

For Those Left Behind | Ysabella Gonzalez

Sei

The world came to an end when Dijal burst through the door with a smile on his face. His short, black hair was point in every direction and his green skin was covered in sweat, but his eyes shone as bright as ever. Sei's heart fluttered in his chest. You'd think living together for a few months would make the butterflies go, but nope. "Sei!" Dijal nearly stumbled over in a rush to give him a hug.

Sei couldn't help the laugh bubbling up his throat as he grinned. "Does this mean you have good news?"

"Nope." Sei snorted as Dijal pulled back without letting go. For a few moments, they just stared at each other. Dijal was wearing the purple shirt he had gotten him for his birthday a year ago, though it was smudged with grass stains now. Sei couldn't thank the gods enough for Dijal, the handsomest orc to ever exist.

"Then?"

Sei watched as Dijal took a shaky breath, his smile wavering for the first time since he arrived. "I never actually made it to the council."

Sei's heart dropped, confusion and panic slowly churned in his chest. Asking the council was the only way to get permission to leave the Southern forest to fish in the ocean. They had been planning this trip for a month, wanting to spend a few days out of Akaj together. Unless ... was he changing his mind?

Dijal cleared his throat, pulling out of their hug. "Don't get me wrong, I did and still do want to fish with you ..."
His uncertainty did nothing to ease Sei's drumming heart. Dijal's gaze shot up as he looked to their wooden table, their two seats by each other. "Can we sit?"

It took everything in Sei not to freak out as he nodded

his head. His heart sunk to the floor as he watched Dijal move the seats to be across from each other. The walls in their home were filled with drawings to bring warmth, but now it felt foreboding. Sei's breathing was becoming short. What was going on? What happened? His boyfriend wasn't gone that long. Why hasn't he spoken yet? Did he do something wrong?

"Are you breaking up with me?" Sei's voice came out strained as his vision grew blurry. Dijal sucked in a breath and rapidly shook his head.

"No, no, no." In seconds, they were next to each other again. Sei watched as Dijal moved his hands to be together. Sei's heart slowed, but the anxiety stayed at the back of his head. Dijal offered a smile, but it was fragile. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to give that impression. I was just ... excited, but I'm not sure how you'll take it. I've been chosen for something. It's ... a lot."

Sei squeezed Dijal's hands, a silent comfort and assurance to continue. Even if Sei was nervous, he would always be there for Dijal. "A god talked to me."

Sei's thoughts came to a screeching halt. "A god? Like Ratheus and the others spoke to you?" Dijal nodded and pulled his hands away. "But they only choose monarch families through angels. And the Meshazco family has their blessings. Unless," Sei sucked in a deep breath. "Did the Meshazcos lose it? Are you the new monarch?" Sei took a glance around the room, but there were no angels.

"No, I'm not the new ruler." Sei's eyes drifted back to Dijal, a small traitorous part was relieved to hear Dijal hadn't been called to be a king and leave the home they had made. He didn't want to lose this peaceful life they shared, but when Sei really looked at Dijal, he was staring at the floor and wringing his hands. "But I was chosen to be a champion."

Sei's breath caught. "For what?"

Dijal raised his gaze. There was a determined look, like a fire had been lit under him. It was a look Sei would normally swoon to, but it just sent a shiver crawling up his

spine. "To save the gods." Sei felt the world tumble around him as Dijal barreled on. "While I was walking, Miras—y'know god of wisdom, reason, and what not—came to me in a vision. She showed me a threat greater than the gods or mortals could handle alone. She needs my help."

"Why?" Sei's question came out thick with anger and desperation. His eyes were burning from the tears he was trying to hold back.

Dijal looked as if he had been struck. "Our gods are in danger. Why are you so angry?"

Sei took a shaky breath. "Why are you so reckless?"

"The world needs help—"

"And I need you." Sei's voice cracked as he cut off Dijal. His voice came out quieter, "Or does that not matter in the face of glory and heroics?"

Dijal crossed his arms, "I'm not doing this for the world." "Then why?"

"I'm doing it for you!" Dijal's voice raised, taking a more desperate tone. "To keep you and our home safe. If you had only seen what I had—"

"But I didn't." Sei's heart was being squeezed, tears threatening to pour over. Could his boyfriend not see how much this hurt? Or did he not care? "Miras chose you, and you never thought about me when you agreed."

"I thought about how to keep you safe." Dijal's eyes held a mix of stone and confusion.

"Am I not safest by your side? Am I not strong enough to keep you safe too?"

Dijal's voice came out angrier. "This isn't some wild animal. This is a murderous elf who has already killed an angel—"

"Is that supposed to comfort me?" Sei couldn't stop the

tears anymore.

Dijal's gaze hardened. "It's supposed to make you understand. I am doing this to keep you safe."

"That's not what I see." His gaze steeled. Sei nearly sobbed at the sight. His chest was twisting with anger. Who was this? "I see someone who is throwing their life and our future away for some kind of adventure. I see someone who is only thinking about himself."

"I was chosen by Miras to protect our people, but I accepted to save you." For a second, Dijal was back. The love in his eyes shone through, but Sei was drowning in his own pain. How could Dijal just choose to leave?

"Then you are lying to yourself. If you wanted to keep me safe, you would stay by my side. And if you loved me, then you would spend the rest of our 50 years of life together. Not gamble some amount of it away for this death wish."

And then Dijal was gone. The cold look was back, his steel gaze sliced through Sei's heart as Dijal spoke. "Well, then maybe that's why Miras chose me and not you or anyone else. Because when the world is in danger, I am willing to put it first."

That was it. When it came down to it, Sei would never be chosen first. His voice was filled with hollow anger as he stared at the floor. "Then go. Go be the 'hero' you think you are, but if you come back, there will be no home for you here."

And without another word, Dijal pulled away and stepped out of the house, leaving Sei in the silence of his own world falling apart.

Johe

The sun was shining brightly when Johe learned that followers of Ratheus had been massacred in a temple. It was off the tongue of some gnome traveler. He looked well-off in his polished steel armor as he downed his second

cup of ale inside the tavern. Johe had just stopped by to check on the room count for the inn, but couldn't help the gasp that escaped his lips. Everyone inside the full tavern was just as shocked, a sudden silence overcoming them all. The traveler froze.

Did he not expect everyone to hear? Did the stranger not know he was in the Holy City of Jad? Ale and faith were all these people had. Johe's shaky hand moved up to his necklace, the charm was in the shape of a flame. It was warm as he squeezed it into his palm. As if the goddess Erkhest was reminding him to believe in her and his younger sister Okijek.

She had left the day before.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Johe tried not to wince from the look Okijek was shooting at him. The pair of them were in her room as she stuffed clothes and whatever else she may need into a bag on her bed. It was the same bag they had used a week prior to hand out food to weary travelers at the port. It was work that would make their father proud, if that man was ever around instead of saving lost souls.

"Are you doubting me?" She had stopped packing to look at him as he sat on the floor by her door. It gave Johe a moment to really look at his sister. She was a kid, barely 19, and dressed in a simple tunic with pants. She looked ready to help the poor, not save the world as Erkhest's champion. Even so, Okijek kept that prideful spark in her eyes. It's been there for ten years, ever since Johe got in his first fight with a city guard over the fate of a child that had stolen out of hunger.

"I'd never doubt you." Okijek gave a strong nod before turning and continuing to pack. Anyone else would've missed it, but Johe practically raised his sister. It was one of the advantages of being seven years her senior. Johe cleared his throat as he stood up. He moved slowly to the other side of the bed as Okijek continued to pack. "You know, Erkhest made a good choice."

Okijek's head shot up. She was frozen, her eyes wide with curiosity and a whirlwind of emotion. Johe nodded, allowing a smile to creep on his lips. "I mean, Erkhest is the goddess of healing, medicine, hearth, and home. You have always helped the lost, weary, and poor in this Holy City. It makes sense that you have been called for something greater, if anyone can bring a sense of peace and safety to the world, it is you."

Johe smiled wide. Okijek's eyes were beginning to water before she smiled and wiped at her tears before they could fall, "Thank you."

"Of course." Johe glanced down to see that his sister just had to pack one last pair of shoes. "Besides," He flipped his head as dramatically as he could, "if Erkhest chose me, she'd have to drag the threat off me. My good looks would be too enticing."

Okijek's laughter rang out as she rolled her eyes, threw her shoes inside her bag, and closed it. "Yeah, whatever. Erkhest didn't choose you because you're insufferable."

Johe let out a mock gasp. "I'll have you know, Erkhest didn't pick me because I'm already too powerful."

"Loser." Johe snickered at Okijek's nickname for him. With her pack done, she moved to Johe and wrapped him in a tight hug. "May Erkhest shelter you."

Johe hugged her just as tight, determined to savor the moment before she would leave. "May Erkhest guide you."

"A temple of Ratheus?"

"They were all left to die?"

"In Plojin? That's three days travel from here."

Johe slowly returned to the world around him, leaving the memory that left a knot in his chest.

"No one knows who did it."

"Is it someone the gods fear?"

People in the tavern were beginning to turn to him.

"What hope do we have?"

"Could Erkhest really shelter us?"

A silence overcame the group at the last question. All were looking to Johe for answers. It didn't matter that he was the youngest, as a human with one of the shortest life spans and in age, there was a responsibility in being a temple official's son in Jad. But what answer could he possibly give? The necklace in his palm heated up momentarily, that would be his response. Johe let go of the charm and removed the necklace, he raised it above his head for the whole tavern to see. He did his best to project his voice as he spun in a slow circle.

"Be at peace, Erkhest is watching over us." Some of the folks rolled their eyes, but most were nodding and calming. They wanted to believe Erkhest would protect them, or at least, believe in his words. "She is the goddess of home, and the temple in this city is her symbol of devotion and faith. Jad will not fall."

For a moment, it almost felt like his charm was shining. As if Erkhest were by his side for a moment to reassure the people through him. And as the light dimmed, Johe sent one last thought to be carried away.

Keep my sister safe, Erkhest.

Ahshui

It was only on the seventh night of lying awake in bed that Ahshui began to wonder if he had done wrong by his son. Even if he was only a boy, barely 24 years, Ebaki had become a fine young tiefling who could find his way through the forest and survive. But that didn't mean he was ready to leave home. Ahshui himself didn't leave until 60, and that was nearly worth being disowned if he hadn't

found himself a wife. Yet, Ebakl thought he could just leave home for some call to adventure.

Ahshui huffed and swung his legs out of bed. His heart was already drumming with anger; there would be no sleeping now. After a few minutes, he was able to sit at the table with some tea, his tail hanging limply. The forest outside his window was silent as the moon hung in the sky. It was on a night like this that Ebakl stormed out. Ahshui tightened his grip on the cup.

The boy had barely listened to any of the advice and points Ahshui had made. He just insisted that the goddess Arinba chose him for something greater, to save the gods and the world. Ahshui snorted, a bitterness twisted over his heart. What did Ebakl even know of the world?

They were mapmakers, not travelers. They stayed in the forest around their home, their village. They didn't explore the greater area, much less the continent. They were meant to protect their home and the people who took care of them, not run off on an adventure for a world that ignored their village's existence.

And yet, when he pointed this out to the boy, all Ebakl said was Arinba would take care of him. That maybe saving their world was the step needed to bring awareness to their village. That maybe, just maybe, if a Tiefling—those that inherently looked like demons—saved everyone, they would finally be treated as equals.

But this was the naivety of youth and people's hearts are not so easily swayed.

Now Ahshui believed in the gods like everyone else, he could point you to the nearest temple if needed, but he is not one to tempt the whims of immortals like the boy. Arinba specialized in hunting, archery, protection, and animals; a known fact to every tiefling around the village. But she knew nothing of fighting great evils that the boy had grown excited to face.

After a lifetime of faith, Arinba had repaid Ahshui by corrupting his son's mind with fantasies of being more than he is. If that was all the goddess had to offer then Ahshui

was done with fai—

A knock at the door cut off his thought. Ahshui blinked. The forest outside was bustling with life as the birds sang and flew. The sun was beginning to climb, but hadn't yet reached its peak. The tea in his hand had long since gone cold. How much time had he lost? The knock was harder this time. Ahshui let out a sigh as he stood. His joints were creaking from being stiff for so long. His jaw began to loosen as he finally unclenched it. Thinking about Ebakl never led to anything good.

It was only a few footsteps before he swung the door open. Ahshui's brain screeched to a halt seeing Zahar, the baker's daughter, standing there out of breath. Her face was flushed as if she had run across the village to talk to him. Ahshui opened his mouth to speak, but she just raised a finger. Her tail was swaying slowly but her horns stood tall. Whatever she had to say must've been important to drag her away from her work.

"There is news of Ebakl." The words streamlined out of her once she caught her breath. "He and a few others had a run in with the person who massacred the followers of Ratheus. Ebakl and the others lost, but don't worry, he is safe."

A tiny part was relieved at the news, but a larger part of Ahshui felt a cold wave wash over him. His eyes narrowed, his tail bristled, and his mouth twisted into a sneer. "I don't want any more news of that boy."

Zahar flinched as if she had been struck. Who was she to judge? She wasn't there when Ahshui raised his son alone after his wife had passed. She wasn't there when Ahshui had to figure out how to be a father. She wasn't there when Ahshui sacrificed everything for his son. And all that boy did was throw it all away. So what did it matter?

Ahshui slammed the door shut with one final word. "Ebakl is no son of mine."

Koi

"Is it true your sister left to save the world?" The man in

the fruit stand held out the apple for Koi to take, as if her answer would be payment enough. He had an earnestness in his eyes, searching for misplaced hope or a good story to tell.

Koi scoffed and took the fruit. "Sure, off to be a hero."

The elf's face dropped into a frown, but the gleam never left his eyes. Even if she was just the younger sister, a lot of people treated her differently after word got out of a band of 'heroes' looking to take down the angel-killer. Even in a big port town like this one, they somehow all knew how to find her. So much for the days where she and Ojwe were ignored like street rats.

"You say 'hero' like it's a bad thing."

"Is it a good thing?" Koi glanced around the market. Most people talked in hushed tones after the monarch family had been massacred by the rampaging elf. A month ago, this street would've been alive with shouting, laughter, and stories. There would be days where Koi and her sister would sit on the roof of a nearby building and just listen to the noise, pretending they were a part of it all. Now, there was a soft murmur as if sound would bring death.

Koi glared at her apple. "In every story, the hero gets praise for going on some long journey and defeating the great evil. But no one ever wonders about the people they leave behind or the ones they couldn't save."

Her words hung in the air for a moment before she blinked and cleared her throat. "Sorry. No one really listens anymore—"

"It's alright." The man gave her a soft smile. "In a port town, everyone is itching to tell stories,

but no one ever takes the time to listen to one."

"Then why are you?" Koi's eyes narrowed.

"Because everyone needs to feel heard. From ancient

elves to tiny dwarves like you, we all have something to share."

Koi shook her head. "Yeah, well, go learn another story."

"Wait." She had already pivoted when the elf called after her. She shouldn't have spoken to him, he was becoming tedious. "Can I at least offer you another apple? You look like you could use the food."

"Fine." Koi took a deep breath and held out her spare hand.

The man smiled and handed it over. She rolled her eyes. "Ojwe would be happy to know you ate."

Koi snorted. "Yeah, well she is my older sis—" Koi's heart dropped. Every alarm was going off in her mind as her breath caught. The elf had a darker gleam in his eyes as he watched her.

She never told him her sister's name.

Her body was itching to run, but everything in her mind screamed to stay still. As if this tension was the only thing keeping her alive. The elf's face spread into a wide grin. "Oh come on now, we were having a moment." He slowly moved around the fruit stall and for the first time, Koi really looked at him.

His clothes and boots were filthy, but they were covered by his deep purple, long coat. It's a fabric to symbolize wealth, but it hung loose on him. It's not his. His golden eyes were a strange counter to his dark brown hair. Everything about him said commoner, but Koi knew this had to be him. The angel-killer.

Koi's mouth went dry as she began to shake. The elf began to glow, his entire being screamed death. Every customer and stall owner screamed and fled. Koi wanted to go with them, to shout for someone to grab her, but she was frozen and ignored.

The entire street was deserted in two minutes.

He glared down at her. His eyes were shining with glee. "Aren't you going to eat the apples?"

How am I supposed to tell Ojwe and her little friends that you ate if you aren't taking a bite?"

Koi couldn't breathe. Her heart was hammering her chest. Years of living on streets hadn't prepared her for feeling this kind of powerlessness.

The elf took a step closer, he was towering over her. "Do you think it would be better to kill you with a magic you don't understand? Or to strangle the life out of you?"

Koi didn't give a response. Like coming up for air, she burst into a flurry of life and pivoted. Only sparing a glance to chuck both apples at that man's face. She barely made it a few steps before she got slammed to the ground. The elf used his weight to pin her down. She could hear him laughing as she struggled to kick him off or punch him or wiggle out.

He held her arms down and shoved Koi's face into the floor. "Not so fast. You were hard to find, I'm not letting you go so easily." His breath was right by her ear. "Did you know there are a lot of dwarves in this city? Killed a few before I realized that the only way to know who Ojwe's sister was would be talking to them."

"Fuck off!" Koi shouted. Her voice was strained as the elf crushed her.

He just laughed again, there was a cruel joy in his tone. "You know, I think you were right to run and put us here. There's nothing more satisfying than hearing your screams and watching the life leave your eyes."

Koi gave another kick in response. He grunted and lost his grip as she scrambled to her feet and made another run for it. She made it further down the street only to get tackled again. This time he waved his hand and she was forced to the ground. He had a crazed look in his eyes, as if

he couldn't decide between being angry or happy. "That wasn't nice." He pulled out a knife.

Oh gods, where was her sister? If the angel-killer was here, then she had to be too, right? She would come save her in time ... right?

The elf took a deep breath. "Are you scared? Have you prayed to the gods yet? Have you felt their silence? Because they aren't coming for you, like they didn't come for me."

"Fuck you!" Koi's voice cracked. "Ojwe will come! She chose to be a hero and she will save me!" The elf smiled and knelt down with the blade at her neck. The steel was cold as it pressed against Koi's skin. "She ... she has to be here."

"I'll let her know

Anelle

Anelle thought she knew busy. Being raised in the blessed city of Virce, they got a lot of travelers coming into the northeastern forest in the hopes of being closer to the gods. Anelle herself had never even met one until Ratheus appeared before her and her girl, Ibani, a few weeks ago. Now, the city was thriving with life ... but for all the wrong reasons.

"The port city Drocx was attacked two days ago." Anelle froze as she eavesdropped on the conversation shared by two orcs. The best place to get news was ironically the temple. It's where people felt the safest to gossip, as if any of the gods were sitting there listening to them. "I heard the angel-killer was there to murder someone important to a champion."

Anelle's heart dropped as the orc's companion gasped and spoke. "Did they succeed?"

The orc nodded. "And after, the entire city was set on fire. Anyone who escaped is homeless. I couldn't imagine losing everything."

Both women shook their heads as ice moved through Anelle's veins. That's what Ibani had left to face? She grabbed the ring hanging on her necklace. Ibani had promised to come home to her, but could she really face that kind of a monster? She had always imagined a full life with her, all 640 more years left. But could that really be at risk?

"Are we really safe here?" The women continued to whisper. Only to send a glare in Anelle's direction. "Maybe as long as they are around." The orc's voice was dripping with venom. "Why do the gods favor aasimars? Why not protect and bless us all?"

"They protect those with faith. Where is yours?" Both women looked aghast at being confronted. Was she supposed to just take that and go? Anelle took a deep breath and shook her head as she left the temple.

Before this mess, aasimars were treated with respect or at least indifference, but lately, there has been nothing but contempt. Not that it was fair, the aasimars had to fight for everything they have just like the others. But no one bothered to listen. Anelle swung open the temple doors and marched away from the city.

It felt like a lifetime ago when she and Ibani would spend days helping tourists to the temple of Ratheus before spending their evenings up in some tree. They'd giggle about the children's rhyme as they kissed in a tree themselves. Before Ibani was chosen to be champion, Anelle had proposed and gotten a yes. It was the happiest day of her life, and now she didn't even know if she'd get a ceremony.

Anelle took a deep breath as her heart began to beat faster. She wouldn't panic. Ratheus was the most powerful of all the gods, he was the ruler of the skies, surely he could protect Ibani. And if she was correct, each of the champions chosen were represented by some kind of god. Each had to be powerful in some kind of way.

Her body gave a shudder as she thought about what the orcs said before. She couldn't imagine her or Ibani's life being cut short. In some distant part of her mind, it felt

like they would live forever. Anelle shook her head. Despite how sheltered everyone thinks aasimars are, Anelle knew Ibani was strong and persuasive. She would make it home.

She had to.

Anelle took a glance around the area, noticing she had walked over to their favorite tree to sit in. Being closer to the stars always helped. Anelle made it up the tree and leaned against its trunk as she sat on a sturdy branch. If she shut her eyes, she could almost pretend it was a stiffer Ibani.

In her mind's eye, Ibani had a soft smile as she wrapped her arms around Anelle. They would enjoy the breeze and draw images in the stars until Anelle fell asleep. Anelle's eyelids began to droop, feeling heavier and heavier as her heart slowed. It had been so long since she felt Ibani's arms. Maybe, just maybe, it would be okay to take a small nap here—

An explosion of thunder echoed as a giant lightning strike hit the forest and blinded Anelle. A huge wave of air blasted the trees a second later. Anelle barely kept her grip on the trunk as the tree she was on swayed. As the trees came to a standstill and Anelle's vision returned, she noticed a huge smoke cloud rising from the forest where the lightning struck.

That blast wasn't natural. Thunder never sounded that suddenly and lightning never struck that hard. A tiny voice at the back of Anelle's mind whispered that it was Ibani. If Ratheus chose her, wouldn't that give her some kind of power? The explosion was probably only half a day's walk. If she ran, she could see Ibani again.

But why would she need such a big strike? Anelle's heart stuttered. The only reason they would need something that big was to face the angel-killer. But was it enough?

Was this the silence of victory or death?