

An Unexpected Chance

Rhiann hobbled over to the door of his house. It had been too quiet, after Maskar and Evanira had found a place for themselves. While he did not mind the solitude to a degree, it kept him focusing on being out in town more, spending most of his time on his duties as an Ollahmic Singer, even more than he worked on his duties attuning crystals as a kee-ali-dahlri one. Tonight he wasn't expecting anyone to come by his cottage, though there was always the chance that someone in the family would come visiting.

The person at the door, however, was not one of his relatives, or at least not a direct one. She was the mother to his Uncle Zenir, though she shared no blood with the Calasti family herself. And likely would not, until Zenir himself managed to quicken Aunt Rinah. The elvara was gird, as expected, in a robe of spring green, Jirel's green, and looked as young as Rhiann himself did, for much the same reason. For both of them, their lives would last centuries. And, especially among the elvari, that left a woman beautiful for ages after their children were grown.

"Lady Iltres," Rhiann started, dropping into an awkward bow. Considering that she'd born the child of a man destined to become a god, she was deserving of what respect he could give her. "I had not expected you here. But come in. I will make tea, and I'll see what it is that I can do for you."

The elvara smiled, brushing silvery hair out of her face. Then she stepped inside, seating herself awkwardly at the table. That was right. Rhiann had heard that she was largely unused to chairs and benches, if only because, from what he gathered, the enclave she'd originally come from didn't use them. Unfortunately, Rhiann almost required his. If only because it was too difficult to get down onto the floor and back up again with his false foot. He would have to see what he could do to help her to be more at ease here.

He had the pot refilled and set over the fire before he turned his attention back on the Jirellian priestess. "Now, Lady Iltres, what can I do for you? I have little experience dealing with Jirel's priests, though I have cousins who follow that path. Surely you do not come here for only my company, considering that I do not know you well." He eased himself into his specially carved chair, looking over toward her. A random thought told him that yes, the Twilight Folk were beautiful, if not in the typical ways. Their beauty was more etheric, more like a stray beam of moonlight.

She tilted her head, as if trying to decide how to approach whatever it was on her mind. Then, when she spoke, it struck him by surprise. "Thou are alone, without those who would give thee comfort. Though many are in awe of me because of my night with Lord Vythen, I have little enough that I can seek for the same. And I have heard that thou are one who is easy to speak with, easy to relax around." Her eyes seemed to be seeking about him as she spoke, as if trying to be certain of what she might want.

He wasn't entirely sure what she was getting at, but understood, at least, that she wanted someone who might treat her more as a person, and less like some exalted being on loan from the Heavens. And, outside of Maskar, who wanted nothing to do with the Heavens, there might be few indeed who would look past that act of Jirellian worship that had brought about Zenir.

"I do have time to talk, if that is what you want, Lady Iltres. Though I'm not entirely sure that I know enough to bring you comfort merely in conversation. I will try, even with as little knowledge of

your past as I have.” He reached out, hesitantly, touching her hand with a few fingers. “But I do know what it’s like to be alone. If company is what you seek, I suppose this would not be a bad thing, to have a beautiful woman visiting me.”

She turned her hand, palm facing up, against his hand. Then there was a knowing smile, though knowing of what, he was less certain. He only knew that his last statement was very true, especially seeing her sitting there, across from him. The dark sheen to her skin seemed to catch and reflect the light, almost as if she were in shadow rather than the bright light of the crystals here. Her hair was a cascade of translucent silver, not even bound back for practicality. Which left some of it flowing over the shoulders of her robes, leading to a look of mystique.

“I remember,” she began, “when thou gave me this tongue, the language of this time and place. Thou, though like unto many of the men in thy family, are distinct enough to remember. I didn’t understand at first, because my people’s ways were so different, what thou said to me, about the one that thou had companioned before. Back where I grew up, though strong bonds existed, companionship was only for the duration of a couple’s desire. Should they tire of one another, they would part, with nothing in the way of anger or resentment. It was much different than what I find here. Thou kept a companion until her death, and have sought none since.”

Rhiann was confused by this conversation. But perhaps she merely wished to learn more about how his culture worked. He wouldn’t put it past that, especially as the other churches would have decidedly different views than the Jirellian one on long-lasting relationships. For all that Jirel’s church protected the idea of procreation, they were perhaps the least likely to form life-long bonds, though the ones he knew in his family had chosen that. Ranor had taken earth-bond with Emiera, and Largo and Wystyl had done the same with each other.

“Is there something you want to know about how we live, Lady?” He idly traced the lines in her palm, while waiting for the pot of tea to boil. “While I’m sure that there are many who would enjoy explaining how we do things, I will do the best I can, if that is what you want.”

She laughed faintly, not the trill he would have heard from his shapeshifter relatives, but something more normal, more human. “There is much I would learn of thee, Singer. Much that intrigues me, for it is different from what I know, and yet, also very enticing.”

Enticing? Well, she is Jirellian. I shouldn’t be entirely surprised at this, Rhiann thought, his eyes searching that ageless face for the truth of her words. There was a part of him, perhaps the part most closely aligned to his Grandfather Arandel, that wanted him to make some form of excuse, to get her out of his house, but there was another, perhaps something in long forgotten words of his father, that overrode the fear that settled for a moment on his spirit.

“Lady Illtes, I believe I might be following your words now, where they were unclear before. You are offering companionship, but more in the way of your own people, and asking for mine under the same beliefs. It’s not a suggestion that I was expecting. I’m honestly not sure what the best way to answer that is, for my mind is torn multiple ways at the mere thought.”

She matched his gaze, with eyes that were a glimmering amber. “Singer, have none thought thee so intriguing or pleasant company that they would make such suggestions? Or have thou merely

bound thyself away from any consideration for thy own needs and desires. While thy solitude has lasted less than mine, surely thou would seek something for thyself?"

He did his best not to sputter at that open invitation. It certainly had not been something in his thoughts, though perhaps it was largely because there were few unpaired elvari, and no kee-ali-dahlri woman who he might court. Taking a deep breath, he tried to focus his thoughts. "Lady, I have lost my wife to death, to old age, which barely touches our kinds. I have seen her deteriorate before me, while I remained strong and hale. Is it any wonder that I do not seek to face that again, the pain and loss of seeing someone I love fail and falter, and finally buried beneath the soil of the Green World? I had not considered it, because I did not want the pain of watching another human love die as I watched her do so."

She spoke softly, "I am no human, and I have stayed alone for more than the lifetime of many humans. I do not desire to be alone, nor do I seek a human lover, if for the same reasons thou have. I do not wish to see a relationship fail due to age. But I have seen how gentle thou are, and have some curiosity as to what might emerge, should we decide to see where we might go. Is it so strange that I look to someone who might be able to match me for a long time?"

Rhiann stood up to pour the tea, grateful for the distraction. This was not what he was expecting, most certainly, but, at the same time, it wasn't a bad suggestion. That is, if they took into consideration what might be the results of such companionship, if it was not made official. And, well, he wasn't sure he was ready for that, especially not with a near stranger, no matter that she'd been very pleasant to kiss while he was giving her his languages.

As he set a mug in front of her, he finally found his words, vaguely amused that there were things that could render a long-time priest of the Lord of Bards speechless. "Lady, I'm not sure that I could commit to anything at this point, for I have little knowledge of you, and I know that you have as little of me, at least right now. But that does not necessarily mean that we cannot enjoy each other's company, even, perhaps, more than just talking here, in front of the fire. There are some considerations I must make, to come to that decision, but perhaps I should offer you an opportunity to find your own answer to this, too."

Iltres laughed, tilting her head, "And what is it that thou would bargain, to bring us both a period of enjoyment? Speak what it is thou would ask, so that we can make such decisions as lie before us."

He settled back into his chair, then gestured to the chair first. "I feel, at least at the moment, that if you're thinking of offering this to me, you'll need to know the truth. I am not whole. My left foot, above the ankle, was taken when I was bitten by a serpent. I imagine that, for all that Nefta has gone to the Heavens, she has yet to forgive Lord Vythen for allowing a creature of his to harm me. I'm less worried about it, as I can move easily enough, though some movements are more difficult for me. What I have, in place of that foot, is one that my adopted daughter, Nefta, crafted of a piece of golden wood. It functions well enough, and does not bother me, but, if you're thinking of what I might do with you, you will need to understand some of my limitations. They don't limit me as much in certain pleasurable activities, but I am not quite as mobile as I might have otherwise been."

She smiled wryly, "It was not uncommon for the elvari of my enclave to be injured, some like thee, missing parts. That did not change the fact that they needed pleasure, or companionship. It merely means that one might need to be more creative when answering those needs."

He nodded, taking a sip of his tea before he continued. "Lady Iltres, the other concern I have regards what happened to your son, and the fact that family is very important to me, to most of those in my family. Where possible, it's best that a child be raised by both of their parents. This is not always possible, but I do not want to have a child that might miss either of his or her parents. If we did this, and a child resulted, I would want assurance from you that we would work together to parent those children. I don't feel that I can commit to a marriage, not without knowing you much better, but, if we can take reasonable precautions, and agree on what we would do, should we have an unintended result to such pleasure, I will consider this. If you want something more permanent to prevent this, I'm sure that my mother would be willing to enchant a token to keep me from siring any children, but I do need your agreement on this, before I did anything more than speak with you."

There was a nod, eyes that did not flinch away from his requirements. "It is best that a child is raised by both parents, true, even if there is no further bond between such parents. I will agree with this, Rhiann."

She reached out for Rhiann's hand, rubbing her fingers around his. While this left Rhiann still rather cautious, almost afraid, he realized that he wasn't quite afraid of what this might bring. She was beautiful, and he had enjoyed the one kiss he'd shared with her before, when she had needed to learn Trade quickly. He had wondered, for a moment, what it was that his grandfather had seen there, but guessed that it might be this. Clearly Grandfather Arandel had not seen fit to reveal his vision to anyone else, unless it were Grandmother Quanild. No, spending time with a beautiful, and interested, Jirellian priestess would not be onerous. Indeed, it might help keep him from being too lonely. And there was always the chance that this attraction she felt might transform into something beautiful for both of them.

He finished his tea, then moved around the fire, slightly hobbling, but not overmuch, and put his hands on Iltres' shoulders. For a moment, it brought back a pang of when he'd done the same with Lisete. But this was subtly different in feel. He ran his fingers through her fair hair, and then bent close. "Lady, I was told, long ago, that it was not a good idea to turn down a woman intent upon my own pleasure. I won't be a fool and refuse you, no matter how this might make things complicated with my family, my grandfather particularly. I just needed to know that I won't be shirking the most important responsibility, should it reveal itself."

He took a half-step to the side, and then planted a gentle kiss on her dusky forehead. The simple, soft, mood didn't last long, however, for she turned and stood up, wrapping her arms around his torso. Her face tilted up, and he found himself kissing her again, this time for purposes other than transferring languages. Her mouth was sweet, and he realized that he was going to enjoy this, regardless of what Grandfather might say.

Surfacing from that kiss, it became very obvious that she was likely to have her way this very night, if only because holding her had left him with physical reactions that he was uninclined to refuse, at least with a willing woman here. "Perhaps we should move to another room," he began. As she helped him around the table, he knew that this would be a night he was going to enjoy.

Now, more than before, Rhiann often had a song on his lips and moved with a slightly less pronounced hobble. While he had always tried to overcome his weaknesses, it was different now. He wasn't entirely sure what made the difference, only that a difference had been made. He wasn't focused on courting Iltres, per se, but did enjoy their times together, whether or not they led to the pleasures of the back room. It was just good to have someone he could focus energy upon, something that would serve to provide memories to linger on after dark. And Iltres did that.

No word had been spoken since that first night about the possibility of one or the other of them acquiring tokens to prevent childbirth. Honestly, Rhiann wasn't too worried. Iltres had promised that, should children arrive, and they did so less frequently for her kind, they would both be involved, as equal partners, in the children's upbringing. Nothing more was needed, especially as neither of them could legitimately demand a family name for any offspring. Both were priests, and, where Iltres had never had a family name, Rhiann had given his up, when he'd decided to follow Ollahm's path. So, the only reason for marriage would be to silence tongues that might wag, really. And, so long as Iltres was unconcerned about that, and she seemed to be, Rhiann would not worry.

It had been the greatest part of a moon since they'd shared their first time together, when Rhiann got an unexpected visitor at home. He'd almost been expecting that Iltres had come for more conversation, but was not too surprised when it turned out to be his grandfather. Rhiann gestured within, and held the door. "I'll start some tea in a moment, Grandfather."

The older Calasti settled in on the main bench on the side of the table opposite Rhiann's specially carved chair. He shifted his soulsword from his back to his lap, as expected, but didn't speak until Rhiann had the water over the fire. And, even then, he seemed awkward.

"Rhiann, I seem to have been hearing things I'm not certain about, and thought I'd clear up any misconceptions that might have arisen." Rhiann knew what Grandfather Arandel was about. It made all too keen sense. And, at least this was being dealt with privately, rather than visibly, such as at the temple Rhiann headed.

Rhiann settled in on his chair, shrugging. "I'm almost surprised it took this long for you to show up, Grandfather. It's not like there has been excessive secrecy or anything."

Arandel cocked his head. "Then you're admitting to these rumors, without any attempt to diminish what they make you sound like?"

"Grandfather, with all due respect, I'm not in quite the same place that Father was in, nor am I doing anything that is either illegal or against the tenets of my faith. I have taken due consideration of my actions, and am willing to let them speak for themselves."

"I didn't expect you to imitate your father, although, for all rights, you aren't as wild as he apparently was. But I came here almost expecting something other than a casual acknowledgement of the time you're spending with a Jirellian priestess."

Rhiann shook his head. "I'm not going to make up my mind quickly. It took me a year to make up my mind about Lisete, Grandfather, and I knew that my time with her would be much shorter. So, for now, we're taking things as they come and merely enjoying our time together. Neither faith

precludes such activities, and I have taken consideration to what might happen if our enjoyment of each other's company leads to new members of the family. And, before you berate me for behaving like my father did, you might consider that he has lived a full life, and has learned not to regret what he did, if only because his 'mistakes' as you might consider them, ultimately led him to the greatest happiness he could have. If he hadn't offered Mother that night of pleasure, many things would have been changed, and there's a chance he would have been dead early, because Mother was the one who found out about the kril'dga assassin. I certainly wouldn't have been born, or Irryn. So many things would have been different. Do you honestly think that they would have been better otherwise?"

Arandel frowned, opening and closing his mouth without words for a moment before he could get a proper response. "Neither you, nor your older brother, would have lived, true, if Telin had not been who he was, and perhaps much harm would have come, especially if Lady Keske had found someone else who could understand those artifacts. I cannot argue with that reasoning, but I wonder what it is that you've decided, if you have not yet decided upon a marriage that would gladden the family at this time."

Rhiann laughed, "That's the question you should have started out asking, Grandfather. For that I can answer in a way that you will be less upset with. As to our decisions on the matter, thus far, I can say that neither of us can grant a family name to any children that result, so the 'shame' as it were of being of unwed parents might not be such, in fact. She has agreed, if there are children that result, we will parent them together, even if we decide later that we do not wish to wed. The reason for waiting, taking our time to decide, is that I have learned what it is to lose someone I love deeply. I hope that you don't have to face that, Grandfather, but it is not something I look forward to again. Nor will I risk marrying someone merely for appearances, only to find that we do not suit each other on many levels, not merely on attraction, or because of children we have brought into the world."

"I'm not sure I can understand that. I married Quanild without knowing even that I would live, much less if I would grow to love your grandmother. I married her because it was the only thing that I could do under the circumstance that I could live with. It wasn't something I was happy with, though I did the best I could to open the way for love. It worked out amazingly well, I'd say. With the family that we have, I'd say that my choice has been proven the right one. Yet you believe that it might not be the right choice for you?"

"You went into that marriage knowing that you could well die within a few moons. That makes a difference there. You weren't able to consciously focus on the fact that you were likely to survive, to live to a great age. As such, you could make a choice that I do not feel I can in good conscience make right now. I have to look at the fact that I am not likely to die soon, not within the next few centuries, even. The same is true for Iltres. Would you have us join together and then find out, later, that we irritated each other on some level to the point where our marriage would be without joy? I do not wish to make a mistake here, and taking my time for the choice is the best one I can make. Because I do not wish to break a marriage, not simply because I didn't think things through first."

"Yet, from what you've said, you're progressing in other ways, even when that might not be quite so sensible as your previous statements?"

"Grandfather, I think in this you'd be asking me to choose between the wisdom of yourself, or Father. In that, I have to gauge who might have the best answer here. Father has told me that when an

opportunity arises, I should seek to take it, enjoy what fruits it bears me. He would be quite disappointed if I were to tell him that I turned down a chance at friendly companionship merely because of what people outside would say about it. Just as you are disappointed because I take the opportunity offered. I think Father honestly knows more about enjoyment. He's learned that even if something brings a little shame at first, it might be worth doing anyhow. He has every reason to be grateful for what he'd done. Even though it brought about censure from you. Can I have any better example of what might make me whole?"

Arandel sighed. "There is probably a reason that no one tries to argue with you at Ollahm's Temple. You seem more than capable of spinning logic in ways that, while they do not make me comfortable, at least are somewhat comprehensible. You are correct about there being no laws that prohibit this behavior, or even guidelines that I'm familiar with in either church that argue against this. I worry, though, that this will show a bad example, especially to the students you help to teach. Too soon we might have people careless of their affections, and I do not expect students to consider the matter of children as you clearly have. Children follow the examples of those they respect. Do you want them to follow yours, here?"

Rhiann lifted a hand. "Unless children result, nothing that is done here is a matter for more than speculation outside. Nor would I hesitate to explain the difference, and the logic, to any student I find that might not be reasoning clearly. And I keep enough of an eye on the students to recognize that. I believe it will be the same for Iltres, once she has taken on more of the teaching duties within her temple. We are not going to carelessly allow people to be misguided. Nor are we going to be shamed into making a decision that might not be good for us. If we did marry, and found out that we did not work well together in the long run, would that not harm any children we might have more than they would be in a relationship that is not official, but based solely upon mutual respect?"

Arandel shook his head. "You've made up your mind, if not in the way I want. I can't order you to handle things the way I would. It might be easier if I could. But, if I could, well, things would have been much different with your father, as you well know. I would ask that you try to consider the family's reputation, if nothing else. While I would be grateful to know that there might be a wedding in the future, I can't force that to happen. I can only strongly suggest that you be circumspect until you have come to a decision. And, whatever the decision is, it is one that you can live with, with a clean conscience."

"I will endeavor to keep that clean conscience, Grandfather. You might not understand it, but it's how I intend to live. And, possibly, in the next year or so, I might have made a decision. But I'm not going to rush it, not for any reason. She understands this, and I hope that you'll grow to do so too. Just, well, Grandfather, I need time, time to decide on what I want out of the rest of my life. One thing I have learned, however, is that even if I'm not ready to make a long term choice now, I shouldn't turn down an opportunity to enjoy myself merely because of appearance's sake. I've enjoyed myself these past tendays far more than I have in a long time. And, for now, that's what I need."

"As you will, Rhiann. I don't agree with you, but, it is your choice, not mine."