

# When Friends Collide

A novella, set after Eriadren's story in *The Undying Champions*

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# 1

## Mycella, Gaelen

*Mycella*

I'd lost my son again.

This situation wasn't that unusual, as Gaelen was highly independent and much more self-sufficient than any four-year-old had a right to be. Long ago, I'd learned to give him space, but today, his disappearing act might be a problem.

Today, we were among the humans.

As I raced through their castle with a mop resting on my shoulder, I found myself muttering under my breath—

"Come on, come on. Where are you, Gaelen?"

—and sealed my lips shut. Speaking was an infraction that the humans would find unacceptable. It was bad enough that I was delaying with today's assigned task. If they stumbled across me and I was doing something *more*, the consequences could range from nothing to... bad.

So, I was quiet while searching empty rooms, always listening for the sound of my son's distinctive voice.

I heard it quickly enough, to my relief. Maybe I *could* finish the momentous task of mopping the castle's floors in time to get the evening with my son tonight. Considering it was the only day every month when Gaelen got to leave creche, I'd like that.

I eagerly followed the sound of his voice, even if I couldn't make any sense of what he was saying.

"I *know*, Creation."

There was a pause, as if he was listening to someone.

"Maybe I could get more practice if you *left me alone*."

Another pause.

"Alouin above. Fine!"

Why did he sound so much older than his short four years?

A crash filled the hall, coming from one of the rooms ahead, and dropping my mop, I sprinted for it. I careened through a doorway, only to see Gaelen struggling to sit up from where he'd collapsed beside a wall, and a shout sprang unbidden from my lips.

"Gaelen!"

Then, I was rushing across the room and kneeling beside him, hovering my hands over his body.

"Honey! Are you ok?"

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*Gaelen*

"-you ok?" came swirling to me through a haze of pain.

*No, mamma, my leg!* was what I wanted to say in response.

Instead, I bit my tongue to contain those words, letting salty liquid light my mouth like a fire on the darkest of nights. Telling my mother that I'd again broken a bone would be a *bad idea*, especially when any minute now, Restoration would roll over my body and-

As if summoned, muted light flared for three breaths, and as it faded, it took my pain with it. I grabbed my mother's reaching hands, hoping beyond hope that she hadn't seen what had happened.

"I'm ok. Nothing hurts," I said.

Fortunately, she was turned my way with none of the alarm or wonder on her face that I'd expect from someone who'd seen a miracle. Gathering me to her, she breathed into my hair.

"Thank, Alouin."

Then, she thrust me away.

"What were you thinking?" she said. "By now, you should know to stay near me while we're in this place!"

Ah, yes. 'This place'. Once the hub for a vast empire, it hosted a squabbling band of humans now, one of the many 'tribes' that had become prevalent in recent years.

I couldn't let my thoughts about this situation show right now, though.

With a rueful grin, I said, "I'm sorry, momma. I wanted to explore."

Which was somewhat true. I was still looking for somewhere to practice new techniques, even this many years into a new life.

Clicking her tongue, my mother hugged me again before getting to her feet.

“That’s all right, honey. I know how curious you can be,” she said. “Try to stick with me for the rest of the day, though, ok? I’d like to get home in time for dinner tonight.”

I’d like that too, so it was with little protest that I smiled and made my promise.

Mama helped me up, and after taking my hand, she tugged me back to where I’d left her, not an hour before. As we moved along, I trotted beside her, keeping up as best I could, but my mother was in a hurry, and my legs were short. Before long, I tripped, landing on my knees, and despite my best intentions, I couldn’t stay here.

From somewhere in my head, I could feel my lip trembling, tracing a teardrop as it fell across my cheek, but all I could focus on was how unfair all of this was. I missed my old body, the one with legs I’d grown accustomed to and a voice that wouldn’t make me blush every time I used it. In this new one, I forgot myself all the time, switching to the cadence of step that I’d spent decades walking, and this mistake inevitably landed me flat on my face.

The older boys in creche *loved* it when I did that, teasing me mercilessly, and so help me, if they put my shoes somewhere I couldn’t reach again, I’d show them what I’d learned in the war...

The war. With so much blood and death and SCREAMING—

The next thing I knew, my mother was lowering me to the tile floor, and I blinked. When had we gotten here? Had I-?

I’d blanked again, hadn’t I? Hell.

With a sigh, I resisted the urge to scrub my face, padding to retrieve a bucket and mop instead. As I joined my mother in scrubbing the floors, she didn’t comment on another of my terrifying lapses in consciousness, times when *I knew* she couldn’t get a response from me. Alouin, what must that do to her?

As the day progressed, we continued to clean the palace, and by the time we emerged from it, the sun hung heavy in the sky. Still, it hadn’t set, something I was quite proud of, and as we headed home, I could put the day’s unpleasantness behind me, allowing a skip to infect my step.

A home-cooked meal awaited me at home, a distinct improvement over the food creche provided, and tonight, I’d get to sleep in a room, all by myself.

When my mother cleared her throat, though, I snapped my attention back to her.

“Earlier, when you were by yourself,” she slowly said, “who were you talking to, Gaelen?”

For a moment, I didn’t understand the question, but then, a silhouette of solid, white light winked into existence beside her. Had my mother heard me griping at Creation when I’d been alone? That was unfortunate. Possibly disastrous.

Even still, I was halfway tempted to tell her everything.

That her little boy was actually a man named Eriadren, inhabiting what had once been a true son's body. That sometime in the future, I'd vanish from her life, on a mission to hunt down my only friend. That I possessed a power the likes of which the world had never seen. That said power was monitored by the Ele splinter, hovering at her side.

But Creations shook its head, so of course, when I opened my mouth to speak the truth, a lie spewed forth instead.

"My imaginary friend, mamma."

Snorting, my mother raised an eyebrow at me.

"You have an imaginary friend?" she said. "Why haven't I heard about that yet? Someone at creche should have mentioned it to me by now."

Ha. That was unlikely. I'd be *astonished* if my keepers found anything more to complain about me than my abnormally antisocial behavior.

In the time since I'd been moved to that horrid place, I'd tried my best to act like a four-year-old should, difficult as that might seem. For the most part, I'd kept to myself, only helped along by my complete lack of desire to make friends.

Why would I do that when at some point, I'd have to abandon them? One of these days, Daevetch would find a body for my real friend, Arivor, and after that, no one here would see me again.

Given how often creche pushed children into social situations, though, what else was I to do but act petty and sullen with my 'peers'?

That was another thing I sorely missed from my time as Eriadren: solitude. I craved a single time or place where I could be alone and left to my own devices. In creche, an adult was always lurking nearby, silently watching, and I hated it. Back home, Lirilith had always known when to leave me—

The clatter of clay against wood shocked me back this time, and dizzy, I tried to puzzle through why a bowl of stew was steaming into my face. When my mother offered me a spoon, I cautiously accepted it.

"Thank—" I started.

But my mother overrode me.

"Is... *that* still going on, honey?" she asked. "Are you blanking at creche?"

For some reason, the questions made me want to slap her.

*Of course* my mind was shutting down sometimes. I might have been here for four years, but I'd spent decades somewhere... worse. When my past came calling, I couldn't push it away, no matter how hard I tried.

Apparently, my lack of a response was all the answer my mother needed. She heavily dropped into her chair, and watching her clutch at her forehead, I couldn't help but think: *Don't worry, mamma. I don't want them to declare me defective either.*

I didn't say that, though. After taking a bite of my stew, I let my eyes slide off of her, considering how best to phrase this.

Once I'd decided, I said, "It's ok. I know how to hide it."

Maybe my mother released a relieved sigh. I was too focused on my food to care.

I was halfway through the bowl when she spoke up again.

"Do you know what starts them, honey?" she said. "Maybe if we know that, we can stop them permanently."

And I pursed my lips. Setting my spoon on the table beside the bowl, I scanned the hovel I was inside, nodding when I didn't see Creation. Maybe I could get away with a partial truth for now.

"Memories," I said.

Unfortunately, that answer only seemed to confuse my mother, but it was all I could spare without risking Creation's interference.

Fortunately, my father came home at that moment.

My father, the only truly bright spot in this new life. As Eriadren, I'd never known the man who'd once held that role, had never wanted to know him, but this life's version had shown me nothing but love.

"Papa!" I shouted as I shoved away from the table.

When I reached my father, he lifted me into his arms, spinning so fast that the room blurred, and despite myself, I shrieked with laughter. As he came to a stop, he kissed the top of my head before returning me to the table.

"How are you, son?" my father said. "How was creche this month?"

That was all the provocation I needed to jump back into 'my life as Gaelen'. With the three of us gathered around the table, my parents listened as I chattered about creche to them, scarfing down stew in the breaths between. When I could, I tried to entice stories from them as well, but they refused to share with me, much as they refused to eat anything other than their tasteless rations.

Which I hated. By the time dinner was over, I'd gritted my teeth together so hard that I could swear they'd cracked. Damn humans couldn't even play the benevolent, conquering masters right.

While my parents prepared for an early bedtime, I hovered nearby, watching, and beside me, Creation clicked its tongue.

"Why are you still here?" it said. "We should be out in the woods already, practicing!"

Maybe that was true, but I refused to acknowledge it, merely hugging myself. While I could easily sneak out of this hovel—my parents were always *exhausted* at day's end—I'd much rather not.

Instead, I waited until my parents tiredly hugged me good night before turning to Creation.

"Next month," I whispered.

Then, I followed my new family to bed.

# 2

## Noblinson, Gaelen

*Noblinson*

I hated having these conversations. The first one was bad enough: sitting a parent down to let them know that our lords and masters had taken issue with their kid, but the second one?

Who liked telling a parent that their child was on the brink of death?

It didn't help that tonight's parents were two of my community's shining pillars. Mycella was one of the sweetest women someone could come across, ever hopeful and willing to help even the lowliest of strangers, and everyone knew that Quincy was the best swordsmen the Esela had produced in years. If he joined an expedition into the forests around our city, most of the people in it were guaranteed to come home that day.

It doubly didn't help that the subject of tonight's conversation was my favorite pupil in this current creche crop.

"So, what did Gaelen do this time?" Quincy asked with a smile on his lips.

How did he do that? We were here so I could tell them that Gaelen had one more chance to please the masters, and both he and Mycella looked so at ease! As if they didn't have a care in the world.

It was a good act. Damn our masters for making it necessary.

"Something we all should have expected," I made myself say. "Ever, Gaelen has insisted on maintaining his sense of pride, and unfortunately, that backfired on him today."

Sighing, Mycella shook her head with a fond expression in place while Quincy merely snorted. As they absorbed this small piece of news, I reached into a drawer I didn't often open, one that our masters could never know about, and retrieved a bottle of home-distilled alcohol from it. When I set it on the desk in front of me, my friends' faces went still, but they seemed grateful as I handed them poured glasses.

We Esela weren't supposed to indulge in this sort of thing. In all things, we were to suffer in silence and without distraction, but as my people's sole representative in creche, I not only had the influence needed to get away with this sort of infraction, but I also knew when it was necessary.

I carefully watched as Quincy and Mycella gulped down a first taste of their drinks, sipping at my own, and when Quincy rested his cup in his lap, he grimaced.

“All right, ‘blin, I think we’re prepared,” he said. “Tell us the story.”

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*Gaelen*

History. Of all the world’s fields of study, I’d decided that history was the worst.

Every other class, I could half-attend, only paying enough attention to add anecdotes to the items where my current education was lacking, but unfortunately, history required my full concentration, if I was to have any hope of also ignoring it.

A human woman was teaching the six-year-olds today, which I found hilarious on a number of levels. Even after this long spent living in a world where the two races’ roles had been swapped, I still hadn’t wrapped my head around the concept of humanity as the ones in control.

This human in front of me—droning on about... something important, I guessed—was an Eselan sympathizer, someone who refused to see those of my race as mere dogs on a long leash. Such sympathizers visited creche every so often, all part of their efforts to further civilize the ‘poor Esela’.

It was infuriating.

Evidence of this human’s dedication to the cause was leaning against the door frame with his arms crossed: a half-Eselan, most likely a ward. A mistake made by some lust-filled human, given into the care of a home willing to feed and support him.

Lucky bastard.

Seated beside today’s teacher was her own kid, a pretty, blonde-haired and blue-eyed girl child. When she caught me staring at her, she blushed, ducking her chin to her chest. Given how intensely she’d decided to stare at her fingers, they must be truly fascinating.

Before I could get too annoyed by her behavior, something the teacher said briefly caught my attention—

“-Ele and Daevetch. Although it’s faded in recent years, belief in these age-old gods made a brief resurgence after the rise of Doldi-”

—before she lost it once more.

Gods. Really?

If I’d learned anything from my curse, it was that the gods, if they’d ever existed, were dead. Sure, Alouin might be a powerful being, but unlike a god, he was fallible. If he hadn’t been, Arivor and I

wouldn't exist. Alouin would have ended us after our first deaths, but instead, he'd been helpless to stop the primal forces from rebirthing us.

Given that, I could see how someone might consider Ele and Daevetch as gods, but I didn't. The one time I'd even been tempted to think such a thing, asking Creation about it as a result, that nuisance had only laughed, making several choicely scathing comments in response.

On some level, that answer had made me a little sad. After all, if Ele and Daevetch could be considered gods, that would mean I'd become fairly godlike in my own right.

Bored, I chased a speck of Ele across my rickety desk's surface. It was the smallest amount of the primal force that I'd managed to tease from my source, but even still, I wouldn't normally risk doing something like this. If I didn't practice with Ele, though, Creation would never let me hear the end of it.

For years, that splinter had been hounding my every waking hour, always just out of sight. Long were the nights that I'd spent scheming of ways to get rid of it, but nothing I'd tried had worked. Not yet at least.

Eh...maybe I shouldn't try to destroy Creation. Maybe I should just ask it for space.

At that thought, I snorted. A simple request like that would never work. Creation was too stubborn-

A hand slammed onto my desk, startling me from my thoughts, and jerking back, I lost control of my speck of Ele. It zoomed, unseen, across the room until it smacked into the human child, and rocking in her chair, she jerked her eyes across the room, stopping her search when her gaze landed on me.

Above me, the human woman snapped, "What's your name?"

Somehow, I kept from rolling my eyes, opening my mouth to answer. At the last minute, the word I meant to speak switched from Eriadren to-

"Gaelen."

Frowning, today's teacher said, "Was something about my lesson funny, young Gaelen? So far as I'm aware, no one should find the story of Doldimar's rise amusing."

Oh, shit... I'd forgotten that she'd been talking about that today. Well. If I wasn't very careful, the next few minutes could end horribly for me.

"I'm sorry," I said as contritely as I could. "Of course I don't find the story funny."

And almost, I let it go, but as if to frustrate my efforts, my tongue decided that now was just *the most ideal time* to run away from me.

"Kind of thought your interpretation of Doldimar's rise to power was strange, though."

Immediately, I winced. That had been extraordinarily stupid.

With her expression flattening, today's teacher straightened off of my desk.

"Really?" she said. "Why don't you share *your* interpretation with us then, Gaelen?"

The ice in her tone turned me into my own frozen sculpture. For several silent seconds, I merely stared at her. There was no way this woman could know what she'd asked of me. *No way* but even still, the wrench of hurt inside almost had me breathing fire at her.

Instead, I leaned back in my chair, crossing my legs with my hands folded on my knee.

"All right," I said. "Simply put, I believe the rise of Doldimar was a natural progression for the man he used to be. After what his uncle did to his son, what else was Arivor supposed to become? Reive may have been a cruel bastard, but of all his atrocities, burning a beloved family member alive had to be..."

And my breath caught with my thoughts starting to slip on themselves.

Shit. I shouldn't have-

The human woman's laughter brought me back from a fall into myself.

"It sounds like you *sympathize* with Doldimar, young Gaelen," she said, "but that can't be right. Everyone knows of the many travesties Doldimar spread across our world, and it's only through Reive's heroic actions that we're able to sit-"

My chair toppled behind me, so quickly did I shoot from it, and that noise snapped the woman's mouth shut. Somehow, I kept my fingers lightly pressed into my desk's surface, rather than reaching for her stupid neck.

"Let me ask you a question," I said, breathing ice. "If I tied your little girl to a stake, lit the pyre under her, and held you back from saving her..."

For a split second, I could only sip at the air, but I rushed forward so the woman couldn't fill the gap I'd left open.

"If I made you watch those flames consume her... forced you to listen as she cried out in agony, wouldn't you go a little mad?" I snapped. "That is what your manipulative, conniving, son of a bitch Reive did to his nephew. And your hero, the one you humans laud? He did nothing to topple Doldimar. Absolutely *nothing!*"

I was shouting. Oh, this was bad.

Still, I couldn't help but continue.

"Maybe, *just maybe*, you lot should check your facts before telling a story like this."

The woman lashed out, leaving a burning imprint of her hand on my cheek, but really, I should have expected that. I should have expected her red face and the fury in your eyes.

“How dare you!” she growled. “You are Esela, Gaelen. Not human. *You* do not tell our history, and you will not breathe a word of Eriadren or any other Esela lies here.”

...Esela lies?

Oh, I'd truly made a mess of this, but no matter that I should be bowing and scraping at this woman's feet, I couldn't bring myself to lower my head.

“I will tell *my* story however I damn well please,” I hissed, “and in the end, you will do the same.”

Spinning away from the woman, I stormed out of the classroom, and after making it a few feet outside, one of creche's monitors called after me. I was too wrapped in fury to hear what they said.

“I don't feel good!” I shouted at them. “Going to lay down!”

Fortunately, they didn't stop me.

I didn't know how I kept it in check for as long as I did, but somehow, I made it to my cot before my body started shaking. Clenching my eyes against the tears in them, I pulled the sheets over my head, screaming deep into my own mind.

*Look! I'm not thinking about the past anymore! I'm not remembering them or seeing their faces! Not Arivor or Lirilith or Sepiala or Rafe or any of my victims from the war...*

After who knew how long, someone plopped onto my cot, dropping so heavily that it jerked the sheets down, but before they could settle, I yanked them back into place, restoring my hiding place.

Whoever had decided to join me was silent for a long while, but eventually, she spoke up.

“That was quite the speech you gave. Mother plans to report you for it.”

Of course she did. What else was a human like her supposed to do with my spat of insolence?

“I don't care,” I muttered. “Go away.”

Rather than doing as I'd asked, the girl shifted in place, making my cot creak.

“You should care,” she said. “If she reports you, creche's headmaster might declare you defective. Doesn't that worry you?”

Barely retaining a laugh, I shrugged. Why should I be worried about that and the death it implied? If the humans ever decided to put me down...

Well. Let's just say I'd wish them luck.

“What were you playing with before my mother talked to you?” the girl asked. “I’ve never seen Esela magic like that before, and don’t you dare deny that it was magic! You used it to push me from across the room!”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “It’s not Esela magic.”

“What was it, then?” the girl asked.

Good gods.

With a growl, I exploded from beneath the sheets, ready to do whatever I must to get this girl to go away.

“Leave me alo-!”

Something cold rested against my neck, stopping me short. A blade.

It, however, wasn’t coming from the human girl, perching on the foot of my cot and staring with curious eyes. At her side, the half-Eselan from before was standing stock still, carefully holding a sword to my skin.

“So, are you full-bloods really as feral as mother always says?” he asked.

Closing my eyes, I hissed out a long, annoyed breath. Guess I’d have to put up with these curious children.

Maybe if I was polite, they’d leave me alone.

“My apologies, mistress. Master,” I said. “I don’t know what’s come over me today. My base nature must have assumed control, if only for a short time. I shall strive ever harder to become more like my masters so passion doesn’t gain another hold on me.”

With an inelegant snort, the human girl lifted a hand, laughing into it.

“What a pretty lie!” she said.

Well, obviously that hadn’t worked.

Making a face, I said, “I may have lied, yes, but I promise. I won’t attack you now. I was just... upset before. It’s under control.”

Shifting in place, the half-Eselan glanced at the girl, maybe hoping she’d know what to do, and when she nodded, he lowered his sword. With a grimace, I rubbed my neck. He’d left a nick there.

“Does your mother know you’re here?” I absently asked.

“Doubtful,” the girl said. “She was kind of exploding after you left, and we both know it’s a bad idea to stick around when she’s like that. So, we slipped out. I doubt she’ll come looking for us

anytime soon.”

She shrugged, all while the half-Eselan stared at me. Gods, if that look had been any more pointed, it'd probably stab me.

“You're really not worried about them declaring you defective?” he asked.

Yeah... that probably hadn't been a wise thing to reveal.

With a sigh, I shook my head.

“It's a constantly hovering threat, yes?” I said. “If I let myself worry about it, I'd be a nervous wreck, which wouldn't help with staying alive here.”

“Huh,” the boy said with a frown.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Speaking of survival, I'm due at the sparring grounds in a quarter-hour. I'd rather not be late, especially if your mother's reporting me. So, what do you two want?”

If they were merely curious, surely they'd have left by now.

“I want to know what you did to me back there,” the girl said.

On her words' heels, the boy said, “And I want you to tell me what else you know about Arivor.”

Rapidly blinking, the girl snapped her gaze to the half-Eselan, but he avoided looking at her, instead staring at me with his jaw set.

Pointing at the girl, I said, “I can't answer your question.”

Technically true. I was fairly certain that if I tried talking about Ele, Creation would shut me up pretty quickly.

So, I turned to the boy.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“Everything,” he said through gritted teeth.

Wow, that had been intense. Why was he so interested in Arivor?

Because out of everything these two's mother had said, she'd been right about one thing. Everyone despised my old friend.

With a huff, the girl slapped at the sheets.

“Hey! Don't ignore me, you mo-”

In a flash, I was on top of the girl, pinning her neck to the cot with my glowing hand.

“Do *not* call me mongrel, human,” I snarled.

I swear. If I had to hear that insult *one more time...*

Clapping drew me out of my anger, coming from the being who’d appeared at my side.

“Well done, Eriadren! You’ve figured out how to use Ele to speed up your movement,” Creation said. “Of course, you did that in front of two children, who could be enemies, so I don’t know if we should consider this progress or not.”

All of my focus got transferred from a girl to *that nuisance*. Shooting a finger up to point at it, I tried—poorly—to contain the white-hot fury in me.

“SHUT UP!” I hissed. “I’ve had it up to here with your constant monitoring and nagging. I can’t take it anymore. Leave me THE HELL alone!”

Having pulled back, Creation morphed its face into an expression I’d never seen on it before—fear? incredulity? indignation?—before it popped out of existence.

And I was alone.

Alone! No one was here to judge my every move! No one-!

Again, steel was pressed against my throat, interrupting my brief burst of glee.

“Get off my sister,” the half-Eselan snapped.

Carefully, I raised my hands over my head and pulled away from the girl. As soon as I could, I settled as far away from her as possible.

With my gaze locked on the boy, I said, “I wasn’t actually going to hurt her. That’s impossible-”

“Alouin above, that was awesome!” the girl shouted, interrupting me. “What was that? Can I do it? And who were you speaking to? Oooooo!”

Popping to her hands and knees, she lowered her voice to a whisper.

“Does it have anything to do with Ele and Daevetch?”

Shit. After that spiel, I already had a headache. How was I supposed to answer all of her questions?

As I considered that conundrum, I rubbed my temples, glancing at the boy.

“Come on, kid. Put the sword away,” I said. “If I wanted to hurt you or your sister, I seriously doubt you could stop me.”

And at that, I knew what to say. I was Eriadren, a demon with a blade who couldn't be killed. Why should I hide my magic from two, insignificant kids?

Drawing himself up, the boy said, "Oh, yeah? I've done it twice already. What makes you think I couldn't do it again?"

Sighing, I ran my eyes over his body.

"For starters, your grip on your sword is too weak, your stance is off, and your reaction times are abysmal, even without Ele to speed me up," I said.

With bright eyes, the girl breathed, "I knew it!"

The boy refused to stop eyeing me, but he did get his sword back into its scabbard. With them sorted, I folded my hands in my lap.

"Wonderful! Let's try this again," I said. "I'm Gaelen. Who are you?"

---

*Noblinson*

"-will do the same!' And he stomped out of the classroom in a rage!"

With a flourish, I finished telling the story of Gaelen's most recent misadventure, all while Mycella and Quincy doubled over on themselves with laughter. As they enjoyed this rare moment of joy, I poured them each a glass of water, something to even out the alcohol we'd all consumed.

Accepting his glass, Quincy wiped happy tears away.

"That's our Gaelen!" he said.

On his words' heels, Mycella whispered, "What are we going to do with that boy?"

And the smiles dropped off of their faces. Before the couple could fall too deeply into despair, I hurried to share the one good piece of news I had for them.

"Also. In an impossible turn of events, Gaelen has managed to make a pair of friends," I said. "They might help mitigate the damage he's done to himself."

Lifting an eyebrow, Quincy drawled, "Friends...? You're talking about our Gaelen, right?"

Mycella had a more pertinent question.

"Who are they?"

With a nod, I acknowledged the hope she was blazing at me.

“Their names are Sarai and Corsivis,” I say. “They’re the children of the teacher who visited on the day in question.”

Mycella and Quincy absorbed this news fairly well. The only indication of their discomfort could be found in how still they were holding themselves.

“So, they’re human?” Quincy eventually said.

“One human and one half,” I confirmed.

As Mycella dropped her head into her hands, Quincy touched her knee, swallowing hard, but given what I’d said, I found these reactions appropriate.

“You’re right. These friends could be dangerous,” I said, “but even still, the two of you should encourage the relationships. The next time Gaelen gets into trouble, having a pair of the masters’ children closely tied to him could keep them from declaring him defective.”

“You’re right,” Mycella said before grimacing. “Only... humans? Gaelen finally makes friends, and they’re *humans*?”

Wincing, Quincy downed the rest of his water.

“Thank you for letting us know, my friend,” he said. “We’ll do our best to stay optimistic, but let’s be honest.”

Resting his cup on my desk, he pulled away with a pained expression in place, taking his wife’s hand once he was comfortable.

“Knowing our son and knowing our masters’ dispositions, Gaelen will almost certainly be dead within the year.”

They were right, but looking at my favorite student’s parents, I had to hold onto hope. I had to believe that Gaelen would find some way to survive.

# 3

## Corsivis, Gaelen

*Corsivis*

“Again!”

Despite my trembling muscles and generally out-of-breath state, I clumsily tried to do as I’d been told. I lunged at Gaelen, doing my damndest to get around his defenses, but he merely swiped my attack to the side, as if it were an irritating mosquito come to land on his skin.

“You don’t have to break through my defenses immediately,” he said. “Most of the time, that’ll just get you killed. Simply engage, and then, wait for an opening. Again.”

We’d been at this for at least an hour. An hour where I’d learned exactly how much I’d always underestimated my friend’s skill with the blade.

In the six years since our first fateful meeting, Gaelen had dodged any and all questions about his abilities, whether martial or otherwise. He’d always been more than happy to answer any of my questions about... *that man*, but soon enough, even that opening had no longer been enough for me. With every passing day, my curiosity about this enigmatic Eselan had grown, getting almost as obsessive as Sarai’s recently.

After our first few months at trying to crack his shell, the two of us had changed tactics. Trailing Gaelen everywhere had been getting us nowhere, and frankly, it had started feeling like an invasion of his privacy. So, Sarai and I had decided that we would feign friendship with Gaelen instead, at least until he’d told us about his magic. Over the years, though, that false bond had changed into something real and true.

At least, it had for me.

“Why the sudden desire to master the blade?” Gaelen asked, drawing me back to the fight.

Ducking the swing I’d sent for his head, he lightly rested his sword’s tip against the hollow of my neck, reminding me yet again of how absolutely *mad* my friend was. Not only did he talk to thin air on occasion, but he had an almost suicidal lack of fear, one that both thrilled and terrified me. In the city, all sparring took place with blunted blades, but when I’d suggested that we use them today, Gaelen had laughed.

"You'll never learn to fight like that," he'd said. "When sharp steel is coming for your face, people have visceral reactions, and how that presents is different for everyone. It's better to figure out what yours is when your opponent is someone friendly to you, rather than not. Don't worry, Cor. I won't hurt you. I have too much practice with this awful thing to accidentally stab you, and I literally can't end your life."

That had confused me. Couldn't end my life? What could that mean?

But I'd merely asked, "What about you? I don't want to hurt you, Gael."

At that, Gaelen had flashed a fierce grin.

"Trust me. You won't be able to hurt me, Cor."

After hours where I'd failed to land a single blow on him, I could believe that statement.

As for my friend's question about my new fascination with learning to fight...

Locking my lips tight, I looked away. I didn't want to discuss my recent change in fortune, couldn't contemplate my mother's closed-off face as she'd brought me to creche's headmaster. I couldn't think about that man's pronouncement or Sarai's expression when we'd given her the news.

As if in tune with my thoughts, Gaelen asked, "Where's Sarai? She's usually materialized by now, the little leech."

Alouin, that question hurt almost as much as his first one.

"You've heard about the recent parlay?" I asked, continuing once Gaelen had nodded. "During it, our neighbors requested more brides in exchange for some of their best fighters and scouts. On hearing the news, mother got Sarai an etiquette tutor, on the off chance they choose..."

With a lump in my throat, I couldn't continue with that thought, but fortunately, Gaelen was well prepared to distract me. Dropping under my waist-high blow, he swept a leg at my ankles, and tripping, I hit the forest floor with a thud, which knocked the air out of me. Unfortunately, my lungs refused to draw it back in, and I spent a moment wheezing around that temporary paralysis, barely hearing Gaelen's shout.

"*Damn* them! Bickering tribes? Loveless marriages? Trading people like so much cattle? How far has the world fallen?"

With a frustrated growl, my friend flopped to the ground beside me, and while catching my breath, I took a moment to watch the younger boy. At some point in the last hour, Gaelen had taken off his tunic, letting sweat freely trickle over his flushed skin, and I tracked each bead of it as it dropped from his hair to his curled-over back.

"So, what was my mistake that time?" I distractedly asked.

“Hmm?”

When Gaelen flicked his eyes to me, a zing shot through me, only building when he smiled.

“Oh! No, falling wasn’t your fault, although you should never let an opponent distract you like that. Not even if your opponent is me!” he said. “You should also never try to kick someone’s legs out from under them like I just did. Under normal circumstances, that would never work, giving your enemy a chance to kill you instead.”

Mmhmm. Don’t get distracted. Something about never doing what he did.

Gaelen didn’t need to worry about that last bit. At times, it seemed like my friend had a death wish, especially when it came to his behavior.

A good Eselan was unassuming, respectful, and subservient, all of which Gaelen was not. Did he know how many times his friendship with Sarai had saved his life in the last few years? No one wanted to declare the plaything of a wealthy, human girl defective.

Given recent events, I couldn’t afford to copy my friend’s behavior. Not anymore.

So, it didn’t matter that Gaelen’s self-assured pride stirred something in me. Alouin, that demurred conduct toward the humans that somehow gave off the impression that he was laughing at them! Every time I saw it, I couldn’t help but shiver. It was delicious.

But that was Gaelen. Something about my friend had enticed me since we’d first met.

Hell, if that sensation hadn’t puzzled me over the years, an anomalous footnote that no other person had had ever matched. Not even those closest to me.

At first, I’d thought it had something to do with those grown-up things that adults never liked talking about. They’d certainly spoken of similar things when other boys my age had started experiencing body changes.

Boy, if that hadn’t been a trip for me. The emotional and physical discord of it had been bad enough, but then, I’d started noticing *girls*. I couldn’t say how many times I’d caught myself staring at my female classmates when I should have been listening to lectures.

By the time my ever-absent, surrogate father had sat me down to truly explain what the hell had been going on, I’d already gone through most of the changes that older man had described. I’d also already discovered the glorious phenomena of touching and kissing the girls I’d found so fascinating.

At first, I hadn’t been sure why human women had seemed to find me irresistible. At the least, they’d ever been eager to giggle and moan when we did anything even slightly physical, but they’d always stopped me before our time together could get too heated.

I’d been several years older and wiser before I’d realized that what they both loved and despised about me was the fact that I was a half-Eselan.

Well. That and the other, more fascinating aspect of my heritage.

Since finding out about that, I'd learned to enjoy what I could get. So, the girls I sometimes played with didn't truly like me? So what? At least they'd talk to me, unlike some of the other humans I'd once spent time around.

But I supposed that was over now too.

*The point was* that what I'd once felt when I'd been with those girls was a pale shadow of what I felt when I was around Gaelen, which had always been a frustratingly irritating conundrum. No other boy, both in my class and in creche, had ever attracted me like this, and I didn't know what to make of it.

Frankly, it had always scared me a little.

Collapsing onto his back, Gaelen absently stared at the canopy of the forest around us, and viewing his relaxed state, I tensed. Given what had happened at home, this might be the only chance I'd have to find out if I was defective in the one way that everyone in our world, whether human or Esela, abhorred. My last chance to eliminate the disturbing possibility.

Did I want to do that? If I didn't, I'd never know, and for some reason, that seemed like too much to bear.

Besides, if I did test this theory, I didn't think Gaelen would mention it to anyone else. He wasn't the type to gossip like that.

Still, it was with no small amount of terror that I sprang to my hands and knees so I could crawl to Gaelen's side. What would I do if this conundrum was... what I thought it was? Could I live with myself if-?

I couldn't think about it. Gaelen was looking at me funny, as if he was about to speak, so without thinking about it, I ducked down and kissed him and...

Nothing. Just cool lips on my warm ones.

Huh. If the attraction wasn't sexual, then what-?

Something slammed into me, stopping my contemplation short, and as I went soaring—up, up, *up* into the forest's canopy—wood and plant fiber slapped at me. Soon enough, rough bark abruptly halted my speeding flight, and I had a split second to see the ground, waiting seemingly miles below.

Then, I was bouncing and tumbling through tree limbs at ever increasing speed, soon to meet a solid plane of grass and dirt.

When I landed, I sightlessly blinked for what seemed like hours, although a small part of me knew it had been mere seconds. What had just happened?

With a groan, I sat up, looking for Gaelen. Hopefully, he'd have seen what had thrown me so far, but before I could find him, biting agony forced me back down to my elbows with a whimper.

Oh, hell. What-?

Through the fog obscuring my vision, I noted the thin stick protruding from the side of my waist and the crimson-stained, white... thing that was mangling my leg, and I screamed.

---

*Gaelen*

When I'd collapsed into the leaves smothering the forest floor, I'd known Corsivis was watching me. He'd always had that slightly uncomfortable habit, but as the years had passed, it had bothered me less and less, unlike Sarai's decidedly more infuriating tendencies.

Those two thought they'd been so clever by trying to pry secrets from me with their 'friendship', and I had to admit that for a time, I'd fallen for it. After living for so long as Eriadren, the social outcast, I'd been desperate for friends. It hadn't mattered that I should avoid them, given what was soon coming for me. I had needed... no, did need companionship.

My initial resolution to evade attachment had been originally helped along by the fact that in this era, no one wanted to associate with the kid who refused to kiss the humans' boots. So, when Sarai and Corsivis had invited me to join in with their fun and games, I'd eagerly accepted.

Unfortunately, Sarai had asked one too many questions about why I could control Ele, and after that, I'd known what their 'friendship' really meant.

Learning that they only valued me for my connection to Ele had hurt, but I couldn't help myself. Ever after that, I'd dropped every assignment if they asked me to join them in their latest escapade.

Yes, their companionship might be false. I didn't care. One day a month with my parents barely put a dent in my self-imposed loneliness.

Of course, it also helped that by making friends with Sarai, I'd mostly exempted myself from the humans' culls. The creche headmaster couldn't declare me defective without causing an uproar as a result.

So, when Corsivis had crawled to peer down at me, I'd thought nothing of it. We weren't exactly friends, but he and I had spent enough time together that I'd let my guard down around him. Just a little.

I didn't realize what he'd intended until our lips met, but by then, it was too late. At that touch, a barrage of memories ripped through the framework of the cage I'd built around them.

*Lirilith and I meld as one during a Joining. Lirilith's hair flies around her when ecstasy has her flinging her head back. Lirilith carefully pecks Sepiala's forehead while I hold our daughter. Lirilith*

*kisses away the ghosts of killing wounds while I violently shiver. Lirilith's eyes glaze as I cling to her, pressing my lips against her blood-streaked forehead.*

With acid on the back of my tongue, every muscle locked into place, and I couldn't... I needed this to *stop*. To GO AWAY before—

This time, a scream dragged me back to the surface.

I hadn't blanked like that in years. Practice with shoving memories to the side had lessened the frequency of those terrifyingly absent spells, but every so often, something would catch me unaware, triggering such a deluge of unwanted memories that my brain would kick me out of it.

The something this time had been- had been Corsivis kissing me. What the hell had that been about?

And who the hell was screaming?

As the familiarity of that distressed voice sank in, I sat bolt upright. Someone had mangled the tree opposite me with half-broken limbs dangling up it for at least thirty feet. Corsivis was slumped at its base, reaching for the branch skewering his side with shaking hands.

In a flash, I was beside him, scanning his body for injuries.

A broken shin, a through-and-through puncture of his abdomen, and some abrasions and bruises. If Corsivis was the one who'd devastated the tree he was lying under, then he was lucky he'd escaped with such light injuries.

When I could get a word in edgewise, I said, "What happened?"

*"I don't know!"* Corsivis shouted, panting around each word. "One minute, I was leaning over you. The next, something sent me flying."

Wait.

Glancing between where I'd been lounging scant moments before and the spot where the broken limbs began overhead, I imagined the trajectory of Corsivis' body. What could have generated enough force to propel him that far?

It couldn't be. Could it?

"Creation?"

Appearing beside me, the splinter said, "Yes, you used Ele to force him away."

I let loose a stream of curses that had Corsivis staring at me with confusion, but the cold sweat on his face soon halted my tirade. The blood stain around that gods-awful branch was seeping outward at a much faster rate than I'd like, so I retrieved my tunic from where I'd tossed it,

wrapping it around the wound while moving Corsivis' hand on top of it.

"Apply as much pressure as you can," I said.

I had no idea how I'd treat the leg. None of the branches around us looked sturdy enough to serve as splints, much less a crutch. I'd have to bear the other boy's weight while we walked back to the city.

Not that I minded doing that! I was just worried that waiting so long to treat his leg might permanently cripple him.

*Damn* but I missed the shop from my old life right now!

"Why don't you take this wound from him?" Creation asked. "It's not like you'd keep it for long, and having Corsivis discover that ability is preferable to him--"

"No," I snapped.

Letting out the restorative power that constantly raged under my skin wasn't an option. Too many times I'd unleashed it, only to give my patients relief for a short time. Sometimes, they'd lived for months, sometimes mere moments, but always, ever, and for each time, a fate infinitely worse than they'd originally have suffered had taken their lives. If possible, I'd never use that power again.

"No, what?" Corsivis gasped.

Glancing at him, I said, "Nothing, Cor. We just need to get you back home. I can't set that bone on my own."

I threw his arm over my shoulders, ignoring his pained whimper.

"Are you ready?"

When he hesitantly nodded, I stood, carefully dragging him upright. Corsivis sucked in a gasp, but when I checked on him, he nodded once more. We managed to take one shuffling step forward and then, another before the boys' body started trembling like a leaf.

After about ten feet, Corsivis went limp, which made me stumble. For a moment, I thought pain had weakened him, but when I caught a breath of what he'd been mumbling since we'd begun our trip, I barely restrained an eye roll.

"I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm--"

Gods, he'd lived such a sheltered life. This was probably his first true experience with pain. Meanwhile, his full-blood brothers and sisters would suffer this and worse before they reached the age of seven.

But I couldn't let the unfairness of that situation affect my treatment of the boy. I was a healer. He was my patient, and I'd certainly treated far worse people. At least I was somewhat fond of this one.

Lowering Corsivis into the fallen leaves, I knelt in front of him, clasping his hands in mine.

"You'll survive this, Cor. I know it hurts, but none of these injuries is life-threatening," I said. "At worst, you'll be bed-ridden for a few weeks."

If anything, my reassurance only distressed Corsivis more. He bit back a panicked sob while shivers buzzed even more intensely over his body.

"You- you don't under- understand, Gael," he gasped. "I can use magic, and they... *they know.*"

My grip on Corsivis' hand tightened, and as I did some mental math, I vaguely registered his wince. I'd turned thirteen this year, and Corsivis was two years my senior. That put him at fifteen, the year the humans...

Another round of cursing broke the forest's stillness, sending birds flapping away.

Once I'd calmed down enough to force words off of my strangled tongue, I asked, "How long?"

With a sob, Corsivis bit his lip, looking away.

"They ga- gave me a week."

On receiving that answer, the choked scream that emerged from my mouth surprised me. I hadn't made a noise like that since Sepiala-

*Can't think of that now.*

But given that, my affection for Corsivis must run deeper than I'd thought.

"Will you fix him now?" Creation asked, just out of view. "Believing in the inherent evil of your healing ability is ridiculous, Eriadren. You have no idea how many other people have used it with no consequence! It's more likely that you've had bad luck."

Making a face, I snapped, "No, Creation. Just... no."

Creation huffed.

"Why don't you ask his opinion about it? Or will you decide his fate for him?"

Glaring at the splinter, I wished it would go away, and it must have read something in my eyes because it quickly popped out of existence.

"What does your invisible friend say?" Corsivis shakily asked.

He was using a weak smile to bely his previous despair, and seeing that, I considered him with narrowed eyes.

One boy shouldn't be too difficult to watch, right? Especially if I could convince my parents to give him my rarely used bed. With monitoring, I could keep disastrous consequences from coming near him, and besides, I... couldn't stand the idea of a world without Corsivis.

My friend.

For a moment, I could only blink. When had that happened? I'd vowed that I wouldn't make friends while I was here. At best, these people should only be temporary companions, but Daevetch was taking its time with resurrecting its Champion. Given that, it made sense that a few people would worm past my defenses, and apparently, Corsivis was one of them.

So, damn what might happen. Damn the humans and their horrific policies. I'd fix my friend just to defy them.

Plus—and I felt guilty even thinking this—Corsivis would make a fantastic test subject. If he met his end in a less violent manner than this, then perhaps Creation was onto something. If not...

If not, I'd never use this deceptively miraculous power again.

Still holding my friend's hands, I smiled at him.

"Don't worry. I'll make everything better," I said.

And I Let Go.

Sharp pain tore through my abdomen while my lower leg snapped like a twig, an agony that sent bile surging from my stomach, and I swallowed it back with only a grunt escaping from me.

It was disappointing, really. Toward the end of my time with Reive, I'd endured worse than this without a peep. Years sans any suffering appeared to have lowered my pain threshold, but to my credit, a single grunt wasn't the blood-curdling scream that Corsivis had unleashed.

Still.

When my friend snatched his hands out of mine, I thought disgust had come to rule him until he ripped the crude bandage on his stomach away, pressing it to my wound.

"What did you do, Gael?" he said. "What the *fuck*...? You're already walking a fine line as it is!"

Ah. So, this contrived friendship had, at some point, become real for him as well. As white light erased my injuries, laughter bubbled from me, although both quickly dissipated.

Stunned, Corsivis lifted the rag from my side, staring with wide eyes at my unbroken skin.

“What *are* you?” he breathed.

That question resumed my cut-off hilarity, and falling to my side, I clutched at my stomach.

“I. don’t. know,” I gasped.

Which was true. Champion of Ele? What did that mean? Was I an extension of Ele now, or did I simply have greater access to it than the average person?

Creation had tried explaining it to me, but its strange vocabulary usually confused me so much that I couldn’t follow what it was saying. Until now, all that had concerned me was learning to use my new abilities so I was prepared for Arivor’s coming.

As my laughter died out, I stayed curled on my side, considering questions I should have thought of before helping Corsivis. Would he share what he’d learned with creche’s headmaster, and if he did, what would that cruel son of a bitch do on discovering my abilities? My arms tightened around my chest at the idea of another life spent with a Reive replica.

Leaves crunched nearby, but over that noise, I heard Corsivis sigh.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

Flopping onto my back, I stared at his extended hand like it was a Esla-turned-monster, and rolling his eyes, Corsivis leaned over to grab my arm. After hauling me to my feet, he trudged toward the city, and for a moment, I couldn’t move. When I could force myself forward, I had to jog to catch up.

“Do you want to-?” I started.

“Nope!” Corsivis said.

So... he wanted to ignore what had happened. That was fine by me but...

*Stop it. You can trust him. You CAN!*

We walked for several more yards before I gathered the courage to speak again.

“Do you need a place to stay?” I asked.

A pained expression crossed Corsivis’ face.

“I suppose I will, won’t I?” he whispered.

Oh, how I knew that hurt. I barely restrained myself from squeezing my friend’s shoulder.

“Stay with my family,” I said. “That way, when I slip out of creche, I can easily find you.”

At that, Corsivis looked at me like I was crazy.

“Why would you do that?” he asked.

Shrugging, I said, “Someone needs to teach you how to properly fight in the week the humans have given you. I’m volunteering.”

Stopping short, my friend stared at me like I was an unfinished puzzle or a prized possession just out of reach, and flipping toward him, I raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t approve?” I said.

“No! I...”

Corsivis sighed. He was doing a lot of that today.

“It’s just... thank you,” he said.

“You don’t have to thank me,” I said. “This is what friends do, right?”

I waited for his response, hoping... *praying* he’d confirm my suspicions.

Corsivis’ eyes widened with surprise flashing through them, but of course it did. Up to this point, I’d never called us friends out loud. Swallowing hard, the boy beamed.

“Yes! It is!” he said.

# 4

## Noblinson, Gaelen

### *Noblinson*

Applications of Magic was the one class that I both loved and hated to teach.

I loved it because... well. Who wouldn't? It involved manipulating the body's form and summoning desired objects from thin air, among other things. Who wouldn't want to impart such fantastic knowledge on those who could use it?

On the other hand, once my students had mastered these abilities to the headmaster's satisfaction, they were released from creche, trading the relative safety found here for something infinitely more dangerous.

Today was this group's first lesson in magic, a long series of which would culminate in an examination on their fifteenth birthday. That day would be the last time the creche's headmaster could declare them defective. It would also be the first time they were available for the masters' use.

"All forms of Esela magic are accompanied by a toll on the body. This price is a drain from the life energy that animates us all," I said. "In your magic usage, you must be ever careful about which forms of it you use and what you do with it."

This class's Esela were hanging on my every word, save for one notable exception. At the back of the classroom, Gaelen was playing his usual game with himself, lobbing something unseen between his gloved hands. He was impatiently jittering his leg, bouncing his gaze between his diversion and the obsidian-lined windows, and the further the sun dipped toward the horizon, the more agitated he became.

I wished my favorite pupil would focus. The skills I'd teach here would likely save his life in the years to come.

"The first magic form we'll examine is that of illusion. In a fight, illusion will likely be your most favored form," I continued. "It's perfect for distraction and deception, and with its light cost, it won't exhaust you in the middle of a fight for your life."

With an exasperated sigh, Gaelen raised a hand overhead, and somehow, I managed to keep from rolling my eyes.

“Yes, Gaelen?” I said.

Straightening in his chair, the teenager said, “If I can prove I’ve already mastered your ‘forms’ of magic, may I be released from creche early?”

That made the class gasp and titter while I tried to keep anxiety off of my face.

Every year, someone made this challenge, a kid desperate for their ‘freedom’, and not one of those reckless youths had survived their first day in Applications of Magic. I’d come to expect the challenge at the beginning of each year, despite the rumors of death that floated within the student body, but I hadn’t thought Gaelen would be the one to issue it this time. My favorite student was usually smarter than that.

Sure, he’d breezed through every other class without paying the slightest bit of attention, but this was *magic*, the one subject that every student must be eased into. Mastering the skill came at a natural progression, and its steps couldn’t be skipped without consequences.

I opened my mouth to refuse the challenge, but before I could speak, Gaelen cut me off.

“It’s my right to request an examination at any point during my fourteenth year, yes?” he said. “Well, I’m requesting that examination now.”

*Damnit, Gaelen!*

The corners of my mouth turned down as I sighed through my nose. Over the years, I’d done everything I could for this boy, whether in creche or elsewhere, but with this, Gaelen had backed me into a corner. I had to grant his request. May Mycella and Quincy forgive me.

Waving toward the teenager, I said, “By all means, show us what you can do.”

“Thank you.”

Rising from his seat, Gaelen marched to the front of the classroom, already in the midst of a shape change. With each step, his height jumped in increments while the green in his blonde hair was steadily leached away.

Seeing this, I bit my lip. A full body shape change? Was Gaelen trying to kill himself? During their first attempt at shape change, no one could alter all parts of their body, and if Gaelen wasted so much energy on this first magic form alone, he’d have nothing left to pay for the others.

Without warning, the classroom dropped into the middle of a battle, making me trip as I retreated from the sword jabbing at my stomach. Several other students cried out, but within seconds, the frozen nature of the picture around us reminded the class of what Gaelen was attempting.

An illusion. It was all an illusion. The Esela and humans locked in deadly conflict. The dead and wounded trampled by those left standing. Amazingly, Gaelen had even managed to capture the awful stench of blood, sweat, and piss that hovered over every battlefield.

As I scanned the illusion, the first fingers of awe played over my skin. This was perfect. When viewing it, my brain screamed at the danger I'd encountered, even knowing that nothing about this battle was real.

The other students, poor things, were trembling with fright. They might have completed years of combat training, but nothing could prepare someone for a battle of this scale.

So... how had Gaelen created it?

On finding my favorite pupil at the head of the classroom, I threw a hand over my mouth to muffle a gasp. In that normally vacant space, three people were now standing, two of them illusory and one real. An angry mob of human soldiers was descending on the two motionless Esela, and they were standing back-to-back, facing their doom with fierce grins and wild laughs.

One was dressed in an officer's armor. Grim amusement danced over his noble bearing while a defiant yell remained frozen on his lips, and with a single sword lifted overhead, sweat had plastered his mottled, brown hair to his forehead and neck. He was the historic description of Doldimar, visualized and brought to life.

This image might make me shiver, but even still, the man who'd reversed the races' roles, raising the humans high while condemning the Esela to an unspoken slavery, could evoke nothing more from me. Doldimar's companion, however, froze me solid while my lung's contents escaped in a rush.

The second Eselan was wearing a light infantryman's armor. He was hunkered close to the ground, holding a long knife in his right hand and a standard, army-issued sword in his left. Even gripping the knife, he beckoned the closest human forward with his teeth bared and a thrill lighting his gray eyes. His blue-tinged, dirty-blond hair stood up from his scalp at odd angles with the helmet at his feet explaining the mess.

That was...

I shied away from even thinking his name. Whispers and rumors of the Preserver had always run rampant through the Eselan ranks. People told plentiful tales about the man who'd truly saved the world from Doldimar, and when the masters were absent, we shared with one another our vain hope that he'd someday return to set us free.

It was a hope no Eselan would dare impart upon a creche child, not when they were so constantly monitored. If given into the hands of innocents, people who would too quickly trust the masters, such a dream could endanger all the Esela.

Given that, Gaelen couldn't know the Preserver's story. So, where had this illusion come from, and where was-?

Gaelen, the teenage boy I loved like a son, was standing in front of the two illusory men, and he'd assumed the Preserver's appearance, right down to the freckles and the birthmark on the elbow. With a grim expression in place, he stared into the empty eyes of the Doldimar illusion.

“Where are you, Arivor?” he asked, as if to himself. “I’m tired of waiting.”

Then, Gaelen extended a hand, and— and a sword, of all things, dropped into it, one that was embraced by a plain scabbard. When the teenager pulled the blade free, I gasped.

Alouin, that wasn’t a simple sword. With engraved words—intelligible and not—running over the blade, it could only be Shadowsteal, the sword of legend.

I had barely enough time to process what I was seeing before the illusion changed, freezing me solid.

The illusion’s human soldiers had vanished, replaced with people of both races. Black, squiggly lines bulged under their skin, raising their flesh, and as one, they fled from the Preserver. That one, clear-skinned Eselan carved through them, even with arrows peppering his body and a dagger jutting out of his neck.

Then, the illusory Preserver *moved*, and I retreated until I realized it was only Gaelen, stepping into the illusion. My student raised a hand once more, making a butter knife appear in it, and he made a face before it crinkled into confusion.

“Huh.”

The illusion dissipated, leaving an altered Gaelen at the head of the classroom. He was fiercely frowning at the knife, as if it had betrayed him in some way.

“I may need your lessons after all, ‘blin,” he said. “For some reason, alchemy’s escaping me. I haven’t been able to find a suitable side knife in the masters’ armory, so I’d planned to morph one. I suppose it’ll have to-”

“Alchemy?!” I squeaked, squeezing the word through my closed-off throat. “We haven’t used that magic form in decades!”

Making a face, Gaelen flipped the butter knife through his fingers before stashing it in a pocket.

“Must have faded with the defusal of Eselan blood,” he said. “How sad.”

With that, he started returning to his desk, but I cleared my throat, drawing him up short.

“You’re still holding the shape change, Gaelen,” I said.

Spreading his arms, the teenager peered down at his body.

“So I am.”

Over the course of mere seconds, Gaelen shortened with his body taking on a gangly appearance, and his hair bleached blonder while its second hue shifted to green. Once again in the guise of my favorite student, he stumbled and fell, slamming sideways into a desk, and I hurried to help him.

Before I could reach his side, however, Gaelen was back on his feet.

Waving my hand away, he said, "I'm fine."

And I nodded. What else was I supposed to do? Right now, I needed to clasp my hands together to keep them from shaking.

Had I hallucinated what had just happened? Because it couldn't have been real. I mean... I couldn't logically explain what Gaelen had done, especially not how he was still standing. Using so much potent magic all at once should have killed him. It would certainly have killed me.

"Do I pass, 'blin?" Gaelen asked.

Retrieving his bag, he threw it over a shoulder.

"I have somewhere to be."

Did he-?

"Are you kidding me? You do... whatever that was, and your only concern is whether you've passed my silly class?" I said. "No. We need to sneak you out of the city. The humans may know about our old legends, but they don't pay them any mind. If they discover what you can do, though, they'll kill you, eradicating any trace of your existence, and I'm not sure they'll stop the violence with you. No, we have to get you out so that..."

I stopped, hardly believing what I was about to say.

"The humans can never know that you're-"

"Stop," Gaelen said. "Even if I am who you think I am, I'm not here to free the Esela. You're more than capable of doing that yourselves. I've spent fourteen years in this era, and I still don't understand why the Esela have allowed themselves to be so debased when they have the power to change the status quo."

He shook his head.

"No, I'm here for another purpose entirely," he said. "So, do I pass?"

I didn't know what to say. Apparently, discovering the legend of the Preserver had a basis in truth hadn't been enough. I'd also had to learn that the hopes and dreams tied to it were unfounded. Also, the subject of said legend concerned someone I'd been nurturing since birth.

So, had Gaelen passed Applications of Magic?

"Yes," I faintly said.

"Thanks, 'blin."

With a mischievous grin, Gaelen patted my shoulder.

"I'll see you around," he said.

He walked away, leaving me numbly staring at an empty doorway long after he'd ducked through it. Gaelen had left the safety of creche a year earlier than he should, striding into the adult world without hesitation, but for once, I wasn't worried about my former pupil. Knowing what I knew now, I also knew that handling the difficulties of life outside these walls would never trouble him.

"Teacher," another student hesitantly said, "what just happened?"

Even with all that he *apparently* was, Gaelen could still face mortal peril here. His classmates couldn't start rumors about him, not when something like that could threaten both his safety and the safety of this city's Esela. It was time for me to salvage what I could of this situation.

"Gaelen graduated," I said with a smile. "Let's discuss the mistakes he made during his examination."

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### *Gaelen*

Now that I was done with creche, I departed my last classroom with no trepidation or fear. Instead, what haunted my steps was nostalgia.

Of all of creche's teachers, Noblinson had been the only one to show any sense of concern for the other children and me. That concern had prompted some small sense of affection in me, and now, my time with him was over.

I'd certainly see him at some point in the future, but with my release, our relationship would change. We were no longer mentor and pupil. The humans would consider us equals.

I didn't have time for nostalgia, as my demonstration had taken longer than planned. Soon enough, today's expedition would return to the city, and I wanted to be there when they emerged from the forest. If it were any other day, I could be late, but not today.

Today was Corsivis' birthday.

For once, creche's monitors allowed my passage down its corridors without comment. What was hanging from my hip was the only proof I'd need to show that I'd surpassed my time here.

Except for the hours spent in combat training, Eselan children were forbidden access to weapons. So, with Shadowsteal on my person, I'd gone from a boy they'd watch for mistakes to a man they'd ignore.

This freedom was exhilarating.

Once I'd stepped out of creche and into the great outdoors, I plucked at the fabric around my fingers, peeling leather off of my skin. I hung my gloves beside my new sword.

Shadowsteal. Every time I sought the damn thing, the search for it stretched longer. When I'd been Eriadren, it had lasted mere months, a time I'd spent scouring the empire I'd called home.

In the decade after Lirilith's murder, my desperation for a guaranteed method to end Arivor had sped my hunt. At the time, I hadn't known what abilities my failed experiment had bestowed upon my former friend. I'd only had my own to extrapolate from, and since I emulated Alouin's powers, I'd gone in search of a weapon that could kill a god.

I'd learned about a pair of god-forged swords, weapons that contained purified essences of Daevetch and Ele, from an obscure reference to the Eselan home world, and with that, my course had been set. Half a year later, I'd found them, claimed Shadowsteal as my own, hidden Lighteater from the world, and returned home to end Doldimar's reign.

This life had required years to find the swords. I'd spent that time researching the century after Doldimar's fall, looking for a clue about where my once-comrades might have misplaced Shadowsteal. This had been made all the more challenging by my confinement to the backwater city that my parents called home.

Not long ago, I'd caught a hint of a whisper about its location, and armed with only that slim hope, I'd been a little nervous that today, Shadowsteal would fail to come when I called. Fortunately, my theory about its resting place had been proven valid, and when I'd needed it, the sword had materialized in my gloved hand.

The gloves had been Creation's suggestion. It had claimed that since Ele sustained my current body in the world, I held a more substantial bond with its 'whole' than the average person. Given that, this was probably why I could only now manipulate primal energy, unlike my time as Eriadren. Because of this, the splinter had warned me that touching a weapon made of Ele might cause unintended consequences.

Hence why I'd donned these gloves when I'd woken up this morning. With them, I could hold Shadowsteal without actually touching it.

Unfortunately, the gloves' leather was stuffy and hot, so now that I was finished with the sword—at least temporarily—they came off, and I greeted cool, open air with relief.

As I made my way through the Esela barracks, neighbors and familiar faces stopped to stare at me. Over the years, they'd learned to ignore me when I snuck out of creche, but today, I was openly striding among them, making no attempt to hide my presence.

Several of them split off, probably to inform either my parents or the headmaster of my presence. Who they reported to first would depend on their position in the social stratus.

I ignored them all. The only thing I cared about was reaching the forest-city boundary without interruption.

I barely made it in time. Around me, straw and daub had given way to leaves and wood, pushing me into the open, right as the first scouts came trudging home. Sweat-streaked, soot-caked, blood-soaked, the first handful of the hale and hearty quickened their paces once the city surrounded them, off to deliver reports to the households that had employed them for this expedition.

Not long after, the bulk of the expedition's participants stumbled into view.

Some few among them were uninjured, much like the scouts from before, but ash and soot had coated them so heavily that their skin had become a mottled patchwork of black and skin tones. They assisted their wounded brethren along the last stretch to the city and consequently, its healers.

I inspected the group's injuries while waiting for Corsivis. Among them were some broken bones, a stab wound to the chest—*he might not see the next morning, considering the suck in his lungs*—and many nasty gashes.

These, however, were of little consequence. The majority of the Esela who staggered into view were sporting burns of varying degree. Some only suffered from a slight reddening of their skin. Others were so severely afflicted by blackened blisters that their comrades had to drag them home.

"What happened?" someone gasped behind me.

Rounding on Sarai, I graced her with my most incredulous look.

"What do you think?" I said. "They ran into another city's raiding party. Looks like they might have fallen into an ambush too, judging from the burns."

"This is..."

With horror, Sarai followed the passage of a keening man with wide eyes.

"An everyday occurrence for the Esela, Sarai," I huffed, crossing my arms. "Why are you here?"

"I'm—"

Wrenching her gaze away, Sarai cleared her throat.

"It's Cor's birthday," she said.

"So?" I said. "Your parents have made it abundantly clear that he's not your brother any longer."

A twitch started beside one of Sarai's eyes.

"I don't care what they say!" she snapped. "They raised him like a son, and I love him like a brother. I say that makes us siblings, whether the same blood runs through our veins or not."

Silently regarding her, I tried to decide whether I believed this girl. In my experience, human children tended to cling to their parents' beliefs and prejudices, at least until they could experience independence, and regarding the Esela, Sarai's parents held a chip on their shoulder, no matter how much they might try to prove otherwise with their charity work.

Sarai must have come to a realization about something because her face crinkled into the pouty look she wore when she was disappointed.

"Why are *you* here?" she asked. "Shouldn't you be in creche?"

"No," I said.

And I gave her nothing else, returning to my inspection of the troops. The rush of wounded had slowed to a trickle, and seeing that, the first niggles of worry rose in the back of my mind.

Where was my friend? Why had so few of the Esela returned? Had my father been among those called to fight this morning?

"Why do you have a sword on you?"

Sarai's question had been so forcefully spoken that it broke through the stream of my own.

"Don't you know how the humans' creche operates?" I said.

Over the years, Sarai had adjusted to my lack of deference for her, so when I slipped up, calling her people 'humans' rather than 'the masters', my typical cringe had been replaced with a shrug. This girl had stuck to me like a bad case of lung rot, no matter what insult—whether intentional or not—I'd paid to her.

"I know creche children don't carry swords," she said with a frown. "It's a privilege that's reserved until after they..."

I enjoyed a brief moment of silence while she put two and two together.

"Have you graduated?" she eventually asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

And nothing else.

"But... you're fourteen, Gael!" Sarai cried. "How...? Why?!"

"I wanted to be here for Cor's birthday, and class was taking too long," I said, narrowing my eyes.

The human who'd coordinated today's expedition had ridden from beneath the canopy of the trees. He was immaculate with not a hair out of place and not a drop of sweat marring his features. Instantly, my hackles rose, my fists clenched, and I took a step forward.

So, it was extremely fortunate that Sarai took the moment to storm in front of me, smacking me with all of her strength. The force of it staggered me, and dazed, I raised a hand to the offended cheek.

“What was that for?” I snapped.

She was looking at me with tears in her eyes.

“Why are you so careless, you fool?” she cried. “How much do you hate the people who care for you?”

For the love of...

“I don’t hate you, Sarai!” I growled. “I need-”

Pausing, I grabbed at the air as if to throttle it. Why couldn’t she or anyone else understand?

“I’m doing what I must to keep you, *all of you*, safe,” I continued. “But if I’m to do that, I need more freedom than what I had in creche. If I’d stayed there, I could never find-”

I cut off, going cold at the realization of how close I’d come to revealing my truth, and while indignation and concern still clung to Sarai, a familiar hunger had also come to light in her eyes.

“Find what?” she asked.

But something else had caught my eye. The last of the Esela were emerging from the trees, and among them limped my father and Corsivis.

My friend’s arm was flung over my father’s shoulders, which seemed needed. Weeping blisters had crusted over half of Corsivis’ face, from just below the eye until they disappeared beneath his cuirass’ neckline. His armor had been charred to his left arm, and if that hadn’t been bad enough, a wicked slash on his hip was opening and closing with every step he took.

“Sarai...”

I’d meant to send her home before she could see this picture of horror, but as she’d watched the blood drain from my face, she must have also heard the warning in my voice. She flipped around to face her worst fear, and a breath later, her distressed shriek pierced my heart.

Tripping on her skirt, Sarai flew to her brother, leaving me to follow her at a much slower pace.

“-you the best healer in the city,” she was frantically chattering when I caught up.

With every word, she lifted her hands toward and away from her brother’s unburned skin.

“They won’t see him,” my father said. “None of the masters’ healers will treat an Eselan.”

Seemingly dazed, Corsivis rasped, “Best healer in the city’s not human.”

That assertion launched him into a coughing fit so violent that it had Sarai and my father struggling to support him.

“What are you talking about?” Sarai asked.

I barreled over any reply my friend might have made.

“How long have you been coughing like that?”

Corsivis started to answer, but before he could, my father interrupted.

“Gael? Why are you outside of creche?”

I raised a finger toward him, fixing my gaze on my friend.

“Cor?” I said.

“It won’t stop,” Corsivis said before breaking into another wave of body-shaking coughs.

“Godsdamnit,” I said under my breath. “All right. I can do this. Let’s get him home.”

Jerking back, my father said, “Home? We need to take him to a healer!”

I couldn’t indulge the impatience I wanted to unleash.

Calmly, I said, “If Cor has saved the items I’ve been pilfering from creche’s clinic over the years, I’ll have everything I need *at home*.”

Both my father and Sarai loudly voiced their objections—

“Gaelen, you can’t play mad scientist on-”

“I’m not letting you-”

—and I considered the possibility of getting Corsivis home on my own. Fortunately, my friend spared me that difficulty.

“Do what he says,” he gasped. “Gael... best healer...”

And he promptly fainted. Once my father finished balancing the significant addition of weight on him, I expectantly cocked my head.

“Well?”

Slowly exhaling, my father deflated, nodding once. As we started moving, Sarai sputtered protests, but she was helpless to stop us now that we’d made up our minds. She trailed us as we dragged Corsivis through the barracks. Eventually, we reached the hovel that my parents called their own.

When we burst through its door, my mother shot out of a chair by the table, leaving a bowl full of shucked peas on top of it. She must have been out of her mind with worry. Those precious peas only ever emerged once she'd worn a furrow into the earth with her pacing.

"What-?" she said. "Gaelen."

Then, she spotted the people behind me, lifting her hands to her mouth.

"Oh, no. Cor..."

"Start boiling water!" I snapped at her.

I could afford no other words right now.

Before my mother had registered my demand, we were in the bedroom, and after carefully lowering my friend into bed, I dropped to my hands and knees, dragging my hidden lockbox from beneath its slats.

"What happened?" I asked.

"An ambush," my father said. "We'd finished with scouting for the day and had turned back when fire encircled us. It was near instantaneous, Gaelen. I don't know how they did it. Must be something new from a tear..."

As he trailed off, I said, "So, you walked through the fire to escape. How did some of you get out without injury?"

"They left an opening for us. A chokehold. An obvious trap," my father said. "We all knew what would await us if we took that way out but--"

"The human ordered you through it anyway. Bastard!" I snarled. "Did the enemy have a form of contained flame with them too?"

"Little jars of it, yes. They rained the missiles of death on us and Cor--"

My father looked away.

"Cor took one for me," he said. "You've made a good friend, son. Are you sure you know what you're-?"

"Yes."

Popping open a smelling salt vial under Corsivis' nose, I laid my arms over his limbs, preparing for-

Taking a deep breath, my friend released it in an agonized scream, struggling to break free of a perceived enemy, but I didn't move my arms. I couldn't have him moving too much. His injuries were bad enough without terror exacerbating them.

“Cor! You’re home! You’re safe!” I shouted. “I’m sorry.”

Vaguely, I felt Sarai pounding her fists on my back before my father dragged her out of the room. Probably a wise move on his part. Corsivis’ sister didn’t need to see what I must do to heal him.

The bucking body beneath me fell still, and wheezing breaths replaced yelling.

“Gael?” Corsivis said. “What’s going-?”

He went quiet, tensing.

“Ah.”

Corsivis had lived with the rank and file long enough to know why I’d woken him up. His wounds were severe, meaning I’d need him conscious while I treated him. He’d tell me if anything I did to him felt excessively wrong.

“Sorry,” I said with a pained grimace.

“Stop it,” he rasped. “Let’s get this over with.”

While I’d woken my friend up, my mother had brought me the boiled water I’d requested, and I used it to sterilize my instruments the best I could before returning to my patient.

“How about another Arivor story while I work?” I asked.

“Sounds great,” Corsivis gasped with panic making his breath come short.

Setting my scalpel against his cuirass’ neckline, I began both with removing his ruined armor and my story.

“Years before the event that ruined Arivor’s life, a war broke out between the Eselan empire and the lesser human kingdoms. Life was different back then, you know. We Esela were considered the superior race, and humans were cockroaches beneath our heel.

“So, the Esela thought this war was a joke, a conflict that would be over and done with in the blink of an eye. Their expectation wasn’t to be.”

I paused, meaning to give my friend a break from the peeling of fabric and flesh from his charred arm, but Corsivis waved for me to continue.

“The war was brutal and long, for if there’s one thing humans excel at, it’s violence. Early in the war, Arivor and his best friend, Eriadren, were drafted to the front. There, they made names for themselves: Arivor for his cunning and Eriadren for his bravery. They saved one another’s lives on countless occasions with both of them determined to safely shepherd the other through the war-”

A hissing screech interrupted my story, and I blinked back tears. It seemed fitting that the first time I shared a tale of Arivor *and* Eriadren would be while I fulfilled the role that had consumed my former life.

I'd finished removing Corsivis' melted armor, and while he fought to keep still, I applied a soothing balm to his arm and face. The stuff was shit, but this era had come with something I thought I'd never see after my last life: worse medicine. I was using the best salve I'd found here on my friend.

It must have provided some comfort because Corsivis soon calmed down, enough for me to continue with the split in his hip.

"During the war, a pivotal battle took place. The humans overcommitted, moving to capture the city that regulated the empire's river trade: Rastchaka. It was a move of stupidity that surprised the Esela because during this war, the humans had produced the first competent general they'd had in centuries. He'd been the reason that the Esela had retreated until the humans were occupying a significant swath of the empire's fringes.

"Eselan high command saw the numbers arrayed against this city and panicked, predicting certain defeat. Arivor looked at it and saw an opportunity. With so many troops to protect him, the human general would think his safety was secured. He'd never expect an assassination attempt.

"So, Arivor, Eriadren, and a hand-picked squad of soldiers shape changed to appear human before infiltrating the enemy camp."

Snipping away a last stitch, I sat on my heels. I could do nothing more for my friend, besides keeping him hydrated and monitoring him for changes.

His smoke inhalation worried me. If too much damage had taken place in his lungs, Corsivis might suffocate simply because those organs couldn't function the way they were meant to.

And I could do nothing about that...

Well. I could do one thing, but I'd rather not use Ele to fix my friend, if it could be helped. I'd already tempted fate once with him. I didn't want to do that again.

"That's it?" Corsivis wheezed. "You won't finish the story?"

My treatment of his injuries must have taken a lot from my friend. His eyes kept drooping while his features had relaxed, and at that, I smiled. I'd give him a bedtime story, if that was what he wanted.

"As you know, shape change is the most difficult of Esela magics. Not everyone can maintain it for long.

"Unfortunately, Eriadren was one of those people. His guise slipped while the squad was inside the human camp, and they were all captured. They thought they'd met their end, but the humans made a vital mistake. They underestimated the Esela.

“The squad, weakened by magic’s energy drain, was brought before the infamous general so he could scoff and gloat to his heart’s content, and in that moment, Eriadren showed his strength.

“Yes, that man was horrid at all things magical, but he was a genius with the blade and a stubborn bastard to boot. He slipped free of his bonds, vanquished the general’s bodyguards, and killed that troublesome man with his own blade. Of course, after that, he fainted. Magic use and physical exertion had caught up with him in one immense rush.

“When he regained consciousness, his squad was dead, except for Arivor, and with no relief in sight, those two notorious friends faced certain death, back-to-back. They fought their enemy, tooth and nail, with a wildness that for years to come, the humans would call insanity, standing firm until the cavalry could rescue them.

“After that rout, the humans were broken. Several more skirmishes broke out between the races before peace was achieved, but not one of them came as close to threatening the empire.

“And Arivor went home a hero.”

Corsivis’ snore was the most appreciated applause I’d ever received. I’d wanted to share this story since class this afternoon, when my demonstration had sparked the memory. I was glad to have given it to my friend, the only person in this era who viewed Arivor with anything but disgust.

“Happy birthday, Cor,” I said under my breath.

Someone moved behind me, making me tense.

“Why did only Arivor go home a hero?” Sarai quietly asked. “Eriadren seemed like the story’s hero to me.”

Gods. It was only her.

Quietly breathing out, I said, “How long have you been listening?”

“Long enough to know that you shared a story about Eriadren, or the Preserver as the Esela call him, with my brother,” Sarai said.

When I whipped around to face her, she waved me down.

“Oh, I don’t care about Eselan legends. Your race needs all the hope it can get. I’m more concerned with the Doldimar side of that tale,” she said. “Why do you tell my brother these stories? You can’t fill his head with a glowing vision of that man.”

What...? Why did she care?

“I share them because he asks,” I said with my brow crinkled. “Is there some reason I shouldn’t?”

Sarai looked down her nose at me for a while, at least until she realized I was genuinely curious.

“You don’t know who my brother is?” she said. “He’s never told you?”

That was a strange question. I’d always wondered why Corsivis, a half-Eselan, had been allowed to live among the humans. For a long time, I’d thought it was because of his human half, but other half-Esela hadn’t been welcomed into that exceedingly closed community. Perhaps there was something more to the story.

“He’s never said a word. Why do you ask?” I said. “Who is he? Besides Corsivis, I mean.”

Shaking her head, Sarai said, “Cor is Doldimar’s descendant.”

For a moment, I could only blink at her, but then, I burst into laughter; the idea was so ridiculous.

“That’s impossible,” I gasped. “Rafe... his kid... he died.”

At the mention of that boy, a blanking spell threatened to overcome me, but with the preceding laughter’s help, I shoved it aside.

It didn’t help that Sarai was looking at me with something akin to disgust right now, though.

“Do you really think that Doldimar, crazy overlord of absolute power, stayed celibate between the destruction of the Eselan empire and his defeat?” she asked.

That was... huh.

I’d always thought Arivor was devoted to Clariss, his wife, but I supposed that devotion would have been exempted after she’d left him.

Still. Corsivis was a half-Eselan...

As if hearing that objection in my mind, Sarai continued, “Doldimar preferred human women. I suppose he couldn’t stomach violating the women of his own race, so he saved his... peculiar proclivities for women of the lesser race instead.”

With my gorge rising, I shot to my feet. I couldn’t consider... COULDN’T.

“Let me know if he stops breathing,” I said before fleeing the room.

Sightlessly fumbling for a chair, I collapsed into it before hiding my head in my hands. I’d almost forgotten what Doldimar was capable of, almost forgotten the horrors, almost forgotten the victims—

A release of weight from my hip drew me out of this blanking spell’s grip. Frantically, I reached for Shadowsteal, only to find my gloves alone at my waist. In a flash, they were on, and I summoned my sword back to me, leaving my father temporarily frozen.

Lowering his empty hands, he said, “I see you’ve graduated early.”

From their mat in the corner, my mother yelped.

“He’s *what?*”

As she jerked upright, I sheathed Shadowsteal, returning my head to the care of my hands.

“Yup. I’m free of creche,” I said.

In the resulting weighty silence, their judgment loudly shouted. The only sound in the hovel came from Sarai, who was softly chattering to her unconscious brother.

Soon enough, though, the two chairs across from me scraped over dirt, and my parents settled in for a long conversation.

“Tell us what happened.”

# 5

## Quincy, Gaelen

### *Quincy*

“Please, don’t make me come with you.”

When the summons had come, this was the request my son had made of me, which had only furthered my confusion.

To me, Gaelen’s recent behavior had been even more odd than anything he’d done in the past. He wasn’t a coward. That much was clear from how little he feared the masters and his insistence on being who he was, despite their displeasure. Knowing that, I didn’t understand why my son had been avoiding our city’s daily expeditions into the forest.

A little over a year had passed since his graduation from creche, and in that time, he hadn’t joined the expeditions, not even once.

This wasn’t to say that Gaelen wasn’t pulling his weight in the community! Throughout that time, he’d been working in the city’s healing clinics, spending many a day in crop fields as well.

Unfortunately, these jobs, the ones he’d chosen to do? They were traditionally women’s duties, and because of that, people had been talking.

When Gaelen had first graduated, no one had paid his latest oddity any mind. As a rule, young people fresh from creche typically got a week’s leeway, time where they could establish themselves, before they were expected to take up the duties they’d carry for the rest of their lives.

After his first week in the community had passed, people hadn’t commented on Gaelen’s failure to follow this tradition. Over the years, the many times he’d snuck out of creche had ingrained the practice of ignoring him into them, but as soon as other children from his creche year had started graduating, the whispers of ‘coward’ had started circulating, getting ever louder.

I didn’t care what my neighbors thought of my son. I knew Gaelen, and because of that, I was proud of the man my boy had become. What worried me, though, was what happened when a whisper from the Esela rumor mill eventually got the masters’ attention.

Supposedly, Esela were allowed to have free reign of our activities during the day, so long as whatever we did also advanced the city’s interests, but in actuality, the masters made their preferences for our tasks known.

Typically, no Esela would dare defy them. For instance, they wanted Mycella to be a maid, so every day, she gathered her tools and commenced scrubbing whichever home she'd been assigned that day. They wanted me to be a soldier, so every morning, I joined an expedition into the forest, praying all the while that we'd avoid encounters from another city's scouting parties.

If either of us chose to take up a different task, then our rations got cut for a week.

And we needed to eat.

In the last month, Gaelen's rations had dwindled to nothing, and he'd begun showing signs of starvation. He'd been snapping at the slightest irritant, and when he wasn't cranky, he'd been sluggish and slow to respond. Having lost too much weight in far too short of a time, he'd gone to bed almost immediately after coming home each night.

And I'd had enough of this. I wouldn't watch my son starve to death because he was being stubborn.

Over the last week, I'd been supplementing Gaelen's rations with my own, and once he'd seemed more clear-headed, I'd sat the boy down, informing him in no uncertain terms that he'd be joining me on today's expedition.

Now, we were waiting on the forest's outskirts for the master of today's outing to arrive. Having quietly stood beside me this whole time, Gaelen cleared his throat, quickly drawing my attention.

"I understand why this is happening, so I won't protest it," he said, "but for today, can we at least stay at the back of the group?"

I wished I could grant that request, truly, but given how our lives were, I had only one answer for my son.

"We can do that if that's what the masters decide," I said.

At that, Gaelen winced, which had me running my eyes over him. He looked antsy than I'd ever seen him before but...

This wasn't fear I was seeing. I could perhaps call his bearing restless or agitated, but Gaelen definitely didn't look afraid. With his lip pinched between his teeth, he picked at the gloves that he insisted on wearing into combat.

As if to distract me, the Esela around us shifted, a change in demeanor that announced the master's arrival, and on seeing who it was today, I groaned, releasing a fervent prayer to Alouin for safety.

Jace was one of the city's best commanders. Innumerable captures and routs could be attributed to his name, but unfortunately, he was also ridiculously careless with Eselan lives, spending them without a thought or concern. Some said that losing more soldiers per expedition than any other commander was Jace's pride and joy, something that was only made worse by the man's second

fixation: befriending me.

While I didn't typically like to admit it out loud, I knew that I was the best swordsman in this city. In fact, my excellence with the blade was one of the reasons that over his childhood, Gaelen's many shenanigans had been excused. The masters had wanted to see if my son would display the same talent.

In the past, other human commanders had courted me, trying to get me to give them my fealty, but Jace didn't seem to care about that. He was fascinated by the idea that an Esela could be superior to a master in even a single skill.

Many were the nights where Jace had insisted on taking me drinking, despite the strictures against an Eselan doing such a thing, or to parties where he could show me off, all in a vain attempt to catch me off guard. He wanted to prove that he, the master, was better with the sword, studying my every move whenever possible, and frankly, I was sick of being his pet project. I'd been sick of it for a while, actually.

This was the man who would lead us into the no man's land of the forest today. He rode to his waiting soldiers, inspecting us with a critical eye.

"Good enough," he said, as if to himself.

When he spurred his horse into the forest, we followed, and as per Gaelen's request, I kept us toward the back of the column.

This position was new to me. Usually, I was one of an expedition's scouts, leading the way into danger, so being surrounded by so many people was strange. I was used to my tense, daily communions with the forest.

Even in the relative safety found this far back, I stayed on high alert, flicking my gaze across the forest with my ears pricked, but after hours without a sign of another expedition, I let myself relax, if only minutely. Dusk had come calling, and within the hour, we'd turn back to the city, soon to celebrate our good fortune today.

As if to disappoint me, a scout noiselessly slid through the brush, rushing to confer with Jace. That man carefully listened to the scout's report before breaking into a fierce grin, and my heart sank. While Jace dispensed orders, I turned on Gaelen, grabbing his wrist.

"No matter what happens here, you stick with me, all right?" I whispered.

Gaelen nodded with his jaw clenched, and at the expression on his face, I snatched my hand away. In the space of a breath, my little boy had aged ten years, but I didn't get time to marvel at this change. With Jace shooing the column into cover, an ambush was soon set.

When the enemy party arrived, they slunk into our trap with a professionalism I had to admire. Their column had kept to a tight formation, and despite the late hour, I saw every one of the Esela's eyes peeled. Almost, that attentiveness was enough to save them.

Almost.

Unfortunately for them, our scouts had proven better than theirs today, eliminating the enemy's lookouts, and without the advantage of a warning, these people had no chance. As soon as the order to attack came, these men were doomed.

So, why hadn't Jace given the order?

I contemplated this delay for a few moments before realizing that the enemy party's master had yet to make an appearance. While eliminating an expedition's worth of hostile soldiers would certainly be advantageous for my people's masters, Jace had always been notoriously greedy. He'd want to capture this expedition's master as well, to be ransomed back to their home city later.

As I watched the hapless Esela marching scant few feet in front of me, I tried to silence the voices of despair and outrage in my head, the ones making my blood boil. It was bad enough that the masters wouldn't find common ground with each other. Not only did they refuse to stop these pointless expeditions, but they also threatened my people with extinction via starvation if we didn't participate as well. If we wanted to eat, we had to fight the masters' battles for them, and that... that *wasn't fair*.

Silently, Gaelen covered my clenched fist with his own hand. Holding my gaze, he gave me a small shake of his head, and I forced myself to relax.

My son was right. Starting a deadly fight wound up like this would only get me killed.

And this fight was about to begin. The quested after master had emerged from wherever he'd been hiding, and tensing, I waited for the signal.

The twang of bowstrings soon had me springing to my feet, moving forward as enemy soldiers dropped to the ground. After that, my play on time became a blur of perfectly flowing activity. I was the avatar of death among the enemy, my fellow Esela. Every swipe, every thrust was made with extreme efficiency, all to end these people's lives as painlessly as possible.

My performance was only slightly marred today. I'd given a large chunk of my attention to my son's work.

I'd never doubted that Gaelen would be good in a fight. Noblinson and the other combat instructors had always insisted that my son made his weapons sing for him, and on watching him dance through the enemy, I could understand why they'd said that. Almost always accompanied by rivers of light, Gaelen moved from one opponent to another in the blink of an eye, making fighting forms that took decades to perfect look easy.

It was only as the skirmish ended that I noticed the single item of utmost importance Gaelen had failed to do.

My son's opponents were still breathing. Gaelen hadn't killed a single one. Some of them were missing limbs while others were unconscious, but none were dead. The skill needed to accomplish

something like that... the awe of it almost canceled out my dismay.

In most cases, the masters would approve of these acts of mercy, just like any other person of conscience, but when on an expedition, the party's goal wasn't one of feints and permitted retreats. In these forests between the master's cities, a war of attrition was constantly playing out. The point of the expeditions was to eliminate as many enemy soldiers as possible.

Because why would the masters ever stop to negotiate or talk to one another?

As I finished off my last opponent, I hurried to Gaelen's side. With his shoulders slumped and his eyes absently fixed on his sword, my son looked lost, and I didn't know how to comfort him, not when I had to help him fix his mistake as well.

"Gaelen! What are you doing?" I hissed. "You have to kill them. Now. Before Jace comes this way."

My son raised his gaze to meet mine, and the anguish in them nearly knocked me over.

"I can't," he said with his voice strained.

Oh, Alouin. *Oh Alouin*, I'd never wanted this for my son but...

"What do you mean, you can't?" I growled. "It's easy! Look."

Striding to an Eselan who was whimpering over a lost hand, I silenced his cries with a thrust through the eye.

Gesturing to my son, I said, "Now you."

But Gaelen only stared at me, refusing to move, and on catching sight of Jace's swift approach, I grabbed my son's arm, dragging him to a soldier he'd merely knocked unconscious. Once there, I positioned his hands so that his sword was left hovering over the enemy's ribs. He needed to only apply a little pressure, and this man would die, but Gaelen wouldn't move.

Glancing toward coming danger, I whispered, "Come on, son. If you don't do this, the masters won't be happy."

When Jace caught sight of us, he frowned, sending panic tearing through my thoughts.

Why was my son hesitating like this? Didn't he know what was at stake? If Gaelen couldn't deal death on the enemy, it wouldn't matter that he'd graduated from creche. This was the one issue that any master could use to declare an Eselan defective.

Hell. Maybe Gaelen just needed a shove.

With a soft growl, I took hold of the pommel of my son's sword, pushing down with all of my might, but- but Gaelen's arms refused to budge.

Which wasn't possible. With the force I was applying, my son should have at least lost his balance. Even if he'd somehow stayed on his feet, those arms should have extended, surrendering in their fight against gravity. They most certainly shouldn't have stayed fixed in stone like this. That was *impossible*.

But that meant...

Gaelen had said he couldn't kill.

"Alouin, that wasn't a metaphor, was it?" I said, horrified. "Your body literally won't let you end a life."

"I asked to stay home today for a reason.," Gaelen said.

This was why my son had avoided joining expeditions for so long. He hadn't been running from a fight. He'd been trying to avoid a death sentence, and I'd destroyed any chance he'd had at that.

Dear Alouin. What had I done?

As he stopped beside us, Jace said, "Why aren't these Esela dead?"

Oh, hell. How did I-?

"We're in the middle of fixing that," I scrambled to say. "Just finishing up now."

"Well?"

With a significant glance, Jace waved at Gaelen, who still had his sword point hovered over an enemy's heart.

"Get to it," he said.

I didn't know how I could fix this mistake with my son left alive, but even still, I turned toward the master, intent on doing it. Whatever would soon be required of me, I had to get in between these two men. In fact, I was ready to kill Jace if I must, even if that would start a wave of persecution against the other Esela in my city. I loved my son that much.

His voice stopped me short.

"No," he said.

And I whirled on Gaelen. Many were the words that an Eselan should never say in the masters' presence, but one of them was paramount: no. The masters didn't take well to our refusal.

With his eyebrows soaring high, Jace whispered, "What did you say?"

Calmly, Gaelen sheathed his sword, lifted his chin, and glared at the man behind me.

"I said no," he firmly stated. "You want these people dead? You'll have to do it yourself because I refuse to do your dirty work for you."

Something brushed against my shoulder hard enough to knock me into the dirt, and by the time I was on my feet again, Jace had hold of Gaelen's hair, tilting the boy's head back. My son continued staring at the man until a knife was buried into the soft spot under his chin, and once that was done, Jace dropped the body like it was so much trash.

In the distance, someone howled into the blood-soaked forest, but I was too busy reaching my son to care about that. I lifted an empty sack of flesh and bone into my arms, brushing hair out of its face.

"No, no, no, no, *no, no, no!*"

When Jace slapped me, dragging my attention to him, the blow was almost enough to send me into a blood-lust filled rage, one that would see the man who'd murdered my son *dead*.

He looked at me like I'd done something unexpected.

"What are you so upset about?" he said. "It was just a defective mongrel."

And wrath colored my world red, choking my voice.

"*He was my son!*" I coughed.

With a sharp inhale, Jace took a step back.

"Ah," he said. "I'm- I'm sorry... wait. Why am I apologizing to an Eselan?"

Shaking his head, he gestured at the motionless mass in my lap.

With a shrug, he said, "Well, I guess you can keep the dagger. Maybe its sale will compensate you for your loss."

I wanted to indulge my rage at those words, truly I did, but instead, Jace's prompt dragged my unwilling gaze down to my son. A dagger was still stuck through Gaelen's head with its cross guard resting under his chin, and when I'd moved him into my lap, it had opened his jaw, revealing a metal glint between his crimson teeth.

In a flash, I was on the other side of the clearing, offering the gift of my last meal to the forest. Tears joined vomit on the forest floor, and for the single longest hour of my life, I shuddered in place, struggling to digest the fact that my son was dead.

Wondering if Jace would let me return to the city with his body.

Lost in the face of how I'd share this with Mycella.

Eventually, I took a steadying breath, ready to face the nightmare that Jace had made of my son. When I turned, however, white light blinded me, leaving splotches in my vision, and around them, I saw Gaelen's body twitch with his hands feebly searching for the dagger's hilt.

"Papa! Please!" a beloved voice gurgled.

---

*Gaelen*

As the human's face mottled into an interesting array of red shades, he charged me, bowling my father over in the process, and I sighed, wondering how he'd murder me.

Earlier this morning, I'd discussed this possible outcome with Creation, not long after my father had revealed his immovable intentions for today. The splinter had agreed that with my annoying handicap, death had been almost guaranteed for me before the day's end, and once I'd convinced it that my father's mind couldn't be changed, I'd begged Creation to keep me dead for more than an instant. Whoever eventually murdered me couldn't see my return.

I hoped the splinter kept that promise.

As the human jerked my head back, I poured the totality of my disdain onto him, but when I tasted steel in my mouth, I couldn't stop my eyes from widening. After the years I'd spent with Reive, I'd come to expect more agony before the release of death. It seemed, however, that this death would be quick—

*I crumpled onto a familiar, white landscape, quickly righting myself to find Alouin. After what that bastard had done to me and Arivor, I hated him, but in the past, he'd proven useful during the brief moments I spent in his world. Our communication had typically progressed one word at a time, but considering how many times Reive used to kill me in one day, such a hindrance had been no hindrance at all over those years.*

*As usual, Alouin was looming over my sprawled body, but this time, the distress on his face was new.*

*"Eriadren! What are you-?" he said before frowning. "You've been here for far too long."*

*He began playing his fingers through the air and—*

A burst of white light propelled me into my body.

Damn. I hadn't gotten to ask-

Why could I taste steel—?

*"Fuck!" I shouted, letting the expletive fly into Alouin's worried face.*

*That son of a bitch had left his dagger in me? Godsdamnit! Maybe this would be an agonizing death after all.*

*"Gaelen-" Alouin started.*

I took a deep breath, forcing my jaw open as wide as it could go, but even then, steel pierced through the roof of my mouth.

Desperately, I sought the dagger's grip while crying out for help, and as I did, the blade fileted my tongue. I choked on a rush of blood—

*"Arivor-" Alouin blurted when I appeared in his world.*

Somehow, I gained a hold on the weapon, tugging to no avail. I was too weak.

Meanwhile, I once more made a mess of my tongue with tears crawling down the sides of my face.

"Please, help!" I cried.

My body convulsed—

*"-is coming!" Alouin hurried to finish.*

Coughing, I flailed for something, *anything*, to help me. I couldn't stay stuck in a life-death sequence like this for much longer. I'd go well and truly mad.

When someone took hold of my questing hands, years of torture with Reive asserted their dominance on my mind, and I let loose a wail, thrashing and kicking.

Fighting with all my strength to buck my captor off of me.

"Son! SON! *GAELEN!* It's all right! I've got you!"

That voice wormed through my mind-numbing terror, forcing it back long enough for me to realize two things. One: my father was the one speaking to me. And two: I couldn't taste steel.

I was alive.

"Papa," I croaked despite my ravaged throat.

"I'm right here, Gaelen," my father said.

Beaming down at me, he smoothed my hair along my forehead. He held my wrists with his other hand, so tightly clasped together that my fingers had started going numb.

"My hands," I managed to mumble.

And my father loosened his grip so quickly that I wondered if he'd forgotten he was holding me.

“What happened?” I gasped. “Did anyone-?”

With a flash of muted light, my throat was healed, leaving me coughing.

“Did anyone see...?”

How should I finish that question?

“Besides me, you mean?” my father asked.

He laughed at my annoyed expression before patting my shoulder.

“Your secret’s safe, son.”

So, Creation had done its job. I’d have to thank it later. Maybe I should also ask what it had done to delay the force that kept me in perfect health.

When I sat up, my father reluctantly released his hold on me. Night had fallen in the time since the human had forced a knife through my mouth, and in the quiet, I noted that my father and I were alone, surrounded by the dead.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Headed home, I presume,” my father said. “I lost track of them after...”

After I’d died.

Poor man. I hadn’t meant to hurt him, but when leaving this morning, I couldn’t have told him what I’d thought would happen today, much like I couldn’t share that I’d survive it. He’d never have believed either of those claims without proof. Hell, he’d had a hard enough time with accepting my inability to kill someone.

Still, I hated that circumstances had made him think his son was dead, no matter how unavoidable that had been.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry! You came back to me,” my father said. “You’re-”

His eyes went wide.

“You’re a miracle, Gaelen!”

Wincing, I turned away. I was no miracle. If anything, I was a curse.

After climbing to my feet, I dusted my trousers off before offering my father a hand. In an awkward silence, we set off for home while I racked my brain for a way to explain why I was alive and breathing. I needed something that would convince an entire city I wasn’t an abnormality that

needed to be put down.

As if to himself, my father said, "When you graduated last year, I always thought 'blin had gone a little crazy, but he was right, wasn't he? You are the-"

"Don't," I interrupted. "Please, don't put your faith in me. I have one purpose in this life: to murder my best friend when he shows his face. I don't care about anything else."

Whoops. I probably shouldn't have said that, but as always, dying had left me a little... addled, we'd put it.

"What are you talking about?" my father said, snapping his head toward me. "I used to change your diapers when you were a baby, young man! I have all the faith in the world in you, but that faith is that you'll become a decent man, not that you'll fulfill some preordained role."

He made a face before crossing his arms.

"And what's this about murdering your friend?" he said. "You're not planning on hurting Corsivis, are you?"

As he fell silent, glaring at me, I contained my delighted laughter with difficulty. There had been so many amusing comments in that diatribe, but the greatest of them had been that a man half my age had had the balls to scold me like a child. The experience was... refreshing.

"Corsivis has nothing to fear from me," I said. "Arivor, on the other hand..."

Trailing off, I slowed down. While I'd been fluttering between life and death, Alouin had given me a message about my friend. What had it been?

I scrambled through an adrenaline-fueled mess of memory to piece it together, and once I had, I stopped short.

"Gaelen, Arivor is coming," Alouin had said.

Damn. Had that man actually *helped* me? He was supposed to stay impartial in this aspect of the Eternal War, but instead, he'd given me a warning so I could prepare for-

The true implication of what Alouin had said hit me like a galloping horse. If he was right, the end was almost upon me this time, and I wasn't ready for it. I'd gotten comfortable here, making far too many connections. I didn't want to return to the Eternal War's front line, to be born into a new body, to start over *again*.

"What is it?" my father asked.

When he rested a hand on my shoulder, I realized my body had been shaking, and if that weren't bad enough, the concern in his voice made me flinch. Here I'd gone, giving this man hope that his son was un-killable, and I'd be leaving him soon. Hell.

“It’s nothing!” I tightly said. “I just realized that today’s commander will probably report my murder, although he’ll probably use a much more polite term than that for what he did. How’s a corpse supposed to get rations? And more importantly, how am I supposed to walk into a city that thinks I’m dead?”

For now, I couldn’t consider what was coming, not when I had so many present-day problems to address.

“We’ll worry about that if it becomes an issue,” my father said. “Right now, I’m more concerned with getting you to your mother before someone decides to share the news with her.”

That was a good point. My mother wasn’t exactly rational in the face of bad news. Who knew what she’d do to the person who told her that her son hadn’t survived today’s expedition?

And of course, I didn’t want her to think I was dead for even a minute.

Soon enough, the sparkle of firelight peeked through the trees, which had us picking up the pace. When we emerged from the forest, the typical crowd that gathered to welcome soldiers home had dissipated, leaving behind a single, tear-streaked girl. As soon as she saw us, she darted forward at an unbelievable speed, barreling into me when she reached us.

“Gaelen!” she sobbed. “They said you were dead! I didn’t want to believe them, but you took so long to come home.”

Hesitantly, I patted the girl’s back.

“Sarai,” I said. “It’s ok. I’m... fine.”

Pulling back, she snapped, “What happened?”

And I examined her. Considering the events of the forest and what Alouin had shared, could I-? Should I-?

When Creation didn’t pop in to stop me, I took a deep breath.

“You know those questions you love to pester me with?” I asked.

With her face closing off, Sarai warily said, “Yes...?”

“If you can convince the city that today’s commander was mistaken about killing me, then I’ll answer them for you,” I said.

That would be a good way to guarantee her help, right? And yes, a well-known look of calculation had taken hold of Sarai’s face.

“Jace had that honor today, so your request shouldn’t be too challenging. That man may be a brilliant commander, but half the time, he’s drunk off his ass,” she said before sharply nodding. “I

can do it.”

With a relieved sigh, I said, “Thank you.”

I had nothing else to do here. Jerking my head at my father, I started my journey home.

Behind me, Sarai snapped, “And just where do you think you’re going?”

“Home,” I called without stopping. “I’m only answering those questions once you’ve followed through with your end of the deal.”

“You’re going *home*?” Sarai said. “Where a mob of terrified people could easily find you?”

She had a good point. Stopping, I rested my hands on my hips.

“What do you suggest?” I said, glancing back at Sarai.

“My parents are at a parlay with another city at the moment,” she said. “No one knows about this, but I’m the only one in the house right now. My family has...”

She flicked her eyes away.

“We’re having some issues. We’ve had to live without guards, among other niceties, for a while now,” she eventually continued. “So, my suggestion is this. Stay with me until tempers cool. No one will suspect that the ‘rogue Eselan’ is living with a human.”

Hmm. That could work.

Turning to my father, I asked, “What do you think?”

“I think she’s right, much as I hate to admit it,” my father said. “You go with her, and I’ll let your mother and Corsivis know what’s happened.”

Well, this idea made me uncomfortable, especially when it meant I’d have to trust a human to keep me safe, but I didn’t have much of a choice with it.

“I’ll follow you home, Sarai,” I said, “but I won’t like it.

When she rolled her eyes, I made a face, and while I was distracted with that exchange, my father scooped me into a bone-crushing hug.

“I know this will be difficult for you, son,” he said, “but try not to cause another incident while you’re with that girl.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

Clapping my shoulder, he brushed past me to plunge into the city, but before he could disappear, I called out, slowing down his pace.

“Papa, you know I love you, right?”

That made surprise flash through my father’s eyes. I wasn’t typically fond of expressing affection, so this was a rarity for me.

My father smiled at me.

“I know,” he said. “Love you too, Gaelen.”

I watched him go until he rounded onto a cross-street, hoping all the while that I’d see him again. If Alouin had been right and Arivor was on the way, though, that hope was likely to be dashed.

I had one more conundrum to address before following the human child to her den.

“So, tell me,” I said, “why were you waiting for the expedition’s return today?”

Sarai didn’t usually do that.

“I was waiting for you, silly,” she said.

Shifting in place, she refused to meet my eyes.

“I heard you’d joined the expedition today.”

Ok...

“But still. Why?” I asked. “After a day in the forest, I wouldn’t have had the patience for your constant questioning. So, why-?”

“I just wanted to check if my friend had survived,” Sarai said, glaring at me. “Am I not allowed to do that?”

But... she...

“Friend?” I squeaked.

With an exasperated sigh, Sarai lifted her hands to either side before dropping them in a rush.

“Yes! Friend!” she said. “Alouin, what else must I do to convince you of that?”

Oh, no. Her face was splotching, which was a sure sign she was about to explode.

“I- I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought you only associated with me because of my... unique abilities.”

That was what it had always seemed like, at least.

Rolling her eyes, Sarai snapped, “Like you only hate me because I’m human?”

And I recoiled because... because she was right. I'd never looked at Sarai as simply *Sarai*. She'd always been Corsivis' human sister or the irritating human girl-child to me.

For all my griping about the prejudice and injustices done to the Esela, I'd certainly discriminated against her. Damn.

"I'm so sorry, Sarai," I said. "I don't know if it can excuse my behavior, but I promise that from now on, I'll see you as you are, regardless of your race. I'll only see you as my... friend."

Great. Another connection that the end would soon sever.

But when Sarai slung her arms around my neck, I thought that would be worth it.

# 6

## Gaelen, Mycella

### *Gaelen*

With a crisp, fall snap in the air, today had dawned bright and beautiful, and I tried to enjoy it, despite the itch pressing me to escape from my self-imposed prison. It had been five days, and still, Sarai spent most of her time walking through the city, laughing at the tales of my demise while spreading rumors of her own. She told me that soon, I should make a public appearance to prove her version of the story, but that would only come once people's moods had calmed down. Once it was safe.

That time couldn't come soon enough.

I needed to be out of Sarai's house and among the city's citizens, keeping a finger on the pulse of the world. Trapped in this house as I'd been—separated from everyone except Sarai and the occasional visitor—I'd never hear the whispers of Arivor's coming in time to find him. I had to reach him before he began his inevitable, bloody conquest.

At my side, Corsivis asked, "What's got you so agitated, Gael?"

This morning, he and my mother had finagled their way into the work assignment for Sarai's home. When they'd knocked on her door, the place had already been immaculate—I hadn't had much to do while waiting—which had left them with plenty of spare time to visit with me.

We were lounging on the house's roof garden, high above the buildings around it, while waiting for Sarai's return. Lunch would commence once she'd arrived.

At Corsivis' question, I stopped tearing the roll in my hand into tiny, fluffy pieces.

"I'm fine," I snapped.

My mother disguised her short burst of laughter with a cough into her hand.

"Sure, sweetheart," she said. "Only, you look like someone's stolen your favorite plaything."

With a soft growl, I scattered breadcrumbs over the table in front of me.

"I don't like being idle, is all," I said.

“You should enjoy it while it lasts,” Corsivis said.

Leaning back, he threw an arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

“Soon enough, you’ll be free to join the expeditions again.”

Frowning, I narrowed my eyes at my friend. Had that been jealousy in his voice?

“Yes, that’ll be great,” I said. “Because my first time doing it went so well.”

When Corsivis lifted his arm to glare at me, I raised an eyebrow. Apparently, that had been jealousy.

I couldn’t blame him for that, though. So many months before, my friend might have survived his brush with death, but despite my best efforts, his burns hadn’t properly healed. Because of them, his face had been pulled into a permanent sneer, something that had inexplicably increased his popularity with women, but the burns on his arm had healed so poorly that the limb hung at a crooked angle, a position that was incredibly painful for Corsivis to straighten.

With a disfigurement like that, no one wanted him to join an expedition, probably worried that he’d be more of a liability than an asset, but fortunately, because he’d earned this wound while on a trip into the forest, none of the humans expected him to join them anymore. He’d already proven his worth.

So, rather than venturing out to fight every day, Corsivis earned his rations by cleaning houses with my mother.

His diminishment was a shame, really. Since his injury, Corsivis and I had occasionally sparred at day’s end, one way we relieved stress, and I knew from those sessions that my friend hadn’t lost his skill with swordplay. From the jealousy in his eyes, I also gathered that Corsivis missed the expeditions, or perhaps it was more that he missed feeling useful.

“Stop it, you two,” my mother said before my friend could make a scathing reply. “Don’t make me break up one of your fights again.”

With a wince, I remembered the months after my parents had welcomed Corsivis into their home. How many times had she gotten between us when we’d been brawling?

I didn’t typically lose my temper badly enough to do something like that, but sometimes, when I’d come home to find my carefully organized belongings strewn across the room, I’d exploded. The backs of my thighs sympathetically twinged at the memory of her charging into the midst of those scuffles, armed with only a broom.

As if in concert, Corsivis and I said, “Yes, ma’am.”

Which was the only proper reply to what my mother had said.

Fortunately, a breeze blew through our enclosed arbor before another argument could start, sending loose food skittering across the table, and the three of us broke apart, scrambling to save it before it hit the floor.

This was how Sarai found us.

“Well,” she said, “I’m glad someone is doing their assigned work today.”

When we three Eselan shot baleful glares at her, the human girl giggled into a hand.

“I’m only kidding!” she said.

Once she’d dropped into the last empty spot around the table, I nudged her.

“How did it go today?” I asked.

“Alouin, Gael! Can’t I have a moment to relax before you bombard me with questions?” she said.

Chuckling, I said, “Now you know how I’ve felt in the years since I met you.”

Too busy stuffing her face to reply, Sarai swatted my arm, and making a face, I rubbed it.

“Ow! What was that for?”

With a rueful grin in place, my mother said, “Do I need to smack some sense into the two of you as well?”

“Mama...” I said, collapsing onto my elbows.

“Hey!” Sarai yelped over me. “He started it!”

“What are you talking about?” I growled. “I’m only-”

With a head shake, my mother butted in.

“No, she’s right, sweetheart,” she said. “You’re unusually snippy today. What’s wrong?”

Suddenly, I was the sole actor on a stage of my own making, and as Sarai, Corsivis, and my mother stared at me, I squirmed in place. The hunger that had earlier filled my plate with food abandoned me to my less than desirable fate. Hell, I didn’t want to get into this.

“I told you. I don’t like being idle,” I said, hoping that would be enough of an explanation for them.

As if to frustrate me, Corsivis chirped, “Nope! That’s not it. Sometimes, you spend hours staring at nothing. If that’s not ‘being idle’, I don’t know what else is.”

And I bristled in place, barely keeping scathing words in check.

*Those are blanking spells, you insufferable moron! I can't help them!*

"Fine. That's not it," I conceded. "The truth is, I have a time-sensitive mission to complete, and the circumstances that have trapped me here are driving me a bit crazy."

I expected them to laugh at me. What teenager claimed to have a mission beyond discovering their place in the world?

So, I was more than a little baffled when the others made noises of comprehension.

"Your dad mentioned this," Corsivis said. "Murdering your best friend, huh? Should I be offended that you haven't tried to kill me yet?"

When he stuck his tongue out at me, I rolled my eyes.

"Since it's out there, can we talk about the fact that Gaelen wants to *kill* someone?" my mother said. "That's... I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I don't know what to think about that."

Oh... hell.

"It- it's not what you think!" I said. "It's a mercy!"

Fortunately, Sarai stepped in, saving me from having to explain.

"You two haven't figured it out yet?" she said.

Their blank looks sent her into peals of laughter, so strong that her hand's grip on the table became the only thing keeping her upright. Seeing this, I leaned back into the pillows, closing my eyes. Soon enough, this attack of hilarity would peter out, and Sarai would continue.

She knew almost everything now. True to my promise, I'd been answering Sarai's numerous questions over the five days I'd spent with her, or at least, I'd answered the ones that Creation had let me respond to. For a time, those questions had seemed endless, but at some point, Sarai had gone quiet with the wheels in her mind turning.

I was proud to admit that Sarai, the girl who'd trailed in my shadow for nine years, was much smarter than I'd given her credit for.

As her laughter slowly exhausted itself, I contented myself with imagining the expressions on Corsivis and my mother's faces, never opening my eyes.

"That man—"

Sarai must be pointing at me.

"—your son and friend, is Gaelen, well and true. He's also Eriadren, the Eselan Preserver, and the mission he's talking about? It's not to free the Esela, like all of you believe it to be."

As my mother and Corsivis absorbed this, the silence stretched, and I waited in its embrace. The pillows at my back were far too comfortable, and the sun's rays, diffusing through the arbor overhead, were pleasantly warming my body. Why should I leave this state of relaxation to handle the can of worms Sarai had opened? So far, she'd managed that relatively well by herself.

After a moment, Corsivis said, "Sarai, have you gone mad? Eriadren's been dead for almost a century."

"But no one actually saw him die. He just... disappeared," Sarai said. "Even if he did pass from our world, though, do you really think he'd stay dead for long? Come on, Cor. We know the stories. Eriadren couldn't truly die. Always, he returned, just like he could never kill anyone free of Doldimar's Corruption. Just like he became a flash of white light when he fought. Does that sound like anyone we know?"

Again, silence descended, one almost thick enough to pry my eyes open.

"But... he's my baby," my mother eventually said. "I carried him for nine months. How does that fit into your theory?"

"I..."

Sarai clicked her tongue.

"I don't know," she said.

And I sighed. I'd known she'd eventually hit a wall. It was time to sneak as much information past Creation as I could.

Never moving, I said, "The backlash destroyed my body. I needed a new-"

As my words choked off, I coughed. Damn Ele splinter. I hated when it stole my voice.

"Oh! Yes, that makes sense," Sarai said. "Killing Doldimar must've come with consequences, what with Ele's control of you. Any disbalance between Ele and Daevetch should never be allowed."

At that declaration, I cracked open an eye. That girl had surprised me. I'd left enough hints for her to extrapolate those facts from, but I hadn't expected her to put them together.

"Wait, wait, wait! You're giving me a headache," Corsivis said while rubbing his temples. "Assuming any of this is true, what's our supposed Eriadren's mission?"

Sarai looked at her brother like he'd just asked the stupidest of questions.

"Why, to kill Arivor, of course," she said. "Isn't that obvious? If Eriadren can return to life after a century without his presence, then so can the best friend he was tied to."

After a beat of stunned silence, Corsivis moaned.

“Oh, you are *not* helping with my aching head!”

On those words’ heels, my mother whispered, “You think the worst plague this land has ever seen is destined to return?”

Enthusiastically nodding, Sarai pointed at me.

“And Eriadren will once more save us from him,” she said.

With a headshake, I slid my eyes shut again.

“My name’s Gaelen,” I said. “Eriadren died a long time ago. I’m Gaelen now, and Gaelen has a family and friends that he dearly loves. I’d like to have a pleasant lunch with them now, considering how few of these moments I have left.”

“Sorry, Eri- Gael,” Sarai said. “I was only trying to-”

“Help, I know. It’s all right.”

Groaning, I left the pillow’s comfort behind, sitting ramrod straight behind my place at the table. Smugness had, without a doubt, captured Sarai’s face, but the other two were unreadable.

Not that I needed facial cues to know what they were feeling. They were terrified. They were uneasy. They were-

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” Corsivis said with his voice clipped. “I’ve been your friend for nine years, and you never said a word!”

Or they could be outraged. I hadn’t considered that possibility.

Wincing, I said, “I couldn’t tell you. My invisible friend won’t let me talk about my life as Eriadren or the experi-”

Gagging, I spat into my hand, waiting for my voice to become mine before trying again.

“It won’t let me explain my curse, relegated as I am to be the Champi-”

This time, my entire body rebelled against me, leaving my stomach heaving, but I managed to keep it—if not my lungs—under control. My coughing fit lasted for so long that it temporarily impaired my ability to breathe.

“Alouin, stop!” Corsivis cried. “I believe you!”

Crawling to me, my mother rubbed my back until my lungs let me breathe once more. When the coughing fit subsided, she grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet her eyes.

“You’re my son, no matter who else you may be,” she said. “Nothing will ever change that.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Thank you,” I shakily said.

“And you’ll always be my friend, Gael,” Corsivis said before smirking, “but you know this food’s getting cold, right? We should eat.”

Thank the stars for that attempt at a subject change.

As my mother released me, I smiled. Maybe this revelation hadn’t fazed them as much as I’d anticipated.

The four of us dug into delightfully human-grade food. At first, conversation around the table was stilted and forced, but with every passing moment, the knowledge that I was an Eselan of legend faded into the background of my companions’ minds, escorted along by my unchanged behavior.

After we’d eaten our fill, we relaxed, or most of us did. My mother got up to clear the table, meaning to fold it away, but before she could get started, Sarai insisted that she stay where she was. We three Esela uncomfortably watched the human clean up our meal’s remains.

Soon enough, only four people occupied the rooftop garden, and I moved closer to Corsivis while the ladies chattered about some rare dish that both of them wanted to cook.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “You’ve been grimacing and squinting up a storm over here.”

Making a face, Corsivis said, “Don’t worry about it, Gael. It’s only a headache.”

Rapidly shaking his head, he pushed his fingers into his temples.

“Although it *is* getting worse,” he continued.

“Maybe you should lie down, then,” I said.

My friend opened his mouth to protest, but then, he winced, rubbing his forehead.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

Climbing to his feet, he trudged to the stairs, and I faced the ladies.

“Did I hear one of you mention strawberries?” I said. “I love strawberries!”

Shattering ceramic emphasized the enthusiasm of my exclamation, which had me whirling toward the sound. A few feet from us, Corsivis was lying on the ground with his body twitching, and at the sight, Sarai screamed. I scrambled to my friend on all fours.

“Mama, get help!” I yelled.

She flew past me as I oh-so-gently pulled Corsivis onto his side, moving him away from the stairs.

“Sarai, help me get these broken pieces away from him!” I called.

While she did as I’d asked, I stepped around my friend’s convulsing body, putting myself between him and the stairs, but before I could get to my knees again, Sarai attacked me, grabbing my tunic so she could shake me.

“What are you doing?” she shouted. “Help him!”

“I am!” I said. “Sarai, calm down.”

The tone of my voice had her face blanching, and before she could lose her composure, I pulled her to my chest. I couldn’t handle two uncontrolled siblings alone, and Corsivis’ seizure took precedence over Sarai’s panic attack.

As I watched Corsivis’ body rhythmically twitching, I hoped the fit would soon stop. He’d fallen to the ground, what? Thirty seconds ago? A minute? As I recounted them, the seconds seemed to both crawl and race.

When my friend began gasping in time to his convulsions, I knew the worst was over. I let Sarai go, ready to guide my friend when he drunkenly emerged from the seizure.

It was to my surprise, then, that he fell still once it was over, and for a moment, I was afraid the fit had been enough to kill him. Before that fear could pull me apart, however, Corsivis exploded into motion. Springing upright, he crawled backward until a short wall halted his retreat.

“What’s going-? Where am-? Who-?”

Gods, he was so scattered that he couldn’t even finish his questions.

With my arms raised, I cautiously advanced on my friend, wondering what was happening. After a seizure, people didn’t typically recover like this. Corsivis shouldn’t be able to move as quickly as he had, not to mention coherently talking...

“You’re all right, Cor,” I said. “You had a seizure, but it’s over. You’re fine.”

“I don’t- I can’t-”

When Corsivis jerked his head up, his eyes landed on something behind me.

“What is *that*?” he shrieked.

Before I could answer, Sarai stormed past me, dropping to her knees so she could fling her arms around her brother’s neck, and Corsivis froze.

“I thought you were going to die!” she cried. “Don’t do that to me!”

After an awkward pause, Corsivis pulled away from his sister.

"I'm sorry. Who are you?" he asked. "I don't know—"

When he was far enough away to see Sarai, the color drained from his face, and he desperately tried to retreat again, kicking at tile while scratching his fingernails against the wall behind him.

"What *are* you?" he hissed. "You're—"

He stopped, as if listening to something.

"No! I won't! Leave me alone!"

Oh... shit. Something must have gone severely wrong during the seizure. I needed to get Sarai away from her brother.

"Sarai... I think you should give Cor some space," I said.

She either didn't hear me or decided to ignore my suggestion. Scooting closer, Sarai rested a hand on her brother's knee.

"Cor. It's me!" she said. "Sar—"

"GET AWAY FROM ME!"

Panicked, Corsivis flung his hands in front of his face, and as if in response, Sarai's head exploded in a shower of bone, blood, and brain. Something whistled by my shin, shattering a pot behind me, but I was too focused on watching a headless corpse fall to the side to worry about this destruction of property. A thick blanket had come to cover my ears, an impediment that failed to stop me from hearing Corsivis' fevered protestations.

"What was that? I don't... *What did I do?*"

So much blood. It was happening again. Another person I loved, dying before I could stop it. How did tragedy find me no matter where I hid?

Sarai, with her curiosity and intelligence, so like Lirilith—

"I don't understand! I- I can't! Not again!"

With a gasp, I jerked free of a blanking spell. At some point in the time I'd been absent, Sarai's brother had extricated himself from her body, withdrawing to a far corner. He was crouched into a tight ball with his hands on his head.

"Go away!" he shouted.

Sighing, I scrubbed my face.

"I can't do that, Cor," I snapped. "We have to decide what to do about this."

I couldn't help the cold fury festering in my gut. Intellectually, I knew I shouldn't blame my friend for what had happened. He hadn't been in his right mind, but still, part of me was furiously screaming to take his head. How could he do that to his sister?

Wait. *How* had he done that to his sister?

"Cor?" I cautiously said. "Get up, please. My mother went for help, and she'll return soon. With friends. We need to go."

At the sound of my voice, my friend sprang out of his crouch, extending both hands toward me beseechingly.

"Who's Cor?" he whined.

And I could only blink.

No. Gods, no.

Because shadows were roiling over his imploring hands.

"I told you to *go away!*" my- my friend shouted. "Why won't you leave me alone?"

Somehow breaking free of the statue shock had made of me, I took one step forward and then, another. I approached my friend as one would with a wild animal, scrunching down to make myself look less threatening.

"Everything will be all right," I said in as soothing of a voice as I could manage. "I'm here. Just like we planned, remember?"

With his face screwed up, my friend roughly shook his head.

"No, no! Stop!" he shouted. "You KEEP AWAY FROM ME!"

Swallowing hard, I said, "Arivor, it's-"

Aiming at my heart, Arivor pointed at me, but fortunately, his arm was shaking so hard that it threw off the bolt he released by half a foot. It still collided with my chest, shredding through muscle and skin, and I still spun, scraping my hands as I broke my fall. Pain made time crawl around me, but eventually, an inevitable white flash came, making the hole in my body disappear.

And in the resulting silence, a quavering voice hesitantly asked, "Eriadren?"

"Hey, Arivor," I wearily said. "Where have you been?"

With his body still shaking, Arivor said, "I- I *just* left that nightmare land of shadow. Right after you. Why? How long-?"

"Fifteen years," I interrupted, unsure how I sounded so calm.

Arivor plastered a hand to his mouth.

“Alouin, that’s horrible,” he said around it.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I tiredly said. “I- I made some new friends.”

And I promptly fell to my knees, accepting fate’s decision that my place was on the ground. Burying my face in my hands, I sobbed into them.

It was too much. An hour ago, I’d been happily chattering with Sarai and Corsivis about possible Ele applications, and now, both were dead because of the Eternal War. Because of me.

Folding to the ground beside me, Arivor awkwardly patted my back.

“I’m sorry for whatever it is,” he said.

The hiss of chill air through my teeth sent an ache pounding across my face.

“Whatever it is?” I snapped. “It’s that!”

I pointed at the motionless form nearby, lying in a pool of cooling blood.

“And this!”

I waved at my old friend, wearing my newest friend’s body like a puppet master.

“You killed the people closest to me, Arivor!” I cried. “Again.”

As I gasped for air, I faintly noted how badly my throat hurt. Gods, when had I started screaming?

Arivor squinted at Sarai.

“No...” he said. “That was a monster. A walking, talking form of Daevetch.”

What was he-?

“A splinter...” I whispered.

How well did I remember when Creation had first appeared in my life? If I hadn’t been a helpless baby at the time, I probably would have attacked it.

And if I was right... if Arivor’s splinter had masked Sarai with its presence, my friend had understandably panicked. He must still believe that the headless corpse by the wall had been a manifestation of Daevetch, not a spunky, human girl.

I wouldn’t heap the guilt of these murders on my friend, not when he was already staggering under a load of other deaths. Especially not when a splinter had manipulated him into it.

As if summoned, Creation popped into being at my side, glaring at Arivor.

“Why haven’t you eliminated him yet?” it said.

“He’s wearing my friend’s body,” I said. “I can’t know if Corsivis is still in there, and I... *I refuse to kill three friends today.*”

Rolling its eyes, Creation said, “Two of them are already dead. Don’t make me force this, Eriadren.”

As he got to his feet, Arivor cocked his head.

“Who are you talking to?” he asked.

Distractedly, I said, “No one important. I’ll tell you later.”

“Once we’ve returned to the frontline?” Arivor asked.

But he'd spoken that question with such fear and hope. Gods...

“Are you that keen to leave the physical plane behind?” I asked.

Almost immediately, Arivor said, “Yes.”

Crossing his arms, he rubbed his skin, looking away.

“I can already feel Daevetch chipping away at my sanity. I don’t want a repeat of what happened last time, and *you promised me* that this time, you’d stop me before I fell to it.”

“I also promised that I’d break this curse,” I said. “I haven’t been able to make much progress with that yet, but maybe together...”

Arivor skeptically stared at me, as if aware of how little we’d be able to advance that cause now, but I... I just couldn’t.

“Look,” I said. “I’ll monitor you for erratic behavior. At the first sign Doldimar’s emerging, I’ll fulfill my promise to you. But first, let’s live a little. Please. I- I can’t take another loss today.”

I needed my friend. I needed a glimpse of the man I was fighting for, the person I’d known before his uncle had killed his son.

With narrowed eyes, Corsiv- Arivor pursed his lips, contemplatively regarding me.

“All right,” he eventually said.

Stepping forward, he offered me a hand up.

“Do you know any good taverns around here?” he asked.

I could only laugh at that. As if the humans would allow Eselan near alcohol. Arivor had a lot to learn.

“No, but I’m sure Sarai’s parents stocked *something* inebriating in this house,” I said. “We can steal some of it before we run.”

Because the humans would not take kindly to an Eselan killing one of their young. I pushed away thoughts about how that had happened.

Sighing, I took Arivor’s hand, meaning to pull him into a hug.

“You can’t say I didn’t warn you, Eriadren,” Creation said.

Freezing, I glanced at it. The splinter inclined its head at my free hand, and of its own volition, it grabbed Shadowsteal, the weapon I’d absently donned this morning. Arivor dragged me to my feet, I pulled that legendary sword out of its scabbard, and the world slowed down to a crawl.

But I did not. I’d plunged Shadowsteal under Arivor’s ribcage—straight into his heart—before Creation gave me my body back. Once it was mine again, I almost lost my grip on the blade, so great was the renting, tearing pain in my heart.

Again. I’d murdered Arivor again, but this time, the one who would die was him, not his sick and twisted version.

He wasn’t dead quite yet, though. Surprise, confusion, and hurt were only just beginning to paint their way across his features, and I couldn’t watch that piece of art be completed.

“See you soon,” I said.

Placing a hand on Arivor’s chest, I did something I’d only attempted once before. As I pushed Ele through my fingers, I dropped Shadowsteal. Time sped up, and my friend flew off the roof, disappearing into the streets below.

And that was it. This life was complete, and my task was done. Soon enough, fire would consume me, and I’d be allowed a short respite.

What a mess I’d leave behind.

Trudging to Sarai, I collapsed beside her, clasping her hand in my lap.

“I should never have said you were my friend,” I said. “Nothing good ever happens to them, but don’t worry, Sarai. I won’t make that mistake again.”

Leaning my head against the wall, I closed my eyes and waited.

I took the stairs two at a time, pausing on the fourth-floor landing to catch my breath. Finding a master who'd listen to my pleas had taken far longer than I'd have liked, and the men who'd agreed to come with me were taking their sweet time with following me. Had I told them how bad the situation was?

Alouin, I could barely think about it. In the years since he'd come to live with us, Corsivis had become like a second son to me. Seeing him lose control of his body had unfurled a wild animal inside of me. How crazy must I have appeared to the masters walking down the streets below? Maybe that was why they'd kept avoiding me.

When I heard the excited chatter of the two coming to my aid, I sprang up the last flight of stairs. Corsivis had been moved from where he'd been twitching earlier, and for a moment, I dared to hope that he'd already recovered.

Maybe Galen had helped him to a bed downstairs. That would certainly annoy the men on my heels, but so long as my loved ones were safe, I couldn't bring myself to care about that.

"Mama! You're not supposed to be here yet!"

Gaelen was slumped against a nearby wall, tensing when I faced him. He was holding a delicate hand in his lap, a hand attached to a body. Sarai, judging from the dress. Something was... wrong with the girl.

I took a step forward with questions on my lips, but when I moved toward Gaelen, he let go of Sarai's hand, lifting his toward me in warning. Now released, the girl fell onto her back, and with the rise of her shoulders dropped to the ground, the absence of a face above her neck was revealed.

Screaming, I stumbled away from the sight, smacking a hand to my mouth.

"What happened?" I gasped.

*How did things go so wrong in the short time I was away?*

With his lips twitching, Gaelen refused to look at me.

"I did," he said.

What was that supposed to mean? And where...?

Frantically, I scanned the rooftop garden. There was my son. And the horrifying corpse. But no one else was here.

Storming forward, I flung myself to the ground, grabbing Gaelen's shoulders.

"Gael! Where's Cor?" I shouted.

I tracked my son's unfocused eyes as he traced them over a nearby wall.

"On the street. Surrounded by a crowd of curious humans by now, I'd imagine," he huffed. "Gods, what's taking so long this time?"

Brushing my hands off of him, Gaelen swiped at the film of sweat coating his face. Panting, he was flushed a bright red, and his face was pinched, as if he was holding something back.

What was wrong with him? I'd left his side to get help for one son—a boy whose fate still worried at my nerves like a cat with a ball of string—but did my other child need help as well?

I took his face in my hands, making him look at me so I could examine his eyes. They'd glazed over, and despite my attempts to hold them with my gaze, they refused to focus on me or anything else, lazily drifting instead.

Behind me, a shout rang out, followed by the sound of someone vomiting. Finally. My volunteers had caught up.

One of them shoved me to the side, grabbing Gaelen's tunic so they could haul him to his feet.

"What happened here?" he demanded. "Where's the master of this house?"

I leapt to my feet so I could free my obviously unwell son, but the other man caught hold of my elbows before I could throw myself at his companion's back.

"Answer me!" that man snapped.

Hauling back, he slapped my son, but at the impact, Gaelen gave no reaction. He didn't even move his head back to center.

The human, on the other hand, released him, clutching at his offended hand with a hiss.

"He's burning up!" he hissed.

Breaking free of the other human, I sprinted to my son, gathering him in my arms. What were they talking about? Gaelen was fine. Everything was fine, and if it wasn't, I'd make it so, damnit!

"Sorry you had to see this, mama."

With those soft words, Gaelen pushed against me with just enough force to stop me from clinging, and seeing him, I winced.

The human had said he was burning up, and as the man had claimed, I could see fire dancing under my son's skin, a play of orange and yellow that had turned his skin translucent. He'd bitten his lip hard enough to draw blood, but what he'd been trying so hard to restrain was too strong. With his mouth springing open, a shriek of terrifying agony emerged, a sound that tore at my soul in a way that nothing ever had and I knew, *I knew*, nothing ever would again.

And then, his body dissolved into ash, white specks that daintily floated in the breeze. They landed on my clothes and hair and skin. Falling to my knees with a subdued crack, I reached for that pile of powder, shakily trailing my fingers through it.

What-? How-?

I turned my hands palm-up to inspect the remains of my son. The image took center stage in my mind, fixed in place even with the subsequent shifts in my location. Other people tried to lower my hands to my side, but they couldn't understand. The grit on those hands was my world. I wouldn't let it out of my sight.

Someone sat me down, cupping one of my hands in a larger copy, and its twin brusquely wiped a rag across my palm, leaving only flesh behind. Recoiling, I drew my other, ash-caked fist to my chest with a gasp.

"Don't!"

Rapidly blinking, I took a moment to process where I was. A sparse room with a mat in the corner and two doors leading from it. This was home.

How long had I been a husk of myself? I recalled the march from one master's home to another through a fog. Details had been blocked out by my intense focus on-

My mind lurched away from that thought.

Someone had come to retrieve me, I thought, and there'd been an argument with the masters keeping me. A gentle hand on my back had guided me along while the stars above the tree line had shone down on us. Who would have helped me like that?

What a silly question. I already knew the answer.

"Quincy," I croaked.

My husband was crouched in front of me, gripping the hand he'd cleaned. He had his head bowed, probably trying to hide his pain from me, but from what little I could see of his face, I knew it was drawn with grief.

"Give me your other hand, Mycella," he said.

Flinching, I said, "I can't! Gaelen-"

His hold on my hand tightened.

"I know," Quincy growled. "Hand, Mycella."

Dragging my fist away from my chest was the hardest thing I'd ever done. As he brushed ash off of it, I bit back a sob.

"It's not him," Quincy said.

Gathering both of my cleaned hands in his, he finally met my eyes.

"We were lucky," he said.

With my jaw going tight, I tensed.

"What are you talking about?" I said through trembling lips. "Our son is dead. How is that lucky?"

Shaking his head, Quincy said, "Mycella, Gaelen was Eriadren, the miraculous man of legend. For years, you and I have suspected this was so. We just decided not to talk about it."

He was right. I knew that.

"Given that and our son's character," Quincy continued before pausing to collect himself. "Given Gaelen's quick wit and compassion, how lucky were we to name him ours, if only for a short time?"

My body was shaking from the effort of restraining the wild weeping that my brain, body, and heart insisted I must unleash, and when Quincy again tightened his grip on me, I saw the same losing struggle in his eyes.

Biting back a crazed laugh, I whispered, "Alouin, we were the luckiest parents of this era."

Quincy joined me in my pained laughter: our flimsy defense against the roaring monster of grief. Soon enough, we fell silent, but before either of us could lose our battle, Quincy lifted a hand to rest it on the weapon beside us.

"Shadowsteal!" I breathed. "They let you keep it?"

"Well, their choices were to give it to me or explain why a human killer was carrying a sword of legend," Quincy tightly said.

Drawing back, I snapped, "Gaelen killed no one! How could they-?"

Quincy lifted a hand to stop me.

"I know, but they are our masters," he said. "They can say whatever they want, spinning the story however they desire."

The flare of my indignation was quickly drowned beneath aching despair.

"What will we do with it?" I quietly asked. "If it stays here, the masters will eventually take it from us, and I can't- I won't-"

"We will take it far from this place," Quincy said. "We will find a suitable hiding spot, and we will scatter clues about its location across the land, clues that Gaelen can follow when he eventually returns to this world."

The room went quiet as I reached a pivotal understanding. If the legendary Eriadren had been Gaelen, my son, this meant that years from now, my Gaelen would be born once more. It meant that my son wasn't dead, merely... gone for a time.

The tsunami of grief threatening to obliterate me diminished, becoming a simple, staggering crest instead.

"Where will we take it?" I asked.

A final message for my son. An act of love and care that would take a lifetime to complete.

At this idea, my future considerably brightened.

"Noblinson has people he can put us in touch with, Esela who live out from under humanity's control, but we'll need to leave tonight," Quincy said. "The humans won't leave the parents of a supposed child killer in peace."

I ran my eyes over my home. Leave this place? I couldn't wait! But first...

"Before we leave, will you hold me for a moment?" I asked.

Over the course of our conversation, the crater in my heart might have partially filled, but an empty, aching hole continued to throb in my chest. After the day's events—losing not only Gaelen but Corsivis as well—I needed someone, anyone, to wrap their arms around me and tell me everything would be alright. A shaking sob burst from me, and the panicked urgency in the set of my husband's shoulders relaxed.

"Of course, my love," he said.

I clambered into the dirt, and the two of us might desperately cling to one another for hours, but when the morning summons came the next day, our hovel would be empty.

# 7

## Eriadren

With my legs crossed, I sat as close to a thin strip of gray as I dared. Across from me, Arivor copied my pose, eagerly leaning forward as I told my tale, albeit with one significant omission.

As if picking up on what I'd left out, Arivor asked, "What happened to Sarai? Didn't she stay on the roof with you when- when-?"

*When Daevetch forced your domination of my friend's mind?*

"I don't know," I lied. "I was a little focused on Corsivis. Maybe she joined my mother in her quest to find help."

"In the end, that's probably for the best," Arivor mused. "Who knows what I might have done to her if she'd been there when I woke up?"

Gods, the pain of that... I couldn't look at my friend, keeping my eyes pinned on my hands, folded in my lap, instead.

When Arivor cleared his throat, it drew my gaze back up.

"Just so you know, I- I felt Corsivis die, Eri. When Daevetch forced me into his body, I could feel him being torn apart, and fragments of him vanished with every moment that my mind lived alongside his," he said. "I saw his life. I know what he was. My great-great grandson. How could Daevetch-?"

For a moment, he was silent, strangled by what the primal force had done to him.

"You know, he felt a strange attraction to you," he eventually continued. "I suppose that he knew, deep down, what you were and what he was destined for, and yet, he still befriended you. You draw people to you like a morsel would to a starving man."

I smiled, hoping it didn't look as brittle as it felt.

"I'm sorry about killing you the way I did," I said. "I meant what I said about delaying your death for a time but-"

"Your splinter forced your hand, I know," Arivor said. "Don't apologize for something you had no control over."

And I bowed my head, unable to meet his eyes.

White had slipped halfway up my chest, which meant time was running out. We needed to hurry.

“We were lucky this time,” I said. “Daevetch chose a poor host for you. If it had been anyone but Corsivis, I wouldn’t have heard of your return for weeks. Given that, we should come up a better way for me to find you than blindly hoping I catch rumors of your return. Could we set up a rendezvous point?”

With a wry grin, Arivor said, “Eri, your splinter made you kill me, despite your wishes otherwise. What makes you think that mine would let me willingly travel to my death?”

That only made me groan.

“What are we going to do, Arivor?” I said. “We’ve only been at this two times, and already, my hope’s dying.”

“Don’t say that,” Arivor snapped. “You’re the cleverest man I know, Eriadren. If anyone can outmaneuver Ele and Daevetch, it’s you. I have faith in you.”

Gods, why...?

But I couldn’t indulge in that, not when a black sheet had slid over Arivor’s chin, and I knew mine was on a similar track. We had seconds.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Smiling, Arivor winked.

“Be seeing you,” he said.

And as white closed over my head, I said, “Here we go again.”