

The ceremony had been called sooner than expected after several newcomers had found their way to the village, following the distant glow of the Fire through the woods. Most of the Family had gathered around the main grounds to welcome them, with the elders preparing the great altar and beginning the long chants that would carry through most of the evening. YBSC had been pulled into the gathering as well, helping direct the newcomers toward the others and answering what few questions he could while the ceremony was being prepared. Before he left, he had glanced toward Vaelis and gave him a small nod, silently letting him know he'd see him later.

Vaelis had remained behind with Elder Caldera. Neither of them needed to attend the entire welcoming ceremony. As bearded vultures, there were certain parts of the evening that were left to the others while they remained within the quieter parts of the grounds. Vaelis had taken advantage of the silence by sitting cross-legged on the floor of the elder's tent, a sheet of rough paper balanced across his knees as he carefully practiced his handwriting. His tongue poked slightly from the corner of his mouth while he concentrated, copying the same line of scripture over and over until the letters finally began to look even.

Caldera sat nearby, sorting through several things she'd prepared earlier in the day. She rarely spoke while Vaelis worked unless she had something worth correcting, and the quiet between them had never really bothered either of them. It was simply how things were. After a while, she reached for a covered plate resting beside her and placed it on the floor near Vaelis, uncovering a collection of clean, pale bones that had been carefully broken into smaller pieces.

Vaelis looked away from his writing almost immediately.

V- "...for me?"

Caldera gave a small nod, her expression remaining as composed as it always was. "You have been working more than usual." Her voice was quiet and matter-of-fact as she pushed the plate slightly closer to him. "You need to maintain your strength."

Vaelis looked down at the offering with a small smile. There was no hesitation in him as he reached for one of the pieces, turning it between his fingers before beginning to eat. He'd been given bones like these for as long as he could remember, usually after long days of prayer or communal work. Caldera never explained where they came from, and Vaelis had never thought to ask.

They were simply bones. Clean. Pale. *Perfect*.

Caldera watched him with the same quiet attention she gave everything that was considered important to the Fire. Her hand reached over after a moment, brushing a stray feather back into place near Vaelis's temple before returning to her lap. The gesture was almost gentle, though there was something strangely practiced about it, like she was checking that a precious instrument remained undamaged.

"You are growing stronger."

V- "I'm trying."

"I know."

For a moment, her expression softened in a way that could almost be mistaken for a mother's pride. Vaelis returned to his paper with the faintest smile, carefully dipping his quill again before continuing his writing. Caldera remained beside him, watching the movements of his hand while the distant chanting from the main grounds drifted through the walls of the tent.

"Finish those before you continue."

V- "...yes, Elder Caldera."

There was something almost peaceful about the scene. A mother near her child and a plate of food between them. A quiet evening spent together while the rest of the Family gathered outside. Except the bones on the plate had never been called animal bones.

But Vaelis had never questioned it, where they came from.

Why would he?