



Sacred Fate

Chronicles of Ylandre

Eresse

(c) 2009

Sacred Fate

Chronicles of Ylandre

Eresse

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-595-4

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Eresse. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Devin Govaere

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Blurb

In the dual-gendered realm of Ylandre, the great divide between the high-born True Bloods and the lower-ranked Half Bloods is deemed impassable by most. Rohyr Essendri dared to cross it when he took young Lassen Idana from his provincial town and made him his paramour. Lassen perforce learned how to navigate the intricate byways of life at court. What he never expected, however, was to fall in love with Rohyr, a most

inadvisable and impractical thing to do when one's lover is sovereign ruler of the land. But anything worth having is worth fighting for, both figuratively and, as Lassen discovers, literally speaking. Contains hermaphrodisism and explicit homoerotic sexual encounters.

Note: Glossary of terms at end of book.

Prologue

Genesis

Ylandre, in the 1009th year of the Common Age

She left with a sigh so faint the physician almost did not hear it. Her chest barely heaved with that final breath; her wrinkle-framed lips scarcely moved. The healer gently pressed his fingers to the loose flesh at the sides of her throat then lifted her thin wrist. He shook his head and looked up.

Veiron Essendri curtly nodded. He watched the family gather around her in mourning.

It was no coincidence that the Ardan of mighty Ylandre had attended an old female on her deathbed. She was just a commoner but she was also the last of her kind in the land. And so he had come as soon as word reached him of her imminent passing. Veiron looked at the kinsfolk she had left behind—brothers, cousins, nephews, great-nephews. Not a one sprung from her for no one had taken her to mate. How could they when her form had no longer found favor with the folk of her township or even her own blood relations? She, whose ancestors were the firstborn of Aisen, had lived her life and departed it a virtual stranger in the world of her birth.

Veiron signed to his counsellor to give her family a bag of coins to help defray the cost of the funeral. They received it in timid silence, the eldest thanking the king in hushed tones. Veiron acknowledged their gratitude then stepped out of the chamber.

When he returned to the capital he retreated to his study and took out his journal. He needed to record the demise of the last female not only in his realm but also in the entire continent. He was not the only sovereign to do so. Female-kind vanished in the continents of Lydan and South Vihandra during his sire's reign. Arvalde had only a scant handful left and Khitaira maybe twice that number at most. But they were all in their twilight years, these spouseless, childless, kindredless daughters of Aisen. They would leave the world before Veiron's eldest came to the throne.

It was a death knell for their race. Their passing would herald the extinction of Aisen's first offspring. And the irreversible ascendancy of her adopted heirs.

Unsure how to begin his account, Veiron glanced at the nearby shelf that housed the journals of his predecessors for inspiration. He recalled an entry he had read when he was just a lad. He rose and retrieved his grandsire's journal. Sitting at his writing desk once more, he quickly flipped through the crisp pages. He soon found what he was seeking and began to read.

* * * *

They came in that time before written history in this world. A wondrous race of great daring and spirit. It seemed their fate to suffer extinction. They defied fate instead and won their battle to prevail against impossible odds.

The ancient scribes wrote that their world began to die. The climate slowly changed. An unending winter set in, killing plants and beasts alike. They realized that sickness and starvation would destroy them if the cold did not. And so the sharpest, most farseeing

minds amongst them gathered together and strove to discover a way for their people to escape oblivion.

They were masters of the mind arts. They harnessed mental energy to heal or wound, to save or slay. They could communicate without speaking though they never forsook speech. Language was important to them for they were a highly cultured people who revered their teachers as much as their soldiers.

Yet they were first and foremost a warrior race. Their history was marked by conflict, the extension of borders routinely realized through the use of force and the attainment of power and property more oft than not achieved by conquest. Fortunately, by the time of the Great Frost, they had learned to eschew war for the most part and live in harmonious coexistence.

It was this general peace, this conscious will to cooperate, that won them salvation. They were learned enough to surmise that they were not alone in existence. At the behest of their scholars and leaders, they joined their consciousness in a shared endeavor to discover if there was another place to which they could relocate their race.

They saw it in that collective mind's eye. A world similar to theirs that appeared untouched by sentient life. It held the hope of survival and promised a future for their kind. And so they came together on the last continent that could still sustain them. And for the second time, and likely the last, they joined minds, each and every survivor of that deadly winter. They harnessed the energy generated by that joining and channeled it into the creation of a corridor by which they could pass through the void to their new home. That was how they came to the world they named Aisen.

It was only upon their advent that they discovered the presence of a nascent homegrown race alike to theirs in appearance and intelligence. They called themselves the gelra.

The colonists had to make a choice. They were numerous, long-lived and strong. And they were possessed of a power with which they could easily overcome and supplant the gelra. But these ancient ones were wise. They comprehended that the indigenous population possessed what was needed to thrive in this strange new world. They chose assimilation over extermination, breeding with the native inhabitants over many generations until the distinctions between them blurred and finally disappeared.

We are the progeny of that wondrous era. The children of the Inception. A people hewn from the threat of extinction, the harshness of survival, the hardships of wholesale migration, the relentless toil of civilization started anew and the inevitable adversities of evolution. A mercurial race, as capable of bringing down empires as raising them, undertaking both with equal fervor. We are the result of the journey upon which those long ago gallant hearts embarked in a desperate bid to preserve their kind.

They were the Naere and we, the Deira of Aisen, are forever indebted to they who were our forebears, sprung from a world that no longer exists except in blessed memory.

Joram Essendri

Rikara, Ylandre

Year 825 C.A.

Chapter One

Happenstance

Tal Ereq, in the 2996th year of the Common Age

The air was redolent with the lush aromas of an Ylandrin summer. Cranapples, sugar pears and honeyberries sprouted in profusion. But they failed to distract Mithre Idana as he strode down the orchard lane, peering up at overhanging branches along the way.

A flash of pale blue amidst the green, rose and brown of a cranapple tree's canopy caught his eye. He stared into the thick foliage and espied his quarry seated on a stout limb, a half eaten fruit in hand.

"Lassen!"

A sheepish chuckle greeted his call. Mithre waited patiently until his son shifted on his perch and gazed down at him, so sweet a smile curving his lips that Mithre was hard-pressed to remain stern.

"Come down now," he said, his lilting speech marked by the elongated vowels of the south. "The delegation will be here very soon."

"Yes, Adda."

Lassen lightly dropped to the ground. Straightening, he tucked a stray strand of sun-bright hair behind an ear and attempted to smooth down his rumpled shirt. Mithre shook his head reprovingly.

"That won't do at all. Go bathe and dress properly. Or do you wish to shame your sire?"

"Nay, I don't want that. But is there still time?"

"There is. You'd better hurry though if you wish to see them come out of translocation." Mithre grinned when Lassen's eyes widened. "And that's a very rare sight in these parts."

Lassen raced home, barely waiting for his father to finish speaking. Mithre fondly watched him go. Ah, to be that young again and unburdened by worries, he smilingly mused as he walked back.

Meanwhile, Lassen set about making himself presentable, settling for a quick soap and rinse over a leisurely soak in the tub. Thank Veres it's summertime, he thought, as cool water sluiced down his slender frame. He tossed the dipper back into the shallow basin and briskly toweled himself dry. Pulling on a robe, he exited the bathing room and hastened up the stairs to the residential quarters and the bedroom he shared with his brother.

A glance out the window showed scores of townsfolk scurrying down the street toward the main gate. Lassen threw on a pair of thin drawers, a white full-sleeved shirt and long pale grey breeches. He eschewed the usual tunic however and donned the sleeveless aquamarine jerkin he wore during his begetting day celebration the previous spring instead. It was a sunny day and he would be just one youth among many. Who would notice, much less care what he wore?

The volume of chatter from outside increased. Lassen plaited his hair as fast as he

could, twisting the flaxen locks framing either side of his face into two thin braids, which he pulled back and bound with a narrow riband. The style kept his face clear of untidy strands and allowed his hair to hang neatly down his back, as was the fashion among his people.

After slipping on soft leather boots, he gave himself a cursory once-over in the mirror. He did not care much for the stunning visage reflected nor did he appreciate how the jerkin matched his eyes and pointed up the ivory hue of his skin. Some townsfolk attributed Lassen's disinterest to his youth but that was hardly accurate for few of Lassen's peers were as unaware of their charms as he was.

The lad took the stairs two steps at a time. Coming out of the Idanas' modest house, he spotted his brothers Yuilan and Fileg climbing to the ramparts whence they would have a better view of the wide plain fronting Tal Ereq. As with most prosperous communities that lay outside the bounds of Ylandre's fiefdoms, the town proper was enclosed by earthen fortifications.

Lassen hurried after his siblings. It would be his first glimpse of politically powerful bluebloods and these ones from the faraway capital of Rikara at that.

Tal Ereq was located near the eastern bounds of the Autonomous Province of Velarus. Essentially buffer zones between Ylandre and the neighboring nations, the Provinces' populace neither owed fealty to the realm's Herune or fief-lords nor were under direct monarchial control. Only rarely did the government interfere in their affairs. But such leniency had a price.

Royal aid was limited and often delayed. Trade with the fiefs and Crown lands was minimal at best. Consequently, the Provinces were not as affluent as the vassal states. Outlawry was also more prevalent. Ruinous when left unchecked, such brigandage had spread too widely of late for the comfort of Tal Ereq's citizens. Hence the petition the townsfolk sent to the capital posthaste.

Word had arrived the previous week that the Ardan would send a delegation to negotiate terms with them. Visits by high-ranking dignitaries being extremely rare, the news had thrown the town into a state of excitement. For while the most prominent families of the town were of the gentry, none could claim more than fleeting social contact with the *enyra*, the elite True Bloods who formed the ruling class of every realm in Aisen.

Tal Ereq's folk were *sedyra* or Half Bloods, that is to say, Deira whose ancestors had bred indiscriminately with the aboriginal Aiseni. The result had been the wholesale diminishment of the mental prowess passed down by their Naeren forebears. Few *sedyra* possessed the talent today, let alone wielded it. Not so the *enyra* who, through judicious breeding with the ancient natives, preserved both their bloodlines and the mind gifts in large part. They also aged more slowly than the Half Bloods and often surpassed the average Deiran lifespan of one hundred and fifty summers by another twenty years or so.

Just as Lassen reached his brothers, an excited murmur spread among the townsfolk. The Idana sons turned their gazes on the wide plain before them. Lassen caught his breath when he descried the ripples in the atmosphere that heralded the blossoming of a translocation portal. Not even True Bloods all possessed the skill to create these transient gateways. In eastern Velarus, it was a phenomenon so rarely witnessed as to be almost mythical.

Within moments of the portal's blossoming, figures materialized in the corridor

within, which swirled and blurred like shifting sand across a barren dessert. As if coming from the other side of a mirror, Lassen thought.

Several cloaked riders appeared mounted on zentyra, the fleet and powerful Ylandrin war steeds whose silken manes, whimsically dappled flanks and elegant gaits belied their inherent ferocity and the lethal nature of their sharp cloven hooves and the single short horn that protruded from their brows. They were not found anywhere else in Aisen and it was forbidden to use them for leisure or labor or to bring them out of the country without royal permission.

When the last rider emerged, the portal shimmered then faded away. The delegation regrouped and began to traverse the plain toward the town.

“Let’s go down!” Yuilan urged. “I want to see *Aba* welcome them. Hurry, brothers, hurry!”

The three descended and raced to the town hall. Lassen glanced back as the first of the visitors passed under the wide arch of the main gate. His heart beating wildly, he followed his brothers who made their way to Mithre. As mate to Dael Idana, Tal Ereq’s First Elder, Mithre stood at the forefront of the Elders’ families gathered on one side of the hall courtyard. Other prominent townsfolk filled the remaining space. The rest made do with lining the street outside.

Taking his place beside Fileg, Lassen watched the Rikaran party enter the courtyard. There were eleven riders, six of whom formed an armed escort. Once they were all within, they reined in their steeds and dismounted.

Mithre had visited the capital several times and seen many of its ranking citizens in the course of business. He identified the delegates as they let down their hoods.

“That is Keosqe Deilen, Minister of Internal Affairs,” Mithre murmured upon sight of cool amethyst eyes and pale gold hair. He added that the *enyran* lord was cousin to the king.

“Ah, the Chief Counsellor, Yovan Seydon,” he said, nodding in the direction of an aristocratic Deir of middle years. “His son will some day inherit a great fortune. The counsellor wed into one of the wealthiest families in the land.”

“Isn’t he also kin to the Ardan?” Lassen ascertained.

“You’ve been paying attention to your teachers,” Mithre said approvingly. “Yes, he is. Indeed, nearly all his inner circle are related to him by blood or law. They intermarry a lot, these high-born True Bloods.”

“You don’t approve?” Yuilan asked.

“‘Tis not our custom to bind with over close kin,” Mithre admitted with a shrug.

“But the nobles hew closely to the traditions of our ancestors who wed their own brethren to keep their bloodlines pure.” He turned his attention once more to the delegates. “There, that is Gilmael Calanthe, another of the Ardan’s cousins. ‘Tis said that he heads the most efficient intelligence network in the North Continent. And he is a twin. He and his brother are so alike, ‘tis nigh impossible to tell them apart.”

His sons studied the dark-haired, blue-eyed noble, trying to picture two of him standing side by side. Gilmael spoke briefly with one of the party, a somewhat elderly Deir whose handsome features were marred by what appeared to be a perpetual scowl.

“Who is that sour-faced fellow?” Fileg questioned, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

“Hush,” Mithre muttered. “He’s the Ardan’s uncle of Qimaras, Imcael Essendri. I wouldn’t cross him for he’s said to nurse his grudges. He’s haughty as well and puts

much stock in bloodlines and titles. Not a pleasant person by any standard. But here now, who is that?" He eyed the one visitor who had yet to uncover his face. "Look how he regards what goes about him. Not much escapes that one, I wager."

As Mithre finished speaking, the unknown Deir dropped his hood. The Elders gaped then hastily genuflected, heads bowed low in obeisance. All the adults present did likewise, compelling the young ones to follow their example.

"*Adda*?" Lassen asked, looking sideways at Mithre in confusion.

"Veres almighty!" Mithre whispered. "Why is he here?" He glanced at his anxious sons. "Don't be afraid, I was only so surprised," he assured them as he straightened up. "We didn't think the Ardan himself would deign to visit our humble town."

"That is the Ardan?" Fileg blurted excitedly.

Lassen stared at Rohyr Essendri. *Saints, but he's handsome!* Nay, beautiful was closer to the mark. His patrician features and rich sable hair bespoke his pure Essendri descent. But what distinctly marked him as the ranking member of Ylandre's ruling family were his eyes. Lassen had never seen such eyes before—slate grey irises rimmed with smoky blue. As he continued to stare at Rohyr, his heart began to race and his cheeks flushed. In that moment, Lassen knew the befuddling throes of first infatuation.

He watched Rohyr graciously respond to the effusive welcomes and requisite introductions to each Elder and his mate. The Ardan did not raise his voice but what Lassen heard of it affected him nonetheless. Low, deep and spoken in the slightly clipped manner of the northerners, it rang with compelling authority yet was surprisingly melodious. A frisson of excitement singed Lassen's suddenly unsteady limbs.

Dael invited Rohyr and his party to enter the town hall, gesturing deferentially to Rohyr to precede him. Before he passed through the doorway into the building, the king turned his gaze to where the Elders' families were gathered. His eyes swiftly skimmed over them. Still awe-struck, Lassen continued to stare at him.

He nearly stopped breathing when Rohyr looked straight at him. Their gazes met and locked. The earlier frisson of emotion turned into a veritable quake of sensation as those grey eyes studied his features then swept over him in appraisal. Spellbound, Lassen could not move or speak or even think clearly. His head felt light, his chest seemed constricted and his knees threatened to give way. If Rohyr did not release him soon from his regard, he would swoon.

Just when Lassen thought he would disgrace himself before everyone, Rohyr turned away and entered the hall. Lassen breathed in deeply to ease his starved lungs. He glanced about him. No one was looking at him, not even his brothers. Had nobody noticed? How long had it lasted anyway?

The crowd began to disperse and Yuilan and Fileg hurried to join their friends. Everyone was talking about the king's unexpected visit and Lassen's brothers were no exception. He stared after them feeling a wee bit disoriented.

Mithre studied him with concern. "Are you well?" he murmured.

Lassen swallowed then softly replied in the affirmative. Mithre's expression turned a shade more worried.

"The way he looked at you... Did the Ardan—did he impart anything to you?"

Lassen frowned. "How could he when he didn't speak—" he started to say, then stopped and shook his head. "I heard nothing in my mind, *Adda*." He shivered when he remembered the oppressive weight of that silvery gaze. "But I felt..."

“Felt...?”

“‘Twas as if I were a book and he was turning my pages and reading a little of what I contained.”

Mithre sucked in his breath. He would speak with Dael after the meeting was over, he decided. Absurd as it seemed, he could not shake the feeling that there had been more to Rohyr’s perusal of Lassen than mere curiosity.

“Was it wrong of him to do that?” Lassen asked.

Mithre hesitated. It could be perilous to speak ill of the Ardan. Not that Rohyr had done anything that was not within his rights as monarch of the land. And in any case, it was said that he never employed his considerable mind-talents on a mere whim. Mithre hoped the whole incident was no more than a mare’s nest and that he was just seeing phantoms in his protectiveness of his children.

“‘Twas not wrong,” he said at length. “He had his reasons and ‘tis not for us to question them.” Mithre forced the frown from his face and smiled at his son. “I’ve been tasked with preparing our guests’ evening meal. Would you like to help?”

Lassen eagerly nodded. “Will you serve them your roehart stew? I think for a bite of that alone, the Ardan would readily grant our petition!”

The elder Idana laughed, his forebodings stilled for the moment. Fondly patting his son’s shoulder, he made his way out of the courtyard. Lassen fell in step with him.

Neither sensed the gaze that followed them as they wended their way through the thinning crowd.

Chapter Two

Proviso

Located on the upper floor of the town hall, the main audience chamber was an airy room with polished wooden floors and tapestry-adorned walls. Its many windows overlooked the courtyard and the surrounding residences.

Rohyr Essendri stood at one of those windows, surveying the tableau below. The others quietly waited for him. To do otherwise would be deemed a breach of protocol.

Despite the simplicity of his raiment, the Ardan cut a striking figure. He was clad in a chestnut-hued tunic styled in the *enyran* manner with the sword arm sleeve cut above the elbow. High-collared and knee-length, the tunic hugged the body and opened up front and at the sides from hem to mid-thigh for ease of movement. Underneath were a close-fitting shirt and hardy long breeches. Completing the ensemble were rugged boots and a sturdy belt from which hung a plain-hilted sword sheathed in a leather scabbard.

Though born to wealth and privilege, Rohyr displayed little of the trappings of his position. Were it not for the white-silver almond shaped earring that gleamed at his left ear, the single blue-tinged gem of adamant at its center emblematic of his sovereignty, he could have passed for any Deir of aristocratic birth. But not unmarked. He could never be overlooked even were he less than inordinately comely or did not tower over everyone save for his kinsfolk.

He radiated an aura of barely leashed power despite his age—Rohyr was much younger than most of his contemporaries in other lands. Indeed, he was the youngest Essendri ever to rule, having come to the throne unexpectedly a decade and a half ago when he was little more than a callow lad of twenty-eight summers—a full seven years before his majority.

At last, he turned from the window and the Third Elder Owyn led him to his seat.

In the center of the room were nine high-backed chairs. They were arranged in a semi oval so that eight faced each other across a wide burgundy runner, its center emblazoned with Tal Ereq's crest. Between the chairs were small tables bearing pewter plates and drinking cups. Owyn conducted Rohyr to the chair at the head of the arrangement.

Once they were seated, attendants entered the chamber. Some brought platters and bowls of savory tarts, chunks of grilled wildfowl on tiny skewers, spiced and salted haronuts and assorted sweetmeats. Others bore pitchers of mulled wine and flagons of cool mead. In all, a light but filling afternoon repast fit for noble guests.

To the Elders' surprise, Rohyr asked that the attendants leave right after they served the food and drinks. He broached the town's petition as soon as the last of them departed.

"Speak plainly and waste not our time or yours," he admonished when the Elders lingered on the niceties of formal introductions, the reference to himself in the plural form automatically lending an official air to the proceedings. "Else you may find brigands at your threshold before you manage to convince us of the merits of granting you our protection."

It fell to Dael to expound on the town's predicament. Tal Ereq's folk were proud of

their independence, having thrived on their own for more than fifteen generations. But of late that independence had been threatened by neighboring Cattania's aggression.

Cattania shared a tenuous border with Velarus and its rulers had once attempted to redraw the map of the North Continent in their favor. That botched invasion had cost the principality dearly. Repelled by the Ylandrin army and invaded in retaliation, the Cattanians had watched with impotent rage as fortresses and frontier communities fell to the Essendris and the border was pushed back several leagues onto their own soil.

Though the chances of regaining those lands were negligible, the Cattanian princes continued to harass the towns and villages along the marches. Lately, they had taken to unleashing the dregs of their society on the region and were responsible for a great portion of the banditry that afflicted the area.

The tally of outlaw bands had sharply risen, as had the escalation in their savagery. News of pitiless raids culminating in wholesale destruction and rapine gave Tal Ereq's residents cause to doubt their ability to defend themselves. Sooner or later, the brigands would turn their sights on the thriving communities farther west of the border. The townsfolk feared that their home would vanish from the face of Aisen before the lords of the nearest fiefs saw fit to mobilize their constabularies.

"We own ourselves in dire need of Your Majesty's protection and guidance," Dael earnestly said. "We ask that you extend your aid to this town and its citizens."

"And what do you offer in return, Idana-tyar?" Gilmael Calanthe inquired, courteously appending the honorific to Dael's surname though he was of much higher station than the Elder.

"We will cooperate in the establishment of an outpost within our territory as was once requested of us," Dael replied.

"By my sire," Rohyr wryly remarked. "You denied his request."

The Elders looked uncomfortable. "Our predecessors didn't think it necessary at the time," scholarly Mykal diffidently explained,

"You mean they didn't appreciate the idea of a constant military presence so close by," Rohyr rejoined. "It is wise of you to reconsider your stand." He gestured to Dael to continue.

The Elder gamely enumerated more concessions, most having to do with placing Tal Ereq's natural resources at the Crown's disposal. He faltered under Imcael's incredulous regard, however.

"That is all you can offer?" the latter scoffed.

Though inwardly chafing at the Herun's incivility, Dael maintained his composure. "We will tender liege homage, Essendri-dyhar," he said, mindful to employ the high honorific used to address someone of noble blood or profession.

Rohyr smiled humorlessly. "Do you understand what liege homage entails? It's far more than simple fealty. Are you prepared to swear yourselves to the service of the Crown, even to your children and grandchildren?"

The Elders exchanged pained glances. But they looked with resignation at Dael and he stoutly declared, "We are prepared."

Before any could respond, Imcael spoke none too patiently, his northern accent becoming more pronounced as his irritation mounted. "But what use have you for a backwater town, Nephew? What in *heyas* can they possibly offer that is worth our time and trouble? Verily, all they have in significant quantities are trinkets. And whilst those

are admittedly pretty enough, not all the jewel smiths of Ylandre come from this town. Why, the bazaars and shops of Rikara offer an abundance of baubles from all over the land!”

Unused to such open contempt, the Elders shifted uneasily in their seats. Rohyr raised a hand to stay his uncle’s diatribe.

“But few are as beauteous as what the folk of this town create,” Yovan Seydon interjected. He pointedly stared at Imcael. “As you well know, Imcael, since *your* most prized trinkets come from Tal Ereq.”

The young lords hid their smiles behind their hands while the Elders gawked at the counsellor. A red-faced Imcael glowered at him.

“Whence my property hails has no bearing on whether this town merits protectorate status or not, Yovan,” he growled. “And I’ll thank you not to discuss personal matters in the presence of strangers!”

Swallowing his mirth, Rohyr said, “Nonetheless, I laud your taste, Uncle. Tal Ereq is renowned for its jewel craft and deservedly so.” He glanced at the Elders, then swept a keen gaze over the others. “Alone, this town isn’t much of a prize. Apart from Lord Imcael’s arguments, it is quite far from the main trade routes and any major hub of commerce and industry or center of education and culture.”

He looked at Keosqe Deilen for confirmation and received a nod of assent. “It’s a problem Tal Ereq has in common with its neighbors,” Keosqe elaborated. “This part of Velarus is underpopulated and underdeveloped. Furthermore, the towns and villages are fairly distant from each other and the citizens keep to themselves for the most part. They are insular folk, these eastern Velarusians.”

“Yet a score of Tal Ereq’s neighbors have made the same request of us,” Rohyr pointed out. “Put their populations together and their numbers would equal that of a city-state. Should more follow, they could swell to the size of a fief.”

“Which would warrant the installation of a full-fledged regional constabulary in lieu of a border outpost,” Keosqe said.

“And encourage commerce with the fiefs should they pool their resources and cooperate in the distribution of their goods and produce abroad,” Gilmael added.

“Finally, consider the benefits of having a united populace on our eastern front,” Yovan quietly finished. “Cattania’s belligerence would be significantly reduced. Until now they’ve depended on the isolation of this region’s communities from each other to hinder any concerted resistance against their incursions. Prevention is always more desirable than retaliation. When foreign aggression is checked at the borders, we need not worry about possible attacks on the fiefs and Crown lands farther within or bother to expend efforts in rebuilding diplomatic ties with chastened would-be conquerors.”

“I think that sums up the benefits of taking this town into the fold,” Rohyr said. “Are there any other objections?” When none was voiced even by a scowling Imcael, he turned his gaze back to the Elders who were nonplussed by the blunt discussion of their town’s merits and flaws. “There is one other matter that needs clarification before a compact is drawn up.”

The Elders gaped. From the tenor of Rohyr’s words, it seemed all would be resolved in the span of one afternoon’s talk.

Rohyr looked at Dael inquiringly. “There was a lad in the courtyard earlier. He regarded our party quite relentlessly and myself in particular. It’s a wonder his stare did

not scorch us to a crisp.” He paused to allow for a round of chuckles. “He has your mate’s coloring and something of your features. I assumed he is kin to you.”

“That would be my youngest, Lassen,” Dael replied. “I beg pardon for his untoward behavior, *Dyhar*. He’s never seen True Bloods before, let alone of such high birth.”

“Never? You’ve sheltered him quite rigorously.”

“He is a breeder,” Dael explained.

There was no need for further elucidation. The chances of conception were greater with breeders whose fertility so exceeded the ordinary they could easily and safely reproduce even past the age when the general ability to conceive waned considerably. It was not unheard of for a reluctant breeder to be abducted and forced to bear his captor’s progeny. This latter practice was outlawed in Ylandre several centuries back. But it was difficult to fully enforce any law in the more remote regions. It was better to be overly careful than have cause for regret later on.

“You’re hardly to blame for your caution,” Rohyr agreed. “But that is of no account to me.” He eyed Dael so intently it unnerved the Elder. “He’s all that is needed to gain my consent, Dael Idana. Give your son into my ownership and I shall grant Tal Ereq full protection and aid equal to a fiefdom’s.”

Stunned silence met his pronouncement.

“What of the concessions they offered?” Gilmael ventured after a moment.

“We have no need of them save for the outpost,” Rohyr said dismissively, shifting once more to the royal “we” to emphasize the intractability of his stand. “They merely provided a good gauge of the severity of their need.” He regarded the dumbfounded Elders. “You may retain your autonomy and all the rights thereof. Though should you offer assistance at any time, it won’t be declined.”

Finding his tongue, Dael anxiously sputtered, “But-but, *Dyhar*! Lassen has just passed his twenty-sixth summer. He mayn’t be bedded before his thirtieth.”

“A leman may with parental consent,” Rohyr shot back.

Dael stared. “You will make him your concubine?”

“You think I will cast him aside after a few tumbles?” Rohyr caustically said. “What do you make of me, Elder?” When Dael paled, he continued in a kinder tone. “It’s not my habit to bed younglings for sport. Rest assured I shall keep him well and bestow every privilege that is within my power on him.”

Before Dael could reply, Rohyr’s uncles spoke up. Imcael protested vehemently; Yovan advised caution. Rohyr shrugged them off.

“I don’t see how this will affect my governance. It’s not as if I will grant him the rule over a ministry or hand him the keys to the royal treasury! This has naught to do with my obligations save in providing me with a greater measure of contentment in my spare time. And since it is when I am most content that I’m also the most inspired to do my duty, I think you’ll agree that this can only better my performance as a whole.”

Wincing at the reference to what would be required of Lassen, Dael voiced another concern. “Lassen is too young to imbibe *mirash*,” he said, feeling quite ill at publicly discussing his son’s current level of reproductive maturity. “Should he conceive... Your Majesty, ‘twould imperil him to breed before his time.”

“Nor should he!” Imcael exclaimed. “No other may precede your lawful heir, Rohyr. None should conceive your child until you have begotten one on your legal consort!”

Rohyr frowned. “You need not get into a pother over this, Uncle. You know full well

that there are other means by which conception can be prevented.” He turned his attention back to Dael. “However, Lord Imcael is correct. Even when he reaches breeding age, Lassen must not get with child before I have sired one in wedlock. And in the event of a mishap occurring, I will want to be certain that the babe is indeed mine.”

Dael caught his breath. “You will imprint him?”

“I cannot chance his straying from our bed and mayhap foisting someone’s bastard on me.”

The Elder swallowed hard at his frankness. An image of his son spread beneath Rohyr came to him unbidden. Involuntarily, his eyes dropped to the king’s lap where his tunic parted, revealing the length of his muscular thighs and a glimpse of his crotch. His snug breeches left little room for guesswork. Dael inwardly cringed.

He knew what it was to be speared but never had he experienced coupling with one as generously endowed as Rohyr obviously was. Would Lassen be able to bear it? It was not that he thought Rohyr cruel or insensitive but surely it would be no easy thing to sheathe a sword such as the king possessed.

Dael became conscious of the other Elders’ averted gazes. They did not pressure him with either word or look but Dael knew what they hoped for. He glanced at Rohyr’s companions. Imcael was obviously displeased while Yovan had adopted a neutral expression—he had said his piece and now left matters to his nephew. Gilmael and Keosqe, on the other hand, regarded him with sympathy but also, to the Elder’s bemusement, some humor.

Keosqe glanced at his royal cousin then shook his head with a wry smile. Dael followed his glance and regretted it an instant later. Rohyr was smiling, too, but his smile did not quite reach his eyes. Dael understood then that the choice had already been made for him and that his acquiescence was little more than a formality.

“Well?” Rohyr said, his voice edged with mild impatience. “Are we agreed on this or not?”

Dael resigned his son to the inevitable. Drawing an almost painful breath, he formally acceded. “’Tis as you wish, Your Majesty. Lassen is yours from this day forth.”

Chapter Three

Contract

Dael listened to the clink and clatter of colliding kitchenware. If the sounds got any louder, he would have to consider ducking behind the stout kitchen door. Mithre's aim was nothing to sniff at.

The welcome dinner had been small and intimate, the chief officers of the town militia and the Elders' mates the only other folk present. Throughout, talk had focused on the region's chronic banditry and when reinforcements would arrive. These would be drawn from the royal army and the constabularies of the nearest fiefs of Edessa and Qimaras. A grumpy Imcael had not hidden his displeasure at having to send troops to this Veres forsaken region as he called it, conveniently forgetting that if the region were overrun by brigands and the like, his fief would come under threat as well. No mention was made of the main proviso Rohyr had required in return for his protection and aid.

Only when the dinner drew to a close was the matter finally broached. Gilmael took the Idanas aside ostensibly to inform them of the advent of some of his people within the next few days. The Intelligence Ministry had been monitoring the outlaw activity and been aware of its rapid escalation far earlier than the Velarusians themselves.

"You knew?" Mithre blurted out. He shook his head. "Of course you knew, *Dyhar*. Your people have their fingers in every pie in the land."

Initially alarmed by his mate's boldness, Dael calmed down when Gilmael chuckled. "We did anticipate calls for aid such as yours," he readily admitted. "And we let it be known that we would visit your town and that the others would be welcome to present their requests to the Crown here."

Mithre sighed. "I never thought I would live to see Tal Ereq become liege property."

"You haven't," Gilmael corrected. "The Ardan declined your offer of liege homage."

Mithre stared at him. "But he granted our request."

"He accepted another concession," Dael softly explained.

Mithre noted his discomfort. "Are you permitted to share it with me?" he warily asked.

"He is," Gilmael said. "Indeed, it is my cousin's counsel that you do so before it is made public. It's you and yours who will have the most to lose or gain, depending on your point of view."

Mithre looked from the *enyran* noble to his spouse. "Dael, tell me," he murmured, not altogether sure that he wanted to know.

Dael did, Gilmael's presence lending him fortitude in the face of Mithre's mounting incredulity. Thankfully, Mithre only responded with a curt, "I see."

But once they returned home, Mithre's temper showed. He did not berate Dael but he sent their servant home early and finished cleaning the kitchen on his own with a vigor one would have thought sapped from him after having spent the better part of the afternoon preparing the formal evening meal. Dael winced at the near violence with which Mithre stowed away the cookware. While Mithre was principal caregiver in addition to bearer of the eldest and youngest Idana children, that did not mean he was

physically weaker or more domesticated than Dael.

Bowing his head, Dael muttered, "Forgive me."

The angry sounds ceased and he heard Mithre sigh. He glanced cautiously at his spouse. Mithre turned around to face him, his expression pained.

"You had no choice," he finally said. "'Tis just that..." Mithre peevishly rubbed his forehead. "Ah, if only I had spoken to you before your meeting with him began. This might have been averted. But, nay, that is wishful thinking. From the moment he laid his eyes on Lassen, our son's fate was sealed."

"What do you mean?" Dael asked.

Mithre gestured to him to seat himself at the worktable then quietly recounted the incident in the courtyard. When he was done, Dael stared at him for some minutes. When he was able to speak again, he said, "He mentioned seeing Lassen beforehand but I didn't know that's what he meant. I only thought his proposal quite sudden."

"It *was* sudden," Mithre affirmed. "One swift perusal will hardly yield thorough knowledge of anybody. Certainly not enough to stake a relationship of any length on it. Yet you say he intends to keep Lassen even should he wed another and maybe even beget sons on him."

"He also promised to acknowledge any children Lassen may give him," Dael added. "How strange that he should be willing to give by-blows his name."

"It bespeaks a deeper regard than would be usual for a kept lover."

Dael frowned. "What are you suggesting? Surely you don't believe that he's enamored of Lassen."

"I'm not suggesting that at all," Mithre demurred. "Indeed, I don't understand his interest in our son. But if you had seen how he looked at Lassen earlier and what Lassen felt when he did..."

"As if he were a book and Rohyr was reading some of his pages," Dael mused. "The Ardan is inordinately gifted in the mind arts. Did he see something of portent?"

"'Tis the only logical explanation," Mithre agreed. "Not that it matters now." He looked inquiringly at Dael. "Lassen must be told soonest. Will you do it or shall I?"

Dael's shoulders drooped. "I'll do it," he decided. "'Twas I who agreed after all. But would you instruct him in what he'll need to know to—?" He swallowed with some difficulty. "To see to the Ardan's needs. I don't want him to offend Rohyr unwittingly and we too far away to guide him."

Mithre wanly smiled. "'Twas time to begin instructing him. I just never imagined I would prepare him for royal service. But, alas, there are some things Lassen can only learn at the end of Rohyr's sword."

He repentantly rubbed his mate's back to ease his sudden fit of coughing.

* * * *

The sun shone brightly on the meadows north of the town. Partially shaded by the golden elms and drooping willows that lined its shallow banks, a small lake provided refreshing play for the town children. It lay some distance from the town proper; far enough that had the banditry spread toward Tal Ereq's vicinity, it would no longer have been safe for any of the townsfolk to venture down to it. But since they came under direct royal protection a fortnight ago, that peril no longer existed.

The constabulary troops from Edessa and Qimaras arrived first. A great contingent of

soldiers from the capital followed two days later. The townsfolk had watched the company ride off toward the border under the command of Vaeren Henaz of the Royal Army.

All had expected Rohyr to return to the capital once the promised military aid had been dispatched. But the Ardan stayed on until he received word that the deployed troops were enough. Hardly surprising though since he often led his forces into battle during critical conflicts, the first being when he quelled an insurgency by Varadani separatists in the northwestern province of Tenerith barely three years after he came to the throne.

In the meantime, representatives from Tal Ereq's neighbors arrived in quick succession. Rohyr met with them and granted his provisional help while extracting major concessions in return. The townsfolk counted themselves very fortunate that he had not demanded as steep a price of them. Or at least, a price that would beggar the community in terms of political autonomy.

That price now watched the frolicking children unseen. Hidden by lush foliage, Lassen sat on a low-hanging willow branch and wistfully gazed at the merry youngsters. Not too many years ago he had been one of their number. Now, not only had he left those halcyon days behind, he would also leave the place where he had passed all those days. And he would do so very soon.

Commander Henaz had sent word that there would be no need for further reinforcements. Faced with well-armed, professional soldiers, the outlaw bands began to retreat whence they came. Whether Cattania would permit them to cross into the principality once again was unlikely and these bandits would be caught between the border guards and pursuing Ylandrin troops.

Lassen sighed dolefully. He wondered how he would fare in his new home and the role thrust on him.

When he learned that he was the lynchpin upon which the success of Tal Ereq's petition hinged, he blanched so alarmingly that Dael had dosed him with a fortifying cup of blackgrape cordial. Afterward, he had wept profusely, prompting Mithre to enter his room and join Dael in consoling him. But when he became aware of Dael's anguish at playing so vital a role in his plight, he set aside his misery to comfort his sire instead. Apprised of the situation, Yuilan and Fileg alternated between sympathy for their youngest brother and awe at his unexpected entrance into the royal household.

That was ten days ago. All the while, preparations for his relocation to the capital proceeded without cease. And Mithre sat him down one evening and discussed what would be expected of him and what Lassen should anticipate in the course of serving the king. Lassen flushed when he recalled the particulars of that conversation.

He was not some uneducated rustic. He knew what sexual communion entailed. But it was one thing to know about the act in a general way, quite another to be informed of the specifics of it and in graphic detail. He closed his eyes and suppressed a whimper when his belly fluttered with unfamiliar sensations.

He had spoken with Rohyr just thrice and always in the presence of others. He knew next to nothing that was not already public knowledge about the Deir who would claim his innocence and order his life from hereon.

Lassen almost yelped when a hand gently clasped his shoulder. He opened his eyes and stared disbelievingly at Rohyr, astounded that he had deigned to join him on so unregal a perch as a tree limb. The king was as simply clad as he in a plain shirt, long

breeches and soft boots.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Rohyr said, "But you didn't respond when I hailed you. So I thought it best to join you instead."

Lassen paled, anxious that he had given offense. "Forgive me, my liege, I did not hear you," he tremulously replied.

A small smile hovered on Rohyr's lips. "Unsurprising. You were deep in thought." He nodded toward the happy scene below. "You will miss this."

The youth sighed. "I know no other life."

Rohyr regarded him silently for a spell. "Rikara is no bucolic haven," he said at length. "But I dare say you'll find much to interest you."

"They do say 'tis beautiful," Lassen ventured.

"It is. And the Citadel more so."

That intrigued Lassen. The Citadel was both a royal residence and a great fortress. He could not quite imagine the two purposes consolidated in a structure as wondrous as folk described it.

"Does it feel like a home?" he impulsively asked.

Rohyr smiled. "It does. I wouldn't live there otherwise."

Encouraged by Rohyr's easy manner, Lassen assayed another question. "Where would you live then?"

The king's smile widened. "The estate in Vireshe perhaps. It was my domain when I was still crown prince. But I assure you the Citadel is a home not only to me but to the members of my household as well."

Lassen considered this then nodded. "Mayhap I shall also learn to call it home," he whispered.

His woebegone expression prompted Rohyr to ask, "Do you want me to release you?"

Startled, Lassen said, "I would not have my sire foreswear himself."

"I see." Rohyr pursed his lips. "Then if it was not he who had given his word, you wouldn't hesitate to ask to be freed."

Lassen was aghast. "Nay, your Majesty! I would still honor what was agreed upon. I mean—" Fearing that he was compounding his error, Lassen fell into stricken silence.

Rohyr chuckled. Unexpectedly, the sound of it set Lassen's skin a-simmer and he blushed in acute embarrassment.

"Rohyr," the Ardan said.

"*Dyhar*?"

"Call me by name."

Lassen stared at him in shock. "I can't do that!" he objected. "'Tis not meet to address you so-so familiarly."

"And why not when you'll be far more familiar with me than any other in all Ylandre?" Rohyr pointed out.

Lassen gaped at him, his cheeks flaming. "If that is your wish, Majes—" He broke off at the warning gleam in the Ardan's eyes. "Rohyr," he amended, lowering his gaze.

Rohyr gently chucked him under the chin. "It is."

Lassen drew a ragged breath. Forcing himself to meet Rohyr's gaze, he managed a shy smile.

Rohyr shook his head. "Are you aware of the power of your smile?" When Lassen

frowned in puzzlement, he sighed. "I thought not."

He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a tiny silk-covered box. Rohyr placed it in Lassen's hand and signed for him to open it. Despite the season's warmth, Lassen shivered as he lifted the lid.

His breath hitched when he laid eyes on the gold earring within. It was elliptical in shape, a sprig of royal holly delicately graven in the middle. Each tapered end was adorned by a gem—at the top, a small but perfect diamond and, at the bottom, a deep red heartsfire. Lassen swallowed, perturbed by the earring's significance.

Heartsfire was the symbol of passion. A heartsfire stud signified that its wearer was available so to speak while a single stone set in precious metal indicated that he was either betrothed or in a long-term liaison. A heartsfire coupled with one of the gems associated with the aristocracy identified a blueblood's concubine.

Lassen flinched when he felt Rohyr's breath upon his ear. He became aware of Rohyr's scent—fresh and clean with the faintest tinge of spicy *sandara*, a fragrant oil from the southern lands. It was an enticing scent and suited the Ardan very well.

"So soft," Rohyr murmured, sifting his hand through Lassen's hair. "Leave it long." When Lassen nodded, Rohyr returned his attention to the jewel. "Yuilan informed me that Symon Barash is your most renowned jewel smith."

Lassen nodded. "When?" he faintly asked.

"The morn after your sire gave his consent for you to join me. This should be an adamant," Rohyr added, lightly touching a fingertip to the diamond. "But it seems it's impossible to acquire in these parts."

"They are beyond the reach of most folk," Lassen croaked.

"Not mine," Rohyr said. "Or yours from hereon. I shall have this changed in Rikara."

He placed a finger on Lassen's lips to silence him when the youth started to protest. Taking the earring from its case, he instructed, "Wear this."

Lassen mutely obeyed. With slightly shaking hands, he removed the honey-hued suncrystal stud from his left ear. He closed his eyes and quivered slightly when Rohyr fastened the new earring in place. It felt heavier and not only in the physical sense. With it came the weight of the obligations he would take upon himself as a king's leman.

"It suits you, *Las-min*," Rohyr softly said.

Lassen caught his breath, blindsided by Rohyr's implicit familiarity with him. The diminutive form of address was generally applied to a Deir of junior years or rank and only when a close relationship whether familial, platonic or professional was in place. When appended to the shortened form of the recipient's name, it implied intimacy such as existed between parent and child or mentor and protégé. Or lovers. Rohyr addressing him thusly was an anticipatory sign of the future state of their relations. He cautiously peeked at the Ardan.

To his shock, Rohyr gently brushed their lips together. The kiss was brief and ever so light that Lassen half thought he had imagined it. It left him severely shaken. His first kiss and it was his king who had bestowed it. It struck Lassen all over again that all of his firsts would henceforth be shared with Rohyr Essendri. He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip to stop its trembling.

When he dared to look at Rohyr once more, the latter was regarding him sympathetically. He fought for calm and, achieving a measure of it, said in a hushed voice, "I pray I will please you, Rohyr-*dyhar*."

Running his knuckles down Lassen's rosy cheek, Rohyr replied, "You already do."

Chapter Four

Displacement

Standing among his fellow Elders in the town hall courtyard, Dael somberly awaited his family.

It would be hard to watch his youngest child ride out of Tal Ereq and their lives. It was unlikely that Lassen would join them often enough to make it feel like he was still a resident of the town. He would be more a part of House Essendri than the family he was born into.

Dael straightened when Rohyr walked up to him, his eyes drawn to the black and silver asitra that perched on the king's shoulder. The small hawk was arguably the fleetest bird in Aisen and was employed as a courier when speed was of the essence.

Some True Bloods were gifted in mind-speech and could communicate by thought alone over great distances. But it took an enormous amount of mental energy to sustain a lengthy exchange and one so engaged often required that others equally gifted channeled their strength to boost his. Dael doubted that Rohyr required much assistance in this, however, and wondered what need the Ardan had for a messenger hawk. He was surprised when Rohyr urged the bird-of-prey onto his wrist then extended the creature to him.

"She's gentle and well-trained," Rohyr said as Dael gingerly accepted the asitra's hold on his arm. "And she knows the way to Rikara. You'll be able to communicate with Lassen as frequently as you wish. This is paltry recompense for the loss of a son's presence but it may ease your grief."

Dael looked at the hawk wonderingly. He hesitantly stroked the asitra. It slightly bated its feathers, then settled into his touch. Dael smiled and turned gleaming eyes on the king.

"We are indebted, *Dyhar*."

Rohyr snorted. "Hardly. It is I who is taking the greater treasure with me."

Lassen entered the courtyard with his father and brothers, looking about him with the air of one committing everything to memory. Keosqe approached Mithre and gave him a small bundle.

"His Majesty desires your son's comfort," he said. "This is better suited for our journey than the cape he's wearing."

Mithre unfolded the bundle to reveal a brown and black cloak. Of finest wool, it was light despite its thickness. Mithre softly thanked the *enyran* lord and slung the cloak over his arm, briefly pondering what travelling by translocation entailed that a warm mantle was advisable on a summer day.

Meanwhile, Lassen saw his things bestowed on board the baggage wain in which sundry items of varying shapes and sizes were ensconced. Most were gifts from Tal Ereq's neighbors to Rohyr, given in the hope of predisposing him to their petitions. But there were a few purchases by members of the delegation. Several beautifully crafted baskets from Mithre's shop shared space with vividly hued *sedyran* window and wall hangings and two capacious garden urns made from the deep russet clay found only in

this part of Ylandre.

When Lassen came to him, Dael wordlessly hugged him, burying his face in his son's fair locks. When would he hold his youngest again, breathe in his scent, or look into his eyes and hear his laughter?

Lassen reluctantly withdrew from his embrace. Turning to face Mithre, he started when his father reached for the ties at his throat, pulled off his cape and handed it to Yuilan. Mithre draped the cloak over Lassen's shoulders. Lassen glanced down at the rich garment in surprise as Mithre fastened it at the neck.

"'Tis from the Ardan," Mithre explained. "A fine gift, don't you agree?"

Lassen swallowed and nodded. "I'll do my best to make you proud of me," he said in a quavering voice.

"Oh, my child," Mithre whispered, pulling him into his arms.

At last, he let Lassen go and led him to Rohyr. The king looked the hushed family over.

"It's no easy matter to travel to Rikara by land," he said. "Nonetheless, you're welcome to come whenever you wish to see Lassen." He considered the youth thoughtfully. "And it can be arranged for him to visit you on occasion."

The Idanas' expressions brightened somewhat. Struggling to smile and hold back his tears at the same time, Lassen stepped away from his family. He looked at Rohyr expectantly.

Rohyr gestured to his steed. "You will ride with me."

Lassen blew his breath out then hauled himself onto the great beast's back. Rohyr swiftly mounted behind him.

The delegation's departure drew an even larger crowd than its well-attended arrival. Folk thronged the main street all the way from the town hall to the main gate, strewing the way with sprigs of snowy royal holly, emblem of the Ylandrin ruling family, and clusters of butter-hued bellflowers, the symbol of farewell.

Lassen blinked back his tears and managed to smile at friends he spotted along the way. But when the riders traversed the short distance from town gate to wide plain beyond, he looked back and espied his family ranged along the rampart, faces strained as they strove not to weep while he could still see them. A sob caught in his throat.

Rohyr reined in his mount, bringing the rest to a sudden halt, and turned the zentyr about until they faced the town. Recognizing the opportunity Rohyr had given him, Lassen gazed long at his parents and brothers, doing his best to smile brightly at them. At last, he raised his hand in farewell, then averted his face as tears slid down his cheeks. He did not look back again as the delegation continued on its way.

Up ahead, the air faintly shimmered and Lassen became aware of an intense stillness about him. Similar, he realized, to the sensation he'd experienced when Rohyr had regarded him so steadily that first day. The shimmer gave way to distinct light and movement—the former muted as if seen through a fog, the latter waxing until he descried the quickening undulations that portended a portal's blossoming.

He clutched at Rohyr's arm as the party neared the portal. In the next instant, they were enveloped in a silver shot grey mist. Lassen stifled a yelp when the mist caressed his cheeks like an icy breath despite his cloak's protective hood.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, they were past the haze and inside a shadowed tunnel. There was a whispery sound like wind rushing through the passageway.

But Lassen knew this was not possible for the air was so still and cold it was almost oppressive. Far ahead, he could see a pinpoint of diffused light and he wondered how long it would take to reach what appeared to be the end of the tunnel.

Through the corner of his eyes, he saw images and he turned his head to look at them. A jumble of color and light met his startled gaze and he realized that he was catching glimpses of the countryside as they passed it by at a dizzying speed. He whimpered in distress.

Rohyr pulled him back against his chest. "Close your eyes," he murmured. "If you must look, look straight ahead."

Lassen did as he was bid. He quickly came to appreciate the security of the Ardan's embrace. But at such close quarters, he also noticed Rohyr's scent once more. Coupled with being pressed against his warmth, he felt the strange stirrings that flared whenever he was in proximity to Rohyr. But for the first time, instead of apprehension alone, he also knew excitement. He wondered when he had ceased to fear the service he would render his king.

After what seemed like forever but was probably no more than several minutes, they slowed down. Lassen opened his eyes in time to see the muted light rush toward them. He braced himself. Suddenly, they were out of the corridor and in a vast meadow. Lassen blinked, disoriented by the abrupt change from close passageway to wide-open space.

"Where are we?" he wondered.

"Ilmaren," Rohyr replied.

Lassen remembered that Ilmaren was in the central region known as the breadbasket of Ylandre. Rikara was farther northwest.

"Must you break transit when there is a change of direction?" he asked.

"Nay. But my cousin of Ilmaren is also travelling to Rikara. During our last communication, he agreed to join us for this leg of our journey."

A horn sounded in the distance. Lassen turned his head and saw a large city a goodly distance away, all gold and amber in the sunlight. He thought quickly. Rohyr said that they were meeting his cousin, his choice of words indicating that the latter was Ilmaren's lord. That could only mean the city before them was the capital of the fief.

"Is that Althia?" he asked.

"Yes," Rohyr confirmed. "You know your geography."

"Tis my second favorite subject."

"The first being...?"

"History."

Rohyr smiled. "You are not only comely but intelligent as well."

Lassen lowered his head bashfully, hiding his face behind the folds of his hood.

"They come!"

He looked up at the call and saw half a dozen riders exiting the city, the lead rider astride a zentyr of magnificent proportions very similar to the beasts Rohyr and his kin rode. Guessing that this must be Rohyr's cousin, he wondered if all the Essendris bred their war steeds from the same pool of zentyra to achieve such uniformity of size and strength.

As the group neared, Lassen studied the Herun of Ilmaren with fascination. He was built as his cousins, tall and lean and sleekly muscled, and rode his steed with a warrior's grace and agility. But it was his striking countenance that piqued Lassen's curiosity.

Silky black hair shot through with strands of midnight blue framed features that may have been deemed delicate were it not for the fief-lord's steely, almond-shaped eyes. They bespoke forebears who hailed from the westernmost continent of Khitaira.

The Herun deferentially nodded his head to Rohyr then broke into a grin in response to Rohyr's smile of welcome. They tightly clasped hands, greeting each other affectionately. The fief-lord glanced at Lassen.

"Lassen Idana of Tal Ereq," Rohyr answered his unspoken question. "Lassen, my cousin Reijir Arthanna, Herun of Ilmaren."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lassen-tyar," Reijir said, his muted upper midlands accent sounding less foreign to Lassen's ears than Rohyr's distinct northern inflection.

"Your Grace," Lassen diffidently murmured as he bowed his head to the Herun.

Reijir spotted the earring in his left ear. His eyes glinted with approval.

"You have exquisite taste, Roh," he said. "I envy you. Are there more gems of such rare beauty to be found in Tal Ereq?"

Gilmael quipped, "If there were, think you Kes and I would have come back empty-handed?"

"Yes, since you both know certain parties would geld you were you to bring home more than linens to grace your beds," Reijir smartly retorted.

Gilmael sighed in mock resignation while Keosqe chuckled. Both reached out in turn to grip Reijir's outstretched hand and exchanged hearty greetings with him.

"And you, Uncle?" Reijir said when he turned to Yovan. "You are well, I hope? You and yours?"

Lassen observed the Essendris' easy affection with each other. Even stiff-necked Imcael unbent enough to smile and inquire after Reijir's well-being. Small wonder that, after all these millennia, they were still the ruling House of the land. They were capable of a loyalty that went beyond oaths of fealty. And it was plain that they nursed great love for their king.

He amended that assumption upon spotting the flicker of irritation in Imcael's face when Reijir briefly rode abreast with Rohyr to relate news of the region in the manner of a vassal reporting to his liege-lord. No, not all the Essendris equally loved the head of their House. It was apparent Imcael resented being beholden to a monarch a third of his age.

Lassen recalled that Rohyr's sire had wed late and fathered his only son after it was thought he would not provide an heir of his loins. His brother Imcael had then stood first in line to the throne. Lassen could only imagine the disappointment of an ambitious prince to have such power within his grasp only to watch it invested upon a nephew decades younger than his own firstborn.

* * * *

When they arrived on the vast plain that the locals understatedly called the Great Field, Lassen needed more than a few moments to collect himself. It was hard to believe that just that very morning they had been in Tal Ereq. Now here they were clear across a country that took a mounted traveller at least a month to traverse.

Farms, orchards and vineyards thickly dotted the landscape alongside bustling villages and tiny hamlets. Yonder was a wide highway that cut through the Great Field. Laden carts and wagons drawn by people and beast alike hauled sundry goods up and

down its length. There was a general air of prosperity that the more isolated communities would be hard pressed to match.

While the group made its way onto the highway, a guard raised the Ardan's standard. A strong breeze caught the banner and it unfurled, revealing a spray of royal holly within a circlet of white-silver against a deep blue field. With his standard raised, Rohyr lowered his hood. The others followed suit.

As the royal party continued along the highway, folk made way for them, stopping and making gestures of obeisance to Rohyr. Many furtively peeked at the youth who rode with the king in intimate fashion. The oblique scrutiny made Lassen wish that he could pull his hood up once more.

After several minutes, they crested a low hill.

"Welcome to Rikara, *Las-min*," Rohyr softly said.

Lassen stared at the panorama. "Veres almighty!" he softly exclaimed.

Rikara. The Royal House's millennia-long seat of power. Backdropped by majestic, snow-capped Mount Sarak some three leagues behind it, the city was grander and far more beauteous than Lassen had imagined.

It was a massive metropolis that had somehow avoided the sprawl of most large cities during its evolution from compact fortified market town to ever expanding preeminent center of trade, culture and political power. The silvery Azira neatly bisected the city and from this great river ran many streams and canals while broad streets sliced across in systematic fashion. The stark white stones of which the homes and buildings were built appeared almost immaculate in the sunshine and added to Rikara's pristine appearance.

To the east of the city center was a low hill and on this stood a walled multileveled cluster of buildings of stone, steel and glass. This was the fabled Citadel, fortress residence to countless generations of Essendris.

* * * *

There was little pageantry when Rohyr entered the capital for he did not favor pomp. But many of Rikara's citizens lined the streets nonetheless to welcome him home. Lassen became conscious once more when they stared at him and descried his earring. Even before his name was known, the news would quickly spread that Rohyr had acquired himself a leman.

Lassen strove to keep calm as they ascended the long road to the Citadel. Peering upward, he saw that numerous archers and spear-bearers manned the outer wall. Here and there, through apertures in the wall, he caught glimpses of the stout ropes and well-oiled levers of catapults.

He was quite dazed by the time they passed through the Citadel gate into the capacious bailey and dismounted. They then entered a large courtyard fronting the royal keep. It was an expansive space made welcoming by slender ivory birches, lush greenery and two graceful fountains flanking the entrance. A stone-paved path lined with faultlessly kept hedges and statuary led to a massive double paneled door flanked by soldiers liveried in the silver and lapiz lazuli of the Citadel Guard. Courtiers and retainers had gathered before it to greet their king.

As he walked behind Rohyr, Lassen let his eyes sweep up the pale walls of the Citadel, overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of it all. He surreptitiously studied the

waiting crowd and wrinkled his nose at the wealth and influence trumpeted by some in the richness of their clothing and accoutrements. A few were more expensively attired than the king. Struggling to banish a wave of homesickness, Lassen followed Rohyr into the Citadel.

Hardly had they swept past the doors when retainers hurried to take their cloaks. Rohyr and his cousins and uncles briskly peeled off their riding gloves while they walked, the servants keeping apace to relieve them of the items.

Just beyond the entrance was a brightly lit octagonal hall with a domed ceiling. A circular span of stained glass comprised the centermost portion of the ceiling and through it sunlight streamed in varicolored luminosity. Lassen curiously studied the shimmering pattern cast on the middle of the white stone floor. It was a stylized map of Ylandre.

To the rear he saw a curving flight of stairs flanked by bronze and marble balustrades. As he ascended the stairs, Lassen realized that the basic design of the Citadel was much like a traditional Ylandrin house. He recalled that the complex had been built first and foremost as a home for its residents despite its vastness and political significance.

Upon reaching the upper floor, they proceeded down a lengthy gallery with a soaring ceiling hung with many elaborately wrought lamps. To the left was a mural-covered wall chronicling the great exodus of their ancient forebears from their dying world and their taming and colonization of Aisen, including the events of the Inception. Lassen turned his gaze aside, scandalized by a graphically detailed depiction of the sanctioned seduction of an aboriginal male by the alien colonist upon whom he would beget the next generation.

The tapestry-hung wall to his right gave way to a series of mullioned floor-to-ceiling glass paned windows. They overlooked the north district of Rikara with its elegant homes, manicured lawns and parks, sparkling streams and the least congested portion of the Azira. The quays were well-kept in comparison to the crowded docks in the less affluent south district.

Enthralled by the spectacular view, Lassen almost did not realize their passage through another doorway. This one opened to an immense, elegantly appointed chamber, a little longer than it was wide. Lassen caught his breath when he saw the high-backed chair at the far end of the chamber perched on a low dais. Artfully inlaid with gold and silver, the chair was wrought of heavy nahra, a rare wood so dark in color it was almost black. On its cushioned seat rested an ivory staff tipped with a white-silver falcon with eyes of bluish adamant. Thus did Lassen get his first glimpse of the ancient throne of the Ylandrin monarchs and the priceless sceptre of Rikara.

Rohyr and his relations were immediately engaged in talk about court matters. Lassen alone of the party was idle. Feeling quite lost and self-conscious, he furtively looked about the great chamber. He started visibly when Rohyr gripped his shoulder and drew him near, sliding his hand down to Lassen's waist in a proprietary manner.

Lassen managed to still his trembling as Rohyr introduced him. Though obviously shocked, the courtiers acknowledged him, most dipping their heads in respect. Some sought proof of his installation as the king's paramour. A few betrayed consternation and disappointment upon seeing his leman's earring.

"I entrust Idana-*dyhar* to your care," Rohyr said to a small group of servants.

Hearing the high honorific, Lassen glanced at Rohyr with a slight frown. Since when did a mere commoner of no esteemed profession merit such deference? Granted he was

gently bred and had been taught to comport himself properly. But he was not an important member of the court and it felt inappropriate to be treated as if he were.

At a gesture from Rohyr, an elderly Deir stepped forward. His warm smile soothed Lassen's strained nerves.

"This is Josel," Rohyr fondly said. "He has been in my family's service since his youth and had a hand in raising me from my infancy onwards." He chuckled. "And a firm hand he needed with me, I confess."

"You were more gamesome than most, Rohyr-*dyhar*," Josel agreed, his eyes twinkling.

Lassen smiled at the familiarity with which the old servant addressed the Ardan and the endearing scapegrace grin Rohyr flashed his erstwhile caregiver.

"Josel will take good care of you," Rohyr told him. "You need only inform him of anything you need." He looked at the waiting courtiers and sighed. "Go with him. Mayhap I shall find time to join you tonight."

Lassen obeyed and followed Josel out of the chamber. Glancing back, he saw that Rohyr was once more embroiled in court matters. An unexpected surge of indignation on the Ardan's behalf overcame him.

These people did not seem to care that their king was newly arrived from a long sojourn abroad and might wish to rest awhile before taking up the reins of active governance once more. Sympathy for Rohyr followed on the heels of his ire.

Rohyr glanced up and met his gaze. A small smile curved his mouth. Lassen felt the now familiar flutter in his belly. Managing a nervous smile in reply, he turned and hurried after Josel.

Chapter Five

Novice

“There must be a mistake.”

Door after door bore the insignia of a member of the royal family. The heavy door at the far end of the corridor displayed the unmistakable crest of the Ardan of Ylandre.

“There is no mistake, *Dyhar*,” Josel replied.

“But this is the royal residential wing, isn’t it?” Lassen protested. “I’m not a member of the royal family. I don’t belong here.”

“On the contrary, it’s customary for the Ardan’s leman to abide here,” the old retainer assured him.

Lassen subsided into stunned silence.

Along the way, Josel pointed out the one other apartment currently kept ready for occupancy. But Rohyr’s uncle preferred to stay at his townhouse in the city proper and seldom stayed over at the Citadel. Lassen was relieved that he would not have to constantly encounter the dour, openly disdainful Herun.

It must be lonely to live here, he mused. With both his parents gone and his kinsfolk rarely in residence, Rohyr lived by himself in luxurious isolation. Well, not any longer, Lassen thought when he walked into the elegantly appointed apartment that would be his home. It was composed of three adjoining chambers—a spacious sitting room, a sleeping chamber with a balcony overlooking the gardens and a private bathing room with its own commode. This last had Lassen shaking his head.

Latrines were generally located outside residences. To have a commode deep within a building and in an upper story bespoke elaborate and costly plumbing the likes of which was not within the reach of simpler folk. To the country bred youth, it was a nigh unbelievable extravagance.

“Only in this wing was the plumbing designed to accommodate indoor privies. For the security and convenience of the royal family and their guests,” Josel clarified. “And it also eases the work of the household staff. It’s not easy to carry chamber pots to the lower levels in order to empty them. It was a rather messy affair in the days before these modern conveniences or so the stories go.”

Lassen examined the luxurious fixtures. Instead of a washstand, there was a built-in sink. There was also a bathing tub but it was much larger than any he had seen and was partially embedded in the floor for a half sunken appearance. Both were serviced by water taps. Lassen almost whistled in appreciation at the prospect of no longer having to draw water from an outdoor well in order to bathe.

“What is this?” he wondered as he inspected a tiled space partitioned off from the chamber by a divider wrought of thick glass blocks. Slightly above his head was a curved metal spout and jutting out from the inner wall was a shallow stone shelf upon which reposed a selection of soaps.

Josel drew him out of the space and turned on one of the taps below the spout. Water gushed out in a heavy spray.

“It’s a bathing chute,” Josel said. “Would you like to try it?”

Lassen eagerly nodded. The servant smiled and indicated the other tap. "This provides hot water."

"Hot water?" Lassen repeated incredulously. "How is it done?"

"Water is heated at intervals and stored in special tanks that keep it hot for long periods of time. The tanks release their contents whenever the hot water taps are opened."

"Do all the houses in the city have running water?"

Josel shook his head. "Unfortunately, not all can afford to install the necessary plumbing into their homes. However, the city provides running water for its citizens. In lieu of community wells, there are public spigots in every district. Some folk do draw directly from the river or depend on deep wells but that isn't advisable since the water hasn't been cleansed for consumption."

"Are you saying tap water is potable?" Used to boiling water to render it safe for drinking, Lassen was impressed.

"So long as it's drawn from the city government's waterworks, yes, it is potable. Of course, such an extensive system is possible only if there is a major waterway nearby."

Sensing the youth's reluctance to undress in his presence, Josel withdrew. As soon as he left, Lassen shed his clothes and stepped into the bathing chute enclosure. A few seconds later, he was squealing and giggling as water cascaded down on him. Lassen also discovered he could regulate the temperature of the water for a nice warm shower.

He was not too pleased with the assortment of soaps, however. Their aromas were too sophisticated for his taste. He stepped out of the cubicle and searched the small pack of personal effects he had carried with him from Tal Ereq. To his relief, he found a bar of his favorite herbal soap. When he lathered himself with it, the familiar scent made him feel less uprooted.

Coming out of the bathing room, he saw that his belongings had been neatly put away. Josel had also arranged a selection of clothing on the wide bed. Lassen blew his breath out in some vexation.

About to retrieve a simple dun-hued tunic and plain buff breeches from the long antique wardrobe, he stopped and reconsidered. Josel would show him something of the keep even if he requested that a more extensive tour be put off until the following day. He would be seen by a number of folk and they would appraise his appearance. He had to make a good impression to avoid becoming a bad reflection of Rohyr's taste in lovers.

He looked at the array of garments on the bed once more and finally selected a blue tunic embroidered at the collar and cuffs and dark grey breeches to go with it. The tunic would mark him as a Half Blood due to its briefer length and looser cut but it suited his fair coloring and slender frame.

Almost as soon as he finished dressing, Josel reentered the bedchamber with another servant who fetched his used clothing. The old retainer noticed his uneasiness and gently said, "I did not look in until I deemed you decently attired. I love Rohyr like my own son and it's not my intention to discomfort his leman."

"Oh, I don't mind being tended to on occasion," Lassen explained. "But I am unused to being waited on and even less showing myself to others. 'Twill be hard enough doing so for Rohyr."

Josel smiled sympathetically. "He won't force you to do anything before he has properly prepared you for it. But once he takes you to bed, I doubt you'll have thought for aught else but his pleasuring. I assure you, he's a most accomplished lover."

Lassen's eyes widened at his frankness. *Saints!* Were blunt references to private matters of no consequence around here?

"Forgive me, *Dyhar*," Josel apologized. "I forget that customs are not the same everywhere. You don't speak openly of such things in your town?"

Lassen shook his head. "'Tis bandied about only amongst intimates, though my *adda* did teach me something of what Rohyr may expect of me."

Josel pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It was prudent of your father to instruct you, *Dyhar*. But Rohyr's expectations of his lovers are not what many believe of him." Seeing Lassen's confusion, he said, "Ah, I'm only muddling matters further. Suffice to say that Rohyr doesn't believe in excluding his partners from the taking of pleasure. Now, how do you wish to fix your hair?"

With the sudden change in topic, Lassen's embarrassment subsided and he turned his attention to the styling of his flaxen locks. A blush warmed his cheeks at the memory of fingers rubbing strands of his hair between them and Rohyr softly requesting that he leave his tresses long.

He sat at the dresser and allowed Josel to plait his hair for him. Perhaps being waited on was not all bad, he thought, as the servant deftly twisted his locks into place. At the very least, he could be certain the back of his head was perfectly coiffed with no wayward strands sticking out every which way.

Josel led him afterward into the sitting room where he discovered a light midday meal laid out on the small dining table. Thankfully, it was simple fare—cool mead, crusty bread, a hearty stew and fresh fruit. The fruit was sweet and flavorful but rather odd-looking—thick and finger-shaped with a bright yellow peel and soft pulpy flesh.

"We call it sunfruit but the southerners' name for it is *plantan*," Josel informed him. At Lassen's puzzled frown, he explained, "We import it from South Vihandra."

Mention of the neighboring continent reminded Lassen that, while the North Continent was now commonly referred to as such by its inhabitants, its official name and indeed the name found on any map of Aisen was North Vihandra.

"Must we explore the keep today?" he asked Josel after the meal.

"Would you like to walk in the gardens instead?" Josel offered.

Lassen readily assented. He felt confined, accustomed as he was to houses where reaching the front and back doors did not entail a short hike from one's quarters. As they walked, Josel pointed out the many chambers, hallways and galleries and their functions. At all times, Lassen was aware of folk observing him. He reckoned they were probably summing up his potential uses to them and debating whether he would be a valuable conduit to Rohyr and worth their time and attention.

He hoped he would not become entangled in the intrigues of court life though he knew this was unrealistic. Dael had warned him that if his intimacy with Rohyr appeared sufficient for Lassen to make requests of the king, there would be attempts to bribe or befriend him. But the thought of asking anything in tacit exchange for sexual favors sickened Lassen and he doubted he would ever be able to bring himself to undertake such dealings.

Josel took him to a less frequented part of the gardens, a semi-enclosed area reserved for the royal family's use. Lassen walked about, taking in his fill of fresh air and curiously inspecting the profusion of exotic blooms and greens that shared space with more familiar flora and foliage. His pleasure however was tempered by the feeling that

the place was deserted. Lassen wondered if he was the first visitor to the enclosure in a long while. It impressed on him once more that none of Rohyr's relations resided with him.

Thinking about what must be a lonely existence for the Ardan, he said, "Does he see his cousins often? They seem extraordinarily close to him. I've seldom seen such devotion before, even amongst the older families of Tal Ereq."

Josel smiled. "Rohyr grew up in their company, or at least those who spent much of their early youth in Rikara. And they are indeed devoted to him. But it's as much due to his loyalty to them as it is a function of their kinship. They know Rohyr would strain the limits of the constraints placed upon him out of love for them. And so they return it in full measure. They are the brothers he does not have."

"Then he's not so alone after all," Lassen said with relief. "Thank Veres for that."

When Josel's smile warmed even further, Lassen realized his concern for Rohyr had earned him the old Deir's approbation and likely the beginnings of his loyalty as well.

* * * *

Come evening, Josel informed Lassen that Rohyr would join him for dinner in his suite. As Lassen donned the loose shirt and trousers and light slippers the old Deir had prepared, he wondered if he would be expected to perform his duties this very night. By the time Rohyr appeared, he was as tense as a drawn bowstring.

He felt the rush of warmth into his cheeks at first sight of the king. He seemed more handsome than ever, his fine form pointed up by the simple style and soft fabric of his clothing. Lassen struggled to compose himself. It would not do to act like a provincial bumpkin whenever he was in Rohyr's presence. But Rohyr only smilingly greeted him and led him to the dining table.

The meal both entranced and intimidated him. The dishes were more sophisticated than anything he'd dined on from the frond salad with caramelized haronuts and edible flower petals and the tiny freshwater fingerlings plunged live into boiling oil and served whole and crisp to the piquantly sauced breast of rainbow-plumaged tarmican. And delighted though he was with the freshly churned fruit ice at the end of the meal, the presence of the chilled sweet in the middle of summer emphasized the rarified social sphere he was now part of. Who else could afford to have ice transported from Mount Sarak's perpetually half-frozen lakes and streams?

Throughout, they were plied with the appropriate beverage to go with each course, even unto the sparkling wine at the end of the meal that further intensified the flavor of the fruit ice. The contrast to the plainer and comfortingly familiar midday repast was jarring. Lassen wondered if this was what the king dined on most days.

Afterwards, Rohyr ushered him to the long couch facing the hearth where Josel served them Rohyr's favorite siriyana wine. As soon as the dishes were cleared, they were left alone. Lassen tensed.

But Rohyr sat back and idly regarded the rosy depths of his wine. Lassen began to relax as well. Until Rohyr pulled him close to nuzzle his hair. He caught his breath. Hearing Rohyr sigh, he glanced sideways at him.

"I like your soap," Rohyr said. "It has a sweet refreshing smell, yet it doesn't mask your scent."

Lassen made a mental note to write to his parents and ask them to send him a goodly

supply of Velarusian herbal soap.

“Did Josel show you around?” Rohyr asked.

“A little,” Lassen replied. “‘Tis a bit too much to absorb everything in one afternoon.”

“Indeed,” Rohyr agreed. “Forgive me for not seeing to it myself. Unfortunately, work always accumulates in my absence no matter how diligent my people are.”

“But Your Majesty,” Lassen protested. “I don’t expect you to tend to me when there are more important matters at hand.”

“Rohyr,” the king reminded him.

Faintly blushing, Lassen complied. For the next few minutes, they did not speak again but savored the peace and quiet with only the chirping of crickets coming through the balcony to break the silence.

At length, Rohyr stirred and glanced at Lassen. “What do you wish to know, *Lassen*?” he murmured. When Lassen looked at him in surprise, he added, “I can sense your curiosity. Don’t be afraid to ask any question of me. I won’t bite, I promise.”

Hearing the good humor in Rohyr’s voice, Lassen huffed a nervous giggle. “I was just thinking that the Citadel seems easy to invade because of all the glass and open galleries,” he admitted. “But I suppose that is deceptive.”

Rohyr nodded. “It is indeed. This is a fortress despite all the modifications that have made it appears less of one. Rest assured the Citadel is extremely well fortified. Its frame is made of stone and steel and the glass used in the large windows is thick and not easily shattered. It will be difficult for any invader to breach our defenses. Not that Rikara itself will be subject to invasion anytime soon. The last time an enemy penetrated Ylandre so deeply that they laid waste to liege property was during the so-called Ferrenda Interregnum.”

Lassen had brightened when Rohyr began his discourse. Diffidence forgotten, he eagerly faced the king. “I know something of the period but not all the details. It seems such a troubling part of our history that my teachers were reluctant to dwell on it.”

“What do you know of that time?”

Lassen recalled what he had been taught about the ambitious rulers of the now defunct nation of Varadan. “Horem Ferrenda took advantage of a rift in the royal family when Rovar, eldest son of Wylan Essendri, sought to depose his ailing sire in the belief that ‘twas time he stepped aside,” he duly recited. “His attempted usurpation and subsequent rebellion nearly tore the country apart and divided the Ylandrin nobility and military. This allowed the Ferrendas to sweep across the northwestern border into our country.”

“That is correct,” Rohyr said. “And even then they failed to take Rikara. So they fell back on Ziana instead and declared it the new capital of the occupied territories. They ruled the northwest for nigh on seven years. But Wylan named his second son Diorn heir and commander of the loyalist forces. Four years into the occupation, Diorn succeeded in quelling Rovar’s revolt. He was far more ruthless than his sire and dealt with the rebels accordingly, even executing his own brother and the bluebloods who had supported him.”

“And used the vacated titles and accompanying lands to reward the nobles who fought under his banner,” Lassen interjected, obviously absorbed in the account.

“The following year when Wylan died and Diorn ascended to the throne,” Rohyr affirmed approvingly. “He also preempted future attempts at insurrection from within the

ranks of the aristocracy by demanding oaths of fealty and liege homage from all his nobles. Oaths that stand to this day. A Herun who so much as speaks sympathetically of any instance of rebellion against the Crown can be charged with sedition.”

“It must have been quite easy to extract those oaths from the newly made fief-lords and barons given the wealth and privileges he had bestowed on them,” Lassen remarked, fascinated by the historical maneuverings that had shaped Ylandre’s present political structure. “And it put pressure on the rest to follow suit, didn’t it, lest they be suspected of harboring disloyal leanings.”

Rohyr regarded him with such open appreciation, Lassen’s bashfulness returned. He nervously gestured to the Ardan to continue. Smiling faintly, Rohyr obliged.

“So with the nobility now solidly behind him, Diorn rallied the Royal Army and concentrated on driving the Varadani out of Ylandre. And this is where the tale turns black. Do you recall the reversion of the Varadani to the worship of the ancient pagan god Xeras?” When Lassen nodded, Rohyr said, “I had thought no other transgression equal to that deed, that they dared mass apostasy in favor of a barbaric deity long repudiated by our forebears. The Ferrendas proved me wrong.”

Barely concealed revulsion now limning his speech, the Ardan went on. “Once Diorn united the Ylandrin forces, he was able to turn the tide and, by the last year of the occupation, had routed the greater part of the Varadani army and regained so much territory that Horem became deathly afraid of defeat and retribution. Hearing that Diorn was preparing to march on Ziana, Horem ordered that sacrifice be offered to Xeras. His victims were the priests and servants of the Temple of Ziana. They were ritually defiled on the Horn of Xeras, then left to bleed to death before that unholy altar.”

Lassen shivered at the harsh timber that shaded Rohyr’s voice. The Ardan’s eyes gleamed darkly, as if he were seeing something that filled him with sorrow and rage.

“When his entreaties predictably went unanswered, Horem had the city burned then fled the approaching Ylandrin forces. He was captured just before he gained the border and dragged back with his sons to face punishment. When Diorn saw what had been done to Ziana, he ordered that Horem and his family be impaled in the main square of the city. On the same horn with which the priests and temple servants were slain. Diorn then invaded Varadan, subjugated it and annexed it to Ylandre.”

This part of history Lassen knew by heart. Varadan ceased to be within a mere decade of its conquest. A third of the old kingdom became the fief of Vireshe and from thereon was held by the Ylandrin crown prince until he ascended to the throne. The remaining two-thirds made up the Autonomous Province of Tenerith. Every now and then, self-styled Varadani separatists rose up in the province, invariably claiming to have uncovered descendants of one of Horem’s sons and demanding that Tenerith and Vireshe reunite and regain their ancient sovereignty.

Unexpectedly, Rohyr turned the tale back to when the Ylandrin army first came upon the smoking ruins of Ziana. By some miracle, the temple remained intact though badly scorched in places. Within were found the corpses of the butchered priests and servants.

Rohyr’s voice dropped almost to a whisper. “But in a small room inside were also discovered the bodies of the temple acolytes, most just past their majority. They had taken poison rather than be violated and offered up to a heathen god. The only poison available was the embalming potion used on the dead.”

Lassen shuddered. Embalming kept the dead whole and sound for the duration of the

customary ten-day mourning vigil.

Rohyr's eyes glistened as he finished the tale. "The agony they had known before they died... The way they had curled up together, holding on to each other for comfort in their last moments. And their faces—all contorted and ashen. Deity's blood, I can't bear even the thought of it."

Lassen frowned in confusion. From the anguish in Rohyr's voice, one might think he had actually witnessed the horror of that day.

Rohyr noticed his expression. "There were many eyewitness accounts of that tragedy and they were chronicled in great detail," he explained. "I perforce read them all and was much troubled after. It made for grim reading and I can never truly forget. Ah, let us speak of less disturbing matters."

They fell silent for a brief spell. At length, Lassen hesitantly asked, "May I finish my schooling? I'd like to attend university. 'Tis my parents' wish as well."

The king nodded. "I've already instructed Josel to make arrangements for you to enroll at the Rikara Academy. Mithre told me that you have two years of secondary school to go." When Lassen nodded eagerly, Rohyr continued with an indulgent smile. "You may also go to the State University. My only condition is that you always make your schedule and whereabouts known to Josel and me. And don't ever take your earring off. It will be your insurance against ill-treatment."

"Ill-treatment?"

Rohyr stroked the curve of Lassen's ear, then ran a fingertip over the earring. "You are newly come to the capital and don't hail from any of the cities. It's unfortunate but bigotry and elitism are not uncommon amongst True Bloods and there are some who go so far as to mistreat those they deem beneath them. University students of high birth coined the terms *enyra* and *sedyra*, did you know that? But as long as you are known to be mine, you won't be subjected to that unpleasantness."

Lassen promptly colored at the reminder of his role.

Rohyr softly chuckled. He took their wine glasses and set them on the side table. "Eager as I am to teach you your duties, I know enough to give you time to accustom yourself to your new home. But it's not too soon to learn a few lessons in the art of pleasing."

Before Lassen realized what he was about, Rohyr leaned forward and caught him in a gentle kiss. When Lassen gasped, Rohyr took advantage of the parting of his lips and slipped his tongue between them. Lassen went still, stunned by such intimacy. But when Rohyr slanted their mouths together, he unthinkingly yielded to the deeper caress. He was swiftly locked in a kiss so molten he might have swooned and fallen had he not been ensconced in Rohyr's arms.

His father had told him that he would share kisses with Rohyr but this tender pillaging went beyond anything he had imagined. He moaned as Rohyr's tongue swept the recesses of his mouth, tasting him and tempting him into a like response. Lassen hesitantly thrust his tongue against Rohyr's, thrilled at tasting him in turn.

He heard Rohyr groan. An instant later, he was pinned against the couch, lost in a scorching kiss that banished all sentient thought from his mind. The only things that mattered were Rohyr's mouth on his and the Ardan's body beneath his clutching hands, all firm flesh and hard muscle. His arms crept around Rohyr in mindless need.

Rohyr released his lips to explore his ears, jaw and throat. Inundated with pleasure,

Lassen intuitively molded himself against the king. A hand alighted on his chest. Through the soft fabric, Rohyr thumbed a nipple to a hard nub.

Someone moaned. Lassen realized that it was he who had uttered the wanton sound. He knew so little and that innocence conspired to render him utterly tractable to Rohyr's sensual onslaught. Panic and pleasure collided and he mewled in distress.

Rohyr stopped and drew away. To Lassen's confusion, the cessation of sensation left a void inside him. He opened his eyes and stared at Rohyr, relief warring with frustration.

"I shouldn't have pressed you," Rohyr whispered.

"Nay, I-I am yours to do with as you wish," Lassen stammered, anxious not to offend but also affected by their aborted intimacy. "Please let me serve you."

"Hush, sweet one," Rohyr murmured. He dropped a kiss on Lassen's forehead. "That can wait. For now, get you some rest. It's been a long day and you must be weary."

Lassen blinked. Without warning, lassitude overtook him and he clapped a hand over his mouth to cover a yawn. He gazed at Rohyr a little owlshly.

Sleep well, Las-min.

The silent command gently brushed his mind and Lassen could do naught but obey it. He closed his eyes and soon fell into dreamless slumber.

Rohyr carried him into the bedchamber. Laying Lassen down, he pulled off his slippers and drew the bedcovers over him. He thoughtfully regarded the youth's comely face, his eyes gleaming at the prospect of eliciting Lassen's full passion, a tantalizing sample of which he had tasted this eve.

Yes, it would be better to introduce his leman to bodily pleasure in stages. Better and much more enjoyable for both of them.

Chapter Six

Initiation

Learning his way around the Citadel unnoticed was nigh impossible, Lassen discovered in the days that followed. Meals proved a gauntlet as he was forced to greet and make small talk with just about every courtier he encountered from the moment he set foot in the main corridor until he finally took his seat at Rohyr's table in the great dining hall. Once settled at the royal table, he came under scrutiny that lasted the duration of the meal. He wondered when he would be able to walk about without feeling like a circus beast on display.

He preferred to have his meals in his quarters but he knew that would only give rise to talk. And it would not be mere talk about a perceived eccentricity. The foregone conclusion would place Rohyr's choice of concubine in a bad light. Lassen was not sure why but he felt protective of Rohyr and did not want his reputation besmirched even the slightest by misperceptions.

The kindest folk were the palace retainers. Like Josel, most hailed from families whose service spanned generations. They were fiercely loyal to Rohyr and predisposed to being warm and obliging with whomever he deemed an intimate.

The soldiers and guards were also generally amicable but many were given to ribaldry, especially when in the presence of a comely face or a nicely shaped rump. Lassen knew they meant no harm when he overheard them placing wagers as to which of his charms Rohyr had sampled thus far. Nevertheless, his face burned all the way to his ears and he requested that he and Josel descend from the battlements before he heard another bawdy remark about himself.

The courtiers on the other hand varied widely and there was no judging one by the actions of another. For that matter, there was no telling if a blueblood's demeanor one day would still stand by the next. So much rested on their respective ambitions and the extent of their influence on Rohyr or the scant handful of nobles who formed his innermost circle.

Lassen renewed his acquaintance with some of them when they came to the Citadel. Keosqe kindly asked after his well-being when they bumped into each other in one of the myriad corridors of the keep. So did Rohyr's Uncle Yovan after he emerged from a meeting with his fellow advisors. And Gilmael sought him out to introduce his twin who, as chief royal archivist, visited the Citadel most days and could be easily reached if Lassen needed help or counsel. It had been difficult not to stare overmuch when confronted with Zykriel's startling likeness to Gilmael. Had Zykriel's hair not been styled somewhat differently than his brother's, Lassen doubted anyone would be able to tell them apart. Thankfully, he had not had the misfortune of recrossing paths with haughty Imcael.

"I hope you're enjoying yourself."

Lassen shyly smiled as Rohyr came to his side and looked out at the vista from the open gallery in the west wing of the keep. It was late afternoon and this was the first Lassen had seen of him all day.

Rohyr slipped a hand around Lassen's waist and drew him close. "Exploring my home isn't too terrible an adventure, is it?"

"'Tis not terrible at all," Lassen assured him. "And I'm looking forward to exploring Rikara as well."

"But why are you alone? Where is Josel?"

"Oh, he was seeing me back to my rooms, but he was called away to settle some quarrel or other. A dispute between two squires, I gathered."

The king snorted. "Poor Josel. It is he they always send for when the young ones fight. But then, seeing how he tamed me, I suppose it's inevitable."

Lassen grinned. "Were you that wild?"

"Much to my parents' despair," Rohyr admitted. "Yet I fear much of it was their doing for they indulged me to a fault."

"Because you were their only child," Lassen guessed.

Rohyr looked keenly at him. "Yes, they didn't always know when to discipline me. Josel braved their displeasure to tell them the truth and show them by his example how to deal with me. Thank Veres they listened to him and I am as you see me now—a most estimable and well-mannered Deir."

Lassen burst into chuckles.

"What? You disagree?"

Lassen's laughter mellowed to a gentle smile. "Not in the least. You are more than well-mannered. You're kind and gallant and 'tis not difficult at all to like you."

He started when Rohyr shifted him about to face him and held him so that their bodies molded together. Lassen gulped as their groins pressed close.

"Have you indeed learned to like me?" Rohyr murmured, looking at him from beneath half-lidded eyes.

Lassen drew a shaky breath and nodded. His cheeks turned rosy when Rohyr cupped his face to kiss him. But not so much from being kissed as from doing it in a public place. He was no longer a stranger to the act after all.

Each evening, before Rohyr retired to his own chambers, he spent an hour or so with Lassen in his. Ardent kisses filled a goodly portion of that time as well as the caress of hands and fingers that sent the strangest and most enjoyable of feelings racing through Lassen's body. The youth knew that he was already being taught his duty for all the leisureliness of Rohyr's pace.

He felt something stir down yonder. His breath caught when he realized that it was not only Rohyr who showed evidence of physical arousal. His own length rapidly firmed as it rubbed through his breeches against Rohyr's shaft. It was not that he had not responded thusly prior to this. But never had he felt so hard, so hot, so ... needful.

He moaned in protest when Rohyr broke their kiss. He stared at the king, pleading for something he could not quite define.

"Come," Rohyr said, ushering Lassen to the youth's quarters.

Hardly had they entered the apartment when Rohyr backed Lassen against the door and tugged his shirt collar open. Lassen whimpered when Rohyr lowered his head and kissed the length of his throat down to the hollow at its base. Lost in the welter of sensation, Lassen did not register the hand that slipped beneath his clothing until a nipple fell prey to Rohyr's venturing fingers. He stiffened in shock.

Lassen shut his eyes tightly, wondering when the maddening stimulation would stop.

A moment later, his shock increased when a gust of cool air caressed his heated skin. Lassen opened his eyes and regretted it as soon as he did.

The Ardan had undone his tunic and shirt to his waist and now gazed at the pebbles of flesh he had exposed. Idly rubbing his thumb over one, he studied the two visible physical traits that distinguished breeders from all other Deira—their plumper nipples and slightly wider and paler areolae, a difference noticeable as early as birth.

Rohyr lifted his eyes to meet Lassen's. A slow smile spread along his mouth.

Lassen was unable to tear his eyes away as Rohyr bent down. Several tongue flicks against the rosy bud left the youth gasping erratically. But when Rohyr fastened his lips around the firm flesh and drew upon it, Lassen could not stifle a shuddery cry.

Between licking and sucking the tiny peak, Rohyr swiftly reduced Lassen to shaking, moaning helplessness. He had never imagined that certain parts of his body could be so sensitive.

"*Dyhar*, please, I... Ah, what are you doing to me?" he almost wailed.

His answer was a hard, plundering kiss that left him clutching desperately at Rohyr. Keeping their mouths engaged, Rohyr lifted him off the floor and carried him to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him to seal them within the privacy of the sleeping chamber.

Lassen could not look at Rohyr as the Ardan laid him down on the bed. This is it, he fearfully thought. He would be shorn of his virtue and fulfill his designated role.

"Don't be afraid, Lassen. I won't despoil you."

The youth opened his eyes at that murmured assurance. Rohyr was gazing at him with equal parts sympathy and mirth.

"At least, not wholly. Not yet," he added with a positively wicked smirk.

Lassen groaned. "Oh, Veres," he whispered. "You are cruel to tease me so."

Soft laughter greeted his words followed by the press of Rohyr's lips on his. Lassen tensed, then told himself to relax. Rohyr had promised that he would not take him just yet. But even if he broke his promise, it was fruitless to panic over it. He belonged to Rohyr and the Ardan would have him eventually whether it was this day, tomorrow or a fortnight hence. Best to resign himself to his defloration and trust that Rohyr would take good care of him.

He shivered as his belt was removed and his clothing was completely spread open. Rohyr ran his hands over his sides and chest, teasing his nipples until they ached deliciously. All the while Rohyr did not part their lips but embarked on a more thorough exploration than ever before. By the time he lifted his mouth from Lassen's, the youth could no longer think clearly, much less do more than instinctively return Rohyr's embrace.

The undoing of the buttons of his breeches alerted him to the imminent exposure of more of his body. He stared beseechingly at Rohyr while suppressing a surge of his innate modesty. His breeches came open, followed by the unlacing of his drawers. Rohyr's fingers slid under the loosened garment.

Lassen half reared when Rohyr curled his hand around his shaft and gently stroked it. Choked whimpers escaped him followed by gasped groans. The fondling was briefly halted when Rohyr pulled his breeches and drawers down around his thighs to bare his groin.

Freed from its confines, Lassen's member half rose, stiff and faintly flushed, the

capped head glistening with the milky fluid of emergent semen. It was still a pale rose in hue as was natural for the shaft of a Deir not yet of age. As he further matured, it would turn a darker shade as would the seed pouch underneath.

Lassen shivered when Rohyr ran his fingers through the sparse golden curls on his groin then gently fondled his seed pouch before returning to lightly stroke his length.

"You fit my hand so well, *Las-min*. Shall we see if the same can be said of my mouth?"

Lassen swallowed. "You can't mean to..." he started to say. He bit back his protest. "If-if that will please you," he whispered instead.

Rohyr glanced down at the flesh he held and smiled. "I'm certain it will." He bent and licked the rim of Lassen's ear, setting the youth a-shiver. "And you had best pay attention for I may require the same service of you one day," he huskily added, ending with a chuckle when the youth tightly shut his eyes.

He moved between Lassen's legs, dropping kisses on his torso as he steadily moved lower. Lassen's body bore signs of nicely developing musculature; he would be utterly ravishing in form one day. The thought of that form lying beneath him, legs spread for his pleasure, further whetted Rohyr's anticipation.

Reaching Lassen's groin, he nuzzled the springy curls around the base of the youth's shaft, grinning at the nervous inhalation of breath that elicited. He eyed the swelling flesh and the tender sac beneath. It was tempting to slip his fingers under and beyond that soft pouch but Rohyr knew that if he touched Lassen thusly, he would not be able to stop himself from taking him then and there. The youth trusted him. Rohyr did not care to break faith with him out of a mere lack of patience.

He turned his attention to Lassen's shaft instead. He licked off the slippery fluid that had gathered on its rounded tip before running his tongue up and down the rosy column. Lassen's muffled hiss spurred him on and he took the hardened flesh into his mouth. A low moan greeted this initial sensual salvo and he applied himself to pleasuring Lassen within an inch of his life.

Sucked repeatedly nigh to the base of his shaft, Lassen did not know whether he wanted to push farther into Rohyr's mouth or flee altogether. The sensations were exquisite, almost excruciatingly so, and, while one part of him revelled in them, the other was overwhelmed almost beyond bearing.

Not that Rohyr would have let him flee. When he half twisted in an involuntary bid to escape, Rohyr held him down and drew on him even more hardily. Lassen pressed a fist against his mouth in a desperate attempt to hold back his cries

It did not take long for him to climax. He had no experience of one and had not the slightest idea how to delay its onset. After spending himself endlessly or so he felt, he gazed at Rohyr in wordless amazement. His eyes widened when Rohyr licked his lips.

"That was quite a mouthful you bestowed on me," he teased. "And it was sweeter than any I've ever tasted."

"I can't-can't believe you-did that!" Lassen blurted out.

Rohyr grinned. "Expect it whenever the chance presents itself. It's a measure of how much I enjoyed this taste of you."

As he spoke, he shifted position slightly and his groin brushed against Lassen's leg. Lassen lowered his gaze to the impressive bulge therein. He looked up uncertainly and found Rohyr grinning at him.

“*Dyhar?*”

Rohyr raised his hand and ran his thumb along the youth’s lower lip. “Kiss me, *Lassen*,” he unexpectedly said.

Lassen gulped. It was one thing to respond to Rohyr’s kisses; altogether another to initiate one. He hesitantly lifted his head and pressed his mouth against Rohyr’s. Heartened when the king returned the kiss, he dared to slip his tongue between Rohyr’s parted lips.

Rohyr groaned at the timid incursion. He pressed Lassen down and sealed their mouths in a torrid caress. Lassen gasped when his nether parts were cupped and fondled anew. Aroused, a desire to please Rohyr took hold and he reached for the buttons of the Ardan’s breeches and undid them. He tugged the tie of his drawers loose and caught his breath when warm, rigid flesh prodded his groin. He wondered what to do, then made an inarticulate sound when Rohyr shifted above him and their lengths slid against each other.

Rohyr took Lassen’s hands. Lassen drew in a shuddery breath when they were wrapped around the paired columns. Instinct took over and he began to stroke their shafts jointly. In this he did not need instruction and his movements slowed or quickened, his touch lightening or intensifying accordingly.

He soon felt the resurgent pressure in his belly and he hastened his stroking, hurrying them both toward the rapture he knew was just around the corner. When Rohyr broke their kiss, he saw that the king’s eyes were shut tight and that he was breathing shallowly, his shoulders and arms stiff with the strain of trying to control himself.

It was Lassen’s first time not only to bring another to pleasure but also to make him lose himself to it. He impulsively recaptured Rohyr’s lips and was borne down hard. Rohyr ravaged his mouth in a kiss that stole the very breath from him.

The tight coil in his groin steadily unravelled and he pumped his hands vigorously. He heard his name groaned against his lips followed by sharp gasps, a stifled moan and the first spurt of warm cream on his fingers. It only took a moment’s realization that he had brought Rohyr to completion to trigger his own. The coil within him came undone and, with a muffled cry, he climaxed once more.

It was a long while before he became fully aware again of his surroundings. Gathered into an embrace, he turned into it and pressed his face into the comforting warmth of a cradling shoulder. The faint scent of *sandara* reminded him of who held him and why. He blinked, then looked at Rohyr.

The king lay with his eyes closed, his cheeks still faintly flushed from his orgasm, his lips slightly parted as slight puffs of breath slipped through. He looked achingly handsome and Lassen could not resist the urge to steal a kiss.

A smile curved Rohyr’s lips at the stealthy caress. He opened his eyes and lazily regarded Lassen. “I trust you enjoyed yourself?”

Lassen blushed but smilingly nodded. “I’ve heard many a tale about this, but none were enough to make me truly understand.”

“Words are seldom sufficient,” Rohyr agreed. He glanced down and smirked.

Lassen followed his glance. His blush deepened.

His belly was generously stippled with the pearlescent mingling of their seed. More clung to his fingers and he snatched up the edge of the rumpled bedding to wipe himself off. Rohyr snickered. He took the sheet from Lassen’s fumbling hands and cleaned him

of the milky essence.

“Don’t let this abash you,” Rohyr said when he was done. “A good tumble will always leave a mess behind. The messier it gets, the more satisfying a coupling is likely to be.”

Lassen did not quite know whether he was being serious or facetious. And so he hid his burning face against Rohyr’s shoulder.

“There is something I must discuss with you,” Rohyr murmured after a spell. “Did your parents tell you about *viratha*?”

Lassen nodded. “*Aba* said you would imprint me but he didn’t say how.”

Rohyr ran his fingers through the shining strands of Lassen’s hair. “I shall place a command in your mind in the course of a coupling. It will prohibit you from knowing desire for anyone else even if you feel affection for him. And in the unlikely event that someone attempts to force himself upon you, it will alert me to your situation and impel you to resist to the utmost of your ability. Or should your strength fail, perish from the shock before the act can be completed.”

When Lassen paled, Rohyr held him closer. “No one would dare incur my vengeance by harming you. And as for inhibiting your desire, it’s a precautionary measure, given my position. But I want you to be truthful with me should you come to love someone. I would rather release you from service than keep you by force, knowing you want another.”

Lassen pondered his words. “’Tis as much for my protection as yours,” he said at length. Musing aloud, he continued, “There are some who would seek anything to use against me should they believe what sway they have with you has been weakened by mine. ’Tis foolish for I care not for such things, but I suppose I can’t say the same for many at court.” He looked at Rohyr trustingly. “I wouldn’t refuse even if you gave me the choice. Do as you see fit, *Dyhar*.”

Rohyr stared at him. With a soft exhalation, he lay back and pulled Lassen partly atop him, his arms encircling him. He stared at the ceiling with an expression the youth could not quite identify.

Lassen regarded him curiously for a while, then decided he knew too little about Rohyr to fathom his various moods and reactions. He rested his head on the latter’s breast. Listening to the steady beat of his heart, he felt the gentle up and down of Rohyr’s chest with every breath he drew.

There would be time enough later to better know the Ardan. But this much Lassen already realized—it would not be difficult to lose his heart to Rohyr Essendri.

He wondered if this was his fate. And on the heels of that realization followed a question. Was such a fate boon or bane?

Chapter Seven

Ownership

“Have you imprinted him?”

Whatever he thought of Imcael’s tactlessness, Rohyr did not say. His uncle merited courtesy if nothing else. But seated at Imcael’s right, Reijir Arthanna rolled his eyes tellingly.

“Nay,” Rohyr evenly replied.

“Wherefore the delay?” Imcael demanded, slamming his palm down on the tabletop. “He mingles with some of the wealthiest and most influential Deira of this realm. It will go to his head and he’ll be all too ready to fall for whatever blandishments come his way. Mark my words, you’ll find yourself cuckolded and saddled with someone else’s bastard if you don’t bind his mind soonest.”

Rohyr’s mouth tightened slightly but he only said “Lassen isn’t gullible. Nor is he a fool to jeopardize his good fortune for the sake of someone of lesser name than mine.”

“Oh, he could were he foolish enough to believe himself in love,” Imcael insisted.

Rohyr’s eyes gleamed. “Does this mean you agree that he esteems love above wealth and privilege?” he mildly inquired.

Imcael’s eyes widened in horror at having attributed a virtue to his nephew’s concubine. Before he could respond, Reijir quipped, “That hardly makes him the sort to indulge in empty affairs. You’ve truly found yourself a prize, Cousin.”

Rohyr suppressed his grin. He regarded Imcael who looked ready to have a fit. “Don’t fret, Uncle. Lassen knows his duty, as I do mine. I assure you, if he bears any by-blows, they’ll be *my* by-blows. *And* none will precede my lawfully begotten heir,” he emphatically added when Imcael began another round of protests. “Now, what say we tend to your concerns about the policing of the borders?”

“I thought Vaeren had everything well in hand,” Reijir said. “What has caused you displeasure, Uncle?”

With practiced ease, the two distracted Imcael from the issue of Rohyr’s leman and drew him back to the original reason for his visit. It was a good three-quarters of an hour however before Imcael was satisfied that Rohyr understood his resentment over having to deploy a goodly portion of his herunic forces to eastern Velarus. When he finally departed, his nephews heaved sighs of relief. They looked at each other across the table and broke into rueful grins.

“My thanks, Rei,” Rohyr said.

Reijir made a dismissive gesture. “What are cousins for if not to help each other endure overbearing, sanctimonious relations?”

Rohyr chuckled briefly. “He is rather unpleasant.”

“Rather unpleasant?” Reijir repeated. “That is an egregious understatement. It’s to your credit that you’ve never yet raised your voice with him. Were I in your place, I wouldn’t be so patient or kind.”

“I’m not such a saint as all that,” Rohyr demurred. “But I don’t care to descend into the gutters with him. It’s already crowded enough down there.”

Reijir snorted. "Still, I own myself just as surprised that you haven't imprinted Lassen," he admitted.

"I would rather he learns to enjoy fulfilling his duties to me first."

Reijir stared. "You haven't bedded him yet, have you?"

Rohyr dipped his head in confirmation

"Whence this sudden restraint?" Reijir asked. "You're no libertine, but neither have you ever denied yourself a great desire nor delayed the granting of it."

Rohyr sighed. "I don't want to overwhelm him. He's young and innocent and I have taken him away from everyone and everything he holds dear. I thought it prudent to give him time to accustom himself to his new life."

Reijir studied him. "It would please you to be held dearest of all he holds dear, wouldn't it?" Rohyr shrugged but Reijir knew him too well. "And you're certain you're not mistaken about him?"

Rohyr squarely met his gaze. "I am not mistaken." He rose to his feet and Reijir did likewise. "Had Uncle Imcael not stood on his right of seniority, I would be done with my meeting with Gilmael by now. I had best get back to him. What of you?"

"I was supposed to join Keiran for the midday meal but it's too late for that now. Ah, don't worry; he'll understand once I tell him the reason for my delinquency."

Rohyr had to grin. A tenured instructor at the State University, Reijir's brother enjoyed gossip and intrigue to an inordinate degree.

Reijir snickered. "Indeed, he'll deem me a saint for sacrificing my peace of mind to help you bear through dear Imcael giving you a piece of his."

* * * *

Lassen peered up and down the corridor before hurrying to his apartment. With Imcael temporarily in residence, it was all the youth could do to avoid bumping into him, especially when the Herun's quarters were just two doors away from his. He would not soon forget Imcael's reproachful expression when he espied Rohyr leaving Lassen's suite late one night.

He did not know why the Herun had decided to stay at the Citadel. Imcael had suddenly shown up a fortnight ago with Reijir in tow and demanded an immediate audience with his royal nephew, ignoring the fact that Rohyr was in the middle of a meeting with Gilmael. He also pointedly informed Lassen that it was not a leman's place to meddle in official business, never mind that Rohyr had asked Lassen to be present since Gilmael's report had pertained in part to the welfare of his hometown. In turn, Rohyr had welcomed his uncle, apologized to Gilmael and bade him wait on his return and, lastly, mildly rebuked Imcael for his impoliteness toward Lassen.

That had earned him a frown and Lassen a black scowl, but Rohyr quickly ushered Imcael out of the conference chamber and took him to a smaller audience room. Gilmael and Reijir exchanged looks of exasperation before Reijir turned on his heel and followed the pair.

Well, whatever they had talked about must have prompted Imcael to stay on and virtually dog Rohyr's every step. Something his nephew had done greatly displeased the Herun and he was apparently determined to ensure that this failing would be addressed without further delay.

Lassen had just come from the dining hall and a most uncomfortable supper. Rohyr

refused to banish him from his table and that had worsened Imcael's temper. Hence, every meal he inflicted with his presence was tainted by silent rancor. Had it not been for Yovan's droll remarks and the humorous quips of Gilmael's brother Zykriel, they would have dined in near intolerable silence tonight as well. Nonetheless, the tension had been so thick the head cook could have sliced it with the long-bladed knife he used to carve the roast swylboar.

Entering the bathing chamber, Lassen saw that a warm bath had already been drawn. Bless Josel, he thought, as he quickly stripped, then sank into the sudsy water. A few minutes later, he felt much better and could feel more charitable toward Rohyr's surly uncle.

Sighing, he lathered his arms and chest. When his fingers passed over his nipples however the memory of lips sucking and a tongue laving those pert buds suddenly came to mind. He stifled a whimper and closed his eyes.

His tutelage had continued apace. Each day invariably found him at one point or another in Rohyr's company and in his arms. The Ardan did not always take their encounters to the point of near coupling as he had that dizzying afternoon. But there was no mistaking his intent to show Lassen the pleasures of the flesh and teach him how to receive as well as bestow them.

Lassen licked his lips. Only the other day, he had learned how to pleasure Rohyr with his mouth; a highly agreeable exercise it turned out. There had been something exquisitely intimate about the act—his first full sight of Rohyr's shaft, the thrill of running his tongue up and down its formidable length and wrapping his lips around its impressive girth, the sounds of Rohyr's gasps and groans and the moment of his orgasm when he caught Lassen by the shoulders, bucked up and spilled himself into the youth's mouth.

The taste of that warm and opulent mouthful had added to Lassen's already heightened lust and he had desperately sought to caress himself to release. But Rohyr had pried his hand away, rolled him on his back and stroked him to completion. All the while he had kissed Lassen almost senseless, shamelessly tasting the lingering flavor of his own essence on Lassen's tongue.

Roused by the memory of that scarlet interlude, Lassen had reached down to take his stirring shaft in hand. He now shuddered as he rapidly pulled on the firm column. Before too long, he spent himself with a moan, his seed mingling with the fragrant bath water. Trembling, he waited for the aftershocks of his climax to subside. At last, he lazily opened his eyes. And met Rohyr's piercing gaze.

The Ardan stood at the foot of the tub, leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. He was clad in a silken shirt left unbuttoned to reveal a trim yet muscular torso and drawstring trousers that rode low on his lean hips. His hair was damp from his own bath. A small smile lifted the corners of his lips while his eyes roamed over what he could see of Lassen's body through the dispersing suds.

Lassen sucked in his breath. Color flooded his face and he lowered his gaze, unable to speak or maintain eye contact after having his wantonness revealed. Rohyr came around the tub and, cupping his chin, compelled him to lift his face. He kissed Lassen hard and long, drawing his tongue into a sensual duel.

"Come to me when you're done," Rohyr murmured, rubbing his thumb over Lassen's lower lip. With that, he turned and left the room.

Lassen hastily finished bathing. Padding out afterward to his chamber, he stopped short when he saw the nightshirt Josel had laid out on the bed. As with his regular nightshirts, it was close-necked, long-sleeved and calf-length. There, the similarities ended. Fastened at the collar by a single button, the garment opened up front nearly to the navel. The ensuing gap ensured that a sliver of skin showed through. Not that so minute a glimpse mattered much when the fabric itself was so thin and fine that it revealed rather than hid the body it covered.

Lassen stared in dismay at his reflection in the mirror. He could make out the color of his skin and the details of his body through the filmy material, particularly the telltale shadowy mound at his groin. And in the absence of drawers, it was apparent that said body part was meant to be seen.

He donned a dressing robe over the thin garment lest he encountered anyone in the hallway. Taking a deep breath, Lassen walked the short distance to Rohyr's apartment.

The moment had finally come. He would awaken in the morning shorn of his bodily innocence.

Lassen paled when Rohyr opened the door to admit him then visibly shivered as the Ardan closed it behind them. Rohyr lifted one eyebrow at Lassen's reactions.

"This is no merlion's den for you to tremble so," he commented. "Unless you deem me a frightful creature."

"Nay!" Lassen protested. "I could never deem you anything less than splendid, Rohyr-*dyhar*."

Taking his courage in hand, he lifted his face and pressed a trusting kiss to Rohyr's jaw. Rohyr went still at the caress. An instant later, he caught Lassen to himself and drew him into a searing kiss, his hands making short work of Lassen's robe. With little more than their scanty garments between them, the warmth of their bodies as they touched seemed as scorching as a firebrand to the youth.

Lassen moaned when Rohyr slid his hands over his flanks, back, and hips before they cupped his buttocks and pulled him tight against him. Their shafts rubbed tantalizingly against each other through their clothing.

With a groan, Rohyr broke their kiss. He touched his forehead to Lassen's. "You are more temptation than is possible for anyone to resist," he murmured.

He led Lassen through the sitting room into the sleeping chamber. In Lassen's anxiety, everything was a blur of color and texture. The only thing that clearly stood out was the huge, canopied, four-poster bed that dominated the bedchamber. Built from precious nahra, it looked almost twice as wide and half again as long as Lassen's own large bed.

Lassen vaguely noted the thick feather mattress, luxurious down pillows, crisp snowy linens and gauzy white curtains that could be drawn to conceal the bed and its occupants from casual scrutiny. Something gleamed in the muted light, drawing his eyes to the bedside table. He gulped upon spotting a small wide-rimmed bottle of colorless, scented oil.

He felt the feathery stroke of his consciousness. A come hither sensation that made him aware that he was being watched with appreciation. It set his body aflame. To his dismay, his nipples stiffened slightly and his shaft lifted in nascent arousal. Lassen closed his eyes and waited.

He did not wait long. Rohyr gently clasped his shoulders and guided him onto the

bed. Lassen tried to calm himself. But he quivered when he felt the warm slide of Rohyr's hand on one thigh, caressing him from knee almost to groin.

The gentle tug at a nipple impelled him to open his eyes and he looked down to see Rohyr sucking one peaked bud through the thin fabric. Farther below, his hand stroked Lassen's thigh, scarcely hidden by the shirt hem. Both images were nigh unbearably erotic and Lassen's groin tightened accordingly.

Rohyr looked up and their eyes met. The king smiled and shifted upward to capture Lassen with one of his inimitable kisses. Lassen avidly responded and pressed his body against Rohyr's with abandon.

Rohyr's hand came up between them and unfastened the single button at Lassen's throat. The garment parted and Rohyr slid his hand underneath to touch the stiffened nipples now revealed. Lassen arched into his touch. The king drew back and gazed at him, the hungry glimmer in his eyes causing the muscles in Lassen's belly to clench. Without a word, Rohyr gripped the hem of his nightshirt and drew the garment up and off Lassen's slender form.

For the first time, he lay completely naked before Rohyr. Lassen remained as still as he could while his royal lover had his fill of this first sight of his bared charms.

"Too much," Rohyr murmured huskily. He doffed his shirt and trousers.

Lassen gaped at him. *Saints!* Here was no soft, throne-bound sovereign, but a battle-honed, warrior king of striking beauty, steely grace and an endowment that left Lassen's mouth dry from mingled admiration and perturbation. He did not stop staring until Rohyr drew him close and engaged him once more in a spate of torrid kisses.

He clung to Rohyr, reveling in the feel of naked skin and unshielded warmth against his body. As he yielded further to Rohyr's sensual assault, he only vaguely felt the king's hand as it moved down from his shoulder to his hip and finally to his thighs. Even when Rohyr parted his legs and reached between to cup his seed pouch, he did not pay much heed.

But Rohyr's fingers moved lower and he lifted the tender flesh to uncover the small lipped opening that was the most telling indication of the Deira's descent from the ancient Naere—the seed channel more commonly known as the sheath. He brushed his fingers against the sensitive flesh.

Lassen gasped. He tried to pull away but Rohyr held him fast. "Oh Veres, what are you doing?" he moaned as he perforce endured the teasing slide of Rohyr's fingers and the burgeoning bliss that came with it. "Please-don't... I can't—"

"Don't think, *Las-min*," Rohyr murmured. "Just feel."

The young *sedyr* could do little more than obey. With every stroke, his pleasure mounted until he raised his hips in an unconscious effort to spur Rohyr into slipping his fingers between the delicate folds of flesh that guarded his sheath. Rohyr obliged and pressed a finger into the moist passage beyond. Lassen reared at the unfamiliar intrusion but Rohyr continued to caress him, setting off the chain of bodily changes that turned a Deir and rendered him the sheath to his partner's sword. Not that Rohyr planned to take him by genital penetration. Until Lassen reached his thirtieth year, breaching his seed channel was strictly forbidden.

Lassen whimpered as his seed pouch contracted, receding upward and slightly inward, and tightened into a small fleshy sphere to completely uncover the glistening orifice behind it. When Rohyr looked searchingly at him, Lassen closed his eyes, unable

to endure the scrutiny. Thus, he did not see Rohyr reach for the oil and, though he sensed him as he shifted downward between his upraised knees, he did not realize what Rohyr was about until he felt the gentle swipe of his tongue. He almost stopped breathing, shocked that anyone should use his mouth on so private a part of his body.

“Nay, this isn’t right!” he blurted, reaching down in protest.

Smirking, Rohyr briefly met his gaze. “Who told you that?” he archly asked before employing his tongue once more, ignoring the clutch of Lassen’s hands on his shoulders.

Overcome, Lassen fell back with a lingering moan. Mithre had said that it was not unusual to employ one’s mouth for the purpose of pleasuring a partner, but the more common manner of oral play was to suckle the shaft. The sheath was not as frequently stimulated in the same way and, since Mithre could not imagine Rohyr agreeing to be serviced so and even less servicing anyone thusly, he had not gone into detail about it.

Inarticulate mutterings spilled from Lassen as sheer sensation superseded all lucid thought. And that was before that wicked tongue dipped into the virginal channel. He cried out as he was pierced repeatedly. But when he reached down once again, it was to run his fingers through Rohyr’s dark locks, unconsciously encouraging the sensual pillaging of his graces.

So lost was he in pleasure that he did not notice the insertion of a well-lubricated finger up his backside until it slid in to the knuckle. By then it was too late. And too much. With a strangled keen, Lassen came undone, caught in the throes of an orgasm that seemed to go on forever until he thought he would swoon from the sheer intensity of it.

Struggling to corral his scattered wits afterward, he gulped in air while his madly pounding heart strove to calm down. When his vision and reason cleared somewhat, he realized that Rohyr’s finger was still deep inside him. He squirmed a little when Rohyr twisted the finger and the intrusion became more acute. He stopped wriggling when Rohyr placed a restraining hand on his hip.

“You’re so tight,” Rohyr murmured roughly. “I must prepare you or it will hurt overmuch when I take you.”

Lassen took a shaky breath and nodded his comprehension.

Mithre had told him about defloration. The sensation of a rear breaching was different from a first sheathing. The former burned before subsiding into a dull ache as the snug ring of muscles that guarded the rectum stretched to accommodate entry. The latter, on the other hand, stung then lapsed into mild soreness when the fragile remnants of the once protective membrane midway inside the sheath tore upon penetration. Either way, Mithre had warned him to expect some discomfort if not pain.

The insertion of more fingers made him wince. Assuredly, each addition coaxed his arse to open up further but Lassen doubted any amount of preparation could loosen him enough to withstand the entry of a shaft as impressive as Rohyr’s. He braced himself for the worst.

Of a sudden, Rohyr caressed something and rapturous sensation erupted in Lassen’s belly. The youth gasped in surprise, then half sobbed as he was stroked within over and again until he was bearing down on Rohyr’s fingers, seeking the wondrous feelings they wrought.

When Rohyr withdrew his fingers, Lassen softly protested their removal. But Rohyr slipped his hands under his parted knees and lifted them and something large and blunt and slippery slid between the cheeks of his buttocks. Lassen tensed.

“Let me in, *Las-min*,” Rohyr softly said.

His breath coming in nervous huffs, Lassen willed himself to relax and permit his body’s breaching. He felt the momentary nudge of flesh against his entrance before it slipped past and pushed into him. Lassen let out a strangled gasp as he was steadily stretched and filled. He closed his eyes to stem his tears over the burn of thick flesh sliding into his untried backside. Striving to adjust to the discomfort, he did not realize at once that Rohyr was holding still and awaiting a sign from him that he was well.

The pain decreased to a mild throb. Indeed, the pain had been nowhere near as bad as he expected. Rohyr had been extremely careful with him. The thought warmed Lassen and he lifted his legs and wrapped them around Rohyr’s waist.

“Are you certain?” Rohyr asked.

Lassen drew a steadying breath. Managing a tremulous smile, he whispered, “Show me how to please you.”

Rohyr’s eyes gleamed appreciatively. He shifted position and delivered a shallow thrust. When Lassen did not flinch, he deepened the next few thrusts. Silk bound muscles gave way before spearing flesh and opened up further with each invasion until Rohyr was well seated inside Lassen. He began to drive into Lassen, caressing him deep within as he had earlier done with his fingers.

Once again, sweetly addictive pleasure swept through Lassen and he lifted his hips to sheathe Rohyr as much as he could, desiring the intense sensations each thrust fetched him. In answer, Rohyr grasped him behind his knees and pushed them back against his chest. Lassen whimpered as he was impaled to the hilt. He could not move as much but it mattered little for the position allowed deeper, more acutely felt penetration. The repeated slide of Rohyr’s generous length into him lifted him ever higher into an intensifying storm of rapture. He made a litany of Rohyr’s name, moaning it helplessly with every inward stroke.

Before too long, Rohyr’s measured lunges and murmured assurances faded as he, too, careened toward completion. His thrusts quickened and his breathing roughened as his pleasure spiralled beyond his control. But he managed at the last to snatch back some vestige of mastery and, staving off his climax by sheer dint of will, reached between their heaving bodies to curl his fingers around the rigid shaft that prodded his belly. He briskly stroked it. A spate of harsh sobs burst from Lassen.

“Please!” he cried out, unable to voice what exactly it was he wanted.

Moments before his climax hit him, Rohyr fastened his lips on a nipple. Groaning around the plump peak, he spent himself, shuddering with every fulsome gush of his seed. A few seconds later, staccato cries rent the air and frantic fingers raked his back as Lassen came to explosive release, the draw of Rohyr’s lips on his nipple and the contracting of his muscles around Rohyr’s shaft heightening every sensation and lengthening his rapture. While his orgasm slowly faded away, Lassen clung to Rohyr as a castaway might hang on for dear life to a boulder in the midst of a stormy sea.

Chapter Eight

Enchainment

Rohyr carefully pulled out of Lassen and gently rolled them onto their sides. There was no need to clean up. Only a few drops of seed stippled the flaxen curls on Lassen's groin. When a turned Deir orgasmed, he produced very little semen if at all.

He leisurely ran his fingers through Lassen's tousled hair, occasionally kissing his damp brow. The affectionate gestures soothed the lad. He calmed down to Rohyr's satisfaction and snuggled against him, laying his head on the king's shoulder. Rohyr smiled against his fair locks.

At length, he reached behind Lassen and gingerly probed his bottom. Lassen winced and stiffened.

Rohyr sat up and, turning to his bedside table, pulled open the topmost drawer. Lassen watched curiously as he retrieved a small glass jar filled with a slightly translucent substance with a bluish hue.

The king unscrewed the cover of the jar and scooped up a dollop of what appeared to be a loose cream with his fingers. It had a mild minty fragrance. Setting the container aside, he turned back to Lassen.

"Roll over, *Las-min*," he instructed.

Lassen hesitated at first, eyeing the cream suspiciously, but finally did as he was bid. He tensed as his legs were parted then jerked and gasped in protest when Rohyr slid his fingers up his aching rump. But the dull pain quickly gave way to a bearable twinge and, after a short while, he sighed and relaxed.

"Better?" Rohyr murmured.

"Very much," Lassen almost purred. He looked over his shoulder to meet Rohyr's amused gaze. "What is it?"

"A medicament developed by my physician. It numbs the pain of an injury while it helps it heal. You should be quite recovered by morning."

Rohyr scooped up another generous amount of the cream.

Lassen blushed as Rohyr smoothed more of the salve into him. A ridiculous reaction, really, when only minutes earlier, he'd had far more than Rohyr's fingers up his arse. Still, the king's tending of his post-coital aches felt just as intimate as their coupling. It was not only his body that Rohyr soothed with his care but also his spirit.

Lassen wondered at the deepening warmth he felt toward his lord and lover.

* * * *

He awakened to the feel of kisses on his back, shoulders and nape. Woozily turning his head, he started when his chin was cupped and his mouth caught in a plundering kiss. By the time he was released, he was fully awake.

Befuddled, Lassen glanced at the antique timepiece that graced the bedside table. It was just three hours past midnight. Rohyr was certainly no laggard in concupiscence, he thought, before the tender marauding of his ear by lips and teeth nearly robbed him of

coherence.

"Veres preserve me," he whimpered, whether in apprehension or yearning Lassen was not sure.

"You're so sensitive," Rohyr whispered when the mere dip of his tongue into Lassen's ear made the youth tremble. "And noisy," he added with a grin as his leman's moans escalated into soft cries.

"I'm-I'm sorry," Lassen managed to gasp.

"For what? I enjoy hearing you, *Las-min*." Rohyr's fingers crept into Lassen's rear to probe his readiness. "Especially when I am well up your backside."

Unthinkingly, Lassen bore down on the invading digits as sensory memory recalled to him the pleasures of being fulsomely speared and filled.

"Eager are we?" Rohyr gently teased.

"Nay, that's—I'm not—"

Lassen's protests ceased when Rohyr's legs shifted between his own and nudged them apart. His upper leg came to rest on Rohyr's thighs, spreading him for penetration. He caught his breath when tumescent flesh eased his buttocks apart then pressed in. Rohyr slid into him until his groin was flush against Lassen's buttocks. There was no discomfort, however, for Rohyr's shaft was well slicked and Lassen's entrance was nicely stretched from the night before. Furthermore, his rear passage was still coated with the medicinal salve and the copious remnants of Rohyr's semen.

Rohyr thrust repeatedly into Lassen. He was pleased when Lassen pushed back in turn to take in as much of Rohyr's shaft as he could. The youth was capable of much passion and would be a most fulfilling partner when he matured and learned more of the love-arts. Even now, innocent and inexperienced as he was, he had satisfied Rohyr's needs the previous night. Indeed, he had exceeded his expectations and Rohyr was tempted not to proceed to the next step.

Lassen did not notice the invasion into his consciousness at first. The pleasure and desire that seeped into every corner and cranny of his body clouded his perceptions enough that it was some time before he realized not all of it was his. It was then that he detected another presence in his mind, powerful and compelling.

And it waited. For what, Lassen did not understand. What he did remember was how Rohyr had once browsed through his mind and that the experience had been unnerving. Almost terrifyingly so.

He shut his eyes, frightened amidst his rapture. Fearful whimpers forced their way past his lips, as loud to his ears as his uneven inhalations.

"Afraid?" he heard Rohyr say.

Lassen nodded. "Forgive me, I don't mean to offend you," he apologized in a shaking voice.

Gentle fingers caressed his cheek and soft lips left a trail of kisses along his shoulder to the side of his neck.

There is nothing to fear. Trust me, sweet one.

Lassen trembled at the mental caress. It was almost as potent as the hard shaft that filled him. Like a wave washing over a rock-strewn shore to eddy or settle into shallow pools amidst the nooks and crevices, it crept over and into his consciousness. An intoxicating haze of pure rapture that was not of the body alone slowly overtook him, seducing and ensnaring him until he could not bear to wait but needed completion of

some kind. He reached behind and grasped Rohyr's hip in a mute plea. Rohyr answered it and pressed deep into him with every forward thrust.

Lassen felt a slight nudge in his mind that urged him to open up to the sensual encroachment, permit it to enter, take hold and fulfill his unspoken yearning. It was this considerate request for entry that eased his fears. With a sigh, he gave himself over to Rohyr's control.

You are mine alone, Lassen. With no other will you share yourself.

It was akin to being swept into a maelstrom where there was only Rohyr to anchor him. His face, his scent, his voice and touch. And his shaft inside him, joining them in the most intimate physical act possible between two beings. As a rolling climax swept through Lassen's body, so did an otherworldly rapture inundate every recess of his consciousness.

The surfeit of pleasure was more than he could bear. His ragged ululations resounded through the chamber and beyond.

* * * *

Josel stood patiently at the bedchamber door. It was not a pleasant duty but it was demanded of him and so he waited.

You may tell him, came the silent command; a curt whisper in his mind that bespoke barely contained displeasure.

Frowning in distaste, the elderly servant walked out of the sitting room and made his way to Imcael's suite. Rohyr disliked revealing details of his private activities and Josel liked being privy to them even less. But, Saints above, the Ardan's uncle was so obstinate.

Imcael himself opened the door with a jerk, eyes bleary with sleep. Whatever reprimand he'd thought to unleash died on his lips when he saw who had disturbed him so early in the day.

"Well?" he impatiently demanded.

"It is done," Josel quietly replied.

"You're certain?" the Herun pressed.

"I listened and heard, Your Grace. He is wholly in the Ardan's thrall."

Imcael wrinkled his nose in disdain. "Threw himself at my nephew, I wager," he snorted. "But what can you expect of common folk?"

Josel's lips twitched but he stayed his tongue. Useless to protest Imcael's prejudiced assessment of Lassen's conduct. Rohyr knew the truth and that was what mattered. When Imcael dismissed him, he stiffly bowed and departed as swiftly as possible without appearing to be in unseemly haste to get away from the fief-lord.

* * * *

Lassen came to with a moan, startled into full awareness by the sensation of being filled. He vaguely realized that he was on his back beneath Rohyr, legs loosely wrapped around the king's waist. He gasped as Rohyr speared him deeply.

"My lord..." he half stuttered, half groaned as he was cleaved repeatedly.

Rohyr paused and leaned down to kiss him gently. "This will have to be the last for now," he murmured. "Else you won't be able to sit comfortably for a goodly while."

“Not able to sit...? Why won’t I—?” Lassen paused as he became aware of a throbbing in his arse that had not been there at the onset of their pre-dawn coupling. Frowning in confusion, he suddenly noticed light streaming through the cracks in the draperies. Bright sunlight. He blinked. Last he recalled it was still some two hours shy of daybreak when Rohyr awakened him.

“How long...?” he began to say when he espied mirth in Rohyr’s eyes. “How often?” he faintly asked instead.

Rohyr chuckled huskily. “Enough that you’ll need to apply the salve frequently and religiously today.”

Lassen caught his breath. It was disconcerting to realize that he had repeatedly coupled with Rohyr through the early hours of the day while in a fugue. And hugely enjoyed it if his disjointed memories of intense pleasure and overriding desire were any indication.

Color flooded his cheeks. He had not thought himself capable of such lustfulness.

“Was it really necessary?” he weakly asked.

Rohyr stroked his flushed cheek. “Even were it not, my need to have you is not so quickly satisfied. You are much too delectable, my beauty.”

Lassen moaned with the resumption of his body’s piercing. For several wild heartbeats, he could do naught but stare at the Ardan, his growing affection for him strengthened by Rohyr’s many kindnesses and compassion. Not to mention his exceptional handsomeness and nigh perfection of form, which Lassen had come to appreciate even more now that he lived in daily proximity to him.

He gazed at Rohyr in artless worshipfulness. “I hope I satisfied you, my liege.”

Rohyr regarded him intently. “You are no mere bed-treat. In your arms, I can lose myself for a while. Forget my cares and simply be Rohyr. Your bed is a refuge to me. Your body my haven.”

Lassen stared at him in wonder. About to speak, he felt a tug, there in the back of his consciousness. He recalled the incursion of another consciousness into his mind and the strange, unsettling sensation of being opened and read and, finally, bound. Full understanding finally came to him as he remembered being completely under the Ardan’s control, yielding to his desire without hesitation or resistance.

He was essentially Rohyr’s to do with as he wished, when he wished, where he wished and no one could undo the hold his royal lover had over him.

It should have frightened him beyond bearing, this mental thralldom. But thus far, Rohyr had never treated him as if he were a mere piece of property, to use or discard as he pleased. He had not bedded him as soon as he set foot inside his halls nor had he taken Lassen without care for his apprehensions or lack of experience. Lassen had placed his trust in him and Rohyr had proved time and again that his trust was well-founded.

He felt the pull again. More than a request, less than a demand, it enticed him rather than forced him into compliance. Lassen’s desire heightened at so subtle a caress. He wove his arms around Rohyr and ran his hands down his strong back.

“I pray you will always find your ease in me, Rohyr-*dyhar*,” he whispered.

Rohyr made no answer but caught him in a scalding kiss, prying his lips apart to pillage Lassen’s mouth and swallowing the youth’s moans.

He would enjoy teaching his leman the many ways to pleasure him. All the more when complete possession of his body was no longer restricted. But there would be no

need to teach him how to please Rohyr outside of their bed. Lassen simply gave himself over to the role as if born to it.

As if he had been made for Rohyr's delight alone.

Chapter Nine

Lover

The Citadel, in the 3006th year of the Common Age

Lassen wiped the sweat from his brow and neck to the resonating clash and clang of swords behind him. He tucked the tendrils of hair that had escaped his long braid behind his ears and glanced back to see who still remained on the field.

He was no high-born True Blood whose station behooved him to learn the battle-arts. But he was part of the royal household, a member of Rohyr Essendri's inner circle, and that was reason enough for him to train as the Ardan and his kin had since they were old enough to lift a broadsword.

Lassen nodded his thanks at the squire who had handed him a tall cup of water poured from a flagon embedded in cracked ice. He gulped down the chilled liquid, refilled the cup, and strode to a pair newly done with their sparring. He offered the water to his lover of ten years. Rohyr accepted the cup with a smile and drank deeply of it. Meanwhile, an attendant passed a towel to Lassen.

"You're finished?" Rohyr inquired.

"I am," Lassen affirmed as he plied the towel on Rohyr's face, nape and bare arms. He watched Rohyr hand his sword to a squire in exchange for a pair of knives. "But I take it you mean to continue."

"Only one last bout," Rohyr said. "There will be a number of petitioners at court today. Best I see to them early else I shall have no time or energy for aught more than sleep tonight. That is not my idea of a good way to end the day."

He brushed his lips against Lassen's before turning to face his new opponent. Lassen shook his head fondly at the king's indefatigability.

As he made his way along the perimeter of the drill yard, he passed some newly arrived visitors. Gentry and minor nobility from the countryside, he surmised, not only from their less cosmopolitan attire but also from the way they comported themselves.

They ogled Lassen appreciatively in turn. But when they espied his leman's earring they burst into speculative talk. Some did not trouble to lower their voices.

"Is it white-silver?" one asked with awe as he eyed the costly piece.

"How presumptuous of him!" sniffed another. "Doesn't he know that only members of the Ardan's family may bear white-silver?"

"How can he when he's just a simple-minded provincial?" a third added derisively. "I wonder what Rohyr saw in him to elevate him to so undeserved a station."

"He is comely," the first Deir pointed out grudgingly. "He likely contents our Ardan well enough."

Lassen gave no indication that he had heard. After all these years, he was used to being discussed with admiration, curiosity or disparagement. Nevertheless, it still rankled when he was shown disrespect either by the ignorant who were not aware of the difference between an official concubine and a casual bed-partner or the knowledgeable who disapproved of his liaison with Rohyr and let him know it so long as Rohyr was not

present. Lassen disliked them far more than those who did not know enough to make sound assumptions. But either way, he had little regard for folk who were so full of themselves they could belittle others on the basis of their perceived inequality.

“For now,” the third Deir snorted. “Rohyr will bore of him and he’ll find himself out on the streets before he knows what’s happening. If he has any wits at all, he’ll save every coin and trinket he earns spreading his legs for the Ardan!”

Stung by the utter crudeness of that last statement, Lassen turned to speak up in his defense. There were some things that could not be borne.

“Do you actually believe Rohyr pays for his leman’s services? You betray your simple-minded provinciality, lackwits.”

The trio emitted a collective gasp of indignation and whirled around to rebuke whoever had addressed them so insultingly. Only to pale when they came face to face with Dylen Essendri *il* Teris. The words they’d thought to flay him with died on their lips and they scrabbled to appease Rohyr’s half-brother. Dylen ignored their fawning apologies.

“You dare seek an audience with His Majesty yet demean one of whom he is very fond,” he scornfully said. “Obviously you have not been informed that the surest way to gain the Ardan’s sympathy is through his leman’s good graces. I suggest you leave before word of your shameful behavior reaches my brother. Unless you relish being thrown into a cell for a sennight to reflect on your rudeness toward Idana-*dyhar*.”

The combination of contempt and threat plus Dylen’s use of the high honorific with Lassen’s surname thoroughly impressed the error of their thinking on the three. They hastily exited the yard, sidling around Lassen with their heads bowed. Lassen flashed Dylen a grateful smile. Dylen winked at him before he returned to the company of the brethren Gilmael and Zykriel.

Lassen liked Dylen. He always treated Lassen with utmost respect though he was brother to the king. This was probably due in part to Dylen’s humble beginnings. But Lassen believed that even had Dylen been born into Rohyr’s circle from the start, he would still possess that core of kindness and regard for others. He was also very sharp-witted and observant and could be ruthless in the discharging of his duties as Gilmael’s adjutant. Dylen was a valuable addition to Rohyr’s group of trusted intimates.

He was not the only one. Lassen spotted Riodan Leyhar as he came over to have a word with Gilmael, his light bronze hair a bright contrast to the twins and Dylen’s dark tresses. The young diplomat was being groomed to succeed his ambassador sire.

Riodan did not return Dylen’s cool greeting in kind but addressed him with a deference that was puzzlingly humble. Lassen knew that Riodan and Dylen had been acquainted with each other prior to becoming part of Rohyr’s inner circle. But what drove Dylen to behave with such aloof politeness toward Riodan he did not know nor had he attempted to find out. All in good time, his *Aba* Dael oft said. If the details of their common past were meant to be shared with the others, it would happen. No one had any business prying into theirs.

“Las! Am I very late?”

Lassen grinned as young Shino Essendri barrelled down the stone path that linked the lower rear gallery and back gate to the barracks compound. Black curls in charming disarray and hastily donned shirt all askew, Shino was the picture of a youth long past the threshold of unruly puberty but not quite on the verge of orderly adulthood. Orphaned

with the death of his sire, one of Rohyr's untitled Essendri uncles, he became his royal cousin's ward three years ago.

"Rather," Lassen dryly replied. "Didn't you set your alarm, Shin?"

The lad sighed and attempted to comb his tousled locks into some semblance of order. "The confounded thing fell off the bedside table and got smashed."

"You mean you knocked it off when it disturbed your sleep," Lassen corrected him with a smirk. When Shino sheepishly shuffled his feet, Lassen relented and said, "Go. The others are still about."

"And Rohyr?"

"He'll be done soon but Tenryon won't mind taking you on."

"Tenryon is there?" Saying no more, Shino dashed off.

Lassen shook his head. Tenryon Hadrana was the Herun of Ziana and Rohyr's mentor in the mind arts. The scions of the ruling House of the former city-state were known for their prowess in the gifts of the mind; equal to the Essendris it was said. Tenryon was a force to reckon with. It was fortunate for the realm that he was not only Rohyr's ally but a close friend as well.

Shino worshipped the very ground upon which Tenryon set foot. Rohyr alone stood higher in his regard and that was only by a half-step at most.

Lassen went on down the path and entered the Citadel proper. There would be time enough for a bath before he saw to his morning duties. He was especially looking forward to visiting the home for orphaned children run by the monks of the Order of Saint Ambrion.

He settled for a warm shower to save time. Afterward, he looked himself over critically in the mirror. His hair he wore long as Rohyr had bid him though he frequently tied or braided it into a queue. He was also very fair of complexion. His skin simply refused to color further than the faintest hint of a tan. But his relative paleness belied his physical maturation.

Ten years of rigorous exercise in the drill yard, riding across the Great Field and hunting in the sprawling forest at the foot of Mount Sarak had put their stamp on him. Though willowy of form, his body was hard and sinewy, his slender limbs supple and strong. His face had changed as well—his cheeks had lost all remnants of roundedness and were now handsomely sculpted, as were his nose and jaw.

Contrary to what those newcomers believed, Lassen had also undergone considerable edification all these years. He had achieved his parents' desire that he finish his education and graduated with scholastic distinction just a year and a half ago. That same year, he also attained his majority and Rohyr had gifted him with the white-silver earring that adorned his left ear.

He touched a finger to it, recalling the general shock over the thought that Rohyr deemed him worthy of the privilege to wear the precious metal that was the exclusive province of sovereign rulers and their immediate families. But Rohyr had always had a penchant for doing the unlooked for. He had taken Lassen as his leman against expectations and the protestations of a few. And he had then bestowed on him many of the privileges and responsibilities that by tradition were enjoyed or carried out by members of the royal family alone.

Lassen quickly dressed and pulled on a sturdy cloak. But as he was about to leave, Josel forestalled him.

“There are two envoys from Tal Ereq here to see you, *Dyhar*. I took the liberty of taking them to the blue chamber. Will you meet them?”

“But of course,” Lassen promptly replied. “‘Tis not often that I get to speak with folk from home.”

The blue chamber was so called because of its midnight blue carpet and the cobalt-hued drapes that framed the windows. Lassen was surprised when he saw who awaited him within. While it was not unusual for the jewel smiths and craftspeople to come to the capital, the same could not be said of the town Elders whose professional pursuits were in fields that had naught to do with trade and travel. He wondered why Mykal and Owyn had seen fit to journey all the way to Rikara.

“*Dyhar*,” Mykal murmured as he and Owyn dipped their heads deferentially.

“Ah, please don’t stand on ceremony with me,” Lassen protested. “You are my sire’s closest friends and as kin to me. I’m glad to see you after so long.”

They smiled, pleased by the warm greeting. Lassen signed to them to take their seats at the oval table in the center of the room.

“In *Adda*’s last letter, he wrote that all is well in Tal Ereq,” he said. “It must be so if you were able to squeeze in enough time to travel so far.”

Owyn sighed. “If only our journeying were for pleasure. But in truth, we came to beg an audience with the Ardan.”

“And we hope you can help us gain it soonest,” Mykal added. “We were very fortunate that Commander Henaz offered to bring us here by translocation.”

Lassen frowned. Trouble was a-brewing if something had engaged the sympathy of Velarus’ constabulary commander enough to risk leaving his post that he might hasten the Elders’ journey to the capital.

“What has happened that you need to speak directly to His Majesty?” he inquired. “And why didn’t *Aba* or *Adda* write me about it?”

“I dare say they feared their message would fall into the wrong hands and cause you much aggravation thereafter,” Mykal explained. “Particularly if it should be Imcael Essendri’s hands.”

Lassen’s belly did a flip-flop. “What has the Ardan’s uncle done?”

“He has denied eastern Velarus passage through and around Anju. The move has cut us off from the rest of Ylandre.”

An oath nearly escaped Lassen. Bringing his indignation under control, he visualized the political geography of southeastern Ylandre.

Eastern Velarus was carved out of Cattania after the principality’s defeat in its war with Ylandre. Narrow and bow-shaped, Anju was a minor fief that had originally been located northeast of old Velarus, almost a third of its border adjoining Cattania. But as that border was rife with treacherous bogs and pools of quicksand, the Cattanians had never attempted to cross into Ylandre through the fief.

With the annexation of eastern Velarus, the western end of Anju came to be sandwiched between the two territories, almost plowing into the middle of the province where it curved southward. The main roads that connected eastern Velarus to the rest of the province and Ylandre at large either passed through the fief or skirted around it. Either way, Anju’s Herun had the power to control those roads.

“Why would he do such a thing?” Lassen wondered.

Mykal shrugged. “Who knows what whims drive these nobles? It could be spite for

having had to succor us against his wishes all those years ago though 'tis a terribly long time to hold a grudge."

"And overly late to indulge it now," Owyn added.

Lassen frowned. "But how did he accomplish this? Anju isn't his to direct."

"But 'tis his son's to rule," Owyn said. "Imcael's second consort Naral was the brother of Javan Kardova, the late Herun of Anju. The coronet has now passed through Naral to his only son, Tyrde Kardova *thar* Essendri."

Lassen swiftly mulled over the information. He knew Imcael had wed twice and that both spouses had predeceased him. His first Heris, his herunic consort, was a cousin of Essendri descent. His second consort hailed from House Kardova. His first marriage begot two sons while the second produced one.

The eldest, Mahael, was soft-spoken and phlegmatic of disposition. He was not as warm as Rohyr's other cousins but neither was he as overtly hostile as Imcael. Ronuin, on the other hand, was very affable but quite dull. However, he was unequivocally loyal to Rohyr and for that Lassen would forgive him any amount of tedium borne in his company.

He was unfamiliar with the youngest son, Tyrde, save for talk around court that, of all Imcael's progeny, he was the least close to Rohyr. Lassen wondered if it was because Tyrde had presumably spent his growing years being groomed to be Anju's Herun to the extent that he did not even carry his sire's surname but rather his birthing father's. The term *thar* simply designated the High House Tyrde alone of the Kardovas belonged to.

"Unless it pertains to national security, Rohyr will grant no private audiences this week," Lassen informed them. "You'll have to address him in public and the rolls of petitioners are long. I'm not certain if they'll accept further names at this point and on such short notice."

The Elders looked distressed. "The blockade has been in effect for nigh four weeks now and already we keenly feel its bite," Mykal said. "Can't you help us, Lassen? Surely His Majesty will listen to you."

Lassen hesitated. He could do as they asked. But should word of his intervention get out, and he had no doubt that it would, his detractors would pounce at the chance to besmear his name.

Thus far, Rohyr had ignored most of the rumors floated by his leman's naysayers because they tended to be patently false. But let there be one grain of truth in any charge and he would be forced to examine it at the very least. A few had arisen in the past decade and all had had to do with the rare occasions when Lassen had acted on behalf of his province and its peoples. For this reason did the Idanas inhibit themselves from making any requests through Lassen lest they invited accusations of nepotism as well. Throughout, Rohyr had maintained his faith in him. Lassen did not wish to give him reason to regret that trust.

Lassen made his decision. Best to be open about his intentions that no further motives be attached to them other than the simple desire to assist his townsfolk and their neighbors. After all, it was common knowledge that Rohyr had made Lassen the main proviso that had gained Tal Ereq its protectorate status. Lassen's critics might still find fault but subterfuge would not be one of them.

Chapter Ten

Rumblings

Lassen made his way to the formal audience chamber. The fifth bell had sounded and the day's petitions were underway. He had considered waiting until the next day but eventually decided to get the matter over with soonest. There was no predicting Rohyr's temper after listening daily to a litany of complaints and requests from those of his subjects fortunate enough to be included in the supplicant's list. The chances of catching him in a fair mood were greatest today, when the more petty or unreasonable of the demands made on him had not yet annoyed him past his normal equability.

He had dressed with care, choosing a dress tunic of forest green cut in the *sedyran* fashion that would enable him to stand out among Rohyr's *enyr* dominated courtiers. Its short sleeves exposed the cream-hued shirt beneath while the thigh-length hem, close-fitting breeches and soft boots showed his sleekly muscled limbs and slender feet to advantage. His hair he left loose save for the tiny plaits above his ears that held his locks from his face. Lastly, he had donned a silken mantle pinned over one shoulder with a simple gold brooch.

Lassen paid the stares that followed him no mind as he walked up to the chamber entrance. He looked for Mykal and Owyn amidst the waiting throng and saw them standing towards the rear of the line. They were not on the rolls and would not be permitted to enter the chamber unless Lassen secured a place for them among the officially acknowledged petitioners. He beckoned to them to approach the door then quietly entered.

The guards dipped their heads respectfully as he wordlessly slipped past them to take a place alongside the courtiers standing nearest the door. Sooner than he liked, those in proximity to him noticed his presence. He gave no sign that he heard their curious mutterings but simply waited. He did not wait long.

At the far end of the room, Rohyr sat on the black wood throne of Ylandre, the sceptre of Rikara loosely cradled in one arm. Flanked by his cousin Keosqe on one side and his uncle Yovan on the other, he patiently listened to an elderly petitioner.

From his travel-stained raiment, Lassen knew the Deir hailed from afar—the seaward fief of Glanthar or thereabouts if the fisherfolk's basket at his side was any indication. Sure enough, as soon as Rohyr promised to address his complaint, the petitioner lifted the basket and pulled aside the cloth that covered it to reveal an offering of salted, dried blue eel from the Samaran Sea west of the North Continent.

Many wrinkled their noses as the pungent aroma of the delicacy wafted across the chamber. But Rohyr did not allow even a flicker of distaste to show. Instead, he briskly thanked the old petitioner for his gift and bid one of the squires to take it to the kitchens forthwith. Concealing what Lassen knew to be a grin with his hand, he sat back to await the next supplicant.

In the next instant, he straightened and looked about searchingly. His gaze alighted on Lassen. Heeding the king's command, Keosqe signed to the attendants to hold the succeeding petitioners back awhile. Rohyr lifted the sceptre and pointed it at his leman.

Lassen approached the throne at a measured pace, ignoring the whispers that accompanied his every stride. Coming before Rohyr, he bowed low before him.

“Wherefore the pleasure of your presence, *Las-min*?” Rohyr softly inquired, the familiar form of his name Lassen’s signal to straighten up.

“I wish to request an audience with you, *Dyhar*,” he replied. “For certain of my townmates who’ve come hotfoot to plead for your aid.”

Rohyr glanced at the chamber entrance. Mykal and Owyn stood just outside the door, hopefully awaiting permission to enter. Rohyr looked at Lassen once more.

“You so rarely ask anything of me, I can only imagine what dire circumstance has compelled you to appeal to me now. I will hear them out.”

Lassen beamed his thanks and stepped to one side as, at a gesture from Keosqe, the Elders came forward.

Surprise met their recounting of the blockade. Even Keosqe whose business it was to keep abreast of such events had not anticipated it.

“There was no indication of this whatsoever?” Rohyr questioned.

Keosqe shook his head. “Had there been, either Gilmael or I would have been apprised of it by now.”

“Then it was a sudden move on their part,” Yovan surmised. “And they counted on the distance and isolation of eastern Velarus coupled with the dearth of translocation adepts in the region to keep news of it from reaching us too soon. They did not foresee Vaeren sympathizing with the Velarusians.”

“But what in *heyas* do they hope to gain by it?” Keosqe wondered.

Rohyr frowned. “What indeed? Kes, have Tyrde explain his actions. Make it clear that we require his answer within the day. I’ll contact Uncle Imcael myself.” He looked at the Elders. “If Qimaras and Anju can give me no good cause for it, I will have the blockade lifted immediately.”

The two glanced uncertainly at Lassen. His smile assured them that the unspoken order for Imcael and his son to cease and desist was as good as done, Rohyr’s diplomatic wording notwithstanding. Relieved, the Elders thanked the king profusely. Following tradition, they also tendered Rohyr a gift of appreciation—an exquisitely crafted brooch depicting the four-rayed Star of Veres.

While the Elders were ushered out of the chamber, Lassen also took leave of the king that he might keep them company before they left the capital.

I expect to see more of you this eve, Las-min.

“Shall I go to your rooms?” Lassen softly inquired.

Rohyr murmured, “Nay, await me in yours.”

* * * *

Lassen slipped out of the bed and went to the bathing chamber. He relieved himself then washed away the milky rivulet that trickled down the inside of his legs. The slight tenderness between his thighs and a mild twinge in his rear told of a night of indulgence.

Rohyr had been insatiable. Lassen perforce pleaded rawness and offered him his arse instead. Whereupon Rohyr took him twice more before he was finally relieved of the surfeit of tension that had manifested itself in his sexual voraciousness. Rohyr had meant it when he said long ago that Lassen would be his haven from the problems and pressures of rulership.

He revealed one of those vexations just before slumber took them.

“Tyrde was flexing his muscles and Imcael didn’t see fit to discourage him from doing so,” he said as they rested after their last torrid bout.

Lassen lifted his head from Rohyr’s shoulder and peered at him. “You’ve communicated with Imcael?”

Rohyr nodded. “Of course, he couched the admission in fair words, claiming Tyrde was only reminding the Velarusians that Anju isn’t to be trifled with. Why they thought your people needed reminding, he declined to explain. And Tyrde was swift enough with his apology as well. Keosqe’s emissary waited only for the length of time it took for Tyrde to compose his reply before returning here.” He sighed in exasperation. “If they wanted attention, they certainly got it, though Veres knows there are less offensive ways of going about it. Neither Imcael nor Tyrde could believe that I would countenance such a course of action once word of it reached me.”

“But if they knew you wouldn’t condone it, why did they proceed?” Lassen pursed his lips. “A test?”

Rohyr smiled humorlessly. “Of the limits of my tolerance now that Tyrde is come to his title. Imcael and his sons are my closest kin who stand in line to the throne. Yet I feel no great affinity with any of them as I do with the others, or even Tenryon or Riordan. I should love my sire’s only brother and his family best, but I don’t. Or more to the point, I can’t.”

“You’ve shared so much more with the others,” Lassen murmured. “And they love you for yourself, not because you wear the crown.”

“True. Imcael resents it to this day that it is I who wears it and not he.”

“Have you ever worried that he would...” Lassen hesitated then pressed on. “That he would try to wrest it from you?”

Rohyr shook his head. “He resents me but he does not hate me so much that he would attempt to depose me. He’s still my uncle and did love my *aba* well. And for all his ambition, he is loyal to me.”

Lassen did not question Rohyr about the means by which he had ascertained his uncle’s fidelity. He suspected though that Rohyr had made good use of his prodigious talents.

All True Bloods possessed the latent power to wield the mind gifts though the degree of strength varied. However, not all knew how to tap that power to the fullest or learned to use it competently. Even among the Essendris the level of skill differed and not all scions of the Royal House were taught how to harness their power proficiently. Surprisingly, Imcael was not as adroit as one would expect of a prince who had once been thought to succeed his then childless brother. Lassen wondered whether it was simply due to a lack of proper training or if the Herun had been unfortunate enough not to inherit the Essendri potential in full.

“What of his sons?”

“There is nothing to fear from Mahael or Ronuin. But Tyrde is an unknown quantity,” Rohyr admitted. “He’s only a few years older than you and the last time he came to court was before your arrival. I haven’t seen or spoken with him since.”

Returning to the bed, Lassen looked down at his sleeping lover. He gazed upon his features, so comely even in repose, before his eyes travelled down the length of his splendid body. He knew every inch of that body. Just as Rohyr knew his. There was not a

part of him the king had not uncovered, plumbed and owned over the course of their liaison. And still, each time he bedded Lassen, it was with the same driving lust as when he had plucked his virginity or divested him of the last of his innocence when he reached his thirtieth year.

Lassen abruptly turned away, the mere recollection of that night enough to unsettle him. His memories of the dinner in his honor were hazy, distracted as he was by the way Rohyr had eyed him throughout the meal. He could not clearly recall the jests that had peppered the dinner conversation or the sympathetic glances Rohyr's cousins cast his way as the evening progressed and Rohyr's forbearance wore thin. But Lassen would always remember the moment when, instead of more wine, Josel served him a narrow crystal flute filled with a clear, cerulean-hued liquid.

Mirash. Ingested after a meal, it inhibited the viability of the womb by causing its lining or seedbed to reject infiltration by semen. Lassen had not thought he could blush as deeply as he had upon laying eyes for the first time on the potent conception suppressor.

The others had considerably turned their attention elsewhere while he slowly downed the liquid. Its flavor was akin to sweet wine but with a mild astringent aftertaste that was a reminder of *mirash's* medicinal purpose. Needless to say, by the time dinner ended, Lassen was so high-strung he could barely utter coherent goodnights to the others.

His bedding that eve had been markedly different from the first time he lay with Rohyr.

His lover often turned him when they coupled to heighten Lassen's sensitivity and pleasure. But this time, with genital penetration at hand, Rohyr had lengthened their foreplay to ensure Lassen would receive him with a minimum of discomfort. The prolonged stimulation left the youth in such a state of anticipation and need that, when Rohyr finally entered him, Lassen no longer gave much thought to the sharp sting that came with the tearing of the vestigial membrane within his seed channel, so focused was he on the throbbing emptiness inside him that begged to be filled. So happy had he been to completely belong to Rohyr that he'd shamelessly reached down between them to ascertain for himself that they were at last joined in reproductive intercourse. It had thrilled him to the core to feel Rohyr's shaft move beneath his fingers as it slid in and out of his sheath.

Lassen snatched up his robe and pulled it on as he walked to the balcony. The night air slightly cooled his heated cheeks and he let out a shuddery exhalation. The memories were too stirring for comfort. He squeezed his thighs together, cursing under his breath. Despite the mild soreness therein, his body yearned to be pierced once more.

There was no helping it. He was hopelessly addicted to the joy of Rohyr's possession of him.

He blunted the sharp pang of wanting by turning his thoughts back to the problem of Imcael and his youngest son. Lassen worried that their actions were only the beginning of something else. He could not shake the sense of foreboding that Imcael was hatching some scheme that would have a profound impact not only on his nephew but also on his nephew's leman. He had no grounds to explain why he felt so, he simply did.

Lassen.

He looked back. Rohyr was awake and watching him.

Come back to bed.

The summons was enough to make Lassen forget his anxieties for the moment. He

returned to Rohyr's side and slid into his embrace. Rohyr rolled him beneath him and sealed their lips together.

In truth, the Ardan was just as much a refuge to his leman. There was no room for thoughts or feelings other than rapture when Lassen lay in Rohyr's arms. The world and all its problems receded before the relentless tide of his passion.

Chapter Eleven

Bargain

Torrents of water lashed at the windowpanes with the fervor of end of summer storms. The second wet season of a northern Aiseni year had begun and would hold sway for the next month or so until the cool dry weather of autumn supplanted the rains.

Lassen checked the window latches. A strong gust of wind could wrench an insufficiently secured window open and smash it against the keep walls. He stared out at the greyed vista to see if the Azira was swollen enough to cause concern.

The great river that wound its way through the very heart of the capital did not overflow its banks as a rule, even after near endless downpours such as they had experienced in the past few days. But on the rare occasions it did, flooding in the low-lying districts occurred.

"Has it risen overmuch?"

Lassen turned around. "The waters are still safely below the banks."

Rohyr sat in his great chair before the hearth. The table beside it held two mugs of mulled wine, an empty glass and a stack of correspondence. The Ardan was engaged in reading a letter. Or trying to, judging from the frown that marred his brow. Sure enough, he suddenly huffed and crumpled the missive in his hand.

"Is it too much to ask that one learns to write legibly if he refuses to let a scribe do it for him?" he acidly commented, glaring at the offending document.

Cool fingers alighted on the sides of his forehead from behind and rubbed them. He sighed after a while and, reaching for Lassen's wrist, pulled him to come around and sit on his lap. Lassen obligingly straddled him.

"Is it important?" he asked.

The letter was from the steward of one of the numerous royal holds scattered throughout Ylandre. Rohyr made it his business to know how his estates were faring and oft made sudden visits when he had time to spare or demanded regular reports when he did not.

"Who knows?" Rohyr irritably replied. "If there is aught in it that needs tending to, it's lost in a swamp of atrocious scribbling." He tossed the letter onto the table. "Remind me to have Gilmael or one of his people decipher the confounded thing. They may be able to make some sense of it. They are used to the gibberish of encrypted messages after all,"

Lassen chuckled. He ran his hands through Rohyr's hair, letting the dark strands slide between his fingers. A moment later, he caught a shuddery breath when Rohyr nuzzled his throat before trailing kisses along its length. Rohyr's hand crept under the hem of his shirt to fondle the wakening bulge in his crotch.

"You have a number of letters to read," Lassen moaned.

"They can wait," Rohyr roughly murmured. Lassen's legs securely wrapped around his waist, he rose to his feet and bore his leman to the bed.

The rain continued to clamor for entry into the cozy confines of the chamber. It clamored unheeded as the couple made good use of a rare afternoon of leisure. Lassen

watched Rohyr move above him, mesmerized by the strength and beauty of this Deir who owned him so wholly. Ten years onward and the experience of taking Rohyr inside him never palled; never lost the thrill he had known when they first joined their bodies.

He clung to Rohyr as the Ardan repeatedly speared him; inwardly stroking the sensitive walls of his seed channel that wrought so much pleasure the frictional contact was enough to bring him to completion. Lassen enjoyed coupling with Rohyr not only for the physical enjoyment of it but also because of the exquisite closeness he felt to the king whenever he took him into his body. In these moments, he could believe that he was more than Rohyr's lover. He could pretend that he was his love as well.

Lassen gasped helplessly as his climax overtook him. He clutched at Rohyr while his body quivered in the throes of his release, his sheath spasmodically gripping Rohyr's embedded shaft. Already swept up in the storm of his own completion, Rohyr groaningly swore as his pleasure heightened further. Lassen softly laughed in between shaky intakes of breath.

It was always a pleasure to see Rohyr so caught in rapture's thrall that he was reduced to uttering imprecations over his loss of control. In the fulfillment of his avowed role in Rohyr's life, Lassen found contentment and deepest joy. If he had a regret, it was embodied in the emptied glass beside their mugs of mulled wine.

Lassen savored the rush of warmth within him that made its way to his belly. He bit his lip as it dissipated soon after reaching the vicinity of his womb. Had he not earlier consumed *mirash*, the warm sensation might not have faded but flared instead into a spreading heat that would have signified the infiltration of his seedbed by Rohyr's ejaculate. He knew the familiar pang of sadness when the warmth petered out.

Not that it was advisable for him to get with child while he was still below breeding age. Though his seedbed had probably reached its fertile stage, it did not mean his womb was developed enough to house a child. It was highly unlikely he could carry one to term and miscarriage was no thing to take lightly. It could cost a young bearer his life for Deira below reproductive maturity tended to bleed overmuch in the wake of losing a babe.

But even were he of breeding age, Lassen doubted he would ever have a son by Rohyr. The king had said that he would not balk at siring children on his leman once he had done his duty of begetting heirs on his official spouse. However, he had never promised Lassen that he would indeed get him with child. After all, there were the sensibilities of his future Ardis to consider.

Rohyr's consort would likely endure Lassen's continued presence. It was not uncommon for Deira to keep their lemans even after wedlock, particularly in arranged unions, which were more the rule than the exception among the aristocracy. Nobles who openly resided with their concubines rather than their lawful spouses were not unusual. But bastard children were another matter entirely. Not all bluebloods countenanced the siring of potential rivals to their own progeny. Among the highest born nobles, it was more expedient to simply disallow the begetting of children outside of the legally recognized union.

Lassen stifled a sigh as Rohyr pulled out of him, careful to conceal the pang of loneliness he experienced each time they parted their bodies after making love. He could not bring himself to confess his feelings to Rohyr. His pity would only add to Lassen's sorrow over loving one who could never truly be his.

* * * *

The heavy rains did not hinder Imcael Essendri. He rode straight to the Citadel as soon as he arrived in the city. When he dismounted in the bailey, the grooms led his sopping wet steed away to be rubbed down in the stables while the retainers took his dripping oilskin cloak and replaced it with a warm mantle then plied him with hot spiced wine. To his escort of four, they offered strong ale and a warming spell before the great hearth in the servants' hall. Throughout, though all were curious as to why Rohyr's uncle would brave such foul weather, none dared mention it lest they received a tongue lashing from the fief-lord. Imcael was always afforded the respect due his station but the people did not love him.

If Rohyr was surprised by Imcael's unexpected arrival, he did not show it when he received him in his study. Nor did he display annoyance when the Herun demanded an audience with him as soon as possible. Rohyr simply could not dispense with his sense of obligation to his uncle.

Dylen was not as constrained, however, and inquired about Imcael's haste and presumption, as Rohyr might were he not a monarch faced with a relative he loved but whose company he preferred to do without. Dylen was impeccably tactful as expected of one whose former trade necessitated judicious language. But Imcael had never been known to tolerate so much as a smidgen of an affront. Consequently, he was in a huff when he retired to his rooms to change into dry clothes, leaving his nephews to discuss his advent. Neither missed his failure to answer the question Dylen put to him.

"What is so important that it couldn't wait for fairer weather?" Dylen remarked.

Rohyr sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Uncle Imcael thinks the world revolves around him. Anything that troubles him he deems necessary to bring to my attention forthwith." He rose to his feet reluctantly. "Just this morn, I felt sorry for you. Now I envy you and wish I were the one leaving for Vireshe."

Dylen snorted. "You think travelling in a storm preferable to meeting with him?"

"Anything is preferable to meeting with him!" Rohyr exclaimed. "And it's not as if you'll be in the rain the whole length of your journey."

Dylen grinned. While his mental powers did not match Rohyr's in breadth or strength, he possessed the Essendri potential and could generate translocation portals, the best-known hallmark of gifted True Bloods. He risked a real drenching only in the time before he entered the corridor and after he exited it. That is, if it was pouring as heavily in Vireshe as it was in the capital.

He drew on his cloak and made to leave. But before he opened the door, he turned and looked at his brother, his brow creasing into a frown.

"Take care, Roh," he said. "Don't let him badger you into a course of action you might regret."

Rohyr stared at him. "Do you suspect something in the offing?"

Dylen shook his head. "It's only a feeling I have. That blockade of Velarus last month? There has to have been more to it than mere conceit." He exhaled. "I suppose my unease stems in part from my dislike of him. I can never forget how he opposed your taking me into the family fold or the way he looks down on my *adda* to this day."

Rohyr's lips tightened. But he could not blame Dylen.

Begotten on a Rikaran *hethar* by the late royal consort Dyrael on the eve of his binding to his king-cousin Keldon, Dylen's standing in court rested entirely on his

immediate kinship to Rohyr. Imcael had been horrified to learn of an Essendri by-blow who was sprung of a member of that elite fraternity whose company and sexual favors could be had for the highest of prices. Even worse, Dylen had practiced the profession himself for years before Rohyr discovered his existence and formally recognized him as his brother. Imcael had been vocal with his dismay, retreating only when Dylen fought back and eventually giving grudging respect to his law-brother's proud bastard.

"I fear his ambitions not for himself, but for his children," Dylen said. "There are things he may do for them that he'd never think of doing for his own sake. Whatever the cause, I don't trust him in this and neither should you."

Rohyr grimaced. He never discounted Dylen's opinions about anyone; his brother was a good judge of character. But he had also always trusted Imcael implicitly no matter how much the Herun irked him.

"I shall keep your counsel in mind."

Dylen regarded him sympathetically. "I know you believe him incapable of treachery and likely you are correct. But it's a weakness that can be exploited and you must guard against that. It's not as if our family has not known betrayal by its own flesh and blood."

"That is ancient history," Rohyr said a little sharply

"And history can repeat itself," Dylen quietly reminded him. He walked back to Rohyr and gripped his shoulder, his *terre verte* eyes somber. "I may hold no love for Imcael but I would never be unjust about him. Surely you know this, *Ardan-tyar*."

Rohyr's budding anger swiftly dissipated. When he first came to court, Dylen had addressed him with strictest propriety. Only after a year had Dylen finally felt at ease enough to call him by name. It took two more years to convince him to drop the titles and honorifics altogether. A reversion to formality was indicative of Dylen's not quite vanquished uncertainty of the permanence of his place in House Essendri or in Rohyr's affections.

"I do know it, Dy," Rohyr replied. He clapped his hand over his brother's and squeezed it. "Rest assured, I will proceed with caution."

Made uneasy by Dylen's concern, Rohyr checked who of his coterie were currently in town and asked them to attend his meeting with Imcael. The Herun was taken aback to find him accompanied by Yovan, Gilmael and Riodan Leyhar. Nonetheless, he did not demand that they leave but stated the reason for his visit in his typical blunt manner.

The others were patently nonplussed. Even Rohyr stared at him in open disbelief. It was Yovan however who responded first.

"How can you even consider binding Tyrde to Lyam of Cattania?" he said with scathing acerbity. "Would you have him beget heirs for the Dimaris? That is tantamount to handing Anju over to them on a gold platter."

"Lyam is not the heir presumptive," Imcael objected.

"But his sire is, Your Grace," Riodan pointed out. "Moreover, Hanon Dimari stands as Regent and governs in his nephew's name. There is no surety that young Aranel will survive to his majority and take on Cattania's rule. Regicide isn't unheard of in their history after all. And in any case, a union with a Cattanian prince would ensure that a Dimari will one day rule Anju."

"So it would," Imcael readily agreed. "But he would still be beholden to the Ylandrin Crown."

"For how long?" Yovan challenged. "Anju shares her easternmost bounds with

Cattania and has direct control of the main thoroughfares of eastern Velarus. What if a Dimari Herun should decide to ally himself with his Cattanian kin? He could easily permit the inflow of enemy forces into Ylandre before we could learn of it soon enough to effectively repel such an incursion.”

Rohyr looked askance at Imcael. “I trust that isn’t what Tyrde had in mind when he blockaded eastern Velarus last month.”

Imcael scoffed. “Tyrde is no fool. He knows he would be charged with treason.”

“But a Dimari lord may not feel so constrained,” Gilmael reasoned. “He would have Cattania to retreat to.”

“You’re already assuming what Tyrde’s heirs might do!” Imcael growled.

“It’s our duty to assume the worst, Uncle,” Gilmael reminded him. “And even if the worst does not happen, kinship with the Anjuin Herun will in all likelihood embolden the Dimaris to exert influence on him and through him on eastern Velarus.”

“A flimsy excuse—”

“Which they would not be above using to foster dissent in the southeast,” Yovan interjected. “Cozening its folk with promises of prosperity, more say in the governance of the land and greater attention to their needs which, admittedly, the Ylandrin Crown can’t match given the present political dispensation. Lest you have forgotten, Imcael, that was how they gained a foothold in Velarus before.”

“Keep in mind, too, that we’ve kept the peace in the region for ten years now,” Gilmael continued. “Even a century hence, the greater number of Velarusians won’t remember the Cattanians’ brutality and rapaciousness and might consider a nearby Dimari overlord preferable to a distant Essendri ruler. I wouldn’t put it past the Cattanians to invade Velarus once again on the pretext of liberating its citizenry.”

“While the Varadani separatists continue to produce Ferrenda pretenders and stir up unrest in Tenerith,” Riordan commented. “Ylandre would be beset by strife on two fronts.”

Gilmael dipped his head in affirmation. “Exactly.”

Imcael shrugged dismissively. “Be that as it may, I came only to inform Rohyr of the proposal, not to ask him to grant Tyrde permission to accept it.”

Riordan gaped, his diplomat’s poise overtaken by sheer incredulity. “You would still proceed?” he blurted. “Even if His Majesty can’t possibly approve this course of action?”

Imcael raised his chin defiantly. “I carry the blood royal, as do my sons. We have the right to wed whomever we please.”

“And thereby invite treason into the very heart of our House.”

“How dare you accuse me of treacherous intentions, Yovan,” Imcael snapped. “Fie on you to even think it when I’ve held my hand all these years though I stand so close to the throne!”

“Not you, Imcael, or your sons,” Yovan retorted. “But you can’t guarantee that Tyrde’s children or theirs will remain as loyal to the Crown as you are.”

“And can any of us here claim that?” Imcael countered. “No one of us can foretell the future and say with any assurance that all will be well if we follow this course or another!” He clenched his hands angrily on the table. “I have only ever wanted what is due my sons. Verily, I shouldn’t have allowed Mahael and Ronuin to wed outside of our House to Deira of lesser blood.”

Gilmael shook his head. “Uncle, their mates hail from families of unimpeachable

bloodlines.”

“But they are princes of this realm and should have wed those of like royal heritage,” Imcael shot back. “I should have insisted on Essendri kin. As it is, the purity of our House has already been seriously compromised by ill-advised unions.”

While Gilmael and Riordan uncomfortably lowered their eyes, Yovan glowered at Imcael in indignation over the unsubtle jab at his family. Imcael had never made secret his opinion of the binding of Yovan’s father to an untitled Deir of the lower aristocracy and taking his surname to boot. He had also deplored Yovan’s marriage to one of the heirs of Clan Cordona. Wealthier than some entire cities the family might be with their extensive network of banks and financial institutions, but they were still commoners whose antecedents had started out with a money-lending stall in the commercial district of Rikara. In Imcael’s opinion, they had no business infusing the loftiest House in Ylandre with their plebeian blood.

Thank Veres his brother was not present, Rohyr thought. Dylen would have been terribly offended by the indirect slur to his gentle father. Shunting aside his irritation, he returned his attention to the problem at hand.

Long centuries past, House Kardova ruled Anju, a sovereign duchy before it was absorbed by Ylandre. The Kardovas had kept their ancient laws of succession and governance save where they came into direct conflict with royal legislation. This set the fief apart from the others in that the Anjuin Herun had greater latitude than his peers in the manner of his rule. That and the fact that no member of their House ever took a spouse’s surname. Not even if that surname be Essendri.

Because of Anju’s small size and relative unimportance in the regular affairs of Ylandre, Rohyr’s forebears had seldom interfered in the Kardovas’ rule of the fief or compelled them to break with their traditions. But now Anju had suddenly risen in significance thanks to the confluence of the Cattanian regent’s desire to regain territory and Imcael’s ambitions for his remaining unwed son.

“You didn’t travel here just to inform me of Tyrde’s marital prospects,” Rohyr said. “Else you would have simply wed him to Lyam and related the details to me afterward.”

Imcael nodded. “You’re right. I didn’t come here to gossip but to negotiate for a better situation for my son.”

“What is there to negotiate?”

“I’m not eager for a Cattanian marriage either. Their continued aggression against Ylandre does not sit well with me anymore than it does with you. But even you have to admit that a binding between one of our princes and theirs will go a long way to securing some peace at our eastern border.”

“Or open the door to more incursions in the future,” Yovan sniped.

Imcael glared at him. “We’ve already discussed that, Yovan. Have the courtesy to let me offer Rohyr an alternative.”

Rohyr heaved an impatient sigh. “Speak plainly, Uncle. What alternative?”

Imcael folded his arms defensively. “Only this. That whilst I am pleased to have Tyrde marry a fellow prince, I would much prefer that he be from House Essendri. Your sire wed a cousin after all.”

The reference to his parents’ marriage shocked Rohyr into brief speechlessness. Forcing down his anger, he stared hard at Imcael.

“My sire loved my father,” he retorted. “He wouldn’t have wed him otherwise.”

“I’m not suggesting that Keldon didn’t love Dyrael,” Imcael clarified. “But Dyrael also being the son of our *Aba Joren*’s brother Raval contributed to the attraction. Else why think you did Keldon bide his time while Dyrael matured further when there were others of our House who were already of age and would have done just as well? Mayhap even better considering their greater years.”

A dangerous gleam lit Rohyr’s eyes. “Are you implying *Adda* did not discharge his duties satisfactorily?”

“Nay, only that he had to learn so much that others of our cousins already knew. But that is neither here nor there. My point is Keldon chose to wait for a child to grow up because he believed in keeping our bloodline as pure and noble as possible. And we all know that the surest way to achieve this is to kin-bind or wed with those of equal nobility to ours. You would serve Ylandre best by following your sire’s example.”

“Not to mention your family’s interests, eh, Imcael?” Yovan snidely commented.

While Imcael glared daggers at Yovan, mild-mannered Yovan looked ready to do Imcael bodily harm. Rohyr moved to preempt a bout of fisticuffs.

“What you’re saying in essence is that you will accept Cattania’s proposition if I decline yours,” he grimly stated.

“That is the toll of it,” Imcael haughtily agreed. “Think on it, Nephew, and be quick about it. Yea or nay, I’ll have your answer forthwith.”

Rohyr stared at him as if he were seeing him for the first time. Imcael stared back with ill-concealed belligerence. Rohyr tightly gripped the armrests of his chair. Remembrance of Dylen’s warning exacerbated his sense of betrayal. Never had he thought that Imcael would willfully disregard their familial bond for the sake of personal aggrandizement. It was extortion, pure and simple, and no less injurious than overt treachery.

He fought down the urge to throttle his uncle. He was Ylandre’s sworn protector and that entailed keeping the realm free from foreign encroachment. Whether he could stomach Imcael’s methods was beside the point. And he could not deny that Imcael’s proposal was more politically palatable than Cattania’s. He willed his revulsion at the prospect of mating with a virtual stranger to subside to tolerable resignation to the demands of duty.

“Very well, Uncle, I accept your proposal,” he bitterly acceded to the dismay of the others. “But it will cost you,” he snapped when Imcael smiled with nauseating smugness.

The Herun’s smile faded. “What do you mean?”

Rohyr took little comfort in his uncle’s discomfiture. “First of all, Tyrde and I will bind by handfasting; there will be no fane rites.” Overriding Imcael’s indignant protests, he swept on. “Tyrde had best expect nothing more of me than what is legally and officially due him. Our relations will be restricted to the getting of heirs.”

Imcael scowled. “That is unseemly!”

“And coercion isn’t?”

“This isn’t coercion—”

“Pardon me, Uncle, but I fail to see how it can be deemed otherwise,” Rohyr brusquely interrupted. “Furthermore, you shall inform Tyrde that, once we wed, he will take the name Essendri, as will any and all children I sire on him. I won’t permit a child of mine to bear a different name or take another upon espousal. Henceforth, it will be Essendris who rule Anju, not Kardovas. Do I make myself clear?”

The corners of Imcael's mouth twitched upward before he appeared to force them down. Rohyr frowned. Had Imcael almost smiled? Without warning, the latter's mental shields slammed down.

The king curiously regarded his uncle. Why did Imcael suddenly guard his thoughts? Had he misconstrued Rohyr's reaction for a mind-probe? That was absurd since Rohyr did not make it a practice to intrude on the innermost thoughts of his kinsfolk or friends. For Imcael to hurriedly shut him out meant that he was concealing something.

It was tempting to break through those shields and find out what Imcael was hiding. But that was the way of despots and Rohyr refused to set foot on so treacherous a road. Once one made it a habit to attain one's desires by dint of the extraordinary gifts of which one was guardian, it was extremely difficult to break the habit and return to being less than godlike.

That sense of entitlement doomed the Ferrendas more than twelve centuries ago and had much to do with the Dimaris' ill-fated Velarusian venture some four hundred years back. Now all that remained of the former was a cadet line of little consequence while the latter could only wage futile campaigns to regain lost territory and prestige.

Rohyr did not care to follow their examples. He would have to discover what Imcael held back some other way.

"You have no objections thus far?"

Imcael rolled his eyes. "Are there any more of these stipulations?" he growled.

"Yes, one last. As soon as we are wed, you will retire to Qimaras and show yourself no more at court unless it is at my express behest."

There was a concerted gasp at his pronouncement. Imcael goggled at him, all traces of arrogance evaporating.

"You can't banish me from court!" he protested.

"I just did," Rohyr caustically replied. "Since I came to my throne, I've put up with your demands and atrocious behavior toward even those undeserving of it. I refuse to continue bearing with you on top of wedding one of your brood!"

He ignored Imcael's stricken expression, the first he had seen on his uncle's face since Keldon's funeral fifteen years past.

"I don't love you less, Uncle," Rohyr quietly stated. "But it's time you realize that you can't forever force your whims on me and never pay a price for it."

* * * *

Lassen said nothing for the longest while. He stared at his hands where they rested atop his knees, tightly clasped to still their trembling. He had always known it would come to this and done his best to steel himself for it. To no avail.

After several minutes more went by and he still did not speak, Rohyr reached for his hands and took them between his own. Lassen looked up, his eyes glistening.

"Will you still have need of my services?" he whispered.

"More than ever," Rohyr replied. "Why else do you think did I stipulate a handfasting?"

Why else indeed? A handfasting was a purely temporal marriage, recognized by the state alone. Absolute connubial fidelity was not required in that the keeping of long-term lovers by either party was permitted though promiscuity with different partners was not. By insisting on one, Rohyr had ensured the continued acceptance of his liaison with

Lassen. Nevertheless, the thought of Rohyr binding to another wounded Lassen deeply.

Rohyr pulled him onto his lap and tenderly cradled him. Lassen pressed his face to Rohyr's shoulder. A faint shudder passed through his body as he struggled against his heartache.

"I'm so sorry, *Las-min*," Rohyr murmured.

Lassen nodded forlornly. Rohyr hugged him closer in empathetic sorrow, feeling the waves of anguish and despair that rolled off his leman as if they were his own.

Chapter Twelve

Price

To make amends for the bare bones simplicity of a handfasting rite, the marriage of Ylandre's king was celebrated with all due pomp during the feast that followed in the great reception hall of the Citadel.

Jewel-hued hangings and fragrant garlands of royal holly and mint blossoms festooned the hall. The long tables were covered with costly damask and set with gold and crystal ware. Minstrels sang and dancers swayed to the lilting strains of gittern, flute and harpsichord while liveried retainers passed around trays, bowls and flagons of the finest food and drink the royal kitchens and cellars could produce.

Resentful he might be of being forced him into an unwanted union but Rohyr did not vent his rancor on his new consort. Whatever his sire's machinations, Tyrde did not deserve ill treatment. Nor would it serve Rohyr to besmear his reputation for fair dealing.

He and Imcael had forged an uneasy truce at best. Keeping it had tested just about everybody's forbearance.

The king and his uncle discussed the handfasting date as if they were negotiating a political alliance. Rohyr flatly refused Imcael's insistence on a winter wedding. They finally compromised on the following midsummer. But the interim months had been far from pleasant.

Rohyr only half-heartedly participated in the preparations for what was supposed to be a milestone in his life. Lacking information on what he might desire for his nuptials, his staff resorted to gathering it from the one source who most likely knew. Lassen cooperated to ensure his lover's binding would not be marred by embarrassing errors. Imcael almost had conniptions when he found out.

Unwisely, he threatened to end the betrothal he had forcibly brokered. An acrimonious altercation erupted, the likes of which the keep's residents had not witnessed in recent memory. It necessitated intervention to bring back the peace.

"You have the delicacy of a drunken burhog run amok in a glassware stall!" Yovan exasperatedly chided Imcael in the aftermath of the quarrel. "Take heed, Imcael. Rohyr can be pushed only so far. Were you not Keldon's brother, you would have passed the bounds of his patience long ago."

"Which would you prefer? A sleeping draught or a mind touch?" Eiren Sarvan tartly inquired that night of a still fuming Rohyr. "And don't tell me it's none of my business. It becomes my business when Lassen is worried enough to send for me at this unholy hour and beg for some way to sedate you."

Cousin to the Ardan and Rikara's foremost physician, Eiren was said to be the greatest healer in the entire country. Calm and reserved by nature, he was not given to impassioned displays and his uncharacteristic outburst quickly quelled Rohyr's.

Imcael seemed to realize the error of his actions for he apologized to Rohyr. The apology was duly accepted but the tiff further widened the rift between them. And with Imcael's imminent banishment from court, there was little chance of it being mended.

Hardly had that tempest been settled when the prospective consort arrived on the tail

end of the spring monsoon. Rohyr welcomed his intended with due hospitality and little more. But chastened perhaps by the king's simmering animosity, Imcael kept his opinions to himself for a change. In any case, he could not complain about his son's accommodations or the utter correctness with which everyone comported themselves.

If it galled him that said correctness was born out of protocol rather than true amicability toward Rohyr's betrothed, he held his tongue. After all, they did not know Tyrde. For now, all his son could command was due deference to his office to be. Loyalty would come later.

Rohyr's group of intimates was another cause for concern. Imcael's sons were not part of that group even if they were Rohyr's closest blood kin besides Dylen and Imcael himself. He observed their demeanor as they welcomed Tyrde and his brothers. They were cordial and courteous—and that was all.

There was none of the intense and affectionate camaraderie characteristic of those who formed Rohyr's trusted circle. They would suffer or die for each other if need be. And like it or not, Rohyr's paramour seemed to have earned that same regard. Not so his sons, Imcael reluctantly admitted. The compunction was not there.

For once, he rued his insularity about his children's upbringing. Mahael attended court regularly as was expected of the heir of a major fief. Ronuin sometimes accompanied him while Tyrde had visited on a number of occasions in his early years. But they had not lived in Rikara for any length of time that would have enabled them to forge close ties with Rohyr. Small wonder they were not part of his coterie now.

Imcael watched as Rohyr took his place beside Tyrde to lead the traditional wedding jig. Watched and noted Rohyr's less than high spirits. Oh, he smiled, made nary a mistake and imbued each step with the proper liveliness. But there was something lacking.

Afterward the couple joined a quartet of cousins—Yovan's sandy-haired son Rysander, Ranael Mesare of the Royal Army and the brethren Aeldan and Ashrian Mithani. That Tyrde scarcely knew any of the four and had little in common with them became evident all too soon. He did not long remain by Rohyr's side but took his leave to sit with Ronuin and his spouse instead.

Imcael sighed. Tyrde had his work cut out for him. He wondered if his youngest was up to the challenge.

It was some time before Rohyr rejoined his consort. Not an offensively long time but it was clear to astute observers that here was no love match. Even Rohyr's attire bore testament to his lack of enthusiasm for the occasion. He was clad in the customary nuptial colors of cream and gold but there was little of the resplendence expected of the ruler of a great realm. Only the heavy collar of white-silver links and square-cut adamants marked him as royalty. And in lieu of his crown or even a ceremonial coronet, he wore a plain gold circlet.

But the most telling sign of all was the way he periodically twisted the wedding band of entwined gold and white-silver on the middle finger of his right hand. Not in the manner of one unused to wearing a ring on that finger but rather as if it were too tight and he wished he could remove it.

After a few minutes conversation with Tyrde, Rohyr scanned the hall until he spotted Lassen. His leman was seated at one of the far tables. Engaged in conversation with Eiren Sarvan and Reijir Arthanna's brother Keiran, he showed no sign of unease though he

must have felt it at a feast celebrating his lover's binding to another.

Conspicuous by his absence or presence, Lassen had chosen to endure the latter. Snubbing Rohyr's nuptials would have sparked criticism however unjust. Though it cost him, Lassen made a quiet appearance, dressing appropriately but not so well lest he be accused of vying with Tyrde for attention.

He maintained a discreet distance from the royal couple. Rohyr could not help a surge of pride at his impeccable behavior along with a pang of regret that he should have to conduct himself thusly in the first place. After ascertaining that all was well for the moment with Lassen, he returned his attention to the Deir who was now his legal spouse.

Last he had seen his cousin was close to fourteen years ago, just before Tyrde attained the age of consent. He was comely even then and promised to gain in beauty as he further matured. Well, that promise had been fulfilled.

Tyrde was every inch a scion of the Royal House—tall, well-built and very handsome. He shared some similarities with Rohyr but not enough to be mistaken for his brother. For one, unlike north-bred Imcael, Tyrde's speech was of southeastern Ylandre. For another, his hair was a bright golden auburn, a Kardova trait. Lastly, he did not have the distinctive rimmed irises that were usually the mark of Essendris of the direct line of descent. Then again, neither his sire nor siblings possessed it though, surprisingly, Rohyr's half-brother Dylen did.

Rohyr stifled a sigh. It would be no chore to bed so fair a partner. But he could not be happy doing so primarily for the purpose of begetting heirs. If only he could feel more for Tyrde than token amiability and casual desire.

He shouldn't have had to attend.

Rohyr glanced up to meet Tenryon Hadrana's indigo gaze. They easily slipped into full mind speech, which only the most gifted adepts were capable of lengthily sustaining.

To not do so would have invited talk, he silently replied.

And you're not accustomed to talk?

I am. But even after all this time, Lassen avoids it if he can.

And so he has come to watch his lover marry another. It's a high price to pay for decorum's sake.

He is strong.

Strong enough to stomach your connubial bedding?

Rohyr suppressed a grimace. *I don't know. I can only hope.*

We will stay by him when the moment comes, Tenryon assured him. But only you will be able to truly comfort him.

I'll need comforting myself. Rohyr glanced up at his mentor. Tenryon met his brief, imploring gaze. *I've lain with many but never unwillingly. And I'd hoped that I would at the very least feel some affinity for the bearer of my children even if I didn't love him. This ... arrangement ... shrivels my very soul.*

Tenryon gripped his shoulder in comradely fashion but Rohyr knew it for what it was when he felt the slight consoling squeeze. The Herun leaned down to murmur into his ear.

"Take heart, Roh-min," he said. "It's too soon to say that this is the end. And even you can't scry what the morrow holds."

He met Rohyr's curious frown with a small smile then straightened and walked away. Rohyr watched him thoughtfully. After a while, he took leave of Tyrde to mingle

once more. His seat did not remain vacant for long. Imcael sat beside his son, his eyes bright and his mouth turned up in rare cheer.

"I'm so proud of you," he said. "You were born to be Ardis of this land."

Tyrde smiled back. "And I hope I continue to do you proud, *Aba*. Especially when I give you grandsons."

Some of Imcael's pleasure faded. He glanced to his side and quickly espied the Deir who had shared his nephew's bed for a decade now. It would be no easy matter to supplant Lassen Idana in Rohyr's regard. The *sedyr* had given no one cause to complain and, by all accounts, had served Rohyr's needs most fulsomely.

The Herun sighed. Tyrde was beautiful and enticing by any standard but even Imcael had to admit that Lassen possessed that indefinable something that went beyond mere beauty and engaged more than simple lust. It was not only Rohyr's desire that Tyrde would need to wrest from his leman but also his affection and respect.

His eyes still on Lassen, he said, "I only regret that I couldn't secure his fidelity to you as well. Beware his paramour. He is a formidable rival."

Tyrde followed his sire's gaze. "He's comely enough. But I am Rohyr's recognized mate and the designated bearer of his heirs. Surely 'twill not be so difficult to dislodge the Half Blood from my spouse's esteem eventually."

Imcael shook his head. "Don't underestimate Rohyr's regard for him. I've spent the last ten years trying to get him to end their lamentable affair. When Rohyr pursues a course, there's no gainsaying him. That tow-haired upstart has become almost a part of our House; even taking upon himself some of the duties of one born to the blood."

"But not the privileges I trust," Tyrde murmured. "Surely, Rohyr didn't go so far."

"He didn't," Imcael grudgingly conceded. "Well, save for that damnable earring."

Tyrde studied Lassen, noting the gold earring set with diamond and heartfire that hung from his ear. In contrast, Tyrde flaunted the white-silver, adamant-adorned earring of an Ardis in addition to his binding ring.

"He isn't wearing it now," he remarked. "And he has attired himself quite simply for a royal feast. Methinks he's taken pains to avoid upstaging me. Quite commendable."

"Are you defending him?" Imcael asked in surprise.

"Of course not. I'm only pointing out that he's apparently willing to uphold the dictates of duty and protocol. Perhaps I may find something there to work on."

"Work on?"

"To convince him to leave royal service. Rohyr may prove difficult to persuade, but what of his leman?"

Imcael regarded him with some amazement. "Verily, I never considered that. But I advise you to proceed with caution. He's no credulous halfwit. And you must be wary of Rohyr as well. Neither you nor I could withstand a breaching of our shields were he resolved to know our minds."

"I won't give him cause to read my thoughts," Tyrde assured him. "Trust me, my lord. You will have a say in the rule of Ylandre even if you don't wear the crown."

The Herun frowned. "Have a care what you say, Tyr-*min*. Rohyr's intimates won't hesitate to bring word to him of any suggestion of treachery."

"Treachery? I merely implied that I would ensure you returned to your position of eminence at court. Surely no one can fault me for desiring to recall my sire from exile."

Imcael pursed his lips. "Still, tread softly. You have no allies at court."

“As yet,” Tyrde agreed. “Rest assured, I shan’t waste time making them.” His eyes wandered to Rohyr who was speaking with guests from the Province of Fenycia. “Starting with my dear spouse. He’s even more beautiful than I remember. Coupling with him will be no hardship at all.”

Imcael had to smile. “And you’ll not want for a skilled lover either if the gossip I’ve heard is true.”

“I’ll know for myself this very night,” Tyrde smirked. “And *he’ll* learn the vast difference between a spouse and a mere leman,” he added, pointing his chin in Lassen’s direction.

Seeing the hard look in Tyrde’s eyes, Imcael suddenly felt a twinge of sympathy for Lassen. Whence it stemmed, he did not know but it was unusual for him to feel anything that remotely resembled compassion for Rohyr’s lover. He regarded his son, then looked at Lassen again, confused by the emotion, fleeting though it was.

Meanwhile, the time for the consummation rite came too quickly for Rohyr. He forced a smile as he rejoined Tyrde and took his hand to lead him out of the hall to a spate of bawdy cheers led by Mahael and Ronuin. If Tyrde noticed that his cousins were a tad more restrained, he did not show it but beamingly followed Rohyr, displaying his elation at the prospect of bodily union with his handsome spouse.

Just before he left the hall, Rohyr looked for Lassen. He spotted him standing a little behind Dysten and Tenryon, doing his best not to watch Rohyr leave with Tyrde. Rohyr silently called to him but Lassen would not meet his gaze. Or rather, could not. Eyes lowered, cheeks pale and shoulders drooping, he was a picture of misery.

Feeling as if he were committing a sin beyond redeeming, Rohyr walked out the door, Tyrde’s hand fast upon his arm.

* * * *

He awakened at daybreak the following morn. It took him a moment to recognize his surroundings. The last he had spent any length of time in the Ardis’ suite was many years ago when his *Adda* Dyrael still lived. Since Dyrael’s death from illness, Rohyr had not reentered the apartment save once before Tyrde’s arrival and that had only been to approve his staff’s refurbishments.

He glanced to his side. Tyrde still slept soundly, his titian locks tousled about his face. Rohyr sighed and sat up.

Last night had been pleasant enough where his body was concerned. Tyrde was no innocent. He had known what to do and how to do it and mutual completion had been easy to attain. Now if only the pleasures of the flesh were enough to fill the void inside.

Rohyr took a deep calming breath then scowled. The scent that rose from his skin was Tyrde’s mingled with his own.

He slipped out of bed and pulled on a dressing robe. Leaving a brief note on the writing desk explaining that he was accustomed to starting his day early, he exited the bedchamber. He made his way out of the apartment, sweeping past the handful of nobles gathered in the sitting room to whom had fallen the duty of ascertaining that the royal marriage had been consummated. Their greetings died away when they espied his expression.

Halfway down the corridor, Rohyr passed Lassen’s door. He slowed down and looked at it. But before he could make a move, he saw Josel hurrying toward him.

“*Dyhar*, shall I have a bath drawn?” the elderly retainer inquired. When Rohyr did not answer but continued to stare at the door, Josel softly added, “He has already left for the day.”

Rohyr jerked his eyes back to Josel. “Left?” he repeated incredulously. “The first bell hasn’t even rung!”

Josel averted his gaze. “*Idana-tyar* mentioned something about attending to duties he had neglected during the preparations for yesterday’s celebrations,” he murmured.

Rohyr winced. “Did he say when he would return?”

Josel shook his head. “But I gathered he would be back quite late, *Dyhar*. He, ah, mentioned that he wouldn’t have his supper here.”

Silence met his announcement. At length, Rohyr muttered, “I see.” He looked at the door once more. “Inform me when he returns,” he tonelessly instructed. “And, yes, please draw me a bath.”

Josel solicitously ushered him to his apartment, wishing he could take Rohyr into his arms and comfort him as he had when he was a child.

* * * *

The night was old when Lassen returned to the Citadel. He trudged his way to the royal wing, his body as tired as his heart was sore.

He had planned this many weeks back. Planned that he would spend the day after Rohyr’s binding in incessant activity so that he would not constantly think of his loss. He had visited as many charities in this one day as would ordinarily require a sennight.

Walking down the hallway to his quarters, he studiously avoided glancing back at the door at the other end of it. The Ardis’ apartment was where Rohyr would likely spend the night now and many more to follow until Tyrde got with child.

Tyrde Essendri *tir* Kardova. Lassen swallowed hard. It did not lessen the hurt one whit to know that Rohyr had wed Tyrde against his will. He dearly wished there was some drug Eiren could prescribe that would ease the pain of heartache.

He entered his suite and headed straight for the bathing chamber. He badly needed a warm bath to soothe his tired body and fraught nerves. Filling the tub however would take too long and he opted for a brisk shower instead, hoping there was enough hot water stored in the Citadel reservoirs.

As he bathed, he wondered if Tyrde would demand that he be moved to another apartment in the keep. Lassen hoped not. This was his home, his refuge. One he had oft shared with Rohyr over the years. Many times had Rohyr foregone returning to his own suite for days on end, save to dress for court, ignoring tradition in the process much to the consternation of some.

After all, the point of placing the royal couple’s apartments at opposite ends of the wing was to ensure the security of the succession. When the king wished to lie with his consort, he went to the latter’s apartment for the night. But he did not linger there as a rule. For in the event of calamity or war, the chances of both Ardan and Ardis dying were far less if they maintained separate living quarters for the most part. This was particularly important if the Ardis was with child. The stricture had once applied to royal concubines as well for, in the ancient days, it was not unheard of for a sovereign to sire heirs on his leman either because he had no intention of marrying or his legal consort was barren. A pity such a recourse was no longer accepted in Ylandre, Lassen wistfully thought.

He vexedly turned off the hot water tap and welcomed the sting of cold that followed. It was foolish to nurse such fantasies. Best to resign himself to the many lonely nights to come.

Shivering afterward, he desolately dried himself. Strange how previously he had never been lonely even when Rohyr was not with him. The mere knowledge of his lover's presence in the keep had been enough to content him. Lassen pulled on a robe and stepped out of the chamber. He stopped short.

Rohyr stood by the bedside window, staring at the dark outside. But he sensed Lassen as soon as the latter entered the room. For a long moment, they gazed at each other. Lassen caught his breath at the look in Rohyr's eyes. And then Rohyr held out his hand.

Lassen wordlessly went into his arms and was enfolded in a tight embrace. He turned his face into Rohyr's neck and breathed in his distinctive scent. Rohyr buried his face in Lassen's fair hair.

"I sought you first thing this morn but you had already gone," he quietly said.

"Forgive me," Lassen murmured. "I didn't think you would have need of me so soon and—"

Rohyr cut him off with a swift kiss. "Hush, I know, I know." He closed his eyes and tilted his head so that their temples touched. "But I did need you. By Veres, I didn't think it possible to feel so alone whilst sharing a bed with another."

And your body. Lassen firmly pushed the thought away and took comfort in his lover's words instead. That Rohyr should still want him after spending the previous night with his consort was a balm to his aching heart. Tyrde might be Rohyr's legally acknowledged spouse but Lassen was his freely chosen lover of many years standing.

"Come to mine," he whispered.

While Rohyr undressed, Lassen poured himself a cup of *mirash* and hurriedly downed it. They would need to prolong foreplay or initially engage in anal intercourse to give the suppressor time to take full effect. No matter. It was not the mere joining of their bodies that Rohyr wanted but the exquisite intimacy born of the entire experience from seduction to final consummation.

Lassen shed his robe and joined his lover. Rohyr pulled him flush against his body and virtually stole the very breath from Lassen with a spate of kisses more scorching than the fire that crackled in the hearth. Lassen hungrily clung to him.

Midnight was long past when they finally succumbed to the pull of sleep, their bodies spooned together and still joined for Rohyr had not seen fit to withdraw from Lassen after their last bout. Lassen drowsily listened to Rohyr's breathing as it lengthened and deepened. He inhaled the aroma of their mingled scents and found it as soothing as it was intoxicating.

Just before slumber overtook him, he smiled at the thought that he would probably find it quite uncomfortable to sit for long the coming day. But he counted the discomfort well worth it after having been so thoroughly owned by his beloved. He suspected Tyrde had known only a fraction of the passion Rohyr had lavished on Lassen all these years. His smile widened when Rohyr drew him back even closer against his tall frame, his shaft securely harbored within Lassen's body.

Chapter Thirteen

Discord

“How long do you think before he shows his fangs?”

“He’s already begun.”

Ranael Mesare frowned. Not that Tenryon Hadrana’s reply was unexpected. But for Rohyr’s sake, he had nursed a faint hope that the Herun held a different opinion from him.

The two watched Ylandre’s Ardis as he walked about the gardens, a gaggle of admirers in tow. Half hidden behind a blossom and foliage covered trellis, they could observe Tyrde and freely make comment on him.

“You didn’t have to agree with me,” Ranael grumbled.

“And thereby perjure myself?” Tenryon said, his soft northwestern burr contrasting markedly with Ranael’s lower midlands drawl. He followed Tyrde’s progress down the main garden path a while longer. “What do you ken about him that led you to expect the worst?”

Ranael stared. “How did you—?” He broke off and shook his head. “It’s unseemly to steal a peek into another’s mind for no good reason.”

“I did no such thing,” Tenryon demurred. “Your demeanor whenever you are in his presence betrays you, Ran.” He gestured in Tyrde’s direction. “You conceal your animosity toward him very well but I can sense how you truly feel. And since it’s not your habit to make foes of virtual strangers, it stands to reason that you have previous knowledge that prevents you from making a friend of him now.”

The tribune folded his arms and leaned against the sturdy trellis frame. “I visited Vaeren at the Velarus constabulary base some years ago. Javan Kardova was ailing and he sent for Tyrde. Vaeren and I paid a courtesy call on Javan when we heard of his poor health and arrived soon after Tyrde. He was pleasant and charming enough, I’ll give him that. Yet I was uncomfortable with him. I didn’t feel our kinship at all.”

“You hadn’t seen him in many years,” Tenryon reminded him.

Ranael snorted. “If that were so, explain why we accepted Shino so easily when, last we saw him before he arrived, he was little more than a child. Nay, it was not for want of recent contact that made me feel uncomfortable with him. He lacked warmth and scarcely responded to my efforts to reestablish familial relations between us. It was as if I were witnessing a demonstration of proper manners, no more.”

Tenryon frowned. “Perhaps he’s not as outgoing as we thought.” His frown deepened when Tyrde’s merry laughter floated back to them. “Curious,” he remarked.

“That wasn’t all.” Ranael’s mouth tightened before he spoke again. “He flirted with Vaeren our whole stay in Anju.”

“Ah, reason indeed to dislike him,” Tenryon murmured.

Ranael glared at him. “That’s not the point! Had he kept it to mere flirtation, we could have stomached it. But he went so far as to importune Vaeren the last evening of our visit. Was presumptuous enough to accost him in his room when he knew full well that Vaeren and I—” He broke off but his eyes flashed with ire. “He suggested that it

wouldn't be wise for Vaeren to refuse him if he wished to rise in rank. Had I not arrived, they might have come to blows."

Tenryon pursed his lips. "Did you tell Rohyr?"

"I wanted to as soon as I learned of the betrothal. But I feared it would prejudice him against Tyrde before they had a chance to better know each other. Well, to *heyas* with that! I should have talked to Rohyr before he wed that hornet in silverwing's guise." Ranael ran his hand through his fair hair in frustration. "But if I speak now, it may drive a wedge between them when they should be forging a friendship at the very least."

"Indeed."

"And perhaps Tyrde has changed since," Ranael half-heartedly suggested.

"As he has demonstrated in the past four weeks," Tenryon dryly quipped.

Ranael looked askance at him. "What do you really think?"

The Herun shrugged. "Does a serpent's nature change when it sheds its skin?"

* * * *

Scarcely a month had passed since Rohyr's handfasting to Tyrde and already the Citadel was rife with intrigue thanks to Tyrde's efforts to establish himself as the second most preeminent personage in the royal keep. Since no one had ever made so active a bid for power, small wonder that those who frequented the Citadel lived each day in either anticipation or apprehension of some new development. Change was unwelcome when it disturbed the steady rhythm of life and replaced it with discordance.

He was never overt. Tyrde was no fool to flaunt his ambitions. And certainly not in a manner guaranteed to draw censure at best, outright anger and resistance at worst. He conducted himself with all outward propriety. He never openly demanded what was due him, never dressed down anyone in public and never behaved as other than a supportive spouse to the king, a gracious ruler to the people and the benevolent castellan of the Citadel. In other words, he seemed the quintessential royal consort.

Plain as day, Ylandre's new Ardis was bent on winning the people's love and favor and in particular the fidelity of the Rikarans.

The capital was almost a nation unto itself, its citizens comprising an amalgam of the many tribes of Ylandre. There was no regional homogeneity of tradition, speech or even train of thought. But in one thing the Rikarans did not differ and that was their adherence to the ruling family that had founded the city and went on to build one of the strongest nations in Aisen around it.

An Essendri by blood Tyrde might be, and of the direct line of descent. But in Rikara, the only Essendri who commanded the citizens' complete loyalty was Rohyr. To win the nation at large, one had to win Rikara. And to win Rikara, one had to win Rohyr.

Tyrde knew this of course. Else he would not bother to expend so much time and effort on the capital's folk. But knowledge did not always translate to smoothness of course and, even less, success of endeavor. For this small mercy and others, Rohyr was thankful though his temper could hardly be sweetened by the daily stress of an unwanted marriage.

* * * *

"Hanon Dimari wasn't pleased with your binding to Tyrde."

Rohyr slammed a palm down on the table. "Really, Gil, tell me something I don't know!" he exclaimed.

Gilmael did not respond in kind but only waited for his cousin to vent his pique. He glanced at a sympathetic Keosqe before speaking once more.

"Then you need not be informed that Tyrde is wooing not only your courtiers but also the city folk."

Rohyr scowled. "Is he succeeding?"

Gilmael and Keosqe exchanged another glance. Keosqe rested his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. "It depends on your definition of success. He's made a good impression on the Rikarans. They like him well enough to welcome him into their midst. And he has been undeniably generous with his largesse. But Tyrde seems to lack the common touch. He appears ill-at-ease when in close quarters with the 'great unwashed' as he calls the common people. He goes to great lengths to avoid contact with them. I can never forget how he scrubbed his hands immediately after cradling some poor farrier's child. You'd think the babe suffered from blight the way Tyrde carried on afterward."

"Which explains why he declines patronage of charities that require him to visit the slums in the south district," Gilmael remarked. "He's also been heard to say that he doesn't understand the practice of inviting petitioners to court. That if he had his way, the rabble would never set foot within the Citadel. I wager he'll manage to keep the people's goodwill for a while but winning their love is going to prove elusive, especially once they learn of his sentiments about them. And they will, just as they uncovered Uncle Imcael's disdain for them long ago."

"Like sire, like son," Keosqe agreed.

"And at court?" Rohyr prodded.

"He's had better results with the courtiers though probably not as much as he would like. He's made considerable inroads amongst folk who desire greater influence at court. But he isn't doing as well with those who are already in positions of power and have no need for greater access to you."

"Access?" Rohyr snorted. "I wonder how he explains his lack of knowledge with regards to my plans."

"Do you never confide in him?" Gilmael ventured.

Rohyr shook his head.

"You don't trust him."

Distaste shadowed Rohyr's face. And a hint of disappointment as well. "He's too ambitious. I'm no more than a way for him to further his fortunes. And someone to warm his bed," he bitterly added. "He enjoys discussing politics and gossiping about which noble got caught with his breeches down. And that is all we talk about. Veres help me, I know what acts and positions he favors in bed but have not a single idea what he finds entertaining outside. Music, books, theater, gaming... I don't know his likes or dislikes any more than he knows mine. The only thing he obviously finds worth his while sharing other than our bodies is power."

Rohyr sighed. "I can't love him but I'd hoped we could be friends at least. Well, it's clear that is a vain and foolish hope. And I fear our children will fare no better in his esteem. Small wonder that it's Lassen's company I seek. Would that he could bear my heirs. They would never languish for want of love and care."

Thoughts of his leman softened the sternness in his features to such a degree that one who did not know him well would have been shocked by the sudden change. Lassen was proving a refuge to his lover more than ever before, much to the bewilderment of certain quarters.

* * * *

“What can he possibly do between the sheets that I can’t?” Tyrde angrily demanded of his sire on his last evening in Rikara. “He has warmed Rohyr’s bed all these years, yet he’s as prudish as a virginal temple acolyte! You should see him blush when lewd tales and bawdy jests are bandied about. Surely he can’t please Rohyr as well as I do.”

Imcael stared at his son. Even he comprehended that the king cared for his paramour in more ways than one though, Veres forbid, it had better not be love. Still, it was Tyrde who was Rohyr’s official partner and, in Imcael’s opinion, he was wasting a grand opportunity to oust his rival.

“He pleases him not only in body,” Imcael pointed out. “Surely you know that.”

Tyrde looked at him with raised brows. “That Rohyr cares for him goes without saying. But that’s only to be expected given the years he’s had him in his service. ‘Tis the same with that lackey of his—what’s his name? Ah, no matter. But, really, I must find a way to retire the old fart. He’s of no use to me and only takes up space better suited to a younger, hardier soul.”

Imcael frowned. Josel had been in service to the Essendris almost all his life. It grated to hear the elderly retainer belittled.

“Don’t speak that way about Josel,” he rebuked Tyrde. “He’s been faithful to our family and served us well.”

Tyrde shrugged. “Forgive me my rash words but I scarcely feel his vaunted loyalty. He doesn’t serve me but rather that trollop. Rohyr refuses to assign him to my staff.”

“That’s not surprising,” Imcael gruffly replied. “Rohyr won’t allow his leman to feel forsaken by taking away those dear to him.”

Tyrde hooted. “Dear to him? A mere retainer? He shows his base blood, doesn’t he?”

About to protest that in no way could Lassen be accused of being base-born, Imcael caught himself. He had oft made the same insinuation during the worst of his tirades against his nephew’s concubine, but it had always been understood that it was meant as an insult to one he did not like and not a true reflection of his opinion of the Idanas’ place in society. Tyrde, however, spoke as if he believed that a member of the minor gentry belonged to the lowest social class. It betrayed ignorance of the many-layered structure of Ylandrin society. Or was it disregard for it?

Imcael shoved aside the disturbing thought and said, “I would counsel you not to speak thusly in front of Rohyr if you wish to remain in his good graces.”

An unexpected chill snaked its way up his spine when Tyrde merely burst into amused laughter.

* * * *

Lassen alternately groaned and whimpered over the continued play of lips against his throat and along his jaw. He shifted his hips slightly when the delicious tension in his lower belly intensified and his shaft strained against the crotch of his trousers. A moment

later, a similar hardness ground against his groin and he moaned with delight and a touch of frustration. He stared into twilight grey eyes, a-gleam with lust and mischief.

“Wicked,” he muttered, wishing he could convince Rohyr to pick up the pace. But with his hands bound to a sturdy leg of Rohyr’s hearthside armchair, there was little he could do in the way of active persuasion.

The fire cast its amber palette on them, dispelling the numbing cold that gripped northern Ylandre in midwinter while thick skins shielded them from the chilly floor. In the golden light, Rohyr appeared the image of a heathen god from the ancient tales of their long-vanished foresires—beauteous and powerful and enticing in a way that went beyond mere aesthetics. Lassen moaned when his body reacted further to the vision of his lover that his mind conjured.

Rohyr rewarded him with a molten kiss. Plucking at the buttons of Lassen’s shirt, he undid them slowly until Lassen was bared to the waist. He paid amorous attention to each nipple, his tongue naughtily tracing the wider circumference of his leman’s areolae before sucking each plump nub to a hard peak.

“Rohyr, please!” Lassen gasped, arching up into him.

Deciding he had teased him enough, Rohyr made short work of the rest of Lassen’s clothing. He smiled as the latter’s shaft immediately rose in proud splendor as soon as he freed it from the confines of his drawers. A luscious temptation if ever there was one and Rohyr did not bother to resist it. He bent to take the rosy flesh into his mouth. Gasping in approval, Lassen parted his legs as much as he could.

Tyrde’s accusation was not entirely true. Prude he was indeed when subjected to prurient humor and tale-telling. But when in thrall to his lover’s desire, modesty and inhibition fled and he yielded himself wholeheartedly to Rohyr’s wishes.

The king steadily unravelled him with every draw on his length. His pleasure stoked beyond bearing, Lassen soon spilled himself down his lover’s throat. With the edge taken off his need, he sighed in blatant relief, turning a little indignant when Rohyr snickered.

“Can you blame me?” he huffed a little tartly.

Rohyr laughed harder then moved up to kiss the burgeoning pout from his lips. “You’re as adorable tonight as you were the day I plucked your innocence,” he said with a raffish grin.

Lassen wrinkled his nose though a smile tugged at his lips. “Adorable! That makes me sound like a child.”

Rohyr’s eyes glinted. “Hardly a child,” he huskily murmured, his gaze following the downward progress of his wandering hand.

Lassen hissed with pleasure as his sheath was teasingly fondled then repeatedly breached. His seed pouch tightened and receded in response to the stimulation. Rohyr’s fingers drifted further on to trace the cleft of his backside, circling the tight aperture before sliding in to the knuckle. Lassen’s renewed excitement heightened and he mewled a protest when Rohyr withdrew his fingers. He watched mesmerized as the Ardan lazily licked his lips before nudging Lassen’s knees up and apart and leaning down to partake of the earthy delicacies thus exposed.

A goodly, wonderful while had passed when Rohyr finally untied his wrists. Lassen turned into his embrace a little weakly, his lower body throbbing deliciously from rigorous usage. When Rohyr set to undoing him, he was very thorough about it. He snuggled contentedly in Rohyr’s arms.

This was the first time since Rohyr's binding that Lassen had entered his suite again. It simply would have been too impolitic for the king to invite his leman to spend the night in his rooms when he had not asked it of his consort. Or at least to blatantly do so when that consort was quartered just down the corridor from him.

But Tyrde was not in residence at the moment. Right after the solstice feast, he declared that he was unaccustomed to the oft severe winters of the north. Tyrde had departed only that morn for the milder climes of the south to sojourn briefly in Qimaras before proceeding to his fief of Anju. Lassen had until mid spring before the rhythm of his life was disrupted once more.

Not once had Tyrde said an unkind word to him if and when they bumped into each other. Nor had he ever raised a hand to Lassen on the pretext of some offense or another. But what the Ardis did behind closed doors wounded Lassen far more than any abuse Tyrde might heap on him. What could be more hurtful than having to bear witness to Tyrde's aggressive attempts to wean Rohyr from him with charming entreaties and torrid overtures?

"Las?" he heard Rohyr murmur.

"Hmm?" was all he could muster in reply.

Rohyr chuckled then drew slightly away that he could look into Lassen's face. A few minutes silent regard was enough to rouse Lassen from his post-coital torpor into mild anxiety. Rohyr spoke with sudden soberness.

"What if I were to reverse my imprint on you?"

Lassen stared at him, any lingering drowsiness vanishing in an instant. "Are you—are you releasing me from service?" he blurted, alarm sharp in his voice.

"Nay!" Rohyr caught him in a reassuring hug. "Didn't I tell you that I need you now more than ever?"

"Then why?" Lassen shakily asked.

Rohyr caressed one pale cheek. "Years ago, I told you that if you were ever to love another, you could ask it of me and I would set you free. You've never done so and I'd like to believe that you never will."

Lassen swallowed. "I don't want another," he whispered.

"How can you be certain that it's not my imprint that holds you back?" Rohyr softly countered. "Maudlin as it may sound, I want you to stay with me for my sake and not because you have no choice in the matter. I've thought long and hard about this. You know I would never act thusly on a mere whim. And I believe that you would never break faith with me," he added. "I trust you, *Las-min*, with all my heart."

It was a gift, Lassen realized. Rohyr had not couched it in those terms but that was what his offer was. He pressed his face against Rohyr's shoulder, moved beyond words that his lover should have such faith in him.

They never spoke of love. It was not wise when there could be no culmination at an altar for the both of them. What feelings they harbored beyond their fervent couplings and companionable moments together were left unvoiced.

Lassen ran his fingers reverently along Rohyr's lips. "I know why I have stayed by you all these years. But if you would have me unfettered, so be it."

The reversal of an imprint required no coupling as its initial placing did nor did it take as long to accomplish. Rohyr simply took hold of the ever present link that bound Lassen to him and severed it.

The change was subtle; layer upon layer of control withdrawn so slowly that Lassen did not quite realize he was free until he registered the void Rohyr's presence had previously filled. He shuddered, feeling adrift after having lived with that presence for ten years.

"How do you feel?" Rohyr asked.

Lassen shook his head, keeping his eyes closed as if in fear of a physical release as well. "Strange," he said, his voice breaking. "Alone."

He felt the Ardan's lips on his brow and cheeks. "I'm here, my sweet. I will not leave you."

Lassen opened his eyes. Rohyr's concerned visage met his hesitant gaze. He stared at him. He did not know why but it seemed as if Rohyr was even more beautiful than he remembered. Was it possible he already missed him just from having him withdraw from his mind?

He reached up and pulled Rohyr down until their lips met, parted and slanted against each other in scorching urgency. It occurred to Lassen that in the absence of the imprint that had once connected them, the searing intimacy of their bodies' unions would become the means by which to bridge the gap left behind.

Rohyr rode him hard, banishing by sheer dint of his near ravishment the shards of fear that threatened to overcome him. Proved that the intense pleasure Lassen had always experienced whenever they came together was no illusion imposed on Lassen's consciousness but derived from the sharing of their bodies. When he shattered at last, Lassen knew nothing but the ecstasy of completion made more glorious by the knowledge that it was at Rohyr's hands that he had found such bliss.

* * * *

The snow lay thin on the ground in Anju even at the height of winter; such was the climate's gentleness in the south of Ylandre. Few of its feathered denizens migrated to the warmer lands further down yonder and the hardier flora did not wither away to reawaken in the spring. As such, the view from Tyrde's chamber was a pretty one indeed.

The lovely sight went unnoticed as Tyrde's rage mounted. He had just finished reading the dispatch that came that afternoon. There had not been much beyond frivolous gossip in the missive composed by one of his coterie. He was not a friend; Tyrde was no fool to confide in any of these recently acquired hangers-on. But the courtier was loose-tongued and enjoyed spreading tales. Who better to keep Tyrde abreast of what was happening in Rikara?

He had not however expected to feel such anger and jealousy over the talk that Lassen had spent each and every night with Rohyr since Tyrde left the capital. And in Rohyr's apartment no less when he, Tyrde, had never set foot within.

He could not believe it. It appeared that all the attention he had lavished on Rohyr had been for naught. Tyrde crumpled the missive and viciously cast it into the crackling flames in the bedroom hearth.

It was time he dealt with his spouse's irksome paramour once and for all. Lassen Idana was proving too much a thorn in his side for Tyrde to suffer his presence in Rikara any longer.

Chapter Fourteen

Sacrifice

With the onset of spring, life in Rikara resumed its usual ebb and flow. No longer impeded by chilly weather, folk of every trade and profession made their way to and from the city. Farmers' carts laden with winter crops, caravans of itinerant peddlers, couriers from abroad and representatives from the various fiefs and provinces—all converged on Rikara like a benevolent plague. With their advent came the renewed hustle and bustle characteristic of the capital of Ylandre.

Humming softly under his breath, Lassen entered his apartment. He had spent the morning at the public market purchasing goods for two charities Tyrde had not deigned to take from him. The monks of the Saint Ambrion orphanage and their wards would welcome the lengths of flannel for the crisp spring weather and bolts of cotton for the coming summer. On the other hand, the south district hospice's store of liniments and dressings had been running low and Lassen had taken it upon himself to provide them with a goodly supply of both until the ministry of health acted on their requisitions.

He stopped in surprise upon finding Tyrde seated at the small dining table. The Ardis was not supposed to be back for another month at least.

"Very nice," Tyrde commented with a sweeping wave of his hand. "Small wonder my dear spouse enjoys spending time here."

Lassen politely asked, "How may I be of assistance to you, Your Highness?"

Tyrde smiled. "By leaving Rikara."

Lassen tensed. It seemed Tyrde would no longer be pulling his punches.

"If the Ardan commands me to leave, I shall," he quietly replied.

"So sure of yourself, aren't you?" Tyrde remarked. "But I have to admit the possibility of Rohyr ever doing so is practically nil. Therefore, the order will have to come from me."

"My service is to Rohyr," Lassen said evenly. "I obey him alone."

Tyrde sighed dramatically and leaned back in the chair. "You're a stubborn one. How bothersome."

He pointed at Lassen then gestured to him to take the other seat. Lassen reluctantly obeyed. He kept still as Tyrde openly perused him.

"Yes, I can see why he fancied you though, for the life of me, I don't understand his continued interest after all these years. You may have acquired the veneer of a Rikaran but, at heart, you're still a simple provincial who could do without all the intrigues of court life." Tyrde's smile widened. "And the prospect of never having a family of your own."

Lassen's cheeks colored slightly but he said, "I have no interest in starting a family of my own."

"Unless 'tis with him," Tyrde finished for him. "Well, the closest you'll get to tending Rohyr's get will be if he places any of ours in your care. Which I assure you I won't ever allow."

"Nor would Rohyr do such a thing," Lassen said indignantly. "He would never insult

his consort by charging his leman with the care of his sons. Save of course if he thought it necessary for their well-being.”

Tyrde’s eyes flashed at the tacit aspersion. “Nay, he wouldn’t stoop so low,” he coldly agreed. “But he has no compunction about offending my sensibilities behind my back, does he? And you have no qualms about aiding and abetting him. Or spending the winter cozily ensconced in his quarters.”

Lassen lifted his chin proudly. “He asked me and I complied. My duty is to please him.”

The Ardis leaned forward, his air challenging. “But not to do what is good for him or his people?”

“Such as?”

“Such as ensuring that Ylandre never faces another incursion from abroad.”

Lassen frowned. “There are no indications of invasion of any sort or even the planning of it.”

Tyrde raised an eyebrow mockingly. “How would you know? Such reports are never divulged to the populace at large.”

“I am not part of the populace at large,” Lassen retorted.

The implication that Lassen was privy to much that Tyrde was not did not go past the Ardis. The corners of Tyrde’s mouth began to descend into a scowl before he caught himself. He glared at Lassen.

“No indications *now*. But it can be encouraged. Cattania for instance.”

“What of Cattania?”

“Hanon Dimari is still interested in an alliance between his son and myself.”

Lassen shook his head. “He should turn his interest elsewhere. You’re already taken.”

Tyrde smirked. “Taken perhaps but there’s no guarantee that I shall allow myself to be kept.”

Lassen stared at him, a prickle of unease unsettling him. “What do you mean?”

“Rohyr insisted that we handfasted that he may carry on his affair with you,” Tyrde snapped. “But there are always two sides to every coin and if a handfasting benefits him, so can it benefit me and those who would treat me with, shall we say, more consideration.” He slyly smiled. “Just as a handfasting can be made, so can it be broken. The only one of our connubial unions that can be undone.”

Lassen’s blood ran cold. “Surely you’re not suggesting—”

“A divorce from Rohyr and remarriage to Lyam Dimari? Oh yes, I am suggesting it. Indeed, ‘tis not a mere suggestion but almost a done deal.”

“You’ve been communicating with the Dimaris?” Lassen demanded.

“Cattania borders Anju.”

“That is treason!”

“What’s treasonous about negotiating a marriage contract?”

“But you’re still wed.”

“And I intend to eliminate that problem soonest. Unless...”

“Unless?”

“You end your liaison with Rohyr.” Tyrde tittered at Lassen’s disbelieving expression. “Oh come now, are you truly surprised that I would wish to see to my well-being? I am a Herun in my own right, Lassen Idana. I bend my knee to only one Deir in

all this land. Think you I'd allow myself to be relegated to second place behind a mere commoner in my own marriage?"

"You don't love him any more than he loves you," Lassen countered. "Why should our affair matter to you?"

"Because he withholds not only his heart but also his trust," Tyrde shot back. "I am Ardis. 'Tis I who should have his ear and I he should confide in before all others."

"Trust isn't a matter of office," Lassen pointed out. "'Tis earned."

"And I intend to gain it," Tyrde retorted. "But I've not the patience to work my way around every obstacle, you least of all. I prefer the straightest course." He leaned back again, his cold smile returning. "Think about it and think well. There is much more at stake than your relationship with him."

Lassen stared at him. It seemed Tyrde was ready to carry out his threat. If he did, the repercussions would be severe for the realm at large and for eastern Velarus in particular. Lassen may not have witnessed the Cattanian incursion that had ended with the extension of Velarus' borders but he had heard enough tales of the slaughter and rapine that had taken place until the Ylandrin forces repelled the invaders. The Dimaris were cut from the same cloth as the brutal Ferrendas of yore.

He started when Tyrde suddenly leaned forward and caught a lock of his hair, rubbing the soft strands between his fingers. The Ardis grinned when Lassen jerked back out of reach.

"Hmm, you are pretty," Tyrde commented. "Not quite to my exacting taste but you'd do in a pinch."

That made Lassen's skin crawl. He rose to his feet and darted a glance at the door to gauge the distance to it from where he stood.

Tyrde laughed. "Oh, don't be silly," he mocked. "I know Rohyr has imprinted you and would make it most unpleasant for me were I to attempt to sample whatever virtue you may still possess. A pity. 'Twould be interesting to see what drew him to you." He stood up with a shrug. "But not enough to put up with any unpleasantness," he added as he turned away and walked to the door. "Think about what I said in the meantime. Or better yet, act on it soonest. And, oh yes." He paused at the door. "If you mention this conversation to Rohyr or anyone else, I shall break with him forthwith."

He opened the door and came face to face with a startled Josel. Tyrde glanced back at Lassen, snickered, then swept past the old servant. Josel stared after him suspiciously then turned concerned eyes on Lassen.

"Are you well, *Dyhar*?" he asked, noticing Lassen's pallor.

Lassen nodded and strode to the balcony. He stared at the gardens, breathing in deeply as if to dispel a noxious odor in his nostrils.

* * * *

"Rohyr-*dyhar* bade me tell you that he will come to you tonight."

"Thank you, Josel."

Lassen checked his clothes pack and the bundle of gifts for his family and a few friends back in Tal Ereq one more time. It would only be his third trip home in the ten years he had resided in Rikara. He had been looking forward to it so much that Rohyr finally allowed him to depart Rikara ahead of the heavy rains of the spring monsoon on the condition that he returned by midsummer. Lassen sighed. He was excited about

seeing his parents and brothers again. But Tyrde's threat had taken away a good chunk of his joy.

Josel patiently awaited him at the door. He obliged the old servant and entered the sitting room to have dinner. In the month since Tyrde's return, Lassen more oft than not had his meals in his apartment unless he was out and about in the city. In which case he would eat at an inn or tavern instead.

Furtive talk was not the cause for his avoidance of the dining hall. He was used to gossip. But Tyrde had taken to eyeing him in none too friendly fashion whenever they wound up in the same space whereas, previously, the latter had simply ignored him. It was a dilemma even Rohyr could do nothing about and Lassen refused to draw his lover into a situation that would do his name no good. It was one thing to keep a paramour after one was wed, quite another to esteem him over one's official partner. Deiran permissiveness did not extend that far.

Lassen ate sparsely of an excellent tomquail stew and crisp flat bread. Even the slice of wildberry tart with its crunchy nut crust and honeyed custard base did not tempt him beyond a few bites. Josel worried over him but Lassen managed to convince him that his lack of appetite was due to his elation over seeing his family again after so long. Appeased, Josel placed a crystal flute of *mirash* on the table.

While Josel prepared his bath, Lassen raised the flute and stared at its bright blue contents. Rohyr always employed the greatest care to avoid getting him with child. When Lassen took the occasional respite from the consumption of *mirash*, they coupled by anal intercourse alone. Now, of all times, the thought struck Lassen particularly hard. Sighing, he brought the flute to his lips. He stopped before taking the first sip.

Lassen stared at the *mirash* again. And then he stood and strode to the balcony. Two potted plants adorned it, one on either side. After a moment's hesitation, Lassen poured the *mirash* into one of the pots. When Josel came to fetch him, he was seated on the balustrade, clutching the empty glass to his chest and staring into the dark.

He settled on the bed afterward to await Rohyr. But restlessness overtook him and he rose to pace about aimlessly, oblivious to the nip of the cool night breeze on his bare skin. It felt as if time was passing too quickly. Time wasted on waiting when there was so little left of it. By tomorrow, he would be gone from the city and far from Rohyr.

Lassen did not know whence the impulse came but he pulled on a dressing robe and slipped out of his apartment. He looked up and down the hallway to ascertain that it was empty then hastened to Rohyr's suite. He had already committed a crime by not taking *mirash* when he would be spending the night with the Ardan. What was a mere violation of protocol compared to that? And in any case, neither act would be repeated. He would not be around to do either.

He entered Rohyr's quarters and padded silently through the sitting room to the bedchamber. Peering in, he saw Rohyr at his writing desk reading a letter, clad in a loose shirt and plain breeches. Engrossed in whatever the missive contained, he did not notice Lassen's approach. Lassen waited for him to set aside the sheet and rise to his feet.

Rohyr's expression when he turned around to discover his leman standing right behind him would have prompted Lassen to tease him mercilessly at any other time. Instead, he pressed against Rohyr and cut off his surprised, "Why are you here?" with a kiss that communicated a hunger of such magnitude, it blindsided the king. Rohyr caught Lassen to himself and kissed him back hard.

He was in for a further surprise, however, when his shirt fell open and his breeches loosened around his waist. Lassen plunged his hand into his crotch to grip him. Rohyr broke away and stared at his leman in confusion. Lassen was never less than a wanton in their bed but neither had he ever been so forward before.

“Las?” he ventured, his voice hitching as he was assiduously stroked. “What are you—?”

Lassen did not wait for him to finish speaking but slowly slid down his body, lips and teeth grazing whatever they encountered as he did, leaving Rohyr quite speechless. And when he sank to his knees and came face to face with the thick flesh in his hand, still he said nothing but took the whole of it into his mouth.

The sudden clutch at his shoulders and drawn out hiss followed by a spate of sharp gasps confirmed the merit of continuing. He drew upon Rohyr’s shaft voraciously, ignoring Rohyr’s whispered imprecations and his almost painful grip on him. All that mattered was this taste of his lover, of the faint salty flavor of engorged flesh mingled with the sweet-bitter tang of emerging semen. Ah, how he would miss this, he thought, as he repeatedly slid his mouth along that gorgeous length.

But even more would he miss the feel of Rohyr inside him. Spurred by the potent image that thought conjured, he reached down to fondle his sheath, turning himself on his own. The stimulation drove him to service Rohyr even more hungrily.

“Enough!” Rohyr ordered, his enunciation caught between a growl and a groan.

He kicked the chair away then pulled Lassen to his feet and whipped him about to lean against the desk. Lassen latched onto his mouth, smiling around the kiss at the muffled curse Rohyr uttered. Rohyr reached around him to shove the sheaves of paper and the narrow case of quills off the desk. Lassen entertained the passing thought that it was a good thing the inkwell was empty else there would be a beastly mess to clean up the following morning.

Rohyr lifted him onto the desk and pried his legs apart with titillating crudeness. Before he could think another thought, Rohyr was in him, deep and hard, and he cried out at the jolt of pleasure limned with the faintest hint of pain at so sudden a piercing. He fell back and grabbed at the table edge above his head to brace himself against Rohyr’s almost brutal thrusts. Veres almighty, he was going to be spectacularly sore tomorrow if this was how Rohyr used him this night. Lassen dearly hoped that was the case.

They climaxed one after the other in short order, the pace they had set too intense to sustain for long. With a groan, Rohyr allowed himself to rest atop Lassen for a few minutes while he caught his breath. Lassen held him tightly, enjoying the closeness that was more than the joining of their bodies. He felt the familiar rush of warmth as it made its way up his seed channel to his womb.

Lassen caught his breath. His eyes snapped open. He almost sobbed out a paean to all the saints in the pantheon when the warmth flared into a spreading heat in his belly. Tears prickled at his eyes and he struggled to hold them back.

He clung to Rohyr, feeling closer to him than ever. Even if Rohyr did not know that his seed had taken root.

At length, Rohyr drew back slightly. As he did, he noted Lassen’s overly bright eyes. “What is it?”

Lassen shook his head and smiled. “I was only thinking that I shall miss you terribly,” he murmured.

Rohyr gazed at him awhile before softly saying, "I'll miss you, too, Las."

He started to pull out only to find his waist entrapped by Lassen's legs. He regarded his leman with an amused lift of his eyebrows.

"May I assume that you're not yet satisfied?"

Lassen chuckled, the heady knowledge of having conceived easing some of his heartache. "I want to feel you tomorrow even when I reach Tal Ereq."

Rohyr groaned. "Sweet Veres, you're a saucy one tonight!"

He caught Lassen up and bore him to the bed. They came together once more, all but tearing each other's garments off in their haste to mold bare flesh against bare flesh. If Rohyr thought Lassen's boldness surprising, he did not dwell on it. Nor did he really care given how fulsomely Lassen was feeding his desire.

A slight wince, however, warned them that their first coupling had been far rougher than usual and left Lassen too tender for more breaching so soon. Flashing his endearing scapegrace grin, Rohyr retrieved the small jar of oil he kept in his bedside table then rolled Lassen onto his belly. Lassen wriggled blissfully as his back was peppered with kisses all the way down to the firm globes of his rear and the cleft between. He buried his face in the pillow, smothering his moans as Rohyr teased him with his tongue before dipping repeatedly into his core to taste deeply of him. When he was reduced to incomprehensible pleading, Rohyr replaced his tongue with oil-slick fingers and finished readying Lassen to receive him.

Lassen closed his eyes as Rohyr entered him. He was as used to the slide of Rohyr's shaft up his arse as he was to its press into his sheath. There would always be some initial discomfort given the natural snugness of the rectal entrance but the pleasure of anal intercourse was no less potent than that of genital penetration. Lassen pushed back against Rohyr's thrusts, yearning to be filled as deeply as possible.

Rohyr's hand snaked around him to rest on his abdomen. Lassen tensed in some alarm, as if the proximity of Rohyr's hand to his womb would alert his lover to the life within.

"Las? Did I hurt you?" Rohyr asked with concern.

Lassen reassured himself that only especially gifted healers could detect life at its conception. He glanced back and smiled mischievously. "If anything, you are far too gentle."

Rohyr laughed under his breath. "Too gentle, you say," he almost purred. "I hope you don't regret your words when I'm done with you."

Lassen knew he was in for a hard ride when he was enfolded from behind in an imprisoning embrace. Caught beneath Rohyr's powerful body, he could do naught but clutch at the sheets as Rohyr repeatedly drove into him with nigh bruising force. The pleasure from breaching alone was breath-stealing. But when Rohyr reached around him to stroke his sheath as well, the rapture spiralled.

"Take hold of yourself," Rohyr huskily commanded.

Lassen obeyed and gripped his shaft. With Rohyr's continued onslaught from behind and down yonder coupled with his self-inflicted caresses... *Saints!* The pleasure was going to kill him if it did not leave him permanently insensible first.

They tumbled into ecstasy almost simultaneously. Lassen collapsed soon after when his arms and legs gave way under him. Rohyr had just enough reason left to fall slightly to his side so as not to crush Lassen under his greater weight. He pulled Lassen back into

the curve of his body and chuckled softly into his shoulder.

“Last you were so noisy was when I imprinted you. I must remember to do this again.”

“Oh, please, don’t,” Lassen protested weakly, uncaring for now of the improbability of another time. “I don’t wish to keep awakening the entire keep thusly!”

Rohyr grinned. “But it pleases me to make them wonder what manner of lover I am that I can make you scream so.”

Lassen shook his head. Looking back at Rohyr, he wanly smiled and said, “‘Twould only provoke Tyrde if this hasn’t already.”

Rohyr hugged him tightly, suddenly sober. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “He has treated you with abominable disrespect since his return and I’ve done little to stop him.”

Lassen turned in his arms to face him. “There is naught you could have done. Think you I don’t know how much you’ve broken with custom for my sake? ‘Twas more than I expected; more than I could ever ask for.”

Rohyr gazed at him appreciatively. “You are worth it, *Las-min*. You always have been.” He sighed. “You haven’t even gone yet and already I look forward to your return.”

Lassen quelled the impulse to tell Rohyr the truth. For good or ill, he had to hold his tongue. Instead, he sealed their mouths in a warm and tender kiss.

Sometime past midnight, he awakened to the pang of sharp desire for Rohyr coursing through him. They had made love until their bodies demanded rest. But Lassen had gone to sleep still feeling as if he had not had enough. He was not certain if it was a function of conception—Mithre had told him that a bearer’s libido tended to strengthen during the first month, almost from the moment of fusion—or his sense of imminent loss and the need to use as much of the time remaining as possible. But whatever the reason, it did not matter.

It was not difficult to rouse Rohyr from slumber. Delight gleamed in his eyes when he realized what Lassen wanted.

“I don’t know what drives you tonight,” he whispered as he pulled Lassen into his arms. “But I pray this won’t be the last I see of it.”

Their play was much slower this time, the build-up in tension almost languid but no less enjoyable. However, Lassen could not help flinching when Rohyr caressed his nether parts. It seemed they had coupled more vigorously than was prudent.

“You’re too sore,” Rohyr murmured, withdrawing his hand. “And I haven’t replenished Eiren’s salve,” he added ruefully.

“I will bear it,” Lassen insisted.

“Nay,” Rohyr objected. “I won’t have you journeying in more discomfort than you’re undoubtedly feeling already.”

“But I need you,” Lassen pleaded. “Just this last time before I leave. Please, Rohyr.”

Rohyr gazed at him a long while. “Perhaps we should try something else.”

To Lassen’s puzzlement, Rohyr lay on his back then drew Lassen atop him. His next words jarred Lassen out of his confusion.

“Have me, *Las*.”

Lassen stared at him in disbelief even as the invitation’s import shot straight to his groin, causing his shaft to harden as it had never hardened before.

“Are you—are you certain?” he whispered. At Rohyr’s affirming smile, he swallowed hard, the very thought of being inside his love making his shaft ache almost unbearably.

“But what of Tyrde? Surely, ‘tis his right.”

Rohyr shook his head. “It is not a right but a privilege and only I may choose on whom to bestow it. I choose to yield to you alone.” He pulled Lassen down for a hot, consuming kiss.

With shaking hands, Lassen prepared Rohyr for breaching. The occasional wince that flickered across Rohyr’s face as he was stretched reminded Lassen that not only had the king never lain beneath another, he was also not obligated to. And in the unlikely event that he did choose to play the mare, it was understood that only anal intercourse was permissible so that the chances of conception were altogether done away with.

Lassen wondered if he was worthy of Rohyr’s submission; more so considering what he was about to do. But on the heels of his doubt came remembrance of his reasons for leaving and the loneliness he would face from thereon. If only to add to the store of memories that would buttress his spirit, he would take this precious gift. And if that damned him in Rohyr’s eyes ever after, so be it. He would have Rohyr safe. He would see Ylandre whole.

It was with a sense of unreality that he positioned himself to take Rohyr, even the wrap of his lover’s legs around his waist not quite enough to dispel his disbelief. He had never imagined such a moment, much less expected it. And then he slowly slid into tight heat as satin-bound muscles gave way before his invading shaft. He let out a gasping groan as pleasure rippled through him, the sensation of being sheathed indescribable and intense.

He gazed at Rohyr, his expression a mixture of incredulity and joy. Rohyr’s answering smile mirrored his. A few whispered words of encouragement and Lassen began to drive his hips forward in the age-old act of bodily penetration.

They were soon gasping in concert, both experiencing sexual union from the opposite perspective for the first time. Lassen hoped that Rohyr was enjoying this union as much as he was and worried that he was not. The strong grip of hands on his arms cut through his haze and he peered at Rohyr with pleasure-dazed eyes.

Rohyr had thrown his head back on the pillow and his breathing had grown rough and unsteady. There was no mistaking the ecstasy etched in his features despite the discomfort he must have felt from a first breaching. Lassen’s doubts vanished, supplanted by relief and satisfaction. He discarded the last of his uncertainties and threw himself with abandon into their lovemaking. Their joint pleasure waxed sharply. All too soon, feeling himself near orgasm, Lassen remembered to reach between them for Rohyr’s shaft and stroke it in time to his thrusts as well as he could.

With a choked cry, he climaxed, the part of him that had not turned incoherent thrilling to the knowledge of spending himself inside Rohyr. Liquid warmth hit his skin. Pushing himself up, he saw that their bellies were dappled with pearlescent fluid. He had not turned Rohyr and that meant the release of semen upon his orgasm. Lassen closed his eyes with a groan. There was something exceedingly erotic about the sight of Rohyr’s seed on their bodies.

He started when Rohyr’s fingers grazed his shaft where they were still joined to each other. The sensation combined with the faint frissons of resurgent desire to wrack his body anew. He opened his eyes and gazed at Rohyr.

The king looked at him from under lowered lids, a lazy smile hovering on his lips. So handsome did he look with that devilish sparkle in his eyes that Lassen’s heart swelled

with overflowing affection. His lust banked in the wake of his feelings. He gingerly pulled out of Rohyr and rolled off him to lie at his side.

After Rohyr wiped their stomachs clean with his discarded shirt, Lassen kissed him with lavish tenderness, his sorrow at parting from him muted for the moment by their sweet intimacy. With Rohyr's arms around him, he laid his head on one broad shoulder, knowing utter and unblemished happiness for this brief moment in time.

Rohyr dropped a kiss on his crown then murmured, "Had I known how well you could play the cleaver, I would have yielded long before this. Ah, why must you leave me now?"

For an instant, Lassen was alarmed. He forced himself to relax. Not since their first meeting had Rohyr purposely read his mind again and even that first time he had not delved deeply but only did a swift probe. Rohyr did pick up stray thoughts, particularly when strong emotions underlined them. But unless he deemed the circumstances dire enough to warrant the full invasion of another's mind, Rohyr resisted the temptation.

There was no reason for him to suspect Lassen of planning to separate from him. If Rohyr sensed Lassen's grief, he would ascribe it to Lassen's unwillingness to part from him for a long period of time. After all, that had been the case in Lassen's past visits to his hometown. And his reluctance was real in any case, as was his sorrow.

"If it were possible, I wouldn't go," he whispered. "I wish I could stay with you always."

Rohyr gently ran his fingers through Lassen's hair. "What need is there to wish for something that has already been granted? You belong here. With me."

To this, Lassen dared make no reply even if he could speak past the lump in his throat. He curled his arms around Rohyr, relishing his nearness one last time.

* * * *

Rohyr did not accompany him when he left the Citadel nor did they make their farewells in public. Some conventions had to be observed and even the king acknowledged the imprudence of flouting them. But neither did he permit Lassen to make the short trip out of the city without company. Tenryon Hadrana and young Shino Essendri rode with him to the Great Field.

Sensing Lassen's desolation, Shino steered the conversation toward Rohyr's decision to have him trained by Tenryon. Rohyr's orphaned cousin had started to show signs of possessing far more than the Essendri potential, which could put him in the same stratum of ability as the Ardan. Hence Rohyr's desire that Tenryon teach Shino how to wield his power not only proficiently but wisely as well.

They rode out a fair distance from the city. The creation of a corridor almost always took place in wide open spaces to reduce the chances of a portal blossoming in the middle of a solid structure or object such as a wall or tree or, Veres forbid, in the same space as an unsuspecting passerby. The energy generated was strong enough to shatter glass and stone, rip wood apart and bend steel. Anyone caught in the midst of a blossoming would be instantly obliterated.

It was not a problem with adepts like Rohyr or Tenryon or a gifted physician like Eiren who could plot a route through space more accurately than a navigator could guide a ship on the high seas. But the greater number of *enyra* could not be as precise. Thus, opening corridors within populated locations was generally forbidden and only condoned

in the direst of situations.

For his previous trips, Lassen had always had the benefit of Vaeren Henaz's company and ability to travel via translocation. This time, it was not necessary. Not when Tenryon could generate a corridor for Lassen even if he did not enter it with him. For the Herun was a templar whose mastery of the mind arts went beyond rigorous training and was rooted in inborn power of a degree that surpassed the ordinary.

Despite having oft seen it done by now, Lassen could not help being awed as a corridor began to open just a few paces away from their position. He stared at it a little nervously. It would be the first time for him to enter one unaccompanied by its creator.

"Don't be afraid," Tenryon assured him. "It will remain open until you exit it."

Lassen looked at him sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Your Grace. I didn't mean to impugn your skill."

"Nor did you."

Lassen faintly smiled at him. He glanced at Shino then looked at Tenryon once more. "How many templars are there?" he curiously asked.

"In the North Continent, there are ten of us, not including acolytes."

"Ten. I wonder who the others are. Do you know them all?"

"Aye. The birth of a templar resounds through the bond of our brotherhood and we seek him out as soon as he reaches puberty that he may be taught to harness his powers."

"It must be a frightening experience for a youngling." Lassen remarked. His expression turned rueful. "Forgive me, I am stalling and keeping you overlong."

"None can blame you." Tenryon regarded him with concern. "Lassen, whatever it is that troubles you, don't act rashly. Action without due thought will breed ill consequences or worse."

Act rashly? Lassen had agonized over his decision the past several weeks. But he only said, "I shall keep that in mind. Farewell, Hadrana-*dyhar*. Shin, luck be with you in your training."

"Veres keep you, Las," Shino responded. "Until we meet again."

Lassen turned his steed toward the corridor and urged it forward. Just before the beast entered the shadowed passageway, he placed a hand on his belly, protective of the budding life within. And then he was gone, swallowed by the swirling mists that shrouded the portal.

Chapter Fifteen

Exile

Tal Ereq, Eastern Velarus

Lassen had not expected much change when he first returned home seven years ago or even on his last visit three years back. But a decade on, Tal Ereq still had not altered much. Not that he should have been surprised, he conceded. Provincial towns seldom did.

The homes and buildings and farmsteads remained much the same, as did the daily routines of work and play. The population, however, tended to fluctuate significantly of late in terms of births and temporary residents. This was due in large part to the regional constabulary base located a few leagues away.

Velarus' constabulary headquarters had been built near Tal Ereq because of its size and prosperity. It was from Tal Ereq that the base purchased the majority of its supplies. The townsfolk also provided respectable company for the soldiers that the inevitable camp followers could not. Consequently, liaisons had sprung up between unmarried townsfolk and the constabulary bachelors. When these soldiers were transferred elsewhere, their new families went with them and Tal Ereq's population changed accordingly.

Lassen smiled as Yuilan haggled with a draper over the price of a silk brocade tunic for his mate's upcoming begetting day. The eldest Idana son had made a good match by espousing himself to the only child of Symon Barash. Formerly apprenticed to the master jeweller and now his assistant, Yuilan fell hard for Gelen Barash and wooed, bedded and wed him in the span of a year. The kerfuffle over the premarital impregnation of his employer's son had been as explosive as it had been brief.

Such behavior had been expected of Fileg, who, as soon as he reached the age of consent, made it clear that he was eager to learn his bed manners and not necessarily from one teacher alone. None foresaw that his first teacher would be one of the constabulary officers. Or that Araen Mihar would refuse to share Fileg and claim him in wedlock before Fileg could turn his eyes elsewhere.

Araen was reassigned to the military base in Edessa two years ago. Therefore, Fileg, like Lassen, no longer resided in Tal Ereq. But Fileg, unlike Lassen, was married to the sire of his son.

Lassen sighed, his gaze focused on nothing in particular.

"Are you well, Las?"

Yuilan was looking at him with concern. "Yes," Lassen quickly replied. "I'm well."

His brother regarded him doubtfully. "If you say so. 'Tis just that you remind me of the way Gelen behaved when he was childing."

"Oh? How did he behave?"

"He often seemed abstracted," Yuilan said, tucking his package under his arm. "As if his mind was miles away. It unnerved me enough to badger *Adda* about whether 'twas normal or not."

"And I act as if I'm expecting?" Lassen asked lightly.

“What? Oh, not at all! I only meant to say that your absent-mindedness is much like Gelen’s. It comes over you at the oddest times. Not at all like old Harod who would forget his own name if his mate didn’t shout it at him several times a day.”

Lassen faintly smiled. “If I’m abstracted, ‘tis only because I worry over where I can settle down without fear of discovery.”

Yuilan grimaced. “As to that, is it truly the right thing to do? Rohyr will be furious when he discovers you’ve left him. Can’t you tell him about Tyrde’s threat?”

“Must I repeat myself?” Lassen snapped back.

He abruptly turned away and began to walk down the aisle between stalls. But as soon as Yuilan placed a hand on his arm and voiced an apologetic plea for him to slow down, his irritation died away. *Saints!* He was so short-tempered these days. He had to control his moodiness if he desired to keep his secret. He looked repentantly at his brother.

“I’m sorry, Yul, that was uncalled for,” he murmured.

Yuilan threw his arm around his shoulders. “You are beset by the troubles foisted on you by that pathetic excuse for an Ardis. And it pains you greatly to leave Rohyr, doesn’t it?”

Lassen forlornly nodded. “I would have happily lived out my life as his leman,” he whispered.

“You weren’t supposed to fall in love with him,” Yuilan commented. “Only...”

“Service him,” Lassen finished. “But much as I tried, I couldn’t help myself any more than you could resist bedding Gelen when the chance presented itself.”

This last he said with a crooked grin and his brother did not take offense.

“I should have avoided being alone with him once I started having dreams of him bent over my worktable with his breeches down around his knees,” Yuilan remarked.

Lassen pulled away with a snicker, his face screwed up. “Please, Yul, keep those thoughts to yourself. Else I won’t be able to look Gelen in the face again without imagining him thus displayed!”

* * * *

Mithre was the only one who knew he was with child. Lassen apprised Dael and Yuilan of the situation with Tyrde that they might accept the need for him to part from Rohyr and go into exile. But of his condition he said nothing, fearing that, should Rohyr come after him and find his family unwilling to divulge either his whereabouts or reasons for fleeing, the king might resort to taking the information directly from their thoughts.

He did not know if Rohyr would deem finding him worth the distastefulness of a forced mind probe but Lassen preferred not to take the chance. However, he knew he could not carry out his plan alone. He had to tell one of his parents. Needless to say, Mithre was shocked and angered when told the truth.

“You are below breeding age!” he exclaimed in dismay. “How could you imperil yourself this way?”

“I had to, *Adda*,” Lassen replied. “If I’m never to see Rohyr again, this is the only way I’ll be able to endure it.”

“Do you realize how closely you’ll need to be monitored?” Mithre pointed out. “Even our choice of destination will be dependent on the availability of an able physician. No mere birthing helper or backwoods practitioner will do.”

"I know," Lassen meekly agreed. "Will you help me?"

Mithre exhaled. "As if I can refuse you," he said. He paced around his workroom as he thought about their options.

There were times Lassen thought Mithre was better suited to be an Elder than Dael if all it took was the ability to keep one's head in the midst of turmoil. True, he was not adept at remaining objective about issues that directly affected him nor could he remain civil with anyone he came to dislike. But it was his birthing father's equanimity under fire that Lassen needed at present.

"Are you aware that what you've done can be regarded as treason?" Mithre sharply asked.

Lassen nodded. "'Tis why I must have this child where I am not known."

"And live in exile until Rohyr tires of looking for you," Mithre said. "If he ever does. He doesn't strike me as one to take betrayal lightly. I fear he will not cease to search for you. You may never be able to return home, you or your child."

He softened when he saw Lassen's stricken face. With a sigh, he went to his son and gathered him into a hug. "Ah, pay my ravings no mind. Let us determine where we can safely hide."

"'Twill have to be as far from here or Rikara as possible," Lassen murmured.

"Which means we must head west," Mithre decided. "And we shall have to avoid the fiefs at all costs. Methinks Camara will be our best chance at concealment. The Camarans are *sedyra* for the most part and their speech not too different from ours. 'Twill not be too difficult to adjust to living amongst them."

"Camara then." Lassen looked at Mithre entreatingly. "We should keep this to ourselves. *Aba* and Yuilan mustn't know."

"You think Rohyr might force it out of them?" Mithre asked with some alarm.

"He will not need to. If he chooses, he can simply pluck it out of their minds."

Lassen smiled sadly. "What concerns me more is that they could unwittingly provide him with the information. Best they know nothing at all."

"Your sire won't be pleased when he learns the real reason for your need to go into hiding," Mithre warned.

"But perhaps there will be a new grandchild to appease him by then."

* * * *

Lassen and Mithre decided to leave as soon as the seasonal rains passed. They did not disclose their destination to Dael much to his bewilderment.

"If something should befall you, I won't even know where to start searching," he protested. "What then, Mithre? Saints above, why such secrecy even with me?"

"Because the less you know, the less you can reveal to Rohyr should he choose to read your thoughts," Mithre pointed out as he and Lassen folded clothing and placed them in a large wooden trunk.

"Yet he told you," Dael bit out.

Lassen left his packing and went to hug him. "Only because *Adda* will be with me and can't be questioned should Rohyr come searching. Verily, if I thought I could do this alone, I wouldn't have asked him to accompany me either. I don't want you to reap Rohyr's anger. This way, you can't be accused of intentionally hindering him. Please, *Aba*, this is as much for your protection as mine."

Dael held him tightly. "I should have denied him," he whispered. "I should have told him he couldn't have you."

Lassen shook his head. "'Twas never your choice. But even had it been and you declined, I wouldn't have known him then. I wouldn't have lived the last ten years in such joy had you refused to yield me to him. Don't grieve for me, *Aba*," he said with a sweet smile.

His sire looked searchingly at him. "'Twould have been better had you not learned to love him," he unhappily remarked.

"Mayhap," Lassen said. "But my life wouldn't have been as enriched either. I am content with my lot. I don't regret a single day of my time with him."

Dael sighed and let him get back to the business of packing. "What shall we tell Commander Henaz?" he asked at length. "He'll be expecting your request that he escort you back to Rikara. And there's Rohyr. What if he comes looking for you?"

Mithre straightened after locking the trunk. "We'll tell Commander Henaz that I intend to sell my wares in the northern markets this summer and that Lassen decided to accompany me via our trade route that he may see something of the land. And since Rohyr expects Lassen back no earlier than midsummer, he won't notice his absence until then. Time enough for us to find ourselves a safe place to settle."

He went to his morose spouse and kissed him. "I'll send you word of our arrival that you may know we are safe," he promised.

"But what if Rohyr has your correspondence watched?" Dael said. "He could trace your letters back to wherever you are."

Mithre frowned. "I didn't consider that." He looked at Lassen. "We'll think of some way to contact you without giving away our location."

"Perhaps we could pay messengers to take our letters and post them elsewhere," Lassen suggested.

"Yes, that we could," Mithre agreed. He looked at Dael again. "There, you see? We'll manage somehow."

"You'll be so far away," Dael muttered. "And with no surety of when you can return." He sighed. "If you ever do."

"We will return," Mithre assured him. "And, Veres willing, we shan't be parted for far too long."

Dael gazed at his spouse, eyes bright with worry and sorrow. He caught Mithre in a tight embrace and sealed their mouths together.

Lassen quietly slipped out of the chamber and returned to his room. His trunk was by the door, ready to be carried down to the wain come early morning. Before the family retainer arrived and wondered why they were taking so much clothing and other necessities with them.

Before he changed into a nightshirt, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. His eyes drifted down to his abdomen. There was no sign as yet that he was breeding. That would not be obvious until the end of the fourth month of the half-year gestation period. Only then would his belly begin to swell enough to require looser clothing.

He traced the faint horizontal line that ran under his navel, almost a shade darker than his skin. The birthing seam began to show a fortnight ago. It would continue to darken in color, its thickness gradually diminishing as the time of birthing drew near before finally and naturally splitting open to permit the babe to emerge.

There would be pain, Mithre had warned. But swift recovery from birthing was necessary to a warrior race. The wound would close within a day's span and the scar remain tender only for a sennight or so after. Meanwhile, his body would produce sustenance for the newborn. Infants were suckled for about five months before being weaned, the nutrient-rich fluid called *estra* speeding their physical growth and mental development considerably.

Lassen smoothed a hand over his belly, hoping his child would resemble Rohyr enough to be a reminder of his royal sire. A sound interrupted his musings. A soft groan came through the wall from his parents' bedchamber next door. Lassen pensively drew on the nightshirt, clambered into bed and extinguished the oil lamp on his bedside table. Lying in the dark, he listened to the muted sounds of lovemaking.

He would do his best to ensure that his parents would be reunited not too distantly in the future. It saddened him that they had to suffer through a lengthy separation for his sake. He only hoped they would deem a new grandchild enough recompense for the pains they were taking to see him safely through the consequences of his life choices.

* * * *

Lassen and Mithre left the next morning with a wagonload of baskets and other products from Mithre's shop, their personal baggage concealed underneath. At their behest, the soldiers of their escort accompanied them only as far as Sanora, a bustling market town in which the first major crossroad leading north was located. Lying little more than a league from Anju's borders, it was in this town that Tyrde had implemented the blockade of eastern Velarus the previous year.

From hereon, traffic was heavy and journeying was safe so long as one remained in company with fellow travellers. Besides, Mithre knew how to hold his own in a fight and Lassen had learned the bulk of his martial skills from the Ardan himself. Thus, their escort could part from them with confidence that they would reach Rikara safe and sound on their own.

Father and son stayed the night at one of the inns for it was late afternoon when they arrived and there was no hope of reaching the next town or village before daylight failed. But they left at dawn the following day, Mithre turning their wain down the west road that would take them to Camara.

The traffic was lighter for the region between the southeastern territories and the less prosperous lower lands in the west were only sparsely settled. Furthermore, Camara, the smallest of Ylandre's autonomous provinces, was not as populous as Velarus and even less progressive. Its folk were very insular and seldom strayed beyond their borders.

"How long before we reach Camara?" Lassen asked.

Mithre shrugged. "Provided the highways were not heavily damaged last winter, I think a fortnight at most." He glanced at Lassen, wondering how he would take the constant swaying once they hit the sharply winding roads and rolling countryside that was characteristic of Camara's hilly interior. "I made a space for you in the back should you need to lie down."

Lassen smiled. "Thank you, *Adda*."

Mithre smiled back and squeezed his son's hand reassuringly.

Chapter Sixteen

Pursuit

Dael went over the accounts once more. Perhaps Mithre was confident that he and Lassen had enough funds to tide them over until they could return at some Veres only knew point in the future. But Dael had to check for himself that his mate had calculated their needs accurately. That it was his fourth pass through their banking documents escaped him entirely.

It was now almost two months since Mithre and Lassen left Tal Ereq. In all that time, he'd had just one letter from Mithre and it did not mention where they had finally settled. That was only to be expected given the need for Dael to maintain real ignorance of their whereabouts. And he welcomed the assurance that they were hale and whole. But it did not make their absence any easier to bear.

He heard the door to his small study open and half turned to see Yuilan come in. Surprised that his jewel smith son should visit him so early in the day, Dael started to ask why but stopped when he saw his expression. Dread overcame him to mirror the fear on the Yuilan's face.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he asked, rising from his chair.

"*Aba*, the Ardan is here."

Dael caught his breath. "Here? In Tal Ereq?"

"In the front yard. He looks positively furious."

"He asked about Lassen?"

"Yes. And when I couldn't tell him anything other than that Lassen and *Adda* left together, he ordered me to fetch you." Yuilan frowned. "*Aba*, is it true? He said you didn't respond to his last letter."

The Elder combed his fingers through his hair distractedly. "I didn't know what to say," he admitted. "He sent Lassen a letter unexpectedly just three weeks after they left. I was forced to respond and tell him that Lassen and Mithre were on their way to Rikara and when they left town. He was terribly displeased that Lassen didn't inform him beforehand of his plans and he said so in his next missive."

Yuilan's eyes widened. "So if Rohyr knew when they left, he was expecting them to arrive in Rikara by the end of last month at the latest."

"Precisely. And when they did not, he sent another letter. But all I could say was that they had probably tarried along the way. After that, I hadn't the faintest notion how to explain Lassen's continued tardiness."

"Perhaps you should have just said you didn't know. He might not be so angry now." Yuilan swallowed nervously. "The way he stared at me... Do you think he read my mind?"

Dael's belly did a flip-flop. "I don't know," he muttered. "Nor do I want to."

He drew a deep breath and headed downstairs. He stepped out onto the small porch where Yuilan's spouse Gelen nervously waited.

The sight of a yardful of restless zentyra and stern-countenanced riders nearly unmanned him. Having his neighbors anxiously watching from afar did little to steady his

nerves. An instant later, he was confronted with a none too patient Rohyr, the Ardan's stance that of a saber-toothed fighting hound ready to pounce at the slightest provocation.

"Where is he?" Rohyr asked without preamble.

Dael blanched. "I ... That is—Welcome to Tal Ereq, Your Majesty," he stammered. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"I have no use for pleasantries, Elder," Rohyr curtly said. "I repeat. Where is Lassen?"

Dael glanced at Yuilan then looked once more at Rohyr. "Isn't he—isn't he in Rikara, *Dyhar*?"

"Would I be here if he were?" Rohyr snapped. "Not only did you fail to respond to my inquiry, but for someone whose mate and son have apparently gone missing, you are unnaturally calm. Verily, playing the fool isn't your vocation and I suggest you dispense with the act."

The Elder gulped. He resisted the urge to flee and drew himself up to his full height instead, which was not much higher than Rohyr's chin.

"In truth, I don't know, Ardan-*tyar*," he shakily said. "Neither Mithre nor Lassen informed me of their destination."

Rohyr's eyes flashed. "Are you suggesting that Lassen has deliberately hidden himself from me?" he demanded, his voice dangerously soft.

Dael paled even further. "He had his reasons."

"What reasons?"

"I can't tell you, *Dyhar*," Dael desperately replied. "None of us may. Lassen made us swear to this."

He cried out when Rohyr suddenly grabbed him by the collar and thrust him hard against the porch wall. "*Aba*," he heard his son exclaim. But Rohyr paid Yuilan no mind and two guards restrained the jewel smith.

"You will tell me whether you wish it or not," Rohyr snarled, his face so close to Dael's the Elder could make out little more than the slate grey of his eyes.

A wave of giddiness overcame Dael and his vision tunnelled until all he could see was a spherical blur of light and color in front of him. His chest tightened and his knees threatened to buckle as his limbs seemed to lose all sensation. He grasped blindly at the king's arm, gasping frantically as if he were drowning. An expletive escaped Rohyr's lips.

As suddenly as it started, the onslaught ended. Dael slumped against the wall, greedily gulping down air. Yuilan hurriedly gathered him into his arms while Gelen came to stand at his other side, a supportive hand on the small of his back. When his trembling eased somewhat, he blearily looked at Rohyr.

"What did you do to him?" Yuilan demanded, his voice tinged with equal parts outrage and terror.

Rohyr glowered at them. "When did Tyrde speak with him?" he sharply asked.

Dael caught his breath. He stared imploringly at Rohyr but the king gave no sign of relenting.

"Tell him, *Aba*," Yuilan urged him. "Lassen wouldn't want you to suffer any further on his account."

The Elder heaved a shuddery breath. "Lassen told us the Ardis visited him the day of his return from his winter sojourn in Anju."

“But that was more than three months ago. Why didn’t he tell me?”

Dael managed to straighten up. “Tyrde warned him not to tell anyone, else he would carry out his threat forthwith.”

Rohyr’s eyes narrowed. “That doesn’t make sense. If all that was needed to stave off Tyrde’s threat was to part from me, why did Lassen deem it necessary to leave Tal Ereq? He could have simply informed me that he wished to be released from service. I wouldn’t have kept him against his will. There’s something far more amiss than Tyrde’s threat.”

“If there is, I swear we don’t know it,” Yuilan insisted. “Lassen confided in *Adda Mithre* only because he needed his aid. But the rest of us he told nothing more than what you have learned.”

“To keep me from getting the information out of you,” Rohyr shot back. “How prudent of him. Or should I say sly?”

“There isn’t a deceitful bone in my brother’s body!” Yuilan hotly objected.

“Nay?” Rohyr challenged. “Then how do you account for his decision to vanish without so much as a by-your-leave? Wherefore the need for stealth and secrecy?” When neither Dael nor Yuilan could muster a reply, he smiled mirthlessly. “I lifted my imprint on him. Did he tell you?” he bitterly asked.

The Idanas stared at him. “He didn’t mention it,” Dael admitted.

“I trusted him,” Rohyr said under his breath.

Dael heard the sorrow underlining the anger. “Lassen is devoted to you, *Dyhar*,” he softly insisted. “He would never do you wrong.”

“I find that difficult to believe at the moment.”

Before either Dael or Yuilan could speak, Rohyr turned away and strode to his zentyr. Vaulting onto his steed, he spared the Idanas one last glare.

“Pray that I locate him soonest,” he said. “Before my temper sours beyond hope and I can still bring myself to be merciful.” About to turn his zentyr about, he paused and looked back at Dael. “When did Mithre’s letter arrive?” he asked.

Dael started. “Just the other day. How did you—?” He caught himself.

Rohyr coolly nodded at him then led the way out of the Idana yard. The family watched the company go, holding tight to each other. None noticed the rider who glanced back at them, a thoughtful gleam in his violet eyes.

He urged his zentyr forward and caught up with Rohyr. “Shall I set a watch on their correspondence?” Keosqe asked.

Rohyr nodded. “Though I very much doubt that they will give away their whereabouts in their letters,” he said with a scowl. “I saw the missive Mithre sent to Dael. It was still fresh in his mind.”

“Ah, then he was telling the truth that he had just received it.”

“Yes.”

“What did it say?”

“That they had reached their destination and found a small comfortable house and that Dael was not to worry about them. That was all.”

“Whence did it come?”

“Qimaras.”

“What? Surely they wouldn’t go there of all places.”

“It was dated a month back.”

Keosqe pursed his lips. “Postal delivery between Qimaras and eastern Velarus takes

only days, not weeks. They must have had a courier post from Qimaras for them,” he hazarded a guess.

“I believe that is the case. He’s doing his utmost to cover his tracks, Kes.”

Rohyr’s voice had lowered to a whisper as he finished speaking. Keosqe regarded his cousin sympathetically.

“We may still glean some clues from their letters and narrow down the possible places he may be,” he said. “It’ll take patience and some extrapolation, but it can be done.”

“True,” Rohyr conceded. “And in any case, I’ll need to know where to concentrate my efforts should I have to resort to a mind link.”

Keosqe frowned. “Is that possible? You said you lifted your imprint on him. Your link to him is gone.”

“It’s not entirely gone,” Rohyr corrected. “Fading, but still there nonetheless.”

Keosqe considered the information doubtfully. *Viratha* created a mental bond between its creator and recipient. Such a bond was dormant for the most part, a function of the imprinting process. It only became active when there was an attempt at intimacy with an imprinted Deir by someone other than his patron lover. When Rohyr reversed *viratha* on Lassen, their immediate connection was broken. But there were powerful mental adepts to whom even the weak traces of a former bond were visible. Keosqe knew Rohyr was one of them.

He wondered however if even his cousin had the power to read those traces given the distance involved and the length of time from the severance of their bond. What if it took more mental energy than Rohyr possessed to uncover those traces?

“Have you the strength for it?”

Rohyr’s expression darkened. “That remains to be seen.”

* * * *

They were back in the capital by midday. While Keosqe proceeded to his office to arrange for the interception of the Idanas’ correspondence, Rohyr returned to the Citadel. He did not confront Tyrde but his demeanor toward his consort was distinctly chilly from thereon.

It was obvious his leman’s disappearance had much to do with Rohyr’s dour mood. And going by his behavior toward Tyrde, it was also apparent he had discovered the latter’s role in it. Given Rohyr’s sometimes maverick disposition, there was no telling what he would do about the situation. But Tyrde was fairly certain Rohyr would not be above subtly venting his displeasure on him by marginalizing him at court for instance or keeping him in cloistered, useless splendor.

Tyrde had not anticipated such an adverse repercussion. Now that there was no risk of being accused of favoring his paramour over his consort, Rohyr could radically reduce Tyrde’s political visibility and influence. And with his main bargaining chip gone, Tyrde had no leverage to demand a greater say in the rule of the land. Nor could he employ the threat he had held over Lassen’s head that he would divorce Rohyr if his leman continued to hold more sway with him than his legal spouse.

With said leman out of the picture, neither could he demand dissolution of their union due to almost non-existent relations. After all, nearly half the arranged marriages in Ylandre languished in just such a state. So long as Rohyr fulfilled his duty of tumbling

Tyrde reasonably often enough, it mattered little if he spent next to no time with him outside of their conjugal bed. Besides, if Rohyr were to retaliate by letting it be known that it was Imcael who had brokered the marriage *and* that Tyrde had willfully entered into it fully aware that Rohyr's assent had been coerced out of him, the loss of face to Tyrde's family and his sire in particular would be enormous. Not to mention the general outrage were he to contract a Cattanian marriage after using so flimsy an excuse to force a divorce.

Still and all, he had achieved his desire. His rival was gone. Rohyr's attention would no longer be divided. And Rohyr dared not divorce Tyrde either since that would lead back to the original problem of a Cattanian alliance.

Yes, his relationship with Rohyr was badly fractured. But with Lassen out of the way, Tyrde was confident he could woo his spouse and win his esteem and trust if not his affection. As far as Tyrde was concerned, with his path to more power nicely cleared of obstacles, love was of little consequence.

* * * *

Rohyr perused the documents Keosqe placed on the table before him. They were closeted in his sitting room. Rohyr had given strict orders to Josel not to permit anyone to disturb them unless it was to report that the country itself was in peril.

It was almost three months since Lassen left Tal Ereq. Keosqe's people had secretly monitored the Idanas' correspondence, intercepting four letters from Mithre and one from Lassen. After all, far be it from any letter carrier to challenge an agent from Internal Affairs when asked to turn over his postal bag.

The agents never permitted the carriers to see what it was they sought. They did not open the pertinent documents in anyone else's presence nor did they keep them. Keosqe's instructions had been to copy the contents of the letters verbatim then seal them once more, replace them in the bags and send the carriers on their way. Only one letter did they keep and this was at Rohyr's express order.

He read that letter now, face devoid of expression as he took in the familiar handwriting. Like his father, Lassen had been careful to avoid including any specific references to his location. Basically, it was a recounting of a day at a local festival with a few mentions of certain activities and shows he had enjoyed.

Rohyr's mouth tightened. He could picture his leman's face as he watched the acrobats and listened to the minstrels. Lassen loved the earthy music and lively entertainment of the common folk as much as he admired the sublime compositions and witty plays that were the upper class' general preference.

It had been his wont to mingle anonymously with the crowds whenever itinerant bands of entertainers came to Rikara. On one memorable occasion, he persuaded Rohyr to accompany him, both of them and their guards dressed so simply it was only toward the end of the evening that a player recognized them and excitedly announced to one and all that the Ardan was in their midst. Rohyr found himself singing a well-known folk ballad with the troupe, delighting the swiftly swelling audience no end.

Rohyr swept the memory aside. Now was not the time to indulge in maudlin reminiscences. He looked at Keosqe expectantly.

Keosqe indicated the copies of Mithre's letters. "They are, as you expected, most diligent in avoiding any specifics about places or folk. But there are references that point

to their general location.” He tapped one of the copies. “He mentioned selling his wares to a trader who was going to dispose of them up north. That indicates that they are in the south at the very least. And as it’s unlikely that they would remain in proximity to Tal Ereq or come as close to Rikara as the midlands, I would venture to guess that they travelled west of Velarus. This seems to bear that out.” Keosqe held up another copy. “Mithre reported that the weather has been unusually cool and that this adversely affected the locals’ summer crops. That tallies with recent reports of a dearth of produce coming from the southwest.”

He gestured toward the letter Rohyr still held. “Most revealing of all is Lassen’s account of the festival. He described a competition amongst the local sweets-makers, in particular the bakers of fruit cream pasties. That is a rarity as pasty fillings are generally savory. To my knowledge, there is only one place in Ylandre where such sweet pasties are made—the low lands of southern Camara.”

“Camara,” Rohyr breathed. He glanced down at Lassen’s letter. “The Camarans are Half Bloods, am I right?”

“By and large,” Keosqe affirmed. “They have rather similar mores and traditions to the Velarusians. Even their speech isn’t too different—the lilt in their accent and the vowel elongation are just more pronounced. It wouldn’t be too difficult to adapt to living amongst them.”

“And their low country is a good distance from Rikara and Tal Ereq,” Rohyr mused. He smiled at his cousin. “Well done, Kes.” His eyes strayed to the map of Ylandre that covered half a wall of the chamber. “Last I visited southern Camara was nigh fifteen years ago. Methinks it’s time I reacquainted myself with the region.”

“I can have my people scour the area,” Keosqe suggested.

Rohyr shook his head. “I haven’t the patience for a protracted search.” His gaze moved northward of Camara. “I shall leave for Ziana tomorrow morn.”

Chapter Seventeen

Measures

Serene, mysterious Ziana.

If Rikara was pristine white and Althia sun-warmed gold, Ziana was shimmering silver. Or so it appeared from a distance. This was due to the local quarries. The stone taken from the mountains surrounding the city was actually a light grey but intermittently streaked with a silver-hued ore that gleamed when struck by light.

A wide highway led to the city where it lay in an immense fertile valley cradled by the almost circular Sag Habron mountain range. Snow-capped peaks and craggy cliffs overlooked Ziana, as if standing guard over the place of worship for which the city was famous. The oldest temple to Veres still open for public worship was located here.

The main highway to the city snaked through the undulating foothills of lofty Mount Qarval then gently descended into the vale where the city nestled. But Rohyr eschewed the traditional approach.

The sentries who guarded the Hadrana manse were alarmed by the portal that blossomed in the middle of the stone-paved courtyard. But their surprise was nothing compared to the shock of seeing their king suddenly emerge from the gateway ahead of the company of warriors who formed his escort. Fortunately, one of them had the presence of mind to dash into the house and inform the staff of the Ardan's unexpected arrival.

Rohyr quickly dismounted and strode up the wide steps to the pillared portico shading the front entrance.

"I wish to speak with Hadrana-tyar," he crisply told the servant who met him at the door. Before the awestruck lackey could respond, his lord appeared behind him.

"What brings you here, Your Majesty?" Tenryon murmured, gesturing to the servant to take Rohyr's cloak and gloves.

"I need your help to locate someone."

They walked to the main study in purposeful silence. Only when they entered the room did Rohyr speak again. "I have a general idea of his location and a fading imprint at my disposal."

Tenryon closed the door then turned to stare at him. "Lassen?" Rohyr nodded with an air of such weariness, Tenryon bade him to take a seat. "Show me."

They locked gazes and, in the span of a few minutes, Tenryon knew the toll of Rohyr's problem. He did not speak at once, surprise at Lassen's actions briefly forestalling all other thought. But at length, he asked, "Are there enough traces of the link to work with?"

"I managed to find them yestereve but they were not clear enough to follow."

"That's not surprising given the time that has passed since you lifted your imprint." Tenryon frowned. "I can't promise anything, Rohyr-*min*. Even my strength joined to yours may not be enough."

"What if I lend mine as well?"

They both looked up as a tall dark-haired aristocrat with steel blue eyes strode into

the room, another younger Deir just behind him.

“Jareth!” Tenryon softly exclaimed. The two met in a hearty embrace. “When did you arrive?”

“About an hour ago,” Jareth answered. He turned into Rohyr’s welcoming hug, saying, “I thought to see how *Adda* was faring before I reported to you in Rikara.”

Tenryon’s half-brother and Rikara’s ambassador-at-large did not look it but he had a number of years on Rohyr. Jareth’s youthful appearance tricked many an unwary envoy into indiscreet talk or untimely disclosure by leading them to believe that he was much too young and callow to possess the guile needed for crafty business.

He now looked searchingly at Rohyr when they drew apart. “It seems I’ve been spared a wasted visit. What need have you of others’ strength?”

About to speak, Rohyr remembered the presence of Jareth’s companion. He glanced at him then smiled in recognition.

“And what need have you of your aide for a family visit, Jath?” he inquired, beckoning to the *sedyr* to come closer. “It’s been a while, Yandro-*min*,” he said as the latter bowed low. “Is he treating you well?”

“He is, Ardan-*tyar*,” Yandro Vaidon affirmed.

Rohyr regarded him thoughtfully then glanced at Jareth. *Can we trust him?*

Implicitly. Jareth shed his cloak and handed it to Yandro. He motioned to the latter to stay by the door to ensure no one attempted to eavesdrop.

“He looks so much better than when he left university,” Rohyr commented as they sat themselves around the card table at the far end of the study. “Diplomatic work suits him.”

Jareth nodded. “He’s the best of all my aides thus far. I’m inclined to keep him on indefinitely.”

Another glance at Yandro revealed him surreptitiously looking at Jareth. Rohyr’s lips twitched.

It was no surprise that Jareth’s adjutant thought him attractive. Rohyr did not know of any of the ambassador’s staff who was not half in love with him. Like Tenryon, Jareth was exceedingly handsome. But whereas Tenryon maintained an aloof demeanor with all but his trusted intimates, Jareth dissimulated his, exuding warmth and amicability even when he was actively planning to bring about someone’s ruin. Or rather, especially when he was doing so. It made for a maddeningly enigmatic persona wrapped in irresistible beauty. Was it any wonder that Jareth tended to leave hopelessly infatuated admirers in his wake?

He glanced at Yandro again. Merry eyes of purest teal met his and a sweet, almost shy smile lit the face of the ambassador’s aide. Veres help him, Rohyr thought. Jareth would eat him alive if he had not done so already. He turned a severe look on his diplomat cousin.

“What did I do wrong?” Jareth mildly inquired upon feeling the heat in Rohyr’s stare.

“Have you gotten him between your sheets yet?” Rohyr inquired, tilting his head slightly in Yandro’s direction.

Jareth sighed and leaned back in his chair. He ruefully said, “Not yet, though it’s not for want of trying.” He scowled at a faintly smirking Tenryon. “Can you blame me? He has brains as well as beauty and enough brawn to hold his own besides.”

“An admirable combination,” Tenryon agreed.

Rohyr snorted. “It’s a relief to know that there *are* Deira who can resist you.”

Jareth turned a jaundiced eye on him. “As if *you* didn’t cut a wide swath through all the eligible lovelies who came your way before Lassen caught your eye,” he retorted. Seeing pensiveness abruptly shadow Rohyr’s features, he glanced wonderingly at Tenryon then back at Rohyr. “What has this to do with your leman?”

He did not flinch when Rohyr caught his gaze but met it and opened his mind to the flood of thoughts and images sent his way. When it was over, he quietly offered, “Let me help.”

Tenryon rose and went to his desk. Unlocking the bottom side drawer, he drew out a square leather case. He returned to his seat and opened the case. From within, he lifted a rose-tinged piece of crystal, irregularly triangular in shape, and set it on its flat base in the middle of the table. Almost as soon as the three focused their attention on the crystal, its center began to glow. The glow spread until the muted radiance infused the entire piece.

The ignorant and superstitious called it magic. Indeed, the crystal was commonly known as a scrying stone even among those who knew better. But it held no power to foretell the future. Rather it had the singular property of amplifying mental energy. And when manipulated by a skilled and powerful adept, it could be used to channel that energy as precisely as a master carver wielded a knife.

It was not native to Aisen but came from the Deira’s long vanished homeworld. With the help of these crystals, the ancient Naere had raised great cities, waged destructive wars, healed the wounds of those lamentable conflicts and driven a tunnel to salvation through the very fabric of space. Once numerous and of much larger size, there were only a few pieces left and all were now in the custody of the templars who kept them under lock and key in their regional strongholds. That Tenryon had one in his keeping outside of the secret cache kept in the Ziana temple’s subterranean vaults bespoke his standing among the Ylandrin templars.

Using the crystal to sharpen his focus, Rohyr concentrated his thoughts on the tenuous link that still remained between him and Lassen. The knowledge of his quarry’s general location eliminated the need for a diffuse and draining mental sweep of the country. Like the gossamer strands of spider webbing, the link eluded capture and disintegrated further with every attempt to take hold of it. But with the crystal magnifying his mind’s vision, the fragile connection became clearly visible to Rohyr.

He resisted the urge to latch onto it but awaited the others’ entry into his consciousness and the landscape he had wrought. It was the first lesson taught to every student of the mind arts—to control one’s gifts through the use of comprehensible or recognizable images.

Suddenly, Tenryon was beside him, keeping the outside world at bay and allowing Rohyr to focus wholly on clearing the mists from the bridge he’d created to span the perceived chasm that yawned before him. He sensed a presence at his other side and felt power surge through him. Rohyr reached out with his mind and drew more strength from Jareth while honing in on the link that now shone bright on the bridge like a glittering trail of precious stones in the dark.

He followed it swiftly lest it faded any further until he saw a glimmer of light in the distance. He pursued the light, speeding toward it until, without warning, an image formed before him.

Mithre Idana.

He had found his quarry. He was seeing what Lassen saw.

Mithre was conferring with someone. Rohyr noted that the latter was attired in a physician's tunic. But it did not matter. He did not need a visual depiction of Lassen's surroundings to pinpoint his location. Instead, he planted a mental marker in his unsuspecting leman's mind. It would act like a beacon when he plotted the course for the translocation corridor that would take him to the Camaran village where Lassen presently resided.

His vision blurred. The connection began to waver. Jareth's store of energy was fast approaching the point of severe depletion. He would soon be forced to pull out of their link. Without the boost of Jareth's strength, even Tenryon would not be able to support Rohyr's psychic journey much longer.

It was then, just as he was preparing to withdraw, that Rohyr sensed it. A presence that was not apart from Lassen but part of him. How could that be unless—?

The connection broke. Abruptly yanked back into the blinding light of reality, Rohyr emerged from his trance with a shuddery gasp. He became aware of Tenryon's hands rubbing his shoulders soothingly. A glass of strong Sidona brandy appeared before him. He looked up into Yandro's concerned face.

Thanking Yandro, he took the glass and swiftly downed its contents. The burn of it seemed to clear his thoughts and crystallize his emotions. A slow rage bubbled up inside him.

"I'm going to Camara," he suddenly announced and stood up.

Tenryon shook his head. "I sensed what you sensed," he cautioned. "Tread with prudence. You don't know for certain that—"

"That he cuckolded me?" Rohyr all but spat. "Ample reason to flee and hide, don't you think?"

"Rohyr..."

But the king brusquely pulled away and strode toward the door, his suppressed fury palpable to the Hadranas and to Yandro as well. The *sedyr* turned dismayed eyes to his superior.

"If he meets with Idana-tyar in that mood—" he began to say.

Jareth did not wait for him to finish. "We'll go with him," he told Tenryon. "Come, Yandro."

With brief nods of farewell, they hastened after Rohyr.

Chapter Eighteen

Reckoning

Southern Camara

Mithre frowned as he returned to his son's room. The village physician's reassurances had not been convincing. How could they be when Falan admitted that he'd never treated an over-young expectant Deir before? Yet he had insisted that the mild pains Lassen was feeling in his belly were not cause for too much concern. Mithre was of half a mind to move elsewhere, preferably to a community with better-trained healers of longer and wider experience.

Weilan was prosperous for its size and its residents were sufficiently hospitable but not inclined to mind each other's business unless invited to. However, as with most small, far-flung communities, the village lacked in services oft taken for granted in the cities and big towns. Formally trained *enyran* physicians for instance.

Falan, like many of his rural peers, was a Half Blood who possessed little, if any, of the mind gifts native to True Blood healers and had learned his profession by apprenticeship to his predecessor. That meant he was proficient in the basics of the medical arts but anything out of the ordinary was beyond his scope of knowledge and skill. A childing Deir below breeding age was definitely out of the ordinary and Mithre had little confidence in Falan's ability to cope should anything go wrong.

He erased the frown from his face when Lassen looked his way as he reentered the room. Half reclined on the small couch beneath the window, Lassen was paler than Mithre liked. And the occasional wince that crossed his features added to his father's anxiety. Mithre knew, however, that physical pain was not solely responsible for his son's low spirits. The strain of exile and the resulting separation from the sire of the child he carried was wearing him down bit by agonizing bit.

Too often in the past month had Mithre come upon him lost in thought when he was not preoccupied with his chores. Staring at nothing and no one, his eyes would moisten and he would look lost and listless. He had also not gained the requisite weight necessary for the last stage of gestation. Consequently, he looked too thin, his now overly prominent cheekbones and the dark shadows under his eyes making his face seem almost gaunt.

"Are you in pain again?" Mithre gently asked.

Lassen shook his head. "A twinge now and then. What did he say?"

"That we need not worry," Mithre replied. "But we are to call him forthwith should the pain worsen or the incidents become more frequent."

"You don't believe him, do you?"

Mithre sighed. "He thinks he's right." He sat on the edge of the couch and rubbed his son's legs comfortingly. "Still, I've been thinking that perhaps 'twould be prudent for us to move somewhere with better medical facilities or at least more experienced physicians. We can return here once you've birthed."

"Do you think it that serious?"

"I don't know enough to make an informed opinion. Best we play it safe."

"I shall abide whatever you decide," Lassen replied. After a moment, he added, "I'm so sorry for involving you, *Adda*. 'Twas foolish of me not to consider all the repercussions of having this child."

"Nonsense," Mithre briskly said. "How could I ever resent caring for you?"

He watched as his son slid a lean hand down to his slightly distended belly, spreading his fingers protectively over it. Pangs of apprehension smote Mithre. If Lassen lost this last link to Rohyr... Mithre shoved his fears aside and forced himself to speak cheerfully.

"Rest whilst I go to the apothecary. Falan prescribed something for your discomfort. Let us hope 'tis more helpful than he is."

He hurried down the stairs and out the front door and almost barrelled into the zentyr that had inexplicably planted itself in his way. Cursing, he glanced up and froze.

"I must commend you, Mithre Idana," Rohyr sarcastically remarked. He looked the small row house over, one of the dozen that lined the main road. "Seldom have I had to give chase longer than a few days before overtaking my prey."

The swirling dust kicked up by his company's zentyra as they cantered down the road was still in evidence. Mithre nervously looked the Ardan's entourage over. He immediately recognized their captain. Vaeren Henaz nodded his acknowledgement with curt civility. Mithre could not fault him given how he and Lassen had deceived the officer. Beneath three of the five other riders' cloaks, he descried military livery. But the remaining two were attired similarly to Rohyr, a subtle sophistication underlying the simplicity of their clothing. The sympathetic look the older of the pair gave Mithre did little to calm his suddenly strident nerves.

Meanwhile, the neighbors began to gather a safe distance away, many gesturing in curiosity toward Rohyr who had kept the hood of his cloak up to obscure his identity. Nonetheless, Mithre did not wish to deal with an irate king in full view of an audience.

"*Dyhar*," he managed to say without stammering too much. "You may prefer to come inside." He indicated the onlookers.

Rohyr regarded the growing crowd disinterestedly but nodded in assent. Dismounting, he motioned to the two riders Mithre had noticed to accompany him.

Mithre led the way up to the second floor and ushered them into the sitting room then hurried to Lassen's chamber. He barged in, saying nothing to his startled son, but hastened to the couch and leaned over Lassen to look out the window. He pulled back abruptly upon espying four mounted warriors stationed in the narrow dirt lane running between the houses and the buildings in back.

No hope of flight now. Rohyr's soldiers were watching every entryway and window, cutting off all means of escape.

"*Adda*, what's wrong?" Lassen worriedly asked.

Mithre exhaled in frustration. He knelt before his son and took his hands between his own.

"Rohyr has found us."

Lassen drew a sharp breath and his eyes widened. He looked almost wildly at the door.

"Where—?"

"The sitting room."

“Can’t we slip out?”

“Nay, we’re surrounded. There’s no eluding him now.”

Lassen stared dumbly at him for several seconds. “I can’t do this,” he finally gasped. “He mustn’t see me! He will know and—”

A soft knock on the door cut him off. They looked at each other fearfully.

Attempting to reassure Lassen with a smile, Mithre went to the door and opened it. The younger of Rohyr’s two companions stood there. He glanced from Mithre to Lassen apologetically.

“Please forgive the interruption but ‘tis not wise to keep the Ardan waiting much longer,” he quietly warned them. “His temper won’t get any sweeter.”

Lassen got to his feet. He flushed when he saw the Deir glance at his abdomen then quickly avert his eyes. He self-consciously pulled at his loose tunic to keep it from clinging to his slightly rounded belly. Coming to the door, he paused.

“How strange to meet you here again of all places, Vaidon-tyar,” he murmured. “Last I saw you was two years ago when Rohyr named you Jareth’s aide. He seems to have kept both of you very busy for either of you to so seldom visit court since.”

Yandro nodded respectfully. “We’ve been abroad more oft than home.”

Lassen remarked, “The Ardan underwrote your university education.” At the surprised lift of Yandro’s eyebrows, he added, “He told me about you. He said that Keiran Arthanna had recommended you for royal patronage. I’m glad their faith in you has been well rewarded.”

Yandro faintly smiled. “And I wish I could help you stall for more time, *Dyhar*. But, verily, you’d best meet the Ardan without further delay.”

Lassen fell silent then nodded and made his way to the sitting room. He tried to ignore the dull ache that flared once more inside him. When he reached the room, Jareth stepped out as if on cue. He gestured to Lassen to enter. But when Mithre attempted to follow, he smoothly barred the way.

“Rohyr wishes to speak to Lassen alone,” he softly informed Mithre.

Inside, Lassen hesitated to move away from the door, his eyes riveted on the Deir he had thought he would never see again. Starved for a glimpse of his lover, he thought Rohyr more handsome than he remembered. Rohyr, likewise, looked him over, his eyes growing colder by the second.

When Lassen finally noticed the icy appraisal, he reflexively folded his arms to partially obscure his no longer taut belly. He timorously approached Rohyr where he stood by the hearth, hands casually linked behind him and head slightly tilted back as he watched Lassen near him.

Standing before Rohyr, he gazed entreatingly at the king, at a loss as to what to say. Worsening matters was Rohyr’s glacial demeanor. This disheartened Lassen as well as puzzled him. He’d expected anger and distrust and perhaps disappointment. But more lurked in his lover’s eyes. When had Rohyr ever looked at him with contempt?

“*Dyhar*...” he started, floundering for words.

“How long did he bide his time until you were free of the shackles of my imprint?”

The question took Lassen aback. “He? What do you mean?”

Rohyr’s eyes dropped to his abdomen. Lassen all but reeled at the implied accusation. He shook his head vehemently and reached out a hand to Rohyr.

“You are mistaken!” he protested. “Let me explain—”

The months of mounting fury mingled with fear born of not knowing and culminating in a terrible instant of disillusionment overcame whatever reason or calm were still left to Rohyr. Lassen staggered back, his hand going to the scarlet patch on his cheek where Rohyr had struck him.

He kept his hand on the rapidly bruising flesh, dazedly thinking that in all their time together, never had Rohyr raised a hand to him. And, saints, the blow hurt. Though why he should be surprised was absurd given Rohyr's strength. But even more painful was the realization that Rohyr believed him faithless. Only belatedly did Lassen make the leap in reasoning that led Rohyr to make a connection between the lifting of his imprint and the probability of infidelity on Lassen's part.

"If you wanted a child, you could have asked it of me," Rohyr spat. "Have I ever denied you? I would only have bade you to wait until Tyrde bore me an heir." He raised his fist again. Lassen instinctively fell back a step but Rohyr caught his arm in a cruel grip and hauled him closer. "Or is this babe a mere accident?" he sneered. "An unfortunate consequence of your deplorable indiscretion."

Lassen suppressed a moan as the incessant throbbing in his belly gave way to a sharp, unfamiliar pain. His reason clouded, he could think only of gaining the king's forgiveness. He gazed at Rohyr beseechingly.

"Have mercy," he pleaded. "I would have told you but I thought—I just—I'm so sorry, *Dyhar*. Please ... please forgive me."

Rohyr flinched as if scorched by a brand. "You admit it!" he gasped. "And I'd hoped—Deity's blood, I am a fool thrice over!"

Lassen inhaled sharply, shocked by the enormity of their misunderstanding. He struggled to form words to allay Rohyr's suspicions and soothe his hurt and wounded pride. But none came to him. He closed his eyes, unable to think when he ached terribly in body, heart and mind.

Rohyr abruptly released him. Shorn of the king's painful but steadying hold, Lassen swayed as a wave of dizziness swept over him. Rohyr's tirade penetrated the haze nonetheless.

"Uncle Imcael warned me at the very start. He told me I would find myself saddled with someone else's by-blow if I didn't imprint you. Fool that I am, I didn't believe him. *Heyas*, I even defended you. And, to compound my idiocy, I freed you. I should have known better than to trust a common Half Blood plucked from obscurity!"

So enraged was Rohyr that he did not notice how much Lassen's face had blanched until his features contorted in pain. Lassen looked down almost in surprise. Rohyr did as well and caught his breath. A trail of crimson seeped through the blue of Lassen's breeches until it formed a garish streak down his inner thigh.

Rohyr heard a soft sigh—or was it a gasp? Lassen slumped down on his side, his face deathly white, his pinched features slipping into the blank serenity of unconsciousness. Rage forgotten, Rohyr dropped to his knees and lifted Lassen to cradle him. He did not need to shout for help. His frantic thoughts reached the three who waited just outside the door.

Jareth burst in followed by Mithre and Yandro. When Mithre would have gone to Lassen, Yandro caught him and urged him to summon the village physician at once. Mithre anxiously stared at his son then dashed out the door.

Meanwhile, Jareth knelt before Rohyr and, taking his hand, placed it on Lassen's

abdomen. "Lend him strength, Roh," he murmured. "Protect the child."

He laid his own hand over Rohyr's. Physical contact permitted a more controlled and concentrated outpouring of power.

Rohyr forced himself to focus their joint energy where it was needed. Though neither could approximate the mending power of a trained healer, what they expended could hold further decline and death in abeyance a while longer, hopefully buying enough time until the physician arrived.

Focusing on the life within Lassen's womb, Rohyr could not help making contact with it. He gritted his teeth, refusing to allow his jealousy and anger over the babe's unknown sire to interfere with the need to save and succor. When the babe responded, he opened himself to its tentative touch, assured by this proof that it still lived.

Rohyr paled. The infant knew him as surely as he knew it.

"Veres forgive me," he groaned. "What have I done?"

Jareth looked at him in alarm. "What is it?" he urgently asked. "What's happened?"

Rohyr raised anguished eyes to him. "The child..." he whispered. "Jath, this child is *mine*."

Chapter Nineteen

Watershed

With Rohyr distraught over Lassen, it fell to Jareth to summon Eiren. The physician wasted no time travelling from outside the village but opened a portal right on the street fronting the Idana residence. The blossoming shocked the various onlookers gathered in small pockets before it, as did his sudden emergence on steedback. In all its years of placid existence, never had Weilan been witness to so many eye-opening events as had occurred in the space of one day.

He was met by Yandro who swiftly apprised him of the situation.

“Of course he’s in danger of losing the babe,” Eiren said as they hurried into the house and up the stairs. “His womb isn’t mature enough to safely carry a child to term without proper supervision.”

“Can nothing be done?” Yandro anxiously inquired.

“Let us hope there is. Didn’t his physician recognize the signs of an impending miscarriage?”

“Apparently Idana-tyar had been complaining of pain for several days now but the village healer said ‘twas normal to feel some discomfort toward the end of gestation.”

Eiren scowled. “In the last month, yes. Earlier than that is always cause for concern and with premature breeding, it’s the first sign that something is very wrong. Ah, there’s truly a need for better educated healers in these remote parts.”

Rohyr had transferred Lassen back to his bedchamber and he now stood watch over him with Mithre as Falan doggedly tried to stem the bleeding. Eiren only spared enough time to courteously acknowledge his fellow physician before taking over. He swiftly examined Lassen, frowning at his paleness and lack of response to his probing.

The sheet underneath was streaked with blood but Eiren noted that the flow had slowed to a heavy trickle. He laid his hands on Lassen’s belly. In what seemed like mere seconds, the bleeding ceased. Eiren continued his ministrations, using his fingers to direct the healing energy his mind generated.

“The child lives,” he announced, smiling a little when Rohyr exhaled with blatant relief. “They’ll both survive if I can heal and reinforce Lassen’s womb. Roh, Jath, share your strength with me.”

He heard Falan catch his breath and sharply glanced at him. The healer was gawking at Rohyr with curiosity and suspicion. Eiren shook his head. It would not do for the Deir to guess their identities.

“We thank you for your help,” he told Falan. “You may leave.”

The healer hesitated. Eiren sighed. Too quick for Falan to react, he suddenly placed his fingers on the latter’s forehead. Falan’s eyes widened then glazed over.

“Remember only that all is well,” Eiren softly commanded. “Aught else you will not recall.” He released the Deir. “Go now.”

As soon as Falan departed, Yandro led Mithre aside while Rohyr and Jareth gathered close around the bed. They opened themselves to Eiren, allowing him to tap their strength and channel it. Mithre gasped when Eiren’s dark eyes and slender hands glowed ever so

gently, as if the physician were lit from within. Never had he yet seen a healer wield such energy. It was a mesmerizing sight.

“Will he be able to help Lassen?” he whispered.

“Eiren Sarvan has saved many in far worse states,” Yandro murmured.

Mithre looked at him searchingly. Yandro steadfastly met his gaze.

“I pray you’re right,” Mithre said. He turned his eyes back to his son. “He meant no harm. He only wanted something of Rohyr to help him endure parting from him. He didn’t realize just how dangerous it could be to breed so soon.”

Yandro stared at Mithre in dawning comprehension. “Was that your reason for fleeing? You feared what could happen should it be discovered that your son had conceived the Ardan’s child?”

Mithre sighed and nodded. “He’ll be charged with treason for bearing Rohyr’s firstborn. And Veres only knows what would happen to the babe. Tyrde will do everything in his power to dispose of a rival to his own get.”

“Rohyr would never allow anyone to harm his son,” Yandro staunchly declared. “Granted he would be discouraged from making an illegitimate child his heir, but he would recognize him nonetheless. Just as he recognized his father’s son and named him brother.”

“But Lassen?” Mithre countered. “He won’t be allowed access to the child, will he? Even if he escapes imprisonment, he’ll be banished; forced into exile. He would never see his son again.”

Yandro hesitated then said, “The main cause of Rohyr’s anger was not that your son got with child but his assumption that the child wasn’t his. He couldn’t stomach the thought that another had touched what he deemed his or that his leman had taken someone else into his bed as soon as he was free to do so.” He met Mithre’s stare. “Rohyr cares deeply for him. I don’t believe that he will exile him or deny him access to their son.”

Mithre swallowed. “If only I could be as sure of that as you are. Even Lassen couldn’t say with certainty whether Rohyr would dare to flout law and tradition. Had he felt as you do, he wouldn’t have run away. He wouldn’t have gone into hiding.” Mithre looked once more at his son. “We would now still be back home, awaiting the birth of this babe amidst our family and in peace.”

He caught his breath when Eiren straightened and looked across the room at him. The physician gestured to him to approach.

When he came to Lassen’s bedside, Eiren said, “His womb is sound and the babe is strong and active. But I sense a deeper trauma that is responsible for his failure to regain consciousness.” He glanced at Rohyr and Mithre was amazed to see the king actually flinch before his cousin’s reproachful regard. Eiren briefly returned his attention to Mithre. “Meanwhile you may wash him and change the beddings.” Again, he looked at Rohyr. “A word with you, Cousin.”

Rohyr gazed long at Lassen, taking heart that the sickly pallor was gone from his flesh. He bent and gently kissed the bruise on Lassen’s cheek then followed Eiren out of the room. On their way out, Eiren asked Jareth and Yandro to join them.

They moved to the sitting room down the hallway. Eiren addressed Yandro as soon as the latter closed the door.

“You spoke with Lassen’s father. What did you talk about?”

“He revealed Idana-tyar’s reasons for having the Ardan’s child and running away,” Yandro replied.

Rohyr blew out his breath. “Tell us.”

Yandro recounted his conversation with Mithre. When he finished speaking, Rohyr abruptly turned away and walked to the hearth. He stared down at its blackened floor, the stiffness of his stance betraying just how close he was to breaking.

Jareth reached out with his mind to comfort him but came up against fiercely defensive shields. Not about to force himself past those shields, he glanced at Yandro and saw his aide wince in reaction to Rohyr’s sorrow and self-recrimination. He quickly strode to Rohyr and tightly embraced him. Rohyr curled his arms around him and buried his face in Jareth’s shoulder.

Yandro turned his attention elsewhere, uncomfortable at seeing his king weep. Beside him, Eiren sighed. He went to Rohyr and placed an apologetic hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Roh,” he murmured.

Rohyr shuddered as he fought to control himself. At length, he drew out of Jareth’s embrace and faced them, his eyes still bright and slightly reddened, but his demeanor calm and decisive once more. He looked at Eiren.

“You implied that my confrontation with Lassen is what hinders him from waking up.” Eiren nodded. “Explain.”

“Lassen has been under an inordinate amount of stress these past months,” Eiren said. “Doing what he thought would be best for you, fearful of discovery and the repercussions, lying, hiding, going into exile, struggling to carry this child to term, trying to cope with a life far removed from anything he’d ever imagined...” He grimaced. “And then you accused him of faithlessness.”

Eiren gestured in the general direction of Lassen’s sickroom. “I think losing your trust proved too much for him to bear. And so to numb his pain, he’s retreated inward. It’s akin to locking one’s self up to keep trouble at bay. I tried to reach him; tried to tell him that it was safe to awaken. That there was naught to fear or grieve. But he blocked me and wouldn’t listen.”

Guilt-stricken, Rohyr looked away but Jareth frowned and said, “How can he possibly block you? He isn’t a True Blood.”

“Why is Yandro an empath?” Eiren pointed out. He looked at the young aide. “When did you first realize that you were thus gifted?”

Yandro appeared abashed but replied. “My first year in university. There was a group of students who didn’t believe I deserved a place amongst them. I strongly felt it when their animosity toward me turned dangerous.”

“You sensed that they were about to express their hatred of you through violence.”

“Yes, *Dyhar*.”

“And did they attempt to attack you?”

“They did, but I’d confided my fears to Arthanna-tyar and, consequently, he was with me when they made their attempt. They stood no chance against him.”

“That goes without saying,” Eiren murmured. When Keiran’s wrath was aroused, he was a most fearsome opponent. “It’s a classic case of self-preservation awakening a heretofore unknown ability. The mind gifts may have diminished considerably amongst the *sedya*, almost to the point of extinction, but the ability to wield what is still extant

hasn't altogether vanished. Admittedly, few know if they have any latent abilities at all and even less how to use them. There simply aren't enough adequately gifted Half Bloods to warrant systematically searching them out and training them. But every once in a while, a situation arises where those abilities, if they exist, may be tapped unknowingly. Especially when the need to protect one's self is stronger than usual. It's an instinctive reaction."

He paused briefly to allow the others to digest the information. "Lassen has thrown up shields against any attempt to contact him," he resumed. "I can breach those shields but, given his fragile state of mind, that could destroy his reason." He gazed urgently at Rohyr. "He has to lower his shields willingly if he's to be persuaded to awaken. And awaken he must else his body will die from lack of nourishment. We can't force-feed him whilst he sleeps so deeply. He would only choke on whatever we spooned into him and that would likely kill him before starvation does. Furthermore, it must be done soonest. The longer he remains thusly, the further will he withdraw unto himself and the more difficult it will be to reach him at all."

"What can I do?" Rohyr demanded.

"He'll listen to you. If you can make him realize that you've forgiven him—"

Rohyr snorted. "It is I who should ask for forgiveness. Tell me what to do."

Eiren laid a cautionary hand on his arm. "Be warned, it can endanger you. You are not a healer. You don't have the natural safeguards that prevent us from being stranded in our patients' minds. To reach Lassen, you'll have to delve deep into his consciousness for a far longer length of time than you're accustomed to. And you'll have to cut yourself off from the outside world and become a part of his."

Rohyr frowned. "But how shall I find my way back?"

"I can protect you to a certain extent. I shall enter with you and be your link to the outside. If you are successful, Lassen will reveal the way out. The danger lies in failure. If you stay with him too long and he refuses to heed you, the stress of it all could break our connection."

"I would be trapped with him," Rohyr half whispered. "We could both die." Eiren hesitated then nodded. Rohyr's eyes narrowed. "But we'd be together."

"You can't be serious!"

Rohyr looked at Jareth in desperate appeal, forestalling further protest. "If I don't make it back, Uncle Imcael will be Ardan," he instructed. "Jath, I trust you to help ensure a peaceful succession."

Jareth started to object again. But the look in Rohyr's eyes stayed him. He resignedly replied, "As you wish."

Rohyr said no more but returned to Lassen's room with Eiren. Jareth stared after them in dismay.

"Veres help them," he muttered.

"Else Imcael will wear the crown," Yandro murmured.

The thought nearly turned Jareth's stomach. "Veres help us all."

* * * *

Mithre retreated to the couch where he was joined by Jareth and Yandro. There was nothing they could do now save to watch and pray that Rohyr would succeed where a renowned healer had not. Rohyr sat by Lassen and stared at him.

"I should have brought a scrying stone," he commented.

"It would do little good," Eiren said as he pulled up a chair and sat opposite Rohyr. "You have no need to amplify your power when what is required is to subsume yourself in his consciousness."

"But our link? Might it not strengthen it and keep it from being severed?"

"It might. Then again, Lassen could mistake it for an invasive force and retreat even further behind his shields. And he will sense it. There is no way to mask the presence of a scrying stone once it's activated. Do you wish to risk it?"

Rohyr shook his head. Placing a hand on the side of Lassen's forehead, he drew a deep breath then slowly exhaled. The world dissolved into shadow and silence.

He was in.

Remembering Eiren's instructions, he forced himself to give up control and accept Lassen's perceptions of his surroundings as his own. Between one moment and the next, he found himself in a dimly lit hallway with pale stone walls and a cold grey floor. The ceiling receded into complete darkness. He could not tell how high it was or what it looked like.

Eiren?

I'm here.

Misliking the stifling gloom, Rohyr looked about. There seemed to be no way into or out of the corridor.

It's too dark to see anything clearly.

You can introduce some light but not so bright as to alarm him.

Rohyr conjured a small torch. By the light of its soft glow, he saw a narrow opening in the wall. He passed through it and found himself in another passageway with a gap about midway along its length. Taking a deep breath, he proceeded down the corridor.

Several twists and turns later, he cursed in frustration.

Is there no end to this maze?

Eiren's answer was hardly encouraging. *It wasn't as labyrinthine earlier. He's doing his best to keep from being reached.*

Rohyr grew apprehensive. *What if he succeeds? What then?*

I don't believe he will, came the reply. Not against you. Don't lose hope, Roh.

The king forged on. About to utter a scathing expletive after turning into yet another seemingly endless tunnel, he saw what appeared to be a room at the end of it.

There's a chamber. A barred one.

Ah, that's it! You've found him.

Rohyr cautiously approached the chamber and peered into what seemed to be a small cell. He heard a soft moan and glanced in the direction whence the sound came. He almost dropped the torch when he saw Lassen huddled in the far corner of the cell.

He immediately searched for a way in but a close examination revealed the lack of a discernable door. Rohyr tested the bars. They were made of a hard substance he did not recognize. But that was to be expected given that everything he saw was wholly the creation of Lassen's mind.

Rohyr scowled in frustration. There was no entrance into the cell. Nor was there an exit. Lassen had imprisoned himself.

He sought Eiren once more for counsel but there was no answer. Rohyr realized he was on his own. He determinedly shunted aside his fears.

“Lassen.”

Lassen started at the utterance of his name.

“Look up, Las.”

His leman slowly did as he was bid. Their eyes met across the cell. Lassen stared at him and paled. Uttering a low moan, he frantically scrambled back, head bowed and one hand flung up as if to ward off a blow. It smote Rohyr to the quick.

“Las, don’t!” he cried out. “I won’t hurt you!”

Lassen did not answer but only hunched over, hugging his knees like a waif quailing in fear.

“I’m so sorry,” Rohyr repentantly said. “I had no right to strike you. No right at all. Please, Las-*min*, don’t shut me out.”

“Leave me be,” came a muffled plea.

“I can’t do that,” Rohyr replied, forcing calm on his voice.

“Why not?” Lassen mumbled. “It feels so safe.”

“But it *isn’t* safe. You’ll die if you remain here.”

Lassen glanced up in confusion. “Die?”

“Yes! Your body will deteriorate if you don’t awaken and tend to its needs.”

“Oh...” Lassen seemed to consider it and for a moment Rohyr thought that he would acquiesce. But Lassen shook his head and said, “‘Tis for the best then.”

An imprecation escaped Rohyr. “How can you think that?” he demanded. He stopped and spoke a little more gently. “Please come back with me.”

Pained eyes lifted to him. “But you no longer trust me,” Lassen plaintively whispered. “I betrayed you.”

“I do trust you,” Rohyr insisted. “I know you were only trying to protect me.”

“...just a common Half Blood plucked from obscurity...”

Rohyr groaned. “Plague take my wayward tongue! I was wrong to slander you thusly. Please, Las, give me another chance.”

When Lassen did not reply, Rohyr’s anxiety sharpened. Exacerbating his disquiet was the oppressive atmosphere about them. It enveloped him and sank into his very pores. He almost felt like a parasite whose host was doing its utmost to make it as inhospitable as possible for him to want to stay.

Something tugged at his consciousness. Rohyr realized Eiren was warning him that he had already submerged himself too long in this otherworldly realm of another’s mind. He desperately looked back at Lassen, wondering what he could say to make his leman hearken to him. He noticed Lassen’s slightly rounded abdomen.

“If you won’t live for me, live for our son,” he suddenly said.

Lassen looked up at him, startled. “You accept that he is yours?” he warily asked.

“As I should have as soon as I sensed him in your womb,” Rohyr regretfully answered. “I’m sorry for doubting you at all. I should have known that you had acted for my sake. As you always have. I pray you will forgive me my idiocy.”

Lassen gazed uncertainly at him. His hand dropped to his belly and he caressed it protectively.

As he waited for Lassen’s response, Rohyr noticed something about the bar he still gripped. It felt less solid. He glanced at it. Veres almighty, it *was* less solid. But even as elation welled up in him, he felt the tug in his mind again, painfully urgent now and feebler than before. As if it were coming from a great distance.

Alarmed, Rohyr dared to be forceful. "Come back to me now," he demanded.

Lassen frowned. "But what of Tyrde and Cattania—?"

"Hang them all! I love you!"

"You—Oh!" Lassen looked at him, stunned. The bars continued to lose color and substance.

Rohyr pressed his advantage. "I would have you as my mate."

A sad smile curved Lassen's lips. "There is naught I want more. But we can't wed. You're already espoused."

"Only in name," Rohyr pointed out. "My heart and spirit are free to mate with yours. Bind to me, Las."

Lassen gaped. Had Rohyr just asked that they soul-mate to each other? Surely not. Soul-mating could not be broken by death or the multiple cycles of lifetimes Deira passed through before they finally entered the hallowed halls of the Maker. The soul-bound were wed for eternity, their vows blessed and affirmed by the Creator himself.

"B-but our son—?" Lassen stammered.

"I shall name him my heir."

Lassen shook his head. "Tyrde won't allow it."

"He has no power to allow or disallow it. He's merely my consort. You'll be my true mate. You *are* my true mate. You always have been." Rohyr gazed at Lassen, hiding nothing from him. "I should have declared your place with me from the start."

After what felt like an interminable while Lassen nodded. Rohyr held his breath as the bars dissolved completely. He entered the chamber and hastened to Lassen. Still wary of spooking him, he set the torch aside then knelt before Lassen and gingerly took his hands between his own. To his relief, Lassen did not pull away. Rohyr looked imploringly at him.

"Bind to me, *ariad*," he whispered.

Lassen looked at him wide-eyed. Rohyr had called him his beloved. "This is no illusion, is it?" he said in a hushed voice

Rohyr adamantly shook his head. "It has been my heart's desire for many a year now and I deeply regret that I didn't grant it."

Lassen bit his lip. "And even now you shouldn't grant it," he reluctantly said. "You are Ardan and Ylandre's welfare comes first with you."

"I will serve Ylandre to my dying day," Rohyr replied. "But it need not be as Ardan. I'm done with making do with the paltry rewards of a lonely soul and an empty heart. I will rule with you as my mate or I won't rule at all."

Lassen gaped at him. "You would abdicate? Nay, you can't! You mustn't! The kingdom needs you, Rohyr."

Rohyr beamed at him. "Then stop me, my love," he challenged. "Grant my heart's desire. Bind to me."

He opened his arms to Lassen. With a blinding smile that was equal parts disbelief and joy, Lassen went into his embrace and laid his head on Rohyr's shoulder. Rohyr pressed a kiss to Lassen's golden crown and held him fast.

Suddenly, he heard Eiren's voice once more, clear and close at hand, urging him to come back. Looking around, he saw that the cell had disappeared and that they were in a brightly lit forest glade. A stone-paved path lay to his left and he huffed a relieved chuckle when he saw Eiren on it, hand lifted and beckoning to him.

“Come,” Rohyr invited, and rising to his feet, pulled Lassen up with him. Firmly placing his arm around his love, he led him down the path.

Rohyr came to with a sigh, Eiren’s steadying hand on his back. Shaking away the last of his trance-induced daze, he looked down at Lassen.

Golden-lashed eyelids fluttered faintly. Rohyr bent to kiss him. He felt Lassen smile against his lips and he drew back in anticipation. Lassen’s eyes opened. Rohyr could have wept again from the utter devotion that shone out of those aquamarine depths.

“I will bind to you,” Lassen said, his voice thready but decided.

Rohyr grinned and leaned down once more to thoroughly kiss him.

Chapter Twenty

Avowal

Lassen's eyes lit up as Dael handed him a bowl of honey sweetened spiced porridge liberally laced with chopped nuts and roseberry slices and doused with fresh cream. When he entered the sixth and last month of gestation, his appetite had increased accordingly. He smiled gratefully at his sire before happily tucking into the sumptuous dish. Dael chuckled and sat down to his own less humongous serving of porridge. Mithre soon joined them, setting down a platter of steaming buns, mild curd cheese and assorted fruit and a pitcher of hot milk tea. He sat beside his lately arrived spouse, weaving their fingers together briefly before starting on his breakfast.

The salty aroma that wafted up from the beach and the sound of water softly crashing against rock and sand were soothing accompaniments to the family's meal. So was the sight of the vast expanse of sapphire-hued sea dotted with ocean-borne vessels and seabirds swooping down from their cliff-bound aeries to snatch fish and terrapins from their watery haven and carry them back to their hungry broods. It was here, within sight of the lush Samaran Sea, that Lassen would birth his first child.

As soon as Lassen was hale enough, Rohyr had moved him to the safety of the seaward fief of Glanthar. Olriq Mithani was wed to a cousin of Rohyr's late parents, and he was loyal to his royal law-kin almost to a fault. His sons were part of Rohyr's faithful coterie and served as his eyes and ears at court.

The family looked up when the younger of the Mithani brothers stepped out onto the covered terrace overlooking the sea. Ashrian merrily greeted them before handing a large napkin-covered basket to Lassen.

"Compliments of *Aba* and *Adda*," he said with a grin.

Lassen uncovered the basket then laughed. He showed the stack of fruit cream pasties to Dael and Mithre. Mithre chortled while Dael curiously took a bite out of one. The senior Mithanis had apparently gotten wind of Lassen's recently acquired taste for the Camaran sweets.

"Give them my thanks, Ash," Lassen smilingly said.

"I shall," Ashrian replied. "Though I don't see the attraction. They are too rich for my taste."

"Mayhap it's because you're not with child, brother."

Aeldan came up behind him, his head of striking red-black tresses contrasting with Ashrian's bright mahogany hair. Otherwise, their resemblance was strong.

"Are you suggesting Lassen's liking for this is due to his condition?" Ashrian asked, picking up a pasty and studying it with a dubious air.

Aeldan shrugged. "Well, I do recall *Adda* becoming a glutton for sweets when he carried you." He looked at Mithre. "What say you, Mithre-tyar?"

Mithre murmured confirmation while Dael could only shake his head in disbelief. Lassen's parents were not used to being spoken to by these nobles with such kindness and courtesy. They were nothing like uppity Imcael. The Essendris were not all of a piece but it was still surprising just how different Rohyr's uncle was from the others.

Remembering his manners, Dael asked the Mithanis to join them for breakfast. The brothers assented and soon they were all engaged in lively conversation. It was this homely tableau Rohyr came upon when he joined them a half hour later, Rysander Seydon and Keiran Arthanna in tow, the latter attended by the Arthannas' household adjutant Ruomi Garvas.

Lassen suppressed a grin at his parents' reaction to Keiran's appearance. Reijir's brother shared his coal-black hair, high cheekbones and verdant, almond-shaped eyes. But Keiran was not as tall as Reijir and his features were sweeter; almost like the native females of old. There was also the faintest trace of effeminacy in his movements though he was neither weak nor soft.

"Are you planning a reunion, Roh?" Aeldan inquired.

His surprise was understandable. Keiran and Rysander were not the first of Rohyr's inner circle to journey to the estate. Zykriel had arrived the night before saying Gilmael would follow while Eiren was already a few days into his latest visit to check on Lassen's health.

Rohyr smiled as he settled beside Lassen. "In a manner of speaking. Ranael should arrive any moment now and Dysten, Keosqe and Uncle Yovan will join us this afternoon at the latest."

"Reijir as well," Keiran added, motioning to Ruomi to pull up a chair and sit at his side. "He and Jareth will travel together. I expect they'll be here by midday."

The brethren glanced at each other then looked curiously at Rohyr.

"Are Tenryon and Shino joining us, too?" Ashrian asked.

"Eventually."

"What about Riodan?"

Rohyr shook his head. "He left a fortnight ago to take up his new posting in Qatare. It would be imprudent to recall him so suddenly so soon."

"And Uncle Imcael?" Rysander inquired.

Keiran snorted. "Since when have we longed for his company?"

Aeldan dryly smiled. "I presume Tyrde wasn't invited either."

"You presume correctly, Dan," Rohyr said. He curled a protective arm around Lassen. "I shall explain my reasons when the others arrive. Suffice to say it's a matter of great import to me and therefore to Ylandre as well."

"How intriguing," Keiran declared. "You're not planning to have Tyrde assassinated, are you?"

While Dael and Mithre nearly choked on their teas, Rysander threw a cranapple at Keiran. Ruomi neatly fielded it.

"You'll scandalize Lassen's parents if you don't school your tongue," Rohyr mildly chided. "And, nay, I'm not about to commit parricide and mariticide in one stroke."

"Much as you wish you could," Keiran quipped. "What?" he asked when a reproving Ruomi nudged him. "I was merely stating the truth."

"Kei..." Rohyr murmured in the long-suffering tone they all tended to use with their irrepressible cousin.

Aeldan chuckled and said, "Whatever it is you're planning, you have our support. May we tell *Aba* and *Adda*?"

"But of course. I can hardly leave them out when they've been so hospitable and supportive." Rohyr gestured toward the breathtaking view. "This is just what Eiren

recommended for Lassen's recovery."

Having always travelled around his kingdom on a regular basis to ensure that he knew firsthand much of the goings on among his subjects, Rohyr now used that habit to his advantage. Only Vaeren Henaz and the handpicked warriors of the Ardan's personal guard accompanied him on his sojourns abroad. No word escaped them regarding his side trips to an unassuming coastal town in Glanthur's southernmost reaches.

Pelmorth was many leagues distant from Glanthur's seaside capital of Evinor and the estate in which Rohyr had secreted Lassen was the smallest of the Mithani properties and also the most remote. But it was this seclusion that made it a perfect retreat for Lassen as he awaited the advent of Rohyr's son and heir. So far down the rung in geopolitical importance was Pelmorth that it was the last place Tyrde or Imcael would think to look should they get it into their heads that Rohyr was concealing something. Or someone.

Rohyr feigned weariness of searching for his leman and gave the appearance of having given up altogether. Only those whom he trusted utterly did he take into his confidence. And if Tyrde harbored resentment of the frequency of Rohyr's absences, he did not voice it. To do so would only call attention to the lack of rapport between them and feed the speculations about the state of his fecundity.

The Deiran reproductive cycle spanned the decades from the mid thirties to the early eighties. But the peak conceiving period ran from the forties to the sixties. Tyrde's age of four and forty years was when most wedded bearers had their firstborns. Yet, more than a year into marriage, Tyrde had not conceived.

He could not attribute it to a dearth of sexual contact with Rohyr for his spouse did his duty and visited him frequently enough to ensure no one could accuse him of negligence. Tyrde had considered shifting the blame onto Rohyr by spreading rumors that he might not be the fertile producer of seed most thought him. But he discarded the ploy in the face of his sire's indignant objections. Imcael remained mindful of the Royal House's reputation and would not countenance the airing of such a detrimental piece of hearsay for personal gain.

You are Ardis of the land, he wrote Tyrde. It is beneath you to besmirch the Essendri name and for no better reason than to counter mere gossip. Remember, when you present Rohyr with his heir, no one will dare demean or gainsay you again.

So Tyrde stayed his hand and concentrated instead on promoting the common belief that Rohyr left him in charge during his absences from the capital. Never mind that the various government heads remained in control of their ministries and consulted with Yovan and Keosqe when a problem arose. Or that foreign correspondence meant for Rohyr's eyes alone was quietly redirected either to Jareth or Gilmael and that the Citadel core staff and security officers, while always careful to outwardly obey his orders, discreetly abided Dylen's instructions instead. Whatever the truth of his situation, Tyrde kept up appearances.

The ordinary citizenry knew nothing of this. Nor would they have particularly cared so long as everything was in working order and life could proceed with as few hitches as possible. But among the growing faction of Tyrde's supporters, such knowledge could compromise his bid for power. They would abandon him if he did not soon show more for their efforts beyond the occasional invitation to court or the rare privilege of a private audience with the king.

* * * *

By late afternoon, the others arrived. Taking advantage of the fine weather, a rarity during the wet season that came on the tail end of summer, Rohyr summoned everyone to an outdoor supper in the long open-sided hut the Mithanis had erected on one of the bluffs overlooking the bay. A fair distance from the house, it was completely out of earshot of anyone. Rohyr was not about to let his plans go awry due to an inquisitive servant eavesdropping and stripping away the secrecy that had thus far protected Lassen and their unborn child.

Pelmorth was so out of the way, the gossip about the disappearance of the king's leman had yet to reach it. No news of his arrival in an advanced state of breeding had gotten back to the capital either. Keosqe and Gilmael had seen to it that all communication with the outside was restricted until such time that Rohyr lifted said restrictions on the property's residents.

They gathered around the long wooden table, Rohyr at one end, Dylen seated to his left, Lassen to his right, and at the opposite end, Yovan. The sitting arrangement was telling for it assumed the appearance of a royal council. In such a council, the chief advisor sat facing his sovereign while the left-hand position was always held by the eldest of the monarch's brothers or, if he had no siblings, the most senior of his first degree kin. The right-hand seat was reserved for his spouse.

It was customary for either of the latter positions to be left vacant in the event of their respective occupants' absences. Lassen's appropriation of the seat revealed something of Rohyr's intentions.

He waited until Vaeren signalled that it was safe to speak before recounting the occurrences of the past several months to those who did not know the full story of his brief separation from Lassen. As soon as he was done, he broached the reason for their gathering.

"I took Tyrde in wedlock to protect Ylandre and its people. All my life, I have lived by the dictates of what will benefit this realm regardless of the cost to myself. What joy I could snatch I took, but always in readiness to relinquish it should it be required of me." He reached to his right and clasped Lassen's hand. "I believed I could endure any loss for the sake of the country and so I gave in to Uncle Imcael's proposition. That I did what I could to keep Lassen with me gave the lie to my belief. And when I thought I had lost him, I realized that this was one loss I couldn't endure."

Rohyr's eyes glittered darkly, warning them of the appearance of the nigh adamantine streak of stubbornness inherent in almost all the Essendris.

"I intend to soul-bind to Lassen and I'm prepared to abdicate if any should forbid me to do so," he bluntly informed them. Ignoring their shocked exclamations and expressions of incredulity, he declared, "Try as I may, I can no longer ignore our bond. It pre-dates my first meeting with him." Rohyr sensed Lassen's surprise and squeezed his hand reassuringly. "That was the reason I made him my leman. I recognized him almost from the start."

Silence reigned for a while as they digested his words, some more taken aback than others. Yovan was first to respond.

He gently said, "I think we've long suspected that something far deeper than mere attraction drew you to Lassen. Indeed, we grieved for you that duty superseded your heart's desire." The others readily concurred. "However, much as I am loath to point it out... Roh-*min*, it's unheard of for a sovereign ruler to be wedded to one partner and

soul-bound to another.”

“There is no precedent,” Rohyr agreed. “Therefore I shall set it. As I should have from the moment Imcael forced me into damnable wedlock.”

Yovan sighed. “Many will gainsay such a move. I mean no offense to Lassen but he is a *sedyr*. The last time a Half Blood married into the royal family, he was blamed for the decline in talent in the generations that followed.”

“Bollocks,” Eiren scoffed. “A single union between castes can’t dilute a bloodline sufficiently to cause a marked decrease in the mind gifts. In any case, that so-called decline occurred two generations down the line. And the talent *was* there but Syrdon Essendri was so fearful of being overthrown by his rogue sons, he chose not to properly train them. No matter how gifted one is, if one doesn’t receive proper tutelage, one’s full potential can’t be realized. Witness Uncle Imcael’s situation. Besides, Lassen isn’t completely without skills.”

“Well, that should put that misconception to rest,” Ranael commented after Eiren gave them a brief account of Lassen’s shielding ability.

But Gilmael said, “It would still give Tyrde a valid reason to break with Rohyr and wed himself to Lyam Dimari. That would bring us right back to the original problem.”

“Then I will step down,” Rohyr retorted. “Imcael can have the throne. I very much doubt that he’ll permit such a union once the sceptre lies heavy in his hands.”

“Veres forbid that he should rule Ylandre,” Keiran objected with a shudder. “Why, he would have the country up in arms against the Crown by the time his reign was done! You can’t leave the land to such a fate.”

“All the more reason for us to discover a way for Rohyr to have Lassen as his mate *and* consort,” Aeldan asserted. “It would be fatal to Ylandre were he to relinquish the crown to Imcael.”

“But more than that, we would see you happy, Cousin,” Rysander stressed. He looked at the others, hands spread in appeal. “There *must* be a good reason for him to divorce Tyrde.”

Keosqe shook his head. “No matter what reason that may be and however valid, Tyrde still holds the threat of a Cattanian marriage over Rohyr.”

“Does he?” Reijir unexpectedly said. “I’ve been wondering about that. Consider that Tyrde could have gone straight to Rohyr and threatened to divorce him if he didn’t send Lassen away. Why did he speak with Lassen instead?”

Following Reijir’s train of thought, Zykriel commented, “And why did he warn him not to tell anyone of their talk? The potency of his threat lies in Rohyr’s constant awareness of the repercussions to Ylandre should he fail to uphold his end of their bargain. What need was there for secrecy?”

The exchange of questioning glances betrayed the others’ puzzlement.

“Because he didn’t want Rohyr to think too hard about it,” Dylen suddenly suggested. When the others stared at him in bewilderment, he said, “When something we loathe is pressed upon us repeatedly, there comes a point when we may stop enduring it and start to look for a way to rid ourselves of it instead.”

“But that presupposes that there *is* a way to be rid of this,” Ashrian pointed out.

“And how do we know that there is no way?” Dylen countered. “Everything stems from what they’ve revealed to us. How do we know that they told us everything?”

“Or that they told the complete truth,” Gilmael said, his brow furrowed as he tried to

recall the details of that fateful meeting with Imcael.

"I concur," Jareth spoke up. "Something about Imcael's claims bothered me when I heard the details of your negotiations with him," he said to Rohyr. "But you were already wed by then and I needed to concentrate all my attention on the Treyana crisis."

"What in particular disturbed you?" Rysander asked.

"I'm not altogether sure but it had to do with the Anjuin law of succession. It reminded me of..." Jareth shook his head and looked across the table at Keiran and Zykriel. "What say we do a little digging in the archives as soon as we return from Ziana?"

Zykriel blinked.

"Ziana?" Keiran repeated.

"Neither Tenryon nor Shino is here and Roh has stated his intention to bind to Lassen forthwith," Jareth reasoned. "Am I too far off the mark to suggest that they will bind in Ziana?"

Rohyr smiled. "They indeed await us in Ziana. I can think of no more fitting place to soul-bind to Lassen than in the most ancient temple in Aisen." He swept them with a searching gaze. "You've indicated that you would accept Lassen as Ardis rather than have me abdicate. But what of the nation at large? Will the people be as accepting?"

"I believe so," Ranael answered. "In all my travels around the country, I've heard naught but praise for you. The people love you. You've governed this realm so well that they would resist a change in leadership. There is no surety that whoever replaces you would rule Ylandre half as wisely as you do."

Keosqe agreed. "Perhaps in the early days of your reign it would have been imprudent for you to do as you pleased if it meant flouting tradition. But you've proved yourself more than worthy of the people's trust and they highly esteem you. I don't think they'd begrudge you this one indulgence of a personal desire. And I warrant it will please the common folk that you are capable of loving one not so high above them."

"It would hardly please the more hidebound amongst the nobility," Reijir dryly remarked. "But I doubt they'll make much of a fuss if they find themselves in the minority. Which I think they will judging from what we know of the people's sentiments."

Rohyr relaxed when the rest readily agreed. "I have your support in this then?"

"Was that ever in doubt?" Yovan said with a smile. "When do we depart?"

"Tomorrow morn that we may reach Ziana by midday," Rohyr replied. "The temple is closed to the public from noontide until the third bell after."

As they made their way back to the house afterward, Rohyr looked at Lassen inquiringly. As was his wont, Lassen had not taken part in the discussion. Long experience in the politics and intrigues of court life had taught him to avoid being perceived as having overmuch influence on Rohyr. It was usually better to keep his opinion to himself in public.

Pulling Lassen closer, Rohyr murmured, "What troubles you?"

Lassen shook his head. "I'm not troubled. Only curious."

"About what?"

"You mentioned a bond between us and that it pre-dates our first meeting. What did you mean by that?"

Rohyr pressed a kiss to his temple. "I'll explain everything to you when this is over."

Best you know nothing that may be of use to Tyrde should he try to read your thoughts.”

“Would he dare?” Lassen wondered. “I’ve never felt him attempt it.”

“Only because of the imprint he believes you still bear. An invasion of the mind counts as much a violation as bodily rape and that would trigger a warning. But you are no longer in thrall to me though he doesn’t know that. There’s no telling if desperation may push him to force information out of you. Speaking of which...” Rohyr grimaced. “I’m guilty of the same sin against your sire.”

Lassen reached up and ran his knuckles down Rohyr’s cheek. “*Aba* told me what happened,” he softly said. “Though you frightened him at the time, he doesn’t hold your actions against you and neither do I. We know you did it out of love for me.”

Rohyr caught his hand and held it to his lips. Lassen felt his breath on his knuckles as his lover released a sigh of relief.

* * * *

They arrived in Ziana the following day just as the noon chimes sounded, emerging in the courtyard behind the monastery through which only the clerics and Ziana’s ruling family could enter the temple grounds. Tenryon and Shino welcomed them and ushered them inside the hallowed sanctum.

The temple formed the bulk and center of the entire compound. Longer than it was wide with a soaring ceiling from which hung exquisite lamps of gold and crystal, it was adorned with magnificent paintings, sculptures, tapestries and stained-glass windows and panels. So massive was the temple that the nave alone housed four rows of a hundred pews each, all made from rare *nahra*. Marble pillars separated the adjacent sections on either side, each with its own altar and set of pews. Wide shallow steps led up from the nave to the gold leaf adorned marble altar. On the wall above the altar, flanked by huge stained-glass panels, hung a massive four-rayed star of Veres wrought of white-silver and snow-sapphire.

Tenryon had requested that the temple and its immediate vicinity be closed off to everyone for the duration of the midday break. The request had puzzled the temple Prelate but he acquiesced nonetheless. The ancient complex’s well-being depended in large part on the goodwill of the Hadranas who gave generously of their wealth toward the upkeep of the temple. The Prelate was not about to refuse a request that broke no laws nor violated sacred tradition.

They closed the main door and side entrances then quickly shed their cloaks. Tenryon led them down the main aisle to gather at the foot of the steps fronting the altar. Eyes on the great star, the Herun knelt down on one knee. The others followed and he led them in prayer. Afterward, he rose and motioned to Rohyr and Lassen to ascend to the altar.

Lassen smoothed a hand down the front of his tunic as he and Rohyr climbed the shallow steps to stand before the great star. They were clad in nuptial cream and gold but Lassen’s formal tunic was *sedyran* in design because he could belt it as loosely as he wished without being obvious about it. He had tied the gold-embroidered belt a little lower so that it rode on his upper hip, allowing the satiny fabric of his tunic to drape softly around his waist and obscure the swelling of his belly.

Both wore the new earrings Lassen’s brother Yuilan had created for them. They were similar in design to the white-silver leman’s earring Lassen had worn since his coming of

age but were edged with delicate gold braid and inlaid with crystalline adamant and frosty snow-sapphire, the latter the emblematic gem of the soul-bound. It had moved Lassen to tears when he discovered that Rohyr intended to identify himself as his concubine's binding-mate.

Rohyr gently turned him to face the star then pulled him back against him. He slid his palm down Lassen's arm to take his right hand in his and entwine their fingers. Lassen heard him begin the prayer of invocation.

"Creator Almighty, Sovereign Most Holy, we beseech You. Allow us to approach Your holy presence."

Lassen shivered at the solemn words. How often had he heard members of the clergy chant them during worship? Had seen them enter into a state of such contentment and peace that their faces glowed with utmost felicity. True, that sense of well-being, of oneness with something powerful, almost always touched the congregation as well, which made for the prayerful atmosphere desired in Veresian worship. The lack of that sense of spiritual communion was a sure indication that an officiating cleric was not fully absorbed in what he was doing.

Nonetheless, there had been times Lassen had wondered if the congregation only experienced the scant spillover of the total experience. Something akin to tasting the dregs of a good wine but not ever imbibing the wine itself. Devout as a child who believed because he had been taught it was so, Lassen did not doubt the otherworldly nature of the rite he was about to undertake. But neither did he have any expectations of palpable divine intervention beyond what Rohyr through his special abilities might sense.

He realized Rohyr had finished the invocation and now waited silently behind him for a sign. Lassen swallowed hard at his lover's faith that their plea would be visibly acknowledged. Several heartbeats passed. A seeming eternity in the utter silence. How long would they wait? How long were they supposed to wait? Lassen did not really know what to expect. How could he when soul-binding was very rarely practiced nowadays.

For most, the infinite nature of such a bond was frightening, the fear further exacerbated by the diminished sense of direct divine contact that was instrumental in lending courage and inspiring conviction to commit to so immutable a fate. The exigencies of racial survival had taken its toll on what had once been a part of Deiran life: the primal connection wrought by constant communion with the Creator that had been a matter of course among the Naere in the early days following the evolution of the belief in one supreme being and the development of a universal creed.

Soul-binding required no magistrate to validate the nuptial vows as in a handfasting or a priest to solemnize the union as with a fane marriage. Nor was there a need for witnesses to affix their signatures to a document to guarantee legality. The transcendental nature of the rite needed only the invocation of the Maker's presence and a tangible manifestation of his blessing.

A collective inhalation of breath pulled Lassen out of his musings. He glanced back and saw the others going down on their knees once more, faces upraised in reverence. He followed their gazes and caught his breath.

The star was glowing with an unearthly, purest white light. It was not reflected light but came from within. Even the metal seemed alive with the gentle incandescence that suffused it.

"Holy Veres..." he whispered as something washed over him. A feeling of affection

and concern so profound, so encompassing, he found himself blinking back tears of gratitude and joy.

Tenryon began to speak in the language of their Naeren foresires. The archaic speech was used only for the most formal and solemn of religious and state ceremonies such as a sovereign ruler's coronation or a ranking cleric's investiture.

"Rohyr Essendri, Lassen Idana, ye wouldst join thy selves in eternal and sacred matrimony. Rohyr, dost thou pledge thyself to this?"

Lassen glanced back at Rohyr. The king smiled at him with a tenderness that almost snatched the breath from his breast. Lassen beamed and returned his attention to the incandescent star.

"I do," Rohyr clearly answered.

Tenryon asked the same of Lassen and received the same firm declaration.

"Then speak thy vows before the Creator."

Rohyr lifted their joined hands, slipping his under Lassen's to partially cup it. Lassen turned his head to meet his gaze.

"My heart to thine, thy soul to mine," Rohyr vowed. "I bind to thee for all the days of this world and beyond. Naught and no one will tear us asunder. This I pledge in the name of Veres All-Powerful, Master of all that is seen and unseen."

Lassen took a deep breath before uttering a similar oath.

"Thy heart to mine, my soul to thine," he said in a hushed voice. "I bind to thee for all the days of this world and beyond. Naught and no one will tear us asunder. This I pledge in the name of Veres Most Merciful. May He grant us our plea."

Silence fell as soon as he finished speaking. A silence so deep, it seemed time had ground to a halt and everyone had stopped breathing. But before doubt and worry could take root once more, Lassen heard what sounded like the whisper of a zephyr.

The sound gradually increased in volume until it recalled to him the wind in Pelmoth as it swept across the pebble-strewn beach at night and the cliff-bound meadows in the day. Yet the air within the temple was balmy and still. Not a whiff of the faint breeze outside passed through the open windows high above nigh to the vaulted ceiling.

"Look," Rohyr whispered, squeezing his hand slightly. Lassen glanced down.

A silvery blue flame had flickered into existence in the cup of their joined hands. It steadily grew yet it remained cool and gentle to the touch and emitted not so much as a puff of smoke.

Lassen had almost forgotten to breathe when the flame suddenly flared, metallic tongues shooting up and out and curling in on themselves until he realized they were spiralling around him and Rohyr. He pressed back into Rohyr's embrace, startled by the silvery blue inferno that engulfed them.

Don't be afraid, Las. Rejoice in His presence.

Lassen cast his fears aside and opened himself to the benevolent maelstrom. At once, the near ecstasy he had previously felt swept through him once more and he opened himself to it. He closed his eyes to stem his tears but they forced their way past and streamed down his cheeks.

On the heels of such glorious happiness, he felt another connection slide into place. An embrace that was not physical. A joining that was not of body parts but of the mind and soul. Much like when Rohyr's imprint had still lain on his mind. But this was more

encompassing. It did not lurk in the recesses of his mind but boldly took up residence in the forefront. Calling to him. Inviting him to say something.

Rohyr?

I am with you, ariad.

He had never initiated mind-speech with Rohyr before. It had not been in his power. He could only respond when Rohyr communicated with him first.

A sob burst from him and he turned his head and blindly sought Rohyr's lips. They crashed down on his and he was captured in an open-mouthed kiss so molten, he thought it would begin another conflagration.

When they drew apart, they were quite breathless. For a moment, they did not move, their foreheads touching, their eyes closed. And about them the inferno began to diminish. They opened their eyes to see the flames slowly recede until one tongue flickered gently once more in the cup of their joined hands. Rohyr reverently closed their fingers over it, holding the silvery light within for one tender moment before it was extinguished.

A voice rose in song. A song that was both a hymn of praise and an ode to love. The others swiftly joined in.

Pressing closer into Rohyr's arms, Lassen listened as the music echoed thrillingly in the vast space and filled his already full heart to overflowing.

Chapter Twenty-One

Idylls

Tenryon arranged for a celebratory tea at his manse. It was a cozy and casual affair with just the newly bound pair, their trusted circle and Lassen's parents. Accustomed to Rohyr bringing his leman and cousins with him to Ziana in years past, none of Tenryon's servants guessed at the nuptial nature of the occasion. The small group drew ever closer together as each basked in the feeling of being a part of something rare and momentous. Lassen decided then and there that he would not exchange the simple manner of his binding to Rohyr for any lavish ceremony bereft of the loving intimacy that had made the former special beyond compare.

Only Aeldan and Ashrian came back to Glanthar afterward. The others returned to their own homes and duties before their absences were noticed. Eiren gave Rohyr one piece of advice before they parted, cautioning him to stick to anal intercourse until after Lassen birthed.

"It's just a precautionary measure given that he nearly miscarried," the physician explained. "One of the properties of semen is to elevate pleasurable sensation by inducing mild spasms in the womb. Which is good and desirable with a healthy womb but not so fine when a breeding Deir has a history of prenatal problems."

They returned to Pelmoth just as dusk was blanketing the countryside in twilight. The Mithani brothers insisted on escorting their cousin and his mate to their chamber, archly advising Rohyr to deal gently with Lassen even if he had abstained for far longer than they had ever known him to bear.

Once within their room, however, it seemed Rohyr would ignore their counsel. For he hauled Lassen into his arms and kissed him hungrily as he swiftly rid him of his finery. Not to be outdone, Lassen responded as avidly, frantically unfastening clasps, undoing buttons and untying laces.

As soon as Lassen was bared to the skin, Rohyr pulled him flush against him and backed him toward the bed without breaking the seal of their mouths. Lassen thought Rohyr would tumble him into bed and take him without further ado. But Rohyr carefully lowered him onto the mattress, following him down to cover him with his body, one hand slipping between them to caress the slight mound of Lassen's abdomen.

His gentleness did little to dampen Lassen's ardor. If anything, it roused his lust even further and he fervently wished Rohyr would just ravish him senseless.

"As you wish, my love," Rohyr murmured with a rakish grin.

Lassen gaped in surprise before he recalled that their binding allowed him to impart his thoughts to Rohyr without the need for his mate to open a channel between them. He smiled at Rohyr in joyful affirmation.

Rohyr's fingertips ghosted over his belly. "I envy our son lying so safe and warm within you," he whispered. "Would that I could do the same."

Lassen's eyes widened at this tender utterance. A moment later, he gasped as he felt a faint kick from within right under Rohyr's hand. He quickly glanced at Rohyr and laughed when an expression of complete delight lit up his handsome face.

“It seems our child agrees,” he teased.

Rohyr nodded and leaned down to kiss Lassen’s abdomen. Lassen raptly watched him.

Grey eyes lifted to look at him. Lassen caught his breath at the love and lust that blazed in their depths. He moaned softly as Rohyr caught his lips in scalding union. In all their years together, one thing had not changed. Rohyr’s kisses were still as potent as they had been when he first introduced Lassen to bodily pleasure. He closed his eyes and let himself drown in sensation.

His lips were happily swollen by the time Rohyr released them to explore the column of his neck, marking it with crimson bruises. He groaned when Rohyr assiduously played with his nipples. They were more sensitive than ever and visibly plumper than usual. Small wonder that Rohyr sucked them so vigorously. And then he was following the faintly curving line of Lassen’s belly, his hands mapping his flanks, his tongue teasing his navel and tracing the rose brown birthing seam below.

His senses swimming, Lassen dazedly gazed at him as his beloved moved even lower. His dark head dipped between Lassen’s outspread thighs and all coherence disappeared as Lassen was engulfed in wet and heady warmth.

Rohyr drew on him voraciously. It proved too much. The rapturous tension mounted and pooled in Lassen’s groin until, finally, he spent himself explosively in Rohyr’s demanding mouth.

He fell back, winded by so intense a climax. When Rohyr’s arms slipped around him, he quickly turned into his embrace and sealed their mouths in hot-tongued urgency. He had denied himself this pleasure for so long and now that he could indulge it, he craved union with Rohyr. Soon, he was shuddering against him and his kisses had turned almost frantic with want.

Lassen broke away and whispered imploringly, “Fill me.”

“I shall, my sweet,” Rohyr softly crooned, scattering kisses on Lassen’s face. “But I can only take you from behind until after you’ve birthed.”

“It doesn’t matter how you have me, so long as you do,” Lassen moaned.

“Oh, I intend to,” Rohyr murmured with grin. “I’ve waited far too long to be inside you again.”

As he spoke, he reached for the oil on the bedside table. Lassen’s blatant haste to be speared made mincemeat of Rohyr’s patience and, after the most hurried of preparations, he slipped behind his eager mate and pulled him back into the slight curve of his body that Lassen might nestle against his tall frame. Lassen sighed when he felt the evidence of Rohyr’s desire hard against his bottom.

“Please, Roh,” he begged, insistently pushing back until Rohyr’s shaft slipped into the cleft between his buttocks.

With a husky chuckle, Rohyr complied. Lassen groaned as he was pierced. Gaspd raggedly as he was repeatedly filled. Reaching around him, Rohyr gripped his hardened length and proceeded to stroke it. Lassen nearly keened. Every sensation was heightened from the caress of demanding lips upon flushed skin and the slide of heated bodies against each other to the wrap of possessive fingers around swollen flesh and the inward plunge of satin-bound sword into yielding, silk-soft core.

“Have my love, Las,” Rohyr whispered hoarsely.

Lassen turned his head, begging for his lips to be pillaged anew. His wordless plea

was swiftly answered and he surrendered himself to his ferocious need.

Completion came with storm force. Ecstasy coursed its way through every nook and cranny of his body as he spilt onto the pristine sheets. He heard Rohyr gasp out his name as he also spent himself, the tightening of Lassen's body around his shaft all but milking him dry. They lay entwined for several heartbeats as they waited out the last sweeps of their spent desire.

Rohyr carefully withdrew then helped Lassen lie back before gathering him close in his arms. Lassen snuggled in his embrace.

"I missed you terribly," he murmured, idly running a finger along Rohyr's lower lip. He grinned when Rohyr lazily licked it, eyes a-gleam with mischief. "And you missed me as much, I take it."

"You can't imagine it," Rohyr replied. "I can no longer recall how I coped with the barren years before you came into my life. They seem so long ago."

Lassen swallowed the lump in his throat. "Surely Tyrde tends to you. I can never forgive him if he..."

"Neglects me?" Rohyr snorted. "I am guiltier of that than he. Not that he cares. All that matters to Tyrde is that I tumble him oft enough to sire an heir on him. Anything else is irrelevant."

"Even when I was gone?" Lassen could not comprehend the notion of anyone not falling in love with Rohyr, especially one who was in the enviable position of being his official consort.

"I think Tyrde loves only himself and mayhap Uncle Imcael. Everyone else he deems luxuries, not necessities. I'm a trophy to him and a steppingstone, nothing more. Oh, he desires me but that's just bodily attraction. And if he is affectionate with me, it's because he believes winning my regard will win him his desire. But there's no love there and I know it for a mere act. And so we both go through the motions and people think our charade of a marriage is hale and whole if not exactly a love match."

Lassen sadly gazed at him. "I truly thought that once I was out of the way, he would be your friend." Rohyr shook his head. "Did you want that at least?"

Rohyr shrugged. "It would have helped had we become friends. Bad enough that we wed with no love between us. Friendship would have gone a long way in smoothing the rougher edges of our union."

"And might have led to love eventually," Lassen softly suggested.

Rohyr looked at him with some amusement. "And that's what you really want to know." He pulled Lassen down for a long kiss. "Yes, I might have learned to love him had he shown the slightest interest in making something more of our marriage than it is. But it wouldn't be the same way I love you. You complete me, Las. For so long there was an emptiness within that no one could fill. Until I saw you in Tal Ereq. I knew then that my waiting was done. That I would be lonely and empty no more."

Lassen looked at him wonderingly. "Why do I feel that you haven't told me everything?"

"Rest assured I shall tell you when this is all over," Rohyr promised. "When it's safe for you to know."

Lassen stared at him in even more confusion. But he decided to let the matter go in favor of a more pressing personal issue.

"I trust he satisfies your needs at least?"

Silence met his question and he worried that he had displeased Rohyr. But of a sudden, Rohyr rolled him over and pinned him down.

“He came to me as experienced in the pleasures of the flesh as I,” Rohyr roughly said. “Most assuredly he satisfies my needs if spending one’s seed is all there is to coupling. But it’s not and it’s possible to be afterwards gratified in body but wanting in heart and spirit. Tyrde gives pleasure that he may take pleasure in turn. But you have ever pleased me for my sake alone. And what pleasure you took, you enjoyed all the more because it was I who gave it to you. Can you mark the difference? Do you still worry that I could ever rank anyone higher than you in my heart or soul or my body’s sating?”

Rohyr did not give Lassen a chance to answer but sealed their mouths together in an almost brutal kiss. After reducing him to near breathlessness, Rohyr teasingly stroked his way down the length of Lassen’s thighs. He hooked his hands behind Lassen’s knees and parted them wide. Rohyr drove his shaft deep into Lassen’s seed-slick arse with a long slow thrust.

Lassen clung to Rohyr for dear life as he was ridden to another climax. Rohyr drew out their lovemaking, pausing at maddening intervals to slow down the pace and lower the heat enough to prolong that wondrous oneness he shared with Lassen alone. Lassen decided never to broach so silly a question to his beloved ever again. Certainly not when Rohyr had shown him time and again how much more he revered him as a person, subject and lover than any other who had passed through his life before.

* * * *

A few mornings hence found them strolling down the beach, picking their way among the boulders and occasional tree that strewn the narrow strip of wheaten sand and biscuit-hued pebbles. The sun shone brightly with nary a cloud to obscure it. Unlike the spring monsoon, the post summer rains were wont to fall in the afternoons.

Finding a sheltered spot beneath a leafy sapling a little higher up on the beach, they spread a blanket and unpacked a hamper of breakfast fare—steaming hot rolls, soft farmer’s cheese, freshly churned butter, rich blackgrape jelly, slices of honey-glazed ham and several juicy freestone peaches. The cook had also packed a jug of sweet cider for them with which to wash down the meal.

Their enjoyment of their repast had as much to do with each other’s company as it did with the food. Never had they been so open with each other about their feelings before. Indeed, never had the word ‘love’ passed between them and certainly not as often as it had in the weeks since their calamitous reunion.

Lassen watched his mate with admiration and budding desire. How could he not when Rohyr was such a splendid specimen of Deiran pulchritude? And one whose favors Lassen now had every right to demand. Not that he would ever play the hunter to Rohyr’s prey. It simply was not his nature and to act so out of character was to invite acute embarrassment on his part and amused commiseration on Rohyr’s. But the knowledge that he could was intoxicating.

The king lounged on his side, supporting himself on one arm while he bit into a peach. A trickle of juice made its way down from the corner of his mouth. Before he could wipe it away, Lassen leaned forward and licked it off. He proceeded to kiss away the sweet moisture on Rohyr’s lips then drew back with an impish smile.

Rohyr licked his lips in appreciation. “I fervently hope it’s not merely a function of

breeding that makes you so brazen these days,” he said.

Lassen laughed. “I assure you ‘tis not, but rather the knowledge that you are mine. I never wanted for more than that and never expected anything to come of it. Yet it came true, this dearest wish. How can I not let you know how much I love you?”

Rohyr’s grin softened to a tender smile. “As to that, perhaps we can be even more to each other if Jareth’s suspicions pan out.”

“You mean the Anjuin law of succession?”

Rohyr nodded. “I’ve studied the basic laws of every fief and province in this land. But I’m no legal practitioner, much less well versed in the minutiae of statutes that have no bearing on Ylandre’s welfare as a whole. I understand Anju’s law of succession but not the particulars of it. If Jareth is right, there may be something—some legal point that Uncle Imcael and Tyrde kept from me that may render their instigation of this marriage suspect at the very least. In any case, it’s worth investigating.” Tossing aside the peach, he reached for Lassen and drew him closer. “I don’t know if there is a loophole that will free me to make you my consort but I meant it when I said I would relinquish the throne if I can’t have you to spouse for so long as I remain Ardan.”

He lay back and pulled Lassen atop him. For the next several minutes, they kissed and caressed, enjoying the slow buildup of lust between them. Before too long, they progressed to undressing each other, the need to feel skin against skin overtaking their patience. They moved against each other with all the passion of newfound lovers and the ease of long-time partners. And underlining their loving was the melody of their silent communication, testament to the inviolable bond that joined them for all time.

Yet Lassen did not expect the gift Rohyr bestowed on him as they moved toward their bodies’ union. When Rohyr straddled his hips instead of moving between his legs, he looked up at him questioningly.

“A breeding Deir produces infertile seed, did you know that?” Rohyr huskily said. He smiled when Lassen shook his head, eyes wide with surprise. “This is the one time you can’t beget a child on me, Las. What say we take advantage of it?”

Lassen stared at him. “I’m honored,” he whispered. “But do you truly want this?”

Rohyr bit his lip then admitted, “I never imagined giving myself thusly to anyone. I won’t deny that it’s hard enough yielding at all. This is—this is beyond anything ever expected of me.”

He did not have to explain his need to control their lovemaking. To do the riding though it was he who would play the mare.

Pushing himself up on one arm, Lassen slid his right hand up Rohyr’s hard thigh then moved it inward toward his groin. With a faint smile, he murmured, “May I?”

Rohyr nodded. His breath hitched nonetheless as Lassen’s fingers slipped lower and farther, beginning the sensual process by which he would be turned. Lassen watched his face intently, not wanting to provoke an adverse reaction from his skittish mate. He kept his caresses gentle, tamping down on the impulse to fondle him in any way that might be construed as predatory or aggressive. Rohyr would find it easier to surrender control if Lassen’s dominance over him remained subtle and unthreatening.

When Rohyr’s body turned, the instinct to be filled awakened. He tensed once more as his learned resistance against submission duelled with the inborn desire for penetration. Sensing his spouse’s physical readiness and emotional uncertainty, Lassen withdrew his fingers and brought the glistening tips to his lips. Holding Rohyr’s gaze, he

roguishly sucked them clean.

Rohyr's stomach muscles clenched in reactive need. Eyes closed in residual apprehension, he slowly lowered himself onto Lassen's shaft. For only the second time, Lassen knew the pleasure of being sheathed to the hilt and so wonderful was the sensation that he had to fight not to buck up into the untried passage enclosing him.

A degree of discomfort was only to be expected on Rohyr's part. But he was neither a craven innocent nor an inexperienced tyro. Seasoned warrior and lover, he did not shy from pain but faced it head-on. More so if he deemed the price worth it. And giving himself to the owner of his heart Rohyr deemed well worth it indeed.

He weathered the sting of defloration with little more than a wince. Lassen laid his hand on Rohyr's thighs and rubbed them soothingly, tenderly coaxing his mate to relax and surrender himself to the pleasure of being filled thusly. Rohyr let out a small exhalation and opened his eyes to behold Lassen's countenance, all aglow with love and wonder and gratitude. It was enough to help him ignore the discomfort and focus on the pleasurable sensations. More than enough to dispel any misgivings he may have yet harbored and wholly welcome the experience instead.

They quickly found the rhythm that served their needs best. It did not take them long to lose themselves in the timeless dance of love and lust as flesh cleaved flesh and passion and rapture flowed as freely and fulsomely as the seed that spewed forth from one to fill the other at the peak of shared ecstasy. No description could do such an experience justice. One could only remember it in a hot haze of desire and fulfillment.

Rohyr managed to hold on to some sentience though his body trembled with the aftershocks of completion. He lifted himself off Lassen albeit a little shakily and took care not to collapse on him lest he laid his weight on their child's cozy berth. Lassen pulled him against his breast in an embrace that was both appreciative and comforting.

He could guess at the intense feeling of vulnerability Rohyr must have experienced yielding himself in the one act from which he'd been taught to abstain. From adolescence onward, he had never entertained the notion of being genitally pierced, not even by his consort. Exigency rather than affection had always been expected to dictate his choice of spouse. Perhaps it was just as well that Lassen truly enjoyed playing the sheath to Rohyr's sword.

It was not that he did not like changing the rules of their bed-play. Under Rohyr's tutelage, he had learned never to discount the potential for pleasure any consensual act afforded. But there was a joy in taking Rohyr into his body that transcended all other acts of physical intimacy, even the reversal of their usual sexual roles.

"That was wonderful," Lassen murmured. "At least it was for me. I hope your expectations were adequately met."

Rohyr chuckled, his breath feathering Lassen's chest. "More than adequately. It was incredible. I wonder now why I was so afraid."

"Understandable."

"Is it?"

"Absolutely. I was just as anxious my first bedding. Yet I'd had ample time to prepare myself and knew 'twas expected of me. Not so for you. You're so brave to give me all of yourself today. I'm truly honored and grateful beyond words."

Rohyr lifted his head and looked at Lassen searchingly. "Do you enjoy it that much when I yield? Because if you do, I'm willing to try this again. Nay, that sounds as if ... I

mean we can reverse roles whenever you desire it. I wouldn't have it be about my pleasure alone but yours as well."

Lassen stifled a giggle at Rohyr's unwonted discomfiture. "Oh, love, it has always been as much about my pleasure. I enjoy playing the sword, I won't deny it. And I certainly won't mind repeating the experience now and then. But, verily, I still prefer being your sheath. It simply feels so right, having you inside me."

He curled a leg invitingly around the back of Rohyr's thighs.

"You are insatiable these days," Rohyr remarked approvingly as he reached into the basket and came up not unexpectedly with a small jar of oil.

Lassen grinned as Rohyr lavishly anointed his hardened shaft. "Are you complaining?"

"Not at all." Rohyr pressed kisses up the length of Lassen's throat while down yonder he pushed slick fingers up his backside. "But I warn you, I'm inclined to take you as long and hard as I can. You tempt me overmuch."

"Give in to temptation, my lord," Lassen pleaded, lifting his legs to wrap them around Rohyr's waist.

The headlong push of rigid flesh deep into his body robbed him of further speech, as did the sweet intrusion of thought into his mind.

You and yours forever, Las.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Disclosures

Rohyr returned to Rikara before the end of the month only to depart again little more than a fortnight later. With the recent frequency of his absences from the capital giving rise to talk of estrangement between him and his consort, he strove to allay a portion of the gossip by sojourning briefly in the Crown fief of Vireshe with his brother Dylen. What better way to give the illusion of marital stability than to check on the birthright of the union's first fruit?

Vireshe lay in the west just north of Glanthar and was part of Varadan before the old kingdom was annexed to Ylandre. Now the hereditary seat of the Ylandrin heir apparent, the fief was rich in fertile plains, lush forests and teeming lakes and rivers. So great were Vireshe's earnings from taxes and rent that it could support the crown prince and his family and he in turn could dispense with reliance on the royal coffers.

Rohyr had once derived his income solely from the fief but his time as crown prince was prematurely cut short by the equally premature death of his sire. He now held Vireshe in trust for his own heir, the revenue accrued over the decades kept in banks or carefully invested that by the time his firstborn received the fief's herunic title, he would have more than a sizeable nest egg at his disposal.

But the need to keep up appearances was not the only reason for Rohyr's visit to Vireshe. With Lassen nearing the end of gestation, it behooved Rohyr to be closely involved once more in the internal affairs of his firstborn's future holdings. Thus, the decision to stay awhile in Vireshe before he went back to Glanthar. It was at the royal estate just outside the capital of Lythaen that Jareth and Zykriel caught up with him, bearing the results of weeks of arduous research.

Along with Keiran, they had ransacked the Citadel archives as well as scoured the State University library and even the Lawyers Guild records for anything pertinent to Anju's peculiar succession law. The problem had lain in the local nature of the statute.

Given that Anju had been an independent state and its political and legal systems largely left untouched by the Essendris who subjugated it those many centuries back, scant attention had since been paid to the fief's internal dealings, including the detailed archiving of its domestic laws and traditions. After all, who cared how a fief functioned so long as its lords broke no laws, did not brutalize their subjects and regularly contributed to the national treasury by way of taxes?

Rather than chance anyone overhearing their discussion, Rohyr suggested an early morning ride through the estate forest. A hunting lodge was conveniently located in the heart of the woods and could be easily guarded without being obvious about it.

"What have you learned?" Rohyr said as soon as they settled around the small dining table within.

"Much more than we expected," Jareth replied. "To put it plainly, it appears Tyrde's threat against you is toothless."

"How so?"

Zykriel deposited a sheaf of documents on the table. All were yellowed and strongly

musty in odor.

Rohyr wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Where in Aisen did you unearth these? They smell as if they came from underground."

"They were a sight more smelly when we found them," Zykriel retorted. "There was a stash of ancient documents in a vault in the very bowels of the archives. Even I didn't know it existed. I warrant my predecessors didn't bother to inform me because they believed it either empty or no longer holding anything of import."

"Well, what did the vault contain?"

"Mostly census documents and records of revenue from as far back as two centuries after the Inception. The original reports regarding the passing of the last females in Khitaira were there, too. It's just as well they were copied and stored in the upper levels. The old documents were barely readable and almost fell apart when we brought them out." He showed Rohyr a thin bundle of badly streaked old parchment. "We tried to find a newer copy of this elsewhere but it seems there is none available."

"Except in Anju perhaps," Jareth said. "But we could hardly search there."

"Indeed not. So we had to make do with this. It's a duplicate of the charter document by which Anju was created a fief of Ylandre, inclusive of royal ratification of the Anjuin Bill of Rights as set down by the Kardovas when they first founded the duchy. Included, too, are the rules on herunic succession. It's clearly stated that the line of inheritance is always through the eldest son of a reigning Herun's younger brothers. There is no mention anywhere of election of one's successor being permitted. Indeed, primogeniture is against the law and a Herun who attempts to arrogate power to his direct descendants can and will be deposed. Interestingly, the practice is exclusive to South Vihandra."

"It has to do with the reasoning behind the law," Zykriel continued in somewhat scholarly fashion. "The right of succession by dint of being firstborn is most effective when there are few heirs to contest claims to a title or when there are enough titles and/or land to go around to pacify an excess of heirs. Our family is a case in point. Though we are numerous, there has always been a surfeit of wealth and property to share amongst everyone."

"Thanks in large part to judicious marriages and sound investments," Jareth interjected.

"Exactly. But in the centuries immediately following the southward migration of colonists, large families came to be the rule in South Vihandra in order to promote swift propagation. It was not unheard of for one lord to have any number of sons to his name by Veres only knew how many concubines in addition to his official mate. Keiran mentioned that the second Shaja of Myare had eight sons by three successive consorts and almost thrice that number from extramarital liaisons."

"He must have beggared his people through taxes to support such a massive brood," Rohyr remarked with a frown.

"As a matter of fact, he did," Zykriel confirmed. "It's a wonder Myare still exists today after the bloody rebellion that overthrew that family. In any case, as the South Vihandrans deemed all these children legitimate heirs, internecine feuds between brothers, half-brothers and stepbrothers over titles and land ensued and soon resulted in the wholesale extinction of many clans. A direct offshoot of those ancient feuds were the revised rules of succession whereby forbidding inheritance through one line of descendants alone and at the same time encouraging intermarriage amongst brethren and

close degree cousins allowed the surviving clans to spread the wealth a little bit more evenly so to speak. A title and its entailed benefits passed amongst House and clan members and permitted each family to accumulate wealth before the title went to another branch.

“And this has to do with Tyrde because...?”

“The Kardovas originally hailed from Azansa.”

Rohyr’s eyes narrowed. “And Azansa is in South Vihandra.”

“Aye, one of the first cities,” Jareth confirmed. “They later migrated north and settled in what was then free land between Ylandre and Cattania. The Kardovas brought with them all of the south’s laws and traditions and when Anju was annexed to Ylandre, our foresire Ruarq Essendri chose not to change them. Therefore, the old statutes still stand to this day. And here we come to the meat of the matter.”

He paused as Zykriel pulled out a sheet of parchment. It was even more aged and discolored than the others, the faded script just barely legible. “Contrary to what we’ve been led to believe, Tyrde’s being an only child doesn’t automatically invest him with the authority to choose his heir. The Bill of Rights was missing the section that contained the specifics of the inheritance law. Locating a copy of that section proved the hardest chore. We almost gave up when even the Lawyers Guild records yielded nothing.”

“Keiran found this in one of the oldest repositories in the College of Law archives,” Zykriel said of the document. “It’s a copy of the writ issued by Imlen Kardova, first Herun of Anju, that states the particulars of the fief’s inheritance law. In essence, it stipulates that the title should pass to the eldest son of the most senior of the current Herun’s brothers. If said brother does not produce an heir of his body, then the eldest son of the next brother in line inherits the title and so on and so forth.”

Zykriel read on with careful emphasis. “In the event that there are no brothers or none produce heirs of their bodies, the title then goes to the eldest son of the Herun’s closest blood relation.” He tapped the document with a finger. “In other words, it passes completely out of the incumbent Herun’s family.”

Jareth regarded Rohyr sympathetically. “You made the natural assumption that because Tyrde has no fraternal nephews of Kardova blood, it would be his children who would inherit Anju. And neither he nor Imcael saw fit to disabuse you of that assumption.”

“Who is Tyrde’s heir?” Rohyr tightly asked.

“His cousin, Nyol Kardova, the Prefect of the Anjuin constabulary. He’s staunchly loyal to the Crown, I’m happy to say.”

“Not to mention the eldest of a slew of brothers and cousins whose children are now in line for the title,” Zykriel added.

Rohyr fell silent, his face expressionless. Those who knew him well however understood that he was anything but empty of emotion. Dylen had kept silent throughout. Now he clasped his brother’s clenched fist. The convulsive grip Rohyr returned was telling.

Dylen quietly said, “You accepted what Imcael told you because you trust him implicitly. You couldn’t conceive of him betraying you with a falsehood.”

Rohyr closed his eyes and lowered his head. And then, with a pained exhalation, he looked at his brother with unhappy self-reproach.

“You warned me,” he whispered. “You told me it was a weakness he could exploit

but I wouldn't believe you. I refused to think him capable of such perfidy."

Dylen tightened his hold on Rohyr's hand. "You love him, Roh," he softly pointed out. "He's the only immediate kin left to you other than myself. And he loves you; that I don't doubt. If he deceived you, he believed it for your own good and the good of the land as much as it was to further his own fortunes."

"Fortunes he believes his by right," Jareth said with a snort. "There's no excusing his actions."

Rohyr nodded, gritting his teeth. At length, he said, "I sensed he was hiding something that day. He shielded his thoughts so suddenly that I felt them slam into place. I wondered about it at the time." He brought his fist down on the table so viciously, the wood cracked. "Damn it all, I should have forced him to reveal his mind then! I would have discovered their duplicity before binding myself in wretched matrimony!"

About to say something else, he suddenly stiffened. He abruptly rose to his feet.

"Lassen is in pain," he rasped. "He must be about to birth."

The others quickly stood.

"I must go to him," Rohyr said, hurriedly donning his cloak. "Dy, stay here a while longer and keep up the appearance that I am still in residence. Jath, Zyk, I'm indebted to both of you and Keiran as well. For now, return to Rikara and await further instructions."

* * * *

Lassen moaned at the deeply felt tenderness in his muscles. He'd awakened that morning to the onset of labor and the awful pressure from within on the birthing seam. Thank Veres for his bond with Rohyr alerting the king to his condition. Dael and Mithre had both experienced birthing but Lassen's circumstances—his age and previous brush with miscarrying—required a skilled physician's assistance. Thus, it was a great relief that scarcely an hour had passed since Lassen felt the first warning spasms when Rohyr strode into the room, Eiren right behind him.

Rohyr had not made too much of a fuss. Indeed, he had acquitted himself quite well, displaying little of the clichéd behavior of a first time parent. Well, save for the moment when Lassen could not stop himself from crying out due to the stabbing pain blossoming in the vicinity of his lower abdomen. Rohyr began to panic then and only a stern reprimand from Eiren calmed him down.

Eiren had dampened the discomfort with a mind touch but he could not wholly benumb Lassen to it for the birthing parent had to remain awake and aware in order to safely push the child to the mouth of the seam. Otherwise, the attending physician would be forced to take the infant directly from the womb and that could introduce infection, cause inadvertent internal damage and generally lead to complications, some of them potentially fatal.

The worst of it had been when his abdominal muscles had pushed the child down and out through the seam. Lassen was reduced to sobbing out his distress. But fortified by Rohyr's firm grip on his hand and Dael's murmured assurances, he weathered the ordeal. And then he'd heard the first piping cry of life, sweetly thrilling to his ears. Afterward, the sharp pain had given way to a faint ache as Eiren gently brought the edges of the wound together to encourage it to begin healing.

Once he bound Lassen's abdomen with gauzy cotton bandages, the discomfort became quite bearable. But Lassen would be bedridden for at least a week, Eiren told

him. Even the least strenuous of movements would slow his recovery so, for the duration of that period, he was to remain in bed and attempt nothing more ambulatory than visits to the chamber pot.

Through the haze of exhaustion, he saw Rohyr holding their son, securely ensconced in his natal shell. The shell looked like half the cooked white of an egg and was almost double the circumference of Rohyr's cupped hands. No longer smeared with blood and birthing fluid, it was dark beige, its opaque surface streaked with the faintest traces of what looked like bluish veins.

Rohyr lowered the precious bundle to him. Lassen gaped when he saw the tiny infant cradled in its cushiony center, the faintly pulsing pale rose birth cord trailing across his belly to disappear into the folds of the shell surface. He had never seen a newborn fresh from the womb. It was the custom to keep days-old babies indoors and away from non-family members until the shell came off.

Despite his miniscule size, the child was completely formed. And judging from the strength of his flailing arms and legs, healthy as well. The natal shell would protect him and provide nourishment until he was able to suckle. Whereupon the desiccated shell and cord would naturally detach. Lassen noted the silken hair on his son's head, as richly dark as Rohyr's sable locks. The babe's eyelids fluttered slightly and he caught a glimpse of rimmed bluish-grey irises. Merciful Veres... If there was still any doubt as to who had sired this child, there was the proof to dispel it.

"How long?" he asked, feeling the shell. It was smooth and warm and firm to the touch but not inflexible.

"A fortnight, give or take," Eiren replied. "He'll grow rapidly, to about three times his birth size. And he'll be ravenous for *estra* once the shell comes off."

"Shall I produce enough?"

"I don't see why not."

Lassen managed a tired smile. He looked up at Rohyr. "He takes after you."

Rohyr smiled back. "In coloring. But he has also inherited some of your features." He glanced down at his son then gazed at Lassen. "He'll be beautiful."

Lassen chuckled. "I dare say you're biased."

As lassitude overcame him, he closed his eyes, sore and weary but content to the core.

* * * *

He slept through what was left of the morning and missed the midday meal. Not that he would have had much of an appetite. Indeed, he barely managed the small bowl of broth Mithre fed him that evening and only nibbled the toast that came with it. But he did not feel weak and his immediate post-birth fatigue was largely alleviated by his lengthy slumber. The birthing seam was already closed though still red and raw. It would eventually fade to near invisibility over time.

He held his son for the first time, grinning when the infant gurgled and cooed as he ran a fingertip along its tiny chin. It was hard to believe that in two weeks time, this same child would grow big enough to cradle in his arms and strong enough to let the whole world know when he was hungry, thirsty or in need of a nappy change.

He looked up as Rohyr came to sit at his side and folded a protective arm around him. Lassen half reclined against him.

“What shall we name him?” Lassen whispered as he gazed adoringly at the child. Rohyr smiled. “Your choice.”

Lassen frowned. “But he’s your heir,” he protested. “Shouldn’t you give him a name of your House?”

“And you’re not now a part of my House? It’s your privilege, Las, as his *adda*.”

Lassen’s frown gave way to a radiant smile. “Then I should like to name him after my *Opa* Vyren,” he decided.

“Vyren Essendri,” Rohyr repeated. “A name befitting a future Ardan. You must have loved him very much.”

Lassen nodded. “He was a most wonderful grandsire. So very kind and gentle and forbearing yet strong and fiercely protective of his loved ones.”

“Was he beauteous as well?” Rohyr asked. At Lassen’s nod, he smirked. “You took after him the most of his grandchildren.”

Lassen blushed at the tacit compliment but happily rested his head against Rohyr’s shoulder. They lapsed into comfortable silence and simply indulged themselves in quiet joy, fondly regarding their slumbering son. But all too soon, Lassen sensed the melancholic underpinnings of Rohyr’s mood. He wondered what had managed to cast a shadow over his mate’s contentment.

“What troubles you?” he murmured. When Rohyr shook his head, Lassen persisted. “Unburden yourself, *ariad*. Tell me.”

Rohyr reluctantly recounted his cousins’ report. By the time he finished, he was deeply upset and angry all over again with himself. Lassen soothed him.

“No one can blame you for trusting him. Surely such a betrayal is so rare as to be almost unheard of in the Royal House.”

“It was a son’s treason that made the Ferrenda Interregnum possible,” Rohyr wryly pointed out.

“And ‘twas the one and only time in Ylandre’s history that an immediate member of the Royal House acted thusly,” Lassen countered.

“Yet now, here is a second try at treachery,” Rohyr bitterly said.

Lassen sadly smiled. “More an attempt to bluff their way to power.”

Rohyr regarded him in some disbelief. “You are so forgiving considering what their actions almost cost you.”

“I would hope others would be as forgiving were I in their shoes.”

A grin tugged at the corners of Rohyr’s lips. “The tropics of Arvalde will freeze over before you learn to be as deceitful.”

“You esteem me overmuch.”

“I only speak the truth. But in any event, it clears the way for us.”

“Clears the way?”

“For the dissolution of my union with Tyrde. He no longer has a hold on me.” Rohyr pressed his lips to Lassen’s forehead. “It’s time I made an honest Deir of you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Confrontation

There was much talk when Rohyr returned to the capital in the spring of the following year after spending the greater part of the previous autumn and the whole of winter abroad. But it was not that the Ardan had never absented himself from Rikara for five months running that set tongues wagging. It was the reason for it.

The Rikarans watched in shock as he rode into the city shortly after noontide with his long missing leman at his side. What of the rumor that he had given up on finding him? Or that his anger was so great, it was bandied about that Lassen Idana had best not show his face to the king again if he valued his life. But the end of their shock was hardly come.

Eyes nigh popped out of their sockets and mouths dropped open at the sight of the child who peeked out curiously from the sturdy sling that hung from Rohyr's shoulder. Judging from his size, he appeared to be of suckling age. About as old as the number of months Rohyr had sojourned elsewhere in the land. The child had sable hair and rimmed irises.

Hardly had word of the babe spread when a few observant onlookers spotted the matching earrings the Ardan and his leman sported. Adamant and snow sapphire on white silver edged with gold. People whispered. Had Rohyr taken a binding-mate against all common convention? By the time the royal cavalcade ascended the road to the Citadel, the news had already reached the keep and everyone from the most staid courtiers to the lowliest scullions was talking about it.

Rohyr dismounted in the bailey, keeping a firm hand on his lively son who seemed eager to explore his new environs even if it meant crawling out of the sling and climbing over his sire's arm or shoulder. Dylen and Vaeren chuckled indulgently at the antics of Ylandre's infant crown prince.

From the Citadel's great main entrance, a furious Tyrde and his lately arrived sire watched in incredulity as Rohyr walked down the stone-paved path carrying his son, his brother on one side, his leman on the other. Nay, not leman any longer, Imcael realized when he espied the earring dangling from Rohyr's left ear lobe.

He opened his mouth to berate his errant nephew but Rohyr preempted him with a cool, "I don't remember recalling you, Uncle."

"I recalled him," Tyrde tartly cut in.

"On what authority?" Rohyr curtly inquired.

"I am Ardis!"

"And I am your sovereign. None may countermand my word in all this land. Not even you, Tyrde Kardova *thar* Essendri."

It took a moment for Tyrde to realize that Rohyr had used the House identifier *thar* rather than the conjugal adjective *tir*. He stared at Rohyr in anger and confusion.

"You stipulated that I would take your surname when we wed!"

"Because I assumed an Essendri would one day rule Anju," Rohyr snapped. "But as that isn't the case, there's no need for you to bear the name. Nor do I desire it."

He brushed past a stunned Tyrde and led Lassen into the manse. When Tyrde would have followed, Dylen blocked his way.

"I think it highly unlikely that you wish to discuss this matter in public," he said, tilting his head toward the courtiers and retainers who had come out to welcome their king. "Rohyr will treat with you in the red chamber as soon as he has seen to Vyren's accommodations."

"Who is Vyren?" Imcael demanded.

"Vyren Essendri *il* Idana, his son and successor, Herun-tyar," Dylen replied, using his nephew's full name to emphasize Lassen's position as the babe's birthing father.

With that parting shot, Dylen walked away, leaving Imcael and Tyrde to stare after him. It was only when he was out of sight that his earlier words registered.

Treat with them?

* * * *

Within the hour, they convened in the room named for the deep ruby of the upholstery and wall hangings. It was also devoid of furniture save for one high-backed chair at the far end of the room and a low scribe's bench nearby. The red chamber was a venue for informal hearings at best, an interrogation room at worst.

Imcael wondered which circumstance he and Tyrde were about to face as they entered the chamber. Rohyr was already seated within, a number of their relations arrayed about him. It was not surprising to see Dylen and Yovan or Keosqe and the brethren Gilmael and Zykriel—all frequented court. But why were Eiren and Keiran present as well? Or Jareth for that matter?

The Herun scowled when his eyes fell on the fair-haired Deir who stood to Rohyr's left. He glared at Lassen. But Lassen kept his expression neutral. Almost.

Something flickered in his eyes. Imcael's scowl faltered. Was that pity he had glimpsed?

"Wherefore this farce, Roh-*min*?" he demanded, breaking protocol by speaking first.

Rohyr's smile was far from pleasant. "Which farce do you mean, Uncle? My marriage or the threat you used to force me into it?"

"How dare you call our marriage a farce!" Tyrde huffed.

"If the means by which it was achieved is naught more than a sham, the result is just as much a travesty," Rohyr retorted.

"Threat it may be in your eyes but 'tis no sham. If you don't cease and desist with this foolishness, I shall break with you and go where I'm wanted!"

"And how long will Lyam Dimari want you once he realizes he will sire no heirs for Anju?"

Tyrde gasped; Imcael goggled. "What in *heyas* are you talking about?" the former sputtered.

"I hardly think your cousin Nyol will hand over his birthright just on your say so." Silence fell on the chamber. A tellingly long silence.

At length Imcael blustered, "Where did you hear such nonsense, Nephew?"

Rohyr motioned to Zykriel to turn several documents over to Tyrde. The Ardis quickly perused them, his face growing paler by the minute. With a muttered oath, he handed the papers to his sire. Imcael swiftly read them. When he was done, his hands were seen to shake, the clench of his fingers further creasing the fragile documents. He

looked up at Rohyr then glanced at Lassen.

The Half Blood was looking at him with regret and compassion. Imcael opened his mouth then closed it when no words issued forth.

"I trusted you, Uncle."

Imcael's gaze returned to his nephew. Gone were the ire and overt hostility in Rohyr's mien. In their place were sorrow and disillusionment.

"Rohyr..."

"Why?"

Imcael swallowed. "You favored your leman overmuch. I feared you would make him your consort." He looked long and hard at Lassen. "A mere commoner and a Half Blood, mate to Ylandre's Ardan... I couldn't allow that to happen. I couldn't bear to watch you make a mockery of our hallowed traditions."

Yovan gently intervened. "We may revere certain of our traditions but they are hardly hallowed. Imcael, you have ever lived your life in utter accordance with such customs and with little to no regard for your own wants or needs."

"Duty should always come before personal desire," Imcael stiffly protested.

"And since when did mere tradition become immutable duty?" Yovan countered. "Duty should be rooted in our laws, whether legal, moral or spiritual. There is no law prohibiting marriage between True Bloods and Half Bloods. For that matter, there is no statute that proscribes the entrance of Half Bloods or commoners into the Royal House. What you have been upholding isn't duty, Cousin, but prejudice."

Imcael turned his face away, as if the counsellor's words offended him or perhaps hurt. "What does it matter?" he gruffly said. "Rohyr desired to end the marriage and he has found the means to do it. Will I, nill I, the Ardis' coronet shall now adorn the head of a low-born *sedyr*."

"He will have to take it from mine!"

Tyrde's outburst drew everyone's attention. He stared balefully at Lassen before turning a defiant glare on Rohyr.

"I won't let you put me away so easily, Rohyr."

Rohyr coldly regarded him. "Had you shown me even the faintest sign of concern or affection, we wouldn't have come to this pass. But ever did you make it clear to me that I am no more than a means to your end and cared naught about taking away what little happiness I still possessed. Well, your hold over me is gone and I see no reason to prolong my imprisonment in a worse than loveless union."

"No reason but my own," Tyrde shot back. "I claim the rite of challenge!" In the appalled silence that followed, he snarled, "You are mine, Rohyr Essendri, and what is mine, I keep!"

A cacophony of protests erupted. Yovan and Zykriel had to restrain Dylen when he lunged at Tyrde, a murderous gleam in his eyes.

Keiran's voice rose above the rest. "The rite of challenge has not been invoked since the turn of the millennium!"

"Which doesn't make my claim any less valid," Tyrde crowed. He looked at Yovan, his smirk just this side of smug. "You spoke of the law, Uncle. Well, the right to challenge is mine by law and I demand satisfaction."

Rohyr had risen to his feet. "If you think I will stand for this—!"

Tyrde refused to flinch before his glare. "You are not above the law, Rohyr. Not

even you can gainsay my claim.” Seeing Rohyr at a loss for words even in his fury, he turned blazing eyes on Lassen. “You want him?” he taunted. “Fight for him. Let’s see how determined you are to win yourself an Ardan when the cost of it may be your very life!” He snickered at Lassen’s bewilderment.

“Nay!” Imcael cried out. “Tyrde, are you mad? You’ll bring grief upon us all!”

Tyrde scowled. “Surely you don’t doubt my skills, *Aba*.”

“I do not. But this will only worsen matters.”

“How so? The law will uphold my right to reclaim my spouse and marriage.”

“They are bound,” Imcael reminded him. “A widowed soul-spouse will languish after his mate without cease. If you slay the Half Blood, you will condemn Rohyr to never-ending grief. That is the nature of soul-binding!”

Tyrde stared at him then glanced at Rohyr. The king was regarding him with mingled rage and apprehension. Tyrde scowled. He knew at whom Rohyr’s anger was aimed and on whose behalf he was fearful. Tyrde faced his sire.

“I’m hardly to blame for that,” he haughtily declared.

Shocked, Imcael sputtered, “Rohyr is your cousin!”

“Who cares as much for me as I do for him.”

“He’ll loathe you evermore!”

Tyrde shrugged. “What need has an Ardis for love?” Before Imcael could react, Tyrde pointed at Lassen. “Meet me in the sparring yard at the fourth bell, Lassen Idana. That should be more than enough time to shrive yourself and bid your child and my dear spouse farewell.”

“Blood need not be spilled,” Rohyr cut in. “I won’t press for divorce. You will remain Ardis.”

“And ever will I come after that whoreson even if he bears no title.” Tyrde sneered. “In making him your soul-spouse you ensured that he won’t live to enjoy it. And I shall take great pleasure in your misery over your part in his demise.”

He swept out of the chamber, motioning to his sire to follow him. Imcael hesitated but seeing the expressions on the others’ faces, he heaved a shaky breath and departed. The rest gathered around Rohyr and Lassen in dismay and anger.

“You can’t let him do this, Roh,” Dylen protested.

“The law—” Gilmael unhappily began.

“Hang the law!” Dylen growled. “That this one hasn’t been invoked in nigh a thousand years is evidence of its barbarism.”

“Yet Tyrde is right,” Jareth reminded them all. “It’s still the law and one that grants him the right to challenge his rival. The question is whether Lassen is ready to fight him.”

They looked at Lassen. His brows were knitted in confusion.

“I don’t understand. What is this rite? And why must I fight him?”

Rohyr blew his breath out. “It’s an ancient ritual, harking back to the beginnings of our race. And even then it was seldom invoked unless the chances of victory were great. In this day, even fewer remember its existence as the last time the rite was practiced was many centuries ago.” He took Lassen’s hands in his. “Essentially, it’s a means by which a spouse in a failed union where there is another party involved can salvage his honor and at the same time keep his marriage intact. The aggrieved spouse challenges the lover of his partner to a duel. To the victor go the spoils. In the case of the challenger, that means keeping his marriage intact. His mate has to abide the outcome and return to his side.”

“And the loser?”

Rohyr’s grip on Lassen’s hands tightened. “It’s a duel to the death, Las. The winner takes everything including his opponent’s life.”

Lassen gulped. “Sweet Veres,” he whispered. “He means to do away with me once and for all. He knows I have little experience in actual combat.”

“But what if Lassen refuses?” Keosqe asked.

“He can’t refuse,” Yovan heavily said. “Once the challenge is issued, it must be answered. The only way to avoid fighting Tyrde is for you to flee. But that would make you an outlaw and fair game for every bounty hunter in the land.”

“Should you leave Ylandre, you won’t be permitted to return either,” Eiren added. “Nor will you be allowed to bring Vyren with you since he is a scion of the Royal House.” He paused then quietly said, “And because you are bound, you’ll both feel less than whole every day of your lives. There is no assuaging the grief of sundered soul-spouses.”

“So I wouldn’t lose my life but I would lose everything that would make life worthwhile,” Lassen murmured. He gazed at Rohyr, eyes bright with frustration. “I have no choice, do I? I mustn’t only fight for the right to have you, I must win to secure your freedom. If I lose, I shall die and I’ll do so knowing I’ve condemned you to a twilight existence. And if I flee, we’ll both suffer a lifetime of pain. Tyrde has chosen his revenge well.” He pressed his face briefly into Rohyr’s shoulder. After a tense moment, he lifted his head and said, “I had best spend what time I have left with you and Vyren.”

* * * *

Lassen held little hope of surviving a duel with a more seasoned fighter. Tyrde was not as proficient in the field as his cousins but he had fought in a number of local skirmishes in his day. That was far more experience than Lassen had.

He held his son close, breathing in his baby sweet scent, listening to his cheerful coos and first stuttering attempts at speech and feeling his small body snuggled against his, perhaps for the very last time. He crooned a lullaby to Vyren, hoping to make him sleep before he had to leave him. More than anything, he wished for his child’s final encounter with him to be a happy, peaceful one.

When Vyren nodded off, he looked up at Rohyr in relief only to grimace a moment later. The king’s expression quite broke Lassen’s heart. Rohyr had lost the struggle to hide his feelings. Anguish, guilt and helplessness played across his face and showed in the droop of his shoulders and listless clench of his hands on his knees. Lassen laid Vyren in his crib and went to his mate.

It was obvious that Rohyr was berating himself for failing to avert the recent troubles that had beset the both of them. He was blaming himself for not having known the details of an obscure law exclusive to one fief and one clan in all the land, for not anticipating the invocation of an ancient rite that had long been forsaken and forgotten by all but a handful, and for trusting one he loved as a parent even when that one had often tried his patience to distraction and stretched the limits of his tolerance.

Lassen knelt before Rohyr and, cupping his face in his hands, pressed a kiss to his mouth. “No one faults you for not being perfect, *ariad*. Why do so yourself?”

Rohyr pulled him onto his lap and held him tight. “My incompetence has imperiled you,” he whispered.

“Incompetence?” Lassen shook his head. “That is so far from the truth, ‘tis not in the least amusing. I must insist that—”

“You can flee,” Rohyr cut him off, eyes bright with uncharacteristic desperation. “I can arrange for you to live in comfort in any country of your choosing in South Vihandra.”

“Roh—”

“I’ll find a way for us to meet with you, Vyren and I—”

“You’re so certain I will lose?”

“Nay, but Tyrde will take advantage of every opportunity you give him. And you shall for you’re no killer. You’ve never slain before. Tyrde has and he’ll kill you without pity or compunction.”

“Eiren warned that if we’re parted overlong—”

“At least you’ll be alive.”

“Yet dead within. Being apart from you—”

“I’ll endure it.”

“But I can’t.”

Lassen kissed Rohyr hard to preempt any further speech. Afterwards, he pressed their temples together, his eyes closed against the plea in Rohyr’s gaze.

“I’m not made to live apart from you,” he murmured. “Had you not come after me in Camara, I would have likely perished sooner or later. To go into exile again, away from you—‘twill kill me as surely as a knife to the heart. Better a quick death by the sword than a slow one in an empty bed.”

“Leaving me behind to suffer alone,” Rohyr bitterly said.

“You’ll have Vyren,” Lassen softly pointed out. “He’ll be reason enough for you to continue. Who else could possibly raise him to be as glorious and valiant a ruler as his sire? And in any case,” he hurried on before Rohyr could speak. “In any case, don’t discount my winning just yet. Not for naught did I learn my lessons from you. I may yet surprise Tyrde and win myself an Ardan.”

He opened his eyes and Rohyr saw determination in their depths. Rohyr caught his breath as another emotion blazed into being in his mate’s aquamarine gaze.

Take me, ariad. Fill me, own me. Make me scream your name.

They did not bother to leave the couch or divest themselves of all their clothes. Shedding only what was in the way, they clutched at each other in frenzied need, mouths sealed in searing union, torsos sliding against each other, hands touching, fingers stroking, Lassen straddling Rohyr’s thighs, moving his hips to grind their lengths together, the sensuous friction almost enough to undo them.

As soon as his body turned, Lassen lowered himself onto Rohyr’s shaft. There was no need for *mirash* for there was little chance of conceiving while he still suckled their son. But even had that not been the case, neither cared if their loving led to the making of another child. All that mattered was the primal joining of their bodies and hearts and spirits.

Lassen wantonly rode Rohyr’s shaft, revelling in the upward slide of piercing sword into yielding sheath. Rohyr watched him, mesmerized by his wild abandon. Years of tutelage at his hands had borne bountiful fruit. He nipped at Lassen’s throat, marking the pale flesh with crimson bruises. Glancing down, he saw two dark spots of moisture on Lassen’s shirt. He ripped the shirt open to reveal drops of milky *estra* leaking from

Lassen's nipples.

Lassen cried out as Rohyr latched onto one plump bud, pulling the nutrient rich fluid out with each hard suck. The sensation of *estra* being drawn out so forcefully combined with the continued breaching of his flesh produced pleasure so strong he sobbed from the intensity of it.

"Veres preserve me!" he gasped when Rohyr bucked up hard into him as he tended to the other nipple.

Their minds met and melded into a mesh of deepest love and purest desire. The relentless combination of sensations colluded to drive Lassen over the edge into an orgasm that seemed to go on forever. He frantically hung onto Rohyr, muffling his keens against Rohyr's shoulder as wave after rapturous wave crashed over him, his belly and groin seemingly a mass of ecstatically singing nerves. He slumped against Rohyr in the aftermath, arms tight around him.

The sound of harsh breathing and the nigh painful grip on Lassen's hips told him Rohyr had experienced as strong a climax. As did the fleeting surge of heat within his belly and the rivulet of excess semen that trickled out of his body when he lifted himself off Rohyr's shaft. Rohyr pulled him back onto his lap, uncaring of the milky smears on their thighs. They lost themselves in a spate of tender kisses, hands roaming in rightful possessiveness over each other's bodies.

At length, Rohyr drew Lassen against him to nestle in his arms, his mate's golden head tucked into the crook of his neck.

"You *will* win, Las," he whispered. "You must. I won't lose you again."

For some reason, Lassen had the feeling Rohyr was not referring to their separation the previous year.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gauntlet

A sizable crowd gathered to watch the duel that afternoon. Tyrde's doing, a disgusted Dylen informed Rohyr when he arrived. It would have been much larger had he and Yovan not ordered a fair number to return to their duties.

"He's so cocksure of winning he wants as many witnesses to his victory as possible," Dylen fumed. "I wager he would have chosen the Great Field for this were it permissible and invited all Rikara to watch! Shall I have the guards clear the yard?"

Rohyr kept his temper in check. "If there are no outside witnesses present, Uncle Imcael could accuse us of rigging the fight should Tyrde lose. Let them stay. But permit no more to enter the grounds. I won't have this turn into a circus."

Lassen came out of the keep with Rohyr's personal confessor. The cleric looked uneasily at the king before crossing the yard to Tyrde who stood at the opposite end with his sire and coterie. Rohyr's mouth tightened but he refused to stoop so low as to deny anyone the chance to be shriven.

He slipped a protective arm around Lassen when the latter came to his side, briefly caressing the thick braid into which his mate had bound his hair.

"You can best him," he murmured. "You were a more than able student and quicker than most besides."

"I had a peerless teacher," Lassen replied, managing a grin.

Rohyr forced an answering smile. "Just keep your head and remember your lessons. And whatever happens, don't refuse help from without." When Lassen frowned, he added, "This is no game but a fight to the death. You can't afford to refuse anything that could gain you an advantage. Think you Tyrde will stay his hand?" He tilted his head in Dylen and Jareth's direction. "They'll shield you from any mind tricks he may attempt."

"You think he would—?"

"He's partaken of battle. He'll use anything at his disposal against you." Rohyr lowered his voice. "I would shield you as well but I need to conserve my strength should the worst happen."

"What do you mean?"

"Just trust me. Please."

Lassen looked searchingly at him. At length, he whispered, "With my life."

Rohyr caught him in a tight embrace, letting him go only when Vaeren approached them. The warrior apologetically asked permission to inspect Lassen for any concealed weapons or protective mail beneath his clothing. Across the yard, the Citadel guard-captain did the same for Tyrde.

Neither helm nor armor was permitted in a rite of challenge duel. The most protection combatants could hope for were their sturdy leather jerkins. The point of the duel was a fast and decisive finish, not a protracted fight or show of skill.

Once Vaeren was done with his search, Lassen clasped Rohyr's hand one last time before proceeding to the middle of the field. Tyrde eyed Lassen malevolently as they came to stand opposite each other.

A carefully impassive Vaeren spelled out the rules of combat to them. They were few and simple and drawn up to ensure a quick and lethal contest.

“No one may intervene once the duel starts and neither of you may seek aid should you suffer injury. A swift and merciful slaying is preferable but should one of you be incapacitated, the other will be declared the victor. Whereupon he is to execute the loser through decapitation.”

They would start with knives, which almost all Deira learned to use from adolescence onwards. Most duels did not proceed beyond this point. But in the rare event that the combatants were too evenly matched and the fight promised to turn protracted, they would resort to swords to hasten the end of the duel.

After ascertaining that both were ready, Vaeren handed them two knives apiece. One had a long thin blade made for stabbing and parrying; the other was shorter and wider with a wickedly sharp edge that could easily slice a throat or belly open. Lassen tensely waited for the signal to begin—the blare of a herald’s horn.

He tried to recall everything Rohyr had taught him. Still, his inexperience showed almost at once. Whereas Tyrde took the offensive, Lassen remained largely on the defensive, more intent on blocking Tyrde’s blades than inflicting injury on the Ardis. Moments in which he could have dealt blows injurious enough to debilitate the other if not outright kill him came and went with alarming frequency.

It appeared it would not be Tyrde’s skill that would decide the outcome but rather Lassen’s readiness to kill or the lack of it.

He stifled a cry when Tyrde cut deep into the back of his left hand, only narrowly avoiding the follow up stab to his chest. He lunged sideways then ducked under Tyrde’s swing at his throat and took the Ardis by surprise with a feint to his thighs. Batting Tyrde’s tardily positioned long knife out of the way, he had the satisfaction of wiping the latter’s grin from his face.

Tyrde stared disbelievingly at the rent in his jerkin through which a long shallow cut across his torso was visible. Only the thick leather had saved him from being gutted outright. That and the fact that Lassen had once again tempered his blow.

Give him no quarter, Las!

Lassen bit his lower lip as he and Tyrde circled warily once more. Rohyr was right. He could not afford to pull his punches. Tyrde went in for the kill with each and every move. Sooner or later, highly skilled or not, he would wear Lassen down and find another opening in his defenses. He would not hesitate to use that opening.

The horn sounded and Vaeren called to them to halt. Thankful for the chance to catch his breath, Lassen watched as the captain took Tyrde’s knives and handed him a sword in their stead. He swallowed hard. Swordplay had never been his strong point.

He managed a small nod to Vaeren when the latter handed him a silver-hilted sword along with murmured words of encouragement. Lassen did not have to heft the weapon to know it was perfectly balanced nor did he doubt that it had been honed to lethal sharpness. He experimentally swung it, the grip sitting comfortably in his hand.

An inscription on the gleaming blade caught his attention. His eyes widened when he recognized the Naeren runes spelling out Rohyr’s full name. He glanced at his lover, managing a small smile before he turned to face his nemesis once again.

Tyrde scarcely waited for Vaeren to step out of the way before he charged at Lassen. Stroke and counterstroke. Circle and lunge, swing and parry, the clang of the blades as

they smashed against each other seemed deafening amidst the spectators' shouts and comments.

A strike at his shoulder proved a ruse and Lassen barely managed to evade the hewing blow to his belly. But he stumbled as he skipped back and lost his footing. Horrified cries rang out as he fell. Tyrde hurled himself at his rival, bringing his sword down on him with shocking savagery.

Lassen scrambled desperately to get out from under the shadow of the blade, avoiding it with only a hair's breadth to spare. He somehow managed to twist out of harm's way and lashed out with his foot to trip Tyrde. Without pausing to think, he got to his feet and snatched up his sword in one smooth rolling motion. A motion he had not previously practiced in any sparring bout. Yet his body had acted as if he had.

Tyrde rushed him in a blur of movement and he scarcely evaded the downward arc of the latter's sword. But in the next moment, he was bringing up his own sword to ward off a blow to his torso, again in a move that was instinctive. Except Lassen knew it was not.

He was being guided. Nay, more than that. There was a presence in his consciousness that took over from him whenever he was at a loss as to what to do. *Saints above!* Lassen did not know how but Rohyr had become one with him. Momentarily distracted by the discovery, he did not anticipate Tyrde's next strike. But Rohyr did.

Lassen saw his arms move of their own volition. Felt them pull up and raise his sword in time to block the attempt to disembowel him. Recalling Rohyr's plea, Lassen willed himself to surrender to the strange merging of their minds.

The tide turned. Tyrde found himself on the defensive for the first time as Lassen seemed to cast aside his qualms and go on the attack. He ignored the onlookers, focusing solely on besting his opponent, his eyes glittering with newfound confidence.

Watching anxiously from the yard perimeter, Imcael wondered at the change in Lassen's demeanor. Not to mention his sudden mastery of the sword where just minutes earlier he had been barely holding his own. He stared at Lassen with a mixture of fascination and apprehension. His stance, his tactics, the very way he held his sword—where had Imcael seen them before?

The Herun swore under his breath as Rohyr appeared in his mind's eye, looking as he did in the battles where Imcael had fought at his side. For the next several heartbeats, it was Rohyr whom Imcael saw duelling with his son. He angrily shook his head as if to free his thoughts of the impossible images.

Lassen pivoted on his heel to avoid being skewered. As he came around, he brought his sword down and in to slice across Tyrde's flank. Tyrde screamed as the blade cut through the leather of his jerkin and bit deep into his side. He backed out of reach, a hand pressed to his wound, and stared at Lassen incredulously.

"Let us end this," Lassen suggested, lowering his sword fractionally to indicate his willingness to stop the fight.

Tyrde scowled. "Only when you're dead," he spat.

He rushed Lassen, repeating the tactic that had earlier so rattled the *sedyr*, he had tripped and fallen. Lassen evaded him then struck him in the back with the pommel of his sword, hard enough to make him stumble. Tyrde fell on one knee then attempted to right himself. Lassen swept his other leg out from under him. Tyrde landed on his belly, his breath forced out of him with a whoosh.

He frantically grabbed at his sword but yelped when Lassen's foot came down hard on his wrist and forced him to let go. With a swift kick, Lassen sent the weapon skidding out of reach. Tyrde quickly rolled over only to feel the tip of Lassen's sword pressed against his throat.

"Much as I hate to admit it, we are quite alike," Lassen icily told him. "I, too, keep what is mine. And like it or not, Tyrde Kardova, *Rohyr is mine.*"

Tyrde's eyes widened at the stark possessiveness in Lassen's voice.

"You wouldn't kill an unarmed Deir," he said imploringly.

"You're right," Lassen agreed a shade contemptuously. "And in that we are worlds apart." He pressed the blade ever so daintily into Tyrde's flesh. "Yield and I will spare you."

Tyrde swallowed, feeling the faint prick at his neck. "I yield," he mumbled.

"Louder!"

"I yield! Rohyr is yours!"

Lassen drew back his sword and lowered it. At once, a murmur of confusion and protest broke out. One voice rose above the babble.

"The law decrees that the victor takes all!"

Lassen swept the dissenters with a glare. "And can't the victor choose what he desires to take?" he demanded. A hush descended on the crowd. He looked down at his ashen-faced foe. "He is kin to the Ardan, the son of his sire's brother. I won't stain my hands with the blood of an Essendri." He searched for the Deir who had spoken out loud. "Can *you* stomach it?" he challenged, holding his sword out to him. When the latter looked down abashed, Lassen grimly smiled. "I thought not."

There was movement to his side. He saw Rohyr striding swiftly toward him. He beamed and went to him.

Oblivious of the onlookers, Rohyr swept him into a tight hug and pressed his face into the gold of his hair. Through the corner of his eyes, he descried Imcael helping Tyrde to his feet. Behind them, a guard retrieved Tyrde's sword and approached them to return it. Rohyr released Lassen and turned to address his uncle. In the next instant, he was staring at a javelin as it shot through the air straight at him.

Tyrde had shoved the guard aside and grabbed his spear as the other stumbled. He hurled it with all his might at Rohyr then hurtled himself at his cousin almost as soon as the weapon left his hand. Imcael tried to grab at him as he sprinted forward but failed to get a good hold. Everyone else was so stunned by his audacity that they reacted more slowly than was their wont.

With a cry, Lassen threw himself in front of Rohyr. But moments before the spear struck, it splintered into pieces in mid-air, forcing Lassen to fling an arm up in front of his face to protect his eyes from wooden shrapnel. While he was still recovering from his surprise, the king snatched the sword from his hand even as he thrust him aside.

Rohyr turned in time to deflect Tyrde's cleaving blow. Parrying another vicious jab, he shoved Tyrde back. Tyrde lunged at him again, sword raised with deadly intent. Rohyr's battle-honed reflexes took over and he swung his sword upward and across. The blade sliced through Tyrde's lower body.

Tyrde staggered back then crumpled to the ground. Imcael and Eiren were at his side in a flash. Eiren struggled to prevent his entrails from spilling through the terrible wound while trying to stem the massive outpouring of blood at the same time. Rohyr dropped to

his knees and placed his hands on Eiren's to lend him strength. Gilmael and Keiran swiftly joined them. While they fought to keep Tyrde alive, Imcael anxiously cupped his son's face.

"Why?" he demanded in anguish. "He spared you. Gave you your life. Why, Tyrde?"

Tyrde coughed and a pink froth flecked his lips. "For you, *Aba*," he stuttered.

Imcael stared at him, appalled. "*For me?*"

"You should have been Ardan. You were robbed of the crown... *He* was born."

Tyrde wheezed painfully. "But your heirs through me... Your blood in them... They would have ruled... He took even that away... Sired a bastard..."

"But why did you attack him?"

"I wouldn't had I won... Easy to dispose of his brat... But I failed and..." Tyrde hissed with the effort to keep on talking. "So I thought it best if he died... The throne would be yours... They'd never let a bastard..."

His eyes suddenly widened in terror. "Dark! Getting dark!" he gasped, spitting up more blood-tinged saliva. "*Aba—!*" His eyes rolled upwards until only the whites were visible.

"Save him!" Imcael bellowed at Eiren.

The physician shook his head. His arms were smeared scarlet to the elbows.

"He's lost too much blood."

Tyrde went completely slack. Imcael stared at him in disbelief for several moments. He let out a heartrending wail and, pulling his son against his breast, sobbed into his disheveled hair. His nephews quietly rose to their feet and stepped back.

A squire hastened to Rohyr with a basin of water that he could wash off the blood. More did the same for the others. But none of them cared much. Not when close kin wept brokenly over the lifeless body of one of their own.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aftermath

Rohyr studied his uncle as the latter entered the royal apartment. Imcael's face looked grey and wizened, as if a score of years had caught up with him in a fortnight's time. And he walked with the heavy shuffling tread of the bone-weary. The loss of his youngest son in the most ignoble of circumstances had devastated the Herun to the core.

He dipped his chin in curt acknowledgement of Rohyr's gesture to him to sit down. While Rohyr poured him a cup of wine, he looked about the room.

"Last I visited here was on the morning of your coronation," he remarked. "I see you removed the old bureau in the corner."

"I found it too big and unwieldy," Rohyr said.

"Then I suppose you changed the bedchamber furniture as well."

"I did. It's no longer overly crowded in there."

Imcael nodded. "Keldon planned to refurbish this suite. Right after Dyrael died. But he followed your *adda* to the grave too soon." The Herun sighed. "If only he had listened to the grooms when they warned him it would be too dangerous to ride his new zentyr unbroken."

Rohyr said nothing. He had been present when his sire was thrown. The fall resulted in a fractured skull. Keldon had not woken again and died three days later. With Dyrael gone as well, Rohyr began his reign an orphan with only Imcael and his distant sons counting as immediate family. Imcael seemed to recall this as well for he grimaced and waved his hand in front of him as if to banish the memory.

"I doubt you asked to meet with me to reminisce over the past," Rohyr said, pushing the wine cup across the small table toward his uncle.

Imcael accepted it. "I wished to talk about what happened," he replied after taking a sip. "What Tyrde said ... did..."

He looked away a moment, squaring his shoulders. Barely two weeks had passed since the duel. Imcael's older sons came to Rikara to fetch their sire and brother's body and bring both back to Qimaras. Rohyr knew that Tyrde had been cremated just four days ago and that his urn was now interred in the burial vault of his Kardova father. When Imcael returned to Rikara the previous day, he at once sought an audience with his nephew.

"I trust you know that I don't desire to take the crown from you," Imcael continued. "You are the rightful ruler of this land and I never deemed it otherwise."

"I never doubted that, Uncle."

"Tyrde... I don't know how he came to believe that..." Imcael shook his head in frustration. "I do not know. I tried to be a good parent to all my sons. Tyrde didn't always abide with me however. And when he grew up, he didn't enjoy living in Qimaras as much. He came to prefer Anju."

"Not surprising," Rohyr commented. "In Qimaras, he was merely the last-born son whereas in Anju, he was Javan's heir. It seems he placed much stock in bloodlines and titles."

Imcael flinched. "My influence, my error," he muttered. "I should have seen the changes in him each time he returned to my house. He oft asked me if I resented having been displaced as heir when you were born. No matter that I denied it, he always discussed the matter whenever he visited."

"Did you deny it the first time he asked?" Rohyr inquired.

The Herun stared at him then looked down. "He first broached the issue after you and I had just quarrelled over some policy and I..." Imcael grimaced again. "I complained that you'd refused to listen to my counsel."

"So he did think that you were resentful and only hiding your feelings out of duty."

"He might have," Imcael grudgingly conceded. He heaved a testy sigh. "I'll never know for certain." He suddenly regarded Rohyr accusingly. "There's something that's been puzzling me since... During the swordfight, your leman—"

"Lassen," Rohyr interrupted. "He has a name, Uncle."

Imcael pursed his lips mulishly but finally said, "Lassen Idana is no seasoned warrior. Yet there came a point when he seemed to gain expertise he had not previously possessed." He leaned forward and stared hard at Rohyr. "I recognized some of the moves he made, his tactics. I'd seen you make them many a time in battle. It was almost as if *you* were in the yard, in his body, so uncanny was the likeness of his performance to yours. I know not how you did it, but you aided him."

"And if I did?"

"It was not fair to Tyrde."

"And was he fair to Lassen when he challenged him, knowing him for a novice?" Rohyr looked at his uncle pityingly. "Say what you will but Tyrde was no defenseless victim. He actively colluded with you to coerce me into marrying him. And beyond warming my bed, he showed no propensity for my company even when I offered it. I suppose it was because that wouldn't have gotten children on him. But most telling of all, he greatly enjoyed the prospect of killing Lassen and watching me live out my life in agony over it."

Imcael clenched his fingers around his cup. "Most telling?"

"I think you suspected it as much as I, Uncle. There was something wrong with him. Whether it was madness—or a touch of evil—I can't say."

The Herun closed his eyes and bowed his head. "It matters little now," he hoarsely said. "He's dead and whatever he held within died with him. Still, I love him and shall always grieve his loss."

"But of course. I expect no less."

Imcael opened his eyes and silently regarded his nephew for a space. Rohyr returned his perusal just as silently. At length, Imcael exhaled and placed his cup on the table.

"It was never my intention but I put you in grave peril and caused you much unhappiness as well," he reluctantly admitted. "In that I've done a greater disservice to this realm than your leman ever did or could."

He rose to his feet. "Yovan is right. I've permitted my beliefs to dictate my choices to the point of ignoring sound advice and disregarding the opinions of others. Hardly the mark of a good counsellor. I had best retire to Qimaras. It's time for Mahael to make a place for himself in your court."

"He'll be most welcome," Rohyr assured him.

After Imcael departed, Rohyr leaned back and stared at the dregs in the bottom of his

cup for several minutes. Finally, he stood and entered the bedchamber. He smiled upon seeing Lassen seated in the corner chair, a drowsing Vyren in his arms. Dressed in a loosely belted robe, he had just finished suckling their child.

Rohyr took his son and cradled him a while, pressing kisses to the babe's petal-soft cheeks and the downy hair on his crown. Certain that Vyren was fast asleep, he laid him in his crib and tucked him in.

"You heard?" he asked as he straightened.

Lassen nodded. "I truly pity him."

Rohyr took his hand and led him to the bed. They reclined against the headboard in companionable silence, Lassen ensconced in Rohyr's arms. At length, Lassen stirred and regarded Rohyr curiously.

"Roh?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you tell me now?"

"What do you want to know?"

"To start? Well, what you did during the duel... It seemed like you were there with me. In me. And then you—you tore that spear apart. I know you're especially talented but that was beyond anything I've ever heard adepts being capable of."

Rohyr hesitated then exhaled. "I am a templar," he quietly said.

Lassen stared at him. "Like Tenryon?"

Rohyr dipped his chin in assent. "It's why I trained under him. My parents let everyone believe that they chose him because they wanted the best teacher for me. Well, Tenryon is the best. But the real reason I spent a good portion of my adolescence in Ziana was because it is there that all the templars of Ylandre are trained. It's our brotherhood's base."

Lassen blew his breath out. "Does Imcael know?"

Rohyr shook his head. "It's up to each of us to choose to whom to reveal ourselves. I can't tell you who the others are; it's not my right. So far, I've told only Dylen, Eiren and you. And in Eiren's case, it was because I felt that my personal physician should know all there is to know about me."

"But the others... It seems as if they know."

"They ascribe many of my uncommon abilities to the Essendri potential. My family is strongly gifted after all and I am doubly so because my parents were of the same line of descent. More than that they may suspect but they do not know for certain."

"Will you ever tell them?"

"If disclosure becomes crucial."

"Why the secrecy?"

"We are better served when we can move amongst the populace anonymously."

"But Tenryon makes no secret of what he is."

"It is he who initially trains our acolytes and training starts in adolescence. It's easier to ask parents to entrust their sons to him if they know who he is."

Lassen lapsed into ruminative silence. "When you spoke of our bond," he said after a brief while. "You said it pre-dated our first meeting."

"Do you recall how I sought you in Tal Ereq?" Rohyr asked. When Lassen nodded, he said, "Your spirit called to mine. It was why I probed your thoughts. I had to ascertain that it was indeed you returned to me."

"I don't understand."

"Though a reborn Deir no longer harbors the memories of his past lives, his spirit will always remember," Rohyr explained. "They are locked in the innermost chambers of the mind, accessible only to those gifted with the key."

"Like you."

"Like all the templars. We are the only ones who can recall every life cycle of our existence and withstand the burden of it. All others would go mad from such knowledge."

"Then... I was right," Lassen said. "You *were* in Ziana. Right after it was sacked by the Varadani. You saw the slaughtered priests in the temple."

Rohyr said, "I was born Diorn Essendri, second son to Wylan Essendri, Ardan of Ylandre."

Lassen gaped at him, more shocked by the discovery of Rohyr's previous identity than by the disclosure that he was a templar. After pausing for a few seconds to allow for Lassen to recover from his surprise, Rohyr continued.

"As is the way of our kind, I'm always reborn an Essendri though not necessarily within the immediate royal family. I've served through many generations under Tenryon's leadership. But I've also always done my duty to my House. In all my lifetimes I have served this realm in one capacity or another—governor, warrior, diplomat, educator."

"So you knew me from a previous life," Lassen ventured.

"More than that. I loved you in a previous life," Rohyr smiled at Lassen's stunned expression. "You had my heart in your keeping before you were born and have had it for some twelve hundred years of life and death."

Once again Rohyr paused to give Lassen time to cope with yet another shocking revelation. "I was sent to Ziana for training when it was discovered that I was a templar. I virtually grew up there and came to regard its people as dearly as I did the Rikarans. Toward the end of my stay, I met Liere, a newly arrived temple acolyte. We fell in love and formed a bond not only of the heart but also of the soul. I swore to claim Liere as soon as he finished his ten-year of celibate service in the temple. But when my brother Rovar tried to usurp the throne, our sire sent for me and I perforce served in the Royal Army in the campaign against Rovar's insurgency. That same year, the Varadani swept over the border and occupied the northwestern regions of Ylandre. They captured Ziana and made it their base. You know the rest of the story."

His eyes glistened as they had when he first recounted the story to Lassen a decade ago. "Liere was one of the acolytes who took their lives. I grieved for him so deeply that I only handfasted with the consort my advisers later urged on me. And down through the centuries, it was for dynastic purposes that I wed and sired sons. But never in fane marriage. I couldn't bind myself to another before Veres; not until Liere was restored to me." Rohyr's voice lowered to a shaky whisper. "But the taking of one's own life is a wound to the spirit that is extremely slow to heal. Liere was not reborn until now. Until you."

Lassen stared at him in awe. "Incredible," he said in a hushed voice.

They fell silent for a long while as Lassen digested the information. Feeling Rohyr's gaze on him, he looked at his mate and saw his uncertainty as well as his yearning. It moved him beyond words that Rohyr had waited all these centuries to reclaim him. He leaned over to kiss his spouse tenderly, hungrily.

“I want you to know,” he murmured against Rohyr’s lips. “I am yours not by dint of any bond but because I love you with all that I am. And now that we are soul-mated, we shan’t ever again be parted for long. It gladdens me that we’ll always seek each other in every lifetime to come.”

Rohyr groaned and pulled him flush against him. His hands slid under Lassen’s robe to caress his bare skin and moved down his sleek back to cup his firm bottom possessively. Breaking their kiss as little as possible, Lassen shrugged off his robe and set to undressing Rohyr as well.

As soon as the last of his clothing came off, Rohyr bore Lassen down and pinned him to the bed. Lassen gasped as their shafts came into contact, sliding against each other with maddening sensuousness.

“I want to taste you,” Rohyr growled against his throat.

Lassen trembled as Rohyr slid down between his thighs then moaned when he was drawn into the moist warmth of his beloved’s mouth. He struggled to keep his wits, which he knew would soon scatter quite spectacularly to the four winds if Rohyr continued what he was doing.

“Let me pleasure you, too,” he managed to say.

Rohyr grinned as Lassen hurriedly shifted around. A moment later, he caught his breath when Lassen tended to his hard shaft, drawing upon it with gusto. Not to be outdone, Rohyr quickly resumed his onslaught on Lassen’s length. They thrust into each other’s mouths, their pleasure spiralling in near tandem.

Rohyr pried Lassen’s legs farther apart and set upon the inviting entrance behind his seed pouch. Lassen whimpered in pleasure around his luscious mouthful as Rohyr wickedly drew his tongue along moist nether lips before dipping repeatedly into the glistening channel beyond. Lassen’s seed sac tightened and lifted, exposing him further. With a final swipe of his tongue, Rohyr pulled Lassen back under him.

Lassen cried out as Rohyr drove deep into him with one thrust. The world without diminished to nothingness as he was taken to the heights of bodily ecstasy. Nothing mattered but the incessant ingress of hot, hard flesh into him, Rohyr moving with feral grace, his lustful, loving thoughts mingling with Lassen’s, taking possession of him all over again. Lassen tightened his hold on Rohyr and a litany of words spilled from him to punctuate the earthy sounds of their lovemaking. *Harder. Deeper. Yours. Mine. I love you!*

Just when he was on the brink of completion, when it seemed reality would shatter around him, Rohyr pulled out, his shaft gleaming with the slippery essence of Lassen’s sheath. Before Lassen could protest his withdrawal, Rohyr lifted Lassen’s buttocks and spread them to expose the rosy entrance to his backside. Holding Lassen’s transfixed gaze, Rohyr slid into the heated heady softness beyond until he was completely seated within.

Lassen choked back a cry as he was summarily filled. Rohyr resumed pounding into him while shoving his fingers repeatedly into his sheath. The blatant show of ownership on top of the deluge of sensations proved too much.

He would have screamed the Citadel down, so powerful was his orgasm, but Rohyr kissed him and swallowed his cries. Denied even that outlet for the outward expression of his pleasure, Lassen clung to Rohyr, hoping his sanity would survive the mind-blowing rapture.

Rohyr swiftly followed him into ecstasy, the spasmodic contractions of silk-bound muscles around his shaft milking him of his seed while the satiny walls of Lassen's seed channel convulsively gloved his embedded fingers. He smothered his own cries against Lassen's lips as he surrendered wholly to his climax.

"Saints above," Lassen raggedly whispered many heartbeats afterward. "Do you want to drive me mad?"

Rohyr chuckled against his heaving chest. He lifted his head and grinned at Lassen.

"If you mean mad for more, the answer is 'yes'," he quipped.

Lassen groaned and threw his head back. A moment later, Rohyr tongued a nipple. He licked off drops of leaked *estra* before closing his lips around the slightly swollen bud to lazily suckle it.

Lassen gasped and shivered. "You'll be the death of me yet!" he moaned.

Rohyr moved atop him, his scapegrace grin gracing his handsome face.

"But it would be a wonderful way to go," he cheekily drawled.

With that, he kissed his sputtering love, forestalling any further protests and stoking the fires of their mutual passion anew.

Epilogue

Milestone

Rikara, in the 3009th year of the Common Age

Lassen Essendri *tir* Idana lifted his eyes to the circlet of pure white-silver adorned by one large and flawless adamant and a number of small but perfect diamonds. Above the adamant, delicately inscribed in the gleaming metal, was a spray of royal holly. Resting upon a marble pedestal before the altar, the diadem mirrored the crown that sat on Rohyr Essendri's dark head.

A fitting coronet for the Ardis of Ylandre.

He licked his lips nervously as the High Magistrate of Rikara intoned the rights and duties of a monarch's consort. How strange to hear them when they were no longer another's to perform. His breath hitched when Rohyr left his side to stand before him. Behind Rohyr, Dylen lifted the coronet on its silken cushion and bore it to his brother.

Lassen went down on one knee before Rohyr, conscious of the assemblage behind him. The last time the temple of Rikara had been so packed was when Rohyr himself was proclaimed Ardan. Lassen's predecessor was not crowned in the hallowed edifice but rather in the great reception hall of the Citadel, as was the custom for a consort not espoused in fane union to the king.

As the Prelate of Rikara invoked the formal benediction, Lassen's eyes dropped to his right hand and the ring of intertwined gold and white-silver bands on the middle finger. It was not only his crowning that the nobles and notables of the land had come to witness but also his temple binding to Rohyr, which had taken place immediately before the coronation rite. He was no longer Rohyr's leman but his lawful spouse and heart's mate.

He glanced up and chanced a quick appraisal of those dearest kith and kin who stood on either side of the altar. Keosqe Deilen and the Calanthe twins Gilmael and Zykriel. Kindly Yovan Seydon and his son Rysander. Tenryon Hadrana and his equally enigmatic half-brother Jareth. Riordan Leyhar and Shino Essendri flanking nigh unflappable Eiren Sarvan. Reijir Arthanna and his irrepressible sibling Keiran. Fellow officers Ranael Mesare and Vaeren Henaz. The brothers Mithani Aeldan and Ashrian of seaward Glanthar. Yandro Vaidon, Ruomi Garvas, ever faithful Josel.

Last but far, far from least, his dearest *Aba* Dael and *Adda* Mithre, there in the place of honor to the left of the altar, looking on proudly with tear-bright eyes. With them were Yuilan and Fileg, elated as only the brothers of the royal consort could be.

Imcael had declined to attend but his remaining sons were present. They stood on the opposite side of the altar from the Idanas. Relations between Rohyr and Imcael would never truly recover but Mahael and Ronuin were making an effort to maintain the ties of family however loose they had come to be.

Lassen caught his breath when he realized the Prelate had stopped speaking. He glanced up and saw Rohyr take the coronet from Dylen. He closed his eyes and shivered slightly as Rohyr placed it on his head.

It was quite heavy, laden as it was with gems and wrought from pure metal. But there was more to the sense of heaviness than its mere weight. As he uttered the vows of rulership, Lassen acutely felt the profundity of the new obligation he had taken upon himself—the well-being of the country his spouse governed.

Rohyr took his hand and smilingly pulled him to his feet. He bade him turn around and presented him to the people.

Thunderous applause broke out amidst shouted greetings of welcome and approval. A herald hastened to the gathered throng in the temple plaza while couriers rode out to proclaim the news of the king's marriage and the coronation of his new consort.

Feeling overwhelmed, Lassen drew a deep breath, hoping to calm himself. Rohyr pulled him close and pressed a tender kiss to his lips to the rousing cheers of the assemblage. Lassen smiled into the kiss, his anxiety dissipating. Trust Rohyr to place his comfort above protocol and propriety. Was it any wonder Lassen had fallen in love with him almost from the start?

Leaning into Rohyr's embrace, Lassen marvelled at the road down which fate had taken him. Leading him into the arms of his heart's choice. His beloved king. His forever mate.

Glossary of Terms

Aba ‘sire’ Parent who functions as the head of the family and principal caregiver.

Adda ‘father’ Parent who functions as the principal caregiver of the family.

Ardan In the North Continent, hereditary monarch or potentate of a large sovereign realm or ruling overlord of an aggregate of internally autonomous states

Ardis An Ardan’s consort.

ariad ‘beloved’ An endearment.

by-blow An illegitimate child

Deir (*pl. Deira*) Member of the race of hermaphrodites that populate the world of Aisen.

dyhar High honorific applied to Deira of noble blood or high-ranking profession.

enyr (*pl. enyra*) ‘True Blood’ A Deir whose antecedents kept their breeding with the gelra to the barest viable minimum and thus retained much of the physical strength and endurance and most of the mind gifts of the Naere.

Heris (*pl. Herise*) A Herun’s consort.

Herun (*pl. Herune*) North Continent ruling aristocrat. Herune may govern sovereign principalities, fiefdoms, city-states or great urban centers.

hethar (*pl. hethare*) ‘companion’ Deir who provides sexual services and/or social companionship for a considerable fee. Unlike common prostitutes, *hethare* are well-educated and highly cultured and, in most cities, generally accepted in polite society.

heyas A common expletive.

il Designates the birthing parent’s surname when an illegitimate child carries his biological sire’s name, e.g. Dylen Essendri *il* Teris.

Inception Term for the period of engineered racial evolution wherein the colonizing Naere bred with the native gelra which led to the emergence of the present day Deira.

mirash A conception suppressor

min Diminutive form of address applied to a Deir of junior years or station. Usage warrants mutual familiarity whether familial, platonic or professional.

Naere The Deira’s race of origin.

Opa ‘grandsire’ Grandparent who functions as the head of the family.

prefect The chief officer of a constabulary base.

sedyr (*pl. sedyra*) ‘Half Blood’ Deir whose antecedents bred indiscriminately with the gelra during the Inception which resulted in the diminishment or disappearance of many of the characteristics of the Naere in succeeding generations.

templar Extraordinarily mentally gifted Deir.

thar Formally designates the House name of a Deir of noble birth who goes by a different clan name or surname, e.g. Tyrde Kardova *thar* Essendri.

tir Conjugal term used to introduce a bound Deir’s birth surname if he takes his spouse’s surname, e.g. Lassen Essendri *tir* Idana.

tribune A high-ranking military officer

tyar General honorific for someone of higher years or station or whose profession warrants more than general courtesy.

viratha ‘Imprinting’ A process by which a Deir ensures that his concubine cannot

have sexual relations with another partner.

The End

About the Author:

As far back as her college days, Eressë enjoyed writing stories set in historical times or, even better, fantasy settings. A good number turned into homoerotic romances because many of her male lead characters wound up having more chemistry with each other than with the female leads.

Whether Eressë subconsciously wrote them that way even she does not know. In any case, this penchant for fantasy M/M romance became the wellspring of Ylandre, the world in which her seminal piece *Sacred Fate* takes place.

Eressë lives in Southeast Asia with her husband, three sons and one dog. An AB Journalism graduate, she started her writing career as an advertising copywriter. One of a handful of winners in a nationwide journalistic competition, she is a contributor to a number of publications. She also enjoys cooking and baking and tries her hand at everything from pasta to pastries. But her first love is and always will be writing stories.

Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin
Lsbooks.Net

We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books

LSbooks.com
for other exciting erotic romances.

2007: Terran Realm

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

Featured Series:

The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

The Max Series by JB Skully
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!