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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.”

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.”

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