

The First to Fall

"He's in here. He's okay. But he's hurt, and needs rest."

Anxiously Mis'to and Morgana made their way through the Conjurer's guild, to where Fionn had his own quiet room. A quick knock to check he was awake, and then the conjurer ushered them in. There he was, all bandaged up, looking terribly small and frail.

"Fionn." Mis'to rested a hand on his shoulder. "What happened?"

The pale Miquo'te closed his eyes. "I... was stupid. Ok...? I... went to drink with a stranger..."

"No, Fionn. You were not stupid. You were not to know this would happen. You had no reason to know it would." Morgana tried to reassure him, looking worriedly at Mis'to.

"I was...I was stupid. I should never have t-taken that drink. And t-then... I... m-managed to feel cold... Hearing my.. own? voice speak things. Next thing I k-know, he called me by my birth name..."

Mis'to tilted his head, looking at Morgana. "I'm...not aware of anything that would cause visions like that...?"

"I think he might have been poisoned.... by the Parahels..." she answered solemnly.

"The Keeper that took me to the Canopy said my real name... but a voice akin to my own was saying something to me." His eyes grew wide. "I... did hear a name that was close to... my sire."

"What was the name?"

"I... think their name was Rrahn'wo..?"

Mis'to sucked in his breath. Morgana looked at him. "What number would that be?"

Blinking, he looked back at her. "...Wo? Seven?"

"Seven! Didn't you say that there are a lot less boys born? How many children must they have had to have had seven boys!?"

"No kidding." Mis'to ran a hand through his hair. Morgana was no Keeper, but she had the right of it; was even resting a hand on her stomach as if pained at the thought of so many children. Seven was...unheard of. "That's. Well. A lot."

"T-the man hunted me though, as if I was some kind of beast... But I... don't think that it was his name. I think... there might actually been two of them."

Frowning deeply, Mis'to closed his eyes. Time to bring his secret weapon into play. "...Don't think you've sensed my Echo before, Fionn. So...let me explain. I kinda...get a link on someone's soul. And I can see what's going on between the aether of your body and soul. See what's hurting it. If you need me to, I'll stop. Okay?"

"Um." Fionn blinked. "Excuse me. But... what is an 'Echo'...?"

Oh. Of course. He wouldn't know. "Well...." Mis'to looked at Morgana, wincing slightly. To him, it was just a thing that was.

Morgana smiled back to Fionn. "It's a set of skills that some people have that are tied to something to do with the soul. Some can be a bit strange, but they are usually useful, like Mis'to's is."

The Keeper nodded, struggling to understand it all. "I trust you... I'm just... sorry to let you down.."

"Don't blame yourself Fionn." Mis'to closed his eyes, holding a hand over Fionn. "Here...."

"Still... I walked straight into their trap..." Fionn closed his eyes.

Mis'to knew the effect his strange soul-link had on others. Warm, soothing; not unlike floating in a warm sea. It was visible on Fionn's face, and much as the situation was concerning it was good to see the young Keeper relax. "It's okay kiddo. You didn't know they were coming." Mis'to looked up after a moment. "....I don't sense anything wrong. Save the arrow wounds." Though he had sensed something else. Some strange...disturbance of his aether. Unsure how to word it, he kept it to himself for now.

"So.. what was it what I saw...? Menphina... how many arrows did he even shoot at me..." He tried to move but clearly still hurt. "Guess they weren't messing around with me having to rest."

"No they weren't." Mis'to frowned. "Hit smart too. Not in places to wound you badly. You'll heal up just fine."

"I'm worried they did this in the middle of damn Gridania. I-I... thought I was safe in Gridania... I-I just wanted some arrows."

Morgana nodded. "Quite... what makes them so brazen? I mean... I thought the point of the Parahels is that they hated Gridania?" She looked up at Mis'to, brow furrowed. "We would have said something if we had thought you unsafe for a moment, Fionn." Morgana's eyes flicked back to the young Miqu'te, an apologetic look on her face. "I am sorry that this happened to you."

Fionn sighed. "I can't believe.. I ran to the Twin Adders for safety. A few months ago, I... would never have done that. That is how terrified I was, when they were hunting me. I..." He took a deep breath. "Never felt fear like this before."

"You did what you had to survive." Mis'to smiled faintly. "And you're going to be okay. We're just going to have to keep a close eye on you eh?"

"Perhaps you staying on Vylbrand might be better. There is less chance of them finding you that way."

The door opened once more as Rayne came in, a large cloth sack over her shoulder. Clearly she had been in the Shroud when she got the call, some dirt on her hands and trousers. Mis'to looked up at Rayne, smiling wearily. "Hey Rayne. Trouble as always eh."

"Sorry I'm late," She said with an apologetic look, "How're you feeling Fionn?" The Keeper hung his head and she smiled a little, walking over to give him a gentle pat on the head. "Honestly, I'm not too surprised, I knew they'd make a move sooner or later... But this was a bold one to do first, that's for sure. I'm sorry... I should've done more to prepare you in the weeks we've had. Would you mind if... I examined your wounds quickly? I just want to... confirm something."

"... I have no choice, do I?" Fionn sighed. "Do as you want."

"Well, you do... If you don't want me to, I won't."

"If it helps figure out what happened, I really have no choice."

She let out a small sigh, "I promise it'll be quick," Lifting one of the bandages of the injuries slightly, she leaned forward just to catch the smell of fresh blood, tasting it with her keen senses. "Have the conjurers found out what poison was used?" She asked the other two as she did this, "As in, what plants were used."

"Not yet had a chance to ask." Morgana replied.

"...I have an idea." Mis'to frowned. "We used to use the same poison for big beasts. It's a pretty rare herb found in the deep Shroud. It's...well. Where it's found is generally only known to the huntresses of the clan. It's rare, sacred...that sort of thing."

"Well..." Rayne put down her bag to open it, revealing a number of various poisonous plants each wrapped up in their own separate, labelled bags so as to not cross the leaves. "These are the ones I was able to find. I've been building up my tolerance again, but if we could make some kind of antitoxin, that would be helpful... As for that herb, I might have some ideas, but... It'll take time."

Mis'to nodded. "...Wish I knew more. Alas, was something very closely guarded. At least, in my clan."

"Those of the Ithilen may know, perhaps," She suggested, "As for the rest, if we can gain some protection from poison, that would help. Worse comes to worse, you could always introduce a little bit of poison to your diet," She says in a light hearted tone to suggest she was joking. Though that smile slowly fades. "I have... discovered some things though and now that we're all here, it might be good to discuss them."

The others tilted their heads. Morgana gestured at her. "Go on..."

"Well first... After the Ithilen got settled, I went in the Deep Shroud to try and find out where the Parahel were camped. I was able to find the entrance to their territory and that felt good enough for a first scouting...However, when I followed Rrahn'a's trail, it... Disappeared. It didn't feel like teleportation exactly, but it was very similar in how it sort of was... Pulled away." She looked at the others. "At first I thought it was deliberate, like maybe some sort of potion or... I don't know. I was worried that they might have similar sensing to my own. Which is why I spent a lot of time covering my tracks. And then... There was an aetheric disturbance, along with a third trail that followed Fionn for a time and trace elements of that same aether. So..." She turned to Fionn finally, "The same thing has happened with this current attacker and I was hoping we could learn from witnesses and you, Fionn, how the man escaped, as that might provide some clues. Do you remember how he escaped?"

The other frowned. "His... eyes.. They flashed blue and then he... disappeared."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about what happened? Anything that struck you as off or weird?"

"I... at one point felt like I was no longer in Gridania, was forced.. t-to relive what happened to me, the bad memories..." He sighed. "And then, I found myself on the ground."

"Memories huh..." She narrowed her eyes a little, "My current theory is that the mother, Rrahn, is still alive and she's who pulled her sons from their respective places. She was also likely the one who got all up in your head. It was a link formed when you got close to her son. The way it feels is... Somewhat similar to Mis'to's ability. But not quite the same. It's definitely one that seems to connect her and her children though."

Mis'to frowned slightly. "...Going to guess you felt the same weird...disturbance in his aether I did?" He looked at Rayne.

"I noticed it for sure," She says, tapping her nose, "But there must be some kind of limitation. And not something she can just do all the time. I wonder what the aim was though... It looks like they were out to capture Fionn, but if that was the case, I wonder what the whole memories deal was about."

"I really do not want to go 'home'... Is this... because of my sire?"

"Perhaps... But we're also standing against them, and that may be the cause as well... And home is where the heart is, I highly doubt yours is with them. It goes without saying we could all be targets, and we've no real clue as to their number. That, of course, includes people close to us becoming targets as well."

"...I don't know-" Mis'to frowned again. "We-"

At once Morgana winced, the tell-tale headache of an Echo vision striking all at once. She clutched her head; the only warning the others would have that it was coming; and sure enough, soon Rayne and Mis'to followed. Fear rippled through Morgana as all she could do was let the vision play out.

The three stood now within the Shroud, a number of figures retreating into the distance. From where they were they could see two Miqo'te clearly from behind; one tall and strongly built with brilliant ruddy colored hair, wearing leather and hide armour and a large bow on his back. In complete contrast the one next to him was small, thin; almost gaunt, skin and long hair ice-white. Dressed in pale blue robes, this latter figure seemed to resist a direct glance, slipping away from their gaze.

"You have him?" The first said.

"Soon." The others voice is wispy; you have to strain to hear it. "We are the same."

"Don't make it easy for me, Rrahn'wo." The first's amber eyes flashed in anticipation. "I hate an easy hunt."

"I will do what Mother demands."

The first's fist clenched; you get the feeling that if he wasn't being watched, he would have struck the other. "Good," he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Follow me, then."

The first moves to leave but the second does not follow. Instead something about him shifts - and abruptly he startled, turning to face the three watchers.

As pale as Fionn, and perhaps a similar age, he might have been pleasant to look at save where his eyes would be there, there were only thin black lines, rough and coarse as if covered in scabbed blood and with three scars running through each socket. Scarred upon his forehead was the symbol of Menphina. As his gaze fell upon them, the Shroud faded to misty white.

Back in the conjurer's guild, Fionn cried out as Morgana and Mis'to suddenly collapsed. Rayne continued her strange vigil, clearly agitated and fur bristling. "M-Mis'to?! M-Morgana!?" He tried to move towards them but got pulled back by the pain in his body. "W-what's going on..."

The white one lifted his head, before hurriedly raising his hands. "How-"

Mis'to blinks a few times. "What....?"

With a sudden fearful growl the white Miqu'te reaches out a hand, drawing slivers of ice and throwing them out at the three caught in the Echo visions. Thinking it a normal vision Mis'to didn't react, blinking; until one sliver caught his cheek and *cut* as if it were real. Yelping he leapt back, surprised to find himself moving.

In the real world, Fionn watched a bloody rent go across Mis'to's face.

Rayne darts out of the way, her nose catching the smell of blood and quickly moving so he couldn't strike all three of them again. Morgana had ducked without realising what she was doing, the ice passing overhead as she tries to straighten up, gasping for breath. She looked to Mis'to, the blood on his cheek, then back to the white haired figure. "How are you doing this?!"

Rayne tilted her head. "You know, I was hoping that you'd be more polite and interested in talking than your brother... I guess not," She shrugged, "Friendly advice though, you may not want to keep us here."

The other paused, hand shaking just slightly. Hesitant. Frightened.

"Who are you?" Morgana watched, unflinching.

"Rahn'wo," came the wispy reply. More felt, than spoken.

Morgana looked up to Mis'to briefly and whispered "seven" before looking back at the white haired man. "Call me Morgana," she said, taking a single, careful, step forward, keeping her hands where they could be seen. "Are you the one doing this?"

The other stepped back, slowly. "Who are you?"

"In what sense?" She rocked back, endeavouring to show she was not a threat. "I shared my name, but I get the feeling that's not what you mean."

Rayne stepped forward also. "If you just leave us alone, we won't have to fight... It's a kindness I'll offer once... But don't mistake my kindness for weakness," She said in a low voice, her eyes dilating. There was something more that she wasn't saying, the air around her grew thick with tension as a low rumble emanated from her chest.

Rrahn'wo didn't respond; but a palpable fear filled the vision. "What are you-" he whispered - before abruptly, the vision vanished.

Morgana gasped loudly as she found herself slumped over on the bed, senses flooding back.

"Ugh-" Wincing Mis'to sat up, a hand flying to his cheek. There was already a good amount of blood. "What was...that..."

"W-what happened? Is.. t-this this Echo thing?" Fionn's voice came through, high and panicked.

"It was to start with... but it appears to be beyond what I know..." Morgana said. On catching sight of Mis'to's wound she moved to heal him.

Mis'to nods wearily, letting her do so. It was gone quickly enough, though the blood remained. "...What the hell."

"Yeah... That was weird," Rayne said, her tone oddly jovial.

"Weird's the word." Mis'to rubbed his cheek; still somewhat caught out at being injured through an Echo vision. "...I think we met your other hunter, Fionn...."

"Whatever it was, it's probably old magic to protect from being spied on from far away, I would guess... Probably something to do with what symbol is on his forehead... I still wonder what caused the vision in the first place," Rayne said, lifting her nose to the air to see if there was another scent around. The third scent was stronger. That of this...Rrahn'wo, then.

"... That explains why I wasn't in Gridania at moments..." Fionn rubbed his head.

"Your visions were definitely linked to him, yes, though if I had to guess, when we're nearby, it may accidentally hit us instead because of the Echo. Or perhaps, another reason, but it seemed he wasn't exactly in control of the targets, or hadn't intended for us to be there. But those are my own thoughts."

"Menphina..." The Keeper said as he hid himself under the blankets.

"If it helps though... I think we scared him. At least a little."

"Really...? I.. d-don't want to see that again..."

"You felt like you were not in Gridania? What did you see Fionn?"

"The... p-place was white and misty.. it was weird." He uncovered his head from underneath the

"I wonder..." Rayne trailed off, thinking about it, "I wonder if it's like... A pseudo illusion... Ah that's probably not the best way to describe it." She rubs the back of her neck, thinking, "Like a dream...?"

"Aye that's what we just...saw." Mis'to nodded.

"Like a dream..." Fionn repeated, trying to process it all.

Rayne snapped her finger, "Hypnosis I think is the Eorzean word for it. It's like... trapping someone in an illusion within their mind, so it functions kind of like a dream, that you have some level of control over. And illusions can sometimes affect reality, I know how they work kind of... But I couldn't do it to that level."

"Can that... force you to relive memories?" He cast a gaze at Rayne, one filled with worry. "As... I-I remembered things I did not want to."

Mis'to gently rubbed his head. "...Didn't happen to us but then..."

"Well, hypnosis can make you relive things. And so can dreams. And as I understand it, it's much easier to use an illusion from something the target knows," She gives Fionn an apologetic look, "Sorry... But in essence yes... And in the cases of experienced users, the term nightmare is more appropriate than dream. It's not a very pleasant technique..."

Morgana sighed. "The question is... other than getting Fionn back to Vylbrand, what do we do next? I'm rather tempted to consult the tomes we have access to and see if there is any mention of such dream states being used in magic, and how we can best be prepared... The fact it physically hurt Mis'to has me worried, for sure."

"I can go to my mentors in Doma and see what they have there as well... As well as brush up on what I know, just bear in mind, illusion techniques are very broad. We can only better arm ourselves with knowledge, but I don't think we'll fully know what will happen until it happens." "Or perhaps send someone to retrieve copies of said texts."

"Assuming it's even magic." Mis'to rubs his head wearily. "...So. Seven."

"Well... It's going to be some sort of aetheric manipulation on some level. Whether it be magic they have learned, or something else... And yes... The number of sons has me a bit... Put off. I think something very unnatural has happened." Rayne frowned.

Mis'to nods slowly. "Sae is unusual enough. Ra - five - is once a generation. Wo? That's....unheard of."

"How in Menphina's name... is this possible? And... y-you really think I'll be safe in Vylbrand...?" Fionn looked extremely worried, still clearly trying to process everything.

"Magic is very old Fionn, with some stories just as old, so really it's anyone's guess... As for being safe, well, very few places would be safer. Unless you wanted to get out of Eorzea completely. But a Keeper will definitely stand out in Limsa, nevermind getting there on their own."

He looked downwards. "Guess I have no other choice... I've become a game for them, and I assume that this magic is why..." He stopped himself there. "Just hope they won't track me down that easily."

"Our Rrahn'wo does look a lot like you." Mis'to frowned. "And used ice. Right?"

"Ice...? And yeah... Now that you mentioned that. He did."

"To be completely honest with you, I think they'd try and make a game out of anyone they'd hunt. It's a sport to them, though that doesn't bring much comfort," She leaned back a little and mulled it over, "Well... It makes sense considering he had a symbol of Menphina on his forehead."

"Sound at all familiar?" Morgana said, rolling her eyes. Mis'to looked at her, knowing full well who she was referencing about the love of the hunt. "Enjoys hunting for the sport it gives? Though to be fair, if they even close give him a run for his money, I would be surprised."

"Ah, that guy," Rayne says nodding, "Though to be fair, it seems like a lot of people who would call themselves a hunter end up like that." She looks to Fionn and then thinks. "I don't know... It seemed very specific, though the question of why remains to be seen... Until we know more, we can only speculate."

As the group continued to muse, a sudden noise outside caught their attention. The sound of a number of people; conjurers calling out to each other urgently.

"Easy now - don't move too much - keep those arrows still-"

All four turned their attention to the door, watching the conjurers hurry past, a figure being carried carefully between them. It was only a flash, but they saw enough to recognize who. From the flash of fur and leather armor - it was Jirr'a Noralo. The Keeper they had met out not two weeks earlier, on the way to the Ithilen.

A sudden feeling of dread overcame them all.

Morgana pushed past and through the door to follow, intent on offering aid if it could be used. "What happened?" She asked, looking for the one in charge.

One looked at her quickly. "Ambush," she said, moving past quickly to open a nearby door.

Both Mis'to and Rayne followed quickly, Mis'to pausing to gently pat Fionn's hand before leaving the worried Miqu'te behind. "The Noralo clan...." Rayne's fur bristled as she ground her teeth, her eyes flashing dangerously for a moment. "When I get my hands on one of them..." She muttered quietly

The conjurers were quick to get Jirr'a to a room, make him comfortable. He'd been shot in the back several times, with one arrow sticking out the side. The young Keeper was pale and shaking, his strength draining by the moment. "Mo...Morga-" He reached out weakly. "R-rayne...?"

"Morgana... Can you..." Rayne asks quietly, her throat tightening. She took Jirr'a's hand gently. It was cold, so cold. He was clearly fading fast. She kept her face schooled, trying to lend some of her warmth; much as she needed answered, she didn't want to make him talk while he was like this. Instead she just held his hand, trying to give him what strength and courage she could. "If there is anything I can do... Let me know."

Morgana looked to the other conjurers before doing anything, as if asking permission to attend the patient. They were more than glad for her help, stepping back as much as they could while keeping Jirr'a stable. "I will need fresh water and clean cloths, please," Morgana said looking to one of the conjurers. She then started to test the arrows carefully to see how deep they were lodged. "I need to get these out and clean the wounds before we start to heal, or we risk trapping an infection." She said firmly. One conjurer moved quickly to do her bidding. Mis'to hung back, clear stress visible on his face.

"This should make things a bit easier," Rayne carefully focused some heat to cut the arrow shafts shorter, so that way the entire arrow wasn't still sticking out of him. Whilst Morgana tended to the wounds, she continued to hold the Miqu'te's hand, bringing one of the pieces of wood to her nose, she gave it a few sniffs before focusing on the fletching. Trying to catch the scent of the hunter on the fletching itself. Different to the two she knew, and yet similar.

Jirr'a clutched Rayne's hand weakly again. "It was....ambush....I didn't see..."

"Shh, shh, it's okay," She said gently, placing a hand on his head and running her fingers through his hair, "Save your strength, you've got good people looking after you."

"Help me clean these before we do anything else." Morgana said to Mis'to before turning to her patient. "Jirr'a, on a scale of one to ten, how much does it hurt?"

Mis'to was quick to step forward, having clearly already decided to act. He took Jirr'a's other hand firmly, as the other took the cloth from Morgana to gently clean the arrows. "Stay with us, kid." His voice was strong, confident; for a moment a flash of the old healer he was coming through clear. "You're all right. Hush."

"Mis'to - Rayne - please...I...sh...she's...they're going to kill them-"

Rayne's tone dropped a little as she simply asked, "Where?" Her other hand clenched into a fist as she gently cradled the hand she was holding.

"We were coming to...Gr--Gridania...so...close to-" With a faint groan his grip weakened, eyes closing. "We-"

He was fading too fast, and abruptly Mis'to dropped the cloth to grab the staff from a nearby conjurer, barely thinking straight. For a brief moment he hesitated, hand trembling slightly. That familiar terror of healing threatening to overwhelm. He knew what would happen if he tried. He knew what would happen if he didn't.

Jirr'a's hand released its grip. Rayne clutched him and let out a small gasp as the young man went limp.

"No no *no*!" With a cry Mis'to closed his eyes, brilliant white light pouring from the hand holding the staff.

Morgana was not going to waste any time; with a flick of her wrist, Lily appeared, twinkling in a puff of aether. Both quickly set to work, doing what they could to stabilize the young miqo'te. Mis'to hadn't reached out to Morgana with his Echo as he had before, his full attention on Jirr'a as their healing magic flooded into him. Yet she could sense Mis'to's power; aether moving with near surgical precision, struggling vainly to stop the tide. Morgana could feel it too; the desperation in Mis'to's aetheric movements. Anger turned to desperation, turned to terror.

Rayne held on for as long as she could, desperately willing life into the failing Miqu'te, wishing there was something she could do to help, all while knowing she was powerless. She knew Mis'to was trying his hardest, even so, she felt an overwhelming sense of dread.

Suddenly Mis'to screamed; an awful heart-rending cry. He collapsed, heaving and retching as the staff clattered across the floor.

Jirr'a's hand slipped from Rayne's grasp.

Rayne fell silent as Morgana hurried anxiously to Mis'to's side, Lily turning her attention to the fallen red mage. Slowly she let out a breath, and leaned over. A small wisp of silver escaping as she gently closed Jirr'a's eyes, leaned down and placed a tender kiss on his forehead. "I will carry you with me," She whispered and placed the hand on the fallen Miqu'te's chest.

Quietly she looked up, to the door. "I will leave a trail... But I will not wait..." An ominous breeze fluttering through the air for a brief moment as she walked towards the door, her muscles tensing as her heart hammered faster. She brought the emotion in, letting it coil tightly around her until she was ready to strike.

Morgana knew she could not stop her. "Do as you need, but keep to the shadows." Her tone was serious and low. "Mis'to and I will follow when he is stable."

Like that, Rayne was gone.

Mis'to had collapsed to the floor, lying on his back. Hands were over his face, the Keeper shaking uncontrollably as he struggled not to throw up. One of the conjurers knelt down anxiously to help Morgana, while the other turned to Jirr'a with deep sadness, drawing the sheet up over his face.

With a faint groan Mis'to rolled onto his front, slowly picking himself up, face etched with grief. "I tried-" he said, hoarsely, still shaking.

"Sweetie... you were amazing!" Morgana hugged him tight, beaming proudly, yet tears were swelling in her eyes. "I'm so so sorry that we couldn't save him."

Mis'to gave a sob, clinging onto her a moment. Then he took a deep breath, sat up. "No time," he murmured gruffly, blinking away tears. "We...we can't let his clan down-"

"You're right." Morgana said, helping him to his feet.

Wincing, he got up. "....We should tell Fionn. Then go."

She nodded and lead the way back to Fionn's room.

Mis'to moved quickly, pale and unsteady. "Fionn -"

Fionn was glad to see them. "I heard a scream, what happened?" The Keeper looked from his bed, in a sitting position. "And... why are you looking like that?"

Mis'to lowered his head, clear pain on his face. "Jirr'a...he...he's gone. I'm...I'm so sorry..."

Fionn looked to the side, clearly struggling not to break down from the awful news, his voice oddly distant and his hair slowly freezing over, the tips shining like snow. "...Got it. You think I'll be safe here...?".

"There is currently no place safer, Fionn." Morgana said, looking back at the young man for a moment. "The clan was heading this way, we have to go and help. Stay here and look after yourself." Morgana turned to Mis'to. "We need to move."

"I know." Mis'to rested a hand on Fionn's shoulder a moment, squeezing tightly. On some level too, he had to keep his mind on the goal. "They want the Keepers. Not this place."

With that, Mis'to took off with Morgana. Lily vanished into the aether as the two sped out of Stillglade Fane.

There was no time to lose.