

Illan's Perspective of Being Comforted by Ali After Being Injured by the Archives

from The Doorway to the Future Episode 4 Chapter 9

By Nicole Eatough

At Illan's third use of magic within the white-washed dimension of the Archives, fire bloomed around him. The heat scorched him in a way no true fire—or even genie-summoned fire—could. His skin didn't burn, but his insides writhed with pain, the heat seeming to pierce straight through to his core. Clearly, the Archives very much counted him freezing the water already in the dimension the same as him summoning his own ice.

"Illan!" Miss Ali screamed, fear and anguish coating her voice.

The pain drove him to the ground, the flames seeming unending, though they likely only lasted seconds. He heard scuffling beside him, then felt Miss Ali's gentle hands rolling him over until his head and shoulders lay in her lap.

He blinked up at her to see her eyes filling with relief. If he'd had the energy, he might have blushed at being so close to her. Despite the circumstances, it was still an intimate position. Then he moved wrong and winced in pain. No, he definitely didn't have the energy for blushing at the moment.

"Is it worse this time?" Miss Ali asked.

Her question wasn't specific, but he imagined she wanted to know if there was a compounding effect from being harmed by the Archives multiple times. But it felt a little awkward to hold a conversation from her lap, so he fought to sit up, grunting with the effort.

Miss Ali touched his shoulders, as though to help him to a sitting position, but his eyes

met Rajan's in that moment. Illan paused. Back in the cave in the Mynoch dimension, the fire genie had sounded so . . . something. Possessive wasn't quite the right word, but he'd spoken as though he and Miss Ali were the only two here, and as though all they needed to get through this was each other. There was an implied closeness to his words, as though Rajan shared a relationship with Miss Ali that Illan—or anyone else—couldn't touch. But Illan was the one in her lap. Slowly, he lowered himself back down.

This didn't count as taking advantage of Miss Ali, did it? He was hurting, and she had offered her lap. He didn't ask for it or suggest it. And he wasn't particularly hoping to get anything out of it. He just . . . wanted assurance that he mattered to Miss Ali too.

She blinked down at him, seeming confused by his odd behavior. He hoped she wouldn't ask. He didn't want to make up a lie for why he'd laid back down.

He stilled a moment later when she ran her fingers through his hair. She didn't even seem to realize she was doing it, her eyes pensive. The motion soothed him, and he relaxed against her.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked in a soft voice.

His eyes lifted in a smile, but the motion brought back the feeling of his inside scorching, so he dropped the expression. In addition to the Archives harming him more than most things could, the pain also lasted longer. "No, Miss Ali. I . . . tried to sit up too quickly." It wasn't a complete lie. He could have done it, but it would have hurt. There would be less pain if he waited a little longer in his current position. "I will rest here a moment, if that's all right."

He couldn't deny that he would enjoy resting in her lap for longer than needed. But he wouldn't. That *would* be taking advantage of the situation. Whereas his current actions held some doubt as to how much advantage he was taking.

“Of course,” she readily agreed, her eyes full of worry and compassion.

Rajan shifted, though Illan didn't bother looking at the fire genie. When he spoke, Illan heard the scowl he must have worn in his voice. “Why are you petting him?”

Miss Ali's hand stilled as a pink flush filled her face. “I don't know.” Illan fought back a wave of resentment. What right did Rajan have to criticize her actions? Illan didn't mind. He was actively enjoying it. So she was more than fine. “Isn't that supposed to be comforting?”

Illan blinked at her. Had she posed her words as a question because humans found the action comforting and she wasn't certain genies would feel the same? Or because she wasn't certain if the action was comforting in general?

Rajan raised his eyebrows. “How the hell would I know? Humans don't generally touch us, and we genies don't really make a habit of comforting each other.” He tilted his head, his eyes seeming to darken a little. “Only weak beings need comfort.”

Illan withheld a sigh. Was the fire genie throwing a fit because Illan was in Miss Ali's lap? Or because the fire genie genuinely didn't understand her actions? Illan wished Rajan had chosen a different time to question her over this.

She raised an eyebrow at Rajan with a challenging expression that pleased Illan. One of the things he enjoyed about her was that she did not take words or ideas at face value. “So I'm weak when I hide from bugs behind you? Or freak out over cold caves?”

Now Rajan blushed, looking distinctly unconformable before he scoffed, “I was talking about genies. It's different for us.”

Now he sounded as though he were intentionally insulting Illan, though Illan didn't think that was the fire genie's intent. Rajan didn't put much thoughts into his words before speaking.

“Well, I don't think it should be.” Miss Ali placed a protective hand over Illan's chest as

she looked down at him, drawing his eyes to hers. He hoped he still didn't have the energy to blush. Her hand on his chest was not any less pleasant than her running her fingers through his hair—but unlike with his hair, soothing was not the word he would use to describe this touch. “If one of you is hurt, or upset, or needs something, I want to know. I want to help.” Her hand briefly tightened against his chest as she looked up at Rajan to quietly ask, “That’s how it’s supposed to work with friends, right?”

Now the fire genie looked even more uncomfortable, his face turning red as he shoved his hands in his pockets before spinning away. “Yes. No. I don’t know.” He spun back around. “Why are you asking me all these questions like I should know the answer? Why don’t *you* know?”

Miss Ali flushed red again. “Because I . . .” She paused, a sheen of what might be tears filling her eyes. “Because you’re my first friends, all right?” She glared at the floor, blinking furiously as though to urge her tears away.

Illan placed his hand over hers, still on his chest. She jumped at his touch, her eyes going to his. He wanted to be irritated with the fire genie for placing Miss Ali in this upset state, but he was more concerned with comforting her. There was absolutely nothing wrong with or lacking in her for not understanding human nuisances around friendship.

“Was it because of your parents?” His position was too awkward for this conversation, and he was feeling less like his insides wanted to flake away. He managed to push himself into a sitting position without wincing, keeping Miss Ali’s hand in his.

She gaped at his words, seeming stunned. He gave her a sympathetic smile. “I overheard a conversation between you and your mother once, remember? As I recall, she was rather . . . controlling.” It was what made him think that perhaps she understood genies’ plight in life, if

only just a little. He'd wondered before if the conversation he and Miss Ali had that day had been part of what convinced her to go after the rest of the McMichael genies.

"That was part of it," she admitted, seeming reluctant to go into more detail.

"Jeez, Girlie," Rajan muttered, rubbing the back of his head as he looked away from them. His actions and tone showed that upsetting her had been far from his intent. Which was unsurprising, but why had he gotten annoyed in the first place? "I didn't mean it like that, okay? I just—"

Before he could finish, the air rippled a yard away, rainbow edges appearing around it, mimicking other doorways they had seen within the Archives.

Miss Ali gasped and jumped to her feet, her eyes wide and surprised. Illan stood beside her. She cast a quick look between him and Rajan.

"Guys, we need to be ready to—" Her words cut off as Ocean and Light stepped through the doorway.

It nearly immediately dissolved behind them, and Illan let out a huff of disappointment. They were still stuck here for the foreseeable future. Ridiculously, he felt a flare of resentment. If Ocean and Light couldn't help them escape—and he imagined this dimension wouldn't approve of their magic any more than it had his or Rajan's—what was the point of them being here? Illan would have rather continued spending more time with Miss Ali with less genies around if he could have.

But they had far more important matters at hand, so he pushed those thoughts of his head, saving them for a later date.