

Love

It burned.

Hot, voracious, his unwieldy control over his fire birthed an equally unwieldy inferno, devouring the vegetation surrounding them with unprejudiced fervor. And yet Valeria stood unharmed, confident amidst the flames, as if she belonged there. *She*, commander of foliage. Why? As her weaponry smoldered around her, she remained poised, detached, simply spread more seed, eyes on him like she had a secret she knew hadn't been shared with him. Her presence, unperturbed, mocked him.

Yet he still didn't want to hurt her.

Frustrated, he flexed his fingers. He didn't want to hurt her. He didn't want to be hurt. He couldn't have both -- they'd made that perfectly clear when they'd spoken to each other, their objectives identical yet incompatible. They would lay down their lives to protect the ones they loved.

...

Love...? The word was still foreign, felt awkward and embarrassing to say out loud. After a quarter of a century of mistreatment, misbehaviour, misconception, and mistrust; of trying to exist in discrete formality on the outskirts of interpersonal society; of keeping others at an arm's length lest they betray him as he'd been betrayed so many times before...

... when had he begun to let himself love people?

When did he start to love *them*?

Was it the day Newhaven burned? After the tournament, initially so thrilling, such a remarkable display of the elemental talent living in Newhaven, until it wasn't, until it took a turn, until the field itself tried to eliminate the competitors, until a sore loser destroyed the entire arena, injuring several dozen competitors and onlookers alike. Escaping unharmed and yet circling back around, eager to help, eager to tend to the injured despite his very blatant lack of medical expertise, ending up alongside Rue, fetching her medical supplies as she patched up Azelvia, utterly unaware of how much the two of them would mean to him one day soon. The explosion, the whole island burning, selfishly trying to make his way back into town, back home, back to the homeowner who'd so generously given him lodging, who'd so generously considered him like family. ... underestimating his own element and nearly burning to death, and how they could have left him for dead but they didn't, they helped him to the shore, helped him to

*board the Harmonia where Evie patched up his injuries. Bonham, where they'd docked in desperate need of supplies, how he'd gone with the group into town, how he'd been dragged into an anti-elemental protest, how his godawful tattoo had given away his identity as one of exactly the kind of **monsters** they raged against. ... how once again the Newhaven refugees had saved him, yanked him back to safety as they raced back to the docks...*

Was that when?

Was it when they divided? How he'd reluctantly sided with Jehiel, with Talion, hating the thought of splitting from the rest but terrified by his close call in Bonham and swayed by Jehiel's frustration toward the unfair exile they suffered for simply existing. Sneaking uneasily back to Newhaven once the flames dissipated, searching for answers -- he more than the others, lost, confused, struggling with the language barrier and his attempt to comprehend the situation. How they nevertheless treated him like one of their own, like he had every right to be among them. The Aether beasts, surrounding them, attacking them both physically and mentally, how he'd nearly broken free of the swarm, how he'd been so close to being able to find help when the damned creatures provoked him, stealing his own face and using his frustration against him. How he'd fallen victim to their mind games and attacked, how they knew he'd attack and knew how to catch him off guard, how he'd courted death for the second time, useless, unable to help the others fight the monsters off. How he'd returned to the Nemesis in shame, how the shame had given way to determination, to desire. To the urge to become stronger. To stand up to the terrors surrounding them. ... to protect his crew...

Was that when?

*Was it the heist? Targeting the museum, taking back what belonged to them, letting the country know they meant business. Slipping up, exposing himself, his fears, his heartaches, waiting for the mockery that always followed and having his expectations betrayed. Jehiel, Azelvia, strangers until recently, swearing they'd stand by him, that they'd protect him, knowing, understanding. Then nearly losing them both mere hours later, Azelvia to gravity, a close brush with death that he only knew happened by the frantic screaming of his crewmates over the comms; and Jehiel nearly overpowered by Security, the guard grappling him down. That one he could prevent, and his movement was automatic, second nature, lunging at the stranger, latching on, blasting him with the full power of his element, just like he'd been conditioned to do, **forced** to do, eliminating him, disabling the threat. And even as the threat's corpse cooled on the floor, his Captain, his crewmates, still stood by him, reassured him, **protected** him...*

Was that when?

Was it the terror that followed? Ned, leaving Concord behind after an incident in Hyrum, immediately latching onto him, bonding over their shared element, their shared affinity, his enthusiasm confusing, then charming, then infectious, soon imbuing in him the first faint sparks of pride in his element. Pelagius, awakened, enraged, attacking the Nemesis and forcing the crew to evacuate, to escape into the depths of the ocean or else drown in the wreckage, fighting against the torrent of seawater rushing in,

*drenched, useless, but unwilling to leave anyone behind. Reaching out desperately for Sanka as he struggled against the water pressure, nearly succeeding before his hand was torn from his grasp and he was forced to evacuate. The alchemical glass cave beneath the ocean, their only refuge, and despite the heaviness, the discomfort, the sudden draining feeling as the material lining the walls sapped their elemental strength, they remained in high spirits because they were here, they were **alive**, all of them, even Sanka, and they laughed and celebrated their living to see another day, the first uncontrollable giddy laughter he'd felt in years. And then it was over, just like that, as the cave system revealed its demons and one by one they started to fall, and in his heartache and frustration he killed again-- only to wake on board the Nemesis, as if it had never happened...*

... was that when...?

...

... teeth.

Gnashing, sinking into his hand, and he recoils in shock, tries to tear himself away from the source of the pain. One of Valeria's wolves, the flames comprising its body lapping at his arm as it tugs at him, tries to control him. He won't be controlled. Not by his own element. He yanks free, manipulates its flame, shoots it back toward its mistress. ... and toward the figure accompanying her. She's not alone anymore. She has backup. It doesn't matter. One support or a hundred supports, if he can keep them here and not out attacking his family then he'll do everything in his power.

*Was it the auction? Their activities having attracted new allies, a tentative affiliation with Concord in the works, a new mission needing planning, a chance to liberate other, enslaved Elementals. He should be preparing, on guard, ready to act on a moment's notice for his crew. Instead, he is hurt. Aedus, Mortimer, and, most painfully, Jehiel -- all three expressing disapproval regarding the murders left in Talion's wake, and though the nuances of their language may escape him the meaning does not. He has done bad. He is bad. He is a disappointment. But why should he hurt? Why should their disapproval matter? He is a weapon, and a weapon is built to kill. And though he should destroy such unwelcome feelings and focus on the task at hand, he cannot, letting his disappointment in himself distract him, frustrate him, his performance faltering, until-- until the opportunity arises, until, alerted by a triggered alarm, security arrives to investigate their rescue mission, and he stays behind, distracting the guards, changing the way he thinks about his element, using his electricity to paralyze, not to kill, subduing them without killing, and he's so proud, so proud thinking that **they** will be proud, that maybe he has redeemed himself. ... but it's all for naught, as disaster strikes, the guards are killed, and his only thought goes to assuring, **promising** his crew that **he didn't do it this time**...*

Was that when?

Was it the plague? His crew crippled by sickness and desperate for reprieve, and he feeling right as rain, willing to trade places with any of them if it meant they should be at peace again. Still struggling to

restrain himself, to work his way back into Talion's good graces, taking it upon himself to barge into the run-down hospital and demand treatment for the sick. Nearly slipping up -- losing his temper with a nurse and incapacitating him, inhuman though he may have been -- but remaining determined not to do it again as he cornered one of the only doctors available. Letting Azelviah take his place, away from police conflict, as he took hers escorting the facility's owner, their hostage, to the front for negotiation. And then chaos. The blast. Screaming. Fighting. The building swarmed by the authorities, him cuffed, dragged up, thrown into the back of the police van before his nose had even stopped bleeding, and as much as he panicked at how they were taking him, he was going back, they would own him again, it was nothing compared to the absolute despair that sunk to the bottom of his heart as he watched more and more of his family loaded in alongside him, and all he could do was hang his head and weep...

Was that when?

*Was it the execution? Staring death in the face on the docks of Bonham. Powerless to help his crew no matter how willingly he went to his own death. Jay yelling at him to put his anger to good use for once but there was no anger, only sadness, only fear, only regret, until the floodgates opened, until the furious crowd rushed them, knocking several of them into the water to drown, and **then** he was angry, he was **livid**, that they would **dare** to cheer the deaths of his family, and he did it again, he snapped, he wrapped the chain of his cuffs around the neck of the first protester he could grab and choked the life out of them-- and for nothing. They were all swept away, rescued, transported to Zadkiel's mansion, and though their immediate peril was eliminated his anger still burned, turned now toward their unseen host, the catalyst for all their misery, keeping them at his mercy just as the humans had. And then to destroy them, to take so much of his family away, corrupting them, turning them against one another. Sanka. Not. Gen. Valeria. One after another, seeking from Zadkiel what they couldn't get from Talion. ... what they couldn't get from him. He'd failed them. Knowing that, knowing there was nothing he could do, made his heart still sink when he thought of them...*

... was that when? Was that when he'd started to love them?

... no. ... he'd loved them long before that.

...

A jolt. A flash of lightning that isn't his strikes out and Valeria stiffens, immobilized. She's encased before she can fall, surrounded in a massive bubble of malleable energy.

They call his name. Not the sharp, hacking sound his mother always spat out shortly before her open palm connected with his cheek. Not the detached, disinterested monotone of his former owners, his *slavers*, glancing over his paperwork as he was sold yet again. Not the bemused half-laughter of the late residents of Newhaven as they took pity on him for his poor English and *unconventional* demeanor.

... it's the sound of people worried for his well-being.

He turns, already knowing who'd be there. Jehiel. Huo. Kamen. Men he'd vowed to give his life for, who Valeria had snidely tried to claim *owned* him, made him fight their battles for them, when it couldn't be farther from the truth.

He fought their battles for them whether they wanted him to or not. Now, standing in the burning forest, flashes of electricity dancing across his arms as his muscles twitched from stress and adrenaline, looking every bit like the monster he'd accused Valeria of being, that much was abundantly clear. He fought their battles for them because it was all he knew, it was the only way he could show how much they meant to him.

Because he would rather die than lose any one of them.

"I..." he manages to croak out, his eyes damp from his overwhelming guilt, shame, fear, anger...

... love...

Something stirs between the trees. And then...

... and then...

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... and then...

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