

The Changing of Seasons:  
Fae Tales of Love

Part One

A Tragic First Love

By Ruth Davis Hays

Many years ago...

A crowd of excited children had gathered around the jeering ten-year old human boy and his victim. The boy was tall and husky with a mop of unruly, red hair hanging in his dull, brown eyes. The freckles that covered his face seemed to dance with his taunting grin. He was enjoying the attention from his peers that his jests gathered. The fact that he was playing with fire never entered his mind. There are two things that one should never tease; one is a wolverine. The other, the red-haired boy was teasing at the moment.

Adults called him 'Khiall, a nickname that his stepmother had given him. The human children that he went to school with called him Freaky. That was a nickname he had earned with his looks, his strange behavior, and his temper. He tolerated many names that were hurled at him but there was one name that 'Khiall hated more than any...

"Changeling! Look at the freaky changeling! Your ma was cursed with you for being a whore!"  
The redheaded boy laughed.

His proclamation brought a roar of agreement and approval from the pre-pubescent onlookers. The chorus of "Changeling" began to ring out loudly in a singsong manner.

"That's why you're so ugly!" Jerem, the taunting boy, continued.

The almond-shaped eyes of D'harrowmarrie'khiall glared warningly at the child. The rage pounding in his head sent a trembling urge to strike through his limbs. It was held in check only by his intellect. He had heard his stepfather declare that if he got into one more fight with other children, he would send the boy away to a militia academy or a monastery. The thought of being alone among more of this stomach-churning ignorance filled the fae boy with dread. Nevertheless, his limits of tolerance were quickly approaching.

"Fascinating theory, Jerem." He forced a smirk from beneath the layer of hurt and anger. "What's your excuse, then?"

This insult halted Jerem in thought only for a second, then he let it slide over his head and pursue his newfound popularity as the school ground bully. The half-faerlin boy was thin and lanky, an easy target. Jerem was broad shouldered and hosted a heavy gut. He was taller than 'Khiall and he assumed that meant that he was stronger as well. Jerem did not know much about the fae.

"Open your mouth, Changeling!" the red haired Jerem sneered. "Why don't you show the girls your dog teeth? He's part dog!"

The other children laughed, and then another boy joined the debate. "Look at his fingers! His nails are gray! Is that dirt from digging, Faery-dog boy?" came the shout from a puny, brunette urchin that barely had an inch of skin that was not darkened with dried mud. D'harrowmarrie'khiall would have remarked on the irony of this boy's insult if he had not been consumed with trying to keep his fists in check.

A barrage of snide questions and demands followed as the circle of children grew braver, their prey standing stock-still and mute, his dark blue eyes closing to block them out.

"Is your skin white 'cause you live under a rock?"

"Did you get that black hair from your ogre-father?"

"Bark for us, animal boy!"

"Do changelings eat rats or just other babies?"

"Maybe they eat shite!" Jerem's voice boomed louder than the others did. "Com'on, Changeling, eat some shite!"

Something hit 'Khiall in the side of the head. It spun him around and he went down into the dust. But, only for a fleeting heartbeat. His eyes flared open, his claws digging deep clods of dirt that he hurled at Jerem, one instant before he pounced.

Jerem screamed as the dark-haired fae flew at him, a frightening fire in his eyes. The children scattered, yelling for help from the adults that had been hovering back near the buildings observing the antics of the youngsters. However, they were not fast enough to stop the furious, young 'Khiall. He was atop Jerem in seconds, forcing the human boy's head into the dirt. Knees and fists, strong and quick,

pummeled him, as the pale half-faerlin screeched his rage.

Three large men struggled to grab hold of the wiry 'Khiall, his little hands curled like claws slashed out at them. Meaty hands laid hold on him just as one pale hand, with its talon-like nails, dug into Jerem's fat chest and the other tore into his red, tangled scalp. Jerem screamed. 'Khiall lunged to bite him in the face, just as the men pulled furiously at the fae.

A large crowd of adults had circled the combatants now. Many shouted in horror at D'harromarrie'khiall. One woman screamed and fainted as they pulled him off Jerem. The saphien boy's flesh and hair was still in the fae child's grip. Jerem mercifully fell to unconsciousness as the authorities dragged 'Khiall away from the crowd, snarling and kicking at them.

They knew that he would have to be locked up securely until his stepfather could come pay for damages and then be given the ultimatum, keep this deviant fae at home or else he would be sentenced to prison despite his youth. There carnage must not happen...again.

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She was a vision of youth and beauty. Her soft hair cascading down her back and shoulders in a dark waterfall of curls. Her skin, full and pale, rounding out each angle in girlish softness. Her blue eyes calling out to the young men of the town in curious fascination, transfixed more than a few as she passed along the lane to her father's estates. She liked walking. The air warm and fresh on a summer day was sheer joy to her. Going to the town market by foot was the only true freedom that she felt these days. Her father, Solomen Khnyghtsyde, was the physician of the area and a very rich and powerful man. He had sent her off to boarding school as a young girl, which had been wretched and stuffy. But, now, she was a blossoming woman and had returned from her graduation to live with her family on their estates. Though it had proved to be almost as intolerable as the school.

Solomen did not allow her to visit with the young people of the town, nor attend any parties. He made her study all morning in his cramped and smelly libraries while the boys, her brothers and stepbrother, got to learn more interesting things like hunting and archery. She detested being a girl sometimes. She longed to ride on a fast horse, climb tall, sturdy trees, and run with abandon on the cliffs that hung over the river to the west of their property. She wanted to meet new people. Wanted to go new places. She did not see the fairness in her life at all. The only chore she had been allowed outside the house was to accompany the servants as they went to and from the market once or twice a week. So, Lauralei took full advantage of this time. She refused to ride in the open wagon that hauled the barrels of spices and wine, large sacks of flour, and grains. She insisted on walking. This allowed her to have more time outside and she got to pretend that she was an adventurer wandering lonely and dangerous country roads, armed with nothing but her strength and a stick.

Today, the wagon had gotten far ahead of her, for the housekeeper had warned of bad weather that had been predicted by an old injury in her knee. The servants had pleaded with Lauralei to climb aboard as the weather on the river could change in an instant and old Kora's knee was rarely wrong. Lauralei had laughingly refused and went on at her own chosen pace, occasionally running up into the feathery meadows along the road to fight her imagined foes.

The winds blew up from the west, tossing her silken skirts about her petite legs, and pulling her hair around her head playfully. Clouds high above raced across the bright afternoon sun and made moving pools of shadow on the lands below. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. This was wonderful.

She could not think how these few precious hours could get better.

A burring noise startled her and she opened her eyes. An arrow had struck the ground at her feet. Her heart jumped in fear and she looked around to find her assailant. She saw nothing for miles but a small copse of trees deeper into the meadow. She looked down at the arrow again and relief passed through her as she recognized the fletching. It had been made by her stepbrother. With a laugh to show him that she was not frightened by his bravado, she plucked the arrow out of the ground like a long stemmed weed.

"Very funny, 'Khiall!" she shouted to the seemingly empty land. "If father saw you try that stunt, he'd box your ears, you know. And I have half a mind to tell him of it, just to see you get punished!"

Her threat was an idle one, for she never liked seeing her stepbrother punished. Which seemed to happen frequently when she was away at school, according to her snide and gossiping brothers, the twins Galian and Corian. They were younger than herself and ‘Khiall. And they seemed to delight in getting their strange fae-breed, stepsibling into trouble.

She saw movement beneath the trees in the distance. It was he. She smiled with delight. Lauralei had always enjoyed playing with her stepbrother. As children growing up together they would wrestle and play tag for hours. He was older than her in years, but being a fae he aged slowly. She had not seen him since she had returned home this time, Solomen had kept him busy or in his room. Her heart raced with joy and excitement at being able to see him again. She had so much to share with him.

Perhaps he would join her in her new adventure today, she smiled. ‘Khiall had always had the best imagination and thought of the most fun games to play.

Seeing his small, dark shape moving out of the shade of the trees towards her, she laughed happily and ran to him.

As she neared, her arms outstretched to give him a welcoming hug, she was struck by the changes in him. He was not a little boy any longer. She herself was a picture of youthful loveliness, a woman emerging from the layers of childhood with a voluptuous figure and sultry expressions, but the vision that met her eyes caught her breath. ‘Khiall had grown taller, his shoulders widening to hold a muscular frame that slanted nicely down to narrow hips and strong legs. His black hair, still held some wave as he wore it long and loose. His ears were recently cropped to the height of an elf’s and she could see the scabs on the tips. But, his face and eyes, that was where she saw the most difference. His strong features were striking, beautiful, and masculine; culminating in the captivating dark blue of his almond eyes. The light that burned in them as he looked down at her gave her a flush beneath her skin.

“Khiall?” she gasped and moved to hug him, hardly believing that this attractive, young man was her adopted sibling. He seemed to hesitate at first, then his eyes brightened with the same old irrepressible twinkle of adventure and his smooth face broke into a wide smile and he caught her up in his warm embrace.

“Laure!” he crowed happily as he squeezed her tight to him. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

Lauralei melted into his arms with an old familiarity and comfort that was suddenly mingled with a new tingle of excitement that she had only felt before with one of the stable boys at the boarding school. That had been her introduction into the realm of physical arousal and adolescent love, though it had not been serious or lasting. She had explored out of curiosity more than affection and he had done the same. But, now as she felt ‘Khiall’s body hard against hers and smelled his warm, musky scent, she felt the same flutter and rush inside her and this alarmed her.

Quickly pulling away, she swallowed the feelings and smiled up into his wonderful face.

“What are you doing out here alone?” she asked, trying to separate her feelings of happiness and arousal so that she could enjoy his company simply as once she used to.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he smirked, making fun of her silly question. His voice had grown deeper though he still held a hint of the faerlin accent that she remembered. It was not as thick as his mother’s was for he had lived among humans for the greater part of his life. “Hunting! And it looks as though I’ve found a maiden in distress!”

“Hang on!” she laughed, once again playful and at ease. “In distress? Don’t you see my sword?”

She held up the long, thick walking stick that she had carried along the road with her. He bounced back, a grin on his lightly sun-touched face, and bent to snatch up a stick of his own.

“Oh, pardon me! I didn’t know you were a warrior.”

“Well, let this be a lesson to you, so that you will know better next time, you knave!” she giggled as they began to parry and thrust around the trees, laughing and charging each other.

They battled out into the meadow until both collapsed breathless and sweating in the summer sun. It was good to hear his laugh again. She sighed in contentment. Now the day was perfect. Turning to face him, she smiled. He was looking at her, his chest heaving and the dimming sun highlighting his short, sharp eyeteeth. She stared at him, her eyes tracing his cheeks, chin, and brow. She found him stunning and never wanted to look away. Briefly, she wondered what he felt when he looked at her. Was he maturing at the same rate as she, she pondered? Had he already tasted the delicious fruits of youthful fancy?

“Do you have a girl, ‘Khiall?’” she asked suddenly, her curiosity burning hot. He looked puzzled and gave an awkward little laugh.

“What?” he shook his head. “What do you mean?”

Rolling onto her side, Lauralei decided to pursue this. It was suddenly far more interesting to her than sword fighting.

“You know, a love? Do you have one?” she spoke precisely, as if she were speaking to a younger child. He frowned at her tone and turned to stare at the darkening sky above them.

“Why should I?” he huffed, despondently. “*How* could I? Solomen never lets me off the estate.”

“But you do want one?” Lauralei queried tentatively.

Dharromarriekhiall shrugged and folded his hands behind his head. “I don’t know. Do you?”

She giggled, “What, want a girlfriend? No.”

He scowled at her silliness. “No. Do you want a love?”

She rolled onto her stomach, closer to him, propped on her elbows which inadvertently made her full bosom bulge in her neckline and threaten to spill out. “I think on it sometimes.” She sighed. “In fact...” she started, then paused debating on whether to let him in on her girlish secrets.

His face whipped over to look at her at the hint. He leaned over eagerly, his body very close to hers. “What? Tell me, Laure. You know I’ll keep your secrets and it sounds like you’ve got one.” He urged conspiratorially.

She smiled slyly and shook her head until he pleaded again. Her mind made a tiny note that he was glancing down at her chest repeatedly as she began to speak.

“While I was at school...” she whispered as he leaned in closer, his eyes sparkling. “just last month, I had a love.”

“One of the other girls?” he smirked, as she slapped his arm hard.

“No, you ass! One of the stable hands that worked there.” She griped at him. “His name was Ethan. He was tall, strong, and handsome. We met a few times in the hayloft after hours. I would sneak out my window and we...”

She blushed; suddenly shy saying this aloud to him. His face was smooth and serious again and his blue eyes inspected her with a different light in them. Lauralei saw a scowl of disapproval on his brow. Kicking her heels in careless irritation, she shrugged his look off with hurt bravery. “You don’t like my secret? I don’t care.” She huffed. “I did it and that’s all there is to it. I’m a woman now, and I don’t care if you go running off to tell father either!”

‘Khiall flopped back onto his back again and looked away from her. “I wasn’t going to do that.” He pouted moodily.

“You’re a big baby’s blouse if you do.” she challenged, hoping to get her stepbrother’s affections back.

“So you’re in love with him?” his voice seemed distant. He did not look at her. She saw his chest heave unevenly for a moment. She felt a rush of compassion for him and wished to wrap her small arms around him to comfort him. He seemed in hurt.

“No,” she said softly to the ground. “It was a brief fire. We both knew that I was leaving soon. I’ll never see him again and I don’t really care if I do or not.”

The dark eyes returned to hers. “Then why did you lie with him?” he asked.

She cocked her head in shock for a moment, then blinked at his innocent question. “Why not?” she responded with a small laugh. “I was curious, he was attractive. It was fun. A dangerous adventure to explore. Why do you think? Haven’t you thought about it?”

Sitting up suddenly, Dharromarriekhiall wrapped his long arms around his knees and scowled at the wind swept landscape. “Don’t laugh at me, Lauralei. It was just a question.” He growled petulantly. The accent was thicker when he was upset.

She moved to sit close to him and hugged his arm lovingly. “I’m sorry, ‘Khiall. I wasn’t laughing at you. I’m simply wondering if you are interested in love the same as I. That’s all. I won’t pry if you don’t want me to.”

He softened again and leaned his head on hers. They said nothing for a while, simply sitting and finding comfort in each other's company. She knew that she would be expected home soon, as would he. This private time together was rare and special; she did not wish to ruin it with harsh arguments.

A light sprinkle began to fall on them and it quickly grew into a downpour. Leaping up, once again laughing together at their dilemma, Lauralei and Dharromarriekhiall ran towards the trees for shelter from the rain.

Stumbling under the canopy of branches, breathless and wet, she found herself being wrapped in his arms for warmth and the nagging pull of attraction started inside her once more. His musk was hypnotizing, she wanted to bury her face in his hot chest and taste his flesh on her lips. The thought startled her and she looked up into his staring face. His eyes seemed beseeching and wondering at the same time. He was feeling it too, but was unsure of what to do. She felt his heart pounding against his skin and found him trembling as his face dipped closer to hers. His dark, wet hair hanging about his face like a curtain, he touched his lips to hers briefly in a curious peck. She saw him look deeply into her azure eyes for what to do next. He searched for approval or chastisement silently.

Smiling sweetly, her body quivering with thrills that made her pulse race, Lauralei took his cheek in one hand and gently pulled his strong, youthful face to her once more. They kissed, a new spark igniting within them both. His arms pulled her tighter to him, his lips eagerly exploring hers and devouring her in an aimless frenzy.

A thunder crack startled them both and broke their embrace. They stared wide-eyed and flushed at each other then without a word, picked up his few belongings hurriedly and dashed into the chilling rain for the estate gates hand in hand.

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Lauralei found it a most awkward time sitting around the dinner table with the family. Solomen silently shoving his food into his mouth in order to be done with it and free of his family as quickly as possible, his two wives quietly respecting his right to a peaceful meal, the twin boys swinging their legs restlessly and staring from one face to the next looking for a reason to argue or tattle on something. And then, there was Dharromarriekhiall sitting several chairs away from her, picking at his meal joylessly, his head down trying hard to disappear into his black veil of hair. It was almost intolerable. The only good thing was that she was able to look at her stepbrother. She got to secretly admire his more mature looks, the slanted eyes, dark brows, and pointed ears. Being allowed to go out hunting had given a warmer tone to his pale skin than she remembered from their youth. He could have passed for an elf, she noted, except for his new height. As they had walked home in the downpour, she had noted that he was just over six foot. An attractive height, she remarked to herself as they had plodded along. She had a small frame, barely reaching over his chest. Yet, as they had embraced under the wet trees that afternoon, she had felt as though their bodies were a perfect fit.

Shyly glancing up again, her eyes cut along the table to see what he was doing, only to find her little brother, Galian grinning at her for no reason. Rolling her eyes she went back to eating. Dinnertime crawled into an eternity. She sighed. Part of her ached to be gone from the room, but she desperately wanted to ask 'Khiall if he would come talk with her later and that would not be possible until after Solomen left the room.

As she waited, her mind racing with the memory of their kiss earlier, she was startled to hear her father's voice break the silence.

"I see my food is not good enough for you?" The gruff voice snorted. Looking up, as they all did, to see to whom the comment had been directed, she was not surprised to see Solomen's glare planted firmly on 'Khiall, who had frozen at the attention. Reaching out a broad hand, her father slapped the back of the fae's head and ordered him to leave the table if he was not going to eat. Dharromarriekhiall mumbled an apology and quickly tried to stuff some of the fine venison into his mouth, only to have his fork slammed back down onto the table.

“Don’t insult me, Boy! I gave you an order.” Solomen roared, his keen gray eyes on fire with some resolution that he was not sharing, but buried under his anger. “Now leave my table! I don’t want to see your ungrateful face again tonight, do you understand me?”

Lauralei saw ‘Khiall’s fist tighten on the steel fork, then without looking up, he said, “Yes, sirra.” And swiftly pushed away from the table and retreated to the stairs before the twins even started to snigger.

She wanted to scold her father and run after the fae, but she knew that this might only bring more thunder down upon him. So, sitting silently, she was somewhat surprised when Ammarron’s sweet, sad voice was heard.

“How has he offended you so, my husband?” she asked gently. If anyone but Ammarron had spoken, Lauralei felt certain that Solomen would have furthered his tirade. But, her beautiful, lilting faerlin voice, thick with her dialect, was like a balm to all there. It eased the older man’s temper and he turned to her, his tone calmer.

“He was late coming home tonight.” He said, glancing briefly at his only daughter. “That was a clear abuse of privilege. I allow him to help with chores and practice hunting with my boys because it is not healthy to stay inside all the time. I allow it for you, my dear. But, I cannot allow him to take advantage. It makes for bad character. He is not a child anymore,” to which he added with a roll of his aging eyes, “thank the gods. That was an excuse that has wasted too much of my time. We must give him discipline. And I will not tolerate him sitting here tossing his food about his plate and wasting it after I have provided it for him. Especially when he brought nothing home to contribute to the meal.”

This last bit he mumbled with a proud nod to his son, Corian, who had shot the deer that they were enjoying. Ammarron nodded briefly and patted her husband’s hand. “You have given him, and myself, many blessings over the years and I’m sure that he does appreciate it, my love. But, he is young, and wild at heart. We are fae, we do not do well staying inside for long. Perhaps if you would allow him to go back to school, or have more time in the woods, it might calm his spirit.”

“Fine,” Solomen resumed stabbing his meat and quietly proclaimed, “He can start helping chop wood tomorrow. Winter will be upon us soon. We will need to stock up. That, added to hunting and drawing water, should be plenty.”

“Thank you, dear.” The faerlin woman smiled, though Lauralei could tell that she was not altogether pleased with the conclusion.

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The library on the third floor of the mansion was small, cramped with moldy uninteresting books, but it had one advantage that Lauralei discovered. It had a window that gave a perfect view into the back courtyard where the house’s two wings thrust back and made a three-sided workspace around the well, where the servants performed their tasks for the household. The recent command that her stepbrother help chop wood for the house, had given her a reason to stay in this room, despite the unpleasant atmosphere. She had spent every afternoon as the sun crested the house and filled the little courtyard, watching him going about his tasks silently. His complexion had darkened over the past week. It gave him a new look, not quite as pale and inhuman as before.

As she leaned out the small window, her eyes riveted to his movements, her heart raced as the heat of the early afternoon forced him to remove his shirt. It was the moment she waited for each day.

Leaning her chin on her arms, she sighed gratefully. Her dress lacings felt tight and constricting as she admired his physique. She had had only two boys to which to compare him. The stable boy she had known at school, and a smooth faced, intellectual fellow in town that had caught her eye once or twice as she had accompanied the servants. He had been one of the reasons that she had asked to go to town so often, but she suddenly realized that she had not even thought on the boy for over a week. She blushed at the thought. She did not just admire the manly form that ‘Khiall was growing into, but she was irresistibly attracted to him. Somewhere deep in her subconscious, she felt guilt for it. She had been raised thinking of him as her brother. As a child it did not matter to her that they were of two different races, she loved and accepted her big brother ‘Khiall, as her own. When she had left for school, she realized just how little she or most humans knew about the fae breeds. All her friends had been human there, all her teachers and the

topics they taught were concerned only with human society. Now, she stood in a library full of knowledge and none of it could answer the questions burning in her mind.

She glanced around at the book-lined room and sighed again. She could spend hours pouring through them looking for information about the faerlins, but she knew that she would much rather find out by getting Dharromarriekhiall alone somewhere. And that was what she determined to do.

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Dharromarriekhiall felt the sweat tickling down his face and neck as he paused in his work to drink from the cool, fresh, well water. The afternoon was hot and his work only half done. He wasn't certain what he had done to warrant the punishment of added chores, but he was heartened by one aspect of it. He was able to see Lauralei as she took a break each afternoon and leaned out of the third floor window where she was stuck studying. No one would have guessed that he was watching her while he worked. He was careful to look only from the corner of his eye, and to keep his head down.

Glancing over to the library window, he saw it empty and his heart sank a little. The labor would seem slower now. He had nothing to distract him. He slumped down to sit in the shadow of the well's wall for a moment of rest. The treetops beyond the low wall of the estate seemed to dance and beckon to him. There was little here to stop him from answering their call. His mind stretched across the distance and found the freedom he desired. A place with no one to obey, a glade full of the music of the wind and the majik of the fae. He could run there, leave everything behind and miss nothing of this wretched life.

Into his mind's eye skipped the small, voluptuous figure of his stepsister. Her long, dark waves bouncing about her shoulders, her fair skin glistening and her light eyes flashing playfully at him. If it weren't for his fae heritage, they would be mistaken for blood siblings, their looks were so similar. Her dark brown hair and blue eyes were gifts from her father that her younger brothers shared in most respects, except that their eyes were dark brown. But, Dharromarriekhiall had no idea where his coloration came from, as his mother had fiery blonde hair and jade colored eyes.

The image of Lauralei brought with it a stirring in his blood and in his lower regions. Self-consciously he glanced around the yard to see if anyone had noticed his burgeoning affliction and quickly tried to concentrate on work. He got back to his chopping before his misplaced fascinations could raise his stock higher.

Sweat and exertion would cure him of these thoughts, though he could still feel her lips against his from days ago. As the axe struck hard on the block, splitting the short log with a loud crack, he found his eyes wandering up to the library window again.

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Tumbling into the spacious, stone kitchen that opened onto the back courtyard, Lauralei was met with a number of servants that kept her father's tables filled and his house clean. Busy about the tables was the older cook, Fiona, with her large, rounded frame covered with flour and a big, white apron and her second in command, Leela. The younger girl was leaner and would have been considered a beauty if it were not that she had spent most of her life at hard labor serving her betters. At the ovens, she saw another woman that had been hired while she was away and she could never remember the stern looking woman's name. But, the two, younger, milkmaids giggling at the open double door that led out to the courtyard, Lauralei had known most of her life. Carra and Melan were their names, and she knew too well at whom they were staring. She was surprised to see her own mother, Sarrah, sitting on a wooden stool at the broad cutting table that took up the center of the large room. They all seemed to be enjoying some jovial conversation when she came in, and though the talk stopped to greet her, the two at the door were still grinning absurdly. Lauralei could hear the steady, heavy sound of 'Khiall's axe from the outside.

Swallowing hard, she strolled in casually and seated herself next to her mother. Sarrah smiled at her with that loving, yet simple way that she always did. She doted on her daughter and always encouraged her. But, she also always had spread her attentions to the young male fae in the family that was not her son. Sarrah had always remarked on how special he seemed.

“What do you know of the Faerlins, mother?” Lauralei asked innocently as she picked up a bowl of beans to snap open and look helpful. The ladies all around the kitchen smiled at her and she got the distinct feeling that they were all preoccupied with the same subject.

“I know a little, dear. Ammarron speaks to me of their traditions and such.” Sarrah’s eyes cut over to gleam at Fiona, who chuckled under her breath and pounded a large lump of dough in front of her.

“How old did she say ‘Khiall is?’” Lauralei asked wistfully, trying her best to sound innocently interested. The girls by the door quieted when the name of the dark haired, young man came up and they moved closer to hear the conversation as well.

“Past his fourteenth Age.” Sarrah said plainly. When asked what that meant, she told what she had learned. “By fae reckoning, he is as a youth in his mid-teens, but an Age is a cycle that spans ten years. So, he is actually just over one hundred and forty years old.”

Lauralei hummed with contemplation of this. She had only lived a mere fraction of the time he had been on Jorthus, yet in so many ways he seemed younger to her now. She had always thought of him as an older brother, but in the six years she was away at school and he was trapped here at home, she had experienced so many new things that had been denied him. If he had been human, he would be considered a mature middle age at one hundred and forty.

Melan gasped at the news and looked over her shoulder to the open door. “He is so old. Pity. Imagine living that long.”

Fiona huffed in indignation at the comment. “Silly girl, you make it sound like eons! You forget that I’m one hundred and fifty myself. I may not be a spring chicken anymore, but I’m not senile!”

As the girl stammered an apology, the wiser woman only waved it away and told her to be about her chores. Reluctantly leaving her vantage point in front of the door, Melan went to tend the butter churn in the corner.

With a quick calculation in her head, Lauralei confirmed something that had been in the back of her mind for years though she had never bothered to ask about it once she had formed the suspicion. As a child, she had somehow assumed that ‘Khiall was a half-breed because of Ammarron being fae and Solomen being human, but then it all didn’t add up.

“So there *is* no way that he could be Solomen’s son, even if he were a bastard. He is almost as old as Father.” She spoke the affirmation aloud and Sarrah nodded absently. The family had never mentioned the intricacies of the relationships to the children when they were too young to understand or care about such things. They had simply been raised with the two mothers, the father, and no questions.

“Yes, we never really spoke of their hardships when you were young.” Her mother said with a sigh. “Ammarron had him out of wedlock, but his father was not a human. Solomen assumed the role of father when he bound himself to Ammarron. And since she is his first wife, if he chooses to claim ‘Khiall as his legal heir, he will inherit before you or the twins. But, that has been a bone of contention for many years between she and Solomen. And they never had any children of their own.”

Lauralei was not interested in the legal squabbles of the family. She knew that in this country, being a girl, she would not inherit much. Her fortunes would come from a choice marriage. That was if she were unable to escape to another land where she could gain adventure and treasure of her own. Her mind begrudged this dream, as it seems to drift farther from her with each day that she was at home. As she settled her heart on the small adventures that she would be able to conjure here in her present situation, her mind spun back to the mysteries of her stepbrother.

“What’s his real family name then?” she asked.

Sarrah’s small, fair brow wrinkled as she chopped vegetables and tried to think. “Oh, it’s rather long. D’harro mark-ath-or I Khiall. I don’t remember. I know that she gave him Khnyghtsyde as a second name in honor of her husband and then his family name is Bailly-something.”

Her mother proved less than helpful in this area. She had never been good with other languages. That was why they all called him ‘Khiall. It was the derivative that she had come up with before Lauralei was born because she could not pronounce his name as it was in the faerlspeak.

“You should ask Ammarron if you want the fae pronunciation and all.” Sarrah shrugged lightly.

“Why didn’t she and Father have any other children?” Lauralei wondered suddenly. Sarrah was unsure on this topic, but the cook near the oven spoke up.

“I heard that the Faery breeds can’t get children with humans.” She said in a crackled, dry voice.

Fiona retorted, “Then where do half-elves come from?” This made all ladies nod in agreement and contemplation when, suddenly they all grew quiet and attentive as ‘Khiall entered the kitchen from outside, carrying an armful of cut logs for the oven. The atmosphere was silent and hot. He glanced around nervously, his blue eyes falling on Lauralei for a moment and then he quickly dumped the wood and retreated back outside to retrieve his shirt.

Lauralei heard an audible sigh of admiration from all present. Then Sarrah commented low, “He is growing into such a fine looking young man. And with such magnetism, it will be hard to keep the young ladies from him.” This brought smiles and giggles from all the women.

Although she was relieved to know that she was not the only one that had noticed his attractiveness, Lauralei was feeling a bit piqued that they were all practically swooning over him. In the back of her mind, she did feel a little victorious in the knowledge that he had kissed her, but on the heels of that thought, she began to wonder jealously if he had already approached the other young girls here. After all, she had been away for six years.

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Lauralei sat curled up near Dharromarriekhiall in a secret meeting place beneath the stairs in the main hall. It was a small, slanted, broom closet that ‘Khiall had showed her earlier when she had approached him before dinner to ask where they could talk without interruption or discovery. He had brought her to it, explaining that he would sometimes hide inside in order to escape finishing his chores. She had giggled and told him to meet her inside after the meal.

They had squeezed in, both laughingly uncertain about what was going to happen, but both eager to be alone, and close to each other once more. For a few moments they had stared into each other’s eyes, waiting to see what the other would do, both anticipating something but reticent to say what exactly. Looking into his blue eyes, Lauralei wondered so many things about the young man. She had been so close to him when she was young. Though, as she stared deeply into the depths of the vast ocean of his eyes as he looked at her now, a fire of mystery and longing in them, she realized just how little she knew of him. Her full, round bosom rose and fell faster as her heart began to race at the thought of learning all she could about him. Finally, she had shifted to sit in front of him and decided to speak her questions. But as she opened her mouth only one thing tumbled out.

“Have you ever kissed another girl?”

Taken aback by her question, he asked, “Is that why you asked me here?”

Blushing, she was acutely aware of their proximity to each other, their knees and toes touching in the cramped quarters. The boards of the underside of the stairs close over their heads. “No, not really. I was just wondering.” She mumbled.

He glanced down at her fumbling hands for a moment then looked back into her beautiful, sea-blue eyes and shook his head.

“Did you mean to kiss me? I mean, did it mean anything to you when we did?” she stumbled with her words. Her heart was beating fast and her head seemed dizzy with his closeness. He slowly reached out and picked up her tiny hands in his own and brought them to his warm cheek, brushing his face against them as a cat does. She giggled a bit, and then sighed as she felt his hot, full lips against her fingers as he kissed them tenderly. Her emotions were fast overwhelming her and she wished to taste his lips again.

“Do you wish to kiss me again, Khiall?” she asked breathlessly. His answer was clear as his hand cupped the back of her slender neck and pulled her to him. They met in a fevered kiss, her hands escaping into his silken hair to trace around his soft, pointed, cropped ears. Brief moments stretched into stolen eternities of awkward adolescent fumbling as they tried to shift and find the most comfortable way to embrace in the tight space. Lauralei got her long dress caught up on a nail, and a broom handle nearly struck ‘Khiall in the head several times. The mishaps only slowed their kisses; they did not bring a halt to them. Finally, sitting side by side, both panting with their ardor and exertions to find a safe area, they smiled into each other’s face, their hands intertwined tightly. His eyes were dancing with the light that snuck into the dark closet from the slatted door.

“I can hardly breathe,” Lauralei giggled in a restrained whisper. “This dress is so tight, I feel like I can’t even move.”

The light was outlining the curve of her bosom in the low neckline of her dress and his first instinct was to offer to loosen her lacings, but he paused and looked away from her. He heard her whisper his nickname, the low, soft sound calling him back from his fevered infatuation.

“Don’t call me Khiall anymore.” He said in a rough pant. “That’s what Sarrah named me.”

“Why don’t you want me to call you ‘Khiall?’” her voice sounded hurt and confused. He tried to explain his feelings, though he was not entirely sure of them.

“Because you called me that as your brother and I don’t wish to be your brother anymore.” He said petulantly. His face downcast and his fingers picking at hers, the strange nails pinching a little where they were starting to grow out. He had clipped them a week ago and already they were looking like claws again.

“But you aren’t, not really.” Lauralei said happily, though there was an edge to it.

“I know,” Dharromarriekhiall grumbled as he turned back to face her. “But I was in my twelfth Age, the night you were born. They brought you into my room and said, ‘Here is your little sister Lauralei. Love her and protect her.’ And I did. I rocked your cradle, I sang lullabies to you. I did my best. Because that was what was expected of me.”

“Yes, I remember.” Lauralei sighed tenderly remembering all she could of his sweet devotion. “I grew up with you as my best friend. I love you and that can’t change.”

“But, you *are* changing.” He insisted. “It’s been twenty years, Laure. I liked playing games with you... I liked seeing you grow up. But, now you’ve grown past me! You’re not my little sister anymore.”

“Then what should I call you now? Your whole faerlin name is so long and complicated.” She was at a loss for what he was looking for here, she wanted to keep their time together pleasant, for she knew that it would be far too brief to satisfy either of them.

“You don’t like my real name? Then make something up, I don’t care.” He seemed put out at her comment.

“That’s silly, a name should mean something.”

“But my name *does* mean something.” He pouted.

“Really? What does it mean?” Lauralei was in truth interested in this, and tried not to sound like she was only mollifying his disgruntled mood. He still would not look at her.

“Mi Nomei’s people give meaning to everything.” He said of his mother. The faerlish words sounded so lovely to her ears. “My name means The Darkening Sun of Deepest Winter.”

She thought on it and asked, “Which part of it means The Darkening Sun? That sounds like your eyes, I like it.”

Her words seemed to calm his tangled emotions and he slowly turned back to face her. “D’harro Mar.” He said softly.

She considered this, tumbling it around on her lips for a moment and whispered, “Dharromar.”

“That’s not how its pronounced by the Faerlin.” He snapped, not angry with her.

It was so rare to hear him speak of being fae and he almost never spoke the word Faerlin. He looked at her curiously, so she smiled. “I’m not Faerlin.” She said. “Besides this will be our secret, special name for only each other.”

“Alright,” he seemed to settle back next to her. “Then what will be my name for you?”

“Laure, what else?” she laughed. He scowled but she explained, “No one else calls me that and I like it when you do.”

They lay in a comfortable silence, contemplating the new path they had chosen for their relationship. Then she felt him shift to kiss her again. She accepted it readily. His scent was sweet and inviting, his skin warm and soft. He kept her lips, stealing her breath from her as he hunted deeper. One hand wandered to her breast and caressed her roughly over her dress. She returned his kiss, allowing his hungry touch with her own ardor. The hot feel of his hand on her was invigorating; she found her body pressing in close to him. She was ready to melt into him when her fingers touched the tops of his fae ears and he flinched. Their kiss parted.

Pulling away to gasp for air and pressing her face to the curve of his neck, she whispered, “Do you love me?”

He pulled back a second and looked at her, his face inscrutable. Then, he smirked to the darkness of the closet. "I don't know." He said, but when her eyes seemed to scowl and flame at the same time, he continued. "What exactly is love, Laure? What does it mean?"

She wanted to touch him, to push past his game of quiet nonchalance that he would throw out lately when she would ask something personal. A piece of her heart wanted to crumple, but she had been prepared for his shrugs and she barreled along with her chosen path.

"It's when you care about someone and their happiness more than you care for your own. At least, that's what I've heard." She added the last with her own careless shrug. He noticed.

"Then I suppose..." he hedged. She cut in on his thought a little peeved.

"You suppose? You don't know?"

A flash struck behind his night-blue eyes and he turned to face her challengingly. "Well, no, then. I don't love you."

His words were like a slap striking at her heart. She felt her stomach lurch and twist. Her fiery Khnyghtsyde blood rose at the insult. "What?" she hissed. "Why?"

"Because you say that to love you I would desire your happiness above my own. But, I don't!" His voice was low, rising to a harsh whisper as she listened with extreme care to his reasoning. "I want you near me because it makes *me* happy. Your happiness doesn't matter to me. I want to be with you whether you want it or not. So, then I don't love you, do I?"

Though his tone was striking at her as a boy would strike at a sleeping dog to rile it, some part of her understood his words and his confusion. It was like showing a piece of glacier ice to a desert nomad and telling him that it is cake. He could feel it, but would not know what to call it.

"But, being with you does make me happy, 'Khi...Dharromar." She said softly with one of her warming smiles. "So, I should think that it is proper to count it as love."

She watched his face fall back to a smooth contemplation, and then as his eyes followed her form up to meet her face, they were alight with renewed interest and passion. The midnight blue drew her into their depths, drowning her in a fevered compulsion to touch him and feel his skin next to hers. She pulled him closer to her, his arms encircling her. They kissed hotly, their hands exploring, searching for the tender exciting responses from each other.

As his lips followed her flesh down her chin and along her neck it sent chills through her that flooded her mind and made her ache to be enfolded in his body. He smelled so good to her. The fabric of their clothing was the only thing restricting them. His mouth traced along the top of her breasts, sweet moans making his lips tremble against her skin. She giggled lightly, her limbs demanding to be wrapped around him.

He crawled back up to capture her lips again in his uncontrolled urge to devour her with a tender flame. His hips pressed down on her as she curled one leg over him, her long, full skirt tumbling in a crisp cascade along her leg. She thrilled at the firm pressure of his masculinity as it brushed on her thigh, the layers of fabric warm between them. He moaned with a stumbling breath, pushing appreciatively against her. His arms squeezed her tighter. She felt her own body silently preparing to receive him, when a voice from the outer house intruded on their ardent embrace.

Sarra's mewling call for Lauralei could be heard filtering through the mansion's rooms. They both stopped still, afraid to move for a moment as the end of their tryst sank into their impassioned minds. Swallowing hard, Lauralei quickly extracted her hand from the front of his pants and slid away from him. On hands and knees, he crept off of her dress and they fumbled over each other to peek out the door. The hall was still and empty. They were both breathing heavily with their blood racing with the fear of discovery. Turning to him, she saw his face on fire as he crouched in the shadows and for a moment she felt as though he would leap on her regardless of their danger.

"Do you want to meet me again?" she whispered, to which he readily agreed. "Then leave your window open tonight."

She flashed a wide smile; her own eyes alight with the sensations that were soaring through her and hurriedly scurried out the door. Leaving him alone in the forgotten compartment with his breathless thoughts.

The small closet was suddenly quiet and still without her inside it. Dharromar sat down heavily, his mind and body swirling with the new impressions that life had thrust upon him. The strange, aimless urges of the past week had integrated in a storm of contact with soft flesh. Reluctant to leave these sensations that buzzed about his loins, he closed his eyes and imagined that Lauralei's warm, supple form was still against him, goading him on to a stronger frenzy. Her image moved slowly against the blackness of his private loneliness. Her eyes invited him to caress her silken skin and made him promises of assistance. As his pulse tingled and curled towards the centralized ebb and pull in his hips, his breath became labored, his blossoming lust demanded more consideration. His head fell back against the beams of the cupboard, its chipped paint flaking off into his fine hair but he no longer cared. Stretching out one leg, he bit down into his lower lip as he thought of his hands running up Lauralei's round, creamy thigh and cupping the bare flesh of her hips.

His body cried out for more in a sweating pant for more than just imaginings. He barely heard a pounding from without the closet that matched the pounding of his pulse in his own ears and he was not aware of the heavy, determined step of Solomen until he shouted out for 'Khiall only yards away from his hiding place. His boiling blood turned to ice. Fearing that his own breath would give him away, he sat motionless, trying his best to quiet his pulsing, nagging excitement.

"Khiall!" his stepfather shouted from the hall. "Where are you?"

He knew trouble would come if he kept Solomen waiting, so banishing the last thoughts of Lauralei, he tried to silently scramble to the door. In an awkward panic, he discovered in horror that his enthusiastic lower member was still in evidence. As Solomen's legs came into view just outside the door, he saw them through the small slats and became desperate to rid himself of this formation.

"Khiall! We have a foundered horse in the east meadows!" The patriarch bellowed before storming off down the hall mumbling loudly, "Where is that damned faerlin?"

Seeing this as his chance to escape the broom cupboard unseen, Dharromar hurriedly searched for how to diminish his incriminating impediment. He felt his hand pricked by a straw of the broom that had repeatedly attacked him earlier. He quickly snatched out one of the hard reeds and rammed it under his thumbnail. Biting his lip and wincing with the pain, as tears came to his eyes, he felt with satisfaction that it was working. His ardent stumbling block was dying. Sighing and sucking the blood from under his nail, he quietly opened the door to find his stepfather. He muttered curses under his heated breath as he did.

