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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.

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