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## 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.

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