

## Elf Friend

King Averett of Escarland began to suspect something was up when he was forty years old and had yet to find so much as a single gray hair, despite men in his family being prone to go gray early and the rigors of the kingship resting heavy on his shoulders. Neither of his brothers had gray hair either, but both of them had bonds with their much longer-lived elf or troll wives. Lack of gray hair was to be expected in them.

When he was fifty and had finally gotten his first gray hair, his suspicions grew. But it wasn't until he was sixty and his thirty-seven-year-old son had nearly the same amount of gray hair that Avie began to believe something was seriously wrong.

Now, as he faced King Weylind of the elves across the breakfast table in Weylind and Rheva's treetop palace of Ellonahshinel, Avie gathered the courage to ask the question.

The morning sunlight spread patterned shadows on the floor as it beamed through the leaves of the elven forest. The summer breeze filled the room with a pleasant warmth that made them want to sit and linger rather than rush off to tackle the stack of trade agreements and records paperwork waiting for them in Weylind's study.

Rheva and Paige had already finished breakfast and hurried off to oversee the set up for the luncheon they were hosting together for the ladies among the elven nobility.

With one last bracing sip of tea, Avie set down his cup with a clink and faced Weylind. There was no other way to bring this up than just say it. "Why am I not aging the way a human should? Not that I'm complaining, but I'd like to understand what is going on. I don't have a heart bond like my siblings. I shouldn't be experiencing unusual aging."

Weylind froze, his teacup pausing partway to his mouth. Something flashed across his face.

So the elf king *did* know something about this. Avie braced himself, not sure if the answers he sought would be a good thing.

Weylind gathered himself and slowly set his teacup down with only the faintest clink. His face cleared into that almost too blank, reserved expression that seemed to be the elven default for difficult conversations. “I have begun to suspect as much as well, and it prompted me to research a few obscure elven legends.”

Obscure elven legends. The elishina—heart bond—that his siblings Essie and Edmund experienced with their elven spouses had been considered a legend when shared between an elf and a human, up until Essie and Farrendel suddenly got one.

“It has been many hundreds of years since this phenomenon occurred, but legends say it used to happen in the days of the elven empire.” Weylind spoke slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. “I did not realize I might cause such a legend to occur again by claiming you as my friend.”

“What are you talking about? What legends?” Avie resisted the urge to huff a frustrated breath. In true, mystical elf fashion, Weylind preferred cryptic riddles rather than plain speaking when it came to stuff like that.

“You are, I believe, an elf friend. *Amafshynel a’ elvena* in elvish.” Weylind made the statement, then picked up his teacup and sipped, as if to punctuate the words with tea.

Avie gave in to the frustrated breath. Even when stating things out right, Weylind still managed to be confusing. “I’m assuming *elf friend* means more to an elf than what friend means to a human. My elvish isn’t as good as my siblings’ but I recognize the word *heart* in there.”

“A more literal translation would be *friend of the heart to the elves*.” Weylind gripped his teacup almost like a shield, even if his expression didn’t change.

“And that makes me age slower? Like a heart bond?” Avie wasn’t sure how he felt about that. “This is sounding an awful lot like a heart bond.”

“Not quite like an elishina, but there are similarities.” Weylind gave that small, rolling elven shrug. “An elishina shares the years of the elf with the human. An elf friend merely gains a few extra years due to living in the light of the elves. It is the same sharing of the elven light and essence that causes our horses and other pets to experience longer lives than would be expected for their species.”

“I had wondered why Farrendel’s cats always seemed to experience such long lives,” Avie muttered. Then the full implication of the words hit him, and he narrowed his stare on Weylind. “Wait...Are you saying you see me as a *pet*?”

Weylind hesitated and took a sip of his tea before he answered with a slow, “No.”

“You hesitated. Why did you hesitate?” Avie crossed his arms, giving Weylind a fake glare.

Weylind met his gaze and sipped his tea. But, after a moment, he could not entirely hide the slight curve upward to his mouth.

Avie heaved a breath, slouched in his chair, and waved a hand at Weylind. “I see how it is. Thank you so much for making me your little pet human.”

“You should indeed be grateful for such an honor.” Weylind maintained the haughty tone and bearing for only a moment longer before both the feigned superiority and hint of humor vanished into the deep grooves of a scowl. “It seems that in the past, some elf friends were seen as similar to pets. But the origin of the legends and term seems to extend farther, as *amafshynel* is the term we elves use for our closest companions rather than for pets.”

Well, that was somewhat reassuring. Avie picked up his teacup again, though he didn't sip at the dregs, which were undoubtedly growing cold. "So, I'm an elf friend. You said that happened because you deemed me a friend? Does that happen to all humans that an elf claims for a friend?"

"The legends are somewhat unclear." Weylind set down his teacup, his gaze focused on it rather than Avie.

Big surprise there. The cryptic-explanation-loving elves had unclear legends? Never would have guessed.

"Elf friend could mean that you have been claimed as a friend—a deeper, stronger fellowship beyond mere acquaintance—by an elf in such a way that there is a very real bond. Not quite to the depth of an elishina, but very real nonetheless." Weylind's gaze lifted to Avie's, holding steady despite the depth to those words. "Or elf friend can refer to a human who has performed deeds that show they are a particular ally to the elves above and beyond the usual. Perhaps the qualification for elf friend is both, as I believe you are an elf friend in either sense of the word."

Avie sat there for a long moment just absorbing those words and the implications. Finally, he drew in a breath and asked the most pressing question, "How many extra years are we talking? Five years? Ten?"

"For you, likely several extra decades, given that you became an elf friend relatively young for a human." Weylind relaxed against the back of his chair, as if reassured that Avie was taking the news well. "Your mother, too, will likely experience a long life for a human, though she will not gain quite as many extra years as you will."

“My mother? She’s an elf friend too?” Avie had thought his mother was aging rather well, but he’d chalked it up to good genetics and healthy living.

“She is well beloved of her elven children.”

True. Both Farrendel and Jalissa had bonded with their mother-in-law. Farrendel had never known his own mother, and he, especially, had welcomed Mother into that role. Jalissa had lost her own mother when she was still young, for an elf, and she’d been happy to let Mother step into that place in her life.

“Is there any other elf friends or potential elf friends I should be aware of?” Avie eyed the remnants of the breakfast pastries. He was plenty full, but those tarts were still tempting.

“Your wife Paige is undoubtedly an elf friend.” Weylind sent a significant look at the door through which Paige and Rheva had disappeared that morning.

Avie released a long breath at the question Weylind had answered before Avie even had the chance to fully process what being an elf friend would mean for him and his family. He’d gotten used to thinking in terms of long lives for all his siblings. But he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around experiencing such a thing himself.

“I suspect Farrendel’s guard Eugene Merrick is also experiencing the affects of being an elf friend.” Weylind rested his hand on his teacup, one finger tapping lightly for a moment.

“Anyone else who would have been considered an elf friend also married an elf or a troll and are thus likely experiencing longer lives due to heart bonds.”

“And the phenomenon isn’t just access to elf healers giving me, Paige, my mother, and Eugene longer lives?” That had been the explanation Avie had come up with when he’d been living in denial that he wasn’t aging like he should.

“Access to elf healers likely does play a part in the long lives of elf friends, but it isn’t the sole reason for the extra years.” Weylind paused, studying Avie for a long moment before he continued, “All of Escarland might see an overall longer life expectancy. In part because of the presence of elf healers in many of the larger cities but also because, by the second definition of the term, your entire kingdom could be considered an elf friend. To my knowledge, there has never before been a human kingdom so closely allied with—and thus a friend of—an elven kingdom. It will be fascinating to observe the results.”

Avie mentally made a note that he would have to discuss with his advisors what measures would be needed for a kingdom filled with people with a long life expectancy. That problem—a good problem to have—could be further exacerbated if war with Mongavaria did break out and a generation of young men were killed.

A problem for another day.

Another, far more pressing thought had Avie sitting up straighter, especially since Weylind had so clearly side-stepped it. “My sons? Are they also elf friends?”

The lines on Weylind’s face deepened as his gaze dropped from Avie’s. “I am afraid not. At least, not at this time.”

Avie sighed and nodded, not needing Weylind to go on. While Albert and Phineas liked their elf aunt and uncle well enough and they certainly hadn’t minded their visits to Tarenhiel growing up, they hadn’t bonded with Weylind’s children nor did they have any particular friends among the elves. They had both married Escarlsh women, and since becoming adults, they had been concerned with raising their families and life in Escarland.

Unless his sons became elf friends, Avie and Paige would outlive them. They might even outlive a few of their grandchildren.

It was a heartache neither Edmund and Jalissa nor Essie and Farrendel would likely experience. Their children would all be half-elves and would experience a similar lifespan as a heart bonded human or elf.

“I am sorry.” Weylind’s voice dropped, low and compassionate. “It was a consequence I did not anticipate when I claimed you as a friend.”

“It isn’t your fault.” Avie released a long breath, still trying to wrap his mind around the news.

He’d have to discuss this with Paige. Probably share a few tears with her over it. He’d also have to have a long discussion with Albert on the very likely possibility that Albert would never be king. Not unless Avie chose to abdicate.

Something he was loathe to do as long as the Mongavarian problem still loomed over them. As long as Avie remained king, the alliance between Escarland, Tarenhiel, and Kostaria stayed ironclad. As soon as Albert took the throne, the alliance would return to being merely political and less familial. That weakness, slight as it was, might be the very thing Mongavaria exploited.

Thinking of Albert and the way that he seemed to rather enjoy his carefree life as a prince with all of the luxuries and none of the true responsibilities made Avie wonder if his son would mind never taking the throne or if, perhaps, avoiding the throne might be Albert’s dream come true.

A trouble and a grief Avie would have to deal with on another day. There was no sense borrowing sorrow until it came.

Avie forced himself to meet Weylind’s gaze. “I would not change anything regardless of the cost.”

He couldn't regret his friendship with Weylind. Nor the way he had been an ally to the elves for the past decades. There was no changing or regretting the things had made him an elf friend.

While he would mourn the sorrows the extra years would bring, there would be joy as well. More time with his siblings and family. More time to shape Escarland into a kingdom that would stand with the alliance even after he was gone.

More time to annoy Weylind and make little wagers.

Time to lighten the mood a bit. "We probably should get to work. But first, it has been a while since our last wager."

Weylind huffed out a breath, though as tightly as he pressed his lips together and tried to grimace, he couldn't fully hide his smile. "What do you wish to wager on now?"

Avie grinned. Now he just need to think of a proper wager—and a properly ridiculous punishment for Weylind if he lost.