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Corsivis, Gaelen

Corsivis

“Again!”

Despite my trembling muscles and generally out-of-breath state, I clumsily tried to do as I’d been told. I lunged at Gaelen, doing my damndest to get around his defenses, but he merely swiped my attack to the side, as if it were an irritating mosquito come to land on his skin.

“You don’t have to break through my defenses immediately,” he said. “Most of the time, that’ll just get you killed. Simply engage, and then, wait for an opening. Again.”

We’d been at this for at least an hour. An hour where I’d learned exactly how much I’d always underestimated my friend’s skill with the blade.

In the six years since our first fateful meeting, Gaelen had dodged any and all questions about his abilities, whether martial or otherwise. He’d always been more than happy to answer any of my questions about... *that man*, but soon enough, even that opening had no longer been enough for me. With every passing day, my curiosity about this enigmatic Eselan had grown, getting almost as obsessive as Sarai’s recently.

After our first few months at trying to crack his shell, the two of us had changed tactics. Trailing Gaelen everywhere had been getting us nowhere, and frankly, it had started feeling like an invasion of his privacy. So, Sarai and I had decided that we would feign friendship with Gaelen instead, at least until he’d told us about his magic. Over the years, though, that false bond had changed into something real and true.

At least, it had for me.

“Why the sudden desire to master the blade?” Gaelen asked, drawing me back to the fight.

Ducking the swing I’d sent for his head, he lightly rested his sword’s tip against the hollow of my neck, reminding me yet again of how absolutely *mad* my friend was. Not only did he talk to thin air on occasion, but he had an almost suicidal lack of fear, one that both thrilled and terrified me. In the city, all sparring took place with blunted blades, but when I’d suggested that we use them today, Gaelen had laughed.

"You'll never learn to fight like that," he'd said. "When sharp steel is coming for your face, people have visceral reactions, and how that presents is different for everyone. It's better to figure out what yours is when your opponent is someone friendly to you, rather than not. Don't worry, Cor. I won't hurt you. I have too much practice with this awful thing to accidentally stab you, and I literally can't end your life."

That had confused me. Couldn't end my life? What could that mean?

But I'd merely asked, "What about you? I don't want to hurt you, Gael."

At that, Gaelen had flashed a fierce grin.

"Trust me. You won't be able to hurt me, Cor."

After hours where I'd failed to land a single blow on him, I could believe that statement.

As for my friend's question about my new fascination with learning to fight...

Locking my lips tight, I looked away. I didn't want to discuss my recent change in fortune, couldn't contemplate my mother's closed-off face as she'd brought me to creche's headmaster. I couldn't think about that man's pronouncement or Sarai's expression when we'd given her the news.

As if in tune with my thoughts, Gaelen asked, "Where's Sarai? She's usually materialized by now, the little leech."

Alouin, that question hurt almost as much as his first one.

"You've heard about the recent parlay?" I asked, continuing once Gaelen had nodded. "During it, our neighbors requested more brides in exchange for some of their best fighters and scouts. On hearing the news, mother got Sarai an etiquette tutor, on the off chance they choose..."

With a lump in my throat, I couldn't continue with that thought, but fortunately, Gaelen was well prepared to distract me. Dropping under my waist-high blow, he swept a leg at my ankles, and tripping, I hit the forest floor with a thud, which knocked the air out of me. Unfortunately, my lungs refused to draw it back in, and I spent a moment wheezing around that temporary paralysis, barely hearing Gaelen's shout.

"*Damn* them! Bickering tribes? Loveless marriages? Trading people like so much cattle? How far has the world fallen?"

With a frustrated growl, my friend flopped to the ground beside me, and while catching my breath, I took a moment to watch the younger boy. At some point in the last hour, Gaelen had taken off his tunic, letting sweat freely trickle over his flushed skin, and I tracked each bead of it as it dropped from his hair to his curled-over back.

"So, what was my mistake that time?" I distractedly asked.

“Hmm?”

When Gaelen flicked his eyes to me, a zing shot through me, only building when he smiled.

“Oh! No, falling wasn’t your fault, although you should never let an opponent distract you like that. Not even if your opponent is me!” he said. “You should also never try to kick someone’s legs out from under them like I just did. Under normal circumstances, that would never work, giving your enemy a chance to kill you instead.”

Mmhmm. Don’t get distracted. Something about never doing what he did.

Gaelen didn’t need to worry about that last bit. At times, it seemed like my friend had a death wish, especially when it came to his behavior.

A good Eselan was unassuming, respectful, and subservient, all of which Gaelen was not. Did he know how many times his friendship with Sarai had saved his life in the last few years? No one wanted to declare the plaything of a wealthy, human girl defective.

Given recent events, I couldn’t afford to copy my friend’s behavior. Not anymore.

So, it didn’t matter that Gaelen’s self-assured pride stirred something in me. Alouin, that demurred conduct toward the humans that somehow gave off the impression that he was laughing at them! Every time I saw it, I couldn’t help but shiver. It was delicious.

But that was Gaelen. Something about my friend had enticed me since we’d first met.

Hell, if that sensation hadn’t puzzled me over the years, an anomalous footnote that no other person had had ever matched. Not even those closest to me.

At first, I’d thought it had something to do with those grown-up things that adults never liked talking about. They’d certainly spoken of similar things when other boys my age had started experiencing body changes.

Boy, if that hadn’t been a trip for me. The emotional and physical discord of it had been bad enough, but then, I’d started noticing *girls*. I couldn’t say how many times I’d caught myself staring at my female classmates when I should have been listening to lectures.

By the time my ever-absent, surrogate father had sat me down to truly explain what the hell had been going on, I’d already gone through most of the changes that older man had described. I’d also already discovered the glorious phenomena of touching and kissing the girls I’d found so fascinating.

At first, I hadn’t been sure why human women had seemed to find me irresistible. At the least, they’d ever been eager to giggle and moan when we did anything even slightly physical, but they’d always stopped me before our time together could get too heated.

I’d been several years older and wiser before I’d realized that what they both loved and despised about me was the fact that I was a half-Eselan.

Well. That and the other, more fascinating aspect of my heritage.

Since finding out about that, I'd learned to enjoy what I could get. So, the girls I sometimes played with didn't truly like me? So what? At least they'd talk to me, unlike some of the other humans I'd once spent time around.

But I supposed that was over now too.

The point was that what I'd once felt when I'd been with those girls was a pale shadow of what I felt when I was around Gaelen, which had always been a frustratingly irritating conundrum. No other boy, both in my class and in creche, had ever attracted me like this, and I didn't know what to make of it.

Frankly, it had always scared me a little.

Collapsing onto his back, Gaelen absently stared at the canopy of the forest around us, and viewing his relaxed state, I tensed. Given what had happened at home, this might be the only chance I'd have to find out if I was defective in the one way that everyone in our world, whether human or Esela, abhorred. My last chance to eliminate the disturbing possibility.

Did I want to do that? If I didn't, I'd never know, and for some reason, that seemed like too much to bear.

Besides, if I did test this theory, I didn't think Gaelen would mention it to anyone else. He wasn't the type to gossip like that.

Still, it was with no small amount of terror that I sprang to my hands and knees so I could crawl to Gaelen's side. What would I do if this conundrum was... what I thought it was? Could I live with myself if-?

I couldn't think about it. Gaelen was looking at me funny, as if he was about to speak, so without thinking about it, I ducked down and kissed him and...

Nothing. Just cool lips on my warm ones.

Huh. If the attraction wasn't sexual, then what-?

Something slammed into me, stopping my contemplation short, and as I went soaring—up, up, *up* into the forest's canopy—wood and plant fiber slapped at me. Soon enough, rough bark abruptly halted my speeding flight, and I had a split second to see the ground, waiting seemingly miles below.

Then, I was bouncing and tumbling through tree limbs at ever increasing speed, soon to meet a solid plane of grass and dirt.

When I landed, I sightlessly blinked for what seemed like hours, although a small part of me knew it had been mere seconds. What had just happened?

With a groan, I sat up, looking for Gaelen. Hopefully, he'd have seen what had thrown me so far, but before I could find him, biting agony forced me back down to my elbows with a whimper.

Oh, hell. What-?

Through the fog obscuring my vision, I noted the thin stick protruding from the side of my waist and the crimson-stained, white... thing that was mangling my leg, and I screamed.

Gaelen

When I'd collapsed into the leaves smothering the forest floor, I'd known Corsivis was watching me. He'd always had that slightly uncomfortable habit, but as the years had passed, it had bothered me less and less, unlike Sarai's decidedly more infuriating tendencies.

Those two thought they'd been so clever by trying to pry secrets from me with their 'friendship', and I had to admit that for a time, I'd fallen for it. After living for so long as Eriadren, the social outcast, I'd been desperate for friends. It hadn't mattered that I should avoid them, given what was soon coming for me. I had needed... no, did need companionship.

My initial resolution to evade attachment had been originally helped along by the fact that in this era, no one wanted to associate with the kid who refused to kiss the humans' boots. So, when Sarai and Corsivis had invited me to join in with their fun and games, I'd eagerly accepted.

Unfortunately, Sarai had asked one too many questions about why I could control Ele, and after that, I'd known what their 'friendship' really meant.

Learning that they only valued me for my connection to Ele had hurt, but I couldn't help myself. Ever after that, I'd dropped every assignment if they asked me to join them in their latest escapade.

Yes, their companionship might be false. I didn't care. One day a month with my parents barely put a dent in my self-imposed loneliness.

Of course, it also helped that by making friends with Sarai, I'd mostly exempted myself from the humans' culls. The creche headmaster couldn't declare me defective without causing an uproar as a result.

So, when Corsivis had crawled to peer down at me, I'd thought nothing of it. We weren't exactly friends, but he and I had spent enough time together that I'd let my guard down around him. Just a little.

I didn't realize what he'd intended until our lips met, but by then, it was too late. At that touch, a barrage of memories ripped through the framework of the cage I'd built around them.

Lirilith and I meld as one during a Joining. Lirilith's hair flies around her when ecstasy has her flinging her head back. Lirilith carefully pecks Sepiala's forehead while I hold our daughter. Lirilith

kisses away the ghosts of killing wounds while I violently shiver. Lirilith's eyes glaze as I cling to her, pressing my lips against her blood-streaked forehead.

With acid on the back of my tongue, every muscle locked into place, and I couldn't... I needed this to *stop*. To GO AWAY before—

This time, a scream dragged me back to the surface.

I hadn't blanked like that in years. Practice with shoving memories to the side had lessened the frequency of those terrifyingly absent spells, but every so often, something would catch me unaware, triggering such a deluge of unwanted memories that my brain would kick me out of it.

The something this time had been- had been Corsivis kissing me. What the hell had that been about?

And who the hell was screaming?

As the familiarity of that distressed voice sank in, I sat bolt upright. Someone had mangled the tree opposite me with half-broken limbs dangling up it for at least thirty feet. Corsivis was slumped at its base, reaching for the branch skewering his side with shaking hands.

In a flash, I was beside him, scanning his body for injuries.

A broken shin, a through-and-through puncture of his abdomen, and some abrasions and bruises. If Corsivis was the one who'd devastated the tree he was lying under, then he was lucky he'd escaped with such light injuries.

When I could get a word in edgewise, I said, "What happened?"

"I don't know!" Corsivis shouted, panting around each word. "One minute, I was leaning over you. The next, something sent me flying."

Wait.

Glancing between where I'd been lounging scant moments before and the spot where the broken limbs began overhead, I imagined the trajectory of Corsivis' body. What could have generated enough force to propel him that far?

It couldn't be. Could it?

"Creation?"

Appearing beside me, the splinter said, "Yes, you used Ele to force him away."

I let loose a stream of curses that had Corsivis staring at me with confusion, but the cold sweat on his face soon halted my tirade. The blood stain around that gods-awful branch was seeping outward at a much faster rate than I'd like, so I retrieved my tunic from where I'd tossed it,

wrapping it around the wound while moving Corsivis' hand on top of it.

"Apply as much pressure as you can," I said.

I had no idea how I'd treat the leg. None of the branches around us looked sturdy enough to serve as splints, much less a crutch. I'd have to bear the other boy's weight while we walked back to the city.

Not that I minded doing that! I was just worried that waiting so long to treat his leg might permanently cripple him.

Damn but I missed the shop from my old life right now!

"Why don't you take this wound from him?" Creation asked. "It's not like you'd keep it for long, and having Corsivis discover that ability is preferable to him--"

"No," I snapped.

Letting out the restorative power that constantly raged under my skin wasn't an option. Too many times I'd unleashed it, only to give my patients relief for a short time. Sometimes, they'd lived for months, sometimes mere moments, but always, ever, and for each time, a fate infinitely worse than they'd originally have suffered had taken their lives. If possible, I'd never use that power again.

"No, what?" Corsivis gasped.

Glancing at him, I said, "Nothing, Cor. We just need to get you back home. I can't set that bone on my own."

I threw his arm over my shoulders, ignoring his pained whimper.

"Are you ready?"

When he hesitantly nodded, I stood, carefully dragging him upright. Corsivis sucked in a gasp, but when I checked on him, he nodded once more. We managed to take one shuffling step forward and then, another before the boys' body started trembling like a leaf.

After about ten feet, Corsivis went limp, which made me stumble. For a moment, I thought pain had weakened him, but when I caught a breath of what he'd been mumbling since we'd begun our trip, I barely restrained an eye roll.

"I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm dead. I'm--"

Gods, he'd lived such a sheltered life. This was probably his first true experience with pain. Meanwhile, his full-blood brothers and sisters would suffer this and worse before they reached the age of seven.

But I couldn't let the unfairness of that situation affect my treatment of the boy. I was a healer. He was my patient, and I'd certainly treated far worse people. At least I was somewhat fond of this one.

Lowering Corsivis into the fallen leaves, I knelt in front of him, clasping his hands in mine.

"You'll survive this, Cor. I know it hurts, but none of these injuries is life-threatening," I said. "At worst, you'll be bed-ridden for a few weeks."

If anything, my reassurance only distressed Corsivis more. He bit back a panicked sob while shivers buzzed even more intensely over his body.

"You- you don't under- understand, Gael," he gasped. "I can use magic, and they... *they know.*"

My grip on Corsivis' hand tightened, and as I did some mental math, I vaguely registered his wince. I'd turned thirteen this year, and Corsivis was two years my senior. That put him at fifteen, the year the humans...

Another round of cursing broke the forest's stillness, sending birds flapping away.

Once I'd calmed down enough to force words off of my strangled tongue, I asked, "How long?"

With a sob, Corsivis bit his lip, looking away.

"They ga- gave me a week."

On receiving that answer, the choked scream that emerged from my mouth surprised me. I hadn't made a noise like that since Sepiala-

Can't think of that now.

But given that, my affection for Corsivis must run deeper than I'd thought.

"Will you fix him now?" Creation asked, just out of view. "Believing in the inherent evil of your healing ability is ridiculous, Eriadren. You have no idea how many other people have used it with no consequence! It's more likely that you've had bad luck."

Making a face, I snapped, "No, Creation. Just... no."

Creation huffed.

"Why don't you ask his opinion about it? Or will you decide his fate for him?"

Glaring at the splinter, I wished it would go away, and it must have read something in my eyes because it quickly popped out of existence.

"What does your invisible friend say?" Corsivis shakily asked.

He was using a weak smile to bely his previous despair, and seeing that, I considered him with narrowed eyes.

One boy shouldn't be too difficult to watch, right? Especially if I could convince my parents to give him my rarely used bed. With monitoring, I could keep disastrous consequences from coming near him, and besides, I... couldn't stand the idea of a world without Corsivis.

My friend.

For a moment, I could only blink. When had that happened? I'd vowed that I wouldn't make friends while I was here. At best, these people should only be temporary companions, but Daevetch was taking its time with resurrecting its Champion. Given that, it made sense that a few people would worm past my defenses, and apparently, Corsivis was one of them.

So, damn what might happen. Damn the humans and their horrific policies. I'd fix my friend just to defy them.

Plus—and I felt guilty even thinking this—Corsivis would make a fantastic test subject. If he met his end in a less violent manner than this, then perhaps Creation was onto something. If not...

If not, I'd never use this deceptively miraculous power again.

Still holding my friend's hands, I smiled at him.

"Don't worry. I'll make everything better," I said.

And I Let Go.

Sharp pain tore through my abdomen while my lower leg snapped like a twig, an agony that sent bile surging from my stomach, and I swallowed it back with only a grunt escaping from me.

It was disappointing, really. Toward the end of my time with Reive, I'd endured worse than this without a peep. Years sans any suffering appeared to have lowered my pain threshold, but to my credit, a single grunt wasn't the blood-curdling scream that Corsivis had unleashed.

Still.

When my friend snatched his hands out of mine, I thought disgust had come to rule him until he ripped the crude bandage on his stomach away, pressing it to my wound.

"What did you do, Gael?" he said. "What the *fuck*...? You're already walking a fine line as it is!"

Ah. So, this contrived friendship had, at some point, become real for him as well. As white light erased my injuries, laughter bubbled from me, although both quickly dissipated.

Stunned, Corsivis lifted the rag from my side, staring with wide eyes at my unbroken skin.

“What *are* you?” he breathed.

That question resumed my cut-off hilarity, and falling to my side, I clutched at my stomach.

“I. don’t. know,” I gasped.

Which was true. Champion of Ele? What did that mean? Was I an extension of Ele now, or did I simply have greater access to it than the average person?

Creation had tried explaining it to me, but its strange vocabulary usually confused me so much that I couldn’t follow what it was saying. Until now, all that had concerned me was learning to use my new abilities so I was prepared for Arivor’s coming.

As my laughter died out, I stayed curled on my side, considering questions I should have thought of before helping Corsivis. Would he share what he’d learned with creche’s headmaster, and if he did, what would that cruel son of a bitch do on discovering my abilities? My arms tightened around my chest at the idea of another life spent with a Reive replica.

Leaves crunched nearby, but over that noise, I heard Corsivis sigh.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

Flopping onto my back, I stared at his extended hand like it was a Esla-turned-monster, and rolling his eyes, Corsivis leaned over to grab my arm. After hauling me to my feet, he trudged toward the city, and for a moment, I couldn’t move. When I could force myself forward, I had to jog to catch up.

“Do you want to-?” I started.

“Nope!” Corsivis said.

So... he wanted to ignore what had happened. That was fine by me but...

Stop it. You can trust him. You CAN!

We walked for several more yards before I gathered the courage to speak again.

“Do you need a place to stay?” I asked.

A pained expression crossed Corsivis’ face.

“I suppose I will, won’t I?” he whispered.

Oh, how I knew that hurt. I barely restrained myself from squeezing my friend’s shoulder.

“Stay with my family,” I said. “That way, when I slip out of creche, I can easily find you.”

At that, Corsivis looked at me like I was crazy.

“Why would you do that?” he asked.

Shrugging, I said, “Someone needs to teach you how to properly fight in the week the humans have given you. I’m volunteering.”

Stopping short, my friend stared at me like I was an unfinished puzzle or a prized possession just out of reach, and flipping toward him, I raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t approve?” I said.

“No! I...”

Corsivis sighed. He was doing a lot of that today.

“It’s just... thank you,” he said.

“You don’t have to thank me,” I said. “This is what friends do, right?”

I waited for his response, hoping... *praying* he’d confirm my suspicions.

Corsivis’ eyes widened with surprise flashing through them, but of course it did. Up to this point, I’d never called us friends out loud. Swallowing hard, the boy beamed.

“Yes! It is!” he said.

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