



Catherine Miller

BOUND

THE TENTH IN THE DERIDIA SERIES

Catherine Miller
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This book is dedicated to my Liv. The queen of my heart, my floof, my Bunny Bean. Fierce to the last.

I didn't know how hard it would be to write without you on your cushion tower at my feet. I didn't know I could miss anybody so much.

19 years wasn't nearly enough.



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Conceive

“You are lovely,” he purred, his hands creeping up her thighs. To the smooth line of her back. “So strong...”

She almost laughed at him. Flattered, even though it was ridiculous. She wasn't, not compared to most of her kind. But he wouldn't know that, would he? She was the only one he'd known.

She'd found him. Felled. His wings were knotted and bound with ropes and stones. A weapon, he'd said. Bloodied and bruised as she'd set him free and shared her fire with him.

And he was... handsome. With his pointed ears and pale hair.

And he marvelled at her.

No man of her kind had done that before. They might say sweet things if they wanted to lie with her, but those quickly passed afterward. She might receive a nod. A grunt, but she wasn't *special*. Not like she was to him.

“Althon,” she breathed, a catch in her throat when he reached the fastenings of her uniform. Haggard now, despite her attempts to keep it clean and relatively mended.

“Would it be too forward,” he asked, nuzzling his face against her cheek. “To ask you to remove this?”

Maybe. Yes.

She shivered.

No.

Her hands moved before she had consciously thought of it. Up toward her throat and then downward. If her remaining layers disappointed him, he did not say. Only made some sort of sound low in his throat that could only mean approval.

A purr?

It did things to her. Made her feel desired. Cherished.

When his hands delved into the firm layer that supported her breasts, her breath caught. She loved the way he handled her with reverence, as if committing the shape of her to memory. Loved the way her body trembled with the wonder of where next he might touch her.

He smoothed her uniform down her arms. Allowed it to pool about her waist. They were seated, after all. And she would have to shimmy and that would likely not be as attractive as she hoped it would be, and she wasn't particularly practised in this part of things. She was used to fumbling, to be left wanting for *some* kind of connection.

Not gentle, worshipful hands.

Not being lowered to the ground as he lay over her, looking at her as if she was his saviour.

She hadn't done that much, really. Freed him, she supposed. But anyone would have, if they'd found a person in such a state. Fed him with a few of her provisions.

Hid him because...

Because the rest of the survivors would not appreciate another delving into their few remaining rations.

They'd need a better plan soon. When the food ran too low and desperation took its place. They were supposed to be farmers, not foragers.

He hummed against her throat. And he hadn't asked. Only delved between her legs, and that was all right because... because she wanted him too. Beautiful fallen angel that he was.

He didn't ask when he entered her. When the cloth of his clothing shifted and suddenly he was there, pressing inward.

But she was used to that part. To men getting to the point, and he'd touched her so kindly first. That was new, and rather lovely.

He did not know what to do for her, but she should have known that. They were not the same, after all. It didn't hurt, at

least, and that was always better.

And he nuzzled into her palm when she touched his face, and he seemed to remember her better, then. When he moved to her cheek, and she was warm and covered and maybe this was nice after all. To be with him. To feel something other than horror and fear and the never ending gnaw that no one was coming for them.

It was a risk coming here. She'd left a life, before. A home. But there was work, and it was going to be a good life. The rest of her family would come later, after they'd settled. She was brave; they said. And they loved her. They'd see each other when the colony was established.

His wings fluttered about them as he moved, and it was beautiful. She liked when he reached his arms about her and crushed her to him. When she felt wholly bound to him. Would he stay once he'd healed? Would he help her? Help the rest of them? She hoped so. Maybe... maybe this time it would mean something more. More than a nod. More than a whispered accounting around the fire that ended in knowing laughter. Because she'd done it again, hadn't she? Been seduced with a simple touch and a kind word and...

Althon wasn't like that. Wouldn't discard her afterward.

He stilled, and something pinched at her, something inside, and she startled and glanced downward, but he held her too close to make out anything at all.

He nuzzled her neck. Her breast. Allowed his words to curl about her ear.

She did not know them, of course. He spoke, and the discarded translator spit out a mechanical facsimile of his rumbling voice. But he spoke too softly for the machine to catch it, and she found she preferred this. To imagine the meaning for herself. That he cared for her, that she meant something to him, that... that he would stay.

"Ada," he murmured, and she smiled because... that was her name. The one thing she'd conveyed before she'd snuck back into camp and pilfered the translator.

“Althon,” she greeted back, and... kissed his cheek. She wouldn’t be clingy. She’d learned that a long time ago. But... she always liked it better when there was a kiss. Perhaps it was too many stories when she was a girl. About love and happy endings and all the rest of it. But... there should be kisses. Even short, stolen ones that left him looking at her with such bewilderment.

But something swelled in her heart when she returned the gesture, and it felt a little too much like hope.

1. Tumble

Many orbital cycles later...

Market day.

It brought the promise of goods and coin, but also the twist of dread that inevitably stole her appetite the night before. And the morning too, even though she prepared it with all the reluctance of knowing it was good for her and yet she would manage little of it.

Chores had to be done earlier. There were animals to feed, after all. Who were never pleased to have their routines disrupted, no matter how she tried to explain that the reason was a good one.

Necessary.

She could only manage so much on her own. Grow so many crops, preserve it all. Tend to the animals that provided her wool and company.

It was easier, before.

When...

Well, when Mama had been alive.

But she didn't need to think about that. Not today. Not when there was work to do.

She removed her hand from the satchel of grains, refusing to pretend she'd eat it at all. There would be a feast when she came home again. With vegetables she hadn't grown herself. Herbs in braided bundles she hadn't tied with her own two hands.

Two delicate paws reached up her leg, tugging downward with sharp claws that nicked at her skin as she bent the opposite way to avoid them. "Just because I am going without mine does not mean I will neglect yours."

She was met with unblinking eyes of accusation before she laughed and reached down to pull the indignant creature into her arms. Merryweather was tiny, really. Beneath the thick pelt that had yet to shed fully from the winter. Even though she wriggled heartily, Wren kept hold of her, placing her upon the large worktable in the centre of the kitchen. It was a battle long lost, for Merryweather would go where she pleased and *do* as she pleased. She was a wild creature, after all. Her presence was bestowed, not owed from centuries of domestication.

There'd been a litter the year before. Tiny, mewling kits that lived by the kitchen fire for a full two months before they'd realised their legs were for more than coaxing milk from their mother's belly.

All boys. She'd learned that when they preferred to hunt and wander off to find mates of their own rather than remain. Merryweather had watched them go with little care, seemingly pleased to have the house a quiet sanctuary yet again.

Wren tried to feel the same.

Minced meat in a bowl, a purr of acknowledgement. A tail that reached out almost of its own accord to curl about her wrist as she petted once down her spine.

Then out to the rest of her chores.

The stable doors opened with a groan. The hinges could use oiling. The floor could use a good sweep. But those would be other days.

Not market day.

She let the two *hesper* out into the field to graze, and she tended their stalls. That could also use some attention. It had been a wet winter, and a few of the posts had begun to show their ages.

The list felt endless, and if she dwelt too long, then...

Well. It didn't matter. The list didn't care how she felt. It would keep until it didn't. And suddenly priorities would shift if it meant keeping Temperance and Calliope from escaping their pens.

She'd already had to fix one line when she'd found a male happily grazing in their midst. And was doing a great deal more than grazing to Temperance.

She was hardly in need of another, and he'd wandered away when he'd had his fill—of both sweet grass and of Temperance herself.

Typical.

The fence used quite a few of her last good nails. She'd need more, and they rarely wanted what she traded. They valued metals, after all.

Coin.

Not something she usually had in abundance.

She'd prepared her baskets the day before. They were good and strong—she'd made them herself. The ones her mother had crafted were now used strictly within the house. Wasteful, her mother would say, but her eyes would be warm. Then sad. Always sad about the edges.

When did grief end? She was a woman grown. And yet not a day passed that she did not wish her mother was still with her. Not simply to lighten the load, but because... because she'd loved her. She'd been company and family and...

Wren buckled the first of the baskets. It was awkward. Always was. It pinched at her diminutive wings and would chafe them raw if she did not wrap them in wool first. She'd visit that field later. When she was home again.

It was a long walk, after all.

She didn't mind it.

Well. Sometimes she minded it.

When the winds were cold, and when she caught the first glimpse of the *Harquil*. Then it hurt. In ways that were old and had no business aching the way they did. So she kept her head down and continued her march into the city itself, the path indented by the merchants who had enough to warrant a cart.

The city itself was walled so high that she risked pinching her neck to see the top when she neared the base. The gates must have been able to close at one time—but time and lack of care had dirt bunching up around their bottoms. The wood itself succumbing to the unwelcome moisture. Even the great hinges that held open the giant doors looked rusted and decayed.

Whatever they had once had to fortify against had clearly long since died away.

Age had smoothed the cobblestones. The entire city itself had been built from white stones, the tops gleaming in the sun as the bottoms grew murky from wood-smoke and inevitable dirt. The cobbles were dingy and grey, cleaned seemingly only from the rain rather than an attempt to keep the roads clear.

Was that tucked away on a list somewhere? A forgotten task. Or simply a neglected one.

She had plenty of those back home.

The awe she'd felt at the white city had long since faded. She was not the little girl that had come with her mother to sell, wide-eyed and fascinated by all the sights and the *people*.

The bustling. The hum of many wings as people flittered between their chores. Or were they visiting just because a neighbour was close enough to do it at all?

Wren had never bothered to pace out how close the next dwelling was to her own homestead. Logically, she *knew* there were others that must live away from the city, but if they'd chosen to live apart, then it was for good reason.

Her mother had good reason. With a daughter born outside the bond, a half-blood that was not supposed to even be possible.

She swallowed. Kept moving.

The stalls were stationary. She had to pay a fee each season in order to keep her spot. Maintenance, they said. Which she supposed was true. Hers was one of the smallest, but there was still a tile roof to keep out the sleet and hail that did not seem to care that some were attempting to do business.

It was harder. When she was young and it meant long days and few sales and a discouraged mother to trudge along afterward back home. She'd try to hide it, of course. That she was disappointed with how little coin jingled. But there was food.

Her father would bring some.

Always did.

He'd got them a home, after all.

He'd even stayed there for a while. At first. She could remember sitting on his knee and remembered her mother smiling.

Remembered too when she'd watch from her bed when they thought she'd been asleep and they slipped away outside.

She'd wanted to follow, to see what she might be missing, but they'd put her to bed and her mama had told her to stay, so she didn't get up. But they always came back. Holding hands and even kissing a little.

She liked it when he stayed.

Liked it less when her mother sobbed. When she tried her best to explain... explain that he wouldn't be staying anymore. He would visit her, that he loved her, but that... something had happened. Something big and important, and it wasn't his fault. Wasn't anyone's fault. It was just part of being a Harquil. Maybe she'd understand someday.

She unloaded her goods, sparse as they were. But they filled the front table.

They were nothing much to look at, of course. It was reputation that brought her any custom at all. Inherited from her mother. Medicines. A few potions in vials. Lozenges that could soothe even the worst of a flight-cough.

Some had tried to mimic them, but were not able. They might taste similar—she'd sampled a few with tight smiles and a nod that perhaps she'd be back to purchase a full bag of them. But the herbs were her own. Her mother's. Carefully

cultivated and grown from mothers beyond the stars themselves.

She didn't like to think about those things. The stories. She'd stopped asking for them early on because, more often than not, her mother would cry. And no amount of hugs seemed able to soothe her.

So it was enough that they were special plants. That it was important they flourished, and they had to be treated carefully.

They were kept in the garden closest to the house. With a high fence surrounding it all. To keep out *certain* parties that would find the deep green foliage a particular treat compared to the perfectly ordinary sweet grass of the pasture.

Then there were the hives that had to be tended, the delicate little insects encouraged toward the flowers of that particular garden and...

Wren took a breath.

She would manage. She just needed to organise herself a little better.

Doubts pushed in. There were only so many hours to each day after all and...

A mother appeared. Fluttering down with a squalling fledgling on her hip, and it did not take even her speaking before Wren reached for a pouch of her lozenges to hand over. A coin was pressed into her hand, and Wren smiled back in sympathy as the woman did not wait before popping one into the child's mouth.

He quieted quickly.

"It's the season," the mother added apologetically. "The air, you know. I try not to take him up, but..." she shrugged and her feathers ruffled back into place.

Wren did know. They could walk. There were paths and streets enough for it—for the carts that would come from other lands, other people, ready to do their trades.

But flying...

It was easier. It was in their nature.

She remembered her father taking her. The sun on her skin, the wind ruffling through her hair as she laughed and held her arms out, pretending she was doing it all on her own.

He'd kissed the top of her head and chuckled and told her that soon it *would* be her. When she was stronger. When her wings grew to match her size.

Wren added the coin to the pouch at her waist while the mother and now-quiet fledgling wandered down to look at other stalls. They would be back. Summers were even worse, and it was only the beginning of spring.

She moved the second stool over so she could rest her feet on it. She took out a ball of yarn from her basket and her hook and kept busy while she waited for more mothers to appear.

More waste, her mother would say. When she'd tucked away each of the articles that her mother had made. Preserving them as best she could in a wooden trunk with sachets of oiled wood-shavings to keep anything from nesting within. The idea of them deteriorating, of being poked full of holes that accompanied daily use, was not tolerable.

So she started new. New stockings, a sweater for the cold season. Even a blanket to wrap herself in when the evenings turned chilly. If she had a larger flock, she could sell such things as well. For all that the Harquil possessed, this particular skill did not seem to be one of them.

But it took time. Lots of it. And this was a private skill. Taught by her mother, who was taught by *her* mother, in a land far away.

The next to approach was not a customer at all, but the keeper from two stalls down. A pretty girl, with silvery wings and hair that seemed often to forget that they were to keep Wren at a distance. They would allow her to come and sell if she had the coin for it, just as they would any other merchant. But she was an *other*. Not supposed to exist at all.

Firen did not seem to remember that. She came and chatted just as she did with any other of her stall-neighbours—no

matter how many times she was reminded to keep a careful distance.

“Fair morning to you, Wren,” she greeted with a bow of her head followed by a bright smile.

“And to you,” Wren offered politely. She also took her feet off the neighbouring stool and stilled her hook. She could not remember if she should stand as well. Her father had only gone so far in teaching her the customs she should know. The rest came from her mother.

If Firen was offended, she did not show it in the least. Her hands were clasped neatly in front of her and she leaned forward ever so slightly, the better to catch Wren’s eye. “I wanted to make sure you knew of the fete tonight.”

Wren heard a snort from the stall beside hers, and could well imagine the shaking of Old Henley’s head. Firen glanced leftward briefly, and her smile faltered for just a moment before she smoothed it over again. “And that you are most welcome.” She gave a breathless sort of laugh. “By me, anyway.”

So she had some sense, at least. And was kinder than she needed to be.

A fete. Where men and women who hadn’t found their bond-mate would mingle and hope to suddenly be struck with *knowing*. Mystical and beautiful. Something to long for.

She’d heard it all before.

But that was not Firen’s fault. She was younger, and did not know Wren’s history, and she would try to be gentle about it. “Thank you,” she offered with something that she hoped was close to a genuine smile rather than a grimace. “For including me. I’m afraid there are a great many chores waiting for me at home.”

Firen’s smile fell, but only briefly. “Of course. I don’t know how you live outside the city, really. It’s hard enough minding the stall, let alone doing all the rest of it.”

Wren shrugged. It was her life. And while she harboured many regrets, she did not truly have any complaints. It was

quiet, but it was hers. She had animals enough for company, and there was plenty to occupy her time.

Her mother had taught her to be grateful. That they had food to eat and shelter, and the rest... extras.

Most of the carts had already arrived, loaded from the ships at the docks and brought before first dawn was even a smudge over the horizon.

But there was a clamour of hooves and the roll of heavy wheels against the cobbles, and even Firen turned her head to see what had arrived so late.

Two male hesper pulled the cart. She always forgot how much smaller Temperance and Calliope were compared to their male counterparts. Bulky and muscled, they pulled the cart heavily laden with logs with relative ease. A hired cart by the signet painted onto the wooden wheel. The driver walked beside, a long pole in hand as he encouraged them forward. He was young, and as he took upward to reach to the other side, the line attached to the pole fluttered against the flank of the left hesper. It reared, its horned head thrashing in distress, irritating its yoke-mate, which turned to the other to shove at it reproachfully. She'd seen Temperance do much the same to Calliope with near daily frequency. But her horns were small and curved behind her, so the damage was rare.

“Control your beasts, driver!” a man bellowed, storming up behind, dripping with impatience. “You lose this load...”

A wheel caught in the dent of the cobbles, and with the tussling of the hesper, the threat did not remain empty for long.

They were more trees than logs. Stripped of some of their branches, but they were not the tidy pieces she tucked into her hearth each day. They spilled free of their confines, rolling and tumbling freely. There was a flurry of movement as stall-keeps tore up to the skies, leaving behind their wares as the first of the stalls was hit with a terrible crash of splintering wood and shattering tiles.

Firen had disappeared as soon as the first of the logs had tumbled free, while Wren...

It all happened so quickly.

She made it free of the stall, but the log itself was thick that she had no way to jump over it, only try to escape around. But it crashed into the stall beside hers and there was nowhere to go.

Her wings moved of their own accord, the instinct strong even if it was impossible to accomplish. They were useful for quieting a fall, but she jumped as best she could, knowing it was not nearly enough.

She felt the scrape of bark against her leg, cutting and rubbing and *burning* and she waited to be caught beneath, for it to break and shatter bone as she was pressed between the log and the cobbles.

But something caught her around the middle, pulling her upward as she drew her legs up and over.

“Worse than a fledgling,” came from behind her, the voice low and angry.

It shouldn't have hurt. Shouldn't have stung. But it did.

The last log settled and with it the chaos as merchants descended from the skies, furious at their losses.

The man eased her down, but she could not bring herself to look at him. “Are you all right?” he asked at last, and she shrugged.

Yes. No.

Did it really matter?

She opened her mouth to offer him a retort. To assure him it was *not* her fault that she had no abilities with her wings.

But merchants descended, both upon him and the young driver, and she lost her opportunity.

Her legs stung. She should have worn her tall boots, but she hadn't, and her leggings were torn at the calves.

She was bleeding. It was sluggish and slow, more scrape than a true wound, but she would need to tend it.

She glanced at what remained of her stall, the large log—no, the *tree* that had fallen through it dominating the space.

The stools had been crushed. Toppled and broken.

She wouldn't think about that. Wouldn't think about her mother sitting beside her. Wouldn't think about her baskets and how she'd been quite right to keep her mother's tucked safely back at home.

What few coins she'd made were attached to her belt, and she would leave the rest. Her hands were shaking, and the commotion was only worsening just how distraught she felt. The Proctor appeared, hands outstretched as he called for order and would likely soon be talking of recompense.

She had no idea what she would ask for. It was an accident, and while she should likely wait to give some sort of testimony, the last thing she desired was to bring any sort of trouble in front of the Proctor. She'd had to beg to be allowed to sell at all, given her... status.

He'd relented, with a warning to keep to herself, and if any higher officials came through...

Disappear. He hadn't said it, but she'd caught his look and understood it well enough. It went against the order, after all. They allowed all sorts of peoples and trades precisely because the bonds ensured the Harquil remained precisely as they were.

She did not resent them for it, despite it all. They were kindly. They cared about family—perhaps to a fault. Their only desire was for those families to be made within the bond.

Her throat tightened.

She took a breath and then a step. Her legs were firm and stable. Her skin stung and there would likely be deep bruises come tomorrow, but she could walk. Would walk. Leave the chaos behind. Merryweather would be pleased to see her home early. It was a blessing, really. No need to fret about any of it.

She made it out of the city gates before she had to pause. To glance down at her legs again to ensure that nothing else had opened. Splinters poked out, and she sighed, leaning down so she might examine it all. A thorough wash would be needed. She'd wrap them with a poultice and remove the splinters. Perhaps take a swig of something strong and heady beforehand.

She kept moving.

It wasn't an agony, but it was far from pleasant, and if she limped...

Well, so she limped.

Just a little. On the left side, since she hadn't been so quick drawing it upward.

There were wings overhead.

She dismissed it.

Kept moving. Toward the path that cut through the forest surrounding the city itself. Toward the felled clearing that made up her own lands. It would take twice as long to reach home again, given her pace, and she wished she had her flagon to wet her tongue and perhaps wash away the worst from her legs. But it couldn't be helped.

She would not cause trouble.

The thrum of wings grew louder as someone descended beside her.

She startled, jumping slightly at the sudden flurry of sound and dark wings, and she scuttled to the side, certain a mistake had been made.

But it wasn't the Proctor demanding yet another accounting. It was the angry man, the one with the dark wings that had... *intervened* on her behalf.

Then insulted her.

Her lips thinned. And while it might have been good manners to wish him a fair afternoon, there was nothing fair about it. Not if it had been his load that had been lost from the

errant cart and driver. And he should find some stout chains to remove the logs from their market so repairs might be made rather than here, following her.

“You gave me no answer,” he called from the distance between them as she continued to make her way down the almost non-existent path into the forest. He had to follow on foot, the boughs too dense to allow much flight at all, and she was not terribly sorry for it.

She managed, so would he.

She paused. Took a breath. He’d hurt her with his careless comments, but her mother had raised her better than that.

Wren turned back toward him, keeping her hands carefully neutral at her sides. “My injuries are minor and will be tended to once I am back home again. I thank you for your concern.” She did not add that she was not a fledgling at healing—that there were plenty of mishaps tending to her chores that ended with some measure of bleeding. All of which were attended to by *her*.

He took a step nearer even as she turned to do precisely as she’d said. Her brow furrowed as she regarded him.

He was of an odd stature for a Harquil. He had their usual height, but he was burly. Strong. A woodcutter? It would explain his logs, although not why he had needed a hired cart rather than one of his own for transportation.

“I think your logs are in more need of your attention than I am.”

He grunted at that, his head turning back toward the city. “Where are you going? Everyone else has stayed to receive compensation.”

She shrugged. “Home. It was a bit too chaotic for me.”

His brow furrowed. “This is a strange direction for a home.”

She did not stiffen. There was no outrage at his queries. Likely the Proctor had sent him to find her to ensure there was not a body trapped beneath the wreckage of what should have

been a perfectly ordinary day. “Is it? And yet it’s the one I have.”

She was tired, and there was work yet to do, and her shins hurt. She did not wish to grow curt, but she had no intention of returning to the Proctor or the mess of it all, and she sighed a little. “You may remind the Proctor that he will receive no trouble from me. I would appreciate the stall being put to rights. That’s more than enough.”

The woodcutter’s mouth turned ever so slightly downward. His hair was as dark as his wings, his eyes equally so. There was a severity to his nose, the set of his mouth, and she found she did not like to look at him for too long. It made her nervous, made her all too aware of just how alone she was, and...

“May your afternoon be fairer than your morning,” she offered in way of parting, determined she would continue on her way rather than be subjected to yet more questions. The Proctor knew where to find her. He could come himself if it was so very important.

“Wait,” he called, and it was too close to a command and he must have noticed as she turned her head back with an arched brow and watched him grimace. “Wait,” he tried again, this time with something nearer to an entreaty. She didn’t. But she kept her steps slow and her head turned just enough.

And heard a rumbling sound from his chest as he moved toward her, and her lips thinned ever so slightly.

“Your name,” he insisted. “For the Proctor.”

Oh. “Wren,” she offered. “He’ll know me.”

He nodded, his steps lagging, looking all the while as if there was more that he wished to say. And maybe she should have lingered. Should have told him how he’d insulted her. That she could not help if her wings were small and somewhat useless, but that it certainly did *not* make her a fledgling.

She was a woman grown, and she was going home.

To her own home.

Where she'd happily allow Merryweather to bully her for minced meat or affection alike.

Where there were books brought by her father, read through more times than she could name, yet still felt like old friends.

She did not need him to think well of her. Did not need him to think her capable and competent.

"The next... event. Will you be in attendance?" The words were spoken in a stilted manner, as if ground from somewhere deep within that had no interest in bringing them from his unwilling throat.

She stopped then. Turned once, just briefly, then glanced away again when she felt the same nervous tightening in her belly that suggested he was dangerous. "No." She laughed, and if it was filled with a humourless resignation, then... "No, of course not." Wren did not elaborate. She owed him nothing. Let him think what he willed.

And when he stopped following her, she was not disappointed. And if she tried not to limp, to keep her steps even and of a normal gait, then... well... she simply did not wish to appear weak.

Yet the walk was long, and no matter how many times she tried to dismiss the events of the day from her mind, they replayed themselves over and over. What she should have done. What she might have said.

But the lessons had started early. Had started when she *was* just a fledgling. When her mother bundled her up and hid her wings, and took her to the market. Better for them to think her just a human baby, another merchant from another land.

It had worked for a while. Even as Wren had chaffed and argued, not understanding why it mattered at all.

When her father visited, he said her wings were lovely. He would laugh as she made them flutter as she sat upon his knee, and he would kiss the top of her head and insist she was the prettiest Harquil he had ever seen.

It was different as she grew. When... when he'd found his bond-mate, after all.

There was a sadness about him that he could not fully put aside, even for her. She'd asked if she had brothers and sisters somewhere, and the look he shared with her mother was enough to quiet any further inquiries. It was enough that he was there. That he'd brought provisions and an afternoon. That he would take her twirling above the pasture so she might know what it was to be a proper Harquil after all.

Temperance batted her head against the gate when Wren approached. "You should not be complaining," Wren chided as she rubbed against the woolly head that tried to bat at her through the wooden slats. "I wasn't supposed to be home for ages."

Calliope gave a bellow across the field, a low sound that never failed to send a shiver through Wren. It was visceral, a warning, even if Calliope merely meant it as a greeting to the one that might give her an extra helping of grains.

They needed milking. She should check on the other field. She turned towards the house after giving Temperance one last rub. Her legs needed her attention, and these clothes would be added to the ever-growing pile of mending.

And she would forget anything about hurt feelings and damaged legs and a stall that was no longer shared.

And it was easier to do when she'd finally allowed herself to tuck in for the night. When Merryweather took her place on the old woollen blanket on her side of the bed and set to washing her foreleg and paw.

When the lamplight was low and the book in her hands was worn and familiar.

Contentment settled. The way her body only seemed to fully relax when she went back home again. Tucked into her own bed, surrounded by memories. Some sweet, some that sent little aches in her heart. But they were hers.

It was only later, when she'd doused the light and pulled the covers up to her nose, that she realised she had not even asked the man's name.

It had not even occurred to her to wonder.

“Sorry, Mama,” she whispered into the dark, but it was Merryweather that chirped back in answer. Polite. Gracious. Even... even when she'd been wronged.

She sighed. And found that it was rather a long time before she slept.

2. Half-blood

It wasn't supposed to happen that way.

It was supposed to be at one of those horrid fetes he had ceased attending when it became more than apparent his mate was not in attendance. Or perhaps a friend of his sister's when she insisted he come to her home to share a meal. He shouldn't be alone so much, she'd say, and he'd nod and do as she'd bid simply because it was easier.

She'd have a woman there. Because she knew him well, despite how he grouched and insisted otherwise. And they'd look at one another as they were introduced, and they'd *know*. And it would be strong and mutual and everything he'd been told since his fledgling days.

It was not supposed to be in a clutch of fear and chaos.

Was not supposed to be when he was ready to throttle Jamen for his ineptitude.

They were related by marriage and nothing more. What did it matter to him if the boy had begun a new venture, and wouldn't Braum please consider using his services whenever he could?

He'd relented. Against his better judgement.

And now...

He watched her go.

Watched her *walk*.

With her stunted wings and her utter lack of recognition for what they should be to one another.

That she'd wanted to be free of him was obvious. So he'd held back. Allowed her to go, while every instinct in him screamed he do the opposite.

She'd walked away from the city. And it bothered him. Bothered him that she presumably lived beyond its protection as well. He had a duty to protect her, to care for her, and how could he do that if she was not close by to tend to?

His hands turned to fists.

There was a mess at the market. That needed his attention. Jamen needed an earful, if not a sound smack for his incompetence.

He forced himself back. To deal with his mistakes and assure himself that he would sort out the rest. Like why her wings were so small. Why she'd looked at him as if he was a stranger rather than...

He took to the air. Lurched himself back when he realised he'd begun to follow her once more.

He wasn't welcome. That much was clear. And she was guarded with her answers, as if it was all about coin and restitution and not...

He shook his head to clear it.

Failed utterly.

Felt a stab in his gut that nearly took the breath from his body. Because he'd left her? Listened to her when she insisted she be on her way?

He landed and took stock of the disaster. Splintered wood and shattered tiles would need to be swept. The damage to the logs themselves would be smoothed away when they were stripped of their bark. He rarely had cause to bring anything of such size into the city itself—everyone wanted everything neatly chopped and ready for their kitchen fires. But these were to serve as pillars for a new dwelling. A wealthy merchant from across the sea that had taken residence. A wooded place, he'd said. Wanted it to feel like home.

As if a few pillars could replace the peace that came from a natural forest. Or the woodlots he planted and tended himself. Neat rows, some taller as they strained toward the sun, determined to outdo their plant-mates.

He rubbed at his side where it hurt. Glanced down to reassure himself he was not actually wounded. There was no blood. No bruise that he could tell. And yet it *hurt*.

Did it hurt her?

That bothered him more than the pain. To think that perhaps she felt the bond, the tear, to be parted so soon. But there had not been even a hint of recognition in her eyes.

His side throbbed anew.

He'd been certain. Of himself. Of her. When he'd seen her standing in that stall, when she'd not flown to safety like the rest of them. The fear in his belly had been real and some of it was his, but most...

It had been hers.

Swirling and biting and urging him to action.

As he touched her. Lifted her. In ways that should have been unnecessary, except that she was...

Different. That was all. In ways that he needed to understand.

Jamen was arguing with the Proctor. No, not arguing. Pleading. The hesper were harnessed to one side, by older and much more capable handlers—coaxed to stillness by the buckets of grain provided to them.

None of it was their fault. They were used to the open skies and pulling loads far from the city walls. But their strength was needed for this order, and it would mean so much if people could see Jamen's signet, and didn't Braum remember being young and new to his trade?

And Braum had been fool enough to listen.

Braum broke in. Took Jamen by the collar. Shook him once to get him to stop his pleas and talk sensibly.

The Proctor calmed considerably.

"This should not have happened," Braum acknowledged with a nod of his head.

“In that we are agreed,” the Proctor grouched, glancing about at the displaced stall-keepers.

Then there were the swarms of angry merchants. Some chattering in languages he did not understand, but the irritation in their eyes was clear enough. Some were winged, others were not, and yet none seemed to be torn and bloody like his...

As she had been.

His hands curled into fists as he fought for calm. To stay and tend to his responsibilities—even though they seemed paltry and ridiculous compared to the one that mattered most.

Wasn't that what they were always saying? Nothing else was of greater import. *Nothing*.

And yet he was here.

Pulling out his meagre bag of coins as Jamen did the same, offering the first of a few instalments. The merchants stared with interest at the exchange. Braum could well imagine they would insist on restitution from the Proctor before even the first sun had set.

He rubbed at the back of his neck. He needed to fetch another cart. Get the logs out of the way and to their intended destination.

He was inspecting the largest of them, that was all. And if he did so from the crushed remains of *her* stall, then...

That was hardly his fault.

He wasn't prying. Certainly was not *spying*. As he leaned down, his hand resting against the thick bark of the log that had destroyed much in its wake. There were bits of fabric on the stone floor, but he could not make out its purpose. Was she a weaver? There was too little for that. Unless she had sold most of her stock already.

He glanced up warily as he caught sight of a stranger leaning against the log, looking over at him with a less than pleased expression.

“You may take your complaints to the Proctor,” Braum got out with all the politeness he did not feel. “Unless your preference is for a personal apology rather than coin.”

A grunt in answer. “I’ll get my due; I’m not worried.”

And yet he lingered. An elderly man, his hair poorly combed—or perhaps it was simply the flurry of movement that had dislodged it from its band.

Braum stood from his crouch. He’d learn little from here. And besides, he would rather hear from her directly, if ever she allowed him that particular privilege.

“Girl get hurt?” the man continued, eyeing the stall with a critical eye.

Braum had to swallow down the unreasonable outrage he’d seen at her blood. She was fine. She certainly had walked away from him quickly enough. “A few marks. She refused assistance.”

Another grunt.

Braum cast him another look. “Do you know her well?”

He shouldn’t ask about her. It was wrong, wasn’t it? Although why he couldn’t say. They should have stayed together. Exchanged family names, their occupations, their lodgings.

She hadn’t wanted that. Or if she had, she’d hidden it well.

He frowned at the memory.

“She’s been my neighbour since she was yea high,” might have been a fledgling, the gap between his hands was so small. “Her mother then. Just her now.”

Braum glanced his way, uncertain if that meant the mother had deceased or if she simply chose not to attend now that she had a daughter old enough to manage it on her own.

“You know what she is, don’t you?”

Braum’s eyes narrowed. “I do not know your meaning.”

His lips curled slightly upward. “Half-blood. Right here in our little market.” There was nothing little about their market, and Braum did not appreciate the apparent relish the stranger took in sharing that bit of gossip.

But the knowledge of it tugged at him. The diminutive wings, the lack of recognition in her, while he...

“You seem old enough to have heard talk of it when she was born. Raised quite a stir.”

Braum had enough of the man’s tone. The pleasure he took in sharing details of Braum’s mate when she was not there to defend herself.

But they were not accusations, were they? Merely facts regarding the nature of her birth.

That was being shared with him because...

He stood a little taller. “Have you need of anything else?”

The man took a step backward, his hands raised to show he’d meant no harm. Which perhaps he hadn’t. It had been a wretched day. An important day.

The *most* important of days.

And yet he was here.

Alone.

He saw a mostly intact pouch peeking out from the corner of the log and yanked it free with more force than was strictly necessary. It tore, but only a little. Braum was sorry for even that.

He did not want to open it while being stared at, so he pocketed the pouch and made his way back into the thrum of the crowd.

He needed a cart. Needed to get this done.

And then...

Then he would make further enquiries.

The thought settled poorly.

He did not want to pluck the details of her life from other witnesses. He wanted to ask her directly, to hear her responses and to absorb each and every one of them. Perhaps hold her hand as they spoke.

He shook his head, scowling as he took to the skies. He wanted his usual team. With hesper used to the climb, with experienced handlers that would shake their heads at the mess Jamen had made. Perhaps smack him upside the head as they passed.

Would he have noticed her? If the beasts had not startled, if he had simply walked by her. Would he have known to turn his head, to look at her? To recognise her for who and what she was?

He wanted to think that he would.

But he'd attended the market before. He needed supplies, the same as anybody else.

And he hadn't seen. Hadn't known.

And the thought curdled in his belly, that he might have overlooked her. Perhaps she had recognised *him* ages ago and was now too hurt and angry to accept him for his obliviousness.

Surely, if that had been the case, she would have sought him out. Would have told him and made him see, to see her for what she was. To insist upon her due.

There was the pull. The reminder. That all was not as it should be because she was not near enough. He should follow. Forget the team, forget the order, and find her.

Should he care she was of half-blood? The tone of the stall-keep suggested it was some sort of failing on her part. As if she had any control over the circumstances of her birth.

And yet, it troubled him. As his thoughts turned fiercely back to her, even as he hired a more qualified team. As he listened to the droning from the Proctor. From the other merchants that approached and gave him an earful before they went back to doubtlessly tell tales of the event to any that would listen.

He thought of her as he brought the logs to their destination. Wondered what might put such an expression of unreserved glee upon her face. He tried to remember back to when his sister had found her mate. If Cyrras had utilised gifts and favours upon their initial meeting, Braum could not recall. What he remembered most was the wide smile his sister wore whenever Cyrras would come close. How she would fling herself into his arms, rest her forehead against his, as if there was no one else present. Most particularly, as if there was not a brother in attendance which did not care to see such displays when his sister was involved.

So he'd stopped looking. And eventually, he'd stopped attending the fetes at all, and even Kessa had ceased her insistence that he continue to *try*.

He hadn't listened. Which meant she was... somewhere, and he'd been too stunned by her utter lack of reaction to speak with her properly.

It shamed him. Which settled poorly with the anger he felt toward himself. The situation. Of gossip and half-formed wings and a woman that was supposed to know him.

And didn't.

He rubbed his hands over his face as he left the city behind him. Pretend that he considered that his home rather than the woodcutter's cottage that held most his actual possessions. Visit Kessa and tell her...

What exactly?

That it had happened. That she'd been right all along and there was a mate for him after all and he'd...

Failed.

Already.

With Wren.

His stomach tightened. His hands curled. And he flew instead to where he'd left her. Fool that he was. He should have pushed, should have insisted all the while she...

She'd been bleeding.

Insisted she was fine. And yet...

Were those not the most rudimentary responsibilities from one mate to another? To care for. To protect.

He landed where she'd stood.

There were stories. Tales of mates that could feel one another across great distances—heroic nonsense that he'd loved as a boy. The ones he would urge his mother to repeat over and over. Not for the talk of lovers, but because there was war and battles and couldn't she better describe the axes?

But Kessa would insist on the rest of it. And their mother would sigh and remind both of them that the point of such stories was to help them fall *asleep*, not to send them into yet another argument.

So he'd hear it anyway. That it was good and nothing to be frightened of.

A gift.

He'd stopped believing it a while ago. Or maybe he'd shoved it down so far because it became more than apparent that gift was not for him.

So he worked. And laboured. And he slept outside the city walls, away from the house he'd crafted with a faceless mate in mind.

But even now, with so short a time between them, he could see her. The unhappy set of her mouth, the tense line between her brows. Because she'd been in pain. Because he'd listened about family and opportunity and let the idiot Jamen do more than he could handle properly.

Which made him just as much a fool.

Which she'd seen. And maybe that was part of it. She thought him lacking, so it didn't matter if there was a pull, a call that was ancient and filled with longing. An insistent niggling in his gut to go, to find, to bind her to him, and all the rest didn't matter. Not in comparison.

She hadn't known him.

Or worse, did not want him.

He rubbed the back of his neck, the wrongness of it all sickening him. Urging him to find her, to make things right, to apologise that he'd let her go at all.

But first he must find her. And then he would show her that he would be a capable mate. Attentive and...

Another twist.

And he turned for home.

Not home.

Because a home would have her in it.

He was too old. He'd been too long without her, and he'd stopped trying. Stopped learning about women and what she might need of him and...

He groaned low in his throat and went back to the city instead.

As much as he hated the thought of it, he needed to prepare. Needed help.

And as loath as he was to admit it to himself, he needed his sister.

3. Wren

A few days passed. She wasn't hiding—really, she wasn't. She would go back to and deal with the Proctor when everyone could manage in her absence.

When she made it out to the *grimble* field, there were a few fresh faces to greet her. Tiny, their white bodies already licked clean of the mess of birth, with points of deep blue on their noses and ears.

Then there was Thorn. Keeper of the pasture. A great hulking beast that often resembled a knoll with his light fur stained green from the freshly chewed grasses. Often he would be covered in *grimbles* as they jumped on his back and darted away again before he could lift his great head and give any form of protest.

He stood at her approach, a true gentleman, and approached with a bowed head so he could receive his customary attentions. “See anything interesting?” she inquired, but there had been no bellows from the field. No blood strung about to suggest he'd torn through predators that threatened his flock.

There were all sorts of leaves and twigs stuck into his thick coat, and he shook lazily. He had soft, gentle eyes that always made her feel a little too *seen*. His kind could be vicious, would protect against any foe that threatened what was theirs. Her father had brought him when he was young. When he was small enough to live in the house with them. But he'd grown, and he was *bored*, and then her mother had wanted *grimbles* so they'd have wool of their own and not have to waste coin for it, and suddenly he had a purpose. So fierce and strong when needed. A plaything when he wasn't.

Birds liked to flock to the pond at the end of the pasture, shouting at one another during mating season. But they had already made their pairings, settling into the rushes to nest for the season.

Thorn's head tilted upward, his dark eyes narrowing and his lip curling back briefly. The light of the suns made it where she could not immediately make out the cause, but if he reacted, she would believe him.

The sound came first.

Then the landing.

She swallowed, forcing down the ache.

"Fair morning, Da," she offered without turning her head. Thorn remembered when her father had lived with them. A picture of domesticity, if only for a little while. "I did not think to see you this month."

Her father sighed and approached. Careful. Respectful? Thorn did not mind him, evidenced by his huff as he went to watch his flock, now that he knew Wren was in no particular danger either.

"Are my visits as regulated as that?"

Wren shrugged and turned toward him. She favoured her mother greatly, with her brown hair and diminutive stature. But her deep grey eyes came from her father, and he reached out toward her, his fingers grazing her chin briefly in greeting. "I heard of the market. I saw the remnants of your stall. Were you injured?"

She did not remind him that days had passed since then. That her wounds had already turned to scabs, and she'd spend a long evening with a delicate pair of tweezers as she pulled each of the slivers free.

"It might have been worse," she hedged, keeping still. He was the parent she had left, and her mother had been fierce that he'd done plenty that was right toward them, even if fate itself had conspired to keep them apart.

He quirked a pale brow at her so she might elaborate and she swallowed stiffly, feeling very much the child she wasn't. "Someone pulled me out of the way. A few scrapes, that is all. I am fine, truly."

He hummed, clearly not quite believing her. “And you’ve provisions enough?” he sighed, looking over at the land that had been granted to her. “I worry for you, out here all alone.”

It wasn’t exile, her mother insisted when Wren had grown old enough to question it. It was a gift. The best they could hope for given... everything. She wouldn’t prefer the wreckage of an escape pod, would she? A hovel in the woods rather than fertile ground and flat lands for them to thrive?

She wanted her mother happy, but she couldn’t say that. Not when there would be the tired lines about her eyes just to speak it. Loss and hardship and so much that should have been *better*.

“It’s what I know,” Wren reminded him as gently as she was able. “It’s my home.” He did not reach out and touch her as he might have done when she was younger. The last time he had held her, the last time she had *allowed* him to embrace her, was when her mother had...

She’d stopped counting how many summers it had been without her.

When her father had found her digging a hole in the pasture, sobbing and filthy. Under her mother’s favourite tree, where the creek kept the soil soft and the summers cool. A fine place for the woman who had meant so much to her.

That had simply not woken up that morning.

She’d washed her. Wrapped her in linens. Tried to remember if there were any rites to be given from her mother’s home-world. But they hadn’t discussed it, had they? Because there was supposed to be *time*. She was to grow old and become sickly, and Wren would have nursed her, loved her for as long as she could and then...

Her father had taken her by the shoulders. Shaken her when he could not get her to answer him at all. Couldn’t he *see*? See that she was alone and when had Mama failed to greet him even after... after everything?

She’d struck him. Pummelled a dirty fist against his chest as her eyes blurred from too many tears, and finally got the

words past her unwilling throat. “She’s *dead*. She... she died and I...” she couldn’t finish. Couldn’t bring herself to face the rest of it. The rest of her life. Not yet.

He caught her wrist. Pressed it against his chest and waited, his eyes wide—and she almost felt the flutter of his pulse beneath her hand. “Wren,” he began, and she did not want to hear it. Although, what precisely she feared he might say, she did not know.

“I loved her. She was... she was my best friend.”

Her mother would have told her to mind her glares. That they had a good life and her father had been more than generous and she had to stop being so romantic about everything.

She blinked, and the light caught and...

Was there a glimmer of tears in his eyes? As he wrenched her forward and held her to his chest, and her shovel fell into what would soon be the grave of her mother.

“I wish...” he began, then shook his head. There were things they couldn’t speak of. She’d learned that early. But she regretted it now. So much left unsaid, so much tumultuous confusion for a girl that had so naively wanted her parents to love one another. To go back to how they had once been.

“Your mother,” he tried again while her throat tightened and her stomach roiled. And she hadn’t wanted him to talk, hadn’t she? Better to be angry than to feel the emptiness creeping through her. “She is...” he paused, her shoulders shaking. “She was the most remarkable woman. It was my privilege to have known her. To share a daughter with her.”

Not enough, though. Not *fair*.

They’d been close. So close. To when he would have been beyond the age of bonds and mates and the fates themselves.

But it had happened anyway.

And there was another remarkable woman. Who needed him. It was selfish to condemn her to a lifetime alone. She needed her mate in ways that only a trueborn Harquil could

understand. Who was horrified at his past and the history that should never have been, and...

Mama had shut the door behind them and Wren hadn't heard the rest, no matter how she'd strained. She'd peeked out the curtains instead. To see her father, usually so immaculate and regal in his bearing, looking so... lost.

And her mother, strong and fierce...

Sobbing. Her shoulders curling in on themselves. While he... He tried to comfort her without touch.

Couldn't touch. Not anymore. Not when he had a proper mate at home.

Wren still remembered the curl in her belly. The wrench and wrongness and hatred for bonds and fates and anything but deliberate choice.

Of... of love.

Because it had been real. Her little family. No matter what the Harquil said about it. She had not been a mistake. An accident of nature and biology that was to be hidden away and forgotten.

"Why weren't we enough?" she sobbed out. The question her mother had forbidden her from asking long before.

And he choked. And she could feel the way he shook with his own emotion, and clutched her to him. They were standing in a hole, in a grave, and this was wrong and she'd known not to talk about it and yet...

"I loved your mother," he promised her. "I love her still. There was duty in leaving but Wren..." he took a breath, shaky and filled with tension. "The bond is real as well. It is insistent. *Persistent*. A duty, perhaps, but sacred. Beautiful when..." he shook his head and his eyes were dim even as he tried to offer a smile to her. "When a person has not loved first. When it does not tear a family apart when it comes."

Her legs would not support her. She crumpled, and she found herself sitting in the dirt, in the earth that was dry and unyielding from the long summer.

“I do not know if you will feel it. If perhaps that too became... muddled.” She flinched. “I only speak of it so that... if you were to...” he sighed deeply, crouching down beside her. “I would not want you to be frightened. To resist because of all the hurt I have caused you. Caused your mother.”

Her jaw tightened, and she could not look at him.

Not when he touched the top of her head.

Not when he picked up the shovel and dug the grave himself.

When he helped her bring her mother. When he said a prayer in a voice so low and broken that she almost believed that he'd loved her as much as he'd claimed.

He'd visited. More than she'd known what to do with, in the beginning. To help, he'd said. With the animals. Cooking, if she could not do it for herself.

But she got up each morning. Made sure the animals were fed, and that *she* was fed, and life kept going.

And he had even begun to see that. That she was capable and strong. That she'd learned much from her mother.

So his visits had altered. Less from fear that she needed him, more hoping she might want his company.

And she did. Stilted though it was. Bringing with it the pain and so many unspoken conversations. Did he tell his mate of his visits? Did she approve? Surely children had come from the bond. Were they...

She put a stop to such thoughts. They were no siblings of hers, no matter if they shared a sire.

But his visits became more ordinary. His presence in the kitchen did not twist and hurt like it once had. And she found she did not think of the family he still had, the resentments not curdling as fiercely in her belly as she tried to share a meal with him.

Perhaps it was grief. The need to belong to someone.

The argument turned old. That he should petition for her to live within the city. Somewhere closer. Where she might make some friends. Meet people.

As if she wanted that.

She looked at her father. The subtle lines about his eyes that betrayed his age. The worry that was always so prevalent as he regarded her.

And she found she tried to smile at him. To offer some sort of reassurance that perhaps he was not owed, but she wanted to give, anyway. “I liked it here,” she reminded him, and he smiled a little grimly in return before bowing his head ever so slightly.

“I suppose I can hardly blame you for that. You were almost murdered within the city walls, after all.”

She rolled her eyes and rested her forearms against the fence posts. That still needed to be redone before another storm came through and blew this portion over completely. “An accident. Even I am not so bitter as that.”

He hummed, and she nudged him, and it was... pleasant.

To set the rest aside. To accept that he worried for her and that she did not have to resent it. She had a choice. And she was tired today. And the suns were warm and...

“I cannot stay long, I’m afraid.”

It shouldn’t hurt. It did.

“Of course.”

“Wren...”

She shrugged. Her tone had been carefully neutral. She’d made no complaints. She was a woman grown, and he had a life outside of hers.

He sighed, a deep, tired thing that spoke of age and heartache of his own. Choices, Mama had said. With the twisting of her lips and the furious brushing of Wren’s hair as she braided it before bed. Better make them good, because you’ll be living with the consequences. And she’d kiss the top

of Wren's head when she'd felt small and nervous and ask if she was a consequence.

A mistake.

"You, my little bird," Mama had promised, eyes bright and warm. "Were my gift. Not supposed to be possible, they all said so. And yet here you are. All mine." And she'd squeezed her so tightly that Wren had to wriggle free with a laugh so she might breathe at all, and when did it all stop hurting so?

She took a breath. Released it slowly. "Thank you for checking on me." She made herself look at him. "Truly."

He frowned, and did not move. Her mother always said she was too hard on him. That she pushed and shoved far more than he deserved. Never physically, but with all the staunch determination that kept her little homestead going.

"If you needed my help, would you ask it?" It was not the half-hearted niceties that she might have received at the market. When politeness overcame old memories and trespassed conventions. It was a genuine query, and she took a moment to consider her answer.

She almost said no. That there were lines she had placed within her own mind. What was allowed. What was just enough to honour her mother's plea to forgive her father as much as she was able, while also satisfying her own loyalty to the family they had once been.

The girl that had been so lost without her mother that she had been vulnerable. Prey.

And her father had not seen, had he? Had smiled and encouraged and perhaps even grew relieved that he would not have to worry for her so any longer. Because she had a mate, after all.

But she didn't, did she? Just a bunch of lies and a bruised heart and...

She shoved it all away.

Temperance. Calliope. Thorn's field. Those things mattered. The rest certainly did not.

“I would like to think I would,” Wren answered as truthfully as she could. And she watched his shoulders droop before he nodded. She might be so prideful for her own sake. But if it meant having no grain for her animals, if it meant no mince for Merryweather’s breakfast...

She wasn’t desperate. All was well for now.

There just was not enough time in the day, that was all. But she’d manage. Always had.

“I suppose if you will not ask, then I shall simply act accordingly.” She opened her mouth to argue, but he held up his hand, his mouth forming into a grim line. “Will you allow me to speak to the Proctor on your behalf? There should be compensation for your lost wages.”

Her throat tightened, and her blood grew hot and insistent that she could manage such matters on her own.

Wren’s stubbornness could be a beautiful thing. Her mother had always said so. Or it could mean she’d hurt herself and everyone around her. “Choose wisely, please,” she’d say with that pleading look. “Maybe don’t choose... this particular matter.”

And Wren would yield. Because she trusted her mother more than herself.

But she had only her own judgement now.

So she swallowed back the stubborn set of her jaw. Made herself look at her father and accept his offer of assistance with as much grace as she could manage. “That would be... helpful. Thank you.”

To not have to make the trip again so soon. To waste time and risk trouble...

Her stomach gave one last twist before it settled, the relief greater than her prickled pride.

Some of the tension eased out of him. His eyes grew a little warmer and for a moment, she thought he would reach out. Squeeze her shoulder in a show of familiarity. But he didn’t.

He allowed her to dictate that part of their accord, so uncertain of his welcome.

“Could you give me a figure on what you lost? So I will know what to negotiate?”

She couldn't keep his eye. Looked out at Thorn and saw one of the youngest grimbles was climbing up his back, bellowing to its mother all the while. “Whatever is offered will be fine.”

Her father huffed and shook his head. “There is fine, and there is fair. You could not finish your full day's allotment.”

Wren closed her eyes. “I'm not like the other merchants. You know that. They'd prefer me not to sell at all, so yes, I will take anything that is offered and they will hear no complaint from me on the subject.” She peered at him from the corner of her eye. “Or you, if you would like for me to keep my position.”

His mouth tightened. It bothered him. That she was pushed to the sides. It had bothered him when her mother would hide her wings as a fledgling. And when Wren had grown older and more embittered by the whole mess, she's bitten out that it would have been easier if they'd simply taken her wings as a newborn. Useless as they were.

She remembered the fury in her father's eyes when she'd said it. The way he'd stormed from the house to keep hold of his temper.

The way tears had pooled in her mother's.

And shame had twisted at her and she'd cursed her tongue and her own wretched temper, left to squirm and wait until her father returned to address her.

He'd knelt before her chair, which was even worse.

He'd cupped her chin to ensure that she looked him in the eye.

“Perhaps I would have hoped for an easier life for you. But you are my daughter, and you were born precisely how you were meant to be. And there is nothing useless about any bit of you. Most especially not your wings.”

He'd touched them so gently. Almost reverently.

And her eyes had burned, and a lump settled in her throat, and she'd flung her arms about him and sobbed that she was sorry, and he'd shushed her. Told her he was sorry too, for a great many things.

But not for having her. Never that.

She believed him, sometimes. Other times it became a murky mire of old resentments and too little time spent together and loyalty for a mother that had deserved a great deal more.

"You know best, I'm sure," he said at last, although nothing in his tone suggested he believed it. But they were her affairs to manage, and he would respect them—even if a part of her warmed he should wish to fight for her.

"Maybe not best," she conceded. "Mama knew best."

His smile was sad. And he reached out then. Laid his hand upon her shoulder and squeezed it, and she found she was glad of it. She had the animals to batter at her, to nuzzle and nudge and to be harassed by Merryweather for every scrap and crumb she could extort.

But it wasn't quite the same as another person. Of a kind hand, a gentle touch.

"You're all right?" he pressed.

And she drew a deep breath. Leaned into his hand, and allowed herself to be comforted by it. "I've all I need," she assured him. Perhaps a few coins lighter than she'd hoped. Perhaps with fruits and veg that she had to preserve for herself and shelter from the elements and greedy creatures alike.

He nodded and gave her shoulder another pat. "I suppose I shall be content with that."

She smiled, a little wistful, a little sad. "I suppose you'll have to be."

He grunted.

Said his farewells. Promised to stay longer the next time.

Maybe he would. Or maybe there would be more pressing needs at home than a daughter on the edges of his world.

A few grimbles startled when he ascended, used to their minders staying firmly on the ground. Thorn raised his enormous head, displeased at their upset. “All is well, Thorn,” she called, and he laid his head down once more with a huff of protest.

All *was* well. She was home. Her animals were well. And her larder would soon overflow with the season’s stocks.

She walked back toward the garden. The seeds had been planted, the little green shoots pressing up proudly in their neat rows. She had thinned them already, pushing down the brief pangs whenever she weeded out the weakest of the sprouts. They had done their best—their neighbours had simply done better.

The soil was dry when she entered through the small garden gate. It was a dry spring which did not bode well for the summer heats.

She turned to go to the pump instead, then stopped, her heart catching in her throat.

No one came here.

No one would *need* to.

Yet there was a figure at the front of her house. Tall. Dark. His wings tucked low as he peered about her property.

Wren took a step backward, more afraid than was reasonable. She had neighbours; she reminded herself firmly. There were other farms to supply the city with needed stores.

Perhaps he was a new worker. Had simply got lost.

She was being ridiculous.

It did not change that she would rather run back to Thorn, to hide away until he realised his mistake and flew away again.

His head turned, and there was no mistaking when he caught sight of her—not when his entire body turned, so he might face her properly.

Not a stranger.
The woodcutter.

4. Pursue

She was harder to find than he'd expected.

He'd begun with the trails, twining through the forests. But they were not *his* forests, and he knew them no better than any other stretch of landscape beyond the city walls. He'd found the great swathes of crops, thriving from the knowledge of irrigation from across the sea. The workers that looked at him with curiosity as they moved between the tidy rows.

But there was no Wren. With her furrowed brow and trepidation.

Perhaps he should have been embarrassed to have to make such enquiries at all. What other man lost his mate the instant he'd discovered her? But upon his fifth, he could not conjure even a semblance of self-consciousness, boldly approaching and asking any that had a moment to spare if they knew of her.

But concern took its place. Just how far removed was she? From the security that came with numbers, of the little conveniences of steady food, clean water.

Another round of failures. Of pitying looks as they waved him off, and a few wished him well.

"Stranger, wait," one of them called. A rough sort, who did not take adequate care with the grooming of his wings, his skin much used to the unfiltered light of the suns. "There is someone. Or a couple of someones. North of here, about five spans?" He glanced at the others in the group, recognition coming slowly.

"Oh. Them. Nudge a little eastward, I'd say."

Perhaps Braum should have enquired why they knew of the place. Why they looked so awkward to speak of it, already

turning back to their tasks and leaving him with thoughts of who precisely might make up *them*.

She was a half-blood. Her neighbouring stall-keep had told him that with great, scandalous relish. Perhaps that meant she had...

Not a mate. Because that title was reserved solely for him. Even his bones cried out at the prospect of it, the wrongness of imagining her with a life already built. A... a love that was not him.

Perhaps it wasn't her at all, and the worry was for nothing.

His sister had been patient with him. As he paced and couldn't seem to get the word out of his unwilling throat.

Until at last she'd stood, grabbed hold of his arms and gripped him firmly. "You're going to damage my carpets," she complained, her eyes pointedly drifting downward. The rugs might have been fine once, but with two fledglings now in their home, they could use a thorough beating.

The rugs.

Not his sister's children.

That liked to climb all over him and tug at his wings until Kessa intervened with the stern voice reserved solely for children. But she never failed to kiss each cheek so they might know all was well again.

She was a good mother. Like *their* mother. Warm and kind, but with the brisk sort of efficiency that kept the household together.

The heart of their home.

And he loved her. Not in the way her children adored her and her husband treated her almost reverently. But in the begrudging way between brothers and sisters, where touches were often playful shoves rather than tight hugs. Where compliments were buried beneath a lifetime of teases.

So he'd told her.

Couldn't look at her while he was doing it, but he was a coward like that. There were sisters that might squeal. Ones that might gloat that she'd been right all along and there was a woman for him, despite his insistence in recent years to the contrary.

But Kessa ducked her head. Caught his eye. Smiled at him gently. "You don't seem happy about it," she observed with that infuriating way of *knowing* that must simply have come from too many years spent in the same household with her. "I'd hate to think that Garran had the same look on his face the day he met me."

His mouth twisted. Maybe it was an attempt at a smile. Maybe it was a grimace because he remembered that day all too well. The way they beamed at one another. How they did not seem able to part long enough for their fingers to stop twining together.

His mother had been so pleased. Had almost embraced Garran just as tightly.

So he'd told the rest of it.

His half-blood mate. The way she had looked at *him*.

She stayed quiet. Took hold of his arm and pushed him down into one of the cushioned chairs favoured by guests if the slight wear upon the arms was any indication. When had he last visited properly? More than a quick meal for supper only to hurry back to his cottage with talk of early mornings and long days filled with chores to look forward to.

"You'll have to find her, of course," Kessa declared as she took the seat opposite. "Talk things out with her. Maybe... maybe things are just a bit jumbled if... if her blood is as you say." She was trying to be delicate, but he'd grappled with the concept just as she was doing currently. It wasn't supposed to be possible at all. Wasn't that the point of the bonds to begin with? He knew there were some that... dabbled with the foreigners that came to their city. With their ships and their strange ways, and they were welcomed for the prosperity that came with them. But children did not come of those dalliances.

Or did they?

He rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m going to make us some tea,” Kessa insisted, rising from the chair she’d just taken. “Then we’ll decide what you should do.”

We will decide.

Typical Kessa.

As if she was going to have a say at all.

Yet he’d stayed. And he’d listened. All about being careful and not frightening her, and of course he’d have to find her, and how could he have been such an idiot to think that it was all right not to?

Until the tea grew cold and there were three swallows left in his cup, but he could not bring himself to drink them.

Not when...

He’d left. Cursed that he’d stayed so long when it meant there was little time to fly. To begin a cursory search over the trails he knew well. The ones he did not. Until it grew too dark to see much of anything at all. What use was a bond that would not drag him to her? To pull and tug until he was beside her. Where he belonged.

Where *she* belonged.

Mustn’t scare her. Had to listen. She was a woman first, a mate second. Or so Kessa said. Which seemed backward and a ridiculous distinction, but that Kessa insisted would make sense as he settled into his role.

North. Maybe a little eastward.

A direction, even though he almost hoped that the labourers were wrong, and it wasn’t her at all. Shouldn’t he be glad if she was not exiled out here alone? If she had people, a family, a...

His stomach twisted.

Parents, maybe. A sibling. But not... not a...

He landed. A barn. A house.

Pastures.

Her.

Not alone. With a man that was allowed to touch her, to talk with her. That she touched in return.

It hurt. In ways he had never known it could hurt.

But he did not retreat. Found that he couldn't. Not when she was there.

At last.

It shamed him it had taken so long to find her. That the bond was so tenuous that it had proved no help at all. It was enough that he'd questioned if the feelings had been real, that he had not conjured them into being simply from sheer force of will.

But when she turned, when she caught sight of him, everything settled. Every doubt he'd harboured began to quiet.

Because this woman...

Wren...

She was real. And despite the half of her blood that made her wings too small, made her look at him with such trepidation, if not outright fear...

She was his.

If only she might come to realise that he was hers.

5. Bargain

Her throat tightened and the impulse to flee became something near to a necessity.

But this was her land. Her home. And she could not afford to be frightened away from it.

There was a knife at her hip. For twine and cutting through vines and thistles, but she tried to pretend it was some kind of comfort if his presence was malicious.

“I am unused to visitors,” she called out over the distance between them. His head canted ever so slightly, and she was struck yet again by the strength of his build.

Her knife seemed flimsy and absurd.

She’d learned from Thorn, though. She must stand her ground. To wait and consider the predators in a field. To assess before committing to any form of action.

“Had we business left between us?”

He continued to stare. Assessing her just as thoroughly as she did to him.

“You had a visitor just now,” the woodcutter countered, his lips turning downward ever so slightly. “Unless he is a resident here.”

Wren did not huff, but she moved her hand to block out the suns as best she could, to look at him without coming any closer. She felt no particular obligation to answer him—the manners carefully instilled by her mother only demanded so much.

So she shrugged, and watched his brow furrow, and she decided she did not like being cut off from her own front door. It took only a moment to convince herself to move. He was too near the pump to carry on with her chores as if he was not

there at all, but she could go toward the door. Would. As soon as her legs obeyed.

He watched her, and her skin prickled with the same anxious awareness as when she walked through the marketplace. It was rude of him not to offer the purpose of his visit. She tugged at her braid before she forced her hands down—to soften. To not betray just how awkward she felt.

Even so, he watched.

Waiting. For her to answer him about her father?

She felt better with the solid wood behind her. To know that she had only to fumble with the latch and slip inside before there would be a heavy iron lock to offer her protection.

“I’ve chores to attend to,” she hedged as calmly as she was able. “And you’re keeping me from my pump.”

He glanced to the side where it stood up proudly from the ground, a neat square of aged bricks trimming the edges. It had always been there for as long as she could remember. Weeds were pushing through the corners, threatening the tiny yellow flowers that her mother had planted to thrive beneath the runoff.

Another item for her list.

He took a measured step to the side, away from it. “That was not my intent.”

She hummed a little. Kept herself from shrugging at him once again. “All right.” He was still frowning, and she did not think it had anything to do with the morning suns. “Would you like to share what your intention might be?” She tried to keep her tone genteel, although even she could not quite pretend it was friendly.

He looked at her again. Waiting. As if she was missing something terribly obvious. It frustrated her. Made her feel small and foolish when she *knew* she was anything but.

Another tug at her braid. Another forcing of her hands back to her sides. “Ser,” she supplied, forcing calm into her voice. “I thought we had settled the matter of the market.”

His frown deepened, and her hand went to the latch at the door.

His shoulders pushed downward. Not a slump, but evidence of some sort of displeasure. The feeling was entirely mutual.

“We had not,” he said at last, but with a sigh of reluctance that suggested... she did not know what.

It was her turn to frown, her arms crossing over her chest as she tried to push down the sudden urge for defence. “Really?”

“No,” he affirmed, nodding his head absently. “Since you would not apply to the Proctor, then you have received no restitution for the mishap. *My* mishap. Therefore, I feel it is only right to offer any to you directly.”

She huffed out a breath. This again. “I need nothing of you, woodcutter. I am not as destitute as that.”

He glanced around her home, and there was that prickle again. The one that spoke of embarrassment, of judgement, and she could not bear it. Not about the home she took such pride in.

“I release you from this perceived obligation,” she insisted, if only to have him fly away from her doorstep. To leave her be. “You must have taken a loss as well. I doubt that cart you hired had coin enough to cover the damages, either.”

“Yes. Well.” For the first time, she felt she had discomfited him as he reached up and rubbed at the back of his neck. “It is possible that the cart was hired as a favour. And that I am quite regretful for having ever agreed to it in the first place.”

She softened, if only a little. She had often done favours for her neighbours at the market with the hope of them warming to her. It had worked a little too well, in Firen’s case. She shifted her stance ever so slightly, her arms loosening as they fell back to her sides. “It will sort itself out,” she hedged, not wanting to speak of her father. She did not know if he had made any enquiries about her—if he knew she was a half-blood. Her father had never forbidden her to mention his name. It was her own reticence that kept her quiet when

people stared. For all that she resented of him, she did not truly want his life to be any more difficult than it already was.

The woodcutter grunted. “Regardless.”

He stared. Waited.

And she did huff then, shifting her weight onto her other leg, easing back to lean against the door. She could well imagine Merryweather perched in the front window, assessing the strangeness of a man situated before their home.

She shook her head, irritated with his reluctance to speak plainly. “I’ve chores, as I said before. So if you’re here to make some sort of offer, I’d prefer you to simply be done with it.”

He grunted. “What are these chores?” He squinted at her, and she blinked at him once in surprise.

“Chores,” she repeated. “The little dailies that keep all this from falling apart.” She gestured about her to the pastures beyond. The kitchen garden to the right of her home.

He drew in a great breath and released it slowly. As if... as if he was trying very hard to be patient with her. As if *she* was being the difficult one.

“I am well acquainted with the concept.” His mouth tightened into a firm line. “I wish to know which of them I might offer... assistance.”

It was her turn for her brow to furrow. To feel defensive and uncertain as she leaned forward just slightly so she might stare at him better. “Do you know what I am?” she asked, as if... as if that was the issue. He thought her just a slighted woman. Or perhaps he felt guilty for calling her a fledgling.

No. *Worse* than a fledgling.

And he wanted to assuage his guilt by action rather than simply offering an actual apology.

He glanced down the length of her once more, as if trying to ascertain if he had missed something obvious. She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Do you know about my birth?” she clarified, and his eyes darted up to meet hers.

Careful. Wary.

Before he gave one solemn nod.

Maybe she was grateful he didn't speak the words aloud. Or maybe that was worse. But she wondered who had told him. How many salacious details had they included? If they had slighted her mother as thoroughly as they could, no matter that she was dead and could not defend herself.

She swallowed thickly, pushing down the worry, the anger. This was her home, and he was on her stoop.

Wanting her list of chores.

She heard a yowl from beyond the door. It would follow with a persistent set of scratches to the wood if she left it unanswered. So she undid the latch and allowed Merryweather to rush out—a plume of unshed winter coat and fierce indignation as she pushed into the yard.

She kept her long tail held high as she noted the woodcutter, and she approached him with all the suspicion that a predator had entered her domain. Her nose twitched and her tail swayed at the tip, considering.

As he stared and regarded her in turn. “You keep a wild animal in your home?”

It was true that Merryweather was not precisely domesticated. She had appeared one day. Small and wet and determined as she pushed through the doorway and insisted that their home was now shared.

And Wren had needed her. More badly than she cared to admit to anyone, let alone the strange man before her.

“She is sweet,” Wren insisted. When she chose to be, at least. Other times, their play became a little too real, and her fingers bore the consequences of Merryweather's hunt. “But if you have any objections, then you can certainly—”

He held up his hand, and she stopped, her manners overtaking her.

Merryweather tired of her inspection, trotting off toward the barn. She would look over every nook in search of pests that

might make a fine meal. But more than likely Wren would find her curled in a pile of fresh straw, napping the afternoon away.

“What would be most helpful to you?” he asked.

And something lurched. Something that twisted and wriggled deep inside. At the strangers beyond the sea that did not care about bonds and illegitimate daughters, who were kindly and talked easily with her mother. Or would have, if they had shared the same tongue and not been afraid of the translator she’d shoved near enough to work. But who still smiled and welcomed them into their stalls to share something hot to drink.

It was delightful and lovely and...

Rare.

He wanted to help. For whatever reason.

She should pay him. Or... feed him? Something. But she did not know the protocols for this sort of thing. Of favours rather than contracts. Of clearly written rules and veiled threats of what might occur if trouble followed.

“Don’t you have work of your own?” she asked, a little breathless as she worked at mastering her own emotions. “I’m sure there is plenty to occupy your time rather than tending to my responsibilities.”

He sighed, and she quieted.

“Allow me this. Please. I realise I am the one in your debt, but...” he trailed off, his eyes flickering briefly back to hers.

It was all so strange. And she swallowed back her objections, her suspicion bred of a history of regrets.

Of falling for honeyed words and customs she was incapable of fully understanding.

She rubbed at her forehead, giving a helpless look toward the pastures. “The fences need mending. Some posts are rotten.”

He nodded, turning toward the rightmost—the one where she’d stood with her father. She took a step closer, her hand

outstretched, already imagining Thorn's reaction. "Wait," she urged. "I..."

He turned, his brow raised in question.

"The other one is safer. Only two hesper to contend with."

He gave a dubious glance toward the other. "More of your wild beasts?"

She shrugged. Thorn was from good stock—her father had traded for him, brought over on one of the ships. They were used often from... wherever he originated, but she could not attest to precisely how long his kind had been of use. "Grimbles, mostly. It's their protector you have to worry about."

He gave her a hard look, and she did not bother suppressing yet another shrug.

She took him to the worst of the posts, struggling to push down the embarrassment as he grabbed hold and gave it a shove. He showed no sign of strain as the entire structure bowed under the simple action, Calliope looking on from across the field. Wren could well imagine she was already plotting her escape, although she would wait until the stranger had gone away.

Temperance did not share her sister's reticence, and she lumbered over, her head coming over the top of the fence to push at the woodcutter's shoulder.

He grunted, holding his hand out for her to smell, and she nuzzled at it for a moment and Wren opened her mouth to warn him, but she was too slow. His hand jerked back as her teeth made contact with his palm.

"Sorry," she murmured, glancing down at his hand to ensure that no actual harm had been done. "Temperance is... well, she likes things how she likes them." Mainly, she liked only to have people near her pasture when they had offerings of grain to bestow.

"I should rethink her name, then."

Wren tugged at her braid. Her mother had named them. Temperance precisely because she preferred to be ornery and headstrong. Calliope because she'd suffered an injury to her throat as a calf and her voice was the most pathetic rasp. Her mother had loved her little ironies. Blessings, she called them. That Calliope's voice would mend. That Temperance would be gentle as she grew older.

Neither came to fruition.

But she loved them both. And while they would bellow and rage at her for interrupting their time in the field, she would not allow them to harass the only one offering to help her.

She tugged harder at her braid.

"I will need my tools," he observed, wriggling the post about more. "I could reset it, but it would be better to start with fresh wood. Go deeper into the ground." He knelt, and she was fairly certain he wasn't talking to her any longer, but was absorbed in the task she had set before him.

It was strange. And... rather nice.

And if he left, he very well might never come back to fix it at all. And she would have two hesper to track in the neighbouring fields when they realised they could simply push the fence over without the least effort.

Her throat tightened. And she reminded herself that she had managed, and she *would* manage only... she'd rather know. If she should keep this on her list or maybe, maybe it would be all right to allow it onto his.

Not that he'd have a full list.

This was only to make up for a single half-day's lost coins.

One task, that was all.

And yet she asked. Not timidly, because this was her home and her pasture and her hesper that was continuing to nudge and burrow and would soon begin her bellowing.

Even so, she asked.

"And you'll come back?"

She didn't look at him. Watched Temperance instead as she pushed her head forward and nibbled at his sleeve, jerking his arm toward her in search of the treat that he certainly didn't have.

But she felt his attention settle on her. Fought down the urge to meet his eye. "Tomorrow," he affirmed. "With my tools. And wood."

She smiled thinly. "Convenient. As you can be your own supplier."

He grunted, rubbing at Temperance's nose before she turned her head and attempted to bite him for his trouble.

Her cheeks flushed, and she pushed the hesper away, urging her back to her sister. "Sorry," she offered, because... she was. He was doing her a favour, and she couldn't allow any of her animals to abuse him in the process or else...

She huffed. Tugged at her braid. If he didn't come back, that was fine. Good, probably. Or else she might get used to the help and then it would be even worse when he thought his supposed debt repaid and went away again.

Then there was the further realisation that she had never asked his name. He'd taken hers during the trudge home from the ill-fated market, but she'd been spiteful and hadn't cared to enquire after his.

Her mother would have scowled at her.

Another tug to her braid. Now that Temperance was not there to harass him, he paced out the length of the fence-line, testing more posts and shaking his head slightly as he went. "You aren't," she began, uncomfortable with his assessment. No. Embarrassed by it. For all that she had not maintained. "I didn't mean you had to fix all of it. Just this one." She wriggled the post for herself to remind him it was indeed the worst of them.

He glanced at her only briefly. "Better to do the job right the first time. Or so I've found."

She flushed. Was that a criticism? Or was she simply prickly and overwhelmed?

“It’ll be worth more than I would have made,” she insisted. “Which means I’ll owe you for it. I’d rather we work out a price beforehand.” That way she’d know to confine him to the singular post, lest she not be able to afford the grain and goods she needed to keep everyone fed and relatively happy.

He stilled. Huffed out a breath, and she *refused* to accept the niggling voice that insisted she was bothering him. To let him measure and pace as he liked and allow him to do this for her.

“You needn’t worry,” he insisted, giving her a long look.

As if that sorted the matter. That he would take on too much and she would be in his debt and she should *not* carry the burden of the unfair exchange?

Most especially if her father succeeded with the Proctor. Then what?

She’d have to give him what coins he returned with. She would not profit from an accident.

“Maybe not, but I will. Unless we settle on the terms.”

Another glance. Another frown.

“The terms,” he repeated. His voice was deep and lacked the warmth she’d always known from her father’s timbre. It was enough to make her want to take a step backward, but did not allow herself to take it. “Consider it recompense for your injury.” She opened her mouth to object, but he fixed her with a hard look. “Do not pretend you were not harmed.”

He made it sound so serious. It might have been, if he had not intervened and pulled her away in time.

That was enough to conjure the memory of his growl, the insult fresh and biting.

Fledgling.

Her spine stiffened. Her jaw set. This was her home. Her land. And while she appreciated what honour dictated he offer her some sort of trade, she would not be bullied.

She lifted the hem of her split skirt high enough that he could see the supposed wounds, still shiny with salve from that

morning, but healing nicely.

His jaw tightened, and he glanced at it only briefly before turning his attention back to the post in question. “As I stated,” he continued, voice low. “Harmed.”

She rolled her eyes. Settled her clothing and huffed out a breath. “All right,” she agreed at last. “You’re saying that my *harm* is worth fixing the whole of this fence line?” Which still left her feeling like she was taking advantage of him. Left her even more wishing he’d simply apologise for his rudeness so she wouldn’t have to think of him judging her and finding her wanting.

Not that it mattered.

Lots of people did that, and she’d learned a long time ago that it was a waste of good breath to defend herself.

He swallowed. Didn’t look at her.

It would be like that, then.

She could not decide why it disappointed her so.

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” he declared, giving the post another shove, which meant being forced to watch it wobble with disrepair. Shaming her. “Bring what I need.” A half-glance in her direction. “If that is agreeable to you?”

She shrugged because...

Well. Because her days were much the same, one after another. Chores. Meals. Petting the animals that craved her affections, respecting those that did not. Quiet evenings reading in the corner of her bedroom in a pile of blankets and cushions.

It was lovely.

And it was hers.

And this was an intrusion, and she resented that, even as she eyed the fence and knew that she was grateful for his help.

“I’ll feed you,” she gave in answer, and it wasn’t begrudgingly offered.

Mostly.

He opened his mouth, and she was almost certain he meant to refuse her. But he nodded instead, and there was something near to relief that he allowed her to give something in return.

It had been so long since she'd cooked for two. And if a lump settled in her throat, if she turned and made her way to find Merryweather and was rude, then...

Then it was only to save herself the embarrassment of him witnessing just how much it had affected her.

She'd apologise. Tomorrow.

If he came back at all.

6. Work

She always dressed to begin her chores.

Perhaps not *all* of them, depending on how persistent Merryweather decided to be regarding her breakfast.

But it felt suddenly different, now that someone might come. Might see her.

Not that she felt the need to impress him. But she might have reached for the pair of her overalls that were the least grubby. She'd need to tend the laundry soon. Maybe even today if she felt the need to keep an eye on the woodcutter's work.

Her stomach gave a twist, and it felt very much like her mother's reproach that she'd yet again had such poor manners that she'd neglected to ask his name.

She'd rectify that today.

If... if he came.

It was early yet. Merryweather gave her a reproachful look from the bed as she turned to do up the covers, stretching long limbs out until claws appeared, a sharp reminder that she was, in fact, a predator. When she was so inclined to be.

Wren peeked out the window. No supplies. No woodcutter.

Her stomach was in knots, and she resented it. But she forced herself to make herself breakfast, simple with boiled oats and thick cream.

Another dish of that for Merryweather, who pushed her head insistently at Wren's hand and threatened to take the oats as well unless she was given her own dish.

"I should have slept longer," Wren grouched, but that had been the problem. Sleep was slow in coming and harder still to

keep, tension and trepidation intruding upon the peace she so enjoyed about her home.

A sound outside.

A rumbling growl of Thorn.

Wren unbolted the door and pushed outside, taking out her hatchet as she prepared to run toward Thorn and his flock.

But there was no answering roar from a predator in search of a seemingly easy meal. Rarely did she have to intervene, her assistance more a hindrance to Thorn's efforts than a help. But she felt better for trying. For being there if he needed her.

Her throat tightened.

Not a predator, after all.

The woodcutter, with a cart and a lone heifer to pull it. Male, then, although she did not peer between its legs to confirm her suspicion. Temperance and Calliope were still inside the barn, preferring to remain inside until the sun rose. They were always eager to go in when dusk came, but they would bellow and rage if she kept them inside all day while the fence was mended.

She tugged at her braid, remembering the figment of her mother's warnings about manners, and stepped out into the cool morning.

She had her own chores that required her attention and yet...

Why did she feel relieved he had come back? The fences were not *so* bad. She would have seen to them eventually.

Her eyes widened as she took in the amount of lumber he took from the cart. He was sorting them into neat piles as she approached, and her mouth grew dry as she took in the whole of it.

"Have you eaten?" she asked, wondering if her responsibilities to feed him began with breakfast or closer to midday. Her cheeks flushed as she tried again. "That is, fair morning."

He halted in his work, a post still in his hands. “And to you,” he offered back. “And yes, I have had my fill.”

She nodded, feeling awkward. She had her own tasks and yet it felt... wrong to simply abandon him here. To see to the little chores that filled her days while he laboured out here alone.

“I will return the cart, then begin. I did not intend to wake you.”

Did she look that dishevelled that he thought her straight from her bed?

Her cheeks warmed, and she did not care for it. Did not like the way her stomach tightened, the way her fingers twitched for something to do rather than stand and make idle conversation she was practiced at.

“I wasn’t. That is... you didn’t.” She huffed, irritated with him.

No. With herself.

That having someone else here should affect her so.

The second sun was peeking over the horizon, the sky beginning to bloom with its customary light. Thorn made another sound, and she remembered the hatchet still clutched in one hand—not the most welcoming of sights.

“I...” she began, then shook her head. Turning on her heel and moving toward the pasture.

She still had not asked his name, but the sound of piled lumber met her ears and he did not press her for courtesies.

Ones that he deserved for doing her such favours.

She rubbed at her forehead, Thorn’s large head pushing over the fence to watch the woodcutter and his cart.

He made a low warning sound in the back of his throat, and Wren approached him slowly. “It’s all right,” she soothed. “I should have reminded you we’d have company.” He glanced at her, but only once. His loyalty was to the grimbles, not to her, and they were crowded into a nervous huddle behind him.

She sighed, closing her eyes briefly. It was an inconvenience. An irritation, surely.

And an embarrassment when she could not use his name to call across the distance.

“Woodcutter?”

His head turned, and she gestured for him to come toward her. Should she have gone to him? Explained?

She took a couple of steps back toward the house, but he abandoned his posts. He did not walk, but closed the distance with a few great strokes of his wings.

She stood quickly between Thorn and the woodcutter, her hands slightly outstretched to keep him from moving any closer. “Thorn,” she stated firmly. “He is our guest. We will feed him, and he is going to keep my hesper from escaping into the woods. We are thankful. Do you understand?”

She was not so deluded to think that he truly might, but he was an intelligent creature. He knew her tone, knew that the woodcutter was positioned even more closely than her father typically stood during his visits.

“Braum,” the woodcutter offered. “If we are making introductions. Perhaps he would prefer that to ‘woodcutter.’”

Wren closed her eyes, mortified.

“Braum,” she repeated, appreciating the pretence to cover a modicum of her embarrassment. “Will only be here for the day, so settle, please? You’re making everyone nervous.”

He gave a long pull of breath, to bring in the new scents and decide for himself if there was danger.

Then snorted. Before lumbering back toward his grimbles and ignoring the both of them.

Wren huffed out a breath and turned her head. “Sorry,” she murmured. “We’re not used to people here.”

Braum eyed her for a moment, and she was reminded just how close they were standing. “Has he ever hurt you?”

“Thorn?” Wren turned her head, pleased to see the grimbles were scattering about in search of grasses for their breakfasts. “Never. He’s protective, that’s all. Maybe even a little ill-mannered.” Her throat tightened. “Must get it from me.” She turned back and found Braum still looking at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t know your name.”

He gave a low grunt. “You did not ask, and I did not offer. Perhaps we have all had a lapse in protocol.”

Hers was the greater, and she was fairly certain they both knew it. “Also,” Braum continued. “I believe you were mistaken when you told him the duration of my project. I will need tomorrow as well, at the very least.”

Wren frowned. “Braum,” she said again. Perhaps to prove that she knew it now—or simply to commit it to her own memory. “Truly, a single post would have been more than enough for my wages. You...”

He held up his hand, and she ceased her arguments. “Did we not settle this yesterday?”

She tugged at her braid. “You are pushing the debt toward me,” she continued, keeping her voice as cordial as she could. “And I will not have the means to pay it back.”

She had annoyed him. That was plain in the sharp exhalation, the way his hand rubbed the back of his neck as she waited for his answer. She wasn’t wrong. She knew she wasn’t. There would be expectations. Possibly even an arbiter if she could not give an adequate sum in coins and then...

Wren took a measured step backwards. “I should pay you for the lumber,” she insisted, voice steady. Certain. “You may do as you please with your labour, but you had to hire the cart, did you not? And those were fine posts that would have fetched a fair price at the market and...”

Braum huffed out a breath and closed his eyes.

Then he turned and walked back to the cart in question.

Walked. Not flew.

It was rude. For all their talk of manners, she was certain that had meant to be an insult—to not even allow her the courtesy of finishing her sentence.

She tugged at her braid. Turned back to look at Thorn once. Wondered if it would be possible to simply evict the woodcutter and allow him to take his guilt and his sense of honour back to wherever he'd come from and leave her be.

Thorn was ignoring her. It was Merryweather that twined about her legs, pushing at them and curving her tail so the wide legs of her overalls tucked closer to her calf.

She glanced back at the man, half expecting him to be loading up his wood to take his cart and be done with her.

Why did her stomach have to tighten so?

But he wasn't leaving. Instead, he was back to unloading his cart, his mouth pulled into a tight line that showed every bit of his irritation.

Which shouldn't bother her in the least. She only wanted matters to be clear between them. A clear contract of what precisely her supposed *injuries* were worth.

She reached down and picked up Merryweather. She did not have a particular affinity for being held, but she allowed it occasionally. Her forelegs perched over Wren's shoulders as she surveyed the yard from this new perspective, uncaring that Wren was using her for comfort.

She pressed her face into Merryweather's soft side, her voice soft. "This is different, right? You'd tell me if it was like last time?"

Merryweather did not answer. Possibly because the *last time* had very little comparative impact on her life and wellbeing, even if Wren could not say the same.

She wriggled. Jumped down without a backward glance toward Wren, strutting purposefully back toward the barn for her nap.

Wren sighed. Closed her eyes briefly before mustering her courage. Her steps were slow and her will toward negotiating a

solid agreement between them waned in the face of his obvious displeasure. She'd insulted him, somehow. Which hadn't been her intent and yet...

"I must see the cart back," he told her. Without looking at her. It bothered her more than it should have. "Fair morning," he repeated from earlier, although it did not sound the same as it had.

So she nodded, not at all certain he would return at all, and she wondered how long it should be before she hired a cart of her own to take the wood back to the market. Not to sell—she was not as dishonourable as that. But she would see it returned.

He did not have to pull himself up onto the tall seat of the cart. His wings made it an easy distance—graceful even, despite his size.

Her throat burned.

Wondered if she should make some sort of goodbye.

But before she could decide, he made a sound low in his throat, and the hesper lumbered back toward woods.

There was no true path, and she wondered how long he might actually sit before he had to take care of the brush and brambles to make way.

Not her business. Not her concern.

Or so she told herself before she followed Merryweather back into the barn, Temperance and Calliope bellowing all the while that she was late.



To release them meant she'd given up on him. That she'd ruined her chances of his help.

To keep them in meant she trusted him to come back.

Which she didn't.

They looked at her expectantly, and she sighed, rubbing at Calliope's nose for a moment while she warred with

indecision.

“We’ll go out,” she declared, her hand on the bolt to the stall. “But no complaining if you’re banished to the other pasture. And no bullying Thorn either.”

They both ignored her, pushing past her as they lumbered toward their grazing spots.

Which left her to muck out stalls and worry and try to turn her thoughts back where they belonged.

All while Merryweather supervised from her perch in the hayloft.

The suns drew higher, and she took the milk pails with her as she returned to the house. It wasn’t her fault that her attention drifted to the pile of lumber. Wasn’t her fault either that she felt a moment’s disappointment that he hadn’t yet returned.

Bread. She’d set that to rising. Bottle the milk and set it in the springhouse until she’d need of it. Unless Braum would like a cup of fresh milk after his labours?

She rubbed at her forehead, refusing to look out the window.

This was intolerable.

The not knowing. The guessing. The apology that had lodged in her throat, unspoken. Twisting at her insides as she hoped he’d come back long enough that she could tell him she appreciated his efforts, truly, and she would... attempt... to worry less about what she might owe him at the end of it.

He was back. There was no call made to her in order to alert her to his presence. Just the sound of wood against wood, as old posts were pulled all too easily from the ground and into a neat pile.

She rubbed at her forehead. Forgot that flour covered her hands as she’d set about the kneading, and went to wash them at the kitchen pump.



She had the right to ensure things were proceeding properly. It was her fence, after all. And it was her hesper that were crowded at the open entrance, hassling the man trying to work.

He did not ask her for help. Did not call out to her to fetch them. Merely nudged them back to the field with a low word she could not catch.

Guilt niggled. Resentment, too, but she huffed out a long breath and insisted it move along just as quickly as it had appeared.

She ducked back into the barn and pulled out a bucket of grains, returning to her nosey hesper. "Come along," she called, the grains rattling in their confines, promising a welcome treat to get them moving.

He did not thank her, but she did not begrudge him that. She had been the one to give offense, and he was the one that was working, regardless.

She sighed. Walked them toward Thorn's field. He did not particularly care for the large beasts to mingle amongst his flock, but he knew better than to protest.

She shut the gate firmly, pouring the contents of the bucket onto the ground so they would not fight one another for access. Some grimbles raised their heads in interest, but she doubted Temperance or Calliope would share anything but the most meagre dregs.

That done, she went back toward the house. Did he ascribe to the same mealtimes as she did? Or perhaps since he rose earlier, he needed to eat sooner?

She could ask. Should ask. It was the one thing thus far he'd allowed her to contribute to his repayment scheme. She talked with people at the market easily enough, when there was a counter and a purpose behind it that was simple and straightforward.

She glanced at him. How quickly he worked, and it seemed like she merely blinked and half the fence line was in a pile at his feet.

He might leave it like that. Take some sort of revenge by disassembling it all and then leaving—taking his tools and his lumber with him.

She sighed. Tugged at her braid.

Approached him with all the enthusiasm that Thorn had for her hesper in his pasture.

When she was little, her mother would sit her at the table. Teach her how to hold her spoon, to use a napkin. Prepare little treats that were to make company feel welcome.

“For later,” she’d say. “When you’ve friends to entertain.”

Wren hadn’t asked when her mother got to use those skills. When it was her turn for friends to come and sit at the big kitchen table and appreciate those little efforts toward hospitality.

They’d only talk about her mother’s past at bedtime. When Wren was tucked beneath quilts her mother had made for her. When the only light came from the dying fire in the hearth below the loft. When she did not have so worry so much if her mother would get that sad, wistful look because it was too dim to see much of anything at all.

“Do you wish you hadn’t met Da?” Wren had asked, throat tight, heart heavy. After he’d... after he’d left, and the crying had given way to a bone-deep sadness that hadn’t been able to leave either of them.

Her mother had reached out, grasping hold of Wren’s chin so she could better make out her features in the dark. “Why would you ask me that?”

Wren tried to shrug, but she couldn’t quite manage it. “Because then you could have gone with the people from the ship. And then maybe you could have married one of them and then maybe you’d be happy. Have friends. People to sit at the table with you, that’s not... not just me.”

Her mother did not answer her right away. But when she did, her hug was fierce and her words were firm, and Wren wondered now if perhaps she had to battle down her own

emotions first. “I do not regret your father. And more than anything, I do not regret *you*. Do you understand me?”

Wren nodded. Hugged her back just as tightly.

Those lessons in table manners had grown more scarce, but Wren could conjure them even now. “If you’ve a flask, I’ll fill it at the pump.”

She did not stand too close to him, but it was near enough that she did not have to raise her voice to be heard. “Or if you don’t, I can bring you a mug from the house.”

He didn’t quite look at her, but he paused in his labours.

It was a warm day, and they were away from the bulk of the trees that offered shade to this field. “I have water enough, but I thank you.”

He went back to inspecting the hole where he’d plucked out the loosened post. It looked so shallow now that it was empty, but she could not recall who had first placed it. Her father, perhaps? Back when this was his home as well. Or maybe her mother, a tiny Wren placed inside a basket as she worked on it alone.

He had tools with him. A spade, a great saw, a hammer.

Wren sighed, certain the strain between them was not simply conjured by her imagination. An apology could smooth much, but she was not entirely sure what she should apologise for. Thinking poorly of him? Hopefully she had not been so obvious with the turn of her thoughts.

It wasn’t *him*, exactly, anyway. It was... anyone.

He didn’t know that. Couldn’t know that.

Wasn’t particularly his business, either. She owed him nothing... yet. But she would, if he had his way and worked as hard as he insisted he would.

“Braum,” she began, fiddling with the handle of the bucket. The one that belonged in the barn and would need to be taken back in there. He paused, but still did not look at her. “I’m not... used to people working around here. Or people... helping, for that matter. So I’m sorry that I’m... not handling it

with all the grace I should.” She offered a dim sort of smile, hoping he might turn his head enough to see it. An apology and yet... not. A glimmer into her life here without delving into the whole of it. Not that he would care to hear any of it at all.

He did turn. Face so grave it was almost stern.

She did not allow herself to fidget, although the impulse was strong.

“And why is that?”

Her fingers moved of their own accord, pulling at her braid once. Maybe twice. “To which part? Why I’m not used to it, or why I’m not handling it so well?”

“The former.”

She sighed. A personal query. Not the little niceties she might have shared with Firen at the market. “You know what I am,” she reminded him with a shrug, pretending it didn’t hurt. Pretending it didn’t cost something to discuss it at all. “They... that is... your kind...” His brows raised, and her cheeks flushed. “They liked my mother well enough when she could hide what I was. They turned on her pretty quickly afterwards.” She cleared her throat, hoping he would realise she did not want to discuss the subject further. “So forgive me if I am... unused to anyone being here. It is not personal.” Another smile. Dim and lacking in anything he could consider warmth, but the most she could manage at the moment.

Her attention turned to the other pasture, where Thorn was giving Temperance a displeased look as she meandered through the flock. They’d sort it out. Intervening would only make things worse.

“And the latter?” Braum pressed.

Wren blinked. Frowned.

“Experience,” she gave in answer, going back toward the house before he could ask her to elaborate further. “I will let you know when the food is ready.”

Then she disappeared inside and bolted the door. Just because she could.



She did not hide for long. Just until her heart stopped hammering away in her chest. When her hands stopped trembling and she had some measure of control over herself.

Long enough for the bread to be shaped. And maybe baked.

To be sliced and piled with slices of meat and a few vegetables from the garden, the easier for him to eat out of doors and without utensils.

Because she wasn't going to invite him in.

She peered about the room, trying to imagine it. Failed utterly.

This house was for family. The one time she had bent those rules before...

She set everything on a plate. Debating eating her own, but it was already later than she'd hoped and she did not want him going hungry. Not when she'd heard the persistent sounds of progress being made about the pasture.

She still felt a trickle of anxiety as she peered out the window to watch him at work. That she should be helping. That it was a trick. That...

She took a deep breath.

Released it slowly.

Gratitude. There was that too. For something to have been fixed around here that was not done by her own hands. That for just a moment, it did not all fall on her to keep things going.

She would not grow used to it. But maybe she could accept just this one thing. And feed him for his trouble.

She poured a cup of milk. Picked up the plate with his meal and even a napkin to show that she was a little bit civilised even if she wasn't going to invite him in to eat with her.

“Is now a reasonable time to stop?”

She held up her offerings so he could see that she was not interrupting him for nothing, and he wiped his hands on a cloth before nodding his head. It was warm out. He should sit in the shade.

Sit *inside*. Like a guest.

She wanted to growl at her mother’s lessons, at all that she had *not* been taught along the way. He went to the pump. Washed his hands and doused his head and even brought his wings down to flutter through the stream.

And she watched. Which was personal and intrusive and wholly inappropriate.

The house was warm as well. There was the heat from the kitchen fire, the lack of breeze to push through the open windows.

It would hardly offer him a reprieve at all except a moment out of the hot suns.

She groaned. Closed her eyes.

Placed his meal at the table. The napkin too.

At the seat farthest from hers.

Perhaps her mother would insist even that was rude, but it was the best she could manage. She had not tidied the room particularly. The counters needed to be wiped, and there were bundles of herbs in various states of drying dangling from every conceivable place she could stash a hook. He might find the smell objectionable. Might even ask to retreat outside. Which would be fine. She wouldn’t mind a bit. Would even be relieved for it.

He stood in the open doorway, peering inside as if looking for... something.

Not her, as she was already seated at her place, simply so she would not be able to change her mind again. He filled more of the doorway than she liked. He was tall, his shoulders broad, and he... lingered in ways that her father did not. But then, he was certain of his welcome. Braum was not.

She swallowed thickly, bringing her own cup of milk closer to her. “You can sit. Or if you’d rather take it outside, I won’t be cross.” She tried to infuse a hint of levity into her tone so he’d know she was speaking truly, but he simply gave her that grim stare of his as he considered his options.

It made her nervous.

Made her feel very much alone here.

He ducked his head.

Moved to the chair at the end of the table and sat.

“If you don’t like anything...” she began, but he halted her with a shake of his head.

“This is more than adequate, thank you.”

Her heart wouldn’t calm. It dulled her appetite and made it an arduous task to bring the food to her mouth. To chew calmly. Swallow.

He seemed not to share her troubles as she stole glances in his direction. He ate with vigour, holding the contents of his meal together with better care than she was able. It was just that he had large hands. That was all. And she’d been too intent on finding things to do inside the house that she’d sliced too many vegetables. Which made the entire meal cumbersome and unwieldy, unless one happened to be blessed with overly large hands.

She took a sip of milk and caught him looking at her just briefly. He still had half left, and she realised she had only to wait him out before he’d be gone again and she could eat in peace.

Her throat ached.

“I can go. If you are as uncomfortable as you appear.”

She sighed. Made use of her napkin. And if it hid her for just a moment, then that was just as well. “It’s one meal,” she told herself. Told him. Except he claimed he would need part of tomorrow as well, which would mean another, wouldn’t it? Anxiety tugged at her throat, made her hand curl into a fist beside her plate.

And still, he watched her.

Until he sighed.

Picked up his plate and his cup.

And went outside.

It should have made her feel better. Should have settled her home to rights where it was solely hers again.

But instead there came the regret, the feeling of failure. Of being an inhospitable wretch of a hostess, that she could not even give him a moment's rest in her kitchen for his labours.

She picked up her own plate. Her cup. Even the napkin because she was civilised, even if... even if she hadn't quite managed it well enough on her first attempt.

He was settled beneath a tree near the pump, his legs out in front of him as he took his time with the last of his meal. She blinked, warring with herself. With old hurts and ones she feared she was inflicting with no true intention of doing so.

She approached him slowly. He had plenty of time to tell her to turn around, to go back to her kitchen and her discomfort and leave him be.

He canted his head back ever so slightly, but he did not speak. Not even as she settled on the other side of the tree with her knees pulled up so she could rest her plate there. It was not precisely comfortable—not with her wings squished against the bark. But it was cool. Cooler even than the kitchen, and the guilt eased. If only a little.

Merryweather found them. She had a sense for when Wren was eating, and it did not matter how well her hunting had gone for the day—she seemed endlessly hungry. She crossed the yard with all the determination of one about to be fed, as if it was commonplace to find her keeper seated outside with a plate.

She sniffed the edge of Braum's boot once, and Wren was relieved to see that he kept still for her perusal. Then she sat.

And stared.

Full of expectation.

“Merry,” Wren urged, delving into her own meal to find a scrap of meat about the right size for her mouth. “Leave him be. He’s worked harder than you have.”

Merryweather did not seem to care for fairness. She wanted the newcomer to feed her as quickly as she had trained Wren to do so, and he chuckled softly before doing as Wren had done. “I do not mind sharing.”

Wren huffed out a breath. “You should. She will never stop insisting on it.”

Merryweather approached his outstretched hand and took his offering daintily, mindful of her sharp teeth. It was rare she hurt anyone, and when she did, it was on purpose. And usually only when she had kits and forgot herself when Wren approached too quickly and handled them a little more than she cared for.

“And how did you come to a *leptus* for a companion?”

Wren shifted slightly, wondering if she should feel offended that Merryweather had been captivated by a stranger. “I don’t know, really. She came one day and decided to stay. It was easier just to accept it.” She peered around the tree trunk as best she could, but could not catch a glimpse of his expression. Only the curve of his wing, his legs. The way he kept his hand out for Merryweather to sniff as she finished her offering. “You don’t have to indulge her, truly. She feeds herself most days. Just likes to pester all the rest of them.”

Merryweather stretched lazily, her mouth opening in a yawn to show the two rows of teeth that served as a distinct reminder that she was made for more than nudging and bed-warming. But her fur was soft, and her claws could retract, and Wren was grateful for her company.

Even if it seemed it was being seduced away as Merryweather stepped nearer, two paws coming to step onto Braum’s lap as she inspected him more closely.

Or, in truth, his plate.

He did not push her away. Did nothing but give a quiet sort of half-laugh. More breath than sound. It was... pleasant. To sit. To fiddle with her food and even to eat some of it, delving into her own meat so she could hold out her hand and try to coax Merryweather into letting him be. "You're as bad a hostess as I am," Wren groused, but with no true vehemence behind it.

Merryweather did not seem to share Wren's guilt on the matter, although she left Braum alone long enough to come and steal the portions Wren offered to her. "You're very patient," Wren observed, petting Merry's soft head as she chewed.

He turned his head, peering over his cup to look at her. "You think it a hardship to be here?"

She blinked at him, startled. "Well, I don't. It's home. But you probably do. Especially when at some point you're going to realise you're poorer at the end of it than you should be."

Braum sighed, and she glanced away from him. She hadn't meant to bring it up again. Really, she hadn't. "Sorry," she murmured because she didn't want to upset him again. "I just..."

"Experience, you said," Braum cut in. "A debt you could not pay?"

Her eyes burned, and she blinked, swirling the rest of her milk around in her cup. Her throat was too tight to drink it. "Not exactly."

He hummed a little. Did not press her, and she was thankful.

Did she owe him an explanation? She could not think why she should. He would not be her friend after this. He would not come to her for lozenges for his fledglings. No syrups for a wintery chest.

"Have you a mate?" she asked, because that was the proper thing, wasn't it? To make inquiries. To learn about a person. She was used to Firen, that volunteered much and coaxed out little. "Children?"

He looked on the older side, but perhaps that was merely a result of his form. Height and breadth of shoulders did not always indicate age. Her father was lean, looked young even when he was not.

He shifted. Finished the last bite of his meal and he seemed to take a very long time to chew. Perhaps he'd lost her, and she'd trespassed on a subject that brought pain along with it. Before she might rescind it, he spoke, his voice low. "A sister. She has children." He did not expound further, and she was determined not to pry.

"And you? Do you live alone here?"

Merryweather bumped her head against his elbow, and he showed his empty plate to her before she sauntered back toward the barn.

Wren allowed her head to fall back against the trunk of the tree. "If you mean people, then yes, I'm alone."

His head turned rather sharply, and she caught the edge of movement just enough to be curious about it.

"What?"

He smoothed his napkin across his thigh. "I made a few enquiries to find you. Someone suggested there were more that lived here."

Why it should matter to him, she did not dare to contemplate. Her mother had given warnings, in that veiled, vague sort of way that Wren now found infuriating. To keep the door bolted, because it was safer.

Safer than what, Wren had tried to ask, but her mother had smiled and tugged at her braid and wouldn't answer.

Wren didn't need to fret about that. Just do as she said. Keep it locked. Make sure you could light a lamp even on the darkest night. Keep a blade somewhere close, just in case.

She didn't have a blade now.

She looked at him as best she could without climbing to her feet. Watched the way he kept his attention away from her as he made little patterns with his fingertip against the cloth of

his napkin. "There were others, once, but not anymore." She was proud she could say it without a tremor. With little emotion at all. "I would appreciate," she continued, less frightened than perhaps she should be, but firm. "If you didn't tell anyone otherwise. I can't imagine what good would come of it."

But she could conjure the dangers now. What it meant to be alone. What harm could come without another there to help. To advise.

She got to her feet and went to his side, holding out her hand so he might stack his plate with hers and give her his empty cup. His fingers lingered on the napkin, almost as if he still had some need of it, but his face was perfectly clean.

A fine face, she decided. Perhaps his brow set a little too low. His mouth formed too grim a line.

It startled her. To look. To think any such thing at all.

"I'll go wash up, then." He nodded in acknowledgment. "Not to rush you. If you need to rest for longer. It's warm today, I know." She gave a rough sort of laugh that was less humour and more awkwardness. "Or if you need to stop for the day, that's fine, too."

"Wren," Braum huffed out, coming to his feet as she took a measured step backward. "I will see to your fence. As much as is needed. Until *I* am satisfied with it. And there will be no more talk of payments or debt or anything of the kind. Can I have your agreement on that?"

She should leave it be. Give her assent and be done with it. But too much pushed at her. Too much history, too much doubt, so she gave one last effort. "A few scrapes isn't worth all this," she reminded him. "It just isn't."

His brow furrowed, and his mouth tightened, and he truly did look very severe when he did that, and her heart raced a little faster. "But," she hastened to add. "If you think it is, then... then I'll just have to get used to the idea."

To say that he relaxed would be an exaggeration, and yet something eased. "Thank you." He nodded toward the plates.

“For the meal as well. I do not agree about your hostessing.”

Her cheeks burned, and she ducked her head—nodding solely because she did not know what else to do. He was being generous, and there was a persistent niggling of suspicion that wanted to know *why*.

But those were personal concerns. Ones she did not have to foist onto him, doubtlessly insulting him in the process.

So she went back into the house and set to washing instead.



He stood in the doorway. Didn't enter. Just knocked once upon the doorframe. She'd left it open to catch a little of the breeze, as well as to keep Merryweather for screeching her unhappiness at the obstruction.

She hadn't hidden again. She'd watered the kitchen garden, the special herbs that came from her mother's world in their screened area beside the house. It was... pleasant. To have someone else around again. Even if they did not speak, keeping to their mutual tasks, she had not been willing to acknowledge just how much she had missed it.

“I'm going to let these posts set for the night. I'll do the rest in the morning.”

She nodded, already wondering if she should make him breakfast, or perhaps offer him a snack for his journey home. But before she could decide on either, he turned, already approaching the clearing to fly off by the time she reached the door.

He did not see her. And she was not quick enough to call to him before he was up beyond the tree where they had shared their meal.

She huffed out a breath, annoyed with herself. She should be relieved at having her home back to herself. The quiet should be welcome after hearing the sounds of his labours all day. Pounding and sawing and the occasional gush of water from the pump.

A pleasant day, she scolded herself. Something different. To be enjoyed for what it was, but certainly not to be missed when it was over.

She brushed her hands against a towel, her hands stained green from where she was shredding herbs to mix into a paste so they might ferment in their jars.

She would take good soap out to the pump. And a scrub brush as well. Then she would relieve Thorn from the burden of watching hesper as well.

And settle in for a quiet evening.

Which was precisely what she liked them to be.

7. Stray

Sleep was elusive for Braum. The flight back to the cottage was a stilted, aching thing, no matter how he soothed himself that he was mere hours away from making the journey back again. The instincts were old ones—burned deep into his bones that told him that home was with a menagerie of wild creatures.

And a mate that did not know him.

He waited. For some sign, some glimmer of recognition. For her body to relax from its seemingly endless tension. For Wren to *see* him. Know him.

But she didn't.

Her eyes were often filled with mistrust. With an anxiousness that seemed as deeply ingrained as the ones that insisted they were bound.

And he hated it.

Hated the way they could not share a table without her appetite fluttering away. How they could not seem to converse without the distraction of the *leptus* to loosen her tongue.

What she divulged plagued him.

She was unused to help. She was fearful of debts. Of causing *trouble*.

If any had taken advantage of her, of what she was...

His hands curled into fists.

He had not bothered to light a fire upon his return. His meal had been plain—dried fruits and meats he'd purchased in the market in bulk, so he did not always have to be bothered at the end of a long day. But both felt particularly unappealing compared to fresh bread. Vegetables picked just for the

occasion of their meal rather than sitting in a market stall for days waiting for him to trade for them.

He sat up, rubbing at the back of his neck as he closed his eyes and fought down urges that were so foreign to him. The want.

More than that.

Deeper. The trembling in his hands suggested something physical. The way his heart raced and his legs twitched for movement, his wings rustling as if preparing to thrust him through his door.

Anything, if it meant going back to where he belonged.

He moved from the bed.

Paced, urging himself to tiredness. The day had been long and overly warm, but he had not noticed. Not when his every attention was attuned to the woman so oblivious to him.

He had tried so hard not to stare. Either at her, or at the contents of her home. There at least had been reasonable confirmation that she held no other male as her...

His mind rebelled before he could supply *mate*.

He was her mate. *He* was.

Braum groaned.

Opened the door.

He needed air, that was all. To seek a cool breeze to calm his blood and keep him from doing something he would surely regret.

But the night was still, the stars bright and almost mocking as they reminded him how easy it would be to return to her now that he knew the way. There was light enough, even without a lantern.

He stalked back and forth. Willing himself to tire.

She was alone.

She'd asked him not to tell anyone.

A kernel of trust, perhaps, that she would find him capable of keeping a confidence.

That was how he'd seen it at the time, but now...

She was *alone*.

With only bits of wood and iron to protect her.

He went back into the house. Dressed himself. Smoothed his hair. He would go to his sister's. That would keep him sane. He would sleep in her front room, would not even wake her, but it would keep him accountable for his actions.

It was justification enough to take to the night sky. To break free of the thick trees—some mere saplings, others large and awaiting the need for their lumber. And if he entered near a trance, then was he truly responsible when he did not turn toward the city? Instead, a simple glen that suddenly was of the greatest importance.

It was wrong. Intrusive.

But he would not see her. Would not trouble her at all. Just... be there. In case danger found her. That couldn't be wrong, could it? He had permission to be there, after all. So long as he had something he could fix, could convince her that his work was repayment.

She'd shown him her legs. Drawn up the fabric and let him see as if it was nothing. As if his blood hadn't heated and he hadn't wanted to *touch*. To soothe and to explore and...

He landed early. Did not want the great beast in her field to hear him and frighten her with any sort of alarm.

Guilt warred with the insistence of ancient instincts that this was right. He belonged here. Belonged wherever she was.

He walked the rest of the way. Avoided the house entirely because...

She would not forgive him if she saw him. He knew that as well as he knew he needed to be here.

He settled on the barn. Where the hesper slept in their large stalls, heads tucked toward bellies, oblivious to the near-

stranger that settled into the hayloft above. There was an obvious depression where the *leptus* apparently had slept for much of the day. He'd worn his cloak. Settled into the clean straw and it should not have been comfortable. Should have poked and made him feel ridiculous. But as he settled, he found his eyes could finally close. That he could breathe, deep, full breaths.

It could be better. If he was inside. In a bed shared with her. Where he did not have to imagine what it might be like to have her close. To feel as if...

As if he was whole.

But this would do, for now. For as long as she needed. If he could just have this...

It would be enough.

8. Slip

Wren made a double portion for breakfast. Did not ask him if he needed it, not when he was already sitting beneath the tree when she peeked out the window at first light. She couldn't imagine why he needed to start so early, but presumably it was to have most of the work down before the midday suns became intolerable.

Which would mean he'd be gone soon.

She swallowed. Made a tray this time. Napkins. Spoons. Two bowls of stewed grains and berries. Thick cream. Steaming mugs of tea—brewed strong as she'd tossed and turned much of the night. The heat, that was all. The breeze needed to return, and quickly.

Then she unbolted the door and watched his head turn as she took out her tray.

She did not sit on the opposite of the tree this time, settling so the tray was between them and she could better catch his expressions from the corner of her eye. "If you don't want it, Merryweather will eat most of it."

Which was true. Anything the cream touched held her interest. She was still lazing about their bed, taking up far more than was reasonable given her size. Perhaps that had been the problem rather than the heat. She'd only a sliver of bed to her name. She could take her mother's but...

Wren picked up her mug rather than the bowl and watched Braum do the same. "It is peaceful here," he murmured into the stillness. As much a greeting as a wish for a fair morning.

She chewed at her lip. She should have brought a blanket to put down—one of the thick, woven ones that made for poor bedding but practical for more wear.

Wren took a sip. Savoured. “It is,” she agreed. Was pleased that an outsider might see the beauty in her home rather than the endless list of little chores that went to its upkeep.

A mist hung low on the grounds, as if a cloud had pushed so low that it mingled with the tips of the grasses. The first sun was a smudge on the horizon, pinking around the edges of the violet sky.

She could not recall watching such a thing with her mother. Back then, Wren had slept as long as she could. Groaning and complaining when her mother would shake her shoulder and remind her there had to be tasks done if she wanted any breakfast at all.

Now the drudgery of it all kept her from appreciating the quiet moments. She’d be in the stalls already. Releasing an irritable set of hesper before mucking out stalls.

Over and over.

Every day the same.

Wonderful, in its way, she reminded herself firmly. Precisely what she would have chosen for herself if presented with a whole host of professions. Of livelihoods. But there was a great deal that was monotonous.

She’d get to the rest of it. But there was something about sitting. Enjoying. That was... nice.

“Not too sore from yesterday?” she asked, because... she didn’t want him to work too hard. Especially when his only compensation was a few meals that could hardly be considered *fine*.

He tilted his head in her direction and perhaps it was merely a trick of the light, but she thought the corner of his mouth pressed upward ever so slightly. “I am a woodcutter,” he reminded her. “Yesterday was a mild day.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she nodded. She was well used to long days and hard work, but she would not pretend that she did not find cutting wood for the winter exhausting.

She'd tried. When she was stubborn and insistent that she could manage everything on her own.

Until her father had come with a cart and a solemn expression and informed her that he would relieve her of that particular burden and he did not care to hear her arguments against it. He'd provided wood for her mother, and why she'd thought that would change when it was just her was beyond him.

She'd thanked him. A lump in her throat and an ache in her chest that was so fierce she'd cried.

And he'd sighed. Laying his hand on the back of her head as he pulled it a little nearer to him. "I do not do enough. I know this. But allow me to do what I can."

But Braum was used to hard days and rough labour. She glanced at his hands. Wondered if they would be rough. Full of calluses to protect against axes and saws alike. There were scrapes along his knuckles in various stages of healing, but she glanced away before he caught her staring at him.

It didn't matter what his hands were like, only what he chose to do with them. And for a little while, he wanted to use them to her benefit.

She nudged the bowl of grains closer to him. "I'll make something else if you'd rather. Unless you've eaten already."

He hummed a little, and she could not tell if that was an assent to either query. "Tea is best hot, and while the morning is cool."

She agreed, and allowed the worry to pass that she'd failed to provide adequately for him. Tea first. Meal after.

They sat in quiet, and she did not allow herself to feel guilty for that either. He liked the peace, he'd said. Perhaps when the land was not his to tend to, when he did not have to look out and see all the little tasks that awaited his attention.

He could simply... be.

She hoped so. Didn't know why exactly, but she did.

“No companions this morning?” he said at last, setting down his empty cup as he picked up the bowl. She hoped she had not made it too sweet—it was a trait from her mother that her father did not share. “I am shocked they allow you out of sight.”

She stirred her breakfast carefully, able to watch as the cream mingled with the berries, swirling into deep purples and splashes of orange. “Merryweather likes to sleep until the suns come up. She does not approve early workdays.”

Braum turned his head, frowning ever so slightly. “I did not intend to wake you before your usual hour.”

Wake her? He hadn’t made a sound.

“You didn’t,” she assured him. “Her chores differ from mine, that’s all. Some of us need more hours in the day.”

He nodded, although he did not ask what responsibilities Merryweather took upon herself. She tested all the food, of course, saving Wren’s stomach more than once when she staunchly refused a cut of meat from a new vendor. Upon closer inspection of its middle, its preservation was less than adequate.

Wren had been more than cross at the waste, and she’d argued with herself for days if complaining to the proctor would constitute *trouble*.

She’d decided it would, and would simply be grateful for Merryweather’s superior senses. Her mother’s herbs could do much, but she doubted even they could spare her the misery of spoiled meat.

There was also how the pests that plagued the barn and feasted on the sacks of grain mysteriously disappeared when she’d decided to make this her home.

Her bowl was empty. So was his. He stacked his neatly into hers as soon as she placed it on the tray between them, thanking her for the meal. She nodded, wanting to ask if it had been to his liking. If she should know for next time if he would prefer something else.

Then scolded herself firmly.

Because there would be no more morning meals beneath a tree. Instead, they'd be in her favourite chair with Merryweather batting her head against her shoulder. And that was good too, so there was no reason for the brief pang of disappointment.

None at all.

"I should go warn Thorn about his guests making a return."

She stood, but before she could stoop to take up the tray, Braum held it out to her. "Is there a point in asking if I might help wash before I begin?"

Her mouth grew dry, and she shook her head before she had made any conscious decision to do so.

He stood with a sigh. "I thought not."

She did not know why he said it in such a way. As if she'd insulted him somehow. He'd commented on how uncomfortable she'd been when they'd been in her kitchen, and that was true—no matter how irritating she found it that he'd noticed.

That she hadn't hidden it better.

"You're doing more than enough," she reminded him, and if she addressed their dirtied dishware, then... that was simply her prerogative.

She did not await his answer. Or his looks, or his hums, or the frowns that he seemed to wear most of all.

She had her own work to do, and a Merryweather to appease as soon as the second sun made its appearance.



Thorn's low howl alerted her to the trouble. It was not followed by his customary growls when it was a predator—or a stranger, in Braum's case. So she hurried but did not run, climbing over the fence and squinting to make out his form. All four of his legs were in the pond at the far end, and he howled again, huffing his frustration.

There were many things Thorn could do. Swimming was not one of them.

“Bother,” Wren groaned, walking now. Not an emergency, not yet anyway, although she could even hear the grimbles bellows from here.

She did not know why the younger ones liked to swim to the small shoal in the middle. Perhaps it was curiosity, or perhaps it was because the tall rushes that sprouted there were too much of a temptation.

“Lost a few, did you?” she commented as she neared Thorn’s side. He gave a huff, giving her only the briefest glance before he stared pointedly at the wayward charges outside his protection. “I know. You want me to fence it in. But you won’t thank me when they have nothing to drink. And neither would you.”

No huff. No glance.

Not even one of reproach as she leaned down to remove her boots and stockings.

If she’d been alone—truly alone—she would have removed her overalls as well. The morning was nearing hot rather than pleasantly warm, and she did not mind the prospect of a quick swim. But she wasn’t alone, so drenched clothing would simply have to be the price for a modicum of modesty.

She knew better than to ruffle any of his fur when he was on alert, and she waded into the pond with care. Most of it was mud and bits of sand, but every so often a stone would appear, slick and dangerous.

It did not take long before the water was past her waist and it was not a matter of walking, but of swimming. Only one of the grimbles voiced any sort of distress. The rest wriggled their tails and chomped at the reeds with abandon. It was the smallest one that yelled for its mother with near bleats so piercing, she almost winced.

The mother was on the shore, pacing ever so slightly, but content that either Thorn or Wren would sort out her errant offspring.

She made it to the shoal, grimacing at the hints of sand and gravel at the edge. They pushed into her feet and made her scowl as she moved up further into the grasses, the grimbles scattering as she approached. The youngest did not move, fixated instead on its mother and she picked it up with a huff of her own. “Perhaps you’ll think better about following the others, hmm?”

Another baleful bleat and she rubbed at its head before urging the others back toward the water with a whistle and a nudge toward the most stubborn. “Back you go. You’re upsetting Thorn.”

He gave a bellow of his own, their heads coming to stare at him as he took one more step into the water before turning back to the shore.

They followed, far more used to obeying his instructions than her own. The smallest squirmed in her arms, and she placed it down gently to see if it would make the way back on its own.

It wriggled.

Began to dunk beneath the water, but Wren snatched it up again. “All right, then,” she murmured, certain she would end up scratched and scuffed by the time she got it back to shore if she had to carry it the entire way.

But such was the way of things.

She walked as far as she could, looking for areas that were shallowest. But there was nothing for it and eventually she had to swim. To hold her squirming grimble and hope that whatever latent instincts that got the tiny creature to the shoal would kick in again.

The rest made it, shaking and rolling about in the grasses to dry themselves, but she was only partly relieved. It was difficult, and her burden was less than helpful, and she winced as a hoof made contact with the delicate skin of her forearm.

Thorn took pity on her.

He went to the furthest edge he could, and as she scrabbled to make contact with the bottom of the pond—to find her feet

and make sure no water was getting in the grimbles mouth. And then his large head appeared. Took the wayward grimble into his mouth and waded back to shore.

Gentle as could be, as he placed it back down.

Watched it scamper back to its mother and shoved its head beneath her middle so it might nurse away the horrors of its self-inflicted exile.

She smiled despite herself. Grateful that more had not gone wrong.

Then her foot caught a rock.

And she slipped. Yelped.

And plunged beneath the water.

It might not have been so bad except the shore moved sharply upward, and her lungs did not seem to know whether to inhale or exhale. And for one disorienting moment, she was not even certain of the way back to the surface.

Hands found her. Strong and determined as they grasped her upper arms and brought her out again.

She gasped. Coughed. Spluttered a little at the unexpected events, only to find herself dragged back up onto the shore to recover.

She leaned over, trying to draw in a full breath, but she must have inhaled something after all because her lungs would not cease their complaints.

There was a hand on her back. Not a paw like she had expected, thinking that perhaps Thorn had come back to assist her as well.

But no, it was a hand. Patting insistently as she curled toward the ground. Until the spasms ceased and she could breathe. Slowly at first. As thought returned. As she managed to open her eyes and turn her head, only to see Braum frowning down at her.

“Are you all right?”

She wiped at her mouth, her eyes, and nodded, doing her best to sit up. Her wings were soaked and heavy. Her overalls clung to her, and she shivered despite the warmth of the day.

“Just lost my footing, that’s all. No harm done.”

His frown turned to a scowl. “You might have drowned.”

She suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. “Hardly. It’s only a pond.”

He snorted, shaking his head at her. He meant to say more, she could tell. To scold or... she did not know what else.

But Thorn interrupted, nosing at the back of Braum’s head as he sniffed.

Then over his shoulder to look at her.

She held up a hand, and he lowered it enough that she could rub between his eyes. “I’m all right,” she repeated. “Got your baby back in one piece. That’s what matters.”

He snuffled a little, nuzzling her palm before he stalked back to his favoured spot to dry.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Wren asked Braum, a little cross that the entire episode had been witnessed.

“Why am I looking at you as if I almost witnessed your demise?”

She did not much appreciate his tone or the accusation she found within it.

“I *slipped*,” she insisted. As if it was his business. As if he should care about anything more than the fence he had almost begged to fix. “Perhaps that is something beyond your comprehension since you have a fully formed pair of wings, but for someone like me, it’s just one of those things.”

She regretted it. Regretted the bitterness that had seeped into her every word, the anger that festered and bubbled when she should have been thanking him for intervening at all.

But the wounds were old ones, and she prickled and her eyes burned as fiercely as her throat, and she wriggled upward. Because she was *fine* and he was being dramatic and...

Her hands clenched.

Manners.

“I should not have said that,” she managed, trying to be calm. For it to form with a measure of sincerity, but sounded like a grouse, even to her own ears. “But thank you.”

Braum rolled his eyes.

Which brought back that horrid moment in the market. When he’d gripped her, his voice low, and belittled her.

She’d pushed it aside. Pushed it down and away because he was trying to make it up to her.

Her jaw set. She was dripping and needed a towel. Her overalls would stiffen and grow uncomfortable as they dried against her, and the cream shirt she wore beneath likely was not as modest as she’d hoped.

But she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Anger flared, hot and biting, and for one terrifying moment, she thought it would overflow. A gush of vitriol that would make him pick up his tools and leave and there would be no more meals beneath the tree, and...

That was more than fine.

“This is *my* home,” she reminded him. “These are my animals to care for, my land to work. You might think me incapable, might think me *worse than a fledgling*, but I am not. If I slip, if I splutter and embarrass myself, it is no one’s business but mine.”

She couldn’t look at him. Not when her heart raced, and she caught sight of Thorn’s posture turning defensive. His fur prickling and his posture dropping slightly lower, obviously uneasy with her tone.

Braum might have hurt her, but she did not want him savaged either.

She huffed. Turned to walk back toward her house with as much dignity as she could manage given the state of her.

She wished she could fly. To take to the sky and hide away in a tree somewhere until he'd gone and she could nurse her bruised pride in privacy.

But she couldn't.

He reached out.

Grabbed hold of her arm.

And she almost turned, ready to lash out and remind him that he had no right to touch her, to leave and forget the fence entirely because she could finish it herself. She could. It might take her a few weeks and Temperance and Calliope would hate it, but she'd do it.

"Wren," he breathed out. A soft press of air that stilled her temper as he looked at her. With sadness in his eyes. For a moment, she thought it was pity. Before her blood settled and she could truly look at him. But no...

"I do not think you incapable."

She swallowed, her throat too tight and her eyes dropped, unable to hold his gaze. "All right."

He did not release her arm. And she did not pull it free, for reasons she was not willing to contemplate. "Whose words were those?"

She glanced back at him, her brow furrowing, a tinge of anger returning that he could not even remember it. "Yours. When I couldn't fly over your wayward log."

He closed his eyes, and he had no business moving his thumb ever so slightly against her upper arm. Soothing. Gentling. As if she might be coddled into calm by his touch alone.

Why couldn't she lurch away?

"I was referring to Jamen." She looked at him blankly, and he smiled grimly. "The fool with the cart. Although you might argue that it was true of myself as well, as I was the one that trusted him with it." He ducked his head, shaking it ever so slightly. "Never you."

Her stomach twisted. Her throat burned. And she was perilously close to crying.

“Oh,” she croaked, before she found herself suddenly capable of using her limbs after all. It wasn’t so difficult after all, not when to stay would mean he could watch the sudden onslaught of tears that threatened to fall.

“Wren,” he said again, but this time there was no halting hand, and she was able to keep going. She did not run, she could not bring herself to do that, but she hurried.

And she bolted the door firmly behind her as she entered the house, her hand over her mouth as she tried to put herself to rights. To forget the sincerity in his voice. The way that she *believed* him.

Not her. Never her.

It shouldn’t matter. Should not affect her so deeply.

But for reasons that shamed her, it did.



She dressed. Rubbed at her hair with a towel before putting it back into its customary braid. Ruffled her feathers with a shower of misty water and allowed guilt to eat away at her stomach.

She needed to go apologise.

A true one, as her mother would say, eyes firm as she taught a fledgling Wren about looking someone in the eye and talking about wrongs done. How she might do better in the future.

But there wasn’t going to *be* a future with him in it, so did it truly matter? Feed him his meal, thank him for the work, and perhaps she might wave at him on market days if he happened to pass by.

She wished Merryweather was inside. Where she might coax her into a huddle on the bed with her as she nursed her bruised feelings.

But she was out prowling, and did not have need of Wren's comfort at the moment.

She scrubbed at her face, feeling trapped and restless.

She went to the loft, anyway. Not to the bed as she might have liked, but to the window seat. It was stuffy, and she allowed herself to open it with a creaky push. The hinges needed oiling, that was certain. But to traipse back down the ladder was more effort than she cared for, so she added it to her never ending list.

He was working.

And if she squinted, he could make out his scowl.

She'd done that. Been cross and angry and held things against him that were apparently not meant for her at all.

She tucked her chin upon her knees, watching. Disgusted with her own cowardice and yet unable to force herself to move, either.

He stopped. Ran a cloth over his forehead.

And looked toward the house for a long moment.

Before he shook his head.

Kept working.

He held his wings aloft, offering him shade. He'd rolled up his shirtsleeves, either from the heat or because they were wet from her *rescue*.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. Wishing she was different. Knowing that she wasn't.

And that it would take her a long while to go downstairs. To come up with some way to smooth things over.

And if she cried just a little more then...

Then it simply could not be helped.



Wren went to the springhouse. There was no ice left. Not since late spring. But there was cold milk that she poured into a jug.

She might have left by the backdoor, and did not chide herself for it. It was simply faster, that was all.

He wouldn't want to eat with her—she was already resigned to that fact. He'd always eaten the entirety of his portions, so she made sure there was a little extra. And a biscuit too taken from the clay jar on the counter where she kept them fresh when the mood struck her.

Two biscuits.

Because she was sorry for speaking so harshly to him.

She took out the tray when he was on the far side of the field. That was cowardly too, because she was able to raise it slightly to get his attention before she placed it down beneath the shade tree.

She'd forgotten he would not have to walk, so she startled when he was suddenly beside her. She straightened, the tray at her feet. "Hungry?" she asked lamely. It was hours since they'd shared breakfast, so it was a foolish enquiry, but that was her, wasn't it? Foolish and...

"You do not care to join me?" he asked, staring down at the offering she'd brought.

It was obvious from the single glass, the lone plate. The napkin she'd folded with care before placing the biscuits on top.

Her cheeks flushed. It was the heat, that was all. Although today a breeze pushed through, a welcome relief to the intensity of the suns. "I..." she began, uncertain how she meant to answer him. The truth was easiest, although it cost her something to give it. "I didn't think you'd want me to." She couldn't look at him and tugged at her braid instead, looking out at his progress. He'd be done today, just as he'd said.

He sighed, his hand coming to tug through his hair before he pulled the appendage back with a grimace. "If I make use of your pump to wash, would you come and sit?"

Her mouth opened. She closed it again.

He was being gracious. Pretending that he had been the one in the wrong.

She tugged harder at her braid. “Braum,” she began, needing to get this out. But he sighed again, nodding to himself as if that was a rejection to his offer.

“All right,” she said instead. The apology could come when there was food between them. Although... she might sit on the other side of the tree again, the better to manage it.

She could not say that he brightened, but he nodded and there was... something that shifted in his posture. A loosening of his tension as he moved toward the pump and waited for her to go to the house and fetch her own meal.

She stooped first, lest any insects find their way into his plate while unattended.

And did not allow her eyes to linger when he brought fresh water from the pump and into his hair, scrubbing at his face and hands and...

What was wrong with her?

She did not hurry, and it was a bit of a scrunch, as the best tray was already in use. But she managed, and he was already seated at the tree when she came out again. Hair and skin glistening with fresh water rather than sweat.

Her stomach tightened.

She swallowed.

Almost took a step back into the house to shut and bolt the door.

But didn't. Which, perhaps, was progress?

He did not smile at her approach, but he took up the tray and settled it in his lap. He'd waited for her. It flustered her. Made her all the more anxious, although she could not claim to know why it should.

She crossed to the tree, the soil damp from the runoff of the pump water. The breeze tickled at her hair, reminding her that

most of it was still damp as well, tucked and plaited as it was.

Wren sat, pulling the tray into her lap, knowing she could not eat until she'd offered some sort of apology. "I should not have yelled at you," she murmured softly, because she was capable of being calm. Genteel even.

She grimaced.

He canted his head in her direction. She'd forgotten her resolve to sit on the opposite side of the tree, taking the spot she'd occupied that morning. "Did you yell? I do not recall."

She huffed out a breath. "Fine. Then I should not have *spoken* to you the way I did."

He shifted, this time his torso twisting so he might look at her fully. Or might have done if she was not intently studying the tray situated on her lap. "I am glad of it," Braum declared, and she peeked at him, but only briefly. "I insulted you, whether it was intended or not. I would not have wanted you to harbour it."

She wanted to say that she hadn't. That it hadn't really bothered her at all and she'd only said it because she was embarrassed. But that would be a lie, and she might be a coward, but she was not a liar.

"Did..." she could not recall the young man's name. "Did he lose his job? The one with the cart?"

Braum grunted, easing back against the trunk of the tree. "He did not. Perhaps he should have, but he is an apprentice, and we are supposed to be patient as they learn."

Nothing in his tone suggested he would be so forgiving with the poor man, but she was not certain she blamed him. It had been a disaster, and people easily could have been hurt.

Or worse.

She swallowed thickly.

Had that not been his point about the pond?

There were risks that came with living alone. With having the animals she did as companions. She tended not to dwell on

it, so used to it that it simply did not faze her any longer. What *would* happen if she came to harm?

She knew the answer to that. She'd die, and someday her father would find her just as she had her mother. He'd have to dig a hole, and he would mourn and sell off her animals and...

Her throat refused to cooperate, so she did not even bother trying to eat.

They sat in silence. He ate, but slowly, and she was not oblivious to the way he would steal glances at her with increasing frequency. "What is wrong?"

Those were private worries, steeped in all too real memories.

So she made light of it. Forced a smile and picked up her glass, running her thumb over the smooth edge of the lip. "Oh, you know. Life. Death. Everything in between."

His attention lingered a little too long on her, and she did not miss the way his mouth pulled into a frown. "So everything," he reiterated slowly. "Everything is wrong." A pause as his eyes drifted back to her. "That is why you are too anxious to eat?"

Her stomach gave a twist. "No," she admitted. "That is because I dislike how I behaved by the pond. And I haven't quite forgiven myself for it yet."

There. If he wanted the truth, that was the whole of it.

He bit into a vegetable and chewed it thoughtfully. "Would it help if I forgave you for it?" Her grip tightened on her glass. "Not that it is necessary, as you did not yell. And most particularly because you thought me a brute that considered you lesser than you deserve."

Her eyes watered, and she bit the inside of her cheek hard to get control of herself. "You would have flown over there, picked up the little miscreant and been done with it." She huffed out a breath and wiped at her eyes, and was grateful that no tears had actually escaped. "I don't like being reminded of all that I can't do."

He stared out at the pasture. “You might have asked me.”

She closed her eyes, pressing down the brief stab of irritation. “That is true. *This* time. But all the rest, it is going to be me. And that means walking and swimming and doing my best not to slip.”

He did not answer her, which she supposed meant that he had no argument to give her.

“You will finish today?” she offered, so they might drop that particular subject.

He nodded slowly. “Your hesper will be glad of it, I’m sure.”

She smiled, feeling slightly better. Enough that she could take a bite of her own meal. “Thorn, mostly. He seems certain they’re going to step on one of the grimbles.”

“He should learn to swim,” Braum muttered, and she wondered if she was meant to hear it at all.

“It’s not his nature,” she defended gently. “He’s usually good at keeping them from going out that far. He’s trained the older ones well, but every spring there’s a new batch that don’t know any better. Gets him frustrated.” She swallowed. “I don’t do all that much for them, really, so I’m happy to help him when I can. Even if my methods are less than graceful.”

Braum hummed slightly, and she did not doubt it was in disapproval.

Which was his right. As it was hers to tend to her grimbles however she must.

Her father had stopped complaining when she’d reminded him not too gently that he did not live there to tend them for her.

Instead, he merely bid her to be careful.

And patted her arm with that slight tightening about his eyes that she knew so well.

They sat quietly. She picked at her food and made herself take a few nibbles, while he did not bother with even that

effort, until he allowed a finger to touch one biscuit thoughtfully. “Your methods are admirable,” he said at last. As if she was in search of his praise when she most assuredly was not. “I cannot help...” he paused, considering.

Just as she considered if she truly wished to hear what came next.

“I try to imagine my sister out here, on her own. And I confess I cannot.”

Her shoulders relaxed, and it became a little easier to make a genuine effort at her meal. “She lives in the city?”

Braum nodded. He did not smile, his attention still drifting over the land. The animals that even now could be heard bellowing to one another. “She is an excellent mother. A hard worker.” A grimace. “She would have to be, to keep them alive and relatively clean.”

She felt a pang of something that was a little too near to sadness. “Has she many?”

“Two. But they move so quickly that you would swear there are more of them.”

She thought of the children in the market. The harried looks that the mothers wore as soon as their flight feathers came and suddenly they might be *anywhere*.

“Then I think she would manage just fine,” Wren argued. “Exchange fledglings for grimbles and it’s much the same.”

She did not know that, but there was a sort of chaos that could come when order and routine made way for the stubbornness of small creatures, no matter their kind.

“No,” Braum disagreed. “She relies on people. To help her. To advise her.”

His tone did not suggest it as a criticism, but she could not help but take it that way, if only a little. She might have accepted more help if it had been offered.

It was not.

“Would it be wrong to ask after your other people?”

Had she clarified that it was her father that had visited? She could not recall. She'd been suspicious and angry with him, so it was doubtful. "My mother's people," she offered, her thumb smoothing over her cup thoughtfully. "I do not know where they are. What happened to them. They were not... welcomed. After your kind learned of... of me." She ate a little too quickly, trying not to think of those stories.

They had been. At first. When they were simply a new people. They were offered lodging in the city. Their few resources were marvelled at for trade.

Then her mother had begun to show.

And suddenly, they were all expelled.

Her father had been devoted to them. Had sworn to go with her, if that's what it meant to remain together and...

How often had her mother wished she'd made a different choice? If they'd gone and remained a family, in foreign lands with none to help them.

She swallowed thickly and needed a sip of milk to get it down at all.

"And your mother?" he asked, so gently that she could not even begrudge him the query.

Even if it meant a lump settled in her throat. When she could not help but look at the biscuits that were her mother's favoured recipe with an ache so real she was certain a wound had opened anew.

"She died. A few years back. I do not know why."

She ignored the rest of her meal. Reached for the biscuit instead and allowed its sweetness to comfort her. A taste of home. Of being a girl again. When life was hard, but shared.

"I am sorry."

It was not a trite offering. Something that good manners imprinted as a response, but meant.

Felt.

She nodded, strangely grateful for it. Firen had been much the same. That first, horrible venture into the market... after. When she'd asked in her usual bright manner where her mother was, and Wren could not speak the words.

"Thank you," she murmured, playing with a crumb of biscuit. "I miss her. Every day."

She did not know why she said that. Confessed it. He was too easy to talk to. A quiet presence that coaxed without pressing. That was content to sit, to think. To watch the beauty of the fields with no chatter.

She liked it. More than she cared to admit to herself.

"And your father..."

She might have known that was coming. "He lives in the city, too. With his... with his mate."

There. It was not precisely a secret. But the rumours and gossip had long ago died away, so perhaps they were not as willing to share it as they once were.

He shifted. Turned so he could look at her. She waited for the lecture. About mates and the wrong that had produced... her.

And she would hate him for it.

Would thank him for his work and then walk back into the house and not care to speak to him again.

Which might have been for the better. That way, she would miss nothing when he'd gone away again.

Wouldn't miss *him*.

She did not know him. Perhaps he was not a stranger any longer, but they were not friends. Acquaintances. She might allow that.

"I am sorry," he repeated. Just as genuinely.

And she shrugged because... to do anything else would mean appearing just as weak as she suddenly felt, and that was not something she wanted exposed to anyone. Let alone him.

“I am not complaining,” she managed, because that was true as well. It might be unfortunate. Might be an abomination to some and yet...

It was her family.

Her parents had not regretted it. She would not either.

He hummed, just a little. A quiet argument that... perhaps she should be.

She shrugged again, because there was nothing else to say.

“Was your father a woodcutter?” she asked, wishing to turn to his family histories rather than dwell upon hers. “A family trade?”

He grunted, picking up one of the biscuits. If she watched him take a bite, if she stared a little too long as she waited for a reaction, it was only because the recipe was so dear to her.

“My mother’s father. Showed me the plots he’d raised. Taught me how to plant, when to cut.”

She turned toward him. Not all the way, but enough. “And you like it?”

The corners of his mouth pulled up ever so slightly. “Parts of it. Tending to the trees. Walking the rows. I am not certain there is anyone that would claim that cutting wood is the most enjoyable of tasks.”

She grimaced, remembering her brief foray into the skill. “No, I suppose not.”

He gestured out toward the field. “This has been a welcome change. Building something useful.”

She sat the tray down beside her and pulled her knees up. “I really am grateful,” she murmured because... she’d said it before, but she was uncertain her tone had led him to believe she meant it. “Truly. This would have taken me ages to finish.”

He glanced at her. Perhaps even assessing the strength of her arm briefly before he turned his head back toward the pasture. “But you would have done it,” he countered. “And that is admirable.”

Her throat tightened. She did not need his approval. His praise. And yet it made something tighten in her stomach, made her throat burn as she curled her arms about her knees and couldn't quite look at him.

She didn't need it.

But she liked it.

Didn't like that she liked it, but...

"I..." she swallowed. "Thank you."

He nodded, and she did not know what else to say. Her skin felt hot and her cheeks flushed. She was *flustered*. As if she was some girl freshly grown that held dreams of mates and love and all the rest of it.

Had she ever been that? She could not recall.

Wren curled up a little tighter, chiding herself firmly. She was being ridiculous. She needed a good wash at the pump, to get some cool water on her face and hands and that would make her feel better.

But she certainly was not about to do that in front of Braum. Not that he would... not that *she* would...

She rubbed at her forehead. "Are you all right?" Braum asked. He'd finished the last biscuit, and neatened everything on the tray before placing it to the side. "I will fetch you water, if you like.

"No," she croaked out. Her mouth *was* dry, but she didn't... that was not their bargain. "I'm supposed to give you food and drink, remember? Not the other way around."

He shook his head, and she was left with the distinct impression that she'd irritated him. Again.

She did not mean to. It just seemed to happen with increasing frequency whenever she opened her mouth.

"I believe those terms were made at your own discretion. I may still offer what I wish, even if you do not care to accept my help."

There it was again. His constant insistence that help was normal. That it was the gracious thing to do to simply... accept it.

She tugged at her braid.

Looked at her empty cup and sighed deeply.

Her pride prickled. Her stubbornness, too.

And yet...

She swallowed it back. Her heart racing and full of shame that it was so hard to do it at all...

She held out her cup. "Thank you," she repeated.

And was rewarded with a half-smile. Not of mockery as she might have expected. But something nearer to relief as he went to the pump and let it run for a moment, just to ensure it was cool for her.

Watching him did nothing to settle her.

So she turned her head and tried to calm herself. Which was easier to do once she fixated on watching Temperance lead Calliope across the field, Thorn trailing behind them—suspicious as always.

"Here," Braum murmured, and she accepted the cup with yet more thanks. He did not return to his spot by the tree, but stood. Waiting for her to drink? She took a careful sip, then another, deeper pull. It was clear and cool as usual, but there was something different. Perhaps simply because she had not fetched it for herself.

"About those dishes," Braum posed, glancing down at their trays. "Would you still prefer I remain out of your kitchen?"

Her cheeks coloured further. This was a test, wasn't it? And for an inexplicable reason, she wanted to pass.

To... please him.

To see that half-smile again.

"You've a fence to finish," she reminded him, fiddling with the trays and stacking dishes as she finished her water and

added it to the rest. “I think I’ve had enough help for one day, yes?”

She did not expect him to agree with her, and by the tight line of his mouth, there was no pretending that he did so.

But he did not argue with her as she got to her feet. And went back to her house with her dishes and a churning feeling in her belly that a cup of water did not quell.

Merryweather was waiting for her in the kitchen. She was seated on the edge of the table, where they might usually have shared a meal together. “You didn’t want to keep us company?” she asked, allowing Merry to nudge her head into Wren’s open palm. “Ready for it to be just the two of us again?”

Merryweather gave a little chirp, and Wren smiled. She was ready for that, too. For the calm to come back, the peace she’d had for so long.

Then everything would be all right again.

Braum would go, just as she knew he would.

And that would be that.

She fetched warm water from the kettle to clean their dishes, and wondered why it took so long for the tightness in her chest to dissipate as she worked.



He knocked on the edge of the open door frame.

She was seated at the table, mending. She’d need to start on a new pair of stockings, these so worn at the heels that even darning was proving inefficient.

The garden was watered. The barn was filled with clean hay.

A peaceful afternoon, aside from the continual strike of Braum’s hammer as he finished.

Because... he had. She might have peered out the kitchen window more than once to see the fresh boards he’d placed

and secured. The gate he'd fixed, so it did not sag any longer.

"All finished?" she asked brightly, already knowing the answer.

"I have." He stayed in the doorway, and she felt the memory of her mother so fiercely it was as if she'd truly given the reprimand anew.

"You may come in," Wren added sheepishly. She stood, crossing to where she'd prepared a basket for him. She did not know if he'd be able to take it along with his tools. He had a good eye for lumber, so there was very little excess—and what remained had been placed with her woodpile. She knew better than to argue that he should have it back.

He entered, but just beyond the threshold. He appeared distinctly uncomfortable, his head ducked slightly as if to avoid looking at her home.

She'd done that, hadn't she? Because he'd noticed how uncomfortable she'd been to have him at her table.

"For your way back," she explained, moving close enough that she might hand him the basket. "Since I do not know how long the journey is."

She'd wrapped everything up tightly since he would almost certainly be flying most of the way. He seemed... tense. Almost reluctant as he accepted it. There were biscuits. Vegetables from the garden. The berries were dried lest they crush against the weight of everything else. A few slices of bread had rounded it all out, and hoped would make an acceptable supper.

"I will... return the basket," Braum offered, his words tight. Careful.

She shrugged. "No need. I can always make another."

Something tightened about his eyes, and she wondered what she might have said wrong. She wouldn't burden him. He needn't burden himself with making another trip all this way just to return a basket.

It wasn't one of her mother's, anyway. Just woven from the pond reeds. An amusement as she sat amongst the rushes in the heat of last summer, grumbles all about her as they tried to eat her work just as quickly as she could fashion it into something useful.

Should she thank him again? Make another attempt at offering him coin? There was a strained sort of awkwardness between them. He seemed to wrestle with... something, and she could not decide what else she might offer him.

He'd washed at the pump again. Her mother would have offered tea. More biscuits. Something to end his day in company rather than a meagre basket to take home with him.

"Would you..." she began.

"Will you..." he started at just the same time.

They looked sheepishly at one another before she gestured for him to continue.

"I had asked before... if you would attend any of the fetes."

Her cheeks burned. "You did. And my answer is the same."

He glanced down at the basket—to avoid her, she was sure, since it wasn't much to look at with each article wrapped tightly in waxed paper. "Is there a particular reason for that?"

He could not have selected a worse topic. She would have preferred he probe about her mother. Pick apart the rest of her list of maintenance items she had yet to conquer.

Anything else.

"There is." Her answer was curt. Stiff. She'd tried to make it otherwise, but... Not everything was within her control. "But it is not something I will discuss today."

Or ever.

Even that seeped into her tone, she was sure.

He nodded, his grip tightening on the handle of her basket. Her head tilted slightly, and her eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask?"

He looked at her. A sharp flitting of his eyes that was almost enough for her to take a step backward. But she held her ground. This was her kitchen, after all. And she would not be the one to retreat.

But he looked away again, and the momentary tension eased ever so slightly. “That is not something that should be discussed today, either.” His voice was not nearly as hard as hers had been, and she chewed at her lip, discomfited.

“I’ll leave you now,” Braum declared. “Thank you for this,” he added, holding out the basket toward her.

His tools had been wrapped and placed into a large satchel. She could see it peeping out just beyond the doorway.

She’d bungled things. Been too harsh. But her hands were shaking, and she would not get control of herself while he was still here. Better that he go. So she could breathe, could press the rest of it away again. Lock it up in the corners of her mind, since she could not purge it all away.

She’d tried.

Desperately.

“A safe journey, then,” she managed to get out. Forced a smile on her face as he walked back out and secured the satchel across his shoulders—a practised art so it did not catch upon his wings and prove a bother.

He nodded to her again. Opened his mouth to say something more, but closed it again. “Until...” he paused, and this time her smile was a little more genuine. There was no fixed time to offer in parting. Their business was concluded, and he’d no need of her wares at the market.

“Fair evening, Wren,” he gave instead.

“And to you,” she murmured back. Meaning it. She wished him well. Success in his endeavours. That he’d attend one of those fetes he kept mentioning. Would find a lovely woman and use his talents to make a home for them both.

His mouth twisted.

And he turned before he took the skies in the fading light of the almost-evening.

She tugged at her braid.

Took a shaky breath.

And was comforted by Merryweather bumping her head against her knee. “Come on,” Wren urged. “An early night would suit just fine, wouldn’t it? Things will be better in the morning.”

They were her mother’s words, but as she closed the door and bolted it, her breath was ragged.

And she did not find that she believed it at all.

9. Hover

He could not go back.

Would not.

He had the door bolted. Had even closed the shutters on the window and secured them tightly, the summer night stifling in his cottage.

But he could slip out the window.

Could fly back to her, could convince himself that it was reasonable he make a secondary lodging in her barn. He wanted to make himself useful in exchange. He had no particular mastery in mucking out stalls, but he would if it would help, if it meant he could stay, could *know* that she was safe.

Anything instead of this gnawing, persistent ache in his belly.

That made it difficult to eat the provisions she'd given him. Even though all the vegetables were fresh, the bread soft. Because... because there would be no more of it. No more tree-side meals. No more fresh produce unless he bought it from the market rather than...

Rather than from her.

He groaned.

Rocked slowly.

He did not recall coming to the floor.

He'd been in bed. Body taut with the tension of it. The knowledge that she did not want him there. That she did not want a mate. And could he blame her? With her father tucked away within the comfort of the bond. With a not-wife and a daughter living all alone. Separate. Because they were dangerous.

Fertile outside the bond.

He pulled at his hair, but it proved insufficient distraction.

He'd seen the hatchet in her hand. Presumably she was relatively proficient with its use. She could protect herself from dangers. From predators and people alike.

Or maybe she couldn't. And those wild animals of hers would scatter because that was the sensible thing to do when a larger enemy was near. Which would leave Wren all on her own. With no one to help, no one to *care*.

He would go mad.

He was certain of it.

If it meant more nights like this. Locked away with his sister's words tormenting him. To listen to her. To be what she needed.

She needed so much, although she would deny it. Would look at him with that hint of disbelief when he asked why she did not request his assistance.

As if he was the strange one.

As if everyone grew up as she did.

He hated the anxious tension that seemed her natural state in his presence. It only furthered his resolve that she felt nothing of the instincts that were burned upon his mind, his every muscle. The want of her.

His head hit the solid wood of the wall behind, the pain bright. Almost welcome in exchange for the twisting roil through his body.

It would pass with time. It had to. The longer he went without her, the instincts would grow accustomed to the lack. He would check on her on market days. Would nod and enquire about her animals, just to watch the brightening in her eyes when she spoke of them.

A hint of the loving woman beneath all the anxiety, the suspicion as she regarded him.

Wondering at his motivations.

Should he have spoken plainly? Told her that he... that she...

Could she be his mate, if he was not hers in return?

The ache bloomed. The fears pushed. Threatened to punish him more thoroughly if he did not get *moving*.

He knew the way. He did not even have to think about it any longer. There was a pull, a tether. That insisted it was right to go, that anything else was anathema.

The woodlots did not matter. His seedlings. The saplings. The old growth and the new.

Generations of labour, of care, and he...

He belonged *here*.

He did.

Because... because she did not want him there.

And he would respect it, respect her, would sit and rock and...

He could not breathe.

He moved to the window without thought. Opened first the shutter, then the latch on the window itself. Gulped in lungfuls of air that tasted wrong, for they were not tinged with *her*.

He laughed.

A humourless burst of despair that hung dully in the quiet of a night strangely devoid of light. As if the stars themselves knew of his troubles and dimmed in sympathy.

He needed a plan. If he wanted to keep his sanity, he would need to turn this... this frustration into something productive. To provide a glimmer of hope that maybe... that maybe he might... mean something to her.

Perhaps not to the extent of a mate, but... a friend, at the very least.

Someone that could come. Could share a cold drink. Could help her when no one else would.

That would be all right, wouldn't it? If he kept his expectations low, if he did not frighten her. If he waited to see if some of that tension would resolve on its own. If maybe... if maybe she would become glad of his visits. Would relax instead, and smile and beckon him in. To sit at her table, within her home, and feel that he belonged there.

If only as a guest.

He burst through the window. His wings snagged upon the panes, but he did not know if they bled.

Only knew that he was moving.

He would not stay. He *wouldn't*.

He'd go home again. After he saw the house was dark and that the doors were fastened.

Because... that was allowable too, wasn't it? To check after her wellbeing. Never to trespass. He would not even allow his feet to touch her land without her knowledge. Not again.

But she did not own the skies.

And it saddened him.

That she would not know the pleasure of flight, the freedom that came with it.

A birthright that should have been hers.

He wished he might change it for her. Not simply for his own selfish reasons that he might recognise him. Might embrace him. Relax into him as she pulled him close, allowed him to comfort her, to massage away the tight line of her shoulders, the doubt that hung around her like a mantle.

He wanted those things.

Craved them. Needed them.

But her needs mattered more.

He needed rules for himself. Boundaries. Even as everything in him cried out that those were for *other* people. Not mates. They were to be so attuned to one another that such things were simply unnecessary.

But Wren was different.

He would not enter her land without her knowledge. And if she asked him to leave, then he would. He would...

Braum swallowed, her home coming into view.

He wanted to land so badly. To remain guard at her front door. To keep out all dangers so she could sleep long and well.

But he shouldn't.

He could not betray a trust he hadn't earned. Wanted to earn.

Hated that her life thus far had made it where she was leery. Watchful. Waiting for him to disappoint her, to prove yet again that she was right to doubt him.

So he circled. Took four times before he could convince himself to go back. That she was fine, that her home was fine, that nothing would happen before dawn. When he could...

But he wasn't going back. Not yet. Not until he could come up with a reason she might accept. One that did not include talk of fetes and mates and why her entire body had stiffened at the merest suggestion of it.

Braum squeezed his hands tightly. Grit his teeth and forced himself back to his cottage.

But he could not bring himself to pretend that it was where he belonged.

10. Friend

Life settled. Just as she liked it. Fresh milk in the springhouse, Temperance and Calliope in their preferred pasture. A fine fence to keep them from wandering about. And Wren found that having something new, something sturdy and fine to look at outside her kitchen window, refreshed her vigour for keeping a tidy home.

She took out the carpets to beat—and how long had that stain in the corner been there? Which meant a good bit of soap and a scrub brush. And perhaps some fibres came away along with the stain, but it was *clean* and that mattered most.

She couldn't bring herself to set it over the new wood fence, so she took it instead for Thorn to oversee as it dried. That fence was older—presumably not put into place by her parents at all. There were stone pillars every so often as supports, the stones smooth and aged.

Thorn's head picked up as she placed the heavy rug over one of them, her muscles straining from the weight of it now that it was partly sodden.

“Don't let them chew on it, if you please,” Wren called to him.

He huffed. Laid his head down again, and she was certain it would be her responsibility to keep any curious grimbles away from her rug.

Her mother would have rolled it up for the summer. Tucked it away in the loft until autumn. She claimed it trapped heat inside and the wood of the floor was preferable.

But Wren couldn't manage going up the stairs on her own, so it stayed where it was. Holding the summer heat in its fibres and making Wren feel guilty every time her bare feet rubbed against it.

No. Her home, now. Not her mother's. And Wren's home had a carpet all year long.

She sank down against the pillar. The grasses were long on this side, and she considered allowing a few grimbles outside the gate to take care of the rest of it. She'd need panels to keep them contained, and an irritated Thorn to take the other side, but she could manage it.

But there were flowers beginning to emerge. Ignorant to the heat that would greet them as soon as they pushed from their pods. Perhaps there was nothing wrong with allowing a bit of overgrown beauty to take up the edges of her fields.

It had been three days since Braum had left. And while she found herself looking rather wistfully at the tree nearest the pump, she could not say that she truly missed him.

She could sleep as long as chores would allow. Merryweather was her near constant companion, and the knot of anxiety in her chest since the entire business had begun had finally abated yesterday afternoon.

She wasn't watched. Wasn't judged.

She closed her eyes and allowed her head to drift backward, knowing there was plenty for her still to do, but sitting was nice as well. Her arms felt limp and fairly useless after her work on the carpet, and there was shade enough for the moment until the suns moved again and...

Thorn made a loud bellow, and she turned her head, sighing to herself. She should be glad for her father to visit. But he would ask questions. Marvel, at first, at work she had not completed, and she would have to tell him. Could not possibly take credit for what she had not done.

She shifted, brushing off the bits of vegetation that clung to her skirts, and went to greet him.

"Easy, Thorn," she called, and he sat, but kept alert all the same. She adjusted her rug just once, and pointed an accusing finger at one of the young grimbles that ambled that way. "Let it be," she insisted, one for its tail to wiggle and any semblance of a stern expression melting away as it always did.

“It’ll be your fluff that fixes anything you eat,” she warned. A fruitless threat, in any case. It would be at least a full cycle of seasons before its coat was long enough to comb for fibre. But it did not need to know that.

She grimaced when a damp hand turned the dust on her skirt to a smudge. She should tend to her mounting pile of laundry. Soon. Maybe even today, if her father did not stay too long.

She turned the corner of the house, a tease already in her mouth about just how many days he’d let pass without coming to check on her, but it died just as quickly.

Braum stood by her door. A few paces back, as if he’d knocked but did not know quite what to do since she had not answered.

She cleared her throat. The peace that had settled over her spoiling with remarkable swiftness.

“Braum,” she greeted. “Fair...” she glanced up at the sky, trying to place the position of the suns. “Afternoon?”

The corner of his mouth pulled upward slightly. “And to you.”

She came closer. Her braid was untidy, she was certain. The hem of her skirts were still damp from her work on the rug, and she did not doubt that soap and dirt clung to her in equal measure.

“Did you forget something?” She could not account for any other reason for his coming, and the pause was grating on her.

He was the one that came. He should be the one to explain himself.

She swallowed back the flare of irritation. Wished it would take away the itching in her palms, the knot of anxiety that pushed at her throat.

But it didn’t.

“I did,” Braum affirmed, taking a step backward as she crossed to her door. To allow her room, she supposed. Or to collect whatever he’d forgotten.

“Sorry,” she offered. “I didn’t notice any tools, or I would have...”

What exactly? She had not enquired as to his lodging. She would not know who to ask about a woodcutter and his groves.

She’d have at least brought them in from the elements. Cleaned them, if she could be certain she wasn’t doing any harm in the process.

“No, Wren.” Braum shook his head, and she tried to be patient. “That is to say...” he glanced out at the pasture where Temperance and Calliope had come slightly forward to assess the newcomer. Perhaps suspicious that they would be banished now that he’d come back. “The fence. It will need oiling.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “Is that at all? I’ll add it to my list.”

He raised his eyes skyward as if... as if he was trying very hard to keep his patience with *her*. “No,” he repeated. “I would consider this an extension of our original agreement.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Absolutely not.” And she meant it. “Braum. I’ve never oiled a fence in my life, but if you say that it should be done, I’ll get to it.”

He pointed toward Thorn’s pasture. “It will weather, yes. But it will also rot in the wet seasons. Better to keep it maintained or else we will need an entirely new bargain for its replacement.”

She tried very hard to keep from fidgeting. Wanted to ask if cooking oil was what he meant or... or something else.

That would be stupid, surely. Lamp oil?

She did not like not knowing things. Feeling inadequate and small and...

“No, we wouldn’t want that,” she agreed. She coughed slightly. Placed her hand upon the knob. “I will fetch paper so you may tell me what to buy at the market.”

Then she slipped inside.

And for some reason, was confident that he would not follow—intrude, when she needed a moment, to calm her breath and remain firm in her arguments. To keep from allowing him to sacrifice even more of his time and resources without compensation.

The paper was just as scrap, the pencil so short and worn it was barely longer than her thumb. But they were serviceable enough, especially if he would even give her the name of the vendor he favoured.

It seemed that Braum had made use of the time as well. He stood a little taller, his eyes meeting hers as soon as she stepped back out the door. “I would like to do it myself,” he stated firmly. “I will also supply the oil.”

Wren’s mouth twisted. The pencil cut into her palm; she gripped it so tightly.

Her mother was not there to entreat her not to be stubborn.

Her father was not there to vouch for Braum’s motives.

It was her judgement alone.

She could imagine nothing she trusted less.

“Why?” And before he could give her more drivel about scraped legs and errant logs, she pressed on. “The job is done. More than done. You already knew I was uneasy that you had offered too much, and to come here and offer *more* is...” She huffed out a breath. Wanted to say many more things. Like asinine. Absurd.

Suspicious.

“Give me a better reason, please,” she insisted. The *please* was for her mother. The demand was for her own sake.

His hands curled.

Then relaxed as he took a step forward.

Her eyes narrowed, and he stilled. “Because I like it here.”

She blinked.

If she had conjured any possible reasons, that would not have been one of them.

He'd complimented the quiet. The pleasure to be found in watching the animals as they went about their lives, grazing and ambling at will.

"Because I should like us to be friends," he continued, growing in confidence—only in word if nothing else. He could not look at her as he said it. Which was just fine, because she could not look at him.

"Friends," she repeated, trying to make the word fit into any semblance of clarity.

And failed utterly.

Her brow furrowed, and she huffed out a breath. "Why would you possibly want that?"

He gave a sigh of his own and straightened further, his hands curled as he forced himself to look at her. And she attempted to do the same, although her attention flitted toward his boots more than once. "Is it so strange to consider that I might find your company agreeable?"

She took a deliberate step backward. "Yes, actually."

And for a moment, he looked... sad.

And it did strange things to her. Made her itch to move, to run, to hide away because he had no business looking like that in relation to her.

But then it was gone. Tucked away as if it had never been as his jaw tightened and he regarded her again. "I should like to make the attempt, regardless. If you would allow me the opportunity to try."

She tugged at her braid. Wished she'd kept with her rug and the grimbles. Where things were simple and... not this.

She swallowed, trying to force some measure of moisture into her dry mouth. "A friend would not oil my fence."

He tilted his head slightly. "They would not?"

Wren shook her head slowly, relatively sure of herself. Hating that she wasn't.

Her mother had been her friend. Her *best* friend. And there would not have been questions about oiling fences or any other of the menial tasks that made up their life here.

They would have been tackled together. Just as they always had been.

It was different when the friend wasn't a relation, wasn't it? When the work did nothing to benefit anyone but... her.

She thought of Firen. They were friends, weren't they? From Firen's tenacity alone, perhaps, but it counted. And she could not imagine Firen doing anything with her fence, let alone spend the day in the hot suns oiling it.

"I would not ask it of them," she clarified.

His brow pulled upward. "Even if they wanted to? You would deny them?"

She was growing exasperated, and the urge to disappear back into the house was strong. "This is ridiculous," she groused. "If you would like me to hire you as a labourer, I would say no thank you. I haven't the coin." He opened his mouth, and she held up her hand to stop him. "I do not need your pity. I am merely being truthful." She wanted to close her eyes, to hide away and not finish the rest, but that was because of her pride. And what did she have left of that, anyway? "And if I had any friends," she continued, her voice quiet even as she tried to keep it firm. "I would not squander their efforts on something like that. Not when I'm certain they have plenty to attend to in their own homes."

He turned around, and for a moment, she thought he meant to leave. Her stomach gave an uncomfortable twist, but she stood firm because that was better, wasn't it? They would never agree on this. And she simply did not trust his motivations.

But he stalled. Raised his head upward and said nothing. While she waited with a furrowed brow and a hint of concern

that perhaps she should apologise. No, she believed everything she'd said. But... smooth things over in some way.

"I do not understand," he said at last. He did not turn. Did not acknowledge her in any way, and she almost wondered if she was meant to hear it at all. "Why this must be so difficult."

She did not mean to bristle, yet she did. "Pardon?"

He turned then. Grim-faced, jaw tight. "I am sorry," he began again. "I am sorry that you cannot recognise help when it is offered freely. I am sorry that the idea of friendship is so foreign to you. That you find it so incredible that I should like to be here. To share your company and your labours and enjoy fresh bread that I did not have to haggle for at the market or nick from my sister."

The last she could understand. It had nothing to do with capability or coin, just... the simple pleasure of not having to do it for oneself.

Her shoulders slumped just a little. And she found herself a little steadier, even as his words and his tone stung. He was annoyed with her, that much was evident. And perhaps it wasn't for her to decide if he had a right to it.

She smoothed her hands down her skirt, feeling chastened. "You're right," she murmured softly. Repeated at his look of surprise. "I... I don't know how this works. Perhaps you have a whole host of friends that would think nothing of felling one of your groves simply because you needed it done."

His hand came to the back of his neck and rubbed at it lightly. "I would not go so far," he amended. "And I do not want to speak for others. Just... myself. And I would like to do this for you."

She could not hide her befuddlement. Wanted to ask him *why*, wanted to make sense of this in some other way than a lifetime of experience supplied.

He was using her in some manner. Perhaps a law she did not know. That the land would be hers no longer if he worked a percentage. That he would take it, would turn on her, that his

guise of friendship was simply that and she would regret this, regret all this again and...

“You’ll hurt yourself,” Braum commented, a little chagrined, his eyes full of worry. “If you keep tugging like that.”

She glanced down, only to find her hand tightly curled about her braid, and she released it at once. How many times had her mother chided her for the same action? She could not possibly put a number to it.

She turned, hand on the latch to go back inside. She did not need his chastisement, just as she did not need his sweet talk of friendship that was doubtlessly all lies.

Yet she hesitated. Because he had been good to her thus far. Had done as he’d said, even as now he pushed for more. “I’m glad,” Wren tried gently, her throat tight and her heart racing. “That you’ve had friends. I’m glad that you’ve known people that would make an offer like that and you’d accept it. That you can just... decide that you like a person and their home and want to visit.”

She went inside. Sat at her kitchen table and knew her mother would be disappointed in her. That she’d been rude to shut the door without things settled between them.

But she’d done it, anyway.

She felt strangely chilled, despite the warm day. Felt numb in ways that felt like when she’d discovered Mama’s body.

When she’d gone to the market for the first time, alone.

When the gossip swirled even as she’d made the first terrible confirmation that it would just be her from then on.

Or later still. When she’d thought she would go mad from the loneliness, the weighty depths of her grief and the prospect of it never changing, never relenting, just going on and on until she...

A knock on the doorframe. And she did not have to wonder who it was. Her throat ached, and she was perilously close to tears, and she did not want him there. Did not want to be

seduced with talk of companionship, of compliments on the land she loved so dearly.

She glanced down at her pencil. The scrap of paper.

The door was thick, the wood solid. She could raise her voice and hope it carried. Could ignore him entirely until he grew frustrated and went home again.

But she stood miserably from her chair and went back to the door. Opening it just a smidge so she might look at him with one eye.

Not as rude as all that.

And yet... she could not quite bring herself to believe it was true.

“Were we finished?” Braum asked, taking a measured step back from the door once he realised she did not mean to open it completely.

She rubbed at her eyes and gave a hapless sort of shrug. “We seem to be quite good at finding impasses. I thought we’d let that one settle for a while.”

He shook his head, grumbling something too low for her to hear.

She almost shut the door again, but he held out his hand—not to stop it. But an entreaty. “Wren, please.”

She sighed. Hated how gently he said her name. Hated how she liked how it sounded, coming from him. “I’m tired, Braum,” she admitted. “I did battle with a rug today and I’m sore and I don’t...” It was the wrong thing to say. Not if she wanted to insist that she could handle all the chores on her own.

Already his eyes were darting about, looking for the apparently defeated rug, and she suppressed another sigh. “I don’t know how to negotiate with you,” she finished. “And I don’t know why I must.”

Why he pressed. Why he looked about so desperately for something he might fix rather than simply *going*.

Her fingers twitched about her braid, and she released with another flash of embarrassment.

“I know,” Braum murmured, taking a half-step forward. Not too close. Not enough that she feared he would barge in without invitation. But enough that it felt like a conversation. A confidence. “I am sorry for that, perhaps most of all.”

She waited for him to say more. To speak plainly, so she did not have to conjure reasons of her own.

She huffed. Glared down at the ground between them. “Would you sister oil her own fence?”

He barked out something that was near a laugh. “It would never occur to her to try.”

She did not know if that reflected poorly on his sister—most particularly because she had not known to care for wood in such a manner either. And it made her even more glad she had not asked about the cooking oil.

“Not because she is incapable,” Braum clarified. “But because there’s other of us that have more time to offer. More skill for it, too.” He ducked his head slightly, and she wondered if it was meant to catch her eye. “You don’t have to know everything.” It was said gently enough, but her mouth twisted, and she looked at him then.

Steady and firm, and more than grateful that her tears had disappeared for the moment. “Yes, Braum,” she argued, with all the patience she did not feel. “When you’re all there is, you certainly do.”

He dared to look at her sadly.

But she’d spoken truly before. She was tired. Too tired to muster even the offense at his look, at his pity. Too tired to stand in the doorway and argue with a man she was beginning to suspect possessed the same stubborn streak that Wren liked to pretend she didn’t have.

So she went back through the door. Back into her kitchen, where she waved for him to follow if he wished. To her kettle that did not take too long to heat, not when the water was already warm.

She did not care that it might have been better to head to the springhouse. To offer something cool and refreshing.

It was comfort she wanted. The taste familiar, the heat suffusing through her hands until she felt... something.

His steps were hesitant, and she could not blame him. Not when just a moment before she had shut him out and considered their argument over.

A friend would get a cup of tea while he tried to convince her to let him help.

Maybe even a biscuit if he told her where to buy the oil.

Her eyes didn't water when she pulled two mugs from the cupboard. She'd played hostess during her father's visits—this did not need to feel so very different.

She didn't like him hovering near the door. Didn't like the way he was so obvious in his attempts not to look at her things. It made her feel even more awkward, more frustrated at the entire business.

Made her want to evict him and insist he bother her no more.

And if her stomach gave a funny sort of lurch even to think it then...

She poured the tea. First in the pot, where the shrivelled leaves swirled and burst inside the confines of their pot.

Then to the mugs. With the delicate sieve to keep out the leaves that her father had given to her mother for...

She frowned, not recalling the occasion. Birthdays were muddled things. Mama had tried to talk of rotations of the suns and calendars and the like, but Wren had retained little of it. There were seasons. Those mattered. Were real and known. The rest...

They were stories, that was all. Real to her mother, but not to her.

“Sit down please, Braum. You're making me nervous.”

He did not comment that she always seemed anxious. But continued to stand until she turned to look at him, a brow raised in question.

“Are the seats allocated in any particular way? I would not want to intrude.”

She bit her lip. They had been. Once.

She pointed to the one nearest her. “That one’s usually mine. Merryweather takes whichever has her favoured cushion.” Or she’d perch on the table. But perhaps that would offend some people, so she did not mention it.

The chairs had low backs. Her mother had often complained about them, grumbling about having to accommodate wings she did not have. But they’d come when her father lived there, and she hadn’t seemed to mind so much when he was at her table.

She made a circle of biscuits on a plate. She would have to make more if... if she was going to keep company.

She swallowed.

A friend.

Her friend.

She tried to settle the thought, and it clamoured wrongly through her mind. But she turned. Placed a mug in front of him, the biscuits in the middle. Then took her favoured chair.

He was seated across from her, which was a novel experience. Not with her back to him. Or her compromise of just to the side.

But where she could look at him too closely, where he could watch her in turn.

Better to sip her tea. To nibble at a biscuit and wait until any of this made sense. He pulled the mug closer to him, his hands curling about it. It was the wrong thing to offer, especially since he had likely flown a rather long way, but he did not complain.

“Would it help,” Braum began slowly, staring down at the steam that swirled up from the cup. “If I taught you along the way?”

Wren took a thoughtful sip. “I suppose,” she agreed slowly. “Although you would still be doing far more than I’m comfortable with. Not unless you give me something specific you want in return.”

He glanced up at her, and for a moment, her breath caught in her throat. “This,” he declared. “I want this.”

So serious. So firm in his resolve.

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to supply precisely what he meant. Sitting with her? The tea and biscuits? They were perfectly ordinary things, according to her mother. Surely his sister would even provide them during visits.

Or perhaps they were human niceties. Leftover from a world that didn’t mean much of anything at all, now that...

Now that Mama was gone.

She could think it. Could feel the little ache and not let it consume her.

She swallowed. Skimmed her finger across the smooth lip of her mug. “Could you be more specific?” she prompted, her words slow. Careful. Because she dreaded his answer.

He leaned back in his chair, frowning ever so slightly. “This,” he repeated, gesturing toward her. The plate between them. The tea itself. “It’s nice, isn’t it? To not... to not always be working.”

“Oh,” she murmured, more relieved than she cared to admit. “Yes,” she agreed, thrilled that she could do so. She did not like to argue with him. To argue with anyone. “It’s easy to just... keep going, isn’t it?” When there was no one to insist on proper meals. On breaks throughout the day. To sit and rest and take a moment simply to... be.

“Precisely,” Braum affirmed with a nod and a sigh. “Is it wrong to want that?”

Wren picked up her cup and took a long sip. “Of course not. Not sure it’s worth offering to teach me to oil an entire fence, though.”

He shrugged. An awkward lurch of his shoulders that was wholly unnatural. And... perhaps learned from her? It was enough to make her shake her head, to laugh a little at the attempt, although she smothered it quickly enough behind her hand. She would not like to be laughed at. “Sorry,” she murmured, eyes still bright, but genuine in her apology.

His eyes were steady on hers for longer than was comfortable. Until he looked away, down at his mug as he shook his head and hunched those same shoulders slightly inward. “It is fine.”

It wasn’t. Not if she’d made him feel self-conscious. She nudged the plate of biscuits closer to him. “No, really. I’m...” She huffed. “Take one, please. Let me buy your forgiveness.”

The corner of his mouth turned upward, and he obliged her, yet the tension did not leave until he’d taken a bite.

Which happened to be half the biscuit.

She hadn’t fed him enough, had she? When he’d worked so hard, and his proportions were... large. Almost burly.

Which she knew because she’d seen him stripped of most of his layers as he washed at the pump. Not watched him, of course. Because that would have been intrusive and indecent. But she’d... noticed.

Her cheeks burned.

She took another sip of tea. Wished she’d sweetened it, just a little.

A comfort when things were difficult. More difficult than they needed to be, perhaps, but...

She glanced at the little pot on the counter. She should have asked how he liked it. Made it up special. Offered to fetch cream and...

A friend would know how he liked his tea.

She rubbed her fingers across the tabletop, feeling strangely shy as she tried to force herself to ask him. She wanted to know him, didn't she? That did not have to be such a vulnerable thing. There were no obligations, no expectations.

Wren almost snorted to herself. There were always those, even between stall-mates. How to behave, how quiet to be. Who got the privilege of packing up first, to make use of the market carts and in what order.

“Should I not be the one to decide how my labour is purchased?” Braum enquired patiently as he took a long pull from his mug. “If I think that tea and biscuits and your company are more than sufficient, can that not be enough?”

She frowned down at the table. “But it isn't fair. To you. Which means... which means you'll ask for something later. Something to make up for it.”

She huffed out a breath. This is why she'd escaped into the house in the first place. Why she wanted to be alone. To be quiet and thoughtful until she could push all the little parts of herself that she hated back into their respective corners of her mind.

But he'd knocked.

And she'd answered.

So he was here, and she wanted him to be. Didn't want him to be.

She swallowed, rubbing at her eyes and trying to sit properly, to make him feel welcome and not... not allow the tension to spread through her body. To coil in her throat and the corners of her eyes, to allow past wrongs and assumptions to be unjustly applied to the man across from her.

Merryweather appeared on the kitchen window ledge. The windows were open, and she had no trouble flitting across the counter and onto the floor.

Then to her favoured cushion on the chair beside Wren.

Wren reached out a hand dazedly, the long strokes down Merryweather's back more habit than active choice.

Merryweather did not mind. Curling and preening into her palm, until she sat, her blue-green eyes staring at Braum across the table.

“I did not take your cushion,” Braum reminded her, and Merryweather blinked slowly in answer. “Your minder would not have let that happen.” He glanced at Wren, and she tried to take a steadying breath. She was safe. Everything was fine.

“I think you have that backward,” she grumbled, still feeling somehow outside herself. But trying to come back. With every stroke down Merry’s back, a little more real, a little more centred. “She minds me.”

A flick of Merryweather’s long tail in agreement, and it was enough to pull the slightest of smiles from Wren’s lips.

“I think Merryweather makes my case for me,” Braum continued after another pause. She could feel his attention flicker between the two of them before he leaned forward ever so slightly. “Leptus do not domesticate easily—if they do at all. Yet she stays for your tea and your biscuits. And she keeps your barn clear of pests in return. Can you not think of me like one of your wild creatures?” His tone suggested he was partly jesting, but there was an undercurrent of entreaty that caused her to frown.

“She cares nothing for tea or for biscuits. Only the cream that I did not think to offer you.”

A lie. She had. She simply hadn’t bothered to fetch more from the springhouse.

“Regardless,” Braum pressed, his right hand coming to rest on the table. “I do not...” He paused, his mouth coming to a firm line. “I will not pretend to know why you are so suspicious of me. Of my intentions. But I can promise you, I only...” She did not begrudge his stumbling speech. The way he scowled down at his mug, the way his hand curled into a fist as he wrestled with his own thoughts.

It was much the same with her, although there was rarely anyone to see it.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” he settled on at last. Forcing his eyes up to meet hers.

She could tell that he meant it.

For the moment.

An excellent liar, if he proved to be one.

But that was the trouble, wasn't it? Wren had known too few people. Did not know when sincerity was feigned. Did not know when a man coaxed and sweetened his words, only to get a woman to yield, to trust and then...

She smiled at him sadly. “I wish that was true.”

For a moment, there was dismay. Then his expression smoothed, and he sat back in his chair, his wings tucked neatly behind his back as he rested both hands upon his mug once more. “Is there...” He cleared his throat. “Is there something I might do to...” A scowl. “Is there something I *have* done to make you believe me false?”

Her fingernail tapped uneasily against the side of her mug. “I do not mean it so personally,” Wren offered. She hoped it was a balm. Knew that it would not be. “I do not mean to be unfair. I... I should like to be your friend, I think. If I knew how to have one. But... experience, you know? It is a more than adequate teacher. And I'd rather not have to learn those lessons again.”

He said nothing for a long while.

“Do you speak of your parents? Of their pairing?”

She despised when people were bold enough at the market to make enquiries. To push for little sordid details. They'd stopped after a time. When the novelty of her presence faded. Most were not even directed to her—instead posed to her mother under the guise of friendliness, their eyes too bright, too interested in the little girl at her feet, with wings that were most assuredly deformed.

Her father hated when she spoke of them in such a way. They were perfect in his eyes, if small. But to her...

The fusion of their kinds had not been a gentle thing. There had been no effortless combination that left Wren all the better for their heritage.

Old resentment flared, and she leaned away from him, biting at her cheek until she was certain she had some measure over her temper.

It was not a wrong assumption.

But she felt a strange defensiveness overwhelm her. For as angry as she had been at him, as bitter as she'd been for a bond that was apparently outside of his control...

She did not tolerate others speaking poorly of him.

Thinking he was awful. That he'd used her mother, that he'd abandoned her. He... hadn't.

And he had.

A tangle of right and wrong, of biology and choice and...

She was not a regret for either of them.

No one else seemed willing to accept that.

Did friends talk about such things?

"I've upset you."

She opened her mouth to deny it. Closed it again. "I don't..." she huffed out a frustrated breath. "People are rarely kind when it comes to my parentage."

"Experience," Braum repeated, and she grimaced.

"Exactly."

He leaned forward, his eyes gentle, and it made her distinctly uncomfortable. "Would it be so terrible to have some new ones?"

Her throat tightened. "It might. If I choose the wrong person to have them with." She tugged harshly at her braid before she remembered not to.

Braum hummed slightly. Made no promises that she could trust him. That he differed from the others she'd known. It was

a relief not to have to listen to such things. Words meant little. Actions however...

“I should like to hear about them,” Braum said instead. “If you would like to tell of them.”

Her eyes narrowed even as some part of her swelled, warming at the offer. She chewed at her lip, considering. “Do you...” she began, then shook her head. “I don’t like gossip going around,” she tried again. “I don’t... If I tell you things, I cannot even tell you how much of a betrayal it would be if I hear anyone else talking of it later and—”

“Wren,” Braum cut in, his voice firm. “I am not like that. Anything you say to me, it remains here. Just with us.” He ducked his head, trying to find her eyes. “Can you believe that?”

She tapped her finger against her mug, warring with herself. “I’d like to,” she admitted quietly. “I’d like... I’d like someone else to know about them. How it really was.”

He reached his hand across the table. And for an all too brief moment, she thought he was going to take hold of her hand. To hold it in his, and...

Was it anticipation she felt, or dread?

She could not tell.

Not until he pulled it back again and there was a ridiculous sting of disappointment that he hadn’t touched her at all.

“I will keep your stories, Wren,” Braum swore to her. “Keep them safe and keep them private. They’ll still be yours.”

Her eyes shouldn’t well. She’d meant it. She would not forgive him if anything she told him spread about to his people. If word got back to the Proctor, or worse, even beyond...

Was it worth the risk?

It shouldn’t be. It was enough that the truth of it was tucked inside her heart. But he was looking at her so sincerely, and she...

She was weak.

She knew that.

It had been proven to her in ways that hurt even now.

“I...”

She hesitated.

He did not sigh. He did not grow impatient with her. Instead, he pushed the biscuit plate closer in her direction. “I’ll start,” he offered. “Give you something to keep first.”

Her fingers itched to curl about her braid.

She took a biscuit. Promised herself she would make more if... if he meant to come back. To sit at her table and coax stories from her.

Is that what friends did?

“You will?”

“Of course,” Braum declared. “Because it would mean you’re curious about me.” He paused. “Are you?”

Her cheeks flushed, and she couldn’t meet his eye. “I suppose,” she hedged, feeling strangely vulnerable to make even that admission. “Mostly how you have so much time to spend here. Why you want to be my friend?” The latter was more a whisper, and she hated how uncertain she sounded.

“As I am sure you are aware,” Braum answered, a hint of a smile caught in his voice. “Trees grow on their own. Unless I have a contract, there is not always something that needs my attention.”

“Oh.”

He took another biscuit of his own. “As for your other query,” she braced herself. “Because I admire you.”

She blinked, not at all expecting that to be his answer.

She did not allow them to dwell there. For her to question what he could possibly find in her to *admire*. Most days felt like a kind of survival. To keep things running, to keep everyone fed and alive and do her best to simply... keep on.

Day after day.

But she tried. And maybe... maybe that counted toward something. He'd said that, hadn't he? That it would not have occurred to his sister to even attempt some of the tasks that were a part of Wren's everyday chores. To learn. To better herself. Her home.

"So," Braum continued. "If you had your choice of confidences to pull from me, which would you like first?"

"I should like to know the vendor that supplies the oil for my fence."

It came unbidden. Before she had even considered her options, what she might ply from him in exchange for talk of her family. Her birth.

And he laughed. A long, rich sound that made her cheeks burn.

While she suppressed a hapless smile of her own.

11. Dry

He'd gone home again. Because that was what he should do. He'd sat, and he'd listened, and he'd pretended that the story she'd shared with him was normal.

Because to her, it was.

Horror had filled him. Coiling in his belly, leaving a bitterness in his mouth as he...

He hurt for her.

She'd looked at him so accusingly by the end.

Waiting for his judgement. For him to rail against her father, to call him a louse and a cad. That he'd been careless.

Braum tried to imagine having a dalliance with another woman.

And what he might have done once... once he'd met Wren.

He wanted to be sick just to think it.

But it hadn't been a dalliance, had it? He'd thought himself beyond the bond. That it was safe to create his family. And he'd been wrong.

Hadn't Braum thought himself much the same?

But he hadn't... he would never have...

He'd taken too long to say anything at all.

She'd picked up their empty cups and the plate full of crumbs and crossed to the sink. Her shoulders too tense and her mouth drawn into a grim line of acceptance.

Because evidently she could fill his silences with plenty of words that he'd never said. Never meant.

Was it any wonder she mistrusted so deeply? She clearly loved her father, but he'd had to leave, regardless. Her mother

had not been welcomed. Not by her people, and not by his. “You can leave now,” she’d said, not turning from her place at the sink. “That’s best.”

He stood. A tangle of too many emotions, some hers, some his. “Wren,” he managed to get out, and she’d turned, brows arched and hand firmly pulling at her braid.

“No, it’s all right. The whole thing is disgusting to you, which means I am too, because obviously I’m the evidence of the whole sordid business. So... please. Just go. Don’t think anything you say will be anything I haven’t heard before.”

Her voice caught.

Her shoulders hunched.

As if... as if he’d landed a blow he’d never—*would* never have made.

“If I wanted to wash up, would you let me?”

Her brow furrowed.

“What?”

He glanced over toward the sink. The setup was similar to the one in his cottage, and it would not be so very difficult, especially once she told him where she kept the cloths to dry them afterward.

“The dishes,” he repeated. “Would that not seem fair? When you made the biscuits and the tea, and I certainly did not do any work for you today.”

He calmed as he spoke. Because... because she needed him to.

He could feel it later. When he was home again. Could rage at every tiny injustice that had been heaped upon her. Make the list of the people that had wronged her and promise himself that they’d never be given such opportunity again.

But for now...

She needed something else.

His calm. His reassurance.

He wanted to touch her. To hold her.

It was easier to ignore those impulses when he was out in the pasture. When he was more than aware of what a long day meant and his need for a proper wash with soap.

But now...

He wanted to grasp her wrist. To pull her to him. To tuck her against him, to feel the tension ease from her body as she leaned into his strength. As he murmured she was precious and that he would be faithful to her, that she never had to fear that this was anything but real...

If she felt the bond as he did, he could.

But she didn't.

Sometimes he caught flickers. Moments when she looked at him as if... as if he was more than just a near-stranger.

But it was not the same. And he could not allow him to pretend that it was, no matter how he longed for it.

"Don't be ridiculous," Wren brushed away his offer as he'd known she would. Why then was it still a disappointment? He had no great love of clearing up his plates when he forced himself to cook his single night-meal. It was a chore and nothing more. And yet at the prospect of doing it for *her*...

Better yet, for *them*...

It held appeal.

Because it meant they had shared another meal. Another hour in each other's company. That the pounding in his heart, the urgency in his pulse to go, to find her, to keep her safe from any that might harm her...

It was quiet.

He could calm.

Could revel in the peace that seemed to now only come when he was here. Staring out at two pastures that were becoming as familiar to him as his own woodlots.

“You’re a guest,” Wren continued, already turning to the kettle to pour warm water over the lot of dishes.

A guest.

It shouldn’t hurt, yet it did.

That was all.

Perhaps a little nearer to a friend than he had been the day before, but even that was wholly inadequate for what he felt for her.

But it was a start. He would cling to that. When he left again. When he coaxed himself away from flying over her dwelling until his shoulders ached, his wings protested. When he climbed back into his bed and pretended he was near her, that everything was well and he could breathe after all.

All lies. The whole of it.

Every night was becoming an agony. It was enough that he almost—*almost*—missed the time before he knew her. When he was content with his profession and his role as mischief-maker with his sister’s children. To long days spent flying amongst his trees, trimming and feeding and checking meticulously for signs of blight.

“And if I told you that guests often did the washing up before returning home? A token of gratitude for the host?”

Her eyes narrowed. She plucked at her wrist, her thumb, and then, inevitably, her braid. “Is that true?” she entreated, her voice too soft, too high. This was not a teasing matter.

He could lie. Could tell her any manner of things in order to coax her into allowing him to care for her.

But she’d spoken truly. She would not forgive him if he spoke of her secrets to anyone. And doubtlessly, she would feel quite the same if she learned that he’d lied about his people’s customs.

He could pretend it was for her own good. Could conjure all sorts of excuses if it allowed him to linger, to relieve some of the little chores that took up the whole of her days.

But he couldn't.

Not if he wanted her trust.

"In some houses, maybe," Braum answered honestly. "Perhaps in this one?" He tried to smile, but he knew her answer already, the rebuff that would come just as certainly as her insistence on visiting his oil vendor.

He'd not given the name.

Instead, he'd insisted that he would escort her the next market day.

She'd wanted to argue. He was well used to the narrowing of her eyes, the sharp intake of breath as her reactions came before she'd even formulated the words to her objection. But he'd leaned forward. Captured her eyes as best as he was able. "If you want to learn," he reminded her as gently as he could. "Then you should be taught as I was. I was not given a slip of paper and vague directions and told to make purchases." He leaned back, satisfied at her chastened expression. "Unless you think yourself a far superior student."

Her cheeks flushed, and she dropped his gaze.

He wished the bond would share her thoughts. That he was gifted more than the few words she'd give to him, and little motions to betray her feelings when she tried to keep them so carefully hidden away.

But it worked in no such mystical way. An imperative. A *knowing*. But her thoughts, her feelings, those were her own. To share or keep secret at will.

He should have said something about her parents. About her. But everything fell short of being enough. There was no comfort he could give that did not also disparage in some way. To say her father was wrong, that he should have waited for his mate as was intended would have meant...

No Wren.

No pastures with her menagerie of half-wild creatures.

But he ached for her. To have been set aside—no matter how she claimed that her father had done nothing of the sort.

He felt for the woman he'd never meet. That had raised his bond-mate and taught her how to survive so well on her own.

There was the craving again. To reach out and touch. To rest his hands upon her shoulders, hunched as they were as she scrubbed at their mugs, ignoring his offer to help.

She would evict him for the presumption.

So he curled his hands inward, forced his jaw to relax. To grab hold of a towel resting upon the counter and reach for the plate she'd placed on the drying rack.

"Guests may dry, surely," he posed, quirking a brow at her open mouth. Always with the arguments.

She huffed. Scrubbed with extra vigour at a mug that needed a rinse and a swipe with the soapy rag at most. "I'm sure your sister would appreciate your help," she grouched. "If she has fledglings to mind, as you say."

"She does," he reaffirmed. What a curious thing she should think he'd lied about. "But she has a mate to help her." He did not miss the way she flinched at the word, and he had to suppress the urge yet again to comfort her. "Our parents also, when they are in town."

She turned her head, swallowing thickly. "They do not live in the city?"

"They do." He walked to the shelf on the wall, nestling the plate amongst the rest of its kind. Was more than aware that Wren had stopped to watch him as he did so. "My father's profession was odd, for our kind. He was orphaned young, and did not much care for his adopters. He decided he liked the sea. Found a place on a ship and began to run the trade routes."

She handed him the mug that had suffered under her abuse, and he did his best to quiet the thrill at her acquiescence. "I did not think..." She swallowed. Grimaced. "I was told that mates could not be parted for so long."

He did not miss the way her lips curled. The way her eyes flashed with something bitter and angry.

He wanted to cup her cheek. To hold her still so he could look deeply and try to work out its source with no words at all.

But instead, he added the mug to the tidy line of hooks fashioned beneath the shelf.

“They couldn’t. He had to give it up when they met. Worked the woodlots until Kessa and I were grown. Now Mam goes with him. They should be back before autumn. She doesn’t much care for the seas come winter.”

He had not meant to talk of his parents, not when his story differed so entirely from her own. There had been sacrifice, yes. The good of the family over his father’s love of the adventure, of salt air and briny seas. He’d tried to instil it in Braum as well, but had failed miserably.

He liked the steadiness of the trees. The work was hard, but the results could be beautiful. More than wood to feed stoves, more than shims for old houses. He could carve. Could craft. Little pieces that scattered through his cottage, reminders of when he’d been young and thought he’d soon be making them *for* someone.

Kessa missed them more. Her home was only a few doors down, and she said the street always felt emptier when they were away.

Then she’d give him that pointed look. That *he* should make use of their childhood residence while they were gone, lest it be overtaken by dust and pesky *fictin* flies.

Which would not happen. Not when their mother always ensured that someone would come in to clean each month, to air it out and make sure it felt welcoming and liveable for their returns.

“Or,” Braum would counter, gaze just as pointed. “You could come to the hovel and wait for them to get back.”

Kessa would roll her eyes. Shove at his shoulder. His cottage was not a hovel, no matter what his sister said about it. The joints were tight, the roof sound. It was small, that was all. Meant more for cooking midday meals and resting during long days rather than a permanent residence.

But he liked it.

Had liked it.

It was getting more difficult to keep his eyes from drifting. To study the space of her home, to imagine what it might be to live here with her. To be welcomed inside, for her to smile when he returned from the lots, for him to have a chair at the table along with Merryweather and Wren.

He folded the towel neatly and placed it back on the counter.

Then took a measured step backward.

He was presumptuous to the extreme.

She barely tolerated his presence here. He hadn't forced, but he'd been persistent. It had been rewarded with more of her time, but he still doubted that she wanted him there at all.

Which hurt. More than the aching muscles when he was still young and learning his trade.

"Thank you," he managed, realising that was the most important thing he wished to convey. There was nothing else he could say about her past, her history, that would not also hurt her in some unintended manner.

"For what?" Wren peered about the kitchen, as if the answer might be on the counter along with the towel.

Always so uncertain. So nervous. It might have been endearing, did not so frequently leave him with a deep sadness for why it was so.

"For trusting me well enough. For telling me about your parentage. It should always have come from you. I am sorry that any of it came from... others."

She grimaced. "Who told you about it?"

He rubbed at the back of his neck and took another step backward. "I was not privy to his name. He... approached me, as I was assessing the damage to your stall."

She snorted. "That's answer enough, then."

Was it?

He'd seemed pleased to share what gossip he could, but Wren made it seem as if his nature was notorious.

"Still," Braum pressed. "I should not have listened. Those were private matters, and I am sorry they were spread about."

She moved her shoulders in that dismissive gesture, as if his apology was unwarranted. "He's persistent. I don't blame you for it, so don't trouble yourself."

Her fingers tangled together as if uncertain what to do with them now that the dishes were washed and their tea was shared and over.

He should excuse himself. Get some of his own work done.

That would be the kindly thing to do rather than let her fuss and worry.

Another step back.

Another tug through his entire being that he was a fool, that her feelings did not matter so much after all, and she'd realise she wanted him if only he touched her...

He turned. Closed his eyes.

They were only instincts. Imperatives, to be sure, but they did not rule him. Not completely.

Nothing in her posture suggested she would be receptive to his touch. Nothing indicated she would find it anything but alarming.

His head was swimming, and he rubbed at his forehead, willing his impulses to die down. To quiet. To let him think, to reason, to put her first.

Always that.

"I should go," he got out. Hated it. Hated saying it, hated meaning it.

"Right." He could picture her tugging at her braid, although he did not open his eyes to see it for himself. "But... market day. You'll... you'll show me where to get the oil."

Even now, her tone made it clear that she doubted him. She fully expected that he wouldn't come. That she would be left to find it for herself—or worse, that he might sneak onto her land while she was out and do it without her.

The market was not so very far away. He could be patient. Be content with his nightly watches.

A lie, and he knew it.

“The market,” he repeated. “I will find you.”

She swallowed, and he'd looked. Wanted to see if she believed him. “Wherever the Proctor sticks me until my stall is fixed.”

“I will find you,” he repeated. A promise in ways he knew she did not understand.

He'd left.

He'd said a goodbye to Merryweather as well, although she'd curled onto her cushion at the table and was sleeping soundly. But it felt right to acknowledge her. To acknowledge her importance to Wren.

She was a member of her household. The same as Thorn and his flock.

And Braum had spoken truly. If that's all she could offer him—a place in her barn, what few moments of her time and attention that she could spare...

He would take it.

Gladly.

He would not be greedy.

He'd never blamed her for her reticence. And hearing of her father, of her poor mother and the pain that even now lingered so potently in Wren's every word, her posture...

Her guardedness was indeed born of experience.

Her mistrust had been fuelled by constant disappointment.

She mocked the prospect of attending a fete because she resented the very premise of it.

And he could not fault her.

He'd grown up in the quiet assurance that his mother and father were bound. That he might speak wistfully of the sea. But then she'd huff and kiss him and it would fade into a grin. Then he would claim he only spoke of it at all so that she'd have to remind him of how little he'd lost compared to his gains.

He'd learned afterward that there was truth in it. When he was grown and that wistfulness turned to plans. To commitments. Set aside for a time, postponed during the raising of their children, but hardly forgotten.

Wren's memories were of fracture. Of hardship and uncertainty.

He ached.

And no amount of rubbing at the back of his neck, even at his chest, seemed to abate it.

They'd agreed upon an uneasy sort of friendship, yet even that felt perilous. How long could he pretend he did not feel as he did? How long before she'd push, and he'd *answer*, and he'd...

Lose her.

There was the panicky fluttering inside of his chest. The urgency that demanded he turn back. Remind himself that she was there and everything was fine, and then he could breathe again.

Braum grit his teeth.

Forced himself home.

Back to barred doors and sleepless nights. He'd neglected his woodlots, and he'd put that to rights. He would pretend that they mattered, and that he was diligent, and that he would not spend most of the night circling high above the home that mattered far more.

He'd chop wood.

And he'd promise himself that it was for her. So she'd be warm in the winter, with her *leptus* for company in front of the kitchen hearth.

He did not know if she was used to chopping it herself. He cringed at the idea, grew even more resentful if her father did not at least attend that particular chore on her behalf. She was strong, and he did not doubt her. But the instinct was there, regardless. That she was smaller, slighter, that she should not have to trouble herself with the tedium, the *danger* that came from an axe poorly maintained.

Not that he'd paid attention to that hatchet of hers. That there was rust upon one screw, and it looked as if it had not been honed for an age.

He swallowed.

Landed before his cottage.

He'd chop wood. Until he couldn't anymore.

For her. With tools that were properly cared for, because he had time and knowledge to do so. And maybe he'd show her how to attend to hers, then tend to them himself when surely one of her animals would require her attention and...

He was supposed to wait until market day to see her.

He needed to wait.

Give her time to rest. To maybe... maybe think of him. To decide that she liked him. Maybe... maybe even missed him.

If only for the help he could give her.

Kessa would grow disgruntled at that. Would insist that mates were more, that *he* was more, and couldn't Wren see that?

But he thought of her expression as she spoke of her parents. The sadness that seemed so deeply a part of her that he could not quite imagine her smiling and carefree.

But... maybe someday.

He could hope, couldn't he? When he was here, away from her. He could let his thoughts linger where it was dangerous.

Of what might have been, what... what could.

If he had restraint enough to keep from frightening her.

A friend could wait for market day.

A mate...

He groaned.

Picked up his axe.

And set to work.

12. Mate

Wren didn't know if Braum would insist on walking with her.

Not that she hoped he would.

But she... wondered.

And even if he did, he likely hadn't the slightest idea how long it would take her without the aid of wings. He wouldn't know to be there when the second sun was only a smudge. Wouldn't know about avoiding breakfast or of Merryweather's disgruntlement.

And why should he?

If she dressed with a little more care, if she stared at the stove and contemplated making a double portion of a meal she did not usually eat, then...

It was only because they hadn't been clear. She'd see him today; that was all she knew. That was all she should need to know. The knot in her stomach was her usual anxiousness on market day. Worsened, now that she did not even know if her usual stall had been repaired or if she would need to find the Proctor to make enquiries.

That thought alone was enough to banish any thought of lighting the stove and fixing even the most meagre of breakfasts.

She laced her boots. Straightened her overalls.

Her bag had been packed the night before—twice over.

Her coins were in her pocket, buttoned closed. She didn't like bringing so many, but if fence oil was as precious as the ones for lamps and cooking, then she would need them.

Another twist of her stomach, and she gave a sleepy Merryweather a long stroke. "We need our fence," Wren

reminded her. “If we take care of it now, we’ll have longer before we need to fix it again.”

Merryweather extended a paw, then closed her eyes and waited for Wren to leave her be.

She sighed.

Leaned down and placed a kiss on the top of her head, then hurried away before Merry could give any form of protest.

She did not always care for kisses, but for reasons she couldn’t name, Wren needed the extra bit of affection.

There was no Braum waiting outside. Not that she expected there to be. And it would make the walk more peaceful.

Should have.

Except she was going to market, and only the return journeys were pleasant ones.

It had been exciting when she was small and caught first sight of the carts coming in from other places. She’d ask about them, if they might visit them one day, and her mother looked at her with such horror at the prospect that she’d never made the enquiry again.

She’d tried to smooth it over, her hand tucked around Wren’s much smaller one. “They’re far, little bird. And we like our home, don’t we?”

Home was everything. Home was where Da came back.

“Course,” she’d mumbled, still feeling abashed that she’d asked at all.

And she must have looked wretched enough, because then she was picked up and settled on her hip, which wasn’t very good at all because Mama had said she had to be big today and walk even though it was far, but her pack was heavy with goods and they needed coins if she wanted any treats.

Braum could have travelled.

The thought came unbidden, slipping in as she tried to picture him on one of the great ships. She’d stopped going to the sea—it only made a long walk even longer. The city itself

was built into a cliff face. A tangle of towers and streets that must have taken decades to carve into the white stones.

Or not. She knew nothing of masonry. Maybe with good tools and strong arms, it would take little time at all. She wondered at the purpose of some of the bolts and bits of metal that protruded from the walls. Rusted and forgotten, as no one had taken the time to see to their full removal.

She joined the long line of merchants. It was slow if she kept to the side with the carts, but to keep leftmost often meant being jostled by those impatient to be at their stalls and making early sales.

Then there were those flying overhead. Some out beyond the city itself to attend to their respective professions. Crops and quarries. Whatever was too difficult or too expensive to ship from beyond the sea.

She followed the throng as patiently as she could. Kept from glancing too often overhead to see if Braum would know to look for her here.

She was growing frustrated. By herself more than the people. She did not like feeling unsettled, did not like that her thoughts turned so often to him. She would consider Firen her friend, if by the sheer stubbornness of the younger woman than any particular choice on Wren's part. But she did not fill Wren's mind each day.

She sighed.

Huffed.

Abandoned the carts and joined in the other pedestrians.

If she was bolder, she might have pushed out her wings as far as they would go. Would have taken up as much space as she could so that others would feel less inclined to intrude upon her person.

But she didn't.

And instead she kept her pack close, kept her other hand over the buttoned pocket with her coins, just in case.

Thieves were punished harshly within the city—everyone knew that. But that made the ones that dared all the more cunning in their attempts.

For all the prestige that came from being toward the centre of the city stalls, she had always secretly been glad for her little stall on the outskirts. While the rest of the throng carried onward, she could step aside, watching with a lump in her throat and an uneasy tug at her belly that her stall remained little more than debris.

The damage was worse than she remembered. While the logs had long since been taken away, the stalls that had once been so familiar were now anything but. The streets had been swept, tidy and orderly as usual, but little had been done to fix anything else.

How would anyone find her? Assuming they allowed her use of anything else?

Wren moved closer to the broken stall. The smashed baskets had been removed, the cobbles free of splinters. She did not dare go beneath the covering; the supports looked all too ready to collapse at the slightest breeze.

“Would you be... Wren?”

She turned, her heart already beating a little faster as she braced herself to make the long trek back home.

Not the Proctor. One of his underlings, with a list in hand and a weary look on his face. He wore the long robes, but he had only a single tassel about his waist, so he must have been fairly new to the position.

“Yes?” she confirmed, moving a step toward him because she would not be rude. Would not give even one of his standing even the slightest trouble.

He glanced over her person, and there was something at the corner of his mouth that suggested he found her lacking. “Your arrival is rather late. You’re the last on my list.”

She closed her eyes, but only briefly. And if her hand reached to the end of her braid for comfort, then... that simply couldn’t be helped.

“I’ve rather far to go,” she answered as apologetically as she was able.

He hummed. Picked a speck of debris from his robe. “You’ve been reassigned.”

She swallowed. “For how long? If... if you don’t mind me asking.”

He did. It was in every bit of his posture as he reordered the papers in his hands, presumably looking for where she was meant to go. “There is a dispute over who should pay for the repairs. Until it is sorted, you and your neighbours will have to make do with new locations.”

She chewed at the inside of her cheek. “And our customers, they will know where to find us?”

A weary breath. A tired roll of his eyes. “I will not remain here the entire day, if that is what you are expecting. A placard should suffice, would you not agree?”

Her insides squirmed with old worries. Twisted smiles and a firm grip on her hand as her mother would placate and smooth and make apologies for things that were far outside her control.

Don’t make trouble.

How many times had she heard that?

She was tired. So weary of it all that she very nearly wanted to tell him that a placard would not be necessary since she would no longer be making use of this market or this city and...

She closed her eyes. Tugged fiercely at her braid just the once.

Had it been so hard for her mother? She could not remember. There had been no ranting on the journey home, no flash of eyes and pursed lips to suggest that she resented her treatment.

Her mother had been a gentle soul. Eager to please, with a hatred for any sort of tension—or the conflict that followed.

Wren however...

“My apologies,” she bit out, reaching for calm. Finding only a tangle of too many emotions that likely had nothing to do with this man at all. “I—”

“Wren!”

Wren did not grimace, but she felt a moment’s regret at hearing Firen’s exuberant call. No matter what Firen seemed to think, nothing but embarrassment trickled through Wren at having her business with the under-proctor witnessed by anyone else.

“I was worried I wouldn’t be able to find you. They banished Old Henley almost to the outer gates, although personally, I think they’ve been looking for an excuse to do that for ages.” Firen turned, her eyes narrowing as she landed and tilted her head toward the official. “Did you? Banish him, I mean. On purpose.” She peered at his list, and he pulled it away with an indignant sniff. “Wren should be somewhere nice. Maybe close to me.”

She smiled at him. As if charms and warmth would mean anything at all.

They’d put her where they put her, and they’d receive no argument.

She reached for Firen’s arm and squeezed it lightly. “It is fine,” she urged, hoping to quiet her...

Her friend.

She frowned softly. Tried to imagine Firen at her home, at her table. Beneath the tree by the pump. She could, but just barely. The images wanted to contort, wanted the guest to be taller. Bulkier. A quiet presence rather than Firen’s fearless optimism.

“It might be,” Firen agreed. “Depending on where he put you.” Her smile broadened. “Were you going to escort us?”

A huff. Perhaps even an eye roll, except Wren couldn’t bring herself to look.

“Never mind,” Firen added with a hint of impatience souring her tone in ways that were quite unfamiliar. “I’d rather have no escort at all than a rude one. What’s her stall number?”

Wren opened her mouth, although she did not know what she meant to say. Chide Firen? Apologise for something she agreed with but dared not say herself?

“Eight-seven,” the under-proctor bit out, clearly offended. Wren’s stomach churned, and she feared what a visit from the actual Proctor might mean later, and her hand retreated from Firen’s arm. “As reflected by the placard.”

Firen hummed lightly. “Much obliged, I’m sure.”

She took Wren’s arm, and Wren very nearly resisted, frustrated beyond reason. “Firen, I do not know their numbers,” she whispered lowly, afraid it came out more of a hiss.

Firen blinked at her. “I do,” she answered calmly, her head tilting ever so slightly. “Are you angry with me? He was terribly rude.”

Wren’s heart was racing, and she tugged harshly at her braid as she fought for calm. “He was,” she agreed. “But I cannot afford to make the officials angry.”

Firen sighed, her eyes flitting upward briefly. “You don’t have to be so afraid of them,” she insisted, her voice gentle. “You pay your yearlies, same as everyone else. You should be treated fairly.”

Wren adjusted her pack, trying to keep hold of her temper. “Firen,” Wren managed, her voice tight and not at all friendly. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but it’s different for me. Always has been. It wouldn’t have cost me anything to let him be curt and think me foolish.”

They were moving, at least. Further up the street, which should have felt like a privileged upgrade in position, but only added to the feeling of being too penned in.

Firen stooped just a little so she could catch Wren’s eye. “It wouldn’t?”

Wren huffed. Walked a little faster, even though she did not know the exact direction. “Wren, I’m sorry. I interfered. How can I mend things?”

She wanted to tell her to go back and make sure that the official knew Wren did not approve of his treatment. She wanted to tell her to point out which stall was to be hers and leave her be, that they could talk again next market and hopefully things would be better for it.

But she took a deep breath, her hands tight upon the straps of her pack. “Just... show me the way, please.”

She was not unaware of the anxious glances Firen gave her. And as they manoeuvred the crowds as stall-keepers mixed with early patrons, some of the anger seeped out of her.

Firen cared. About... about her.

Cared how she was treated. Perhaps she had stopped chiding their neighbours when they were curt or gossiped openly about her, but Wren had no desire to punish her for being kind. If there were consequences after then she would deal with them. Perhaps... perhaps even be forced to ask her father to intervene on her behalf.

Her stomach gave another lurch at the thought.

“You seem different,” Firen observed, after another of her less than covert glances. “Are you all right?”

Wren shrugged, the motion stunted by her pack. “Tired. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

Which was true. Every movement from Merryweather had been waking her, every creak through the house as the breeze caught the open windows. It made early mornings even harder, and by afternoon she longed for a nap.

She worked instead.

A fresh coat of whitewash on the south wall of the house. A bright coat of green trim around the stable door simply because.

All old. She couldn’t recall purchasing the powders herself. Which meant the pouches had been selected by her mother, the

colours her own choices. Perhaps if she'd more coins, ones not mentally allocated for special fence oil, she could have made her own choices. Perhaps the house would look cheerier with a tinge more yellow. If the windows boasted new curtains for the winter, something thicker to draw over the shutters and keep out more of the cold.

Not that she minded the chill so much. Not when there was a fire in the hearth and the loft drew most of the heat, and Merryweather was cuddled up against her throughout the night.

"I know you don't care much for Old Henley, but he has draughts that can help with sleep. I could purchase one for you, if you'd rather not have dealings with him directly." Firen gave her a little smile. "I can't front the coin, though. I spent all of mine on fabric for a new outfit for next fete."

"Firen," Wren groaned.

"I know, I know," Firen insisted, her hands outstretched as if to ward off Wren's arguments. "You can't force it. But... well, won't I make the odds better if I make sure he notices me in something particularly pretty?" She huffed out a breath. "I'm lonely. I don't mind who knows it." Wren believed her. There was no shame in her voice. A simple admission without fear of censure.

Yet still, Wren's stomach clenched. "Just be careful," Wren cautioned. "Don't..." she didn't finish. Because she remembered why they were different. Firen did not have to fear anything at all. She had two parents that would oversee the bonding. She was full-blooded and would know her mate just as well as he knew her.

She tugged at her breath. "Don't make it anything too garish. You wouldn't want to frighten him first thing."

Firen nodded adamantly. "Course not. That can come later." She spoke of it all so easily. She admitted freely to the want of it, and there was not a hint of fear in her eyes. It was love and family and it couldn't possibly lead to pain and betrayal and...

Wren's smile was forced, and she braced herself for Firen to issue yet another invitation to the fete. She should want to go, after all. Should long to glance across the room Wren had imagined with a wistful sort of longing in her girlhood, a knot of dread come womanhood.

"Here we are," Firen said instead. "I'm still at my usual spot, but..." she glanced about her. "Well. Maybe don't get too friendly with these folks." Her smile was brittle, and Wren chewed at her lip as she saw her new neighbours give withering glances from their stalls. Older. Full of *knowing*.

And on the other, someone from foreign parts. The words she could make out were not at all familiar, so beyond nods of greeting, there would not be much other means of friendliness.

The stall was much the same as her previous one. Except that it was all a little wrong. She couldn't picture her mother seated on the stool. Couldn't make out the tiny marks her younger self had etched into the counter with her thumb. Temporary, she reminded herself firmly. And then...

She swallowed.

The counter had been destroyed. She might be situated in her old spot, but it would still be *new*. Would still be change.

Was she supposed to like change? It had never treated her kindly, so she held no particular fondness for its prospect.

"You're not far," Wren reminded Firen, forcing herself to smile. She felt guilty at how few times she was the one to approach her. To come to her stall and chatter about little nothings that made up an entire life. "Perhaps you can show me that fabric."

Firen brightened visibly. "You will have to tell me you like it, even if you do not. I shall be crushed otherwise."

This time there was more warmth as she looked at her... her friend. The word settled. Fitted nicely, in ways that made her feel even more guilty that she hadn't attributed it before. "You would look beautiful in anything," Wren assured her honestly. Her hair was pale, as were her eyes. Her wings were a striking

white. Marks of pale lavender curled about her neatly pointed ears, flattering and lovely.

She needed no comely attire to attract her bond-mate.

“You’re too kind, Wren. Really.” She brought her hand to Wren’s arm and squeezed lightly. “Now, do you need help setting up? Or should I make Mama happy and get back to the stall and pretend I’m helping today?”

Wren untied the straps of her pack and eased them from her shoulders. Despite their padding, they’d rubbed at her wings painfully, and she missed the salve her mother would rub on them once home again. “You know there isn’t much to sell,” Wren reminded her, feeling a little self-conscious as usual.

Firen’s family specialised in metal-ware, and their stall glittered in the suns and some dangled from delicate chains that tinkled in the winds. Ornaments, she’d said. To hang in trees and from eaves and to catch the breezes. Simply to be pretty.

Wren had wanted one desperately when first she’d seen them, but the price was high, even after one of Firen’s discounts that would surely make her father pale to hear of the amount.

“Much to the woe of every fledgling’s mother,” Firen reassured her with a smile. Bright as ever. Wren felt another curl of envy, and she hated it. Wished she could appreciate Firen’s way, her manner, without turning a critical eye upon herself in return.

Wren suppressed the urge to fidget. “I can only do so much on my own.” She shouldn’t feel self-conscious. Firen hadn’t meant anything but a compliment to how well favoured her medicines were, but still. She fretted over her use of time more than she cared to admit. If she took too long for leisure, if she spent too long working and ended up pushing her muscles past the point of fatigue into actual pain...

Something was always wrong. And she doubted anyone judged her quite as fiercely as she judged herself.

“Oh, Wren, I didn’t mean...”

Wren shook her head, pulling out some of the neatly wrapped bundles from her pack. Should she open the stall? Or perhaps it would be foolish since there would be no one to mind it once—*if*—Braum came to take her to the oil-vendor.

“You are exceptionally difficult to find.”

She chewed at her lip, feeling strangely relieved at the timbre that was becoming a little too familiar to her.

“There was a plaque,” she defended, hoping her actual customers did not complain in the same manner.

“First, you were not at home,” Braum observed, as if reciting a list. “Then your stall, which should have been *fixed* by now, was woefully absent. And the plaque was placed upside down.” He huffed out a breath, and she glanced at him worriedly, trying to see if he was truly angry by the situation.

Only to be distracted by the way Firen’s neck jerked back and forth between the two of them, her mouth slightly open.

“*Wren*,” she blurted out with all the accusation of one truly hurt. “Why did you not tell me?”

Wren’s brow furrowed, and Braum took a sudden step backward. “Tell you what?”

She gestured sharply between the two of them, her upset morphing into something akin to excitement. “He was at your *home*.”

Wren tugged at her braid. “Well, that was... that was because we had not been clear enough about the details for today. And I doubt he knows how long it takes me to walk here.” She glanced at Braum, saw the tight line of his mouth and the hard look in his eyes and wished...

She was not entirely sure what she wished. That Firen had left already? Although she felt horribly guilty for even entertaining the notion.

Wren huffed, trying to begin again with all the manners her mother had instilled in her. “Firen, this is Braum. He was the woodcutter that had the... they were his logs that...” She chewed at the inside of her cheek, hating the way she was

stumbling over her words, how Firen was still looking at her as if she was keeping the most important part from her. “He’s been working on my fence. To make up for the incident with my stall. We were going to find oil today.”

Firen’s eyes narrowed. “For the fence.”

“Exactly.”

Firen looked to Braum instead, her eyes drifting over him from top to bottom. He did not falter, gave no indication that he was troubled by her perusal, although he took no pleasure in it either. “Wren,” she added gently. “As noble as that is, men do not do that for women that aren’t their mates. Not unless they’re paid handsomely for their time.”

Braum opened his mouth, but Wren answered first. “Firen! That’s not... That isn’t it at all.”

Firen looked back at her with something too near to pity. And friend or otherwise, Wren did not like feeling small and foolish, and her eyes burned and her heart beat too quickly as her hands curled into fists. “He’s my friend, that’s all. Just as you are. He’s helping me because he wanted to do something nice for me because I’d been hurt with his product, and I... I think that’s rather nice of him. You don’t need to twist it into something... something horrid when...” Words failed her. Her throat grew too tight and her breath too short, and this stall was smaller than her last and she wanted them both to leave. To huddle and hide and wait until she felt like herself again.

“That’s enough,” Braum cut in, taking a step nearer. “Firen. It has been an honour to meet you, but perhaps we might become better acquainted at another time. We’ve an errand to run, before Wren must attend her stall.”

Braum’s voice was tight, yet firm. And Wren could not bring herself to look at Firen, to see if there would be more argument about... about friends and mates and...

She tugged hard at her braid, and Firen sighed deeply. “I’ll check on you later, all right? I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Wren wanted to say that it was fine. That she was fine.

But her words were still locked behind an unwilling throat, and she could only shrug and nod in a semblance of acknowledgement.

And Firen went.

She waited. For him to argue the matter. To assure her that Firen was wrong and the entire thing was preposterous. She wanted that. Needed it.

And yet it did not come.

Instead, there was a weary sigh as he came closer to her stall. “Would you like to ask me something, Wren?” he asked, his voice quiet. Resigned.

Did she?

A whimper caught in her throat. About titles and promises and trust that... that in someone else, in Firen, meant safety and home and family.

And for her...

Meant dread. Humiliation.

Did she want to ask him if it was true? If his friendship was all a ruse. Because... because men didn't do the things he'd done without coins. Not for a woman they did not want... want *that* from.

How many times had she asked him to be plain with her? To tell her what he wanted, so she didn't have to wonder, didn't have to doubt him.

Why wasn't he denying it all?

She made herself look at him. To meet his eye and pretend that she was not so near to panicking. She could ask him. Make him say the words.

But it did not make them true.

There were no stools in the stall. And the cobbles needed sweeping—something she might have done if this was to be permanent, if she wanted it to feel a little bit like home. But she felt blind to it all as she sank down against the far wall of

the stall itself, wishing he'd go away for a while until she could pretend she was all right.

Until she could bring herself to ask after the oil-vendor, and forget Firen's insinuations altogether.

"Wren," Braum entreated, and she closed her eyes, tugging at her braid until it hurt.

He was moving. She couldn't see it, but she could *feel* it. Feel him coming around the corner of the counter, situating himself in a space that suddenly felt small and inadequate for two.

Because it was. This was meant for her, a place to do her business and she did not need Firen's invitations to the fetes, or Braum's chastisement about leaving home quickly for his escort and...

She wasn't going to cry.

She wasn't.

"Nothing has changed," Braum reminded her. "Nothing at all."

Was that an admission? Of either the lies he intended to tell or... or the truth that... that was supposed to mean something to her.

Was supposed to warm her. Make her feel safe and wanted and hopeful for a future she was meant to want.

A proper life within the city walls. With no more Thorn and his grimbles. Where hesper were stabled and kept in herds and she might visit them now and again but...

No more Merryweather, either. She would not like to be kept away from her fields and her hunting even... even if it meant staying with Wren.

A mate would expect that. To live where he was settled. To take her away from what she loved most because... it was her duty, wasn't it? To yield, to pretend she felt things that... that she *didn't*.

He reached out. Touched the hand curled about her braid, and she flinched.

And he flinched in return, withdrawing just as quickly.

He was crouched before her. His face etched with concern, and she couldn't breathe. Couldn't...

She made a choked sound and broke away from the stall. From him.

She'd forgotten her pack, but she could not bring herself to care. She needed somewhere quiet, somewhere hers, and the streets were bustling with the beginning of business and she was supposed to be doing that too. Laying out her wares, making her coins.

Shopping for oil. For a fence he should not have built. Not for his friend.

She ducked beneath an arch, away from the press of people.

That, too, needed sweeping. It was a simple alleyway connecting the main street with one of the residential roads. She laughed hoarsely, realising that her father might live just there and she would have no idea. Settled with his mate. His true-born children.

A few filtered through the alley, so she huddled to the one wall. Forced herself to take deep breaths. She was fine. She would go home. Bolt her door and... and wait.

For what exactly, she did not know.

To feel better. To forget today had ever happened. For her father to come and make her feel like the fledgling she had been. For him to fuss and make her some tea and try to coax her—no matter how unsuccessfully—to tell him what was wrong.

“Wren, let me take you home. I... I will cover your wages. Just... please.”

She almost laughed. Because he'd followed her. Because he offered that so easily. Was he truly so wealthy? Or did he simply feel guilty for another wasted day at the market?

He sounded pained. As if her rejection hurt in some way, and that bothered her in some hidden place. One that was crowded out by the emotions she couldn't control, of memories and feelings that were nearly dizzying.

She didn't laugh. But she could hardly bring herself to respond to him, either.

He didn't touch her. But he stepped closer when another stream of people cut through the alley. She could feel them looking, or perhaps the attention was only imagined, which made the fluttering urge to flee grow all the more. "Braum," she managed to get out, tugging at her braid, her wings twitching for a flight they could not make. "Just..."

He stepped closer still, his wing stretching outward.

Shielding her. From onlookers?

It should make her feel caged, as she had in the stall. But her gratitude won out, and she shut her eyes again as she faced the stone wall of the alley. It was cold here. The overhangs were too close together, their shade blocking too much of the suns.

"Just what?" Braum entreated, his voice tight. Low. "Let me help you," he urged, an entreaty that was becoming far too familiar coming from him.

Her pack was over his shoulder. She recognised that numbly as she peeled open one eye and tried to appraise him critically.

It shouldn't matter that his expression was drawn. It shouldn't matter that he looked at her with such concern.

She'd been a fool, yet again. Allowed him to coax her with talk of friendship, of favours and help and let her believe it was all *normal*.

But it wasn't, was it?

"What do you want from me?" she asked him, and knew it was not the first time.

His eyes grew sad, and she could not abide that. Not the twisting guilt that she'd somehow put it there, nor how it bordered almost on pity. Why shouldn't he pity her, when she

fell near to pieces at such a commonplace subject as *bond-mates*?

She shivered.

Tugged harder at her hair.

Until his fingers curled about hers. Halting. Entreating. “No more than you are willing to give.”

A desperate sort of laugh burst from her throat. And she turned and placed her forearm against the stone of the wall and buried her head there because there was no escaping after all. No quiet moments, not until she could extract herself from the city she tried so desperately not to hate.

It had done no wrong. It was just stone and towers and families and trade and those were good things, weren't they?

He touched her back. The place between her wings that itched so often, and she did not allow herself to shove away from him. Not when... not when there was a modicum of comfort in it, gently pulling her back from the despair that threatened to take hold. “Let me take you home,” he asked again. “Please.”

Her breath caught.

“I'll be fine.”

The words came out, but they sounded terribly far away. As if spoken from someone else entirely rather than her own lips. She didn't believe them, not in the least. She would go, that much was certain. Twine back through paths and trails and shed this day as she went.

He sighed deeply. His hand fell away. “I do not believe you.”

She shrugged. Because... he was right not to. She did not trust herself, but she knew the way home. And sheer stubbornness could get her far, even in her current state. “As is your right.”

“Wren,” he tried again, this time more firmly. And this time, he touched her shoulders. Pulling gently until she turned, until he could see the reddened skin, the wet eyes, and she wiped at

them in frustration, more resentful than she cared to admit. These were private wounds. He might have coaxed her to share about her parents, but that did not entitle him to the rest of it. The rest of *her*. “Let me help you.”

Her hands fell away. And her jaw set and if there was a catch to her voice, then... that could not be helped. “*Why?*” She couldn’t keep his eye, but she tried. “No more talk of friendships or cut up legs or any of the rest of it. Just... was Firen right?”

He dared to allow his thumbs to move ever so slightly. Gentle. Soothing. As if... as if she was some wild creature that was too filled with instinct to recognise there was no danger at all. Hadn’t she done much the same for Merryweather when first she’d come? With Thorn?

She was no creature. She was a woman grown and he...

He wasn’t answering her.

Which was simply intolerable.

“I am going home,” she informed him. “I realise I cannot avoid you if you intend to follow, but please do not.”

She reached for her bag because it was hers and he had no right to it, but he held it fast. “I do not wish to lie to you,” Braum insisted. “I never have. Everything I have told you has been completely truthful.”

She gave her pack another tug. “All right. But I asked for your motives on more than one occasion. You had the—” She stopped short of saying *audacity*, but it was a near thing. “You pretended to be offended. When you knew...”

He grimaced. “Your friend... Firen, was it? Just because she said friendships between...” he hesitated, and she wondered what he’d first meant to say. “Between our sexes is uncommon does not make them impossible.”

Her mouth twisted, and this time she pulled with enough force to dislodge her pack from his shoulder. She would leave it behind if she must, but there was an impotent sort of rage that he meant to keep her with him so long as he held it hostage.

He released it with a sad sort of resignation that only fuelled her ire more. It was surrendered—she had not retrieved it by her own accord.

She was being ridiculous. Foolhardy and too quick with her conclusions. But she trusted Firen. It was a sharp sort of realisation. A thrust of truth that stole her breath and twisted her insides because... because it meant she had been too quick to trust *him*.

And she had.

With his quiet persistence. His calm demeanour and his assurances that he would demand nothing of her.

She did not bother tying the straps. It was an awkward shuffle to secure it without a second person to hold it steady over her wings, and she would not subject herself to the humiliation of Braum bearing witness to her struggle.

It shouldn't matter, yet the burn of her cheeks insisted it did.

She clutched it to her chest and couldn't bring herself to look at him. She felt raw. Open. As if everyone knew more than she did. As if she'd been left to bumble her way through customs and a people that she didn't understand. And it made her resent her father again. For all that he hadn't taught her because... why would it have mattered? Her life was set apart. And he liked to look at her as if she was the fledgling on his knee and not... not a woman that could feel small and foolish and be lied to again and again, and...

Wren swiped at her eyes. Forced herself to turn back slightly. "Do you know what it's like to be made a fool of? Because you *stupidly* believe what someone says? And you'll get the privilege of carrying it with you for always while they..." she shivered. Stopped before she cried in earnest.

He looked stricken. Hurt. And she'd done that. It should have brought some satisfaction, surely. But instead she felt a prickle of uncertainty, a desire to mend things when she knew better than that, didn't she? She could not afford to be vulnerable. To be taken in.

Not again.

Sweet words were only that. And if she craved them, longed for more, then...

That was her burden. Her shame.

“Just leave me be,” she begged him. “I don’t... I can’t...” Her throat burned. Her eyes too.

If there were others milling about, perhaps even watching them, she could not say. Because suddenly he reached for her. Gripped her shoulders tightly and—had she ever noticed how large his hands were before? “This is more than your parents, yes? This is more than being left when your father found his mate.”

The fluttery bit of panic was rising in her chest, and she squirmed. “Leave it *be*.”

If she had not been holding her pack so tightly, she might have reached for him in turn. To show the earnestness of her plea with... touch.

A whimper caught in her throat and she closed her eyes, the impulse curdling with her panic and making her feel ill.

“Please,” she gave one more attempt, feeling suddenly weak and worn, and the trudge home was an undesirable feat in her present state.

It was almost enough that she wished she knew where her father lived. That she could beg a room, just for a little while. She would talk to no one, bother none of his family if just... if she could...

“Let me fly you home. Get you settled. And then yes, I will... I will let you rest and I’ll ask nothing more of you. Is that a fair accord? Please do not ask me to let you make that trek alone. I... I cannot.”

His tone was steeped in apology. As if it was a failing on his part that he could not do precisely as she’d asked of him. Maybe it was.

But to fly her home? To carry her as if... as if she was the little girl with useless wings that would borrow her father’s

now and again. To twirl above their home while she squealed and laughed in delight. Tasting what might have been.

There was no excitement now. Just a resigned sort of acceptance that, despite how she wanted to deny it, she needed his help. She couldn't bring herself to say the words aloud, but she nodded, and she found it cost much of her own pride to do even that.

Braum sighed. A deep sound of relief as he made sure her pack was tucked safely in her arms and then stooped to bring his arm behind her knees. Then the lift, when the panic finally bloomed because the ground was no longer beneath her. And perhaps that felt natural to his kind, but to her it felt like the last vestige of control was suddenly gone.

And she cried.

He glanced down sharply, and his mouth opened, doubtless to ask her yet more questions. And she couldn't bear that. Not when she wasn't sure what would come tumbling out of her mouth.

“Just take me home. I... I need to be home.”

His ascent was gentle, and nothing suggested he found her weight burdensome. She felt it, though. That she was silly and more trouble than she was worth, and why could she not simply get a hold of herself?

She couldn't enjoy the flight itself. Not the warmth of the morning suns, or the tips of the trees beneath her feet. He did not take her too high, as if he knew her stomach possessed a rebellious nature.

It troubled her that she could not make out the way. Which trails were hers. He might have been taking her anywhere at all, and she would not know of it until it was too late.

She buried her face in her pack, her neck aching, her wings crushed uncomfortably beneath his arm, and tried to stop her from crying.

“Oh, Wren,” Braum murmured, almost lost on the winds surrounding them. “Should I stop?”

“No,” she croaked out, turning her mouth ever so slightly so he might catch the sound.

He grunted. A low sound that rumbled through her. Which meant he felt every hitch of her own breath, every sob she fought to strangle.

Humiliation burned through her. Heating her cheeks and bringing back every word she had spoken throughout this horrible day, taunting her. She wanted to hide. To tell him she'd changed her mind, and she'd make the rest of the way herself if only he'd leave and let her wallow in her own self-recriminations in peace.

But that hadn't been the bargain, had it?

He'd see her home. And he'd keep his questions to himself.

They were landing. A slow, careful movement that she almost did not sense at all. Another tug of resentment, because they were home after all. And it was not *hours*. Her feet weren't sore and...

She cut off her thoughts, morose and complaining as they were. She struggled to her feet, and he held fast until he was certain of the soundness of her footing.

“Thank you,” Wren managed, turning her back and trudging her way back toward the house. She'd bolt the door. Perhaps even indulge herself to such an extreme that she'd don a sleep-shift and pretend it was nightfall. Climb into her bed and everything.

“Would it make it worse for you if I told you outright that you are my mate?” Her throat tightened. “Or is it better to keep wondering? To hope that Firen was wrong, and you were my friend, after all. That we might continue as we were.” A grunt. Or perhaps it was more of a groan. “We *are*.” He waited, perhaps, for her to turn.

She didn't.

“Do you know the answer? Because I do not. I do not know how to make this better because I do not know how it has gone wrong.”

Guilt. That mingled poorly with the shame she'd already endured, because he was yet another villain looking to prey upon her. Or maybe he was just... Braum. Noble in ways that left him with too few coins and work that was hers rather than his.

How was she to know the difference?

Her mother would know. Things had only gone wrong after... after she was gone.

She should be beyond that, shouldn't she? Stop thinking of it, stop mourning whenever a flit of memory had the misfortune to cross her mind. Stop measuring time in loss and absence and...

What would make her feel better?

She turned. Feeling wretched and rude and, yes, still betrayed.

"I'd have truth between us, I think," Wren decided softly. Sadly. Because it would change things, even though he insisted everything was just the same as it had been. "Come what may."

His shoulders slumped. As if... as if the mere prospect of it was enough to push the air from his lungs. "I do not want for you to hate me." It was a confession. As sure a confirmation as Firen's first presumption at his presence.

Wren nodded. Felt a numbness creep over her. Filter through her blood and she found it almost soothing as she turned back toward the house. Caught sight of Merryweather peering at her from the window of the loft.

She might have smiled at another time. At the welcome she needed for a day gone so wrong.

But she couldn't. And that was all right.

His voice gave her pause. There was a sharpness there that was always so carefully lacking. A desperation too that made her turn her head just a little. "If you wish for honesty, then I would give you the whole of it. I would give you anything that you ask of me. You are my mate, Wren. I have known it since

that first day. And I have known with just as much certainty that you do not recognise me for the same.”

It hurt him to say it. She could see it in the tension of his jaw, the narrowness of his eyes. The tightening of his shoulders.

He seemed so sincere in his plight. Of a one-sided bond that plagued him, tormented him.

There was compassion, somewhere. Buried so deep that it was almost nonexistent. It all felt terribly far away. As if the words were for someone else, were *given* to someone else and she just happened to intercept them.

She'd heard them before, after all.

“I'm sorry, Braum,” she managed. Wishing it was true. It might be, tomorrow. When she felt something again. Something other than the gaping hole in her chest from a wound that had never really healed. “I've heard this before, you see. And I've learned not to believe it so easily.”

His eyes widened. He took a step closer, his palm outstretched, and she shrank back toward her door. With its bolt and its welcome and everything that was hers and hers alone. “You probably shouldn't come back again.” Was that her voice still speaking? So high and strained and sounded strange to her own ears. “It'll only hurt more.”

It would only hurt him if the bond was real.

It would hurt her either way.

“Wren,” he pleaded, and there was no other word for it. For the way her name ripped from his throat, the way he lurched for her, and he was going to grip some part of her again. Her shoulders. Her wrist.

And she wouldn't allow that. From a friend, maybe. But not from another man that said he was her mate.

All lies.

That burrowed and corrupted. That were filled with promise and came to nothing.

Just another kind of grief for a life she was supposed to want.

“Safe journey,” she called over her shoulder, then slipped into her home.

And bolted the door.

And listened as his hand made contact with it. As he called her name and begged her to speak with him.

Promised her that nothing had to change, that he wanted only for her company, for her happiness, her comfort...

It was a nice thought.

She dropped her bag onto the kitchen table.

Allowed him to continue because she found she did not have to hear it, anyway. Not really.

Not if she moved toward the loft. If she balanced on the stair and undid her boots with numb fingers. They didn't belong where she left them. One toppled over and the other before tumbling to the floor below.

That was all right, too.

She unbuttoned the strap of her coverall. First one, then the other.

Left her shirt and decided it was good enough. Because she was by the bed and her mother's quilt was folded neatly at the foot—or had been, before Merryweather had left her prominent imprint upon its surface.

She pulled it up and tucked it over her head, and felt the bed shift as Merryweather came to curl up along her back, a throaty hum coming from her chest, pleased to have Wren home no matter the circumstances.

Wren waited for the tears to come anew. She did not think she had cried herself out, not when she knew of the relief that came along with the pounding head and dry mouth and pile of handkerchiefs destined for the wash.

It was only then when sounds stopped. When she was certain that Braum had listened to her after all. When he'd... gone.

Just as she'd urged. Just as she'd *meant*.

And yet that was when the hollowness in her chest shattered. Bled. When old memories and new fears mingled and tormented. Until she clutched a pillow to her chest and buried her head and cried.

Mourned.

For a friendship that she'd trusted.

For a man that she'd come to admire.

Who wanted more than she could give.

She turned over, her face hot and already swollen. "Is it so bad, Merry? Just the two of us? I rather like it."

A paw reached out. Fell short of her face and pressed against her chest instead as Merryweather chirped lightly in answer. "You send your husbands away. Your kits too. Does it hurt like this to do it?"

Merryweather only blinked slowly, and Wren sighed deeply, burying her hand in soft fur, and waited for sleep to come. Or maybe to feel strong again.

Or maybe to hear Braum knock once more upon her door.

Wretched creature that she was, she feared it was the last after all.

13. Other

Braum could not leave her.

He'd bargained with himself, concocted rules to make himself feel better about the delicate balance of his own screaming instincts and the need to respect boundaries.

Respect *her*.

But his instincts were winning.

She'd asked him to leave. Told him to leave. With that haunted look in her eyes that spoke of much more than the history shared of her parents. Of an ill-advised courtship, a mating that wasn't properly bound.

This was more.

He'd begged to be allowed to follow. To sit with her, to make her a cup of tea. To press her *leptus* into her arms so it might give the comfort he could not offer. He thought he'd known desperation before. When he'd first watched her walk away from him.

When he watched the way her lip curled, her shoulders curled at the mere prospect that he might be her *mate*.

There was pain in that memory. A metallic taste in his mouth that he recognised as blood. The feel of his teeth against his cheek as he bit it harshly to keep from offering a correction as she stumbled over dismissive descriptions of their relationship.

All about the fence, after all.

Not that she enjoyed his company. That she looked forward to his visits.

It was help, begrudgingly accepted, and nothing more.

He'd clung to her admission of their friendship, but then...

Firen wasn't wrong. Friendships came later. As bond-mates became parents, when families mingled and neighbours helped one another through the trials and joys alike that came with all of it.

Perhaps he *had* betrayed Wren in some way. By taking advantage of her inexperience. Of shrouding his feelings in something safe, something innocuous.

Rather than the title that clearly terrified her.

She'd heard it before, she'd said.

Then bolted the door and thought he'd be able to simply turn away. To go home and forget about her. Forget what little they'd shared when he wanted the whole of her. The whole of *life* with her.

If there had ever been a case of a woman having two mates, he'd never heard of it. Couplings after the other had died, perhaps. When companionship was preferable to the crippling loneliness of losing one's bond-mate.

Perhaps she'd left out a portion of her history. Perhaps she'd sought her mother's people after she'd been alone here, and a man had treated her poorly.

The thought was enough to make his jaw tighten, his fists to clench. The need to defend, to avenge so real it was almost tangible.

But it wasn't. And the foe was a faceless threat. An idea rather than something he could hurt.

He flew. Not away. Not as he should.

But away from the door that could have yielded—would have yielded—had he pressed enough force against it. It was not shabbily made, but it lacked a proper overhang to protect against suns and rain alike, and the edges were beginning to crack. To weaken.

Like Wren?

He went up instead.

To the pitch of her roof. Where he landed as quietly as he could, and was greeted with the soft sounds of her tears flittering through the window. The shutters should be better made. Of higher quality to give her more privacy. He could craft new ones. Better ones. Anything at all if only she'd *accept* them.

A part of him felt guilty for it. A part buried beneath so much turmoil that he could barely detect it at all. He gripped the thatch of her roof, doing his best to keep from pushing through the feeble window that thought to keep him out. To curl himself about her, to hold her as he was *finally* able when she'd allowed him to bring her here.

She hadn't wanted it. He was not so much a fool as to think that.

But she'd relented.

He hadn't appreciated it enough the first time. When necessity and danger had been the force compelling him to take her into his arms and save her from one of his own felled logs.

This time, he savoured.

She was not heavy, but she filled his arms in a way that...

He was ashamed to think of how many times he'd tried to recall the sensation. To remember if she'd been slight, or if there had been a softness to entice and delight him.

He knew now.

Had even revelled in it until...

Until he'd heard her cry.

Felt her crumple.

Even as he held her, as he willed what small comforts he could give to imbue into her...

There was no bond to aid him. She did not turn her face to nuzzle closer. Did not breathe him in and whisper her troubles, so he might bear them equally.

She was alone. Even when he was with her.

His company meant nothing. His promises, his reassurances... They were empty. Tainted by this *other*.

He wanted a name. A description. The location of his person, so he might... What exactly?

Braum was not a violent man. His was an orderly race that preferred treaty and trade to sword and fists.

He questioned if it had always been so with the urges suddenly coursing through him. As he listened to his mate's despair...

She spoke. Too quietly for him to make out the words. But it was an improvement to her continued tears. He should be in the kitchen. Had she eaten that morning? He cursed himself for not making a better plan. Of anticipating how early she would have to leave in order to make it to the city for the beginning of the market.

When was the last time he had walked there? Shame niggled at him. Braum could not truly recall. He would oversee the carts carrying his wood on occasion, but even that would be a flitting sort of inspection from above.

He had choices.

She did not.

It might have been different had he considered his mate more. Attended her from the start. Brought her a fine breakfast for a change. Enjoyed talking with her along the way. Taken her directly to the vendor where they would have doubtlessly argued over whom exactly would pay for the oil he had been the one to insist upon.

In that, he'd prepared, visiting the man the day before and fixing the price considerably lower than was typical.

She would have been angry about that, too. Considered it a deception. What else could he do when she would not allow him to *care* for her?

He thought he'd known desperation before. When he'd first watched her walk away from him, his blood thrumming with the knowledge that he'd only just found her.

The force of will it had taken to stand still, to allow her to go, to keep from frightening her with the ferocity of *feeling* that had terrified him plenty.

He'd known it with each sleepless night. As he circled and prayed he'd be strong enough not to land, to creep inside and terrify her with his presence. To coax her into accepting him because it was right, wasn't it? To be together. To sleep with her tucked close to his body, to shield her from anything. Everything.

So he'd enacted rules. Little boundaries that he could not allow himself to cross, and he should respect them even now. Respect her word. Should go and mourn and live with the roiling twisting of his insides, that everything was wrong and only together could they possibly make it right.

Even the roof would yield if he burrowed. Tore at with enough determination. Insisted on his due, even as she looked at him with those eyes full of tears, full of betrayal and...

Had another insisted on his way? Hurt her? Lied to her?

Abused her?

He leaned forward, his hands abandoning the thatch to bury into his hair instead. As he rocked slowly, trying to hold himself together. She quieted, and that should have been a comfort to him, to know that her distress had possibly faded into sleep.

But it didn't.

He couldn't hear her. Couldn't know she was still there. And his instincts were too near the surface, ones that screamed at a threat he did not know and of a circumstance that was unthinkable.

None of his kind would do such a thing, would they? They were an honourable race. Bonds were sacred. Lauded.

She'd heard it all before.

He wanted to think that it was from her father. Trying to explain to a heartbroken little girl why he had to leave, why he could not be a family with her mother any longer. Talk of

bonds, of permanence, of the inevitability of it all. Twisted and transforming into something ugly, to be feared and resented rather than longed for.

He'd believed that yesterday. Even this morning.

He didn't any longer.

Braum had thought patience would be sufficient. A steady reassurance that she was safe with him. That there would be no other woman to ever pull him away because...

She was everything.

But there was more. He could see that now. As plainly as he could see that he was not wanted here. He was no more than a trespasser, a drifter that she'd fed and watered and could not seem to be rid of.

He would go. Leave her be and call it his gift to her. He might have to tie himself to his bed for a few weeks to keep from making his nightly circuit above her dwelling, but he'd do it. If that meant... meant she was happy.

Another round of sobs.

And he closed his eyes, rocking lightly, his wings working to keep his balance on his perch.

The shuttered windows would be easier than the door. Only a single latch to break and then he'd...

He waited until she quieted again. It was a shorter burst this time, a few moments only as she wrung her heart out with her tears and then slept? Went downstairs to fetch a meal?

His sister would chide him for spying.

His sister had never rejected her mate.

It was a petulant thought, one born of his own hurts, and he felt a fresh swell of guilt for having allowed it to linger for even the barest second.

He reached into his pocket. To the little slips of paper he took into the market to accept orders as he tended to his own shopping. The thick he should have sharpened that morning, but he'd slept later than he'd meant to, finally able to rest

knowing that he would *see* her. Interact with her. No hiding and skirting about the edges of her life but welcomed.

If only for a day.

He scribbled his message with a hand so poor that he hoped she'd be able to read it at all.

The great beast in the grimble field gave a bellow at his descent. It kept behind its fence, but its fur stood out thickly, giving it an even greater mass as it warned Braum not to approach.

He had no intention of doing so, although he hesitated outside her door for a moment to see if she would come back. To see what had troubled the beast and... perhaps have reconsidered talking with him.

But he heard no footsteps.

So he tucked his note into one of the cracks in her door and hoped...

He did not know what he hoped any longer.

For her peace. For her tears to leave her. A hearty meal and comfort from her *leptus*.

But for himself...

He dared not hope for anything at all.

14. Help

Wren was stiff all over.

She'd forgotten the rest of her chores, and evidently found a tight ball a superior sleeping position—one that now left her knees aching in protest, her neck sending shooting pains as she tried to coax it into moving.

She'd left Temperance and Calliope out. They'd be fine.

Mostly.

They'd be cross with her for missing their evening grain, and milking them in the pasture was always an adventure, but everyone would live.

She turned her head toward the window, squinting slightly. There were no bright suns piercing through. It must be early yet. Or... late, depending on her point of view.

Her stomach flitted between a queasy warning and a sharp tug of hunger, and she wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a cup of tea.

And for neither of them to be prepared by her own two hands.

She peeked out the window, feeling an uneasy lurch that the moon was still high and the stars bright. That was worse than an early morning and a day full of catching up on the day before. It meant thinking, instead. Of self-recriminations and...

Privy, first.

Out the back door. Through the covered breezeway and into the little room separate from the house.

That particular need met, she shuffled back into the kitchen, feeling better for the cool water she'd rubbed onto her face,

swollen and itchy as it remained from her seemingly endless tears.

She should check on everyone. She would need a lantern as the sky was dim, with the moon a mere sliver in the sky. The kitchen was darker still, the hearth quiet. Wren should scrape the ashes, set new logs and coal and make a proper meal.

She didn't.

She sat in the dark, wishing Merryweather would join her, even if it was simply to pester for a horridly early breakfast.

But she was tucked in their bed. Leaving Wren with her thoughts.

She didn't feel numb any longer. Not exactly. Instead, she was raw. Exposed. As if... as if all the effort she'd made to push aside the memories had ripped. Broken. And she wasn't certain how to smooth it over again. To function when it hurt so.

The kitchen was stuffy. She should open the windows and allow the breeze to catch and cool as it tumbled through. But that was more effort than simply opening the front door.

She thought nothing of undoing the bolt. There would be no Braum on the other side. No matter what he thought, no matter what he believed, no man would spend half a day waiting. Not when there was work to do and coin to make and a market that she'd missed for the second time in the same month.

Wren sighed. Pulled it open.

And it certainly wasn't disappointment when there was only hard pressed earth and a few flagstones scattered about. There had been talk of paving a proper path at one point. Back when her father lived there, and he thought they'd entertain visitors as soon as people got used to their arrangement.

But that hadn't happened, had it?

Something touched her foot, and she took a hasty few steps back, eyes darting over the dark floor for some sign of an invader. Merryweather kept the house blessedly free of pests. Whether winged or simply in possession of far too many legs,

Wren would not hesitate to fetch her rather than face the threat alone.

She went to the kitchen table. The lamp there was easy to light, the tools handy, and she gave as thorough an inspection as she could, checking first the ceiling, then the walls, then...

She swallowed.

Not an insect, after all.

A bit of parchment, folded and lying innocuously on her floor.

A part of her insisted she burn it. Remove all temptation to be won over by pretty words and empty promises.

She did not doubt who had put it there. He was persistent. She could allow him that. Even as she felt conflicted about how she felt about that particular quality. Firen would be flattered. Her mother would find it endearing.

But for Wren, alone? She stooped low and picked it up between her thumb and forefinger. As if by its presence alone she might be infected with...

What exactly?

She was no liar. She'd been in this position before.

There might have been more talk of obligation, of her cruelty if she ignored him, and perhaps she only needed time to feel the bond as he did? It would be selfish, wouldn't it, to not simply *try*?

She placed it on the table.

Put the lamp on top of it.

It couldn't do any harm there, surely?

Her stomach made another plea for nourishment, coiling strangely with the new tension she'd found along with the note. Or maybe it wasn't a note at all. A picture? She did not know if he could draw. Or what he *might* draw.

She chewed at her lip. Opened the pantry cupboard and, despite her want of distraction, could not bring herself to cook

anything—most especially given how long it would take for the hearth to heat properly after her neglect.

A cup of water filled at the tap. Drunk quickly, as she had not realised her own thirst, then refilled. A bit of hard cheese. A salty biscuit. A handful of nuts. All placed on a plate rather than nibbled on one at a time because she was civilised and she would not entertain anymore of her own foolishness.

She was fine.

She'd been fine before the market. Before Firen and her honesty.

She'd be fine again now that Braum was gone. Would stay gone.

Wren forced herself to sit.

And if she couldn't quite keep her attention from the lamp and its prisoner, then...

A bite. A careful swallow. More water.

She sighed. Closed her eyes.

And freed the note from its confines. Smoothed it out with more care than was necessary. But it *felt* necessary. For reasons she could not name.

Her father had taught her to read. Her mother also, although their languages were different. She was forgetting her mother's tongue now that she had no one to share it with. And it saddened her more than she could say.

She had to squint to make out any letters at all, far more used to the blocky type of her father's books than hand-written notes scrawled haphazardly over a slip of paper.

But she tried. Wishing it was morning so the suns might help her.

Wishing more so that she had burned it before she'd thought any better of it.

She heard a quiet chirp from the top of the loft, and she turned her head to catch the shadowy form of an indignant

Merryweather staring down at her. “Well, come on, then. You can read it too.”

A long stretch. A careful consideration.

Then the flurry of graceful movement as she jumped neatly down the stairs and to Wren’s side.

And stole a crumb of cheese for her efforts as well.

Wren hugged her close just the once. For comfort. For courage.

Then squinted down at the paper and did her best to make out the words.

I am patient, Wren. I will not give up on you... Please do not give up on me.

Your friend,

Braum

It was a testament to how many tears she’d already shed that she could stare down at the page with dry eyes. She pushed it toward Merryweather, but she was more interested in investigating what remained on Wren’s plate—yet gave the edge a sniff of consideration, anyway.

“What do you think it means?” Wren asked her, sighing as she rested it back on the tabletop. Smoothed it again because she didn’t like how she’d crumpled it as she read. “Well, you don’t know what it means because you weren’t here the last time.”

A lump settled in her throat. Not tears, but a warning. Not to press, not to speak of it, even to Merryweather—most excellent secret-keeper though she was.

Easier to pretend it hadn’t happened. Which was fine when she was tucked away at home. When she didn’t have people pestering her about fetes and mates and all the rest that came afterward.

She took Merryweather into her arms and buried her face in her fur. “I liked him,” she breathed. A confession that burned and humiliated as it came out, but she almost felt better for

having admitted it to someone. “And somehow that makes it worse.”

Merryweather wriggled, not for release, but so that she could tuck her head against Wren’s neck. “Did you like him? I’m sorry if you did. We can’t have him back now, you know. It isn’t safe.”

She glanced at the paper. At the final plea he’d given her.

How could she not give up on him? She *had* to. He’d signed it as her friend rather than her supposed mate, but that did not change how he saw himself. What his expectations inevitably entailed.

She gave Merryweather another squeeze and was rewarded with the feel of a raspy tongue tickling at her neck. Wren sighed deeply. “We’ll be all right,” she promised her.

And maybe it was a promise for herself as well.



She couldn’t relax. Not when her eyes scanned the skies. Not when her attention drifted to the tree where he’d rested. To the kitchen pump where he’d washed.

It was the not knowing, she decided. Not the want of him to come back. Whether her days would be spent alone and at peace, or if she needed to be anxious for another confrontation.

She bolted the door more often than she ever had.

And when she saw the first flutter of wings against the skyline, she was not disappointed when she made out her father’s figure instead of Braum’s.

She was in the kitchen garden, her basket nearly full. She should invite him to take lunch with her, and yet her stomach gave an uneasy pull at the prospect.

He found her easily. He always did.

His smile was warm because... he did not know that anything was wrong. That was good—it meant she had not

made such a fool of herself at the market that gossip had reached him of her behaviour.

“Da,” she greeted, pulling another fruit from its vine and tucking it beside its brethren. Would he be able to tell? She was not of a naturally cheerful disposition, so surely it would not be such a difference if her smiles were forced, if her welcome was lacklustre.

“Need any help?”

She opened her mouth to say no, but hesitated. Braum had niggled in too deeply with his chastisements regarding her staunch determination at self-sufficiency. “You know anything about gardens?”

She hated she had to ask, but she did. It had been so long since he’d lived here, she could not remember which aspects had been her mother’s domain and which were his.

He laughed. Nudged at her shoulder, and began picking beside her. “I planted this first garden. No, you wouldn’t remember. Your mother was still carrying you.”

He spoke of it with such fondness, as if, even now, the memory was a sweet one.

Her throat burned, and she couldn’t look at him. Just picked. Ignored the berries that were still tinged yellow, looking instead for the deep reds, the vibrant purples.

“I miss your mother’s jam. I’ve tried to make it since, but it isn’t the same.”

Wren took a shallow breath, although she aimed for a deep one. “She used a sprinkle of herbs from home. To coax the flavours out, she said.”

“Ah. That garden was all her own. Wouldn’t even let me help her tend it. Said my wings got in the way and would bruise everything.” He grunted. “I think she just liked having something that was hers. Had to share everything else—even you.”

“Poor Mama,” Wren countered, with something nearer to a smile than she thought she’d be able to manage.

She'd meant it in jest, but as she watched the corners of her father's mouth pull downward, he clearly did not take it with the levity she had intended. But then there was the forced brightness that followed. A quality she had never considered might have come from him. "No, poor Da? Made to feel guilty?"

Her stomach twisted, and it was a little too near an old wound to jest in return. "No. Not that."

She tucked the basket under her arm. "Are you staying for a while?"

He watched her carefully. "If you'll have me."

She shrugged. She didn't not particularly want him while she was still raw and uncertain of herself, but she wasn't certain the solitude was any better.

"Wren." He grasped her arm lightly as she turned to walk back into the house. "Are you all right?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Made her throat close and her eyes itch and yes, there was anger, too. At Firen, and Braum, and that wretched bit that was always there for her father.

She didn't want it. Wished she could simply cut it out and forgive him for all of it—most especially the parts that were outside his control.

But she couldn't.

She looked at her basket rather than at him.

"The market did not go well," she hedged, pulling her arm free. "I'll start a meal."

It was too late for breakfast, too early for lunch, but she did not care.

She opened the gate to the kitchen garden and waited for him to follow her out so she could close it up properly. His steps were slow and even that irritated her, and she did not like that he took the basket from her as he passed. "If you have need of coin, of food... you would ask me, wouldn't you?"

Her mouth opened, and the retort on the tip of her tongue was not a kind one.

Had she ever asked anything of him?

Had Mama?

She bit her lip, hard.

She didn't know that part. Not when they would take walks together through the pastures. Maybe she had asked him for help. For coins to spend when their market days went poorly. Maybe some baskets of goods had come from Da rather than trade, like a young Wren had assumed.

Wren thought of the firewood. Because no, she hadn't asked him to help her with it. She'd simply tried to carry on as she'd always done.

A weariness spread through her, sapping her of her anger. And maybe that was better, lest she say something she regretted—tucked away in her bed. To play the scene over and over in her mind and rob of her sleep until he came back again and she might apologise. “I don't know, Da.” Another shrug, and she closed the gate and moved toward the house. “I'm fairly sure I'd talk myself out of it.”

“*Why?*”

He asked it with such frustration, such disbelief, that she turned. He was gripping the handle of her basket too firmly, and she went back to take it from him. It wasn't one of her mother's, so it held no sentiment, but she'd worked hard on it all the same.

“Because I doubt a mate that never wished to meet me would not think kindly to you spending her family's coin on the offspring she regretted.” Her lips thinned as he opened his mouth to argue. “I know you do not. Regret me, that is. And I believe you. But please do not pretend...” She took a deep breath. This subject was forbidden. They did not talk of his mate, of his other children.

But she thought of how lost she'd felt in the city. When she'd been so distressed and *alone*.

And despite her stubbornness, the bitterness she hoped so dearly might fade, she'd wanted him.

And hadn't the least idea where to find him.

"Wren..." He looked so pained, so stricken, and she fought down the guilt that always welled so freely when she hurt him.

"I love you, Da. I do. But... something happened at the market. Something that no, I do not intend on sharing with you. And it made me remember, made me realise..." She wiped at her eyes, although she was still out of tears. "You have another life. Another family. One that has nothing to do with me. And you can talk of help, but unless you take the time to come here, I cannot even *ask* if I wanted it. Needed it." Wren made herself look at him. "Am I wrong?"

He looked away first. Swallowed thickly before he took a step away from her.

A new fear. That he would leave. That she'd cut at him too many times, regardless of whether it was with the truth.

And she wouldn't find him.

She wanted to be the type that would not care. That could stand there, back straight and head high and if he wanted to go, to run away from her and leave, then so be it.

But she wasn't.

And a sound caught in her throat. Perhaps a plea, perhaps a whimper. She did not know. It was choked and ragged and she reached for him with her free hand because...

Because she did love him.

And he was all she had.

Which was a sorry truth indeed, because he wasn't really hers at all.

He wrapped his arms around her. Put his hand on the back of her head and pulled her to him. And maybe she had some tears after all because her face was wet and her chest heaved with sobs, and they were only partly born of her father. Of old

histories. Of loss and a twisted, gnawing grief that never seemed to go away.

Some of it was new.

Of a friend that she'd sent away because...

Because it wasn't worth the risk, was it?

"None of this has been fair to you. I am more than aware. My... my mate is aware." There was no mistaking the strain in his voice. The acknowledgement of a woman they both worked so hard to avoid in their talk.

She couldn't look at him. Felt like a fledgling again hiding in his coat rather than face him properly. "Does she hate me?" How often had she wondered? No matter how she told herself it wouldn't change anything, that she'd never meet her, so it shouldn't bother her.

But it did. When she was lonely and she missed her father, she wondered what it would be like to spend a supper in his home. With his family. What it might be like to have siblings to fill a table and...

"Wren, *no*." She listened to his heart race beneath her ear, and it comforted her as much as it saddened her. That he was nervous, that she'd caused it. "It was so complicated, in the beginning. It was what... none of us wanted. And I fear, somewhere along the way, we got used to not talking about things. To pretending. And I think that has hurt you most of all."

He pulled back slightly, his hand coming to cup her chin as he urged her to look at him. "Do you hate her?"

It was not an admission she had ever been willing to give, even to herself. Her mother had seen it. Had known. But even then, they'd never allowed it to be voiced.

She felt childish. An unforgiving, ungrateful fledgling that wanted too much, forgave too little. No one had chosen it, no one had wanted it.

But it had happened.

And she was the one that couldn't seem to move beyond it. Couldn't let go of the pain of him leaving.

Having to go.

Because of this nameless, faceless woman that yes.

Was far too easy to hate.

To resent. To blame. Because if she didn't exist, then her father would have stayed. Then her mother might have been helped sooner. He might have seen, might have known when a man was a liar and no true mate at all.

"Oh, my sweet." He pulled her back to him, and she was more grateful than she could say that he didn't make her answer him. Hadn't made her speak of her great shame. "Come inside," he urged, as if... as if it was his home to bring her to. His table to sit her at while he made her tea and fetched a biscuit from the jar and bid her eat it.

But she allowed it. While she rubbed at her eyes and watched rather miserably as he took the seat across from her, his hands curled about his own mug.

Braum had sat there. When she'd talked of her parents. Her history. His posture was much the same, grave and earnest.

But she hadn't spoken of these particular feelings, had she? She'd buried them. Kept them to herself as if she could pretend they didn't exist at all. Like she was a better person than she really was.

"There were things we decided when... when you were still very young. Things your mother insisted upon because... because she was hurting, too." He reached out and took her hand, and gripped it more firmly than she'd expected. "Your mother asked me not to take you to my home. And I understood why, and I suppose... I suppose I grew used to that promise. Of honouring her wishes. But not if it hurts you more."

Her brow furrowed, and she pulled her hand free. It felt wrong, discussing Mama without her there to speak for herself. To correct anything misremembered, to share her own feelings. But this felt important. To preserve what little

remained of her family and to—perhaps—be able to release some resentments that had grown as steadily as she had.

“Why would she do that?”

Her father smiled, that sad sort of twist of his mouth that came when they dared to speak of Mama, even just a little. “You were everything to her. And no matter how I tried to promise her you’d love her no less, she... she feared you would like it. The city. Living in one of the towers. A home with... with siblings and a father in it every night.”

Her stomach ached. Twisted. For all she wanted to say to her mother now that she was grown. How *absurd* a fear that was when she was her very best friend. When she loved their land, their home, and...

And there was a little niggle of something else. Something foreign and unwelcome.

That maybe she’d been robbed of something along the way, as well. Of belonging.

Of not being as much an outsider as her blood and birth made her.

Not as vulnerable. As lonely.

She glanced out the kitchen window to Merryweather stalking something across the yard, her body down low as she used the late summer grasses for cover.

“I think we say a lot in what we don’t say,” Da continued, taking a sip of his tea. “And you don’t say a lot, my sweet.”

She fought down the urge to tug at her braid. “Neither do you. Mama too.”

Another grim-faced smile, and it didn’t suit him at all. His eyes were the sort that sparkled with good-humour, and yet with her they were steeped in worry. “A fine lot we made.” It should have been a criticism, but there was a fondness to his tone as well. Because... they had. Because they loved each other and that hadn’t changed.

Not now. Not ever.

“So... what about now?” she asked, a tremble to her words because she was all too aware of how it would hurt if he rejected her. Did she even want to go? To meet these strangers that were a part of her father and maybe then... a part of her? She wasn’t certain. But that she *could*—that at the very least she might know where he lived in case she needed him...

It was more than she’d had before.

He didn’t sigh. Didn’t look away from her as if she’d dared ask what he hoped she wouldn’t.

“Would you want to come?” he asked as gently as he’d asked her anything. “Would you want to meet the rest of my family?”

The rest of it. Because... because she was included in the whole.

If she was younger, she would have blurted out a fervent yes. Thrilled to see where her da lived, but also the trip itself into the city. Carried as they flew, taking in the sight of it as it was meant to be seen.

But she wasn’t a little girl any longer. And there was a tangle of emotions that were only partly hers. Some... some were her mother’s. Inherited from careful glances and, as her father had commented, all that *wasn’t* said.

“I... don’t know. I’d have to think about it.” Worry over it was closer to the truth, but she added what she wanted most, even if it was said into her cup rather than to him directly. “But I’d like you to show me where you live. So that I... know. Just in case.”

He reached out for her hand again, gentler this time. “You really won’t tell me what happened? You don’t seem yourself, Wren. Don’t think I know you so little that I wouldn’t notice.” His eyes narrowed, but there was a twinkle behind the concern that he could not hide. “And no shrugging at me. You get that from your mother, and I’ll not stand for it.”

She rolled her eyes because... she did love him. Loved that he knew that when... no one else did.

She'd never told him about... before. The shame had been too great, the way she hated herself for being so gullible. She couldn't bear the thought of him knowing, of knowing how foolish his daughter could be.

And he'd accepted her behaviour, her harsher words, her penchant for tears as the continued grief for the mother she'd lost. He'd been kind and careful with her and it had helped. Especially once she'd learned to bury the rest of it down deep where it couldn't hurt quite so much, drowned out by the want of her mother to make it all right again.

Could she share this part when it was tied up so closely with the rest of it?

"There was... some trouble with the stall arrangements. And I didn't think I would take it so badly, not being in my usual one." Is this how Braum felt? Keeping close to the truth, but not daring to give the whole of it? Hating the prospect of giving a lie so words became stilted, half-hearted things.

Her stomach ached to think of him.

Because he was either a wretch and a liar, or...

Or he was a man without his mate, and supposedly that was rather horrible.

She rubbed at her forehead and fought for calm.

He hummed a little. "They should have prioritised fixing your usual stall. I'm sorry they didn't."

She shrugged.

And he sighed. Before he stood and crossed around the table, his hands coming to her shoulders and pressing downward ever so slightly. He'd done that when she was a girl, all full of mock outrage at being so dismissed. And she would be cross as long as she could until she'd laugh and squirm and wriggle free and shrug as many times as she could before he picked her up entirely.

Why were things so easy, then? Why did she get caught in a painful loop of her twisting insides and constant worry and...

“Anything else?” he asked, leaning down slightly over her. “If you did not make enough, I wish you would tell me. No daughter of mine is going to go hungry, grown or otherwise. Or I could speak with the Proctor? Insist on the repairs?” He squeezed her shoulders and there was no mistaking the affection there. “Let me help, sweet. You don’t have to do this all on your own.”

So she kept being told.

Her heart ached. Or maybe it was her stomach again.

Her throat burned, and she dearly wanted to put her arms down on the table and give into the tears that threatened her.

She wanted to believe him. Wanted to step aside and let him make things right.

Was that wrong? When Mama had been so adamant that she take care of things on her own.

Braum had been softening her to the idea. With his relentless insistence that this was normal, perhaps even expected. That needs were acceptable, that they might be met. Burdens were meant to be shared.

A different life.

And it frightened her.

She liked *her* life. Lonely though it could be at times. It was safe and familiar, and to change felt like an insult to her mama.

“If... if you’d like to make enquiries. And maybe... encourage them a little, to get my stall put to rights, I’d be grateful.”

Why did it cost so much to say it? Why did her pride prickle and some insistent voice deep inside insist she was a failure for having accepted even that much from him?

This was her father. He was hers first, no matter what happened afterward. No matter *who* had happened afterward.

She’d warmed to the idea of friends, only to have it dashed too soon afterward.

But family was permanent, wasn't it? Perhaps not in lodging, but in blood.

"Of course." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "And the rest? Perhaps I should take to hiding coin pouches into nooks about the house if you aren't willing to say you need some." She could pay Braum, then. If... if he came back.

One less debt. One less obligation tied up in a title she refused to even contemplate.

Her fingers curled and her heart raced. And despite the awkward shuffle around her father, she managed to stand, gesturing for him to follow.

If he'd noticed the new fence, he had made no mention of it. She didn't want to talk about Braum. To her father, or to Merryweather, or to anyone else. Not when there was a tight knot in her stomach whenever she so much as thought about him.

But his note made it clear he would be back. Or perhaps his visits would be restricted to the market, and she needed to be ready.

"How much would you pay for that?"

His eyes narrowed, and he glanced at her with a peculiar look in his eye. Shouldn't she know how much she paid for the lumber? For the labour if she hadn't been the one to fix it herself?

She gave her braid a tug and refused to look at him. "Let me look," he said at last, and he drifted toward the fence line, walking the perimeter. It was more than apparent which boards were new and which were old. Which posts had been freshly pounded and poured, and she swallowed as he doubtlessly tallied just how hard Braum had worked.

The city had walls rather than fences. Courtyards surrounded by stone and mortar. Some even without doors. Private, only for the Harquil to access.

Or that's what Firen had told her, her eyes full of apology as she tried very hard not to glance at Wren's stunted wings.

He came back to her with a serious expression. “It’s fine work,” he affirmed, but she’d already known that. “There’s no shame in hiring help,” he continued, nudging her arm so she’d look at him. “But whoever did it should have given you a fair price before it was done.” He frowned. “Did he cheat you? If you paid over ten crowns, I’ll have words with him.”

She flinched. She didn’t even deal in crowns; the mothers frequenting her stalls paid in pennies—which were then spent on spices and teas.

Her father reached over and tugged her braid for her. “Come on now, sweet. Tell me what you need, or I’ll start guessing.”

Her throat ached, and she wished she had drunk more of her tea before coming out here. Merryweather looked at them both from her perch on one of the fence posts, her eyes blinking lazily. She’d be napping in the stable soon enough. “Ten crowns,” she got out, hating it. Hating that Braum had talked her into it, hating that she did not have the coins to pay for it herself.

Da’s brows furrowed. “Help me understand, please. You took on a contract you couldn’t pay?”

She turned away from him. “He would not *give* me a price. No matter how many times I asked. So then we worked out a trade, instead, but now...” Now she knew that he’d deceived her. That his terms had been steeped with hidden expectations. “It won’t suit. So I need to pay him in coin.” She turned, feeling miserable and unsettled. “If it’s too much, I... I’ll make up the rest. Sell more. Try my hand at butter or...”

He reached for her. Settled his hand on her shoulder and squeezed it lightly. “I did not say that. Your father isn’t as poor as that.”

She slumped, tucking her arms about herself as she nodded. She wasn’t going to cry, not when that would only make her seem even more foolish and incapable. Getting into deals she didn’t fully understand, no matter how much she’d *tried* to settle the terms and he’d...

“Would you like me to be here next time? To talk with him directly? Should I know those terms you decided couldn’t be met?”

She chewed at her cheek and suppressed her shrug of dismissal. “No. I just... won’t be using his service again, that’s all.”

Why did that hurt?

Da hummed just a little. “Some lessons are harder than others. If you decide you want help out here, perhaps I can make enquiries for you? Make sure your workers are reputable and the terms fair?”

She nodded, knowing full well that if labour cost as much as he said, there would be no help she could afford. She couldn’t create more hours in the day, more light in the evenings that wouldn’t have to be bought with yet more lamp oil.

“Would you like a special trip to the city to see my home? Or should we plan on market day?”

The prospect of another trip was wholly unappealing, but if she wanted to pay back her father, no matter how slowly, she needed to dedicate herself to more stock. Working longer hours at the market itself. Encouraging people to purchase rather than simply waiting for them to come to her.

The selling had never come easily to her. She could explain her goods well enough, but it was Mama that could draw in people with her welcoming smile, with her easy manner. Wren felt all fumbles and awkward wordage that left her anxious and uncertain after every encounter.

She needed to do better. To *be* better. To make sure that no other... people... could look at her and see a woman to take advantage of, that was lonely and vulnerable and easy prey for...

“Market day,” she declared, trying to ensure her voice was steady. That she could offer him a hint of a smile, fake though it might be.

And it must have looked truly pathetic, because he pulled her in for another hug. But she did not cry. But she sighed, just

a little. And rested her head against his chest and managed a quiet, "Thank you."

"Anything for you, my sweet. Someday you might even believe that."

She hoped so.

But didn't. Not yet.

15. Story

Braum waited longer than she'd expected. Which might have been a relief if every day wasn't filled with the knot of tension in her belly that it might be *that* day. She stopped looking to her front door, expecting to see him, and that was an improvement. She even was able to stop thinking about the market on most days, except for her new determination to make sure her supplies were plentiful enough to turn a better profit than they had been.

She cringed at the thought of raising her prices. They were what they were. Always had been. And while she was certain some mothers would be desperate enough to pay what was asked, she could not bring herself to do it. Not even if it meant being out of her father's debt all the faster.

He did not call it that. It was not a loan, and there was nothing owed. He'd ensured she was looking at him properly as he said that, handing her the pouch of heavy coins with a seriousness that did not suit him at all.

"I owe you far more," he'd insisted, when she'd faltered and wanted to tug at her braid and avoid looking at him. "So we'll not have talk of sneaking coins in my pack in return, all right? I am happy to help you. Always. As a father should."

And he'd kissed the top of her head as if it was nothing, as if... as if this was a typical occurrence, something that was expected and *done* rather than wrenching at her heart and her pride in equal measure.

That didn't make it wrong to take it. Maybe she'd grown a little too stubborn, a little too dogged in her determination to do things precisely as her mother had taught her. She'd want her to thrive, also. To...be happy, if she could. They'd been happy, hadn't they? Before? There had been hard parts, also, but it was a good life.

Still was, she decided, sitting in Thorn's field with a grimble in her lap. It wasn't such a new one any longer, its coat turning long and curly. They'd be cut in the spring. When Thorn would pace and growl occasionally, trying to decide between keeping them in line and yielding to their pleas for aid as Wren twisted them this way and that and freed them from their long coats before the summer heats.

It was a quiet day. And she felt a little lighter than she had. More able to push her past back into its tidy compartment in her mind which left her free to pet her grimble and dip her toes in the pond water, and pretend that autumn wasn't beginning to creep into the breeze. She'd have to pull out her woollens soon enough. Exchange split skirts and overalls for trim leggings and her waxed coat when the rains started.

She'd see little of the grimbles then. Thorn either. They'd tuck away in the burrow. Her parents had started it, but it had been finished by the grimbles themselves—digging and bringing over grasses and leaves until it was almost a part of the incline itself.

Thorn would curl up at the mouth of it, and they'd remain there until the rains stopped.

It was a lonely time. Less life about the place as Temperance and Calliope would refuse to leave the stable and preferred to lie in their stalls and munch on hay and grains for the entirety of their days.

But the rains hadn't started yet. Hopefully, they'd hold off until winter like last year.

Another soft nose nudged at her elbow, and she pulled that one into her lap as well. There were quite a few that were interested, nudging at bits of her they could find, a few nibbling at her wings, hard enough she had to flutter them briefly and they all startled and jumped a few paces away before easing back to her.

She liked to watch her hand disappear into the grimble's thick coat. Like the way its soft black eyes looked at her with trust as its mother watched on with a little more caution five paces away.

Which meant she wasn't watching her front door. Wasn't watching the pump or the fence. Wasn't watching for Braum at all.

She startled when Thorn made a sharp bellow, his fur standing on ends as the grimbles moved as one, the little one scrambling off her lap to join its mother and the rest of the flock behind Thorn.

And there was Braum.

Watching her.

And all the peace she'd cultivated was suddenly gone as her mouth grew dry and she felt grubby and caught out as she lazed about with the grimbles rather than working.

Her toes were still in the pond, and she more than remembered how it felt to have him fish her out of it.

No.

Wren rebuked all of those feelings.

She could laze if she wanted to. Appreciate her creatures however she pleased.

She did not brush off her overalls as she stood. Picked up her boots and did not bother to replace her stockings, not when her toes were still damp.

Some grasses grew dry over the long summer, and they prickled at her feet as she approached him. She wasn't hiding. She also would not wait for him to have to speak first. "I've something for you," she offered in lieu of a proper greeting. Her mother would not think kindly of it, but she could not afford to be friendly.

He was not expecting it, that much was certain. She glanced at him as she went through the gate, bolting it properly behind her. He did not look well. Tired. Worn thin—although it was a poorly description when his physique remained as burly as ever.

It was his eyes, she decided. Feeling...

Guilty.

She shoved it down.

Tucked it into the box of all the other things she wasn't going to think about, and walked toward the house.

She'd stopped carrying the pouch in her pocket as she had the first days since the market. She couldn't abide the thought of losing them, and it became clear as the days wore on that he was going to give her more time than she'd anticipated before striking another claim on her time and attention.

Something prickled, sharp and insistent. She was not being fair. He'd only ever been generous with her even... even amid all his deceptions.

It made the walk a little heavier, made her more anxious as she opened the door and debated whether to allow him in. Manners warred with self-preservation, and she could not decipher which took precedence.

Wren owed him nothing. Or... wouldn't. Once she got him to accept the pouch of coins.

She settled for leaving the door open, placing her boots and socks on just inside as she went in. Wasn't surprised when he hovered in the doorway rather than entering without her express permission. He'd done that from the start. Been careful of her, been mindful of boundaries she hadn't even given aloud.

Her stomach tightened as she reached into the cupboard and pulled out the pouch her father had given her. He'd fight her—she expected that. She'd lain awake many nights since, trying to rehearse what she might say. Some attempts were harsh. Perhaps even spiteful. Then she'd tried to be soft and cajoling, although even in her imaginings he'd still never accepted her payment.

But she hadn't expected him to look so tired. A thin smile. A warm word. Not this quiet, pained creature that haunted her doorway and made her feel more like setting the kettle to boil than to begin an argument.

A tug on her braid for courage.

Then she moved toward him and held out her hand. "Payment. For your help. And my thanks along with it."

He stared at the pouch, his expression revealing nothing at all. It was enough to make her want to squirm, but she didn't. Only moved nearer so he wouldn't have to step inside at all to take it and be off again. She jingled it, just a little, so he'd know that she hadn't skimmed him. Hoped she hadn't, at least. "My father guessed the price since you didn't give one."

Was that too pointed? Her tone was as genial as she could make it, her emotions a tumult of too much conflict. She couldn't afford to be soft. Compassionate. She'd been that before, convinced of just how *hard* things were for a man without his mate to comfort him, and she would not indulge that nonsense again. Not for anyone.

Then why wasn't it easier when it was Braum?

He looked at her at last, blinking twice as if coming out of whatever state had kept him since he'd seen in her in the pasture. "That is all? I take your coin and leave here and... what then?"

She thought of his note. Of his promise. His plea.

She tried her best to keep from flinching.

It felt dishonest to allow him to think the coins were hers. And perhaps she did not owe him anything, not even the truth, but it would bother her afterwards. "My father's coins," she clarified, jingling the pouch again and more than grateful when his hand came and took them from her. Perhaps this business would not have to be so hard after all.

Wren couldn't bring herself to expound. To tell him she hadn't coin enough for what his labour was worth. He'd pity her, and she did not want that. Wanted him to turn and fly away off to his groves and leave her be.

A lump settled in her throat.

She wanted to pretend she didn't know what he was talking about. That their business had concluded, and they didn't need to speak any longer about anything at all.

She rubbed at her eyes and drew a harsh breath, feeling as miserable as he looked. "I hope you find a mate one day," she assured him with all the conviction she had within her. "But it isn't me." Whatever element the Harquil possessed, whatever quality ensured they knew their mates and were bound to them so completely...

It had not passed to her.

And it was cruelty itself for two men to claim that she was so. That she should accept their word on the matter. Just submit, just believe them because it was cruel otherwise. To them. There were laws about keeping mates apart, didn't she know? It went against everything their people stood for, and she didn't want to be selfish, did she?

"Don't do that, please," Braum urged, his voice quiet, but firm. "You can argue with me. Hand me coins I don't want or need. But do not..." he paused, shaking his head and looking as if she'd plunged something sharp into his belly. "Do not dismiss it. I can assure you that what I feel is quite real. And yes, it is for want of *you*."

She did flinch then.

Took a full pace back from him as his eyes met hers. He was too close to desperate, and she suddenly felt just how alone she was, how unprepared if he chose to be anything but...

But the friend she'd known before.

Another, harsher tug at her braid as she wished most furtively that Merryweather was sleeping upstairs rather than the stable.

Braum took another, equal step.

Not toward her. Not invading her home. But backward. Allowing her more room. He looked even worse than he had before. "I would never hurt you, Wren," he breathed out, his voice strained with tension. "If you believe nothing of me, have it be that."

She wanted to. Wanted her nerves to settle and her reason to prove the master over her instincts. The ones that urged her to

fling herself up into the loft, to run from him and ignore his presence until he left. He'd done it before.

But the door had been closed and bolted then and...

"Breathe, Wren," he urged, and she did not like how he kept using her name, didn't like that he was ordering her about in her own home.

But she did breathe.

And some of her vision settled. Some of her nerves as well, as she could see he'd placed even more room in between them.

"You're in no danger," he soothed, and some part of her resented it, resented that he knew to give it and that she was responding to it. "We are only talking."

"No," she choked out, shaking her head, hurting in ways that were new and she didn't think that was possible any longer. "I paid you. And thanked you. So now you'll go to your home and leave me to mine, and that's the end of it."

"Did you receive my note?" There was the tightness in his voice again, the gentle lilt replaced with the tension he could not avoid.

Her eyes flickered to where she kept it. Folded it neatly. Tucked it away with her most treasured pieces from her mother for reasons she chose not to contemplate. "I did."

His fingers curled about the pouch of coins and a deep frown etched into his features. "Then why would you think I would simply leave? That I would take these and forget you?"

She swallowed thickly, bracing herself for the guilt to begin. "*If* it's real," Wren began, stressing the first word because she couldn't bring herself to believe it was so, no matter what he said. "I suppose it would be rather a struggle. Or so I've been told." She shrugged, and that was a struggle all its own. "And when it isn't, when you see that I'm not so easily duped, you'll have everything owed to you." She wanted to tell him she was not so easily seduced, but the words wouldn't form in her mouth, a twist of lies and wrongs and wishes that it hadn't been true once.

His mouth twisted, and her stomach churned when he looked at her fully. “Is that what happened?”

Another step back, but this time he did not give another pace in answer. “You agreed not to ask anything of me.”

He glanced up at the sky, muttering something low under his breath that she was certain was not particularly flattering to her person. “That was a bargain made for the moment, not for a lifetime. You needed to be home, to feel safe, and you would not allow me to take you otherwise.”

She shrugged again, hating he was right, hating that he knew that, but there was little she could do about it now.

“May we talk? Properly? It needn’t be inside, but if you keep moving backward, you’ll end up in the loft and that would make our discussion rather difficult.”

Good.

She wanted to say that to him rather than have it rattle around in her own mind. Wanted to conjure all the rage and indignation left from another time, another man, but that would mean opening the compartment she’d worked so hard to seal again.

She glanced beyond him. To the tree where they’d sat together. It had been easier to talk when they did not have to look at one another. When she’d started to believe he only meant to be her friend.

Wren rubbed at her face with the back of her wrist, her frustration making her cross. She did not want to deal harshly with him. She just wanted him to believe *her*. They couldn’t continue any longer. Not once that horrid word was bandied about, spoiling everything that might have been.

She opened her mouth to tell him she would go nowhere with him. That he was mad if he thought she’d leave this house at his behest. That if he thought she was fool enough to put herself in a position to be lied to again, then he was the greater fool.

She blinked, her shoulders slumping.

Because she wanted to go. And it felt like a greater weakness, one she did not want to admit to herself, let alone to him.

“Must you make this so difficult?” she asked instead, unable to look at him.

He answered with a bark of laughter, utterly without humour. “I am the one making it difficult?”

She glared at him, and it came more easily than the rest of it. “Who else? Because it certainly isn’t me. All I have ever done is keep to myself. Tend to my stall, to my land. Ask for as little as possible so I’m as little trouble as possible for anyone, so if you mean to say that I’m the difficult one...” she pointed toward the door yet made no move to actually close it. “Then I wish you a fair afternoon and ask you to keep it elsewhere.”

He scowled at the ground in front of his boots, his jaw tense—his shoulders more so.

“You are right,” he said at last, which was not at all an admission she expected from him. “The... challenges are certainly no fault of yours.” He glanced at her. “What is it that frightens you? Is it... me, or the prospect of a mate at all?”

Her stomach tightened and her hand came to her mouth of its own accord. “Do not use that word, please,” she begged. Wondering why she couldn’t simply eject him. Why she didn’t truly want to.

He closed his eyes, looking all the world as if her plea was a fresh wound upon him, and she didn’t know how to help that. Not when he was hurting her with every effort at *discussion*.

“The prospect, then. If even the word disgusts you so.”

Her arms came about herself, and she shrugged again. He rubbed his forehead tiredly, and she was struck again by how tired he looked. Her mother’s voice, so clear it might have come from the kitchen itself, that she should offer him some tea. A biscuit too. Lest he fall from the skies on his way home.

She hated this. She had no desire to hurt him, but she felt the beginnings of another sort of voice. Her father’s, sad and

gentle. Trying to explain to his heartbroken fledgling why he had to go. That he loved her no less, and yet...

“Why can you not just leave it be? Just go and...” Her voice broke and her arms were not enough about her. They did not feel like the embrace she needed. His promises were not the ones she craved.

“Would that make you happy? Truly?” His tone was dubious, and an adamant *yes* was at her lips before she even had to think about it. Peace would come back. Her compartments would stay carefully shut without him prodding about her memories. Her histories.

But something stopped her. Gave her pause as she fussed and tugged at her braid and couldn't bring herself to look at him. “I don't know,” she said instead, finding it was true enough. She'd liked him about the place, but that seemed a cruel sort of admission to offer when she couldn't allow it to happen ever again. Not if he mistook it for any hope of taking his place as her...

She groaned.

Wondered at herself. At her own tongue that was fierce and determined in her own mind and then when it came time to *saying* what she thought and how she felt, it failed her. Time and again. She fought for nothing, argued against no one, except for their petty remarks she would say toward her father when she was feeling particularly lonely.

Then chided herself firmly when she was alone again, more than aware that she would know the true meaning of loneliness if she frightened him off from ever visiting again.

But even in her mind, it wasn't her father's face she conjured; it was Braum's.

Shaking his head, glaring at her as he left. If he bothered to give a goodbye at all.

She didn't bother with her shoes. Didn't look at him as she passed, although she should have brought two tin cups so they could at least have the distraction of fresh water from the pump. But she didn't.

Wren went to the tree, the shade almost too cool with the breeze, but she left her wrap inside too. It wasn't so bad once she tucked her knees against her chest and added her arms and chin on top. Braum followed, each step slow and careful, as if he thought she'd yell at him for coming too close.

The looming was worse than the sitting, made her feel small, and she hated it. So she nodded toward the other side of the trunk, and thought briefly of a tray between them, calm and peaceful. When her stomach wasn't in knots, and matters were simple.

She closed her eyes, hating it was spoiled now. Because he'd known. Or thought it. Even then. While she'd been savouring the company, he'd been imagining just how long he could lull her into compliance before announcing his claim.

“Why didn't you tell me from the start?” Wren just as he was easing down beside her. Well, not precisely beside. Far enough that she had to turn her head if she wanted to look at him. Which she didn't.

Braum huffed out a breath. “At the market, you mean?”

She shrugged. Maybe not then. When she'd been angry and hurt about the comment he'd made, that hadn't even been meant for her. But after. That first day when he came and wanted to bargain. When she'd begged him for plain speech and honesty.

And he'd denied her. Made her think things, feel things.

Made her trust him, if only a little.

“After,” she decided. “That first day you came here. You might have told me then. Saved all this bother.”

He turned his head, his wing shifting against the trunk of the tree and coming a little too near to her. It was dark—almost the colour of ash. They suited him well, the feathers long and sleek. A fitting compliment to his burly frame. “You'd have taken that hatchet to me. Do not deny it. I might not have let you get too many hits in, but the intent would have been there.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she shrugged again. He would have deserved it. For lying to her. Pretending. Or worse, if he was sincere.

They were quiet for a while. It might have passed for peaceful at another time, but her insides were too twisted up. Her shoulders were tense, her wings tight against her back as they added to the harsh curl of her frame. She couldn't spread out like he did. Legs outstretched, boots crossed at the ankle. As if he wasn't crumbling inside.

But she'd seen his eyes. He hurt. Perhaps not as she did, but... he did hurt.

"Tell me a story," he said at last. "Not about you. I certainly wouldn't want to hear about that. But a story about why a bond-mate could frighten a woman. A strong, capable woman with a home all her own. With animals that adore her. With a sturdy roof over her head. Tell me a story of how that woman could think something as inconsequential as a bond could ruin all that."

She was crying. Didn't quite know when it had begun, but her heart twisted along with her stomach, and the tight hold she kept on her compartments was loosening. No matter how she scrambled, how she raged and grappled and tried to shove it all inside, she found herself answering.

Her voice raw.

Her tears streaming.

He didn't deserve it. To know. To hear anything at all.

He wasn't her mate, after all.

No one was.

Ever would be.

She felt strange. As if her limbs were not her own, and the words weren't either. Because she never would have answered him. Not for anything. And yet she was aware that someone was speaking, and it wasn't his low timbre, so then it must be her, mustn't it? But it couldn't be, because these matters were

private. Secret. Because they were confessed aloud, then it had happened. And it didn't. Shouldn't have.

Perhaps he was indulging her, calling her strong. Finding her capable. She hadn't always been. This girl that wasn't her. A wraith that moved about the land, tending to chores because... because there was no one else to do them. She'd always be alone after... after she found her mother dead.

Animals needed feeding. Plants needed tending. Milking had to be done or else there would be no more milk, and then what?

She'd been at the market, because that was what she did. She sat, and she handed out little pouches that were not sewn with the care like they used to be. Some even asked why the girl was there alone, and was she all right? Because she did not look very well.

She'd said it once. The words choking in her throat, but she'd managed it. And it had spread. Up and down the stalls, that the human woman was dead, and it was just her daughter now. Did they need to send the Proctor? Negotiate a new deal? Or just let her be. Half-blood that she was...

Didn't really belong there, anyway. Would give the young ideas.

Or maybe it was better. For some of the young Harquil that dallied with the foreigners because it was safe as they waited for their mates. Let them see they weren't so safe after all—could end up with a *complication*.

Until there was another face at her stall.

Smiling. Warm.

Not a woman with a screaming fledgling on her hip in want of lozenges. But a young man, with wings near to sunlight and hair to match.

He'd leaned in close, and there was nothing predatory in it. He'd asked for her name, and she'd given it with the same numbness that she'd shown to everyone else.

“You’re my mate, Wren,” he’d told her. So full of confidence.

She should feel something about it, shouldn’t she? If it was real.

But no, she was a half-blood, he said. With a sheepish turn of his mouth as if revealing he knew some terribly kept secret about her, and he was sorry she hadn’t been able to tell him herself. “I’ve waited such a long time for you.”

Had he? He did not look so very old. But she had no reason not to believe him, and although her heart was battered and broken, she was almost... relieved.

There would be someone, after all.

Someone to care about her. To think well of her.

He’d asked to take her home. He’d laughed at the suggestion of walking, the idea preposterous at such a distance. He’d carry her, he’d insisted, already reaching for her. She hadn’t wanted it, her stomach lurching at the prospect of a stranger touching her, holding her, but his smile was confident as he picked her up. Whispered that he was getting to touch his mate for the first time, and wasn’t that special?

She tried to smile. Tried to keep her manners when she felt little more than a queasy stomach and a prickle up and down her skin. Did it feel good? To be held?

In a way. Maybe. She didn’t know. It was enough to push through the fog of her grief, so perhaps she simply wasn’t able to interpret it correctly.

She’d had to direct him, of course. And he’d smile at her as she nudged him, and she supposed he was rather comely looking. Not that she’d really noticed anything like that before. There hadn’t been a point, after all.

Her mother had argued about it. That she could choose one of the foreign-folk to have as a husband, that she needn’t live out her days at home if she didn’t want to.

Wren had thought her silly. Absurd, even. Leave her mother? Everything they’d built for some stranger that didn’t

mean anything to her yet?

Thorn had bellowed loudly when they landed, forelegs up on the fence which bowed under his weight. She'd attempted an introduction, but the stranger—the mate?—was thirsty and he wanted to see her home.

Pump water wasn't enough, he said. Wasn't there something else?

She'd offered tea instead, which he'd only accepted after he'd pried further about something fermented and bubbly—things she'd seen at the market but that Mama had never had coin enough for them to try. He kept smiling at her, and she found it horribly disconcerting.

He sat at the table without asking where he should, and a lump settled in her throat when she turned to find him in Mama's chair.

She could have asked him to move.

Didn't.

He put his arm about her waist when she brought the tea. Tugged so hard she almost fell into his lap, but kept her balance enough that she leaned against his side instead. "You're prettier than I could have imagined."

Her cheeks flushed, utterly unused to compliments from anyone unrelated to her.

His grip tightened about her, and that felt good, didn't it? To be held and wanted, even if he was a little slow in letting her go to her own seat so she could sip her tea and make sense of the sudden change to... everything.

"We'll have to sell here, of course," he carried on, after he'd finished extolling how pleasing he found her physical appearance. "Find a good buyer. You'll like my home better, in any case. One of the highest towers in the city. Nearly at the very top." He glanced at her wings, and it was the first edge of a frown she'd seen from him. "There are stairs, don't worry. You won't be stuck in here. Not unless you'd like to be." A smile. Too wide, and her stomach flipped a little. Was it unpleasant? She didn't know. Maybe it was a spark of

something. A glimmer of something other than the weight of *everything* pressing in on her.

But to sell her home? As if anyone would buy it. Choose to live out here. Perhaps one of the real farms. They'd plough over the pastures and extend their crops. Or expand the fences and fill them with hoards of hesper.

She didn't want that.

It was small, and more work than she could handle all on her own, but it was hers.

He reached for her hand. Grasped it tightly. Brought it to his mouth where he placed a kiss upon the back of it. "You needn't look so worried," he assured her. "I'm going to take care of you."

That would be nice. To not have to think so much. To worry over every little thing. He was... maybe not her mate, but she was his. Wasn't she?

Did she want him to stay? He asked it, his hand on the door. It was getting late. He'd stayed a long while, plotting out a life that sounded... interesting. Fledglings. Festivals. His family was important, he said. She'd have a lot to learn, but she looked bright enough. New clothes. Maybe even dresses like the foreign women wore since they did not have to worry about their skirts fluttering about as they flew.

He liked that idea, his hand drifting to her hip. It was almost an embrace, she decided. Almost felt pleasant.

Did she want him to stay?

He asked it next to her ear. A breath of sound and steeped with something else that was wholly unfamiliar to her.

Stay? For what?

He did stay. She couldn't remember nodding. Couldn't remember saying much of anything at all. He did it for her. Complained a great deal, as well.

He liked to sit at the table. To watch her prepare meals, and smile, and tell her how nice this all was. Would be nicer still once they were situated in his home instead. There would be

stone walls instead of wood. Tapestries would soften and warm it in the winters. Didn't that sound nice?

And she'd nod, and try to decide why it all irked her so much, and then at night, when he was in her bed with his arm about her, she'd feel the prickle of tears in her eyes at the unfairness of it all.

He was waiting for her, he said. To get to know him a little, before they consummated the bond. Wasn't that kind of him? But he'd inched closer every night, and he'd started to touch her a little. Perhaps to see how she responded. Her hip. Her breast.

His fingers in her hair.

Then there was the night he kissed her. Pulled her beneath him and placed his hands on her face and his mouth moved gently at first. Harder after.

Did she know how hard it was to wait for her to want him back? That maybe he could awaken her side of the bond if he pushed just a little. His hand pushed beneath her shift, and her body didn't feel like hers any longer. It was a stiff, frozen thing that didn't like his touches but didn't know how to reject them. Reject him.

A mate wouldn't do that, would they? They'd want it. Be soft and yielding, and like when his tongue pushed into her mouth just a bit, would like the way he groaned against her ear.

But she didn't.

Her mother had told her about this. About being used, and how different it was when the wanting was mutual.

She felt used.

And when he took her, it hurt.

Maybe it hurt him as well with the way his face twisted. She didn't know.

The pain wasn't welcome. It was enough to push through the nothingness she felt, but that only left her all the more raw when he'd finished. When he kissed her shoulder, her neck,

and whispered how well she'd done, and did she know him yet?

She'd shoved away from him.

Ignored his enquiries. Maybe blurted something about the privy, but she couldn't be sure.

She didn't go there, in any case. Went out to the pump, and the water was cold. The wind was cold too. She rubbed between her legs and anywhere he'd kissed her, swirling water in her mouth before spitting it out into the grasses at her feet.

Better alone than this.

He followed. Watched her from the doorway, his mouth an angry twist—obviously insulted by her reaction.

“I want you to go,” she managed, her voice not as firm as she wanted, but her resolve growing as she regarded him. His posture as if he belonged there, his shoulder against the jamb, as if it was common to see a woman—a mate—washing herself free from him after being used.

“Wren,” he sighed, shaking his head as if she was being ridiculous and he was patient and kindly with her. “This is all a bit dramatic, don't you think? You're fine. I was gentle.”

Gentle, was he? When she felt bruised and sore, and he got to *tell* her how she felt.

She laughed. Which likely only let him think she was gripped by madness rather than reason, but she did not care. Let him think her selfish and horrid for rejecting her mate. She did not care.

Not anymore.

“Get out,” she pointed toward the skies, not caring in the least which way was correct. “You have no business here. Not with me. Not anymore.”

He scowled. And at first she thought he meant to argue, and it took everything in her not to shrink back at his approach. “You're a half-blood whore and no mate of mine. I thought it would be fun to taste you and now I have, I can safely say it was not worth the effort.”

He reached for her, perhaps to pull her close, perhaps to have her again, and she allowed neither. She struck him.

Hard.

Her hand stung and his face grew taut with rage, and she turned toward the house and tried to run, tried to make it before he could gather his wits.

But he grabbed her wing.

And pulled.

And it *hurt*.

She screamed. A loud yelp that tore from her throat and she couldn't pull free and she hadn't known fear like this. Hadn't known that men could be like this when she was used to her gentle father, his easy manners. His good-humour.

She fought. Wiggled.

And then Thorn was there.

A growling mass of fur that pawed at her attacker, sending him sprawling across the yard.

Maybe there was blood. Maybe it was hers, maybe it was his. But her face was warm with it, and she touched it dumbly. Was Thorn going to kill him? She should do something about that, shouldn't she? Try to help, to intervene.

But her limbs wouldn't work. Not even to run into the house and bolt the door like she ought to. Her will was gone and...

And so was he.

A blur of feathers and curses, and there was Thorn, nudging at her with his great head, licking at her face, her neck, and he was warm while she was cold.

And her arms moved of their own accord, wrapping around his neck and pulling him close as the whole of it pushed at her, pressed at her. His coaxing, his wretched smiles, his touches.

He'd lied. Thought it all a jape, to seduce the gullible girl that would believe him to be a mate simply because he'd said it.

No more.

Never again.

“Thank you,” she murmured into Thorn’s fur between her sobs. “I’ll be one of your grimbles, if you’ll have me.”

Another lick, this time against her arm, and her skin prickled from the contrast in temperatures. She needed to go in. To clean. To purge any bit of him from her home.

Because it was hers, and no one else’s.

And it was going to stay that way.

Was supposed to, at least. She’d adapted once already, when Merryweather appeared and insisted that this was meant to be her home as well. But she didn’t have it in her to accommodate Braum as well. Even if... even if he was slow to smile. When he was quiet and helpful, thoughtful of his every movement.

If she was going to have one... if it was real...

Why couldn’t it be someone like him?

He’d grown so still. So tense. The more she spluttered out in her broken way. It was less a story and more a confession, pulled from the depths of her, a wound that had festered by her lack of attention to it.

She should want to take it back. To keep it her private shame, but now that it was out, purged...

She was better for it.

But one glance at Braum—the tightness of his mouth, the tension in his jaw, his shoulders...

He wasn’t.

She wiped at her eyes, resigned to enduring his reaction. Perhaps this would see the truth out of him at last. He’d see she was faulty prey, that if he was simply a better liar, she wasn’t worth his effort.

And if he truly felt she was his mate, then...

She felt sorry for him.

He'd leave, of that she was certain. He wouldn't come back. He'd believe her at last that she'd accept no mate at all, not after all the rest of it.

She went into the house. Left him there beneath the tree. She washed her face in cool water and set the kettle to boil, and still he sat there.

Until she went back again, a mug in her hand that she held out for him. But he simply stared, uncomprehendingly, until she uttered his name gently. "Braum," she urged, and he blinked.

Frowned.

He took it, although nothing in his expression suggested that he recognised it for what it was.

He moved. A twist of legs and motion, and he kept the mug in one hand while the other was suddenly about her middle. He was on his knees, his face at her stomach, and she was too shocked to have much reaction at all. "Wren," he breathed, and he shook. Trembled?

She did not know what to do. Not in the least. She did not know if this was meant for her comfort or a desperate plea for his own, but a lump settled in her throat, and she had a free hand too and...

She laid it against the top of his head. "Braum," she answered back, and there was another ripple through him. This was rather backward wasn't it? Not that she had ever imagined what she might do after telling that particular tale. If she would want to bury herself in that someone's arms, to sob and have it murmured to her that he was the one that had been wrong. That he never should have done those things, never never, and...

He murmured those things against her. While her fingers drifted ever so slightly through his hair. Dark. Not...

It didn't matter.

Shouldn't matter.

But even now, it did.

He stood.

Glanced at his hand holding the mug, the other that she kept outstretched holding her own.

“If I asked for his name, would you give it?”

The voice was grim. Raw. His eyes were red as he looked down at her. Not severe, not angry. But haunted.

She'd had those dreams. Some where Thorn hadn't come. Others where he'd taken her away to live in the tower, sold her home and only then did he tell her it had all been lies. He'd bring his true mate in and they would laugh at her while they made her walk out of the city.

A silly girl with nowhere to go.

“Why?” she got out, her throat tight and her insides twisting, because...

He wasn't touching her.

Wasn't reaching for her. Not like before.

Did she want him to?

He released a shaky breath, his eyes darting away from hers. “So I might bring the law against him,” he confessed after a moment of tense silence. “So he will know the rest of his days that my mate is not without protection. That he should pay for what he did.”

She didn't flinch at the word, and maybe that was something. But her stomach roiled at the thought of any such event. Of people—of *anyone* else knowing.

Her father.

She reached for him instead. Her one hand gripping at his shirt. It was too cool to be without an outer coat, but there he was. Standing beneath the shade when she should have offered him a fire.

“No, I will not give his name,” Wren answered. There were no tears left. At least, for now. She sighed and released him. Sitting down and taking a sip of her tea while he stood where she'd left him, mouth twisting and free hand coiling to a fist.

She let him stew. Let him think. Until finally he sat down beside her, scowling into his own mug.

“Why?” It was his turn to ask, and she gave him an indulgent smile, utterly lacking in warmth. “Who would believe me? And why would they?” She shook her head as she watched him grow angry once again, avoiding her attention and looking out to the far pasture instead. “I’m sorry,” she offered. Not for having told him. She wasn’t, although she was certain she should be. But because he was struggling. With all he’d heard.

Or maybe...

Maybe with what he thought his people were. That they were not capable of cruelty. Of using another.

His head turned sharply, and she looked down at her mug just as quickly. “*I am sorry,*” Braum bit out, bitter and certain. He did not give her time to question the particulars, because he shifted, angling his body so he could look at her—even if she would not do the same. His breath hitched, and she could imagine his fingers curling about his mug, his grip a little too tight. “I do not think I have ever hated someone before, but I do now.”

She shrugged, because she could not undo that. And perhaps it was nice for her feelings to be shared, for the enemy to belong to someone else as well.

There was a pang, a worry she had stifled before, but comforted herself that the circumstances would never present themselves again. There would be no other half-bloods for him to seduce, no other girls so vulnerable, without families to protect them, to keep them safe.

“You get used to it,” she offered at last because... she had. Perhaps not how she should, bottling it up and shoving it away, the memories slipping free mostly at night and within her dreams. When had they last been pleasant? She couldn’t recall. The most respite she got was on the nights when she didn’t dream of anything at all.

His hand came into her vision, and she startled. And then it fell away and she was almost sorry for it. But she had raised her head again, and that must have been his aim. “Do you see him, when you look at me?”

She sighed. Yes. No.

“I hadn’t. Until... until Firen started in about... about mates.” Another glare, this one directed toward the sky itself. “I can’t be that for you,” she reiterated, in case that had been lost in the midst of all her blubbing. “Even if it’s... real. I won’t let you sell my home, I won’t let you take me away to people I do not know.”

“Wren, I would *never* ask that of you.”

He sounded so wounded at the mere suggestion, but she couldn’t allow herself to pity him. It needed saying. If there was going to be clarity between them, she would have him understand.

She hadn’t spoken up, before. And if she had, he might have gone away sooner. Before... well, before.

She shrugged. “But you could. If you chose. And they’d let you make me. Please don’t say they wouldn’t. They already had to make allowances for Mama to stay, and they were very clear how few protections they could give me. Not foreign, not a Harquil.”

A grumble that was more of a growl, and she saw him balance his mug against the trunk of the tree so he could kneel next to her. “You are not listening. I do not know enough of our laws to know if you fall in between. What I am saying is that *I* would not do those things. I would not take you from your home. I would not want you to feel unsafe with me. Or in the home we choose to live in. If... if you ever chose to allow me to call your home my own.”

Her brow furrowed, and she blinked at him. “Live here?” Some of the tension eased from him, as if in relief. As if she finally understood something that she most assuredly did not. “Don’t be absurd.” He sighed deeply and hung his head.

“Weren’t *you* listening? I’ll not have a mate, Braum. It isn’t worth it. I won’t be hurt like that again.”

“He was *not* your mate.” He was always so careful with her, whether it was in tone or in action, but not now. Not about something that, to him, was elemental. But he did not reach for her. Grasp at her. Shake the words into her until she accepted them. He sank down until his back was against the tree trunk, his wing tickling at her arm. “Can that at least be established between us? A liar, most certainly. Scum, I will allow. But... not that.”

Wren almost—*almost*—smiled.

“He said he was. At first. I don’t... I can’t know for sure. Not if I don’t feel anything in return.”

Braum sighed deeply.

And then he did reach for her.

His hand cupped her chin, and he drew it slightly upward, and while she could have wriggled back and perhaps even given his arm a smack for the impertinence, she remained still. “A man sacrifices for his mate. To give her the life that she wants, that she needs. To make sure she is happy, that her home is to her liking, so she is comfortable and safe if any fledglings should come.” Her mouth grew dry. “Does that sound like the cad?”

Her stomach tightened. Her heart too.

“No,” she agreed, and ducked her head, feeling relieved. Feeling worse, also. Because he’d never made her feel that way. Not from the very start. And any true-born Harquil woman would have sent him off at his first smile.

But she hadn’t.

She waited for him to press her about his own attributes. How he’d wanted to give her so much without any talk of payment. Even her meagre offering of meals was begrudgingly accepted.

He wanted to take care of her. Because... to him... she was...

She pulled back from him. And he didn't sigh, he simply let her go. Watched as she curled back into her tangle of limbs and sipped at the last of her tea. She was still reeling from having told him at all. Was trying to decide what to do without the effort of suppressing it all, the constant weight and pressure that resided in her insides, corrupting what should have been quiet, restful days.

Did she regret it? Would he *make* her regret it?

She peeked at him. And he caught her, because of course he did, and his lips quirked upward ever so slightly. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked her, and then his eyes crinkled about the edges as he tapped at her nearest shoulder. "And moving these does not count as a proper answer."

Which she did not owe him, the cynical part of her insisted, but she chewed at her inner cheek and did not say it. But she shrugged anyway because it would always remind her of her mother, but she indulged him with a *proper* response all the same. "There's always more to do. Animals to feed, stalls to muck. Lozenges to make. The rest will settle back down and maybe I'll get better at pretending it never happened at all. And then maybe I'll be able to sleep at night."

How was he able to pull so much out of her? To confess her little troubles in ways that he had no business knowing. Perhaps she had not been gifted with bond itself, with knowing when a mate was real and meant for her. Maybe instead she received a compulsion, where his questions needed answering, where she cared when he hurt and looked at her with eyes so tired and so sad.

When he looked a little too much how she felt.

She turned her head, her cheek resting on her forearms. "Have you been sleeping?" At another time, in another life, she might have reached out and touched the fine lines that spoke of his exhaustion, might have skimmed her fingertip across them to see if they smoothed at a simple touch.

But not the Wren she was now. "You look rather terrible."

Another smile that did not reach his eyes. "I am fine."

She did not like to be pushed. Liked when her answers were left alone and the subject allowed to shift away with little fuss. But he'd been her friend, and if he wanted to share in some of her troubles, then maybe it was not so wrong for her to do the same.

"That is not what I asked."

He blinked, obviously surprised she had not allowed him to avoid her query. "I have not," he relented slowly. "I have had much on my mind."

She nodded. Shouldn't ask if it had been about her. That would be rude. Arrogant, even. "About me?"

She skimmed her finger across the edge of her mug, avoiding him, her heart quickening in her chest that the words had slipped out of their own accord.

A breathless sort of laugh escaped him. "Yes, about you. About how many days I might go without trying to see you again. What I would do when you bolted the door in my face and ordered me away." A sigh, deep and haggard. "It's a terrible thing, you know. Trying to listen to what you say. Respect your wishes. Be what you need. I was not aware a bond could be so complicated."

It stung. Nothing in his tone suggested he'd meant any kind of insult, but it hurt all the same. She'd asked for nothing. Tried to release him on more than one occasion, even before she'd known of his... affliction. "My apologies," she countered tartly, sitting up straighter. She opened her mouth to say more, but he ducked his head, bringing it so that he was looking up at her, his smile warmer than it had been.

"I was not complaining," he assured her gently. "You wanted honesty from me, and I wish to give you what you ask for. You ask for so little, after all."

Her cheeks burned.

"You should have heard my sister," Braum continued, his tone becoming less grave. A big lighter. More fond. That he cared for his sister was more than apparent. That other Wren, the one that maybe had visited her father through her girlhood,

who knew the Harquil ways and would make less of a fool of herself—she wanted to meet her. Would she be like Firen? Or quiet and steady like Braum?

“She sent Cyrras to the market so many times those first days. Insisted he should learn all of her favourites. To know *her* better, she said.” He shook his head, but there was no losing the warmth in his eyes. “Nonsense, the lot of it. She simply likes her food and her pretty baubles, and he was happy to indulge her.”

He did not reach for her, but there was something in his look that suggested he wanted to. Perhaps there was another Braum as well. The one to match with that other Wren. Where things might be easy, their affection free and without hesitation.

She felt sorry for this Braum, that he should be left with her instead.

“And you think,” he continued, his voice a soft rasp, as if caught in some tension in his throat. “That I mind sharing my lumber and my time? That I would not trade both a thousand times over, if it meant sitting here with you?”

Her throat ached, and some of the sting from his earlier comment. He wasn't complaining. Not yet. Not when she did send him away again. Even... after all this. He knew she must, didn't he? He'd understand this time? That she might accept a friend with a little coaxing and a great many rules in place, but anything more, anything else that would mean... *more...*

She couldn't do it.

Perhaps that was a failing on her part. An inability to heal quickly enough, to set aside wrongs and stubbornly hold to those first determinations that saw her through the first, awful days after it happened.

When she hurt so badly, in body and somewhere deeper.

When she'd wept as she realised there might be a baby, the realisation coming slowly. Making her feel even more stupid and childish that she hadn't put a stop to it sooner.

Wept again, this time in relief, when her bloods came.

Only to feel a fresh devastation at the loneliness that followed.

Alone. Forever this time.

Better that, she'd promised herself. Over and over until it became as true to her as the necessity of milking and feeding and mucking. Better alone than to endure a careless, thoughtless mate.

She glanced at Braum. Always watching her, sometimes his smile quick for her, other times slow and uncertain of being caught.

He wasn't careless. Wasn't thoughtless.

She rubbed at her forehead and curled into herself again.

And felt him place his hand between her wings. He did not move. Perhaps he didn't dare to. Which was fair, and she did not know what she might do about it. It was one thing when he'd gripped about her middle, full of his own emotion as he struggled with a story that wasn't his. It was quite another when the touch was for her sake, and she couldn't decide if she liked it or not. Didn't trust herself to know what was safe, what to encourage, what to...

Enjoy.

She sniffled. Wiped at her eyes. Promised herself that if he moved even the slightly bit, she would wriggle away and cling to the other side of the tree and scold him if he tried to close the distance between them.

And he'd listen. For some reason, she was sure of that. Of him.

And it frightened her.

"I can't be what you want," Wren reminded him. She'd been honest with him from the very start. Perhaps she hadn't known all he felt, exactly what he'd wanted, but this was worse. If he wasn't a liar after all. If he was not playing games with her and was bonded to a woman that couldn't want him, *didn't* want him, then...

“You do not know what I want,” Braum countered. And she waited for his hand to begin rubbing, and there was that horrid part of her that wanted him to do it. Either to prove to herself that he wanted more than she could give, or because there was the constant *itch* of human skin that did not care much for the bone and feathers protruding from her back. “We could discuss that, if you like, but I’m not sure you’re ready to listen.”

Her mouth twisted, and she did not allow herself to glare and huff at him. “There is nothing wrong with my ears,” she insisted, and if it was a little sour, then she simply couldn’t help it.

“No,” he agreed. “You’ve fine ears.”

Her cheeks shouldn’t flush with heat. It was mortifying, her reaction and yes, the way it pleased her to receive any sort of compliment from him at all.

It was pathetic, but even acknowledging it and chiding her reactions did nothing but add to her embarrassment.

“What I meant,” Braum continued, withdrawing his hand as if in anticipation of her response. “There is little point in discussing my wants until you’re ready to believe them. To accept just how much, or how little, I need.” She peeked at him, and his eyes were serious. “You’ve been hurt. So badly. And I wish there was something I could do to help you.”

She nodded. He thought her broken. It shouldn’t twist about inside her to think he was giving up on her. The note had come before. When she was a half-blood without a mother, without a people, who he thought was merely mistrustful of the unfamiliar.

He knew better now. There was no helping. Just trudging onward, finding little moments of peace. Contentment was more constant than happiness, anyway.

“There is something we could discuss,” Braum pressed, his hand disappearing into a pocket before pulling out the coins she’d given him. “Never in all my years, have I heard of mates paying one another.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him not to use that word. But perhaps she needed to hear it. For it to belong to another context, another man, rather than...

That other one.

The cad.

The brute.

Something settled. Soothed.

Her father was someone's mate. And while their bond was complicated, he never would have treated her the way the wretch had.

"I will concede, however, that you do not see me in such a way. Not yet." The last he added beneath his breath, an amendment for his own sake, and she did not bother to correct him. "I will take it. I won't argue with you. So long as you agree that it's mine."

Her brow furrowed. "Of course it's yours. I gave it to you."

He nodded, and she grew suspicious of him when he did not elaborate further on such an unnecessary clarification.

She could have pressed him on it, but that would have led to an argument, and she did not think she had it in her. He was taking his payment, and she could not ask for more from him. Not when it had only cost her a story.

She swallowed thickly.

Her story.

A weighty price. More than the crowns tucked into the pouch that went back into his pocket. Secrets for him to carry, for him to keep safe. And a piece of her trust along with it, that he would not use it against her. Would not...

Her heart fluttered.

She sat up straighter, suddenly alarmed that she had not extracted his promise before.

"Braum, please do not tell anyone. About... what happened. *Please.*"

He stared at her, and her panic grew. “I will not speak to you again if I hear of it at the market. I can be stubborn when I need to be, so believe me when I tell you that. Not your sister, not to anyone. That story is mine and...” She tugged at her braid fiercely. “Do not make me regret giving it to you.”

He scowled. Not at her, but at the ground. Sparing her, it seemed, because his tone was one of deep offense. “I wanted the law for you. I wanted justice. You trusted me with the truth of your parents. I should hardly think you need to worry about something as personal as this.”

Her grip did not loosen on her braid, but she kept quiet. Waiting.

Until he looked at her.

The scowl softening, his expression warming, even if his sigh spoke of a long-suffering patience that was near to an end.

He reached for her. Cupped her chin in his large palm, and made sure she was looking properly. “None will hear that tale from me. Not my sister, not the market. And until you wish it, not the law, either. I want your trust, Wren. I’ll not treat lightly any crumbs that you give me.”

She wasn’t going to cry. Not for him, and not for herself.

But she might have wanted to. For the girl she might have been. The one that might have loved him a little, for how well he respected her.

Not the one she was currently. That felt her insides curl and was afraid of it, afraid of him. Of what he made her feel and how it might be used against her.

How it might be taken away.

She chewed at her lip, and he didn’t sigh at her. Didn’t huff and puff that she was slow and frightened and that she wasn’t warming to him fast enough.

Instead, he got to his feet and offered his hand, and she knew he wouldn’t glare at her if she refused it.

Which made it easier to take it so he could help her up. And if she liked the way her hand felt in his, then that was just an admiration of his strength, just as she might give to anyone.

He didn't tarry. Didn't coax out promises or insist on coming back again. Which was good. Saved her the trouble of telling him not to come back. He did lean down and pick up his mug, handing it to her with a hint of hesitation. "You wouldn't let me wash those, would you?"

She rolled her eyes and almost said yes, simply to prove him wrong.

"You suppose correctly," Wren muttered instead, retrieving the mug and holding it close to her own.

He laughed, short, but warm. It was a begrudging admission to herself, but she liked the sound of it. "Someday," he concluded, and her mouth twisted ruefully.

He might be right. She didn't seem able to stick to her stubborn resolve quite so well when he was about, which was a frightening prospect all its own.

"We'll see," she managed, her insides twisting again. Because... that meant he'd come back. Wanted to come back. Except he wasn't supposed to. Or she wasn't supposed to want him to, or...

Merryweather bolted through the door as she opened it, startling her as she nearly tripped on her companion, and she was rewarded with another of his laughs, this time fuller. Richer.

She bolted the door, because she could, and because she was almost ready to urge him back into the house to wash the mugs after all as punishment and that...

That felt a little too near to what her parents had once shared. Laughing and shared chores and simply... living.

And it had been good, for a while.

But her mother had still died alone.

It was a sobering reminder. And when she looked out the window, he was already gone, leaving her to wash and try to

get a hold of her thoughts, of the turn of the day and the little compartments in her mind and heart that were suddenly open.

And she had no one to ask what to do with them.

“You’re no help,” she reminded Merryweather, who batted at her elbow with her nose, suggesting her luncheon in the stable had been inadequate. “You’re perfectly happy after your husbands leave you with your kits.”

She picked her up. Gave her a squeeze and prayed that would not be her fate.

16. Sit

Wren didn't expect him back so soon. Not that she expected him back at all.

She'd been tending the morning chores, her arms weighted down with the milk pails as Temperance and Calliope bellowed their displeasure that she hadn't opened the stall doors for them to meander toward the pasture. One was destined for the spring house, the other the kitchen, but she stopped abruptly to see Braum at the fence line, milk splashing out and wetting her boot.

Her mouth twisted into a scowl. She hated the waste, but she hated wet boots more than anything, and she hadn't worn her waxed pair as the skies were clear and the winds mild.

She went to the springhouse. Then to the kitchen.

Then back to release her disgruntled hesper out to take their ire out on the man perched on the far fence.

She'd have to deal with him, but she was suspicious that he was making her come to him rather than approaching her properly.

It was different. And different made her nervous.

She could ignore him. Hope he simply went away. But then Calliope gave him a rather powerful nudge with her large head and he slipped off the fence with a bellow of his own, and she supposed she did care if he was hurt. A little.

More than a little.

She shoved that thought aside.

Wren didn't run, but she did hurry. But she needn't have worried. He was back on his feet and was shaking his head, his hand delving into his pocket. "We were to ask your mistress

first,” he was saying, eyes on Calliope. “What if your stomach is peculiar and you shouldn’t eat these?”

But Calliope seemed to think nothing of stomachs and asking permission as she nuzzled persistently toward his person.

His eyes came up, and he noticed her coming. His expression shifted, and he looked rather sheepish. It made him appear younger somehow, less worn. Was that because of her? The toll it took to be forbidden from one’s mate?

Her stomach squirmed unpleasantly. “I was going to ask you, first,” he insisted, as if he was committing some great wrong. Maybe he was. No one had ever tried to feed any of her animals before. “This one had other ideas.”

“You are fortunate it wasn’t Temperance. She’s pushed me across the stalls more than once if I get in the way of her grain.”

He glanced over her as if there were some bruises or marks that required his attention and she rolled her eyes. “I know better than to get in her way, now. You’ll have to learn that on your own.”

Braum’s attention shifted sharply, and there was something too near to hope kindling there. She hadn’t meant to say that. To suggest that his presence would become customary. But she’d said it, and to fumble through a half-hearted excuse seemed silly.

He was determined to come. She would get to decide in what capacity. Hesper treat-giver was not such a bad title.

Yet her fingers still strayed to her braid, and she fiddled lightly. Not a tug. She wasn’t anxious, after all. There was no reason to be. “You’ve so few chores that you have time to sit on a woman’s fence and tantalise her hesper?”

He stood up a little straighter. No longer sheepish—he seemed rather to be bracing himself. “I thought it prudent to make friends with the residences, seeing as I will be attending to their fence today.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh, really.”

“It needed oiling,” he reminded her.

Her stomach twisted. “Yes. And I was to pay for it.”

She hadn’t noticed the canister at his feet. The spool of rags and large brush that accompanied it.

Her thoughts drifted to their last conversation. His peculiar insistence that those coins were now his—presumably to do with as he pleased.

He’d known even then how he would spend them.

Which would mean more of his time and his labour, more coins she would owe him afterward. And she had no intention of asking her father for more, not when she’d so soon settled her previous debt.

Did he think that something had changed between them? That she’d softened so greatly that she would let him bury her in guilt and obligation?

“I think not,” she stated firmly. “I’m sorry you wasted your pay, but that oil will not be going anywhere near my fence.”

His brows raised and his head tilted. “And why not?”

Her jaw clenched and she felt the hesper move away from them, their interest fixed on the sweet grass now that the treats had been collected.

“Because I will be back where I started!” she bit out, more harshly than she had intended. “Because I had to ask my father once already to pay you the last time. Because I don’t want to owe you anything.”

“Why?”

He asked it so calmly. As if her reaction was expected, even the depth of her objections. Which only served to infuriate her more. Hadn’t he been *listening*, before? Hadn’t he understood?

“You should *know* why,” she insisted.

He hummed, low in his throat. “What I know, is that if it was another man in front of you. A scoundrel and a cad and as vile a seducer as ever lived, then you should be afraid of being indebted to him.”

She flinched. Maybe he did understand.

“But I know I am not a scoundrel and a cad, and if there is any seduction, it will be to win the favour of your hesper. Perhaps even your grimble-keep, should I be brave enough to attempt it.”

She swallowed thickly, and he took a measured step forward. “I know that my mate’s fence needs oiling. And so I lie awake at night, knowing it needs doing, knowing she has plenty of other tasks to hold her attention, and that I might offer this one, small gesture to make her day a little easier. Now, does that sound so frightening?”

Yes.

No.

He reached for her braid, pulling it gently from her grasp before she could begin tugging. Which she wasn’t. Or hadn’t been. Even if her fingers twitched at the loss as he pushed it over her shoulder and gave it a pat, as if promising her hair it might be safe from her abuses there.

She wanted to huff. Wanted to banish him.

Her head ached. The skin between her wings itched. She was supposed to argue with him, hold her ground so that he did not coax her into yet another concession.

And it would be easy to simply thank him. To go back into the house and set an order to her day. Remove some of the spent plants from the garden. Organise her seeds. Plot out what she intended to do for winter.

Just give in, a little bit. Take him at his word and wait for him to ask too much, to disappoint her, to betray her...

She groaned.

Turned.

She had chores to do. Ones that did not include oil and fencing and spending her day among the hesper, being nudged at and bothered from her work.

Let him tend it, if it would please him so much.

“No objection?” Braum asked in some surprise.

“I’ve plenty,” Wren answered without bothering to pause. “But none I intend to share today.”

When she felt better. When she’d slept more and felt more sure of herself.

She went back to the house. Into the cupboard, the jar at the far back that held a portion of her coins. Not all of them. Mama said that was foolish to keep them all in one place—as if robbers frequently roamed the fields looking for fortunes kept in kitchen jars. But it was a habit she’d kept, and she poured out a portion, frowning down at the pile. It seemed too meagre, but it was a gesture. A reminder that she had not agreed to his proposal.

She slipped it into a pouch, one that would have been filled with fragrant herbs and sold, but now would be given to the stubborn man out in her pasture. She cinched it tightly and placed it on the kitchen table.

It could wait there for his supper. Labour bought and paid for, even if the rate was heavily discounted.

She did not like that part, but there was little she could do about it. Not if she wanted to keep oil in the lamps and grain in the feed-buckets, and meat to supplement for Merryweather and Thorn and their hunting.

No one would go hungry from her pride.

Wren went to the garden. Better to work than to stare out the window and worry herself sick.



He did not want her coins.

That much was more than obvious from the way his mouth twisted. He did not open the pouch, but from the weight alone he must have known that the amount was far less than it had been before.

She’d invited him in.

Or really, the weather had. The winds were beginning to blow fiercely, and it made the tree out front less appealing when she had more than adequate shelter to offer.

Why, then, was it still so hard to do?

The words stuck in her throat, even as Merryweather twined about his ankles as he stood in the doorway. Finished for the day? Or merely hungry?

Hungry, she decided. When his attention drifted more toward the table than to her, and he was willing to respond to a wave of her hand more than an invitation lodged in her throat.

Only to frown at the pouch, already knowing what it was.

“Wren,” he began, and she sat in her own chair with a little more force than was necessary.

“We needn’t discuss it,” she insisted, hoping against hope he would allow the subject to rest. “But I would feel better if you took it.” And supposedly that mattered to him.

Her stomach twisted as he picked it up, turning it over in his large palm.

Merryweather, traitor that she was, took the chair beside Braum and looked at him expectantly. He blinked, as if drawn from his own thoughts, and held the pouch out to Merry. “What do you think? Should we fuss first?”

She nibbled on the string that pulled the pouch closed, and Wren rolled her eyes. “Trying to shift her loyalties against me?”

“Never,” Braum insisted seriously. “Merely taking lessons. She won you over, after all. I’d like to do the same.”

Her cheeks heated and her attention dropped to her plate. She could tell him how Merryweather had managed it, but he was already employing much of the same methods. Stubbornness. A staunch determination that this was home now, and Wren could fight it all she liked, but the choice had already been made.

But it was easy to do for a *leptus* that only wanted companionship and the occasional treat. And breakfast. And

supper too, if the stable was light in pests.

A man was an entirely different matter.

Even if he did make himself useful in her pastures. And she had only to feed him on occasion and send him on his way again...

How long before he ended up in her bed as Merryweather had done?

She coughed into her cup, and both Merry and Braum looked at her—one in offence, the other with concern—as she spluttered and waved her hand at them. She was fine. She'd just breathed in a little milk, that was all.

Wren rubbed at her head, willing her thoughts to settle, for the anxious feeling in her stomach to ease so she could eat, and Braum sighed just a little as he took the pouch and placed it in his pocket. "Better?"

Her throat was still too tight, but she nodded anyway. "I am grateful," she reminded him, her voice smaller than it should have been. "I just..."

He shook his head. "I understand, Wren. Really. If you want me as a workman, I can tolerate that. Although I preferred being your friend."

She bit her lip, hard.

Friends were paid in favours—or so he claimed. In meals and sweet biscuits and shared cups of tea. Not inadequate amounts of coins that likely were more insult than true payment.

"You're not my workman," she admitted quietly.

His eyes shone, and he sat a little straighter. "Well." He stopped. Smiled down at his meal. "Well," he repeated.

It was as much as she could give, at the moment. And perhaps if she was more gracious, she would have asked for her pouch back and the coins along with it, but she didn't.

Evidently he could coax concessions out of her without an argument after all.



Wren kept waiting for him to ask to stay with her. To remind her of his rights, and his place in her bed.

But he didn't.

He came to say goodbye to her when he was satisfied with his work on her fence, then he left. With a wistful sort of smile and a nod, and there was no talk of an evening meal or obligation at all. Just a quiet awareness that she would see him again.

And it turned to a comfort rather than a bother.

He could only draw out oiling for so long before it became clear he was merely sitting in the pasture with her hesper, biding his time and pretending he had business there. She confronted him on the second day, and he made another attempt at one of her shrugs—and it looked as awkward and unwieldy as it had the first time.

It brought a smile to her lips, however, which she was rather certain was his aim.

But the next time he visited, it was with a load of wood and tools in a cart. Just a delivery, he said. She needn't pay it any mind.

Which of course was nonsense as she poked around all of the supplies while he took the cart and its hesper back from whence it came. They should fight about it. He hadn't the right to build anything at all, and nothing was in such disrepair that he should need a pile of boards quite that high.

He came back while she was making biscuits. Did not even have the courtesy to knock on her door, merely stuck his head through the open kitchen window.

"Smells good," he observed, his eyes darting about in search of the source.

"A pity, since I only share with those I've bargained with. And you seem to be dreaming up work all on your own."

He had the audacity to place his forearms on the kitchen window ledge, and her mouth tightened. He looked too relaxed, too much like he belonged there. Too amiable and easy while she was all twisted up inside whenever he was near.

“It seemed rude to bring up a problem without being willing to tend to the solution myself.”

Her brow quirked. “Problem?”

At least he moved his arms, even if it was to rub at the back of his neck instead. “Your front door is cracking in the suns. The house should have a porch this direction. Keep out the rains as well.”

It wasn’t an insult to her father. It wasn’t. Her mother either. It had been more than enough to have a house at all, even if it wasn’t perfect.

“Don’t look like that,” Braum urged, leaning forward again. “I mean no insult. You’ll like it. And if you don’t, I’ll rip it off again. Put it all back as it was, cracks and all.”

What bothered her most was that she hadn’t noticed. She used that door every day. Multiple times a day, but when was the last time she’d *looked* at it. She couldn’t recall.

But he had.

And he’d said nothing. To save her adding it to her list of things that needed her attention. Needed skills she did not possess.

“That will take ages, won’t it?” Wren fretted, fiddling with the cloth she’d soon use to pull the biscuits from the heat.

He hummed a little, still watching her, still bracing himself for her objections. The ones she should have. That, even now, were bubbling, simmering in her veins. Warnings and cautions that had felt like the wisdom of experience and now...

Felt like fussing for no reason.

Because Braum wanted to be here. Wanted to be doing these things.

“It takes what it takes. Besides, there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

He shouldn’t say such things. Not when it left her flustered and uncertain.

“Does that count as a bargain? Have I earned a biscuit later?”

She tugged at her braid, willing the heat to leave her cheeks. “Maybe.”

He grinned at her. Which only made her stomach twist as she flicked the cloth in her hand in his direction. “Leave me be,” she insisted. “I’ve work to do.”

He chuckled, and left her window.



A porch was not what she expected.

She’d thought it an overhang above the door to keep out the rain and sun. A little shade, a bit of shelter.

This was a structure. With a roof and a floor, and she had no idea what she needed with such a space. It was excessive to the extreme, and she told him so with greater frequency every time she took him a meal. Not inside. Not when a blanket had migrated out beneath the tree for them to sit upon and look at this... this *porch*, he was concocting.

“You are not building yourself a room are you?” she asked one afternoon, full of suspicion and nervous dread that she’d finally uncovered his true motivation.

He’d laughed at her, the sound so abrupt and good-humoured that it was easier to believe his adamant denials. “I’m waiting,” he added, a small smile at his mouth even as hers twisted and she grew uncomfortable. It was one thing to enjoy him being about. It was another entirely to allow herself to imagine him here permanently.

It would feel crowded. Intrusive. She’d felt both, after all, in her home and with her person and...

A cad and a brute had been in her home.

Not a mate.

The reminder was quicker in coming than it had been before. It didn't put her at ease, didn't allow her insides to stop twisting about themselves, but she could breathe. Didn't cry. Which was something.

He was waiting.

For her to invite him in. To stay. For this to be his home. For her room to be shared.

He'd be waiting a very long time if the thought even now could leave her so flustered, made her want to hide away in the stable-loft. Until there were only animals to think about, gardens and lozenges and nothing about men and *relations*.

There was a new dread that filled her. Each morning he came, his days eking into the afternoons. She did not know how to explain him to her father when next he came. She lacked the words, and her emotions were too tangled to say anything properly.

And she thought of Firen. Of the last time she'd introduced him. How wretched that whole thing had become. The last market had been cancelled by a span of bad weather, Braum's project covered by tarps that he'd meticulously tied down.

Then promptly untied again, worried he'd locked her in the house with no way to tend her chores.

She'd a back door, she reminded him. The access to the privy and the breezeway in between.

He'd grumbled something, then went back to tying on the waxed fabrics, her porch dry despite the fierce winds and ample rain.

It had cancelled her arrangement with her father as well. To see his home, if only from the outside. Not cancelled. Postponed.

She hadn't seen Braum during the storm. Hadn't expected to, as he couldn't work so there was pretence for his visits. He couldn't barter for her time and attention.

It should have been a relief, and perhaps it was on the first day. When she'd finished with Temperance and Calliope in the stable, stripped out of her soaked clothes and tucked in with Merryweather for a quiet, lazy day with no one to see and judge if her tasks went undone until the morrow.

The next day, she'd almost missed him.

The third, she was antsy and cross, unsettled in her own skin in ways that were unfamiliar.

So she cleaned. From top to bottom, as Merryweather looked on with one eye open, lounging in the bed rather than making the drizzly trek to the stable for her usual afternoon.

By the fourth day, the rains had gone. And she felt a stirring anticipation as she glanced out the window. Surely it was too wet to work still, the ground too soggy. He wouldn't come, not for a few days more.

Except he had.

Not for long. Just to check on things, he said, untying tarps and spending an absurdly long time looking over each board and plank.

She'd put the kettle before she'd even been aware of her own intention. Asked him in and watched him smile at her as he settled at her table.

They hadn't talked of anything serious. She hadn't broached the subject of her father; he didn't pester about mates.

It was quiet, and peaceful, and felt...

Nice.

Then it was work again. While she worried and fretted in between bouts of enjoying it all too much. The newness of the extension, the slow, yet steady progress.

That wasn't a room. But was the size of one when she balanced on the frame, Braum staring at her with full intention of catching her if she wobbled on the board. She might call her wings useless, but they were more than capable of holding her balance on just such an occasion.

He wouldn't know that. He'd think them inefficient, like a *fledgling*.

It was an unkind thought. One riddled with old wounds that hadn't ever meant to be inflicted.

"I am thinking a wood roof," Braum commented. "Unless it will bother you."

She peered up at the beams he'd somehow managed to tie into the structure of the house. She'd had to sweep the kitchen floor more often, dust and shavings making their way through the seams of the panelling, but she could not begin to make sense of how it all worked. It was sturdy. Nothing shifted or moved when she'd sneak out at night and poke at the supporting pillars and wonder at the whole of it.

The house had been finished before she'd even been born. A feat, her father called it, full of pride that it had been managed at all. A trial, her mother would amend, her eyes suggesting it was not the warm memory that it seemed to be for her father.

She liked it. The smell of wood freshly cut. A little bit of change that, for once, did not frighten her.

"Bother me?" she queried, wondering how any of this was supposed to be a bother.

"That the roofs would not match," Braum clarified. "Shingle and thatch. I'd have to ask someone to help with the thatching. Always lived in stone or shingle, myself."

He'd do it, too. He wouldn't complain or insist she choose something else simply for the ease of it.

It was a sobering thought to know that... she held some sort of sway over him. Simply by his desire to please her. To be wanted by her.

She swallowed thickly, a little humbled by the realisation.

"Wood is fine," she assured him. "More than fine."

He nodded, looking rather pleased. "I would do the roof next, but perhaps it should be the floor if you're going to keep standing like that."

She didn't roll her eyes, but it was a near thing as she dropped back down to the ground. Meagre drop that it was, the boards only two hands wide.

“Satisfied?”

He grunted, which she took as his version of a shrug. It suited him, in a ridiculous sort of way. He possessed plenty of words, yet seemed reticent to use them if he could hum or grunt or growl instead.

Her father had purred for her mother.

Her cheeks burned at the errant thought.

“Supposed to be a wet winter,” Braum commented, and she was all too aware of how his attention lingered on the colour in her cheeks. A remnant of her mother's kind. A frustrating remnant, although she'd stopped complaining about it once Mama was gone and she was the last to carry any such traits at all.

“Aren't they always?” she sighed.

“I suppose,” Braum agreed, his wings taking him up onto the new rafters. Or were they different for a porch than a house? Beams? Future shingle-roof supports? “But I'll feel better that you'll have a porch over your door all the same.”

She shook her head, her laughter internal rather than external. “As long as you feel better about it,” she quipped.

Teased.

It was a startling sort of exchange, one she was entirely prepared for. He was not quick to answer, and she was grateful that he'd taken himself away so he couldn't see her dismayed expression.

What was he doing to her?

“I'm... I've things to do,” she blurted out, brushing a bit of wood shavings from her skirt and pulling her wrap more tightly about herself. Leave him to his work. Stop blushing and spluttering and being ridiculous.

She didn't turn back into the house. Not when he was far too near to be anything but distracting.

She'd check the burrow instead. That would be good. Especially if the winter would be as wet as he claimed. Not that she trusted whoever *they* were that had suggested such things.

Thorn greeted her as always. The younger grimbles looked to their mothers for directions, while the oldest nudged at her hands as she passed them. They had seen too many seasons with her to think her any sort of threat—even if she did bother them on occasion with tumbling them about as she removed their heavy coats for the summer heats.

She'd been silly to forget a lantern if she meant to give a proper inspection. But the portion not trudged into the hillside was clean and well trampled. The overhang was sturdy, although she picked a few errant roots that dangled down and would prove a tempting treat to those tall enough to reach. Then the embankment would collapse and they'd be trapped, and she'd have to dig them all out in the middle of a rainstorm.

She tugged a root.

It gave easily.

Not the embankment, just the root itself.

She shouldn't be so dramatic. See and expect the worst from every situation.

Every interaction.

She offered her handful of roots for a nearby grimble, who munched and nuzzled closer in search of more. "If I had to, would you let me bunk with all of you?"

A nibble at her palm, and she smiled.

She wouldn't give up her home so easily, but it was nice to know she had somewhere else to go if these... thoughts... intended to intrude every time she had a conversation with her friend. Workman.

She smiled a little, if only to herself.

Maybe a grimble or two.



Braum was unnaturally quiet.

Not the pleasant stillness they occasionally shared between them underneath the tree at home. But a silent, oppressive sort of withdrawal that made her uneasy, made the part of her that... cared for him... want to smooth things.

She'd tried to be honest with him. Thought it would make matters easier. But she'd clearly insulted him along the way, which wasn't her intention.

She'd said that, hadn't she?

He'd come to walk with her. Before the first sun had even been a smudge on the horizon, he'd been there. Her porch was nearly finished—or it seemed that way to her. He kept hedging, pretending there was more to do, and he did always seem to find something to oil or smooth or there was also the secret work that he'd started on the other side of the pasture, the hesper guarding and overseeing his apparent mischief.

He had his tools with him, so it couldn't be *mischief*. But he had one of his tarps that he'd used to cover it when he'd finished for the day, and then he'd ask her not to look. It was the way he asked that made her want to oblige him. Hopeful that she would listen. Resigned that she wouldn't.

He wouldn't want to work on special, secret things now. Not when he was too quiet and falling out of step with her.

Her throat was too tight, but she tried again, reiterating all she'd said before. Hoping it would mean something different this time. "I'm not trying to hide you," she insisted. "I just... I've business with my father, and I'd rather take care of it myself."

His eyes narrowed, but still, he said nothing.

Which only made her words come faster. "We are to go to his house," she blurted, fingers in twisting about her braid,

anxious about going. Anxious about even telling Braum about it.

His brow rose ever so slightly, and she huffed, her desire to please being culled by her burgeoning irritation. “Which is rather an event, because I haven’t been there before. And I’d rather...” Words failed her, and she closed her eyes, and he noticed because he was Braum, and his fingers curled about her elbow in time to pull her away from an errant tree root. She paused, the irritation dwindling as quickly as it had come. “I’d rather it be about that. Rather than... him asking questions about you. I don’t...” she looked at him, and if she was pleading with him, so be it. “It can’t be like with Firen. I can’t handle that again. Please.”

Perhaps she should have started with that, rather than the curt, blurted, “I’d rather you not meet my father.”

“A good market,” she finished, tugging at her hair and talking more to herself than to him. “I’ve had enough of these dramatic ones.”

Some of the tension left him. And if he did sigh, it was only a small one. And if his hand lingered on her elbow, she hadn’t actually thought to complain until it was gone again.

He offered no disagreement, but she kept glancing at him anxiously, waiting for him to give some kind of confirmation that he’d be gracious in her secrecy. She wasn’t ashamed of him. Not... not like the cad. But he would want to be introduced as her mate, and for all that she had softened toward him, she did not think herself capable of that.

And anything less would hurt him. Insult him.

She huffed, just a little. “Say something, please,” she entreated. “You are making me nervous.”

His head tilted and his brow rose. “I am simply listening. And walking.”

He had not meant it as any sort of pointed remark, yet she felt guilty for it all the same. He was making the long walk for *her*. Because she could not fly with him to the market.

The stubborn parts of her insisted that was all his own choosing. She had not asked him to join her, nor would she have minded if he'd foregone visiting her entirely.

It wasn't as true as it used to be, and that bothered her.

"You are," she agreed. "But I'm finished now, which means you can be walking and answering instead."

Braum's mouth twisted ever so slightly—not a smile, and not a grimace. Some horrid in between. "I am not certain there is anything that requires my response. You have an appointment with your father. You would prefer I not be involved."

Her stomach twisted. "You make it sound so harsh."

Which meant she had been so. Honesty did not have to mean curt. It did not have to mean brash.

She'd somehow accomplished both.

"Wren," Braum countered with a hint of a sigh. "I would love to introduce you to my family. For them to come to know you, and for you to know them." Her eyes widened, and she could not deny the alarm that swelled at the mere prospect. "However, to suggest it would be unfair to both of us." Her steps faltered. "To you, because you would look much as you do now. I don't want your fear, no matter how misplaced."

Her throat burned.

"And it would be unfair to me, because..." He glanced at her, waiting for her to begin walking again. She would, eventually. But her limbs were not interested at the moment. "I had always imagined bringing my mate home with me. Watching Kessa scoop her up, my mother to smile at us both. My father to ply her with questions of any interest in the sea so he might bring the both of us on one of his voyages after all."

She ducked her head. "They are fine people, Wren. And when someday you meet, it will be because you want to. I'll respect that you don't want me to meet your father. Not today, and perhaps not ever."

Wren tugged at her braid, hard. “I didn’t say ever,” she reminded him, her words too soft and inadequate to her own ears. His fingers curled about hers, pushing upward so the tension was no longer on her scalp.

“I’ll not meet him today, then. Because if you change your mind now, it will be out of some sort of guilt. And I’ll not have that. You do what you want. Ask for what you want. I will do my best to oblige you.”

She chewed at her lip, feeling rather wretched all the same. “This isn’t fair to you,” she admitted at last. “You should have a good mate, Braum. You deserve one, truly. One that... that can feel that way about you. So you could take her home and she could be...” Her throat tightened so hard she wasn’t sure she could finish. But she did. Choked and hoarse as it was. “Normal.”

He wasn’t angry. He did not grouse and scowl at her nonsense.

His fingers tightened about hers, and he brought them down from her hair and he simply... held them.

“That wasn’t meant for me,” he said at last. “And you will not hear a complaint from me. Not in the whole of our lives.” She shook her head, rolling her eyes. “You think me insincere? What if I had been paired with that friend of yours?” A stone settled in her stomach. “You think she would have been willing to live in a cottage in the grove? So I would have moved to the city. Been stuck with all the people and all the noise.”

He made a great show of twisting his expression into one of distaste, but she could not stop her thoughts from lingering on Firen beside him. They would have been a striking pair. Dark and light—Braum’s seriousness in counterpoint to Firen’s light-hearted demeanour.

She’d always known that mating business was unfair. A cruel trick of Harquil biology. It had cheated her family, and now it was going to cheat Braum as well.

“You would have done it. If it made her happy, you’d have moved and never complained.”

Her heart hurt. Her throat too. But she did start moving, with enough speed that she was able to pull her hand away from his without much effort at all.

“Wren,” Braum called, sounding confused. Perhaps even concerned.

“That is what you do, Braum,” Wren reminded him. “You accept things as they are. A mate was chosen for you, against your will, and with little consideration for who might truly be suited to you. Who would *welcome* you. And so you accept what little scraps I have to offer rather than accepting that maybe it was all wrong. All a mistake. That you deserve *far* more than I will ever be able to give to you.”

She wasn’t crying, but she was going to start if she wasn’t careful.

He’d believe her, someday. He’d realise it was all a mistake, and he’d go and she’d...

She’d carry on. She would. Mama had. She hadn’t dissolved into hysterics when Da left. She’d hugged Wren close and told her she was loved and always would be, and they didn’t need to fret. Everything would be all right.

She’d say the same to Merryweather. And it would be true enough, even if... even if it hurt a bit. For a while.

“I’ll let you decide many things, Wren,” Braum countered, his tone as firm as she had ever heard it. “Where you want to live and who you want to live with. But when it comes to what I want and what I *deserve*, I’ll thank you to leave that to my own choosing.”

He wasn’t looking at her, his attention on the ground between them, a tight line between his brows as he finally did glare. She’d bungled the whole day. For all her talk of wanting a peaceful market day, she seemed to be charging into the dramatics before it even had a chance to begin, and she was sorry for it.

She fiddled with the strap on her pack—the one he'd offered to carry for her, and she'd refused. She refused quite a bit of his offers, didn't she? Trying not to be beholden, trying to keep him at a proper distance, lest he get any ideas.

Was it working?

She bit hard at her lip, but that didn't stop the sob from coming. Just one, as she fiercely batted at her eyes and started walking again, hoping he wouldn't see, hadn't heard.

But of course he had.

He had a right to be cross. To be disappointed in... in her.

In a half-formed mate that didn't have the right blood, the right bond, to know him back.

She spoke before he could. Before he could retract what he'd said, simply to placate her. "I do not know how to do this," she reminded him. "I don't want to hurt you, and that is all I seem capable of doing."

He reached for her. Did not grip, did not grab, but allowed his fingers to skim down her arm just the once so she would know that he'd quickened his pace to follow her. "Not so," he soothed. "You invite me in. You sit with me. Feed me. That counts a great deal, I can assure you."

She turned her head, glum and not at all comforted. "That's just good manners. Mama was very clear about those."

"All right. But you did not have to listen to her. I'd like to think that you trust me, if only a little. That you can share your table with me and I'll leave again afterwards."

She shrugged, and he stopped walking.

"Wren," he breathed, his own voice slightly choked. "I will take one of those scraps now." She paused. Turned back to him. "Just a hint. A modicum of..." his hands curled. "Do you like me? Even a little? Is it really all manners and obligation?"

She blinked at him, her tears startling away for the moment. She never expected him to be so blunt about it, to... need that kind of reassurance from her.

He was so steady in his course. To come and be with her, even if he had to bargain with her for the privilege. No true mate would make the other do any such thing. His presence in her home would be a right. Just as he could insist she move to his as well.

There was dread, but a great deal of shame as well, and she closed her eyes briefly, hating that she couldn't be what he needed.

But she could offer him the small truths as well as the big ones, and hope that he'd understand.

"I do like you," she admitted, one hand at her braid, the other on the pack of her strap. She watched the tension in his shoulders ease even as it worsened in hers. "If that helps any."

She trudged on. It was easier when she made the turn to the main road. When there were carts filled with goods and other people about to make talk about liking and mates and scraps less possible.

He trailed behind her for a while. She could feel it, even if she did not turn her head to look at him directly. There was more she should have said, she supposed. Perhaps she should have allowed the whole dreadful tangle to come pouring out of her. Let him try to make sense of it all, since she couldn't.

But she felt the weight of it all the same. Coiling about with the usual nerves she felt when she passed through the city walls. She didn't belong there. Never had, and never would.

Even if her father showed her his home. Even if she agreed to meet the rest of his family. It wouldn't change who and what she was, that her presence was used as a cautionary tale for growing children. To wait for mates unless they wanted fledglings like *her* to spoil their future pairings.

She went to her usual stall without any great hope of getting to use it. But rather than the broken and splintered mess it had been the last time she'd seen it, it was restored. The wood fine and sanded. The roof shingled.

Her breath was tight, and she knew he was behind her, knew from the warmth against her back and the rapid beat of her

heart. "I take it you pressed the Proctor."

He hummed in confirmation. "You should never have been moved. This is your stall, for as long as you want it."

It hadn't been. It was Mama's. Even now, she could picture her behind the counter, smiling and welcoming. Always kind, even when other people weren't.

She missed her so fiercely, she ached all over.

But she didn't say that. Didn't chide him for intervening. Because...

She was rather tired of it all. The fighting. For insisting on the struggle for the sake of her own independence, when it wasn't getting her anywhere. Only more weary, more rundown. More determined that she hated the city and wanted to avoid it in any way she could.

But she had creatures that relied on her. Relied on her for the goods they needed to be comfortable and well fed, so she made the trudge each moon and told herself she did not *have* to ever go back if she didn't want to, even if it was all lies.

So instead, she swallowed. Stiffened her spine and made sure her voice didn't waver. "Thank you," she managed. Was rather proud of herself for it, although it was so small a thing. Which probably should have brought its own shame, but she tried her best to ignore it.

He softened. As he always did when she was genuine in her thanks. In her admission that something he'd done had pleased her.

Someday it would not feel so strange. Wouldn't make her fidgety and uncomfortable. When it became expected and common because...

Because he was there so often. Because his presence would become a constant, and the thought of him leaving would be a distant, ridiculous sort of worry.

But today she still tugged at her hair and chewed at her inner cheek and went into the stall. The beams at the front were new, the old ones evidently beyond repair. And with

them went the little etchings she'd carved when she was small, much to her mother's horror when she'd realised what she'd been doing.

Then there was the scolding about troublemaking and Proctors and all of this could be quite temporary if they were not careful.

Then she was hugged tight when Wren's eyes filled with tears and her mouth full of apologies, and her mother had gentled as she always did.

Her father had not given her a time, and she glanced at Braum. Would he want to stay? Hang about while the market opened? She should be setting up her wares, and yet there was the urge to make sure she would know when she'd see him next. Perhaps... to know if he meant to walk her home again.

Which was silly. He had things to do—even if it was only attending to that secret business beyond the pasture that he'd banished her from.

He glanced about the stall but did not enter. As if this was her space, and he would not presume his welcome, the same as he did at home.

"I've things to do," Braum informed her, his attention at the corners of the stall. It seemed finely crafted to her, but she did not have his eye. "Would you mind if I walked you back later? Unless... is that something your father attends to?" He did glance at her then, a small smile at his mouth to suggest that things were mended between them after all. "I will not intrude, if it is."

Perhaps it should have been, but it had never occurred to her to ask after she'd lost her mother. "No." He grimaced. "That is, no, he... he doesn't walk me back. And if you've nothing better to do, I wouldn't mind the company."

He breathed out a rueful sort of laugh, and shook his head. "Better to do," he mumbled to himself. As if it was preposterous.

What was she to do with him?

Give in.

The thought came so gently, so naturally, that her heart raced. It would be easy, wouldn't it? It wasn't like before. Not really. Braum was steady and gentle and thoughtful and he'd be kind even... even when he crept up into the loft and into her bed. Or maybe he'd wait at the foot of it. Insist that she be the one to invite him up. As if she'd *want* that.

She hated the way her thoughts circled. How she didn't trust herself any more than she trusted anyone else. For all that she had come to like him, to enjoy his company, it always came back to the parts she detested, and a mate would *want* that. Would want the whole of it.

Even if a wretch and a cad had come first. Spoiling what might have been...

Might have been different.

She didn't take it back. Let him smile and nod and let their parting be temporary.

It was only after he was out of sight that she allowed herself to sink onto one of the stools—a different height than had been there before, much to her chagrin. And if it took a long while for her heart to calm and her mind to put the subject of *that* back into its compartment, then at least she was able to do it at all.



“No one is home,” Da murmured beside her. “If you'd like to go in.”

It wasn't one of those tall spires she'd imagined when she was little. From counting the windows, she could surmise it was three storeys, but hardly enough to even be considered a tower.

It was stone, just as so much of the city was. One of the older sections, away from the outskirts and nestled in the middle. There was some prestige to that, but not enough that his family would be considered truly *wealthy*.

They didn't talk about such things.

They didn't talk about a lot of things.

The front door did not have cracks in the wood. The stones at the street level could use scrubbing, the white stones taking a grey hue where dirt and soot mingled.

It was ordinary, for the city. Nothing remarkable about it to suggest that her father lived there.

She'd thought there would be. Some sign, some evidence, that if only she had been brave enough to wander enough, she might have found him.

Wren swallowed, warring with herself. Did she want to go in? To see it all?

Or to keep to her memories. Where she could pretend that his home was hers, that their family contained only three members. That everything was as it was.

Her eyes burned, and his arm came about her, squeezing tightly. "We don't have to," he reminded her. "Whatever you want."

As if she got to choose. As if what she wanted counted toward anything when what mattered most to her was to keep those she loved close. To not be left behind.

She pulled away from him. Pushed at the latch as if it was hers to open.

Wren didn't go in. Just lingered at the doorway, to a home that wasn't hers. There was no kitchen waiting just beyond the threshold. No loft plainly within view. There was a hallway and doorways and an open cavity that went straight upward to a floor above.

No need for stairs, here. Not for these residents.

Da waited with her. Squeezed her shoulder and let her absorb it into her mind and memory. She might have spent market days here, if Mama had allowed it. Got to know siblings younger than her, where they would have been friends and family rather than strangers. Had they come to her stall, curious about the half-sister they'd never known? Likely never wanted.

“Don’t cry, Wren,” Da urged, pulling her close so her face was in his chest rather than taking in more of the empty hall. “There’s no need to cry.”

Wasn’t there?

She was a woman grown. That was supposed to mean something. That childhood hurts shouldn’t hold so much sway, that tears shouldn’t come so easily and so fiercely.

But they did.

“Come inside,” Da urged. “I’ll make you something. We can sit awhile and it won’t feel so strange any longer.”

He tried to walk her in, but she resisted, warring with herself. How did one know when to be stubborn? To hold tightly to old ways. When to let them go.

It felt like a surrender. To a battle she’d waged since she was a fledgling. And if she lost, if she went inside, it said that it was all right. That his leaving was acceptable. That she was fine with him moving away and having another family, without her.

He was beyond the threshold, waiting. Watching.

Looking already resigned that she would turn and run. Would not allow him to welcome his daughter into his true home. To sit with her a while.

She rubbed at her face. Her eyes. Tugged at her hair.

Then took a deep breath.

Maybe she got to decide what it meant. Maybe it could just... be.

She took a step inward, and allowed her father’s smile to warm her chilly heart, and when he shut the door behind her, it did not feel as ominous as she feared it might.



It was later than she usually walked home. The suns were not yet setting, but it would be a near thing to dark by the time she made it back.

Da offered to fly her home, but she refused, most especially as he cast an anxious look out the window. She did not ask where his family was and how long he'd managed to arrange for them to keep away from the house, but she doubted any of them would be pleased to be denied his company for supper on her account.

Besides, Braum was there. At the city gate, waiting for her.

She almost apologised for being so late, but didn't. He wanted to wait for her. Wanted to walk with her.

Which made the lateness not so frightening. As the shade of the trees grew long and dark. The winds picking up and making her stop to pull out her wrap.

"You all right?" Braum asked, not for the first time. There was an anxiousness about him, new and unfamiliar.

"Yes. Are you?"

He huffed out a breath and watched her fiddle with her wrap and the pack straps until she was all tangled.

She wasn't surprised when he stepped in to help. Tugging and pulling this way and that until all was set to rights. When had such things grown comfortable? Such attentions would have horrified her, before. Too familiar, and too close. Presumptuous, even.

She couldn't remember when things had changed, yet they had.

"I do not like to think of you making this walk alone. And so near to dark. Predators make use of dusk, you know. And you do not have any of your beasts to help you out here."

She got to walking again. "I'm usually home by now. I let Da make me tea. We sat for a while. It was... nice." Awkward. The kitchen made of stone instead of wood. But the table was similar. The chairs with their low backs, the cushions on the stools. Similar, but different. He was at ease there. Knew which canisters held what. Knew which mugs to offer.

While she sat and tried not to fidget, feeling an imposter.

Braum was walking nearer to her than he had on the way there, his eyes darting about their surroundings before settling on her again. “You make that sound like a novelty.”

She shrugged. “I’d never done it before, so I suppose it was.”

He didn’t tell her how unusual that was.

But he took her hand.

Cautiously. Evidently full of expectation that she would jerk it away again.

Maybe she should have. But it was warm, and she was still a little cold, and just for today, she’d allow herself to enjoy it.

“I see a single shadow moving, and I’m flying you back home,” Braum warned her, squeezing her hand slightly to show he meant it.

“You can try,” she countered, feeling lighter than she had. Feeling...

She lacked the words.

His head jerked toward her, his eyes narrow, but with a glint in them she liked. He’d caught her tease. He’d... liked it. “Is that a challenge?”

She shrugged.

And he reached for her, but she was faster.

He might know the skies, but the land was hers, and why would one need to run when they could fly?

She ran, her heart racing, but not in fear and the constant gnawing ache of old wounds and fresh anxieties.

He followed. Growling low in his breath about unfairness and how much worse this was because they could be pounced on at any moment, which meant she could laugh as well, breathless and a little choked because she really did not run that often.

And it was rather wonderful.

Not the catching part. That sent a squeal through her heart and lungs that was most genuine, and he was a wretched cheat because he'd used his wings after all, pulling her into his arms and up, moving faster than her legs possibly could.

Her heart needn't be racing. It was the altitude, that was all. He'd gone higher than he had before, perhaps to clear even the tallest trees. Or maybe he was punishing her for making him run at all.

"I do not recall giving permission for this," she reminded him, trying for cross. Hoping she was successful. She wasn't quite comfortable, not with her pack still strapped to her back, and his hold on her was a little too tight.

"Really? I heard it quite plainly."

She rolled her eyes, and if she shivered when he brought his mouth closer to her ear and whispered lowly, it was just because of the chill. "Besides, I've something to show you. And I need at least a little light for it."

She shouldn't indulge him.

But she did.

She stopped her squirming and the pack didn't poke *too* much into her back after all.

And her heart was racing anyway, so when he smiled at her...

It was just the altitude.



There was light left when they got home. When they got to *her* home she reminded herself, but it seemed more habit than vehement assurance. Thorn turned his head at their approach but seemed to recognise her at a distance for he did not move from his place, the grimbles beginning to make little mounds about the pasture as dusk settled.

Not in their burrow, not yet. But soon the nights would grow cold and they'd want the warmth of being all together.

She craned her neck about, trying to find some evidence of what he'd done. It would have bothered her, before, to know he'd come back here without her. Fiddled without express permission.

But there was a thrill in her belly. Something different to the twisting nerves she'd grown so accustomed to. An excitement for a surprise, and yes, the assurance that it would be a *good* thing.

He landed. A gentle movement that set her back to squirming as she wanted to go explore what he'd done. He let her down with a chuckle, but grabbed hold of her hand when she went toward the pasture.

“Not over there,” he urged, bringing her back toward the house.

The first sun had set. The second would soon follow. But its light was warm, if dim. And it was more than enough to see that something had been added to this porch of hers. The one that wasn't a room, but evidently could be used as one if her new additions were any indication.

“They'll need cushions, but I think they're rather comfortable as they are. Not that one is for me. Your father, maybe?”

She swallowed, feeling strange as she looked at the way her new porch had altered the look of her home.

How it altered further still by the three chairs waiting there. One remarkably smaller than the other two.

That one was shaped differently. It did not have two curved boards at the bottom. Didn't have a portion cut out for wings to nestle neatly.

“You made a seat for Merryweather,” she breathed out. Oh yes, there would be a cushion. Blankets too as the weather turned colder.

“I don't doubt she'll steal one of the large ones. But it seemed only right she have a place all her own.”

His hand was still around hers. Warm and lightly calloused. Solid and steady when she felt suddenly anything but. “Do you like it?” he asked, a bit soft, a bit uncertain.

He’d asked her for a scrap earlier. Some comfort, some assurance that she even liked him.

What was she to do when she felt the swell in her heart, when tears filled her eyes that had nothing to do with mothers or fathers, or cads and wretches?

And had a great deal to do with the life she saw settled there.

The one she suddenly wanted so very badly.

The one that still frightened her more than she could say.

She didn’t want her father on that porch with her. She wanted a cool morning and Braum beside her, Merryweather bathing on her cushioned throne as she glanced at them every once in a while. Just to see if they were there with her.

A mate had done that.

Not a scoundrel looking to take advantage of her bed and her mourning.

A mate.

Her mate?

She chewed hard at her lip and struggled with what she might say. Nothing had changed, after all. Or maybe everything had.

She believed him. It was real.

That compulsion he felt toward her, the one that said she was the one for him, the one he needed to care for, to protect, to provide for. That was... her.

He didn’t want her coins. He wanted her biscuits and her smiles, and to know that he’d done well.

That he’d pleased her.

Her heart was beating too quickly, and her hands were shaking.

“Wren?”

He needed a response from her. Deserved a response. He was so good to her, so patient, and she...

“They’re beautiful,” she choked out. “Braum...”

He squeezed her hand, perhaps knowing she was near to panicking. Near to reminding him of all the rest of it, all that she couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—subject herself to again.

Even... even if it was from him.

But she quieted. And she let him speak instead. “Could we sit a while? Just... sit. I’ll go, after. But I’d like to try it out, if you’re amiable.”

She should pull her hand away.

But she didn’t.

Argue with him when he pulled the straps of her pack off her shoulders and laid it on the new porch steps.

Solid beneath her. Smelling of freshly cut wood and oil and she hadn’t known she loved that smell, but she did.

She wanted to ask him if he’d take his tools back now. If he’d visit and under what pretext.

But instead, she sat. Yelped awkwardly as the seat moved beneath her, and she grappled at the arm of the chair and to him and whatever else she could as he chuckled and held tight. “It *moves*,” she grumbled, looking at her new chairs with suspicion.

“Forgive me,” Braum murmured, easing into the side beside her—with a great more grace than she had managed, much to her chagrin. “I should have realised you had not experienced one before.”

She huffed. Tried to force herself to relax. To feel the gentle rocking motion that... was rather nice, once she knew to expect it. As the little aches from a long day began to gentle, to ease.

Perhaps Merryweather might leave them alone, after all. Wren doubted she would take to moving chairs any better than

she had done.

Which was all right. Because Braum had thought of her, and she'd a cushion to make, and she had to rub at her eyes again. Watch as Braum's head turned, and he looked at her in that way.

Was she all right? Could he help?

"Thank you," she managed instead, rubbing at her sleeve and doing her best not to tug at her hair. Because she was fine. And this was fine.

She could enjoy it. It didn't have to mean anything.

Or maybe it meant everything.

She could decide, later.

For now, they would sit.

17. Rains

It did not take long before Braum began his next project. He did not even bother taking his tools away, and the wood was joined by yet more planks, wrapped neatly in waxed tarps to keep the morning dew and mists away from his boards.

She almost denied him.

When he came to her, smile too certain, her eyes narrowed.

When he talked about filling in the breezeway between the main house and the washroom, she almost sent him away again.

It wasn't the concept exactly. But she did not appreciate the notion of him poking about in such an area, most particularly when she would need to use it throughout the day with him... about.

That was personal. Private.

And he was wrong to expect her to simply—

“Think of the winter,” Braum urged. “No more wind and rain. Just a hallway. You’ve nothing against hallways, do you?”

She swallowed, thinking of her father's house. “Braum,” she argued, her voice as firm as she could make it. “I’ve no other to use.” Her cheeks were flaming, and she did not particularly care for him to make her speak of it so plainly, but there it was.

He had the decency to look down at the ground, his hand rubbing at the back of his neck. “I’ll take breaks. Every hour on the hour. I’ll never even know when you’re there.” She eyed him dubiously, but he smiled at her hopefully. “Every hour, I swear it. Out to the pump for a drink.”

She sighed. Wondered what had happened to her that she could not seem able to argue with him any longer. Was it a weakness on her part, or a softening of a stubbornness that was no longer necessary?

She wished she knew. Could decide. When every night the same questions plagued her, swirling and nagging, until she felt stupid and small and foolish.

And then he'd come again.

And she felt... relieved.

The thoughts settled, for a little while. He didn't always stay the entire day. He'd other work, he said with a tone of true apology. As if she'd fault him for having trees and patrons that required his attention.

As if she needed all of it.

She didn't. Really. Every few days was more than enough. Should have been too much, but wasn't.

"When will I get to win?" she grouched, walking back to the house. Changed her mind and went toward the pastures instead.

"You'll win when you have a home that keeps you warm for all of your needs," Braum called back. "You'll see."

She hummed.

It kept him busy. Kept him coming back. And she'd slip another pouch of coins onto the tray for the noonday meal, simply to annoy him.



She thought he would stall. Would make the project drag on as long as he possibly could. But he worked with determination, eyes frequently toward the sky.

A wet winter, he'd said.

It was cold, so far. The days turning bitter as the suns hid longer behind thick clouds.

Even with all his labours, he'd begun to wear thick, knitted things. She almost startled when she'd caught first glimpse of him in his grey cap. It suited him, she supposed, but she'd grown used to him in rolled shirtsleeves and hair she could, well, see.

"You are looking at me strangely," Braum complained.

Had his sister made them for him? Or maybe his mother. Wanting him to be warm while he spent so much of his days out of doors, regardless of the weather.

A knot formed in her stomach.

Should she be the one to worry over him? To spend her evenings with a hook and a warm fire and yarn from her own grimbles, making sure he'd have enough to keep him warm the following day.

That's what a mate would do. What family would do.

Socks. Mittens. Hats with flaps to fold down over chilled ears when chores still needed doing, regardless of how hard the wind blew. She knew how to make them. Her mother had taught her, with patient hands that resituated her yarn, who urged Wren to put both project and hook down when she grew frustrated with both of them.

She'd made blankets for Merryweather when she came. Cushions too. But it had been a long while since she'd had to make anything for herself beyond long socks when the heels couldn't be darned any longer.

If she... did make something. It didn't have to... mean anything in particular. She was allowed to care if he was cold. And if she would like to see something she'd made around his neck or warming his hands, then that was a private matter.

He was still watching her. Waiting for some kind of answer as to why she was staring at his neck, imagining one of her scarves wrapped about it. Black suited him nicely. Or maybe a near to rust...

"Did your sister make your cap?" she asked. Not that it mattered. Should matter. He was glad he had family that loved him since... since she couldn't.

Wouldn't.

She rubbed at her forehead, the familiar pressure returning there.

“Kessa? No. When we were younger, maybe, but there's hardly time for that now.”

He tugged at it, and she wondered if he minded her asking. “Bought it in the market. Seemed serviceable enough.” Another tug. Another glance in her direction. “You don't like it?”

She shrugged, her throat a little tight. “I just wondered.”

He hummed, looking all the while as if he didn't believe her at all. She'd like to know what his assumption was, but it might stray too near to her own thoughts, and she'd prefer those remain strictly in her own mind.

He was true to his word. She never had to wheedle to have access to the facilities when she had need of them—she'd only to peek out the window and see him at the pump taking a long drink and a brief rest beneath the tree before she'd slip out back and try not to spend too long looking at the foundation. The framing he'd done. Then the siding.

The shuttered window he insisted upon, although it seemed a silly thing for a hallway.

“You think that,” Braum muttered when she'd brought it up. “Until it's dark and stuffy and you've want of one. Better to make it right from the start.”

She didn't argue with him. It had grown less appealing of a prospect when she realised there was something rather nice about letting it go. Seeing what happened and believing him when he said he'd knock it all down again if she asked him to.

They ate their supper on the porch when it wasn't too cold. She couldn't offer him a blanket for his lap—that felt too intimate somehow. He wouldn't have accepted one in any case, dirty as he was from long days spent on her hallway.

But hot stews and steaming tea were welcome even on cool nights.

And Merryweather approved of her cushion, sitting beside them often.

He always stood before she could say she was tired. Always said goodnight before she could grow nervous that that would be the evening he'd insist on something more.

She was grateful. She was also a little sorry. For him, that was all. She tucked into her own bed as relieved as ever, perfectly happy with Merryweather for company, for the assurance that she'd see him again.

Was that selfish?

The thought plagued her more than she cared to admit. Every time he came to work, when she slipped him a few coins so he'd know he was appreciated, even as he'd begun to roll his eyes at her and she knew he'd only use them to buy more supplies for her home.

She soothed her conscience by taking up her hook. Selecting a colour and spending a quiet evening working on a project.

Then promptly rolled it up again, frustrated with herself.

It wasn't enough. Wasn't nice enough. Not for all he did.

But the prospect of anything else was intolerable, so she took up another colour and started again—only to have the ball of yarn stolen by Merryweather, so she had to wait and fuss and re-roll and chide all at once.

Wren always hid it away when she was done, anxious Braum might see it. She didn't know why—it wasn't a secret. She should tell him about it. Would. After she'd settled on what it was. And which colours. That way, she might take his measurements and see it made properly.

But that was too personal too, wasn't it? She'd have to get close to him. Up and under and she'd have to move his arms this way and that. He wouldn't like it. Or... might like it. Which she wouldn't like. And then her offering would be spoiled, given out of frustration rather than the gratitude she currently felt.

So she tucked it back in a basket every night, and it was really just so Merryweather didn't mess with it. That was all. It didn't mean much of anything. Just a gesture.

Friendly.

For her... friend.

The word didn't fit quite right any longer, but it was the only one she had.

Which wasn't quite true either, but she needed it to be true. Didn't she?



A wet winter.

Like every other winter, really.

The grey drizzle that seemed endless, when the grimbles took to their burrow in protest, Thorn guarding the entrance with all the patience that only he seemed to possess.

Merryweather found it all the more objectionable, and Wren had to keep a dry towel at the door so she could rest her paws on them until they dried, her coat leaving a fine mist of fresh rain as she shook.

Then she'd retreat to the loft to spend the rest of her days.

Braum had finished her hallway. Just in time, he'd said, eyes up at the skies. Perhaps Harquil simply *knew*. Had an understanding with the winds and the open air that someone of her blood simply couldn't appreciate.

He still came. Every few days, his tools gone—and with them, his excuse for being there.

She didn't question it. Not when he was content with sitting on her new porch, watching the evening stretch onward toward night.

She'd finally asked him why he came so late. Preparing the groves for winter, he said. Chopping wood. This, he added with a pointed look in her direction.

“My father secured a service,” Wren reminded him. Or had she never thought to clarify that before? She couldn’t remember. “He brings a cartload when it’s needed.” He’d need to come again soon. She had stores enough for a few weeks, but she’d begun using more to keep the house warm as even the days grew cold.

She hadn’t finished his gift. She worked on it daily, but she removed more rows than she progressed, finding it especially important for it to be... nice.

She’d prefer perfection, as his craftsmanship seemed to be. At the rate she was progressing, it would be spring again by the time she’d finished, and he’d no need of it at all.

He didn’t have a need for it now, a part of her taunted. Just as he’d no need of her when she refused to budge on... anything.

It spoiled some of the pleasantness in their sitting. In the peace of a quiet evening after a long day’s work. Made her anxious and fidgety, and he noticed. Of course, he noticed.

“If I wanted to fetch more tea, would you let me?”

Her mouth grew dry. “I’ll do it,” she hurried, making to stand and already reaching for his mug.

But he pulled it back and shook his head. “Would you let me?” he repeated, and why was this so hard?

She knew the answer. Locked it away as best she could, and yet it wriggled free more often than she cared to admit. She was afraid of him being there. Afraid of his features twisting and becoming someone else entirely.

That someone had never asked to fetch more tea. He’d sat and waited and smiled at her and fed her lies and pretend comfort.

She swallowed, her throat tight and painful.

Held her mug out to him.

She couldn’t speak, couldn’t manage it, but he didn’t linger. Didn’t tease.

He simply went inside and returned with two more steaming mugs, Merryweather at his heels.

Nothing terrible happened.

She just had another mug to warm her hands, and he settled back into the chair that had come to feel a little too much like *his*.

She should put a stop to this. Then the guilty feelings would go with him, and she'd just enjoy the new things he'd given her and that she'd put a stop to all the *mate* business before it had a chance to hurt her even more.

"My parents returned," Braum cut in.

She couldn't look at him. Stared at her mug instead, skimming her finger across the lip as she struggled with herself. "Oh?" she managed, too quiet and too breathless. "They're safe?"

Braum laughed. "Ma is not one to allow for risks. For herself or for Da. Makes for boring adventures, according to him, but she'll just say that it means they're alive to have more."

"I'm glad. For you. That they're home."

"Be glad for Kessa," Braum countered with a shake of his head. "She's a little lost without Ma."

Wren swallowed. "I know the feeling." She cut in before he could tell her he was sorry, before he could reach over and touch her hand. She didn't deserve his comfort, and she did not particularly want his pity, either. "Her mate does not mind?"

Braum's brow furrowed. "Mind what?"

She glanced at him. How could he manage such a relaxed posture when her whole body was tight and anxious? It was the cold, that was all. She'd need to bring her blanket if they were going to keep meeting like this.

Should they? Keep meeting like this?

“That your sister misses your mother. That she loves someone other than just... him.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his head tilting so he could still look at her. “She loves their fledglings,” he reminded her, his voice a soft rumble.

“A part of him,” she argued with a shrug.

“She loves me,” he stated even more firmly. “And our parents. And he loves her enough to love her people, too.”

Her father loved her. Had loved her mother too. But it hadn’t been enough. Not more than the bond.

It wasn’t all the same, her father had tried to explain. The need came first. The knowing. The affection, the love—that sometimes came quickly, sometimes slowly.

She’d wanted to ask which it had been for him, but she hadn’t been able to bring herself to say it. Hadn’t wanted to know. Not when... when a part of her still wanted to think that he loved only them. That he missed them and wished things could have been different.

But now...

There was a new man she wanted to ask. The one that claimed to be her mate. The one that worked hard to make her happy, to be what she needed. To listen to her when she fought through the tangle of too many memories.

Even when she did not know what she wanted.

The pastures were lonely places at this time of year. Calliope and Temperance were tucked into their stable, and Thorn had all of his grimbles neatly in their burrow.

But Merryweather was there. Curled into a tight ball, her long tail completing the circle—only the movement of her ears betraying she was still slightly awake and paying attention to them.

Tucked on her little seat. That he’d made. And Wren had spent a full evening crafting a cushion for.

There were evenings when Wren would come out alone and Merryweather would take Braum's chair instead, her movements surprisingly delicate so as not to set off the rocking of the chair on its rails.

But when Braum was there, she'd keep to her cushion.

And it was... nice.

Perhaps more than nice.

She didn't have people for Braum to love. Her father, maybe, if she was ever brave enough to introduce them. But he'd befriended her creatures from the start, the ones that had become her new sort of family, even... even if that might seem sad to some.

He'd never mocked her for it. Never urged her to move to the city, to spend more effort at endearing herself to the true-born Harquil.

He just... let her be. And tried to fit himself in where he could.

"Braum," she murmured, feeling a strange sort of ache. The one that had urged her to make him something, to make sure that he knew she was grateful. That he was... welcome.

Not because of mates or heavily discounted labour or any other reason than she liked him. Liked sitting here. Liked that Merry liked him.

He sighed. A resigned, sorry sort of sound as he glanced her way. "Already?"

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He shook his head, taking a long pull from his mug and looking as if he was about to stand. "Nothing. It's all right. I'll wish you a good night, then."

He was smiling at her, but there was a hint of tension about his eyes rather than the warmth she preferred to see there.

"No, I-" She reached out. Came just short of touching him before she curled her fingers and pulled her hand away. "That's not what I was about to say."

Not that she ever said it at all. He was always the first to suggest his retreat, the first to give his goodbyes. Never wanted to overstay, he said. With a gentle smile that suggested he didn't resent her for it, didn't mind that she was often relieved. Then sad. Then sorry.

Over and over. Too many feelings, too much conflict.

Except when they sat. And rocked. And were quiet.

He relaxed into his chair, and the rocking resumed. The rhythmic sound of wood against wood, the breeze that rustled the tree that had become to feel a little too much like *theirs*.

“What did you mean to say?” Braum prompted eventually, when her nerves threatened to choke her, when she regretted having tried to say anything at all.

He reached out to her. Pulled her fingers away from her braid. “No need to tug. We are only talking.”

A noise escaped her. Not a squeak, not a groan, but somewhere in between. “That’s the trouble,” she grouched, because it was. Always. It could be something innocuous. Or it could mean a family was falling apart.

And a thousand in between.

“Is it?” Braum asked, a hint of a smile in his voice. “Kessa does not share that trouble. I will admit. This is a more peaceful way to live, comparatively.” He was still holding onto her fingers, his thumb drifting over the tips thoughtfully. It had no business making her insides squirm so fiercely. “And as much as I enjoy the quiet, I do not like that you’re afraid of talking with me. Telling me what you think.” His head tilted ever so slightly. “You are certain you were not going to tell me to leave?”

Her cheeks flushed, and she shook her head slowly. “No.”

His smile warmed. “Well. Then. We’ve already eliminated the worst of it, haven’t we?”

She very nearly rolled her eyes if *that* was the worst outcome he could conjure.

“I’m not used to it, I think. I was... once. When Mama was here and we just... talked all day. Or didn’t. And either felt natural.”

He nodded as she spoke, and he still held her fingers captive.

Not exactly. She could easily pull them away if she wanted to. Which she did. Or... should.

“But this doesn’t?” he prompted when she stalled, her attention on their joined hands.

He gave her fingers a squeeze when she didn’t answer him. An encouragement? Or maybe a comfort. That she didn’t have to respond if she didn’t want to. But wasn’t that what troubled her? How little she gave him, how staunchly she held to her refusals of... most everything he offered. “Maybe,” she hedged.

And still, she did not pull away.

Braum hummed, and there was a hint of amusement that had not faded, and she longed to be more like him. Relaxed when she was tense. Warm and calm when she felt anxious and often too stern.

There were reasons. Lessons hard learned that made that seem the better way, but she wished things might have been different. For him. For her.

“I was going to say I was sorry,” she blurted before she could frighten her words away again.

He grew a little more still. “For what?”

It had made sense to her at the time, but now it seemed silly and inadequate. “For you,” she admitted, her voice small. Which was all right, because they were seated close and she did not doubt he heard her clearly enough.

His brow furrowed, and his expression grew bewildered. “Whatever for?”

She wanted to shrug. But she’d thought to offer the apology, and she couldn’t back away from it now. Braum had made that rather clear. “That... I can’t ask you inside. That I won’t...

that I'm not able to be what..." she paused. He'd already said she presumed too much on what he needed. That his wants were his own, and she shouldn't trespass or presume when too often she pushed another man into his place. "I don't know how to be better," she said instead, voice cracking ever so slightly. It was an embarrassment. She wanted to be strong and clear and not constantly blubbing and yet...

He disarmed her. She could not name how he did it with such unwavering efficiency, and yet he managed it every time.

"Better than what?" Braum asked gently.

She huffed. Felt his fingers squeeze about hers. "Better than I am. Not so anxious, *all* the time. Afraid of what you'll do or say next that will make all this a mistake." She turned miserable eyes to his and found him without reproach or frustration. Just a deep sort of sadness that she often felt herself.

"Because you like how things are?" he supplied just as kindly. A hint of hope about the edges—looking for one of those scraps he claimed to only occasionally need.

She felt the weight of it. The cost. The little protections she had erected about her heart so she could simply keep on going. Living and working and loving only things with four legs. Safer that way, wasn't it? Rather than admitting that she... cared for him. About him. Whether it was the warmth of his neck or that he keep coming back to sit on this porch he'd made for her, it mattered.

He mattered.

"I do, rather," she confessed, trying to keep her tone light even if she did not feel it inside.

Braum hummed, trying to hide just how pleased he was by her admission. "Fortunate, then. For I rather like it, too."

He didn't press for more. Didn't push and rush and frighten her with talk.

Just held her hand.

And let things settle as they rocked.

And watched as even Merryweather's ears relaxed as she slipped into a real sleep.



Braum hadn't visited that day. Which was fine—she had planted the early-spring garden and desperately needed the privacy of a bath to soak away the last of the dirt that clung fiercely to every crevice it could find. The water from the pump was icy as she did her best to make do, but there was nothing for it. A proper bath with hot water.

The winds were growing louder, but that was all right. The animals were tucked in, and Merryweather was prowling about the edges of the house, checking the shuttered windows and watching as the flue didn't quite take the smoke out of the house as it should.

Already she knew Braum was right about her hallway. When she could take kettles of steaming water to the bath without being blown about in the process.

Cold water from the tap. Boiled for the warmth.

Then she climbed inside and felt the tension ease. It was raining. A soft pattering at first, then harder still.

But she was dry when at last she'd finished with her soap and a cloth. When her hair was quickly braided back into its usual precision.

Then a warm nightdress and a wrap. The lantern flame wavered only a little as she passed back into the main house. And she'd finish his present. Truly, she would. Just for the pleasure of *not* being pelted by the storm after a long, tedious day battling roots and grubs.

He'd been right, and she would make sure he knew she acknowledged it.

It was early yet, but the nights were growing darker. She'd work a little on his gift, just to soothe her conscience, then she'd turn out the lamp and huddle beneath her blankets like when she was little and the storms came. She wasn't afraid of

them any longer, but the habit was an old one. Bettered when Merryweather joined her, her pacing finished for the moment.

She only made it a few rows before her eyes grew heavy. And really, it was better to save the oil. She'd work on it more diligently tomorrow by the hearth, assuming the storm lasted so long.

Sleep came quickly, warm and snug.

And if she thought of Braum when she drifted off, it was just to give another silent thanks that she liked to think this mystical bond of his would let him feel.



Wren awoke to a yowl. To the shudder of her house. To cold and wind and wet where there most certainly should not have been any.

It was not the first time a shutter had blown open, but as she blinked and wiped at her eyes, it was not the windows that had succumbed to the storm, but the roof itself. The beams remained, but the thatch had torn loose, leaving a gaping hole at the edge of the loft, threatening her kitchen below.

Merryweather's tail peeked out from the edge of the bed as Wren hurried out of it. She would be safe there, and dry.

She took the time to fetch her waxed coat and her good boots, although she did not doubt she would be soaked through before she'd finished making any sort of patch.

There was a ladder in the stable. A tarp too, leftover from Braum's projects. Stolen, really, as Merryweather had dragged it across the yard, and he'd allowed her to keep it rather than take it back again.

She didn't trust the ladder. It was too long and unwieldy in the wind, and she had no one to hold the base as she climbed.

The storm was bitter and the rain icy as she opened the shutter to her bedroom window and climbed out that way. It was a scramble, made all the more awkward by trying desperately to hold on to the tarp, the winds working hard to

rip it away from her grip. She could only imagine Merryweather's look of betrayal at the open window, tucked away as she was beneath the safety of the bed.

She couldn't close the shutters behind her, not when she needed her strength to pull herself upward. Her wings did their best to assist her, although they acted more as a shield rather than anything more useful. Her arms wavered from the strain, her feet planted on the windowsill, her boots too slick against the wood as the rain pelted steadily on.

Wren held onto great fistfuls of thatch, hoisting herself up and over until she laid flat upon the roof, allowing herself only a moment to catch her breath before pushing up. She had to move, had to fix this. She'd brought nails and a small hammer, hoping she could secure the tarp to the frame of the roof itself. They poked through the pocket of her coat, a persistent reminder that she had a plan, that this was fixable. That she need only manage through the storm and then help would come in a day or so.

Braum would come.

It was a buoying thought. She wouldn't be alone forever. He'd come back, and he'd click his tongue as he surveyed the damage, but she'd also like there to be a shine or pride at her ingenuity. A tarp well secured, a roof that... functioned. Not well. Not until he could fix the thatch—or maybe he'd insist on the thatch being replaced with shingles. To match her porch, so it wouldn't bother her. Didn't she know people cared about such things?

There was no point in laying out the tarp all at once. She settled instead for a single edge, her fingers delving into the thatch as she sought some evidence of a batten—even a scrap of wood. Anything she might hammer into.

Her fingers were almost numb with cold, and she wondered why Braum's weather-tellers could not have mentioned that as well as the apparent wetness of the winter.

It was nearly impossible to see with no moon or stars to help her.

She growled in frustration and brought her hammer down sharply; the tarp supported by her knee as she drove a nail into... something.

She did not know what. Didn't take the time to question it. It was holding, was enough that she could move on to another section, hammering with as much strength as her arm possessed. Some took well, others slipped and fumbled, the tarp whipping about in defiance of her meagre attempts.

Her frustration grew in steady, impotent pulses that lodged in her throat and came perilously close to peals of desperate laughter.

A final corner. That was all. Then she'd be back inside and wouldn't have to leave again until the storm passed. Braum had made sure of that. She'd seen the little things that needed tending. The maintenance that a home required after years of use. He'd seen what it could be, with effort and skill and the will to change it for the better.

She'd had that once, hadn't she? When it was shared and motivation flowed between Mama and herself. When chores became a joy, when they'd save up their coins for wood for new shelves, a better hinge for the cupboard, hooks for the wall because Mama was tired of finding Wren's shift on her bedroom floor.

Wren had lost that along the way. She'd kept herself alive—and her animals, too. But she'd stopped striving for anything better. Anything more.

Don't make trouble.

Don't make anyone take notice.

Don't question Da too much or else he'd leave for good.

She wiped at her eyes and had she started crying? She couldn't be sure. Didn't make much difference when she was soaked to her skin and shivering fiercely as her body fought to keep her warm.

Two more nails for good measure. Strong ones. The tarp gave only a little in the middle, the excess at the edges billowing and rippling, but holding. It would have to do. She

felt only one more nail in her pocket, and she added that one too, for good measure.

The hammer went back in her pocket, and she stood, squinting into the dim to make out if she'd done well enough. She couldn't tell. Wouldn't. Not until she was back in the house and could see if the water was streaming steadily inward or was merely a residual drip that a bucket or cook-pot could handle.

Her steps were measured and careful. Back up toward the highest point of the roof. Then to lie down again so she could ease her foot onto the sill again. Simple. No need for her heart to beat so quickly. No need for her to feel almost dizzy as she reached the edge and eased herself downward. She was fine. Would be fine. Once she was inside again and had built a fire and towelled up the worst of the water from the floor and her person.

Reverse that. Her person first. Or else she'd drip all what progress she made with the floor.

She eased over the edge of the roof, her eyes closed tightly. She felt her wings attempting to help, to balance her out, to take some of the burden away from her arms and her scrabbling legs, but they were too small to help in the effort.

The tip of her boot touched the sill and she could have sobbed in relief as she stretched down further, her fingers tangled in the thatch, gripping so tightly pieces of it pulled away in her grasp.

She wasn't ready. Her other foot came down too hastily, and a puddle of water had formed, slicking the way and causing her to reach out blindly for something else to hold on to.

Her wings worked furiously to propel her forward, to push her into the warmth and safety her room promised.

But instead, she fell.

The chill and the shock of it so brutal that she could not even force a sound from her throat as she suddenly...

Horribly...

Hit the ground.

18. Broken

It was stupid to fly in a storm.

That was one of the first lessons a young fledgling received. Well. Braum had.

Eyes bright and curious as he saw the wind and even made it to opening the front door, fully intent on seeing just how fast it might carry him, since he was strong and big now. His ma's da had told him so.

Ma had caught him. She always did. Seemed to have more eyes than the two in her head, always aware of Braum's thoughts even before they'd formed in his own mind.

She'd shut and bolted the door, an even younger Kessa fluttering about her legs, her feet still skimming the floor.

"You'll hit a tree," she'd said in that firm way that only Mas seemed able to do. "And if not a tree, then a tower. And then I'll have to leave Kessa here to come find your broken body. Does that seem wise to you?"

He wanted to argue. He wouldn't be broken, just bruised a little. But Kessa cried when she was left alone in a room too long, so he supposed it would be even worse if Ma wasn't two rooms over in the kitchen and able to call for her.

"Fine," he agreed. And if it came out a little sulky, that was just because he was deeply disappointed not to have been the fastest ever.

Ma raised her brow at him and stooped low. "It is my job to keep you alive. Please don't make it harder than it has to be." She placed her hand at the back of his head and pushed their foreheads together, and he might have been big now, but he stilled warmed all over when his ma got close. Didn't feel at all the same when Kessa clung at him.

“All right,” Braum agreed, this time meaning it more than the last.

She kissed his forehead and messed with his hair, her fingers scratching at his scalp lightly and that was nice too. “Good. We’ll keep the door bolted though, in case of temptation.”

His mouth twisted. He could reach that bolt easy. And he was strong enough now to have it unlatched in no time.

Her hand cupped his chin and her brow quirked again. “That was not a challenge.”

Then she shouldn’t have made it sound like one.

But he didn’t say that. Braum might not have thought much of flying in a storm, but he knew better than to talk back to his mother.

Braum did not think often of his childhood. He did not dwell on old days like Wren seemed to. They were there, a comfort of familiarity, but he thought well on his current days, and he liked to keep his thoughts there. Not too far ahead, either. Not beyond each project he had in mind for Wren’s house. His chest would start aching when he did that. Thought too much. Wondered and sometimes...

Did a little bit more than wonder.

When his dreams turned to wanting. For the mate that should have been in his bed just as resolutely as she had taken residence in his heart. She hadn’t meant to. That’s what she would say if she knew. And she’d give that sorry little smile that meant she was feeling something too near to pity for him. For all she thought he wanted, and all she thought she’d never be able to give him. Give anyone.

She was wrong about that. She was mending. Perhaps she’d never be the same as if the cad hadn’t preyed upon her, but he didn’t need her to be the same. He loved her as she was now. Hair-tugs and coin pouches and all.

Stubborn to a fault.

Kind and self-less so long as one was blessed with more than two legs.

He rolled over. Adjusted his pillow for the fourth time in as many minutes.

The storm was as bad as had been promised, but it was not so unusual as to be cause for concern. He wished he'd seen her that day. That he'd made time to go. But the winds had shaken loose some of the branches in the grove, and he'd spent the day tending to the lots. Trimming before they'd have chance to tear further. It had seemed important at the time, and to what parts of him remained that were not wholly preoccupied with being Wren's mate, he knew the trees needed him.

Yet he itched all over. A persistent, worrying urge that kept his sleep light and too easily broken by every sound, every whistle of the wind where the logs of his cottage needed a fresh helping of pitch.

It was foolish to fly in a storm.

He repeated that to himself over and over. Tossing and turning until he finally sat, determined to make up the fire and sip hot tea and wait for morning.

Why then did he reach for his clothes instead? Just to be ready. That was all. He wasn't going. That would be stupid. His mother had told him so.

What good was he to Wren if he hit a tree? Or a tower?

No towers near Wren, though. So it was practically safe, surely. There were no bolts of lightning through the sky. Nothing that a strong back and determined wings couldn't get through.

It was cold in the cottage, that was all.

His feet were cold too, that's why he needed two pairs of socks and his best boots.

The hat...

He dropped the pretence.

And with a growl, he opened the door.

He'd break his own rule and spend the night with her hesper. Maybe then he'd be granted an hour's rest.



His mother was right.

It was not the speed and exhilaration he'd imagined as a boy. Instead it was inky black, with rain too near to ice, wetting his wings and keeping him far lower than he should have meant to be.

It was good he had gone so many times to be with her—the way imprinted on his wings so he could focus instead on maintaining any altitude at all. Each gale was a punishing push downward, and before long he was close to exhaustion.

Except he didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Not when he needed to see Wren's house, a low light coming through the shutters, where he might picture her tucked away, warm and safe. There were prickles beneath his skin that had nothing to do with the cold winds. An urgency that kept him pressing on, an anxiousness that... felt a little bit like her.

How often had she complained of that? How she wanted his calm. Wanted to sit and be still when she said her insides were a tangle of too many feelings, none of which were compatible with one another.

He wished he knew what he could do for her. How he could give her some of the peace he felt when he was with her. The niggling worry suddenly gone, the ancient instincts that stressed that all wasn't—*couldn't*—be right unless she was within his eye line.

He swiped at his eyes, squinting hard into the dark. He could just make out the outline of the house, the new jut of the porch he'd made for her.

There was the glow of the light from her room. Not the subtle glow about the edges from a window properly shuttered, but wide and flickering. As if... as if the window itself was open, the lamplight struggling from the winds pushing inward.

Something was wrong.

Had to be.

Wren perhaps did not always possess the greatest judgement when she was upset, but even she would not open her window in a storm like this for no reason.

He did not give thought to politeness. He flew straight through the window, certain he would find her unconscious in her bed. Perhaps even...

Perhaps that was the nature of her mother's kind. Simply to slip away in their sleep without cause or warning. He'd never considered it before, but now...

There was no form in the bed. The blankets and linens were flung back, but she was not amongst them. There was a damp, heavy air to the room, and he wanted to linger, wanted to look and see the little bits and baubles that were his mate's, but he couldn't allow himself.

He needed to find her. Needed to see her.

He shut the window. Bolted it tightly.

And went down the stairs to the front door. He would apologise later for his forwardness. Would insist on helping her to banish the puddles that had formed nearly everywhere.

He paused as water dripped on him from above.

A hole. In her roof.

Patched with one of his tarps.

He swallowed, bolting through the front door and almost taking to the skies again. Up onto the roof. Anger raged through him. At himself, at her. It was only a house. He would build her a new one if it drowned in this storm. Anything if it meant that she wasn't out in it.

Then came the panic.

Because before he could make his tired wings take him upward, he nearly stepped on... on *her*.

Prone. Entirely too still.

He dared—he *dared*—to consider himself her mate? When he rolled about in his bed while she tried to battle with the winds and the rains, when she took to the roof without even the aid of a proper set of wings to help her?

Without... without *him* to help her.

“Wren,” he tried, bending over her, her skin too cold, her entire body soaked. She wore a coat, but the clasps had fallen open, revealing too-thin linen.

She didn’t answer him. Did not move.

He picked her up. There was little he knew of healing, but he needed her close, needed her warm.

Needed her to be alive.

He rushed back into the house. He’d tried to be so polite, tried to keep her from growing nervous with his stares, so he hadn’t allowed himself to inspect her home too carefully. Her bed upstairs was wet and cold, and she needed the fire, needed the warmth. It was down to embers, and even those were cooling too quickly, and he muttered his apologies as he placed her onto the hard wood of the table before adding wood and kindling—anything to get a proper blaze as quickly as possible.

His hands were shaking. He wanted to strip her out of her wet clothes and hold her close to the hearth. Wanted his heart to stop pounding so fiercely in his chest, and surely that would fix it.

Help it. Nothing would be right again until she was awake. Until she looked at him in that accusing way and doubtlessly banished him out of her kitchen for having come uninvited.

The wind pushed at the tarp high above their heads, almost as if the house itself was breathing in. Then out. Over and over. While he stood impotently and...

Warmth.

Blankets.

Not the wet things from upstairs.

“I am sorry,” he called as he opened trunks that he had no business looking in, searching for anything dry and suitable. “If you would awaken, you could tell me where to look.”

But she didn’t.

Another bed. Below the loft, larger than the one he’d so briefly seen upstairs. Her mother’s bed?

With quilts stitched by hand, neatly made and...

No mother would object to a mussed bed. Not when her daughter was in need.

He pulled off the blankets and tucked them onto one of the kitchen chairs before he set about removing her wet things. The boots were simple—except that the laces had swelled and the knot along with it, and his own fingers were clumsy as he fought for the calm she claimed to envy.

Had her brow moved, or had he imagined it? He paused a moment, studying her face closely for sign of... anything at all.

The fear made proprieties seem less than important.

He brought his hand between the fabric of her coat, beneath the sodden shift that had turned transparent during her misadventure.

He laid it on her chest and pressed. Waiting. Hoping. That he might feel her breath, feeling her heart—anything at all.

There.

Subtle, but present.

A flutter. A slight pressure as her breath drew inward. Then out again.

He wasn’t imagining it. He wasn’t.

She lived. Or... would. If he knew what to do. Which he didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured to her, wishing he wasn’t chilled through, that his hands and his whispers might bring her some sort of warmth.

With a growl he shed his own coat. The boots. Chucked them all haphazardly before the fire, taking greater care with her own things.

He wanted to leave her shift. To allow her some measure of modesty that—in truth—that garment did nothing to provide.

He'd known she was beautiful. Every impulse was to stare at her, to enjoy the way she moved, the graceful turn of her neck, the slim wrists and hands as they tended to perfectly ordinary tasks.

He did his best not to look now. As he tugged her free of the last of what could chill her through—made easier when he looked at her still face. She trusted him. He knew she did. Perhaps not entirely, but each measure was hard earned and he treasured every inch of it.

He'd find her something else to wear.

He would enjoy looking at her when she was the one to remove her clothing. To smile at him shyly and beckon him to her. Or maybe she would need him to do that. To come to her and pull her into his arms. To promise she was safe, that she was loved, and he would never, *ever* leave her.

That he would make sure she never wanted him to.

The hope of that, the dream of it, made it easier to wrap her inside the warm bedding. It took a bit of jostling, as he wanted it above and below, and in the process he caught a glimpse of her back.

He swallowed.

She'd said that the joining of two kinds was not always gentle. He hadn't known what she'd meant. But where wings and feathers should softly merge into pliant skin, hers were gashed—angry and red. Had she mentioned pain? He could not recall, and the ever-growing knot in his belly tightened further. Then there was the wing itself. Small. Too delicate. It hadn't always been at such an angle, had it?

He wasn't taking care of her. Not enough. This had proven that.

“Things have to change, Wren,” he murmured to her, rubbing at her through the quilts, willing warmth into her. “I know you don’t like it. You always think it’s bad. I heard you. But it won’t be. I promise you that. Just... please trust me when you wake up. Or don’t. If you can’t. But...” A shuddering breath, and he pressed his lips to her hair—her tangle of wet hair that wasn’t braided like it should be. Wasn’t being tugged on and abused, but lay limp and cold across her, the cord gone to keep it properly together.

“You can be as cross with me as you like, when you wake up. But things *will* change.”

They moved downward. Across the curve of her cheekbone. Just once. More a whisper than a kiss. And he should not have done even that, but what if... what if she didn’t wake? What if she slipped away and then...

She grimaced.

Which was not at all the expression he had imagined when he’d allowed himself those hopeless sort of thoughts. The ones where his kisses might be welcomed, when she’d perhaps even want to return them.

But it was so perfectly *her*.

And he laughed. A bright, desperate burst that meant that maybe... maybe she would come back to him after all.

“That’s it, lovely. You wake up and chide me for taking liberties.”

He kept at his rubbing, watching for any crinkling about her eyes, her nose. Some sign that she was waking up truly.

It felt an agony. The waiting. Perhaps in his youngest years he would have felt a fool for what he murmured to her, the promises he made. But they felt right. And if she heard him, so much the better.

He’d never hurt her. She had to know that by now. There would be no unwanted hands in the dark. No talk of locking her away in a tower that might or might not have stairs enough for her to move about as she pleased. There would no selling of anything that mattered to her, whether animal or material.

It would be a good life together, couldn't she see that? Her happiness mattered to him. Her wellbeing too, which would mean a rather difficult talk once she was lucid enough to have it with him.

It did not take long before Merryweather appeared. Tail up straight as she jumped deftly onto the table, sniffing about Wren's form with suspicion.

“She'll be all right. You'll see.”

Merryweather did not appear to give his opinion much credence, for she moved to her favoured chair and sat, joining him in his vigil.

When she did wake, it was with a gasp.

And a shove.

And it might have been glorious, had her face not been twisted in pain.

19. Stay

Wren did not want a head anymore. Not if it was going to throb like this. The wings could go too, particularly the left one that screamed at her until she lurched off of it.

Eyes could go too, because it hurt to see.

Hurt to breathe for that matter.

Harquils weren't meant to fall. Even a fledgling could slow their descent from almost the beginning.

Humans were meant to keep their feet staunchly on the ground.

She was neither. Or both. She'd only been doing what was necessary.

Was she crying? That could go too, because it made her head pulse with each beat of her heart, and she'd rather go back to sleeping if it meant waking to *this*.

She wasn't alone. She didn't know why that was so apparent to her, not when she kept her eyes tightly closed and desperately sought some sort of comfort in this bed. It didn't feel like hers. It wasn't soft and welcoming, it was...

There was nothing for it.

She peeled one eye open and was met with Merryweather's face almost directly at her own, her eyes wide and nervous as she looked up at her.

"ello," Wren murmured, reaching out a hand so she could offer a little comfort to her. "I'm all right."

Or would be. Once she could get to her feet and shuffle to the kitchen for some of her mother's herbs.

She sat up. There were quilts all about her, and she squinted at them in some confusion. Her feet were not touching the floor, which was another oddity given the height of her bed.

These were Mama's quilts. From her bed.

"Tell me what you need and I'll fetch it for you."

Perhaps it was a testament to her befuddlement that she didn't startle at his voice. Or maybe it was that... she expected it would be him that found her.

She was in the kitchen. On the table. She opened the quilts tucked about her and then closed them hastily again as she caught sight of herself.

Wren swallowed, her mouth too dry.

Her worries were vague, unformed things. About what it might mean to have been naked, to have been defenceless. But it had happened to her anyway, even when she wasn't freshly fallen from a roof. When she'd worn clothes and...

She sighed deeply, rubbing at her head and wincing as her wing shifted. "Herbs. Small canister on..." Directions failed her, so she pointed instead. "That one." He looked to her for confirmation. "Is there warm water?"

He put the canister down and moved the kettle closer to the fire. It was a large one—much more robust than the ones she usually made. "There can be."

"Good," she managed, feeling more exhausted than she cared to admit.

She got off the table, not at all certain why he'd put her there when she had a perfectly good bed upstairs.

Except...

Her eyes welled.

"I didn't shut the window."

Braum turned, a mug in his hand. "No, but I did."

Her throat burned. "How bad is my room?"

"Nothing that can't be fixed. Or laundered. By me."

She was supposed to argue about that. Remind him he did not live there and most certainly was not going to be attending

to her bed linens. But words were an effort, and that was a discussion they could have later.

She made it to her feet. Found they could support her well enough when she leaned her hip against the table. “Wren,” Braum chastised, his voice a little sharp. “You should not be up yet.”

“I hurt,” she informed him curtly. She hadn’t meant to be brusque, but it was far too true to allow for niceties. “I’m going to bed.”

“You need the warmth,” Braum argued, coming around the table so he could grasp her elbow. “You were chilled through when I found you. Let me...” She turned tired eyes to him and waited. Watched as his shoulders sank ever so slightly and his voice softened. “Would you like the bed in front of the fire? I’ll put everything back how it was, after. I should have done that before...” There was a crease between his brows, and she should ask how long he waited for her to wake up. How long she was lying out in the yard before he came.

Those things mattered, didn’t they?

His clothes were rumpled. As if they’d been wet and then dried while still on his person. His eyes were shadowed with exhaustion.

He looked as she felt. Except she hadn’t been allowed to keep her wet clothes.

Chilled through. Even she knew cold was a dangerous thing, so she could not be angry with him for having removed them. For not retrieving a fresh shift... perhaps she could be a bit cross about that.

Later.

Now she needed to lie down on something soft. While she let him fetch her herbs steeped in... “A half spoon of herbs,” she told him. “Then fill the mug halfway with hot water.” She didn’t answer him about moving beds. She swallowed hard and went to her mama’s alcove. She came in here, sometimes. To clean. To freshen the linens so they would not grow dusty.

But it was hard not to think about... about that morning. Of finding her.

“Sorry, Mama,” she mumbled, heart aching to see her bed in such disarray. Needs must, she supposed, lying down on her stomach and keeping her cocoon of quilts about her.

It wasn't long before he was back beside her, kneeling down so he could bring the mug to her lips and urge her to swallow. They were bitter, the flavour tempered in her girlhood with two spoonfuls of sweet syrup, but she hadn't thought to ask for it now.

It was a testament to how poorly she felt that she did not even consider sitting up and taking the mug for herself. She could be better tomorrow, she decided. She'd wave him off and assure him she could take care of herself.

But today...

Was it today? Or was it still last night?

“Is it morning?” she asked, swallowing the last of it.

He blinked, as if he had not given the time the least bit of thought. “Probably. Storm makes it hard to tell.”

She nodded, burrowing as much as she could into her blankets. The fire had been almost too warm, but now that she was without it, she felt the bits of cold seeping into her.

Old trepidations felt suddenly very far away. The stubborn refusal to rely on him, to ask him for anything at all, paled when compared to one of her animals going without.

“Braum,” she started, willing the herbs to work. To calm her aching head and possibly even mend her wing without outside assistance, but she was less hopeful in that regard.

“Wren,” Braum countered back, pulling back the mug and looking as if he was sorry for it. A foolish thing to feel regret about, but he'd told her to leave him to his own feelings.

She might have smiled if she didn't hurt so. “I don't suppose you know how to take care of hesper during a storm, do you?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “No. But I’m a quick learner, if you’ll tell me how.”

She wasn’t going to cry. It wasn’t needed and would only make her head hurt more. But she wanted to. Because... because he was here, and more than willing to help.

“We can talk about the mucking, later. But for now, they’ll need breakfast. Milking too, if you’re brave enough.”

She kept things orderly in the stables, but it still took effort she didn’t particularly have just to describe the sacks of grain. The scoops. Which buckets went where, and no he, he couldn’t leave the bucket in the stall or else Temperance would break it and then there’d be no more bucket at all.

“Don’t fret,” Braum urged, and she didn’t even roll her eyes. Just closed them and hummed something that might have been an affirmation, but it ended up sounding like nothing much at all. “Then we’ll talk about that wing.” He leaned toward her, briefly. “You’d be up feeding the hesper if I went to fetch the healer first, wouldn’t you?”

She winced.

Nodded.

“No one should have to go hungry,” she murmured. And meant it. She’d walked through worse than the storm last night to see them fed properly. Was often nudged at for her troubles, the stable keeping out perhaps too much of the storm so they couldn’t understand why they weren’t let out for grazing.

She didn’t bother arguing about her wing. Each breath sent a tug through it, a reminder that something was very wrong. Not the aching twinges from a night spent in an awkward position. This was searing. Piercing. A stabbing throb that meant...

She swallowed.

Felt Merryweather jump on the bed beside her and curl up close to her side as Braum opened the door and headed out into the storm.



There was a hand on her shoulder. Not an annoying tickle—although its presence was enough to suggest the owner of that hand wanted her to wake. But it was present. Firm. And as much as she had no interest in going back to the waking world with all its pains and throbs, she did not entirely dislike the touch itself.

Not as far as touches went.

“Wren,” came the deep rumble. Apologetic, yet... urgent.

Her eyes opened because that must mean something was wrong with Calliope or Temperance, and she couldn't abide that.

“Hush,” Braum murmured, his thumb moving ever so slightly. Gentling. Soothing. “They are fine. A bit cross when I told them they wouldn't go out, but they even let me do the milking.”

Her lips pressed together. “Then why are you making me wake up?”

His hand moved. Away from her shoulder and rested gently on her wing.

She hissed.

Shoved away from him with a glare. “That was mean.”

His eyes were infuriatingly sad. “It would mean to let you lie here while it heals badly.”

She shrugged. Well. Wanted to shrug. But it was half-formed and quickly aborted once she felt her muscles scream at even that movement. “Not like they're much use anyway. So it's a little limp afterward.”

But even she knew that was foolish. To cripple oneself out of stubbornness, even if the appendage was rather poorly formed to begin with.

“Wren,” Braum repeated, this time with a tinge of impatience. “You need a healer. A good one.”

“I suppose,” she grouched, but it sounded thin and not at all as she intended. Almost... almost an agreement.

Merryweather moved to stand on her back, and she did not have to open her eyes to know that she was pushing out her head to summon Braum to give her a pat.

“I do not want to leave you,” Braum admitted. “Somehow I do not think Merryweather would make a good nursemaid.”

Wren rubbed at her eyes. She did not particularly want a healer here. And she did not like the idea of Braum leaving either. Which was...

She didn't know.

She'd reason it out later. Besides, if he left there would be no hand on her shoulder to wake her, and that was good. Wren felt she could sleep the day through. Maybe the next.

Braum couldn't stay that long, surely. He'd have to go back to his lots and see to the trees. But she could pretend, as she felt the whisper of his palm down her back that he would be there, and she could rest and sleep and everything would get done and she didn't have to worry about any of it.



“Sweet,” Da called.

It was a dream, surely. He had no business coming—especially not in the middle of a gale. And if it was a dream, she could ignore him. Settle deeper into her blankets and sigh and pretend she didn't feel the aching of her wing.

“Healer's here, and he'd rather have a look at you awake.”

Her brow furrowed, and she opened one dry eye. Even that hurt, so she closed it again. Had Braum brought her a shift from upstairs? She couldn't remember. She'd meant to ask him for it, but... hadn't. Or had she?

Opening her eyes revealed little since she was pressed into the mattress, unwilling to move enough to even see just how naked she might be.

“M’ wing hurts,” she muttered, the herbs dulling her senses. The pain too, but also made her words seem rather far away. Another attempt to open one eye, squinting because that was her father, wasn’t it? “How’re you here?”

He smoothed a lock of hair away from her forehead, his brow furrowed. “Never mind that now.” Da’s voice lowered, and he leaned down so his voice was only for her. “We won’t even talk about the strange man I found in your house. The one that’s reluctant to tell me what his purpose is with you.”

If she’d had the strength to feel embarrassed, she would have. But instead she gave a sort of grunt as she felt the covers pull away from her back, and cool, knowing fingers pressed and considered her injury.

“A broken wing is a serious injury,” the healer chided. As if she’d chosen to slip. To fall. She needed onto the roof, and there was nothing else for it. She’d not apologise for keeping her house from drowning. “No less for you just because you cannot fly with them.”

Her father moved away so the healer could take his place at her side. Younger than she’d thought, with serious eyes as he held out a bottle. “I’ll not pretend I know what’s safe for your kind. I’d give this for pain before I set it, but would you rather go without? The choice is yours.”

“She took something before I left.” Braum. So he’d come back after all. Her heart had no business fluttering so. “Boiled herbs.”

The healer moved away, presumably to inspect the canister and its contents.

Da was back. Patting her hand and smoothing her hair, and looking at her as if she was a sickly fledgling that needed his care and compassion. “’m all right,” she managed, and she’d rather like another cup of herbs as her feelings were growing sharper. Her skin itched for having so many men in the house, regardless of how she felt for two of them. It was crowded, and she really wished to know if she’d remembered to ask for a shift...

“No,” Da corrected firmly. “And it might have been even worse.” He glared down at the floor, and it was not at all an expression she was used to seeing on his features. Always smiling, always crinkling about his eyes with good-humour.

“Roof needed fixing,” she reminded him. “No one else to do it.”

She wasn't going to argue, but she wasn't sure if he'd seen. She hadn't been up there for the amusement of it, and she couldn't abide him thinking she was as foolish as that.

“You're going to pretend that's true? With that man over there, looking ready to burst every time you twitch and wince?”

Wren closed her eyes. “You said we weren't talking about him.” The words came out more clearly, and she was almost sorry for it. It was all easier under the muzzy haze of potent herbs. It was quite another to be lucid. To think and feel. For fear to creep about the edges, loosening her tongue until she inevitably hurt Braum again.

At any other time, her father might have chuckled at her stubbornness. Would have tugged at her braid and smiled until his eyes crinkled. But today he sighed, and she tried to pretend it didn't bother her. “So I did, sweet. I'm just not sure that's a promise I'm going to be able to keep for long.”

Maybe she should take the healer's potion after all. And if it mingled poorly with the herbs or her physiology, she wouldn't have to talk about anything at all.

It was a morbid, horrid thought that would have earned her a sharp word from her mother if she'd ever voiced it aloud. But thinking of Mama, lying in her bed, wrapped in her quilts...

When the healer returned, she shook off his offer of the potion. Allowed her father to take her hand and wondered why she was a little disappointed it wasn't Braum instead.

“Ready?” the healer asked. Perhaps he meant to be gentle in his manner, but it grated on her. There was not going to be

anything gentle with what came next, and she was not certain there was anything she could have done to prepare herself.

He did not wait for her reply. The pain was a flaring, blinding light that forced sound from her throat as she tried desperately not to move. There were hands pressing at her, and somehow she knew they were Braum's—and she hated that was his task rather than to comfort. To distract her with talk of new projects and fresh improvements, ones that had never occurred to her to want.

“The worst is behind you,” the healer soothed. “The wrappings will be a comfort while it mends.”

Comfort was the wrong word. She felt bruised and battered, inside and out. Not like herself at all. A different woman had woken from her fall. One that forgot to ask for shifts and didn't banish Braum for invading her home and undressing her and allowing her father to see him when they'd already discussed waiting...

Her tears were silent. A private mourning for what was to come and all she might have to say.

The healer was back at her side; the wrappings finished. “Are you hurt anywhere else? Perhaps you'd like some privacy and I could look you over more thoroughly.”

He gave a pointed look toward her father, but did not do the same toward Braum.

Because a mate would stay for such a thing, wouldn't he? He'd have seen every bit of her already—nothing could surprise him save how black and blue she'd turned from her plummet from the window.

Except they weren't like that. She'd made sure of that.

A lump settled in her throat.

“No, but thank you. My wing took the worst of it.” The journey could not have been easy, although the winds did not sound as harsh as they had been. The rain was present, but almost lazy as it dribbled down onto her roof.

Her poor, broken roof.

He gave a thin-lipped smile. “I can see that.”

“I have coins,” Wren blurted out, suddenly remembering payment would be necessary. She could offer him milk if he was in want of a trade, but that would mean more effort for Da or Braum and...

Da made a sour face and tapped her lightly on the nose. “Stubborn to the last,” he chided, but there was a hint of warmth back in his features, and that was something.

She couldn't see Braum. Hadn't since she'd woken. It... bothered her. The not knowing. Had he left, and she hadn't noticed? But no, those had been his hands on her back, she was certain of it. She might not have often felt them, but she'd stared at them more than she cared to admit. They were not healer's hands. They were large and scarred—with calluses smoothed with time and age. He knew hard work and long hours, and he knew also what it was to sit and rest on her porch with a reluctant mate and a half-wild leptus.

There were whispers. As if a conversation was happening in low tones, either in the far end of the kitchen or the porch itself. Another Wren would have called out—if there was anything she should know about her care, she'd need to hear it for herself as there would be no one to tend her.

But this Wren...

This one was too overwrought. Could feel the weight of her father's attention, the questions that simmered as he tried to let her rest, let her heal.

“Da?” she asked, her voice tight and too high.

Then he was leaning over her, smoothing at her hair and looking too much like the man that had stayed in this very alcove with her mama, flying up to her loft at the smallest word from her.

“Yes, sweet,” he murmured.

“Can you fetch a shift from my trunk? Please? I want one.”

If he felt any strangeness at the request, or the fact that she was in need of one, he didn't show it. He didn't have to ask

where he'd find it—her furniture was much the same as it had been when he called this place home too. He didn't make use of the stair—never needed to.

“You taunt the invalid,” she called. Tried to call. But her mouth was dry and her throat was hoarse, so it was more of a whisper.

The door opened. Closed again. The footsteps familiar, if perhaps a little heavier than they had been.

And still, he did not come to her.

Perhaps he would have, if Da hadn't come back down, one hand filled with a fold of linen.

Or so she told herself, wishing the knot in her stomach would untangle itself.

She wouldn't have him dress her. Braum either—no matter this business of *undressing* he'd permitted himself.

Needs must.

She had needed it then, but she didn't now. There would be chores to see to soon in any case, and she'd have to get used to moving with her wing bound to her torso, keeping it still and quiet.

She sat up. An awkward shuffle that sent twinges of unhappiness through her shoulder, spine, and wing, but she did it. All while keeping the quilts pulled up to her chest as she held out her hand for her shift.

“You're sure you don't need my help?” he offered, his voice low and gentle. “Or maybe...” if he offered to get Braum, her cheeks would likely never stop heating.

“I do need help,” she agreed. “Could you check on things in the stable? I asked Braum about the grain, but I don't know about the milking or the mucking and—”

“Wren,” Da cut in with a sigh. “This is not my first day in this place. You needn't give me the full list. I'll see to it.” He squeezed her good shoulder and she nodded, feeling grateful and unsettled all at once.

He left the alcove. Tucked behind the hearth it afforded plenty of privacy even without a door to separate the rooms. Or had, when she was little and knew better than to spy and peek when she'd already been sent to bed.

But it felt different now as she heard the front door open and close once again. It brought the smell of wet earth and fresh rain. A soothing scent that might better be enjoyed out on the porch if she felt well enough for it.

Which she didn't.

She swiped at her eyes and rubbed her nose and looked down at her shift. It was easy enough to get into. When one had use of all their limbs and could step into it—straps over her shoulders, back cut low enough so as not to bother the joint between back and wings.

Should she stand? Or maintain her modesty with quilts and covered breasts and shimmy and squirm?

That hurt too much. A single attempt made that more than clear.

She needed to stand then. Followed by bending.

That was... Surely that was doable.

Her legs weren't broken. Bruised—rather badly, if she was truthful. When she allowed the quilts to fall away and she looked down at her skin with an appraising eye. It was no wonder she was so sore, her flesh taking on the mottled hue that would soon blossom into deep purples and blacks where she'd hit the ground hardest.

She didn't dare turn to see the state of her backside, not if the marks that stretched out from her hip were any indication of how unsightly it was going to be.

She just needed to bend over. That was all. Bend and shimmy her hips through the shift and be done with it.

The shift slipped from her finger and onto the floor when she made even the slightest move forward, and she groaned, wanting nothing more than to bury herself in her quilts and maybe cry a bit longer.

No, that wasn't right. She wanted to not have fallen at all. Wanted to feel herself, and not this weakened, dependent creature that couldn't even muck her own stalls.

She sank back onto the bed and fiddled with the puddle of fabric with her toes, willing it to fly upward and back into her lap.

"Wren?" Braum asked, his body in the doorway but his eyes carefully averted to the ground.

She didn't squeak, but her cheeks flooded with warmth as she hastily pulled a quilt over her lap, the bandages for her wing doing a great deal to cover the top of her.

"Do you need help?"

He did not ask if she wanted it. He knew her better than that. The answer would have been curt and frustrated, even if it was directed more at herself than to him.

But did she *need* it?

It was a huff. That was all. It wasn't a sob at all that lodged in her throat and came out a choked sort of, "Yes." An admission rather than an answer. The cost was only her pride—and Braum was not one for mockery.

His steps were slow and measured as he closed the distance between them. As if he was waiting for her to change her mind and banish him outright.

She wanted her mother so badly it was like a physical ache in her chest, adding to the soreness, the pains and making her eyes leak like a fledgling.

She covered her face with her hands and suddenly she could bend after all, because her body wanted to huddle, to contort and hide and...

Braum was kneeling. His hand was on her knee. His skin was warm, but rather than a comfort, she felt an even greater swell of embarrassment. He always saw her lowest moments, and for a great while she'd blamed him as the cause of them.

He said nothing. Neither in comfort or in teasing, and she was grateful for it. As she fought to take in one full breath

after another. His touch left her knee and went down to her ankle, easing her foot through her shift. Then the other.

His fingers did not linger, but her heart raced as if they had. As he pushed the fabric up her legs and then to where her thighs touched the mattress and he could get no further.

“Will you stand?” he asked, his voice low. A little tight, and it made her insides twitch faintly.

She didn’t ask him about modesty or quilts or coverings. He held her hand with his free one and kept his eyes firmly up at her face as he eased the shift up her hips and helped the straps over each shoulder, standing as he went.

“There now,” he soothed, smoothing his hand over the edges of the straps and catching just a bit of her skin as he did so. “Feel better?”

“No.” Yes. Somewhere in between.

He hummed a little, as if understanding. “I’m afraid I’ve turned your kitchen into a washroom. Your bedding is drying. The mattress will not take quite as long, I think. You’ll be able to move back upstairs tonight.” Wren gave him a miserable look. “I will help you,” Braum amended. “If you’d rather be in your own bed.”

She did want that, but there was so much more pressing down on her, making her feel foolish and vulnerable. She’d hurt herself before. Cuts and bruises, mended with herbs and bandages and half-hearted chores for a week while things mended.

This was... more.

She sank back down onto the bed, feeling as if what little strength she had left was suddenly gone.

Which hurt. The jostling and the impact, no matter how soft her mother’s mattress might be. She eased onto her side, mindful of her injuries, and fought not to huddle.

Braum was kneeling again, hovering and not quite touching as he looked her over for some sign of what she needed—how he might be useful.

It wasn't just up to him, she reminded herself. Da would help. He'd stay until she mended, if she asked him to.

She did not have to beg.

Wouldn't.

No, she amended to herself. If any one of her animals was at risk for going hungry, she would even do that. Her pride wasn't worth it. Not in comparison.

"Wren," Braum prodded gently. "I think we need to talk some."

She turned blurry eyes to him, even though she wasn't truly present. The list of things that needed doing was pressing in on her, and her body was failing her and she *hated* it.

Never mind the roof itself. The workers she did not know who to ask for, and possibly more coins she'd need to borrow from Da when she'd yet to repay him for the last ones.

"Wren," he repeated, his tone turning harsh and insistent.

She blinked, her brow furrowing. That was no way to speak to an invalid—even she knew that.

"I'll not leave you."

Her head hurt. Not the ache at the back of it that had accompanied her waking. But a persistent throb that was a pressure between eyes, heavy and unwelcome. "Braum," she groaned, and he shook his head.

"No, Wren. I was wrong before. It is not a talk we need, but for you to *listen*." She might have scowled if she was not so sore and cross already. "To me," Braum clarified. "Not cads. Not even your father to your mother. Just me and you."

She swallowed, eyes too wide. Her heart was beating too quickly, and she glanced toward the exit as if she would make it there. "You're safe, lovely. Always," Braum soothed, and her vision blurred briefly because he noticed her. Even when she wished it to be otherwise, he saw. "But if I intend to keep that promise, I must *be* here."

Her lips thinned, and his thumb came to her bottom lip, his expression warm, yet... troubled.

“I’ll not insist on living in your home. That is yours, to invite me or to exile me, at your whim. But I’ll be on this property each night—with your hesper, if they’ll have me. At least until I can build a cottage for myself.” Still, that hint of sadness he did not seem able to will away. “I could have lost you,” he continued, his thumb coming to her cheekbone, stroking it so lightly that she wanted to cry to entirely different reasons than before. “In my desire to respect your wishes, in my need for you to be happy, I kept away. I gave you distance and in it, I failed in my most fundamental duties as your mate.”

He was always so careful not to say that—she’d insisted on it, hadn’t she? She didn’t want to be called that, and he did not want to impose himself on a woman that did not recognise him for what he was.

How much of that mattered anymore? If he was just a man, and she...

Not a woman preyed upon in her grief.

Not a girl that had lost her father to tricks of fate and biology.

Just a woman.

That was rather fond of this man. Liked the way he looked at her animals with affection instead of annoyance. Liked the way he spoke so well of his sister. His family. He knew how to love and to love *well*.

Could she say the same?

She’d apologised to him already. For not being what he deserved. What he wanted. He’d been cross, and rightly so, and she wouldn’t insult him now by offering anything of the kind.

Instead, she’d do as he asked, and listen.

“Will you hate me for it? For staying?” Something shifted in his expression. He lost some of the sadness, and there was a

hint of just how lost he felt. The worry he carried, but did his best to hide away from her. To appear calm and unaffected, for she was anxious enough with her own concerns.

A poor friend, indeed. So preoccupied with herself, with sad histories and troubled pasts, she'd not taken nearly enough care of him in turn.

Not from responsibility or obligation. The weighty, unwelcome burden that she'd felt... before.

Lies. All of them.

But she'd believed them. Still had, for a long while after. Of what a troublesome thing, mates seemed to be. Steeped in expectation—selfish to the last.

She thought she'd been protecting herself by rejecting it all outright. There was no one else to look out for her, after all.

Hadn't been.

Or...

That wasn't true, either.

Firen was.

Da, too. When she wasn't being stubborn and let him.

And now there was Braum. Steady, careful, Braum. That would live in the stable like a hesper if it meant he could be close to her. To take on the tasks too dangerous and the ones she was too unskilled to manage on her own.

There was still that persistent, nagging voice that she could manage. That she didn't need him.

But it had become an irritant more than a counsellor over these last months. Twisting her up inside as she fought down her growing admiration for him. It would only hurt her, after all. To think well of him and then inevitably be disappointed.

Cowardly. That's what it was. Tucking herself away in a fortress of her own fears and cherished solitude.

He thought she might hate him. Always so careful of her wants, her freedoms. Playing the delicate game of knowing

when to push, when to press, and when to allow her the space to miss him.

If he was a seducer, then he had earned his prize. With patience and perseverance. Chipping away at her armaments until there was just... her.

Lying in her mother's bed. In nothing but a flimsy shift and bandages.

While he leaned close. Touched her.

And she... trusted him.

With herself. That he would not do what she didn't want. Not because he was so noble as to not want it for himself, but because he would never, ever hurt her. To do so was to hurt a piece of himself.

Because...

He was her mate.

She chewed at her lip, hard.

Her mate.

Not the one that some invisible tendrils had bound her to. Born of blood and instinct.

Instead, it was care and patience and quiet moments underneath a tree. Tucked away on a porch. Peaceful talks and yes, some difficult ones.

If she was going to choose one...

If she wanted one, which... which maybe she did...

She'd want it to be him.

"Hate you?" she rasped out, her throat too tight and her mouth too dry, and her heart beating wildly in her chest. "I didn't know how to ask you to stay."

She had never seen him smile that way. It started slowly, as her words sank into him, then her meaning. And those shadows that lingered, the sadness and the concern began to thaw, leaving a brightness that had not been there before.

“Oh really?” he breathed, and there was a hint of teasing to him that made her smile in turn. “And here I thought for certain you were going to fight me to the last.”

Wren hummed, just a little. “I fell off my house,” she reminded him. “I might be stubborn, but I’m not so foolish I can’t admit I shouldn’t do all this on my own. Not if I want to live to the next time.”

Braum’s expression sobered, and she was sorry for it. She’d wanted to be truthful, for him to see that she saw the seriousness of her fall and the danger she’d been in, but she did not like the way his face clouded, as if... as imagining the outcome very differently.

Not finding a bruised and battered mate, but a dead one.

Because he’d been kind and thoughtful, and listened to her when she said she wanted nothing to do with that mating business.

She opened her mouth to apologise. Again. But she stopped herself. He’d accepted none of it when she’d tried before, but perhaps... perhaps she hadn’t approached it correctly. It had been pity, mostly. Trying to show she had some compassion for his situation, as if it was his alone. Not shared. Certainly not.

Her eyes blurred, and she reached out to him. Her fingers were clumsy and the touch was not the soft brush against his cheek she meant for it to be. It was stilted, and she paused too long about his cheekbone, but he was very still and looked at her, and he did not move away from her. That was something. “I’m sorry I didn’t see you,” she offered. “I’m sorry I didn’t know you.”

How many tears had she shed in his presence? She couldn’t begin to recall. Too many—not for the hurts she’d shared, but for the embarrassment of reactions she wished she could recall. Of wounds that should have healed years before. For all her talk of compartments and keeping her life carefully separated into before and afters, she’d picked at each wound in turn. Over and over as she lay in her bed, reproaching herself,

hating herself. Hating a nameless, faceless woman that had the audacity to take her father away.

Hating her father for being willing to go.

Hating her mother for leaving the family she claimed lived on a planet far away.

No. That wasn't true. She'd never done that. Been angry, perhaps. When life was difficult and Mama would talk of tricks and tools that made life seem so *easy*.

But Wren's life was gardening and mucking and calluses on her palms.

And rocking on porches and drinking hot tea, and cuddling up with Merryweather with much-loved books.

She'd really thought to complain?

Foolish, selfish girl.

Cold, heartless woman.

Braum had never said those things. He'd never criticised her for... anything.

He'd been angry on her behalf, for wrongs done. He'd been kind and faithful and so very patient while she...

He had tears in his eyes.

As he crumpled slightly, his large frame falling forward, his head resting on her side as he hid himself away, his body tight with strain as he wrestled with...

"You mean it?" he asked, his voice hoarse and so unlike him it was almost startling.

How much had he held back, on her behalf? Never wanting to frighten her, never wanting to damage what small ground she'd given him to work with.

Her heart ached. Her throat too. And her wing, and her hip, and so many other little parts of her that were just... her.

Because... because her mate hurt.

She'd hurt him. Hadn't meant to. Hadn't been able to trust him, stranger that he was. But she could feel sorry for it now.

Now that he was her friend, and her...

Her mate.

Chosen. By her.

A little too slow. A little too late. With a great deal too much fight on her part.

She moved her hand and laid it on top of his head, her fingers going through the waves of his hair she'd spent far too much time looking at. Wondering at its texture, if he combed it each night as she did, or if he simply left it alone aside from the fingers that moved through it in frustration.

Frustration with *her*.

"I mean it," she murmured, watching his shoulders stiffen. Relax. Over and over. "I'm sorry," she repeated, finding it was just as true as it had been the first time. "I see you now."

Not in the same way. Not in the *knowing* he claimed to have felt from that very first moment. But in the quiet familiarity. The warmth she experienced each time she'd glance out her window and find him there. He'd become a fixture of her home just as assuredly had all her other creatures. He'd asked Merry that, hadn't he? What it would take to be adopted? To be hers.

It should have been shameful, his willingness to be thought a pet or a worker on her little farm. But that was Braum. He'd sleep in the stable, if that's all she would allow. Because... he put her first.

"Braum," she murmured, fingers still skimming through her hair, finding it novel and new and intimate. Which should have been frightening, and yet... wasn't.

He tilted his head ever so slightly to indicate he was listening, but he wasn't ready to move. To face her. Let him have his tears, just as he allowed her so often to have hers. "You needn't sleep in the stable."

Braum grew very still.

"We can... work out the rest. When I'm feeling better. I don't... I'm not saying I'm ready for..." Her face was hot and

her words were stilted and stuttering, but she'd have things clear between them. For once. "Well, you know what for. But I'll not sleep at night thinking of you out in the stable. Calliope and Temperance might get ideas." Why were the words so hard to get out when they were so clear in her mind? "They'll have to see about seducing their own mates. I've just got mine."

Her fingers curled about his ear, and he shuddered.

And when he turned to her, his eyes were dark and they might have been frightening, if not for the warmth she felt trickle through her. He was a handsome man, her Braum. Had been from the start. Which of course was knowledge she'd tucked away and buried as thoroughly as she could, because it wasn't relevant. Didn't mean a thing to her, not when she'd never look at him as someone to admire, someone she might like to touch...

But she was touching him now. Her hand had shifted when he moved, dropping away from his hair and she found it pulled between his warm palms. Rough and soft, all at once. As if he knew hard labour, but took care of himself as well.

He was going to say something. Probably a lot of assurances about expectations and she needn't fear him. That he would not impose upon her in her bed, even if he was allowed to sleep by the fire, and she couldn't abide hearing all that. Not now. It was all true, and they were comforts she had offered herself when she grew too anxious at his presence in her life and near her home.

"No, it is my turn to talk and for you to listen." Her voice was soft and calmer than she felt. Or was it? Some of that anxious roiling was quieter than it had been. As if some of the knots and tangles that had been the state of her stomach for months was suddenly soothed. "I haven't treated you fairly. You've been... more than gracious about it, and I know... I know you understand the reasons." She chewed at the inside of her cheek, and if he did not have such a hold on her hand, she would have tried to touch his face again.

How long had she buried those impulses? She couldn't even recall. It had become so commonplace to tuck them away, it stopped being any effort at all.

"I'm not saying I can be a proper mate. Not... not right away." She grimaced, thinking of her broken wing and how an already odious business would be made even more tedious if she had to be pushed about with a wing to twinge and ache with every movement.

No, she told herself firmly.

What she'd known before... that was before. With a brute and a wretch, and it was not a worthy comparison at all.

It was different when a man cared. Mama herself had said so. And she'd get that wistful look in her eyes that Wren knew meant she was thinking of her father. Sad. Fond. She'd been loved, if only for a while.

It would be different for Wren. For Braum. Because... he'd chosen her ages ago. And she'd choose him now. Each day, if she had to. Until it was as real and as tangible as the bond he felt for her.

"But I'd like you to be mine. And... I'd like to think I'd treat you better than my animals, but I'm not really sure how to care for anything else. So I can promise you food and company and shelter, and that I'll be happy to see you every time we're together, and..."

He squeezed her hand. And she'd forbidden him to talk, hadn't she? Hadn't meant to, not really, but he was always so respectful of her.

"I want you to be happy," she finished, not sure what else she meant to say, but knowing that was important. "And to know... that you're welcome. And you don't have to keep fixing my house if you do not want to—I'll even stop trying to pay you for what you've done already." She grimaced again, thinking of the roof. "But maybe, if you'd like, you could help fix the roof, since... since you'll be staying here too. And maybe you'd like to be dry for this wet winter we're supposed to have."

Another squeeze to her hand, and she blew out a breath. She was tired. Would sleep soon, if this wasn't so important. It was easier, somehow, to talk when the haze of tiredness quieted her anxieties. They were there, always present in the back of her mind, gnawing and niggling, but easier to ignore. "I want you to stay," she added, in case that hadn't been clear along the way. "All right, I've finished."

Maybe there was more he needed from her. More thanks. Just... more.

He was still holding her hand, but he took away one of his so he could skim his thumb across her cheek, just as she had wanted to do to him.

"Do I have those herbs of yours to thank for this sudden change of heart?" Braum asked. His tone might have been teasing, but there was a hint of genuine concern in his eyes that made her answer more serious, even as warmth crept into her face at having to speak so plainly.

"I don't think sudden is the word," she confessed, her insides squirming in that familiar way as he watched her. "I've been... wondering, for a while. If maybe... maybe things could be different. If I could be different. If I... tried." She chewed at her lip, and it was her turn to squeeze his hand. "You make me want to try. I think... I think I held on a little too tight. To how things were. But they can't be that way again. But that doesn't mean I can't have something good. Even if it's different."

He leaned forward, and for a moment she thought he was going to press a kiss to her lips. Her heart swelled and fluttered, and she didn't want that, did she? That was too close to the *other* matter, the one they'd deal with later when she was better, and yet...

He moved so it was her forehead instead, and his lips were warm and his hand nestled in her hair for just a moment to keep her still.

Then he moved.

To the cheekbone he'd touched. And there was a kiss, yes, but he did more than that. It was a brush of his lips against her skin, a gentle nudge that was almost a nuzzle as he... he purred.

A soft sound as he breathed out, so subtle she wasn't certain if she'd imagined it at all.

She didn't allow her thoughts to turn to her parents. On wondering if Da had ever purred for her mama when they were together. Maybe that was something reserved solely for a man and his mate, something deep and soothing when she was frightened, when she needed him close and to hold her and...

She resented how sore she felt. The broken wing that would keep her from sleeping how she preferred.

She resented it especially now when she wanted to feel what it was to be held by Braum. Not to be carried and flown home during one of her upsets. But if it felt as she thought it might.

Like... like a little bit of home.

His lips moved from her cheekbone, and she held her breath, waiting. Wondering. If... if he was going to kiss her properly. "Wren," he murmured, and she hadn't realised she'd closed her eyes until she opened them again at his rumble of her name. "There you are," he murmured.

Only then did his mouth meet hers. Awkward and askew, her head resting too near the mattress itself, and only belatedly did she think to tilt her chin to help him. But it was warmth and it was comfort, and it made her heart race and her blood quiver, and yes, she cursed her broken wing and the roof and her slippery heels.

For she would have liked more of his kisses, if they were going to feel like that.

He pulled away too soon. His eyes over-bright and his breath coming in short little spurts. And she might have been sorrier still, except his thumb brushed against her bottom lip, as if he too was regretful that it needed to end.

"You need to rest," Braum murmured, his hand coming to curl her loose hair behind her ear. "Do you know, I'm not

certain I've seen your hair out of its braid."

That should not have been mortifying, yet it was. Somehow even more so than when he'd helped with her shift.

He must have seen evidence of her embarrassment on her cheeks, for he smiled at her, chuckling softly as he shook his head at her. "A strange woman, my mate," Braum added beneath his breath. She might have been insulted, had his tone not been so very fond.

"It isn't strange to want your hair tidy and out of the way," she protested. She reached out her hand and found his shirt. It wasn't neatly tucked in to his trousers, not as it usually was, which made it easier to tug on. "Herbs, please. As before. And another cup of water besides. If it's not too much trouble."

He leaned down over her, his eyes a little too serious. "Caring for you will never be that."

She swallowed. Nodded.

Because...

Because he seemed to believe that. Which meant she should probably try to do the same.

She'd drifted off before he returned to her, and she grunted when she felt herself propped up, a strong arm supporting her and keeping her from tumbling. "Herbs first," Braum rumbled, her head against his chest letting her feel the vibration of his voice. "Then some water."

Yes. Just as she'd instructed.

But her grouse did not find her voice, and maybe that was for the best, because she should be kind to the one taking care of her, shouldn't she? Not complain and whine even though she still hurt and she didn't know when she wouldn't again. Which really wasn't fair, not when she'd only wanted to keep her house from drowning and...

He held the cup to her lips, which wasn't necessary. Her arms worked. Hands too. She could grip his wrist, see? And he had no need to chuckle at her that way, not when he'd already embarrassed her by reminding her of the state of her hair. A

comb would be on the list, tomorrow. Perhaps even a bath if she could manage it.

Her hip gave an unhappy twinge. Her wing too.

Maybe not a bath. Maybe just a warm cloth and a proper hair combing, and yes, a braid because that was proper and usual and she really would need something to tug if she had to face her father when she woke up and *explain* and...

There was water. And she really had been thirsty.

And maybe there was a kiss to the top of her head as well, but she was already asleep.

Which was... really rather wonderful.

20. Hers

Braum only left her because Merryweather had taken her role as sentry by her side. Which really did not last very long at all, when he peeked in again only to find the leptus stretched fully along Wren's back, sound asleep at her vigil. He hoped her warmth was a comfort rather than an irritant to the delicate bones that had broken, and he fought down another wave of self-recriminations.

She would mend.

He would stay with her.

She... she'd asked him to. In her roundabout, Wren sort of way, full of misgivings and darting eyes and stuttered words.

She'd apologised. To him. It wasn't the first time, but it was the first he could recall wanting to accept. Because... because she wanted him. Perhaps not in the same way that he needed her, but it was enough. Because it was her, and she'd asked him to stay.

He was elated.

And then, when she was not within his eye line, he was nearly crushed beneath the worry.

That she would change her mind once she was well again. That she would not need his help with her chores and her beloved animals, so he'd be dismissed—what ground they had made together, suddenly forced into an abrupt and agonising retreat.

The prospect of that was somehow worse than the tremulous peace they'd concocted. The comings and goings, the nights he spent flying above her home, until exhaustion sent him back to his cottage and his own, lonely bed.

He hadn't been there when it mattered, and that still gnawed at his gut and as much as she talked about what he deserved,

she never once gave much credence to what *she* deserved.

Someone to help her. Someone to take on the little burdens as well as the larger ones.

She had thought mating all about selfishness and yes, the *act* of mating itself.

He took a few calming breaths, trying to push those particular thoughts from his mind. They could serve no useful purpose. Not here. Not after...

He'd kissed her.

He closed his eyes and his hands curled into fists because...

It had been perfect.

Or might have been. If she wasn't hurt. If he hadn't neglected her.

His father had taken Ma on plenty of adventures. And while he might have been damaged a time or two in a squall, nothing had ever happened to his mate.

He looked in on her. Again.

Watched to see the rise and fall of her chest. To reassure himself that he'd come in time for the worst. But he knew it would take an age before he forgave himself for the rest.

How many times had she mentioned the roof? As if... as if looking for his validation. That her efforts were important. She never wanted to appear foolish to him, even from the beginning. Perhaps she hadn't known it was her mate that addressed her, but she'd wanted him to think well of her. Strong and capable, his Wren. Determined, suited her better. Stubborn, too. And lovely and soft, with hair that tormented him in its braid, and mocked him when it was free...

He might not have much prowess in a kitchen, but he knew how to make broth. He'd cook the vegetables down until they were soft enough she'd no need of a spoon. Bread... he was hopeless at bread. And that took hours, didn't it? But there was a half-loaf tucked away in the cupboard, a bit dry about the edges but it would perk up nicely if he left it by the fire.

When had she last eaten? He wanted the healer back so he could press him further on her care, but he'd likely be back in the city by now.

“She sleeping?”

He had not heard the other man's return.

“Yes,” he answered, keeping his voice as low as he could while not seeming rude. The broth bubbled pleasantly, and he added a few root vegetables before turning his attention to her many pouches of herbs. She was not one for labelling, his mate. Some were dried in bunches, the bundles hanging down from hooks on the wall. Others from the ceilings. Still more were in little canisters like the ones he'd brewed for her medicine.

Should those not be away from the cooking herbs? Presumably some were for the lozenges she sold at market, others for the syrups...

As much as he'd come to know her during their friendship, he'd not trespassed into her kitchen. Tea had been the extent of it.

He'd learn, he promised himself. Every cupboard, every canister. He would know it all.

Know all of *her*.

The slide of a chair against the large rug, and presumably her father was sitting. Watching him.

Braum had not known how to react when Althon came to check on his daughter. Wren had been so clear that Braum wasn't to accompany their last visit together, and so far there had been no overlap between the two.

Until this morning. When Althon had been rightfully worried after the strength of the storm, and wanted to ensure she was well.

Only to find two strange men keeping watch over her, his eyes darting between the two as his mouth firmed and his body coiled.

“I found her,” Braum had admitted, a truth and a lie all at once. “She needed a healer.”

Althon had grunted, but took his place by Wren, smoothing at her hair and murmuring softly.

Before he cast stern looks at Braum and muttered promises about later conversations.

“Every time I visit my daughter, there is a new improvement. And yet, when I look around this room, I do not see any signs of a mate living with her.” His fingers drummed briefly against the tabletop, and Braum kept sniffing at herbs, trying to find ones he recognised. “A curious arrangement.”

Althon did not know of the cad. Did not know of his daughter’s fears—and Braum would not be the one to enlighten him.

“I am a woodcutter. My belongings reside in the grove.”

Althon smiled at him mildly. “So you do not deny your attachment to my daughter?”

Braum blinked. Thought briefly of Wren and what she might want. But things had changed, surely? She’d... she’d acknowledged him. Chosen him. That had to count for...

Everything.

It sent a jolt, an ache, just to think it, and he had to fight down the urge to go stare at her once more.

“Of course not,” he offered, turning so the man could gauge his sincerity for himself. “Any of our *arrangements* have been for your daughter’s sake. She was not interested in sharing her home until recently.”

Very recently, but that did not need to be shared.

Althon hummed lightly, rubbing at his chin as he turned his hand and glanced toward the alcove. He could not even make out the end of the bed from where he sat—Braum was well aware of that. “I have not known of mates that struggled to live with one another.”

Braum shifted slightly in his stance and selected his words carefully. “Wren has only half your blood,” he reminded him, no matter how unnecessarily. “It has made things... more complicated.”

He would say no more than that. Wren could supply whatever else she wanted her father to know. He’d not risk angering her. Not now. Preferably not ever, but he was not so foolish as to think he could prevent every turn of her temper with a well-placed word or kind gesture.

“Complicated,” Althorn repeated, as if the word was distasteful on his tongue.

And maybe it might have been to Braum once. If those *complications* were solely a mistrustful mate and fearful glances. Of bartering for what came naturally to other couples.

But no longer.

He treasured every bit of it. Every hard-earned smile, every crumb of progress they’d made *together*.

Perhaps it was not all affection and gladness like Kessa and Cyrras experienced when first they met. Perhaps it was strange that Braum had been her friend first, her mate second.

But those challenges were theirs. Born of private pains and hurts he wished he could expunge from her mind and heart. But he could be a balm to them. And would be, for everyday she allowed him.

“Your daughter prefers to make her own choices, and in her own timing. I am certain you have noticed.”

Althorn lost some of his suspicion, a wide smile crossing his features. “Ah.”

Braum gave the broth an unnecessary stir. “Indeed.” He turned back because he was no coward, and this needed saying. “I have the greatest admiration for your daughter, and my commitment to her is no less than if she was mate-born. She is...” Words failed him. She was infuriating. Special. A treasure. Could hold grudges and too much grace all at once, much to his constant annoyance and respect. “Everything,” he supplied, a remnant from his earlier thoughts. Perhaps too

personal a confession with a man he'd met only hours before, but regardless of the hows and the should haves, this was Wren's father. His love for her was more than apparent, and Braum would have them understand one another.

Althorn pushed one of the chairs back with his foot; an invitation if ever there was one. "Sit, Braum was it? I'd like to come to know my daughter's mate."



Wren insisted on getting up. Then when faced with objections from both men, she glared at each of them in turn and threatened their expulsion if they intended to stop her from using the facilities in privacy.

Then there was the matter of washing.

She wanted to do it alone. To which Braum asked her to reach to her shoulder to mimic the use of a washrag.

There was no hiding the grimace she made, and when he waited for her argument and denials to begin, he was met only with a huff and a glare at the floor as she asked him to assist her.

Althorn did not stay. He promised to come in the mornings to tend the hesper, just until Braum got the hang of them both, he said. "You won't do much good for Wren if you've broken ribs, now will you?"

Braum had thought him teasing, but Wren admitted that there had been an incident with Althorn that involved a rather fierce head turn from Temperance that left him tightly wrapped for a few days.

And he'd left his mate here to tend them alone, day after day.

He pushed the guilt aside. It had been necessary. He might have overpowered her—worn her down with arguments and talk of rights and obligations, but she wouldn't have smiled when he entered the room. She wouldn't have thanked him for mugs of warm broth and answered each of his questions about

the state of her cupboards and the contents of each of her little bundles.

He knew her. She would have run. Would have rather lived out in the burrow with her grimbles than endure her home being intruded upon.

And Merryweather would have followed. He'd have her house, but he wouldn't have *her*; and that was no trade at all.

It was a strange thing, filling a bath for someone other than himself. He often did not have the patience for it, using the creek and hard soap and a rag rather than boiling water and fussing with the tub.

It was different when it was Wren. He'd been given firm instructions on rewrapping her wing every few days, and he'd yet to attempt it. After a proper bath seemed reason enough.

Where the water wouldn't be too hot. Or too cold. He never wanted to see her chilled through ever again.

She was at the table with Merryweather. He wanted to banish her back to bed, but she claimed her hip was sore from lying on it so long. He suspected it was sore from the black bruise that covered a great deal of it, but he wasn't going to argue with her. It was wrong to argue with an invalid, she said. Didn't he know that?

Growing up, it had been wrong to argue with his mother, sick or otherwise, but maybe it was different for her.

So it would be different for him.

And besides, it meant he did not have to lean quite so far to place a kiss on her lips. Her cheek. The top of her head.

He tried not to do it too often. Watched her carefully for signs that his affection was unwanted, or even simply allowed an indulgence on her part.

But she would get that soft, wistful smile on her lips, and her eyes would be warm as she looked at him, and that was simply an encouragement to add more throughout the day.

“Did you...”

“Your balms are added to the water, as you already requested.” Another kiss, this one to her temple, so it would not feel neglected. “You think my memory as short as that?”

She shrugged. Tried to shrug. Which rewarded them both with one of her pained hisses followed by a huff of frustration.

Which he hated. Hated that she hurt, hated the flare of renewed guilt he felt each time she felt a twinge or an ache. Instincts knew no rationalisations. No justifications. She was his responsibility. In all things.

And yet...

He liked that he knew the crinkle of her nose. Liked that he could guess her responses even before she gave them. She was no stranger to him, this woman. Which felt more right than he could have thought possible.

The addition of Wren’s brews had turned the water to a milky pool of fragrant steam. She wanted his arm for the trek down the hall. He hadn’t anticipated that, most particularly given her fervent stance that she could utilise this room *alone*.

But they’d agreed about the bath. Yet somehow he’d imagined she’d want to situate herself in privacy. Perhaps drape a few cloths here and there to hide what the opaque water did not quite cover.

He swallowed.

It was tantalising. This closeness that did not include the assurance of fulfilment. Appreciating the trust she placed in him. To care for her during her convalescence. To love her unselfishly.

Was it wrong to admit there was love? Was there such a thing as too soon between mates?

He never would have thought so, and yet with his Wren, he never knew which matters would trouble her. Would hurt instead of comfort.

She sighed when he undid the bandages. And his appreciation for her slender back, the curve of her shoulders, was tempered by the stiffness of her wings, huddled against

her shoulder blades. The angry skin that lay between where bone and matted feathers met natural skin.

Her wings twitched, and he could well imagine the desire she barely suppressed to stretch and unfurl after being bound for so long. He brought his hands to her unbroken wing and massaged gently, and was rewarded by her back arching as a groan escaped her. "Better?"

The feathers needed attention. They must be uncomfortable, ruffled and backward as a few of them had become. Others were hanging limp and ready to fall, yet unable to from the wrappings. How did she reach them at all? With no one to help her with them as new ones needed to be unsheathed?

No more.

"Would you like a moment?" Braum asked, voice a little too low and strained. He'd give her anything, including privacy, if she wanted it from him.

"Hmm?" she asked, her own tone a little hazy. "Oh," she murmured, his words evidently registering. She glanced down at the water, then back toward him. "Just a bath, yes?"

As if being involved in her bath was not privilege enough. As if she had to worry he would insist upon more while she was hurt. Both inside and out. Old wounds and new.

"Didn't your mother have rules about invalids being propositioned for anything else? If so, it was a grave oversight."

He was rewarded with one of her smiles, the kind that was wistful and warm with just a hint of sadness about the edges. "She must have neglected to share that one."

He hummed. Smoothed his hand between her shoulders, on the reddened skin that looked so desperately in need of a salve. "We are fortunate, then, that mine did not neglect that particular education."

Her cheeks were pink with colour. He did think her so fetching when she blushed. He'd thought it reserved for her cheeks alone, but he could see now that it crept down her neck

and kissed over her collarbones. Did it go farther still? She still wore her shift, and it made him wonder.

He'd know soon. If... if she stepped out of that shift. If he allowed himself to look as she made her way into the bath.

He should look. Should help her over the side so she did not slip and fall.

It wasn't wrong. Not if she didn't mind.

He could see her mouth twitching in that peculiar way of hers. "Well," Wren breathed once. Twice. "Well," she repeated. Then dropped her shift. And took his arm.

And yes, her lush went lower still. Down to the breasts he wasn't certain he should be looking at, but once he'd glimpsed...

It felt even more wrong not to.

Not to appreciate his mate in all her beauties. To help her down slowly, one arm steady for her to hold, the other about her waist to make sure she did not tumble in.

The water was still warm—perhaps even a little too hot, but she sank into it with a sigh. Only to remember herself with a grimace as she kept her wing from pressing against the hard side of the tub.

"Here," Braum offered, fetching one of the cloths from the cupboard and rolling it. It would soak, but cushioned her wing enough that she could lie back some, and she smiled at him gratefully.

Her smiles had no business affecting him as they did. It made him want to do anything at all for her, if only she'd give him another one.

He'd hoard them like some did coins. Tucking them away inside his person, a promise that she was pleased by him and with him.

What other ways might he please her? Coax others from her lips he'd yet to experience?

He knelt beside the tub, thinking how nice it might be if she allowed him to wash her all over. But his mate wasn't like that. She'd think him insulting her in some way, as if she wasn't *capable* of washing herself.

Foolish mate.

When he merely wanted the pleasure of touching her skin. Of knowing how it felt when it was wet. When it was slicked with soap.

How it compared when he wiped her dry and she was soft and warm all over. He swallowed thickly.

And handed her a wedge of soap and a cloth.

Kept one for himself, to tend her back.

"Rushing me from my bath, are you?" she asked, eyes closed.

He reached out and touched a tendril of hair floating in the water. Curled it about his forefinger and marvelled at the feel of it. "Never." And he meant it.

He'd fill this tub with hot water every day if it meant he might sit here and watch her in it.

"You say that now. Just wait until the chores are piling up because I'm lounging away." She said it so dryly, as if there was any part of her that would actually consider doing that. She was dedicated to her home, to its care—then there were the animals themselves. He could not even imagine a world in which his Wren did not put them first.

Perhaps he should feel jealous of them. They held her heart first, helped keep her going after so much wrong had been done, and he would not begrudge her that for anything. It meant only he would have to earn their affection in turn, so their tasks might be joint ones.

Whatever was in that concoction of herbs seemed to relax her tongue as well as soothe her pains, and he wondered if he should object to that. Protect her in some way from things she did not mean to say to him.

But in truth, he found himself enjoying it. For her to simply *talk* to him rather than torturing herself in the process.

Or maybe it wasn't the herbs at all. Maybe necessity had made her finally decide that trusting him was a worthwhile risk. That he loved her enough she might allow herself to be vulnerable.

He prayed it was so.

“Will you attend to your hair, or should I?”

His mouth was dry. He hadn't thought to bring a cup for water, but he regretted it now.

“Can't reach over my head, remember?” She reminded him lightly, but her eyes opened and there was a hint of tension there. She did not like limitations. He doubted he would much care for them either.

Washing his hair was a rough, necessary venture. Quick swipes of soap, a haphazard lather, then a dunk in the creek—sometimes the pour of a pitcher if he remembered to bring one.

He would not be so careless with her. She undid the end of her braid herself, then it was left to him to smooth out the rest of the plait. For all their teases of her being an invalid, he could not pretend that he did not feel his own blood heating at the feel of her hair through his fingers. The trust she put in him as she moved away from the edge of the tub to allow him better access to her scalp.

He was doing something, wasn't he? More than combing his fingers through long, dark hair. Dry at the roots, damp in the middle, sodden at the ends as they tried to meld onto her skin, flushed pink from the heat of the water.

Washing. Yes. Which is why there was soap in his other hand.

“Wait,” Wren cut in, her head turning and eyes narrowing. “Were you about to put that in my hair?”

He glanced down at the soap, his brow furrowing in confusion. It was perfectly ordinary. Dotted with herbs that

made it smell nice, but still just... soap.

“Yes?”

She cringed away from him, which was not at all as nice as having her ease against him, all trust and closed eyes and a soft smile about her lips.

“There are potions for hair. Not... not just *soap*.”

Was that what those bottles were for? He'd seen them in the cupboard, but...

“You label nothing,” Braum reminded her, feeling a tinge of embarrassment at having evidently erred in his task before it had even fully begun. “It makes it rather troublesome for the uninitiated.”

It wasn't a complaint. Truly it wasn't. If Kessa had a cabinet of lotions and potions for her hair, he did not remember it. Or perhaps it was something from her mother's side that made it require more care? It would also explain the silken texture, soft and slippery in the water...

“Teach me,” he entreated, his hand curling about her shoulder. “Please. How to take care of you.”

Her eyes lost their squint. Her mouth wasn't pinched in that tight line of displeasure. Instead she sighed and put her arms on the edge of the tub nearest to him as she looked up at him. “It doesn't occur to me to say such things to you. Why do you know what to say? Twists up my insides...”

She was hurt. Even with the murky water and wet hair, he could make out the edges of her bruises. He could not pluck her from the bath. Could not take her to her bed and...

Just a bath. *Just* a bath.

“Do I?” He asked, his voice low and strained. Just had his muscles felt tense with all he mustn't do, all the touches he mustn't give.

Later. This was another lesson in trust, and he would not fail her. It was one thing to threaten her hair with ordinary soap; it was another to go back on his word. His promises.

The weight of that cooled his blood, but only just. Most particularly when her eyes met his in surprise. “You did not know? I was certain you did it on purpose, trying to prove something. Whether to me or to you, I couldn’t be sure.”

He frowned ever so slightly. “Contrary to what you might think, we do not receive lessons in wooing a mate. Most of the work is done for us.” Blood and instincts. Some hints of magic that were bound within his kind, with origins he could not begin to explain.

He did reach for her then, his finger following a drop of water down her neck toward her collarbone. He watched her throat move as she swallowed, watched the way her lids dropped ever so slightly in response. Did that mean she found his touch pleasing?

He hoped so. He knew the faces she made when she was displeased, and they...

They did not look like this.

“Do you mind?” Wren asked, eyes mild, but with a hint of the worry she so often carried. “Having to work harder?”

He leaned close. His knees ached vaguely against the hard floor. He’d purchase a rug for just this spot. Just so he could feel the warmth of her, listen to the slight hitch to her breath as he brought his hand to curl about her ear, to push damp hair away from her face so he could see her all the more clearly. “You are worth it.” And he meant it.

She made to duck her head, to shy away. And if she spoke one word of apology, he was going to have to kiss her to stop the unnecessary flow of words. He was sorry she hurt. Sorry that the circumstances of her birth had meant she thought that family was a temporary affair. Was sorrier still that a bit of scum had preyed upon that. Used it, abused her, and made her afraid of anything more.

But there wouldn’t be more. Because this was a bath, and that meant if he placed a kiss to her cheek, that was just a part of this new ritual they were creating. Together.

And if she shivered a little, it was because she had crept a bit too high from the hot water, and he should coax her to relax. Just a bath.

“Hair or back first?”

She blinked, as if coming back from somewhere far away. “Oh. Hair, I suppose. That jar there. Half a palm full. At the scalp first, then the rest smoothed downward.”

He could do that. Felling a tree was hard work. Smoothing a potion through his mate’s hair was...

Somehow harder.

Not the act itself—although he watched her intently for any sign he was pulling too hard or treating her too roughly. He wanted to be thorough, as he was more than aware she could rescind her consent to this intimacy and make do with unwashed hair for the duration of her convalescence.

It was the way she relaxed into his hands that was hardest. The way she gave a little sigh when he found a particular spot that pleased her. That hinted at just how compatible they would be.

Not today.

Not for the foreseeable.

But... someday.

Rinsing was not as challenging as he feared. Not when she allowed his hand to settle at the back of her neck, holding her suspended so her wing was not crushed along the bottom, and he could swirl her hair until slick foam was added to the water.

Then her back. To the reddened skin that was so clearly in want of attention. That he used the *usual* soap, then spent longer with something creamy from the cupboard. She directed him to it with a small voice, and he wondered if this was the first time it had been attended to since her mother died.

He could have asked.

But he didn’t.

Her feathers took longer still. She curled forward into a ball as he worked, her head propped on her arms as she looked occasionally over her shoulder at him. “Do you think I don’t take care of myself?”

Always so worried about his opinion of her, his Wren. Even from the start.

“I think I was made to take care of you,” Braum deflected. Leaned forward. Placed a kiss between her shoulder blades. Perhaps it would encourage her skin to calm, or maybe...

Maybe he simply wanted her to know what it felt like. Just as he wished to know how the soft skin of her back felt against his lips. “You’ll have to teach me how to do it properly.”

The bath was growing cooler, the steam settling and leaving a heavy air that was in want of an open window for relief. That might be another day. Another project. One he might barter for with kisses and biscuits rather than the coins she insisted on gifting him.

But she’s promised to stop with that, hadn’t she? Because she knew that anything he owned was hers.

He was hers.

He brought out a large towel and, though her cheeks pinked anew when he helped her stand, he tried his best not to look. To watch the water sluice over her skin, her every curve.

He swallowed. Wrapped the cloth about her instead and watched her huddle into it, her glances at him shy and a little nervous.

“It isn’t fair, you know,” she grouched, taking the ends of her hair and squeezing gently into yet another cloth. “I should have got to go as slow as I wanted. Not had to show you a bit of me without clothes on for ages and ages.”

He hummed, absolutely certain that she would have done just that if necessity had not changed things. “Stay off the roof, then,” he countered, touching the end of her nose and smiling at her.

Only to be rewarded with her scowl as she made to push at him. “I...” she began, full of indignation and outrage, and his smile broadened.

“And keep out of the pond as well. Might have broken your wing just as easily in there.”

She ducked her head, her hand curled about the cloth covering her. “I thought you would not order me about.”

What had begun as harmless teasing had trespassed somewhere else, no matter how unintentionally.

“So I did,” Braum agreed, tipping up her chin so she might look at him. “Then do as you please, Wren. I’ll be here to patch you up afterward.”

She huffed. But she smiled afterwards and...

He thought his heart might burst from his chest when she leaned into him. Her head against him, her body too.

And his arms came about her.

“I’ll stay off the roof,” she murmured.

And if this was a quarrel, it wasn’t so bad after all.



“Braum, you have to go.”

His mouth twisted. The argument was growing thin. He thought it settled. Wren, obviously, did not.

“If you are to live here,” she began anew, and he raised a brow at her.

“If?”

Her lips thinned, and her eyes briefly rolled toward the ceiling. “*Since* you are to live here, you should have your belongings.”

“I am fine.”

Wren plucked at his shirt sleeve, her nose wrinkling. It was his turn to roll his eyes, but he did his best to make it less

obvious than she had. “My clothing has been washed, I assure you.”

She grimaced. “Well. Still. I can manage on my own. Truly. Not so bad at all now.”

He reached out to put his hands on her shoulders in case she felt the need to make any sort of physical display of just how well she could *manage* in his absence.

Her head tilted as she looked up at him, and he watched a delicate line appear between her brows as she regarded him. “I’ll still want you to come back,” she added, her voice a little gentler than it had been. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

His throat tightened. His grip too, if only marginally. “Braum,” she murmured, her hand coming to rest upon his chest. “Really?”

As if it was so absurd that she might change her mind. As if it was so beyond the realm of possibility that it had all been a plea of desperation, not at all applicable when she was mending.

Her wing was still bound. It was the bruises only that were turning from their blackened state to a sickly yellow that looked somehow even more painful than they had before. “You’re sleeping on the floor,” she continued in that soft way.

He’d offered to take her upstairs for her convalescence, but she preferred what autonomy she could find by remaining in her alcove behind the hearth. He could hardly argue with that, and she’d insisted he stay upstairs. In her bed.

Alone.

“Not without you,” he confessed, just as quietly.

He hadn’t wanted to say it. Hadn’t meant to say it now. But she was looking at him that way, and being so... so *gentle* about it all, it slipped out without his least intention.

He loosened his grip, so she was free to step away from him. To tug at her braid and look at him worriedly—even with accusation. As if he’d confessed some of those *intentions* she’d feared between mates.

It wasn't that. It was simply...

"That is your room," he continued. "Your place. It feels... very wrong to simply take it over. I am more than fine by the fire. I promise you." She'd given him blankets. Pillows. Or at least, directed him to the trunks that housed some of each. He slept far better regardless. For her to be only a room away from him. That he could wake and stand at the doorway and tell himself it was all right, he wasn't going in, he simply needed to hear her breathing.

Then he'd settle back beside the fire, prodding it every so often to make sure the house did not grow too cold.

Even Merryweather chose him on occasion—he'd wake to her warm body curled at his hip, his hand coming to stroke her dense fur as she rumbled a mild protest at being woken.

Then show her underside for rubbing, so perhaps it was not much of a complaint after all.

Wren shifted slightly. He'd brought her handiwork. She'd skill with a hook and yarn, and it brought to mind his mother, hands always busy even as the rest of her was still in her favoured chair and footrest. Would Wren like a footrest? He hadn't seen one in the house, and surely she'd be more comfortable if she had one and...

"I didn't see it as taking over," Wren argued. "I saw it as... keeping it warm for me." She glanced upward. "I've spent my whole life up there. I don't think it would know how to be your room alone, even if you tried."

It was a room made of wood. Nothing more. And yet she spoke of it as if memory itself had seeped into the timbre itself. A part of her.

Not just her. The family she'd lost.

He approached her slowly, his hand cupping her chin so she couldn't shy away from him. "If there is not room here," he began, his thumb skimming across her cheek. Gentling, before she even had a chance to frighten. "You need only say so. I will build us new rooms for new memories. If it is perhaps too painful to have us here together."

Her eyes welled. They did that often. But she blinked, and the tears dissipated, and he found her against his chest once more.

He would not pretend it did not please him immensely, that she felt safe enough to seek comfort from him when it was needed. It was right, no matter how she fretted about mates and what he deserved.

Couldn't Wren see she was more than enough? That she was made for him, and him for her?

She would. Someday. Even if they were wizened and wrinkled by that time.

"This is a home," Wren mumbled against him. "Not a shrine. We can make it what it needs to be."

His fingers skimmed down the back of her head, along the bumps and ridges of her plait. "I'll not rush you," he reminded her. "If you need it to stay the same for a while longer, you'll hear no complaint from me."

She gave a snort of laughter before shaking her head. "Of that, I have no doubt."

Perhaps it should have stung, but if patience and goodwill were faults, they were ones he'd gladly own.

He reached for her, bringing her close as he leaned in slightly, the better to catch and hold her eye. "Do you mean this to be my home? Truly?"

He watched her swallow. Watched her eyes narrow, and he knew well that her mind was whirling with potential outcomes and meanings and undoubtedly her hand itched to twist into her braid. But he took it before it could make its journey. Squeezed it gently in reproach.

"I suppose I do," she hedged. But while her words were vague, the grip she returned to his hand was not.

He hummed. "We shall see."

He smiled at her. Watched her mouth drop open.

"What does that mean?"

His smile widened.



It meant a cart. With Kessa at the helm. The note had been delivered by Althorn, and if Braum had felt sorry that he and Wren would not be there for the initial introductions between families, that simply could not be helped.

He would not leave her. Not until she was fully well.

And perhaps not even then.

He was already making plans for the lots. The work that could wait, the rest that would mean hired hands to help until he could master all the responsibilities that pulled him in too many directions.

What he knew most was that he belonged here. In this home. With this woman.

He did not know when Kessa would come. He did not know if it would include an entourage of his parents—of Cyrras and the fledglings as they took what opportunity they could to meet his mate.

But instead, it was just her. The hesper was borrowed, for truly he did not have so many things in way of possessions. A cot. His trunk. All things that Cyrras could have helped her load, or she had seen to herself, simply because that was Kessa's way.

She came down from the tall cart seat, her eyes alight as she scanned the surroundings.

“No greeting?”

Kessa finally glanced his way. “Oh. Hello.” She waved her hand toward the back of the cart. “Your things.”

Then her attention was back, lingering over the animals, the stable.

The door that was carefully closed. He hadn't told Wren of his plans. He could only imagine the state she would work herself into full of the unknowns he couldn't answer for her.

But this... this was something real. A choice she could make for herself, and one he would not foist upon her.

“Kessa,” Braum said once. Then again, when he did not seem to catch her attention in the least. “I’ll have to talk to her first.”

Kessa smoothed down the fabric of her tunic—unnecessary though it was as it was unmarred by the trip. “Of course. Poor dear. I’ll behave, I promise. I won’t embarrass you at all. If that helps with you convincing her to meet me.”

She smiled at him sweetly, and he grunted in response. He’d not argue with Wren. Not even for his sister. But he must admit, if only in the privacy of his own thoughts, that he hoped she would be willing. She’d hidden away for so long, regardless of the validity of her reasons, and he hoped... He hoped it might be different. He’d take his things from the cart and hug his sister and send her back home again, if that’s what she wanted. But... he would not deny that he could picture them all seated at the table. Watching as two of the women he loved most became friends.

Braum sighed and made his way toward the house.

He’d left Wren near the hearth, tucked in a blanket with a pile of wool in her lap. Most days he’d find her sleeping, her body jerking awake as she insisted she hadn’t napped at all. “Busy,” she’d say, holding up her progress. “See?”

And he’d nod and tell her what fine work she’d done, even if he did not quite know what she was crafting at all.

It would be rude to ask, wouldn’t it? Because surely if it was something as common as a sock, he might tell its shape. At the moment it resembled a small blanket, her rows tidy and neat, the yarn dyed to a deep green that was near to black.

She wasn’t sleeping today. Instead, her eyes were shadowed and worried, her mouth twisted as she chewed at her inner cheek.

“My belongings,” Braum explained, trying to keep his voice calm and soothing. “My sister brought them.”

She didn't squeak. Didn't flutter her hands and dart her eyes toward the ladder as if convincing herself not to hide away up there. Not that he would have allowed her to risk such a venture while she was still healing.

"You do not have to meet her," Braum assured her. "I will thank her and send her back to our mother with her tales of your land alone, if that is what you wish."

She was so pale, it worried him, and he almost—*almost*—went back out again without her answer. He'd protect her from anything, even his own sister, if that is what she needed of him.

But he could not deny his own disappointment.

It would pass.

There would be more occasions to try again. When she was better, more herself. When she was settled in her own room again and they'd sorted out this business of his and hers and theirs and...

"Braum," Wren murmured as his hand was on the door latch. "Wait."

He paused, but did not walk back toward her. There was little point when she looked so frightened of it already. He wanted to say it was all right. Wanted to offer her the assurances she needed that he would think no less of her, that she was safe.

He was here. Would stay with her.

She came first.

But the words were lodged beneath a hurt he did not want to acknowledge, and belatedly he realised she'd put her work aside and got to her feet. She was stronger today. She'd told him so. The careful movement of her hip that she *insisted* was not a limp at all was less pronounced than it had been.

She'd even begun to wear more than her shifts and warm wraps—although the addition of a flannel skirt overtop was not something he'd seen her wear before.

“Your sister should be welcome in your home,” Wren continued, and to her credit, her voice did not waver.

He did move then. Back toward her where he took her hand and threaded their fingers together. “I thought this was meant to be our home,” he reminded her, his voice gentle. He’d take nothing from her. Things might be shared if she was so amiable, but she would not have *less* because of their union. Not because of him.

She smiled. It was perhaps a little strained about the edges, but it was genuine all the same. “Our home, then. Mama...” she swallowed. Started again. “*I* don’t want to leave her out on the stoop. Not when she could have some tea and company for a while.”

He hugged her. It was not an action of choice, but of sheer impulse. And it was so delightfully easy to reach forward and pull her to him, to feel her warm and pliant as she relaxed against him. “Thank you,” he murmured into her hair, and he could sense her smile broadening even though he could not possibly see it.

“I did not say you were invited to join us.”

He feigned a deep hurt as he went back outside to fetch his sister.



Wren’s mouth twisted. Untwisted. Each time he glanced at her, she tried to smooth her features so he wouldn’t see that she was clearly displeased with the arrangements he’d made. It was simply a cot in the kitchen—not anything to fuss over. He would have offered to sleep in the stable again if he hadn’t already known her aversion to the idea.

She wanted him upstairs. And while he’d placed his trunk there—nestled beside hers in a way that was decidedly domestic and appealing—he simply could not abide the concept of sleeping there without her.

This seemed the only available compromise. Unless she was going to invite him into the alcove with her, which he knew

she would not.

Tea with Kessa had gone... well.

Very well.

He'd watched as Wren had grown more comfortable as she came to understand that Kessa would not pepper her with too many questions. She did not press after their bonding, did not chide her for... anything at all. She was kind. Smiled often. Complimented the biscuits shared and the pretty floral pattern about the rim of the plates—things that Braum had taken a vague notice of during his visits but never thought to mention.

Wren had grown a little wistful as she thanked her, her finger skimming over the subtle petals, making a continuous chain. "My mother picked them. Cheerful dishes for cheerful meals. I hope... I hope you'll come back again. For a supper, perhaps?"

Kessa had beamed at her. And while Wren's smile was far more timid, it appeared as if she meant it as a genuine hope rather than an obligatory nicety.

"Of course!" Kessa had gushed, full of the enthusiasm she was trying so desperately to calm into gentle interest. "And you'll come to our home as well? The whole family would dearly love to meet you. If... if that is agreeable."

She glanced at Braum briefly, and he gave her a stern look. "Or not. Truly. I didn't mean..." She held up a finger at her brother. "Don't banish me," she insisted. "You're making me nervous, glowering at me."

"I only glower because you take more than is offered."

Wren pushed the biscuits closer to Kessa. As if they were talking about biscuits and tea rather than the invitation that Wren undoubtedly would fret over for weeks to come.

Kessa took another biscuit with a marked change in attitude, her smile turning sheepish. "You are a lovely hostess, Wren. It was rude of me to bring up plans when you are still healing. Please, do not trouble yourself. I am merely excited to know you."

They'd talked of motherhood and chores and plans for the winter. The festival that would have the city twinkling with moonstones and garlands for the solstice. Across the iron arches that transacted most of the city, although no one could recall their exact purpose. The garlands, most likely. Some rusted and broken, repaired with great iron hooks to better secure the faintly glowing stones.

Kessa did not ask if they would attend, only mentioned that the children were most looking forward to it now that the garlands were being strung between the high towers. Some of the boughs were even from his grove, some cut and bound by his hands. Others were by apprentices and hired help for the occasion.

He should go back at some point. Should trust that Wren was sensible and would not hurt herself trying to attend to... *anything*.

She was not one for risks—she simply put other beings first. Most particularly, the creatures entrusting her with their care.

He tried to picture his Wren as a fledgling at the festival. Perhaps when she was youngest and her parents might have dared to take her when they were still whole. At the very least, she must have seen the preparations during market days, but she only ever spoke of the city with the mild distaste of one who had never truly enjoyed being within its walls.

Would she attend if he asked it of her?

Could he ask?

He wanted her happy. He did not want her to feel pushed and prodded into a different life, simply because she'd accepted him as her mate.

But perhaps...

Perhaps there was room for him to have wants. To make requests and suggestions and leave her room to say no when she wanted to.

Needed to.

They were on the porch. The house perhaps felt a little crowded with the cot and the table and some of his belongings strewn about in want of a proper place to reside. The porch was better. With plenty of blankets for Wren, and Merryweather curled on her cushions—more throne than chair now.

But it made Wren smile without fail, which meant he would make Merry whatever furniture she wanted.

“You’re very quiet,” Braum observed.

Watched as she rocked. Stared out at the pastures forlorn of animals. A lonely place, if he was not with her. Peaceful, but barren.

Some might have said the same of his lots and groves, but he’d loved them. Loved to fly between the rows, full of purpose and intention. And sometimes, with neither.

“Just thinking,” Wren said at last, then offered nothing more.

“Should I be worried?” he pressed, hating to trouble her, but needing to know if they’d done something wrong along the way.

“About what?” Wren turned to him, her brow furrowed.

“About you,” he amended. “About us.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “No. I just... I keep thinking about what you said, before. About... mates loving the same people.”

He shifted, but only slightly. “You’re under no obligation to love my sister, Wren. She is... *I* will, but there is a lifetime of enduring her as well, and...”

She reached out and squeezed his arm gently. “Your sister is lovely,” Wren murmured. “I was trying to imagine keeping you here to myself for always. I could. I think you’d let me. But that’s...” she huffed and shook her head. “What a wretch that would make me. To refuse to have family because it scares me.”

His heart raced, and he settled his hand over hers on his arm. “There is no rush,” he reminded her. “They’ll keep. Until you’re ready.” He brought her hand to his mouth and placed a kiss to the back of her fingers. Then her palm. “I did. I think that’s turned out all right.”

She sighed. And he might have thought her troubled, except that she brought her head to rest against his shoulder, and had the chairs always been so close together? He was certain they hadn’t been. Which meant...

He liked what it meant.



Baum slept deeply every night. It was so different from the stilted, pacing nights that inevitably led to hours of circling over this very plot of land.

This was far superior. A comfortable cot, the embers of a friendly fire. A shared cup of tea before bed. He’d even grown used to Merryweather’s occasional interruptions, as she pushed and nudged for more space beside him—taking up far more space than her body possibly should have.

He felt that now, half-asleep and if he grumbled, it was only because sleep was so very nice here in this house. Under this roof. With the company he kept.

Except Merryweather was persistent, nudging at his shoulder and then his arm, and he turned his head, ready to reprimand that breakfast was hours away yet, and surely Wren did not give meals at this time of night and...

“Braum.”

His eyes flew open. He made to sit up, his eyes already drifting over whatever parts of her he could, certain something must be wrong. She did not ask him for anything frivolously, and if she felt the need to wake him, then...

She pushed harder at his shoulder. “Relax.”

He brushed a hand over his face, suddenly wondering if this was a dream. Although that Wren came to him full of warm

smiles and soft sighs, not a mouth pressed into a fine line of determination.

She had a quilt wrapped about her, and there was a pillow. Why did she have a pillow?

To smother him?

The thought settled poorly, because he could better believe that was the reason than that she...

Was what?

If this was a seduction, she was as poor at attempting it as he was at receiving it.

“Wren, what—”

“I want my kitchen back,” Wren declared, patting his shoulder in a way that he supposed was meant to be soothing, but was awkward and only added to the absurdity of the situation.

“No more tripping over cots and pretending I’m as bad off as I was. I’m mending. We both know it. And if that means moving back upstairs, which it does, and if you won’t go until I’m up there with you, then...”

A pillow was pushed next to his own. And it was only a cot, meant for a rather large woodcutter and not the woodcutter and his mate. The injured one that he was tending, not... not one that was soft and warm and stretching out beside him. Still on her side, mindful of her wing, and should he ask her if she needed water before going back to sleep?

“And because I’m a kindly person, I will tell you.” She turned over her shoulder, her expression as serious as it ever was. “This is a test. To see if... if I’m safe next to you. Last time didn’t turn out so well so...” There were not tears, but there was a hitch to her breathing that suggested she was not quite as bold and certain of herself as she pretended to be. “If we can have just a bath, can there just be sleep as well?”

He wanted to curl himself around her. To tuck her close and kiss her hair and promise her that no one would ever impose upon her again—least of all him.

But he couldn't purge her past experience with hopes and affection. She was trusting him. Trusting him *not* to.

A test on her kitchen floor. Before they moved to her room. Before they made it *to their* room.

He grasped her hand in the dim of the room. Squeezed it gently.

And felt some of the tension ease from her. "Just sleep," he murmured, a rumble from a voice too thick with it.

She hummed in agreement.

And they were a little too close, and it was harder still when Merryweather came later and wedged herself between them.

But in another way...

It was rather perfect.

21. His

She awoke on her back. It never would have seemed such a strange occurrence, except that the state of her wing had made it where she suddenly needed to keep either to her side or her stomach—both unnatural to her preferences, which meant she woke frequently as she battled down the twinges and aches of broken bone.

She was used to a companion in her bed. To the warm lump at the foot. Or in the middle. Or wherever else she pleased.

Braum was different. Not a lump, but a mountain. Broad shouldered and warm, and she found herself creeping closer to him in her unconsciousness. Merryweather did it too, so that made it all right. It was not an invitation.

Each night he held her hand, occasionally placing a kiss on the back of it before he bid her goodnight.

Each night, he would murmur softly that they would just be sleeping.

And her heart would calm and she would make the conscious choice to trust his word. That she was safe.

Safe with him. From him.

But this morning, she woke on her back. And her wing did not hurt. And she could stretch and suppress her groan because he was still sleeping, and it was rude to wake him, wasn't it? He was working so hard. Tending to her work. Pretending he did not need to care for his trees. Could continue wooing Calliope and Temperance to like him best.

She should let him sleep.

But she didn't hurt, and that... that was something.

His back was to her. He slept in shirtsleeves of soft grey, the neck too open for decency, but she did not comment on it.

Besides, it seemed a shame for him to make use of the little tie about the neck when he looked rather handsome.

Not that she noticed.

She was an invalid, after all. Or had been.

She chewed at her lip, considering. Perhaps she might creep down and start on breakfast. Allow him to wake to the smell of hot tea and sizzling sausages. Or maybe she could milk her own hesper and make sure they remembered her.

She did neither.

And instead reached for him. Just a hand between his shoulder blades, his wings tucked neatly against his body. If she'd seen her father's like that, she could not recall. It was... nice. Seeing him in a new state. To allow her palm to spread as she felt his strength through the fabric of his sleeping shirt. Felt the ripple through him as he came awake. He wanted to turn, to look at her, but she rather liked this. To feel him without... without feeling embarrassed as he watched her a little too closely, looking for reactions she wasn't sure she should have.

"Wren?" he whispered, his voice thick with sleep.

"I don't hurt today," she answered, responding to the worry in his voice with a squeeze of his shoulder.

She liked the way his muscles coiled. Loosened. Responding to such an innocent touch. That wasn't fair, was it? To touch if she didn't want... if she wasn't willing to...

She swallowed, withdrawing.

And he did turn. Eyes soft and warm, and she felt her insides twist just to see it.

"Already planning your escape?" Braum asked, and her cheeks flushed. "Do not think I haven't seen those lists of yours."

She plucked at the blanket that had fallen a little too low while she was sleeping. "Just things that need doing. That could keep until I was well enough to do them."

He hummed.

“Tell me about them.”

He settled onto his back next to her.

And if he had objections to morning touches and squeezed shoulders and no promises of anything more, he gave no voice to it.



“We do not have to go.”

Wren did not huff. But she might have wanted to.

She did not roll her eyes, but it was a very near thing.

“We should just wait for a market day. Not make another trip. Consolidate your outings.” He nodded to himself, doing the arguing for her. Arguments she hadn’t made and wouldn’t have.

She took his hand.

Brought it to her hip. The one that had been blackened and swollen and then sickly and green, and though she could faintly make out where the mark had been, it was no longer tender in the least.

“What am I?” she asked, trying for patient. Truly. Yet there was a tinge of perhaps something that might have been considered by some to be impatient.

His eyes brightened. “My mate.”

She did roll her eyes then. “Other than that. I am...”

He swallowed. “Feeling better.”

Not just feeling better. Was better. Mostly. Her wing was stiff and awkward, but she’d begun to go without the bandages, so she might try to build some strength back into it. For a true-born Harquil, a broken wing was a tragedy. Not unheard of, to be sure, but something to be treated with the utmost care. Hers were ornamental, mostly. He needn’t fret as

he did, pretending her life would change so very drastically if it healed poorly.

“Yes,” Wren agreed. “And when you asked to attend the festival, I said I would. So we’re going.”

The animals were attended to. Merryweather had been bribed with an early supper.

He’d even procured a cart and hesper so they would not have to walk the whole way.

One that watched Calliope with a little too much interest.

Braum said nothing for a moment, one hand still on her hip, the other coming to rest on her shoulder. “But it’s just... for me.”

Her brow furrowed. “And?”

He caught her glance and frowned. “And that troubles me. You should not be making sacrifices. I should not be asking you to do what you do not want to do. In any regard.”

He was going to step back from her. She did not know how she could tell—something in his eyes, the set of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders. But she knew.

And so she grabbed hold of his shirt and opened her mouth to make a retort, and quickly changed her mind.

Perhaps that was part of his blood. Of mating and bonding and things she couldn’t possibly understand.

It was afternoon. The day was thick with clouds, but there was no rain as of yet. But it would be cold, and they needed to dress warmly—most especially once the second sun set, and they were out in the dark.

“Wait here,” she declared, patting his chest lightly before she hurried up to their room. He thought she’d find it difficult to think of it as such, but it had been shared with Merryweather for a long while now. Perhaps he was bigger and took up more space in her bed, but it was... nice.

And now that it had happened, she couldn’t quite imagine him out of it again.

Her skills were modest. The craft itself was from her mother's people, passed down from her grandmother. Or so Mama had said. Wren had struggled for an age to learn even the most basic of stitches, and what more advanced she'd learned, she had no one to ask for help when she fumbled and forgot.

It meant it wasn't as fine as she might have liked. Meant that she'd ripped out many rows and started anew, none of it good enough. Not as a thank you, and certainly not as any sort of recompense for all he'd done for her. For them.

He'd persisted. When she was so stubbornly opposed to him. To their potential. He'd listened and been kind, and yes, he'd been her friend. The dearest she'd known. And all she had was a smile that was too watery, and a wrap he likely did not need when he had woollens bought from proper makers in the market.

A coat too.

And gloves and hats, and he didn't need this and yet...

He eyed her peculiarly, the article well known by now. There was no way to hide it, not when he'd been about so much during her mending.

She cleared her throat, and gestured toward the table, waiting for him to sit so she could put it on him without tweaking any of the delicate bones in her wing.

"I do not know what instincts are swirling around in there," Wren began, placing it over his shoulders. Then down his wings, with the slit she'd redone four times, unwilling to spoil what surprise she could by measuring the breadth of their protrusion from his back. "Nonsense about sacrifices and me and that nothing can be solely for you."

She feared it wasn't instinct at all, but a remnant of the story she'd told him from before. Of presumption and force and not at all the warmth and gentleness she found between the two of them.

A button beneath the slit so he wouldn't have to fuss with pushing a wing unhappily through a too-small space. Another

for good measure, so it would stay put when he flew. Then a tie about the front, and another button also. Secure and warm as it draped on his shoulders and went slightly high upon the neck.

If it felt strange to him, if it would be an embarrassment to wear in the city when other people would see, she hoped he would say something. It was a common style, not when there were other fineries. But it was what she could make, and she hoped it made a small bit of her point for her.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you,” she continued, smoothing down the collar, the belt. Fixing it just so while she struggled with what to say to him. “I think... I think I did for a while. Trying to make things fair and even...” she grimaced. “I’m pretty sure I did anything but.”

He sighed, and he reached for her, but she grabbed his hand and held it instead. “No,” she insisted. “I think this got lost along the way. You... you can need things. Want things. And if it’s at all possible for me to give them to you, I will.” A breath. A prayer for courage. “Because I rather love you, you know.” She squeezed his hand and couldn’t look at him, but she’d got the words out and that was something. “And I’d like you to be happy. Here. With me.”

He must have forgotten she was so recently an invalid. Because suddenly he was pulling at her hand and she was brought between his knees as he crushed her to him, his breath against her. “What changed?” he asked, muffled as it was by her own wrap. “It wasn’t just your wing...”

She grimaced, waited to feel trapped or smothered.

But didn’t.

Couldn’t.

Because when her heart pounded, it was because he was near. When she felt warm all over, it was because of the emotion in his voice. “No,” she assured him, her hands skimming through his hair, her fingers brushing against his scalp, and she hoped that the tensing and relaxing she felt through him was a good thing. “I think... I haven’t had to

make many decisions in my life. Everything just... *happened*. My home, my livelihood... all of it was inherited. And then there was the scum..." It didn't hurt as much to mention him as it used to. There was an ache, but it was muted. As if it was in the past, after all. "And then when I decided I wanted you, *let* myself admit I wanted you..."

Her fingers skimmed down his cheeks, hoping he'd look at her. He did, and she smiled at him. Suppressed the urge to kiss him, which was new and exciting and she would explore in a moment. "Not all change is bad," she admitted. "So you were right about that."

And he smiled. A slow broadening as her words settled, as he got that look of pride about the edges, and then she did lean down.

And kissed him.

It felt different to be the taller of the two. To be the one to instigate it at all. There was an extra thrill that she could lead, could pull back, could do anything at all.

They needed to be going. She needed to be brave and remind herself that a festival was meant to be *fun*, and at least it was not one of those dreadful fete's that Firen described.

It would be food. His family.

And holding Braum's hand in the cart. And maybe stealing a kiss or two on the way there.

She was aware of all of that. The pressing, niggling awareness that they had plans.

And yet...

She altered the angle slightly. Skimmed her fingers close to the nape of his neck.

And was rewarded with his purr. Soft. Rumbling. That settled into her and she felt something respond in kind. Something deep and unknown to her, as if something ancient was waking up.

She pulled back, a little startled. A little...

Something else.

As he looked up at her with heat in his eyes and he swallowed thickly as if trying to keep from reaching for her, from bringing her back to him so they could repeat it all over again.

They needed to go.

Going was stupid.

She took a step back from him. Watched as he tried to pull himself back together with tightly closed lids. Hands balled into fists upon his knees.

She took another step back, a flicker of fear cutting through her previous enjoyment. It could be just a kiss, couldn't it? Even if... for a moment... she'd wondered about what it would be like to have more.

“Braum?”

She didn't like the way her voice was too high. Didn't like how when his eyes opened, they were worried. She was fine. They were fine.

He was a good man, her Braum. Not scum. Not a cad.

Her mate.

Who cared if she just wanted to sleep. Or to kiss. Or to touch him just a little.

He stood. Held out his hand to her and she took it with a considerable relief that shamed her. “Shall we go?”

Merryweather chirped at them from the loft as they left, and after a few more promises, they would be back late, but they *would* be home again...

And maybe a cracked window so Merryweather could come and go as she pleased—which Braum watched with an eye that suggested he was adding yet another project to his list...

They left.



Wren could not recall being embraced so hard.

Da was careful of her.

Braum was so nervous of frightening her.

But his mother...

The instant they'd appeared, the cart and the hesper left at a stable so they could walk and twine through the decorated streets, Wren found herself surrounded by distinctly motherly arms.

She'd been afraid of this?

"Ma," Braum began, his hand reaching out, but Wren waved him off.

"You've no idea how pleased I am you're here," she told Wren in a distinctly choked way that suggested she was near to tears. Which was all right, because Wren felt much the same. She pulled back, not quite releasing, but enough they could look at one another. Wren had not thought anything about Braum to be particularly feminine, yet looking at his mother, there was a prominent resemblance. The dark hair, the slant of the nose, the way their eyes crinkled when they smiled so brightly.

His father was not nearly so demonstrative, but she accepted the pat on her shoulder with a smile.

"Oh, we can hug now?" Kessa asked, pushing her father away so she could pull Wren close as well. "I'm so glad."

Her mate did not make the attempt, too busy keeping his hands on the fledglings fluttering about his waist and shoulder, wrapped about ankles to keep them from flying off in opposite directions.

But he nodded to her, and that was more than enough. Particularly when Kessa was putting a packet of something warm into her hands and urging her to try one. It was a simple paper packet, presumably procured from one of the vendors. Nuts of some kind, spiced and toasted through, and really rather good.

She held it out to Braum, who took far more than the one she'd delicately picked off the top. "It's Solstice, Wren," Braum reminded her. "You're supposed to be indulgent."

She picked up three more and popped them in her mouth all at once.



She loved the glittering lights of the candles and lanterns. The ones higher still that were the moonstones that caught and amplified the firelight, even the moon itself. Not warm like the fires, but cool and ethereal, bouncing about the white stones of the towers between them.

The garlands of greens and the deepest blue that seemed endless as they twined and swung in elaborate swags. Braum would stop her every once in a while to point out a few that were from his own groves. How he knew she couldn't possibly know, but it made her itch to see his lots for herself. The trees he nurtures and cared for with as much attention as she did her own grimbles.

Or... had.

Until he'd become rather preoccupied with her.

She tucked herself a little nearer to his side.

He smiled whenever she drew closer to him. He didn't always look down at her in acknowledgment, but she could see the upward turn of his mouth. Could feel the way his arm settled about her, steady and firm and welcome.

She tucked her face into the wrap she'd made for him, a little overwhelmed. The sights. The smell of incense in the air. Of spices and meats. Of sweet treats that called forth from smiling vendors. All of it was exotic to her, even though it shouldn't be. She did not know which recipes had come from beyond the sea. Which were traditional only to here.

She'd learn, though.

Every year, they'd come.

Until it felt as natural to her as it did to anybody else.

Braum saw him first.

She felt the stiffening in his frame, which made her look about for the source of his sudden discomfort.

For one awful moment, she thought somehow he'd plucked the image of the cad from her mind and he'd be there, spoiling things.

But no.

That wasn't possible—a groundless fear rooted in a bond she was only beginning to understand.

Instead, it was her father. In a cluster of faces she did not know, but could begin to guess. A woman's hand was tucked into his, and he was smiling as the boy next to him pointed toward a stall further up the street.

She couldn't move. Her feet had forgotten their purpose. Braum stopped with her, his hand a warm presence on her back as he waited for her to decide what she might do.

Was it a decision? She didn't think so. She had to run, obviously.

Back home before she was seen, back before she made any trouble.

Isn't that what Mama had taught her?

She could hear whispers about her. Braum explaining in hushed tones the bare minimum of what his family would need to know.

And it shamed her. That she should react so to seeing her own father. With a family that wasn't hers, but might have been. If Mama had not feared losing her, if she'd met them early on.

Her throat ached. Her heart too.

Braum's mother was there.

Holding her face with her palms, her eyes so much like her mate's that suddenly she could breathe.

Perhaps it should have been him. And yet...

The relief was pronounced. Hadn't she known she needed a mother even still? A woman grown, but...

"You're all right," she stated firmly. "You are not alone. We can walk on, or perhaps it would be better if we went and said hello?"

The way she said it, it was clear which option she thought best. This woman that was a stranger to her, but wasn't. Because she'd raised the man beside her. The one with his hand she tucked hers into. That knew when to press and when to give space. That knew how to be kind and gentle, yet firm when he needed to be.

She knew these people, because she knew Braum. Because she loved him with all that she had, and maybe...

Maybe she needed to do this after all.

She hated it. Every step she took. The racing of her heart, the absolute insistence in each breath this was a mistake, she was doing something wrong, she would be far safer to just go and...

She felt a kiss on the top of her head.

And she closed her eyes and let him keep her moving.

And it was glorious.

To let him be her comfort and her strength. To have someone else to make the decision on what was right and what was best and not to have to think and worry and pick apart every little detail and their consequences.

For once, just to be.

To watch her father's face light up as he saw her approach.

For him to cross the distance and pull her close.

"Wren," he breathed.

And there was a part of her that wanted to ask why he'd never brought her. Why he'd never tried harder to make her a part of this world.

But she didn't.

It was a talk they might have later. When she was ready to hear that perhaps Mama was a little more responsible for that as well.

But maybe...

It didn't matter so much at all.

All of them bowed heads to one another.

And although the boys hung back, casting looks between their mother and father as if uncertain of how to react to her sudden presence. But that was all right. She didn't know what to think or how to feel, either.

Other than...

Her father's mate reached out and grasped her hand tightly. "Wren," she greeted, her smile soft. She was not the villain a fledgling Wren had conjured in her mind, so filled with hurt and anger at a situation so entirely outside her control. Not as bold as Braum's mother. Gentle. Perhaps even a little bit fragile. "I'm so pleased to meet you."

Wren swallowed. She should say something back. Something kind and not antagonistic. All too aware of her father coming up behind his mate, his hand at the small of her back just as Braum's was on hers.

Was she pleased? Had she wanted this?

She couldn't pretend she had.

But there was something about her. Something that made it impossible to be anything but gentle in return. "Me too," she managed and found that it was true. Not that there was relief in it. Not that there was the same sense of family and belonging as she'd felt that night as she'd been enveloped by Braum's relations.

But she wouldn't have to wonder. The meeting was done and all the rest...

It could be whatever she wanted.

They did not linger for long. There were no drawn out introductions as names were passed between parties. But there

were smiles, some forced, others not. She gave her father one last embrace and then allowed her new family to sweep her off to yet another stall, while Braum whispered in her ear that he was proud of her.

She'd done it. And she'd survived. And when a mug of something frothy and sweet was passed into her hands and she took three deep pulls of it, her heart began to calm, and she decided she was rather proud of herself, too.



They'd been invited to stay. First at Braum's parents, then by Kessa. Well, not precisely Kessa. Instead, it had been her youngest, a little girl with bright eyes and a ready smile, who insisted that Wren could sleep in her bed if she wanted, and they might have griddled cakes in the morning since those were the best sort.

Which began an argument with her elder brother that they most certainly were not, and the best came from the oven, and she was silly for thinking otherwise.

It was late. And even the sky-dancers with their bodies covered in fabric studded with chips of moonstones were not enough for fledglings long beyond their bedtimes.

Even Wren was beginning to feel it. She'd spent so long lazing about—for that's what it had become, regardless of what Braum said about mending and healing. She was well strong enough for mucking stables and cooking meals and all the rest of the little duties she'd foregone.

Braum answered for her, much to her relief. "We've made a promise to be back tonight," he informed them. And although there were a few quizzical looks, none of them dared to press him further.

Which meant bundling back into the cart. With a lantern to guide their way, and blankets to keep them warm. And if Braum had any hope of company, he would be sorely mistaken, for she nodded off before they'd even left the city walls.



She was being carried. Which was all right, because she knew the scent tickling at her nose. Knew the arms that held her, and she would not fall. “I’m awake,” she insisted. And it was rather rude of her words to slur when she was perfectly rested. She hadn’t meant to sleep the whole way, truly.

But that was her bed behind her back, and it was her boots he was trying to wrestle off her feet, which was wholly unnecessary because she was awake. “You’re undressin’ me.” It was a statement as well as a complaint, her eyes squinting and far too dry, and it left him all in a blur as she tried to make sense of him.

She wiped at them, frustrated at the pain of it, and tried to conjure something sad so her eyes might well and alleviate the discomfort.

But all she could think about were moonstones and spiced nuts and the feel of Braum’s hand in hers, and there was really nothing to cry over when those were the memories first in her mind.

His fingers stilled. “Would you rather I not?”

Always so careful of her.

And that did the trick.

So she swallowed and this time she could see him clearly. He looked tired. She wondered if the borrowed hesper still needed to be stalled or if he’d already seen to it. She should get up. Help.

Or...

She could let him ask. If he needed it. Wanted it. Could trust him that he could set his own priorities.

“I’ll allow it,” she said instead, holding out her foot a little further for his attention.

She’d do the same to him. Help him out of the buttons of his wrap. His boots too, if he wanted it.

Wren was rewarded with a chuckle as he went back to work on her laces. “How magnanimous,” he countered dryly.

He conquered the first boot. It went to the floor with a mild thump, but he did not immediately release her ankle. Instead, she caught him looking at it, still encased in her thick stocking.

A perfectly ordinary foot, really. The stitches perhaps were not. Or maybe it was the colours he found strange—a hodgepodge of all her different scraps that she couldn’t bear to waste when they could be something useful.

His scrutiny was almost enough for her to withdraw. To tuck and curl and ask him what he found troublesome.

She did not expect his thumb to come to the ball of her foot. For his eyes to glance toward hers as he pressed firmly.

Any less, she would have squealed and possibly kicked him.

But it wasn’t a tickle. Wasn’t a sensitive brush that made her shiver. Just a persistent rub that felt...

Rather glorious.

She hadn’t even realised her feet had begun to ache. It was her lazing; she decided. That’s what had done it. Never before would a walk on hard cobbles have tired her feet so, and it was almost an embarrassment that he’d noticed at all.

Might have been. Except that he was persistent, finding the tightest coils of tension and pressing his thumb just so, his attention on her face all the while.

While she tried not to squirm. Tried not to groan because of how lovely it felt.

There were no rules about *this*, surely. It wasn’t like the kisses where she should consider being careful. This was... this was like her baths. Or not even a bath. This was a favourite meal prepared, or an extra cup of tea on the porch when the last had gone too quickly.

She sighed.

A soft sound that wasn’t a whimper. It wasn’t. Just the release of breath and yes, perhaps a hint of pleasure as well,

and she could not help but notice the way his eyes warmed. The way he allowed his other hand to grip her ankle. Even... to skim slightly upward, his thumb brushing upward along her calf.

She should stop this. He'd managed to find the edge of her stocking, daring to touch bare skin rather than keeping to the safety of soft wool.

She'd make them longer next time. All the way up past her knees so that even when they scrunched down from walking, he couldn't find that sensitive bit of flesh that felt most traitorous. As if it was an entity all its own. That wondered why Braum hadn't found it before. That didn't want longer stockings at all, not when it meant he couldn't brush his thumb just *so*.

And it was stupid. It was just a bit of calf. Just a strong hand wrapped about her ankle, trespassing where he had no business being.

And yet..

And yet...

The tingling of her skin was not unpleasant. The catch in her breath was not from fear of any sort. If anything, it was a cloying sort of anticipation. The wondering if he'd press further upward. Steal another delicate touch under the pretence of care.

She was supposed to be tired. She was supposed to be reserved and remind him of all the careful boundaries they'd erected.

She took a breath.

Sat up.

Pulled her foot away from him. And should have felt rather silly, sitting there with one boot still on the floor, the other tucked beneath her knee.

She did not want his apologies. Did not want to watch as the heat that had crept into his vision was replaced with his careful understanding. This had been a night of daring. Pathetic to

some, a courageous leap forward for her—and she would not diminish it.

If she swallowed, it was not from nerves. It wasn't. It was just... new. Just liked spiced nuts, warmed through on hot coals and placed into waxed paper.

Strange, but delicious.

He opened his mouth, and she got to her feet.

Touched gently at the centre of his chest. Then with a little more force as he continued to stare at her, uncomprehending of what she wanted.

“Sit,” she insisted, her voice a little tight even to her own ears.

He sat.

Merryweather was sleeping at the head of the bed, nestled between two of the pillows. Which was just fine because... because there would only be as much as she wanted. He was tired. She was. Had been.

She undid the first of the buttons on his wrap, and his shoulders relaxed. Perhaps he thought he knew her intentions, and they were safe. Expected.

Another button. The loosening of the knot that tied it all together.

Then to her knees. To undo *his* boots. Even as he reached for her and she batted him away. If he could take care of her without feeling it somehow beneath him, then she could do the same.

She even attended to her own boot while she was at it.

Left her stockings on because it was cold.

Then it was back to him. Who froze uncertainly when she came back in between his knees as she brushed a lock of his hair away from his forehead. “We should undress,” Wren whispered. As if it was some great confession. As if it was a secret between just the two of them. “There’s rules about outside clothes in the bed.”

He smiled at her, but his eyes...

His eyes made her blush.

“Your mother’s rules?” he asked, amiable sort of tease, which might have felt misplaced given her suggestion, yet didn’t.

She undid the tie of his shirt. “No,” Wren admitted. “Mine.”

He hummed and settled his hands loosely on her waist as she had her fill of ties and loops. She was used to her own clothing—overalls and split skirts. Shirts and shifts that dipped low in the back to accommodate her wings without much fuss.

His were open plackets she had to fiddle and frown as she tried to see him free of it.

Failed. Until he shrugged and chuckled at her. And then it was off entirely with much less effort than she could have imagined.

But then, his clothing had been purchased. Hers were fashioned from her mother’s recollections from her old world. Modified for a daughter she’d never quite expected.

She’d caught glimpses of him changing. Not that she was *watching*. Not exactly. But sometimes she could not quite help herself when she saw the flutter of fabric. The flash of skin that was suddenly just... *there*.

Which was only fair when he’d helped her bathe. She’d made no such claims on him, not even under the justification of fairness.

He reached out and touched her own wrap. “Is this to be reciprocal as well?” It was asked gently. With plenty of room that she might say no. She chewed at her lip and reached out a hand to touch the hard muscle of his upper arm. The softer flesh about his collarbones. She admired his strength. Admired more how he chose to use it. To help. Always that.

She shrugged, simply to tease him. “If you like.”

Her heart was racing in her chest. There had been no declarations of how far they might go. No careful tests she’d laid before him. It was freeing and a little frightening, and she

thought her pulse might never calm again when he began working on her own layers.

She should have fetched their nightclothes. Would. In a moment.

But for now, she'd stay. Let him peel away her wrap. Then the overdress. Was a little gratified that he had to turn her about three times before he decided how best to approach its removal. They'd learn.

Which brought a fresh round of blushes to think this might someday be common.

Or not. Maybe she'd decided she did not care for it. That she'd insist they change in separate chambers and never see a hint of naked flesh ever again.

She skimmed her finger down his arm as he studied her in her shift and socks and thought that would be rather a shame.

There were fine scars dotted here and there. Some thicker and swollen where the flesh had mended poorly. Others silvery and fine.

A woodcutter, her mate. With all that required.

She'd ask him to take her. To show his trees and she would ask if there was anything she might do to help him. Not... not live there. Home would be here. With their porch and their room, and their trunks that looked rather well together.

But she'd be his help, as he was hers. She'd make sure of that.

He gave her a questioning look, and she quirked a brow in answer. She would not direct him. Did not want him to be afraid to touch her. Perhaps that was a better way of it. For him to trust that she would tell him what she did not like. For her to know that her refusals mattered.

He brought a hand to her shoulder. His hands were warm, and she wondered why when she felt such a nip in the air. Then they were at the straps of her shift. And this was a familiar dance, reserved before for the bath that was just a bath.

It was enough of a difference to set a burst of fluttering through her stomach as he pushed the straps over her shoulders. Followed as they skimmed down her arms. Where the opening of the neck caught at her breasts and held there, if only because her breath caught briefly.

“What would you like this to be?” Braum asked, his thumb catching the fabric. Holding it. Protecting what little modesty she’d like to pretend she possessed. “Just undressing?”

She should have a firm answer. Should know her own mind and heart.

But she felt a pleasant sort of glow. The one that came of a trip to the city that did not end with her feeling sheer relief to be free of it again.

She did not know what came over her. Did not know if it was fair when she could not promise that there would be more at all. But she wanted to feel something. Wanted to feel his hands on her. So she reached for one and brought it to her left breast and held it there. Still through the fabric of her shift, even so, she *felt*.

“I thought... maybe we could kiss for a while? If you are not too tired? And maybe... touch a little?” Her throat tightened, too afraid to offer the prospect of the rest when she wasn’t sure, wasn’t positive that she...

He groaned.

Pulled her to him.

Held her. His hand crushed between them, but she didn’t mind.

“A grand thought,” Braum approved.

Then shifted so his other hand was behind her head, bringing her mouth to his.

While his other delved. Pushed at her shift. Until it caught at her waist instead, leaving her exposed to even more of his touches. First a caress. As if he’d never felt anything quite like her softness. Which she supposed he hadn’t. Not exactly.

But rather than feel saddened for herself, she was left with a feeling of fierce possession. That he was *hers*. The whole of him.

She would not share. Not with any other. She was not her mother, and he was not her father.

She broke the kiss and rested her forehead against his as she fought with the swell of emotion as well as the need for breath at all. “You won’t leave me.”

Wren hadn’t meant to say it aloud. It was a personal promise to herself rather than an assurance she needed from him. It would only be words, after all. Sweet and effectively meaningless if he chose to do it afterwards.

While she would be shattered. In ways she had not realised she might be.

Because it was different this time. Different because she loved him. Because she *wanted* him to stay. To love her in return and be with her, and love her people as she would learn to love his.

“Oh, Wren.” He moved her. Not to their pillows, as those were still in use by Merryweather. But so that she might lie on her back and he could hover over her. Could smooth his fingers in her hair, her cheek, doubtlessly looking for some sign of discomfort.

She’d mended. They knew that.

He did not say that he was incapable of leaving her. He did not talk of bonds and of instincts, of his ever present need to stay in her proximity.

None of the desperate explanations her father had given for why everything had suddenly changed.

“Do you think your love is unreciprocated?” Her breath caught in her throat. “If you must have doubts, let them be for something else. Not how much love I have for you. Not how much I wish to spend each of my days here. With you.” A kiss. Soft and gentle and filled with promise that felt a great deal more than simple *words*. “I’ll not leave you,” Braum murmured, not rising enough that she might look at him.

Another kiss, this one to her cheek.

Oh. Because... because she was crying a little. She hadn't noticed, yet he had. Because that was Braum, and he loved her, and he liked to watch her. To listen to her.

"You are safe with me. Always."

She reached out blindly so she could hold the back of his head, could pull him so that he would look at her. Because this was important. To her. To him. "I will hold you to that."

And he nodded seriously. "As you should."

And her eyes burned, and maybe that wasn't how kisses were meant to be, but she rather liked them. When they were fervent and needful, and perhaps lasted too long so she had to gasp, or when she caught at his lip with her tooth, however accidentally, and he pulled away and tapped at her cheek in the facsimile of a chastisement.

Perhaps they were not particularly artful, but they were *theirs*.

And they made her blood race. Made her pulse a prominent entity all its own. Her arms were too tangled in the straps of her shift, which left her squirming to free herself so she could reach for him more freely. He did not move quickly enough to accommodate her, so for a moment, it was skin against skin. Hard and soft, all at once.

Distracting. Tantalising.

Kisses, she'd said. Undressing too. Which he seemed to remember, for he was working to free her of her shift. First one arm, then the other. Never quite removing himself from being near to her.

Then a kiss to each spot that he freed. First one arm. Then the other.

The space between breasts that were not very ample. She'd never thought to mind, for it seemed relatively common between their kinds. She almost wondered if she should fret about such things—but a kiss to each tip was enough to steal her thoughts. The worries that died only half-formed.

Then lower still, to the hollow of her stomach. Even her navel.

The swell beneath that seemed persistent no matter what she ate or what she didn't.

Fussy things. A body that was perfectly functional, yet naked and kissed, she felt...

Anxious. And not. All at once.

The desire to cover herself. The desire not to be. Warring and tugging until she was breathless from either the kisses or from the tangle of feelings that did not seem to want to let her go.

Then her shift caught at her hips, and she was not at all prepared if he meant to kiss lower still. Whether on her legs, or the ankles still covered in stockings that could be seen as rather hideous depending on one's point of view.

Or else there was also the place she'd not intended them to... for him to want to...

He smoothed his hand down her covered hip. "Easy, Wren," Braum murmured into her skin. Another kiss, this to one of her ribs. Which tickled and didn't all at once. "Kisses. A little touching. Just that, yes?"

She relaxed into the bed.

"Yes," she answered back. Because this was nice. She liked the feel of his lips skimming across her skin. Like the way his hands felt on places that she had only touched in those perfunctory ways. A little balm, the swipe of a cloth in the bath.

She liked it too when he sank against the bed and he allowed her to kiss him as well. Feel the differences between them. The bits that were hard muscle where he knew well the work of a saw. Some softer—perhaps a result of her and her many biscuits.

She did not mind in the least.

She liked his form. Liked how it felt when she skimmed her hands against him. When she followed the movement with her

lips. Learning him. She'd know him as well as she did herself, someday. Someday soon, if Braum had his way.

Perhaps that should have been frightening, but it wasn't.

Perhaps she would have even allowed the flaring pulse in her blood to urge her to straddle him. To see if the pleasures her mother mentioned really made such a difference when wanting was mutual.

Except Merryweather woke up.

Was nudging at her shoulder and wondering why she was not involved in the petting and affection.

And she waited for Braum to grow cross.

Or maybe...

Maybe she was waiting for some other to grow angry.

Because her Braum merely chuckled. Picked up Merryweather and gave her a kiss to the top of her head and apologised for having disturbed her.

Then he rose from the bed and found a nightshirt for himself. Then a nightdress for her.

And when they went to bed all together, Wren dreamed of kisses and touches that did not end quite so abruptly.

Could she?

She watched him over breakfast with a blush affixed to her cheeks.

Maybe.

Maybe she could.

They could.

Soon.

Merryweather permitting.



“So,” Braum commented, leaning on the counter where a customer was meant to be.

It was just after midday and it was a drizzly sort of day. Few would venture out beyond necessities, but all the most dedicated—or the most desperate—would still sit until dark and cold closed the market early.

“I’ve thought of something that would please me.”

Wren was in her proper stall. She was nearly sold out of her lozenges. Her absence and the weather meant that mothers were eager to refill their stores, and she would not complain at their enthusiasm.

“Have you now,” Wren countered, her feet propped on the stool she might have offered him, but didn’t. This was her business, and he had his. Which he’d attended to for most of the morning, dealing with his vendors and clients and returning often to complain that he’d rather be working on Merryweather’s personal door.

“I have,” Braum insisted, grinning at her in a way that suggested he knew she was going to fight him. “I should like to buy you something.”

Wren tried to keep from rolling her eyes—honestly, she did. But the way his smile grew, she knew she hadn’t been successful. “Wouldn’t it be more pleasing if I bought something for you?”

Braum shook his head adamantly. “Not just *something*. I want to get you a gift. Out of all these stalls, there must have been something you’ve wanted. Wished you could have had, was impractical.”

Wren’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “You want me to pick something frivolous. For you to buy me just because.”

He drummed his fingers against the counter and stood up straight. “Now we understand one another.”

Not at all. Because that seemed a silly sort of thing to do. The market was for necessities.

Or... had been.

When she was young and with her mother, and coin did not stretch too far.

This was new. And she could either be stubborn or she could bend. A little.

To keep that smile on Braum's face, because she liked the way it made her stomach tighten when she saw it.

“And what if I cannot come up with anything of the sort?”

He leaned forward ever so slightly. “Indulge me. Please. Unless you've more custom?”

He glanced about, as if invisible mothers were standing behind in a queue.

The trouble was, she did know where she would go. What she'd pick.

And he must have seen it in her eyes because he was suddenly in the stall with her, taking up her hand and pulling her free of its confines. “Come along, then.”

Too observant, her Braum. Frustrating to the extreme.

Except when it wasn't.

She still made a great show of huffing and slowing her pace, which he matched as he smiled at her too often every time he glanced down at her.

The walk wasn't far. Never had been.

They were neighbours after all.

She'd seen Firen a few times since that horrid incident when she'd introduced Braum. The smiles were forced, and Wren hadn't known what to say—not when she wasn't willing to admit even to herself what Braum truly was.

She was sorry for it. Sorry for a great many things.

Sorrier still when she saw Firen's anxious look between the two of them as they approached, her eyes landing on their entwined fingers before she glanced to Wren instead. “I...” she began, but Wren shook her head.

“I'm sorry,” she offered. “I'm sorry for how I behaved that day. For hurting you. You were only being truthful.” She swallowed, and if her heart beat a little faster, it was because

she was glad. “This is my mate, Braum. And we’d like to buy one of your chimes for our tree.”

“Oh!” Firen’s hands went to her mouth. And if her eyes grew misty, then so did Wren’s, so it was all right. And if they hugged, it was because they had something to mend between them.

She did not even grow jealous when Firen embraced Braum as well.



Wren couldn’t sleep. She wanted to. Or... thought she should want to.

Merryweather was asleep in her yarn basket downstairs, too cosy by the hearth to bother making the trek up to the loft.

Wren did not sleep well without her. That was all.

Having a man in her bed—a *mate* in her bed—did not change how she felt about Merry and her company. Not at all.

Except there was another thought that niggled. Insistent and irritating while she burrowed under her covers and reminded herself that she’d chores in the morning. Bread to make. That sort of thing.

Why then did she want to reach over and see if Braum was awake too? To take advantage of the aloneness in their bed, to see about that kissing and... touching... they’d started before.

She flipped over a little more harshly than she should have now that she had a person for a bed-mate and not just Merryweather. Not that she was particularly gracious about being bothered in her sleep. But it was... different.

She should get up. Fetch some water. Maybe rock on the porch and wait until this heavy feeling low in her belly disappeared.

It would. Had to.

“You all right?” Braum asked, his voice low. Sleepy.

She was keeping him from his rest. He was going to the groves tomorrow. She'd thought of asking to go with him, but hadn't. Would.

Which meant sleep was important or else he'd claim she was tired and shouldn't make the trip.

"Yes," Wren muttered. Felt the lie sour in her mouth. "No."

He reached for her. Not to tug her to him—they were careful about those sorts of things. Perhaps too careful. But he put his hand on her arm. Held it there, present and distracting. "What is it?"

How was she supposed to explain such things to him? Wants that she barely understood herself? Ones that she was certain she could even fulfil without...

Her mouth pressed into a grim line.

She'd been robbed. Of innocence and trust, and she wanted it back. If they had to stop, they would. *He* would. He'd rather drown himself in her pond than ever, *ever* hurt her in that way.

So if she wanted to kiss him... wanted to indulge the warming of her blood and the urges to touch and to be touched...

She took his hand. Placed where she ached.

Her heart beat wildly at her boldness. For him to give the reasons they shouldn't try.

He purred. His hand coming to her hip as he pressed her into him. They were on their sides—she could pull away whenever she wanted to.

But she didn't.

She liked his fervour. Liked his hands, pressing and pulling. Like better still when he went to his back and brought her over him, his hands smoothing up her thighs. "Did you think I would object?" he asked as she leaned down to kiss him, fighting down the urge to squirm on top of him. The lights were low, the lamp extinguished for the sleep they were meant to be having.

But she could make out enough with the glow of the fire down below.

“No,” she confessed. “Just... worried if I got scared, or if I couldn’t...”

His hand was in her hair. The back of her head. Keeping her steady as they looked at one another in the dim. “You think I would keep going? Not care that you were unhappy?” She’d hurt him. Hadn’t meant to, but she had.

It hung between them, the memory of this *other*; and she hated it. Wanted him purged from her mind and her heart and the very home he’d pushed into. She’d scrubbed it all once he’d left. Until her hands were wrinkled and sore. Then she’d cleaned it all again—herself included.

Over and over.

Until she’d discovered it was better to box away the entire business. To stop thinking about it at all because it hadn’t happened didn’t matter. Couldn’t hurt her anymore if it just went away.

Lies, the whole of it.

She brushed her lips against his. Soothing. Promising. “No,” she assured him. “No, I don’t think that. You love me too much.”

She liked the hand in her hair. Like the one at her hip. Liked leaning and whispering and having the whole world fall away until it was just the two of them—if only for a little while.

“I do,” he swore to her. And it was a vow. She knew it all the way into her bones that he loved her. Cherished her. Would do anything in his power to make her happy, even if it meant building a small extra door just for Merryweather. A porch so they might enjoy the outside together even during the wetter months.

“That’s good,” Wren murmured, kissing his cheek. His brow. “It would be rather lonely otherwise. Loving you all on my own.”

He hummed. No, it was the purr that came back. And something flared. Something she could not begin to name, but that knew that sound and felt it swirl about in her blood. Calling and prickling and making her *feel* all over.

And she squirmed. Because it was impossible not to. With him below her, with his mouth on her, with love between them.

This she could do.

Would do.

Because she wanted to, and wanted him, and it was natural and good and she needn't be afraid of it.

Of him.

Never again.

“Can we try? And just... see? I'd... I'd like to.” She brought her lips to his ear, because it was embarrassing to talk of such things, and yet...

There was something rather thrilling about it all the same. “We have the bed to ourselves. Who knows how long it might last.”

That earned a chuckle from him—a choked, odd sort of sound as it contrasted with the purr and left her smiling in turn. “Seduced with the prospect of haste. That is not quite how I imagined it.”

She pulled her head up, but only just. “Did you? Imagine it?”

He did not look away from her. Only brought her braid over her shoulder and took up the end of it, painting the edges of her shoulders and tickling her exposed collarbones. “Oh yes,” he murmured. “There were usually biscuits,” he confided. “Then you would sit on my lap afterward.”

She blushed all over.

In the *kitchen*? Where they made their food?

But then, Merryweather walked wherever she pleased and she thought little of it other than to wash the cooking areas

before use. So maybe it wasn't so different after all.

He touched her lower lip with his thumb. "Have I shocked you?"

"No." She wouldn't have him worried about that. "You can't grow your stock of grimbles without seeing how it's done, you know."

He smirked. Smiled. Then laughed outright. "Is that how you intend for us to be?"

It frustrated her that he did not flush with colour—perhaps it was her mother's blood that formed that particular ability. "I don't know," she admitted, feeling some relief at the confession. "I just..." She took his hands. Placed them at her hips and held them there. "Do you ever waken and find that you just... are tense all over? That you need something even... even if you don't know what it is?"

There was the purr. While his eyes grew heavy and his attention was fixed on the open collar of her nightdress, then the way it bunched about her thighs as she straddled his chest.

"I know," Braum answered, so certain she couldn't help but believe him. "When I wake, it's because I need *you*."

His palms smoothed up the softness of her thighs, up beneath the fabric. Then inward. Toward the part of her that was tense and pulsed lightly, threatening to grow in intensity if she did not do *something*.

"Do you need me, Wren?" he asked. A foolish query. Unnecessary too, as her breath hitched as he touched her. There was little room for it, situated as she was. Little need for it at all, as she could attend to it herself if given permission to use him as she pleased.

She'd worried about this? Truly?

"Would you like to stay like this?"

She made a strangled sort of answer, stiff and uncertain because it felt good where he was touching her, she liked the pressure and the weight of her body against him, and yet...

She gave a half-formed shrug, frustrated with herself. With all she did not know and all she wasn't prepared for. She knew the fundamentals—had experienced...

It didn't matter what she'd experienced.

None of it *helped*. To know what she liked and what he might like, and...

He made a sound that was perhaps a sigh, or maybe it was a laugh.

And then she was moving. Onto her back with Braum over her.

And he was kissing her.

Which was familiar and welcome, and it was easier not to worry when she was engaged in that instead.

Made all the more delicious by the way his hand had access, her legs parting in welcome without her conscious decision to do so at all.

It wasn't fair. That he seemed to know what to do while she didn't. She'd never had to think about her anatomy, if it looked any different, *felt* any different than a Harquil man might expect.

But from the way he could make her squirm, make her tense, make her feel as if he was playing her body as if he knew precisely what would please her most...

Oh.

Oh.

He had the bond. And she... didn't.

He had some mystical essence deep within him that told him how to stroke, how to touch—when to kiss, when to pull away and let her breathe. When to hold her hand and when to let her grapple with the bed linens and pretend there were still thoughts in her head.

But that was cheating.

She meant to say it aloud.

Meant to chide him because that truly was unfair, and he was going to be very unhappy when she tried to please him back and he had to cope with all her fumbling and uncertainty because she was not tethered to...

Except she was.

With something deep and ancient and glorious in its own rite. That perhaps was not tangled with blood and birthright, but something simple and profound all at once.

That she loved him.

And he loved her.

She was crying. She hadn't meant to, but then, she wasn't particularly in control of any of her responses at the moment. He stilled, coming from his attentions he was paying to her breasts so he could whisper in her ear. "You all right?"

"Can you... can you be with me?" It wasn't what she should say. Wasn't direct enough and he wouldn't know what she meant. But how exactly did one ask for...

Maybe some things did need words.

So she reached for him instead.

And was rewarded with a groan as she curled her fingers about him. He was surprisingly warm. And it wasn't at all like her mother had tried to tell her—in stilted language when a young Wren had grown curious about the differences between men and women, and was it quite as unpleasant as it looked when the grimbles were at it?

She'd tried to talk about slits—the ones insides, the ones with parts that came out. Of eggs and not-eggs, and it all sounded about as magical and mystical as the bonds the Harquil claimed were real. But there were fledglings and babies, and she supposed that meant it was real after all.

She was doing it all wrong. Her hips weren't angled right, and Braum wasn't moving to assist her, and she supposed that meant she should settle down and stop trying to push him inside of her. But now that the idea was in her head, it was a tangible sort of need. Like when she knew she needed just one

more cup of tea before she started the rest of her chores. Like she knew when the syrup for the lozenges needed another teaspoon of herbs, just off the smell alone.

“Wren, why are you crying?”

He nuzzled at her cheek, and it was tender and sweet and only made things worse because she rather loved him. Rather needed him. And it hurt to think that maybe he didn't need her quite as much, wasn't quite as desperate for her as she seemed to be for him.

She wiped at her eyes with her free hand. “Do you not want to?”

“Oh, I want to,” Braum corrected. “But I'd rather be certain you're all right.” He kissed her cheek. Nibbled at her jaw. “Are you?”

“Yes,” she murmured back. “Truly. Just... please.” He came back to her mouth. Kissed her slowly. Until she wanted to kick him just a little for teasing her, when she'd been perfectly plain about her desires.

Then he was purring. A low sound on the exhale. It did not alter what she wanted, but soothed her. Made the tears stop and calmed her breath until her words were a bit more herself. “Mine,” she whispered, her fingers in his hair as she looked at him. “Only mine.”

He took that hand. Kissed her palm.

“Yours,” he swore. “As you are mine.”

She sighed. There was no ensuing panic. No horrid, creeping *wrongness*.

Because it was true. Perhaps not as instantly as it had been for him.

But gently.

Patiently.

Much the same way he entered her at last. A warm, full stretch that didn't hurt. It didn't. Well, maybe a little.

Not enough that she wanted him off of her. But maybe.

“Wren,” Braum breathed.

His hand was on her chin, and his body was very still.

He wanted her to look at him.

Which seemed a terribly funny sort of thing to do when they were as *together* as two people might be.

Her brow furrowed, and the rumble in his chest increased. But she looked. Saw him tense and worried.

And she didn’t want that. She was fine. Would be fine.

“You do not feel pleasure,” Braum extrapolated.

Retreated.

Leaving her empty and wanting and that wasn’t what she meant, wasn’t what she wanted and yet he wasn’t quite wrong either.

She grappled with her heels against him, trying to keep him close. “It’s new,” Wren reminded him. “Or...” Perhaps it was wrong to say that. It was, and it wasn’t. “I don’t want to stop.”

That was the important part, wasn’t it?

Braum gave her a dubious look, and she smiled at him as sweetly as she could. No crying. No shoving down her feelings to protect his.

“Can you... touch me? Like before? While you...” She was certain she was flushed all over, for they were certainly not things she’d ever imagined asking of another person.

But he wasn’t just anyone. This was Braum, and he was her friend, and her mate, and so she supposed that made it all right.

She hummed. Not a purr, just the sound he made when he was thinking.

Not just thinking. Evaluating a problem and how he might fix it. And she was *almost* offended by it.

Would have been. If he hadn’t started over again.

Touching her all over. Kissing her and coaxing until she forgot about much of anything at all. Just him. The feeling of

warmth. Of safety. Of being surrounded and loved and cherished and if she did cry again, it was because...

Because it was good.

They were good.

Together.

He was nuzzling at her cheek again. After the tensing and the coiling and the sudden, urgent relief that loosened every part of her.

He wanted her eyes. When she wanted most was to sleep, and he wanted her to look at him again.

She supposed she might oblige him. This time anyway.

Her heart was still racing, but she cupped his cheek and watched as his smile grew. "There you are."

She shook her head at him and might have chuckled, but she was cross with him, really. For doubting her.

Doubting them.

"Rather pleased with yourself, are you?"

He purred. Tucked her in closer.

And she could tell that he was spent, and there were vague warnings from her mother about getting up and washing and don't be a fool about it because healers are expensive, and yes there are herbs that she shouldn't have to rely on such things.

She turned she might place a kiss to where his nightshirt gaped open. Were they supposed to have removed those first? Next time. All skin and kisses, and she'd make sure that he lay quite still while she sated all her curiosities on just how different the male form might be.

Maybe in the daytime. When the suns were out and Merryweather was out in the stable tending to her hunting.

"What are you thinking about?" Braum asked, his hand coming to her braid. Twining it about his palm. Allowing it to fall. Again and again.

“How we’ll do it the next time,” Wren declared. Paused. Considered if that was an admission she should give, most especially when he snorted.

“I take it that means I have left you unsatisfied.”

He was already reaching for her again, but the delicious pulse that flared and ebbed gave a hint of warning that it could grow to pain if she grew too greedy of him.

So she grasped his hand and tucked below her breasts. She’d get up in a moment. Truly. But she would savour just a moment longer like this. “Not at all,” she promised him. “Just means I liked it.” She tilted her head, trying to catch his eye. “Did you? I tried to pay attention, honest, but there was just so *much*.”

His smile was tender, even if his eyes were alight with mirth. “You are a treasure,” he assured her, pulling her more firmly to him. “My treasure.”

She felt warm all over.

Words failed her. But that was all right when she had kisses now to give instead.

And when Merryweather gave a yowl from downstairs that she’d woken from her nap and thought a late snack would not be remiss, it made it easier to tend to the rest of it.

Not with scrubbing and tears. But with a simple cloth and a hurry to get back to him. Only to find that her spot had been taken by Merry, that looked all the while that it was Wren who had intruded on her rightful position.

“My great defender,” Wren groused, clinging to the edge of the bed as she took what bed linens she could.

Braum’s shoulders rose and fell, the gesture looking much more normal than it once had. “You keep a wild creature in your home. I think it best not to anger her.”

Merryweather stretched languidly, and Wren cuddled as close as she dared to the both of them.

It was perfect.



It wasn't spring.

Not yet.

But there was a whisper of it.

She'd woken early. Well, Merryweather had. So she had. And so she'd crept down and started the fire, while Merry made use of her new door that flapped gently at her exit.

A clever man, her mate. Generous and kind.

She set the kettle on to heat. Put two mugs down on the counter. Leaves in the pot.

He'd wake soon, on his own. Always aware when she wasn't there. But some morning she made it back to him. Woke him with tea and a cuddle, and sometimes it even meant a little more than cuddling.

She could do as she pleased. Braum said so.

The first sun was already beginning its ascent, and as she peered out the window, she heard the faint tinkling of her chimes. He'd had to take them down in the last bout of storms, and she hadn't thought he'd put them back again.

But he had. Because he'd catch her looking—missing them.

She opened the door. She hadn't dressed, but that was all right. Because spring was coming soon. Where the winds would be gentle and the rains would be right for sprinkling onto crops, and warmth would see her wraps returned to their trunks until autumn.

She stepped onto the porch when she heard Thorn's greeting.

Her arms crossed over her chest as she went as far as she dared in her bare feet, her hand raised to him. She did not dare call out lest it wake Braum, but she wanted him to know she acknowledged him.

She caught sight of Merryweather's upright tail in the long grass, and smiled.

Which grew all the more when she felt the presence behind her. Felt Braum and a blanket all in one as he hugged her to him.

“Tell that bond of yours to settle,” Wren chided, not meaning it in the least. “I’m allowed to wake before you do.”

Braum grunted. “Nonsense.”

Wren sighed and felt him kiss the top of her head.

“Sit with me a while?” she asked. “Chores will keep.”

He hummed.

And when she mentioned the tea she was making, he purred.

And it made her insides warm as it always did, and she was grateful that one day she’d returned from the stable to find that her rocking chairs had been replaced by a bench. To sit together, you know. And he might hold her while they did so.

He was right.

Usually was, although she did not admit it often.

But she could today. Tucked against him with their tea and a shared quilt.

Watching the second sun rise.

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