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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.

Revision #1

Created 30 August 2024 18:22:42 by FatalisticFable

Updated 29 August 2025 18:29:44 by FatalisticFable