

Friends with the Dead

1031, Ten Month Sixday afternoon

“It wasn’t my first choice,” Dano said, trying to pretend he was alone.

“You injure me,” Faile said, with all due angst. The ghost sat on Dano’s bed, watching the songbird decorate himself for dinner. He wore the white linen suit he’d married Leticia in, his red hair bound up around his head with golden circlets. Faile appeared translucent, even to Dano. “The least you could do is let me tell you a secret. Let me make up for that last mistake. Was it my fault those berries would be poisonous? I think you were just allergic to them. Really, they look just like the ones at home.”

Dano closed his eyes for a moment, counted to twenty. It was very late afternoon, just a little of the winter sun left. This performance felt like it was one of the most important of his entire life. With eighteen, or nineteen, maybe seventeen winters to his honor, he was sure that this night would make or break the rest of his life. Trying to block out the ghost, he picked up the his kohl stick with all the attention he could give it, the sensation of the smooth rose colored wood in his bare fingers. The powdered kohl shifted under the tip of his stick and he stirred it slightly, enjoying the feel of the powder’s movement. Still doing his best to ignore his friend. “You’re lucky my voice came back for tonight. Everything would have been ruined if I’d had to sit up here in my room tonight.”

He touched the little stick to his closed eyelid and completely missed the ghost’s exasperated look at the ceiling. “Oh yes, that would have been just awful. My sister’s a dreadful barbarian. She doesn’t much like music.”

“She liked my music last time I sang for her,” Dano nearly snarled, having to pause as he drew the stick across his eyelid. “You’re doing to mess up my make up.”

“Really?” Faile said, standing up, scratching the back of his head and smiling suggestively.

The smile was something Dano could feel even with his eyes closed and he spun around, one eye lined with black and the other naked still. Amethyst lightening dancing in his eyes, such that Faile pressed both palms together and did his best to look innocent. “Don’t you dare look at me like that. I don’t care if I am the only person on the planet who can see you. I am going down there tonight and proving to everyone there that Tokala is not interested in that sister of yours!”

“Don’t get testy, Dano. I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want him anyway.”

Tapping one foot, Dano pointed his kohl stick at the ghost. “Why wouldn’t she want him? He’s beautiful, smart, gentle. Can you really see those eyes of his in your ghostly state? Even if you liked girls when you were alive, can’t you see how beautiful he is?” Dano took hold of his chair, swung a leg over it and propped his chin on the back, arms wrapped around it. Much calmer, he took a deep breath and forgot the ghost completely as he thought about Tokala.

Tokala had been gone all summer, stuck down in Equilobos City with the ghost’s sister, the

Empriatsen'na. The Empriatsen'na's party had arrived early in the morning and every possible thing that could have come up to keep Dano and Tokala apart done just that, until Dano had given up and gone to his room to get ready for dinner. "Do you remember when he and I rode last? The day before he left. He sits a horse like he's the wind flowing over it. He's got such power in his body and then he just smiles and," Dano let his rambling trail off. "I'm not Emprial like Charity. I'm not wealthy and I'm not powerful. I'm just some small shire songbird and a bastard on top of it, but Faile, he's mine. I've loved him all my life and when I started thinking about.. uh more than just holding onto his tail, it's like.. Faile, you loved Leticia, would you have stopped loving her if you were a poor shire rat and she was going to be Empriatfay if she didn't love you?"

Faile sat back down again, hands in his lap, looking like the teenager he'd been when he died. "No, I did anything and everything to be with her. Dano, it's just, you're more than you think or seem, or I wouldn't be here talking to you. Emprial ghosts only talk to the High Songbird, you know?"

"Nope, don't know nothing about Emprial politics. All I know is that I'm going down there tonight and I'm gonna make Tokala feel what I feel. I'm going to make him know that I'm not a little kid anymore." As carefully as he could, Dano outlined his other eye, shaping it oval and slightly cat like, doing the other over as well.

Neither of them said a word as Dano took down his hair, fingers combing through the dark black braid, fanning it out until it lay around his shoulders, down his back. "Wish you could help me put the flowers in. Faile, there are three other older Carlyes children. Why don't you ask your father why he picked Tokala in the first place? Any of the other children would be better a better bond for your sister."

"I'd ask him but he's not dead," Faile said, moving his fingers absently through the ornately carved poster that he sat by. "He must have had his reasons though. He always did. Can't you feel all the spirits gathering around here? Something's happening tonight. Can't you feel it at all?"

"Nope. I'm not feeling anything except Tokala's back!" With his little finger, Dano picked up a little oil of winter berry, and not the poisonous kind, then smoothed the shiny thick oil over his lips. "Faile, I'd give so much just to kiss him, just to touch him. I'd give my songbird gift to lay next to him, to have him know how I feel about him. It gnaws at me that he doesn't know. He's so kind and honor blinded. Even if he doesn't like me back, I have to make the offer."

"You lose your gift before you send me and I'll haunt you for the rest of your life, Dano. Love is pretty demanding, but try to send me before you lose your gift. Songbirds die sometimes, if they lose their virginity to people that don't really want them!" The ghost fell back over on the bed, hand on his chest, legs out straight like a board, the death march humming in the air around him.

"Damn you're morbid!"

Faile lifted his head and smiled as he put the back of his wrist to his forehead. "Well, I am dead! What do you expect? Besides, if you go down there, I'll have to go too and my son will be there. I haven't seen him since he was born. He's ten. I'm still fifteen. It'll be freaky."

“You’re a ghost. What do you expect? Faile, I’ll send you, I promise. Tokala loves me, just like I love him. But maybe he’s forgotten or something, being around Charity.” Dano looked over his shoulder and smiled. “If she’s as cute as you, he’s probably attracted to her. And she’s the Empriatsen’na after all. But he loves me, so my gift will get stronger, and then I’ll send you in the morning, before Charity has a chance to have me beheaded, deal?”

The ghost sighed. “Yes, but then who would keep you company? Everyone knows you talk to yourself.”

Dano laughed. “Who says I’ll stop? How do I look? The black pants are okay?”

The black pants clung tightly to his hips, leaving no doubt at all about his gender. He wore soft black boots with thick hard leather soles, and blue velvet belts and buckles on them. His shirt was loose and white; a stark white in contrast to his black hair, with a V shaped collar and silver laces that went from his neck down to his wrist. His left wrist had a lace cuff that would fall back against his arm when he fingered his violin. The right wrist had no cuff at all, but he wore a silver chain around his wrist that wound around his middle finger. “Well, do I look okay, really? I should put some pearls in my hair.”

Faile laughed. “If I liked guys, I’d want to stay a ghost just so I could float around you. Put some rose oil behind your ears.”

“I will send you, if you want, Faile, really, but I think I’d miss you.” After a small pause, he asked, a bit shyly, “If I do lose my gift to Tokala tonight, are you gonna be able to go out of the room? Losing my gift being just a phrase, you know? Not the real thing.”

“I will disincorporate, unless you want to send me first. I don’t like men with men, even if you are cute enough to be a girl.” Faile said it with a snicker though, friendly and playful.

Dano turned his back on him. “Tonight’s the night.”

“Yeah,” Faile agreed, but he was looking past Dano, off into some spectral plane. “I’ll be back, Dano. Don’t get in trouble without me.”

“Wouldn’t think of it,” Dano replied sarcastically, putting the rose oil behind his ears.