

**“Words Unspoken”**

**By Lauren Rivers**

## FOUR YEARS AGO

Sunlight peppered the grass beneath the tree where Ethan sat. Both he and his companion rested by the picturesque lake, one of their favorite childhood spots since hatching. While they had rested here on many days prior today was different. Today was the first day his friend Patrick had become a knight. He was the first among their group to achieve such a distinction. Every noble family had similar plans for their children and Ethan was no different. It had been his destiny since the moment he had been old enough to hold a sword. At least, according to his father.

Patrick Winters had been his best friend since he could remember. The young crow was just about the same age and unlike some of his other friends his mother had raised no objection to their friendship, saying it was appropriate. Ethan still questioned the class system they seemed to follow not quite understanding why one had to be a certain thing or love a certain person based on the way they were born. It seemed patently ridiculous to him, but not to anyone else. Patrick was from a well-hatched family like himself with many of the same friends. Unlike Ethan, however, he had embraced the destiny their parents had set out for him and taken to knighthood training like a bird to flight. Today, he had finally realized his dream and wore a set of chain mail along with a light tunic that displayed the banner of Tannaris.

“It’s a beautiful day, don’t you think?” Patrick asked.

“Oh yes, rather pleasant,” Ethan replied.

Patrick sat up and looked at him askance. “All right, Ethan, what’s bothering you?”

“Nothing,” he lied.

“Ethan, you’re a lot of things but you are a shitty liar. Tell me what’s bothering you.” Patrick tilted his head towards the hawk. The crow gave him an expectant glance. Knowing his friend would not drop it Ethan thought it best to answer.

“I guess I’m just preoccupied.”

“About what?”

“About the war with Etasca.” Ethan ran his talon through the dirt creating a line. He then produced another one an inch away from it creating a pair of parallel lines.

Patrick leaned back against the tree. His wings were wrapped around his torso so as not to get in the way as they relaxed. “That’s a subject that’s been on everyone’s minds lately. The hostilities between our two nations have been increasing as the war heats up. I expect it won’t be long before I’m called to duty.”

“My father as well.” Ethan looked down at his own clothes. While his friend now wore the off duty trappings of a knight Ethan was still a squire. He had trained for it since starting as a young page. His performance on each of the prerequisite tasks had been exceptional, but his father would accept nothing less. It occurred to the young hawk he had made almost none of his own choices since he was old enough to understand the concept. His father had guided Ethan onto a path already set since his egg was fertilized. He supposed there was a certain comfort to knowing what one’s future held. Perhaps that was why so many did not question the structure of their society.

Over the past year both Etasca and Tannaris had been competing for trade with the neighboring nation of Akaeria. Both nations had attacked the other’s shipping in efforts to gain the upper hand in their economic struggle to position themselves as the

optimal trading partner. At first it was minor incidents whereas one nation would steal the other's cargo and leave the ship adrift not far from their home, but in time it had grown where one ship would destroy the other and leave the survivors to their own devices. A declaration of war had been inevitable.

"I wish your training was complete, then we could at least be at each other's side in battle," Patrick said.

"As much as I am happy for you that you've been knighted, I'm honestly glad I'm not." Ethan drew another line in the dirt with his talon.

"Don't you want to be a knight?" he asked.

"I don't know. My father wanted this for me. He always spoke as if it were my destiny like I had no choice in the matter. I know how important it is we have good knights to defend our kingdom and that I fulfill my obligations but I never wanted it like you did." He lowered his beak. "I sometimes think my father wishes you were his son instead of me."

Patrick unfurled a wing and wrapped it around Ethan's back. "You know he cares for you."

"Yes, but I'm a disappointment to him. He knows I don't want his life. I never did." Ethan placed a hand on his friend's wing. "To him, you're the perfect son. I may receive exemplary results on all of my training assignments but he knows that it's not in my heart."

"No bird can know his heart but himself. It's true I've always wanted this. I wanted it since I saw the knights return from the last campaign as a young hatchling. Watching them ride back into town with their armor shining in the afternoon sun, it always meant something to me. I remember one of them nodded in my direction as he carried the Tannaris banner down the streets towards the castle. I didn't know what they were but I knew I wanted to be one of them. My father told me that they were defenders of the kingdom. They were our protectors and that's what I wanted to be. Our family was nobility so it wasn't hard for me to earn my way. Once I began my training I knew it was what I was meant to do." Patrick removed his wing and returned it to the curled position around his body.

Ethan nodded his agreement. He had long understood his friend's reason for wanting to be a knight. "In my case I never really had a choice. My father had told me I was going to be a knight like there was nothing to discuss. He never asked what I wanted nor did my mother. To them I was the next in a long line of knights that would defend our kingdom and marry a woman of good breeding. They had planned my entire life for me before I had even been old enough to begin page training."

"There are worse professions," Patrick said.

"I know. I don't mean to sound as if I disapprove of knighthood. As I said, I realize its necessity. I just don't understand why I have no choice in the matter," he said.

Patrick offered a shrug. "Have you spoken to your father about it?"

"Any time I mention it he insists I'm simply not ready to make my own decisions. Whenever I think about it he seems to know and gives me a lecture on the responsibility I have to our people. I sometimes think if I were to voice the fact I don't wish to follow in his talon prints in front of anyone else he would disown me on the spot." Ethan looked up almost as if he thought he might find his father hiding among the tree branches above

their heads. After he was satisfied there was no one above them he returned his attention to the conversation. “Even if I thought he’d listen I don’t know what I would say.”

“You would stay silent instead?” Patrick asked.

“I don’t know. Part of me can’t bear to take that away from him. He’s always so proud of what he does when he returns home every day. Him and my mother both. To them, their lives are perfect, save for their disappointment of a son. My father would never dream of doing anything else with his life other than protecting the kingdom, serving the crown, and coming home to his beloved who keeps the fires warm and the home in order.” He threw his hands up in mock surrender. “To them, it’s the perfect life.”

Patrick shifted his position so he faced Ethan. “No life is perfect. You ask anyone and I’m sure they’ll find things about their life that they’re not happy with. It may seem that way from someone on the outside, but trust me on this one. Besides, your father won’t live forever.”

“I don’t want him to die,” Ethan said.

“I didn’t say that. I just meant you only have a limited amount of time with him. Maybe what you need to do is tell him the truth. So he gets mad at you for a while and maybe kicks you out of the house for a few weeks. You can stay with my family.” Patrick slapped him on the back. “After a couple of weeks your dad will beg you to come home.”

“You don’t know my father,” Ethan said. “He’s practically a living recruitment poster for the knighthood. If I told him what I wanted he’d never speak to me again.”

Patrick turned his head in a quizzical avian expression. “What do you want, exactly?”

“What?”

“I mean, what do you want? We’ve been talking about what you don’t want, what would you do, if you had the choice?” he asked.

Ethan had never thought about it terms beyond a daydream. He’d long thought about his future and what he would choose were he free to do so, but he had never put it into words. Even doing so now seemed to take momentous effort. “I’d like to travel. I don’t know what I’d do on the road but there has to be some profession that involves traveling to all sorts of interesting places. I’d like to learn about other cultures and maybe meet a girl that doesn’t stop at cooking and cleaning thinking that’s all she can be. I don’t want some slip of a thing that just desires to look pretty for parties and hatch a bunch of eggs to repeat the same cycle. The woman of my dreams would be bold and caring but not afraid to be feminine when the situation called for it. I want a woman that can handle herself in a pinch and knows how to keep her head about her when things get crazy.”

Patrick shook his head. “I don’t know where in the world you think you’ll find a woman like that.”

“Neither do I,” he said.

Patrick looked as if he were about to say something else when he stopped with his beak half open. Ethan turned around to see his mother standing before him with her hands held together and a beautiful dress with such fine detail that it almost blended in with her feathers. She looked down at her son and extended a hand. “Your father wishes a word.”

Ethan swallowed hard.

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Hargrove Manor always felt cold and empty to Ethan. While the size of the house was a result of his family's considerable wealth and influence he had always felt uncomfortable in a home so large. The residence had three wings and a stable as well as a large marble fountain out front. Ethan followed his mother into the house like a criminal on his way to his execution.

His father only summoned him when he had a particular lecture in mind. While he was certain his father cared for him he knew that to the elder Hargrove he was a significant disappointment. Lucian Hargrove was one of the most well known knights in the kingdom and he expected his son to follow in his footsteps. On this point there was no discussion. From hatching he had his destiny planned out by his parents. Ethan imagined his father wanted him to take his place when he was old enough.

Ethan was skilled with a sword and had trained as a page and in turn a squire. Though he had performed well in both of these roles his father had sensed that his heart was not in it. This was one point on which he knew they did not understand each other. He had attempted to broach the subject with his mother on numerous occasions though the conversation had not gone well. Both of his parents were long part of the society into which they had been born, where a great deal of one's life was determined by things out of their control.

The hawk had considered leaving all of this behind once or twice. Any time the thought touched his mind an imperious look from his father drove that away. Perhaps there was a reason hawks were considered birds of prey.

His mother led him into his father's private study in the north wing. Lucian Hargrove stood with his wings spread behind him but idle. Most avians did this to appear imposing, he thought. The polite thing to do was generally to wrap one's wings around the body. However, his father had not invited him here out of politeness. He took his position in the center of the room while his mother moved to the left of the door to block any attempts to leave. He knew the routine well.

"Father," Ethan said.

"Ethan," he responded.

"You requested my presence?" he asked. His father's tendency to say little in the opening salvos of the conversation was a technique he used to establish his dominance over the younger Hargrove. Both of them knew precisely why he was here though the elder hawk would make him say it. To his father, there was nothing higher than duty. Ethan would play the game for now.

"I did. As you're aware, as a Hargrove you have certain responsibilities to the kingdom." He still had not turned around to face Ethan. Another power play. His father was surprisingly skilled at the art of conversational manipulation despite his claim he preferred to deal with his adversaries face to face. Though Ethan knew his father did not see him as an enemy he treated their conversations as much like a battle as any he fought with a sword.

Ethan returned fire. "Responsibilities that I have discharged to my mentor's satisfaction." Though it was not something he enjoyed his trainers had always reported

Ethan's skill and dedication to the art of combat. His father could not fault him on that point.

"True," Lucian Hargrove grudgingly agreed. "Though as you are aware a bird of your station has responsibilities outside of your training." The younger hawk felt some satisfaction at his small victory. This gave way to hesitation when his father shifted the conversation into new territory. He kept his stoic expression knowing he could not allow his father an opportunity to strike.

"Such as?" he asked, lacking a better response. He cast a glance towards his mother, who offered no aid or clue to what his father meant.

Lucian regarded him at last. He kept his wings remained open yet idle. The elder hawk took a step closer, his feathers a darker shade than Ethan's. As always for these conversations his father wore his finest clothes with the family crest on his breast. His tunic was dark blue with a pair of black pants and a brown belt at his waist. "I'm told you have still not selected a lady to court."

*So that's what this is about.*

Ethan had expected his father to lecture on and on about how important it was for him to become a knight of the kingdom. He was certain he would tell him that it was his highest duty and that he had no other purpose more important than the task for which he had been born to do. The lecture had been given so many times Ethan could almost recite it from memory. His mother remained silent for the moment, her beak closed and her eyes soft. "I am not even a knight, yet."

"No, but it is about time for you to consider your future as one. There are many fine ladies among the nobility to choose from," he said.

Ethan felt his hands ball into fists. "That should be my decision."

"It will be, provided you make the correct choice." Lucian approached his son. "Have you even considered the matter?"

The younger hawk had to admit he had not. So much of his energy had gone to trying to satisfy his father while at the same time seeking a way out of his supposed destiny that he had not been prepared for such a shift in tactics. "I have been focused on my training."

"Which is of course, commendable. I have long considered what maiden among the noble families would make the best match for you," he said.

Ethan thought of the only defense he could manage. "I should prefer to make that evaluation myself." He considered making the declaration his beloved may not be a lady of some station but given he did not even have a beloved at that time it seemed a poor gambit. He let the statement stand.

"As you shall, my son." Alina spoke for the first time in minutes. "Your father merely wishes to begin the process as soon as possible. In order to ensure you have the best selection you must begin courting a lady from an appropriate family. Given you have taken no steps to do so yourself we have taken it upon us to do so for you." She touched his arm. "A knight's responsibility to his king does not end with the point of his sword. He must ensure the continuation of the noble bloodlines by selecting a suitable mate and marry a woman of noble birth. This is how it has always been."

Ethan shook his head. "You make it sound as if we are livestock, mother."

“While you may consider the entire societal arrangement constrictive, it is only because you fight so hard against it. You would find the life your father and I have lived is not so distasteful to those that embrace it.” His mother turned away, obviously hurt.

Ethan knew he had just made a grave tactical error. Disrespecting his mother, however unintentional, was an offense often seen as an affront by his father. He spoke in the hopes he could mitigate the damage. “I meant no disrespect, to either of you.” Ethan felt his father’s eyes burning into him. “I simply do not understand why I cannot begin the process on my own.”

Lucian stood a few feet in front of Ethan. His superior height was intimidating as he spread his wings. “I do not understand why everything must be such a struggle with you. My entire life has been a clear path from the moment my father selected my mate and I began my training to serve the kingdom of Tannaris. I wanted nothing more than to follow the path he had walked before me. I had never felt so blessed than the day I met my beloved Alina, your mother. I could not have chosen better. My father had the wisdom to guide our paths together for he knew she was the other half of me. Why can you not trust we know what is best for you, as my father did for me?”

Ethan shook his head. “I am not like you or my grandfather. When your paths were clear mine is not so obvious. I do not know what I would choose for myself but how can I when you have already decided what my future holds?” He lowered his beak and turned towards his mother. “I know this life is all either of you has ever known. I do not blame you or mother for you have done your best to guide me. I am a bird and I must be allowed to fly as I see fit. Though I possess the skill to serve I do not know if I would be happy on the battlefield. All I ask is the ability to choose it, should that be my destiny.”

“You foolish boy. You wear the clothes of a man but you are still a hatchling. You do not have the ability to understand what you would so casually throw away. Without the nobility and the knights to defend Tannaris there would be nothing for the commoners to sustain themselves upon.” Lucian slapped Ethan across the face.

The pain stung from the strike but he dared not move his hand to the source of the sensation. Ethan knew his father did not understand but he could not stop himself from trying to convince him. “One bird flying his own path will not destroy this kingdom.”

“SILENCE!” Lucian’s voice echoed off the walls. “I will have no more of this nonsense. You are my heir and my son. You will carry on my legacy. I will not see you marry a bitch or a whore for your own indulgence. Now stand at attention.” He forced Ethan’s beak up with his hand and pointed at his face. “You have a guest. We will discuss this later.” He and Alina both walked out of the room together.

Ethan remained still for a long moment until a young female hawk walked around him and peered her head to the side to look at him. He regarded her for a moment with some curiosity as he examined her features. She was attractive with light blue eyes and creamy brown feathers with a well-defined beak much like his mother’s. He swallowed as she touched his chest. “Excuse me?”

“OH! Good heavens, I thought you were a statue for a moment. My mother insisted I come here to meet you. I think she fancies us a rather ideal couple. She’s already named our children. My name is Lady Willow.” She smiled. “Can we go somewhere and talk? I promise, I love statues.”

“Oh, okay,” Ethan took her arm in his and escorted her out towards the fountain.

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After the two of them had reached the fountain Ethan kept on going until they were well away from Hargrove Manor. When they had walked far enough that he felt he was not under his parents' watchful eye he sat upon a short stone fence and offered Lady Willow a seat beside him. The female hawk maneuvered herself a bit for the perfect dignified seat. Ethan knew it could not be simple between her tail feathers and the dress she wore. Nevertheless she managed to comport herself with grace and elegance.

Behind the short fence was a deep gap into the heart of the soil that looked as if some giant had scooped up a massive amount of dirt and carted it off. Ethan had never known how it had come to be but it was well understood that no one was to go beyond the short fence. It had influenced the design of the city in which he lived, shaped like an octagon with eight equal sections in a ring around the hole.

"I'm sorry about what happened back there," he said.

"You mean about your father?" she asked.

He nodded.

"He's only looking out for you," she said with a gentle smile.

Ethan turned away from her. "He thinks he is. Really, all he's doing is just making it harder for me to be the son he wants. I don't know why his approval matters so much when I don't find myself wanting anything he would have for me." The fact of the matter was he had never felt the attraction to the life his father led nor the one his mother seemed to accept without question. Perhaps for them it was more than suitable but Ethan could not seem to understand many of the things his father took for granted. He had tried to see things his father's way for as long as he had been old enough to do so. Nevertheless, the two had never managed to see eye to eye.

Willow chirred towards Ethan with one hand on her chest. "Is the life he leads so bad?"

"It's not that at all. Life at Hargrove Manor has always been pleasant. I've never lacked for anything I required." The hawk had considered himself fortunate he had been hatched into a well respected family with adequate means to provide for him and his parents. That privilege, at least in his father's eyes, came with certain obligations. Most of his father's wealth and resources had come from loyal service to the king. In return most of the noble families encouraged their children to continue in that tradition feeling service was its own reward.

"Then what?" she asked.

"I've spent my life asking that exact question," Ethan said. "I have by hatching what some would spend their lives trying to achieve. Yet for some reason I find I am unsatisfied." The hawk envied those like Patrick that never questioned their destiny. As much as he had tried to be like his friend he had never felt the same calling both he and his father did. Ethan sighed.

Lady Willow touched his arm. Her caress was gentle yet supportive. He could tell why she was such a well sought after female among the nobles. Her family was well regarded and wealthy. To the outside world she was a perfect social match for a bird of his station. Ethan considered it might be easier to throw off the weight of his father's expectations if he'd already had someone he considered his beloved. Even though

Willow was kind he once again found himself at the mercy of his father's wishes. He had not expected this to happen so soon and it had caught him unprepared.

His mother would insist he at least spend the appropriate amount of time with her before disregarding her out of hand. His father would be furious if he were to decline the match without another of equal standing to replace her. Once again he found himself at odds with the rules of society.

"It's not that I find the life he would wish for me so repulsive. I simply wish I were certain it was what I wanted," he said.

Lady Willow removed her hand. "At least you are allowed to become a knight if you so choose."

Ethan met her glance. "Females are allowed to serve the king."

"Perhaps others are, but I am a woman of noble birth. Like you, I have obligations. I am expected to marry into a suitable family and hatch a clutch of eggs to secure my family's continuation. I cannot choose another destiny any more than you can escape yours." She chirred again and offered a hand to him.

He accepted the gesture and lowered his beak. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any offense."

"I've come to accept what society expects from me. Perhaps I'm just too much of a coward to abandon the life I've known since my hatching." She intertwined her fingers with his and became quiet.

Ethan thought of his own attempts to reconcile what society expected and what he thought he wanted. He had always attempted to toe the line between the two, to please his father and perhaps to find a way to satisfy his own desires as well. Travel had always been one of his interests. He also thought while he would get to go places as a knight, it was rare he would get to choose his destination or what he would do when he got there. Ethan considered he had similarly tried to hold on to the life he had known while wishing to be free of it. His father's attempt to secure him a bride meant he was running out of time before he would need to make a decision.

Willow's eyes sparkled like jewels in the morning light. They had met a few times over the past several years, mostly at official functions and society events. She had often been with a flock of other high society ladies. Though he had thought she was pretty he had been shy to approach her while she was in a cluster. He had never spoken to her before today, other than a bit of minor small talk.

"It's not easy, to walk away from all this." Ethan gestured at his clothes. "I've followed in my father's flight path for years because I know it is what he wants. If I thought he would accept anything else I might have gone in search of myself years ago." Ethan smiled towards Willow. "I know he means well. He's been good to mother and I and I can tell that he would desire nothing more than for me to want his life."

"The heart wants what it wants," Willow said.

"It does, though damned if I know what that is right now." Ethan rose to stand. "So what are we to do?"

Willow stood with him. "You mean about you and I?" she asked.

"Yes," Ethan nodded.

She gestured towards the next section of the city and motioned for him to walk with her. "I suppose for the sake of our parents, we should indulge them."

"You want to be betrothed?" he asked.

“Well, there are worse things to be, Ethan Hargrove, and I would say with no false modesty that I am not the most unpleasant partner you could receive.” She turned away from him with a squawk.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“I’m kidding,” she said. “You know, for someone who’s as well educated as you seem to be you don’t know much about females.”

Ethan tilted his head in a gesture of avian confusion. “Apparently not.”

“What I’m proposing is since neither of us right now has a better idea, we should court each other to keep our parents happy. Perhaps you might even learn to enjoy my company.” She smiled. “While betrothal or any sort of serious arrangement might be in store for us later on, for now, society expects it will take some time for us to determine if we’re a suitable pair. Until we attend at least a few society events as a couple they won’t regard us as formalized until then. That said, lacking a better alternative, why don’t we simply make the best of what we’ve been given?” The female hawk took a few steps and spread her wings giving him a fabulous view of the uniquely avian appendages.

While mammals preferred the lumps of flesh on their females’ chests, avians preferred to inspect the wings of their mate. He ran a hand along her delicate wing and trailed it down to the edge of her wingtips. Her primary feathers were groomed well and smelled of a fine perfume. He rubbed the side of his beak against her neck and spread his own. When she turned she repeated the gesture on his wings, feeling the strong muscles and fine feathers. Ethan smiled at the touch and considered perhaps such a life was not so bad after all.

When Willow had finished her inspection of his wings, she met his glance. “I don’t suppose you’re up for a flight.”

“Can you fly in that layer cake?” he asked, indicating her dress.

Willow held up a talon as she somehow removed the lower layer of her gown to reveal a unique garment thin against her body. With a silky sheen she was relieved of the bulk of the gown and it appeared she was now wearing only the layer underneath, designed for flight maneuvers. “I can now.” She set the rest of the dress down on a nearby barrel. “It will be fine until we return.”

“Once around the city?” he asked.

“Race you,” she said, as she started sprinting.

“HEY!” Ethan grumbled as he took off after her. He ran faster and faster, picking up speed until all at once he spread his wings flat and flapped hard. It was a fine skill, the running takeoff. If you opened your wings too soon you’d produce drag. Too late and you’d fall on your face. You needed to open them flat and just at the right angle to provide lift.

Both Ethan and Willow launched into the air with each taking wing on their path around the city. Ethan had not expected her to be such an expert flier, but as she sped ahead of him he smirked and dashed after her. The two weaved between the buildings in a low flight around the city. Watching Willow as she dashed underneath a low bridge he moved to pursue. He held his wings straight as he glided through it. His eyes widened when a cart pulled into view of the other end of the tunnel.

Ethan flapped his wings hard for an extra burst of speed before wrapping them around his body. The force pushed him past the cart by a narrow margin. The large amount of wind drowned out whatever profanities the cart owner shot after him.

The hawk spread his wings to gain some altitude as he searched the skies for Willow. He found her a couple hundred feet above him flying lazy circles in the sky. His wings protested as he pushed them to urge his body higher to meet her when she dashed downwards without warning. He began to recall her statement about not understanding females when he sighed and wrapped his wings around him to dive after her.

She was headed straight for the bell tower that dominated the Commerce District. He followed after as she bolted towards her destination. When she neared it she waited until the last possible moment to spread her wings for braking force and set down on one knee before the bell. She moved aside to allow Ethan to land, though he simply spread his wings and landed with heavy breaths.

“You are seriously nuts,” he said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” he asked.

“I noticed you followed me everywhere I went.” She smirked.

“I was trying to keep up with you!”

Willow put one hand on her hip. “I’m the top flyer in the city. That’s just never going to happen,” she said.

Ethan’s beak dropped open as he recalled seeing her at some of the various social competitions the avians had held among themselves. Some of the maneuvers he had seen her pull had been beyond advanced. It was now he saw why his father had wanted him to meet her. Socially speaking, they would be couple no other could match. “Holy shit.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re standing on a church, so you should apologize for that,” she said.

Ethan regarded Willow with a smirk. “I never would have thought you had such talents.”

“That’s because you spend so much time trying to get away from your life you don’t see half of what it does have to offer,” she said. “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t do what you want to do. All I am saying is, you should make an informed decision, don’t you think?”

Ethan approached Willow and took her shoulders in his hands before touching his beak to hers in the closest approximation avians could manage to the mammalian tradition called a kiss. It was much less sexy but the gesture always looked nice.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Mammals use it to signify love.”

“Love?”

“I mean, um, affection.” Ethan looked away until she wrapped her wings around them both at the midsection. “Maybe this isn’t so bad after all.”

Willow rested her head against his chest. “I don’t know if we’re meant to be, but at least for now, we can give it a try.” She suddenly retracted her wings and stood on the edge of the tower. “Until then, the race isn’t over.” She leapt from the edge and soared away.

Ethan leapt after her.

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Sunlight streamed into Ethan's bedroom in long beams that weaved their way across the intricate tile floor. He opened one eye and spent the next few minutes watching the first beam make its way over towards the bed. When it reached a particular line in the floor he knew it would be time for breakfast. He attempted to will the sunbeam to go back from where it came with no effect. Ethan had come to dislike the morning meal of the household, as his father would always ask how things were going with Willow. It had only gotten worse as the two had actually gotten along somewhat. Perhaps his father was entertaining fantasies of their future children and the fine line of knights they would hatch.

He delayed getting up until he could do so no longer without arousing his father's irritation. Knowing his mother would come looking for him were he late to breakfast he threw back the covers and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. When his talons touched the floor he spread his wings, stretching them as he searched for his favorite tunic. He dressed himself without much fanfare. Ethan preened in the mirror for a few moments to be certain his appearance was acceptable.

He opened the wooden door that led to the hall and headed towards the dining room. The male hawk nodded to his mother as he entered. Alina welcomed her son with a gentle rub of her beak against his own before she took her seat at the table. Lucian was already eating as Ethan sat in his usual chair. The elder hawk did not look up right away though he gave a curt nod to indicate he knew his son was present. After a moment one of the kitchen staff brought a plate out for he and his mother. They lifted the lid and presented them with a sumptuous plate of small meats that smelled rather delicious. Ethan took his fork and pierced one, noting the meat practically slid down his throat as if it were a liquid.

Alina spoke first. "Did you sleep well, Ethan?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"How are things going with Lady Willow?" Alina had raised the question since he could never find the will to be angry with her. No doubt his father had requested she do so in order to discover how his heirs were coming along without being the one asking. By addressing the subject in this manner he kept his son from responding with irritation since his mother was often his secret weapon when he wished him to maintain his composure while discussing touchy subjects.

"Rather well, mother, I suppose." Ethan had met with her during a few social occasions in order to keep his father happy. As long as he was seen in her company his father had backed off on the topic of his future as a Knight of Tannaris. He was certain the elder hawk hoped she would convince him there was much in the life he had chosen that was worth pursuing. His father was a skilled tactician both on the battlefield and with his son. Ethan had invited her over for dinner a couple of times finding that he enjoyed her company. The fact that it kept his father at bay was a welcome bonus. It would not last forever, but it at least bought him some room to breathe.

Lucian nodded to his son. "She's a fine lady, from a good family." The elder hawk spared a glance at Alina. "You're lucky she was free to be courted, my son. Women like her don't stay available for long." He touched his wife's hand giving it a gentle massage. She chirped in response.

"She is rather pleasant," Ethan said. He had found her to be amusing and somewhat adventurous for a well hatched lady. She had more than once given him a run

for his money in their flights over the city. His favorite of them was the one that had ended in a picnic he had prepared at the top of the bell tower over the church. He had brought with him some of the finest foods from the kitchen at Hargrove Manor, expertly prepared and kept warm for their arrival with a little help from the kitchen staff. Ethan generally was not one to take advantage of his family's status as respected and somewhat wealthy citizens but male birds often did spectacular things to woo their mates.

Of course his mother had known about it. Mothers always seem to find out about things like that. He met her glance as if she had sensed his thoughts. It was another reason Ethan could never be irritated with her. She saw right through him as if she were an Oracle.

"I like her. You should bring her to dinner sometime this week," Alina said.

"Of course, mother." Ethan knew although it was phrased as a suggestion his mother intended it as a statement. He could never refuse her for the same reason he could not be angry with her even when he had a right to be. "Lady Willow is a rather skilled flier."

"So was your mother when she was her age," Lucian said.

"Was?" his mother assumed a smirk and glared at her husband.

"Was, and still is." Lucian held up a hand in his attempt to be diplomatic. He rubbed her hand again placing his beak to its surface as mammals tended to do with their beloved.

Satisfied, Alina gave him a conciliatory nod. "I recall your father often had trouble keeping up with me when he was a young hawk."

"I managed, most days." He held up a hand summoning a member of the kitchen staff to remove his empty plate.

"More than once I managed to beat you to my father's home." Alina preened a bit while Lucian this time held up his hands conceding her point. "Though you were rarely far behind."

"Ethan, perhaps now that things with you and Lady Willow have become somewhat established you might consider formally declaring your union." Lucian kept his eyes on Ethan as the younger hawk considered a response. His father wanted him to publicly accept Willow as his future mate, but Ethan knew doing so would put him one step closer to his father's chosen destiny.

Before he could speak, Patrick entered the room in full armor with a scroll in his left hand. Ethan knew what it meant though he had not anticipated it would happen today. The crow nodded to his friend and handed Lucian the rolled up paper. He stood at attention with his hands behind his back. "By order of the king you are hereby called to duty as of this day."

"I accept the call," Lucian said in the traditional response to a new duty assignment being issued. He reviewed the scroll. Ethan was certain it contained his father's new orders. The fact Patrick was in full armor and had delivered it himself meant that he was being called to duty as well.

Ethan was aware the war had only intensified in the intervening weeks since he had begun to court Willow. He had hoped perhaps in vain that neither his father nor his friend would need to be pressed into duty, instead being kept on local assignments. No doubt the war had taken more lives on both sides necessitating that their numbers be replenished with skilled soldiers from Tannaris.

Once his father had finished reading the scroll he rolled it back up and placed it on the oak table. When he rose he turned towards Patrick. "I can be ready within the hour."

"I'm to wait for you and join you as three additional units are sent to reinforce our position to the north." Patrick spared a glance towards Lady Alina who kept her head lowered as she absorbed the news.

Ethan watched as his father approached his mother and took her in both arms. "My beloved, I will return to you as soon as circumstances allow. Ethan, I trust you to take care of your mother. We'll discuss the completion of your training when my duty is fulfilled." The elder hawk gave his son a nod before giving his mate the avian equivalent of a kiss. She reached after him as he turned away and left the dining room to begin preparations.

Alina approached Patrick who remained in the room. "See that my husband returns."

"I'll do my best." He turned to Ethan. "I only wish you were coming with us, Ethan."

"Stay safe," he said. Ethan did not wish either of them to come to harm but a small part of him was grateful he had not yet completed his knight's training. A life on the battlefield did not appeal to him nor did he feel the same call to duty that his parents did. Sensing his father's silent disappointment he was not going with them he turned away and left the dining hall to return to his own bedroom. He leaned against the wardrobe and closed his eyes until he felt a hand on his shoulder. Expecting his father or Patrick, he was surprised to see his mother before him. "Mother."

"You should say good bye to your father," she said.

"He doesn't want me to see him off," Ethan replied.

Alina shook her head. "As much as you may think it, he is not the enemy. He only wants what's best for you. In any event, you should bid him farewell as you may not get another chance."

"He would consider it sentimentality," Ethan said.

"I would consider it a favor." Alina walked back to the doorway. "Please."

Ethan did not move. He spent the next hour considering the possibility of packing up and leaving while his father was away. When he returned he would be furious, but he would not abandon his post to go looking for his wayward son. Both his parents would be angry with him and disappointed, but Ethan knew his future did not rest here. He pulled out his duffel bag and rested it on the bed but made no effort to pack it. As much as he considered the desire to leave he could not bring himself to complete the act.

When Ethan finally descended the stairs to the main level, his father had already left.

## **ONE MONTH LATER**

During his father's absence Ethan had done his best to keep up the sensation of normalcy. He continued his training though his performance had slipped. He was not certain if it was due to his father's status being in question or his absence removing his reason for doing it. Either way he attempted to keep his mother's spirits up. Every day she would go down to the barracks and ask for news of her husband. The soldiers at the

front sent regular updates insofar as casualties and wounded. So far Lucian Hargrove had not shown up on either list.

As Ethan woke up this morning to watch the sunbeams make their way across the floor he declined to wait until they indicated he was late to breakfast. He rose a few minutes early and selected a nice tunic to wrap around his torso. Avian clothing often required some unique designs to fit over their wings. He slipped it on and secured it in place, inspecting his appearance with a practiced eye. Once he was satisfied he proceeded downstairs to breakfast.

His mother was seated at her usual spot at the table, and he joined her without ceremony. He was certain she had gone to the barracks already to ask about Lucian. The messenger always traveled at night to minimize detection and arrived just before sunup. He watched her to see if there was any reaction but she merely moved the small bits of meat around her place.

“Mother?” he asked, breaking the silence at last.

“They won’t tell me anything down there,” she said.

“I don’t understand?”

“Normally they tell me that his name isn’t on the list. I’m certain the messenger had arrived, but they wouldn’t let me in this morning to speak to anyone.” Alina placed her fork down on the table.

Ethan felt a tight sensation in his stomach. He attempted to tell himself that it was nothing. He was just picking up on his mother’s obvious distress. “I’m certain they’re just busy down there. They are trying to win a war while at the same time make certain the city is protected.”

“Perhaps so, but I would think the wife of one of their more decorated soldiers would deserve an answer,” Alina said.

Before Ethan could say anything to comfort her, he looked up to see Patrick enter the dining hall in his armor. His friend’s talons clicked on the stone floor in a slow pattern during his approach. The crow had a sullen look on his face and when Ethan saw it he knew.

His father was dead.

He glanced to his mother but found himself speechless until the crow had entered the room and stood before her. “Lady Alina Hargrove, I regret to inform you that your husband has been killed in the field of battle. He died with honor. His dedicated service to the people of Tannaris will be remembered as his body is returned here for burial.”

Alina could not say anything for a long moment. She lapped at her drink before she returned her attention to the crow. “So this is why they would not tell me anything down at the barracks.”

“I thought you would prefer to receive the news from me.” Patrick placed Lucian’s sword upon the table.

“Please leave,” she said.

Patrick and Ethan looked at each other as he passed. He could only offer a nod as he left the dining hall. Alone with his mother, Ethan moved to sit beside her and take her hands. “Mother, is there anything I can do for you?” he asked.

“Hold me,” she said.

Ethan held her in his arms. He wrapped his wings around her while she wept into his tunic. He felt his own eyes moisten at the realization his father would never return

home again. As much as he had fought with him he had never desired his death. It was always his hope they might somehow find a way to understand each other but now that would never be possible. He held his mother, rocking her back and forth as she sobbed. Her body shivered in between waves of anguish. He was helpless to do anything other than hold her and share her pain. He knew whatever his parents were that they loved each other.

He was certain Lucian's last thoughts would have been of Alina. If he had any last words they would undoubtedly contain her name. Alina cried for what seemed like a half an hour before she was able to pull herself away from her son. She wiped the tears from her eyes and attempted to regain her composure. "I'll need to make the funeral arrangements."

"You don't have to do that now," Ethan said.

"Yes, I do. I need to do something. Sitting around here will just remind me your father isn't here. I have to do something to keep myself occupied or I fear I'll fall apart." She rose from her chair and touched his arms. "You should tell Lady Willow before she hears from anyone else."

Ethan held her arms. "Mother, I can't leave you like this."

"Yes, you can. I know that your destiny does not lie here. With your father's death there's no reason for you to stay. Speak to Lady Willow before you go. She at least deserves a proper good bye." She gave her son a hug and touched their beaks together on the side, as he stood there dumbfounded.

As Ethan considered what she had just said he realized she was right. Though he had entered knight training to please his father he hoped that he would find some way to tell him it was not what he desired before he completed it. With his father's passing there was no further reason for him to pursue this path he did not desire. After his body was returned and buried he would request his mother's permission to find his future.

Ethan climbed the stairs to the roof of Hargrove Manor and spread his wings for flight. Once he was airborne he sought the familiar rooftop that identified Lady Willow's family home. Pursuant to proper etiquette he set himself down outside of the gates and greeted the bird that stood guard there. "I've come to see Lady Willow."

He nodded and allowed him entry. Ethan had been here enough times that he did not need to wait for permission from the house to allow him inside. He walked up to the front where Lady Willow stood with a delicate flower dress. She gave him an avian smile as she extended her hand. He touched his beak to her flesh and held it in his own as they took a walk towards the garden.

Her creamy brown feathers looked smooth and well groomed in the light of the morning sun. He sat beside her still amazed at her ability to sit without disturbing either her tail feathers or her dress. Ethan lowered his beak.

"Ethan, why have you come? I know that we didn't have a breakfast date," she said. "Has something happened?" she asked.

"My father was killed." Ethan let it out without much hesitation. His father's death had affected him more than he had realized. He turned away from her and felt his body shiver when he spoke the words. "He died on the battlefield. We just got word today."

"I'm so sorry," she said. Lady Willow embraced him with both arms before she wrapped her wings around him much the way he had done for his mother. It was an

intimate gesture of support among avians. She touched his cheek and looked into his eyes with a supportive smile at the edge of her beak. “He was a bird of honor,” she said. “My father always spoke well of him.”

Ethan nodded his agreement. He had always respected Lucian Hargrove even if the two of them had never quite seen eye to eye. He nevertheless hoped he and the elder hawk would one day find an accord between them. The hawk wiped a tear from his eyes. “He had always hoped I would follow in his footsteps. I wanted to make him proud but I never wanted the life my father would have for me.”

Willow looked downwards at her hands. “I see,” she said.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Lady Willow.” Ethan held up a hand towards her.

“You didn’t,” she said. “Truth be told, I think I’ve always known. While you and I get along well and we would be more than a suitable social match, I think I was convincing myself there might be more between us than just an arranged betrothal or something like that. I’ve known for a while you don’t love me, Ethan. I know you care about me, but that’s not the same thing.”

Ethan swallowed and looked skyward. “I never meant to hurt you. I never thought any of the decisions my father made for me might actually make me happy, until you.”

“I know you mean well, but you are not the first person I’ve courted. I know you care about me and for a while we might be a suitable couple. In time, I suspect we would want different things. I’ve always known our relationship was only a temporary state of being, as much as I’d hoped it might be more than that.” Lady Willow touched his hand again.

“I’ll always remember you,” he said.

“As I will remember you,” she said. “Promise me one thing, Ethan.”

“Anything,” he said.

Lady Willow smiled at him. “If you do find your beloved out there, bring her home to meet your mother and I. I should think we would both enjoy knowing there was someone out there to make you happy.”

“I will,” he said.

“What do you plan to do now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. After my father’s body is buried, I think I’m going to leave,” Ethan said. “As much as I wish that I could find my future here, I feel like I need to see what’s out there.”

Lady Willow smiled. “There are some that say birds are meant to wander.”

“One last kiss before I go?” he asked. Lady Willow nodded, and they touched their beaks together.

\* \* \*

Lucian Hargrove’s funeral had been well attended. As his son he had been expected to appear in full armor along with Patrick, who seemed to have changed from his time on the front lines. Ethan declined to ask him about the details of his father’s death, knowing that such an inquiry would be as painful to his friend as it would be for him. Despite his insistence he did not wish to be a knight of Tannaris, he remained to complete his training in his father’s honor.

After a tour of duty in the capital, he found it did not agree with him. After turning in his resignation he booked passage on a ship that would take him across the ocean. His mother and Patrick had been there to see him off. He had thanked them both for all of their love and promised he would return one day. He remained on deck as the ship pulled out of port to watch his mother until he could no longer see her from the dock.

When the ship reached the open ocean he felt the gentle rocking of the waves. It was only a few hours until the ship would reach Akaeria. A nation not involved in the war between Tannaris and Etasca, he hoped to begin his search for his future there. The fighting had died down significantly now that a new sort of craft had been perfected to ferry cargo between Tannaris and Etasca.

Ethan supposed that with Tannaris being the victor in that conflict it would shift the balance of power in the area. He did not know what it would mean for the region in general. Perhaps in Akaeria he could at least find a fresh start. He had his armor and sword, several sets of clothes, and enough money that he would be fine for the short term. He had declined at first but his mother had insisted if he would take nothing else of his family's wealth he would at least take enough that he could get started wherever he landed. She had declared she would not let him leave unless he accepted this condition on her behalf.

He had declined to request a cabin since it would only be a short journey. Instead he remained in the galley with his belongings while the craft made its way towards the large mainland nation of Akaeria. He had never been there before but he knew that the inhabitants were generally peaceful. They were known to house many large cities that dealt with trade in all manner of goods. Most prominent was Sadriel, one of the largest cities in the entire region. Some of the most powerful and influential businesses operated out of there.

The ship would be docking at a small coastal town somewhere to its south where Ethan hoped he would be able to find some place to spend the night. It was much to his surprise he learned there were only two inns in town and they were booked solid. Frustrated, Ethan set out to walk to the next town hoping his fortunes would be better there.

The road was unremarkable with little more than trees and the occasional rock decorating the side of the route between this town and the next. He could see deep tracks indicating carts passed in both directions on a regular basis. Ethan followed the road for a good long while until he noticed one up ahead that appeared to be stuck in the mud. He raised an eyebrow when a couple of men came out of the woods led by a wolf to approach the cart.

The driver was a well-dressed Gypsy vanner horse in a vest and long sleeved shirt. He turned at the sight of his visitors. "Gentlemen," he said.

"Need a hand there?" he asked. "You look like you need some help." The black wolf tilted his head at the sight of the wheel. "Nasty business, that. Getting caught in the mud isn't good. We could help you, for a small consideration."

The white and black horse hesitated. "What kind of consideration?" he asked.

"Half your stock." He motioned towards the cart.

"No," the horse said.

“It’s either that, or we take all of your stock and leave you here to bleed. This road is dangerous for a fine stallion like you. Things have been known to happen. Carts go missing all the time.” The black wolf smirked as he watched Rhodes.

The horse kept his eye on the group of men but they outnumbered him six to one. He would have no chance even if he did happen to be armed. Ethan knew they had not yet noticed him. He was upwind and the men were too focused on the stallion to notice his presence. He set his bag down and gripped his sword. He did not know this stallion nor did he owe him any allegiance. Yet he could not allow these men to take advantage of his situation, one they themselves might have caused. He watched the men as they continued to menace the stallion.

“How about you boys just give me a hand and accept my gratitude as your payment?” The stallion held up a hand.

“You try to work out an arrangement with someone and they just don’t seem to know how to do business.” He gestured for his men to approach. The Gypsy vanner horse tensed.

Ethan knew he had to act. He screeched loud enough that all six of the men clutched their ears. He ran until he was able to take off and flew closer closing the distance between them in record time. The first thief, a lion, did not even know what impaled him as Ethan dropped him to the ground and pressed his foot against his body to free his sword. He held the blade up against the black wolf as the rest of his men began to spread out.

“Do you have a weapon?” he asked the horse.

“What?” the horse asked.

“Do you have a weapon?” he repeated.

The Gypsy vanner horse touched his vest. “I’ve got a hunting knife!” He ran to the back of the cart and climbed inside.

Ethan kicked a weasel in the chest before he slammed the hilt of his sword into a rabbit’s face. “Any time now,” he said.

The horse leapt back out his hooves making deep impressions in the mud. He held the blade up as he cut the weasel on the arm. The two of them stood back to back surrounded by the five men. “Got a plan?” he asked.

“I was just hoping they’d give up after I killed one of them,” Ethan said.

“They haven’t,” the horse said.

“I see that.” Ethan swung his sword in a wide arc before he thrust it into the weasel’s chest. He stumbled forward and clutched his bleeding wound in an attempt to stop the flow. Without aid, he would soon die.

The Gypsy vanner horse brandished the knife at the rabbit as he kept an eye on the four remaining men. He faked forward and then shifted direction to jam the knife into the rabbit’s chest. The lapine’s eyes widened as the blade cut through his body and sent him down to the ground with the others.

Ethan pointed his sword at the black wolf. “You should have taken his first offer,” he said.

The black wolf growled. “This isn’t over.” He and the others began to retreat, with the wounded men forcing themselves to rise and try to follow after their companions.

Ethan lowered his sword. He turned to face the Gypsy vanner horse. "Are you all right?"

"I am, thanks to you." He dusted off his clothes. "You have good timing," he said.

"Truthfully it was just because the last town didn't have any room at the inns." He gestured back at the direction from which he'd come.

"Well, thanks anyway. I was headed north before I go west on my regular trade route when I got delayed until after the storm and got stuck here." Rhodes pointed to his cart whose wheel was partway sunken into the mud.

"I'd be glad to help you get it out," Ethan said.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Ethan gave him a chirp. "I just helped you fight off a couple of thieves and you think I won't help you get your cart out?" he asked.

"I just didn't want to impose. You look important." He gestured at the armor.

"This?" he shrugged. "It's just armor." Ethan walked to the back of the cart where his equine companion joined him and both of them lifted and pushed to free the cart. When the disgusting sound of the suction breaking could be heard both of them fell backwards into the mud. "Shit!"

"Well, at least the cart is free," the horse said.

Ethan got up first and extended a hand. "My name is Ethan Hargrove."

"Rhodes." He took it as the bird hauled him to his feet.

"Lawson Trading Company?" Ethan asked, indicating the words on the side of his cart.

"Yeah, I work for my father, though he and I don't always see eye to eye. He wants me to take over the family business, though I'm not sure if I'm too keen on the way he does business. I'm thinking about starting out on my own, but first I'd need to buy my own cart." He met Ethan's glance. "You don't know anything about trading, do you?"

"Not really, but I'm good with a sword and I've got a few talents up my sleeve." Ethan shrugged.

"How would you like a job? Better yet, I could use a partner." Rhodes offered a hand to his savior.

"You've got yourself a deal," Ethan said.