating."

"No." He slams his palm on my workbench, sending jars of pigment trembling. "You need to understand—it's not just about art anymore. It's about legacy."

The word hangs between us. Legacy. As if I haven't heard this sermon before.

"Your talent has elevated you beyond mere entertainment, Adellum. You represent something now." His voice softens, the way it did years ago when he found me—hungry and desperate for someone to see my worth. "The Council is watching. The Praexa are watching."

I cross my arms. "Let them watch. My work speaks for itself."

"This isn't about your work!" Sior's wings flutter in agitation, displacing air that sends my sketches scattering. He doesn't bother to help me collect them. "It's about who you are. What you represent. A xaphan of your stature who refuses to bind? It looks... rebellious. Unstable."

My stomach tightens. "Since when is my personal life anyone's business?"

"Since you became the face of New Solas artistry." Sior paces now, gesturing wildly. "You think the upper circles care about your paintings? They care about what you symbolize. Tradition. Continuity. Proper bloodlines."

The word 'bloodlines' makes me flinch. I turn back to my canvas, trying to recapture my earlier focus. "I'm not interested."

"You don't have the luxury of not being interested." His voice drops to that silky tone that means he's already made arrangements. "I've found the perfect match. Lilleth Novar."

The name stops me cold. "The sculptor?"

"Ambitious. Beautiful. Impeccable lineage." Sior's thin lips curve into a smile. "Her flight feathers are pure silver, Adellum. Silver. Do you know how rare that is?"

I feel sick, imagining some stranger's wings entwined with mine in a binding ceremony. All I can think of is Harmony's face, her eyes crinkling at the corners when she laughs at my terrible jokes. The way she looks at me like I'm just a man, not a symbol or an investment.

"Her family is connected to the Third Praexa," Sior continues, oblivious to my revulsion. "The announcement of your bonding would be political gold. Think of the doors it would open."

"I don't want doors opened." My voice comes out harsher than intended. I don't like pushing back against Sior—or disappointing him. But it's all I seem to do anymore. "I want to be left alone to create."

Sior's expression hardens. "That's not an option anymore. You outgrew that luxury when you accepted my guidance."

"When I was a starving child with no other options," I snap, turning to face him fully. "I'm not that desperate boy anymore."

"No, you're not." His eyes narrow. "You're successful because I made you successful. Because I understood what your talent needed—structure, discipline, connections."

The worst part is he's not entirely wrong. I owe Sior for pulling me from obscurity, for teaching me how to navigate the complex social hierarchies of New Solas. But I'll be damned if I'll let him arrange my life like it's another one of his contracts.

"I'm not binding with Lilleth Novar. Or anyone else you've picked out."

Sior's wings twitch—a tiny tell that he's preparing for confrontation. "At least meet her. One dinner."

"To what end? So I can disappoint her too?"

"To show respect for the process." His voice drops low. "The Council is watching, Adellum. The whispers about your... peculiar habits... are growing louder. Your isolation. Your refusal to participate in flight ceremonies."

The nausea in my stomach intensifies. My hands clench around the edge of the canvas. "One afternoon. Here. That's all."

Sior's posture relaxes slightly, mistaking my words for capitulation. "You'll like her. She's intelligent, creative?—"

"I said one afternoon." My silver eyes meet his dark ones. "I'll meet her. Have some tea. But I'm not binding anyone. That's all this is."

It should at least buy me some time. I know it'll go nowhere, though, because there's only one girl for me. And that's Harmony.

I pace the riverbank like a caged animal. The smooth river stones slide and click beneath my boots, wet from the tide that rises steadily against the shore. This is where I first kissed her. Where I first felt the world crack open and realign around something softer, warmer than ambition.

My wings drag behind me, tips brushing the damp earth. I don't care if they get dirty. Let the pristine feathers gather mud. Let them become as tarnished as I feel.

Three nights ago, I laid Harmony down right here, under these same stars. They seem colder tonight, more distant. The memory of her skin against mine burns through me—her fingers tangling in my hair, her breath catching when I touched her. The way she looked at me like I was something precious, not just valuable.

"Fuck," I mutter, kicking a stone into the water. It hits with a pathetic plop that doesn't match the storm inside me.

I drop to a boulder at the water's edge, head in my hands. The conversation with Sior replays in my mind, each word a new wound. The Praexa are watching. The Council is watching. Silver wings. Legacy. Bloodlines. Every word a chain tightening around my throat.

How did I let him gain so much power over me? When did my art become secondary to what I represent?

A night bird calls out across the water, and for an instant, I imagine Harmony's voice. Little bird, I call her, teasing her about her small, quick movements. She'd thrown a fistful of dirt at me the first time I said it, laughing.

"Would you still laugh if you knew what they want from me?" I ask the empty night. "If you knew they were trying to take me from you?"

I've seen the sideways glances, the whispers behind delicate hands when we walk together. A human girl. A servant. How quaint, they think. How rebellious of the great artist. A phase, nothing more.

But it's her face I see when I close my eyes at night. Her voice that cuts through the noise in my head. When did that happen? When did this soft-spoken gardener with dirt under her fingernails become more essential to me than breathing?

I stand again, unable to stay still. My wings flex and shudder with restless energy.

"They'll destroy you," I whisper, and it's unclear even to me if I mean Sior will destroy her, or if New Solas society will. Or if I will, eventually, with all my sharp edges and impossible ambitions.

I stop at the exact spot where we made love. The ground looks the same as anywhere else along the bank, but I know this patch of earth. I could find it blindfolded. I kneel, pressing my palm to the cool dirt.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask no one. "What if I can't protect you from them?"

The darkness that's been coiling in my stomach all evening tightens, cold and heavy. Not just anger at Sior's manipulations, but fear. Real, bone-deep fear that makes my wings tremble.

I close my eyes, seeing again the barely concealed disgust on the faces of the upper circles when I walk with Harmony in public. The veiled threats in their polite questions. How curious, that a xaphan of your standing would spend time with... staff.

"They would eat you alive," I murmur, opening my eyes to watch the river flow, implacable and constant despite my inner turmoil. "And I'd have to watch."

What if I'm selfish for keeping her? What if her life would be simpler, safer without me in it? The thought comes unbidden, and once there, refuses to leave. It plants itself like a poisoned seed.

"They'll never accept you," I say to Harmony's ghost. "You'll always be less to them. And they'll punish you for it."

Is loving her worth what it would cost her? That's the question I can't answer, the one that keeps me pacing this riverbank like a man possessed.

I drag my hands through my short white-blond hair, gripping it at the roots as though physical pain might distract from the emotional. It doesn't.

"What if letting you go is the only way to keep you safe?"

The words taste like ash on my tongue. But the seed is there now, taking root in fertile ground—doubt, fear, and the terrible knowledge of what New Solas does to those who defy its invisible rules.

HARMONY

I kneel in the soft earth by the west archway, my fingertips caressing the delicate petals of the late-blooming aracin flowers. Their vibrant purple and orange hues catch the afternoon sunlight, reminding me of paintings I've glimpsed in Lord Arkan's private collection. I hum an old tune from the human commune—something about rivers and waiting lovers—as I prune away the dying blooms.

"You're looking quite healthy today," I murmur to a particularly vibrant cluster. "Strong enough to survive the first frost, I think."

The garden has become my sanctuary here at Arkan's estate. The flowers don't care that I'm human, don't look through me like I'm invisible. Unlike most of the xaphan servants, who barely acknowledge my existence.

Most, but not all.

I smile to myself, tucking a stray curl behind my ear as Adellum's face fills my thoughts. Those silver eyes that somehow manage to be both piercing and tender when they look at me. The way his massive gray wings curl forward slightly when he laughs, like he's trying to embrace the moment.

The soil beneath my calloused fingers is rich and dark. I pat it gently around a struggling seedling, giving it a fighting chance.

"There you go," I whisper. "Sometimes we all need a little help standing tall."

I've been planning all morning, silly little schemes that make my heart flutter with anticipation. The kitchen mistress is preoccupied with preparations for tomorrow's formal dinner—she won't notice if I borrow some honey and spices. Adellum loves those sweet honey-cakes with a hint of spice. The look on his face when he bites into one—eyes closing in pleasure, that small moan he makes—is worth any risk.

And perhaps, if the stars align, we might steal away to our spot by the river. An hour—just one blessed hour together before I'm needed back to help with dinner preparations. I picture his wings spread out beneath us on the soft moss, my head resting on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart.

I know I'm being foolish. A human servant falling for a xaphan artist of rising fame—it's the stuff of bad poetry and cautionary tales told in the servants' quarters. But when Adellum looks at me, touches me, whispers my name against my skin like it's something precious...

I tug at a stubborn weed, its roots clinging tenaciously to the soil. "You're not supposed to be here," I tell it, "but you don't care, do you? You've decided this is where you belong."

The parallel isn't lost on me. I laugh softly at myself.

The sun warms my back through my simple linen dress as I reach for my water flask. Taking a sip, I gaze toward the eastern wing of the estate where Adellum stays when he visits Lord Arkan. Is he there now? Working on some new masterpiece with those talented hands? Or maybe lounging on the terrace, those magnificent wings stretched out to catch the sunlight?

Sometimes I wonder if he'll ever get me out of here. Not that my position is

terrible—Lord Arkan is fair as masters go. But to be truly free, to belong to myself and to Adellum...

I've heard whispers among the servants about xaphan binding to humans. Rare unions, looked upon with disdain by xaphan society, but existing nonetheless. The binding ceremony is said to be beautiful—an exchange of vows and essences that ties two souls together. I try not to hope for such things, but the dreams come unbidden in the quiet hours before dawn.

"You're a fool, Harmony Aven," I murmur, brushing soil from my hands onto my apron.

But even as I chastise myself, I'm calculating how much time I need to gather honey from the kitchens, how quickly I can finish my gardening duties, when Adellum might slip away from whatever important meetings Arkan has scheduled for him today.

Because fool or not, I love him. The way sunflowers love the sun—helplessly, completely, turning always toward his light.

Hours later, my fingers itch with impatience as I finish arranging the freshly cut aracin blossoms in Lord Arkan's study. The honey cakes are hidden in a small cloth sack tucked into my apron pocket, still warm against my hip. Master gave the kitchen servants an unexpected half-day of freedom due to a canceled dinner engagement, and my heart beats an erratic rhythm knowing I might steal more than just an hour with Adellum.

"Perfect work as always, Harmony," Lord Arkan's steward remarks as he passes, barely looking up from his ledger.

I dip into a curtsy. "Thank you, sir."

The moment he turns the corner, I'm moving, slipping through the servant's corridor that leads to the east gardens. My steps quicken when I pass the last of the occupied rooms, and then I'm outside, breathing in the crisp autumn air. The path to the river is just beyond the rose courtyard—our secret meeting place where the oldest tree droops its leaves to shield lovers from prying eyes.

I edge along the perimeter of the garden wall, meaning only to peek around to see if Adellum is already waiting for me by the riverbank. It would be too risky to cross the more visible courtyard if any of Lord Arkan's guests are about.

The flash of dusky bronze skin and gray wings catches my eye, and my breath hitches. Adellum stands in the center of the rose courtyard, his tall frame bathed in dappled sunlight filtering through the trellis above. My lips part, ready to call to him—but the words die in my throat.

He's not alone.

A female xaphan stands before him, her posture as regal as any queen's. Her wings—pure silver, unlike any I've seen before—catch the light and scatter it like diamonds. Her white-gold hair falls in a perfect cascade down her back, and her gown hugs her slender form in a way that speaks of wealth beyond imagining.

"You've been impossibly scarce these days, Adellum," her voice lilts, musical and refined. "Sior says you've been hiding away your newest works."

Adellum's shoulders tense slightly—a tell I recognize from our intimate moments. "Sior talks too much."

She laughs, bright and clear, stepping closer to him. "He talks exactly as much as he should about the most promising artist in New Solas." Her hand reaches up, slender fingers touching his arm, lingering there. "I'd be honored to see what you're working

on before anyone else."

The smile that crosses Adellum's face—that secret, half-smirk I thought belonged to our private world—makes something cold curl in my stomach.

"Would you now?" he asks, his voice dropping to that low register that usually makes my knees weak.

The woman—Lilleth—rises on her tiptoes, her silver wings fluttering delicately behind her. "I would," she whispers, and then presses her lips against his.

Adellum does nothing—doesn't pull away, doesn't push her back. He just stands there, allowing this beautiful creature to kiss him in the open courtyard, without shame or secrecy.

My heart shatters so sharply I nearly double over from the pain. The honey cakes in my pocket feel suddenly heavy, ridiculous. A servant's pathetic offering compared to the glittering world this woman represents.

The sack tears as I stumble backward, spilling crumbs down my apron. I can't breathe. Can't think. My vision blurs with tears as I turn and run.

I run as if the world is collapsing around me, because it is. My feet pound against the earth, careless of the noise I'm making, of the branches that claw at my arms as I veer off the path and into the woods that border the estate.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," I gasp between sobs, the word becoming a crushing rhythm matching my heartbeat.

How could I have believed I was anything but a diversion? A secret toy he played with when bored with his glittering xaphan world. All those whispered promises, the

tender touches, the way he called me his "little bird"—lies, all of them.

I stumble over a root and fall hard, my palms skidding against rough dirt. The pain is welcome—physical hurt to match the agony tearing through my chest. I stay there on my knees, dirty and broken, letting the tears come.

"He never even told anyone about me," I whisper to the indifferent forest. "Never once claimed me in the light."

A thalivern flutters past, its beautiful iridescent wings catching the sunlight filtering through the leaves. I watch it drift away, free and unburdened, as I kneel in the dirt, my world destroyed by a single kiss.

ADELLUM

I am stunned when Lilleth's lips meet mine. It's so sudden, so unlike the friendly but platonic banter we've been sharing as I fulfill my obligation. She's nothing like Harmony, and I keep finding myself comparing them.

Like right now. With Harmony, I want to pull her closer and memorize every inch of her skin. With Lilleth, I'm disgusted. And that's what whips me out of my shock.

I jerk back as if struck, my wings snapping outward in reflex. The impact knocks over one of the garden statues, sending it crashing to the flagstones with a satisfying crack that matches the fury burning through my blood. My hands find Lilleth's shoulders, shoving her away harder than I'd meant to, but the revulsion crawling across my skin demands distance.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" The words scrape from my throat, sand-rough and dangerous.

Lilleth's perfect silver flight feathers quiver as she stumbles back. Her composure fractures for just a moment before that aristocratic training reasserts itself. She smooths hands down her impeccable silk robes, those polished fingers trembling slightly.

"I—I thought... Sior said you were..." Her voice falters, a crimson flush spreading beneath her high xaphan cheekbones. "He told me you were available. Interested."

Of course he did. I drag a hand through my hair, feeling it stick up at wild angles around my temples. The persistent urge to wipe my mouth overwhelms me, but I resist. Barely.

"Well, I'm not." The words come out clipped, brutal in their finality.

"I misunderstood," Lilleth murmurs, her posture straightening with wounded dignity. Those silver wings—her claim to status, her family's pride—fold tightly against her back. "I apologize for the... misunderstanding."

I should leave it there. Should bow, should offer her amerinth, should salvage what's left of this disaster before Sior hears how I've humiliated the relative of the Third Praexa. But my skin still crawls with the ghost of her touch, my mind fixated on the only pair of lips that belong against mine.

"I think you should go," I say, struggling to moderate my tone into something resembling politeness. "This meeting is over."

Lilleth's composure slips again, her dark eyes widening. "Just like that? Sior arranged?—"

"I don't give a damn what Sior arranged." My wings flare again, uncontrollable in my agitation, knocking a ceramic pot off its pedestal. "He doesn't own me, doesn't decide who I..."

The words die as something cold slithers through my chest. Doesn't he, though? Hasn't he always? I've let him control my life, helped me find a way to salvage it after everything happened.

Lilleth studies me with new interest, her head tilting. "There's someone else."

It's not a question. I don't answer. I don't care to deny it when I'm aching for Harmony right now.

"Does Sior know?" she asks, voice gentler now, almost sympathetic.

My silence is answer enough.

"The great Adellum Vey," she says, gathering her dignity around her like a cloak, "turn down a binding with pure silver bloodlines for what? Some secret affair?" A hint of venom creeps into her tone. "How... disappointing."

"Get out." The words emerge too soft, too dangerous.

She goes, gliding across my garden with perfect poise, though her wings betray her agitation in tiny tremors along their silver edges.

I wait until she's gone before I scrub viciously at my mouth with the back of my hand. The crawling disgust of another's unwanted touch makes me want to shed my skin. I need to see Harmony. Need to wash away this feeling with her laugh, her touch, her warm hazel eyes that never look at me like I'm a prize to be claimed.

I pace the garden, my wings twitching with restless energy. Where is she? She should have arrived by now, slipping through the servants' entrance like always, bringing me some small gift from her garden and that smile that makes my chest ache.

My hand finds the small pendant in my pocket—a crystal geode I've been saving, meant to be set in silver for her birthday next month. The rough edges bite into my palm as I squeeze it, grounding myself.

I couldn't bind with Lilleth if they offered me all of New Solas. The thought of anyone's hands but Harmony's, anyone's voice but hers filling my nights—it makes

something vicious and protective rear up inside me.

"Fuck Sior and his connections," I mutter to the silent garden. "Fuck the Third Praexa and silver bloodlines and all of it."

I stretch my wings to their full span, feeling the tension in the muscles. Somehow I've gone from being the troubled artist genius to Sior's puppet, dancing for the nobility. But not anymore. Not with this. Some things even I won't sacrifice.

I stalk into my house, dark energy crackling around me like storm clouds. My wings won't settle, knocking into vases and candle stands, sending them crashing to the floor. I don't give a damn. The priceless artifacts Sior insisted would "elevate my status" mean nothing compared to the rage bubbling through my veins.

He's in my study when I find him, lounging in my chair like he owns it, sifting through my papers. Always his hands in my life, arranging, manipulating.

"Ah, there you are." His thin lips curl into a smile that doesn't reach those calculating dark eyes. "How was your meeting with Lilleth? The Third Praexa will be pleased to?—"

"You told her I was interested." My voice sounds like someone else's—a low, dangerous rumble that makes the candle flames shiver. "You told her to kiss me."

Sior blinks, affecting surprise as he sets down my contracts. "I did nothing of the sort, Adellum. The girl simply found you attractive. Most do, after all, that's why we've built your entire reputation on?—"

"Don't lie to me." My fist crashes down on the desk between us, splitting the wood with a satisfying crack. "She said you arranged it. Said you told her I was available."

His composure wavers for just a moment—a flicker of irritation crossing his face before the mask returns. But I catch the smirk tucked into the corner of his mouth, the glint of satisfaction. He planned this. Of course he did.

"Perhaps I encouraged her a bit," he admits, adjusting his impeccable cuffs. "You need to bind, Adellum. Your reputation as New Solas's most eligible bachelor has run its course. The next phase of your career requires stability, connections. Lilleth offers both."

I laugh, a sound that splinters in the air between us. "My career. Is that what this is about? Or the money I make you?"

Sior sighs like I'm a difficult child. "You've always been dramatic. It's what makes your art compelling, but incredibly tiresome in conversation." He stands, his dark wings folding precisely against his back. "Lilleth's family connections would open doors even I can't. Think of what you could create with their patronage."

"I don't want their fucking patronage." I step closer, towering over him, letting my wings spread to their full span. Glass shatters as they knock over a shelf of expensive trinkets. "And I don't want Lilleth."

"Because of that human girl?" Sior's voice drips with disdain. "Your little garden pet from Arkan's estate? Don't think I don't know, Adellum. I know everything about you."

Something cold and terrible washes through me. My hand finds his throat before I realize I've moved, lifting him until his feet barely touch the ground. His eyes widen in genuine shock as I lean in close.

"Listen carefully," I whisper, feeling his pulse flutter beneath my fingers. "If you ever interfere in my personal life again—if you so much as mention Harmony—I will

destroy everything we've built. I'll walk away from all of it. And you'll be nothing again, just like before I made you rich."

I release him, watching with grim satisfaction as he staggers back against the bookshelf, his immaculate appearance finally disheveled.

"You wouldn't dare," he rasps, rubbing his throat. "You need me."

"Test me and find out." I turn on my heel, leaving him stunned in my wake.

The evening air hits my face as I stalk out of the house, my wings spanning wide to catch the currents. But I don't take flight. Instead, I follow the path down to the riverbank where Harmony sometimes comes through when she can't use the servants' entrance. My heart aches with the need to see her, to wash away the stain of this night with her gentle hands and quiet laugh.

I settle on our boulder—the flat stone where we've spent countless stolen hours, her head on my shoulder as we watch the river flow past. The geode in my pocket digs into my palm as I squeeze it, tracing the rough edges with my thumb.

"Come on, little bird," I murmur to the darkness. "Come find me tonight."

Hours pass. The moons climb and descend. I try to sketch—I always carry charcoal and paper—but the lines won't come. My mind is too full of her. Did something keep her at Arkan's estate? Did Sior somehow interfere?

The eastern sky lightens gradually, painting the river in pale gold. Dawn arrives, mocking me with its beauty when the only sight I crave is Harmony's smile. I haven't spent a night without seeing her in three months. The emptiness of it carves something hollow in my chest.

I stand, muscles stiff from the night's vigil, wings heavy with exhaustion and disappointment. I know she has duties and I shouldn't bother her, but I can't bear the waiting any longer.

"Damn it all." I unfurl my wings and launch myself skyward with one powerful thrust, not caring who sees me leave. The cool morning air rushes past as I soar over New Solas, toward Lord Arkan's estate in the northern district.

My landing in Arkan's courtyard is less than graceful. A pair of his servants scatter, dropping their bundles of linens as I crash into a decorative fountain. Water sprays outward, soaking my wings, but I barely notice. I shake them once, droplets flinging in every direction, before stalking toward the house.

"Where is she?" I demand of a terrified housemaid who's frozen in the doorway.

"My—my lord? Who?—"

"Harmony. The gardener."

The woman's eyes widen. "I haven't seen?—"

I brush past her, every muscle in my body tense as I stride through hallways I've visited countless times before. I find myself in the kitchens, where Harmony often works on rainy days, helping prepare meals with herbs from her garden.

"Has anyone seen Harmony today?" My voice booms over the clattering of morning preparations. The kitchen staff freeze, looking between themselves nervously.

An older woman—Cook—steps forward, wiping her hands on her apron. "She hasn't been in since yesterday morning, Master Vey. Went out to the gardens and never came back for the evening meal."

My heart constricts. Yesterday morning. She never returned.

I turn, heading toward her little cottage that I know she has on the edges of Arkan's land. I slip outside, my wings propelling me forward as I rush to the little cottage.

The door isn't locked. I push it open to find a small, neat room with a narrow bed draped in a handmade quilt. A single shelf holds a collection of smooth river stones, dried flowers, and a charcoal sketch I drew of her months ago. The tiny window overlooks the kitchen gardens where she spends most of her days.

But the wardrobe stands open. Empty.

"No," I breathe, crossing the room in two strides. I run my hands along the bare shelves, finding only dust and a forgotten handkerchief. Her scent still lingers—sun-warmed earth and herbs—but it's fading, mocking me with its impermanence.

A sound from the doorway makes me whirl around, wings flaring defensively.

"Damn it, Adellum, watch those things," Lord Arkan snaps, ducking to avoid a wing-tip. "You're tearing my house apart. What in Solas's name are you doing?"

Arkan—my friend, my patron, my occasional confidant—looks more annoyed than concerned. His own wings, the white of old nobility though they are a little dappled, are folded neatly against his back, perfectly controlled as always.

"Where is she?" I grip his shoulders, not caring about propriety or rank. "Harmony. Where is she?"

Arkan's expression shifts from irritation to confusion. "How should I know? Probably in the gardens, where she belongs."

"She's gone." My voice cracks. "Her things are gone."

Arkan pulls free of my grasp, straightening his jacket with a disapproving frown. "The servants said you were causing a disturbance, but I didn't expect... this." He gestures at me—wild-eyed, soaking wet from the fountain, my wings trembling with barely contained panic.

"Help me find her," I say, hating the pleading note that's crept into my voice.

"Adellum," Arkan says slowly, as if speaking to a child, "she's a servant. Servants sometimes leave. There are dozens more I can hire."

I take a step toward him, electricity crackling around my fingertips. "She's not replaceable."

Something shifts in Arkan's eyes then—understanding, perhaps, or disappointment. He always knew that I was with her, but maybe he never understood how deep it ran.

He sighs heavily. "I told Sior you'd grown too attached. That's why he arranged the meeting with Lilleth, wasn't it? To redirect your... attentions."

The confirmation that Sior had discussed me—discussed Harmony—with Arkan sends a fresh surge of anger through me. I slam my fist into the wall, leaving a dent in the plaster.

"Did either of you think to ask what I wanted?"

Arkan has the grace to look abashed. "We thought we knew. Power, connections, your art reaching new heights?—"

"I don't want any of it without her!" The words tear from my throat, raw and

bleeding. I sink onto the edge of her empty bed, my wings drooping with sudden exhaustion. "Tell me where she is, Arkan. Please."

He hesitates, studying me with a mixture of pity and bewilderment. "I truly don't know. She didn't give notice. You're the first to see she is gone."

"She wouldn't just leave," I insist, but a terrible dread is building in my chest. "Not without telling me."

"Are you sure?" Arkan says carefully. "Did she want you in the way you thought?"

The implication in his tone makes me look up sharply. "What are you talking about?"

Arkan shrugs, uncomfortable now. "I'm just saying she's a human. Maybe you don't really understand her like you thought you did."

I dig my fist into my pocket, clutching the geode so tightly it draws blood. "I have to find her."

I storm out of the cottage.

HARMONY

The zarryn's hooves beat a frantic rhythm beneath me as I urge her faster. The silver mare snorts, tossing her shaggy mane as we crest another hill. My hands are raw against the reins, knuckles white, but I can't slow down. Not yet.

"Just a little farther," I whisper, leaning close to her ear. "Please."

The beast senses my desperation. She's a good animal, better than I deserve after stealing her from Lord Arkan's stable. Another betrayal to add to my growing list.

I didn't plan it—hadn't planned any of this. But when the sun crept toward the horizon and I still hadn't closed my eyes, the walls of my quarters felt like they were crushing inward. The memory of Adellum's lips against that xaphan woman's played on endless repeat behind my eyelids.

It only took three minutes to decide. Five to gather my meager possessions. Another ten to saddle the zarryn while the stable boy snored in the corner.

I glance over my shoulder. New Solas still shimmers in the distance, a glittering jewel against the dawn sky. Golden spires catch the first rays of sunlight, making the xaphan city look even more divine than usual. My chest tightens. Each mile I put between us makes breathing harder, not easier.

"This is the right choice," I tell myself, though the words sound hollow even to my

ears.

The zarryn's pace slows as we reach a crossroads. South leads deeper into human territories. North back to everything I'm running from. For a moment, I hesitate. My practical side—the one that survived an orphaned childhood, that clawed out a respectable position in a noble household—screams to turn around. To find Adellum and demand explanations.

But the raw, bleeding part of me, the part that watched him with another woman, yanks the reins south.

The roads grow narrower as morning stretches into afternoon. The grand paved roads of New Solas give way to packed dirt tracks winding between fields golden with harvest. My shoulders ache. My heart feels like a stone in my chest.

"You're smart," I mutter to myself, brushing sweat-dampened curls from my face. "You're practical." The mantra doesn't help. Nothing helps.

I'm not sure how long I travel. I keep going, farther south, until I'm nearly out of supplies. And then, one morning, a beautiful village emerges from between gently rolling hills, the sun hangs low in the west. The zarryn's silver coat is dark with sweat, her two tails drooping with exhaustion. My own body feels hollowed out, scraped raw.

The village spreads before me like something from a storybook, nestled between fields and a lazy, wide river. Stone cottages with thatched roofs line cobbled streets worn smooth by generations of feet. Lanterns flicker to life as twilight approaches, their warm glow spilling from windows.

I dismount stiffly at the village square, leading the tired zarryn to a trough. My legs nearly buckle beneath me. How many hours in the saddle? I've lost count.

"You look like you've been riding since before the gods woke up," a voice calls.

An older woman approaches, her face lined with sun and laughter. She carries a basket of wildflowers, their scent sweet and heady in the evening air.

"I have," I admit, suddenly conscious of my disheveled appearance—hair escaping its scarf, dirt smudging my cheeks.

"Runaway bride?" she asks, eyes twinkling.

The question hits too close. I look away. "Just... running."

She nods, seeming to understand more than I've said. "Got a place to stay?"

I shake my head.

"Marda takes boarders above her restaurant. First corner past the well." She gestures with weathered hands. "Tell her Elsie sent you. And girl?"

I meet her eyes, startled by the kindness there.

"Whatever you're running from, it won't chase you here. Saufort's good at keeping secrets."

Something in my chest loosens, just slightly. I manage a nod of thanks before leading the zarryn toward the indicated corner.

The village moves at a pace that feels ancient. People nod as I pass, curious but not intrusive. A group of children chase each other across my path, laughing. A man stacks pottery outside his workshop, each piece glazed in colors that mirror the sunset.

For the first time since leaving New Solas, I take a full breath. The air smells of earth and river water, of baking bread and herbs from nearby fields. It smells nothing like the perfumed gardens of Lord Arkan's estate. Nothing like Adellum's paint-stained hands.

I tie the zarryn up so I don't lose all my belongings in one go. As I approach the building, I whisper to myself, "You are brave."

This time, I almost believe it.

I push open the heavy oak door of the restaurant, the scent of herbs and roasting meat wrapping around me like a warm embrace. Inside, long wooden tables line the room, scarred from years of use and glossy with polish. The few patrons—local farmers by the look of them—glance up briefly before returning to their meals.

"Be right with you!" calls a voice from behind a swinging half-door that must lead to the kitchen.

I stand awkwardly, not sure how this will go. The long journey sits heavy in my bones, and all I want is a bed—any bed—and the oblivion of sleep.

The kitchen door swings open and a woman emerges, wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron. She's round and solid-looking, with streaks of gray in her dark hair and laugh lines framing her mouth. Her eyes, sharp and assessing, travel from my dusty boots to my windblown hair.

"Well," she says, crossing her arms. "You look like you've been dragged backward through The Ridge by your ankles."

Despite everything, my lips twitch. "Not quite that bad. A woman named Elsie said you might have a room to let."

"Elsie, hmm?" Her gaze softens slightly. "Old busybody. Always sending me strays."

I bristle. "I can pay." Luckily, I brought all the money I'd saved up. "And I won't be any trouble."

She makes a dismissive sound. "Didn't say you would be." She comes closer, studying me with the practiced eye of someone who's seen more than her share of life. "When's the last time you ate proper? You're skinny as a dreelk stalk."

"I'm fine, really?—"

"That wasn't the question." She cuts me off, turning toward the kitchen. "Sit. I'll bring something. Then we'll talk rooms."

Too exhausted to argue, I sink onto a bench, suddenly aware of the hollow ache in my stomach. The woman—Marda, I assume—returns minutes later with a bowl of fragrant stew and a chunk of dark bread still warm from the oven.

The first spoonful nearly brings tears to my eyes. Rich broth, tender meat, vegetables I can't even name dancing across my tongue.

"Good?" Marda asks, though she clearly knows the answer.

I nod, mouth too full to speak properly.

"So." She settles across from me. "Got a name?"

"Harmony." I hesitate. "Just Harmony."

Something flickers across her face—understanding, perhaps. "Well, Just Harmony, room's yours if you want it. Ten lummi a week."

The price is so reasonable I nearly choke on my bread. "That's... very fair."

"It's tiny," she warns. "Just the attic space above the kitchens. Gets hot in summer."

"I'd like to see it, if I may?"

Marda stands. "Finish eating first. No one leaves my table hungry."

When my bowl is empty—scraped clean with the last of the bread—she leads me through the kitchen to a narrow staircase. The room above is indeed small, with sloping ceilings and a window that looks out over the village. A single bed nestled beneath the eaves, a small washstand, a trunk for belongings. It's simple, bare—and perfect.

"I..." My throat tightens unexpectedly. "I can work, too. To offset the cost. I cook, and I'm good with plants—herbs and such."

Marda's eyebrows rise. "My garden's gone wild this year. Too busy with the restaurant." She studies me again with that penetrating gaze. "You know cooking and gardening, do you?"

"Yes. I worked in a noble's house in New Solas." The words taste bitter. I swallow hard.

"New Solas, eh?" She doesn't push, just nods thoughtfully. "Fine. Room and board for garden work and help in the kitchen three days a week."

Relief floods me. "That's more than fair. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. I work my people hard." But there's warmth beneath her gruffness. "Get some sleep. You look dead on your feet."

After she leaves, I unpack my meager possessions. The room slowly transforms—a scarf draped over the washstand, my small collection of dried herbs lined up on the windowsill, my extra clothes folded neatly in the trunk.

I force myself to smile, to feel pride in this new beginning. This is mine. A foundation stone.

But when darkness falls and the sounds of the restaurant below fade to silence, the walls close in. I curl onto the narrow bed, pulling the blanket tight against the hollow ache in my chest. And then—only then—do I allow the tears to come.

I bury my face in the pillow to muffle the sound as grief breaks free. I weep for the whispered promises, for the future I'd foolishly begun to imagine. For Adellum's laugh, his touch, the way he'd called me "little bird" when no one was listening.

"Never again," I whisper into the darkness, my voice raw. "Never again will I be so foolish. Dreams are for children and fools."

The tears eventually slow, leaving me hollow. Tomorrow I'll be stronger. Tomorrow I'll begin building a life that depends on no one but myself.

10

ADELLUM

I stand at the edge of my balcony, wings tightly folded against my back, watching the sun sink into New Solas like it's drowning. Three weeks. Three weeks since I've heard her laugh, felt her skin against mine, watched her eyes crinkle when she teases me.

Three fucking weeks since Harmony vanished.

I curl my fingers around the pale blue geode in my pocket, its rough edges biting into my palm. The pain feels right. Necessary. The small stone was meant to be her birthday gift, set in silver to match her eyes when they catch the light. Now it's just another reminder of everything I've lost.

Below, torches flicker to life across the city as dusk settles. Somewhere down there, she has to be. Has to.

"You missed another appointment." Sior's voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp as obsidian. He stands in the doorway to my chambers, his dark wings held precisely at the formal angle that's always irritated me—too controlled, too perfect.

I don't bother turning. "Cancel it."

"I already did. Along with the six others you've ignored this week." His footsteps approach, measured and even. "I've spent years building your reputation, and you're

dismantling it stone by stone over some human servant."

The geode cuts deeper as I clench my fist. "Don't."

"This has gone beyond foolishness, Adellum. Lord Merifel is threatening to withdraw his patronage if you don't complete his family portrait by?—"

I whirl around, wings snapping open with enough force to knock over a small table. "I don't give a fuck about Lord Merifel's patronage!"

Sior doesn't flinch. Never flinches. His olive-skinned face remains impassive, those dark eyes calculating as always. "You might not care now, but you will when you're penniless and forgotten."

I laugh, and the sound is hollow even to my own ears. "Forgotten? Everyone's talking about me, aren't they? 'Poor mad Adellum,' 'Fallen so far,' 'Lost his mind like most artists do.' Tell me—which version are you spreading?"

"I'm trying to salvage what's left of your career while you're determined to burn it all down." Sior glances around my chambers, taking in the chaos—canvases slashed, pigments spilled across the floor, sketches of Harmony's face covering every surface. His lip curls. "Your talent is wasted like this."

"My talent." I move past him into my studio, where half-finished commissions gather dust. I pick up a brush, crusted with dried paint. "My fucking talent is the only thing you've ever cared about."

Sior follows me, his wings tucking tight against his back as he navigates the mess. "That's not fair. I raised you up from nothing?—"

"You raised my price tag." I toss the ruined brush aside. "Have you even asked

yourself why she left? Why she'd just disappear without a word?"

"Because humans are fickle creatures who?—"

"Not her." My voice breaks. "Not Harmony."

Sior's expression softens fractionally—the closest thing to sympathy I've seen from him. "I have contacts searching the northern trade routes. If she's left the city, we'll hear something."

For a moment, I almost believe he cares. Then I remember the night before she vanished, how he'd pushed me toward Lilleth, arranged our meeting in the gardens. "Did you say something to her? Is that why she left?"

His face shutters. "I've never even spoken to your little human."

"She has a name."

"A name that's destroying you." He gestures at the chaos surrounding us. "Look at yourself, Adellum. When was the last time you bathed? Ate? Created anything but these obsessive sketches?"

I turn away, back to the balcony and the city below. In the market district, lanterns bloom like fireflies. Tomorrow I'll search there again. And the docks. The western villages. Everywhere.

"I'm going to find her," I say, more to myself than to Sior.

Behind me, he sighs. "And if she doesn't want to be found?"

The question cuts deeper than he knows. I squeeze the geode again, remembering

how Harmony's fingers felt twined with mine. "Then I'll hear it from her lips. Not yours. Not anyone else's. Hers."

When I turn back, Sior is already heading for the door, his wings rigid with frustration. "The Merchant's Guild gala is in three days. You're expected to attend."

"Cancel it."

He pauses, shoulders tense. "Adellum?—"

"Cancel everything."

After he's gone, I unfurl my wings to their full span, feeling the muscles strain after days of keeping them tightly bound. The silver feathers catch the fading light, reminding me of how Harmony used to trace their edges with gentle fingers.

"Where are you, little bird?" I whisper to the empty air. "Why did you fly away from me?"

The city offers no answer, just the endless buzz of streets I'll search again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next—until I find her or there's nothing left of me to search.

I don't remember walking to the river. Don't remember the paths I took or who might have seen me stumbling through the streets of New Solas with a half-empty wine bottle dangling from my fingers. My wings drag behind me like broken things, silver feathers gathering dirt and leaves.

The water glistens beneath the triple moons, reflecting their light in fractured, dancing patterns. This bend in the river—tucked behind a copse of ancient trees with low-hanging branches that brush the water—it's ours. Was ours.

"Harmony," I whisper, testing her name on my tongue. The wine has dulled everything but the ache.

I sink down onto the flat rock where I first brought her, where nervous laughter turned to sighs turned to her body arching beneath mine. The stone still carries the marks of my magic—scorched handprints from when pleasure overwhelmed my control and power sparked from my fingertips as I held myself above her.

"Is this what you wanted?" I say louder, eyes fixed on the water. "To reduce me to this fucking hollow shell?"

The river doesn't answer. Nothing answers these days.

I drink deeply from the bottle, grimacing at the sour taste. Not the fine amerinth I'm accustomed to—just cheap wine I bought from a street vendor who looked at my disheveled appearance and wild eyes with thinly veiled concern.

Magic crackles along my forearms, sparking between my fingers without conscious thought. The loss of control would frighten me if I could feel anything beyond this void inside my chest.

"I touched you here," I say to the empty air, tracing my fingers along the rock. "You laughed when I said I'd been thinking about you for weeks. Remember? You called me a liar." I smile despite myself. "Said no xaphan would waste thoughts on a human girl."

My wings twitch, sending a cascade of loose feathers into the river.

"You were wrong, you know. I'd wasted months of thoughts on you before I ever worked up the courage to bring you here."

The bottle slips from my fingers, rolls toward the water's edge. I don't bother retrieving it.

"HARMONY!" Her name tears from my throat, echoing across the water. My magic flares in response, blue-white energy crackling visibly across my skin, scorching the rock beneath me. "Where are you?"

Golden plumes of power lick up my arms, dancing along my wings. I don't try to control it. Let it burn. Let the entire fucking riverbank burn if it wants to.

"You could have told me to my face." My voice breaks. "If you didn't want me anymore. If I... if I disgusted you somehow. You didn't have to run."

The magic intensifies with my emotion, and I close my eyes, letting it flow. It feels like the only part of me that's still alive—this raw, dangerous power coursing through my veins.

"I would have let you go," I lie, because we both know I would have fought for her. Would have done anything to keep her.

Like I'm doing now.

I shed my shirt, letting it fall to the ground. The cool night air hits my bare chest, but I barely feel it. The wine has me numb everywhere except where this hollow ache lives.

I spread my wings to their full span—fourteen feet of silver-gray feathers that once made Harmony gasp in wonder. Now they're unkempt, some feathers hanging loose, others broken. I haven't groomed them since she left. Haven't cared.

"Look what you've done to me, little bird." I reach for the geode in my pocket, hold it

up to catch the moonlight. "I'm nothing without you."

The magic surges again, stronger this time. Blue-white energy races across my skin, down my torso, along my wings. The air around me crackles, and small stones near my feet rise and hover, caught in the magical current.

I want to scream. Want to tear the city apart stone by stone until I find her.

Instead, I fall to my knees at the river's edge, wings dragged behind me in the dirt. I dip my hands into the cool water, watching my magic dance across its surface like liquid lightning before it sputters out.

"I will find you," I promise, voice raw. I press the geode to my lips. "Even if I have to burn down the world to do it."

HARMONY

I wake before dawn, as always. It's a habit I've started in the few months I've been here. The attic ceiling slopes low over my bed, wood beams catching the first hint of gray light. My small room feels like a nest—snug and mine in a way nothing has ever been. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed and press my palms against my temples, willing the dizziness to pass.

"Just tired," I mutter to myself, the way I have every morning this week.

The floor is cool beneath my bare feet as I splash water on my face from the ceramic basin on my washstand. I twist my hair into a loose braid, wrapping a faded blue scarf around it to keep the curls from escaping while I work. The ritual grounds me, preparing me for another day of focusing on anything but memories.

Outside my window, Saufort is still sleeping. Morning mist clings to the cobblestones, and the distant silhouettes of the golden fields are just visible beyond the village rooftops. I've been here three months now. Long enough that some mornings I wake up without immediately thinking of him .

Not today, though.

I pull on my work dress—a simple brown linen thing with deep pockets—and make my way down the narrow staircase that leads directly to Marda's kitchen. The familiar scents of yeast and hearth ash should comfort me. Instead, my stomach rolls

unpleasantly. I press a hand against the wall, steadying myself.

"Need to sit?" Marda's voice comes from behind me, making me jump.

I straighten quickly. "I'm fine. Just didn't sleep well."

Marda stands with her hands on her hips, gray-streaked hair already tucked beneath a cooking kerchief, eyebrows raised in obvious disbelief. She's the heart of this place—this restaurant, this village—a woman who speaks her mind and loves without apology. I've learned to trust her more in three months than I did most people in a lifetime.

"You said that yesterday. And the day before." She pushes past me, stoking the cooking fire with practiced movements. "The garden needs attention before the heat sets in. Dreelek's bolting early this year."

"I'll get to it right away." Grateful for the escape, I grab my harvesting basket from its hook.

Outside, the kitchen garden stretches in neat, abundant rows. I sink to my knees among the herbs, letting the scent of soil and growing things wash over me. This is where I feel most centered—my hands working as my mind quiets. I begin cutting stems of meadowmint, filling my basket methodically.

An hour passes in peaceful labor until Joss appears at the garden fence, his potter's hands already clay-stained though the day has barely begun.

"Morning," he calls softly. Since my arrival, he's appointed himself as a sort of quiet guardian. "Marda says you're to come in for tea. Not a request, apparently."

I sigh, rubbing dirt from my knees as I stand—too quickly. The garden tilts sideways,

and Joss rushes forward, catching my elbow before I can stumble.

"Whoa there," he says, concern etching his young face. "You alright?"

"Just stood up too fast," I lie, though the dizziness is becoming worryingly familiar.

Back in the kitchen, Marda takes one look at my pallor and pushes a mug of honeyed tea into my hands. "Sit," she orders.

I obey, too tired to argue. The kitchen bustles around me—Tamsin from the smithy collecting breakfast for her and Holt, Eira stopping by to argue about the proper way to prepare brimbark. My new life, constructed so carefully day by day. Safe. Predictable. Nothing like the secret, stolen moments with Adellum that consumed me for months.

Three weeks ago, I missed my monthly bleeding. I told myself it was stress, the change of place. But deep down, I knew.

"Harmony." Marda's voice cuts through my thoughts. The kitchen has emptied, and she sits across from me, her eyes knowing. "Three mornings you've nearly fainted. You pick at your food like it offends you. And yesterday I saw you step away from the stove when I was rendering fat because the smell made you green."

I stare into my tea, watching ripples form as my hands tremble slightly.

"You're not sick, girl." Marda reaches across the table, her warm, rough hand closing around my wrist. "You're carrying."

The words hang between us, making real what I've been avoiding. My free hand moves unconsciously to my still-flat stomach.

"I know," I whisper, tears pricking behind my eyes.

"The one you left?" she asks, though it's barely a question. I've never spoken his name here, but Marda sees too much.

I nod, a single tear escaping before I can catch it. "What am I going to do?" My voice breaks on the question.

Marda's grip on my wrist tightens reassuringly. "First, you're going to eat something that won't turn your stomach. Then you're going to rest. And then—" her voice softens, "—then we'll figure it out. You're not alone in this, Harmony."

Another tear falls, then another. I've been so careful not to cry since arriving in Saufort, afraid that once started, I might never stop.

"He doesn't know," I say, the words cutting like glass. "And he can't ever."

Not now that I know who Adellum really is. He used me, broke me. I won't dare give him the chance to do that to our child, not when I know he is really a cruel, manipulative bastard.

A wave of nausea hits me hard and fast. I stumble out the kitchen door, nearly knocking over a stack of pans in my haste, barely making it to the small herb patch before my stomach heaves.

"Oh gods," I gasp between retches, tears streaming down my face unbidden. The morning dew soaks through the thin fabric at my knees as I brace myself against the cool earth.

It's impossible. It's undeniable. A tiny life is growing inside me—and I know with painful certainty whose child it must be. Adellum's child. The thought sends another

wave of nausea through me, though my stomach has nothing left to give.

Behind me, I hear the soft creak of the kitchen door. Marda approaches with silent footsteps, placing a cool cloth on the back of my neck. She doesn't speak, just kneels beside me in the dirt, one sturdy hand rubbing circles on my back.

"What will I do?" The words escape in a broken whisper. "How will I raise a xaphan-blooded child alone?" My hands curl into the soil, fingers digging into the soft earth as if seeking anchor. "A half-breed child with wings that might never fully form. Or worse—what if they look just like him?"

Marda's hand stills on my back. "First, you breathe. Next, we see Ansel."

I look up at her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "The healer? I already know I'm?—"

"You need proper care now. No arguments." Her tone brooks no resistance, but her eyes are gentle. "Can you stand?"

My legs feel hollow, but I nod and let her help me to my feet. The world tilts slightly, then rights itself.

"Marda, I can't—the breakfast rush?—"

"Joss and Tamsin can handle the morning. You're more important."

The walk to Ansel's cottage on the edge of the village feels eternal. Every step forces me to acknowledge what my body already knows. I'm carrying Adellum's child—the man who casually kissed another woman while claiming to love only me. The same man whose silver eyes haunted my dreams for months. My hands tremble, and I tuck them into my pockets to hide them from Marda's watchful gaze.

Ansel's cottage smells of dried herbs and river water. The taciturn healer greets us with a raised eyebrow but says nothing as Marda explains why we've come.

"Sit," he instructs, pointing to a wooden chair near his work table.

I perch on the edge while he mixes something in a small stone mortar, his movements precise and economical. Half-nymph blood gives his skin a faint greenish undertone in the right light, and his eyes—eerily knowing—study my face.

"How long since your last bleeding?" he asks without preamble.

"About three weeks late."

He nods, continuing to grind herbs. "Any dreams? Unusual ones?"

The question catches me off guard. "What do dreams have to do with?—"

"Nymph women dream of flowing water when they carry. Human women often report vivid colors." His eyes flick up to mine. "Xaphan offspring sometimes announce themselves differently."

I swallow hard, remembering the strange dream that's recurred three times this week—of flying over Saufort, the village streets traced in glowing gold below me.

"I've dreamt of flying," I admit quietly.

Ansel's expression doesn't change, but something flickers in his eyes. "Lie back, please."

I recline in the chair as he places warm hands over my abdomen, closing his eyes. A gentle warmth flows from his palms, not unpleasant but strange—like sunlight

filtering through water. After a long moment, he steps back.

"About four months along, I'd say." Nausea hits me again for a different reason now. I didn't expect to be that far along.

Ansel turns away, mixing the ground herbs with liquid in a small vial. "This will help with the sickness. Three drops in tea each morning."

"Then it's true?" The question sounds foolish even to my ears.

Ansel gives me a rare, sympathetic smile. "Yes. The child grows strong already."

Marda squeezes my shoulder. "Thank you, Ansel."

He presses the tonic into my hand, his fingers brushing mine. "Come see me in two weeks. Sooner if the dreams change."

The walk back through the village passes in a blur. Marda talks quietly about practical things—shifts at the restaurant, foods that might settle my stomach, the need for rest. I nod mechanically, the vial of tonic clutched in my palm like a talisman.

That night, after declining dinner despite Marda's protests, I curl beneath the patchwork quilts in my tiny attic room. Rain patters against the slanted roof, a gentle rhythm that would normally lull me to sleep. Instead, I lie awake, watching shadows shift across the ceiling beams.

Fear still clutches at me with cold fingers. I have nothing to offer a child—no family, no security beyond what I've cobbled together in these past months. And a half-xaphan child will face prejudices I can't protect them from.

Slowly, I press a hand to my flat belly, trying to imagine the tiny spark of life

growing there. Something shifts inside me—not physically, but emotionally—like the first crack in a frozen river.

I feel the faintest flicker of something new: hope.

"Hello, little bird," I whisper, using Adellum's endearment without thinking. The irony of it strikes me, and a strangled laugh escapes my lips. Will our child have wings? Will they soar like their father?

The thought of Adellum brings a fresh wave of pain, but underneath it something else stirs. This child is mine. Mine to protect, mine to love. Whatever else Adellum took from me, he's given me this—unwittingly or not.

HARMONY

Time passes like water through my fingers, days bleeding into weeks, months into years. I mark the seasons by the growing swell of my belly at first, then by my daughter's first smile, her first steps, her first words.

The birth itself is something I both try to remember and forget. Pain like lightning strikes through my body, Marda's steady hands gripping mine as Ansel wipes sweat from my brow. The tiny room above the kitchen becomes a battleground where I fight for both our lives.

"Push, Harmony!" Ansel's voice, for once urgent rather than measured. "I can see the head."

"I can't," I sob, exhausted beyond measure after eighteen hours of labor. "I can't do it anymore."

Marda's weathered face appears above mine, her gray eyes fierce. "You can and you will. This child needs you. Now, push!"

Something primal takes over, and with a guttural scream that tears from somewhere deep inside me, I bear down one final time. The relief is immediate and overwhelming as my daughter slides into Ansel's waiting hands. For one terrifying moment, silence fills the room—and then comes a furious, indignant wail.

"She's got a temper," Marda laughs, tears tracking down her cheeks. "Just like her mother."

They place her on my chest, this tiny, red-faced stranger with a shock of pale blond hair. My arms curl around her instinctively, and when she opens her eyes to look at me for the first time, my heart stops.

Adellum's eyes stare back at me—clear green, impossibly bright, rimmed with those distinctive thick lashes. I search her tiny back frantically, but there are no wing buds, no sign of her father's heritage beyond those startling eyes.

"Beautiful," Ansel murmurs, his usual stoicism momentarily forgotten. "What will you call her?"

I think of running water, of safe harbors after storms. "Brooke," I whisper, pressing my lips to her forehead. "Her name is Brooke."

As the years pass, Brooke grows strong and wild, her curly pale-blond hair catching sunlight like polished gold, her small hands perpetually dirty from digging in Eira's garden. She's mischievous and stubborn, quick to laugh and quicker to question everything around her.

By the time she's four, she's become the heart of Saufort, whispered about and adored in equal measure. I catch the villagers watching her sometimes, their eyes moving from her striking face to mine, questions hovering unspoken.

I'm placing fresh-baked bread in baskets one morning when Tamsin arrives for her daily order, Brooke perched on her hip. My daughter's face is smeared with what looks like berry juice, and she's regaling Tamsin with a story about a thalivern she saw in Eira's garden.

"And it had purple wings, Mama! Purple! Not blue like the ones yesterday!" She wriggles down from Tamsin's arms and runs to me, throwing her arms around my legs.

"Is that so?" I laugh, smoothing her wild curls. "And did Eira let you chase it?"

"She said I'd scare it if I did." Brooke's nose wrinkles. "But I just wanted to say hello."

I exchange a smile with Tamsin over Brooke's head, then notice something odd—tiny golden sparks dancing from my daughter's fingertips as she gestures excitedly. Not for the first time.

"Brooke," I say carefully, capturing her hands in mine. "Remember what we talked about? About keeping our sparkles inside when we're excited?"

Her eyes—so like her father's it still steals my breath sometimes—widen. "Sorry, Mama. I forgot." She concentrates hard, her little face scrunching with effort, and the sparks fade. The magic manifestations started when she was three, small bursts of golden light when her emotions run high.

Tamsin shifts uncomfortably. "I should get back to Holt. The order for New Solas is due tomorrow."

The name of the city sends a chill through me, as it always does. New Solas, where Adellum still lives, unaware of the daughter who carries his eyes.

"Did her father have magic?" Tamsin asks quietly after Brooke skips outside to look for more thalivern.

I stiffen, my hands automatically kneading dough with more force than necessary. "I

don't talk about him."

"I know, but—the sparks, they're getting more noticeable. People are wondering." She fidgets with her apron. "There are rumors, Harmony. About who—what—he might have been."

I know the whispers. They started not long after Brooke was born, when her unusual eyes couldn't be ignored. I let them think what they want—that I fled from some xaphan who forced himself on me. That my master raped me and I escaped to where I could finally be safe.

It's easier than the truth: that I loved him, that I gave myself willingly, that I still wake sometimes with the phantom touch of his fingers on my skin. That my heart still aches with the loss of Adellum, that he was never truly the man I thought he was.

And then hatred burns in my chest at the way he used me, tore me apart while he treated me like all xaphan treat humans, and I'm able to shove him out of his mind.

"Let them wonder." My voice is harder than I intend.

Tamsin's expression softens. "No one blames you. Everyone knows what those creatures are capable of. We're just grateful you escaped."

The bread dough tears under my fingers. If only they knew how I'd run to him, not from him. How eagerly I'd welcomed his touch, believed his lies.

"He's not part of our lives," I say firmly. "He never will be."

Later that evening, as I tuck Brooke into bed in our small room above the restaurant—expanded now with Holt's help to include her own little sleeping alcove—she asks the question I've been dreading for years.

"Why don't I have a papa like Joss says he had?"

My heart stutters in my chest. I've known this moment would come, have rehearsed answers that are gentle half-truths. "You do have a father, little one. But he... he travels and lives far away. So we stay here, where you're happy and safe, and he lets me love you enough for the both of us."

"Will he ever come back?" Her lower lip trembles.

"He can't," I say softly, gathering her close. "But that's okay. You have me, Brooke. You'll always have me."

She lets me hug her tight and tuck her in. But as I pull her curtains closed to section off her room, my chest aches. I know it will only get harder to face my past with Adellum as time goes on.

I know it's only a matter of time before Brooke's gift becomes impossible to hide. Every mother thinks her child exceptional—but mine truly is, in ways that terrify me.

This morning, I find her crouched in Eira's garden, surrounded by a circle of violet midsummer bellflowers that weren't blooming yesterday. She's whispering to them, her small fingers hovering just above their petals, which seem to strain toward her touch like sunflowers following light.

"Brooke." I keep my voice even despite the panic fluttering in my chest. "What are you doing, little bird?"

She looks up, beaming, golden sparks dancing between her fingertips. "Making them pretty for you! Look, Mama!" She waves her hand and the flowers bob their heads as though caught in a breeze that doesn't exist.

I glance around quickly, relieved to see only Eira watching from her cottage doorway, her ancient face impassive. The old earth nymph has known about Brooke's abilities from the beginning, likely sensed them before I did.

"They're beautiful," I say, kneeling beside her. "But remember what we talked about?"

Her smile dims. "Magic is private."

"That's right." I brush dirt from her knees, tucking a wild curl behind her ear. "Just like bathing or changing clothes. Some things we only do when we're alone or with family."

"But why?" She frowns, lower lip jutting out. "Joss can make his clay move without touching it, and everyone says it's amazing."

I sigh. Joss's elemental magic is different—he's otherwise human and it's just a touch of earth magic. What flows through Brooke's veins is far more dangerous.

"Joss is older," I say, knowing it's a weak explanation. "And his magic is... safer."

"Is my magic bad?" Her eyes—so like her father's—widen with hurt.

"No, sweet one. Your magic is beautiful." I cup her face. "But it's special. So special that some people might want to take you away to study it." It's as close to the truth as I can get.

Her tiny fingers curl around my wrist. "I don't want to go away."

"And you won't." I press my forehead to hers. "That's why we practice being careful."

Despite these conversations, hiding Brooke's abilities becomes harder each day. She charms an extra sweetroll from Tam the baker with nothing but a smile, though I know it's the faint iridescence in her eyes that truly persuades him.

She coaxes raindrops to dance in midair when she thinks no one's watching. Once, when she fell from the apple tree beside Marda's restaurant, I swear she floated for a heartbeat before landing.

This afternoon, she sits at a table in the restaurant, drawing with the charcoal sticks Holt made her, while I prepare for the evening meal. Marda works beside me, her capable hands deftly chopping dreelk greens.

"She made Eira's potted brimbark bloom this morning," Marda murmurs, her voice pitched low. "In the dead of winter."

I nearly slice my finger. "Did anyone else see?"

"Only me." Marda's eyes find mine. "But Ansel was asking about her yesterday. Said he noticed a glow when he treated her hand after that thorn scratch."

Fear coils in my stomach. "What did you tell him?"

"That he works too hard and sees magic where there's only childhood wonder." She sets down her knife. "But he's not a fool, Harmony. None of us are."

I turn away, blinking hard. "I don't know what to do."

Marda's hand settles on my shoulder. "We protect her. All of us."

My throat tightens. "Why would you risk yourselves for us?"

"Because you're one of us now." Her voice is gruff with emotion. "And that child?—"

"Mama! Look what I made!" Brooke's voice cuts through our conversation as she barrels toward me, brandishing her drawing. It shows what appears to be our little family—me, Brooke, Marda, Eira, the Ferrises, Ansel, and Joss—all standing in front of the restaurant. Above our heads float tiny specks that look suspiciously like golden sparks.

"It's beautiful, love." I take the paper, noticing how the charcoal seems to shimmer faintly where she's pressed hardest.

"I put in our sparkles," she whispers, eyes gleaming with conspiracy. "But it's just a picture, so it's okay, right?"

"Of course." I swallow the lump in my throat. "Why don't you take this to show Eira? I bet she'd love to see herself in your art."

As she skips away, Marda sighs. "That child glows from the inside out, Harmony. It's not just magic—it's her spirit. The whole village sees it."

"And loves her for it," I say, watching my daughter through the window as she races across the square, trailing faint golden light that most would mistake for sunshine.

"Yes," Marda agrees. "But love may not be enough to keep her safe forever."

ADELLUM

I squeeze the blue geode in my pocket until its jagged edges draw blood. The pain is welcome—a small, bright clarity in the fog I've lived in for five years. Five years of searching, of chasing ghosts and rumors. Five years without her.

Some people say it's been five years without my sanity.

I think that's what happens when a part of your soul is ripped away and you are desperate to find it. And I would do anything to find her.

"Magnificent work, truly magnificent," the gallery owner purrs, circling my latest piece. "So much... anguish. The collectors will fight over this one."

I stare at the canvas without really seeing it. Swirls of crimson and black threaded with silver—a storm with no center. Like me. I've created seventeen pieces in this series. Each one darker than the last.

"When does the exhibition open?" I ask, my voice flat.

"Three days. And we've already had inquiries from Lord Verran and Lady Nimue. They're both desperate to add to their collections." The gallery owner—Merrick—adjusts his spectacles and peers at me. "You look terrible, by the way. Are you sleeping at all?"

I turn away from him, flexing my wings slightly. They've grown dull these past years, the once-glossy feathers now ashen at the tips. "Sleep is overrated."

"Genius requires rest, Adellum. Even tortured genius."

"I'm not a genius. I'm just—" I pause, uncertain how to finish that sentence. What am I now? A shell. A shadow. A man consumed by a single purpose.

"You're the most sought-after artist in New Solas," Merrick says. "Your work commands prices that would make emperors weep."

"And yet," I murmur, "I can't find one human woman."

Merrick's expression softens with pity. I hate it. "Still searching for your muse?"

My hand tightens around the crystal in my pocket. Her birthday present. Five birthdays come and gone, and I still carry it everywhere, its rough edges a constant reminder of what I lost.

"She wasn't my muse," I say. "She was my everything ." The word is rough and raw, coming out so tortured that I think it's a glimpse to the turmoil inside of me.

I leave without waiting for his response, pushing through the gallery's ornate doors and into the crisp mountain air. New Solas sprawls below, a gleaming tumor of wealth and privilege perched on the mountainside. I spread my wings and launch myself into the empty sky, letting the sharp currents carry me away from the suffocating city.

Sior is waiting when I return to our estate at dusk. His dark wings are folded neatly behind his back, his expression somewhere between concern and exasperation.

"You missed your meeting," he says without preamble.

I brush past him. "Send him a painting."

"He doesn't want a painting. He wants to commission a sculpture for his new wing." Sior follows me into the studio, his footsteps measured and precise. "Adellum, this is the third appointment you've missed this month."

I thought he'd learned years ago to stop setting up appointments I'd miss. But I guess we both never fucking learn.

I pick up a brush, dipping it in swirling blue. "I was following a lead."

Sior's sigh carries the weight of five years of disappointment. "Another false trail? What was it this time? A woman who sounded like her? A flash of curly hair in a market?"

"Someone saw a human woman matching her description in Ecrin." Not that she was. I spent days ripping apart that village until I think the humans there were rallying to kill the monster that had wandered in.

"Saufort?" Sior snorts. "That dreary little fishing village? What would she possibly be doing there?"

I whirl on him, brush dripping blue onto the marble floor. "Hiding from me, obviously."

"Adellum." His voice softens into something almost kind. It's worse than his anger. "It's been five years. She's not hiding. She's gone. And you need to accept that before you destroy yourself—and everything we've built."

"Everything we've built?" I laugh, the sound cracked and hollow. "You built an empire on my talent. I built nothing but dreams that turned to ash."

"You're being dramatic."

"I'm being honest. Something you might try sometime." I turn back to the blank canvas, already seeing the storm of colors I'll pour onto it.

Sior is quiet for a long moment. When he speaks again, his voice is careful. "What if you find her, and she doesn't want to be found? What if she left because she wanted to leave?"

The thought cuts deeper than the crystal ever could. I don't answer him. Instead, I drag the brush across the canvas, a violent streak of blue like a scream.

"I need her," I say finally, my voice barely audible. "If she doesn't want me, she can tell me herself. But I need to know she's alive. I need to know I didn't dream her."

The truth is I don't care why she left or where she is. I will find her. And then I am never fucking losing her again.

"Are you at least going to Lezer still? The golem market?—"

"I leave in the morning," I answer on a rough growl. I'm starting to spiral, as I've grown prone to when I think about Harmony for too long.

So basically I am always caught in a long, downward spiral.

Sior shakes his head and leaves me alone with my canvas, my obsession, my prayer. Each stroke is her name. Each color a memory—the gold flecks in her hazel eyes, the sun-brown of her skin, the dark chocolate of her curls.

I push my zarryn harder than I should through the torrential downpour. The creature's silver coat is slick with rain, its two tails dragging in the mud as it huffs in protest. Lightning cracks open the sky, and my mount rears, nearly throwing me from the saddle.

"Fuck!" I grip the reins tighter, my wings instinctively spreading to catch my balance before I force them closed again beneath my sodden cloak. "Easy. Easy ."

But the zarryn isn't having it. The beast has been temperamental since we left New Solas, but now it plants its hooves in the mud and refuses to move another step down the flooded road. I could force it—I've done worse things lately—but exhaustion seeps through me like the rain through my clothes.

I scan the dreary landscape, squinting through sheets of water. The lights of a village flicker in the valley below, barely visible through the storm. Not where I was headed. Not even close. I'd meant to push south to Lezer and then maybe go even farther toward Mor'ghed, thinking maybe I could find some peace among the dybbuks. At least they understand what it's like to be haunted.

"Fine," I mutter to the zarryn, tugging its reins toward the village. "We'll shelter for the night."

The path down to the village is slick with mud, forcing me to dismount and lead the beast by hand. By the time we reach the first cobblestone streets, I'm soaked through, filthy, and in a fouler mood than when I started. Though when am I not in a foul mood?

It's hard to not be when my chest feels like it's perpetually caving in.

The village is quiet despite the early evening hour, most sensible folk driven indoors by the weather. Quaint little buildings line narrow streets, their windows glowing

with warm light that only makes me feel colder. This place reeks of contentment. Of settled lives and simple pleasures. Everything I've lost.

A wooden sign swings violently in the wind—an inn, thank the gods. I tie the zarryn beneath the awning, not caring if the innkeeper objects. The creature shakes itself, splattering mud in a wide arc.

"Ungrateful beast," I mutter, pulling my hood lower to shield my face. The last thing I need is to be recognized. My reputation precedes me these days, and not the artistic acclaim Sior loves to tout. No, it's the other whispers that follow me now. Unhinged. Dangerous. Obsessed . All very true.

I turn toward the inn's door, then stop. Across the small village square, golden light spills onto wet cobblestones from the open door of what looks to be a restaurant. Someone is kneeling just outside that doorway, a cloth in hand, wiping at a spill despite the rain.

A woman.

Her back is to me, but I'd know those curves anywhere, burned as they are into my memory. She's wearing a simple dress, sleeves rolled up despite the chill. And her hair—that impossible hair—is piled atop her head, a few curls escaping to frame her face as she turns slightly.

The world stops spinning. The rain freezes in mid-air. My heart forgets to beat.

"Harmony," I whisper, the name torn from my throat.

She hasn't seen me. She's still bent over, wiping at whatever has spilled, her movements quick and efficient. She's curvier than I remember, looking absolutely fucking perfect. Still radiating that quiet strength that drew me to her from the first

moment.

I stare, blinking, wondering if I'll wake from this dream. If I'm still caught in a waking nightmare. I waver in indecision as I stare at her, wondering what to do.

She's here. I've found her.

And now that I have, I will not fucking let her go again.

ADELLUM

I 've become a shadow, a whisper on the edges of this village. For two days, I've watched her—my Harmony, alive and whole, moving through this sleepy hamlet as if she belongs here. As if she's found peace without me.

A better man would let her have it. But me? I'd become so fucking twisted without her that I was determined to snatch it up and keep it, keep her and everything she found buried deep beneath my skin where she belongs.

The innkeeper, a stooped, sour-faced woman with hands like gnarled roots, took my money with narrowed eyes.

"Not a word about me," I told her, pressing extra novas into her palm. "To anyone."

"Your business is your own," she replied, but the way she looked at my wings told me exactly what she thought of xaphan business in her village. "Room's at the top of the stairs. Meals extra."

I barely use the room. Sleep is still a distant memory, especially now with Harmony so close I can almost taste her on the air. Instead, I haunt the village like a specter, keeping to shadows and alleyways, watching her from corners and rooftops with wings tucked tight against my back.

She works at a restaurant—a homey place that seems to be the heart of this backwater

village. I perch on a rooftop across the square, watching as she moves through her days.

Harmony looks different. Softer, somehow. Her body has filled out, curves where once there were angles, a fullness to her that makes my hands itch to trace those new contours. Her hair is longer too, wild curls often contained beneath a scarf as she works. But it's her eyes that have changed the most—still that mesmerizing hazel-green flecked with gold, but now guarded, cautious. The easy openness I remember is gone.

What happened to you, little bird?

On the first morning, I watch her open the restaurant, sweeping the front step in the pale dawn light, her movements efficient and practiced. A woman—older, with iron-gray hair and a commanding presence—joins her, and their voices drift across the empty square.

"Market day," the older woman says. "We'll need extra bread."

Harmony nods, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "I started the dough last night. And I've pickled those dreelek greens you wanted."

"Good girl." The woman—the owner, I assume—squeezes Harmony's shoulder. "What would I do without you?"

Harmony's smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Probably sleep more."

I squeeze the geode in my pocket until my palm throbs. Five years she's been here, building a life without me, while I tore the world apart looking for her. The rage burns low in my gut, but beneath it lies something worse—fear. Fear that she never wanted to be found.

Not that it will stop me. Nothing will stop me from getting to her.

By midday, the restaurant bustles with locals. I move closer, finding a shadowed alcove between buildings where I can hear the chatter spilling through open windows.

"Harmony!" a man's voice calls out. "These quillnash cakes are better than my mother's, and I'll be damned if I ever admit that to her face."

Her laugh—gods, her laugh—floats through the air, lighter than I remember, but still unmistakably hers. "Your secret's safe with me, Holt."

I peer around the edge of the building, catching just a glimpse of her as she serves a plate to a ruddy-faced farmer. She moves with grace, smiling and nodding as she weaves between tables. But there's a guardedness to her, a careful distance even as she chats and serves. She's built walls I never saw before.

The evening brings a softer rhythm to the village. I follow Harmony as she leaves the restaurant, carrying a small basket of what looks like kitchen scraps. She walks to a modest garden plot behind the building, where neat rows of vegetables grow in tidy lines. Even in the fading light, I can see the care she's taken with this patch of earth—so like her, to coax life from the soil with those gentle hands.

She kneels among the plants, those same hands now burying scraps beneath the soil. Her lips move silently as she works—talking to the plants? Singing, perhaps? I strain to hear, but I'm too far away.

"There," she says finally, audibly. "That should keep you fed through the week."

I nearly step forward then—nearly reveal myself—but something stops me. The vulnerability in her posture, perhaps. The peace in her face as she looks up at the darkening sky.

I've never seen her alone like this, truly alone. In New Solas, she was always surrounded—by other servants, by expectations, by the weight of her station. Here, she seems... free. And the thought tears at me, that freedom might mean freedom from me.

On the second day, I notice something that turns my blood to ice.

She's not alone after all.

A child—a little girl with wild curls like Harmony's but eyes that strike me with their familiar silver—darts from the back door, flinging herself against Harmony's legs.

"Mama! Mama, look what I made!"

I freeze, feeling as if I've been struck by lightning. The breath tears from my lungs in a sharp, painful gasp.

A child. Harmony has a child.

The little girl clings to Harmony's legs, her small body practically vibrating with excitement as she holds up some crude creation—a clay figure, I think, though it's hard to make out from my vantage point. What isn't hard to see are those eyes—brilliant silver, like mine, like looking into a mirror. But they're set in a face that looks so much like Harmony, with skin several shades darker than mine, curls wilder than mine ever was.

"What's this?" Harmony crouches down, taking the little sculpture with careful hands.

"Oh, Brooke, it's beautiful! Is it a lunox?"

"No, Mama! It's a zarryn! Joss showed me how to make the tails." The child—Brooke—gives an exasperated sigh far too adult for her tiny body. "See the

two tails?"

I count back in my head. Five years since Harmony vanished. This child can't be more than four. The timing... the timing could fit. But my mind rebels against the possibility, already building walls around the hope before it can take root and destroy me all over again.

She can't be mine. She looks too much like Harmony to really tell. And where are her wings? I search the child's back, but there's no sign of even the smallest nubs that would mark a xaphan offspring. Not mine, then. Which means Harmony found someone else. Quickly.

The thought burns through me like acid, eating away what little sanity I've managed to preserve these past five years—which is honestly nonexistent. I'm just a mad man being driven further insane.

Harmony's laughter drifts through the evening air. "Of course it's a zarryn. I see it now." She tucks a curl behind Brooke's ear, a gesture so tender it makes my chest ache. "Did you thank Joss for teaching you?"

Who the fuck is Joss?

Someone who I have an itch to fucking kill now.

"Uh-huh." Brooke nods, bouncing on her toes. "He says I'm the best clay-thrower he's ever seen for someone my age."

"Well, he'd know." Harmony's voice carries that unmistakable thread of pride that only belongs to a mother. "Let's put him somewhere safe to dry, shall we? Then you can help me pick some brimbark for dinner."

I watch, transfixed, as they move through the garden together, the little girl chattering endlessly, Harmony responding with infinite patience. There's an ease between them, a rhythm that speaks of years together, of routines well-established. A life built.

A life that doesn't include me.

Magic thrums in the air around them—no, around the child specifically. I can feel it even from here, a low vibration that makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. The girl has power. Untrained, wild, but undeniably there.

Human magic is rare, but not unheard of. Whoever fathered her must have had abilities.

But as the child turns, laughing at something Harmony said, I catch a glimpse of golden sparks dancing from her fingertips when she points excitedly at something in the garden. Gold. Not the earthy brown of human magic, nor the green of nymphs. Gold like fire. Gold like lightning.

Gold like xaphan magic.

I squeeze the geode in my pocket so hard I feel it cut into my palm. The pain grounds me, keeps me from launching into the air and flying down to them right now.

Logic tells me this child can't be mine. She lacks wings, looks nothing like me except perhaps those eyes, and Harmony left me. But logic has been my enemy for five years now. Logic told me Harmony was gone forever. Logic told me to give up the search and bind with Lilleth.

Fuck logic.

The girl is Harmony's daughter. That makes her mine in all the ways that matter.

They both are. They have always been, from the moment I first saw Harmony in Arkan's garden, from the moment this child drew breath.

I will not lose them again.

Sliding deeper into the shadows, I watch as Harmony leads her daughter inside, both of them carrying small baskets of vegetables. The restaurant door closes behind them, and I wait, wings pressed painfully against my back, the hunger to follow them so strong it makes my body shake.

Soon. But not yet. First, I need to understand this life she's built. Find its weaknesses. Find my way in.

HARMONY

I wipe my forehead with the back of my wrist, careful not to smear flour across my face despite the heat making my skin slick with sweat. The kitchen windows are thrown open, but the summer afternoon hangs heavy and motionless, refusing to stir even a hint of breeze through the restaurant.

"Marda, I swear the gods are trying to cook us alive today." I punch down the bread dough with more force than necessary. "If this weather doesn't break soon, I'll have to start serving the food raw."

Marda's laugh rolls through the kitchen like distant thunder. "Been five summers in Saufort, and you still complain like a newcomer." She hefts a pot of stew onto the counter with arms that never seem to tire. "Heat like this means good business. Everyone too lazy to cook at home."

I smile despite myself. Five years. Five years of safety, of building something resembling a life, of watching Brooke grow from a squalling infant into the fierce little storm of a girl playing in the garden behind the restaurant.

Through the back door, I can see her crouched beside Joss, their heads bent together over a lump of clay. Her pale blond curls catch the sunlight, so much like her father's that sometimes it feels like a knife between my ribs. But today, I push the thought away.

"Mama! Look what Joss showed me!" Brooke bursts through the door, proudly displaying a misshapen clay bowl with uneven edges. Her silver eyes shine, another inheritance I try not to dwell on. "It's for your herbs!"

"It's beautiful, little love." I kneel to her level, genuinely impressed by the care in her small fingerprints pressed into the wet clay. "We'll put it on the windowsill when it's fired."

Her smile could light the darkest corner of Saufort. Four years old and already so determined to make her mark on the world.

"Harmony, table six needs another round of blackberry tea." Marda hands me a tray. "And Tam's gone and upset Eira again. Something about her dreelk being too bitter for his pies."

I roll my eyes. "Those two need to either fight it out or kiss already."

"I heard that!" Tam calls from the dining room, but there's a smile in his voice.

The afternoon drifts by in the rhythm I've come to love—the clink of plates, the hum of conversation, Brooke's laughter as she moves between tables, charming coins from regular customers with her stories. My little entrepreneur.

It happens when I'm balancing three plates of roasted zarryn and dreelk stew. A crash from the corner, followed by Brooke's voice, higher and tighter than usual.

"It's MINE! I made it!"

I turn to see her face flushed crimson, tiny fists clenched at her sides, facing off against Tam's grandson who holds the clay bowl above his head, just out of her reach.

"Brooke," I call sharply, setting down the dishes. "We don't yell inside."

But something's different. The air around her seems to vibrate, a static charge raising the fine hairs on my arms. I've seen this before—rare moments when emotion surges through her too powerfully to contain. Magic. Her father's magic.

"Give it BACK!" she screams.

The clay bowl flies from the boy's hand—not falling, but shooting across the room as if thrown. Glass shatters. A woman shrieks. And suddenly every plate on every table begins to rattle.

"Brooke!" My voice is swallowed by the chaos as cups slide off tables, herbs wilt in their pots along the windowsill, their leaves curling and blackening before my eyes. A chair topples backward. Someone screams.

I push through the suddenly panicked crowd, heart hammering against my ribs. This is what I've feared since the first golden spark danced from her infant fingers—exposure, discovery, the village turning on us when they realize what she is. What lives in her blood.

"Everyone stay calm!" I shout, but Brooke's magic feeds on the panic, growing stronger. The windows rattle in their frames. A clay pitcher explodes, sending shards and water flying.

I reach for her, but the air around her feels wrong—thick and charged with energy I don't understand and can't control. Her eyes have gone luminous, silver light bleeding from them.

"Brooke, sweetheart, you need to breathe." My voice shakes. "Look at mama, focus on?—"

A dark figure steps between us, moving with impossible grace through the chaos. Broad shoulders block my view for a moment, and then I hear it—a voice I've spent five years trying to forget, deep and melodic, as he murmurs something, kneeling in front of Brooke. I feel the shift of his magic, magic that's touched me so tenderly on cold nights, and I know he's counteracting hers.

The rattling stops. The air settles. The light fades from Brooke's eyes, leaving her small and suddenly exhausted.

And the figure straightens, gathering my daughter into his arms with stunning ease, massive gray wings folding slightly to cradle her against his chest. Wings I once traced with wandering fingertips in the dark.

"There now, little bird," Adellum says, his silver eyes—the exact match to our daughter's—scanning Brooke's face with naked wonder. "That's quite a storm you've got inside you."

The world tilts beneath my feet. Adellum. Here. Holding our daughter.

"You're tired yourself out," he continues, his voice softer than I remember, one large hand gently smoothing Brooke's wild curls. "Magic that strong takes practice to control."

Brooke blinks up at him, confusion mingling with curiosity instead of fear. "You made it stop hurting."

"I did." His smile is small but genuine, the one I used to coax from him in private moments, not the dazzling mask he wore for his admirers. "It's a trick I learned when I was not much older than you."

My heart hammers so loudly I'm sure everyone in the silent restaurant can hear it.

Five years of running. Five years of building walls around our life. And now he's here, my nightmare and the father of my child, looking at Brooke like she's the answer to every question he's ever asked.

I can't move. My muscles lock in place, frozen as I stare at the impossible tableau before me—Adellum cradling my daughter like she's the most precious thing in the world, and Brooke's tiny hand resting trustingly against his chest. The chest I once pressed my ear to, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart.

I wonder if she can feel the connection they must share, the magic calling to each other.

But this isn't the Adellum I knew. This isn't the man who whispered poetry into my hair and laughed when I stole his paintbrushes.

He's changed. There's a hardness to him now, a dangerous edge that prickles against my skin like static. The softness around his mouth is gone, replaced by a tense line that speaks of years spent clenching his jaw. His cheekbones stand out sharper than before, as if time has carved away everything unnecessary.

Yet he cradles Brooke with a terrifying tenderness, his massive hands—capable of crushing stone—adjusting to support her small body with practiced ease. Those hands brush a curl from her forehead with the delicacy of a man handling spun glass.

"Your magic is very beautiful," he tells her, voice pitched low and gentle. "But it needs direction, like water needs a riverbank."

Brooke studies him with that serious gaze she gets when encountering something new and fascinating. "Are you like me? Can you make things fly?"

His laugh is a shadow of its former self. "I'm exactly like you, little bird. And I can

teach you to make far more than things fly."

It's the possessive note in his voice that finally unfreezes me. The way he says "little bird"—the nickname he always called me—sends a chill down my spine.

When his eyes lift to meet mine, I see it: he's here for us. He's not asking. He's not begging. He's claiming.

And for the first time in years, I feel true, bone-deep fear.

I thought I outran him but it seems that Adellum's true nature is now on display. A cruel xaphan taking whatever he wants.

"Put my daughter down," I manage, voice steadier than my trembling hands. "Now."

The restaurant has emptied, patrons slipping out during the confusion. Even Marda stands frozen by the kitchen door, sensing something dangerous unfolding. Only Ansel remains in the corner, his healer's instincts keeping him present in case of trouble.

Adellum's wings adjust, the massive gray appendages arching slightly as he sets Brooke down with reluctance. But he keeps one hand on her shoulder, a casual gesture that might as well be a brand of ownership.

"Daughter," he repeats, the word reverent and accusing simultaneously. His silver eyes, once warm when they looked at me, now burn with an intensity that makes my skin crawl. "I don't remember you having a daughter, Harmony."

The room seems to shrink around us. I move forward, forcing myself to walk steadily across the floor despite my leaden limbs.

"Brooke, come here." I extend my hand, willing it not to shake.

Brooke hesitates, looking between us with uncomfortable perception. "He stopped the hurting, Mama. He knows how to make the magic behave."

"I know, sweetheart. Come here anyway."

Adellum's fingers tighten fractionally on Brooke's shoulder before he forces himself to release her. I wonder if he knows she is his or if he's assumed the worst of me. I'd rather the latter.

I pull Brooke against me, positioning myself between them. Up close, I can see the changes time has wrought on him more clearly. Tiny scars I don't recognize mark his face and hands. The unruly white-blond hair I once ran my fingers through is cropped shorter, emphasizing the sharpness of his features. He's still beautiful—painfully so—but it's a beauty that's been tempered in fire, all softness burned away.

He looks deadly. Which is what he is to me.

"Mama?" Brooke tugs at my skirt. "Who is he?"

Before I can answer, Adellum crouches to her eye level, ignoring my protective stance. His massive wings fold against his back, making him appear smaller, less threatening—a deliberate manipulation that I recognize from our early meetings.

"I'm someone who's been looking for your mama for a very long time, little bird." His voice gentles, but his eyes remain fixed on mine, challenging. "And now that I've found you, I'm not going anywhere."

I tighten my grip on Brooke. I cannot trust this new, hardened Adellum. Not with my heart, and certainly not with our daughter.

ADELLUM

M orning arrives with weak sunlight filtering through low clouds. I don't need to check the time; I've been awake for hours. The restaurant opens at dawn. Harmony will be there.

A smile starts to curve into my mouth. Now that she knows I'm here, a cruel amusement has started to take root in my chest. She thought she could run from me? Not anymore. I'll get her back—even if it's by force.

And her daughter—Brooke. She reminds me of everything good about Harmony. She pulls out the pieces of me that I was certain her mother stole, reminds me that somewhere deep there must be some good left in me.

I don't care if she isn't mine. I'm intent on claiming them both.

I position myself by the restaurant's entrance before the first customer arrives. The limestone door frame is cool against my shoulder, and I lean there, waiting. Waiting like I've been waiting for five years, except now the waiting has purpose.

The door opens, and there she is—Harmony, her hair tied back with a faded scarf, already flushed from the kitchen heat. She freezes when she sees me.

"Good morning," I say, keeping my voice light, casual. As if I haven't searched every corner of New Solas for her. As if I haven't destroyed relationships, wealth,

reputation—everything in my relentless hunt.

Her eyes narrow. "We're not open yet."

"I'm not here for food."

"Then you're wasting your time."

Gods, she's beautiful when she's angry. The gold flecks in her eyes catch the morning light, turning them almost amber.

"You're here!"

A tiny blur bursts from behind Harmony's skirts. Brooke barrels into the space between us, her nightdress hastily covered with a little apron, curls flying wild around her face. My heart stops at how excited she is to see me—even though I know I mean nothing to her, not yet. She barely knows me.

"Good morning, little bird." I crouch down to her level, wings adjusting behind me for balance. "Did you practice what I showed you yesterday?"

Her silver eyes widen with excitement. "Watch this!"

She holds out her palm, scrunches her face in concentration, and a tiny golden spark flickers above her finger. It's crude magic, barely controlled, but pride fills me so completely I can barely breathe.

"Magnificent." I reach out, brush a curl from her forehead. "You're a natural, just like?—"

"Brooke, inside. Now." Harmony's voice cuts between us, sharp as a blade.

The child looks between us, confusion clouding her expression. "But Mama?—"

"Now, Brooke."

I straighten, meeting Harmony's gaze over Brooke's head. "Let her stay. I can show her how to control the spark so it doesn't burn her fingers."

"You've shown her enough."

Brooke's bottom lip trembles. "Please, Mama? My hands get all hot when the sparks come, and he knows how to make them stop hurting."

Something flickers across Harmony's face—concern, guilt, resignation. She kneels beside Brooke, touches her small hands. "They hurt you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to worry." So much like her mother—protecting others at her own expense.

I reach into my pocket, pull out a small jar. I keep it on hand because my own magic is wild—years of losing my sanity has slackened my control. "This salve will help. It's made from zynthra root and mountain snow. Works wonders on magical burns."

Harmony's eyes dart from the jar to my face. I see the battle within her—the mother who wants to protect her child from pain versus the woman who wants to protect her child from me.

"Five minutes," she finally says. "Show her, and then you leave."

I don't argue. Five minutes today. Ten tomorrow. I'm not leaving Saufort without them, and Harmony knows it. I can see it in the way she backs away, watching us like I might sprout fangs and steal the child at any moment.

Perhaps she's right to worry.

I work with Brooke every day for a week, teaching her how to control those first wild surges of magic. She's fascinated with my wings, begging to touch them, gasping when I let her run her small fingers along the arch of one.

"They're so soft," she whispers, eyes wide. "Like clouds."

"Like clouds that can knock over furniture if I'm not careful," I tell her, making her giggle. "Just like your magic needs control, little bird."

I feel Harmony watching us from the kitchen doorway. She thinks I don't notice how she hovers, how her fingers worry the edge of her apron, how her eyes never leave her daughter when she's with me. But I notice everything about Harmony. Every breath, every step, every subtle shift of her expression—I've catalogued them all.

This morning, I arrive earlier than usual. The village is still quiet, not yet stirring. I reach into my pocket, feel the rough edges of the pale blue crystal I've carried for five years. I intended it for Harmony's birthday, back when I thought we had all the time in the world. Now it's a talisman, a reminder of everything I lost.

When I push open the restaurant door, Marda looks up from where she's rolling dough, a scowl ready on her face.

"She's in the garden." Her tone makes it clear what she thinks of me. "Girl spends more time there than in my kitchen these days. Running from you, I'd wager."

I nod, unfazed by her hostility. Everyone in this village circles Harmony like protective worgs. Good. She deserves that protection—though it won't work against me.

The garden sits behind the restaurant, a verdant oasis carved into the hillside. I spot her immediately, kneeling between rows of dreelk and zynthra, the early light catching in her dark curls. For a moment, I just watch her, drinking in the sight, filling the parched places in me that five years of searching have left cracked and barren.

"You can stand there glaring holes into my back, or you can help," she says without turning. Her voice is crisp, controlled. "Brooke isn't here. She's with Joss learning pottery."

I have yet to find out who the fuck Joss is, but I'll take the moment alone with Harmony for now.

I move closer, deliberately crowding her space as I crouch beside her. "I'm not here for Brooke."

Her hands falter over the plants. "I have work to do."

"So do I." I reach past her to pluck a weed, my arm brushing hers. She flinches, drawing away, but not before I catch the quick hitch in her breath. "I've always enjoyed watching you garden."

"You didn't come to Saufort to reminisce."

I smile, aware it's the predatory grin Sior always warned me would frighten people. "I came for what's mine."

She jerks to her feet so quickly she nearly topples over. I catch her elbow to steady her, and the moment my skin touches hers, that old familiar heat flares between us. She yanks away, but not before I see color rushing to her cheeks.

"I am not yours." Her voice trembles with fury. "I never was."

"Liar." I stand slowly, letting my wings unfurl to their full span in the morning sun. I know how I look—dangerous, powerful, every inch the creature humans are right to fear. "You were mine the moment I saw you in Arkan's kitchen. And despite what you've convinced yourself, you still are."

"You have no right?—"

"I have every right." I step closer, and she backs against the garden wall. "You think I don't see how you still respond to me? How your breath catches when I enter a room? How your pulse jumps when I'm near you?"

To prove my point, I brush my fingertips along the side of her neck. Her pulse thunders against my skin, wild and erratic. Her eyes darken, pupils dilating despite her scowl.

"That's fear," she insists. "Not desire."

I lean in, letting my lips hover near her ear. "They look remarkably similar on you. Always have."

She pushes against my chest, hard. "Stay away from me."

"You don't mean that." I catch her wrist before she can retreat, my grip gentle but unyielding. "If you truly wanted me gone, you'd have run again. You'd have taken Brooke and disappeared the moment you saw me in Saufort."

"I've built a life here. I won't run again."

"No," I agree, sliding my thumb across the inside of her wrist, feeling her pulse leap

in response. "You won't. Because deep down, beneath all that anger and hurt, you know we belong together."

Her free hand flies up, striking me across the face, sharp and stinging. I don't release her, don't even flinch.

"I hate you," she whispers, and there are tears gathering in her eyes now.

I smile, because hate is not indifference. Hate is passion, and passion I can work with. Hate means she still feels something—and feeling, for Harmony, has always been her undoing.

"Hate me all you want," I tell her, finally releasing her wrist. "It won't change what's between us."

HARMONY

It's been almost three weeks since Adellum materialized in Saufort like a phantom from my past, and I still flinch at unexpected shadows. Each time the restaurant door swings open, my heart leaps to my throat—half terror, half something I refuse to name.

Today, I'm kneeling in the garden behind Marda's restaurant, fingers buried in the cool, damp soil when Brooke's delighted squeal pierces the late morning quiet. My spine goes rigid.

"Look how high!" She shrieks, and I know, without looking, that he's there.

When I stand and brush the dirt from my apron, the sight of them steals my breath. Adellum has her perched on his shoulders, her tiny hands gripping fistfuls of his white-blond hair that's starting to grow out. His massive gray wings are partially extended, creating a shadow that dapples the ground beneath them. They're beautiful together—his dusky bronze skin against her golden-brown, both with those otherworldly silver eyes that seem to hold all the light in the world.

"Mama, he's taking me flying!" Brooke announces, beaming down at me.

"Absolutely not," I say, wiping my hands on my apron and stepping forward to claim my daughter. "Feet on the ground, little one."

Adellum's mouth quirks—not quite the full, easy smile I remember, but something harder, a challenge. "I'd never drop her." His voice is deeper than I remember, or maybe memory has softened all the rough edges I tried so hard to forget.

"I didn't say you would." I reach up, and reluctantly, he lowers her down.

"But Mama?—"

"Maybe another day," I tell her, a lie that tastes bitter. There will be no other days. Adellum can't stay here, can't be part of our lives. The sooner he understands that, the better.

Brooke sighs dramatically and wriggles free from my grasp. "Can I go see if Marda has any leftover sweet rolls?"

"Stay where Marda can see you," I call after her as she darts toward the kitchen door, leaving me alone with the man I've spent four years trying to forget.

Adellum watches her go, a muscle working in his jaw. "She's extraordinary."

"She is."

"She has magic." It's not a question.

"She does."

His gaze flicks to me, sharp as a blade. "Whose is she?"

I look away, focusing on the rosemary bush that needs pruning. "She's mine."

"Don't play games, Harmony." There's a dangerous edge to his voice that wasn't there

before. He steps closer, and I force myself to stand my ground. Surely, he knows? "I know when she was born. I can count."

"Congratulations on your basic arithmetic skills." The sarcasm slips out before I can stop it.

In one fluid movement, he's in front of me, close enough that I can smell him—that familiar scent of storm-clouds and woods that used to cling to my skin after our nights together. His fingers brush my cheek, and I hate how my body remembers him, leaning into his touch before my mind can stop it.

"Whose is she?" His voice drops, husky with an emotion I can't—won't—name. And now, I'm not so sure. Does he think she is his? Or does he believe there was someone after him?

I hope it's the latter. I hope he can feel even a fraction of what he made me.

"Why does it matter?" I step back, crossing my arms. "So you could use her, too? Another pretty ornament for the great Adellum Vey?"

Confusion flashes across his face, quickly replaced by something darker. "Is that what you think? That you were just?—"

"It doesn't matter," I snap. I don't want to hear his excuses. He's great with beautiful words, but the intentions behind them are all wrong.

The Harmony who first loved him—shy, soft, hopeful—doesn't know what to make of this version of him. He's sharp where he was once open, possessive where he was once patient. The playful teasing has hardened into something that cuts. But as he stands there, rolling that crystal between his fingers, I glimpse flashes of the man I knew.

"You can't just come back and expect—" I begin, but he interrupts by reaching forward, tucking a sprig of lavender behind my ear with such gentle precision that I fall silent.

"I don't expect anything, little bird." The old nickname slips out, and we both freeze. "But I'm not leaving again either."

It terrifies me, how much I still want him—this darker, sharper him—even when I know better. How my body remembers his touch, how my heart speeds up when those silver eyes lock on mine.

So I step away and head inside, keeping space between us. It's all I know how to do. I can't seem to get away from him and what's worse—a part of me doesn't want to now that he's here again.

One night after closing the restaurant, I move through my end-of-day ritual with the practiced ease of someone who has done it a thousand times. Brooke is already asleep upstairs, worn out from a day of mischief with Joss at the pottery studio. My fingers are pruned from washing dishes, my back aches from hours on my feet, but there's comfort in the familiar soreness.

I'm humming softly, untying my apron when I sense him before I see him. A prickling awareness that makes the fine hairs on my neck stand up.

Adellum sits at the corner table, the one tucked into the shadows where the lamp light barely reaches. His wings are folded tight against his back, making him look almost human if not for their massive outline. His head is bent over a leather-bound sketchbook, charcoal moving in swift, sure strokes across the page. The sight stops me mid-step.

I should tell him to leave. The restaurant is closed. This is my sanctuary, my hard-

won peace that he has no right to invade. The words form on my tongue, sharp and ready.

But then he looks up.

Those silver eyes catch the lamplight and hold it, transforming into something molten. For a heartbeat, I'm transported back to stolen moments in Lord Arkan's gardens, where those same eyes had looked at me like I was something precious, something worthy.

My anger dissolves, leaving behind confusion and a dangerous yearning. Because this version of Adellum has always been mine.

"I didn't mean to startle you." His voice is quiet in the empty restaurant. It's not quite soft but it's like the edge of him has been dulled just a little. "I thought you'd gone up."

I find my voice, though it comes out rougher than intended. "We're closed."

"I know." He doesn't apologize or move to leave. Instead, he glances down at his sketch, then back to me with an intensity that makes my chest tight. "The light was good."

Against my better judgment, I move closer. "Since when do you care about good light? You used to sketch in pitch darkness."

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "You remember."

Of course I remember. I remember everything—how he'd paint late into the night and make love to me after, how he said I was the reason he even painted at all. Little details I've tried so desperately to forget.

I force myself to look away from his face, down to what he's drawing. The breath catches in my throat.

It's Brooke, rendered with such precision and tenderness that it almost hurts to look at. She's captured mid-laugh, her curls wild around her face, those eyes—his eyes—bright with joy. But there's more. It's not just her features he's captured, but her essence—her stubborn little chin, the mischievous tilt of her head, the spark of magic at her fingertips.

"How did you..." I swallow hard. "You've barely spent any time with her."

"I see her." His voice drops lower. "I see you both."

The weight of his gaze makes me feel flayed open. Not with cruelty or anger, but with a reverence so intense it borders on worship. There's a desperate quality to how he looks at me, like a man who's been wandering in darkness suddenly finding light.

It would be easier if he were cruel. If he were the monster I've built him up to be in my mind, a heartless xaphan who used me and tossed me aside. That version of him I could hate cleanly, completely.

But this Adellum—with his bruised eyes and gentle hands, sketching our daughter with such aching devotion—this Adellum is chipping away at the armor I've built around my heart.

"Did you think, after all this time, I wouldn't soak in every detail? That I wouldn't take everything I could get?" He says it simply as he sets down his charcoal and rubs his thumb along the edge of the paper, staining his bronze skin with smudges of black. "I looked everywhere for you."

"Stop." I press my palms flat against the table, steadying myself. "You don't get to

say things like that to me. Not after?—"

"After what?" He stands suddenly, wings unfurling slightly with his agitation. "Tell me what I did, Harmony. Because for five years, I've been trying to understand what drove you away, and I can't?—"

His frustration crashes against mine, igniting the spark I've been trying to smother.

"You know exactly what you did." My voice shakes with the effort to keep it low. "I was just foolish enough to think that you were no different than any other xaphan."

He assesses me, eyes slightly narrowed. "How am I like them?"

I shake my head. I have no interest in letting him use his pretty words to win me back over. I was foolish once, but not again.

No matter how much I want him.

"Get out." The words are a soft whisper, and for a moment, he doesn't move. Those silver eyes study me like they can see through to my soul.

But then Adellum nods, standing and grabbing his sketchbook. But as he passes by me, he pauses, head tilted to whisper low. "I'm not going anywhere, Harmony. No matter how hard you fight, how much you say you hate me. I will always be with you."

And then he's gone, leaving me far too rattled.

ADELLUM

I watch Harmony as she tends to her garden behind Marda's restaurant, a smudge of dirt on her cheek, her hair tied back with a faded scarf. She works methodically, her calloused fingers gentle as they press seeds into the freshly turned soil. My chest tightens at the sight of her, the same way it has every day since I found her again.

It still feels like a dream, one I am desperate not to wake from. We may be different now, more harsh edges and anger than before, but at our core, we are the same. And just being near Harmony has ripped me open again.

I shift the package in my hands, the weight of it nothing compared to the weight of what I've lost.

"I brought something for you," I say, and she startles, those hazel-green eyes flashing up at me.

Her expression hardens instantly. "I'm working, Adellum."

"You're always working." I step closer, lowering myself to one knee beside her patch of zynthra. Not too close—I've learned that lesson. Push too hard and she retreats further. And I do want her to give in—I just don't mind forcing it, too. "It'll only take a moment."

She sits back on her heels, wiping her hands on the apron tied around her waist.

There's wariness in her eyes, but curiosity too. Good. I can work with curiosity.

"What is it this time?" she asks, her voice carefully neutral.

At least she's coming to accept my presence, and gifts.

I unwrap the cloth covering my latest offering. "Dreelk seeds," I say, revealing the small packet. "Not the common variety. These are from the southern mountains of Ikoth. They're more resilient to frost, and the leaves are less bitter. Better for Brooke, who I've noticed picks around the regular dreelk in her stew."

Harmony's fingers twitch, but she doesn't reach for the packet. "You're watching what my daughter eats now?"

"I watch everything," I say simply, because it's the truth. I've catalogued every detail of their lives since I found them—Brooke's preference for her stuffed lunox with the worn ear, how Harmony hums when she kneads dough, the way she always leaves the window cracked at night even when it's cold.

"That's—"

"Unsettling?" I offer with a half-smile. "Probably. But I have five years to make up for."

"Years you could have been with someone else. Someone appropriate." Her voice is tight, and I would kill to know what is going on in her head.

But she keeps me shut out, driving me mad and stirring my anger until I'm tempted to punish her for it, to make her see that she is mine and always has been.

The geode in my pocket digs into my thigh as I shift position, and I squeeze it in my

palm, its edges grounding me. "There's only ever been you, Harmony."

She looks away, but I catch the tremor in her jaw. "I don't want to talk about this."

I hold back a sigh as I place the seeds on the ground between us. "These are just seeds, Harmony. Take them or don't."

But we both know they're not just seeds. They're another thread I'm weaving, binding her life back to mine.

She takes them, finally. "Thank you," she says stiffly.

I nod and stand, brushing dirt from my knees. My wings shift behind me, adjusting to the movement. "I have something else arriving tomorrow. A set of copper measuring cups from Shozuh. The handles are carved with protective sigils—they'll stay cool even over a flame."

Her eyes narrow. "Adellum?—"

"The pottery set you use has a crack in the largest cup. I've seen you compensate for it when you're baking."

"You can't just?—"

"I can, actually." I let my wings spread slightly, a reminder of what I am, of the power that runs through my veins. Not to frighten her—never that—but to remind her of the intensity that's always simmered between us. "I'm not hiding anymore, little bird. Not who I am, not what I want."

She stands too, facing me squarely despite being nearly a foot shorter. "And what exactly is it that you want? To disrupt the life I've built? To confuse Brooke? To?—"

"To reclaim what's mine," I say softly, cutting her off. "You. Brooke. This chance we should have had."

The twilight casts long shadows across her garden, painting her skin gold and bronze. She's so close I can smell the herbs on her fingers, the faint trace of meadowmint tea on her breath.

"I'm not yours," she whispers, but there's a hitch in her voice that betrays her.

I smile then, slow and sure, enjoying the way her pupils dilate in response. "Fight me if you want," I murmur, letting my voice drop to match the growing darkness around us. "But you'll lose."

I'm taking a step back to leave—I've learned not to overstay my welcome—when I hear the patter of small feet and a high-pitched squeal that sends a jolt through my chest.

"Dell! Dell! You're here!"

Brooke barrels around the corner of the garden, all wild energy and flailing limbs, her pale-blond curls bouncing with each step. My body reacts before my mind can catch up, wings tucking tight against my back as I drop to one knee and open my arms just in time for her to crash into me.

"Little bird," I murmur against her hair, breathing in that peculiar scent of childhood—soap and dirt and something uniquely sweet. My arms encircle her small frame, and I marvel at how perfectly she fits there, how right she feels. She might not be mine, but everything about Harmony was always meant for me.

Even her daughter.

I catch Harmony's eyes over Brooke's head. Her face is a battleground of emotions—fear, anger, and something else I can't quite name. Or perhaps won't let myself name yet.

"You promised to show me the lightning bugs today," Brooke says, pulling back to fix me with those enormous silver eyes—my eyes, though neither of us acknowledge it aloud. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"I never forget a promise," I tell her solemnly. I rise to my feet, lifting her with me, and spin her around once, then twice, her delighted laughter cutting through the evening air like bells. "Especially not promises to princesses."

"I'm not a princess," she giggles, but her small hands grip my shoulders tightly, trusting me completely despite knowing me for only a few weeks. The weight of that trust is almost unbearable.

"Says who? You look like royalty to me." I set her down gently, keeping one hand on her shoulder as I glance at Harmony. "I'm going to show her the thaliverns. We won't go far." I give her the illusion of an option.

Harmony's jaw works back and forth. I can almost hear her thoughts—the need to protect Brooke warring with the knowledge that I can teach her daughter things about magic that no one else in this village can.

"Please, Mama?" Brooke wheedles, bouncing on her toes. When Harmony hesitates, tiny golden sparks dance from Brooke's fingertips, a manifestation of her excitement that makes my heart swell with pride. Such natural talent, untamed and beautiful.

"Fine," Harmony relents, her shoulders dropping slightly. "But stay within sight of the garden, please."

I nod, not pushing my luck by arguing for more. I like to test Harmony, then make her break for me, but when it comes to Brooke, I have infinite patience. "Of course."

I take Brooke's small hand in mine, her fingers warm and impossibly delicate. We walk to the edge of the garden where tall grass meets wildflowers, the sky deepening into indigo above us.

"Watch now," I say, crouching beside her. "Thaliverns are shy creatures. They don't come when called or chased."

"Then how do we see them?" Brooke asks, her eyes wide with wonder.

I reach out, drawing a small circle in the air with my finger. A faint shimmer follows the movement, leaving a trace of silver light hanging in the dusk. "Magic is about intention, little bird. About believing something is possible before it happens."

Brooke's forehead crinkles in concentration as she tries to mimic my gesture. Nothing happens at first, and her lower lip juts out in frustration.

"Here," I say gently, taking her hand in mine again. "Like this." I guide her finger through the air, a slow, deliberate circle. "Feel the air changing? That's your magic pushing against it."

I release her hand, and she tries again. This time, the faintest glimmer follows her movement.

"I did it!" she gasps.

"Yes, you did." I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face, fierce and protective. "Now watch."

I extend my palm toward the shimmer we've created, and whisper words in an ancient language—words of invitation, not command. The air around us thickens with possibility, and then, like stars descending, dozens of thaliverns emerge from hiding places in the grass.

They're more luminescent than ordinary butterflies, their four iridescent wings catching the last light of day and fracturing it into rainbow prisms. They swirl around us, drawn to the magical circle Brooke helped create.

One lands on her outstretched finger, and she freezes, her mouth forming a perfect 'o' of astonishment.

"They're dancing for you," I tell her, watching her face glow with joy. "Because they recognize you as one of their own—a being of light and magic."

I glance back toward the garden where Harmony stands watching us, arms crossed tightly over her chest. The distance between us might as well be an ocean, but I'll cross it. One way or another.

I've been patient. I've been careful. I've schooled my rage into something that resembles restraint. For Brooke, I will always be tenderness itself, a safe harbor for her growing magic. But for Harmony—my Harmony—I am a storm barely contained.

She built walls while I was gone, barriers of stone and bitter memory. But walls can be scaled. Broken. Remade into bridges.

I will have her back. Not because I'm selfish—though I am—but because we belong together, the three of us. A family. My family.

And I will burn the world to ash before I let them slip through my fingers again.

HARMONY

The evening rush has just died down at Marda's restaurant. I wipe a cloth across the empty tables, humming softly under my breath while mentally planning tomorrow's garden work. Behind the counter, Brooke arranges sugar cubes into miniature towers, her little tongue poking out in concentration. She should be in bed, but Marda had a soft spot for her and I let her stay up on slow nights like this.

"Look, Mama!" Brooke balances a sixth cube atop her wobbly construction. "It's taller than the mountain outside!"

"Impressive engineering." I smile, tucking a loose curl behind my ear. "Five more minutes, then it's bedtime, little one."

The bell above the door jingles, and I turn, a customer-ready smile in place that falters when I see him.

A nymph steps inside, tall and unnaturally beautiful in that way all magical creatures are. His hair falls in silver waves past his shoulders, and the faint outlines of delicate blue wing markings shimmer across his high cheekbones. But something's... off.

His eyes. Gods, his eyes.

Where nymph eyes should be clear as mountain streams, his have a milky film over them, clouded like stagnant water. Dark veins creep from the corners, spreading

across his temples like cracks in porcelain.

"We're about to close, but I can—" I begin.

"Fetch me whatever isn't disgusting." He drops into a chair, sprawling like he owns the place. His fingers drum against the tabletop, too long, joints bending at angles fingers shouldn't bend.

I straighten my apron, professional mask firmly in place. "We have fresh bread and stew left."

His smile spreads too wide across his face. "How quaint. Human food for human stomachs." He glances around the empty restaurant. "Quite the... establishment."

Something slithers beneath his skin when he moves, like shadows wriggling under his flesh. I've seen corruption before—living in New Solas exposed me to it—but never this advanced in someone still walking and talking.

I should tell him to leave. Should grab Brooke and run upstairs. But I'm stubborn and I don't want to stir trouble.

"I'll bring you some stew."

His hand catches my wrist as I turn. His grip is ice, fingers pressing into my pulse point.

"Pretty little thing, aren't you? For a human." His thumb strokes across my skin. "So delicate. So... fragile."

I jerk my hand away. "I'll get your food."

Behind the counter, Brooke giggles as her sugar cube tower collapses. The sound—so innocent, so pure—draws his attention like a predator spotting weaker prey.

"What's this?" His head tilts at a sickening angle. "A little lunox?"

"My daughter." I position myself between them. "She's just helping before bedtime."

"Mama, I'm building again!" Brooke calls out, oblivious to the danger sitting ten feet away.

The nymph leans forward. "Children are such fascinating creatures. So full of... potential."

The way he says "potential" makes my skin crawl. I've heard that tone before, from xaphan who see humans as experiments rather than people.

"The stew," I mutter, backing toward the kitchen.

As I ladle the thick liquid into a bowl, my hands shake. Through the serving window, I can see him watching Brooke, that wrong smile growing wider. I need to get her upstairs, away from those eyes.

I return with his bowl, setting it down harder than necessary. "Anything else?"

"Such poor service." He doesn't look at the food. "Is that how you treat all your customers, human?"

"Just the ones who make my daughter uncomfortable."

His eyebrows rise. "I've done nothing to the child."

"Not yet," I say before I can stop myself.

He laughs, a sound like glass breaking. "Smart woman. Most of your kind are too stupid to sense danger until it's far too late."

I clench my fists at my sides. "Eat your stew and leave."

"So hostile." He sighs dramatically. "And here I thought we could be... friendly."

I catch a flicker of movement beneath his fingertips—a shimmer of magic gathering there, dark and oily like tainted water. The corruption has twisted his natural nymph abilities into something perverse.

"Brooke," I call, voice steady despite my racing heart. "Time for bed."

She doesn't hear me, too engrossed in her sugar architecture.

The nymph's eyes narrow, tracking my nervous glance toward my daughter. "She has no idea what's happening, does she? Children never do. They trust so blindly."

The magic between his fingers intensifies, coiling like a snake preparing to strike.

I freeze, caught between running to Brooke and facing the threat before me. The magic in his hand pulses, and I know, with brutal certainty, that whatever he's preparing to do will hurt—will hurt badly.

Brooke's laughter rings out again, bright and clear, as she successfully balances another sugar cube. She's completely unaware of the danger sitting mere feet away, magic gathering in his twisted hands, his corrupted smile widening with anticipation.

As Brooke's laughter fills the air, I realize I've made a fatal mistake. I should have

grabbed her immediately, should have run upstairs when the corrupted nymph first walked in. Now I'm caught in this horrible standoff, watching death gather between his fingertips.

Time slows. The magic in the nymph's hand pulses, a sickly green glow that promises agony. I lunge forward, knowing I won't reach Brooke in time but unable to stand still.

Then the world explodes into motion and sound.

The door crashes open. A blur of movement surges past me—something massive, powerful, unstoppable. The air crackles with the scent of lightning and winter frost.

Before I can even cry out, the nymph's head jerks backward at an impossible angle. Blood sprays across the polished wood floor in a crimson arc. His body slumps forward, twitching once before going completely still, dead eyes staring at nothing.

The silence that follows feels absolute, broken only by Brooke's confused whimper from behind the counter.

And there, standing over the corpse with a thin silver blade in his hand, is Adellum.

My heart stops. Then starts again, too fast.

His massive gray wings are partially unfurled, filling the small space of Marda's dining room. They catch the lamplight, casting feathered shadows across the walls. His white-blond hair is windswept, as though he's flown hard and fast to get here. The sharp lines of his face are set in stone, revealing nothing.

Nothing except his eyes. Those silver eyes that used to look at me with such tenderness are now cold and calculating as he studies the nymph's corpse. He hasn't

acknowledged me yet, busy wiping his blade on a handkerchief before tucking it away inside his coat.

"Adellum." His name feels foreign on my tongue after so long.

He looks up then, and the transformation is immediate. The coldness melts away, replaced by something fierce and burning.

"Harmony." Just my name, but the way he says it—like a prayer and a curse combined.

"How did you—" I begin, my voice shaking.

"I told you I'm watching everything." He tucks the blade away inside his coat, and his gaze drifts to Brooke, who peeks out from behind the counter with wide eyes. "You must know I wouldn't let anyone hurt you."

The realization of what just happened crashes into me. He killed the nymph—slaughtered him without hesitation or remorse. One fluid motion, a whisper of steel, a burst of magic, and a life extinguished.

And I'm glad. Gods help me, I'm glad.

"Mama?" Brooke's small voice fills the silence. She pads over to me, careful to give the still-bleeding body a wide berth. But I still feel too stunned to speak.

Adellum kneels, bringing himself to her level. His massive frame somehow makes itself smaller, less threatening. The contrast is jarring—moments ago, he was a killer, and now he folds himself into something gentle.

He holds his arms out and she runs into them. His wings wrap around her, shielding

her from the sight as she clings to him. "You killed the bad man."

Not a question. A simple statement of fact.

"Yes." No sugar-coating, no lies. Just honest brutality packaged in that velvet voice. "He was going to hurt you and your mother."

"With his magic," Brooke nods. "I saw it. It was ugly."

"Very ugly," Adellum agrees. "Corrupted. Like poison."

I find my voice at last. "Brooke needs to go upstairs."

"But—"

"Now, little bird."

He levels me with a look that tells me he is not happy about this but slowly sets her down. She whispers, "Thank you for saving us," to Adellum before scampering up the stairs.

When we're alone—alone with a corpse between us—Adellum rises to his full height. Blood has splattered across his fine clothes, droplets catching in the hollow of his throat. He killed for us. Without question. Without regret.

It terrifies me. It thrills me. It makes me see just how fundamentally different he is from me—from humans.

For the first time, I understand: this man would destroy anything—anyone—for me. For Brooke. For the family he claims as his own.

HARMONY

I wait almost a full hour after tucking Brooke in before I start packing. My hands shake as I pull our battered leather satchel from beneath the bed, wincing at every creak of the floorboards. The lamplight casts long shadows across our little attic room, making the familiar space feel suddenly foreign.

"This isn't panic," I whisper to myself as I fold Brooke's tiny tunics into tight squares. "This is survival."

I'd scrubbed the restaurant floor myself after Adellum left, on my hands and knees, watching crimson swirl into muddy brown. The smell of iron still clings to my skin despite two thorough washings. Marda had come downstairs during the cleanup, taken one look at my face, and wordlessly grabbed another brush.

We never spoke of what happened. What could I possibly say? A corrupted nymph threatened my daughter, and then my former lover appeared like vengeance incarnate and slit his throat?

I shove my garden-stained work clothes into the satchel, pressing them down to make room. Four years in this village, and everything we own still fits in one bag. I always kept it that way on purpose, though I never admitted it to myself until now.

"Mama?" Brooke's sleepy voice startles me. She sits up in her little alcove bed, rubbing her eyes. "Why are you putting our clothes away?"

I cross to her bed, smoothing her wild blonde curls. "We're going on an adventure, little one. Just for a little while."

"Because of the bad man?" Her eyes—so silver, so like his—blink up at me in the dim light.

"Yes, but he can't hurt us anymore." I stroke her cheek. "But sometimes when bad things happen, it's smart to go somewhere new."

"Is Dell coming too?" She clutches her stuffed lunox to her chest.

My throat tightens. "No, sweetness. Just us, like always."

"But he helped us." She frowns, her little brow furrowing. "He made the bad magic stop."

I turn away, pulling herbs from the drying rack above our tiny hearth. "Yes, he did." I wrap the meadowmint and dreelek leaves in cloth, securing them with twine. "But we don't know him, not really."

A lie. I know him better than I've ever known anyone.

"I know him," Brooke mumbles into her toy's fur. "He's my friend."

My hands freeze mid-motion. I guess I didn't realize she had gotten so attached.

"He was never going to be around long, Brooke," I say, the lie bitter on my tongue. "Now, which book do you want to bring? We can only take one."

"The one about the thaliverns." She hugs her lunox tighter. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere with lots of gardens." I pull the book from our small shelf. "Maybe by the sea. Would you like that?"

She nods, but her eyes drift to the window. "Will Marda be sad?"

I think of Marda's wrinkled hands beside mine, scrubbing blood from the floorboards without questions. The way she slipped us extra bread at meals. How she taught Brooke to count using sugar cubes.

"Yes," I admit, my voice catching. "But she'll understand."

I return to packing, sliding the meager contents of our savings pouch. Eleven novas and a handful of lummi—enough for passage on a trader's cart and perhaps a week at an inn. After that...

I shake my head. One problem at a time.

"When will we come back?" Brooke asks, her voice small.

"I don't know, little bird." I stuff the last of our belongings into the satchel and fasten it. "But we'll be together, and that's what matters."

I help her into her traveling clothes—a simple tunic and leggings, her tiny boots that Holt had made specially for her last winter. She stands patiently as I wrap her in her cloak, trusting me completely. The weight of her faith is almost unbearable.

"Listen to me," I kneel before her, taking her small hands in mine. "We need to be very quiet. Like when we pick zynthra in the garden without scaring the thaliverns. Can you do that?"

She nods solemnly. "Like shadow-walking."

"Exactly." I kiss her forehead. "We'll go down the back stairs and through the kitchen. No talking until we reach the road, alright?"

Another nod, her eyes wide with the adventure of it all. She doesn't understand we're running for our lives. That her father—the man whose eyes mirror her own—is the most dangerous part of staying.

I shoulder our bag, take her hand, and step toward the door. The floorboard near the threshold creaks, and I freeze, listening intently for any sound from below.

Nothing but silence.

"Ready, little bird?" I whisper.

She squeezes my fingers in response, her small face set with determination I recognize as my own.

We are leaving everything behind. Again. But this time, I know exactly what—who—I'm running from.

The night air washes over my face as I step onto the back staircase, Brooke's small hand clasped in mine. The familiar scents of Marda's herbs from the kitchen garden and woodsmoke from distant chimneys would normally comfort me, but tonight they feel like a goodbye I'm not ready to make. I pause, adjusting the heavy satchel on my shoulder and scanning the alleyway behind the restaurant.

That's when I feel it—a charge in the air that makes the tiny hairs on my arms stand up. Magic. Powerful and unmistakable.

And terribly, intimately familiar.

He materializes from the shadows like he's made of them, wings half-folded against his back, the pale silver of his eyes catching moonlight. Adellum stands at the bottom of the stairs, blocking our escape route, his presence seeming to expand and fill the entire alleyway.

My heart slams against my ribs. How did he know?

Brooke presses against my leg, her tiny fingers squeezing mine. "Dell!" she whispers. But she doesn't see the absolute murderous look on his face as his eyes narrow on the bags I have.

"Go back inside, little bird," I say, my voice remarkably steady despite the earthquake happening in my chest. "Go straight to bed. I'll be up soon."

She hesitates, looking between us.

"Now, Brooke." I gently nudge her toward the door. "It's just grown-up talk."

She gives Adellum one more glance before obeying, the door clicking shut behind her. I listen for her footsteps climbing the interior stairs, making sure she's truly gone before I face him.

Adellum's magic ripples through the night air, thick and electric, like a storm held barely in check. His face could have been carved from granite—all harsh angles and rigid control—but his eyes burn with something molten and uncontainable.

"You were leaving." Not a question. His voice is low, a current of barely contained fury running beneath the surface. "Again."

I lift my chin. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"Don't you?" He takes a step closer, and the magic around him intensifies, making it harder to breathe. "Five years, Harmony. Five fucking years I've searched for you."

"I didn't ask you to."

His laugh is sharp enough to cut. "No, you just disappeared. Vanished like smoke. Do you have any idea—" He stops, his jaw working. One hand dips into his pocket, clutching something I can't see. "You were going to run again. You were going to take her away from me, too?"

The words hang between us, heavy and irrefutable.

"She's mine," I whisper fiercely.

"You've seen her with me. She needs me, too." He moves closer, until he stands just below me on the stairs. "I don't care what you tell yourself. You both are mine."

"What do you want from us?" My voice trembles despite my best efforts.

He moves up another step, and now we're close enough that I can see the faint scar above his eyebrow, new since I knew him. "Run again," he says, each word trembling with rage and something that sounds terrifyingly like fear, "and I'll tear the godsdamned world apart to find you."

The air between us crackles with tension, with every unspoken word and buried feeling suddenly sparking to life. He doesn't touch me. He doesn't have to. His presence alone is overwhelming, the heat of him, the scent of ink and charcoal and that indefinable something that has haunted my dreams for five years.

"You can't just appear and claim her," I manage, though my voice sounds thin to my own ears.

"I'm not claiming her." His eyes bore into mine. "I'm claiming you ."

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ADELLUM

I 'm starting to fucking break.

Harmony has taken all my patience, what little of my sanity I had left, and twisted it until this moment, where I am desperate for her, to claim her, to make her mine again.

I pin Harmony to the wall at the foot of the narrow staircase, my hands pressing against ancient wood on either side of her face. The kitchen is empty now, quiet except for the thundering of my heart and the shallow catch of her breath. My wings fold tight against my back, trembling with restraint.

"Five fucking years," I whisper, the words scraping my throat raw. "Five years I've been looking for you."

Harmony's eyes flash—defiance wrapped in fear wrapped in something else. Something she doesn't want me to see. Her chin lifts. "I didn't ask you to."

"You didn't have to ask." I lean closer, close enough to count the gold flecks in her hazel eyes. "I would do anything for you. I thought you fucking knew that."

Her pulse jumps in the hollow of her throat. I want to press my mouth there, feel the flutter of her life against my lips. Want to bite down until she remembers who she belongs to.

"Let me go, Adellum," she whispers, but there's no conviction behind it.

"I did that once." My voice drops lower, dangerous even to my own ears. "Look how that turned out."

The air between us feels charged like before a storm, crackling with everything unsaid. Five years of searching, of losing myself piece by piece, all while she built this quiet life without me. Her scent fills my lungs—earth and kitchen herbs and something uniquely Harmony that makes my blood surge hot.

My hand finally moves from the wall to trace the line of her jaw. She flinches but doesn't pull away. "I nearly burned this whole fucking continent down looking for you. Just to get you back."

Harmony's breathing quickens. I can see the war inside her—hatred and desire battling for control. "I don't belong to you."

"You've always belonged to me." I press my forehead against hers. "Just like I've always belonged to you. Just like Brooke?—"

"Don't." Her hands fly up, pushing against my chest. "Don't you dare use her in this."

The tension between us pulls tighter, a string about to break. I can feel her resistance fracturing, see the moment when something inside her shatters.

And then she's launching herself at me, fingers twisting in my hair, mouth crashing against mine with a violence that matches the storm inside me. I growl against her lips, one hand gripping her waist, the other tangling in her curls, pulling just enough to make her gasp.

The kiss is brutal—teeth and tongue and five years of fury. She tastes exactly as I

remember, like coming home and discovering something new all at once. My wings unfurl involuntarily, curling forward to envelop us both.

"I hate you," she gasps between kisses, her nails scoring my scalp. "I hate what you did to me."

I lift her, pinning her more firmly against the wall, her legs wrapping around my waist by instinct. "What exactly did I do, little bird?" I bite her lower lip, hard enough to punish. "Tell me what crime I'm guilty of."

"You made me believe you." Her voice breaks, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. "You made me trust you when I knew better."

The accusation lands like a physical blow. I pull back just enough to look at her face, confusion cutting through my rage. "When did I ever lie to you?"

But she's kissing me again, fiercer now, like she's trying to devour the question before it can take root. Her hands are everywhere—my shoulders, my chest, tugging at my shirt like she can tear away the years between us.

I want to claim her and punish her all at once. Want to make her understand what these years have cost me. Want to mark her so thoroughly that running again would be impossible.

"I should punish you for what you did to me," I growl against her throat, tasting salt and sweetness.

"Me?" She nips at me, and I groan. "What did I do?"

I grip her throat, fingers digging into her jaw. "You've driven me fucking crazy for years, Harmony." I tip my face forward until our lips are nearly touching. "I am

nothing but an obsessed man desperate for you."

Harmony lunges forward, her mouth crashing against mine with a ferocity that matches my own. Five years of separation burns away in an instant. I grip her thighs and lift her like she weighs nothing, her legs wrapping instinctively around my waist. The perfect fit of her body against mine sends a bolt of pure possession through my veins.

"Mine," I growl against her mouth, already walking us backward into the darkened restaurant.

Every step is torture, her body rocking against the hard length of me through our clothes. My wings spread wide behind me, the tips almost brushing the doorframe. Magic bleeds from my skin without conscious thought—silver-blue light dancing around us, casting shadows across her face as I crush her against the nearest wall.

"I feel your magic," she gasps, her head falling back as I attack her throat with teeth and tongue. "It's... wilder than before."

I laugh darkly against her skin. "You have no idea what I've become without you."

My power swirls around us, thick and heavy, sealing off sound and light from the outside world. Creating a pocket where nothing exists but us.

"Brooke—" Harmony's eyes dart upward, toward the ceiling.

"Won't hear a fucking thing." I catch her jaw in my hand, forcing her to look at me. "But I'll hear everything. Every sound, every breath." My thumb drags across her lower lip, pressing down until her mouth parts. "Every scream."

She shudders against me, and I feel her surrender in the melting of her body against

mine. Her hands tear at my shirt, nails scratching against my skin in her haste.

"I've imagined this every night for five years," I confess, my voice raw as I shove the neck of her dress down, exposing her breasts to my hungry gaze. "Breaking you apart. Making you forget anyone but me."

Harmony's fingers fumble with the lacings of my pants. "Shut up and fuck me," she demands, and the sharp bite in her voice drives me to the edge of madness.

I rip her dress up to her waist, finding her already wet for me. My control fractures completely.

"No gentle reunion for us, little bird." I tear at my lacings, freeing myself with desperate hands. "Not after what you did."

She opens her mouth to argue, but I silence her with a brutal kiss, swallowing her words as I position myself against her entrance. The crystal geode I've carried for years digs into my thigh through my pocket—a constant reminder of everything I've lost.

"Tell me you want this," I command, barely recognizing my own voice.

Her eyes blaze up at me, defiance warring with desire. "Make me forget why I ran."

It's all the permission I need. I slam into her, burying myself to the hilt in one powerful thrust. She cries out, the sound vibrating through my mouth where it's sealed over hers. Her nails rake down my back, catching on the sensitive joints where my wings meet my spine.

"Fuck," I groan, the pleasure-pain nearly undoing me. "You're still perfect. Still made for me."

I pin her harder against the wall, one hand braced beside her head, the other gripping her hip hard enough to bruise. The position holds her exactly where I want her as I withdraw slightly and drive back into her, establishing a punishing rhythm that has her gasping for air.

"You feel that?" I rasp against her ear, punctuating each word with a thrust. "This is what you took from both of us when you ran."

Harmony's head falls back against the wall, her eyes half-closed, mouth parted in ecstasy. "Adellum—gods?—"

I clasp my hand over her mouth, feeling her moan against my palm. "You don't get to say my name like that. Not yet."

Her inner walls clench around me in response, and I have to grit my teeth against the wave of pleasure threatening to end this too quickly. My magic intensifies with my emotions, wrapping around us in tendrils of light that caress her skin, leaving trails of sensation wherever they touch.

She writhes against me, her body accepting me even as her mind still fights. I can feel her approaching the edge, her breathing growing ragged, her rhythm faltering. The knowledge that she's still so responsive to me, that no one else has touched what's mine in all these years, drives me to a frenzy.

"Come for me," I demand, removing my hand from her mouth to slip between our bodies, finding the spot that makes her tremble. "Let me feel you break apart."

Her body arches, her lips forming my name in a silent cry as she shudders around me. The sight of her—flushed, disheveled, utterly mine—pushes me past the point of no return. I bury my face against her neck as my climax tears through me, my wings curling forward to enfold us both completely.

For the first time in five years, the constant storm inside me calms. Harmony's heartbeat thunders against my chest, her breath warm against my skin. We remain locked together, neither willing to break the fragile peace of this moment.

HARMONY

I watch Brooke skip ahead along the garden path, her curls bouncing with each step. She wears a butter-yellow dress that swings around her knees, one I mended three times where she caught it climbing the old oak behind Marda's. The morning light catches in her hair, turning it almost white-gold—just like her father's.

"Dell! Look what I found!" She crouches, tiny fingers careful as she cups something I can't see.

Adellum appears from around the herb beds where he's been helping me weed. He moves with that liquid grace that always made my breath catch, sunlight glinting off his bronze skin. He crouches beside her, massive gray wings folding elegantly behind him.

"What treasure have you discovered, little bird?" His voice drops to a conspirator's whisper, as if nothing in the world matters more than whatever rests in her small palms.

"It's hurt." Brooke's face crumples with concern as she reveals a tiny thalivern, one of its iridescent wings bent at an unnatural angle.

I find myself moving closer despite my resolve to keep my distance. These moments of witnessing them together still feel like walking on ice that might crack beneath me.

Adellum's face turns serious as he studies the creature. "May I?"

Brooke nods solemnly and transfers the fluttering thing to his much larger hands. His fingers—artist's hands, capable of such delicate work—cradle the thalivern with impossible gentleness.

"Watch carefully," he tells her. "This is healing magic. Very special."

I lean against the garden fence, arms crossed over my chest, telling myself I'm just supervising. Not that I'm drawn to him still, to the careful way he teaches her.

A subtle glow emanates from between his fingers, soft white light spilling out like water. Brooke's eyes widen, reflecting the magic's shimmer.

"Is it hard?" she whispers.

"Not when you care enough." His eyes flick up to mine for just a second, and something lurches in my chest. "Intent matters more than power, remember that."

When he opens his hands, the thalivern's wings flutter perfectly, all four of them catching the light before it zips away toward the flowering vines.

"I want to try!" Brooke bounces on her toes.

"Let's start with something simpler today." He produces a small candle from his pocket—he's always prepared for these impromptu lessons. "Remember how we practiced?"

Brooke's face scrunches in concentration as she positions her fingers just so. I've watched this particular lesson for days now, her tiny attempts growing more controlled each time.

"Gentle breath, focused mind," Adellum reminds her.

She snaps her fingers, and a spark—golden like her eyes—leaps to the wick. The candle flares to life and Brooke squeals in delight.

"Mama! I did it!"

"I saw, sweetheart." I can't help but smile. "That was wonderful."

Adellum's eyes meet mine over our daughter's head. There's something raw in his expression, something that makes me look away first.

"What else can I learn?" Brooke tugs at his sleeve.

"Hmm." He taps his chin theatrically. "How about we call the wind?"

"Yes!" She claps.

He stands behind her, showing her how to position her arms. "Like this. Feel the air around you, then invite it closer."

I watch as they move in unison, his massive form somehow gentle as he guides her. When they sweep their arms upward, a breeze rushes through the garden, lifting Brooke's curls and tugging at her dress. She laughs, delighted by her power.

"Again!" she demands, and he obliges.

I find myself smiling despite everything. There are moments like this—Adellum scooping her onto his shoulders so she can reach the apples in Marda's orchard, or the way he crouches to carefully tie the laces on her boots—when I see echoes of the man I fell for. The artist with hands that could shape beauty from nothing, the man whose

laugh used to unlock something wild in my chest.

"Mama, can Dell stay for dinner?" Brooke calls, now sitting atop his shoulders while he holds her legs steady.

I hesitate, searching his face. The intensity is still there, banked but smoldering, yet there's something else too—a careful hope that makes my resolve waver.

"If he'd like to," I finally answer.

"I'd be honored," Adellum says, his voice carrying that formal edge it gets when he's trying to hide deeper emotions.

I turn away, busying myself with gathering herbs, unsure what else to do. I'm letting him into our lives day by day, inch by inch, like opening a door I swore would stay locked forever. But watching him with Brooke—the way his fierceness softens to tenderness—makes me wonder if I might still love him. The thought terrifies and thrills me in equal measure.

I wake to Brooke's soft snores coming from the alcove behind the curtains. Moonlight streams through our small window, silvering the floor in pale streaks. The space beside me in bed is empty—has been empty for years, though lately I've found myself imagining what it might feel like filled with his presence again.

Rising quietly, I wrap a shawl around my nightdress and pad to the window. As expected, Adellum sits on the wooden bench beneath the old tree in Marda's garden. Even in darkness, his massive wings catch what little light there is, the feathers shifting like smoke against the night.

I shouldn't go to him. I've already given him too much ground these past weeks—letting him teach Brooke, inviting him to meals, allowing him glimpses of

the life we built without him. But my feet are already carrying me down the stairs, through the kitchen, out the back door.

The night air kisses my skin, cool and sweet with the scent of meadowmint and nightblossoms. Dew soaks the hem of my nightdress as I cross the grass toward him.

He doesn't turn, though I know he senses me approaching. "She sleeps through the night now," he says, his voice a low rumble in the darkness. "When she was smaller, did she wake often?"

I settle beside him on the bench, leaving a careful space between us. "Every two hours like clockwork for the first year." I tuck my feet beneath me. "I thought I might never sleep again."

His voice is far too soft, reminding me of the version of him I thought I left behind. "And now?"

My gut churns. We've been getting far too close again. "Now, other things keep me up."

He finally turns to look at me, and I'm struck again by how his eyes seem to glow in darkness—not quite human, not entirely other. The silver in them catches the moonlight like polished metal.

"After I met you, you were truly my only muse," he says softly, "I'd go to my workshop and sketch your hands for hours. The way they move when you talk, when you garden. When you touch me."

I feel my cheeks warm. "Adell?—"

"I'd tear the pages up afterward. Too revealing. Sior always said I gave too much

away in my work."

I study his profile, the sharp cut of his jaw, the stubborn set of his mouth. "Sior sounds like he was a terrible influence."

A humorless laugh escapes him. "He was. Is. But I followed willingly."

We sit in silence for a moment, listening to the night sounds—crickets and the distant call of some nocturnal bird. His wing shifts slightly, the edge of it brushing against my shoulder like a question.

"After you left," he says, "I thought I might go mad. I couldn't create anything. All the colors were wrong."

I twist my fingers in my lap. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"A life without you was always meant to kill me." He reaches into his pocket, pulls out something small that catches the moonlight—a pale blue crystal with rough edges. "I've carried this for years. Meant to set it in silver for your birthday, before..."

My throat tightens. "It's beautiful."

"I've held it so often I've worn down some of the edges." He turns it over in his palm. "Thinking of you. Using it to ground myself when the darkness got too thick."

I see it then, what he's trying to tell me. The darkness is part of him now, as much as the light. Born of pain and loss and years of searching, it lives behind his eyes alongside the tenderness he shows our daughter. This man is both the artist who courted me with painted sunsets and the predator who killed without hesitation to protect us.

I find myself reaching for his hand, the one holding the crystal. His skin is warm against my cooler fingers. "We lost so much time, Adell."

His hand turns, capturing mine, thumb stroking over my knuckles. "We have now. If you want it."

The realization hits me with a pang—loving Adellum would never be simple again. It would be a beautiful, perilous thing—a choice I would have to make again, fully aware. The man before me carries shadows he didn't have before, an intensity that sometimes frightens me even as it draws me in.

"I don't know yet," I admit. "But I'm here. Tonight."

And that's as close to letting him in as I can get. I fear it's the wrong move, but I am only so strong.

And Adellum was always my weakness.

ADELLUM

I'm strolling through the market, Brooke's small hand in mine, when the air changes. It's subtle—a shift in the current, the way birds fall silent before a storm. My wings twitch instinctively, feathers bristling.

"What's that?" Brooke points at a booth selling carved wooden animals.

"A lunox." I crouch beside her, trying to ignore the prickling between my shoulder blades. "See the white tail with the blue tip? They live in the mountains where it snows."

"Can I have one?" She looks up at me with eyes that mirror mine—silver, luminous. My eyes in her mother's face. The sight never fails to knock the breath from my lungs.

"Of course, little one."

I hand the vendor a nodal—grossly overpaying for the trinket—but the old woman's grateful smile is worth it. This is what I've discovered in Saufort: the unbought joy of simple transactions. No agendas, no hangers-on, no keeping score.

The quiet breaks like glass when I hear him.

"Are you fucking serious?"

Sior's voice cuts through the market chatter, silencing conversations in rippling waves. I straighten slowly, positioning myself between Brooke and the approaching storm.

"Go find your mother," I tell her, pressing the wooden lunox into her palm. "Right now."

She hesitates, eyes wide, but something in my face makes her nod and dart away through the crowd. I watch until I'm certain she's heading toward Marda's before turning to face him.

Sior stands like a knife thrust into the soft earth of Saufort, all sharp edges and cold purpose. His wings, near-black and meticulously groomed, are pulled tight against his back—a controlled rage that's more frightening than any outburst.

"You were supposed to be in Lezer a week ago." He closes the distance between us, heedless of the humans scattering from his path. "The market opens tomorrow. Your pieces are sitting in crates. Collectors are asking questions I can't answer."

I shrug, which only darkens the thundercloud of his expression.

"I'll get to it."

"You'll get to it?" Sior's voice drops dangerously. Ink-stained fingers clench at his sides. "Do you have any idea what I've done to maintain your reputation while you've been—what exactly? Playing village idiot in this human cesspool?"

Market-goers watch from a safe distance, transfixed by the spectacle of two xaphan locked in conflict. I feel my lips curl into something that's not quite a smile.

"Careful. The humans might take offense."

"I don't give a shit what they take." He steps closer, lowering his voice. "Have you ever been painting? Or are you just here stirring up more drama to sabotage everything we've built?"

My hand slips into my pocket, fingers finding the rough edges of the blue crystal. It grounds me, keeps me from shoving him backward into the dried fruit stand.

"What I do is my business."

"Your business?" Sior laughs, a sound like breaking glass. "Everything you are is my business. I made you. I took a half-starved xaphan orphan and turned him into New Solas' most celebrated artist. And this is how you repay me? By hiding out in some backwater village?"

I feel something dangerous uncurling in my chest. The crystal cuts into my palm as I squeeze it harder.

"Watch yourself."

"What the fuck are you thinking, Adellum?" Sior's eyes narrow, scanning my face. "You look like shit. You're dressed like a peasant. Is this some creative crisis? Some artistic statement I should be preparing the critics for?"

People are staring. I can feel their eyes, hear their whispers. In New Solas, this would be tomorrow's gossip in every high tearoom. Here, it's just unsettling—a reminder that I've brought something dark into their peaceful world.

"Go back to New Solas," I say quietly. "I'll deal with Lezer."

"When? After you've burned your career to the ground?" He steps closer, voice dropping to a hiss. "Or is this about that human girl? The one you were obsessing

over? Did you track her down to this gods-forsaken place?"

My vision edges with red. The crystal in my pocket feels white-hot now.

"Don't." It's all I can manage through clenched teeth.

I watch Sior's jaw work, the tendons in his neck taut as bowstrings. He's never understood when to stop pushing. In the early days, that quality kept us both alive—his relentless drive that turned my paintings into fortunes. Now it just makes me want to shove him through a wall.

"This isn't just about you anymore." His voice drops to a dangerous purr. "The Praetora's commission?—"

"Can wait." The crystal in my palm feels like it's burning through my skin.

Sior follows as I stride across the market square, his footsteps sharp against the cobblestones. The villagers part like water, giving us a wide berth. I can smell their unease—it hangs in the air like smoke.

"You keep saying everything can wait! But you are just neglecting it all! I've spent half your life cultivating their interest in you." His wings flare slightly, an unconscious display of dominance that works in New Solas but looks ridiculous among Saufort's woven awnings and pots of meadowmint. "Do you know how many artists would kill for this opportunity? And you're throwing it away for what? Some rustic vacation?"

My reply dies in my throat as my eyes catch on a familiar figure across the square. Harmony stands outside the herbalist's shop, her dark curls caught up in a loose scarf, wisps escaping to frame her face. Brooke clutches her hand, waving the wooden lunox through the air with her free arm, mouth moving rapidly as she recounts her

adventure.

The sight of them hits me like a physical blow—how I want them both with an intensity that frightens me. How right they look together in the gentle afternoon light.

Sior follows my gaze, and something cruel unfurls across his face like ink dropped in water.

"Ah." His mouth twists. "So that's why we're here. It is the servant girl. The one who ran from you."

"Enough." My voice drops to a growl.

"And does she have a little brat, now?" Sior's eyes narrow, calculating. "The timing is... interesting."

My hand shoots out before I can stop myself, gripping his forearm hard enough that he hisses. "You won't speak of them. Not a word."

He wrenches free, smoothing his sleeve with precise movements, but the damage is done. Something has shifted between us, some final tether snapped. I can see it in his eyes—the realization that he's miscalculated.

"You can't honestly think to throw everything away for a human and her half-breed child." He keeps his voice low, but the contempt drips from every syllable. "Where's your pride? Your sense of duty to our kind?"

"My duty?" I laugh, the sound sharp enough to make a passing woman jump. "My duty was fulfilled a hundred commissions ago. My debt to you paid with interest."

"Is that what you think?" His eyes glitter. "That our arrangement can be measured in

portraits and sculptures? That we're simply business partners who can part ways with a handshake?"

I take a step toward him, my shadow falling across his face. "I think you're not my master, Sior. And you need to stop treating me like it."

The words hang between us, heavier than I'd intended. For a heartbeat, something like hurt flashes across his face—genuine, unguarded. Then it's gone, replaced by the cold mask I know so well.

"Fine." He straightens, wings pulling tight against his back. "Play your little domestic fantasy. When it inevitably falls apart, don't expect me to put your career back together."

"Noted." I keep my voice level, though my pulse hammers in my throat.

Sior holds my gaze for one final moment, then turns sharply on his heel. The crowd parts for him again as he stalks away, his wings a slash of darkness against the colorful market stalls. He doesn't look back.

I stand rooted to the spot, feeling the eyes of the market-goers on me. The crystal in my palm has left an impression, its edges cutting into my skin. Across the square, Harmony has noticed our exchange, her body tense and protective as she draws Brooke closer to her side.

There's no going back now. The life I built in New Solas is unraveling—but I've never cared. Not as long as I can have Harmony.

HARMONY

The weight of the day settles in my bones as I stack the last of the wooden chairs. My fingers trace the smooth edge, worn from years of use, patrons sliding in and out during meals.

Through the window, I glimpse Marda wiping down counters, her movements unhurried and methodical. These evenings bring a quiet peace—Brooke off with Joss learning to shape clay creatures, the evening breeze carrying the scent of river water and baked goods from Tam's place down the lane.

I heft another chair, balancing it atop two others.

"What a quaint little life you've built yourself."

The voice slices through the twilight like a blade. My hands freeze mid-lift, the hair on my arms rising in primal warning. I don't need to turn to know who stands behind me. The cultured vowels, the knife-edge politeness—I'd recognize it anywhere.

When I do turn, a xaphan stands at the edge of the restaurant's patio, looking absurdly out of place against Saufort's rustic backdrop. His dark wings fold neatly against his back, not a feather out of alignment. His olive skin catches the last of the day's light as he studies me with eyes that reveal nothing.

I recognize him immediately as the manager I always thought treated Adellum

wrong. He said Sior kept him on track. I think his manager used him like a fucking work zarryn.

"You're trespassing," I say, proud of how steady my voice remains while my heart pounds against my ribs. "We're closed."

Sior's thin lips curve upward. "And yet, here I stand." He brushes some invisible speck from his immaculate sleeve. "Remarkable how easy it was to find this place. One could almost call it... vulnerable."

My stomach knots. "What do you want?"

He steps closer, and I resist the urge to back away. His ink-stained fingers tap against his thigh—the only outward sign of impatience in his otherwise perfect composure.

"What I've always wanted. A return to order. Adellum has responsibilities in New Solas. Contracts. Obligations." He speaks as if explaining simple arithmetic to a child. "Instead, he's playing house in this—" his gaze sweeps dismissively over the village square "—charming backwater."

"That's between you and him."

"Is it?" Sior tilts his head, studying me like a collector might examine a curious but ultimately worthless trinket. "I wonder what these simple folk would think if they knew what he truly is. What he's capable of when provoked. They seem to have accepted him so readily." His words drip with false concern. "It would be a shame to see their hospitality turn to fear."

I set the chair down heavily. "Say what you came to say."

"Very well." Sior steps close enough that I catch the scent of expensive cologne and

parchment. "You are a distraction, girl. A temporary infatuation. Did you honestly believe a creature like Adellum would be content with..." he gestures at me, at the restaurant, at the entire village, "this? Forever?"

A chill runs through me that has nothing to do with the evening air.

"He has a legacy to build. Art that will outlive empires." Sior's voice softens to something almost paternal. "And what do you offer? A bed above a kitchen and a half-blood child who will never truly belong anywhere."

My hands curl into fists. "Don't you dare speak about my daughter."

"Ah yes, the girl." His expression shifts to something calculating. "Tell me, does she show signs yet? Magic can manifest so... unpredictably in mixed bloodlines. Sometimes violently. I've seen halflings whose powers turned inward, consuming them from within. Others whose abilities lashed out beyond control."

"Stop it," I whisper, images of Brooke's little sparks dancing in my mind.

"Such a fragile world you've built," Sior continues, looking around at the cobblestone square. "So easily shattered. All these kind villagers. That sweet potter boy who watches your daughter like a brother. The old woman with the garden. The smith and his wife." He ticks them off casually, and my blood freezes knowing he's counted them all. "What might happen to them if Adellum's attention remains divided? If he grows... frustrated?"

I step forward, surprising myself with my own boldness. "Is that a threat?"

Sior's smile widens, but his eyes remain cold and flat. "Simply an observation. You have much at stake now, don't you? Far more than just your own heart." He adjusts his sleeve with precision. "Consider what's best for everyone involved. Including

your daughter. A child needs stability, not a father consumed by...distraction."

I turn away from him, trying to walk back inside where Marda's presence might provide some safety, some witness. "I have nothing more to say to you."

"Oh, but I'm not finished."

Sior moves with unsettling grace, cutting off my path with a few swift steps. I change direction, only to find him blocking me again, herding me backward until my shoulders bump against the rough stone wall of the restaurant's exterior. The unyielding surface presses cold against my back as he stands before me, close but careful not to touch, his dark wings spreading slightly to create a barrier on either side of me.

I try to sidestep him. "Move."

"You have always been the problem." Sior's composure cracks, revealing something raw beneath his polished exterior. His jaw tightens, a muscle twitching along its sharp line. "Do you have any idea what you've done? Adellum was on the verge of greatness—true, lasting greatness. His art was transcendent. And then you—" he makes a dismissive gesture, his hand slicing the air between us "—a kitchen servant with dirt under her nails."

"I never asked him for anything," I say, lifting my chin despite the tremor in my voice.

Sior laughs, a harsh sound with no humor. "You asked for everything simply by existing! You have no concept of what was at stake. The connections I built for him. The patrons. The commissions that would have secured his legacy for centuries."

His wings shudder with rage, feathers rustling like dry leaves. "He wouldn't even

consider binding with Lilleth—a match that would have elevated his standing, opened doors that remain forever closed to him now. Because of you. He lashed out over a simple meeting with her all because of you."

The name hits me like a blow. Lilleth. She must have been the woman I saw him with that day, golden-winged and perfect.

But what does he mean Adellum wouldn't consider binding with her? Was it just...sex? Is that worse or better?

"He wouldn't paint," Sior continues, leaning closer, his eyes burning into mine. "When you disappeared, he became obsessed with finding you. Do you know what it's like watching a brilliant mind destroy itself? Watching him tear apart every lead, threaten anyone who might know where you'd gone? He was..." Sior's voice catches, something almost like pain crossing his features, "...unrecognizable. Wasted. All because you ran away like a coward."

"He didn't want me." I shake my head, unable to process this. "He had her?—"

"He rejected her!" Sior's wings flare. "I tried to use her to get him away from you and he fucking lost it."

Realization pours over me like ice water. The memory I've nursed for years—Adellum kissing another woman, planning his future with her while I warmed his bed in secret—begins to warp and fray around the edges.

"You arranged it," I whisper, the truth cutting through years of carefully constructed hatred. "You tried to set him up with someone."

Sior doesn't deny it. Instead, his thin lips curve in grim satisfaction. "I merely accelerated the inevitable. What luck for me that you saw it. Showed you your place

in the natural order. Adellum needed to focus on what mattered."

My chest tightens as the full weight of it crashes down. The betrayal I've carried, the bitterness I've nurtured like a poisonous flower—it was built on a lie. Not Adellum's lie, but my own willingness to believe the worst.

"He never wanted her," I say, the words feeling strange in my mouth after years of convincing myself otherwise.

"He pushed her away the moment she touched him." Sior's admission feels like a physical blow. "I couldn't even get him to go to so much as a dinner with another suitor after."

My hands press flat against the rough stone behind me, needing its solidity as my world tilts sideways. All these years wasted on anger and hurt. All the nights I'd lain awake cursing his name, when he had been searching for me, when he had been faithful in all the ways that mattered.

"You ruined everything," Sior snarls, mask finally slipping completely. "And now I find him here, in this nothing village, acting like a common man, besotted with you and a halfling child. Years of work undone because you couldn't accept your proper place."

But I'm not listening. Adellum never hurt me, never wronged me.

He always loved me. Was always true to his word and I ran at the first inkling that he might not be.

What have I done?

25

ADELLUM

I hate that Sior is here. It has me unsettled and angry, reminds me of all the things I left behind. I realize how much I've come to love being in Saufort, and not just because of Harmony.

Though she will always be the main factor for me.

She should be finishing with work soon, and I am desperate to see her already. I round the corner of Marda's restaurant and the world narrows to a single point.

Sior. His fingers wrapped around Harmony's arm. Her face, pale with shock and pain.

"You won't do it again." His voice carries across the yard, dripping with contempt. He yanks her closer, his other hand raised. "I won't let you get in the way after all I've done?—"

I don't make the conscious decision to move. One heartbeat I'm across the yard, the next I'm there, a sound tearing from my throat that doesn't resemble anything human or xaphan. It's the sound of something ancient, something that lived in the dark before there were names for monsters.

"Get your fucking hands off her."

Sior's head whips toward me, eyes widening. Too late, he recognizes his mistake.

My magic doesn't build gradually like it usually does. It explodes from me in a concussive wave, raw and unfiltered. The pale silver light that normally dances at my fingertips now surges forth like liquid metal, superheated and unstoppable. It slams into Sior with such force that he's lifted off his feet before he can even raise a defensive shield.

"Adellum, don—" Harmony's voice cuts off as I step between her and Sior.

I don't speak. I can't. Everything I am has channeled into the magic pouring from me like blood from an arterial wound. The ground beneath us trembles—not metaphorically, but actually shakes as though the earth itself recoils from what's happening above it. The very air seems to splinter around Sior's body as my magic consumes him.

Sior's mouth opens, but whatever plea or curse he means to utter never forms. His body contorts, spine arching at an impossible angle. His wings crumple like paper in flame. The man who shaped my career, who I once looked to as family, falls to the ground at my feet with a soft, anticlimactic thud.

The silence that follows roars in my ears. Sior lies crumpled like a discarded marionette, limbs bent at unnatural angles, eyes open but seeing nothing.

"You actually killed him." Harmony's voice comes from behind me, quiet with shock.

I turn to her, my breath still coming in harsh pants. "He touched you."

My words hang in the air between us. Simple. Factual. As if they explain everything—and to me, they do.

"You just... gods, Adellum. You didn't even hesitate." She's not moving away from me, but her arms wrap around herself protectively.

I look down at Sior's body, then back to her. The rage that fueled me moments ago doesn't ebb. It transforms, crystallizing into something colder and more focused.

"He was going to hurt you." I flex my fingers, still crackling with residual magic. "I've spent five years without you. I will not lose you again—not to him, not to anyone."

"That's not—" She stops, swallows. "That's not normal, Adellum. You can't just kill people who threaten me."

A harsh laugh escapes me. "Can't I?" The blue crystal in my pocket digs into my palm where I've unconsciously grabbed it. "I told you I would tear the world apart to find you. Did you think I was being poetic?"

The wind shifts, carrying the scent of smoke and cooking food from the restaurant. Behind us, there's the sound of a door opening, someone shouting in alarm.

Harmony meets my eyes, and I see something there I hadn't expected: not fear, but a dawning realization. "You really would do anything, wouldn't you?"

"For you. For Brooke." I step closer to her, careful not to touch her though every cell in my body screams to hold her. "Everything I am belongs to you both now. I failed you once. Never again."

Harmony just stares at me, looking at me like she did after I killed that nymph. Right before I found her trying to run again.

And I can almost feel it now. That I've shattered what little I've been able to rebuild with her because she will never be able to accept me for who I am, for how I became so twisted and obsessed over her.

I stand over Sior's body, my chest heaving with ragged breaths that feel like they're tearing my lungs apart. The silver light still dances at my fingertips, unwilling to recede back into my body. My wings spread behind me involuntarily, the soft gray feathers bristled and full—a defensive posture I haven't needed since I was a child being beaten in the streets.

Sior's eyes stare emptily at the sky. The man who shaped me, molded me, used me. The man I trusted for years despite everything screaming that I shouldn't. Dead by my hand without a second's hesitation.

I turn to Harmony, and the expression on her face hits me harder than any magic ever could. She looks at me like I'm a stranger. No—worse. Like I'm exactly what she always feared I might be.

"Harmony." My voice breaks on her name. "He was?—"

The restaurant door bangs open wider behind us. I hear Marda's sharp intake of breath, followed by her urgent whisper, "Gods above and below."

Panic floods through me, a cold rush replacing the hot fury of moments ago. I can't lose her again. Not after finding her. Not after finally getting this close to her. The thought of Harmony pulling away, taking Brooke, running where I can't follow—it hollows me out from the inside.

"Get inside," I say to Harmony, my voice rough. "I'll take care of this."

I bend down, grabbing Sior's cooling corpse by the shoulders. His wings drag uselessly behind him as I start hauling him away from the restaurant. Away from her. My own wings fold tight against my back, an unconscious attempt to make myself smaller, less threatening. The irony doesn't escape me—as if I could erase what she just witnessed.

"What are you doing?" Harmony calls after me, still frozen in place.

"I'm protecting you." The words come out more harshly than I intend. I drag Sior's body toward the tree line at the edge of Marda's property. "Go inside. Please."

"Adellum, stop." Her voice has that edge to it, that steel I'd first fallen in love with. "You can't just drag a body through town."

I halt, my hands still fisted in Sior's fine jacket. "Then what would you have me do? Leave him for everyone to see? For Brooke to see?" My voice cracks on our daughter's name. "I won't—I can't have her look at me the way you're looking at me right now."

Harmony takes a hesitant step forward. "How am I looking at you?"

"Like I'm a monster." The words tear from my throat. "Like I'm everything you ran from."

I wait for her to speak, to tell me I'm wrong. To reach out and pull me back from this cliff edge I'm teetering on.

She doesn't.

Her silence is a blade between my ribs, twisting deeper with each heartbeat. I've seen that look on others' faces before—the day I realized she was gone, when I tore through Lord Arkan's estate searching for her, terrorizing servants and guards alike until I realized she was well and truly gone.

I can't bear it. Not again.

Without another word, I haul Sior's lifeless body over my shoulder. His weight feels

inconsequential compared to the heaviness settling in my chest. I stride toward the tree line at the edge of town, my wings tight against my back, the tips occasionally brushing the ground in my haste. The brush of feathers against dirt makes my skin crawl, but I can't slow down.

Harmony's gaze burns into my back. I feel it like a physical touch but I don't turn around. Can't. If I see rejection in her eyes, I'll shatter right here in the middle of this godsforsaken village square.

The woods grow denser as I follow the narrow path that leads to the river. Fallen leaves crunch under my boots, branches catch on my clothing as if the forest itself tries to hold me back. The sun sinks low, casting long fingers of light through the trees, turning everything gold and shadow. Any other time, I would find it beautiful—the kind of scene I'd want to paint with Harmony watching over my shoulder, her chin resting on the crown of my head.

"What have I done?" I mutter to myself, the words escaping before I can trap them behind my teeth.

Killed the man who was like a father to me. The man who made me what I am today. The man who tried to touch what's mine.

No, I don't regret killing him. I'd do it again. But the timing—gods, the timing. Just when I thought I was making progress with her.

The sound of rushing water grows louder. I approach the riverbank, my steps slowing as I consider what to do with Sior's body. The river is deep here, the current swift. It would carry him far from Saufort, perhaps all the way to the sea.

I kneel, gently laying Sior's body on the mossy ground. His face looks peaceful in death, more serene than I ever saw it in life. Always calculating, always scheming,

always pushing me toward what he thought I should be.

"You should have left her alone," I tell him, my voice hollow in the empty forest. "I would have forgiven anything else."

I reach into his jacket pocket, retrieving the papers I know he always carries. Contracts, probably. Agreements for my next commission, my next performance. All the ways he planned to profit from me while keeping me trapped in my gilded cage.

I drop them next to his body before lifting him again. The water is cold when I wade in, soaking through my clothes. Sior's wings drag behind us, water-logged and heavy. When I'm chest-deep, I release him, watching as the current takes him. His body floats for a moment before being pulled under, disappearing into the murky depths.

"Goodbye, Sior." The words taste like ash.

I stand in the river, letting the cold water numb me from the feet up. What now? How do I go back to her? How do I make her understand that everything I've done—everything I am—is for her and Brooke?

The blue crystal digs into my palm where I've unconsciously squeezed it again. I pull it out, studying its rough edges in the fading light. It was meant to be a gift for Harmony, set in silver for her birthday. Now I wonder if she'll even let me near her again.

Five years I searched for her. Five years of becoming something harder, darker, more desperate. And in the span of moments, I've shown her exactly what those years made me.

I wade back to shore, my clothes clinging to me like a second skin. Night is falling fast now, the forest growing darker around me. I should head back to the village, face

whatever comes next. But my feet won't move.

What if she tries to run again?

The thought freezes my blood despite my soaked, freezing clothing. I can't lose her. Not again. Not ever again. I'll chase her to the ends of every realm if I have to.

But gods, I don't want to chase. I want her to choose me. To love me. To see that everything—every monstrous, terrible thing I've become—I became for her...

And still want every part of the blackened soul that has only belonged to her.

HARMONY

The night sky bleeds dusky purple as I make my way along the riverbank. My steps are heavy with exhaustion, yet my mind races like the swirling currents below. Two hours ago, I watched Adellum kill a man—not just any man, but Sior, his mentor. The memory sits like a stone in my chest, both terrible and somehow liberating, because it had been for me.

I knew that I needed to talk to Adellum so I asked Tamsin and Holt to keep Brooke for the night. The look they gave me was painfully understanding. And then I went in the direction he disappeared when he left me with too many revelations and an aching heart.

I spot him before he sees me—a dark silhouette against the silver-blue water, broad shoulders hunched forward, wings folded tight against his back. Moonlight catches on the curves of his feathers, turning them ghostly. He sits motionless, staring into the river's depths as if searching for answers there.

My footsteps falter. What am I doing here? What can I possibly say after everything? Five years of bitter hatred dissolved in less than a month. Five years of convincing myself he was the villain in my story, only to discover I'd been wrong all along.

He doesn't move when I approach, though I know he hears me. The fine edge of his jaw tightens—the only indication he's aware of my presence. Up close, I can see his knuckles, still raw and crusted with dried blood. Sior's blood. My stomach lurches,

but I force the feeling down.

I sit beside him, leaving a sliver of space between us. The night air smells of river moss and distant rain. Neither of us speaks. The silence stretches, taut as a bowstring.

Adellum's eyes remain fixed on the water, silver irises reflecting moonlight like twin mirrors. His face is a perfect mask, but I can feel the storm raging beneath it. He closes his eyes finally, lashes dark against his bronze skin, and the gesture breaks something in me. He looks like a man awaiting execution.

My hand moves before my courage can fail me.

I reach across the space between us, my fingers trembling slightly as they find the sharp angle of his jaw. His skin burns hot beneath my touch—it always has, like he carries a furnace inside him. Gently, I turn his face toward mine until I can see the raw pain etched into every line.

"Harmony," he whispers, my name a prayer and a plea.

I don't answer with words. Instead, I lean forward and press my lips to his.

The kiss is gentle at first—tentative, questioning. A relearning of something once known by heart. His body goes rigid with shock, and for a heartbeat, I think he'll pull away. But then something breaks in him. His hands come up to cradle my face with a reverence that steals my breath, his touch so careful, as if I might dissolve beneath his fingers.

"Little bird," he murmurs against my mouth, voice breaking.

The familiar endearment unravels me. I press closer, one hand sliding around his neck, feeling the rapid pulse beneath my fingertips. The kiss deepens, turning

desperate, hungry. His wings unfurl partially, instinctively creating a shelter around us.

"I don't think you are a monster," I whisper, but he swallows the words with another kiss.

"But I am," he says, pulling back just enough to rest his forehead against mine. "I'll always be whatever you need me to be.

The river babbles beside us, a constant whisper that takes me back to stolen moments in New Solas—nights when we'd slip away from Lord Arkan's estate to the secluded bank where the trees dipped their leaves into the water. How many times had we lain there, learning each other's bodies by moonlight, making promises neither of us knew if we could keep?

"We were right here once," I whisper, fingers threading through his cropped hair. "Different river, same us."

A broken sound escapes him, something between a laugh and a sob. "No. Not the same." His hands tighten on my waist. "I'm not the same man who let you slip away. That man was a fool."

"And I'm not the same woman who ran." I trace the sharp line of his cheekbone with my thumb, feeling the slight dampness there. "That woman was afraid."

"Are you still afraid?" His question hangs between us, weighted with all our history.

I kiss him again in answer, tasting the salt of tears—his or mine, I can't tell anymore.

My breath catches as Adellum rises to his knees, moonlight casting silver shadows across his face. The intensity in his eyes makes me tremble—not with fear, but with a

longing so deep it hurts. His powerful hands slide beneath my thighs, and before I can draw another breath, he lifts me effortlessly into his arms.

"I need to see all of you," he whispers, his voice rough with emotion. "No more hiding. No more running."

He carries me a few steps away from the riverbank, to where soft grass forms a natural bed beneath a canopy of stars. The weight of five years hangs between us as he lowers me onto the ground, his movements careful, deliberate. His wings extend slightly, creating a shelter that blocks the night breeze, enclosing us in our own private world.

I watch, mesmerized, as his fingers work the laces of my dress. Each movement is unhurried, reverent. He unwraps me like something precious, something sacred.

"I dreamed of this," he confesses, his gaze never leaving mine as he slides the fabric down my shoulders. "Every night for five years. I dreamed of finding you again."

The cool night air kisses my skin as he peels away each layer. I should feel exposed, vulnerable, but under his gaze, I feel worshipped. His eyes track each inch of revealed skin with a hunger that makes my heart race.

"You're more beautiful than I remembered." He lowers his head, pressing his lips to the hollow of my throat. "And I remembered everything."

His mouth traces a burning path down my body—across my collarbone, between my breasts, over the soft curve of my stomach. Each kiss is a declaration, each touch a promise. When his lips brush across the stretch marks left by carrying Brooke, I tense slightly.

"Beautiful," he murmurs against my skin. "Every mark, every change. All beautiful."

My fingers find his hair, gripping tightly as emotion threatens to overwhelm me. "Adellum..."

He rises up, hovering above me, his massive wings creating a cocoon around us. Slowly, deliberately, he begins to shed his own clothing. First his shirt, revealing the dusky bronze expanse of his chest, the lean muscle that speaks of power carefully contained. I reach up, tracing the familiar patterns of scars across his torso—evidence of a childhood harsher than he ever fully explained.

"I thought I knew your body by heart," I whisper, fingers mapping the new marks I don't recognize. "These are new."

His jaw tightens. "A lot happened in five years, little bird."

When he's fully undressed, he lowers himself over me, skin against skin, and the familiar heat of him makes me gasp. He's always burned hotter than a human, his xaphan blood a furnace beneath bronze skin.

"I want to remember every inch of you," he says, his voice breaking slightly as he aligns our bodies. "Slow enough that neither of us forgets again."

When he enters me, the world narrows to this moment, this sensation. He moves with exquisite slowness, each thrust deep and purposeful. Our bodies remember this dance even as our minds struggle to reconcile past and present.

"Look at me," he commands softly when my eyes flutter closed. "Stay with me."

I obey, meeting his silver gaze, seeing the raw vulnerability there. This isn't the frantic coupling of before—driven by anger and desperation. This is something else entirely. Each movement is a confession, each gasp a forgiveness.

"I thought of this every night," I admit, my voice breaking as he shifts his angle, sending sparks of pleasure racing through me. "Even when I thought I shouldn't. I missed you more than I ever wanted to admit."

"I thought of you every second," he says, his rhythm never faltering. "You are my reason for existing."

His wings tremble as he moves within me, the moonlight catching on the feathers, creating a canopy of silver and shadow above us. One of his hands slides beneath me, lifting me closer to him, changing the angle until I cry out.

"There," he murmurs, satisfaction deepening his voice. "I remember what you need."

The pressure builds inside me with each deep, deliberate thrust. I cling to his shoulders, nails digging into bronze skin, feeling the powerful muscles work beneath my fingertips. The stars wheel overhead, witnesses to our reunion.

"I was wrong," I gasp as pleasure coils tighter within me. "So wrong about everything."

"Shh." He captures my confession with his mouth, kissing me deeply as he continues his relentless pace. "The past is dead. We're here now."

My release builds like a wave, higher and higher until I'm trembling beneath him, poised on the edge of something vast and overwhelming. When it breaks over me, I cry out his name like a prayer, my body arching against his. He holds me through it, his movements never ceasing, drawing out each pulse of pleasure until tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

"That's it, little bird," he whispers, his own voice strained with the effort of his control. "Let go. I've got you. Always had you."

Under the infinite expanse of stars, with the river's song as our witness, I know with absolute certainty that this man would tear apart worlds for me. That he already has.

I wrap my legs around Adellum's waist, pulling him deeper inside me as he rocks against me. The familiar rhythm of our bodies feels like coming home after being lost for so long. Time stretches and compresses around us—five years of separation dissolving into this perfect moment where nothing exists but his skin against mine and the stars wheeling overhead.

"You're perfect," he whispers, his voice rough with emotion. His silver eyes never leave mine, holding me captive in his gaze as his hips drive forward. "So perfect, little bird. Made for me."

My breath catches at his words, at the reverence in his tone. For years I convinced myself that what we had wasn't real, that he had never truly wanted me. But the truth is written in every line of his face, in the trembling of his wings above us, in the desperate grip of his hands on my hips.

"Nothing was right without you," I confess, the words torn from somewhere deep within me. My fingers dig into the powerful muscles of his shoulders as he fills me completely. "No matter what I told myself, I was incomplete."

The admission costs me something—some final piece of armor I've been holding onto. But watching his expression crack open with raw emotion makes it worth it. His rhythm falters for just a moment, then resumes with renewed intensity.

"Say it again," he demands, his voice breaking. His wings create a silvery cocoon around us, shutting out the world.

"Nothing was ever right without you," I repeat, my voice stronger this time. I reach up to cradle his face, feeling the sharp edge of his jaw against my palm. "Not one

single day in five years."

He groans, deep and primal, the sound vibrating through my body where we're joined. His movements become more urgent, more desperate, as if he could somehow make up for all our lost time with the force of his passion. The pressure builds inside me again, a coiling heat that threatens to consume everything.

"Harmony," he gasps, and I feel him swell within me. His wings snap fully open, magnificent and trembling in the moonlight as he drives deep one final time and spills inside me with a broken cry.

The sensation of his release triggers my own, waves of pleasure washing over me as I cling to him. For a moment, we're suspended in perfect synchrony, our bodies remembering what our minds had tried to forget.

Slowly, carefully, Adellum lowers himself beside me on the grass, gathering me against him. His arms encircle me possessively, one wing draping over us like a blanket of silver feathers. I nestle against his chest, listening to the thundering of his heart as it gradually slows. The night air should be cool against my damp skin, but I feel only warmth.

I recognize the sensation immediately—the gentle hum of his magic wrapping around me like an embrace. It's a subtle thing, this extension of his power—a shimmering layer of heat that envelops my bare skin and keeps the chill at bay. He used to do this for me during our stolen nights in New Solas, when we'd lie beneath the stars and pretend the world outside didn't exist.

"I missed this," I murmur, tracing idle patterns across his chest. "Your magic always felt like a second embrace."

He tightens his hold on me, pressing his lips to my temple. "It remembers you. Magic

has memory—it knows what it's meant to protect."

I close my eyes, savoring the familiar sensation. His magic feels like sunshine distilled, like the warmth of a hearth after coming in from a storm. It cocoons around me, seeping into my very bones, chasing away not just the physical chill but something deeper—the cold emptiness I've carried inside me for five years.

We lie in silence for a long moment, our breathing synchronizing as we gaze up at the stars through the canopy of his wings. His fingers trace lazy circles on my shoulder, each touch reverent, as if he's still convincing himself I'm real.

ADELLUM

I pull Harmony closer against my chest, her back pressed to my front as we lay tangled together on the riverbank. The soft rushing of water provides gentle background noise to our breathing. Her hair smells of meadowmint and sunshine, and I bury my nose in it, inhaling deeply. Five years of emptiness—of cold beds and hollow victories—and now she's here, solid and warm in my arms.

"Missed this," I murmur against her neck, tracing lazy patterns across her stomach. "Missed you."

The setting sun casts long shadows across the clearing, turning the water to liquid gold. My wings curl instinctively around us, enclosing Harmony in a cocoon of soft gray feathers. Protection. Possession. Mine.

She shifts, turning to face me, her hazel-green eyes studying my face with that quiet intensity that first drew me to her. There's something there—a question unasked, a confession lingering. I brush my thumb across her cheekbone, waiting.

"I need to tell you something," she finally whispers. "About why I left."

My muscles tense involuntarily. This moment—this exact moment—has haunted my dreams for five years. The why. The thing that stole her from me. My fingers find the blue crystal geode in my pocket, squeezing it hard enough that the edges bite into my palm.

"Tell me." My voice comes out rougher than intended.

Harmony sits up, drawing her knees to her chest, putting distance between us. I hate it immediately.

"I saw you. With her. That day in your gardens." Her words come out fragmented, each one cutting like glass. "The xaphan woman with the silver wings. I saw you kiss her."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I jerk upright, wings flaring out behind me.

"What?"

"I was coming early to surprise you. But I saw you with her instead." Harmony's voice is steady, but her fingers twist anxiously in her lap. "I thought... I thought I was just your human plaything. Your dirty secret until you found someone more suitable."

Fire erupts through my veins, rage and heartache colliding into something primal and shattering. I pace to the water's edge, hands clenched so tightly my knuckles blanch white. Five years. Five godsdamned years of agony—all over nothing.

"Lilleth kissed me." I whirl back to face Harmony, the words torn from my throat. "I didn't kiss her. I pulled away the moment it happened."

She just nods. "Sior told me. I don't think he meant to but earlier, he told me, and I realized how wrong I was."

"Sior was pressuring me to bind with someone appropriate. Someone of 'my status.'" I spit the words out like poison. "He arranged the meeting. I only agreed to get him off my back." I drop to my knees before her, seizing her hands in mine. "And because a part of me wondered if you might be better off without me."

"Adellum—"

"I went looking for you. That same day. When I couldn't find you, I searched the estate. Then the city. Then every road leading away." My voice cracks. "I searched until my wings gave out and I collapsed. Night after night after night."

A tear slides down her cheek. I catch it with my thumb.

"I dreamed of you every time I closed my eyes. Your face. Your voice. Your laugh." I press my forehead to hers. "Those dreams kept me alive at first. Then they started to poison me from the inside out. The wanting. The not knowing if you were safe. If you were happy. If you were even alive." I stare deep into her eyes. "You have to know there was never anyone else for me, Harmony. Only you."

"I'm sorry," she whispers, her hands coming up to cradle my face. "I never should have doubted you. I saw one thing that scared me, and I ran, thinking you could never actually choose me."

"I loved you then, little bird." I curve my hand around the back of her neck, holding her gaze with mine. "I love you now. I will love you until the stars burn out and the universe collapses into nothing. There has never been anyone but you. There never could be."

Harmony's eyes flood with tears, her hands trembling against my skin. "All this time? Even after what I did?"

She might have driven me crazy, but nothing would ever be unforgivable for her. I can't even blame her after how most xaphan treat humans. I just hate I didn't know, that I couldn't have proven to her that she was it for me.

I'm hoping that over these five years, I have.

"All this time," I confirm, voice rough. "Every moment. Every breath."

She nods, tears gathering in her eyes, and I brace myself. She doesn't seem relieved, and I immediately wonder how I can reassure her when she speaks.

"Adellum, there's something else." Her voice catches, a tremor running through it. "Something I've never told anyone. Something I could barely admit to myself."

A knot forms in my throat. I've already lost five years—what more could she possibly have kept from me?

"Tell me." My voice comes out hoarse, my hands instinctively finding the crystal in my pocket again, grounding myself.

Harmony takes a deep, shuddering breath. Her fingers twist together in her lap, knuckles going white.

"Brooke is yours."

I stare at her, blinking slowly. I knew she was xaphan, had hoped deep down, but...I had convinced myself the timing was wrong. I had believed this whole time that someone had taken a part of Harmony I wanted to belong to me.

"What?" The word barely makes it past my lips.

"Brooke is your daughter." Tears slip freely down Harmony's cheeks now, catching the last rays of sunlight. "I didn't know I was pregnant when I left. By the time I realized... I convinced myself it was better this way. That she'd be safer without you knowing."

My wings flare out behind me, a reflexive response to the storm building inside me.

My daughter. My daughter . The little girl with those silver eyes—my eyes—and that shock of pale hair. The child who summons golden sparks from her fingertips when excited. All this time... she's been mine.

"I was wrong." Harmony's voice breaks, her shoulders folding inward. "I was hurt and scared and stubborn. I told myself it was to protect her. From the life I thought you'd chosen. From a world that would see her as less because of her mixed blood." She reaches for my hand, hesitant. "But I was really protecting myself. From loving you. From admitting how much I still wanted you."

I go utterly still, my mind racing backward through every interaction with Brooke. Her curious eyes following me. The way she instinctively reached for my hand. Her delighted giggle when I helped control the sparks dancing from her fingers. How had I not seen it? How had I missed something so profoundly obvious?

"She has your smile," Harmony whispers. "Your temper too. She gets these little creases between her eyebrows when she's thinking hard, just like you. Obviously your eyes and your magic."

My chest constricts, pulling tighter and tighter until I can barely draw breath. I had every intention of making her mine, but I truly am her father.

"I thought she couldn't be mine." The confession rips from me. "When I first saw her, I thought you'd moved on, found someone else. It nearly destroyed me, but I still—" My voice breaks. "I still wanted to know her. To protect her. To be something to her, to be her father in some way."

Harmony's tears come faster now, her entire body trembling. "I'm so sorry, Adellum. I tore us apart. All of us. I've denied Brooke her father. I've denied you your daughter."

Something shifts inside me, plates of rage and hurt sliding against each other, threatening to tear me apart. But beneath it all, a deeper current—love for this stubborn, fierce, maddening woman. Love for the daughter I'd known for weeks but not recognized as my own blood.

I pull Harmony into my arms, crushing her against my chest. My wings wrap around us both, trembling with the force of my emotions.

"I loved her when I thought she wasn't mine," I whisper fiercely into Harmony's hair. "And now—gods, Harmony, I want nothing more than to be her father. To be with you both. You and Brooke are everything to me."

Harmony clutches at my shoulders, her face pressed into my neck. "I never stopped loving you," she confesses, voice muffled against my skin. "Not for a single day. I hate myself for tearing us apart based on one misunderstanding, but I want you to know that I see how I messed up. I hope you can forgive me, Adellum."

I cup her face in my hands, forcing her to look at me, to see the truth in my eyes. "We can't get those years back, little bird. But I'm not going anywhere now." My thumb brushes away a tear on her cheek. "And I won't let you go either. Not ever again."

"Promise?" she whispers, eyes searching mine.

"With everything I am." I press my forehead to hers. "You, me, and our daughter. Together."

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The sun breaks over the fields beyond Saufort at the same time every day, but I never tire of watching dawn claim our little world. The light filters through the curtains of our farmhouse—our home, I still think with a rush of disbelief—and paints gilded stripes across Adellum's wings where they're curled around me.

Our bedroom window faces east. We planned it that way.

I disentangle myself carefully from the warmth of his arms, placing a kiss on his shoulder before slipping from our bed. The floorboards creak under my bare feet as I tiptoe across our bedroom to slip down the hall and check on Brooke. In the soft dawn light, I can make out her small form, curled in a tight ball under her quilt, wisps of pale blonde hair splayed on her pillow.

Five months since we decided to stay. Five months since the world as I knew it shattered and rebuilt itself around these quiet, golden moments.

I never wanted to return to New Solas, to a life I had no interest in there, and neither did Adellum. So we got our own little home here, where I garden and still work for Marda, where he paints and can send his work to be sold while staying the dangerous recluse he's known to be now.

I press my palm to Brooke's back, feeling her steady breathing beneath my hand. A rush of gratitude so overwhelming it almost brings tears to my eyes washes through me. This is my life now. This peace. This family.

In the kitchen, I start the morning fire with practiced movements, setting water to boil for tea. The kitchen window looks out over my garden—not the careful box of herbs I

once maintained above Marda's restaurant but a sprawling, vibrant thing that feeds not just us, but half the village when I'm feeling generous.

"Little bird."

I turn to find Adellum leaning against the doorframe, sleep-rumpled and magnificent. His wings are tucked loosely against his back, and in the early light, his silver eyes seem to catch fire. He's wearing only loose sleep pants, and the sight of him—the casual intimacy of this moment—still makes my heart skip.

"Did I wake you?" I move to the counter where I've laid out mugs and the jar of meadowmint tea.

"No." He crosses to me, sliding his arms around my waist from behind, burying his face in my neck. "Your absence did."

I lean back against him, savoring his warmth. His hands slide to my hips, thumbs tracing small circles against my nightgown. "And you call me dramatic," I murmur.

"Because you are." He kisses my neck, his breath warm against my skin.

"Mama? Papa?" Brooke stands in the doorway, rubbing her eyes with tiny fists. Her hair is a riot of curls, her nightgown twisted sideways. The sight of her turns my heart inside out with love.

We told Brooke, too, that Adellum was her father. She took it in a stride, already attached to him. He wove a great story about going around the continent, becoming the best father he could be before coming here to shower her with love. It was enough to quell her questions.

"Good morning, my sunshine." I open my arms and she runs into them, letting me scoop her up. She plants a kiss on my cheek, then turns to Adellum, reaching for him

with a sleep-warm hand.

He takes her from me, tossing her high enough to make her giggle before settling her on his hip. "And how's my little sorceress today?"

"I dreamed of thaliverns! Purple ones!" She pats his cheeks with both hands. "Can we go to the big field? You said we could practice making sparks today."

"After breakfast." His tone brooks no argument, but his smile is indulgent. "Your mother needs to get to Marda's, and I have a commission to finish."

"The one for the gorgon lady?" Brooke wrinkles her nose.

Adellum laughs, the sound rich and warm. "Yes, the one for the gorgon lady. She's paying us very well."

"Don't worry, sweetheart," I say, pouring hot water over the tea leaves. "You can help me in the garden first. The dreelk needs harvesting."

Brooke slides down from Adellum's arms, already chattering about which basket she'll use for the dreelk. I hand Adellum his mug of tea, and our fingers brush. Even after everything, that small touch sends electricity through me.

Later, after dropping Brooke with Holt for her daily lessons, I walk through the village to Marda's restaurant. The morning air is crisp, full of promise. Farmers nod as I pass, and the baker's wife waves from her door. It took time, but the village has embraced us—our unusual family with its xaphan father and human mother, our wild-haired daughter who makes sparks dance from her fingertips when she laughs.

I pass the small studio Adellum built at the edge of our property. Through the window, I can see him working, wings half-spread as he stands before a large canvas. Paints splashed across his forearms, that look of intense concentration that transforms

his features.

He's different here, away from New Solas, away from Sior's influence and the demands of his fame. Here, he paints what moves him, not what sells.

He must sense my presence because he looks up, catches my eye through the glass. The smile he gives me is so full of quiet joy that it steals my breath.

"You're mooning over him again." Marda's voice breaks into my reverie as I enter the restaurant kitchen. The older woman's eyes crinkle with amusement. Even she's gone soft on Adellum despite him being a xaphan.

I feel heat rush to my cheeks as I tie on my apron. "He's just... he's good at what he does."

"Mmhmm." She hands me a knife for the zynthra I've brought from my garden. "And what he does is make you happier than I've seen you in five years."

I can't argue with that. Instead, I focus on chopping, letting the familiar rhythm soothe me.

After a long day of work, I'm standing in the amber glow of sunset, up to my elbows in soil as I tuck the last seedlings into the newly turned earth. Our garden has become my sanctuary—a place where I create something purely for the joy of it. The scent of fresh soil and crushed herbs rises around me, mint and sage mingling with the darker, earthier notes of my favorite plants.

"Mama, look!" Brooke dances between the rows, careful not to step on any plants. She's learned that rule well. In her hands, she cradles a thalivern butterfly, its iridescent wings catching the last rays of sunlight. "It likes me!"

I sit back on my heels, pushing a stray curl from my face with the back of my wrist.

"Of course it does. You're very likable."

"Papa says I have gentle hands." She beams, pride radiating from her small face. "Just like you."

The butterfly flutters away, and Brooke watches it go with a contented sigh before squatting down beside me. Her little fingers immediately dive into the soil, mimicking my planting technique.

"Can I put in the last brimbark?" she asks, already reaching for the seedling.

"Here." I guide her hands. "Remember, not too deep."

The sound of the garden gate opening draws my attention. Adellum stands there, wings half-spread in that unconscious way they get when he's feeling something strongly. His gaze finds mine immediately, intense and burning with purpose.

My heart stutters. Even after all these months together, the sight of him still steals my breath. He's still intense and possessive, but he's relaxed a little, like he knows he doesn't have to fully dig his claws into me to keep me here. I like both sides of him, the protective and the sweet.

"How are my favorite gardeners?" He crosses to us, crouching beside Brooke. He's changed from his paint-splattered clothes into a clean shirt, and there's something almost nervous in the set of his shoulders.

"We're planting dinner for next month," Brooke informs him solemnly.

"That's very forward-thinking." He tucks a strand of her wild hair behind her ear, then glances at me. "Harmony, I was hoping to talk with you."

Something in his tone makes my pulse quicken. "Is everything alright?"

"More than alright." He helps me to my feet, his touch lingering. "I've been thinking about something. Something important."

Brooke tugs at his hand. "Are you going to give Mama a present?"

A smile quirks the corner of his mouth. "How did you know?"

"Because you get this face." She scrunches her features into what I assume is her impression of Adellum's intensity. "Like this. All serious."

I laugh, dusting soil from my skirt. "She has you figured out."

Adellum reaches into his pocket and pulls out something that catches the light—a blue crystal set in a silver ring to match the geode he gave me for my birth a few months back. The geode he always carried around and now a ring to go with it.

"I've been carrying it for weeks, waiting for the right moment," he says quietly.

My breath catches as he slides it onto my finger. "It's beautiful."

"It's the beginning." His eyes hold mine, silver and sure. "Harmony, I want to ask you something."

Brooke watches us with wide eyes, unusually quiet. But she's bouncing on her toes like she knows what's coming, like she's in on her father's little secret.

Adellum takes my hands in his, mindless of the garden soil still clinging to my fingers. "I want us to be bound. Properly. Forever."

The world seems to still around us. "You mean a soul bond?"

The one thing I thought we could never have.

I spent so long holding myself back, thinking that there was no way I could ever really be his. And I know he sees all that old doubt creeping up.

"Yes." His voice drops lower, just for me. "I know what I'm asking. I know it's forever—that it's unbreakable. That's what I want. You. Brooke. This life we've built. I want it sealed and sacred."

My heart pounds against my ribs. The soul bond is more than marriage—it's a tethering of life forces, souls intertwined until death and beyond. For a xaphan to offer this to a human...

"Are you certain?" I whisper. "Once done, it can't be undone."

His fingers tighten on mine. "I've never been more certain of anything. I would have asked the day we decided to stay, but I wanted to give you time. To be sure."

"What's a soul bond?" Brooke tugs at my skirt, eyes bright with curiosity.

I look down at her, then back at Adellum. The evening light catches in his hair, turning it to pale fire. In his eyes, I see the man who searched for me across continents, who loves our daughter fiercely, who has built a life with me brick by careful brick.

"It's a kind of magic," I tell her. "A special kind of promise where your papa promises to love me."

"Like marriage?" She wrinkles her nose. She knows about human marriage from the village but there's no xaphan here, no soul bonds for her to understand.

"Deeper than marriage." Adellum's voice is soft but certain. "It means your mother and I would be connected forever. Our souls would always find each other."

Brooke's eyes widen. "That sounds nice."

I laugh, the sound catching on unexpected tears. "It does, doesn't it?"

"So?" Adellum's question hangs in the air between us, vulnerability naked in his eyes despite the confidence in his posture.

I step closer, fitting my soil-stained hands against his face. "Yes. Of course, yes."

The tension leaves his body in a rush. He leans his forehead against mine, his breath warm against my lips. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure of you," I whisper. "Of us. I love you."

His kiss is gentle—reverent—and I melt into it, into him. When we part, Brooke is watching us with a mixture of fascination and mild disgust that makes me laugh.

"Can I watch the magic?" she asks, bouncing on her toes. "When you do the soul thing?"

Adellum sweeps her up into his arms. "Of course you can, little sorceress. You're part of this bond too."

"I am?" She looks between us, delighted.

"You're our hearts walking around outside our bodies," he tells her, with that fierce tenderness that still catches me off guard sometimes. "Of course you're part of it."

The xaphan soul bond ceremony isn't the elaborate spectacle I once imagined it might be—no grand procession through New Solas, no audience of nobles with their critical eyes and painted wings. It's just the four of us under the open sky: Adellum, me, Brooke, and the Nashai who arrived in Saufort two days ago.

We chose the meadow beyond our garden—a wild expanse of tall grass and wildflowers where Brooke likes to practice her magic. The setting sun paints everything in amber and gold, casting long shadows across the ground. In the distance, the silhouette of Saufort nestles against the darkening horizon, its windows beginning to glow with evening light.

I wear a simple white dress that falls to my ankles, the fabric light enough to catch the evening breeze. My hair is loose, the way Adellum likes it, with sprigs of meadow flowers woven through the curls by Brooke's careful fingers. The blue crystal ring gleams on my finger, catching the last rays of sunlight.

Adellum stands before me, resplendent in the simplicity of his formal clothes—a deep blue tunic that makes his silver eyes more luminous against his bronze skin. His wings are extended slightly, the soft gray feathers ruffled by the gentle wind. He's nervous—I can tell by the way he keeps flexing his hands at his sides, by the intensity in his gaze as it never leaves my face.

"Are you ready?" The Nashai's voice is melodic, her own white-gold wings folded elegantly against her back. She's older than I expected—her face lined with wisdom, her eyes kind but serious. "This bond cannot be broken. Your souls will intertwine—in this life and whatever lies beyond."

Adellum's hand finds mine, his fingers warm and steady despite his nerves. "We're ready."

I squeeze his hand, my heart thrumming against my ribs. "Yes."

Brooke watches wide-eyed from a few feet away, bouncing on her toes in the simple cream-colored dress we chose for her. She's been solemnly quiet for most of the day, absorbing the importance of what's happening with that preternatural awareness children sometimes possess.

The Nashai nods, her hands raising between us. "Then we begin."

She speaks in the ancient xaphan tongue—words I don't understand but feel in my bones nonetheless. They resonate in the air around us, weaving through the meadow grass, dancing on the breeze. As she speaks, her hands begin to glow with a soft golden light.

"The god Solis hears your intention," she says, switching to the common tongue. "Speak now your promise to each other."

Adellum's eyes never leave mine as he speaks. "Harmony." My name on his lips sounds like a prayer. "I choose you. I've only ever chosen you. Through darkness and light, through all the worlds we may walk, my soul reaches for yours. I promise to protect what we've built, to cherish what we create together. My life is yours, my heart has always been yours."

Tears blur my vision, but I blink them away, needing to see his face clearly. "Adellum." My voice catches, but I push through. "I never believed I could have this—this life, this love. You found me when I was lost, and you've shown me what it means to be truly seen. I promise to walk beside you through whatever comes, to build and rebuild with you as many times as we need to. My soul knows yours, has always known yours—I think even before we met."

The Nashai's hands glow brighter, and from them emerges a thread of shimmering golden light—like liquid sunshine. It floats between us, undulating gently in the air.

"With this tether, Solis binds what was always meant to be joined," she intones. "As this light enters your hearts, so shall your souls be forever woven together."

The golden thread separates into two strands that move with purpose toward each of our chests. I gasp as the light touches me—it's warm, like stepping into sunlight after too long in shadow. It sinks through my dress, through my skin, and I feel it settling

somewhere deep inside me, a gentle pulsing warmth that matches the rhythm of my heartbeat.

Across from me, Adellum's eyes widen as his strand of light disappears into his chest. For a moment, the glow illuminates him from within, shining through his skin like he's made of glass. Then it fades, leaving only a soft luminescence around the edges of his form.

"It's done," the Nashai says simply. "Your souls are bonded. What Solis has joined cannot be severed."

The moment her words fade into the evening air, I feel it—a gentle tug in my chest, a thread connecting me to Adellum. It's subtle but undeniable, like the awareness of a limb I didn't know I had until now.

"Mama!" Brooke can't contain herself any longer. She dashes forward, bare feet kicking up wildflower petals as she launches herself between us. "Did it work? Are you magic now?"

I laugh, the sound bubbling up from a well of pure joy. "Not exactly, sunshine. But something magical happened."

"Can I see the mark?" She tugs at my neckline, peering at my chest. "The Nashai said there would be a mark!"

"Here." Adellum tugs down his collar, revealing a shimmering design over his heart—intricate swirls and patterns that seem to shift in the fading light.

I look down and pull aside my own collar. The same design marks my skin, though where his glows with a soft silver light, mine has a golden hue.

"It's pretty," Brooke breathes, tracing the mark with a gentle finger. "Does it hurt?"

"No, little one." I smooth her wild curls. "It feels like... belonging."

The Nashai bows to us and steps back, her formal role complete. She'll share a meal with us later, but this moment—this belongs just to us.

As the sun dips below the horizon, Brooke twirls away from us, arms outstretched, face tipped toward the darkening sky. "Look! Stars!" she calls, spinning faster, her bare feet kicking up grass and flower petals. Her giggles float on the evening air as she dances in wild, joyful circles around us.

Adellum pulls me against him, one wing curving around to cocoon us together. "How do you feel?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Complete." I tuck my head under his chin, feeling the steady thrum of his heart against my cheek. "Like I've found the missing piece of myself."

His arms tighten around me. "I can feel you. Here." He touches his chest where the mark glows. "It's like... an echo of your heartbeat beside my own."

Above us, the first stars appear—tiny pinpricks of silver against the deepening blue. The same stars we used to sit beneath in the gardens of New Solas, when our love was still a dangerous secret. The same stars I wished on during those lonely years in Saufort, before he found me again. The same stars that will watch over us for all the nights to come.

"Remember that first night you convinced me to sneak out?" I whisper, tipping my face up to his. "When you showed me the constellations?"

His smile is soft, his silver eyes reflecting the twilight. "You wore blue. You had dreelk leaves in your hair from the kitchen gardens, and you tried to hide them when you saw me."

"You noticed everything about me, even then."

"I still do." His finger traces the line of my jaw. "Every new freckle, every laugh line. They're all precious to me."

Brooke collapses in a breathless heap at our feet, her cheeks flushed with exertion. "The stars are coming out," she pants, pointing upward. "Ms. Marda says stars are the eyes of people who loved us watching over us."

And it feels like that now. Especially as I look into the eyes of the one man who has always loved me more than anything.

Adellum pulls me close, kissing the tip of my nose. "I love you, little bird."

I wrap my arms around his neck. "And I love you."