Sick Day - Cieran

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Athina

I SNAP AWAKE SECONDS before the soft click of the front door. It's 2 am, but the immediate push through the heartbond reassures it isn't some idiot with a death wish.

He's back.

The rush of joy snaps in half at the iron wall that hits me as soon as I slip my dampener off. A second pair of light boots halts me at the bedroom door. As does the *stench* assaulting my enhanced shifter senses.

"We should have stopped on base," Dejan hisses.

"I don't *want* a *firren* hospital," my mate snaps in a barely hushed tone. I'm out the door in a second, finding Cieran with one hand propped on the couch and Dejan poised beside him.

They've been gone for almost a month. And smell and look like they haven't washed at all that entire time. The specific singed Wastelands scent is the most powerful, and I wrinkle my nose.

Dejan looks guilty, but Cieran barely looks at me.

"Hey," he says as I make it to his side.

"Hi." My hand hovers over his shoulder even though my heart screams to close the distance. It's been a *month*. A month with dampeners on and no contact. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine," he snaps, still not quite looking at me.

Dejan sighs and takes his arm. "Just sit down, Cir."

My heartfire roars up at the paleness beneath the dust and grime and weeks of scruff. The way Cieran eases to the couch with an uncontrolled grimace and a clutch at his ribs. *This* is the hardest part of being married and not active duty. I can't be at his side in a fight. Don't know exactly what happened and how to help guide him through it. I'm not allowed any details, even with my official role as Kirnae military liaison.

Dejan goes off to raid our medicine cabinet and I help Cieran undo the buttons on his fatigues shirt. He grabs my hand and squeezes, finally looking at me through exhausted hazel eyes. He's making no move to take off his dampener, so I don't either. Instead I lean forward to press my forehead against his.

"Are you okay?" I ask through the mindspeak. The skin to skin overrides some of the dampener's effects.

He just tightens his hold and his shaky breath is my answer. "Sorry, I know I stink," he says.

I allow the redirect. "You both do."

Dejan comes around the couch, medication bottle and glass of water in hand. Cieran swallows two pain pills dry, and curses his way out of the shirt and chain mail. The thermal underneath is soaked in new sweat and crusted with old. And when Dejan pulls it up, I see what happened.

Something tried to take a bite out of Cieran judging from the crescent-shaped field of bruises across his left ribs.

"When did this happen?" I demand. He's bruised *through* a tac vest and chain mail.

Cieran closes his eyes, head thudding back against the couch. His jaw sets in stubborn refusal. My heart sinks at the sight.

"Things went south a week ago and we got sent way off course," Dejan replies. "Accidentally woke a den three days ago."

The magic that he calls up is pale green, and now that I'm really looking at him and not my husband, the dark circles under his eyes seem to reach across his face. He's exhausted. His hand tremors as he puts it against Cieran's side, but he still pushes magic in.

Cir breathes a little easier but when Dejan tries to stop him from laying down on the couch he snaps.

"I don't *want–fir!*" Cieran snaps, and goes off in Elvish.

"Hey!" Dejan cuts him off. "Quit being an asshole. I know it *firren* hurts. I know!"

He's not swayed by Cieran's glare. "*Firren* sleep here then. In the morning, you're seeing a doctor and *firren* apologizing to Besim."

"*Fine*." Cieran spits. He lays down, breaths coming too measured as I pull a blanket over him. I beckon Dejan into the kitchen and wait until he drains a glass of water.

"Everything that could go wrong, did," he says in a low voice, refilling the glass. "We're all okay. He jumped in front of Remy and got caught. I did as much as I could but we weren't sure when we could get out so..." He shrugs. Did the bare minimum. Or moderately over based on how he looks.

"What happened with Besim?" I ask, arms crossing.

"Cir unloaded on him two days ago. We all know it's Wastelands crap and the pain, but." He shakes his head. "Pissed Besim off. Bes was obviously feeling a little dodgy himself with the mission. They haven't talked beyond necessary since."

I rub my forehead. Really bad then. "What's the diagnosis?"

"Nothing internal. Two cracks are healing, but there's some intensive bruising. Half of it is probably here." He taps his head. I nod.

"And you?" I ask.

"Ah." He shrugs. "Not happy he's taking my role as team *shilsa*."

I allow a smile. "Anything I should look for? I don't want to keep you from Tara."

Indecision wars over his face. "I don't want to wake her and taxis aren't running this late. I drove his jeep over," he explains. "He'll need something again in the next few hours and hospitals are still gonna be out."

"Guest bedroom is open," I say. I hate to keep him here when his wife is waiting but I can't manage to feel selfish when my husband might need him.

"Couch is fine." Dejan shrugs. "I'll text Tare, and she can bring over my spare kit tomorrow along with her own diagnosis. We'll just bring the doctor to him."

"You sure?" I ask.

"I'm about to pass out right here," he admits with a rare smile.

"Okay." I get him blankets and a pillow. He's out of fatigues shirt and chain mail and sending a text by the time I make it back. And before I can tell him there's towels and soap in the bathroom, he's pulled the blanket over his head and is asleep.

Cieran's keeping the wall up, even asleep, so I retreat to our room, leaving the door open just in case and crawl back under the blankets.

If I wasn't already in one of his hoodies, I'd grab one now. I send my own message to Tara, and lay back. I was baptized before our wedding two years ago, but my faith still feels fledgeling. My hands press to my

forehead as I mentally offer a prayer on his behalf, hoping for something good to come tomorrow.

I'm awake before both of them. And the smell has only gotten worse. I change into a different pair of athletic shorts and a sweatshirt from my dragonfleet days. My phone lights up and I let Tara in.

A backpack is slung over her shoulder and she balances a carrier with four *Fox and Ground* cups and a paper bag atop them. Her greeting immediately cuts off with a grimace.

"*Oh*."

I give a rueful smile and step aside to let her in.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she whispers. I'm going to have to leave the windows open for a week to get this smell out. Their bags by the door aren't helping things either.

"I tried to send him home last night." I take the drinks so she can set her purse and another cross-marked kit down on the bar.

She waves me off. "He told me a little. How's Cir?" She hands me a coffee cup, and unsnugs hers from the carrier.

I set mine on the counter, picking at the lid. "I don't know." And I don't like that I don't know.

As soon as he'd known they were going to the Wastelands, I'd started praying. Shay was ahead of me and I literally took a page from her book when I found the "prayer for a serviceman" tucked away along with a well-worn litany in one of her prayer books. And then as days passed, only got more and more nervous. More than if he'd been sent somewhere else.

Tara's hand covers my wrist and she squeezes. "You'll be there for him, and we'll be there for you."

I give a small smile and nod. It won't just be her, Maya, Sara, and Nadi. It'll be the rest of the crew too. They won't give up on him, no matter how much of a *shilsa* he was.

Her eyes flick toward the living room and a softer smile grows. "Mine's awake."

Dejan slowly sits up on the couch, looking almost worse than he did hours ago. He scrapes a hand down his face, looking at it with a grimace that turns to a crooked smile when he sees Tara.

"I love you," Tara whispers. "But you *have* to shower before I kiss you."

He catches the backpack she lobs and just nods as I point to the bathroom. Cieran's still asleep when I check.

"You are going to have to burn those blankets," Tara whispers.

"I didn't give him the good ones," I admit. She laughs softly, and we retreat to the kitchen where I start pulling some breakfast together to accompany the pastries she brought.

They're both going to need food, and I'm at least feeding Dejan in thanks before he leaves. I'm two omelets and extra bacon in when Dejan re-emerges in jeans and a tshirt. I start the next omelet, giving them some privacy as he loops arms around Tara.

A pang hits my heart, knowing I won't really get that reunion this time around. It was probably only a matter of time before he came home like this. Not the injury, but the mental disarray. Maybe I'd gotten too confident in how well he's been doing for the last year.

"Hate to ask, Athina," Dejan says. "You have any chocolate?"

I grab a container of homemade protein bars from the fridge. They're filled with chocolate chips and better than just a bar of sugar.

He eats one and practically chugs half his coffee before tucking another between his teeth, grabbing the kit, and heading back to battle. Tara takes over finishing the omelet so I can follow. Dejan sits on the coffee table and pulls on gloves. He sets the half-eaten bar onto a coaster, slaps a charm patch on his wrist, and leans forward to nudge Cieran.

He must have already been awake and I just didn't sense it at all, since his eyes open immediately and he starts to sit up. Cieran's still not really looking at me, and definitely letting nothing past the bond.

Tara joins us and gives me an encouraging smile before pulling on her own gloves. Cieran's not really surprised to see her. Maybe Dejan being clean was the giveaway, or maybe he has been awake longer than I realized.

I don't like feeling reduced and helpless as they both work to take care of him and I see more injuries when they get his shirt off. Cieran just grits some answers out and Dejan supplements in medical jargon as Tara switches to focused doctor.

Her magic is the same clean bursts as Dejan's, and bruising fades, and scrapes and gouges on Cieran's arms and wrist close further.

"Okay." Tara sits back and doffs gloves. "Why don't you go get a shower and changed, then get some food and we'll see how you're doing."

He just nods, and starts to get up. He's going to refuse my help, I can tell in the tight lines on his face. But I don't move, giving my own narrowed look back. My fire leaps to offense before I can quite quell it, and I add just a touch to the singed smell already around.

He doesn't argue my hand under his arm and we head to the bathroom. I leave him braced up against the sink and get clean clothes. The water turns on, and he curses slightly again as I re-enter.

"Cieran," I start, putting my hand over his where it grips the counter. "Let me help."

"No, I..."

"Cieran," I say softly. He looks away but the mirror betrays him. "Let me take some of it while you shower."

A shudder hits him and then he nods slightly.

"I'm making breakfast." I touch his shoulder.

"I don't think I can eat," he admits in a hoarse whisper, finally angling his head slightly toward me.

"You need something," I say. "What if I make some toast with peanut butter? At least a few bites."

"Okay." Another shudder hits him and he sniffs. "Hey." He angles a little toward me. "I'm sorry."

I slide the dampener bracelet off his wrist and gently press a hand to his cheek. *"I'm here, Cieran."*

His eyes close as he nods, and his forehead gently taps mine. I nudge through the heartbond, and he gradually eases up. I don't let a wince onto my face as some of the physical pain creeps over to my body, but he's moving easier as I leave him behind to shower.

I make Dejan start eating when I get back to the kitchen. Several times I bite into my cheek as I work on Cieran's breakfast.

"Don't be stupid," Dejan mumbles through a full mouth where he sits with elbows braced on the kitchen table attacking the food.

"You're one to talk." Tara gently swats his arm, then immediately pins me with the same look.

Cieran pulls everything back to himself, and limps out a few minutes later. He's pulled on a hoodie over the t-shirt I'd brought, and the athletic shorts expose the prosthetic that looks a little dented in places. He's kept

the dampener off, and his wedding ring is back on. That already feels like a step.

He manages almost the entire piece of toast, and doesn't say much more than to thank Tara for the coffee and the help. They reassure that they've already had the debrief, and there's nothing more for me to do other than help him to bed when Dejan and Tara leave.

Tara doesn't stop Dejan as he charms some more meds, and leaves some patches for me.

"Call any of us if you need anything," she says, giving me a quick hug. Dejan double taps my shoulder with his fist, giving the same wordless reassurance.

"Thank you," I already don't have many more words to express what this means to me. They head down the walk with Dejan's arm wrapped around her shoulders and I close the door before I can feel jealous.

Even without the heartbond, I feel like I'd know Cieran inside and out. And we've both braced for this day. All I can do is follow what we'd talked about months ago. So I let him sleep all day, and he gets upright for dinner. I get a kiss before bed, and he doesn't turn away when I slide under the sheets beside him.

"You definitely smell better," I say, getting a faint smile from him. He pulls my arm across his stomach and lets me close the gap, sighing in something almost like contentment as I call my heartfire a little higher.

The next two days follow the same pattern of him mostly sleeping. His nightmares bleed over to my dreams, and I try to help clear them out. Once successfully pushing memories of us in Kirnae in without waking him up. Dejan stops by daily, and I get an email from Captain Wolfe reassuring that he got the report from Dejan and to *"take care of one idiotic Sergeant O'Donnell."*

He lets me get snippets of a call with his therapist through the mind-speak, giving me the realtime updates for accountability later. That night, he rolls on his side and tucks his arm over me. The heartbond fully opens back up and relieved tears sting my eyes. He lets me cry them into his hoodie as an almost frantic exchange of apology, worry, and love weave through the bond from both sides.

We both sleep soundly through the night, and in the morning when his soft "Hey, hot stuff," greets me along with his unapologetic kiss, I know it's going to be okay.