

Sinking down onto the stone bench, Phoebe finally allows the strap of her chorus' case to slide off her aching shoulder. She leans down to tug her bootlaces slightly loose — just enough to give her swollen feet some room — then props her elbows on her thighs and does her best to breathe deeply.

She's fled far enough from the heavily-trafficked high streets she's grown faintly familiar with over the past month that she's not quite sure where in Uryn she is. But admittedly, what matters to her most at the moment isn't *where* this garden is within the city. What's more important is that she's the only soul she's seen in it.

*That* fact alone surprises her. On such a sweltering, late summer afternoon like this one, Phoebe would guess that any garden as gorgeous as the one she's unexpectedly found herself in *should* be filled with people seeking to escape the heat while still enjoying the sun. There should be people wandering the tree-shaded pathways, or admiring the beds of carefully cultivated flora — or even sitting out on this rose-trellis-enclosed balcony and taking in the view of the harbor, like she is right now.

And yet, she's the most alone she's been since arriving in this wretched city.

Phoebe's breath shakes as she tries to inhale. She claps one hand over her mouth on instinct, but her exhale squeezes out as a thin, pathetic wail. Doubling over and burying her face in her legs as her vision blurs, she hugs her knees tightly as she finally lets out the sobs that had been welling up in her throat throughout her flight.

But then another, sharper intake of breath comes from behind her.

Briefly startled out of tears, Phoebe bolts upright.

Standing in the archway in the rose trellis she'd stumbled through just minutes before is a young tiefling man with blue-grey skin. His horns fade in color as they curve back from his forehead, blanching to bone-white at the tips, and his chin-length black hair is swept back from his face, showcasing high cheekbones and an angular jaw further accentuated by the stubbly beginnings of a beard. Though he doesn't look much

older than herself, he's *handsome*, Phoebe catches herself thinking with a flush — and then cringes, all too aware that the added color is likely not doing her blotchy cheeks and red, watery eyes any favors at the moment.

To make matters even *more* mortifying, the tiefling *is* staring at her, his face painted with a softly stricken expression Phoebe struggles to define. She doesn't *think* it's one of annoyance or outrage, thankfully, but neither does it seem to be one of surprise or confusion. But whatever emotion he may be feeling, it has him at an utter loss for words.

Phoebe's not entirely sure what to say either. But she *is* fairly certain that she shouldn't wait for him to speak first.

"I — I think I should go," she hears herself blurt out. Seizing the case off the bench, she scrambles onto her screaming feet.

"Wait!"

Phoebe freezes mid-flight.

The tiefling flinches, as if calling out to her had been just as much of a surprise to him. "Don't — don't go," he manages. "I —" He almost steps forward, then stops himself.

With how tightly she's clutching her chorus' case to her chest, Phoebe swears she can almost feel her pounding heart punching straight through the leather.

The tiefling takes a deep breath, shoulders squaring as he adjusts his posture into something slightly more composed. "I'm sorry for startling you," he says. The timbre of his voice is rich, but balanced, enhancing the even tone of his statement. "I just... wasn't expecting to find anyone besides myself here."

"R-really?" Phoebe stammers. "That's surprising; it —" Catching the swinging case strap out of the corner of her eye, she grabs it and slings it over her shoulder as she gathers her words. "It seems like a view people would appreciate."

“I do appreciate it,” the tiefling agrees. “Quite frequently.” For some reason, he looks like he’s trying very hard not to smile. “In fact, it’s why I installed a bench out here when I restored the grounds.”

Phoebe blinks. *Why he... what?*

For the first time since she’d looked back, Phoebe lets her gaze drift up over the rose trellis walling off the balcony from the rest of the garden. Rising high over the trees is a stately manor house, with lattices of vines climbing up all three brick storeys and tall windows whose glass panes sparkle with faint iridescence.

The realization snatches what little breath Phoebe has left out of her lungs. “This... is *yours*?” she squeaks.

The tiefling allows himself his smile, but a more contrite one. “Indeed it is.”

Phoebe’s slowly heating cheeks instantly catch flame. While the mystery of why she hadn’t seen anyone else out and about in the garden has been definitively solved, that revelation does *not* bode well for her being here now. *As if I haven’t made enough of a mess out of this day already...*

“I am so, so sorry,” she blurts out. “I *truly* thought this was a public garden or — or a park or *something*. I — I just — I saw the gate, off a side street, and I —” Phoebe gestures helplessly, then quickly brings up one arm before the case strap can slide off her shoulder, taking the now-loosely-hanging case with it. “Well, it was more of a *gap* than a *gate*? There probably *had* been a proper gate there once, but — well, there was just an empty arch in the wall, and — and I saw the garden beyond it and — and —” Suddenly aware that she’s rambling, she quickly closes her mouth rather than embarrass herself further.

The tiefling’s eyebrows have been rising higher and higher throughout her lame explanation, but he still seems more gently amused than anything else. “Noted,” he says. “Clearly, I overestimated how long that spell would hold.”

Phoebe gapes at him. Here *she* is, ready to sink into the paving-stones out of shame, and meanwhile, *he* is — “Are you always this... *nonchalant* about people trespassing on your property?”

Unexpectedly, the tiefling laughs. “Not generally, no.” He finally moves out from under the archway, but not towards her. Instead, he crosses to the balcony’s edge, propping his elbows on the stone railing. “But it seems to me you already have enough troubles weighing you down without me laying one more on your shoulders.”

Phoebe swallows a sudden lump in her throat. As odd as this handsome stranger is in his actions and attitudes — *who relies on magic alone to bar a path when he could just install an actual gate there?* — his unexpected understanding is more than she’s been granted all day.

Adjusting the strap of her chorus’ case on her shoulder, she inches up to the railing, but not quite to the tiefling’s side. Far below the balcony, down past the terraced cascade of rooftops leading down to the sprawling harbor, the darkly glimmering waters of the Velvet Sea stretch towards the horizon. If she squints, Phoebe thinks she can make out flashes of the bright sails of ships far out at sea: too far to tell if they’re coming or going.

It’s been a month since she came to Uryn on a ship like one of those. And a month later, she’s all too ready to let one carry her away.

“If it’s not too personal to ask...” The tiefling shifts his gaze over to her; his eyes are a deep blue, almost indigo. “What *is* troubling you?”

A weak laugh bubbles out of Phoebe’s throat. “What’s troubling me enough that it led me to break into a stranger’s garden and bawl my eyes out, you mean?”

“Well, if you put it like *that...*” the tiefling concedes, laughing a little himself. “But considering we’re having a conversation, I hardly think we can still call ourselves strangers.” He turns fully towards her, one elbow still braced against the railing he’s leaning on. “I’m Samson.”

Phoebe hesitates. While she wants to be polite and introduce herself as well, she feels like she *should* be more wary of his overture towards familiarity. Uryn is a far cry from Beszar; even if she *had* grown up here, it would have been impossible to be on first-name terms with everyone in a city of this scale, let alone trust them.

*But... he did offer his name first, she thinks. Would he still have told me who he was if he meant to — I don't know, call the authorities on me for trespassing? Of course, he could be lying, but —*

“Feel no obligation to answer,” Samson adds lightly, as if he could hear her desperate dithering. “I *do* appreciate a well-cultivated air of mystery myself.”

“Oh — um — I’m... really not *that* mysterious. Or at *all*.” Phoebe awkwardly laughs, feeling her cheeks reheat. “I’m just... not from around here.”

“That makes two of us,” Samson remarks. “Where are you from? If you don’t mind me asking,” he adds.

*This deliberation takes less time. I mean, he’s not asking me what my current address is, so — “The Marya Valley?” Phoebe offers. “You probably wouldn’t have heard of it; it tends not to be all *that* well-marked on maps —”*

Samson cocks his head. “That’s up near Kessistrad, isn’t it?”

Surprised, Phoebe nods.

“I’m from Pommes, so: not too far off.” Samson shrugs and gives her a slightly self-effacing smile. “I can’t say I’m terribly familiar with that particular area, but I do know *of* it.”

Despite her lingering reservations, Phoebe feels herself relax a little. “Guess we’re both pretty far from home.”

Samson’s smile softens. “Guess we are.” He straightens up, but still rests his forearm on the railing. “What brought you all the way to Uryn?”

“Um —” Phoebe feels that stubborn lump in her throat claw its way back up again. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

Samson’s forehead furrows. “Why would I?”

*Because everyone else here has.* Phoebe inhales, her hands nervously wringing the strap of her chorus’ case. *But... he is also very different from everyone else here.*

“I — I came here to enter one of the academies?” she says tentatively. “To train. As a bard.”

Mercifully, Samson makes good on his promise. “What do you play?” he asks instead, tilting his head to the other side to get a better look at the instrument case on her back.

“You... probably wouldn’t have heard of it. I’m not saying that to be a snob or anything,” Phoebe quickly amends, flushing again. “It — it’s genuinely unique, as far as I know.”

Samson shrugs. “Try me.”

“Um —” Phoebe bounces on the balls of her feet with a sheepish laugh. “So... when I was first taught music, I learned on the lute. But I’d always really admired the fiddle players we had at fairs and such, so I picked up that instrument, too. And I got pretty good at both of them, so... when my village’s council told me that they could send me to Uryn for formal schooling, I —” She exhales. “I didn’t know which one I should take with me.

“But my grandfather — he’s a pretty good woodworker, and it was his wife — my grandmother — who was my music teacher, so he made me... something that’s a little bit of both.” Phoebe nods over her shoulder towards the instrument case. “Again, I don’t know if it exists somewhere else under another name, but *I* call it a chorus.” She pauses, unsure if she’s talked too long already, but decides it would probably be all right if she offered *one* sentence’s worth of explanation. “Because it has two voices: the strumming of a lute *and* the bowing of a fiddle.”

Incredibly, Samson still isn't laughing: just considering her words thoughtfully. "You're right," he says after a moment. "I *haven't* heard of anything like it."

Phoebe inhales shakily. "And... that's part of the problem," she says. "Every single academy I've interviewed with or auditioned for so far has treated me like — like a *curiosity* instead of a serious applicant. If it isn't the instrument, it's — it's how I dress, or how I comport myself, or — or just who I *am*." Try as she might, the more she speaks, the more she recalls all of the petty slights of the past month: just as pointed now as they had been then. "Not rich. Not bearing a noteworthy family name. And not from any place worthy of inclusion on anyone's map. Just a —" her eyes start to sting again as that afternoon's insult wells to the surface, full of fresh venom "— 'a provincial little slattern with just enough talent and few enough wits to put her stock in a fake instrument and foolish dreams.'"

Ducking her head to hide her resurging tears, Phoebe feels shame burn across her face hotter than ever. *I just wanted somewhere to lick my wounds alone*, she thinks miserably. *But here I am, spilling my guts to a near-stranger who has every right to kick me out of his garden instead of —*

A fine-boned blue-grey hand extends a handkerchief before her eyes.

"Thank —" Phoebe takes it before she even registers that Samson's given it to her. "Thank you," she tries again. "And again, I'm *really* sorry for —" Phoebe sniffs, pressing the handkerchief to her already-running nose as she cautiously looks up "— all *this*; it's just been a — a *really* disheartening few weeks, but today was —"

"*You're* not the one who needs to apologize." For how light his mien has been throughout their conversation, Samson's face is surprisingly dark now. "The academies here can be... *Dismissive* of those who don't meet the standards they tend *not* to outline on formal applications."

*How would you know?* Phoebe almost cries out. *You have that house and this garden; you clearly have enough money to get into any academy you please!*

Still, she holds her tongue in time, and for more reason than gratitude for his graciousness. For all the many different kinds of people she's seen walking the streets of Uryn, Samson's one of only a handful of tieflings — *and the only one in this old, aristocratic quarter of the city. However he came by his money... there must be those still bearing an unfounded grudge from the Incursion who resent that he has it.*

Samson sighs, his hard expression softening into something more sympathetic. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “You deserve more respect than what they denied you.”

“Do I?” Phoebe asks despairingly. “I mean, I appreciate you saying so, but... all sorts of talented people must attend these academies. Even if I *did* have money or connections, I could just...” She shrugs helplessly. “Not even measure *up* to the level of musicianship they expect.”

Samson’s eyebrows arch. “Did anyone even give you a chance to play?”

Phoebe bites her lip. Most of the interviewers who’d deigned to make appointments with her had unceremoniously shown her the door before she’d even gotten a chance to unbuckle her case. And while a few *had* allowed her to play, all but one — the one this afternoon — had cut her short as soon as she’d dared to switch musical modes.

*And that interviewer, she thinks, swallowing hard, made it very clear in his assessment what he thought of my playing... and me as a person.*

Samson seems to take her silence as enough of an answer. “Then who are *they*,” he says, “to tell you you’re not worthy of admission?”

“And who are you to tell me *I am?*” Phoebe protests. “You’ve never heard me play, either!”

Samson stills, and Phoebe instantly regrets her outburst. *Again: this man has no reason to be as kind to you as he has been*, she chastises herself, clenching his handkerchief in her shaking hands. *And yet, here he is, trying to comfort you anyway.*

*And how have you repaid that kindness?*

“Could you play something for me, then?”

Phoebe’s jaw goes slack. “W-what?”

“Play something for me,” Samson repeats: simple and straightforward. He hesitates, his cheeks deepening into a darker blue. “... Please.”

Phoebe just stares at him, more at a loss of what to do or say than ever. But any unfounded suspicions she holds about him wanting to make her eat her words are erased when she meets his eyes, and sees them settling back into that strange, stricken look they’d first held upon seeing her for the first time.

She still can’t place exactly *what* that emotion is. But it’s an achingly honest one.

Phoebe inhales. “Um... all right.”

Samson’s eyes light up, instantly erasing that nameless emotion.

Quickly pivoting on her heel as she feels the fire under her face flare to life once again, Phoebe retreats to the balcony bench. She slings her chorus’ case off her back and lays it on the bench, then undoes the clasps. She realizes then that she’s still holding Samson’s handkerchief, so after she opens the lid, she quickly folds it and lays it inside before turning to her chorus. Even though she knows the interior straps and cushioning would’ve kept it safe and secure during her tearful run through the streets, relief still floods through Phoebe when she sees that the instrument is undamaged.

While she takes out her chorus and readies it for play — although since she knows she’d just played it an hour ago, her preparations are less rigorous than usual — Phoebe catches Samson out of the corner of her eye as he sits down on the opposite end of the bench. For all the cautious distance she’s kept from him, she muses as she slides her bow out of the back compartment to check that it’s still adequately rosined, Samson seems to be just as concerned with keeping a careful berth as well. Phoebe isn’t quite sure if he’s acting as such out of some gentlemanly sense of chivalry, or just basic sensitivity to her skittishness, but she’s once again grateful for his consideration.

*It's a shame I had to meet him so near the end of my time here, she thinks regretfully, slinging her chorus' strap over her shoulder. I could have used a friendly face so much earlier.*

“What should I play?” she asks aloud.

Samson settles back on the bench, lion's tail curling around his feet, and thinks. “Something,” he finally decides, “fitting for a sunset.”

Seeing his gaze shift over her shoulder, Phoebe turns around. The sun had been burning high and hot over the city all day, but now, it's finally slipping towards the Velvet Sea, its golden rays bleeding into vibrant reds and brilliant oranges as they pierce the harbor's dark waters. Even as high up as the balcony is, a cool breeze sweeps off the sea and swoops up to ruffle Phoebe's hair, heralding the arrival of evening — and of autumn soon to come.

Still, Phoebe always clung to summer for as long as she could.

A smile slowly spreading across her face, she loosens the strap over her shoulder, then tucks her chorus under her chin and slides the bow out from the chorus' lower body, whisper-smooth. Between the dying summer sun beyond the balcony and the blooming roses behind the seated Samson, she knows now what to play.

Phoebe inhales, her breath steady once again. Then she draws her bow across the strings and begins her [rose medley](#).

For the first time in a month, she feels none of the nervousness or timidity that'd plagued her in front of all those stern, staid interviewers. Here, she hits the notes as surely as if she were back home playing for the rapt crowds at the Valley's summer fair, and the melody of the fantasia flows from her strings sweet and true. Even her transition between bowing and strumming is seamless, her bow sliding back in without a hitch and the strap faithfully catching the chorus as it drops off her shoulder and into her waiting arms.

*Maybe, she thinks wistfully as she opens her mouth to begin the sung portion of the piece, this is what it feels like to be a true bard.*

*Tis the last rose of summer,  
Left blooming alone;  
All her lovely companions  
Are faded and gone.*

Now that she's no longer focused so intently on both bow *and* strings so close to her face, Phoebe's almost tempted to sneak a look at Samson and gauge his reaction. But even amid her ecstasy, a lingering glimmer of fear admonishes her to stay *focused*.

And so she does, letting her voice effortlessly sail her high and low through the verses: all the way to the finishing flourishes.

*When true hearts lie withered,  
And fond ones are flown,  
Oh! who would inhabit  
This bleak world alone?*

Letting the last note come to its natural conclusion, Phoebe finally allows herself to look at Samson.

Samson has been sitting in contemplative stillness on the bench, hands loosely clasped in his lap and eyes softly closed. But as she finishes, his eyes open again, and they shine with sheer rapture in the light of the dying sun.

The heat finally drains from Phoebe's face and spills, warm and glowing and golden, throughout her chest.

“Bravo.” Eyes still alight with his smile, Samson stands and claps. “Thank you for —” He stumbles over his words slightly as his cheeks darken again. “Thank you. Truly.”

Phoebe grins back at him to hide her own brief breathlessness. “Well,” she manages, “thank *you* for being such a kind audience.”

“Any time.” Samson tilts his head to one side as he gazes at her, his smile undimmed. “In fact... might I request an encore?”

Phoebe's about to agree wholeheartedly, but then she spots the new shadows slowly seeping from underneath the legs of the bench and Samson's feet. Glancing over her shoulder, she's startled to see the sun is already sinking beneath the waves, the bright sunset giving way to blue twilight.

Given how desperately she'd longed for this day to just be *over* only an hour ago, Phoebe is even more surprised to feel her own heart sinking, too.

"I'd like to, but I — I should be getting along," she says regretfully. Returning to the bench, she starts to pack up her chorus: not so fast as to make him erroneously believe she's escaping, but fast enough to convey efficiency. "Not a good look to be late to my own performance."

"Another audition?" Samson remains standing, but still at a respectful distance.

"No, my last one was today; I just have an arrangement with the publican of the tavern I'm staying at —" As soon as Phoebe snaps the case's clasps shut, she realizes what else is still inside the case. "Do you... want your handkerchief back?" she asks tentatively.

"Ah, I have others. You seem to need at least one." Samson's smile fades slightly. "Especially if... you're going to be departing Uryn soon?"

Phoebe gnaws unhappily on her lower lip. "... I don't really know *what* I'm going to do," she admits. "It seems like lunacy to stay and — and keep doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, but —" She huffs, slinging her chorus' case over her shoulder. "I don't want to just *go*. I mean, I'm *here!* I don't want to give up *now*, but..." That old lump is rising in her throat again, and Phoebe just barely swallows it down. "I don't know. I just... don't know *what* to think or do or... *anything*."

Loosely crossing his arms, Samson regards her for a moment. "I don't think," he says finally, "you need those academies to teach you a damn thing." He pauses, the quietly earnest expression in his eyes deepening like the dusk around them. "But I also don't think the sunsets over this city will be *quite* as stunning without you welcoming them in."

Staring speechless at him once again, Phoebe's suddenly intensely grateful to that very dusk for hiding the crimson inferno consuming her cheeks — and probably her neck and chest, too, if the sudden blaze of heat under her skin despite the evening breeze is any indication. Common courtesy is one thing, friendship is another, but *this*? How does she even *respond* to someone who — who makes *those* sorts of overtures to a person they've known for all of an hour?

*Especially if that person is me?*

“I — I mean, who knows?” she stammers. “I... I haven’t decided anything *yet*. I might —” Phoebe musters a smile, if a bit bashfully. “I... *might* still see a few more before I go.”

Samson returns her smile without hesitation. “Well, I won’t keep you any longer,” he says, stepping back and sitting down on the bench again, “but... you already know where to go to get the best view of the sunset.”

Her blush losing none of its fervor, Phoebe manages a polite nod before hastening towards the archway in the rose trellis. But she only gets a few steps away when the full import of his sentence stops her in her tracks.

Phoebe slowly pivots back around. “Is this... you inviting me to trespass *again*?” she asks incredulously.

*That* gets a laugh out of Samson. “Arguably, it’s not trespassing if I *invite* you.”

“You know what I meant!” Phoebe protests, trying and failing to not flush further at his too-light tone. “I just —”

“I know,” Samson says, still laughing a little. “I’m sorry; I shouldn’t tease you like that.” He leans back on the bench, that easy smile still on his face. “There’s a hollow brick in the masonry on the right side of that gap in the wall you came through: about three bricks over, six bricks up. Whenever I put in an *actual* gate, I’ll leave a key in an envelope there for you.”

Despite her continued astonishment at Samson's ready affections, Phoebe feels her heart flutter against her ribs all the same. *Someone in Uryn who — who actually wants to see me again*, she thinks, a little dizzied. *Who would've thought?*

“You...” Phoebe inhales, that golden glow rising phoenix-like in her chest. “You can address that to ‘Phoebe,’ then.”

Samson's smile brightens, transforming his already-handsome face into something utterly beautiful to behold. And yet, that strange, stricken — and *sad*, Phoebe realizes with a pang — expression still haunts his gaze.

“*Phoebe.*” Samson says her name as if he's testing the shape of it on his tongue, with a quiet, almost reverent care. “I'll be sure to.”