

Spring 10, 501 A.O.V.

*Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory:
You have no control
Who lives,
Who dies,
Who leaves your story.*

Rain.

In the wreckage of the tree. On the blood-slick ground. Misting the faces of those lying there. Spilling down her own face. No, those were...

Tears.

Warm and salty. Leaving itching trails as they went. The rain had gone: stopped several minutes ago, after Ekossigan...

Fell.

Like the boughs of the giant tree: shattered into splinters of wood and ice, of blood and bone. Scattered remnants of screams and broken dreams. Wasted youth written in tortured flesh. Small bodies that had fallen too far. While the fey lord didn't fall far enough; too quick an end, for one who'd ended so many. And she...

...was still here. Everything she had and hadn't done ashen on her tongue.

Useless.

But *worse*, to have attacked her friends. *Worse*, because she had known - had *seen* - how to save those children. Trapped behind rotting, weakened wood, riddled with imperfections. Structural flaws that could have been exploited to break the barrier and free those within. Instead *she* was the one who broke: the rotten limb that brought the entire dormitory down. And everyone inside was...

Dead.

Like her mother. Like Millie. Like Xambria and Cillian and Armani Li Vecchi and Ellik and a half-dozen incinerated thugs and all the countless lesser fey strewn about this clearing at the whim of someone else's will.

Killed like the twenty passengers and guards aboard the Avery Coast Railroad she hadn't managed to save. Gone as the young engineer on the Coaltongue who'd smiled at her so shyly. Dead as the dwarf at the tech expo who hadn't laughed when she'd missed the targets outside his father's ammunition stall even though she'd nearly put an arrow through her foot.

All gone. Destroyed by her actions or inaction. Casualties of a year-long career in *justice*. What a joke. What a monstrous *lie*. As if there was anything just about *this*.

How could she stand when everyone else fell? How could she be...

Alive.

Somehow. Constantly surrounded by death but never taken.

"You can't save everyone," her mother had once said, as she stood by a deceased patient's bed. But she'd tried - she'd *tried* every time - and Ella had only ever strived to do the same.

To help people. To make things better.

And this time, *this time*, she could have saved everyone. She **could have-**

...Rain falls. But no, those are tears again: useless and distracting. They blur the clearing as if trying to hide the carnage, to wash away the blood.

She *could* have, but she didn't. Instead she broke - again. Spiraling fears and madness tearing at her mind: temporary insanity overtaking her. And somehow in ninety seconds she'd killed more people than she had in three months.

And part of her had been *right there*: screaming at herself to stop - to *focus!* Couldn't she see that that was **Lisandra**, *not an enemy?*

And those screams. *Those screams.* Still echoing in her mind. High-pitched and panicked as the trapped boys cried. Like *Andy-*

Stop.

She was going in circles: going backwards; Skeet pacing around the massive tree in anxious spirals as if following the path outside Angharad's house. One of the prayers burned into the Cipith's wall spins in her mind:

May the blessing of the rain be on you: may it beat upon your Spirit and wash it fair and clean.

Clean. Her soul felt anything but. Muddied with emotion. Red with blood and anger. Grey with regret. Black with hate and grief.

And there was no rain to wash it away: the clouds clearing without Ekossigan there to hold them. She had to-

Breathe.

An echo of her mother's voice. But there's no time to breathe, and no way to get enough air past the crushing guilt in her chest.

No time, *no time*, **no time!**

There was too much to *feel* and too much to *do*. And too few days to do it all in.

The panic is nauseating - worse than the blood. That familiar scent hangs heavy in the air. When had she become so accustomed to it? To seeing so many mangled corpses without needing to vomit?

They were so small... covered in blood and splinters. Fey and child alike lying amid the wreckage of one fey lord's demented dream.

Help.

The thought is tiny, unworthy, *afraid*. A pointless, childish plea. *She* was supposed to help people: not the other way around. What help did she deserve?

The same aid she'd given these dead boys?

None at all.

Bloody claws sink into tangled curls, digging into her scalp. She squeezes until the pain and loathing conquer the panic.

Focus.

She had a job: seven children left alive - no thanks to her. Seven boys to lead back to safety.

That she could do. She'd found the way here, she could find the way back. One step at a time. Provided she didn't fall apart. Again.

One breath. Two.

Deal with the emotions later.

Three breaths. Four.

Skeet bounces on the spot but at least they're no longer pacing in circles.

Five breaths.

The shattered dormitory ten feet away threatens to drag her back under: her gaze snagging on tiny limbs and faces...

Six breaths.

Hold it. Blink back the tears. Grief was useless; save the living.

Seven breaths.

Fists clenched tight. Heart shuddering. Face dry.

Close enough.

She takes one last look around the clearing: verdant grasses springing up around the wreckage - spurred by the fey lord's demise. They hide the bodies but not the memories. Those remain.

Reminders.

Nightmares.

Not the first.

But for the life of her they'd be the last.