

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 1*

\*Author's note\*: I think I should explain some things about my Wyndrah stories, so that the reader can better understand. Fate and the stories that follow it have male pregnancy content, which of course is explained in detail as the series progresses. The relationships in these stories do not always reflect "real life" relationships between two gay men, as the Lashran are a species removed from Humans and generally have a more defined line of "dominant/submissive" when it comes to sex between two of them. When I started this series, it was a challenge presented to me by some friends. I was speaking to a gay friend of mine, who was trying to adopt a child with his lifepartner.

I'm sure I don't need to explain how difficult it can be for two men to obtain and raise a child together. We got on to the subject of slash fiction, which led to the subject of male pregnancy. We had a laugh about it, because a lot of slash fiction never explains how one male gets pregnant by the other...it just miraculously happens, leaving the reader wondering how it was even possible. My friend dared me not only to write a slash story (up to this point, all of my stories were het), but to write one where two men could have and raise a child together, and make it believable. This inspired me to create the Lashran, which are a race of people composed entirely of males. The road has been difficult, and I'm still unsure of whether I've done a good job of creating a story about men who can reproduce without women, but it's fantasy, so I suppose it doesn't have to be overly realistic.

Of course, this whole storyline would require that the childbearing Lashran enjoy being the "receiver" more than the "giver". The Lashran relationships in this story are not meant to generalize the relationships between real life gay human beings. Thank you for taking the time to read my Wyndrah stories, and enjoy!  
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The lad was a mess. He was covered in dirt and dried blood. It was clear that the shackles binding his ankles and wrists to the chains they dragged him out on were nearly too big for him, and rubbing his skin raw. Tangled, wavy black hair tumbled to his thin shoulders, the unkempt bangs falling over his eyes. What little of his skin that could be seen beneath patches of dirt and torn clothing was very fair...almost as perfect white as alabaster.

"Twenty silver for this young man!" The auctioneer shouted. "Do I hear twenty?" The slave stood strait, though it was clearly difficult for him, hobbled as he was. His eyes were downcast, and his sensitive looking mouth trembled as though he was fighting tears.

Coren frowned at the figure on the platform. There was something...appealing about this lad. The weapons dealer ran his fingers through his blond hair, not caring that he inadvertently pulled a few strands loose from the ponytail that held the long mane back.

"I got thirty-five silver...do I hear forty? Show the nice folks yer face, lad!" The auctioneer shouted. Charlotte's brother Pete approached the slave and put his hands on either side of the lad's head, forcing it back so that the buyers could see his features. He also brushed the slave's bangs back.

Coren felt a stab somewhere deep within him as the boy's beauty was revealed. Though just as grimy as the rest of him, he had the face of an angel, strait out of an artist's painting. Creamy, fair skin, high cheekbones, a strait nose that was slim and tapered and fit perfectly in his ethereal face.

What struck the weapons dealer most profoundly were the lad's eyes, however. Even from a distance, he could see that those eyes did not belong to any native humans of this part of the world. They were large and long-lashed. The irises were larger than a human's, so large that very little of the whites of his eyes were visible. They were so bright and pale a green that they seemed to glitter like gems, and a darker green accented the outer rim of the irises, making their color more intense. The lad's strait, black brows were hedged in pain as his captor forcibly turned his head this way and that, so that all of the bidders could get a good look at him.

"Where is that boy from?" Coren muttered out the side of his mouth.

Beside him, Charlotte stared at the lad as well, and she twisted a lock of her curly brown hair around her finger. "I don't know, luv. I've heard rumors that they caught a few of those Lashran folk in the deep forests of Nandar...maybe he's one of them?"

Coren scratched his well-groomed, short beard and considered the lad. Yes, the Lashran were supposed to have a fairy-like beauty to them. He caught himself wondering if the boy had wings, and he chuckled to himself. How silly...he only looked a bit different than Coren's own folk. His ethereal appearance certainly didn't mean that he was a magical creature.

"Going once...going twice..." The auctioneer spouted.

A fat man was eagerly walking towards the platform, eyeing the young man with lust.

Before he realized what he was doing, Coren shouted, "Twenty-five gold coins!" in a booming voice. A hush befell the assembly, and Charlotte's brown eyes looked as though they were going to roll out of her sockets as she stared up at him.

"Are you mad, man? The boy is too weak to lift anything! You said yourself; you need a strong man to help you with the shop, and a homemaker to help you with your house! Does that lad look like either of those, to you?" Charlotte was sputtering and waving her arms around, narrowly missing hitting people nearby with her wild movements.

Before he could respond to her chastising, Coren saw the fat man scowl at him and dig through his coin pouch. "Thirty gold coins!" Fatty crowed triumphantly, certain that he had the other man beat.

Judging by appearances, it certainly seemed like Fatty would win. He was obviously a rich merchant, dressed in fine silks and draped with jewelry. Coren was dressed in a flattering, if average combination of leather breeches, thigh-high boots, and a loose, red shirt. The kick of it was, Fatty was new in the Pirate haven, and had no idea who Coren was.

Coren smirked and shouted, "Forty-five gold coins!"

A collective gasp filtered through the crowd, and the fat merchant's face fell. The auctioneer stood with his mouth agape for a moment, until Pete hissed, "Do yer job, Cuttlefish!"

The auctioneer shook himself and rasped, "Forty-five gold! Forty-five gold for this nimble young fellow! Who will take it to fifty?"

Charlotte shook her head, wondering what in the tempest of hell could have gotten into her old friend so suddenly. Could it be that he liked lads? She almost laughed at herself. Coren was an excellent lover, and had never openly shown an interest in other men. On the other hand, from what she could see of the young slave's features, he was just as pretty as a lass. She pondered this and forgot to try and talk sense to Coren.

"Sold, to Coren Darshaw, for forty-five gold pieces!" Cuttlefish hollered exuberantly.

Pete half-carried, half dragged the boy to his new owner and deposited him at his feet. "I sure hope ye know what yer doin', old mate," Said Pete with a disgusted look at the trembling lad on the ground. Coren counted out the coins to him and avoided Charlotte's bewildered eyes.

"I haven't a clue, I'm sure," He muttered as he knelt down to examine his new property. The lashran had fainted from exhaustion. Sighing, Coren gathered the slave up into his arms and carried him out of the slave market, with Charlotte following close behind and shouting about how he could have bought two blacksmiths AND a cook for the price of the scrawny boy.

Glancing down at the unconscious lad's pretty face, Coren felt a fluttery feeling in his chest, and began to wonder if he had made a mistake.

## *“Fate”*

### *Part 2*

“Well, what are you going to do now, you crazy sea dog?” Questioned Charlotte as she followed Coren into his house.

If it weren't for the burden he carried, he would have shrugged. “I suppose the first order of business would be to get the lad cleaned up and changed, then see about getting some nourishment into him.” Coren grunted slightly as he lowered the boy onto the couch in the lounge room. “Let me see the papers,” He said, holding his hand out.

Rolling her eyes, Charlotte handed the rolled parchment to him and watched as he broke the wax seal and carefully examined the registration. “Hmmm. You were right, Charlotte. He's one of the lashran that Timulc's lads caught in the expedition to Nandar. It says his name is...er...hmm.”

Coren's eyes narrowed and he mouthed the long, strange name silently, trying to make sense of it. “Lythallendar...ye gods! What sort of people are they, to place such punishing names on their offspring!”

She snorted with laughter. “Why don't you just call him Lythas?”

He considered the idea, gazing down at the boy as he stroked his chin. “Yes...that would suit him, and I would not get tongue cramps trying to call him for errands. Would you be a dear and fill the bathtub with warm water?”

When she glared at him and put her hands on her hips, he sighed. “Charlotte, love...I need to get him out of these filthy clothes and check him for lash marks. I don't want to take the risk of him getting infected from dirty wounds, and the he's already feverish.”

Her look changed to worry, and she bit her lip as she glanced down at the boy's flushed face. “Poor lamb...taken away from his country and abused like this,” She whispered, brushing her fingers across his hot cheek.

The same had happened to Pete and her, when they were only children. It was Coren's father who bought them and eventually granted their freedom. By then, the Pirate life had been engrained into both siblings. They both developed a love for this place and for the ocean, and deemed to stay and go into business here. Slavery was an unfortunate reality of the world they lived in. The weak lost their freedom to the strong.

Once she left to do as he asked, Coren turned back to the papers and finished reading them. “Birth date...oh...I see!” He muttered, glancing down at the boy again. He was, in truth, no “boy”. His papers said he was only a month from his twenty-third birthday. Lashran either aged more slowly than humans, or the males did not grow facial hair. Lythas' face was as smooth and soft as a child's, with no hint of stubble or even peach fuzz.

Coren felt a little more at ease, now that he knew that the lashran was an adult, and not a youth. The feelings he got when looking at Lythas were the same he would normally have when seeing a pretty woman. Not only was it unnatural for him,

but it had also made him feel horrible, thinking he was verging on pedophilia. Ten years difference wasn't such a big gap, was it?

Coren shook his head angrily, amazed at where his thoughts were leading. "Concentrate on the job at hand," He muttered to himself. He whistled softly as he unfastened the few buttons remaining on the slave's beige shirt. Pulling the garment open, he stared down at the lad with a critical eye, examining his chest and torso for whip wheals. No marks there, but the boy was built better than he had first thought. Though small in stature, Lythas was built with a dancer's frame. His pectorals were well defined, and his stomach muscles were tight and firm.

The weapons dealer forced himself to keep it professional as he ran his calloused palms up and down the lad's torso and chest, feeling for any broken or fractured ribs. It seemed there was nothing to worry about in this area, aside from a few bruises.

As he finished undressing the slave and examined him carefully, Coren was forced to deduce that his clothing had simply been very baggy, lending him the appearance of scrawny-ness. Any lass would drool over Lythas' lean, smooth body. There were no marks at all on him, save for the chafed areas on his wrists and ankles from the manacles. The dirt made the boy seem as though he had tan lines, it was so thick on every part of his skin that hadn't been clothed.

The slave groaned in his sleep and squirmed restlessly, nearly rolling off of the couch. Coren held him down until he quieted, then smoothed a tangled, raven lock away from his face. Gods, what a face! Those long lashes cast crescent shadows over his marble cheekbones, and for a moment, Coren wondered what it would be like for that face to be flushed in passion instead of fever.

"Have you checked his teeth?" Said Charlotte's voice suddenly, startling him out of his thoughts so badly that he jumped. "Wouldn't do to have such a pretty slave, if he's got a mouthful of rotten teeth!"

She had a sly look in her eye, and Coren struggled to keep a strait face in the sight of his panic. Could she have guessed what was going through his mind? How long had she been standing there? "Aren't you going to take his knickers off too?" She questioned, pointing at the long underwear.

Coren gritted his teeth and pulled the last remaining garment off of the slave, then tried to look casual as he examined the privates and buttocks for damage.

"Hmmm...he's put together nicely! Oh, and he's not a eunuch! You'd better not get him cut, Coren Darshaw! That's barbaric!" Charlotte was staring at the lad with more than a passing interest as she prattled on about his body.

"Woman, cease your chattering! I've no intention of having him cut...you know I don't believe in doing that to a fellow, slave or no. Go into my wardrobe and fetch one of my robes, will you? He'll swim in any of my clothes. I'll need to have him fitted for some new ones." She smirked and set off to do it, but he did not miss the glance she cast at the lad's groin area.

He wished he had missed it, because he automatically followed her gaze and found himself staring. The Lashran was well endowed for his size...that much was obvious even though his member was soft. Like the rest of him, the penis was as pale as ivory, with the subtle hint of pink giving it mortal coloring.

Coren caught himself just as his hand was reaching towards that somehow adorable organ. "Hell's bells...what am I doing?" He growled, lifting Lythas into his arms. He tried to ignore the fact that his own groin was stirring, but the feel of the lad's body against him as he carried him down the hall made it difficult.

When he reached the bathroom, he carefully set Lythas into the tub, and was thankful that Charlotte had only filled it hip-deep. At least he didn't have to worry about him slipping under the water and drowning.

Bathing the lashran was pure agony. To hell with feeling something similar to what women stirred in him...this was far more intense! As his hands came into contact with Lythas' soap slick skin, Coren had to fight off soft groans of frustration. He caught himself massaging the pale, pink nipples until they were hardened nubs, and he snatched his hands away as if they were burned. This was too much.

He checked a sigh of relief when Charlotte came into the bathroom with a black, satin robe. "I think you can do a better job of this than I can, Charlotte," He said. "You're used to bathing your kids, and I've never bathed another human being seriously before."

She smirked at his choice of words. He had bathed plenty of women before, but it usually ended up in lovemaking before the job was halfway done. She had a sneaky suspicion of why her friend couldn't bring himself to finish the job.

She shrugged. "Won't hurt my feelings...he's a pretty one, to be sure. I'll get him squeaky clean for you."

Coren nodded his thanks and stood up, angling his body away from her as he went out the door. She bit her lip and widened her eyes. Well, her suspicions were correct. Pirate boy had an erection the size of his old ship! Giggling in spite of herself, she continued where he left off and cleaned Lythas up.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 3*

Pete came for a visit the next day, bringing a surprise with him. "Coren, this is Maggie...I got her for 40 silver. Knew ye blew all of the money ye brought with you on that scrawny lad, so I figured I'd pick up a housekeeper for ye." Coren grinned as his friend stepped aside to let a plump, middle-aged woman into the house.

"You're a true friend, Pete." Coren said as he opened his money pouch to count out the silver.

Pete shrugged as he held his hand out for the coins, not bothering to count them. "Yeah, well...yer place is cluttered, and me sister's been spending all her time helping ye out, when she should be looking fer a husband!"

Coren laughed, shaking his head. Pete was so protective of Charlotte. Turning to Maggie, he said, "What can you do, dear?"

She looked up at him shyly, a blush staining her cheeks. It wasn't unusual for women of all ages to react that way to the handsome, blond weapons dealer. "I can cook and clean, sir...and I can sew, read and write."

He lifted an eyebrow, impressed. Slaves who could read and write were a rarity! "Ah, that is good. You shall have a room of your own, and an allowance weekly, so that you can purchase your own clothes and whatever other luxuries you would like. I have one other slave, whose name is Lythas, and soon I will hopefully purchase a blacksmith to help me in the shop. Your room is the third one on the left, upstairs. Go and put your things away and make yourself comfortable, now." She bobbed a curtsy, openly surprised at his generosity and kindness.

As the woman picked up her luggage and went up the stairs, Pete shook his head. "Word ever gets out that ye treat yer help like family, ye'll be ruined!" He said with a chuckle.

Coren shrugged. "I find it makes things much more pleasant around the house to make friends with my help. Feeling at home also discourages them from running away."

Pete smirked. "If ye say so. Now, about this Lashran you bought last night...how is he?"

Surprised by the question, Coren said, "Well, he's been sleeping all day, and his fever broke this morning. He's ungelded as well. Everything is intact. I haven't had the chance to judge how good of a slave he's going to be, yet."

"Aye...that's what I wanted to talk to ye about," Pete said, his brown eyes serious. "Look, I know ye felt sorry for the kid, but keeping an ungelded Lashran around the house isn't the brightest idea. I know a little bit about them, from working with some of the lads that travel to Nandar. The males of his kind are...well...randier than a rutting bull. Given his looks, I don't think your lad would have a lack of female attention, either. Ye don't want him liftin' the skirts of every lady ye have over for tea, do ye?"

Coren bit back a chuckle. What would Pete think if he knew it wasn't only women who found Lythas appealing? "I understand your concern, my friend, but I won't un-man him like that. Remember, if it weren't for mine and my father's attitude over such things, you'd be missing some parts, yourself."

Pete shuddered. "How could I forget? It's just a bit of friendly advice, is all. Wanted to let ye know about it before the boy hits his seasonals."

Coren's brows drew down in confusion. "Seasonals? What in the hell is that?"

"Oh, I thought ye knew about that. Lashran lads have a bought of...er...sexual tension two or three times a year. They aren't the most fruitful lot, so the boys get a little more...um...productive during certain times of the year." Pete was actually blushing...a rare thing for him.

Coren snorted. "You're boshing me."

Pete shook his head, his eyes earnest. "Oh, no! I'd never bluff ye about something like this. Of course, I've never seen a Lashran go into his seasonals, cause they usually geld them when they catch them. I can't tell ye how bad it is...ye'll just have to find that out on yer own. I'd just feel bad if ye bought a slave from us that gave ye more trouble than he's worth, is all." He snapped his mouth shut and stared past Coren's shoulder, suddenly.

Following his gaze, the retired pirate turned around to see Lythas at the bottom of the stairs, wearing the black, satin robe Charlotte had clad him in. The boy was dead white and trembling, and when Coren's blue eyes met his wide, green ones, Lythas covered his groin area and turned around, running up the stairs as quickly as his legs would carry him.

"Lythas!" Coren hollered, but the lad paid no attention to him. Coren scowled at Pete. "You and your big mouth...the lad's scared witless, now!" Pete frowned and lowered his head. His friend was right...the boys' reactions could only mean he overheard him talking about having him neutered.

Coren vaulted up the stairs after Lythas, afraid the Lashran would try to climb out a window to escape and fall to his death in the street. "Lythallendar!" Coren called, remembering the slave's full name. The boy went into the room he had been resting in and slammed the door behind him, barring the weapons dealer out.

"Open this door, Lythallendar! I have no intention of having you cut! Pete was just running his mouth!" Coren put his ear to the door to listen for sounds. It was clear that the boy was leaning his weight against the door, for there was no way he could have locked the door without a key.

"I do not believe you! Humans care not what happens to their slaves!" Came a melodious, strangely accented voice from the other side.

Coren sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. This was the worst start he had ever had with a slave. Perhaps the boy was more trouble than he was worth! This thought put an idea into his head, and his icy eyes narrowed, while a grin spread across his mouth. "Well, I suppose we shall have to do this the hard way then, lad. I'll simply lock this door and have the window watched from outside. I have no use for a rebellious slave, so I shall sell you to that fat merchant who was after you from



the beginning. From what I hear, he has no qualms about neutering his males, and I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy having him rutting over you."

On the other side of the door, Lythas closed his eyes and shuddered. He knew exactly which man his master was speaking about, and the picture that sprung up in his head was a very unpleasant one. Fear and desperation made his breath hitch unevenly, and a cold sweat broke out all over his body. Could he trust this imposing man? Given the horror stories that other captives had told him while they were cramped in the stock hold of the boat, Coren was a saint when it came to how he treated his property. Instead of waking up locked in a cold basement, with cold chains hampering his limbs, Lythas had found himself clean and warm, in a soft bed. Why would his master go through that sort of trouble over him, if he meant to be cruel?

"I'm waiting for your answer, Lashran. What is it going to be?" Came his master's muffled voice from the other side of the door. Lythas rested his forehead on the smooth, oaken wood of the door. He had already deduced that attempting to escape through the window would only kill him or break bones...it was simply too high to land safely. Even if he attempted to use the bed sheets as a makeshift rope, it would only reach five feet or six feet down from the window, and the house was raised on a platform. Slowly and uncertainly, Lythas stepped back and turned the doorknob. When the door was opened and his master stood staring at him across the threshold, the Lashran slowly backed away, licking his lips nervously.

Coren approached him slowly, his blue eyes unreadable. Lythas forced himself to stop backing up, and he closed his eyes, bracing himself for a punishing blow to the face. He winced when the man's fingertips touched his face. "Look at me," Commanded his master's deep voice.

Swallowing hard, Lythas obeyed. His lips parted, and he could not contain the expression of confused relief on his features when he saw gentle concern in the man's blue eyes. "I swear you will not be mutilated in any way, Lythas. That isn't the way I run things around here." Promised Coren.

Weak with relief and pent-up emotions, the Lashran felt his legs giving out, and Coren steadied him with a strong arm and helped him to the bed.

"Easy there, lad," Said Coren as he half-carried the slave to the bed. Those long-lashed, incredible green eyes of the Lashran's filled with tears as they regarded him, and the weapons dealer felt a pull at his heartstrings. He knew from listening to Charlotte how frightening and miserable it must be to have your freedom ripped from you, and to find yourself on an auction block in a strange land.

"Why are you not punishing me?" Questioned Lythas warily.

Coren impulsively stroked the lad's soft, raven hair..., which was actually curlier than it was wavy, now that it was clean. "You reacted out of fear, and in the end, you did obey me," He explained. "I do not punish my slaves for having emotion." His gaze became stern as he continued, "However, if in the future you purposely disobey me, backtalk me, or do a chore badly on purpose, I will strap you. You must understand that while I am lenient, I expect you to do as you are told. Is that clear?"

Wide-eyed, Lythas nodded and chewed his bottom lip. Coren fought off a grin. The lad really was too appealing for his own good, and the expressions his face

went through were endearing. He ruffled the boy's hair. "Well, now that we're acquainted, what say we get some good food into you? If I know ship food, you could use something nourishing."

The lad blushed as his stomach growled, and he smiled bashfully at his master when the man chuckled. "That would be most appreciated, Master." He whispered.

"Come along, then," Said Coren, and he got up and began to walk out the door. Lythas' soft footfalls told him the lad was following. The retired pirate sighed to himself, wondering what he was going to do about the strange, powerful attraction he felt for the boy. It was all he could do not to kiss him when he had blushed as prettily as a lass! None of his emotions showed on his chiseled features as he guided the boy to the kitchen. Part of him was thankful that Pete had left while he was upstairs dealing with Lythas. The last thing the boy needed was to run into the man who was suggesting he be neutered.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 5*

As the days went by, Coren discovered that Lythas was an astonishing learner. The retired pirate was going to buy a slave with smithing skills at the end of the week, but he changed his mind. Lythas watched him create a couple of basic throwing knives, and timidly asked if he could try to make one. Amused, Coren stepped back and allowed the slave to try his hand at it.

His amusement swiftly became amazement as the Lashran worked. When the lad finished, he lifted the red-hot knife carefully with the tongs and set it in the water. Steam rolled out, and Coren gave a low whistle as he inspected the craftsmanship. "Lythas, I believe you are going to work out just fine." Though a bit too light, it was an amazing feat for someone who had never done it before.

Lythas smiled proudly, his fair features flushed from exertion and glowing with perspiration. Coren found himself staring at the young man. This time, he couldn't pull his gaze off of him, as he had managed to do so many other times. Ye gods, the lad was too bloody appealing! The weapons dealer took a step forward before he realized what he was doing, and damned near pulled Lythas into his arms. A knock at the shop door broke the tide of lust surging through Coren's body. He bit back a curse. The way Lythas had his lips parted and moist, the hazy, drugged look in his half-lidded eyes, and the quickened rhythm of his breathing hinted that he had felt the same thing Coren did.

"Stop the bloody banging! I'm coming!" Coren shouted as the knocking became more violent and insistent. "Stay here," He said to Lythas. He almost did a double take. He could have sworn the expression on the Lashran's face was one of acute disappointment.

Practically charging down the stairs to the main part of his shop, Coren cursed himself for a fool. Of course, the lad was willing! He knew beyond a doubt that Lythas was a virgin. He had confessed as much to him yesterday, when Coren had pointed out a comely lass on the street and said something quite lewd. The Lashran was new to desire, and was probably only responding to Coren's own lecherous responses. He probably felt an obligation to respond, even if it was only for show.

Coren quickly banished his thoughts as he opened the door. There stood Jack (who was sometimes called "Three shot Jack" because of his intolerance to alcohol. He had a bad habit of challenging people to shot-drinking contests, believing he could win. This often resulted in him losing horribly and passing out after three shots). "Took you long enough," The big man grumbled, letting himself in.

"I was upstairs, teaching my new slave how to make throwing knives," Coren replied. "What brings you here so early? The shop doesn't open for another hour."

Jack's wide mouth turned down at the corners. "There's been talk, lad. I came to warn you. Fatty Bolringer is getting antsy about your business. Says you're stealing his profits. I guess he expected he'd make a killing in this town with his imports, but he ain't taking it so well that you're still getting most of the clientele. I heard him talking about hiring some lads to come give you a 'scare', last night in the Jade Tiger." Jack's black eyes were twinkling, as if he himself found the whole thing

extremely amusing. “Course, I told him he’d be better off making nice with you. Let him know about your reputation in this town. He just told me to bugger off. Said you cheated him out of enough already. Said you bought something he was after first.”

Coren knew exactly what that “something” was. He was filled with disgust at the fat merchant, knowing full well what he had wanted with Lythas. He smiled coldly. “It’s hardly my fault that the man didn’t bring enough money with him to outbid me at the market. Let his boys come. Don’t let on to anyone that I know about this.” He reached into his money pouch to draw some gold out, payment to show he appreciated Jack’s warning.

The bear of a man clamped a meaty hand on Coren’s wrist and shook his head. “Naw...keep your coins. You’ve done plenty for my crew in the past, and I’ll never forget you backing up “The Harpy” when that bloody patrol galleon put us in a fix.” He was referring to the time his own pirate ship had gotten caught by a larger, more powerful galleon...one of the King’s coastal patrols. Coren saw the cannon fire from a distance (His ship, “The Falcon Wing”, just happened to be passing by on its way to Toria) and discovered his associate in a fix. The Falcon promptly began firing on the galleon, and they won the fight and split the spoils. He probably saved Jack and his entire crew from an early, watery grave.

“Very well, old bear...but I insist you take a discount on your next purchase of supplies from me. This confrontation is going to be far too much fun for me not to reward you for your warning.”

Jack grinned. “I heard you’ve got yourself a map maker. I wouldn’t mind a few fresh ones drawn up. The ones I’ve got are getting downright impossible to read.”

Coren nodded. “As good as done! Just bring the maps you’d like drawn up by, and I’ll set him to it immediately.”

He noticed that Jack was staring past his shoulder at the stairs behind him, and he turned around. Lythas was slowly coming down, and he seemed unsure of whether he was allowed to or not. “Come over here, lad. I’d like you to meet your newest customer.” Coren said with a beckoning gesture.

Lythas relaxed visibly, a slight smile forming on his delicate lips. He smoothly crossed the room and bowed before Jack’s mountainous frame. “Hello, Sir. What can I do for you?”

Jack tugged his gray-streaked, wiry beard and flicked a glance to Coren. “Ah, so this is your new slave, eh? No wonder Fatty was so pissed.” He held his hand out to the lad, and Lythas placed his own slender hand in it uncertainly. He winced as the pirate squeezed it firmly and shook it. “Nice to meet you, boy. I was just telling your master here that I need some of my old maps redrawn. You’ve got an artist’s hands, that’s for certain.” He examined the young man’s soft palms for a moment before freeing his hand. “Think you can do that for me?”

Lythas nodded emphatically. “Most certainly, Sir. Drawing is my favorite pastime.”

Jack frowned and pulled Coren to the side. “You’d better keep a sharp eye out on your lad there, Coren. Fatty’s tastes run to pretty boys. I didn’t understand why he was so upset about you outbidding him, but now I see what his problem is.

He's a bit obsessed, if you take my meaning. Better keep your little artist on a short leash, for his own protection."

Lythas tilted his head to the side and bit his bottom lip. His green eyes were watching the two men in innocent curiosity. Coren sighed. "I know, Jack. That's why I out-bid the tub o' lard in the first place. I've seen what eventually happens to young men like Lythas when someone like Fatty gets their greedy paws on them. He's not exactly a blacksmith, but he's got other talents to make up for it, and he's a fast learner."

"That's good to hear, lad. Now, what sort of crossbows do you have in? I'm looking for some hand held ones that can shoot grappling hooks."

"Damn...you caught me on a bad day, I'm afraid. I'm expecting a shipment of those to come in at the end of the week. I do have some newly designed hooks, however. Want to take a look at them?" Coren said with a frown.

"Aye...that'll do for now. Let's see what you have." Shrugged Jack.

Coren lead his friend over to a table against the left wall, where some wicked looking, barbed grappling hooks of all sizes were laid out. Lythas followed in interest, and gulped. "Master...what do people use those for? Catching sharks?" His eyes were wide.

Coren and Jack shared a look, and then burst into laughter. Lythas blushed and smiled shyly, though he had no idea what he had said that was so funny. Coren wiped his eyes and composed himself; though he couldn't relax his smile as he drew the Lashran close to show him a better view of the devices. "No, Lythas...these are used for attaching ropes to things from a distance. Like high walls, windowsills, tree limbs and such. You see this hole in the end of it?" He picked up one of them and held it before the slave's startled face. Lythas nodded, and he continued, "The rope is threaded through there and knotted, and you throw the hook at whatever you mean to climb or pull down. I've added the barbs to prevent slipping, and it gives those who try to remove the hooks a nasty surprise as well." He grinned sharply, and Lythas gulped.

For all his patience and well-spoken elegance, his master was a dangerous man. Still, something happened to Lythas every time Coren looked at him...especially when he smiled. The Lashran felt so small and helpless in this frightening new life he had been forced into, and Coren was so strong and sure. He felt completely drawn to the man, though a part of him wondered if his feelings were a good thing. He thought that women were pretty, certainly, but they didn't make his stomach fill with butterflies the way his master did. How was he to fit into this new world when he couldn't share the desires of human men?

Noticing that Coren was still looking at him, Lythas tried to keep his face straight and attentive. He gingerly reached out to touch the tip of the grappling hook, then gasped and pulled his finger away. A bright drop of blood grew on his index finger where the sharp point pricked him.

"Ah, hells," Coren swore, dropping the hook on the table. He took the slave's hand in his and applied pressure to the finger, making him wince. "Let that be a lesson to you. Always use caution with the items in this shop."

Jack chuckled. "Here I was worried that the lad might take up one of the weapons in here and try to use it against you to escape. He's as green as a lass."

Coren frowned at the statement as he released Lythas' finger. Jack had a point. He wasn't at all worried about the Lashran turning on him...he was certain the boy knew he was as well off as he could be in his situation. It was the fact that Lythas obviously had no weaponry skills whatsoever that bothered him. In this town, even a slave should know at least a little about self defense. He gave the slave a measuring look. With his slim frame and grace, a rapier would be most suited to him. Muskets were too dangerous...the kick would likely toss Lythas to the floor. The Lashran stared back at him with dismayed emerald eyes, and he placed the tip of his finger to his lips and sucked on it to ease the sting. Coren suddenly found his eyes glued to the shapely lips that pulled at the finger, and he wondered what it would feel like if he were to replace Lythas' digit with his own.

"Coren? Did you hear what I said, lad?" Questioned Jack. The weapons dealer shifted startled, pale eyes to his friend, and the pirate rolled his eyes. "If you'd listened, you would have heard me say that the boy should get up the stairs. I just saw some of Fatty's men out the window. They're heading this way."

Coren leaned over to peer around Jack's girth. There were ten men, all wearing black clothing and masks, heading straight for his shop. He grinned, then chuckled. "What do they think they are, cat-burglars? I don't know whether to laugh myself sick or be insulted!" Jack joined his laughter.

Coren turned to Lythas. "Get up the stairs and stay hidden, lad. This could get a bit rough, and you'll only be in the way if you're down here." He ignored the hurt look the slave gave him and slapped him smartly on the back. Without argument, Lythas did as he was told. "You don't have to get involved in this, Jack." The weapons dealer said to his friend.

Jack nodded. "I know, but I could never pass up a good fight, and I can't risk losing the best dealer in Tariff. Let's have some fun!"

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 6*

Lythas peeked down over the railing of the upstairs room, wanting to watch what was happening. He had a musket rifle sitting beside him. He understood how the weapon worked, though he had never fired one before. He hoped he would not have to fire one now. His master chatted with the burly pirate as though nothing was going on, and he feigned surprise when the door swung open and the ten masked men filed in. One of them, the leader, Lythas supposed, spoke.

"Greetings, Captain Coren. You've been monopolizing most of the weapons trading in this town. We're here to even things out, a bit." The other black-clad men laughed, and Lythas recognized cowards when he saw them. Their bravado was only there because they outnumbered Coren, and they thought they had him at their mercy.

"Ah, I see," The weapons dealer said with a negligent toss of his blond hair. The gesture should have looked feminine, but it was not. "How exactly do you intend to 'even things out'?"

The leader of the ruffians drew his cutlass, and the others followed suite. "We're just going to relieve you of some of your wares. We've got no orders to kill you, unless you resist, so you'd best sit back and relax 'till we're finished."

Coren smiled coldly at the man's matter-of-fact confidence. "Well, you've got a problem, then. I'm under no obligation to keep you alive." As soon as he finished the sentence, he whipped out one of those dangerous grappling hooks and swung it hard. The rope uncoiled with a faint hiss as the hook flew at the bandit, and the man screamed when it landed where his neck met his shoulder. His scream became a gurgle as Coren yanked the rope savagely and tore his throat right out of his neck.

Lythas watched in horrified fascination as the grappling hook landed with a sickening thump, the man's bloody windpipe attached to it. The Lashran closed his eyes and slapped a hand over his mouth as his stomach heaved and threatened to empty itself. There was a moment of shocked silence as the leader fell forward, clawing at his spraying neck, and died on the floor. His comrades howled in anger and began their charge.

His face impassive, Coren lifted his other hand, which held a pistol musket, and blew the face off of the closest of them. Jack shot another in the chest with his own pistol, then unclasped the axe hanging from his belt and met the charge. The big man moved surprisingly quickly. He twisted aside to avoid one of the ruffians sword stroke, then head-butted another one, smashing their nose. As the bandit dropped his cutlass and backpedaled with his hand over his face, Jack swung his axe in a horizontal chop. At first, the bandit stood as if dazed, and then his upper body separated from his lower body and fell to the floor, trailing intestines. The dead man's lower body stayed standing for a moment before twitching and falling to the side. Upon witnessing this, Lythas could no longer hold his stomach down, and he emptied it all over the floor.

He really didn't want to see what was happening, but once he recovered from vomiting, the Lashran couldn't help but look over the railing again. Coren was just finishing off another one, pulling his sword from the man's chest. Only five remained,

and Coren and Jack fought them off back to back, dodging and parrying blows that came far too close to landing, for Lythas' tastes. The slave cried out when one of the ruffians got past his Master's guard and drew a bloody slash down his chest. He cried out again when he noticed that another one had backed away and was leveling a pistol at Coren.

Frantically, Lythas picked up the long musket by his side and sighted the barrel. He grit his teeth and prayed he would at least graze the man before he could get a shot off at Coren. With a deep breath, the Lashran pulled the trigger. The explosion that went off deafened him, and he registered the man's right side turning into a ripped, gory mess, and then he was propelled backwards through the air. It only lasted for a second, but to the Lashran, it felt as though he was flying. He cried out as he landed hard on his back. Pain flashed through his collarbone as he tried to move, and black spots danced before his eyes.

Coren stared up at the top room in alarm. He had seen the man's side explode suddenly, and as he was wondering what happened, he heard Lythas cry out, then a crash. He didn't have time to worry about that, however, for there were still two men attacking him. With a growl, the weapons dealer kicked his leg up and out, and his boot connected solidly with one of his adversary's groin. As the man doubled over, he stabbed him in the back, puncturing his lung. Only one more to go, on his side. "How are you doing, Jack?" He yelled, though his friend was right behind him.

"Couldn't be better!" Was the gruff answer. Coren heard a thump and a scream, and he guessed that the pirate had chopped a limb off of one of them. Coren smiled grimly, his icy eyes promising death to the remaining bandit. The man began to back away, and his nondescript eyes widened behind the mask in terror. He turned to try and flee, but slipped on the blood and gore of his own fellows.

"Please! Please have mercy!" He screamed as Coren advanced on him. "We didn't come to kill you...only to take some of your things! I was only doing what I was paid to do!"

Coren leveled his thin sword at the man's throat, pressing the point against the skin and drawing blood. "You picked the wrong employer," He said, and then drove the point home. As his bandit gurgled and died, Jack finished off the last one with a mighty chop that decapitated him.

The burly man wiped the blood splattering his face with his sleeve and laughed. "Well, we've dropped the population roster on a few cockroaches! What do you want to do with their remains?" People in the streets had stopped outside of the shop and were staring in with interest.

Coren caught his breath and looked at the mess all over his floor with a grimace. "I do wish you would change to a less vulgar weapon," He said.

Jack opened his mouth. "Hey now...you were the one that tore that first mate's throat out!"

Coren grinned. "Very true. I suppose we should gather up the parts and send them back to where they came from...with a thank you note for the entertainment." They shared a good laugh over that.



"You should get that looked at," Jack said, pointing at the bloody gash on Coren's chest with his axe handle.

The weapons dealer shrugged. "'Tis just a flesh wound. He did not tear muscle. I'll have Maggie or Charlotte suture it tonight.

A groan of pain from upstairs caught their attention, and Coren felt a stab of alarm as he remembered the crash he had heard after Lythas fired the musket. He rushed up the stairs with Jack close at his heels. Lythas was lying amidst a broken table, and Coren quickly checked to see if the lad had landed on any of the finished knives and skewered himself. The Lashran cried out when his Master moved him.

"Sorry, lad, but I've got to check you for holes," Coren said in a rush. He sighed in relief when he found nothing sticking out of the slave's body, then gently turned him back over and unlaced his shirt. He winced when he saw the uneven line of Lythas' collarbone, and the rapidly darkening skin surrounding it.

"Looks like the kick caught him and broke his collarbone," Remarked Jack. "Better get him back to your house and have a doctor come look at it."

When he saw how torn his friend looked, the pirate murmured, "Hey, I'll get some of my mates to come over and clean up the mess. If you trust me alone in your shop, that is." He winked.

Coren chuckled. "Well, it's not as though I won't know who to go after if I find anything broken or missing. I'll take you up on that offer."

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 7*

Lythas groaned as his Master carried him into the house and lay him down on the couch. "Easy there, lad...I'm getting a doctor to look at you," Coren said softly, his work-roughened hands smoothing damp locks of hair from the slave's face. Lythas bit his lip and tried to be still as Coren called out for Maggie.

"Master Coren...I didn't expect you home so early in the day!" The woman said as she waddled out from the kitchen. She gasped when she saw the blood soaking the weapon dealer's shirt and face.

"It's alright, Maggie...most of it is their blood. I need you to go to Dr. Calloway's house and fetch him immediately. Lythas is hurt. Do you remember the way?"

She nodded. Of course, she remembered the way. She had only gone there two days ago, to buy some ointment for minor cuts and scrapes to use around the household. "I'll be back as soon as I can, Master." She said, and then she was out the door.

Coren turned to Lythas, noting the way his eyes were unfocused and clouded. "Keep your head, lad. Talk to me. You don't want to go into shock."

He was rewarded when the green eyes turned to him. Keeping a patient talking when injured was usually the best way to keep them aware, so Coren decided to learn a little more of his slave's background. "How were you captured, lad?"

He was taken aback by the shame and sadness that shadowed the Lashran's expression. "I was not c-captured, Master. I was given away. I was unclean."

Coren's eyes widened. Unclean? "How so?" He asked.

Lythas blushed and lowered his gaze. "I...I do not have normal desires, sir. I was discovered doing something that...is not allowed."

The Lashran hissed in pain, and Coren took his hand and held it. "What were you doing that was so awful?" He questioned, keeping the boy focused as best he could.

Lythas blew a sigh as the pain ebbed a bit. "I was...allowing a human male to touch me." Now that he was speaking of it, Lythas felt a need to tell his master more. It was strange, how much he felt he could trust the man. "I am already considered...an oddity among my people, sir. My coloring is off. Lashran usually have fair hair and dark skin. My people are tall...most of them are taller even than you. I...tried to be proper, to have the desires I was meant to have, but I felt nothing for any of the people who would have made a good match for me. One day...some traders came to our homeland. Human traders. I found myself...admiring the men. They were a bit rough looking, not so smooth of face and delicate as the males of my kind. One of them...said that I was pretty. He wanted...to touch me." Lythas broke off as another wave of pain shot through his neck and shoulders, and he sobbed.

Coren impulsively caressed the slave's cheek and murmured, "Easy, Lythallendar. I know it hurts...help will be here soon. Keep talking to me." His curiosity was piqued.

The lad had just admitted that he had homosexual tendencies, and Coren felt that he had to know if another man had taken him. Perhaps he wasn't virginal after all?

"We went to...a secluded spot by the waterfall, and I allowed him...to rub me...down there." Another blush colored his cheeks as he vaguely pointed towards his waistline.

"Go on, Lythas. He didn't...force himself on you, did he?"

The Lashran shook his head, then cried out at the pain the movement caused, and Coren squeezed his hand. "No, Master. He just...touched me and kissed me. One of the Elders...found us like that, and the man was sent back to his people. I was...put on trial for conducting...unnatural acts."

Coren swallowed and was surprised by the helpless anger that rose within him. How monstrous, that they would make such behavior illegal, like that? Humans were far more open-minded about same gender romances. Coren himself used to have two crewmembers on board his ship that were lovers. Still, people who chose that lifestyle were regarded with suspicion, even if they were reluctantly accepted by society. "You could have said that the man made you do it," He said.

Lythas smiled gently. "No...that would have been a lie, and they would have killed him for it. I could not have that on my conscience."

Coren nodded slowly. He was beginning to like who his slave was. "What happened with the trial?" He questioned.

"I was deemed unclean and unfit to dwell in the Green Realm any longer. I was traded to pirates along with some other Lashran who had committed crimes. My people have no prisons. They exile those of their own kind who commit crimes. Outsiders are either returned in restraints to their own lands for their culture to deal with them, or executed, depending on the severity of the crime they committed."

"So, none of you were...violated...while you were being brought here to Tariff?" Coren asked. He would murder Timulc if he discovered he or any of his men had laid hands on Lythas that way.

"No, sir. Nobody tried to make us do anything like that." Lythas replied.

It made sense. He should have known Timulc wouldn't have allowed such a thing. Not out of any kindness...oh, no. The pirate was a businessman, and a shrewd one, at that. He probably figured that delivering his cargo unspoiled would add to their value. Personally, Coren did not like the man, but he was a paying customer, so he put up with him. "You had no parents or relatives to speak up for you at this trial?" He inquired as the thought came into his head.

The emerald eyes lowered. "No, Master. My parents died of a plague when I was only a small child. The only other relative that I have is my cousin, and he does not care for me. He was happy to see me exiled."

Coren felt uncharacteristic pity for the young man. What was this Lashran doing to him?! He had never been so soft in his life! Any further thoughts were interrupted as Maggie returned with Dr. Calloway. "Here I am...nobody panic!" The eccentric physician said as he followed the housekeeper through the door. "Had a bit of a

scuffle, did we?" His eyes looked enormous, due to the thickness of his round glasses.

Coren smirked. "You could say that. Some rowdy fellows decided to try and break my shop up. Three Shot Jack is watching over the place for me. I need you to take a look at my slave's collar bone...I believe it's broken."

The doctor came over to the bed and looked down at the beautiful young man. His eyes widened. "Is he a Lashran?" He questioned excitedly.

Coren shrugged. "Aye. What of it?"

Calloway pulled the lad's shirt open and carefully probed the bruised collarbone with his fingers. "Oh, I've just done a bit of reading on them. Your lad should heal up quite quickly. They have natural regeneration abilities. Easy there, son. You've broken it, all right. What happened?" He turned back to Coren and patted Lythas' head soothingly as the boy whimpered.

The train of words the Doctor used had Coren confused. "Er...he shot a rifle, and the kick slammed the butt of it into his shoulder. He wasn't trained on how to hold the weapon properly. What do you mean, he has a natural regeneration ability?"

As Calloway opened his medical kit, he explained, "The Lashran can put themselves into a trance, which is rather like a coma. It speeds up the cellular regeneration rate in their bodies, enabling them to heal wounds much faster than Humans can. I don't know how it's accomplished...science hasn't progressed far enough to discover the secrets behind it. You'd better keep a sharp eye on the lad, Coren. If word gets out, some people might try to steal him for research."

When he noticed how wide Lythas' alien, green eyes became at that, the Doctor chuckled and patted his knee. "Not me, son. You can relax." The long needed syringe that Calloway had produced from his bag did nothing to reassure Lythas. The lad grabbed Coren's shirt and pulled on it, in a panic.

"Easy, Lythas," Said his master. "Dr. Calloway is just going to give you a shot to help the pain. It's not as bad as it might look." The frightened, bright eyes looked up at him pleadingly, as though begging him not to let this man push this monstrosity into his skin. "Shhh, Lythas. Be brave." Coren said in a tone that made Calloway look up at him sharply.

The physician had known Coren Darshaw's family for decades, and he hadn't heard the retired pirate speak in such a tender voice to anybody since his mother died. Perhaps he looked at Lythas as a son, then? No, the Lashran was too old for that. Calloway gave his old friend a shrewd glance as he filled the syringe with a sedative. There was definitely more between master and slave than met the eye, here.

Lythas went still, drawing strength from his master's cool gaze. He kept his eyes on Coren as Calloway injected the medicine into him, and the Lashran bit his lip and managed not to cry out in pain at the sharp sting in his arm. Calloway removed the needle and gently folded the lad's arm at the elbow, instructing him to keep pressure on it for a moment so that the puncture wouldn't bleed.

Coren watched as the magnificent green of Lythas' eyes slowly became nearly black with pupil. The Lashran's eyes became heavy lidded, and his lips slackened and parted.

"There now," Dr. Calloway said in satisfaction. That will let me work easier, and it should help him go into a healing trance. All I have to do is reset the bone and bind it." He gave Coren a grin. "You're actually lucky that the boy is a Lashran. Collarbones are one of the hardest breaks to heal, because a cast cannot be made for them. Most people would end up with a crooked one for the rest of their life, but I think your lad's going to be as good as new in a week, if my calculations are correct."

Coren somehow managed to hold in the sigh of relief that nearly escaped him. Lythas was going to be all right. He hadn't realized how worried he truly was until Calloway said that. "Now, just to warn you...he might not wake up for a few days. Don't let it bother you...his body functions will slow down, so you don't have to worry about him starving or such. Now, let's take a look at this gash on your chest."

Coren silently complied, his blue gaze unable to tear away from Lythas' beautiful, sleeping face as Calloway removed his shirt and examined him.

## *"Fate"*

### *Chapter 8*

Lythas came awake with a cry. He looked around him frantically, expecting to find bloodthirsty men in black rushing at him. There were none. He was in his room, and daylight streamed through his window. Sighing in relief, he touched his collarbone. It was completely healed. With a small grin, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got up. The Lashran staggered for a moment, and grabbed the bedpost. He should not have stood up so fast, he realized. Looking down at himself, he saw that he was dressed in the blue silk pajamas his master had bought for him. Who had dressed him? Maggie or Coren? At the thought that his master might have done it, he blushed. He really should concentrate on ridding himself of the crush he had on the strong weapons dealer.

Sighing, he left the room and went down the stairs. The lounge room was empty, but Lythas saw that his master had hung the portrait that he had drawn, and another smile found its way on the slave's delicate lips. "Master?" He called eagerly. He wanted to continue his reading and writing lessons. Perhaps Coren would take him out today? Briefly, he was annoyed. It was unfair that Maggie was free to come and go as she chose, yet he was kept on such a short leash. He knew in his heart it was due to over-protective urges his master felt, but it was so boring!

He went into the kitchen, still looking hopefully for the retired pirate. Maggie was in there, cleaning dishes. "Maggie...have you seen Lord Coren?" He questioned.

Apparently, he had managed to sneak up on her, for she shrieked in startlement and dropped a dish on the floor, shattering it. Putting her hand to her chest, she panted, "Lords O' flame, boy...you scared the wits outta me! I thought you were still laying in bed, and you move so quietly...shame on you!"

He checked a grin. "I am sorry. Let me help you clean that up." Any further nagging she might have felt like doing vanished at his elegant apology.

"Master Coren went to the Council today with that bear of a man that got into the ruckus with him. They're leveling charges against Mr. Bolringer for hiring men to come and bust up the master's shop. If they win, he'll be forced to pay Lord Coren a compensation fee, or in the worst case, he'll be run outta town." She said as she stepped aside for him to clean the mess that he had caused.

Lythas paused, staring at the shard of plate in his hand. His delicate lips turned up. "I hope they win." He said, before continuing his work. He didn't add that he also hoped the horrible merchant that had caused the trouble was run out of town. He wasn't comfortable with the fat man living anywhere near him. "Do you suppose...we could go shopping today? You and I?" He looked up at her hopefully.

Maggie gave him a sympathetic look. "No, Lythas. Master Coren left explicit instructions that neither one of us are to leave the house while this is settling down. I don't think he wants you outside without him, at all. Miss Charlotte is in the study, watching over things while he's gone."

Lythas' face fell. "Very well. Perhaps I can strike up a conversation with her, then." He put the broken pieces of the dish into the trash can and left the kitchen, not noticing the pitying look the other slave gave him.

Depression began to weigh heavily on his slim shoulders. Was his life always going to consist of hiding, running away, or being locked up? For a wild moment, he contemplated escape. His master was away, Charlotte probably didn't even know he was awake yet, and Maggie was busy with her house duties. He might actually make it out. His hand unconsciously drifted to the collar around his neck. It was seamless. It had been welded together perfectly. It would take a smithy to remove it, and going to one to ask was a foolish idea, indeed. They would just escort him back to his master's estate and report him.

"This collar...even if I manage to get out of the house and down the street, people would see it and know that I am a slave. Even if they don't, what could I do if I were attacked? I have no battle skills like my Master." He contemplated out loud as he paced the lounge room. It was useless. The only escape that offered any finality seemed to be death. He shivered. No, he couldn't kill himself. He wanted to live...even if it was as a slave.

Sighing heavily in defeat, he went down the hallway that led to the study. He remembered Charlotte from his first evening here...though vaguely. She was a young woman...roughly in her late twenties, with curly, chocolate brown hair and eyes. She was pretty, with fine-boned features, tanned skin and a curvaceous figure. He wondered if she and his master were lovers...or at least ex lovers.

Her head was bent over a parchment with some figures on it as he entered the study. He plopped down on the chair across from her, listlessly. Charlotte lifted her head, and when she saw that it was Lythas, she grinned. "Ah, recovered, are we? Coren's going to be happy to see that. And how is the precious lad feeling today?"

He blushed, for it was finally occurring to him that she fancied him. "Most improved, Mistress. Thank you for your concern."

Her grin broadened, and she chuckled softly. "'Mistress'. How adorable. I think I like that." She set aside the stylus she was writing with and got out of her chair. He watched her warily as she crossed the room and knelt in front of him. "You must get lonely, being cooped up in here all the time." There was sympathy in her eyes, but something else, too. Something that he could not identify.

"You're a right pretty lad," She whispered, and she practically crawled on top of him and began to kiss him. He tried to speak, but her mouth was muffling his words. "Don't be shy," She purred against his lips, "You just let Charlotte wash away some of that loneliness."

He couldn't believe how bold she was! The brazen woman's hand was creeping up his thigh! Poor Lythas was at a loss for what to do. She was a guest and friend of his master's. If he refused her advances, he might offend her, and therefore offend Coren. He hesitantly returned her kisses, afraid of what might happen if he asked her to stop. It could be worse, he thought. Instead of a pretty woman, he could be beneath that disgusting blob that his master was now fighting in Court. He flinched when she cupped his genitals through the silk and began to fondle him.

The young man was soft in her hands. Not willing to give up, and hoping it was merely nervous fear that kept him from being aroused, Charlotte reached into the pajama bottoms and gripped his penis. She pulled back and watched his delicate features as she gently began to stroke it. Lythas closed his eyes. The problem wasn't Charlotte...she was a lovely woman. The problem was that he felt no desire for her. Whether it was simply because she was not a man, or because she wasn't Coren, he did not know.

Despite his lack of interest in her, he felt his penis responding to her skilled hands. His lips parted, and he rested his head on the back of the chair. Her lips were smiling as they started to kiss his neck and nibble his ears. A soft sigh escaped his mouth. Her ministrations felt really good, and before long, he was fully engorged and throbbing. In the back of his mind, Lythas felt ashamed that his body would betray him so readily, yet he was thankful that he was not offending the woman.

"Mmmm...even your cock is pretty," She commented breathlessly. He opened his eyes and saw that she was staring at the erect, pink capped member that she stroked. Cock? Was that not the name for a male chicken? How odd, that she was nicknaming his penis after a bird. She must have noticed the puzzlement on his face, for she said, "What's the matter, Lythas? You look...worried."

He bit his lip and blushed. How could he tell her? He had already kissed her and allowed her to play with his private area...wasn't it too late?

Charlotte stopped petting the silken organ in her hand. "Lythas, you'd better tell me what the matter is." She ordered.

"It...it is not you, Mistress," He whispered. "The problem is...I...I do not desire women. M-Master Coren-"

His emerald eyes went wide with confusion as she laughed throatily. "Oh, I see! I should have known. Lads as pretty as you usually don't go for women. You've got a crush on Coren, haven't you?" She grinned at him as he turned bright red all over.

"N-n-no...it isn't what you think-" He began to explain, terrified that she would tell his master. Coren liked women...Lythas accepted that. He didn't want his master finding out that he was attracted to him...it might disgust him, and he might cast Lythas aside.

She silenced him with a quick kiss. "Don't worry, Cuteness. I won't tell him. Though, I think you might be surprised by his response if you did."

He stared at her, mouth agape. "What do you mean?"

Charlotte pulled her hand out of his pajama pants and stood up, putting her hands on her hips. "I mean that Coren had to step aside and let me bath you the night you first got here. He was as hard as a rock, by the time he left the bathroom. I think he probably returns your feelings, even if he doesn't know it."

Lythas lowered his eyes shyly. "Even if Master Coren finds me...attractive, I am sure it is not normal for him. To humans, we Lashran are very delicate. He might be confused by my looks."



She grinned. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Lythas. You look like an angel. I think maybe our dear Coren has always had these urges...he's just been able to deny it, up 'till he met you. I say you should crawl into bed with him one night." She winked, and he laughed in disbelief.

"Surely you don't mean that?" He said in disbelief.

She shrugged. "You'll never know if you don't try."

"Oh, I don't think that would be wise of me at all...I know nothing about seduction!"

A huge grin split her face. "Well then, Auntie Charlotte is just going to have to give you some lessons!"

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 9*

"Well now, the first order of business is to get you acquainted with Coren's likes and dislikes," Charlotte explained to Lythas. He felt acutely uncomfortable doing this; going behind his master's back and sneaking into his room with Charlotte certainly didn't feel right.

"Mistress Charlotte, I truly appreciate the effort that you wish to go through on my behalf, but I'm not so certain that this is a good idea," He said softly.

She waved a hand negligently. "Nonsense. If you want to be a good lover for him, you have to be prepared, aye?" She grinned as she opened one of the cabinets along the south wall of the massive bedroom.

"What is all of that for?" Questioned Lythas, curious in spite of himself. There were various coils of rope, oils and what appeared to be tools inside of the cabinet.

Charlotte grinned saucily. "My lad, Coren has always been a frisky one. I wanted you to see what you'd be getting yourself into, if you want to be...close to him. These are silk ropes...special made for the dominance games your master likes to play with his lovers."

Lythas swallowed. He had no idea. "Is this sort of behavior...common among humans?"

The woman considered the question. "Aye, I suppose it is. Not everyone has the money to buy these sort of toys, though...so you won't run into many that have a collection like this."

He peered into the cabinet and pointed out something that resembled a battening pin, only it had a glossy, white finish to it, and it was three inches long, and roughly two inches thick. "What is that?"

Charlotte studied him carefully as she said, "That's what's called a ring plug, by gentle folk. Most of the folks around here would call it an arse cork, however."

Lythas shook his raven locks out of his face and stared at her with puzzled emerald eyes. "I...I do not understand your words."

She picked the instrument up and turned to him, then slid her hand down his back and cupped his buttocks. Holding the ring plug before his startled, wide eyes, she said, "Coren likes to slip this inside of his lover's...ahem...neither regions. It excites him to leave it inside of them."

Lythas gave a startled gasp as she reached around with the thing and rubbed the rounded end of it against the cleft between his cheeks. His face turned bright red as he finally understood. "Does...does it hurt?" He said in a faint whisper.

Charlotte shrugged. "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't think women enjoy it as much as Coren thinks they do. We aren't really equipped to take pleasure out of that sort of penetration. You, however...my fine lad...I believe you might enjoy it immensely, once

you adjusted to it." She could see that he had no clue what she was talking about. Clearly, nobody had ever taught the lad about male and female anatomy. Poor thing probably didn't even know about that secret area inside of him that could give such pleasure.

"Why would it give me pleasure, yet give you discomfort?" He asked with wide-eyed innocence.

She gushed at how adorable he was. How bloody unfair, that he liked men! "Well darlin'...men have a...a sort of spot inside that area that's really sensitive. When pressure's put on this little gland, it makes you feel really good. Women have something like that, too, but ours is in the other entrance." She grinned as he averted his gaze in embarrassment.

"Oh, I see. So this arse thing you're holding can't be used in that other entrance?" He said. He bit his lip, embarrassed that he was talking about such things to a woman he barely knew, but he was a curious creature, and he always sought to learn new things.

Charlotte smirked. "I suppose so, but being as he typically uses it in the other one, I certainly wouldn't want it put anywhere else. It's not sanitary to do that, even though he washes it after each...ahem...encounter." The lad's face was so bright it was glowing like a flame, and she giggled. "Let's move on...here's an interesting little piece of work." She opened a small coffer and showed him a pair of silver balls, each one an inch in diameter.

"I am afraid to ask," He said with a tiny smile.

She laughed and kissed his smooth cheek. "These are bindwa balls. THESE are fun!"

He listened in disbelief as she told him how Coren enjoyed putting the spherical objects deeply inside of his lovers and leaving them there for a while. The things apparently had something inside of them that caused them to vibrate when they moved against each other...which happened a lot when someone bearing them moved around. Seeing the doubt on his fair features, she told him to hold out his palms.

He did so, and she placed them in his hands. "Now, push your hands together, like you're prayin', and tilt them forward and back a couple of times."

He furrowed his brows at her, and then did as she said. His lips parted in amazement, and he nearly dropped the balls to the floor. He could distinctly feel them hum in his hands like live things. "Ah, what does this accomplish, again?" He asked, handing them back to her.

"It just feels really nice. If you wear them for too long and move around too much, the little demons can have you climaxing over and over again." She winked at him. "Like I said, Coren likes to be in control, and part of that involves making his lovers lose control...see what I'm saying?"

Lythas lowered his gaze shyly. "I very much doubt it would take all that to make me lose control. I'm horribly excitable."

She put the bindwa balls away and gave him a look. "You say that like it's a bad thing, luv."

He chewed his lip. "It is. I cannot control my body's reactions, half of the time. The most obscure things make me...make me...you know?" His nearly reflective eyes stayed on the floor.

Actually, she did know, thanks to her brother Pete explaining some things about Lashran to her. "Here now, don't you start getting all embarrassed over the way you're made. From what I understand, that's not unusual for a Lashran."

He did not respond, and she wondered what she could say to cheer him up. Perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned his people...she probably made him homesick. "I'm sorry, luv. I opened my big mouth and made you think of your homeland. I'll bet you miss it."

She was surprised by the anger in those ethereal eyes as he raised them from the floor. She took a step back uncertainly, then realized the anger wasn't directed at her. "I could care less about my homeland," he said. The lovely music of his voice was distorted and flat...not the melodic, droning song she was used to hearing. "My people sold me to this life. I no longer care what happens to them."

"Oh, Lythas...come here," She said, holding her arms out. When he didn't move, she went to him and embraced him. He stood still and rigid for a moment, and then shuddered and returned the embrace, burying his face against her neck. "Talk to me," She commanded, rubbing his back soothingly. He broke down and told her everything, just as he had told Coren when his collarbone was broken. He didn't cry when he told his master, but he cried now. It felt good to have a female cradling him. It made him think of his mother, whom he could barely remember.

Charlotte held him for a long time, letting him have the cry he so desperately needed. She combed her fingers through his silken, black curls and kissed his cheek. With a final snuffle, he pulled away from her and wiped his eyes. "I am sorry...I've made a spectacle of myself," He whispered.

"No, you didn't. Quit punishing yourself for having feelings. If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, you just come to Charlotte, you hear?"

He gave her a small grin and nodded. "Likewise, Mistress Charlotte."

Any further bonding between the two would have to wait until later, for they heard the front door open, followed by Coren yelling, "Charlotte, Maggie, I'm home!"

Lythas gave Charlotte a panicked look. If his master caught them in his bedroom, he'd strap the Lashran for certain! The woman put a finger to her lips and closed the cabinet doors, then took his hand and led him out of the room and back to the study. They barely had time to seat themselves before Coren came around the corner from the opposite hallway. He stopped when he saw Lythas sitting on the couch, and a crooked smile graced his lips. "Well, isn't this a surprise," The weapons dealer said, heading straight towards the Lashran. "How goes the collarbone, lad? I didn't expect you to wake up so quickly. You've only been out for three days."

Lythas smiled as his heart skipped a beat. His master's shirt was opened casually, nearly to the navel, and the Lashran had to fight to keep his gaze from straying to the

tanned expanse of chest exposed. "I hardly remember the pain, Master. It is completely healed." He held still as Coren undid the first few buttons of his pajama top and pulled it open to look. The blue eyes were unusually warm as they flicked back to him after examining his neck area.

"That's a wonder, if I ever saw one," Coren commented, carefully refastening the buttons of the slave's shirt. "I'm glad you're on your feet again, lad." He patted the Lashran's shoulder, then turned to Charlotte. "I've good news and bad. Which do you want to hear first?"

Charlotte sighed. "May as well get the bad out of the way, luv."

"Alright then. I think the slimy bastard paid the judge off. We won the case, but he's only got to pay a restitution fee to me, for damaged equipment. They aren't driving him out or making him move his business to another part of the city."

Charlotte groaned. "That means you can expect more trouble, in the future."

Coren nodded. "Just so."

Lythas was distressed by this news. He truly despised that fat merchant now, and he felt a sense of danger yet to come. He kept his fears to himself, however.

"Well, what's the good news?" Charlotte said impatiently.

Coren shrugged. "The good news is that we won. It sort of fit in with the bad, I suppose."

She put her head in her hands and massaged her temples. "You men...all of you are insane!" She growled.

He chuckled. "Be careful, dear. I had intended to treat you and Pete to a night at the pub, in celebration. Keep it up, and I'll conveniently forget."

She pressed her lips together. Her eyes twinkled up at the ex-pirate. "Bring Lythas with us."

Lythas did a double take. What? Did he hear her correctly?

Coren glanced at the slave out the corner of his eye, and then he stroked his well-groomed beard in thought. "Hmmm. I suppose it wouldn't cause too much harm. I'll have to keep a sharp eye on him though the night, though. For his protection."

Lythas flushed. He really wished they wouldn't speak of him as though he weren't sitting right there! His master turned to him fully, and the Lashran willed himself not to flinch as he wondered if Coren had read his mind. "What do you think, Lad? Care to pound a few drinks back with us, and possibly watch Jack fall on his arse?"

"I w-would be honored, Sir," Lythas stammered.

Coren winked. "Perhaps we can find someone to give you some company for the night as well. I think you deserve a bit of a romp, after wounding yourself to save my hide. A lass or a lad...your choice." He expected to see embarrassment or bashful

excitement on the slave's expression. Instead, Lythas seemed disconcerted with the idea.

"Whatever you think is best, my Lord," The Lashran said softly, lowering his gaze. If Coren had turned around, he would have seen that Charlotte looked as though she wanted to throttle him. She stared at her tall, blond friend, then at the disappointed slave, and shook her head.

\*Coren...you bloody fool! \* She thought. When he turned back around to face her, she wiped the irritation off of her face and gave him a sweet smile. "I'll help the pretty lad pick out something to wear."

The weapons dealer grinned. "Don't make it too fancy. There's likely to be some rowdy behavior tonight, and I'd hate to see one of his more expensive outfits ruined." Charlotte rolled her eyes and took Lythas by the hand, guiding him out of the study so that they could go through his closet. Coren's eyes followed them, lingering on the slave, and he groaned as they left earshot. "Pull yourself together, man! The lad's too innocent for the likes of you!" He cursed himself as he sat down. He intended to get drunk enough tonight so that it would be easy to pretend the next lass he bedded was the beautiful young man he lusted after.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 10*

As Coren predicted, the Jade Tiger was busy, that night. It was the week's end, and the popular Tavern/Inn was full of Pirates, Merchants and Smugglers who came to relax and enjoy their profits after a week of hard work. Jack lead the way to a table that Coren had reserved for their party. People moved aside easily for the big man, making it easier for the other four to follow. Coren had even thoughtfully invited Maggie to come with, but the maidservant politely declined, having no head for drinking, herself. As he took his seat beside his master, Lythas began to wish he could have declined as well. Pete was staring at him in a way that made him uncomfortable, and the Lashran put his hands over his lap protectively, remembering how the auction dealer had spoken of having him gelded.

Charlotte, bless her soul, seemed to sense Lythas discomfort around her brother, and she thoughtfully slid into the bench on the other side of the slave so that he would not have to sit beside Pete. "He cleaned up real nice," Pete commented to Coren, eyeing Lythas thoughtfully.

The weapons dealer nodded. "Aye...as it was, the clothing they had him in when he was being put on the block was ill fitting, and he was filthy. He's got a small frame, but the lad is stronger than he looks. He smithed a throwing knife after watching me only once." Coren smiled at Lythas with pride, and the Lashran flushed in pleasure and unconsciously leaned closer to his master.

Pete grinned. "I'm right glad it's workin' out for ye, old mate." Then he began to lose patience. "What's a body got to do in this puke-hole to wet his lips?!" He hollered, loudly enough to make Lythas wince.

Maggie whispered into his ear, "Don't worry...my brother's mostly all bark and no bite. He's loud and obnoxious because he thinks it makes him look tougher."

A serving wench immediately hurried over to their table. It was clear that she moved quickly because she recognized Coren and Jack, rather than over Pete's shouted complaint. She was a comely young woman, if a bit on the thin side. She favored Jack with a sweet smile, then gave Coren a more flirtatious version. "What'll it be tonight, lads?" She questioned, "We've got roasted mutton, whole pheasant in wine and mushroom sauce, beef stew and crescent soup. Our drink specials tonight are half-off on Dragon's Breath and Maiden's Kisses, and two-for-one shots for the ladies." She gave Charlotte a small, respectful curtsy as she finished, and Charlotte nodded politely.

"What would you like, Lythas?" Coren said, putting his mouth close to the Lashran's ear so that he could hear over the background noise. He knew the Lashran was a vegetarian, so he added, "The Crescent soup has no meat in it, and is quite tasty, even if it is all vegetables. I believe it has string beans, cucumber and chickpeas in it."

Lythas shivered in spite of himself at the feel of his master's breath against his ear. "That sounds delightful, Master." He murmured back.

Coren ordered a bowl of the Crescent soup for his slave and a whole pheasant for himself. Jack ordered a leg of mutton and the beef stew, and Pete chose the same for himself. Charlotte declined any food, as she had eaten a late lunch. The serving wench repeated their order back to them, and then asked, "And, what will ye have as drinks to go with it?"

"Water will be fine for me-" Lythas started to say as the lass looked at him first.

"Bah! No you don't, lad!" Said Jack; "You're here to have a good time!"

Coren nodded, smiling at the wary expression on Lythas' face. "Jack's right. Let's start you off with a glass of red wine. You seem the type who would prefer it to the rougher drinks."

Jack snorted. "You'll never make a man outta him, nursing him with ladies drinks like that! You should get him ale! Or a Dragon's Breath!"

Coren looked doubtful, but he gave the Lashran an inquiring look and said, "Well, lad? What would you like to try first?"

Lythas bit his lip uncertainly. That second one that Jack had named sounded interesting, and he liked to draw pictures of Dragons. "I shall try the Dragon's Breath," He finally said. He wondered if that was a mistake, when Coren's lips turned up in a grin as though he found it funny.

"There you go, lad! That's the spirit!" Chuckled Jack, and the pirate reached across the table to give the Lashran a light slap on the arm. Lythas smiled shyly, then rolled his eyes when Jack looked away. What had he just set himself up for?

Everyone else decided to follow the slave's lead and order the same. "Don't try to drink it fast, when it comes out," Charlotte warned in a whisper to Lythas. "You might end up seeing your dinner in reverse, if you do!"

Their drinks came out before the dinner did, and Lythas stared in bewilderment as his was set before him. It was in a goblet, and he could not see what color the liquid was, for there was smoke lightly drifting over the surface of the drink. "How did they do this?" He questioned to his master.

Coren took a swallow of his drink, grimaced, and said, "They add a drop of what's called 'condensed shadow' to the brew. It causes that layer of mist over the top of it."

Lythas regarded the drink warily. "It sounds ominous...I do not think that it is wise to drink shadows."

Coren's lips twitched, and he cleared his throat to cover up a chuckle. "It's only a name, lad. Condensed shadow is really nothing more than a soluble mineral that dissolves in liquid and causes it to cool and form the fog."

Jack raised his goblet. "Cheers, lads (and Charlotte)! Here's to kicking the arses o' fools!"

The others raised their goblets and laughed in agreement, and Lythas hesitantly did the same. His emerald eyes went wide as he took a swallow of the cold drink and felt



it burn and freeze his esophagus alternately, as it went down. He coughed, blinking rapidly as his eyes teared up.

Coren patted him on the back solicitously. "Are you alright, lad? We can order something else for you, if this is too strong."

Lythas nodded. "No...it tastes...good, actually. It simply burned on the way down." He spoke honestly. The drink tasted of elderberries, with an undertone of some biting liquor that he could not identify. He was, however, careful to take smaller sips from then on.

Their meals came, and as they ate, some of the women in the bar took it to their heads to do a bit of a show. Lythas blushed as three tipsy lasses crawled onto one of the larger tables and began to dance to the music that a group of bards was playing. It wasn't so much that they were dancing on the table, but the way they were doing it. How anyone could gyrate their bodies and remove their clothing like that, in front of a crowd of people, was beyond him. The men cheered, and the women booed. Jack and Pete whistled and stood up, tossing coppers and silvers at the dancers.

Charlotte leaned closer to Lythas and said, "This is normal. It's how some lasses in this city make the extra money to get by."

Lythas frowned. Degrading yourself for another's pleasure, when you have a choice? "I find that sad," He said.

Coren looked at the slave with a bemused expression. "How so, Lythas?" He questioned.

The Lashran picked up the peppermint stick that came as a dessert with his meal, and he examined it thoughtfully. "Well, these women are free, aren't they? I mean, they aren't anyone's property?"

Coren shrugged. "That's true enough. How does that matter?"

Lythas lowered his lovely eyes. "Why display yourself as an object, rather than a person, if you have a choice in the matter?"

"Because it's sometimes difficult for a woman to make a living on her own in these times," Coren explained. "A lot of these lasses have children to feed. It is unfortunate, but some lads thoughtlessly father bastards and leave the women to deal with it on their own. This is a way for some of them to pull in the extra money to keep a roof over their heads." His blue eyes sought out Charlotte's brown ones, and he sighed.

Lythas caught the look. "Mistress Charlotte, you aren't in that situation, are you?" He questioned innocently.

She smiled and patted his knee. "Not anymore, luv. Coren and my brother helped me get back onto my feet. My little lads are well taken care of, and my business as a seamstress has picked up."

"How many children?" He wanted to know.

"Just the two. I doubt I can bear more. Both have different fathers. I've got my own house, my own money, and my own way of doing things now. Don't you worry." She was touched by his concern.

He smiled. "I am glad to hear that. It is good to know that situations can be changed."

Coren had stopped listening. He ordered another Dragon's Breath and stared into the misty cup as he contemplated. The words that his slave had said about having a choice in the matter suddenly troubled him. The weapons dealer had started to warm up to the idea of expanding his relationship with the Lashran, as the attraction he felt for Lythas was becoming a physical ache. The lad's latest words made him now think that it was a foolish idea to try to seduce him. Coren wouldn't find true satisfaction in making love with someone who simply submitted because they felt they had no choice. No matter how bad his cravings may get, the retired pirate vowed that he would not use his mastery over the young man to relieve himself.

He became angry, suddenly. Why in bloody hell was he thinking this way over a lad, anyway? He decided to stick with his original plan; get completely pissed and shag some random wench 'till he passed out. He turned to Lythas to ask if he wanted a refill, and froze. The Lashran was sucking on the end of his peppermint stick, his rosebud lips closed tightly around the end of it. Coren felt himself spring to hardness so fast that he groaned.

Lythas turned his emerald gaze to him questioningly and gave the stick a quick lick with the tip of his pink tongue before asking, "Did you say something, Master?"

Charlotte snickered behind her hand as she watched the golden haired man swallow and struggle to think of something to say. She had been watching both of them closely all night, and deduced that Lythas did not truly need lessons in seduction from her. The lad was purely sensual and yet, somehow he managed to be blissfully ignorant of the fact.

Lythas put the peppermint stick into his mouth again and sucked on it innocently as he waited for his master to reply. In his innocence, he had no idea what he was doing to Coren. He slowed the motions of his mouth as his master's blue eyes seem to grow hot, scalding him as they scanned up and down his form. Lythas slowly pulled the stick out of his mouth and tilted his head to the side. Was his master angry with him?

"I think we all need refills," Coren said hoarsely. His voice was disturbingly unsteady, and Lythas frowned. The retired pirate waved the serving wench over and ordered another round of Dragon's Breath, plus a shot of whiskey for himself. He noticed the admiring look the barmaid gave him, and he flashed his most charming smile. "I'd also like to buy a drink for you, lass," He said in a velvety voice. She gave him a coy smile, completely sold on the idea. The barmaids in this tavern were allowed to sit and have drinks with the customers who offered to buy, so long as they did not neglect their serving duties for longer than ten minutes at a time. She leaned over and whispered something in Coren's ear, putting her hand on his knee as she did so. The weapons dealer smiled as she sauntered away to get his order.

Lythas sighed. "Here it goes again," He muttered, unable to stop the jealousy that rose within him.

Charlotte heard him, and she cupped his head to pull his ear close to her mouth. "He's only doing that because he's randy for you, pretty lad. You nearly made him spill himself, sucking on that candy in front of him."

Lythas blushed hotly and gulped, turning to look at her in disbelief. "Please, don't tease me, Charlotte," He said, forgetting to tag on the 'Mistress' to her name.

She smiled, pleased that he was starting to speak to her on a first-name basis. "I'd not tease you about this, luv. I know what I'm talking about. You should try to get him alone, and make a move soon!"

The Lashran finished off his drink in a long swallow, wincing as it bit his throat. "I would not know where to begin," He said lamely.

Her berry stained lips curved into a wicked grin, and his eyes widened as she put her hand on his knee beneath the table, then slid it up his thigh to cup his genitals. "Start here," She purred, rubbing and pressing with her hand. "Exactly like I am doing."

He drew a shivering breath, feeling himself grow firm beneath her touch at the thought of doing this to Coren. "Is that not a bit...er...promiscuous to start off with?" He said breathlessly.

She chuckled as his eyes unfocused and closed. He may not like women, but he enjoyed her touch. Perhaps some day she could convince him to give her a romp...for friend's sake. "It might be, but I guarantee it'll get his attention." She nibbled the Lashran's ear.

"Charlotte, stop harassing the lad," Coren suddenly snapped, breaking the moment. "He doesn't like lasses, so stop drooling all over his ear."

Lythas' eyes popped open wide, and he shifted uncomfortably in embarrassment. Charlotte burst into laughter. "I was just having a little fun, dear. He's too pretty to let him go to waste."

Coren's expression was unreadable. Lythas kept his gaze lowered and said nothing, acutely aware of the silent battle of wills between his master and Charlotte. Were they arguing over him?

Charlotte said, "If you don't do something about it, I will, Coren. Lythas is going to be twenty-three in a couple of days, and he hasn't lost his virginity yet! That simply shouldn't be."

The Lashran slumped in his seat, wishing he could melt into a puddle on the floor, or disappear. This really was humiliating. The barmaid returned with the drinks, and Lythas was actually happy to see her, for it stopped the argument about him. "We will talk about this later," Promised Coren, glaring at Charlotte with cold eyes.

She wasn't phased in the least. "Fine by me."

Lythas grabbed his goblet as soon as it was set in front of him and took a long pull from it. He was beginning to feel lightheaded, and it no longer burned as much as it first did. He glared out the corner of his eye at the tart who was now sitting on Coren's lap, allowing the weapons dealer to lift her drink to her lips. He realized it

wasn't her fault, but he still felt unreasonable hatred for the girl. "I need to relieve myself," He said to his master.

Coren looked at him in confusion, and the Lashran refrained from rolling his eyes. "I need a piss," He said, remembering the terms these humans were so fond of using. He was rapidly getting fed up with his master's refusal to return his feelings.

Coren grinned. "Ah, you're picking up on our words fast, lad. Well, I suppose I can let you go to the privy without an escort. It's around the corner on the left, over there."

Lythas nodded and averted his gaze as he stood up. It was beginning to physically hurt him to see his master being kissed and caressed by other people, and he had no desire to watch that nameless wench touch what he desired the most. "Lythas, will you be alright?" Questioned Charlotte. All trace of humor and lust for him had vanished from her brown eyes, and she gazed at him sympathetically. She was an observant woman, that was certain.

"Yes, thank you. I shall be back swiftly," He answered. There was a strange ache in his chest as he made his way through the crowd towards the line of people waiting to use the toilet. He felt like crying. Stubbornly, he held the feelings at bay, not caring to examine them, for they hurt. He stepped into the line of the men's privy, hoping that it would move fast, for his bladder was aching. Why did he wait this long! At least he was no longer aroused...he didn't think he could handle the embarrassment of these people seeing the evidence of Charlotte's little suggestions.

Someone grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around, and he was suddenly facing the horrible, fat merchant that he despised so. Lythas tried to look as though he did not recognize the man, but Fatty saw that he did. "I'm surprised by your master, little one," The merchant said with a leer. His pudgy hands moved down to Lythas' waist. "You are even prettier cleaned up. You should have been mine."

Lythas couldn't stop the fear that leaked into his eyes. "My master is only a short distance away. You should not risk angering him further." He said. He shuddered inwardly as the man raised one hand to his face to touch his smooth skin. Fatty didn't seem concerned in the least. Either he was very foolish, or very desperate.

Without taking his eyes off of his prey, the merchant spoke to the two tall men behind him. "Why don't you two create a diversion, while I escort this delicious piece of ass to my boat, hmm?"

"Happy to, Mr. Bolringer," Said one of the thugs.

"I will not go with you," Lythas said indignantly. He heard something click, and his bright eyes opened wider as the merchant lifted his cloak to reveal a pistol musket.

The fat man smiled, keeping the weapon trained on the slave. "Oh, I think you will. Come along, pretty slave. You're going to make Gideon a happy man." The Lashran deduced that Fatty had just given him his first name, instead of talking about some other greedy merchant. Not that it mattered...he was now in a sorry situation, indeed.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 11*

Pete was the first one to notice the two rather tall men heading their way. They moved with a purpose, and their eyes were fixed on Coren. "Heads up, Mates," Said the auction worker.

Coren looked up and saw the trouble. "Charlotte, go to the ladies room," He said quietly, while at the same time giving the wench in his lap a pat on the rear. "You should leave the table, my dear," He said to her.

The two women left the table, and Coren stood up and nudged Jack. The big man turned and looked where his friend pointed. With a grin, he fingered his axe handle. "No weapons unless they draw first," Hissed Coren, "There's no reason to risk getting kicked out of the tavern over paranoia."

"Hey, Coren, isn't that your lad, being pushed out the door over there?" Said Pete, pointing to the other end of the tavern and the back door.

Coren swore. It was most certainly Lythas, and he was moving backwards, eyeing a fat man in front of him who seemed to be speaking to him. Gideon Bolringer. Coren knew beyond any doubt that Lythas was not leaving the Tavern willingly. The Lashran's bright, green gaze lifted and searched the Tavern as he slowly backed through the threshold. For one brief moment, slave and master's eyes met. To Coren's fevered imagination, it seemed like the Lashran's lips mouthed his name, and then he was gone from sight.

"Good evening, mates!" Said one of the tall men who approached the table. "We've got something to discuss with you." They blocked Coren's way as he began to move towards the door, and the weapons dealer could see several other men heading his way from various directions in the Tavern. So, Fatty was pulling one of these tricks again, was he?

"Out of my way. I've got business to attend to," Coren said with a glare. He was eye level with the thugs. They looked at each other with a grin.

"You ain't going nowhere," One of them said, and he swung his fist at Coren. The weapons dealer ducked and returned the punch, aiming for the ruffian's stomach. The man grunted and doubled over as the blow struck, and as the other man tried to hit Coren from behind, Pete smashed a chair over his head.

"Brawl!!!" Someone shouted happily, and chaos ensued. It seemed to be an unwritten rule among the pirates of Tariff that once furniture, glasses, or plates were broken over a human head, everybody had to join in. Barmaids shrieked as fights broke out everywhere. The lass who had been serving Coren's party broke a bottle over the head of one man who came too close to her, and then she kicked him in the rump while he was dazed from the blow.

Jack drove his meaty fist strait into one of Bolringer's men's nose, splattering it flat against his face. The man's eyes crossed and he passed out. Coren took a hit in the

stomach stoically, then returned it with one of his own. He yanked the man's shirt up and over his head, then kicked him in the skull. The weapons dealer gave a shrill whistle to Pete.

Pete looked at his friend and saw him point to the back door. He understood. Of the group, he was the only one thin and wiry enough to slip through the crowd in time to stop Bolringer. The auction worker's agility was in his favor as he ducked and dodged past embattled bodies. Charlotte was at the foot of the stairs leading to the inn portion of the building, and she hollered to her brother and lifted one side of her skirt. Beneath her garter belt was a loaded pistol musket. She tossed it to him, and he easily caught it and gave her a quick salute, before slipping out the door.

"That's it," Panted Coren as he took on yet another of Fatty's men. "I'm going to kill the bastard, this time."

Jack nodded in agreement. He was beginning to think Bolringer was insane, for him to continue causing trouble like this. "I was wondering how long it was gonna take for you to say that, lad!" The burly man said with a laugh. He lifted an unfortunate fellow over his head and tossed him into a table, breaking it in two with the impact. Some poor idiot, who wasn't even involved in the fight, broke a bottle over Jack's head in his reckless enjoyment of the brawl. The man paled and realized his error when Jack rose to his full height, turned around, and scowled at him. The mountainous pirate didn't even get the chance to hit the fellow, for he turned and ran from him immediately.

Coren danced aside as one of his assailants produced a dagger and stabbed at him with it. He grabbed the man's wrist and deftly twisted it, while at the same time slamming his palm into the man's chin. Once he had disarmed his opponent, the weapons dealer swung the man round and round, and Jack laughed. Coren released his opponent, making the man stumble into another tough who had been trying to make it over. The retired pirate did not smile, though it was a funny sight. His fury at Bolringer and his worry over Lythas was too great for him to enjoy the brawl.

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Lythas looked around for a way out of his predicament as he was made to turn around and walk facing forward. His green eyes searched the faces of people that he and Gideon passed, but they merely watched curiously or looked away without interest. The Lashran felt both the barrel of the pistol against his lower back and Gideon's hot, smelly breath against his neck. His captor wasn't taller than he was...he was shorter, in fact. The problem was that he was much bigger. Not all of his girth could be attributed to fat, as Lythas discovered when the man gripped his arm painfully and propelled him forward.

He was being herded to a rather extravagant looking boat that bobbed gently in the water by the sidewalk. The vessel barely met regulation size...it was probably only an inch away from being too large for the canals. Lythas could see that it had a cabin within it, and he swallowed as Gideon chuckled. "I think we've got time for a bit of fun, before we're off to my home," The merchant said, pinching the Lashran's buttocks painfully.

"You are mad," Lythas stated, stopping reluctantly at the boarding plank.

"Shut up and get in the cabin," Growled Gideon, poking him with the musket.

Lythas closed his eyes. Death would be preferable to a coupling with this man. When the Lashran's eyes flared open again, they seemed almost to glow. He turned around to face his captor and tried to grab the musket. Though he was faster than Fatty, he was not stronger, and he had no combat training to give him the leverage that he otherwise might have had.

Gideon swore in startlement, surprised by the slave's sudden move. He yanked his wrist out of the Lashran's grasp easily, however, and he brought the butt of his pistol down on the lad's temple, stunning him. The merchant shook his head and grabbed the slave in a headlock, pulling him forcibly onto the boat. "That was stupid, you little fool," He growled as Lythas moaned and tried to clear his head. "Now I'm gonna have to make it painful for you. You'll learn to respect me, one way or another."

He shoved the Lashran to his knees once they were in the cabin and closed the door. "Take your pants off," He ordered, keeping the weapon trained on the slave.

Lythas swayed dizzily, seeing spots. Warm blood dripped down the side of his head where the pistol butt had opened the skin. With shaking hands, the Lashran unlaced his trousers. He bit his lip and tried not to cry, but the treacherous tears came anyways. Gideon licked his lips. "Hurry it up, lad." He said impatiently. The Lashran slowly pulled his pants down and gave a soft sob of humiliation.

"Do not do this," He begged the merchant, raising his green eyes.

Unmoved, Fatty growled, "Get on your knees. Now!" His free hand was undoing his own breeches.

Lythas almost disobeyed, but he was too frightened of what the merchant would do to him if he defied him further. He shook all over as he knelt down on the rich carpet and did as his captor ordered. Heavy footsteps behind him signaled Gideon's approach, and Lythas closed his eyes and willed himself to become detached from his body. A pudgy hand caressed his round buttocks, then slapped the cheek, making him wince. He heard a thump as Fatty set the musket aside, but it was too far out of the Lashran's reach for him to do anything about it, and the man grabbed his hair painfully and yanked his head back.

"I was gonna use something to make this easier on you lad, but now you're gonna have to take me dry. This is gonna hurt like hell." He laughed cruelly as the Lashran whimpered in fear.

Lythas felt the man grasp his smooth hips, and he felt something smooth, round tipped and hard press against his sphincter. He clenched his teeth and curled his hands into fists, trying to brace himself for the pain to come.

"Get off o' him, ye slimy fuck," A familiar, rough voice said suddenly from the doorway. Lythas caught his breath hopefully. Earlier, he wouldn't have been upset if he never heard that voice again, but now it was the most blessed sound in Wyndrah.

Gideon turned his head and looked at the wiry man in the doorway, but he did not move from his position. "This is none of your affair!" He growled. Lythas gasped as the merchant pushed his hardness more firmly against him. He clenched up, trying to keep the man from penetrating.

"I mean it, Fatty. Get off 'o him before I put a hole in yer head." Pete said as he leveled a musket at the man. It was then that he saw the mad glint in the merchant's eye. Gideon didn't even bother reaching for his musket to defend himself. He started to thrust into Lythas, and the Lashran grunted and moved forward. Pete yelled and squeezed the trigger. There was a bang, the smell of smoke and gunpowder, and then silence.

Lythas cried out as Fatty's full weight fell against him and blood splattered the wall. The merchant twitched and fell to the side, leaving the trembling Lashran to look over his shoulder in bewilderment. He saw Pete running to him, and he collapsed and began to sob.

"Come on, lad...get yer pants up," Pete said as he knelt beside the slave. Lythas stared at the wall in shock, all color drained from his face. The auction worker looked carefully at the Lashran's buttocks, checking to see if any blood leaked from his entrance. Seeing none, he breathed a sigh of relief. If Fatty penetrated Lythas, he didn't get more than the tip in. Pete began to tug the Lashran's breeches up. "Ye've gotta help me here, Lashran," He grunted as he yanked at the garment, "I'll be hanged if they catch me on the scene. I don't have the rank to get away with murderin' a merchant, even if I did stop him from rapin' ye."

Lythas sniffled and dragged himself to his knees. Pete helped him stand up and told the Lashran to put his hand on his shoulder for balance. When Lythas wordlessly complied, he pulled the lad's pants up and hastily knotted the laces to keep them that way. "Come on...let's get the hell outta here," He said, pulling the Lashran's arm over his shoulder and slipping his own arm around Lythas' waist to support him. There was an explosion from outside, and the boat rocked.

"Wh-what was that?" asked Lythas.

"A distraction...thanks to me sister...come on!"

The laws were simple and lax in Tariff. If Pete was seen at or fleeing from the scene of the crime, he would be tried and possibly executed. Whether anyone saw him follow the merchant onto the boat was of no consequence. If he were a pirate or merchant himself, the death of Bolringer would have been overlooked entirely, but because he was below his station, he was subject to punishment...but only if someone saw him leaving the scene.

The air was smoky and smelled of gunpowder when they exited the ship, and there were cries of alarm on the sidewalk as Charlotte lit another barrel of explosives. The sky lit up, and nobody noticed Pete and Lythas slip away down the ally. Seeing that her brother and the Lashran were safely away from the scene of the crime, Charlotte squeezed her way through the throng of people crowding out of the Jade Tiger and looked for Coren.

Pete helped Lythas sit down on a box in the alleyway, and he wiped at the blood that had dripped into the slave's right eye. Lythas sat gingerly and kept his eyes on the ground, and Pete frowned. "Did he get in ye deep, lad?" He whispered. He did away with his usual gruff tone and spoke in his true voice, and Lythas looked up at him with vulnerable, wide eyes.

"I...I do not think so. It just burns a bit from him trying." The Lashran said in a quivering voice.



Pete sighed. "Well, yer master should be here any minute to take ye inside and look at ye. Try to be strong."

Lythas forced a tremulous smile. "Thank you, Master Pete. I...I was wrong about you."

Pete cleared his throat and looked away in embarrassment. He didn't want to know what Lythas had originally thought of him.

Coren came around the corner a moment later, followed by Jack and Charlotte. The weapons dealer went straight to Lythas and knelt in front of him. His blue eyes turned hot when he saw the blood matting the Lashran's hair and dripping down the side of his fair face. "I'll kill him," Coren promised in a deadly voice.

"Too late for that, mate," Said Pete, "I blew a hole in the putrid fuck's head. He was tryin' to mount your lad, here."

Lythas stared at the ground, shame making his cheeks burn. He was sullied, now. His master would never want him. Coren cupped the lad's chin and forced him to look at him. The retired pirate's pale eyes were unusually gentle as he whispered; "Did he penetrate you, Lythallendar? You can tell me. I have to know, so that I can see to easing the pain, if he did." He fought off cold fury at the thought and kept his voice and gaze soft, so that his Lashran would not feel intimidated.

Lythas parted his trembling lips to answer, but he couldn't force any words out. Tears spilled down his cheeks and made his eyes luminous. All he could manage was a tiny nod, and his shoulders shook as he began to weep. He couldn't speak to tell his master that the man had only gotten the very tip in, rather than the entire member. He felt Coren's arms surround him and pull him into a warm embrace. His master's mustache and beard tickled his forehead as Coren placed a soft kiss there.

"He only got far enough to stretch the entrance, best I can tell, Coren," Said Pete, feeling like he had let his friend down by showing up too late.

Coren wasn't listening. He rocked the sobbing Lashran and murmured nonsense to him. "Better get him into a room lad," Suggested Jack.

Coren nodded and slid his hands beneath Lythas' knees to lift him. The slave clung to the weapons dealer and wept against his shoulder as Coren carried him out of the alleyway and back to the Jade Tiger. The others followed helplessly, wishing there was something they could do. "I only wish you'd had the time to geld the Bastard, Pete," Said Charlotte softly to her brother. He nodded.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 12*

Coren rented a room and ordered a hip-bath to be brought up. He carried Lythas into the room, ignoring the curious stares other patrons gave him. Jack and the others went down to have a drink and give him the privacy he needed to examine the slave. Trevor, the owner, was quite used to brawls happening in his place. Fortunately, he made plenty of money, due to the popularity of his Tavern/Inn, so repairing damages wasn't difficult. Charlotte approached the owner anyways, and set a bag of coins on the table in front of him. "Coren sends his apologies," She said with a disarming smile. "He hopes this will be sufficient."

Trevor shook his head. "I told the man I didn't want no money from him! I saw the whole bloody mess...if anyone should be payin' for it, that fatass Bolringer should!"

Charlotte ducked her head, hiding her smile. He wouldn't have to worry about Fatty causing trouble in his establishment, anymore. To Trevor, she said, "Coren insists. You'd better take it."

Grumbling, the man did as he was advised. "Fine, then...but you're not payin' for any drinks for the rest of the night, and the room and board is free."

She nodded. "Fair enough."

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"There now, lad. How's that?" Coren questioned after he cleaned the cut on Lythas' temple.

"Much better, thank you." The Lashran replied. He would not look at him.

Coren touched the Lashran's smooth, white cheek with his fingertips. "Lythas, what happened is no fault of your own. I should have kept a closer vigilance on you, knowing that bastard was still wandering free and lusting after you. I should have known he was going to try a stunt like this."

The strange, gorgeous green eyes turned to him, and Coren felt his heart leap. "Do not blame yourself, Master. I should have fought back. I...I was too afraid, and I tried to take his weapon, but-"

Lythas became more upset with every word, and his breath began to hitch. Coren placed his finger against the Lashran's lips. "Hush. I intend to teach you how to defend yourself...with your bare hands, if need be. I'll hear no more self blame from you."

Lythas stared at him, and he was so vulnerable and beautiful that Coren groaned and clenched his fists. He turned away and said; "I shall leave the room while you bath. When you're finished, just knock three times on the door, so that I'll know you are dressed."

Coren was breathing heavily with a tangle of emotions that he could not sort out. He wanted to comfort Lythas. He wanted Gideon alive again, just so he could slowly kill him for doing this. He wanted to make certain that Lythas wasn't damaged from the assault. He wanted to kiss him...

Lythas stepped in front of the retired pirate as he began to make his way to the door. "Please, do not leave me alone, Master." He whispered. Those emerald orbs blinked as they filled with tears. Sparkling dew from the Lashran's weeping clung to his long lashes as he gazed up at Coren pleadingly.

Coren cleared his throat, his hands itching to touch Lythas. "Alright, lad. I'll stay in here while you clean yourself up and get into bed. I need to examine you for damage, anyhow."

Lythas gave him a broken smile that made him ache, and then the Lashran began to remove his clothing. Coren tried not to stare, but it was a difficult task. He found himself watching in fascination as the Lythas' elegant fingers pulled the laces open, baring his pale, smooth chest and tight little stomach. The weapons dealer swallowed as the white linen shirt fluttered to the floor. He quickly looked up at Lythas' face to see if the lad noticed him staring, but the Lashran's head was bowed and his eyes downcast as he concentrated on removing his clothing. His glossy black hair fell forward, partially hiding his face. After a moment, the slave hissed in frustration. He seemed to be having trouble untying the knot that Pete had tied in the laces of his breeches. The fact that his hands were still trembling from the trauma of his ordeal did not help matters.

Coren stepped closer to him and gently covered Lythas' hands with his own. "Here...let me get that for you," He said gruffly. Emerald fire flashed up at the weapons dealer from beneath lowered lashes as the lad rested his hands at his sides and allowed Coren to untangle the knot. Coren kept his gaze on the laces, trying to be business like as he worked at the knot. Beneath his busy fingers, the breeches began to slowly bulge. The weapons dealer stopped for a moment. Lythas was becoming erect before his eyes. He flashed a quick glance at the Lashran's face, and the lad was blushing and biting his lower lip. His eyes sought Coren's, and there was no mistaking the desire in their green depths.

Coren cleared his throat and went back to untangling the knot. His own hands weren't quite that steady anymore. He finally managed to get it undone, and he checked a sigh of relief and stepped back. "There you are, lad. I'll pour the hot water into the hip bath for you while you finish getting undressed."

"Thank you, Master." The Lashran's voice was both husky and somehow shy.

Coren grit his teeth and filled the hip bath, then stepped back and beckoned for Lythas to come to him. "I...shall examine you as you bath, Lythallendar. 'Twill be easier while your skin is...slick." Ye gods, was he blushing? What was this slave doing to his senses?!

Lythas approached obediently and stepped into the bath. He was completely, gloriously nude, and Coren could not avoid staring at the perfect, lithe body of his slave. The Lashran took the soap and sponge that his master handed to him, and then slowly began to lather his chest and arms. The soap continuously slipped from his numb, shaking fingers. He gave an apologetic, helpless look to his master, and Coren's lips turned up.

"It's alright, lad. I'll bathe you." The weapons dealer could hardly believe those words came from his own mouth. He distinctly remembered what happened the last time he had tried to bathe Lythas. His groin tightened, and he bit back a groan and picked up the sponge. Lythas blushed prettily and gazed up at Coren with an almost worshipful expression as the retired pirate lathered his belly and back. Feeling how tense the sleek muscles were beneath his hands, and he began to kneed the silken flesh softly. Lythas closed his eyes and sighed as his master's strong, work roughened hands stroked and massaged his back, shoulders and chest. It was all he could do to stop himself from falling into Coren's arms.

Coren shifted uncomfortably, trying to ease the throbbing, tight heat between his legs. He stared at the Lashran's parted lips, sternly reminding himself that kissing them so soon after the lad's near-rape would be folly. He methodically lathered and rinsed the slave's body...one delicious inch at a time. The weapons dealer groaned softly in spite of himself as his cleansing reached below Lythas' waistline. The penis was fully erect and visibly pulsing with his heartbeat. Coren stared at it, again wondering how a penis managed to look so bloody pretty. It was creamy, peach ivory in coloring, and the flushed tip was rosy. He heard the Lashran's breath quickening as he began to bath the swollen shaft and the heavy testicles beneath.

"Part your legs a bit, Lythas," Coren said huskily, "I'll be able to clean you more thoroughly that way." Lythas obeyed, a soft whimper escaping his lips as Coren resumed. Making up excuses to touch his slave with his bare hands, the retired pirate reasoned that soapy fingers could reach better than a sponge alone, so he lathered his hands up really well and set the sponge aside.

He soaped between the shaft and testicles, on each side of the genitals, and around the base of the penis. Unable to help himself, Coren gripped the length of the Lashran's member and squeezed, then gave it two long pulls before rubbing the dark pink cap at the tip. "Master," Lythas gasped, his legs trembling.

"Hush, Lythas," Coren whispered, "Put your hands on my shoulders if you need support. Just be still and let me bathe you." The Lashran did as he was told, his fingertips pressing into his master's shoulders as Coren thoroughly washed his genitals.

The weapons dealer forced himself to stop this farce; he was enjoying holding the throbbing member far too much. He made Lythas turn around so that he could clean his buttocks and check for injury. The smooth, white skin of the Lashran's hips was beginning to bruise, and Coren winced. There was no evidence of tearing around the small hole that the weapons dealer soaped down, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Lythas did jerk as he bathed it, however. "Does that hurt, lad?" Coren questioned.

Lythas chewed his lips and reluctantly shook his head. Puzzled, Coren questioned, "Why did you flinch, then? He pressed again, and the Lashran repeated the mild jerk.

"It...feels good, Master," The Lashran said, becoming pink all over.

Coren's eyebrows shot up, and then he smiled in spite of himself. He'd better stop this now, he decided. He quickly soaped the Lashran's legs, noting that there was very little hair on the smoothly muscled limbs. "Humph...your legs are almost as pretty as a lassie's," He commented. Coren winced...why did he say that?!

"Th-thank you, Master," Lythas said in a quiet voice.

Coren finished rinsing the tempting young body before him, and then he turned away and grabbed the folded towel off of the chair. "Here...you should be able to dry yourself off," He said.

Lythas took the towel from him and wondered if he had done something wrong. His master's tone was rather tense. The Lashran quickly patted his body dry, blushing as he thought of how wonderful Coren's strong, sure hand had felt on his more sensitive parts. He certainly could live with being bathed like that every night, he decided. He stepped out of the bath and finished drying himself, then draped the towel about his waist and gazed up at his master.

Coren's blue eyes were heated and intense, and Lythas shifted nervously. In his innocence, he did not know that the heat in his master's gaze was desire. "Master...are you angry with me?" Despite himself, Lythas began to cry. "I...I did try to escape that man. I truly did not want for him to...do what he did. I was just so frightened!"

Coren realized that Lythas was trying to explain himself, as if he had somehow failed his master by being unable to escape. It seemed as though the Lashran was more upset over the possibility of Coren being angry with him than the attempted rape, itself. Those big, beautiful eyes gathered with tears once again, and something broke within Coren. He couldn't hold off any longer. He gathered his slave's sparsely covered form into his arms and murmured, "I don't want to hear another word of self blame from you...ever again. You're beautiful, Lashran." And then he brought his mouth down to claim those soft, shapely lips that he had been fantasizing about since he first laid eyes on Lythas.

The Lashran put his arms around his master and parted his mouth to accept his tongue. He sucked on it gently, not caring whether or not he was supposed to. Coren groaned and cupped Lythas' bottom, pulling the young slave hard against him. Lythas rubbed himself wantonly against his master's hard body, whimpering as his erection rubbed against Coren's. "I've got to have you, Lythallendar," Coren rasped heavily. "I'm sorry, but I will not wait any longer. I promise to be as gentle as possible."

Lythas didn't protest in the slightest. In fact, knowing that his master was finally going to claim him made him bolder. He slid his hand into Coren's shirt and explored the muscular, lightly furred chest. Coren pulled the towel from the Lashran's body and lifted him into his arms. His mouth never left Lythas' lips as he carried him to the bed effortlessly. Tonight was the night...he was finally going to satisfy the burning need that was nearly driving him insane.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 13*

It should have felt strange, kissing and touching another male this way, but Coren was mildly surprised to find that it felt perfectly natural. He lay his slave on the bed and began to explore his body. When Lythas started to reach up and touch him, Coren murmured huskily, "No, sweetling. Just lie still and let me touch you."

Lythas obeyed and dropped his arms to his sides, breathing heavily as his master touched his chest and stomach. His green eyes were brilliant with desire as he stared up at the weapons dealer. Coren grit his teeth, determined to take it slow with the young Lashran. He could hardly stand the clash of feelings rushing through him. Lust, tenderness, fear and some other emotion that he dared not identify. He kissed the softly pouting mouth of his slave, tracing its petal-soft contours. A groan escaped him, and he had to take several deep breaths, for Lythas ran his tongue back and forth across the retired pirate's lips and whimpered softly.

"You're too bloody sensual for your own good, my lad," Growled Coren, and he deepened the kiss and gently squeezed the Lashran's hard, pink nipples. Lythas writhed beneath his touch and kissed Coren's throat. He still kept his hands obediently to the sides, though it was very difficult to do so. Coren's rough, large hands slowly worked their way down Lythas' sides and belly, then stroked his hips and thighs. The Lashran arched into his master's touch and sighed in pleasure. Coren watched the peach-alabaster skin break out in tiny droplets of sweat, making Lythas sparkle as if he was covered in tiny gemstones. "So beautiful," the weapons dealer whispered in awe.

He began to lick the salty moisture from his slave's skin, while caressing the insides of his pale thighs with his fingertips. Lythas trembled and gripped the sheets, calling out helplessly. "Master...oh...Coren...I want to touch you," Lythas gasped. In his passion, he did not even realize he had called his master by his given name.

Slightly amused and wholly aroused by the Lashran's eagerness, Coren nibbled the sensitive lips and murmured, "Not yet, Lythallendar. I've waited for too long to claim you. I shall let you know when you can touch me." He smiled as the green flared open and a soft groan of frustration passed Lythas' lips.

He knew what he wanted...he had envisioned it in his head enough that it was practically an engraved image. He wanted Lythas spread out beneath him, with his thighs around Coren's hips. He wanted to take the lad in the traditional position...mainly because it was the one that typically was used between a man and woman. He felt that some of the other positions he had in mind were a bit too risqué for the Lashran's first time. How should he proceed? By the look of the lad's swollen penis and the thick dew of prefluid that sparkled on the flushed head, it would not take long for Coren to make his slave orgasm. He was worried about harming Lythas, however. The sphincter was a tight muscle...normally unprepared for entry. He had played with other lovers before, of course, but only those who enjoyed that sort of thing and were loosened up from their experiences (he was still sometimes shocked by what the lasses in this city enjoyed).

Of course, he also knew that penetration of that area could be a very erotic and pleasurable experience, from what he himself had let certain women do to him. He

stared down at that beautiful organ and squeezed it, gently but firmly, in his hand. Lythas bucked his hips and tossed his head back, moaning Coren's name. "You forgot to say 'Master'," Coren teased the slave, pumping his hand up and down the length of the throbbing organ.

"I'm s-s-sorry, M-master," panted Lythas. His wide eyes were fogged with passion, but there was guilt in them as well.

Coren chuckled and kissed him softly. "I am only teasing you, fair one. When we're making love, I cannot expect you to remember to use formalities, can I?" His other hand reached beneath to tickle the Lashran's scrotum. Lythas closed his eyes and licked his lips, rotating his hips mindlessly and whimpering. Coren's hand moved up and down Lythas' penis in sure, steady strokes. He shushed the Lashran as he began to moan, and he enjoyed watching Lythas struggle to obey. "There's a good lad," He said huskily. He had to admit, it really wasn't fair of him to make his slave try to be quiet as well as still. It certainly was entertaining to watch him fight himself to comply, however.

Lythas bit his lips and arched his back, opening and closing his thighs helplessly as his master relentlessly fondled him. "M-master," He gasped, feeling a familiar, throbbing pressure begin to build in his groin.

"Shhh, Lythas. Be still, sweetling." Coren murmured. This time, the Lashran could not obey. It felt so heavenly, he couldn't stop himself from squirming and crying out. His dark brows furrowed and his lips parted as his penis tightened and spilled itself. Coren quickly cupped his other hand over the member to capture the slick, milky fluid that squirted out. As Lythas lay there catching his breath from the release, the weapons dealer used his body fluid to lubricate his opening.

Emerald eyes flicked to Coren questioningly. "I'm going to take you in a moment, my fair one," The retired pirate said raggedly. Coren practically tore his clothes off, wanting to prepare the Lashran for his entrance and plunge into him, before the slick fluid began to dry. Once he was naked, he nudged Lythas' thighs apart with his knee and slowly pressed one finger into the Lashran's tight entrance. Lythas stared up at him and bit his lip, but made no sound of protest. The Lashran's breath hitched as Coren pushed the finger in more deeply, then added another one. "You can touch me now if you like, Lythas." Coren said gently.

Pale, elegant hands immediately stroked Coren's inner thighs, and he wondered if telling Lythas he could touch him was a mistake. The lad simply had a way about him...he seemed to instinctively know how and where to touch Coren. "M-may I touch your...your..." Lythas blushed, unable to get the word out.

Coren smiled down at him covered one of the Lashran's slim hands with his free one, then guided it to his stiff length. Lythas gently rubbed it, almost tickling it with his fingertips. His green eyes were heavy-lidded and sensual. He licked his lips. "It is very large, Master. Do you eat a special diet to get it that way?"

The retired pirate widened his pale blue eyes, then burst into laughter. "No, Lythas. That is simply my size...the way I developed as I grew up. I doubt anything I ate had anything to do with it." The Lashran continued to fondle the organ with one hand, while the other explored the tightly knotted muscles of his master's abdomen and chest. Golden hair lightly covered Coren's chest in an appealing V pattern. It was not thick, nor was it wiry, as Lythas might have expected. He found that he quite liked the

feel of his master's chest hair. He clenched his teeth on a groan as Coren's probing fingers pushed deeper.

"The discomfort will pass, sweetling. Just try and relax yourself for me." Coren murmured huskily. He wasn't going to be able to let Lythas continue to fondle him for much longer. He wanted their lovemaking to last for a long time, and it might come to a disappointing end if the Lashran's clever fingers kept teasing the sensitive skin of Coren's cock. "That's enough, Lythas," He said firmly, pulling the Lashran's hand away from his penis. Lythas pouted prettily, and Coren kissed the petulant mouth and whispered, "I promise I shall let you touch it again later." Then he withdrew his fingers almost to the tips, and pushed them back in.

Lythas gasped and clutched his master's thighs. He whimpered in discomfort, but Coren continued to move his fingers in and out of the small entrance, stimulating the muscle and coaxing it to relax. He found the Lashran's prostate and smiled, then began to push against it as he thrust his fingers in a fourth time. Lythas jerked and opened his eyes in surprise, and Coren repeated the motion. "Th-that feels...so...strange," gasped the Lashran. He'd never felt anything quite like it, and he quieted and examined the sensation, parting his lips and rolling his eyes as his master continued to make the little shocks of pleasure go through him.

Coren kissed his slave hungrily as Lythas became hard again and tangled his fingers into the retired pirate's hair. He tested the lad's readiness by adding a third finger to the penetration, and was pleased when the Lashran moaned his name and bucked his hips. "It's time, Lythas," Coren breathed. He could barely contain his lust as he lifted the Lashran's knees and spread his thighs wider. Lythas stroked Coren's shoulders and back as the weapons dealer slowly lowered himself between his pale thighs. Coren kept his fingers pressed inside of Lythas until he was positioned correctly, and then he slowly withdrew them and pressed the tip of his cock against the prepared opening.

Lythas looked up at his master with a touch of fear in his eyes, and Coren stroked his soft, raven curls and whispered, "It will stretch you quite a bit at first, but I shall go slowly so that you can adjust." The Lashran swallowed and nodded, and Coren pushed forward and entered him, thrusting his organ in just past the head. He paused and gave Lythas a moment to adjust, noting the sweat that broke out on his slave's fair face and the grimace he made. So quiet! Most virgins receiving him for the first time would be crying by now, but the Lashran stoically accepted the pain and looked up at him trustingly.

The weapons dealer pushed himself deeper and groaned in spite of himself. By all the gods, Lythas felt too good to be real! A soft whimper escaped the Lashran's trembling lips, and Coren soothed him with a soft kiss and a whispered promise that the worst would be over soon. With that said, Coren pushed himself the rest of the way in and held still. The Lashran groaned loudly, unable to stop the exclamation of pain, and Coren grasped both of the slave's hands in his and held them to the sides. Lythas squeezed his master's supporting hands desperately and closed his eyes.

"Brave lad," Murmured Coren, kissing the soft face and neck. After a few moments, Lythas' grip on the weapons dealer's hands loosened a bit, and his breathing calmed. "Better?" questioned Coren. Lythas nodded and kissed him timidly on the lips, and the retired pirate began to move in and out of him. The Lashran's breath exploded in a rush and he cried Coren's name. The weapons dealer released Lythas' hands and propped himself on his elbows so that he could watch his slave's expressions as he



made love to him. He kept his movements slow and deep, allowing Lythas to feel every hard inch of him.

The Lashran gave quick little gasps each time his master's penis thrust into him and stimulated his prostate. "It feels good," he moaned, clutching Coren's bottom to urge him to greater speed.

Coren smiled down at him and kept his rhythm leisurely and gentle. "Patience, my pet," He said breathlessly. Then he dipped his head and began to lick and suck at the Lashran's nipples. His long, blond locks tickled the slave's chest and shoulders as his warm mouth drew on the already sensitive nipples. He closed his teeth gently around one of them and circled the hard nub with the tip of his tongue. As he did this he gave a hard thrust of his cock, and Lythas shouted hoarsely and spilled himself against his master's belly.

Coren kept his new lover off guard. He continued the gentle, slow pace, and just when Lythas began to relax, the retired pirate gave a quick, sharp thrust and caused him to cry out again. The Lashran caressed his master's flexing buttocks and panted as Coren exhibited his control and stamina. Amazingly, his organ again stirred, and Coren looked down at him in surprise. "It certainly doesn't take much to get you randy, does it lad?" He said huskily, smiling as the silken member stiffened quickly and pressed against his belly. Lythas did not answer. His eyes were closed in pleasure, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips. His hair was damp with perspiration, and Coren pulled a wayward strand of it out of his face.

Deciding he could take no more of this agonizing pace, Coren sped his thrusts up and hardened them. He lifted his slave's legs a bit to allow for deeper penetration, and he grunted in pleasure. Lythas clung to him desperately, undulating his hips and increasing the enjoyment of the act. Coren thrust harder and kissed Lythas demandingly, his breath becoming ragged and uneven. After several minutes of this hard rhythm, Lythas climaxed again, and Coren groaned and followed. The Lashran kissed his master softly and enjoyed the feel of his penis injecting him with warm liquid. "Mmm," Lythas sighed, kissing Coren's heaving chest.

Coren stared down at the Lashran and caressed his delicate face. "We've made quite a mess...or should I say, you have," The retired pirate teased. Those emerald eyes opened, and Lythas blushed as he realized how slick he and his master were, due to his orgasms. Coren chuckled and kissed him. "I take it as a compliment, Lythas. It means I've pleased you."

Lythas shyly looked up at him. "You worry over pleasing me, Master?"

Coren nodded. "I take no pleasure in sex when the other person isn't enjoying it as well."

He began to pull his sated penis out of the Lashran, but Lythas cupped his buttocks and whispered, "Please...leave it inside. Just for a little while? It...feels nice."

Hearing that made Coren begin to harden again, and the Lashran's eyes widened. Coren smiled and began to move within him again. "See what you've started?" He murmured.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 15*

Charlotte and Jack both continuously teased Lythas about the ill fitting, baggy clothes he wore as they took a ferry back to Coren's street. The Lashran took it all in stride, blushing as his master grinned at him. His emerald eyes became suddenly troubled as they drew closer to the street that Coren's house and shop were on. "Master? There seems to be smoke billowing into the air ahead...is that normal?"

Coren followed the slave's gaze and felt his heart sink. He swore violently and told the ferryman to let them off at the corner of the street. "Is your house on fire, lad?" questioned Jack. They could now hear shouts of alarm and an explosion.

"No...it's my shop. I'll bet that bastard Gideon set this up before Pete plugged him!" The weapons dealer growled in reply.

Pete grimaced. "He's just as much trouble dead as he was alive!"

Coren broke into a run, and the others quickly followed. Fear gripped the weapons dealer, for he had told Maggie to check on the shop this morning.... he could only pray that she wasn't inside the mess. He shoved people aside as he got closer to his shop, and the heat from the flames sucked all of the oxygen out of the air. "Stay back, lad! Let Jack and I handle this!" He snapped as Lythas tried to follow him inside. The burly pirate moved passed the shocked Lashran to help Coren get inside.

Lythas watched with wide eyes as his master and Jack went through the door, which was half hanging off of its hinges. Charlotte put her arm around his waist comfortingly, and Pete stood protectively on his other side. The Lashran chewed his lip and fought with himself, having started forward several times despite his master's warning. "Oh, please be careful," He said out loud as Coren and Jack vanished from sight.

"Maggie! Are you in here, woman?" Shouted Coren as he stumbled through the burning shop. Jack handed him a bandana, which he gratefully took to cover his mouth and nose. They split up and searched through the wreckage, both for the kindly housekeeper and for any clues leading to who had done this. After a while, Jack called out to Coren and motioned him over to the rope supply room. When Coren reached the area and looked, he felt bile rise within him. They had found Maggie...or, more precisely, what was left of her. "Black hells...only the most foul ruffians would do such a thing," coughed Coren in rage.

"I'm sorry, lad. She was a kindly woman, but there's nothing we can do for her now! We've got to get out of here, fast. The whole place is going to come down around our ears!" Jack rasped.

"One moment! I have to retrieve some documents from my office!" Ignoring the protests that his friend shouted, Coren ducked into a small corridor leading to the back room, where his business files were kept. As he suspected, the vandals who committed the crime had ransacked the office as well, but upon kneeling on the floor beneath his chair and prying at the boards with his boot knife, he found that they missed the hidden compartment. Coren smiled grimly as he pried the trapdoor open to reveal a small chest. It was a bit heavy, but not so much that he couldn't lift it on

his own. "Now, we can leave. They missed the most important thing." He explained to his confused friend.

Jack shrugged. "If you say so, Coren. Let's get the hell outta here now!" He clamped a big hand over the weapons dealer's shoulder and practically shoved him towards the exit. Coren barely managed to dodge a falling light fixture, and the smoke was making both him and Jack dizzy. By the time they emerged from the wreckage, they were both staggering and leaning on one another for support. Lythas and the others immediately ran to them and helped them move away.

"Master...did you find Maggie?" Lythas questioned as he wiped the soot from Coren's face. Though he dreaded the answer, he had to know. The woman was like a kindly aunt to him, and she often snuck cookies to him at night before he went to bed.

Coren looked into the slave's hopeful, luminous green eyes and couldn't bring himself to tell Lythas what he found. The Lashran seemed to see the answer in his gaze, for his face paled, and his lower lip quivered. "Oh...I see," Lythas whispered in a trembling voice. Coren handed the chest he was carrying to Jack and put his arm around Lythas. The Lashran leaned into his master's embrace and hid his face against Coren's shirt, not caring that it was singed and sooty. His shoulders shook as he silently wept.

Pete edged over to Jack. "Did she die in the fire?" He whispered, curious by the pallor of both the pirate and the weapons dealer's complexions.

Jack shook his head and grimaced. "It would have been kinder if she had," he whispered back. "It looked like they had their way with her, then cut her into pieces before they lit the place."

Charlotte heard, and she pressed her lips together and looked down, blinking rapidly. Sometimes, she really, truly despised men. They could be such vile, evil creatures! It was only men like her brother, Coren and Jack who redeemed the entire gender, in her eyes. She didn't count Lythas in that, because he wasn't even human, and from what she understood, the Lashran had no such stupidity problems with their males. She amended that if all of the men of his kind were like Lythas, she might have to take a trip to Nandar and get one for herself...one that liked women, of course.

"Are you going to report it?" She said to Coren, trying to take her mind off of the poor woman's demise.

He shook his head. "Wouldn't do me a damn bit of good. I shall contact my clients and advise them that I will be doing business from my own home, for the time being." He was stroking Lythas' raven hair and rocking the crying Lashran as he spoke, and Charlotte was at least thankful that he had Lythas safe with him. She might have truly been brokenhearted if the angelic lad had been in that building as well. Shuddering at the thought, she crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed them briskly, though it was as hot as Hades.

"Let's get back to my estate," Coren said, "I'll work out what's to be done tomorrow. The important paperwork was missed by whoever did this."

Pete snorted. "Had to have been Fatty that arranged it, old mate. Just put the pieces together!"

Coren nodded. "Oh, I agree that the evidence points to Bolringer. My point is, the man is dead, and I've got some other people to hunt down for this. He obviously wasn't here when it was done. I believe I shall have to do some research, and find out who's under his employment."

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Coren, Jack and Pete scoured the outside of the manor to be certain that no enemies were about, before waving Lythas and Charlotte to come forth. They checked every nook and cranny within for any sign of someone trying to break in, as well. Finding none, they relaxed somewhat. "It seems they were only after my business," Coren murmured as they relaxed in the study. He passed shots of whiskey around, but Lythas politely refused.

"I...do not feel very well, Master." The slave said quietly.

Coren gave Lythas a brief caress on the cheek, not caring if Pete and Jack caught on about the newfound relationship he had with the Lashran. "Why don't you change into your nightclothes and move some of your things into my bedroom, lad? You can lie down and rest, if you need to."

Jack did a double take and dropped his jaw, but Pete merely shrugged, having suspected something of the sort. The only thing that surprised the auction worker was the uncharacteristic tenderness that Coren was showing to the slave. He had never known the man to be that warm with anyone. Courteous and gentlemanly, yes...but Coren Darshaw had always before been an aloof fellow. Pete didn't quite know what to make of this new side of his old friend.

Lythas nodded and stood up, giving his master a thankful look before exiting the room. Once he was out of earshot, Jack hissed; "Coren, what the bloody bollocks is going on here? Have your tastes run to lads now?"

Coren gave Jack a look that told the pirate, in no uncertain terms; that he was still an incredibly dangerous man when angered...regardless of the care he showed to his young slave. Jack lowered his gaze to the glass of whiskey in his hand and muttered, "Just surprised me, is all. You've always been such a lady's man."

"Let us just say that in this particular case, I changed my mind. That's the end of it." Coren said firmly.

Jack grinned at him. "Can't say I rightly blame you, old friend. Your Lythas is about as pretty as a lass, and he's a charming little fellow, for certain." The pirate guffawed with mirth as Coren flushed, and Charlotte even managed a slight chuckle.

Coren sighed. "Sorry for the outburst, friend. I'm overprotective of the lad, after all that's happened. You know, the three of you are welcome to stay here for as long as you'd like. I could also use a bit of help getting my business back on the ground and finding the maggots that did this."

All three of them looked from each other to Coren and sighed. None of them could refuse, of course...and he knew it. The weapons dealer grinned and offered a toast. "To my new partners," he said.

"Whoa now...hold on a minute there, lad!" exclaimed Jack, "You know I'm gonna be putting out to sea in a month or so...I can help you while I'm here, but I've got my own 'business' to attend to!"

Coren chuckled. "That's going to be part of the partnership. You see, the papers for the Falcon are in this chest, along with some little known routes I've held onto. I thought you might be up for some further exploration, to expand my coffers and your own."

Charlotte choked on her drink, then wheezed, "Are you saying you're thinking of going back into the trade, Coren?!"

He shrugged. "Nothing so definite, my dear. I was hoping our good friend Jack would be interested in making use of the Falcon. No offence, old friend, but she's a far cry more extravagant than your Harpy is, and she's faster and better equipped. What do you say? We'll split the profits, and the Falcon is yours."

Jack stood in stunned silence for a moment, then grinned broadly. "You drive a hard bargain, Darshaw. What can I say? This old bear is sold on the idea!" He lifted his glass to the toast.

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Coren told the others to pick whatever bedrooms they pleased for their stay, and then he excused himself and hurried to his room. He worried about Lythas...the lad had taken Maggie's death very hard. He hesitated at the threshold of his bedroom door. What was coming over him lately? He was behaving like a lovesick fool! He told himself it was merely protective instincts that made him dote on Lythas as he did, but the moment he opened the door and looked down at the sleeping Lashran, his heart began to suffer from that peculiar ache he had come to associate with the sight of his slave.

Lythas had fallen asleep reading a book. It lay open in his hands, resting on his belly. The lamp was still going, and the yellow flame cast the Lashran's delicate, alabaster features in sharp relief. Long, unruly raven locks of hair had fallen halfway across Lythas' eyes, making him look so vulnerable and young that Coren swallowed the urge to scoop him into his arms and cradle him. The weapons dealer removed his own clothing and slid beneath the covers beside Lythas. The lad was fully clothed in his pajamas, but Coren didn't mind. Tonight wasn't a night to ravish the poor young man...what he needed was comfort.

Coren carefully removed the book from his slave's slackened grip and placed it on the nightstand beside the lamp, then turned the key to extinguish the flame. As the room darkened, Lythas stirred and opened his eyes. The moonlight made those large orbs seem almost cat-like as the Lashran gazed up at his master. "Was it...a fast death?" Lythas whispered. His expression was almost pleading.

Coren stroked the Lashran's face with his fingertips. "Aye...she did not suffer for long, Lythallendar." he lied.

Lythas slowly nodded, as if he could see through the fib for what it was, but was content to pretend that Maggie died quickly, as Coren said. The Lashran put his arm around Coren's neck and snuggled up to him. He was shivering. Coren rubbed his back soothingly and murmured silly nonsense that he usually reserved for children or frightened women. Sometimes, he reflected, Lythas was very much like a child. Full of innocence and caring. The weapons dealer prayed to whatever deity might be listening that Lythas would never lose that.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 16*

"Move your feet, lad. Don't forget to use that parrying dagger!" Coren instructed as he walked Lythas through another attack routine. It seemed that the Lashran was quick to learn trades, but that talent did not extend to weaponry...at least at first. Lythas was nervous and lacked confidence as his master moved his slender sword in rapid circles and found an opening. Coren shook his head and sighed. "You're watching the weapon too much, Lythas. You need to keep eye contact with your opponent, to better anticipate their moves, while hiding your own intentions. Focusing too much on the sword opens you up to other attacks."

Lythas pressed his lips together and nodded grimly. The sunlight that streaked through the window glinted off of his collar, and Coren found himself staring at it. Though it was a fairly pretty thing, made of bronze with gold inlay, the weapons dealer disliked the sight of it. Pretty or no, it still symbolized the Lashran's status as property, and not a person.

Lythas noticed his master staring at his neck with troubled blue eyes, and he reached his fingers up to check if he had somehow gotten nicked during the training session. He came into contact with the smooth, cool metal of his collar, and he went still. His collar...that was what Coren was staring at. The Lashran bit his lip and tilted his head to the side, gazing up at Coren with questioning green eyes. "I polish it every day, Master," he said, misunderstanding the distaste stamped on the weapons dealer's handsome features. Those steely blue eyes lifted to his, and the Lashran winced. If anything, that statement seemed to irritate Coren further. What had he done to irk his master so?

Coren swallowed. "You polish your mark of slavery like a Medal of Honor...why?"

Lythas frowned and worked his delicate lips. It was on the tip of his tongue to blurt, "Because I'm in love with you, and I do not think of it as a mark of slavery. I think of it as a symbol of you." He did not say that, however. He thought he might only be setting himself up for pain if he confessed his feelings to his master. Shrugging, he lowered his emerald gaze, and bitterness crept into his tone. "It is mine to bear for the rest of my life. Why shouldn't I at least keep it untarnished? There is no need in it becoming like its wearer." He truly didn't mean that, but the words came out of him from a well of sudden despair. Coren would never return his feelings. Lythas was his pet...he may be fond of the Lashran, but how could the man ever truly love him?

Coren dropped his sword and swore. The lad flinched as he crossed the room to stand in front of him. "Look at me," he commanded. Slowly, those large, bright eyes raised from the floor and looked up at him. There was a hint of defiance in that gaze, and the weapons dealer pinched his lips to stop the grin that tried to surface. So, Lythas' little speech was merely hot wind. For a moment, Coren had been frightened to the marrow of his bones that the Lashran had lost his spirit. "Are you trying to say that you are tarnished, little one?" he whispered, cupping the Lashran's chin. So soft...so smooth. He found himself running the pads of his fingers over the velvety skin.

Lythas parted his lips and trembled. "I...I do not know, Master," he murmured truthfully. He was clearly confused. He closed his eyes and nuzzled Coren's palm

instinctively, and the weapons dealer sucked in a sharp breath. Today's lesson was ending now, he decided. He took the sword and parrying dagger from his slave's hands and pulled Lythas tightly against him.

Lythas relaxed against Coren and sighed as his master's mouth covered his. He should put up some kind of protest, at least. Coren had promised to teach him swordplay. Unfortunately, the Lashran couldn't find the words to complain. His master's kisses were so intoxicating, and Coren barely had to touch Lythas to make him immediately aroused. The Lashran parted his lips and welcomed the intrusion of his master's tongue. He moaned against Coren's mouth as the weapons dealer slid his hand into the opening of the slave's shirt and caressed his chest. "I've waited for two long days, Lashran. I'm afraid I'm going to have to be a cad and demand satisfaction now," murmured Coren huskily.

Lythas kissed the hollow of Coren's throat, shivering at the thrill that went through him at those words. "You are welcome to be a cad with me, Master," he purred, nibbling the spot. Coren growled low in his throat and cupped the Lashran's rounded bottom, pulling their bodies hard up against one another. Bloody hell, he'd be lucky if he could even make it to the bedroom!

He lifted his slave into his arms, ignoring Lythas' soft protests that he might hurt his back. The lad weighed no more than a lass did and Coren had carried countless young women up the very stairs which he now moved towards. He kissed Lythas hard to silence his concerns.

The weapons dealer kicked the door to his bedroom open and quickly entered the room and laid Lythas down on the bed. After closing and locking the door (after all, though they were out for the day, Charlotte, Jack and Pete each had their own keys to his front door now. It wouldn't do for them to come in unexpectedly and get a nice eyeful), Coren turned back to Lythas with a wicked grin. He approached the bed, noting the Lashran's deep, uneven breathing rhythm. It was a fortunate thing for him that Lythas was so easily excited. He was a man of strong appetites. He glanced at the closet for a moment, where all of his toys resided. He wondered if it was too soon to introduce Lythas to one or two of them. The thought of it alone made him groan softly.

The weapons dealer hesitated and narrowed his eyes in thought. Lythas had followed his gaze to the closet, and he had swallowed hard and regarded Coren with a half frightened, half-excited expression. How could the Lashran know about the paraphernalia within the closet? Coren knew the answer immediately, of course. Charlotte. The bloody woman had probably described each and every article in there to the slave. "Shit," he muttered. Lythas was likely too frightened to try any of them, given Charlotte's powers of overdramatizing anything to do with sex. Little tart...he was going to have to give her a talking to.

"What's the matter, Master?" inquired Lythas, beginning to stand up in concern. He had never heard that strange word before, and he wasn't certain that it was a nice one. He had noticed Coren's subtle, thoughtful glance towards the cherry wood closet, but then his master had looked at him and spat that odd word out. Did the idea of using those things on him repulse Coren? The Lashran stood up and approached his master, resting his hands on his shoulders and staring up at him. "Have I done something wrong?" he whispered.



Coren shook himself out of it and caressed the Lashran's smooth cheek. "No Lythas...you did nothing wrong. I was merely debating on whether I should try something with you or not. I wouldn't want to frighten you, lad."

Lythas glanced towards the closet again, and though he seemed nervous, curiosity burned in his green gaze as well. Coren brushed his lips across the Lashran's and murmured, "Would you be willing to try something out, lad? You know, you do not have to do anything that you don't want to. Not in bed. Not with me."

The weapons dealer would probably never guess the depth of meaning that had to his slave as the Lashran embraced him around the waist and snuggled against him. Lythas hid his expression, for he feared that Coren would see the blatant love in his face if he looked up at him. "I want to please you, Coren," he whispered. He did not care that he forgot to use the formal title of "Master" in the sentence. During times like these, it mattered little.

Coren stroked the slave's soft, raven hair and murmured, "What would please me is to know that you come to my bed willingly, Lythallendar. Not out of a sense of duty."

Lythas looked up at him with passion glazed eyes and gently cupped the hard bulge between the weapons dealer's legs. Coren groaned softly as the elegant fingers massaged him through his breeches. "I'll always come to you willingly," Lythas purred, "Even if I am a bit afraid or uncertain. I trust you."

It was all the encouragement Coren needed. He removed the Lashran's clothing, kissing his soft, pale skin as it was revealed. Lythas sighed and wriggled against him, enticing the weapons dealer further. He didn't know which felt more full at the moment; his pants or his heart. Again, he wondered what this ethereal young slave was doing to his senses. Coren had never felt so out of control with a lover in his life. He had to fight with himself to take it slow and easy. Once Lythas was fully nude. Coren raked his lithe form with burning, sea foam eyes and said huskily, "Lie down on the bed, sweetling."

Lythas complied wordlessly and stared at his master with burning, emerald eyes. Coren opened the closet and gazed within, trying to decide what to use that wouldn't be too risqué for the lad. His eyes fastened on the little case containing the bindwa balls, and he smiled. That just might be the answer. He bit his lip on a groan at the thought of leaving them within the Lashran's tight heat for hours, and worshiping the slim body with his hands and mouth. Of course, he would need stimulation himself, but he was beginning to think that with Lythas, very little was required. The lad had a way of making Coren practically ejaculate in his pants just by kissing him. A soft moan from the bed caught the retired pirate's attention, and he turned to see what was the matter.

Lythas' skin was shiny with perspiration, and his hands gripped the bedsheets. His shapely lips were parted, and his brows were furrowed as if in pain. Coren's gaze slid down the slave's body and saw that his engorged, flushed penis was capped with dew. Puzzled, the weapons dealer wondered if the mere thought of having some of these instruments used on him was enough to make Lythas orgasm. Not likely, he amended...the lad had seemed quite apprehensive about the whole thing, though willing. "Lythas, are you alright?" he questioned, approaching the bed.

Lythas nodded, but he couldn't stop the groan of aching need that passed his lips. He blushed in embarrassment as he realized what was happening. His seasonals were

upon him, and it was all he could do not to grasp his own genitals to seek release from the throbbing, hot ache in them. "Tell me what the matter is, lad. You seem to be hurting." Coren's blond brows were drawn together in concern, and he set aside the small box he had selected and leaned over the Lashran. He stroked aside the dark bangs that had fallen over Lythas' forehead, and he hissed in surprise to feel how feverishly hot the slave's skin had become.

"It is nothing, Master. I will be fine," Lythas said through clenched teeth.

Coren shook his head. "I have to disagree with you there, Lythas. You seem to have come down with something, and quite suddenly. I shall fetch a doctor."

"No! Don't go anywhere, Master...I need you!" cried the Lashran in a nearly guttural tone.

The desperation in the Lashran's tone gave Coren pause. Lythas had never talked back to him before, and there was a definite quiver of pain edging the lad's tone. "Shhh, alright, Lythas. I won't leave. Tell me what the problem is." He kissed the slave softly on the lips, and Lythas surprised him by tangling his fingers into his hair almost painfully and whimpering against his mouth. The slave's hips rose and Coren gasped in startlement as Lythas' thick seed spurted out, all over the weapons dealer's shirt. "Ye gods, lad...you might have warned me," he said. Then he stopped. Though Lythas had just ejaculated, his penis was still throbbing and as hard as before.

"I am sorry," moaned the Lashran, pressing his hot cheek against Coren's shoulder. His slim fingers dug into his master's back, and he wantonly rubbed his body against the weapons dealer. He nipped at Coren's neck and gave a soft growl, startling his master further.

Well...here was a dark side of Lythas that Coren had never expected to see. The lad was half-mad with arousal; his mouth grinding against Coren's as he moaned low in his throat and undulated against him. It struck the retired pirate then, and he cursed his own stupidity. Pete had warned him about this. Coren firmly grasped Lythas' wrists and pinned them down, then weighted his writhing body with his own long frame. "Calm down, Lythallendar. I'm going to take care of you," he said commandingly, staring into the dilated green eyes.

Lythas looked up at his master in shame, his fair face turning red. He could not, however, control his own body's reactions to Coren's hard frame pressing down on it. The slave bit his lip and cried out, and Coren grimaced as his clothing was again bathed in the Lashran's seed. "I suppose I need to get out of these clothes and put a few towels beneath you, first," he said bemusedly.

The Lashran lowered his gaze, and Coren kissed him lightly. "It isn't your fault, Lythas. Don't feel bad about it. Just try to control yourself long enough for me to prepare you."

"I will try to behave, Master," panted the slave. His breath came shallow and fast as Coren got off of him and removed his clothes. The retired pirate smiled at Lythas as the Lashran stared at his tanned, muscled frame and groaned loudly. "Stop teasing me!" gasped Lythas.

Coren's eyes widened for a moment, and he let out a breathless guffaw of laughter. "Keep it up, Lythas...I'll have to strap you if you continue to mouth off." he was joking, of course...he knew his slave couldn't help it, but those green eyes bored into his with wicked hunger, and the retired pirate rocked back on his heels.

"Do it. Strap me." the Lashran hissed.

Oh dear...this was getting a bit out of hand. For the first time in his life, Coren was at a complete loss of what to do. He didn't want to hurt Lythas, but the lad was obviously delirious with pain. Lythas seemed to think rough sex would help him. Those large, green eyes narrowed in a predatory fashion, and the Lashran sat up with the intention of crossing the room to his master. "Don't move from that bed, Lythallendar," Coren warned ominously. He was unsettled by the look in the lad's eyes. If this was how all Lashran males behaved when they hit their seasonals, Coren wondered if rape was a common occurrence in their society.

Lythas looked as though he was going to defy Coren, but his master gave him a glare that jabbed through his fog of arousal and reached the practical side of his mind. Whimpering, Lythas crawled beneath the covers and bit the pillow.

Coren's gaze softened once the lad's face was hidden from view. Poor lad, he truly was suffering. Lythas was crying softly now...he could tell by the way the Lashran's shoulders were shaking. Whether it was from frustration, humiliation or pain...or a mixture of all three, Coren could not tell. The weapons dealer opened the door to the bathroom that connected to his chambers and took two large towels from the shelves. He had a feeling he might have to change them out more than once. He was going to have fun washing clothes over the next few days. With that thought, he grimaced. Ah well...there was no help for it, and he certainly didn't mind bedding Lythas over and over again, if that's what it was going to take to ease the Lashran's pain.

He approached the bed and gently told Lythas to roll aside for a moment. The Lashran obeyed, and Coren covered part of the bed with the towels, then told Lythas to settle himself on top of them. "I am sorry, Master," the Lashran whimpered, burying his face against Coren's lightly furred chest as he put his arms around him.

Coren kissed his slave's burning forehead and soothed, "I told you before...don't be sorry over something you have no control over. I can think of a thousand worse afflictions to deal with than mad arousal, my lad. Just be still and let me ease it for you." He watched the slave's wide eyes go glossy and half-lidded as he reached down and curled his fingers around Lythas' manhood. He kissed the Lashran's soft lips and murmured, "There now...does that help?"

Lythas groaned and nodded, pressing his lips against his master's throat and bucking his hips mindlessly. It did help, but he needed more. The world spun for the Lashran, and he had difficulty finding a breathing rhythm that gave him enough oxygen. Before he realized what he was saying, he blurted out something which he had only heard harlots and cutthroats say. "Fuck me, Coren."

Coren froze and looked at Lythas with an almost comical expression of shock on his face. The Lashran licked his lips and blushed. "Did...did I just say that?"

Coren bit back a laugh. His gentle lad must be desperate indeed to use words that he considered filthy. "I'm afraid you did, sweetling. Perhaps it's just what you need." his

grin became devilish. "You do know, I aim to please, Lythas." When the Lashran averted his gaze, Coren sobered. "I would never 'fuck' you, lad. You aren't some shanty harlot off the streets. What I will do is give you some hard, long loving...if that is your wish." The Lashran's burning gaze told him that was precisely what he wished.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 17*

Coren could barely control Lythas as the Lashran frantically kissed him and rubbed his lithe body against him. He considered the rope in his closet, then changed his mind. Tying the lad up when he was in this state might cause Lythas to inadvertently damage himself. The idea of restraints was for leisurely play, not to cause rope burns. He also considered the bindwa balls that he had gotten out. No, that wasn't a very good idea, either. If anything, they would make the slave even wilder with desire. Finally, he couldn't bare it anymore. The feel of the Lashran's lips on his neck and mouth, coupled with the way Lythas was rubbing his erection against him and crying out softly was simply too enticing to handle.

With a low growl, Coren rolled his slave onto his side and told him to be still. Lythas whimpered and tried to comply, but when his master's strong hand began to slide up and down his organ, the Lashran couldn't help but buck his hips and curl his hands into fists. Lythas cried out sharply and tilted his head back, pressing it against his master's shoulder as he orgasmed.

Coren nuzzled the damp, silken hair and murmured soothingly to the Lashran. The weapons dealer coated his own throbbing member with Lythas' seed, then prepared the lad's opening in the same way. He would have preferred to use oils, but he doubted that the slave would have held still long enough for him to fetch any of them from the closet. Interestingly enough, Lythallendar's entrance already seemed to be lubricated. Coren didn't stop to wonder about it, caught up in passion as he was.

"Easy, lad," Coren said huskily as he started to push his fingers in. The Lashran moaned and pushed back, impaling himself on his master's probing digits.

"I cannot wait," panted the Lashran desperately, wriggling his hips.

Coren swore softly in both arousal and amazement, and he positioned himself at the tight entrance to his slave's body. "This may hurt a bit, lad...I wanted to prepare you-

He didn't get a chance to finish the warning, for Lythas pushed backwards and down, taking Coren's warm, hard length into his body. The Lashran made a low moan of pain, but he continued to push back desperately. Coren gripped his slave's hips and thrust forward, entering him all the way up to the hilt. The retired pirate groaned in pleasure at the tight heat, so impassioned by his lover's eagerness that he no longer worried if he was harming him.

Lythas' emerald eyes shot open wide and his lips parted as his master began to take him in hard, sharp thrusts. He shouted Coren's name hoarsely and undulated against him. It was painful, but it was a good pain...he lacked the experience to define why this was so. All he knew was that he needed this. The Lashran bit his lip until it bled and closed his eyes tightly as Coren pumped his manhood in and out of him.

The weapons dealer nibbled Lythas' earlobe and reached between the Lashran's legs to fondle him as he took him. He started to regain control of himself and slow his thrusts, realizing how painful they must be to the delicate slave. Lythas growled at him to move the way he was before, and Coren nearly stopped in amazement. "I'm

not going to hurt you, lad...not even if you want me to," The weapons dealer said firmly.

"Please," sobbed the Lashran through gritted teeth, trying to push back against his master. Coren held his hips still in a firm grip and adjusted the angle and rhythm of his thrusts. Lythas made a small, helpless sound and trembled as the sensation washed over him. "Oh, master," he said breathlessly.

Coren smiled and purred in his throat once the Lashran calmed a bit and stopped fighting him. "There now," he whispered shakenly into his slave's ear. "That's better, isn't it?" He pulled Lythas' dampened locks of raven hair away from his neck and kissed the tender skin lovingly. Lythas gasped in pleasure and slowly rotated his hips, and Coren felt the Lashran's penis jerk the moment he curled his fingers around it. "It's alright, sweetling...just let it happen," he murmured when Lythas bit his lip and whimpered.

The slave's breath left his body in a rush and he climaxed. Coren briefly regretted taking this position to make love to Lythas. He couldn't watch the expressions play across his slave's angelic features, this way. He settled for kissing the Lashran's creamy alabaster skin. His rough tongue tasted the slightly salty curve of the slave's shoulder, while his large hand continued to squeeze Lythas' pulsing erection. "You're too damned beautiful for your own good," Coren groaned, fighting an impending orgasm.

Lythas gave a few short, quick pants and moaned Coren's name, and the weapons dealer growled softly in response. Coren found himself fascinated with the feel of Lythas' hard cock bucking in his grip as it again released its fluids. The retired pirate grunted and held himself still for a moment, breathing heavily.

"Why...did you stop?" Lythas questioned raggedly.

Coren barked a hoarse laugh and gently bit the Lashran's earlobe, making him gasp. "I'm trying to pace myself, lad. I can't...keep up with you, and it'll take me...a while to become...hard again once I-" He couldn't finish the sentence, for the Lashran wriggled against him, and he lost control of himself and thrust hard and deep into the lad. "Gods, Lythas!" he growled, feeling lightheaded from the force of his release.

Lythas smiled and licked his lips as he felt his master's warm seed spill into him. "It is...so gratifying to hear you...make those sounds, Coren," he panted. He twisted around halfway to look up at his master with a pleased smile.

Coren shook his head and grinned, kissing Lythas' sweet mouth lingeringly. "You're going to be the death of me," he rasped. He noticed that the discomfort was returning to the Lashran's face, and he furrowed his brow and tried to think of something he could do. He rolled the slave onto his back and continued to pump his hand up and down the stiff length of his pearly shaft. Lythas undulated his hips and closed his strange, lovely eyes in pleasure.

"Do you feel better now, lad?" questioned Coren dubiously.

The long lashed eyes opened and Lythas stared up at him with a dazed expression. "A bit, master...the ache is no longer driving me mad, but it is still quite strong."

Coren had already deduced that the greatest form of relief was given by putting pressure on the Lashran's prostate area, so he came up with a solution. Kissing the Lashran lingeringly, he said, "Wait here. I am going to get something out of my closet that should help."

Lythas' breath began to come out in quick, short pants again, and he clenched his fists. Coren brushed a hand across the slave's forehead soothingly before moving to the closet. When he got what he wanted and turned around, the Lashran's expression was wary. Lythas recognized the smooth object in his master's hand, and he wasn't certain that he wanted it inside of him, despite how much he was suffering at the moment.

"Don't look so alarmed, lad. This is a ring plug...silly as the name sounds. I'll insert it into you, and it will keep pressure on your prostate. I think it will help ease your pain." Coren said.

Lythas stared at his master wordlessly, thinking he would much rather have the weapons dealer's warm manhood inside of him than a cold instrument. He licked his lips, staring at Coren's long muscled frame as his master approached the bed. "Could we not simply...make love again?" he asked through gritted teeth. He winced as a particularly painful throb stabbed through his groin.

Coren smiled at him. "You know I'd love to have you again, sweetling. I simply cannot do it so soon. I promise I shall make love to you again when I recover." His tone said that he expected no arguments, and he parted the Lashran's creamy thighs and stroked the insides of them with one hand. "Just relax, Lythas," he said.

The Lashran blew a sigh and stared up at the ceiling as his master gently probed his sore nether region with the cool tip of the phallic device. Lythas whimpered in spite of himself as Coren slowly and firmly pushed the plug into his body, then gasped when it hit that sensitive spot deep within him. His eyes closed of their own accord and he drew a ragged breath. It felt surprisingly good...it warmed quickly within him, and he found himself moaning softly as his master held it deeply inside of him and kissed his lips.

"How's that, lad?" questioned Coren. He could see the answer to his question on the beatific change that came over the slave's face.

Lythas slowly opened his eyes and looked up at Coren, then nodded slightly. He gave a breathless shout when the weapons dealer withdrew the phallus, then pushed it in again. Coren's callused hand was again stroking the Lashran's member. Lythas tossed his head and panted as he felt another orgasm building within him.

Coren lay down beside his slave and kissed his jaw and cheek as he continued his stimulation. He stared in awe at the Lashran's perfect beauty as the youthful body writhed and undulated beside him. "'Tis a good thing that I cannot keep up with you, Lythallendar," he commented huskily, "If I did, I think we might both starve to death, bedding each other until our bodies expired." He couldn't even bring himself to chuckle at the tempting image. It wouldn't be an unpleasant way to go, that was for certain.

He felt himself hardening again, and he slipped the device out of Lythas' body and moved on top of the slave, kissing him hungrily. Lythas wrapped his legs around Coren's waist and cupped his buttocks encouragingly, wriggling his hips a bit. The

weapons dealer entered him in one smooth, swift stroke, and Lythas hollered incoherently and clung to him.

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"Honeys, we're home!" called Charlotte as she opened the door. She wasn't truly surprised to find the main part of the large house empty.

Pete struggled in behind her, his arms laden with bags that contained everything from paperwork to groceries. He and his sister had agreed to retrieve some of Coren's old smuggling documents from the Warf, which in itself hadn't been an easy task. "Old mate's gonna owe us bigtime for this," he grumbled as he wobbled to the study.

Charlotte frowned. "Where could he be at this time of the day? He said he was going to be giving Lythas fencing lessons, and then he planned on going over this junk we've retrieved for him!"

Pete shrugged. "The auctions, maybe? He could be lookin' for another slave to fill in Maggie's spot."

Charlotte gave her brother a disgusted look. "No, I don't think so. Unlike some roughnecks I know, Coren has a little bit of class. He wouldn't be looking for a new housekeeper so soon."

They both heard a series of muffled bangs and moans coming from one of the rooms upstairs, and Charlotte grinned. She had a feeling that she knew where the two of them had gotten off to, now.

Pete, however, was totally ignorant. He whipped his musket out of the holder connected to his belt and murmured, "Could be a break in...I'd better go check it out."

Charlotte put a hand on his arm to stay him. "Shhh...listen carefully," she said.

Pete sighed in annoyance and did as she asked, cocking his head to one side. After a moment of listening, both he and his sister could detect words within the moans and guttural cries. Pete turned bright red when Lythas' musical voice distinctly groaned something about not stopping, followed by Coren's name. "I didn't wanna hear that," The auction worker said with a grimace. Charlotte merely laughed.



## *"Fate"*

### *Part 18*

Charlotte proved to be a saint for Coren and Lythas. In her open-minded understanding, she caught Coren in the corridor while he was taking a break from his insatiable slave's appetites. The man looked completely worn out. "Not one word, lass. He's in his seasonals," Coren muttered as she smirked at him.

"Oh, you won't hear a peep from me, love. I just figured you could use some clean sheets," she said as she handed the folded linen to him.

Coren blew a sigh and leaned against the wall, closing his eyes. "He's finally passed out from exhaustion. Ye gods, Charlotte...I never thought I'd meet my match, but Lythas has drained me dry!"

She burst into laughter at the thought and squeezed Coren's shoulder fondly. "Well, if you need someone to take over for a while, you know I'm ever so willing!"

Coren raised his eyebrows, and she faltered. Was he taking her seriously? She had meant it as a joke, of course, but she could practically see the gears turning in his head. "Actually, that isn't a half bad idea, love. He is asleep for the moment, but I doubt it will last for long, and I may not be able to keep up with him. He is quite fond of you as well....hmmm." he stroked his short, well trimmed beard in thought and gazed at her with tired blue eyes.

Charlotte opened and closed her mouth and tried to think of something to say. She had become extremely interested in Lashran physiology since meeting Lythas, and she had borrowed several books from Dr. Calloway on the subject. Not that she wouldn't love to help, but she had learned something in her studies that not only convinced her it would be useless for Lythas to couple with her, but Coren might go over the edge if he knew the truth about his young slave. "I...but Coren...you know Lythas only likes men! I don't have the right parts to satisfy the lad!" Speaking of the "lad", she intended to have a talk with him once his head cleared. Knowing Coren as she did, she understood Lythas' fear of telling the weapons dealer the truth about his anatomy, but she felt in her heart that it was best for both of them if the Lashran came clean. Before there was an accident. She still wanted to know about Lythas' "mother" and how such a thing happened.

Coren shrugged and yawned hugely, then said; "I know Lythas is only interested in males, but trust me...in the state he is in, I think he'd make an exception for his 'dear Charlotte', as he calls you. I don't think that Lythas is actively trying to be sexual...he is simply trying to find relief. Due to that, I really don't think it would be a half-bad idea for you to lend a hand in it...so to speak." he grinned as color spread across her cheeks. "My, is Charlotte the Harlot blushing?" he said teasingly, referring to one of the nicknames he used to give her when they were younger and having an argument.

She put her hands on her hips and glared up at him, pursing her lips. "Is Coren the Cutthroat losing his spunk?"

He laughed and put his arm around her. "In this case, I think I just might be. As sinfully desirable as the lad is, I truly feel drained. How bloody long is this 'seasonal' thing going to last, anyways?"

He hadn't directed the question at her, exactly. It had been a general question. She surprised him by saying, "Normally, it stops in about forty-eight hours. Methinks you've got at least another full day to put up with shagging your pretty lad endlessly. Get used to it, bucko."

Coren groaned and rested his head on her shoulder, which she stroked soothingly as she chuckled. "If you think I can do anything for the lad, I'll be happy to try. I suppose I've made no secret of the fact that I fancy him, after all." she murmured.

Coren nodded and gestured towards his bedroom door extravagantly. "The stage is yours. I am going into one of the spare rooms to get some rest while I may." He gave her a kiss on the cheek before handing the linens back to her and making his exit.

Sighing, Charlotte entered the bedroom and padded over to where Lythas lay in an exhausted stupor. She noted that there actually was little need to change the bedding itself, for Coren had used his head and covered nearly the entire bed with towels. He had apparently placed fresh ones beneath the Lashran before leaving the room. She grimaced at the pile of soiled towels in the corner of the room. That was going to be a fun washload. Coren could bloody well do it himself!

She set the linens on the chair and approached the bed quietly. As she stared down at the sleeping Lashran, she couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. Even with dark circles ringing those long lashed eyes, and the disarrayed state of his tumbling raven locks, he was beautiful. Any woman would give much to stay pretty at all times, the way Lythas effortlessly managed to. Sighing, she removed most of her clothes, until she was only in her garters and bodice. Then she slid onto the bed beside Lythas and admired him while he slept. His body was actually quite masculine, though the smooth muscles weren't bulging as Coren's did. She caressed his pouting lower lip with her fingertips and couldn't get over how strange it was, knowing the truth about him. One could not guess it by looking at him, too pretty face or not.

His eyes opened and blinked, then focused on her. "Hullo, Charlotte," he whispered. Seemingly without thinking about it, he put his arm around her and snuggled against her. "Oh...you aren't wearing much," he said suddenly as their flesh made contact. Those emerald orbs were slightly puzzled, while at the same time, curious. They roamed her form and he blushed. "W-where is my master?" he questioned in an oddly squeaky voice.

She rubbed his back and kissed him softly on the lips. "You wore him out, love. I'm here to watch over you while he gets some much needed rest." she grinned impishly at him as he lowered his gaze bashfully and bit his lip.

"Oh. I feel so badly about it...but I really could not help myself," he murmured in a shame filled tone of voice.

She cupped his chin and forced his gaze to meet hers. "Don't you feel bad about what can't be helped, darlin. How are you feeling now? That's what's most important."

He frowned a bit and sighed. "It still aches, though it has lessened. I can think clearly now, at least."

Charlotte gave him a thoughtful look, and wondered if now was a good time to tell him that she knew his secret. It needed to be brought out into the open at some

point, and she had to admit, she was extremely curious about his personal background. Testing the waters, she said; "Tell me, dear...when you and Coren are intimate, does he use a lubricant on you?" She instinctively knew that it was the weapons dealer who entered the slave, and not the other way around. Their personalities spoke volumes.

Lythas flushed and averted his eyes. "Well, I am certain that he means to, but we've never gotten around to it. He...uses my fluids to prepare my body for him. It is my fault, for being so impatient." he seemed a bit concerned about the whole thing, though it was clear that he was unwilling to go into details.

She closed her eyes and groaned inwardly. So, Coren used the Lashran's orgasm fluids to lubricate him...that was not good. Lythas gazed at her with an expression of faint alarm growing on his lovely features. "Why do you ask me this, Charlotte? What difference does it make?"

She opened her eyes and regarded him sternly. "Darling, I think that you know what could happen as a result of that. I've done some reading on your kind, you see. Wasn't easy to find the books...I finally had to ask Dr. Calloway if he had some that I could look at. I know all about how you Lashran reproduce, love."

The slave's eyes went round, and his lips parted. All color drained from his face, and he shrank away from her in fear. "Oh...please, do not tell my master! He...he might despise me...think of me as a...a...freak? You humans are so very different from us, he might not understand!"

She pressed her fingers against his mouth to shush him. "Easy lad. Don't be so fast to fire your cannon. I never said I was going to tell him, but I think that you should! It's better for him to find out sooner, because you're going to have a hell of a time explaining why your belly's getting round, if the worst happens. He's going to eventually find out, the way the two of you go at it. Would you rather him discover the truth after you've had his baby, or would you rather give him the chance to understand, first?"

Tears gathered in the Lashran's eyes, and she felt horrid. "Oh, Lythas...please don't cry. You are no freak! You're just different from us, do you hear me? It's just as natural for you as it is for a human woman! What I would like to know is, what is the real reason you were kicked out by your folk? Who was this woman whom you said was your mother? Please, precious. You've got to quell my curiosity."

He calmed somewhat and stared at her for a long time, then nodded slowly and decisively. "Very well, Charlotte. I shall tell you, since you already know so much. I pray that when I am finished, you will not tell Coren." When she nodded, he continued, "I appear a bit different from the rest of my kind because I am a half breed. My mother was a human woman, whom my father found upon our shores amidst some flotsam and jetsam of a shipwreck. At the time, the elders saw no harm in caring for her until she was well enough to travel to the lands of her own people. None of them knew that interbreeding was possible for us. As you know, there aren't any women of our kind. Some Lashran produce seed, as human males do, and others, like myself, produce eggs and have a womb within us which is very similar to yours."

He shyly placed his hand on her belly as he said this, and she nodded, fascinated. "But, you ARE male, aren't you? I mean, in every other sense of the word?"

Lythas nodded. "Yes. I simply have a spare part, so to speak. Well, my father was a Sire...a seed producing Lashran. He grew close to my mother as he nursed her to health, and eventually, they ignored their species differences and became lovers. I was conceived from that union. The elders did not know quite what to do about it...we are not a violent people, and my father was a very respected healer. The Lashran reluctantly accepted the situation, but because of spreading Xenophobia among the populace, the elders decreed that no Lashran was ever to fornicate with a human being again. They were frightened that it would diminish our kind and eventually pollute the purity of the bloodlines."

"But you broke the rule," She reasoned.

He chewed his lip and nodded. "Yes. They seemed to think that I was touched in the head, due to my mixed breeding. I stayed with my cousin after my parents both died, and he tried to match me up with several Sires, which he thought would make good mates, but I refused all of them. When that man came to the forest and expressed interest in me, I found myself weakened, and I might have made love with him, if we hadn't been discovered. The Lashran are now convinced that my dalliance was purely a result of my breeding, and they believe it bespeaks a danger to them all. I...I understand their fears, and why they cast me out for my desires."

She stroked his hair out of his eyes and kissed him gently as he began to weep softly. "Charlotte, I do not know if I can have children at all. I may be a life bearer, but I'm not so sure that my half-human blood will allow for conception. Please, do not tell Coren? I promise that if I do find myself with child, I shall tell him. I am simply too afraid of what he might do if I reveal my secret to him. I...I need some time."

"Alright, darlin. I won't tell him. I'll leave that up to you," she said soothingly, hugging him to her tightly. Poor dear...he was so sweet, and to be rejected by the only family he had...horrible! No wonder he was so frightened of telling Coren the truth! In all honesty, she wasn't sure how the sea dog would react to learning that his beloved Lashran was a sort of mixture of male and female (technically, that is). Coren liked for things to be in black and white...too many complications in relationships always scared him off. Charlotte made a silent vow that if for some ungodly reason Coren cast Lythas aside, she would take the Lashran under her wing.

"Tell me one more thing, Lythas," she said.

"Whatever you wish to know, dear one."

She smiled at the sweet endearment, pleased that he cared so much for her. "How can you tell a Lifebearer from a Sire? The books didn't go into much detail on that? I mean, surely there's some outward differences in appearance so that you fellows will know whether it's productive or not to bed someone...aside from satisfying lust, that is."

He laughed softly and blushed. "Well yes, of course there are visible differences. The Sires are taller and stronger than we Lifebearers are. They usually have deeper voices as well, and the pupils of their eyes are slit like a cat's. I suppose some humans might have difficulty telling the distinction between us, unless they know what to look for or are close enough to look at our eyes. We also have different scents, though I am not certain that humans can detect them. I...was told that a Lifebearer's scent becomes stronger when he is in his seasonals. Do I smell?"

She snorted with laughter, but calmed herself when she saw that he was really concerned. "Well, you don't stink, sweetie. You smell kind of like a rainforest...it's actually very...arousing." her own cheeks warmed, for she was certain that telling him she was getting randy was no way to continue the conversation. Funny, how she hadn't thought about that intoxicating scent until he mentioned it.

His tongue darted out to lick his lips, and she shivered. "That's not fair, Lythas," she said accusingly.

He gave her a puzzled look. "I do not understand."

She kissed him softly, then slid her tongue into his mouth and tangled her fingers into his hair. He returned the kiss willingly, and she was surprised to feel him harden against her belly. Breaking the kiss momentarily, she said breathlessly, "Lythas, I know you're not yourself right now. Are you...alright with me touching you? I don't want you to feel like you have to put up with it, despite how much I shamelessly flirt with you."

He gave her a tender, painful smile. "Yes, Charlotte. I am sure. I...I think in getting to know you, I've come to be attracted to you. It does not matter as much that you have curves and bumps that are odd to me."

She giggled madly at his words. His guileless honesty really was adorable. "Oh, Lythas...Coren would be the biggest fool in the world if he ever lost you," she said with a kiss to his nose.

He chewed his lip in worry. "Are you certain that my master doesn't mind...this?" he murmured, timidly placing his hand over her right breast. She covered his hand with her own to encourage him and arched into his touch.

"Aye lad. He's the one who suggested it. Like I said, you wore him out."

He grinned guiltily and cautiously kneaded the soft flesh beneath his palm. "This does not hurt, does it?" he questioned, his emerald eyes searching hers.

She shook her head, moaning softly as his fingers plucked at the hardened nipple through the material of her bodice. "It feels fantastic, darling. Let me take this off so that you've got better access."

He obediently released her and watched as she removed the garment. When her breasts were bared, he stared at them for so long that she became a bit nervous and wondered if he would change his mind.

Lythas had never seen a woman's breasts entirely naked before...even the women who had stripped down at the Jade Tiger the other night had the decency to leave their undergarments on. He was fascinated by the asthenically pleasing roundness of the twin mounds, and the dark areolas, which were larger than a man's. The artist in him suddenly wanted to draw Charlotte in the nude. "How lovely," he whispered, daring to cup them and weigh them in his hands. "I understand why men are so obsessed with these, now."

She giggled again, and choked on it as she tried to stop herself. How did the Lashran make her feel like a bloody teenager?! "You haven't seen anything yet, darlin," she

promised as she leaned over him for a deep kiss. The groan that came from his throat surprised and delighted her, and she straddled him and ran her hands feverishly over his body.

"Charlotte," he gasped, raising his hips up to press his aching genitals against hers. He went still, realizing that there was an absence of something between her legs that he was used to feeling. Uncertain of what to do, he stared up at her inquiringly.

They were both considerably startled when Coren opened the door and came into the room quite unexpectedly. He flashed a smile and raised his blond eyebrows, leaning against the door as he shut it behind him. "I do hope you do not mind an audience. I've decided that since I'm too worn out to participate, it might at least be fun to watch."

Lythas turned bright pink all over, and Charlotte even blushed a bit. "You could have warned me, man!" she fairly cried. The weapons dealer merely chuckled and crossed the room to seat himself on the edge of the bed. His eyes raked Lythas' prone body admiringly.

"Do continue," Coren said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 19*

Lythas was extremely uncomfortable with his master watching at first...especially since he didn't know quite what to think about Charlotte's sex organs (or lack, thereof). He chewed his lips nervously, and she could feel his hands trembling.

"Don't be afraid, honey. I promise I don't bite," she whispered, ignoring the presence of Coren and kissing Lythas sensually. He seemed to relax a bit as her lips and tongue teasingly caressed his.

"I...do not know what to do," Lythas admitted shyly when she pulled away. She exchanged a look with Coren, who grinned.

"Just try to relax, lad. Charlotte knows what she's doing. I'll help you," The retired pirate said huskily, running his callused hand along the Lashran's smooth chest. Lythas wriggled at the touch and moaned, and Charlotte began to nibble his ear. His eyes became unfocused with pleasure as her teeth teased his sensitive earlobe. She raised herself up enough to reach between his legs and grip his penis, and he sighed as she began to stroke it.

The Lashran's eyes closed and he began to undulate his hips in time with Charlotte's touch. Tingles shot through his body as Coren's hands caressed his chest and belly at the same time. "Mmm," Lythas moaned softly.

Coren and Charlotte smiled at each other, and the weapons dealer lowered his mouth to the Lashran's and kissed him deeply, while she removed her garter and guided Lythas' hand to her vagina. His green eyes flared open as his fingers came into contact with her loins. He started to ask a question, but Coren continued to kiss him and muffle his words. Charlotte coaxed his fingers to stroke the moist heat between her legs, which was nearly hidden from sight by a soft nest of dark curls. For a moment, she was confused by the bewilderment on the Lashran's fair features. She was clean, and she kept herself trimmed down there so that it wasn't just a wild bush...she did not have any lice...why was he so panicked?

She could have kicked herself. Oh, that was right...the poor lad probably thought someone had maimed her...he knew nothing about women's reproductive organs! "It's alright, Lythas...this is how girls are made," she explained to him, guiding his fingers over her vulva and clitoris. She bit back a soft whimper at the pleasure his touch was causing, for he gained a bit of confidence at her explanation, and he began to explore on his own.

Coren pulled back to watch his slave touch Charlotte. "That's it, lad. Nothing to be afraid of. The spot you're touching is where you will be entering her."

Lythas looked at his master with huge eyes. "Enter her?!" he rasped. Clearly, he wasn't expecting this.

Charlotte realized that either he must have lost his parents at an early age, or they had never spoken to him at length about how he was conceived, in order to give him a more "normal" life, she supposed. "Darling, we don't have to have intercourse if it frightens you," she murmured, caressing his face.

His eyes closed and he licked his lips, clearly indecisive. She continued to pull at the silken length of his penis, rubbing the tip every now and then with her fingers and making him shudder. "Will it hurt?" he whispered.

Coren smiled in amusement and rubbed the Lashran's stomach in circular patterns. "No, lad...it won't hurt. It won't even be uncomfortable for you, as it often is for you at first when I take you.

Lythas nodded. "Very well...I am willing to try."

Charlotte wished that she could wipe the fear from his expressive face, but there was nothing to do for it except show him that he had nothing to worry about. She positioned his cock at her entrance and slowly sank down on him, purring in pleasure as she was filled with his hardness. Lythas' eyes went blank, and his mouth rounded in a little "O" of surprise.

"That...that is actually...quite nice," the Lashran said shakenly as Charlotte held herself still and allowed him to adjust to the feeling. Coren kissed him again, and Lythas moaned and ran his fingers through his master's blond locks as Charlotte began to take him in and out of her slick, muscular sheath.

Sweat broke out on the Lashran's pale skin as he writhed in pleasure from both Charlotte's thrusts and Coren's touch on his body. He started to call out, but stopped in confusion, for he wasn't sure whose name to shout. When Coren dipped his head and began to tease the Lashran's nipples with his tongue and mouth, and Charlotte increased her rhythm to rapid, little bounces, Lythas could not keep silent.

Both Coren and Charlotte laughed breathlessly as the slave cried, "Corlotte!" He blushed as he realized he had mixed their names together, but became immediately distracted by the pleasure they were giving him. Groaning in ecstasy, he began to thrust in synch with Charlotte, fascinated with the feel of her warm tightness milking him. His brows furrowed as he felt an orgasm coming on, and he grit his teeth and pulled Coren's hair.

"Ouch! Easy, lad...don't pull like that," Coren said, disentangling the Lashran's gripping fingers from his blond locks. Lythas looked up at him with apologetic, aroused green eyes and mouthed a breathless apology. Then the Lashran's back arched and he grunted as he climaxed. Charlotte gave a pleased smile to the Lashran and closed her eyes as his organ bucked within her.

She was quite happy to discover that his penis did not begin to soften after he orgasmed, and she tweaked his nipples and murmured his name huskily as she continued to take him. Lythas tossed his head and panted, the emerald fire of his eyes half-visible through lowered lids. Coren left for a moment to get some rose oil from his cabinet, and when he came back, he poured some onto his hand and made his fingers slick with it.

Biting Lythas' ear playfully, Coren moved his hand down and entered the Lashran with his fingers. Lythas gasped and bit his lip, a ragged cry escaping his mouth. Coren frowned as he saw how swollen that sensitive bottom lip was. It seemed that the Lashran had broken the skin earlier, and the weapons dealer could see that his slave was making it worse by biting down on it. He used his free hand to gently pull the lip out from between the Lashran's pearly teeth. "Try not to do that, lad...if you



need something to bite on, I'll get a leather strip for you," he murmured, stroking the Lashran's sweating brow.

If Lythas even heard him, he gave no sign. The lad was bucking his hips almost wildly now and moaning hoarsely. Charlotte gasped and groaned in pleasure as the Lashran gripped her hips and began thrusting hard into her. "Ooh, darlin...didn't know you...had it in you...to be rough," she panted.

Mad with passion and pleasure, Lythas continued his desperate movements, moaning his master and Charlotte's names alternately. He began to tremble all over from the sensation, and when he felt Charlotte's muscles clenching and quivering tightly around his cock when she climaxed, he came as well. He yelled something in his own language that sounded fluid and musical, despite the rough timber of his voice. The Lashran collapsed in an exhausted heap, unconscious.

"Oh...did I break him?" Charlotte gasped, very real concern coloring her voice. Her breath hissed unevenly through clenched teeth as her orgasm played itself out.

Coren chuckled. "Nay...he is fine. I think he's just worn out. Gods, I hope he stays asleep for a while. I know he needs it as much as I do." the retired pirate caressed his slave's soft cheek tenderly as he stared down at him.

Charlotte carefully lifted herself off of Lythas and lay down beside him, propping herself up on her elbow. "I could boil some yellowroot tea for him. It should knock him out for a few hours, at least."

Coren pursed his lips indecisively. He hated the idea of drugging his slave, but the Lashran clearly needed his rest. He was about to pass out, himself. Finally, he nodded at Charlotte. "That's a good plan, love. I think you should do that."

She dressed herself and went downstairs to do it, and shortly after she left, Lythas began to stir again. "Master?" he whispered hoarsely, gazing up at Coren with a dazed, longing expression.

Coren kissed his soft lips and murmured, "Be still, sweetling. Charlotte is boiling up a drink for you that will help you sleep."

"I want to make love again," said the slave, reaching for the weapons dealer with a pleading expression.

Coren squared his jaw and fought the arousal that was trying to surface within him again. "Later, Lythallendar. You need rest more than anything, right now. Try to be patient and bear it for just a little longer." he cupped the Lashran's neck and massaged it in an attempt to relax him.

By the time Charlotte returned with the tea, Lythas was moaning in frustrated need and rubbing against his master desperately. She bit back a laugh at the look of stark relief that crossed Coren's handsome face as she crossed the room with the tea. Lythas obediently drank the brew and lay back, clenching his fists as he waited for it to take effect. After a while, his eyes became unfocused and drifted shut, and he fell off to deep sleep. Coren immediately pulled the lad into his embrace and closed his eyes as well, but he crooked a finger at Charlotte, indicating that she was welcome to lay down on the other side of the Lashran. She gladly accepted the invitation, and

Lythas was sandwiched between his master and the seamstress as he slept blissfully.

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Once his seasonals were finished, Lythas found it much easier to concentrate on his fencing lessons with Coren. The retired pirate complimented him on how much he was improving as the days went by. Jack continued to do all of the shipping and smuggling for Coren, and Pete found a reasonably priced contractor to build onto the weapons dealer's house. Coren had decided that he was better off making the new shop connect with his own home, for convenience. Meanwhile, he spent his days teaching his slave swordplay, along with reading and writing, and he spent his nights making love to Lythas.

When she had time to, Charlotte spent the night sometimes, and occasionally joined the two of them in the bedroom. This did not happen very often, however. Coren was very possessive of his slave, and any lovemaking she did with Lythas was always under his watchful eye. It seemed that Coren set up these little encounters for his own entertainment, more than to satisfy Charlotte's itches. She accepted it stoically. After all, Lythas and Coren first and foremost belonged to each other...she was simply a good friend who was lucky enough to be invited to their bedroom now and then. Coren had even allowed her to watch him make love to the Lashran once, and she whispered suggestions in the weapons dealer's ear during the whole thing.

She nearly forgot about her pact with Lythas not to mention anything about his origins to Coren, for one night, the retired pirate finally got the courage to take his slave's penis into his mouth and suckle him to orgasm (thanks to her pestering him about it). When Lythas had ejaculated into his master's mouth, Coren commented that he didn't understand what the hells women complained about...Lythas tasted as sweet as honey.

"That's because of what he is, love," Charlotte said. She caught the way Lythas' emerald eyes snapped to her pleadingly as he heard her, and she bit her lip. "I assume Lashran don't taste as bad as human men do. I assure you, yours is truly gag inspiring!"

Coren had laughed in amusement and kissed her soundly, and Lythas had fallen back on the pillows in abject relief.

As the weeks passed, Coren continued to work through his home as his new shop was slowly constructed. Pete complained about how bloody long it was taking, and Charlotte scolded him. "Can't sacrifice quality for speed, dear brother."

Jack returned with a new shipment at the end of the month, and the shop was halfway finished. The burly pirate poured shots of whiskey for everyone and shouted a toast to their success in getting Coren's business back on the ground. Lythas lifted the shotglass to his lips, smelled the liquor within, and promptly slapped a hand over his mouth and ran to the privy, barely managing to set the glass down on the dining room table without spilling it. Jack chuckled. "Poor lad has no head for spirits, does he, Coren?"

Coren said nothing. His blue eyes were concerned as they followed the Lashran's retreating form. Charlotte frowned in worry as well. "I'll go check on him," she offered. Coren nodded thankfully and reluctantly returned to discussing business with Jack

and Pete. It bothered him that Lythas' stomach had been so sensitive, lately. If it was a flu, the slave should have been over it by now, or he would have exhibited some of the other symptoms associated with the illness. The weapons dealer waded through the conversation, his mind not truly into it. He was thinking about how much he hated that bloody collar around Lythas' neck. He was torn. He could free the lad, the way his father had freed Charlotte and Pete, years ago. If he did that, however, he might lose the Lashran. Coren's hand tightened on his shotglass at the unwelcome thought that if Lythas were free, he might reveal he had only been sleeping with his master out of a sense of duty. Coren could not handle that. He might kill the Lashran, if he found that the lad had been toying with him all this time.

Meanwhile, Lythas was unhappily heaving away over the bowl of the privy. He didn't notice that Charlotte had come up behind him; he had been so anxious to get to the bowl that he hadn't even bothered to shut the door. "How long has this been going on, love?" her voice was both confident and concerned. She wet a washcloth (and was again envious that Coren could afford the money to have indoor plumbing) and solicitously dabbed the Lashran's sweating forehead with it. He wiped his mouth and looked at her with a terrified expression that went straight to her heart.

"I...have been unable to hold certain foods down for over a week now. I think I might have eaten or drunk something that disagrees with me..." he trailed off and bit his lip as she smirked. There was no use lying to himself.

"Darlin, it isn't the food or water, and we both know it. The only thing to wonder about here is when you're planning on letting Coren know the truth. You have to do it, Lythas. He's going to find out eventually."

Those great, bright eyes began to fill with tears, and his lower lip trembled. He swallowed hard as she brushed his tears aside with the pads of her thumbs. "I know...I am just so frightened! It...it is not just what he might do, Charlotte. I am living among people who know nothing at all of the Lashran, and I fear for myself and the little one. What if something goes wrong with this pregnancy? What if Coren demands I terminate the pregnancy?" his voice was rising, and there was a hysterical edge to it.

"Shhh, Lythas. Please, calm down," Charlotte said, hugging him tightly. He was shaking like a newborn, and his skin was clammy with shock. She cupped his face and looked into his eyes. "Coren would never demand you get rid of the baby, Lythas. I think your fear is making you irrational. As for the birth, I know plenty about pregnancy, and from what I've learned, yours isn't going to be much different than a woman's. Is...is the child going to come out from where I think it is?"

He blushed hotly and looked down. She smiled. "It's alright, sweetie. Listen, I can't promise you that Coren will be immediately understanding about this. He's never been one for kids, which is why he's always been so careful with his women. I think in your case, he might just change his mind. I've never seen that lad faithful to anyone, the way he is with you. He hasn't so much as flirted with any women since you've been sharing his bed. If he reacts badly, just give him time, love. I also promise you, if the worst happens, I'll take care of you. You can come and live with me and my boys, if you have to."

Though he dreaded the thought of his master casting him aside, Lythas truly appreciated Charlotte's support. It made what he had to do a little easier to know that there was someone who loved him that was willing to help him, should he need it. He

took a deep, shaking breath and allowed her to dry his tears. "Thank you, Charlotte. I shall...tell him tonight, when Jack and Pete are gone. Will you stay here? In the event that it goes badly?" His green eyes were pleading.

She kissed him soundly and smiled. "Of course, love. I've got your back."

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 20*

Lythas felt tingles shoot through him as Coren stared at him from across the lounge room. Jack had left, and both Pete and Charlotte had retired for the night. Master and slave sat in companionable silence in the lounge room. Coren sipped a Cognac, and Lythas nursed a cup of hot cocoa. The light from the fireplace outlined the weapons dealer's chiseled features, making them stand out in the Lashran's mind. Lythas swallowed, feeling his nerve weakening. He could not bear the thought of losing Coren. Yet, there was no other way! He had to tell his master the truth, for as Charlotte said, Coren would eventually discover it himself. The retired pirate was a well-educated man, and no fool. He would begin to suspect something once the Lashran became heavy, and most likely would get the information out of him. Even if that did not happen, once Lythas went into labor, his secret would most definitely be out.

"What is troubling you, Lythas?" questioned Coren softly. His seafoam eyes showed concern that few others ever saw. Despite the worry in them, his voice was demanding.

The Lashran looked at his master with wide, vulnerable green eyes and licked his lips nervously. He couldn't think of a way to start. Misunderstanding, Coren chuckled. "Have your seasonals come again so soon? Is that what's been the matter with you?"

Lythas shook his head. "No, Master. I...I have a lot on my mind. There are things about me that you do not know. I feel I must tell you now, before more time passes."

Coren tilted his head to the side and furrowed his brow. The lad looked frightened. Frightened and desperate. Here it comes. Lythas is going to tell me that he has only been coming to my bed out of duty, the weapons dealer thought. He grit his teeth and forced himself not to look intimidating. It was not easy, for his own stomach was suddenly queasy with anticipation, and anger was welling within him at the thought of what surely must be coming. "Go on, lad," he said as gently as he could manage.

Lythas took a deep, shaking breath and stared into his cup. "Master...I have not been completely honest with you. I was afraid of what you might do if you knew the truth about me, you see..." he gulped when he saw the muscle twitch along Coren's jaw.

"I see. What is it that you have to say to me, Lashran?" Coren winced inwardly at the harsh tone of his own voice, and Lythas paled a bit. He hadn't meant to sound so cold.

Steeling himself, Lythas raised his emerald eyes to his master's and told him the whole truth about his people, and how the Lashran reproduce. He told him of his Mother and Father, and how the elders decreed that it was illegal for Lashran to mate with Humans, after the discovery that cross breeding was possible.

Lythas looked at his master hopefully, but felt his heart sink. Coren's handsome face bore an expression of bewilderment and horror. "Lythallendar, are you telling me that there isn't a female among your entire species?"

When the Lashran bit his lip and nodded, Coren shook his head in confusion. Lythas explained the mechanics of Lashran anatomy in detail, so that his master could get a clearer understanding. Coren looked at his slave warily once Lythas had finished. "Which one are you, then?" the weapons dealer said in a scratchy voice. He already knew the answer, of course. Lythas was small in stature, gentle in personality, and his pupils were round...though nearly twice as big as a man's was. These things told Coren beyond a doubt that Lythas was a Lifebearer.

"I am a Lifebearer, Master," the Lashran answered obediently, though he knew by Coren's expression that it was not necessary.

Coren rubbed his temples. "Why now, Lythas? Why did you wait for so long to tell me this?"

Lythallendar held onto his mug with white knuckled hands and licked his dry lips. "I had to tell you, Master. I had hoped that you would never have to learn the truth, but during my seasonals...I...conceived a child by you..." he trailed off as Coren looked at him. His master looked both angry and alarmed, and the Lashran shivered in spite of himself. Coren Darshaw was still a very dangerous man, and it showed in every inch of his body as he got up off of the couch and paced the room. He reminded Lythas of a caged tiger he had once seen while going to the market with Coren. Sleek, powerful and agitate, his Master stalked back and forth in front of the fireplace restlessly.

"M-master?" said Lythas uncertainly. He set his drink down and covered his lower abdomen with both hands...an instinctive gesture of protection.

Coren noticed the movement and gave a bitter bark of laughter. "You think me so monstrous that I would harm the unborn, slave?" he said in a scathing tone. Lythas flinched, and Coren continued ruthlessly. "Yes, as your master, I could arrange for a concoction to be made up. I could force you to drink it, and it would cause your body to miscarry. Perhaps I should? I don't even know what you are, Lythas. Male? Female? Both? One thing is for certain, you are a bloody liar and a tart." He ignored the soulful eyes that pleaded with him, ignored the swift stab of pain in his heart as those lovely orbs filled with tears and Lythas' mouth moved with the effort to speak. "Get out of my sight. Go and sleep with Charlotte tonight. The two of you can conspire until the dawn's light, for all I care! I need to think!"

Lythas bowed his head. His shiny, raven curls fell forward and obscured his face, but Coren could see by the way the lad's shoulders trembled that he was crying. Wordlessly, the Lashran got up and started to flee the room. "Wait," said Coren in a commanding tone. Lythas froze and looked over his shoulder at his Master. The weapons dealer swallowed and armored himself against the sight of the tears slowly dripping down the Lashran's pale cheeks. "Come with me to the smithy room," Coren said.

Lythas parted his lips and stared at Coren. His emerald eyes dilated with fear, and he shook his head wordlessly. Coren snarled silently and crossed the room to grab the Lashran's arm. Lythas backed away and nearly fell over the coffee table, but his master caught his arm in a steel grip and began to pull him towards the newly made forging room. "Please, Master...do not harm the baby!" cried the Lashran in a raw voice as Coren's greater strength overpowered him. Coren grimaced, and if anything, he became even angrier. That the Lashran thought he would do such a thing

infuriated him! He forcibly dragged the struggling slave into the smithy room, and Lythas' cries became desperate shouts.

Charlotte was woken up by the commotion, and upon hearing Lythas' frightened cries, she yanked her robe on and charged down the stairs. She saw Coren dragging the slave's struggling form into the forging room, and her heart pounded. Ye gods...what was Darshaw thinking?? "Coren! What are you doing to the boy?" she yelled, following them in.

"Correcting a mistake. Stay out of this, woman!" His eyes were icy and dangerous. Lythas looked up at her with a pleading, terrified expression, and she squared her shoulders.

"Don't you dare hurt him, Coren!" she roared. The fierce sound of her own voice startled her...she almost sounded like a mother tiger protecting her young.

The weapons dealer ignored her and forced Lythas to bend over the smithing table, holding his head down by the neck. Charlotte searched frantically for some weapon, deciding that her friend had gone completely mad.

Lythas moaned in fear and struggled as Coren reached for a thick pair of metal cutters. Was his master going to geld him now? "Hold still, Lashran," Coren growled in his ear, and Lythas obeyed out of sheer terror. He felt the heavy cutters lie against his spine, and he tensed up and gave a shout of alarm as Coren squeezed the handles together. Lythas felt slight pressure on the back of his neck, and then he heard something snap. Coren moved the cutters to the other side of his neck and repeated his action. There was another snap. Then the weapons dealer pulled back and left the room wordlessly, practically shoving Charlotte out of the way.

Lythas slowly straightened up, and his collar fell away from his neck and hit the table with a metallic ring. Coren had snapped it into two halves. With shaking hands, Lythas gathered the broken collar up and held the pieces to his chest, then sank to the floor on weak legs. Charlotte quickly entered the room and went to her knees beside him, pulling him into her arms. "I...do...not...understand," the Lashran said sluggishly. His eyes were practically all pupil.

Coren's shadow again filled the doorway, and Lythas cringed against Charlotte, who was covering him with her body protectively. The retired pirate scowled at them and tossed something to the floor. It was a drawstring bag...large enough that it would take two hands to hold it. It hit the floor with a heavy thump, and it jangled, as well.

Lythas looked up at Coren with round, bewildered green eyes, and the weapons dealer clenched his jaw to steady his emotions. "Money. Enough to get you by comfortably for several years. Take it, and your belongings. I want you out of my home by tomorrow, Lashran. You are a free...whatever you are...now. I will draw your papers up now and take them to the registrar as soon as I am finished. Good luck to you." With that said, he turned on his heel and left the room, heading to the study to do the paperwork.

Charlotte looked at Lythas in acute concern. Strange, mewling sounds were passing his parted lips, and he stared straight ahead without blinking or seeming to even focus on anything. She kissed the crown of his head and rocked him, wishing there was something she could do to soothe him. Pete padded softly into the room and squatted before the two of them. His dark eyes were unusually sympathetic and full

of pity as he regarded the Lashran. "He flipped his noggin, eh?" the auction worker said. Charlotte had, of course, shared her knowledge with her brother, and he had quietly watched the drama from the shadows. He was a bit ashamed that he had come close to sneaking up behind Coren and bashing him over the head...for a moment, it had seemed that the weapons dealer was going to maim or kill Lythas.

Charlotte tried to remove the broken collar from Lythas' clutching fingers, but he held onto them as if they were a lifeline. She sighed and looked to her brother. "I really was hoping that Coren's infamous patience would apply to this," she said bitterly. "Pete, will you please get his things? I intend to take him to my house as soon as possible. The less he has to see Coren, the better for him, I think." Pete nodded quietly and gave his sister a pat on the shoulder before rising to do as she asked.



## *"Fate"*

### *Part 21*

By midmorning the next day, Lythas was packed and ready to go. He waited outside in the ferry with Pete, staring straight ahead with a listless expression. Coren had calmed down enough to think properly, and he spoke with Charlotte as she prepared to leave the house. "I've decided to go out to sea with Jack. I shall keep in touch with you. You will...keep an eye on him, won't you?" the weapons dealer said softly, unable to stop his gaze from straying out the window to the huddled form of the Lashran.

The seamstress glared up at him. "Aye, I'll take care of him, and keep you updated on his health, you heartless bastard." Before she could stop herself, she swung her hand out and slapped him hard across the face.

Coren took the blow stoically, though his eyes flashed dangerously as he slowly raised his hand to rub the stinging red splotch on his cheek. "I won't bother explaining my reasons to you, girl. Just...take care of him."

She harrumphed and turned on her heel to leave. Her brown curls bounced with her angry steps, and her back was tense and straight. Coren closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the cool glass of the window as Lythas looked into the house and stared at him with aching eyes. "Just go, Lythallendar," the weapons dealer whispered. "I can't be good to you when I'm this confused. You'll forget me, eventually." The thought that his Lashran may actually do that tore at Coren in a way that surprised him. He watched while they disappeared down the canal, then turned and stared blankly at his lounge room. Lythas had taken the drawing he had made of Coren, and the retired pirate hadn't stopped him. It would have been just one more thing to remind him of the time he had shared with the lad...or whatever Lythas was. Despite the Lashran having all the parts and form of a male, Coren was still so very confused about that. How was it possible for a male to carry a baby, if he was fully male? Coren wanted a drink. Badly.

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"You look like you've been shot out of a cannon, lad!" exclaimed Jack when Coren showed up at the Warf. The weapons dealer's hair hung wild and unkempt, rather than groomed and pulled into a ponytail as it normally was. His blue eyes were tired looking, and the smell of whiskey was on his breath. Jack noted the bag which was slung over Coren's shoulder, and the Pirate lifted his eyebrows. "What's all this?"

"I'm coming out to sea with you, old friend. I've got to clear my head a bit," Coren said. His voice was dull and laden.

"What about your business? Your house? It's too nice a place to just leave locked up and hope nobody breaks in, you know," Jack commented. He wasn't arguing with his friend...he was simply curious.

Coren shrugged. "My cousin Garret and his wife will be staying in my home while I'm away. They'll look after things for me in my absence." When Jack tilted his head to the side in a gesture of curiosity, the weapons dealer sighed, "I have my reasons, old friend. I wish for no questions from you...I've had a bad enough two days as it is."

Jack held his hands up. "Alright, lad...don't get testy. I was just a bit concerned, is all. Well, she's your ship, so you can have the captain's quarters back-"

Coren interrupted him. "Just give me one of the suits. You can still stay in the captain's quarters. There's plenty of spirits onboard, is there not?"

Surprised by the question, Jack nodded. "Aye, Coren...we've always got a good stock of brandy and whiskey...plus ale and mead. Life as a pirate wouldn't be the same without plenty of the good stuff onboard!" he laughed heartily, then trailed off uncomfortably when Coren did not laugh with him. Jack wagered that Coren's reason for returning to sea had to do with a pair of big green eyes and creamy pale skin. The pirate shook his head and sighed as his friend boarded walked to the boarding plank wordlessly. It seemed that Lashran were as bad for a man's sanity as women.

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Charlotte was extremely concerned for Lythas. He moved like some clockwork automation, and she suspected that the only reason he ate at all was for the sake of his unborn child. His emerald eyes, once so bright, were now dull and cloudy with sorrow. She tried to get him interested in drawing patterns for clothing, perhaps adding some designs to his own for her to create. He dully replied that he would pay for his share of the rent and living needs out of the money that his master gave him. Days went by, and he wandered the house listlessly. He kept the broken pieces of his collar in a velvet pouch, which in turn was kept safely within an inside pocket of the jacket that she had made for him.

She considered an attempt at lovemaking, thinking perhaps it might help to clear the lad's head, but decided against it. She had a feeling that the Lashran held tightly to his loyalty to Coren, despite the weapons dealer casting him out. Lythas might view it as being unfaithful if he had sexual relations with Charlotte without Coren being present. To combat her own worries, she decided to begin making maternity clothes for Lythas. It was an interesting challenge, to be sure. She had never before had to sew pregnancy clothing for a man. She wasn't entirely sure how big Lythas would get. The gestation period for Lashran was a mere seven months, compared to the nine-month wait that human females had to endure. Going on a guess, she simply measured his current waistline and started on a couple of sets of breeches a size or two bigger.

Lythas wallowed in misery. He had thought that no pain would equal the one he had felt when his own people gave him to the slavers. Surely, being cast out by your own kind was worse than anything else. He had been wrong. Now he had been cast out by the man he was in love with, as well. He sat by the window in the lounge and stared out at the busy walkways outside Charlotte's house. He envied the people out there...pirates or no. Coren had said he was free, but Lythas surely did not feel it. He felt more trapped now than he had when he was shackled to the other prisoners on the ship.

Surely, the Lashran reasoned, if his own people, and then Coren had turned against him, Charlotte eventually would, as well. The thought sat heavily upon his young, overburdened shoulders, and he sniffled and stroked his lower abdomen, soothed by the knowledge that his child could not abandon him as well. "I ought to leave," he thought silently. "Before my heart is broken again. I ought to try and start my own life...away from this place."

The more he considered it, the better the idea sounded. He loved Charlotte deeply...not as much as he did Coren, but enough so that it would kill him if she rejected him, too. He was best off trying to get away from Tariff and all the heartache that lay there. "What're you thinkin' about?" asked Charlotte's youngest son, Morgan. Lythas started, having been completely unaware of the five year old watching him. He was also unaware that his motivation was showing on his expressive face, and Morgan had noticed the change in him.

Lythas forced a smile. "I was considering a new map design, little one," he said quietly. Morgan asked for details, and the Lashran used his imagination and found that he actually DID have a new map design in his head. Charlotte came around the corner and smiled in relief to see the Lashran exhibit some signs of life again. It wasn't until the next morning that she discovered the ruse for what it was. She knocked on the Lashran's bedroom door to wake him, and upon receiving no answer, entered the room. Her quick eyes took in the made up bed, the note lying on it, and most importantly, the absence of Lythas and his belongings. Blinking back the tears that came to her eyes, she forced herself to walk to the bed and pick up the letter.

My dear Charlotte,

I regret to say that I can no longer stay here in Tariff. You have been a wonderful friend to me, and I wish all the best for you and your family. I am broken inside. I cannot forget, nor can I banish the fear that one day, you might come to despise me as well. I could not bear that. I have decided to leave and attempt to start my life over again. Thank you ever so much for your kindness. May your children grow up to be healthy and happy.

I shall miss you.

Lythas

Charlotte sat heavily upon the bed and stared at the wall. "Oh, Lythas...what am I to do now?" she murmured. She knew the answer, of course; find the lad quickly and get him safely back, before something happened to him. She knew in her heart that Coren would eventually seek the Lashran out. She could see the longing and pain in her old friend's eyes the other day when he had spoken to her of keeping Lythas safe. They were fated to be together...she was certain of it. Only now, all of that might change. There were countless dangers in Tariff alone, and Lythas was so innocent and hadn't developed the street smarts that she and the others had. A chill passed through her, and she blinked and got up, taking the letter with her to her pattern room. She had to get word to Coren...quickly. She had a lot of choice words to say to the weapons dealer, and none of them were pleasant. As soon as Pete came by for his visit, she intended to send him out to scour the city for any leads on where Lythas might have gone.

~\*\*\*\*\*~

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 22*

It had been twelve days since they set out. They were traveling along the coast, heading towards the Gulf of Reanan. Coren stayed half-drunk all the time, though it only showed to Jack. The pirate shook his head and stroked his bushy beard as he regarded his friend. Coren leaned against the railing of the starboard bough, staring at the blue waters surrounding the Falcon. Judging by his brooding countenance, he was thinking of his slave. What happened between them, so suddenly? Jack could only wonder and hope that Coren snapped out of it. They were going to be entering a dangerous area, where the King's men patrolled the coast. If they saw through the ruse of the Falcon being a merchant ship, there would be fighting...possibly a mad retreat.

The pirate's reverie was cut short as the crewmember in the crow's nest shouted that he spotted something on top of the water (Jack couldn't remember the lad's name). "What do you see, then?" he shouted up impatiently as the young man waved his arms around.

The burly pirate frowned in confusion as the crewman shouted back something that sounded like; "Man...floating...heading for us!"

Growling in irritation, Jack motioned for the lad to come down and tell him to his face. The wind was high today, and it was carrying most of the lookout's words away from way up there. Quickly, the crewman complied, scaling down the ladder of the mast as fast as he could without falling off. Panting from the exertion of his descent, he jogged over to Jack and said, "There's a...man...he's floating on top of the water to...the Northeast! He's commin' right for us!"

Jack's eyebrows drew together so severely that the lad cringed. "I ain't lyin', sir! He's wearin' purple robes, and he's headed this way!"

With a look at the crewman that said he thought he was out of his mind, Jack snatched the spyglass from the lad's hand and put it to his eye, pointing it in the direction the young man indicated. He squinted into the cylinder, then pulled back, his eyes widening. "What the fuck?!" he said elegantly. Then he looked again. "Coren...you'd better take a look at this!" he shouted. There was, indeed, a man speeding towards the ship...and he was hovering in mid-air with his wrists crossed over one another in front of his chest.

Coren crossed the deck with an irritated, disinterested look on his face. "What's all the fuss about, old bear?" he said dully.

Jack handed him the spyglass. "See for yourself, lad. Tell me if I've gone mad!"

Coren shrugged and did as Jack said. After a moment, he made an unsurprised sound in his throat. "Aye...looks like a Bargel sorcerer is heading our way, judging by the color and cut of his robes. I wouldn't worry too much. If he meant trouble, he would have brought friends with him. I reckon he has a message or warning to give to us."

A slight commotion had begun on deck when word got round that there was a magician floating towards them. "Go about your business!" growled Jack as several crewmembers began to stare at the rapidly growing spot that was the sorcerer. Some of them seemed curious, but not alarmed. Jack shook his head and wondered how he had missed running into any of these sorcerers in all his years of seafaring. The pirate watched nervously as the wiry, middle-aged man finally reached the ship and floated onto the deck, his purple robes fluttering about in the wind. Clearing his throat, Jack strode forward. "What are you about, man?" he asked, unconsciously fingering the musket at his belt.

"I am searching for someone," said the sorcerer, looking around on the ship with mildly vague grey eyes. "Do you have a Coren Darshaw on board?"

Jack was instantly suspicious. "Why do you want to know?"

"I have an important message for him. The lady Charlotte asked that I deliver it with all expediency." the grey eyes were becoming slightly annoyed.

Jack relaxed a bit, though he had to fight not to snicker at the sorcerer calling Charlotte a "lady". "He's right here-" looking around, Jack discovered that Coren was no longer where he was before. The pirate glanced around and sighed. The weapons dealer was back at the railing, drinking from a bottle of whiskey. "There he is," he said in a tired tone. The sorcerer bowed gracefully and floated over to Coren. Jack shivered at the sight...it made the man look like a ghost or something, floating around in those whipping robes like that.

"Lord Darshaw?" said the sorcerer in a dignified voice. Coren didn't turn to look at him.

Taking another swig of whiskey and wincing at the strength of the liquor, he said, "Aye, that's who I am. What do you want?"

Unperturbed by the weapons dealer's rudeness, the sorcerer produced a rolled up parchment from his robes and held it out towards Coren. "I've come with an urgent message from your lady friend, Charlotte. It is in regards to a young man by the name of Lythas."

Coren frowned as his heart did a flip. He turned around slowly, cold eyes narrowed at the man. "I would know the name of the man who delivers this message," he insisted.

The sorcerer bowed slightly. "Of course. I am Jahlad Crem. At your service." when Coren made no move to take the letter from him, Jahlad said, "I believe you really ought to look at this, Master Darshaw. The young woman seemed very agitated when she came to my guild asking for help. She insisted that once you read the letter, you would wish to buy further use of my services."

Coren scowled. Bloody wizards...always using their gifts to get rich. Still, he had never met one that didn't impress him with their abilities. There was very little that a Bargel sorcerer could not accomplish, and if the news was as urgent as the man hinted, Charlotte was probably right. The sudden fear that Lythas was ill or dying made Coren's stubbornness evaporate, and he snatched the parchment from Jahlad's hand quickly and unrolled it.

Dear Coren,

Thanks to your stupidity, our sweet Lythas has run away. He left a note for me explaining that he was frightened that I would eventually come to despise him like \* you \* have. I hope you realize what your unthinking cruelty has done, here! I'm sure you know that Tariff is no place for someone as naïve and innocent as Lythas to be wandering alone...especially in his present condition. Pete and his friends are looking everywhere for him. Hopefully, they will find him before he leaves Tariff or gets into trouble. In the meantime, I am taking this letter to the underground sorcery guild (what did you call them? The Bargel?). Hopefully, they won't fry me on the spot or change me into a toad.

If there is any kindness or love for Lythas left in that stubborn heart of yours, you'll come back home immediately and help us with our search. If you're unable to do that, at least search the coastal and harbor cities for clues. I pray you have enough sense to employ Mr. Crem to use his divination to find the lad, or you may very well never see Lythas again! Respond to this ASAP!

Love,

Charlotte

P.s. When you come back...if you have the courage to do so, I intend to put my boot up your arse for putting me through this!

P.s.s. I told the Bargel that you would pay the fee for having this letter delivered. They don't take "no" for an answer, you know. I hope you had the sense to bring coin with you, for I do not have the money to pay for such an extravagant means of communication.

Coren rolled up the parchment with numb fingers, his eyes staring straight ahead at nothing. Lythas was missing...possibly out of Tariff, by now. He swore a string of oaths that included every part of the human anatomy, plus some of the bodily functions associated with them. Several nearby pirates snickered at his language use, but wisely did so behind their hands and without looking directly at the weapons dealer. The sorcerer looked at Coren in serene patience and waited for the pirate to pay him and possibly ask for further use of his services.

"Bloody, fucking hell," growled Coren again, digging in his money pouch. Then he realized what the price for delivering the message must be. He did a quick calculation in his head. Divining the location of Coren, then divining the location of the ship...add that to teleportation to the nearest coordinates, plus the cost of the levitation spell and danger expenses...dammit. With a groan, he placed the entire bag of coins in Jahlad's hand.

The sorcerer weighed it, then opened it and counted out twelve gold pieces. These he handed back to Coren. "You were a bit over," he said in explanation.

Considering that the pouch held over one hundred gold pieces in it, Coren did not find the gesture to be particularly generous. "Thank you so much," he said with acidic sarcasm.

"Would you like to further employ my skills? I am a rather busy man, you know," Jahlad said a tad impatiently.

Coren pursed his lips, then nodded. Tariff was a large city...it would be difficult to find Lythas without scrying for him. "Excellent!" said the sorcerer. "Let us draw up the contract."

They went into the captains quarters with Jack to do that. When he found out the cost of the sorcerer's fee, Jack exploded, "Five hundred gold just for this dress-wearing star-gazer to look into his crystal ball and tell you where he thinks the lad \* might \* be?! Coren, that's robbery! I should know, being a pirate!"

Jahlad sniffed indignantly. "I doubt you'll find quicker results from anyone in Wyndrah, Captain. The choice belongs to Master Coren, of course."

Coren didn't hesitate. He had dealt with the Bargel guild before, and though their prices were steep, they seldom botched a job. He also knew that Jahlad would do the job required of him to the best of his abilities, without backstabbing the weapons dealer. The calling pendant was already out on the table, beside the contract, which had only to be signed to become binding. If Coren needed the sorcerer for anything, all he had to do was hold the pendant and call to him. In the unlikely event that Crem did try anything funny, he could use the pendant in the same way to contact the head of the order. No Bargel was stupid enough to give their guild a bad reputation.

He signed the contract, then handed the stylus over to the sorcerer, who did the same. Then they signed an exact duplicate of the contract, and each kept his own copy. "Now then...I shall need a picture or a personal item of the missing person to begin my work," stated Jahlad. "If you do not have either of these things, I shall have to rely on your description of the lad, or return to where he was last present and search for clues."

Coren flushed. He did, indeed have a picture of Lythas. He reached into his vest pocket and produced what appeared to be a pocketwatch. Opening it up, he revealed that inside was not a timepiece, but a miniature painting of Lythas. He swallowed the lump that rose in his throat as he recalled the day he had taken the Lashran to an artist to have it done. Lythas had squirmed impatiently and whispered to Coren that he could have drawn a self-portrait in half the time it was taking the man to do it. Coren had chuckled and insisted he endure the wait, for he wanted the tiny portrait to be done in paints, which Lythas was only beginning to work with. Ignoring the sly look that Jack gave him, the weapons dealer reluctantly handed over the watch.

Jahlad faltered a bit when he looked at the wide, green eyes and delicate, angelic features of the dark haired young man in the picture. "Oh...I see. Yes, I do understand the danger of such a lad being on his own," he muttered thoughtfully. "A Lashran, isn't he? Lifebearer, at that." He gave Coren a searching look, making the weapons dealer flush a deeper shade. Shaking himself out of it, he said to Coren, "I am afraid I shall need this for a while, Master Darshaw. The divination will take hours to prepare for, and I will need this with me when I begin to track him. Do you have any objections to that?"

Coren grumbled, "So long as it's returned to me unharmed, I care not. Just find him."

Jahlad nodded elegantly and slipped the watch into a pocket in his robe. "Very good. Now, I shall activate the portal that will take me to my laboratory. I shall inform you immediately of what I've discovered, once I've completed the spell." Coren nodded curtly, rubbing his temples and wincing. He needed more to drink, before the hangover that was trying to surface got the chance to catch up with him.

Jahlad stood up and moved to the center of the room, bracing his feet firmly on the floor so that the rocking of the ship did not disrupt his spellcasting. Jack watched with interest as the sorcerer spewed out some garble that made absolutely no sense and waved his arms around in complex patterns. "Teleportation isn't an exact science, yet," explained Jahlad when he finished casting. The air became thick with energy, and a glowing nimbus formed around the wizard. "Hopefully, this portal will open to my left, this tiiiiimmme!!" his words became a shout as a bright, pulsating hole in time and space opened up beneath his feet. He fell like a rock, and Jack's jaw dropped as he watched the wizard disappear through the portal. As soon as Jahlad vanished, there was a bright flash, and the hole in the floor vanished like it had never been there. The pirate gave Coren a look that said he seriously doubted the sorcerer's ability to track Lythas down, after that clumsy display.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 23*

Tsabrak caught the scent of the young man before he saw him. The Lashran sniffed in the direction the pleasant smell was coming from, thinking that his nose must be lying to him. Perhaps it was some exotic perfume one of the ladies was wearing? Of course, that seemed to be a highly unlikely probability. The only things that gave off scents like that were deep rainforests and egg producing Lashran. Tsabrak carefully scanned the area, his slit-pupiled, golden eyes searching for the source of the smell. He spotted him. A young man, lithe and breathtaking, making his way carefully through the crowd to line up for the job that Tsabrak had an opening for.

The lad was unusual looking for a Lashran. Most likely a half-breed, Tsabrak reasoned. In his homeland, the Lifebearer would have been viewed as unattractive and odd. Tsabrak snorted. Probably how the frightened young man ended up here, in this dangerous human city. He watched the boy, interested in spite of himself. The Lifebearer was really quite appealing, to hells with what Lashran society might say. His hair, so dark a black that it had slightly blue highlights in the dying rays of the sun, was soft looking and fell in curls to his shoulders. Feathered bangs brushed across the lad's forehead over wide-set, gentle looking emerald eyes. Delicate lips mouthed the words on the sign above the stall as the boy read them. It was clear that he had only recently learned to read, judging by the acute look of concentration on his fair features. Another oddity...his skin. It was perfectly smooth, like any Lashran's, but instead of being the typical dark bronze in coloring, it was ivory white, with peach undertones. Definitely a half-breed.

Apparently, Tsabrak wasn't the only one to find the young man desirable. Several other people stopped and stared at the lad as he squeezed past them to make his way to the line. He innocently ignored the looks he got...either he was too busy concentrating on getting in line, or he did not realize his own appeal. Either way, his distraction was likely to spell trouble for him. He adjusted the bag slung over his shoulder and continued to the clearing where the line began, oblivious to the large ruffian who was following him. Tsabrak tensed as the man grasped the boy by the shoulder and leaned over to whisper something in his ear. He forced himself to be still; noticing that the young man was armed with a rapier, which was sheathed at his hip. The Sire Lashran watched and waited to see how the boy would handle himself.

The young man's eyes widened at what must have been a lewd insinuation whispered into his ear, and his delicate lips trembled as the man cupped one of his buttocks. So quickly that the human eye might have difficulty following the movement, the lad whipped out his rapier and spun around, backing three steps away from the ruffian. Tsabrak smiled. Quite the little dancer, he was. He bit back a laugh when he saw that the boy pointed the weapon, not at his tormentor's throat, as most people might have done, but directly at his crotch. People nearby went quiet and watched with interest, and Tsabrak could barely make out the lad's musical voice saying, "Touch me again, and I shall slice them off!"

Tsabrak noticed that the Lifebearer's other hand covered his stomach protectively as he kept the weapon pressing unwaveringly against the man's crotch. Hmmm...probably with child, then. Tsabrak sighed. He needed able-bodied men to help him on his ship...not a pregnant Lashran who would soon be too heavy with child to do his job well. On the other hand, the sight of one of his kind, after all of these years, touched something deep inside of Tsabrak that he thought had died

long ago. Homesickness. Here was someone who might understand him. Oh, he had friends...trustworthy and loyal ones, at that. He had plenty of lovers too. Yet, none of them quite clicked with him. Here was a fellow outcast, alone and in a delicate situation, who desperately needed help.

The Lashran pirate watched as the man who was harassing the Lifebearer scowled and reluctantly raised his hands and backed away. The boy did not waver. His back was turned to Tsabrak (and what a nice, firmly rounded backside it was), so he could not see the lad's expression, but it must have been fierce. Those pretty green eyes of his were likely glowing with anger. That was something about the Lashran that typically intimidated human beings...the reflective quality of their eyes and the way it intensified when they were angered. Tsabrak had used it to his advantage many times before, in order to get out of unnecessary fights in the past. The lad kept his blade pointed at the man until he was out of site, and then he looked around with a challenging glare. Here was a young man who had clearly had enough, and refused to be stepped on.

Tsabrak admired the Lifebearer's spirit, and he found himself only half-paying attention to the applicants in front of the young man. He managed not to tap his foot impatiently as he waited for the Lifebearer to reach the front of the line so that he could look him in the eye. When that time came, he feigned indifference and looked down at the list in his hands.

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"Name?" asked the captain of the "Black Cat".

"Lythallendar, sir," Lythas said softly, furrowing his dark brows. There was something familiar about this pirate. He could not see the man's face, for his head was bent, and his wild mass of shiny, silver hair fell forward as he wrote something on the parchment in front of him.

"Skills? Experience?" the Captain questioned next. His voice was like a purr.

Lythas swallowed. "M-map making, sir. I have no experience on a ship as of yet, but my former master taught me much about seafaring. I am good with smithing knives, as well."

The man finally raised his head and gazed up at Lythas from his seat at the table. The Lifebearer nearly swooned. He was a Lashran, like Lythas! Well, not completely like Lythas...his large, amber eyes were slit-pupiled and his ears were slightly pointed. Even though he was sitting down, Lythas could tell that he was a very tall man. A Seed producer, then. Lythas gulped and took a deep breath, feeling slightly dizzy. The Sire reminded him of Coren...if Coren had golden eyes and happened to be a Lashran, that is. Looking at him, Lythas could imagine what his master might look like without his beard and mustache.

"What good is knife smithing abilities to me on a ship, lad? It's not as though there is any place to forge them," the Sire said. There was a teasing light in his eyes and he smiled slightly at Lythas.

"I...I suppose you are right, sir," Lythas stammered, trying not to stare. The dark skin at the outer corners of the Sire's eyes crinkled a bit as his smile broadened. Lythas chewed his lip for a moment, unsure of how to proceed. "I know that you want

someone with experience on your ship, sir...but I am a devoted individual, and shall do my very best, if you will just give me a chance!"

The pirate narrowed his eyes in consideration, and Lythas held his breath. He had no idea that Tsabrak was actually a bit stunned by the expression of sincere honesty on his face, and was trying to gather his thoughts and not blabber like an idiot. "Very well, Lythallendar. You have a place on my ship, as a lookout, for now," he finally said.

Lythas let the breath he had been holding rush out of him, and he rolled his eyes in relief and gave the pirate a blatantly thankful smile that made Tsabrak feel dazed again. "I cannot thank you enough!" Lythas said in a voice shaking with relief. He almost began to cry, but checked his emotions and closed his eyes to regain control of himself.

Tsabrak frowned. The poor lad obviously hadn't gotten sleep for sometime. "You know where the Black Cat is docked?" he questioned.

Lythas nodded. "Yes, sir. I saw it on the way here. I shall find an Inn to retire at for the night, and rise with the sun to get there early! You shan't regret this!"

As he turned to leave, Tsabrak stood up. "Hold a moment, Lythallendar," he said.

The Lifebearer stopped and turned to look at him questioningly. In the language that he hadn't spoken in over twenty years, the language of the Lashran, Tsabrak said, "I do not pretend to know what you are running away from, little one, but I'll never forgive myself if harm befalls you. Wait here, and get a refreshment from the Kiosk. You may come with me to my ship tonight and sleep aboard it. It is far safer for an expecting Lifebearer than any of these shady Inns in this area." He watched as Lythallendar lowered his gaze shyly and put a hand over his stomach.

"How did you know?" the young Lashran said in the same language, raising his eyes guardedly.

Tsabrak shrugged. "It was the way you moved, actually. You've been shielding your abdomen with your hand quite often, yet you exhibit no signs of cramps or nausea. It was merely a guess."

Lythas parted his lips and wondered why this Lashran was hiring him. As if reading his thoughts, Tsabrak said, "I've a soft spot for expectant parents in trouble, I suppose. Also, I could use a good mapmaker. Let us hope that you do not let me down, Lythallendar."

Lythas studied the older Lashran's face for any sign of ill intent. Finding none, he nodded slowly. "I shall take your offer, sir. Thank you for your kindness."

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"I normally assign all starting crewmembers a bunk in the common quarters, but for tonight, you may have this suite," said the Captain as he showed Lythas to a cabin

on board. He went in first to light the lantern for the younger Lashran, and Lythas gave him a look of supreme thankfulness.

"I...do not know what to say, sir," the Lifebearer murmured as he set his bag down beside the bed.

"For starters, you can begin to call me Tsabrak...or simply Tsab, as most humans do." the pirate chuckled, "my name seems to be difficult for humans to pronounce."

Lythas smiled. "I understand. My master shortened my name to Lythas. He said that speaking the full name too often made his tongue hurt."

Tsabrak laughed softly, quite taken with this young Lashran's guileless charm. He really was a darling. "Which name would you prefer I call you, little one? By your full name, or the shortened version?"

Lythas blushed and lowered his gaze. "I...would very much like it if you called my Lythas, sir...I mean, Tsab."

Tsabrak smiled gently at the lad, seeing the pain in his emerald gaze that he tried so desperately to hide. "He must have hurt you very badly, Lythas," he whispered, seating himself beside the younger Lashran on the bed.

"He did not mean to...he was shocked by the discovery of what I really am." a snuffle betrayed the younger Lashran, and he began to continuously wipe his eyes with his fingers in a vain attempt to stop the tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Did he discover the truth before or after he impregnated you?" Tsabrak questioned softly, reaching out to pat the lad's shoulder comfortingly.

"After...but I lied to him, you see. I did not tell him the full truth of our kind until I discovered that I was with child." his lower lip trembled, and he stared at the flame burning inside of the lantern.

Tsabrak sighed. Never fall in love with a human. That was his motto. They were a breed apart, and made no sense. Of course, he had himself left the Lashran because they judged him harshly for his personality and love of weaponry, but still...they understood him better than any human. Going out on a limb, he said, "I would very much like to hear your story, Lythas...if you do not mind telling me, that is. Mine is fairly short...the Lashran bored the tears out of me, and I joined a pirate crew and left after being pressured to be more like a proper Lashran. How about it? Care to let your new boss know a bit more about you?" \* I'm fascinated with you, \* Tsabrak nearly said. He clenched his jaw and told himself to shut up.

Lythas looked at him with vulnerable, green eyes and hesitated. "It might make you feel a bit better to confide in someone, dear heart," Tsabrak said gently. "You can lie down while you tell me, if you wish. That is, if you feel comfortable enough with me to tell me."

Lythas nodded and opened up his bag. Tsabrak watched with interest as he pulled out a scrollcase and opened it. He pulled the parchment within out and unrolled it, showing the pirate a drawing of a strikingly handsome human with pale hair and eyes. "This is my former master, Coren. He purchased me at the slave market, where

I nearly was sold to a disgusting man who probably wanted to do things to me that are better left unsaid..." He went on with his story while Tsabrak listened intensely. By the time the Lifebearer was finished, he was clearly half-delirious with sleep and sorrow. Tsabrak coaxed the lad to lie down, and he tucked Lythas in and brushed his hand through his dark curls gently before telling him to get a good night's sleep. Lythas thanked him and rolled onto his side, curling into a half fetal position and resting his cheek on his folded hands.

Tsabrak watched him for a couple of moments before extinguishing the lamp and tiptoeing out of the cabin. Once the door was closed, the Lashran pirate rested his back against it and stared at the ceiling. So much for his plans to seduce Lythas. In the short time he knew the young man, he found himself aching for his pain. He decided that the lad needed support and perhaps comfort, but he would not be a lecher and take advantage of Lythas' fragile state. Humph...he was getting soft, he supposed.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 24*

"Livin' saints, Charlotte...his eyes aren't \* that \* big!" Pete laughed as he looked at the sketch of Lythas his sister had drawn.

She huffed in irritation. "I'd like to see you do a better job, Pete! At any rate, it doesn't have to look just like him...I'm only trying to make a sketch to give folks an idea of what to look for." Nearly a month had passed since Lythas had vanished, and though they had received word that Jahlad Crem had picked up his trail, the sorcerer explained that there was something or someone obscuring it and making it difficult to follow. Coren and Jack were searching up and down the coasts and checking every known pirate haven they could find for any news. She worried that the lad was in captivity...possibly in the hands of another sorcerer. How else was it possible that his trail was so difficult for the Bargel to track him?

Pete snickered. "If we were lookin' for someone that was half-fish, it wouldn't be a problem. Look, ye made his bloody eyes take up half o' his face!"

She sighed and crumbled the parchment. "You're right...I'm no artist. To tell you the truth, I doubt it's possible for anyone to draw or paint a portrait of Lythas that would do him justice. I guess we'll just have to keep describing him to people. It's not like lads with his looks show up every day!" They had found a couple of people who had seen him, of course, but they were unsure of where the Lashran had headed to.

It wasn't until later that day, when Pete was having a drink at the Jade Tiger, that he stumbled across a decent lead. "Did that odd Lashran pirate finally set sail out of town?" a man at the table behind the auction worker was saying. If Pete had been a dog, his ears would have perked up. He went still and quiet, and listened attentively, focusing through the background noise so that he could hear the conversation behind him.

"Aye, he did. His ship is called the 'Black Cat'. I've heard of it before...sleek as a cat, it is, and supposedly as fast as Coren Darshaw's ship. The Captain stopped here to pick up a couple of new crewmembers. I heard he lost two of them in a storm off the southern coast."

There was a shudder in the first speaker's voice as he replied, "I can't imagine anyone wanting to work for one o' those funny lookin' Lashran. I've only met one or two o' them, but they give me the creeps!"

The second speaker's voice became a low growl. "Well, it looks like plenty of folks were willing to work for him. The line was pretty long at his sign up desk. I saw the prettiest little lad there, too. Biggest, deepest green eyes you ever did see, skin as soft and white as cream. He would've made a good bit of sport and profit, if I could've nabbed him. Almost had him, but he made a scene in front o' everyone, and I didn't feel like dealing with it."

The other man snorted. "You and your lads...one o' these days, your wife is gonna find out about you bangin' her little brother, and then there'll be hell to pay. Just stick with the women...causes less talk."

Pete grimaced in revulsion and shut his ears to the rest of the conversation. He had heard enough. It fit perfectly...why shouldn't Lythas sign up to join the crew of a Lashran pirate? Plus, the description the disgusting bastard behind him had given fit nobody in Tariff besides Lythas. The auction worker finished his ale and slunk off silently to tell Charlotte what he had discovered, so that she could get word to Coren to be on the lookout for a ship called the Black Cat.

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Tsabrak was aware that someone was using magical means to try and pinpoint his ship's location, and he had a sneaking suspicion that whomever it was had something to do with Lythas. He had grown quite fond of the lad, in more than just sexual attraction. He wanted to protect the Lifebearer...he didn't feel that his old Master had the right to find him and confuse him, and so he used his own arcane talents and worked a heavy obscuring over his vessel. It would not completely hide them from whoever was scrying them out, but it would certainly make them more difficult to find. It was apparently working well, for he hadn't sensed the presence getting any closer. In fact, upon reaching out briefly with his senses, he discovered quite a bit of frustration coming from the other power. The Sire couldn't help but smirk in triumph over it.

Another month passed, and Lythas had begun to share Tsabrak's quarters. The pirate still had yet to make love to the Lifebearer, for Lythas was unable to forget or stop longing for Coren. Tsabrak had offered his bed to the lad because as Lythas' belly began to get the smallest bit of roundness to it, he started to have trouble sleeping at night. The fact that all of the crewmembers that shared the bunkroom with him snored their bloody heads off all night did not help matters. Out of concern for the lad's well being (and, he admitted, the desire to hold him at night), Tsabrak insisted that Lythas move his things to his cabin.

"I cannot kick the Cook or the Navigator out of their cabins, and you are clearly not getting the rest that you and your little one need, Lythas," he had explained when the Lifebearer looked reluctant. "I promise you...I shall not lay an improper finger on your person. Please, just let me help you, Lythas. You've done an excellent job so far, despite the morning sickness you hide from the others so well." Seeing Lythas blush modestly at the compliment gratified him.

"Very well...I shall...sleep with you," the lad said quietly. Though he felt bad for it, Tsabrak thought it was the perfect way to begin courting the pretty Lifebearer. He still found it a bit odd that he wasn't the slightest bit put off by the fact that another man's child was growing within the younger Lashran. He even considered adopting the baby when it was born, if things went well with he and Lythas. It wasn't as if the Lifebearer could not produce offspring of Tsabrak's siring after recovering from the birth of this one...he could sense how fertile Lythas was. Tsabrak had to force himself to stop looking so far into the future. His Lashran appetites were clearly getting the better of him, and he was getting too caught up in the idea of Lythas bonding with him.

He took it slowly as days passed. He started off just lying beside Lythas and conversing pleasantly with him each night. It frustrated him to hear the Lifebearer

moan Coren's name in his sleep, and he longed to wipe that name from the lad's rosebud lips. When Lythas awoke crying, Tsabrak would put his arms around him and rub his back soothingly until he fell asleep again. He began to stroke the lad's soft hair at night, holding him lovingly and murmuring promises that a better future awaited him. Lythas quietly snuggled into the Sire's warm embrace, unable to deny how attractive Tsabrak was, or the way his body responded to the older Lashran. Despite this, he couldn't bring himself to feel anything more than fond friendship towards Tsab. He still loved Coren Darshaw with all his aching heart.

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Tsabrak's firm, silken lips caressed Lythas' as they kissed goodnight. The Lifebearer really wasn't surprised when the other Lashran carefully and gently pushed his tongue between his lips and stroked the inside of his mouth with it. Lythas responded to the kiss automatically, and he gasped when Tsabrak's hand slid beneath his nightshirt and the fingers glided up and down his rounding belly. The touch was more sensual than he would have thought such a simple caress could be, and he sprung to hardness. Tsabrak smiled. The area around the belly button was an erotic zone for pregnant Lashran. He had more experience in lovemaking with his own kind than Lythas, and he used it to his advantage as he stroked and kneaded the silken roundness possessively.

Confused by how wanton and strangely submissive Tsabrak's gliding fingers were making him feel, Lythas moaned softly and tried to pull himself together. His mind kept imagining that it was Coren's hand lovingly stroking the flesh that housed his unborn child, and he whimpered as Tsabrak lowered his lips to his collarbone and licked the skin there. "Rest easy, lovely one," purred the Sire as he continued to coax Lythas' young body to surrender. His breath became ragged with desire too long unsatisfied. He rolled Lythas onto his back and slid one knee between his silk-clad thighs, still moving his fingertips in circular patterns over his stomach. "So beautiful," Tsabrak said as he stared down at the lad.

Lythas couldn't stop himself from arching his back. His body begged for more, though his mind shouted with alarm. "I want to make love to you, my stunning Lifebearer," Tsabrak said in an unsteady, passion filled murmur. He began to unbutton Lythas' pajamas with one hand, while the other continued to stroke his belly.

Lythas closed his eyes as his shirt was opened and the cool night air caressed his flesh. Tsabrak's warm mouth kissed up and down his chest, latching onto a nipple once in a while and teasing it to hardness. The Lifebearer realized what was happening, and his heart urged his lips to speak a denial. His body trembled with pleasure and need at the Sire's skilled touch, and his mouth would not obey his mind's frantic pleas to speak up and put a stop to this. A low moan escaped his lips as Tsabrak pulled his bottoms down to expose his erection. Lythas gasped as Tsabrak's hand began to massage his swollen manhood. His hips undulated and his head tossed from side to side.

Tsabrak purred again and began to work at removing his own clothing, careful to continue his ministrations of the lad's groin with one hand so that he didn't have time to think through the pleasure. The Sire was very good at touching Lythas in spots that were over-sensitive from his pregnancy. Tsabrak's raging desire for the Lifebearer blinded him to the realization that he was practically raping the lad. He touched the spot between the base of Lythas' penis and his scrotum, moving his fingers in a circular pattern. The Lifebearer's tight entrance became moist with the



stimulation, and his breath came out in pants. It wasn't until Tsabrak was positioned on top of Lythas, with his hard, aching manhood pressing against the Lifebearer's entrance, that the pirate realized how wrong this was of him. He saw the way Lythas closed his emerald eyes in helpless resignation, saw the tears that leaked out from the corners of his eyes.

Tsabrak groaned and rested his forehead against Lythas' naked shoulder. How did he become such a thoughtless monster, to take advantage of the lad's weaknesses and try to force himself on him? "Oh, Lythallendar...forgive me," he murmured shakenly, removing his weight from the Lifebearer's body. "I should have paid more attention to you...should have realized that your heart does not want this." He carefully rearranged the younger Lashran's clothes and caressed his face.

Lythas opened his eyes and gazed up at him with an expression of relief. "I am the one who is sorry, Tsabrak. I...desire your touch...I truly do, but I cannot give you more than that. I feel that I would be betraying Coren if I coupled with you fully. You have been so good to me, and so patient...I wish that I could give you what you need." he reached up and touched the Sire's face, cupping his cheek with his soft palm. Tsabrak turned his head and nuzzled the elegant hand, and he tried to fight the lump that was forming in his throat. How wonderfully forgiving the young Lifebearer was!

"Your Coren is a bloody fool, darling one," murmured the Sire as he kissed Lythas' palm almost feverishly. "Would you...allow me to pleasure you, then? To touch you, and give your body the care it deserves? I shall understand if you say nay, Lythallendar."

Lythas bit his lip and nodded. He could allow Tsabrak to touch him, if it would make the pirate happy. He had to admit, nobody had ever found so many pleasure points on his young body as Tsabrak had...he was still aroused from it. Tsabrak kissed him tenderly, and Lythas murmured, "Wouldn't it help you more if I touched you?"

Tsabrak smiled at him. "Little one, you do not seem to realize just how much pleasure it brings to others to feel you writhe against them and moan in pleasure. I came awfully close to reaching my peak, just by watching your face and touching you. Please, just let me give you bliss, beautiful Lifebearer." Lythas nodded in acceptance, and Tsabrak eagerly showed the Lifebearer just how good he was at touching pleasure points. Within moments, Lythas was crying out in a quivering voice and moving restlessly against the pirate. Tsabrak felt love swell in his breast, and he hid his face in the Lifebearer's soft hair to hide the tears that came to his eyes. He wished Coren Darshaw was dead.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 25*

It was a mistake for Jahlad to give both Charlotte and Coren a communication pendant...he saw that, now. The sorcerer's head throbbed with the two presences simultaneously demanding he speak to them at once. "They are going to make my poor head split in twain!" wailed the wizard. Charlotte had called to him first, so he enacted the enchantment on the left side of his own pendant and opened up a portal that would take him to her immediately (once he had an established customer, he always put a dweomer on his pendant which would enable him to teleport directly to them, to save himself the energy of casting the spell over and over again). As it usually did when Charlotte summoned him, the doorway politely appeared in front of him, and it did not throw him through or drop him at her feet.

He stepped out of the portal and brushed his robes in dignified patience as she turned around to face him. "My brother has found a lead, Master Crem!" Her eyes were dancing with excitement; "he overheard someone talking about Lythas at the Jade Tiger. He's apparently taken up with a Lashran pirate that stopped into town to get new crewmembers. The ship is called the 'Black Cat'. Ever heard of it?"

Jahlad made an "O" with his mouth. It all made sense, now! "Indeed, I have. The Captain is a Lashran by the name of Tsabrak, and he has sorcerous powers of his own. I shall inform Coren immediately, and begin my efforts anew. Thank you for this information, Lady Charlotte. It is immensely helpful to our cause." he didn't want to admit just how befuddled he had been becoming at his difficulty in pinpointing Lythas...it was embarrassing that he hadn't thought of the mage-pirate before this, given the missing lad's origins. He enacted the other side of his pendant to open the portal leading to Coren, and disappeared through the floor with a shout as the treacherous doorway typically opened up beneath his feet.

Coren was pacing back and forth in the cabin and glancing at the clock on the wall as he waited for Jahlad to answer his summons. He heard the crackle of magic and saw the flash of light above his head, and the pirate gracefully sidestepped to avoid the falling sorcerer. Jahlad crashed to the floor with a cry and lay there in a daze for a moment as the portal shut above him. "I really must find a way to fix that," he groaned, rolling over onto his back.

"Well? Have you learned anything more, yet?" Coren snapped, giving no consideration to the fall the Bargel had just suffered.

Jahlad indignantly picked himself up off the floor and brushed his hands down his robes to clear away any dust that clung to them. "Yes. In fact, your lady friend and her brother have discovered where your lad can be found. He is out to sea with another Lashran...a pirate named Tsabrak. The ship we must find is called the Black Cat. You must be cautious, lord Darshaw. I know of this Tsabrak...he has natural sorcery powers, meaning he has never had the need to train in them, as most humans must. He seems to know that someone is trying to locate Lythas, and he has been doing a damned fine job of obscuring his location from my sight. This is merely a hunch, but he might have taken a fancy to your lad and wishes to keep him from being found. Evidently, Lythas went to him for a job, and possibly to get out of Tariff."

Coren closed his eyes as his heart sank. So, Lythas was with one of his own kind, now. Was it even worth the effort to find the Lashran anymore? Would his lover even want to look at him, now that he had someone who likely didn't yell at him to get out of his life and make him feel like a freak? The weapons dealer went still with shock as something happened that he had not experienced since he was thirteen years old and his mother died. A tear crept down his cheek. Embarrassed, he scrubbed his eyes vigorously and cleared his throat.

Jahlad wisely did not say anything about the pirate's unusual display of emotion. Instead, he said kindly, "From what Charlotte has told me, your Lashran is very loyal to you, and he loves you dearly. I truly do not think he would willingly bed another man so soon." He realized that last sentence should probably not have been spoken, for Coren's steely eyes flashed with fury at the insinuation that Lythas might be raped. "Is he...carrying your child, lord Darshaw?" the sorcerer quickly asked, to steer the situation around.

Coren's anger thawed, and his shoulders slumped with guilt. "Aye. It was me finding out that drove him to leave. I didn't know squat about Lashran physiology, and when Lythas told me the truth about himself and revealed his condition, I blew up like a ranting, selfish fool." he shouldn't be speaking of this, he realized, but he had to get it off of his chest. Something about the sorcerer made him feel safe in speaking of his feelings. "I've probably lost him forever. I basically called him a 'thing' and cast him aside in disgust. I know that if it were myself in his situation, I would hate a person that treated me that way...lover or not."

Jahlad smiled. "Ah, but you are a different person than your young Lashran, Coren. From what I've gathered, Lythas has a generous, sweet nature, and isn't given to strong feelings of hatred. Do not give up hope just yet. He may forgive you."

Coren grimaced, embarrassed that he had let himself go. "Well, the question now is, what shall we do? I have a name, at least, but I've never heard of this Tsabrak or the Black Cat before today. I'm not sure where to begin my search."

Jahlad tapped his fingertips together. "I am not surprised that you've not heard of him before. His usual routes are centered in the Storm Seas, to the west. I may be able to discover where his ship is bound to next, by travelling to his last known stop. It shall be easier to track him that way than to try and scry out his ship's location, I think. I'm quite shocked that a natural would have the control of his powers that Tsabrak has exhibited." seeing the pirate becoming impatient, he said, "I shall travel the ethereal and go to the Warfs of Tariff first. That is where he was last seen, that I know of. It should be easy for me to sneak into the seamaster's office and find the files, if I am in astral form."

Coren merely nodded, having learned something of astral travel from past dealings with the Bargel. The astral plane was a mirror of the physical one. Anything that existed in the physical world also existed in the astral. It was not safe, however. There were beings on the astral plane that a novice would be helpless against, and even a wizard as powerful as Jahlad would be putting himself at risk traveling through the realm. "How much will this excursion cost?" he questioned, knowing that the danger the Bargel was putting himself in to find this information would raise the price of his services.

Jahlad waved a hand dismissively. "I've done a poor job of tracking your Lashran down so far, lord Darshaw. This one is on the house." he flushed in embarrassment

at the weapons dealer's look of surprise. Yes, it was unprecedented that a Bargel put himself through added danger at no extra cost...bad job or no. Jahlad felt that it was worth it, however. He had a soft spot for lovers who were torn apart, having been through something similar in his youth and never been reunited with the lady he had loved. If he could help make this happen for Coren and his Lashran lover, he felt he would in part be making up for his own past failure.

Clearing his throat, he said, "If you don't mind me lying on the floor in here, I shall begin right now."

Coren shrugged. "As you wish...but would a bed not be more comfortable for you?"

Jahlad nodded. "Yes, quite...but then I might simply fall asleep, instead of going into an astral trance, as I need to." he grinned, and Coren rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Just be sure that my body is undisturbed. Lock the door, and if you see me choking or if I begin to sound as though I am in pain, shake me awake quickly. Some twitching is normal, of course. When I begin to twitch, it is a sign that I am returning to my body."

Coren nodded and went to the door. He opened it and poked his head out to speak with Jack and tell him what was going to be happening. Jack looked incredulous. "You're both of you crackers," the burly pirate said with a sigh. "Don't worry, though. I'll guard out here and make sure nobody so much as knocks on the door." Coren thanked him and closed the door, locking it behind him.

He watched Jahlad lie down on the floor and spread his arms and legs as if making a snow angel. Just before the sorcerer closed his eyes, Coren said, "Do be careful, Mr. Crem." A nod was his only response before the wizard put himself into a deep trance and slowed his breathing to barely a whisper.

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Jahlad took the easiest route that he knew, floating low on the currents to avoid confrontation with the higher, more powerful astral residents. Not all of them were hostile, of course, but enough were that he did not feel like risking a meeting with any of them. Fortunately, he did not meet any hostiles on the way to his destination. He always preferred it that way, as astral battles drained him badly. He located the office that he was searching for, and he stepped into it and searched the room. His eyes rested on what could only be the filing cabinet, and his ghostly lips pulled up into a smile.

He moved towards it, and when he was within one foot of it, a low growl made his phantom hairs rise on the back of his neck. A very large, very sleek black panther appeared in front of the cabinet and regarded him with warning, golden eyes. "I have nothing against you personally, but if you value your limbs, you will not come closer," those feline eyes seemed to say. The sorcerer's heart sank. He had hoped that Tsabrak did not possess the discipline necessary to create a warder. It wasn't uncommon for magicians wishing to cover their tracks from other magic users to create a manifestation of their totem animals to guard from astral spies. The being was powerful. It would drain him to fight it.

"Nice kitty," he said a bit nervously. The cat sat back on its haunches and began to bath its paws with its huge, pink tongue. Though the gesture was a casual one, the golden eyes stayed trained on him. There was really no hope in trying to reason with

it. It was not truly a creature at all, but a manifestation of the caster's will. Jahlad worked the problem over in his head, trying to deduce the best way to proceed.

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Coren watched tensely as Jahlad's breath quickened, and he wondered if he ought to wake him. The weapons dealer called for patience and waited, hoping that he would not be forced to interrupt the sorcerer's task. Jahlad's breathing continued to quicken, and Coren thought he heard the wizard mumble something that sounded arcane to him. The pirate's eyes widened as four long, parallel lines of blood spread diagonally down the Bargel's robe. Coren clenched his fists and fought the temptation to shake the man wildly. Jahlad had not begun to choke or make any other sounds that would indicate a losing battle.

To Coren's relief, the sorcerer's breathing slowly regulated, and his body began to twitch slightly. Whatever had caused that claw wound had been conquered...either that, or Jahlad was fleeing for his life. The sorcerer finally opened his eyes and sat up with a gasp. He winced and touched the bloody scratch across his torso. Coren squatted down beside him and squeezed his shoulder. "Want me to fetch the medic to see to that?" he questioned.

Jahlad shook his head. "No, it is only a phantom wound...see?" he pulled his robes aside and showed Coren, and the pirate swore in bewilderment. Though there was blood on the sorcerer's skin, there were no signs at all of a wound. He decided he did not understand astral travel as much as he had thought.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Our friend apparently knew that Lythas was fleeing something. He covered his tracks well...set a guardian to stop anyone who tried to get to the paperwork that tells where all of the currently docked ships were bound to next. I won the fight, however." he smiled proudly. "I could not destroy the apparition, but I managed to cage it long enough to get the information I needed. The Black Cat's next stop was scheduled three days ago, in Valkyrie Falls. If we hurry, we could intercept it."

Coren smiled and stroked his beard. Yes...Valkyrie Falls was a mere two days south of where they were. He felt confident that this Tsabarak would not be travelling backwards. The Black Cat was heading straight for the Falcon Wing. Finally, what he was after was nearly in his grasp, again. He tried not to worry about whether his prey would struggle or embrace his grasp. \* I am coming for you, Lythas. I shall not let you go again, \* Coren vowed silently.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 26*

Tsabrak stared down at the sleeping face of the Lifebearer and caressed his cheek. His hand strayed down to the mound of Lythas' belly, which was becoming more and more pronounced each week. He estimated that the younger Lashran's child would come within another three months, at most. He kissed the lad's sweet lips and whispered an endearment to him, then got out of bed to dress and make his nightly rounds on deck.

It was a good thing that he decided to do so, for nearly the moment he stepped onto the deck, the lookout gave a shrill whistle and snapped the shutter on his hooded lantern open and closed to communicate with the other crewmembers. There was another ship ahead...a large one. Tsabrak nimbly climbed to the crow's nest and joined the lookout. "Do they have their flag raised yet, Tom?" he questioned.

"No sir...not that I can tell. It's a battle vessel, for certain, though. Don't know if she's another pirate ship or a coastal guard."

Tsabrak took the spyglass from his crewman and looked for himself. It was a formidable vessel, to be sure. He could not tell yet what materials she was made of. Heavy enough to take a beating, yet sleek enough to maneuver well in the waters and move at high speeds, the ship was steadily bearing down on the Black Cat. Tsabrak could tell the instant the other ship spotted his, for a flag began to raise on the mast. He adjusted the lens of the spyglass and peered at the emblem. It was a pirate ship. There was an embroidered image of a striking falcon on the flag. The Lashran pressed his lips together in a thin line. There was no doubt about it...Coren Darshaw was coming for Lythas.

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If Jahlad hadn't told Coren that the Black Cat was truly as dark as its name implied, he might have passed right by the vessel without seeing it. As it was, he saw something that he at first thought was an oddly shaped island in the water a few miles to the east, and on impulse, looked through the spyglass. What he had thought at first to be trees was actually the ship's sails. She was as black in coloring as the night sky, making her effectively camouflaged from all but those passing right by her or those who knew what to look for. "Raise the flag, lads! The Black Cat is ahead!" the weapons dealer hollered.

He was spoiling for a fight, but he knew that Lythas was aboard that elegant, sensual ship, and he wanted no harm to come to his lover. "Prepare the cannons...we'll fire a warning shot off the prow of her magazine if she doesn't raise a flag of surrender!" he ordered. Jack repeated his command in his baritone bellow, and crewmembers scurried to comply. As the Falcon drew nearer, Coren could see that this was most definitely the correct ship. The head of the prow was designed to look like a snarling, black panther's head. This was it. The next few moments were going to be the most important ones in Coren's life.

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Tsabrak gave his orders to his second in command and rushed below deck to check on Lythas. The insulated lower deck thankfully blocked out most of the shouts of his men above, and the Lifebearer was still sleeping peacefully when he entered the cabin. He approached the bed and whispered, "I am sorry that I must do this, sweet one. It is for your own good." Then he focused his mind and whispered a soft incantation, placing his palm over the younger Lashran's forehead. When he was finished, he stroked the lad's dark curls and kissed his pouting lips. The enchantment would stop Lythas from waking up, unless water touched the lad's skin. Tsabrak did not want Lythas to know about Coren coming for him, if he could avoid it...but he made certain that the spell would break so that Lythas could swim if the worst happened and the ship began to sink.

When he came back on deck, it was to the sight of the Falcon Wing firing a cannon. He did not flinch, for he could tell by the angle that the shot was meant as a warning. A great splash arose from where the cannonball landed in the water, mere yards from the prow of the Cat. "Do we parlay?" questioned Tom as Tsab came to his side.

The Lashran narrowed his golden eyes. On the one hand, he could play dirty and order a full-fledged assault on the other ship while it's Captain awaited his response. His magical powers could give him a further advantage. On the other hand, though he felt an unreasonable hatred towards the owner of the Falcon, he also admired him for his relentless pursuit. There was also the love that Lythas bore towards Coren Darshaw to think on. Tsabrak could not in good conscience kill the man who fathered Lythas' baby...not if he could help it. "Yes," he finally replied. "We shall parley with them. Bring her closer so that the Captain and I can have a word with one another without straining our voices overmuch."

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"They agree to parley, lad!" shouted Jack, though Coren was only standing a few feet away from him and saw the signal flare as well.

The weapons dealer nodded curtly. "Be ready for any tricks he might pull. The Captain can use magic," he ordered. Beside him, Jahlad nodded in approval at his caution. The Bargel stood ready, prepared to attempt to counter any magicks the Lashran pirate might throw at them. He prayed that Tsabrak was an honorable man...he was still drained from his astral battle.

As the other ship drew near, Coren could make out a tall, long muscled form at the railing. He knew instinctively that it was Tsabrak. The moon-pale hair and glow of yellow eyes gave the Lashran away. "I know what it is you want, Coren Darshaw," the Lashran shouted. "I cannot in good conscience let you have it!"

Coren bristled at the impudent tone, and Jack slapped his axe handle in his hand and growled. "It is not your decision, I'm afraid," Coren hollered in response, "You've stolen something that doesn't belong to you."

Tsabrak laughed then. "Oh? I was told you gave him his freedom and cast him aside like an old pair of shoes, Darshaw! What right do you claim to have over the lad, now that you've changed your mind?"

Coren grit his teeth. "The right of a my unborn child, Lashran. Either bring Lythas up and allow him to make the choice himself, or we do battle. If you refuse, I shall take it as a sign that you are holding him prisoner, and things could get quite bloody." His

voice did not betray the raging emotions he felt. It was the hardest thing he had ever done, to let what he wanted hang in the balance of a "Yay" or "Nay" from another person...regardless that the other person was indeed what he was after in the first place. He tried not to think of what he would do if Lythas chose not to return to him.

Tsabrak silently applauded the other pirate. How clever, to put him on the spot like that. He should have simply refused to parley and started the battle. Thinking quickly, he yelled, "It's a fine ship, you have there. She's a real beauty."

Coren nodded in acknowledgement. "The same can be said of yours. Is this pretty talk leading somewhere constructive, or are we to chat about wallpaper and furniture next?" Several men on both ships roared with laughter.

Tsabrak chuckled in spite of himself. Darshaw was cunning and witty; he would have to give him that. "Of course. My point is that it would be a shame to damage either vessel, when this could be handled with a duel. What say you, Coren Darshaw? Shall you and I settle this dispute, one on one?" Silence descended as the crew of both ships waited tensely for Coren to answer.

Coren shrugged at Jack. Why not? "Very well. What do you propose the rules to be?"

Tsabrak gave this some thought, then said, "I shall come to your ship, and you send your second in command over to mine. This should assure no ill behavior from either of us. You get the better deal, by far, Darshaw."

Coren raised his eyebrows. Yes, he did get the better deal. He could easily take the captain of the Cat hostage if Tsabrak's men tried anything. It gave him an advantage. "What's his angle?" he murmured out the corner of his mouth.

Jack shrugged. "No idea, lad. It's your call. I'll do whatever you suggest."

"I shall take your offer, Tsabrak. I am sending my co-captain across." Coren shouted.

The exchange was made, and Coren sized up his opponent as the Lashran stood before him on the deck of the Falcon. He was as tall as Coren, though not as muscular. "Rules of engagement?" he questioned warily as the golden eyes looked at him in assessment.

"The rules are that nobody joins in, from either side," replied the Lashran. "No striking from behind, no groin shots. I cannot equal your skill with the sword," he gave a respectful bow, which Coren returned, "yet you have no magic powers. I believe a handicap is in order for both of us."

Coren narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Aye. I shall fight with my right hand, which is my weak one. You will not use magic."

Tsabrak closed his eyes and reached his senses out, and Coren held still, understanding that the Lashran was using his powers to detect whether or not he was lying. Apparently satisfied, Tsabrak gave a curt nod. "Agreed. Shall we?" and he drew his saber.



Coren likewise drew his rapier and switched it to his weak hand. Both men drew their parrying daggers next. "We will begin when Jahlad gives us the word to," said Coren. Tsabrak nodded in agreement.

The Bargel shrugged and said, "Er...commence."

Coren immediately dodged to the left as Tsabrak stabbed at him with lightning-quick speed. He returned the attack, drawing his rapier savagely down to the left, then up to the right. The Lashran barely managed to dance aside and reflect the blade with his dagger. Coren understood the Sire's weakness, now. He was very fast with his attacks, but his defense reflexes were off. Not slow, exactly...just confused. The weapons dealer noticed a barely perceptible limp in the Lashran's right leg. An old wound, perhaps. It caused Tsabrak to be a tad heavier on his feet than desired for a good defense.

The Lashran whipped around in a circle, launching a double attack with his saber and dagger, which nicked Coren on the arm. The weapons dealer responded with a diving roll that put him behind Tsabrak. The Lashran nimbly leaped into the air as Coren's blade swished at his legs. "Oohs" and "Aaahs" were sighed by the gathered pirate crew as they watched the two combatants dance to the deadly music of battle. Several times, their weapons locked and threw sparks.

Coren got passed the Lashran's guard and punched him in the eye, making him reel. Jack hooted so loudly that it sounded as if the burly man were still on the falcon, instead of across the water on the Cat. The weapons dealer grinned. Already, Tsabrak's left eye was swelling shut, marring the beauty of the golden orb. His grin became an "O" of surprise as the Lashran's foot snapped up impossibly high and kicked him square in the forehead.

Both pirate lords were swaying slightly as they faced off again. "Good hit," muttered Coren in approval, seeing black spots.

"Yours wasn't bad, either," complimented Tsabrak as his left eye closed completely.

They circled one another and seemed to move in unison, coming together almost like lovers, then parting and searching for weaknesses in each other's defense. Coren found an opening, and was prepared to take it, when a blast suddenly rocked his ship and lit the night sky up. "You deceitful bastard!" he growled at Tsabrak, automatically assuming the shot had come from the Black Cat.

The Lashran wasn't paying attention to him. Instead his impaired golden gaze searched the waters to the southwest, where his sensitive ears had deduced it to come from. "Fuck!" He hissed. "The coastal guard!"

Another blast struck, sending men and splintered wood flying through the air. Coren immediately put his weapon away and began to shout orders. Jack stood on the deck of the Cat as the other ship's crew immediately began to move to return fire on the attacking vessel as Tsabrak hollered orders to them.

Both pirate ships were caught off guard and surrounded silently by four of the Kings own fleet. The Black Cat hadn't taken any hits, and Coren signaled to Jack and hollered, "Keep Lythas safe, no matter what!"

During that moment of desperate battle, Coren and Tsabrak forgot their differences and worked together in the spirit of a mutual bond of piracy. Tsabrak gave the navigation crew orders to turn the vessel, while Coren prepared the cannon crew to fire. There was no time to see to the wounded.

Jahlad looked around with gears turning in his head. He turned to Tsabrak and cried, "Call the wind! Get your ship out of here, whilst I call the water and attempt to capsize the enemies!" The Lashran nodded in understanding and began his chant, and the Bargel sorcerer's voice rose in his own wailing calls for the surrounding water to rise against the threat.

On board the Black Cat, Jack had assumed command immediately, and the crew did not argue with him, for Tsabrak signaled for them to obey the burly pirate. Jack swore in surprise when a fierce wind blew from the west and filled the sails of the Cat. The vessel groaned in protest and the prow dipped in the water as it caught the air and moved violently away from the commotion.

Meanwhile, Coren's ship had blasted a hole through the poop deck of the nearest patrol ship, and it was sufficient to handicap the vessel slightly. Jahlad's chant rose to a crescendo, and a wall of water rose outwards from the Falcon, making the vessel bob violently. With a shout, the Bargel propelled the wave towards two of the attacking vessels. Screams were heard as the small tidal wave caught two of the King's vessels and washed over them. The magical attack sufficiently capsized one of them and broke the mast of the other.

Coren winced as another cannon struck the Falcon and a half a dozen of his men were tossed overboard or killed from the impact. He looked to Jahlad and said, "Can you get some wind into our sails, Bargel?"

The sorcerer was on his knees, panting from exertion. He looked up at Coren apologetically and shook his head. "I am sorry, my friend. That last spell nearly drained me to the point of passing out," he panted.

Coren squinted in the direction of the Black Cat, which was quickly dwindling from sight. He took comfort that at least Lythas and Jack could escape this mess. Turning to the owner of the sleek, black ship, he said, "It looks as though neither of us will claim Lythas," with a sour smirk.

Tsabrak pointed wordlessly towards the deeper waters. Two more of the King's fleet had sailed in, and they were attempting to follow the Cat. Coren swore. "Do not worry," Tsabrak said, "The Black Cat has gotten far enough ahead that they will not catch up to them...they may continue to follow the trail, however. I am more concerned with us, at present."

The night sky was filled with cannon smoke and orange light as the Falcon Wing exchanged fire with the uncrippled two coastal patrol ships. "You know what they'll do if they capture us," Coren said grimly.

The Lashran nodded. King Stephen was none too lenient on captured pirates. Days of torture awaited them, followed by public flogging, being put on display in the stocks, and eventually, either a hanging or being burned alive. "I shall call the wind, as I did for the Cat. If we are fortunate, the ship will hold together long enough for us to gain a lead away from them," Tsabrak said.

Coren shook his head and stared at the Lashran with intense eyes, and Tsabrak tilted his head to the side in puzzlement. Both men paid no attention as another section of the ship was splintered by a hit from yet another cannonball. "You can teleport yourself, can't you?" the weapons dealer questioned.

Tsabrak frowned. "Yes...I can, but what good will that do for you and your crew?"

Those blue eyes did not lose their determination. "Absolutely none...but it will save you. Somebody has to look after Lythas. If it cannot be me, then I would prefer for it to be you. I know he'll be well cared for, Lashran."

Tsabrak shook his head. "No, Darshaw. I cannot abandon you and your crew. I misjudged you. We will face this together."

Coren made a slashing motion with his hand. "Dammit, Tsabrak...don't you see? One of us has to survive! Think about Lythas!"

The Lashran stood torn, biting his lip in a manner that reminded Coren so much of Lythas that a lump formed in his throat. "Go! Look after my Lythallendar and child, Lashran!" he growled, curling his hands into fists.

He was surprised when those golden eyes (or at least the one that wasn't swelled shut) filled with tears. Tsabrak nodded. "Very well, Coren Darshaw. If I can find some way to come for you and save you, I will. I give you my oath." He turned his back on the weapons dealer and took a deep, shuddering breath, then began his spell.

Coren waited until the tall, elegant form dissolved in the night air (he wondered how it was the Lashran did not need a doorway as Jahlad did), before turning to the Bargel. "You should take that particular exit yourself, wizard," he stated.

Jahlad briefly touched the pendant round his neck. "I may be able to get another spell off, to give you and your crew time," he said.

Coren shook his head. "There's nothing more that you can do. Gate back to Charlotte and tell her what's happened. They'll probably take me to the capitol, if they catch me alive. I intend to make it damned hard on them. Tell her if she can organize a way to spring me, it's all well and good, but don't let her take unnecessary risks!"

The wizard nodded sadly. "Do not throw your life away, lord Darshaw. We shall find a way to free you. Survive, for the sake of your lover and unborn child. I will speak with my guild."

Coren nodded and forced a smile. "I'll see what I can do about living through this, if you insist. Your words give me hope."

With one more, worried look at Coren and his embattled crew, Jahlad touched his pendant, and predictably, the glowing doorway opened beneath his feet and sucked him down. He had become so used to the mistreatment of the portal that this time, he didn't cry out as he fell through. With a sigh, Coren steeled himself for what was to come and turned to shout orders to his crew.

~\*\*\*\*\*~

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 27*

Tsabrak materialized on the deck of his ship, startling Jack so badly that the burly man nearly let go of his hold on the rope controlling the mainsail. "What the fuck?!" the big man's customary exclamation of surprise shot out of his mouth to greet the Lashran.

Tsabrak ignored him and went straight to Tom. "We have work to do, lad," the Lashran said. He explained to his crew what had transpired, and Jack growled low in his throat, his black eyes narrowed in anger.

"You filth! You snuck off like a coward and left Coren to die!" the burly pirate yelled, but before he could launch himself at the elegant Sire, there were several pointed and sharp weapons resting against his chest and throat. He glared at Tsabrak as the Lashran looked to him.

"It was not my decision, old sea dog. Your brave friend demanded that I leave, so that Lythas would have someone to care for him if Coren himself perishes. Rest easy...I have no intention of allowing Darshaw to be executed, if I can help it. The question is, will you help me, or would you rather continue this fracas to its final stupidity?"

Jack forced himself to relax. Tsabrak was right, of course...and it sounded like something Coren would do, demanding the Lashran save himself like that. The weapons dealer's honorable way of handling things had always confounded the big man. "Alright...we'll play this your way for now. Where is Lythas, anyway?"

Tsabrak glanced towards the door that led below. "He is safe in my cabin. Asleep."

Jack scowled. He guessed the Lifebearer was not asleep by natural means. "Well, maybe you should wake him up and let him know what's going on, don't you think?" the burly pirate said in a sarcastic tone.

Tsabrak nodded and turned away. Jack looked around himself at the men who were still holding cutlasses, daggers, rapiers and sabers to his throat. "Don't you think you can put those away now, lads?" he snorted.

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"Wake up, sweet Lifebearer," murmured Tsabrak, brushing his hands across Lythas' closed eyes.

Lythas stirred and slowly lifted his lids and gazed up at Tsabrak with a sleepy, emerald gaze. "Have I overslept?" he murmured with a yawn, thinking that he was supposed to be on deck with the rest of the crew. The long-lashed eyes widened as he noticed the black and swollen state of Tsabrak's eye.

Tsabrak smiled gently. "Nay, sweet one. I...have some grave news to tell you. Your Coren came for you. I put a sleep spell on you, thinking that it would be best if you did not know about it," tears began to form in the Sire's eyes, and he took a deep breath and blinked rapidly. "Forgive me, Lythallendar. If I had just allowed you to

make your own choice, you might be happily on your way home with your master, and we would not have been distracted and been on our way before the coastal guard came..."

The green eyes widened, and Lythas sat bolt upright and grabbed both of Tsabrak's shoulders. "What are you saying to me? Where is Coren?" he asked in a shaking voice. His expression was both confused and alarmed.

Tsabrak told him all of what had transpired, and by the time he was finished, he worried for the Lifebearer's health. Lythas was pasty white, and his delicate lips worked as tears filled his eyes. "Oh, how could you?!" the lad cried, shaking all over as he gave the Sire a betrayed look.

Tsabrak bowed his head. "I deserve your hatred, Lythas. It was not right of me to try and make your decisions for you. I let my selfish desire for you control my actions, though at the time, I was telling myself that I was acting in your best interests. Please...I shall do whatever it takes to gain your forgiveness, Lythas! Just tell me, and I will do it!"

"Help me save him, Tsabrak," Lythas said without missing a beat.

Tsabrak nodded. "Yes, of course! I shall find a way to free him. I know where they will take him."

"I am coming with you."

Tsabrak paled. "No...Lythas, I cannot allow you to go into danger like this...not in your condi-"

"I said, I am coming with you!" those expressive, emerald eyes were determined, and the Lifebearer's delicate jaw was clenched. "Must I blacken your other eye to make myself clear?"

Tsabrak recoiled from the uncharacteristic outburst. Seeing the pain and worry in the Lifebearer's deep eyes, he realized that Lythas had finally been pushed over the edge, with this news. He sighed and ached to take the younger Lashran into his arms. It was so unfair, that Lythas was pushed to this point...and it was all his fault. "Very well, dear one. I shall take you with me. I want you to promise that you won't take part in any fighting unless it is absolutely necessary, however."

Lythas pursed his lips. "If I see anyone trying to harm Coren, I shall attack them, Tsab."

Tsabrak smiled crookedly. "I've no doubt that you will. That falls under the 'necessary' category, of course."

The Lifebearer lowered his gaze and bit his lip. His heart aching, Tsabrak dared to squeeze Lythas' shoulder before standing up and turning to leave the room. "Tsabrak?" said Lythas softly. The pirate turned around wordlessly, his amber eyes questioning. "I forgive you."

Tsabrak smiled, feeling the tension drain from him. He bowed gracefully and did not try to hide the tears that rose in his eyes. "Thank you, little one. You truly are a wonder. Coren is a very lucky man."

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Jahlad gave Charlotte and Pete the unhappy news, and the two immediately began making contacts and gathering people who might be willing to help rescue Coren. The Bargel went to his guild and asked for aid in the matter. He wasn't really surprised when aid was refused, but on the bright side, they didn't forbid him from trying to help. He rested up as much as he could, for as soon as Charlotte and Pete gathered all the men and women that they could, it would fall on Jahlad's shoulders to teleport them, all of them, to a location near Cothmere, the capitol. He prayed he wouldn't botch the spell and send them all hurtling into the ocean, or worse.

He managed to contact Tsabrak through the astral plane. He thought about trying a mind link with the Lashran, but that would have been too draining...not to mention dangerous. Tsabrak's thought patterns may have very well made the Bargel go insane, had he linked with him.

It was really quite amusing to see the Lashran pirate wake from a dead sleep and turn this way and that as Jahlad's astral body entered Tsabrak's cabin. "Who is it? I warn you, I deal harshly with spies, in any form!" the pirate said, his golden gaze scanning the room.

Tsabrak focused his powers and enhanced his eyesight so that it could detect invisible creatures and planar visitors. He breathed a sigh of relief as he finally spotted Jahlad's shimmering form. "Gods, man...why not give me a heart attack the next time?" he hissed. Jahlad's mouth moved, but no sound came out. Heaving a sigh of irritation, Tsabrak said, "One moment...allow me to trance so that we may speak."

He lay down and crossed his arms over his chest, regulating his breathing and heartbeat carefully. Shortly after, his astral form floated up from his body to greet Jahlad's. "Well, have you gotten word to his friends?" he questioned.

Jahlad nodded. "Yes...they are gathering people to help, as we speak. How many days would you say Coren has?"

Tsabrak frowned. "No more than a week. My ship is docked in a pirate haven, which is merely a day's travel from Cothmere. King Stephen would not be amused if he knew it was right under his nose," he chuckled at the irony.

"A week, you say? I certainly hope that we can get there on time. What are your coordinates, so that I will have a relatively safe place to teleport everyone to," replied Jahlad.

Tsabrak raised his brows in mild surprise. The Bargel must be a powerful wizard indeed, to be able to teleport groups of people. "Are you certain that is wise? Don't you risk the chance of the ethereal ripping you to shreds if you do it wrong?"

Jahlad's astral form shivered. Yes, he knew the risk. "I must try...it is worth the danger," he said.

Tsabrak regarded the sorcerer with newfound admiration as he spoke the coordinates. "Those should put you directly on the outskirts of the haven. I'd hate to think of the uproar that would happen if an entire group of people suddenly appeared in the middle of town!" he snickered at the image.

Jahlad smiled thinly. "Yes...that would be quite alarming to most people. Tell me, how is Lythas?"

Tsabrak examined his phantom hands, avoiding the Bargel's gaze. "He's sleeping in one of the suites, now. I thought it best that we no longer share a cabin, given my feelings for him."

Jahlad nodded. "A wise decision. It must not have been an easy one. And Jack?"

Tsabrak snorted. "He's having a drink with some of the other lads above deck, getting them riled up for battle. That man is going to cause trouble for me, mark my words!"

Jahlad laughed softly. "Let us hope it isn't more than you can handle, friend Lashran. I should probably be off now," there was a hint of regret in his voice. He truly enjoyed speaking with the captain of the Black Cat, "I mustn't drain myself before the Big Day."

Tsabrak bowed and replied, "Do be careful, fellow magic user. Until we meet again...in the flesh, that is."

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Coren forced himself not to cry out as the lash struck his naked back for the twentieth time. His lip was torn and bleeding from where he had bitten it, but his back was a raw mess. Those of his crew that survived the slaughter had already been publicly hanged, and now, the constable was trying to glean information from him. Where is the other ship that was with you? You had a wizard on board...where has he gone? Which pirate haven do you live at?

All these questions and more...he had answered none of them. Not that he could even if he were to be unable to bear the torture anymore...the weapons dealer's mind had all but shut off and was a jumble of confusion. His only comfort was to picture Lythas' sweet, beautiful face and caring green eyes. Finally, in disgust, the constable ordered he be taken down from his bonds and tended to. It certainly wasn't out of kindness. He only wanted Coren's wounds healed so that he could have fresh ones opened up in the morning.

The weapons dealer had no strength to fight as he was tended to, then dragged to his jail cell and stripped naked. A maggoty piece of meat was tossed in with some tepid water for his supper. In disgust, Coren kicked the rancid meat away, but he drank the water, for his throat was parched. He leaned against the cold stone wall of his cell and tried to be optimistic, but it was impossible to do so. He was going to die, and he would never see Lythas again, nor hold his son in his arms when he was born.

## *"Fate"*

### *Part 28*

The teleportation spell nearly killed Jahlad. When they exited the doorway that he had created, they found the Bargel lying as still and cold as the dead. Charlotte barely checked a moan of distress as she knelt down and put her fingers to the wizard's throat to check for a pulse. It was faint, but there was a heartbeat. "He dead?" asked Pete in his typically blunt way.

She shook her head. "No, but we should get him into a bed and warmed up. He's as cold to the touch as ice!"

"I shall look after him," said a purring, faintly musical voice they did not recognize. Charlotte looked up, and up, and finally met large, slit pupiled golden eyes. "His body is in shock from handling so much energy," the alien, yet quite gorgeous stranger said, "I will brew up a tea and work a spell to drain some of the excess off of him."

"You must be Tsabarak," she said a bit breathlessly. Were all Lashran so bloody cute?!

He flashed a white smile. "Aye, and you must be Lady Charlotte. Please, bring your people and follow me to the haven. Lythas and Jack are waiting," he took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm in a courtly manner, and she flushed.

"Pete, can you and the boys pick Jahlad up, please?" she said, turning to look at her brother. Pete nodded silently, but was scowling at the fair Lashran who, in his eyes was trying to seduce his sister. There were thirteen cutthroats in all who came with them...each one of them loyal to Coren for various reasons. Some of them, he had saved from certain death. Others did business with him on a regular basis, and still others used to travel the seas with him on occasion. Charlotte wished they had the time to get more, but she was only able to cover the people in Tariff to find help. Time was short.

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"Charlotte! Oh, Charlotte!" Lythas cried when she and the others were led onto the Black Cat.

She smiled hugely and let go of Tsabarak's arm to go to him. She had forgotten just how impossibly beautiful Lythallendar was. The roundness of his pregnant belly seemed to make him even more adorable, somehow. They embraced, and she murmured, "How do you manage to look so bloody good all of the time, sweetie?"

All of the pain and fear that Lythas had been holding in gushed forth as the female held him tightly, and the brave front he had been keeping up for the others shattered like glass. He wept openly and buried his face in her hair. "I'm s-sorry I ran away," he whispered unsteadily, trembling in her arms, "I ought to have stayed and w-waited. It w-wasn't fair to you."

She pulled back enough to cup his face in her hands and stare into his eyes. "Don't you apologize for that, luv. I don't blame you one bit for feeling the way you did. I only wish you'd have come to me and talked about it before you left."



He calmed somewhat, and she rocked him. One of the pirates they had brought along muttered, "Am I off my knocker, or is that lad...er...preggers?"

With a sigh, Pete explained everything about what had happened in the past year, and did his best to explain about Lashran as well. Most of them looked uncomfortable, but at least none of them changed their minds about helping. He supposed the fact that Lythas was just as pretty as a lass kept them from flipping out completely.

Tsabrak took Jahlad into his arms and carried him below deck with amazing ease. The Sire was clearly stronger than he looked. He gave Lythas a quick look before descending with his burden, and Charlotte read that glance easily. So, he was in love with Lythas. Well, who wasn't? The seamstress truly felt that very few people could get to know the Lifebearer and not fall in love with him...even her brother had a soft spot for the lad, though Pete wouldn't admit it. To make him try would be to invite a heated argument, as the auction worker only liked women, and to admit his feelings for the Lashran would have been like admitting he liked lads...in his eyes, at least.

"Shhh...there, now. We'll rescue Coren. Don't you doubt it," Charlotte whispered into Lythas ear as she stroked his back to try and soothe him. He nodded wordlessly, still clinging to her tightly. After a few moments, he calmed down somewhat and she was able to pull back and have a good look at him. "You look as though you're getting close to having this baby, sweetness," she said with a smile, placing her hand over the bump of his abdomen. Lythas nodded and smiled with shy pride, and she continued, "I'll bet it's going to be the most beautiful little one in all Wyndrah." She couldn't help but chuckle when he blushed.

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Tsabrak tended to Jahlad and managed to get him out of the dangerous shock that he was in. The Bargel's eyes fluttered open to find the Lashran peering down at him with a bright smile. "Welcome back to the land of the living, friend sorcerer. How do you feel?" questioned Tsabrak.

Jahlad rubbed his temples. "As though I've been thrown about by a hurricane, to tell you the truth, but I am alive, thanks to you."

Tsabrak lowered his eyes modestly. "I shall have the ship's cook make a soup for you...you should endeavor not to try solid foods, just yet."

Jahlad nodded. "Many thanks. Tell me, when are we going to make our move?"

Tsabrak frowned. "I considered trying to sneak into the prison myself, using magic. I thought perhaps I could go invisible and attempt to get a key and possibly either teleport Coren out or work an invisibility spell on him and guide him out, but it seems that King Stephen takes no chances with his prisoners."

Jahlad grimaced. "He has magic users guarding the place, doesn't he?"

The Lashran sighed, "Just so. In leu of that, I am afraid a rescue will have to involve careful planning, a lot of fireworks and violence. We shall have to wait until the day he is to be publicly executed."

Jahlad paled. He certainly didn't like the sound of that. "Isn't that cutting it a bit close?"

Tsabrak again nodded. "Indeed, but they would hardly expect it. Of course, I am merely going under the assumption that they would assume any attempt at a jailbreak would have happened before the sentencing day."

The Barger pursed his lips. "Quite a gamble, that," he said a tad nervously.

Tsabrak laughed. "Aye, it is...but preferable to an all-out attack on the capitol!"

~\*\*\*\*\*~

The plan was far more in-depth than Charlotte thought it would have been, and it was in no small thanks to Lythas. The Lifebearer suggested that Tsabrak use his magicks to camouflage the Black Cat, making it translucent, and all but invisible. Being as it was merely an illusion, the effort of casting the spell did not drain the Lashran pirate as she thought it should have. All involved in the rescue effort dressed as peasants and carefully concealed their weapons. Pete and Charlotte prepared barrels of gunpowder and sticks of fireworks, while Jack positioned the men he was in charge of at each set of explosives. The plan was to wait until Coren was marched to the scaffold to be hanged, and then Lythas would give the signal to everyone by firing a rocket flare into the sky.

The band's instructions were simple; light your explosives, open fire straight at the king so that the guards would be busy trying to protect him, then run like hell to the Black Cat, which was docked at the harbor. Jahlad was to reserve his strength for an assault on the King's fleet, should the worst happen and they be pursued. Tsabrak was to remain on board with the other wizard and drop the concealing spell when given the sign from Lythas that they had Coren and were on their way....again, this would be done with another signal flare. Tsabrak had them specially designed so that when they exploded in the air, the light pattern would resemble a panther's head.

Tsabrak didn't bother trying to talk Lythas out of it, though he was worried to death about the Lifebearer putting his body through such rigorous activity. He could see by the determined, emerald eyes that such an argument was futile. His only consolation lay with the fact that Charlotte would be constantly by Lythallendar's side. It was Jack's responsibility to cut Coren free and carry him, if need be...mainly because he was the biggest and strongest among them. Charlotte, Lythas, Pete, and three other pirates were to cover the big man's retreat and see him and his charge to safety.

They made it into the capitol with no trouble, claiming to be workers for the marketplace. A bit of sneaking around was needed to get the smuggled barrels out of the carts they brought in, without raising an eyebrow. Even more sneaking was required to get them all set up in their designated areas. It took most of the day and half the night to organize everything. Once it was settled, each group stayed near their designated area and tried to be patient.

"Charlotte, what if we are already too late?" said Lythas in a worried tone, biting his lip. He looked as though he was about to cry.

Surprisingly, it was Pete who offered a morale boost to the young Lifebearer. "Don't ye worry, lad. If Coren was dead, I'd feel it in me bones. We all would. We'll get him outta here, or die tryin'."

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 28*

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All of the pain and fear that Lythas had been holding in gushed forth as the female held him tightly, and the brave front he had been keeping up for the others shattered like glass. He wept openly and buried his face in her hair. "I'm s-sorry I ran away," he whispered unsteadily, trembling in her arms, "I ought to have stayed and w-waited. It w-wasn't fair to you."

She pulled back enough to cup his face in her hands and stare into his eyes. "Don't you apologize for that, luv. I don't blame you one bit for feeling the way you did. I only wish you'd have come to me and talked about it before you left."

He calmed somewhat, and she rocked him. One of the pirates they had brought along muttered, "Am I off my knocker, or is that lad...er...preggers?"

With a sigh, Pete explained everything about what had happened in the past year, and did his best to explain about Lashran as well. Most of them looked uncomfortable, but at least none of them changed their minds about helping. He supposed the fact that Lythas was just as pretty as a lass kept them from flipping out completely.

Tsabrak took Jahlad into his arms and carried him below deck with amazing ease. The Sire was clearly stronger than he looked. He gave Lythas a quick look before descending with his burden, and Charlotte read that glance easily. So, he was in love with Lythas. Well, who wasn't? The seamstress truly felt that very few people could get to know the Lifebearer and not fall in love with him...even her brother had a soft spot for the lad, though Pete wouldn't admit it. To make him try would be to invite a heated argument, as the auction worker only liked women, and to admit his feelings for the Lashran would have been like admitting he liked lads...in his eyes, at least.

"Shhh...there, now. We'll rescue Coren. Don't you doubt it," Charlotte whispered into Lythas ear as she stroked his back to try and soothe him. He nodded wordlessly, still clinging to her tightly. After a few moments, he calmed down somewhat and she was able to pull back and have a good look at him. "You look as though you're getting close to having this baby, sweetness," she said with a smile, placing her hand over the bump of his abdomen. Lythas nodded and smiled with shy pride, and she continued, "I'll bet it's going to be the most beautiful little one in all Wyndrah." She couldn't help but chuckle when he blushed.

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Tsabrak tended to Jahlad and managed to get him out of the dangerous shock that he was in. The Bargel's eyes fluttered open to find the Lashran peering down at him with a bright smile. "Welcome back to the land of the living, friend sorcerer. How do you feel?" questioned Tsabrak.

Jahlad rubbed his temples. "As though I've been thrown about by a hurricane, to tell you the truth, but I am alive, thanks to you."

Tsabrak lowered his eyes modestly. "I shall have the ship's cook make a soup for you...you should endeavor not to try solid foods, just yet."

Jahlad nodded. "Many thanks. Tell me, when are we going to make our move?"

Tsabrak frowned. "I considered trying to sneak into the prison myself, using magic. I thought perhaps I could go invisible and attempt to get a key and possibly either teleport Coren out or work an invisibility spell on him and guide him out, but it seems that King Stephen takes no chances with his prisoners."

Jahlad grimaced. "He has magic users guarding the place, doesn't he?"

The Lashran sighed, "Just so. In leu of that, I am afraid a rescue will have to involve careful planning, a lot of fireworks and violence. We shall have to wait until the day he is to be publicly executed."

Jahlad paled. He certainly didn't like the sound of that. "Isn't that cutting it a bit close?"

Tsabrak again nodded. "Indeed, but they would hardly expect it. Of course, I am merely going under the assumption that they would assume any attempt at a jailbreak would have happened before the sentencing day."

The Barger pursed his lips. "Quite a gamble, that," he said a tad nervously.

Tsabrak laughed. "Aye, it is...but preferable to an all-out attack on the capitol!"

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The plan was far more in-depth than Charlotte thought it would have been, and it was in no small thanks to Lythas. The Lifebearer suggested that Tsabrak use his magicks to camouflage the Black Cat, making it translucent, and all but invisible. Being as it was merely an illusion, the effort of casting the spell did not drain the Lashran pirate as she thought it should have. All involved in the rescue effort dressed as peasants and carefully concealed their weapons. Pete and Charlotte prepared barrels of gunpowder and sticks of fireworks, while Jack positioned the men he was in charge of at each set of explosives. The plan was to wait until Coren was marched to the scaffold to be hanged, and then Lythas would give the signal to everyone by firing a rocket flare into the sky.

The band's instructions were simple; light your explosives, open fire straight at the king so that the guards would be busy trying to protect him, then run like hell to the Black Cat, which was docked at the harbor. Jahlad was to reserve his strength for an assault on the King's fleet, should the worst happen and they be pursued. Tsabrak was to remain on board with the other wizard and drop the concealing spell when given the sign from Lythas that they had Coren and were on their way....again, this would be done with another signal flare. Tsabrak had them specially designed so that when they exploded in the air, the light pattern would resemble a panther's head.

Tsabrak didn't bother trying to talk Lythas out of it, though he was worried to death about the Lifebearer putting his body through such rigorous activity. He could see by the determined, emerald eyes that such an argument was futile. His only consolation lay with the fact that Charlotte would be constantly by Lythallendar's side. It was Jack's responsibility to cut Coren free and carry him, if need be...mainly because he was the biggest and strongest among them. Charlotte, Lythas, Pete, and three other pirates were to cover the big man's retreat and see him and his charge to safety.

They made it into the capitol with no trouble, claiming to be workers for the marketplace. A bit of sneaking around was needed to get the smuggled barrels out of the carts they brought in, without raising an eyebrow. Even more sneaking was required to get them all set up in their designated areas. It took most of the day and half the night to organize everything. Once it was settled, each group stayed near their designated area and tried to be patient.

"Charlotte, what if we are already too late?" said Lythas in a worried tone, biting his lip. He looked as though he was about to cry.

Surprisingly, it was Pete who offered a morale boost to the young Lifebearer. "Don't ye worry, lad. If Coren was dead, I'd feel it in me bones. We all would. We'll get him outta here, or die tryin'."

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 29*

Keeping the nightwatch from inspecting the barrels they had positioned around the walls of the square proved to be somewhat difficult. They had to stop them from looking into it, without harming them or kidnapping them. There had to be no cause for suspicion, if they were to pull this off. This is where Charlotte's plan came in. Pete and the other men had wondered why she insisted on bringing along six tavern wenches...one to group with each man at an explosive. Now, the reason for that was clear. The women flirted outrageously with any guardsman who came too close to the hidden barrels they watched over, offering to share a quick drink with them. Each woman carried a bottle of wine, which was spiked with Belladonna. Needless to say, the nightwatchmen got lonely in their shifts, and any who got too close to a team were soon put into a drugged stupor...all due to the curve of a woman's hip.

On the second day of their vigil, it finally happened. The pages blew their horns and the constable announced that there would be a hanging in the square, with His Majesty, King Stephen IV presiding over it. Beside Charlotte, Lythas tensed up and seemed as if he was going to dive right off of the wall when he saw Coren led out in chains. "Easy, darlin'. Don't lose your control yet," she whispered, squeezing his arm. He closed his bright eyes and took several deep breaths as the crowd pelted his master with rotten vegetables and other various items. Charlotte lifted her rifle musket, and motioned for Lythas to do the same.

It was then that the Lashran caught sight of a guardsman heading their way out the corner of his eye. "Someone is coming!" he hissed.

Behind him, Pete looked over at the guard with narrowed eyes. "I'm on it, lad," the auction worker whispered, and then he was off. Lythas caught sight of Jack, squatted down beside a barrel directly across from he and Charlotte. The Lashran nodded grimly, and the burly pirate returned the nod to let him know he was ready.

"Citizens of Cothmere," shouted the King, "Today I shall rid the lands of yet another Pirate Lord. Their kind have been a scourge on our seas for far too long!" A cheer went up, but it seemed half-hearted and rehearsed. King Stephen waited for it to die down to a murmur before continuing, "Coren Darshaw dies today, and soon after, I shall cleans my realms of all of his despicable kind! I have the locations of several of their havens, and I shall wage war upon them!" More cheers, a bit more enthusiastic, now.

Pete slipped quietly among the shadows and pulled his dagger out as the guardsman came closer to where Lythas and Charlotte were. The guard never knew quite what happened. Pete came up behind him and put his hand over his mouth, then slipped his blade deeply into his heart from his back. The auction worker guided the man to the ground as he died, then wiped his dagger off and glanced around to be certain that nobody saw. Everyone was hanging onto the King's words and awaiting the execution.

King Stephen gave Coren a smug look as he was dragged to the scaffold. The blond pirate could barely move from his mistreatment in the dungeons, let alone put up a fight. "Does the prisoner have anything to say, now?" he said with a sneer.



Coren forced himself to stand straight and tall, flipping his tangled, golden locks over his shoulders. "Only that you are a greedy fool, and your subjects know it!" he shouted defiantly. "If it weren't for your tyranny, there would be no need for people to seek their fortunes through Piracy. You take the food from the mouths of your people." he spit on the ground and glared at the king with a superior expression on his face.

King Stephen's expression darkened. "I expect nothing less than excuses from a man sentenced to die," he said. Then he nodded to the black-hooded man who waited eagerly behind Coren.

The weapons dealer did not move as the noose was placed over his head and tightened around his neck. His blue eyes were far away, as if seeing something more pleasant than this. He pictured Lythas' face and closed his eyes, waiting for the floor to drop out from beneath him, and for the choking, burning pain, if he was unlucky enough for the fall not to break his neck.

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Lythas would not spare another moment. While keeping his musket resting on the wall, he reached with his right hand and picked up the flare pistol that Tsabrak had given him. Pointing it heavenward, he squeezed his eyes shut and pulled the trigger. People nearby gasped as the flare shot into the sky and exploded, forming a smoky panther's face. Some clapped, thinking it was extra entertainment to go along with the hanging. Chaos ensued, at this point. Charlotte fired her musket at the executioner, blowing half of his shoulder off, just as he was pulling the lever to the trap door.

Jack lit his barrel and dove off of the wall, rolling to absorb the damage when he hit the ground. The other five teams began their jobs; the women lit the fireworks and gunpowder, while the men shot their muskets towards the podium where King Stephen was. When they realized that this was no mere lightshow to entertain them, the crowd released a collective scream and began to stampede in different directions. As Tsabrak predicted, the King's men immediately began to surround him, prepared to die in his defense.

Lythallendar's eyes went wide and a denial formed on his lips, for the executioner's dying grip on the lever pulled it back, dropping the trapdoor beneath Coren's feet. "Master!" the Lashran cried, lifting his rifle. Some part of his brain was rational enough to tell him to position the weapon properly, so that he did not damage himself as he once did. Sweating and shaking, Lythas carefully aimed the musket at the rope that held his beloved Coren suspended. "I will not let you die," he whispered, and gave a silent prayer to the Forests. He forced himself not to blink or flinch as he pulled the trigger.

The ensuing explosion deafened him, and it took him a moment to realize that his shot was true; he had severed the rope with it. He nearly passed out with relief as he spotted Jack lifting Coren over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Nearby, Pete was firing a musket at a guardsman who saw what was happening and tried to intercept the fleeing pirate. The man went down clutching his spraying neck as the auction dealer blew half of it off.

Charlotte tugged frantically on Lythas' arm. "Come on, luv! Let's get out of here while we can!" she hollered, deafened from the explosions as well. Lythas quickly fit the

second flare into the gun and followed her down the stairway that would take them off of the wall. The pair met up with Jack, who was huffing and puffing and red-faced with his burden. Pete nimbly jumped off of the wall and followed, pulling out his other pistol as he ran. He fired it at yet another guardsman who was trying to block their way. This time, he missed, but Charlotte screeched like a Banshee and clawed the man's face before he could react.

In a mad, clumsy dash, the four made their way to the docks. Lythas lifted the flare and fired it, signaling to Tsabrak to let the concealment on his ship drop. The Lifebearer bit his lip on a groan as a stitch hit his side, and he clutched his stomach and ran on determinedly.

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"All's ready, Cap'n!" said the gape-toothed sea dog to Tsabrak.

"You've managed to sever the ropes on the sails, then?" the Lashran pirate replied. Sabotaging as many of the nearest coastal ships was an extra idea that Tsabrak had come up with while he was worrying himself sick over the others. Not a bad plan, if he did say so himself.

The crewman nodded enthusiastically. "All the ones you ordered, Sir! We're ready for your next order."

"Excellent. Prepare to sail, and make sure that you have a cannon crew prepared in case we're caught in a fight," Tsab replied. The pirate saluted him and went to do as he bid.

"Any sign yet?" questioned Jahlad nervously. The wizard was pacing the deck beside the Pirate.

"No, but give it time, my friend. It's only been moments since the first signal flared, and there are still explosions happening in there."

Jahlad chewed his nails and tried to be calm. He nearly bounced with excitement when he saw the signature flare explosion and Panther cloud burst in the sky, yards away from where the original commotion took place. "There! There...do you see it!" he hollered, practically climbing over Tsabrak to get a better look.

Tsabrak checked himself and managed not to snap at the other magic user. Yes, he did see it. He also saw several of the team running towards the dock in a half-panicked dash. Yet, he did not see Lythas. Swearing softly, he closed his eyes and concentrated. The illusion dropped, and the Black Cat seemed to materialize out of thin air at the docks. All thirteen of the volunteers scrambled onto the ship, but of Lythas, Charlotte, Pete, Jack and Coren, there was still no sign. "Please," whispered Tsabrak, his golden eyes intense as they scanned the docking area.

His heart nearly burst with elation when they finally appeared, followed closely by several guardsmen. Lythas was clutching his side and lurching, and Charlotte had her arm around him and was helping him. Hardly needing to think about it, Tsabrak waived the words of a spell and gestured towards the men pursuing the group. A huge cloud of insects of every kind manifested behind Lythas and his fleeing companions, and it settled on the guards.

"Now, that is something I wouldn't have thought of," Jahlad mused. His respect for the Lashran was growing in leaps and bounds. He would have used lightning or a wall of fire, but Tsabrak's simple method drained very little energy, and soon had the guards too concerned with slapping the stinging creatures off of their bodies to pursue Lythas' group.

"Prepare cannons!" Tsabrak yelled, and the command was carried down below deck. Pete was now adding his support to Lythas as the group lurched up the boarding plank and onto the ship. Jack nearly dropped Coren in exhaustion once he was safely on deck, and Jahlad immediately knelt beside the unconscious weapons dealer to determine how bad he was. As the Black Cat turned her sails and caught the wind, those below in charge of the cannons fired two shots at the docks. Wood buckled and exploded into the air, taking a few of the King's men with it.

"How is he?" hollered Charlotte in Jahlad's ear, making the sorcerer wince.

"He will live...he passed out from a lack of air, but you saved him before permanent damage or death could be dealt," he answered after a moment. "Please, look after him, milady...I must be prepared to use my powers."

Charlotte barely understood him, but she got the gist of it. She pulled Coren halfway across her lap to support his head as Tsabrak called the wind and filled the sails. The force of their take-off nearly made both her and Coren slide across the deck. Lythas fell to his hands and knees beside her, and she gave him a look of concern as he panted and clutched at his stomach. "It is only a stitch...I am fine," he gasped, giving her a sickly grin that did nothing to rid her of her worry.

Tsabrak looked over his shoulder at the rapidly disappearing harbor of the capitol. He blew a sigh of relief. So far, there were no signs of pursuit. The navy was probably trying to figure out what the hell happened to their sails. He smiled grimly and congratulated himself on his foresight. His smile was short-lived, however. He heard Lythas moan in pain, and when he looked over to him, he saw how white the Lifebearer was, and how his delicate jaw was clenched. The lad lowered himself on his side and lay on the deck, taking Coren's slack hand in his. Lythas hissed through his teeth and put his free hand over his abdomen. "Oh, no," mouthed Tsabrak. He could not force sound to come from his throat, for it had closed up in fear for the gentle Lifebearer.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 30*

Lythas clamped his jaws on a moan of pain as his stomach contracted. Surely he hadn't damaged himself or the baby, had he? He squeezed Coren's hand and was barely aware of Charlotte's worried questions to him. He blinked pain-filled green eyes up at Tsabarak as the Sire crossed the deck quickly and knelt beside him.

"Lythallendar, what is it?" questioned the pirate, "Are you having contractions?"

The Lifebearer tried to rise, and another cramp stabbed him. He panted softly and nodded. "It is...too soon!" he whimpered. His gaze pleaded silently with the older Lashran to make everything all right.

Tsabarak called to a few of his men and ordered them to take both Lythas and Coren down below. When the crewmen complied, gently lifting the groaning Lifebearer and the unconscious weapons dealer, the Sire turned to Jahlad-who was as pale as a ghost. "Will you stay up here and watch for pursuit? I really must look to Lythas...I am afraid that he is miscarrying." he tried to sound calm, but his voice quivered and lump formed in his throat.

Jahlad nodded wordlessly, feeling as though he could cry, too. The sorcerer watched as Tsabarak followed his men below deck, taking Charlotte with him to assist. Jack stood up, still catching his breath. "What's wrong with our little artist?" the burly man questioned, his dark brows drawing down.

Jahlad gulped. "H-he seems to have overexerted himself in the rescue. Tsabarak is going to look after him and help him."

The pirate scowled, still a bit angry with the Lashran who, in his eyes, kidnapped his friend's lover. He did, of course, realize that Tsabarak probably had experience with Lashran pregnancies, and if there was a way for Coren's baby and lover to be saved, Tsabarak probably knew it. He looked around for something to do to take his mind off of his concern over Coren and Lythas.

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"I want to be with Coren," Lythas moaned deliriously as the pain made his body tense up. The men were literally holding him down on Tsabarak's bed as he struggled to get up, despite the cramps twisting his gut.

Tsabarak stroked the lad's sweating brow and murmured, "easy, dear one. Your master is just in the next room. I've the ship's medic tending his wounds, and he is going to be fine. Right now, you are the one in danger. Please, Lythas...let me help you."

Lythas' bright, emerald eyes were panicked and tearful as he looked up at Tsabarak. "Promise me," he growled through the pain. He was momentarily unable to speak as his abdomen tensed up again, and his breath hissed in and out of his clenched teeth. Charlotte took his hand in hers and squeezed it reassuringly, kissing the knuckles to soothe him.

"What, dear heart? What do you want me to promise you?" Tsabrak questioned, unlacing the struggling Lifebearer's shirt as he spoke. He placed his long, warm hand on Lythas' distended belly, frowning at how hard it was.

"Promise me that you will make Coren well," Lythas whimpered, trying to focus through his own pain, "and promise me that my baby will live, even if I do not!"

Tsabrak bowed his head to hide the horrified expression that came over his face. The first promise, he could keep, but how on Wyndrah was he supposed to keep the second? He slowly raised his amber gaze to meet the Lifebearer's, and he nodded. "Coren will be nursed back to health quickly, Lythas. I have medicine that will assure he will be back to his old self in no time at all. I also promise that I shall do everything in my power to save BOTH you and your baby. Do you understand?" he caressed the younger Lashran's silken cheek and gazed down at him intensely.

Seemingly satisfied, Lythas stopped fighting the men and obediently lay still...or tried to, at any rate. He couldn't stop himself from rolling back and forth on the bed and crying out. Tears spilled down his cheeks. "Charlotte...oh, Charlotte...it hurts," he moaned, biting his lip so hard that his teeth cut into it. He did not even notice the blood welling up in his mouth.

Blinking back her own tears, Charlotte held his hand tightly and murmured, "I know it does, luv. Just try to relax your muscles. Fight the urge to push, Lythas." She watched carefully as Tsabrak exposed the Lifebearer's chest and belly, then went to a cabinet against the wall and began to search through it. "What're you doing?" she questioned.

He finally produced a clear phial of yellow-colored oil. "This is used by my people to soothe early contractions," he explained as he returned to the bedside and removed the cap of the phial. She watched as he poured some into his palm, and then he began to rub Lythas' spasming belly with it. "I make it to ease cramped muscles...works just as well for strains and torn ligaments. I never thought I'd be using it for this, to be honest with you," and he spread the oil all over the mound of Lythas' stomach, his elegant fingers gently kneading the taut flesh as he worked.

Lythas groaned as another contraction struck him, and he squeezed Charlotte's hand so hard that she cried out, as well. "Please, little one," Lythas shakenly said, clearly talking to his unborn child, "not yet...please!"

Once he had rubbed the oil into Lythas' skin until it was absorbed, Tsabrak went back to the cabinet and fished around again. Charlotte began to sing a lullaby to Lythas, trying to calm him. It seemed to do a bit of good...either that, or the oil was helping him. She did not care which. That his back had stopped arching with the contractions was a good enough sign to her that something was working. When she looked up again, she saw Tsabrak drawing opaque, milky liquid from a vial into a syringe. "What's that?" she said. She wasn't alarmed by the sight of the needle-when she had given birth to Nicolas, the doctor had to give her pain medicine the same way.

"It is a sedative," murmured Tsabrak, tapping the syringe to clear the air bubbles. "It is also another type of muscle relaxant. I can only pray that this does the trick, dear lady. It is the best that I can do," with that said, he approached Lythas again and gazed down on him for a moment. "Lythallendar, I am going to give you an injection

that should make the contractions stop. It will also induce a healing trance. Are you ready?"

Lythas looked up at him with feverish, but determined green eyes and nodded. Tsabrak pulled the Lifebearer's arm out to the side and pressed down on a spot just above the inside of Lythas' elbow, forcing the vein to bulge. Lythas did not flinch as the Sire pushed the needle in carefully and injected the medicine into him, though he felt it burn all the way up his arm to his shoulder as it entered his body. Once the last of it was injected, Tsabrak pulled the needle out and bent Lythas arm, then placed a gentle kiss on the Lifebearer's forehead. "There now," he soothed, rubbing Lythas' straining belly with his palm, "just try to relax and let it take effect, sweet one."

Lythas nodded and struggled not to cry out as another spasm clenched his torso. He trembled with the effort to ignore his body's demands and not bear down. After a few moments, it became difficult for him to focus his eyes. Charlotte's pretty, kind features were a blur, and the room began to spin. His emerald eyes rolled back as he lost consciousness.

Tsabrak shared a grim look with the seamstress and whispered, "all we can do is wait, now." She nodded wordlessly and kept a tight hold on Lythas' hand.

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Coren sat up with a ragged gasp, and then winced at the pain it caused in his raw throat. His eyes snapped open and took in his surroundings with a burning, blue gaze. He thought at first that it was all another trick that King Stephen had come up with; let him dangle by the neck for a while, then cut him down and return him to his cell, so that he could think on what true death would feel like. A figure was standing beside his bed, and without thinking, Coren lashed out at it, determined to inflict some damage on the sadistic bastards that imprisoned him.

"Easy, old Mate!" a familiar voice cried as the figure nimbly jumped aside and avoided the weapons dealer's clumsy swing, "yer safe now, on the Black Cat! We got you outta there!"

"Pete?" Coren rasped in confusion, "what happened?"

Seeing that the pirate was not going to take another shot at him, the auction worker came closer and grinned down at his friend. "Yer lad came up with the plan. He's a sly one, that Lythas...wouldn't a thought it, meself. We knew ye'd be taken here, ye see, and Lythas made that Tsab chump promise he'd help us rescue ye..." he explained everything as best he could to Coren.

"Where is Lythas?" questioned the weapons dealer. Eagerly, Pete thought. He had never seen his old friend so tied up in a person, before. Pete swallowed and told him about how the Lifebearer went into early labor. "He's okay, though!" the auction worker said quickly as Coren tried to leap out of the bed, nearly falling on his face. "He's asleep in the captain's quarters. Tsab gave the boy some kind 'o medicine that made him stop contractin' and put him to sleep. Charlotte told me Lythas'll be fine, as long as he doesn't strain himself again."

Coren fell back on the pillows and sighed in both exhaustion and relief. "Gods above, I'm such a bloody fool," he muttered, "If I hadn't lost my mind like that when I found

out the truth about him, none of this would have happened." Looking at Pete again, he said, "I want to see him. Now."

Pete nodded. "Aye...I thought ye might. I'll get yer robe," and then he went to a chair against the wall and retrieved the garment, which was slung carelessly over it.

Coren felt the gentle rocking beneath him, and he said, "How far out to sea are we, Pete?"

The auction worker handed him the robe and considered the question. "Well, best I can tell, we're about two days travel from Tariff. 'Least, that's what the crew's told me. They could be lyin, seine' as they're workin for that bloody Lashran."

Coren smirked. Pete clearly disliked Tsabrak, but the weapons dealer saw a kindred spirit in the Lashran pirate. Though he posed competition to the weapons dealer for Lythas' affections, Coren had discovered that he was an honorable, noble man. He rather liked him, he grudgingly admitted...and Tsabrak had taken good care of Lythas during the time the Lifebearer traveled with him. Coren hated to admit it, but he thought that if ever anything should happen to him, he would prefer Tsabrak to be with Lythas, to anyone else. Fortunately, he avoided death, this time. He had another chance to create a life with the lad that filled his dreams.

Coren winced as he pulled the robe onto his nude body, but was surprised that he did not feel the sting of open wounds...or even scabs. Looking down at himself, he saw that the wounds inflicted upon him in the dungeons were nearly healed. In fact, they were barely even scarring. He raised his puzzled gaze to Pete, who grinned. "Jahlad worked a healing spell on ye. Said ye'd be stiff and sore, but with his magic and Tsab's potions, ye'll barely have a mark to show for yer pains."

Coren shook his head in amazement, then winced at the throb in his head that it caused. Obviously, his muscles had tightened up from being unused. "How long was I out?" he questioned.

Pete frowned. "Three days. We've all been taking turns watching over both ye and Lythas. Jack even placed bets on which one 'o ye would wake up first," he chuckled.

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"So good to see you back among the living, Master Darshaw," said Tsabrak politely, bowing to Coren as he met him outside the door of the Captain's quarters. Coren studied the Lashran carefully, trying to read any signs of ill intent. Finding only sincere relief, he smiled slightly.

"Aye...it seems I owe you a debt of gratitude," he said reluctantly.

Tsabrak shook his head, raising his palms. "No, you do not. You and I are even, now. What I would ask of you is that you take good care of Lythas, however. He is recovering nicely from his ordeal, but any stress, be it physical or emotional, is dangerous. I want you to promise that you'll do nothing to upset the lad, when he awakens. Be good to him, Coren Darshaw. Don't let your human nature spoil things again."

They stared at each other for a long time, and Coren finally nodded. "I shall do whatever it takes to make Lythas happy," the weapons dealer finally said, "on that, you have my oath."

Tsabrak smiled, and Coren could see the envy in his golden eyes. The Sire looked exhausted...as though he hadn't slept for days. Dark rings emphasized his strange, cat's eyes, and his gorgeous mane of wavy, silver hair was unkempt and tangled. "See that you keep your oath, Darshaw. Lythallendar is a treasure that you are lucky to have in your hands again," with that said, he stepped aside to allow Coren entrance to the cabin. Coren gave him a nod before proceeding.

His heart was thundering so loudly in his chest that he thought it would surely wake Lythas from his trance-like slumber. Coren silently approached the large bed and looked down at the beautiful, fragile figure in the center of it. He thought he would die from the pain of seeing Lythas again. "By all the seafuries," the weapons dealer whispered as he caressed his lover's marble features with his fingertips, "how could I have let you go?"

Hesitantly, he placed his hand over the bump of Lythas' abdomen, feeling the warmth of both his lover and unborn child throbbing beneath the sheets that covered the Lashran. He gained confidence and rested his hand more firmly there, smiling in spite of himself. It was not strange at all...it seemed perfectly natural that his Lythas was carrying his child. Coren looked at the Lifebearer's soft, parted lips, and he couldn't stop himself from kissing them softly. "Open your eyes soon, sweetling," he murmured against the silken mouth, "I would look upon their emerald fire again." He slid onto the bed and propped himself up on his side, staring down at Lythas for a long, long time before lying down fully and falling asleep beside him.

~\*\*\*\*\*~



## *"Fate"*

### *Part 31*

Lythas snuggled closer to Coren's warmth, thinking that he was in a dream. The Lashran slowly came to full awareness, and he opened his eyes to find that he was indeed in his master's arms. He tilted his head back and parted his lips as he reached a cautious hand up to trace the planes of Coren's strong features. A smile found its way onto Lythas' lips as relief coursed through him. His Coren was alive and well! He fought the urge to laugh giddily, and his grin became a pensive frown. He had done what he set out to do...he had rescued the sire of his unborn child. Now came the hardest challenge; walking away. He loved the weapons dealer with all his heart and soul, but the Lashran felt that he could not bear it if Coren were to hurt him again. The pain of his master's rejection was the most horrible Lythas had ever felt in his life, and it was still raw...still aching.

He stared at his lover's chiseled features and bit his lip as tears welled up in his eyes and blurred his vision. Coren might have come to his bed and held him as he slept, true...but it was likely out of elation to be alive. The weapons dealer proved that he wasn't ready to embrace all that Lythas was. The thought that Coren might look at their baby as some oddity frightened the Lifebearer. He would not risk his child suffering the same rejection that he had. Lythas could only pray that Coren would understand why things must end between them. He almost snorted...likely the pirate would simply shrug and say, "It's your life now, Lashran."

Now weeping silently, Lythas carefully disentangled himself from Coren's embrace and got out of the bed. He stared down at his sleeping master for a long while, then turned away and searched the room. Tsabarak had considerably placed a fresh change of clothing for both Lythas and Coren on the chair in the corner. Fighting down his sorrow, the Lashran dressed himself, ran a brush through his tangled, raven hair, and left the room. His only consolation was that he felt no dangerous symptoms of an impending miscarriage anymore.

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Coren awoke and realized immediately that Lythas was no longer in bed with him. Fighting down fear as the very real possibility that the Lifebearer was miscarrying somewhere on the ship, he bolted out of bed and practically ripped both the clothes he was removing and those that he was changing into. He carelessly jammed his feet into his boots and ran out of the room, resisting the urge to shout Lythas' name. He nodded wordlessly to the curious crewmen he passed as he went above deck to search for his lover...or someone who could tell him where Lythas was.

Coren swore in frustration. Where in the hells was everybody? There was no sign of Charlotte, Pete or Jack. This frightened the weapons dealer even more, and he began to ask people where Tsabarak could be found. One lad who was swabbing the deck said he saw the Lashran Pirate talking to Lythas near the prow of the ship. Coren sighed in relief and thanked him, then started off in the direction indicated. His relief quickly began to transform into anger. So, the captain of the Black Cat was talking to Lythas, was he? Why hadn't the Lifebearer woken Coren up when he came out of his trance? Was Tsabarak's presence more enjoyable to Lythallendar than the weapons dealer's?

When he came upon the two of them, Coren forced himself not to launch into wild accusations. Instead, he took a deep breath and listened to their conversation. The pair were looking out to sea, and Lythas had his head bowed as he rested his elbows on the railing of the ship. "Lythallendar, please think about what you are planning to do," Tsabrak was saying in a quietly desperate voice. Coren smirked. The Sire was likely trying to convince Lythas not to return home with the weapons dealer.

He was surprised to hear the next part of Tsabrak's conversation. "I know that he hurt you, dear one...badly. Yet, he is the Sire of your child, and you do love him. You cannot hide that. If you do not give him another chance, you may regret it for the rest of your life."

Coren felt the warmth drain from his cheeks, and an icy lump formed in his stomach. Tsabrak was trying to convince Lythas not to leave him, instead of the other way around! He watched as Lythas heaved a deep sigh and turned his head to look at Tsabrak. "A part of me knows that you are right, Tsabrak. In spite of this, another part of me-the part that has changed-cannot allow him the opportunity to do it again. You said it yourself...Lashran and Humans are a breed apart! I may love him, but that does not change the simple truth that he was repulsed by what I am. How can I be with someone who might one day be unable to cope with the strangeness of it all and cast me out on a whim? No, Tsabrak...I do not think that Coren Darshaw loves me as I do him. It would be for the best if I did not disembark with him, when we dock in Tariff." Lythas sniffled as he finished speaking, and Tsabrak put a hand on his shoulder and frowned down at him in concern.

Coren felt betrayed, though he knew it was his own damned fault that Lythas felt the way he did. He could hardly blame the lad, after the way he had treated him! Still, he refused to let the Lashran go. He knew what a mistake he had made almost the moment Lythas had left his home, and he had no intention of letting that mistake repeat itself. The weapons dealer approached the two of them and cleared his throat. Lythas turned around slowly, and Coren felt those aching, vulnerable green eyes stab into his very soul as they regarded him warily.

"I d-did not want to wake you," Lythas stammered, shaking his dark locks out of his eyes as Coren stepped closer to him, "You were sleeping so peacefully."

Tsabrak gave Coren a meaningful look. "I shall leave the two of you alone," he murmured, "You have much to discuss," with that, he bowed gracefully and walked away.

Lythas slowly turned back to the sea, avoiding Coren's gaze as the pirate took Tsabrak's place beside him at the railing. Coren watched him, aching to pull him into a tight embrace. What had the Lashran done to him? He had never needed anyone like this before! The pirate struggled with himself for words to speak. What could he say? What promise could he give to the young Lifebearer that would convince him to give Coren a second chance? Finally, with tactless frustration, the weapons dealer said, "I'm not going to let you go, you know."

That got a reaction. The angelic face turned to him, and the color was high in the delicate cheekbones. Those large, emerald eyes were wide and the dark brows above them drawn together in disbelief. "Wh-what? How dare you!" Lythas sputtered, his voice rising, "You are the one who cast me out, Coren Darshaw! You gave me my freedom, and made it quite clear that you cared not what I did with it! Now it is my turn...I have a choice, and I choose to go away from you!" his breath had quickened

with the force of his emotions and his lips trembled. His accent was strong enough that Coren had difficulty understanding the last sentence he spoke.

Alarmed that Lythas might become too excited and harm himself, Coren swore softly and grasped the Lashran's shoulders. His own voice shook as he tried to stem the tide of misery welling within him. "I didn't mean it like that, Lythas! Please, calm down and listen to me...give me a chance to explain," Coren said.

Breathing heavily, Lythas went silent and stared up at him angrily...and expectantly. Coren swallowed hard before speaking again. "I know I'm a complete ass for the way I treated you, and I could kick the shit out of myself for the way I just spoke to you. I don't have a way with words, Lythas. I don't deserve your consideration, but I'm pleading with you to hear me out, all the same."

The Lashran's expression softened and his breathing calmed a bit. He tilted his head to the side questioningly, and the wind blew strands of his silken, black hair across his face. "Go on," he whispered.

"I know that you're a fee spirit," Coren said almost desperately, "I don't think of you as some mindless slave...I never did. I meant that, no matter how you try to avoid me, no matter where you go, I'm not giving up. I'll find some way to prove to you that what's between us is worth the effort of trying again."

He placed his hand over the bump of the Lashran's stomach and looked deeply into his eyes. "Part of me is growing inside of you, Lythas. You can't escape that, and neither can I. For the first time in my life, everything feels right. I have to have you, sweetling. I won't stop trying to mend what I ripped apart."

Lythas closed his eyes and tears spilled down his cheeks. "Coren...I...you hurt me so badly! How can you expect me to...open myself up to that kind of pain again?"

Coren cupped the Lifebearer's chin with his other hand and gently tilted his head back so that he could kiss Lythas' silken lips. "I shall do whatever it takes to make it right for you, Lythallendar," he murmured, tracing the delicate jaw with his fingertips. "Just tell me...what can I do? I would marry you if it was possible," he went still with shock, realizing he meant that. If marriage between two people of the same gender were legal, he would do it. How unlike Coren Darshaw to even contemplate such a thing!

Lythas slowly stepped back and studied Coren closely, no less surprised by the heartfelt admission. He knew his master (well, former master) well enough to know how much such an admission meant for him. "Do you mean that?" the Lifebearer inquired warily.

Coren surprised them both again by saying, "I've never meant anything as much as I mean that, Lythas. If I could marry you, I would do it this moment. I was dying while you were away...not physically, but inside," he took one of Lythas' hands in his and placed it over his chest, so that the Lashran could feel his heart beating, "I was dying in here, day by day. Turning you away was the worst, most incredibly stupid thing I've ever done in my life."

Lythas sniffled and blinked rapidly, but his eyes were intense as he stared up at Coren. "There is a ceremony," the Lifebearer said quietly, testing Coren, "a bonding ceremony between two partners. It is a Lashran custom, much like your weddings. If

you truly mean what you said, we could...perhaps..." he trailed off and bit his lip. His eyes were luminous with tears as he gazed at the pirate questioningly.

Coren nodded slowly, never dropping his gaze or blinking. "Aye, Lythas. I'll do this bonding ceremony with you," he whispered.

Lythas broke down then, and began to weep in earnest. It was more proof that Coren loved him than he had hoped for. He rested his cheek against Coren's chest as the weapons dealer put his arms around him and held him.

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Tsabrak resisted the urge to snap crossly at whoever was knocking on his door. He had given up his quarters for Lythas and Coren (or, at least for Lythas...whether Coren joined the Lifebearer had yet to be decided), and was now in one of the smaller suites. If this wasn't enough to put him in a foul mood, the constant interruptions most certainly were. "What is it?" he hollered in a barely controlled voice. He wanted to get started on that bottle of Port he had just opened up. His heartache and depression needed a salve.

"It is Lythas and Coren," replied a melodic voice from the other side of the door, "may we come in and speak with you? It is rather important."

Tsabrak's anger dissolved immediately. Of all the people on his ship, only Lythas, Charlotte, and perhaps Jahlad could intrude on his privacy without angering him. "Of course, dear one," he said, hurrying to the door to open it.

He stepped back to allow the Lifebearer and weapons dealer to enter, and then he shut the door behind him and indicated the chairs around the small table. "Please, make yourselves comfortable," he offered. He frowned as they sat down. Lythas was blushing like a lass, and Coren bore a look of determination on his features that told the Sire in no uncertain terms that this was indeed a serious matter, whatever it was. He went to the cabinet and took two glasses from it. He might as well share the port...it looked as though it was needed.

"What about you, Lythallendar?" he questioned as he poured himself and Coren a serving of the wine, "I know you cannot stomach alcohol...would you like a glass of water?"

Lythas nodded. "Yes, thank you," he said softly. Coren took his hand and squeezed it, and the Lifebearer returned the pressure.

Tsabrak's golden eyes followed the movement, and he told the swift stab of pain in his heart to kindly take a hike as he went for the pitcher of water he kept in the cabinet. Once all three of them were seated with their drinks before them, the Lashran pirate leaned back in his chair and sipped his port. "Now, what can I do for the two of you?" he questioned.

"Coren and I...we want to take Vashekna together," said Lythas, raising his green eyes to meet Tsabrak's amber ones.

The Sire choked on his port in surprise and doubled over coughing. Lythas winced and patted his back to help him, and Tsabrak held his hand up to indicate that he

was all right. After a few moments, Tsabrak was able to speak again. "I...I see! Forgive me, that was incredibly rude of me. I must say, it was an unexpected development."

Coren said nothing, merely gazed at the Sire steadily. Lythas said shyly, "I wanted to come to you because, well...you are the only other Lashran I know outside of Nandar. You are wise and know both our ways and the human ways, and I was hoping that, perhaps, you could perform the ceremony for us. Here, on the ship."

Tsabrak stared at him and was caught between laughter and tears. He had to take a few deep breaths to calm himself, and he downed his glass of port and poured himself another as he said, "Lythas, would you mind giving Coren and I a moment alone? I...need to speak with him about this, before I decide anything."

The Lifebearer reluctantly nodded, and Tsabrak led him to the door and promised, "It will only be for a moment...I shall retrieve you soon." and he closed the door behind Lythas as he left the cabin.

Turning back to Coren, the Sire had a dangerous gleam in his cat-like eyes as he strode across the room. "I hope you know what the bloody hell you're doing, Darshaw!" he hissed, "This is a serious, serious commitment you plan to take. As serious as any human marriage!"

Coren nodded calmly. "Yes. I'm well aware of that."

Tsabrak crossed his arms over his chest and glared at him. "Are you? Or are you doing this simply to win Lythallendar back?" he uncrossed his arms and placed his palms on the table, leaning forward to fix the weapons dealer with a level stare, "I want to be certain that you understand just how final this is, my friend. If you bond with Lythallendar, you must fully devote yourself to him...much in the same way a husband devotes himself to his wife. Only, I want you to behave the way model husbands do, understand me? If I discover that you are sleeping with other people on the side or keeping a mistress, I will come back and slaughter you myself. This is not a ceremony you take simply to pacify Lythas. You must be whole-heartedly committed to him, if I am going to do this."

Coren scowled at the tone Tsabrak was taking, but inside, he was a bit taken aback. He had no doubt in his mind that the Sire would do his best to hunt him down and kill him, if he hurt Lythas again. Even when the two of them were dueling for the right to be with Lythas, Tsabrak had a good-natured humor about him. Not so, now. The Lashran pirate was dead serious. Coren's scowl softened as he realized just how far beyond lust Tsabrak's feelings went for Lythallendar.

"I gave you my word before, and I shall do so again," he said levelly, "I will do everything in my power to make Lythas happy."

Tsabrak studied him with narrowed eyes for a long time, then nodded curtly in apparent satisfaction. "See that you do, Coren."

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 32*

Tsabarak wasn't truly surprised when he asked Coren when he wanted the ceremony performed and the weapons dealer said, "Tomorrow. I'm in no mood to wait. Will that give you enough time to do whatever preparations you must?"

The Sire nodded. "Aye, it is a simple custom, with simple vows. To sum it up in a nutshell, I shall be asking you both if you choose each other as life mates. Once you both accept and declare that you choose one another, I will sing a hymn, and then announce to the witnesses that you are bound to one another. Afterwards, you exchange the Joining bangles to symbolize your union and devotion to one another, and we celebrate. Why Coren...what is wrong?" he noticed the troubled look on the weapons dealer's face, and the Sire secretly hoped he was changing his mind.

"Joining bangles? What are those?" Coren questioned.

"Oh, they are similar to your wedding rings. You wear yours on your right wrist, and Lythas wears his on his left. They are normally decorated lightly with Lashran runes of love and fertility," he tilted his head, wondering why Coren was giving him such an exasperated look. "What? Oh! Forgive me, I was not thinking...of course, you have no Joining bangles." he frowned, feeling stupid for not thinking of that before. Tsabarak sighed and went to his cabinet. He opened it and searched the second shelf, then smiled as he found the wooden box he had carefully stored away. Turning to Coren, he opened the box and showed him its contents.

Coren gave a low whistle. Within the box were two wide bracelets, obviously crafted for men. They were made of rose gold and etched with ivy patterns and strange, flowing script. He glanced at Tsabarak sharply and saw that the Sire was blushing. "You intended to ask Lythas to bond with you," the weapons dealer whispered. It was not a question.

Tsabarak nodded slowly and closed his eyes. "Yes, it is true. I suppose trying to hide my feelings for him is useless around you, as you feel the same. No matter how jealous I am of you, Coren Darshaw, you are a good man, and I consider you my friend. I want Lythallendar to be happy, above all else, so I humbly ask that you take these for your own use," with that said, he held the box out to Coren.

Momentarily speechless, the weapons dealer took the gift. His blue eyes never left Tsabarak's face as he murmured, "You're a far better man than I, Lashran. I don't believe I could be nearly as graceful, if I were in your shoes."

The Sire's lips quirked. "That is because you're a boorish human, Coren."

The weapons dealer laughed, feeling his heart lift.

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As Lashran custom demanded, Coren and Lythas weren't allowed to be closer than ten feet to each other until the ceremony. Tsabarak enlisted Charlotte and Jahlad to help him enforce this, for Coren seemed to have trouble remembering the rule. "How much do you expect us to avoid one another on a bloody ship?!" the weapons dealer

growled to Charlotte as she steered him away from Lythas. He reluctantly followed, his eyes meeting the Lifebearer's across the deck. Lythas gave him a sweet, happy smile, and it was all Coren could do to not tell everyone to bugger off and run over to his lover.

Charlotte smirked. "Patience, love. You want to prove you're taking this seriously, don't you? Just respect the rules...you've only got a few hours to go before Lythas is yours forever."

Tsabrak approached and had apparently heard the conversation. "I can't blame you for wanting to go to him, Coren, but you and Lythas were separated for months...a few more hours will not kill you, my friend."

Coren scowled as the Sire patted his shoulder sympathetically. "Charlotte, my sweet flower, would you mind giving Coren and I a moment alone together? I have a bit of tutoring to take care of."

She grinned, knowing exactly what he meant. "Of course, you gorgeous lion. Don't keep me waiting too long!" she gave him a wink and a suggestive bat of her eyelashes before sauntering off.

Tsabrak grinned after her, shaking his head in admiration. Charlotte was proving to be a pleasant diversion from his pain. Turning to Coren, he cleared his throat. "I apologize if this seems like an invasion to your privacy, Coren, but I only ask over concern. What do you intend to do with Lythas on the night of your bonding?"

Coren coughed to cover up a laugh. What the bloody hell did Tsab think he was going to do? The weapons dealer hadn't bedded anyone since Lythas left his house over three months ago...he couldn't bring himself to. "Is this a trick question? It's been months, and I'm as randy as a tomcat...use your imagination, Lashran."

Tsabrak nodded, but he did not smile. "Aye, that's what I thought. I understand your needs, Coren, but think on this; Lythas is a little over halfway through his pregnancy, and he recently had a close call with a miscarriage. I don't want you to get over-excited and hurt him or the baby in your lust." he expected Coren to get angry with him and say that he was accusing him of something, but the weapons dealer went still and paled.

"Damn...you're right. Intercourse is probably a bad idea, eh?"

Tsabrak barely succeeded in holding down the chuckle that surfaced at the way Coren tried to blanket the disappointment in his voice. "Well, let us not get hasty. I simply wanted you to be aware of how fragile Lythas is. There is a position that is recommended for lovemaking when a Lifebearer is with child. I shall describe it to you, and also teach you a few tricks that will make your Lythas a very happy lad," he grinned like a cat and guided Coren below decks. The weapons dealer suddenly looked nervous, and Tsabrak allowed him to wonder. He wasn't going to demonstrate these things physically, of course, but the look on the weapons dealer's face said he was afraid the Sire might try.

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At sunrise the next day, everyone was gathered on deck to view the Vashekna. Though most of them were still baffled at the thought of two males getting married,

they all knew Coren Darshaw well enough to keep any remarks to themselves. The man may like lads, but he could still kill any one of them with ease. These were the thoughts of most of the cutthroats as Lythas and Coren stood facing each other, with Tsabrak standing before them.

Lythas couldn't stop smiling as he stared up at Coren and admired the way the rising sun cast his chiseled features in glowing relief. Tsabrak had asked him earlier if he was absolutely certain he wanted to do this. "Humans age much more quickly than Lashran, little one. You will remain young while he grows old and dies...are you certain you can handle that?" Lythas had replied that he was willing to take the sorrow for the joy of being with Coren for even a short period of time. All others on board ceased to exist to the Lifebearer as Tsabrak began the vows. "Today, two souls are coming together in a union stronger than any force on Wyndrah," began Tsabrak, "the force of love."

The Sire was embarrassed to hear his own voice catch at the end of the sentence, and he cleared his throat and continued, "You compliment one another, as bond mates should. Take these bangles and place them on one another's wrists." He held out the box containing the bracelets, and the two lovers took them. "Other wrist, Coren," the Sire muttered as the weapons dealer started to put the bangle on Lythas' right one. Coren flushed and quickly corrected the mistake, and Lythas gave a breathless, nervous chuckle.

Once the bangles were on, Tsabrak said, "Now for your vows. Lythallendar of the Lashran, whom do you choose as your lifemate?"

Without hesitation, Lythas spoke; "I choose the man before me, Coren Darshaw."

Tsabrak nodded in approval at the smooth reply and turned to Coren. "Coren Darshaw of Tariff, whom do you choose as your lifemate?"

Coren had to clear his throat before saying, "I choose the Lifebearer before me, Lythas. Er...Lythallendar, that is."

There were a few quite chuckles at his bumble, until he glared at the crowd. All of them immediately shut up.

Smiling, Tsabrak said, "Very good. Now, both of you press the palms of your hands together and gaze into one another's eyes." They did so, and Tsabrak sang the hymn of Joining and Fertility. His voice was beautiful and strange as it rose and fell in a melody that was at once alien and intoxicating.

Coren's eyes became heavy lidded as the melody lulled him like a magic spell. He was mildly surprised when the etched runes on both his and Lythas' bracelets lit up in a soft, golden glow as Tsabrak sang. Lythas' delicate facial features and bright, emerald eyes filled his vision, and he swayed slightly. The Lifebearer's lips were parted and his gaze was drowsy as well as the hymn reached its final verse.

When Tsabrak stopped singing, everyone blinked and shook themselves. "Now, that was right strange," murmured Jack to Pete. He did a double take and laughed. The auction worker had literally fallen asleep on his feet, and was snoring softly. The burly pirate gave the smaller man a heavy nudge, startling him awake.



Tsabrak smiled at Lythas and Coren. "Congratulations. You are now bonded." He kissed them each on the cheek, then addressed everyone. "Now, we celebrate!"

Charlotte approached Coren and Lythas the moment Tsabrak declared the ceremony completed. She looked as though she was ready to cry, and her smile took to her ears. She gave Lythas a tight hug and whispered, "I knew he'd come through for you," and then she hugged Coren and murmured, "Thank the gods you came to your senses, man!"

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Why was he so nervous? This was Coren standing before him, not some stranger! The man knew every inch of his body, and yet Lythas felt light headed and skittish as Coren closed and locked the door of their cabin, then turned to look at him with a hungry expression. "It's been too long, sweetling," the weapons dealer said softly, crossing the room to stand before the Lifebearer.

Lythas smiled up at him and timidly placed his hands on his new lifemate's strong shoulders. "Yes, it has," he agreed. He examined Coren as if seeing him for the first time. The handsome pirate was a big man-not burly like Jack, but tall and powerful, with muscles like rock. Lythas had always been aware of Coren's power, of course, but now it struck a touch of awe and intimidation in him. He supposed it was because of his condition. His emotions were rather unpredictable these days. He cautiously leaned forward and placed a kiss at the hollow of Coren's throat, putting his arms around the pirate's waist as he did so.

Coren gave a low groan of arousal and stroked the Lashran's soft black hair, while his other hand splayed across the small of Lythas' back to pull him closer. It was clear that the pirate was trying to control his desire and be gentle with his mate, and Lythas appreciated that. He licked and kissed the skin of Coren's throat, while his hands worked at the laces of the weapons dealer's shirt. Once he bared Coren's chest, the young Lashran worshipped the planes of it with his lips and hands. Lythas adored Coren's chest...it was lightly dusted with soft, golden hair, and the Lifebearer nuzzled it and moaned softly.

"Lythas, you are driving me mad," Coren breathed, cupping the Lashran's buttocks. Lythas looked up at him with wide, bright green eyes and moistened his shapely lips with his tongue. Coren groaned and claimed those lips almost roughly, his callused hands eagerly pulling the Lashran's clothing off. He couldn't wait...this was something too long denied to him! "You're beautiful, Lythas," he said huskily when the Lashran seemed uncertain. Lythas' elegant hands were trying to cover the roundness of his belly from Coren's sight, and the pirate gripped his wrists and gently forced him to drop his hands.

Lythas blushed, thinking that surely, Coren would find the bump unattractive, but he was taken aback by the possessive, admiring fire in the sea foam eyes as they looked at his stomach, then at his face. "You aren't...put off...by my stomach, are you?" the Lashran questioned uncertainly, biting his lip.

Coren smiled and cupped his chin. "Put off, Lythas? Quite the contrary...the sight of your belly quickening with my child is surprisingly arousing. I'm a beast, you know," and then he kissed the Lashran hard, his breath coming out harsh and uneven with his desire.

Lythas gasped against Coren's mouth as the pirate's large, warm hand began to stroke the soft skin of his distended belly. Gods, this was what Tsabrak did that night...did the Sire have something to do with this? He felt his knees go weak and his groin throb as his lifemate caressed his stomach in smooth, sensual circles. "Coren," he sighed, closing his eyes, "that does...strange things to me."

Coren couldn't even grin as he stared at his young lover. Lythas' face was radiant and ethereal with pleasure, and the pirate grit his teeth and forced himself to calm down. Tsabrak wasn't kidding about the reaction he would get by doing this! He kissed the smooth, pearly skin of the Lashran's neck and shoulder as he subtly guided him to the bed. Lythas sunk easily onto the mattress, staring up at Coren with hazy, half-closed eyes as the pirate slid in beside him and bent over him. He didn't protest when Coren untied the drawstring of his breeches and pulled them off of him, leaving him nude.

Coren stared down at Lythas and swallowed hard. He felt like he was going to burst with need. "I don't know how much of this I can take," he groaned truthfully, and the Lashran's rosebud lips quirked into a smile. "I suppose you think that's funny," Coren said with a mock frown, leaning down to nibble the Lifebearer's ear.

Lythas gasped and guilelessly cupped the hard bulge between the pirate's thighs. "I know how you feel, Master," he said softly, forgetting in his passion that Coren was no longer his owner.

Coren smiled, letting the slip of tongue pass. There was something erotic about hearing Lythas call him "Master". He moved his hips in time with the Lashran's stroking, his breath quickening. "You're going to get yourself into trouble doing that, lad," he said breathlessly. Lythas said nothing, merely pulled Coren closer to him with his other hand so that he could again taste his chest. Coren hissed as Lythas continued to press and rub his groin through the breeches, and the Lashran's lips closed about one of the pirate's nipples and sucked on it.

"You have to stop, sweetling," Coren said shakenly. He gently disengaged Lythas' clever hand from between his legs, ignoring the frustrated look the Lashran shot up at him. "I'll lose control and possibly hurt you if you get me too excited, my love," the weapons dealer explained.

"You won't hurt me, Coren," Lythas whispered seductively between kisses on the pirate's chest and throat. When Coren had called him "my love" it caused a gush of feelings to move through the Lashran so strongly that he almost felt as if he was in his seasonals again. He was shocked when a lump formed in his throat and tears filled his eyes.

"What is it, Lythas?" Coren asked in alarm when he felt the wetness of the lad's tears against his chest, "why are you crying?" he pulled back to look at Lythas, caressing his cheek as he did so.

Lythas shook his head and whispered, "I...do not know why. I just...missed you so much," he finished with a kiss to Coren's lips that was both sweet and sensual at once.

Coren swallowed as a peculiar ache throbbed in his chest. "I missed you too, Lythallendar."

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 33*

"Easy, Lythas," Coren panted as the Lashran's hands frantically explored his body. He was elated that being pregnant did nothing to diminish Lythas' sexual appetite, but he was finding it harder to control himself by the moment. The Lifebearer sighed Coren's name and rubbed his naked erection against his leg, making the pirate growl in frustration. He finally grabbed Lythas' wrists firmly and pushed them over the Lashran's head, holding them there. "I can't bear much more of that," Coren explained when those wide green eyes looked up at him in confusion.

Lythas smiled and blushed, licking his lips as he tried to regulate his breathing. Fascinated, Coren's blue eyes latched onto the Lashran's mouth and watched the motion. The pirate shuddered in painful arousal and muttered, "That's it...I'm not waiting any longer," and then he stood up and clumsily yanked the rest of his clothes off. When he turned back to the bed, Lythas was staring straight at his erection, his delicate lips parted in wonder. Coren groaned, "don't look at me like that, sweetling...it gets me too excited."

Exasperated with Coren telling him not to do this and not to do that, Lythas rolled his eyes and then shut them. He pouted and said, "Fine then. I shall lie here like a lump and not look at you or touch you at all."

He heard Coren's breathy laugh and cracked his green eyes open to glare petulantly at the weapons dealer. "I'm sorry, Lythallendar," Coren said with a smile as he got back onto the bed beside him, "it's just that you drive me so insane with arousal that I'm afraid I might lose my senses and get rough with you. After what happened recently, I think you know how careful we must be, for the safety of the baby." His fingers began to trace patterns over the smooth roundness on Lythas' lower abdomen, and the Lashran sighed in pleasure and arched his back. Coren grinned and lowered his mouth to kiss the silken flesh there, licking around the belly button with his tongue.

Breathlessly, Lythas said, "You tell me not to get you over-excited, and then you do that?" Coren could feel the wet tip of Lythas' penis against the top of his chest as he lazily kissed his lover's belly.

"I want you, Lythas," Coren whispered, running both his hands up and down the Lashran's lithe body. "I promise I shall be careful." He glanced up at Lythas' face to judge whether the Lifebearer was ready and willing to receive him. The emerald gaze stared back at him, burning with passion. He brought his hand down between Lythas' pale thighs and searched with his fingers for the spot that Tsabarak had told him to stimulate. He was rewarded when Lythas whimpered softly and rotated his hips. So odd, that the Lashran could lubricate like a woman when touched the right way! Coren waited, expecting himself to panic at the strangeness of it, but he relaxed and smiled. It was natural, though not what he was used to.

Lythas trembled and panted as Coren gripped his penis and stroked it while rubbing and pressing the spot between the organ and the testicles. "Please," the Lashran gasped, needing to be filled. His eyes opened in surprise as Coren stopped the stimulation and grasped his hips, then easily slid Lythas to the edge of the bed, so that his legs were dangling over the side. "What-" he started to question.

Coren settled his hips between Lythas' spread thighs. The bed was low enough to the floor that the pirate could be on his knees and the edge of it was level with his waist. He suspected that Tsabrak had designed this bed for this purpose, but he refrained from saying so. "Hush, Lythas...I'm going to make love to you now," he murmured huskily as he coaxed the Lashran to wrap his legs around his waist.

Lythas caught on that in this position, Coren wouldn't be putting any weight onto him and would have difficulty thrusting too hard. Understanding, he did as his bond mate instructed, then bit his lip on a moan as Coren's hard, long length slid smoothly and deeply into him. "Oh...oh, Coren...I had forgotten...oh, gods," Lythas groaned, reaching up desperately for the pirate as Coren retracted his penis to the tip, then pushed it back in again.

Coren shuddered and held still for a moment, staring down at Lythas with an expression akin to pain. Forgetting his manners in the pleasure, the pirate growled, "You feel so damned good, Lythas...so tight," and then he continued to pump himself in and out of the Lashran's gripping heat. His hands moved from Lythas' hips up to his chest, and he caressed the Lifebearer's nipples until they were hard pebbles, then moved down to stroke his stiff erection. Lythas' thighs tightened around Coren's waist as the pirate took him, and he tossed his head and rasped endearments in his own language.

Though Coren couldn't understand the words his lover spoke, he sensed the meaning of them, and he smiled and closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of their coupling. Lythas tried to rise, but Coren gently and firmly pressed his shoulders down and held him there. "No, sweetling," the pirate said shakenly, "stay as you are," when it seemed the Lashran would disobey him, Coren rotated his hips, moving himself around inside of Lythas and stimulating the sensitive gland within. Lythas gave a little jerk and clutched the bedsheets, groaning Coren's name as his strength fled from the pleasure. His breath came in uneven, trembling pants as the pirate continued the motions for a bit, and Lythas arched his back and mewled as his lover's fingers gently squeezed the tip of his penis. He orgasmed hard, making Coren's chest and stomach slick with his fluids, and he fell back on the mattress and stared up at the pirate dazedly.

Satisfied that he had brought Lythas to his peak, Coren changed his rhythm and speed to quick, hard little thrusts. It was exhausting, due to the position he was in, but it felt so good that it was worth the effort it took. He clutched Lythas' hands in his own and groaned raggedly as the pressure built. "I love you, Coren," the Lashran gasped, pressing his young body down to impale himself further on his lover's throbbing erection. Coren bellowed in ecstasy and went taut, and Lythas closed his eyes and gave a sigh of satisfaction as his lover's thick seed filled him.

Trembling like a newborn, Coren bowed his head and took a few moments to recover. His release had been so intense that he almost blacked out from it. After a few deep breaths, he lifted his head to gaze into Lythas' eyes, and he explored the Lashran's fair features with his fingertips. \* Mine, \* he thought, feeling a possessive thrill shoot through him as Lythas kissed his fingers.

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"Want some company, love?" Charlotte said as she reached the top of the crow's nest and approached Tsabrak.

The Sire was nursing a bottle of whisky and staring off into the horizon. The sunset bathed his silvery mane of hair with fire, and his golden eyes were luminous and sad. He smiled at her and offered the whiskey bottle to her, which she accepted. Taking a couple of pulls from it and making a face, the seamstress shivered and passed the bottle back. Then she embraced the Lashran from behind and rested her cheek against his back. "I just want you to know, I really admire you for the way you've helped Lythas and Coren out. It can't have been easy, feeling the way you do."

He nodded wordlessly and heaved a trembling sigh, then rested his free hand over one of hers and rubbed gently. "It is that obvious, is it?" he murmured. His voice was husky.

Charlotte disengaged herself from his waist and coaxed him to turn around and look at her. Tears rimmed those great, amber cat eyes, and the sensual mouth was frowning unhappily. There was something about Lashran that touched others around them. They were such a passionate people that their feelings throbbed from their forms like an aura. Charlotte felt his pain and longing, and she almost began to cry, herself. "Tell me the truth, Tsabrak. I read that you Lashran live for hundreds of years...is that just rumor?"

He took a curly lock of her sable hair in his fingers and toyed with it. "Aye, lovely one. That's the truth. Coren will grow old and die, and Lythas will remain young. The Lifebearer will still be considered just out of his teen years to my people when his bond mate passes on." He saw the distress in her expression, and he drew her into his embrace and tried to soothe her. "I don't think it is as bad as it sounds, Charlotte. Lythallendar and Coren have a bright, pure love that will endure for all the time they have together. If I didn't think so, trust me-I wouldn't have performed Vashekna for them. I'm certain that Coren will sire at least one more child upon Lythas, so the Lifebearer will have something of his lover, always."

"But, what about their children, Tsab? Won't they be caught between worlds? Won't they live longer than other humans, but not as long as Lashran?" The questions were tumbling out of her...she couldn't help it. Her concerns needed to be satisfied.

Tsabrak looked down at her and shook his head slowly. "This is where the elders had it wrong, dear one. I discovered long ago the truth about breeding results between the species. Lythas may have had a human mother, but the only thing he inherited from her was outward appearances and perhaps some personality traits. The lad is pure Lashran. When our two species produce offspring, it goes one way or the other...it doesn't truly mix. Though, to be honest, I've yet to see a union between the two produce a female child, I can assure you that any male children they have will be pure Lashran. It is because of the council's narrow-minded ignorance and reluctance to study these things that I left. Their fear of being bred to extinction is purely unfounded and superstitious."

Charlotte's brow furrowed. "Then, the Lashran genetics cancel out the human?"

Tsabrak smiled. "Quite a little scientist you are, my dear! Yes, they do...in the case of a male child. I have a theory that if such a union produced a female, the child would be purely human...though, as I've said, I've yet to see that happen. Lythas is only the second offspring of a mixed union I have ever seen."

Charlotte sighed. She had a good head for mathematics and science; better than most women did. Yet this was so far beyond her knowledge that it made her head

spin. "I'm worried, Tsab. I love both of them to death, but what will this do to Lythas? I'm sure it'll be great for Coren, having a lover that stays eternally young...especially when he hits his mid-life crisis. You know men...they always feel like proving they still have their virility is still intact once they reach a certain age." she made a disgusted face, and Tsabarak chuckled.

"Do they?" he asked in mild surprise. He wasn't familiar with that part of human behavior, "How silly."

Charlotte smirked. "Aye, it's silly, but it's rare to find an aging man who doesn't start panting after younger women when he starts getting older. At least Lythas won't have to worry about that...Coren will already have his 'trophy lover' in the lad, I suppose. The thing that worries me is that it's not really fair to Lythas, is it? I mean, won't it tear him apart, to watch Coren wither away over the years?"

Tsabarak frowned and pulled her into his embrace again, kissing the crown of her head. "Yes, it will hurt him, little vixen...of that, I have no doubt. But, our Lythallendar is made of stronger stuff than we give him credit for. I asked him if he was aware of the consequences before the ceremony, and his reply was that he was willing to go through it, just to be with Coren. I believe the lad will endure, though it will ache his heart."

Charlotte nodded and snuggled against the Sire, enjoying his warmth. She liked Tsabarak, a lot, but she wasn't foolish enough to let it go beyond a roll in the sheets and fond friendship. He had already explained to her that Lythas' very situation was why he had vowed never to fall in love with a human. Hell, she wasn't the marrying type anyways, regardless of what Pete said. She was content to have friends and lovers and raise her two boys on her own, quite happily.

One more concern plagued her. Lythas was essentially alone in a world of alien people. This was his first baby. He tried to hide it, but she could tell the lad was afraid. "Tsabarak, I have a favor to ask you," she said quietly.

"What is it, dear? You know I'd do anything for you and Lythas," he murmured against her hair.

She stepped back and looked up at him, her eyes warm with sympathy, "I know how much you love Lythas, and how hard it must be for you to see him with someone else, but this is his first babe. I know a lot about birthing, having had two of my own, but I've never dealt with this kind of birth before. Lythas is going to need someone around who knows about Lashran births. Would you be willing to stay with me, at my place, until his time comes? I think having you there to help will make things so much easier."

Tsabarak considered this with disconcertment plastered on his features. She was right, of course, and he worried over the Lifebearer endlessly. It would put him off schedule to stay for possibly three months, but he would never forgive himself if something happened to Lythas or the baby, which he might have prevented. Finally, he nodded and whispered, "Very well, Charlotte. I can't refuse a request like that, and Lythas does need an experienced hand around when his little one comes."

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 34*

Though Coren wasn't all that thrilled to hear the news that Tsabrak would be staying in Tariff until the baby was born, he understood that it was really for the best. Once they docked in the pirate haven and got settled again, he was careful not to leave his bond mate alone with the Sire for very long. Lythas took it stoically, though he wasn't really comfortable with the unspoken rivalry between Coren and Tsabrak. He wasn't insulted by Coren's jealousy, knowing the pirate as he did. The business went back on schedule and Coren's relatives packed up and left once they returned home. They said nothing about the weapons dealer's choice in partner, as they had never really understood him in the first place, and they knew they would only be asking for trouble if they objected.

Charlotte found that the Sire had a way with children...both of her sons adored him. Tsabrak was very helpful around the house, and added an extra sense of security. The seamstress knew that any fool who tried to rob them or assault any of them would be swiftly and painfully dealt with, as long as the Lashran pirate was a guest in her home. Pete expressed his disapproval when she and Tsabrak became lovers, but with typical Charlotte-ness, she ignored his ire. The auction worker was actually thankful that the Sire was around, for it meant that the unsavory types who usually troubled his sister were quick to back off, now.

Poor Jack was once again called upon to take up the slack. Coren was once again becoming a respectable business man (as respectable as one could be in Tariff, that is), but Tsabrak needed his own shady business to continue. The Sire offered Jack a partnership and asked that he take care of things while they waited on Lythas' child to come. The burly pirate, softhearted despite his love for battle and intimidating appearance, agreed. Lythas began to call him "The Gentle Bear", which embarrassed him to no end.

There were no more episodes of early labor with Lythas, but during the last month of his pregnancy, he was often forced to have bedrest. The Lifebearer was easily fatigued, and Jahlad came around often and helped Tsabrak make potions that would restore the lad's energy. Tsabrak trained Lythas to strengthen his lower back and abdomen in preparation for the upcoming birth, and Coren uncharacteristically doted on his lifemate as his time grew nearer. The weapons dealer amused everyone with his excitement. He redesigned one of the largest rooms in his manor, turning it into a nursery. He massaged Lythas' feet every night, for they became swollen when the Lashran was on them for an extended period of time. He wouldn't allow Lythas to bathe himself...he insisted that he do it. Coren also told Charlotte to mind her business when she said he was spoiling the lad.

Tsabrak managed to keep his feelings from showing too much around Lythallendar, though he often caught himself rubbing the Lifebearer's lower back when he complained of it aching. A glare from Coren was all it took to make the Sire hastily stop and look for something else to do. He talked often with Jahlad, who was sympathetic to his plight. Like Charlotte, the sorcerer admired the way Tsabrak was handling it. "I know few others who would be as graceful as you have been, my friend," the Bargel said truthfully, "Coren should count himself lucky that you're willing to help he and Lythas, given your feelings over their union." Tsabrak modestly shrugged. Bless Jahlad and Charlotte...if it weren't for them, he would have become a drunkard by now.



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They were arguing again. This time over whether Coren should purchase a kitten or a puppy from the market. "All lads should have a dog...it's just the way things are," Coren growled at Tsabrak.

The Sire snorted. "Dogs are noisy and difficult to keep clean. A cat is a much better choice for your little one, Darshaw. They are much more independent and cleaner!"

Coren scoffed, "My kid needs a pet that'll come to him when he calls, not some stuck up pussy!" it was clear by his tone that he wasn't referring entirely to the kitten on the last remark.

Tsabrak narrowed his eyes. "So you'd rather him have an ill-mannered, smelly mutt?"

"Are you calling me ill-mannered and smelly?" Coren's hands clenched into fists.

"That depends. Are you calling me a stuck up pussy?" Tsabrak challenged.

Lythas finally lost his temper and approached the two of them from behind. Both Coren and Tsabrak gasped in surprised pain when the Lifebearer captured their earlobes and pinched hard, yanking their heads down close to his face. "Will the two of you stop bickering! I have had enough of this! If you must duel each other like rutting bulls, be my guest, but I have some say in the matter of what pet my child has as well!" he snapped.

Both men calmed and went still, and Lythas released his hold on their ears. They backed away, rubbing their smarting ears and staring at the Lifebearer in amazement. He ignored both of them and chewed his bottom lip as he looked from the box of kittens to the box of puppies. "Our child shall have both a puppy and a kitten, Coren. Do you object to that?" he turned to his lifemate, his green eyes glowing with anger.

"N-no...of course not, Lythas," Coren stammered, taken off guard by the normally sweet lad's sudden bout of temper.

"Good thinking, little one," complimented Tsabrak, no less wary. "That solves the argument."

Lythas rolled his eyes and turned back to pick out which animals he wanted. He wasn't feeling good today, and in all honesty, he really didn't care if they got a bloody rat for a pet. His belly was tight and hard, and he felt a lot of pressure low on his stomach. He was about to tell the stall worker which animals he chose, when he felt something sort of...pop...inside of him. He went pale as clear liquid suddenly spilled down his thighs and legs. "Coren," he gasped, turning to stare at his mate with huge, fearful eyes.

Coren was immediately at his side, catching him as he began to fall. "Lythas?! What's the matter?" the weapons dealer said shakenly, scared out of his wits by the fear in the Lifebearer's eyes and the wetness now soaking his clothing.

"It's time," said Tsabrak calmly. "His water has broken...let's get him back to the house immediately."

Lythas trembled with fear, though he hadn't yet experienced a contraction. Coren easily scooped the Lifebearer into his arms and carried him to the canal while Tsabrak whistled for a ferry. The pilot of the ferry stared openmouthed as an intimidating blond man carried a pale, young man with an obviously pregnant belly onto the boat. Coren snapped instructions to the ferryman, who shook himself out of it and complied as the cat-like, silver haired man settled himself into the boat across from the couple. Lythas moaned as his first contraction struck him, and his fingers curled into Coren's hair and pulled. The weapons dealer winced and began to rub his lifemate's stomach in circular patterns. "It'll be fine, Lythas...just practice the breathing that Tsab taught you," he murmured, keeping eye contact with the lad.

Lythas tilted his head back and hissed through his teeth as he tried to recall the breathing pattern he was supposed to use. Coren held him close and whispered soothingly to him, while Tsabrak held one of his hands and began to breathe with him to help him. After a couple of moments, the contraction eased, and Lythas sighed in relief. Tsabrak had a pocketwatch out and was switching his gaze from Lythas to the instrument as they floated down the waterway towards Coren's house. "Is that as bad as it will get?" Lythas questioned hopefully.

Tsabrak smiled gently at him, wishing he could say it was. "I'm afraid it will get worse, dear one. The closer you come to your time, the stronger the contractions will get. Once you've dilated enough, you can begin bearing down with them." he felt a lump form in his throat at the panic on Lythas' face, and he squeezed the younger Lashran's hand gently and whispered, "We are all here for you, Lythallendar. I promise we will make this as easy on you as we can."

Lythas nodded and rested his head against Coren's shoulder as the weapons dealer ran his fingers through the Lifebearer's hair and rocked him. Just as they reached the street that Coren's house was on and were about to get out of the boat, another contraction struck Lythas and he clenched his teeth and sucked his breath in and out in quick little pants as Tsab had instructed him to do. Tsabrak marked the time of the contraction and smoothed a lock of hair from the Lifebearer's sweat-beaded forehead. "You are doing very well, Lythallendar. Be brave!" he murmured in the Lashran tongue. Lythas gave him a strained little smile and clutched at Coren's shirt as he waited for the spasm to pass. Once he was certain the contraction was over, Coren stood up, lifting Lythas with him as Tsabrak helped so that the weapons dealer didn't strain himself. As Coren carried his mate into the house, Tsabrak tossed a gold coin to the ferryman. The man blinked in surprise at the generous tip...five times the fare. This made up for the strangeness of these people, in his eyes.

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Tsabrak was so relieved when Charlotte came over to visit that he felt weak in the knees. Coren was a nervous wreck, and poor Lythas was frightened out of his mind. The Sire needed a levelheaded person to help him, before he ended up chewing his nails down to the quick. "Oh, is it time?" Charlotte said in excitement the moment she saw the look on Coren's face as he answered the door.

He nodded. "Aye...they're in the bedroom. Tsabrak needs your help...I...seemed to be making Lythas worse with my presence." Tsabrak had snapped at Coren to leave the room, for his pacing and muttering was alarming the laboring Lifebearer. Lythas kept asking if something was wrong, reading Coren's nervous energy as a bad sign. The weapons dealer, for once, didn't argue with Tsabrak when the Sire told him to

get out. He knew he was only making his beloved more frightened, and he couldn't help his own nervous fear for the Lashran and unborn child.

Charlotte nodded in understanding. "It's alright, Coren. Most expecting fathers are asked to stay out of the birthing room. You fellows just can't seem to handle it." She ruffled his hair fondly. "Pete is on his way...why don't you go to the study and have a brandy. Leave this to Tsabrak and me." He nodded, and she felt very sorry for him. She'd never seen Coren Darshaw this frightened before. She wished she had the time to comfort him and explain the intricacies of childbirth, but right now Lythas needed her help more. Without waiting to see if Coren would head for the study as she suggested, she ran to the kitchen to boil up some water and fetch towels.

Tsabrak smiled in relief as Charlotte brought towels and a pitcher of cool water into the room, along with cups and some washcloths. She set her burden down, then went to the bedside and looked down at Lythas. He gazed back at her with dilated, half-lidded eyes, and she looked at Tsab questioningly. "I gave him a sedative. It will be a while before he's dilated enough to begin pushing, so I am trying to ease his pain until then," he explained.

She nodded and dampened a cloth so that she could dab at Lythas' sweating face and neck with it to cool him. "How far apart are his contractions?"

"Twelve minutes, now. Another one should be coming right about now,"

Sure enough, Lythas tensed up and gave a soft cry of pain. "Coren," he moaned, "I want Coren!"

The Sire and seamstress looked at each other, then down at the struggling Lifebearer. "Coren will be up later, sweetheart," Charlotte said gently, blowing on the heated skin of his face.

"He is doing some things downstairs to help," Tsabrak added. Charlotte nodded in approval at his tactful lie. Coren could be no help to Lythas' fragile state of mind right now...it was best to keep him out of the room until he calmed down.

"Pete will be along soon to help Coren out," whispered Charlotte in Tsab's ear. He nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. "Tsab, how will Lythas feed the baby? I mean, it's not as though he's grown breasts or anything during this pregnancy," she questioned.

He continued to rub the younger Lashran's straining belly as he answered, "Lashran young are born with all of their baby teeth intact. The child will be able to eat soft foods from birth."

She frowned and said, "What if it's a girl? I know you said it's rare, but if it's a girl and she's human, she's going to need milk."

He swore softly. "Ah, hells...I didn't think of that!" Lythas gave another cry and the Sire murmured softly to him.

"Don't worry...when Pete gets here, I'll send him to the market to get a cow," Charlotte said.

Tsabrak almost laughed, picturing a cow living in Coren's backyard, but he was too tired and concerned for Lythas to act on it.

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"Bloody hell...ye want me to get a fucking cow?!" snapped Pete when Charlotte met him at the door.

She smacked the back of his head and hissed, "Shhh...calm down! Yes, I want you to go and get a cow. Or, if you can't find one for sale, get some milk; a lot of it. We can put the extra in Coren's icehouse to keep it fresh."

He calmed a bit, glad that his sister was thinking more rationally. "I'll get the milk. It'd take me forever to find a ferry big enough to cart a damned cow all the way here. Anything else?"

She thought on this for a moment. "Take Coren with you. He needs to get out. When you get back, get good and drunk with him."

Pete chuckled, "That I can do!"

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Contrary to his words, Pete found it impossible to get Coren drunk. He nearly had to drag the weapons dealer out the door with him to get him to go to the market...no easy task, considering how much stronger the other man was, and when they returned, Coren kept muttering and looking at the ceiling everytime Lythas' muffled cries were heard. "What's taking so damned long...this has to be killing him!" the weapons dealer said.

"Easy there, old mate...birthin' babies isn't something ye can rush," Pete said, handing him a glass of brandy. "Me sister took eleven hours to get her first out, and seven on the second. They say the first always takes longer."

Coren downed the drink, not even tasting the burn of the liquor. Cramps were twisting his gut, though he didn't mention it. He supposed it was nerves. He swore loudly as the doorbell rang. "Gods, can't people just leave me alone today?" he growled as he stomped out of the study and down the main hall. "What do you want?!" he shouted as soon as he opened the door.

A bewildered looking Jahlad was poised with his hand on the rope to ring the bell a second time. "Forgive me, Master Coren," he said bashfully, "I sensed that your lad is having his baby...might I be of some assistance?"

Coren stepped aside and allowed the sorcerer to enter. "I appreciate it, but I doubt there's anything you can do to help. Tsabrak and Charlotte are looking after him."

Jahlad shrugged and closed the door behind him. "Well, at least allow me to keep you company."

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Coren dozed in the lounge seat he rested in, drifting in and out of awareness. Pete and Jahlad spoke softly to one another, so as not to disturb the weapons dealer's rest. It seemed that Coren was in pain as well as Lythas. He had curled up a bit and occasionally grunted and put a hand over his stomach. "Sympathy pains, I'd imagine," Jahlad deduced.

Pete grimaced, "I thought that was just an old wife's tale. I guess it's not."

Both men stood up as Charlotte entered the study, looking exhausted. There were bloodstains on her hands and dress, and her hair was a disheveled mess. "How goes it?" questioned Jahlad anxiously.

The seamstress smiled tiredly and said, "It's very close now. The head is showing. I came down to get Coren so that he can watch his firstborn come." She shook the weapons dealer gently. "Wake up, love. Your babe's about to be born."

He snorted and sat up dazedly. "What...did you say? It's finally coming?" he sounded like a child who was told Yule morning was finally here.

She smiled. "Aye, Coren. Come up and see...Lythas needs your strength to go the final lap."

Coren bolted off of the couch so fast that he nearly tripped and fell on his face. The others watched in amusement as he sped out of the room to go and see his Bond mate. "Is Lythas all right?" questioned Jahlad. He did not like the way Charlotte had said he needed Coren's strength.

She sighed and nodded. "I think he'll be fine, once he sees his Coren looking down at him. He's just very tired and losing his strength. I know it looks bad, but he really hasn't lost that much blood. All in all, the birth has been a long one, but it hasn't been very violent. I can't believe how small Lashran newborns are! Judging by the size of the head, the wee thing is about the same size as a human babe would be if it were a month or two premature."

Pete poured her a glass of wine, which she took gratefully, heedless of the blood on her hands. She had forgotten how exhausting a birth can be for everyone involved...especially the person laboring. She hoped that Lythas would get a second wind when he saw Coren...she didn't mention to the others that Tsabarak was afraid it was taking too long.

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"Lythas, I'm here...look at me, sweetling."

The Lashran slowly opened his eyes and stared up at Coren's worried, handsome face. "M-master," he said weakly, a smile finding its way to his lips.

Coren lifted the lad's hand to his mouth and kissed the top of it. "Tsabarak says you have to push, Lythas. Can you do that, for me?" he murmured.

The Lifebearer closed his emerald eyes and sighed. "So tired," he whispered. A sharp pain shot through his belly, pelvis and back, and he moaned, too exhausted to move.

Coren shared a grim look with Tsabrak, who mouthed, "Please...get him to push, Coren!"

The weapons dealer stroked his lover's pale, damp face and said, "I know you're tired, sweetling. I promise, you can rest as much as you want, once you deliver the baby. Please, Lythas...he may die if you don't get him out."

Tsabrak's eyes widened...he hadn't expected Coren to be so blunt, but the reaction was immediate. Lythallendar's eyes flared open in alarm, and he bore down with all his flagging strength. Coren quickly removed his own leather belt and fit it between the Lifebearer's teeth so that he could bite down on something. Lythas gave a yowl of agony that was almost feral, and his young body shook with his efforts.

"That's it, Lythallendar," the sire said encouragingly as he saw the head crown again, "Keep it up...you're doing so well!"

Lythas sobbed and bit down so hard on the leather in his mouth that his jaw creaked. His nostrils flared and sweat dripped into his eyes, stinging them. Coren grabbed the cloth that Charlotte had been using, and the weapons dealer wiped the sweat from his laboring mate's face and praised him softly for his efforts. The green eyes were fogged and distant, seeming to be able to focus only on the pain and tearing pressure.

"The head is out! Push harder, little one!" said Tsabrak in excitement.

Lythas' entire body went taut with his efforts, and Coren held him tightly and kissed his hair as he screamed and struggled to bring their offspring into the world. The weapons dealer closed his eyes and wished he could take the pain from Lythas. As it was, he felt his own gut burning, though it couldn't possibly be as bad as what the young Lashran was experiencing. Tsabrak laughed in triumph when the babe came. Coren looked down and saw it slip out of Lythas' body, and the weapons dealer went pasty white. "How are you doing this, Lythas?!" he rasped, and then he quickly turned away and vomited on the floor.

The tiny infant let out a wail, and Tsabrak shook his head at Coren as the weapons dealer heaved up all of the liquor he had drank. "What a lovely thing for your little one to see as soon as they enter the world," the Sire muttered. Then he looked back at the babe he held and did a double take. "By the forests," he breathed.

Lythas heard his comment, and he twisted weakly about on the bed, trying to see his child. "What is the matter?" the Lifebearer cried in terror, thinking his child was deformed or dying. He threw the belt he had been biting on aside and struggled to sit up.

Tsabrak laughed again and gently cleaned the infant's body and cleared its throat. "Nothing is wrong, sweet Lifebearer...it's just that...well...you have given birth to a girl. And if she doesn't look like exactly like you, I shall eat my ship! See for yourself!"

He carefully laid the squirming newborn on Lythas' chest, allowing him to see his offspring for the first time. "Oh," the lad gasped, touching his tiny daughter's cheek. She did indeed look like a tiny version of Lythas, with the exception that her large, Lashran eyes were the same color blue as Coren's. He sobbed with joy and relief, and touched his daughter's silky cheek with his fingertips. "She is beautiful," he murmured in a quivering voice.

Coren recovered from his bout of nausea and rinsed his mouth out with the pitcher of water on the nightstand. Hearing his first born whimper, he turned and stared down at her with awe painted on his features. "A girl...I have a little girl," he said dazedly.

"You aren't...disappointed, are you?" Lythas asked softly, looking up at him in concern.

Coren shook himself out of it. "Of course not, sweetling...I'm just surprised. I thought for sure that we'd be having a lad, since you're Lashran."

Lythas smiled brilliantly as Coren kissed him and thanked him for the baby. "What shall we name her?" the Lifebearer inquired. "We have several male names thought up, but we never thought of female names."

Coren smiled as his daughter's diminutive fingers curled around his finger and squeezed. "How about Aurora? 'Twas my mother's name."

Lythas looked at the baby's beautiful, blue eyes and whispered, "Yes, that is a fitting name for our daughter."

Tsabrak frowned. His theory had been wrong. This tiny child was indeed Lashran, through and through. Lythas had just introduced to the world the first female Lashran to ever exist. It seemed the elders were backwards...the Lashran could cause the extinction of humankind, and not the other way around. The Sire was suddenly thankful for his people's paranoid xenophobia. They thought of humans as lesser beings, and he had the feeling that if they knew they could breed them out, they might just try it. There was much that even young Lythallendar did not know about his people. There was a reason they denounced weaponry, as their culture's hidden history was filled with bloodshed and domination of other species. Tsabrak shivered. He would have to speak with Lythas and Coren once things settled down. They would need to keep their daughter's origins quiet, for safety's sake.

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## *"Fate"*

### *Part 35*

Once Lythas regained his strength and Tsabarak was certain that the baby girl was strong and healthy, he said his good-byes to everyone. Though it ached his heart to leave, as these people had become like a family to him, the Lashran pirate could not stay. A part of him had fallen in love with Charlotte, and it was with much regret that he left her. He did not have the strength that Lythallendar did...couldn't handle watching her grow old and die. "I will never forget you, pretty vixen," he promised as they embraced at the docks.

She sniffled and gave him a hard, deep kiss. "You watch yourself out there, Tsab. I don't want to hear of you getting yourself killed. I want you to be around long after I'm gone, to watch over Lythas."

Her words surprised him, and it showed on his face. She sighed and gave him a forced smirk. "We both know you're still head over heels in love with him, Tsabarak. I know it's for the best that you're leaving, but I also know that it's not just me that you're running away from. Coren won't live forever, and Lythas is going to be lonely when both he and I are gone."

Tsabarak sputtered and tried to search for words to reply with, but it was useless. He finally bowed his head and nodded. "I shall return someday...and I promise that naught will happen to any of your children while I exist to prevent it. That goes for Lythas and however many little ones he and Coren produce in their time together, as well."

She nodded in satisfaction, then whispered, "I'll make sure we keep things quiet about Aurora, too. Tell me, will she be able to have children, when she's grown up?"

Tsabarak shrugged. "I cannot say, dear one. Her scent is that of any newborn Lifebearer's, but she is the first female Lashran to ever exist. I suppose only time will tell." He hugged her to him tightly, one last time. Both had tears in their eyes as he slowly turned away and boarded the Black Cat, where Jack and the crew waited for him. The Sire turned and waved at Coren and Lythas, who stood behind Charlotte. Lythas smiled at him and held the baby up a bit as if to send her farewells, too. Aurora gave a loud coo, giving Tsabarak her own farewell in baby talk. He grinned, his heart lifting a little at the sight. Then he ordered the boarding plank to be retracted, and went to the wheel of the Black Cat to sail away.

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Seven years after Tsabarak's departure, Lythas gave birth to a boy. The child was the opposite of his older sister. Where Aurora looked like Lythas with Coren's eyes, the little boy looked like Coren, with Lythas' eyes...except that his pupils were slit and his ears a bit pointed. They named him Lyre, after Lythas' father. As they grew, it became apparent that Aurora took after Coren in demeanor-hot tempered and intimidating, while Lyre took after Lythas-gentle and patient.

Both children grew into striking young people, and Aurora became quite good at hand to hand combat and weaponry, taught by her Sire. Lyre held more of an interest in books and art, and so he in turn spent more time with his Father. Neither of them



had much trouble understanding why Coren was the Sire and Lythas was the Father, but they were both instructed not to speak of it to their friends, as most humans wouldn't understand the truth. Lythas was beside himself with worry over his daughter, for she enjoyed rough-housing with lads, and as she developed, some of them enjoyed wrestling with her a bit too much, to the Lifebearer's taste. She also swore like a sailor, thanks to Pete.

"Could you please talk to her?" he asked Coren, "She is gaining far too much attention with her behavior than I would like."

It was true...Aurora was both sensual and dangerous at the same time. Though countless young men admired her, none of them dared approach her out of fear. She had caught a group of boys teasing her younger brother and calling him a bookworm, and when the teasing began to progress to remarks about his cat's eyes and pulling at his ears, she leaped to Lyre's defense and beat the hell out of each and every one of them.

Coren merely chuckled and kissed Lythas soundly, explaining that he was quite happy with the way their beautiful daughter handled herself. He said that he felt much better knowing that no lad was ever going to get down her pants (for she wore breeches instead of a dress) until she was damned good and ready. Aurora might be impulsive, but she did inherit some wisdom from her parents. Though she had appetites as strong as any Lifebearer, she had the strength of will to wait until she sensed she was truly ready for coupling, and woe betide anyone that tried to force her to do it before then.

Jahlad visited from time to time, keeping them updated as best he could on Tsabrak's travels, so that they wouldn't worry over him. The sorcerer often traveled the astral and visited with the pirate. The Bargel also kept Tsabrak informed on Lythas' family and Charlotte's. Though he sometimes felt like a messenger boy, Jahlad didn't really mind, as it kept his friends happy to know about each other. They often wrote back and forth, as well. Just after Aurora turned eighteen, they were all saddened to learn that Jack had died of a sword wound at sea. The Black Cat had a run-in with another pirate ship, and many lads on both sides died in the ensuing fight over territory. Tsabrak assured them that the burly man died quickly and with little pain, as the sword had gone straight into his heart.

As he grew older, Coren began to think it was unfair of him to hold Lythas to their vows. He knew he was dying...he felt it every day. It was his heart...he had suffered two attacks, and he could feel the muscle weakening inside of him. The Lashran was still as beautiful and youthful as the day they had met, and as he came to Coren's bed one night, only a few days before the weapons dealer's fifty-third birthday, the retired pirate just stared at him and admired his angelic beauty. He took a strand of Lythas' raven hair in his fingers and brought it to his nose, inhaling the scent. At his suggestion, Lythas had allowed his hair to grow long...down to his mid-back. Coren nuzzled the soft mane and pulled his bond mate closer to him, shivering.

"Are you cold, Coren?" Lythas whispered, stroking the weapons dealer's back. His green eyes were sad as he felt how thin his love had become. "I can light the fireplace for you."

Coren grunted and shook his head. "Nay, Lythallendar. Just let me hold you. I don't have much time left."

Lythas swallowed hard and gazed into the faded blue eyes of his beloved master. A part of him would forever think of Coren as his master, he supposed. Even in his old age, the weapons dealer was a handsome man. True, his features had become hollowed and gaunt over the past few weeks, but it didn't stop Lythas from loving him. "Oh, Coren...I...I do not want to let you go," Lythas finally whispered, hugging him fiercely.

Coren cupped the Lifebearer's chin and forced him to look up at him. "Lythas...I've had a full life. Fuller than it would have been if you hadn't come along. I don't ever want you to forget that. You've given me two beautiful children and more love than an old sea dog like myself deserves. Don't grieve for me, sweetling. I want you to find someone quickly, when I'm gone. You're too young yet to live like a miser." He kissed the tears that were flowing freely down Lythas' face. "Shhh...don't cry. I'm not gone yet." They held each other tightly through the night. No more words were spoken, for none were needed.

Lythas felt it when Coren stopped breathing. He awoke from a dead sleep and stared at the weapons dealer with wide, aching eyes. The last of the air in the retired pirate's lungs exhaled through his slack mouth, and he did not draw another breath. Trembling, Lythallendar hugged Coren tightly and sobbed against his still chest. "It isn't a relief," he whimpered, "I thought it would be, but it is not!"

Aurora sensed her Sire's passing, and she flew down the hallway and opened the door to see her father clinging to Coren's body and crying broken-heartedly. Her blue eyes, so much like Coren's, were dry as she approached the bed and gently pried Lythas away from the weapons dealer, and she held him tightly and rocked him as he cried. "Let it out, Father," she said softly, kissing his forehead. She wanted to cry herself, but not for the sake of Coren's death. She had known this day was coming, and she had made her peace with the notion of her Sire dying. When the tears fell from her eyes, they were purely for Lythallendar's sorrow.

A shadow filled the doorway, and Aurora looked up to see her brother staring at Coren's still form with disbelieving, tear filled green eyes. "He is...dead?" the young Sire questioned huskily. She nodded and motioned for him to come into her embrace as well. The three held each other and cried as the sun rose.

"We will bury him at sea," Lythas sniffled, "That is what he wanted."

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It took four years for Tsabrak to learn of Coren's passing, as Jahlad was getting senile and could no longer act as messenger between his friends. It was through the Bargel's guild that the captain of the Black Cat heard news. Surprisingly, Charlotte's own son, Morgan, was the sorcerer who finally tracked Tsabrak down and explained everything to him. Much in the way that Jahlad had found Coren years ago, when Lythas had joined Tsabrak's crew, the young Bargel found the Black Cat.

Tsabrak sensed the lad trying to track him down, and he evaded him at first, thinking that he was an enemy. After a while, the Lashran began to feel something oddly familiar about the young wizard's magical signature, and he opened himself up to risk and dropped the concealment he kept about himself. Days later, his crew exclaimed wildly that there was a young man in robes running through the air towards the ship.

Tsabrak ordered that they hold their fire and wait, and he smirked when the lad touched down on the deck and approached him. Hazel eyes peered up at the Lashran from beneath an unruly, wind-blown mane of sable hair. "Don't you remember me?" the young man said accusingly as Tsabrak stared at him.

"Good heavens...is it you, Morgan?" Tsabrak finally said in bewilderment. No wonder he had felt so familiar! When the Bargel nodded and grinned, the Lashran laughed wildly and hugged him close. After a few moments, he held him at arms length and studied him. "Well now, you've grown to be quite a handsome young man, haven't you?" Tsabrak said.

Morgan lowered his gaze. "I guess so," he said modestly. "I have some news...it's really important."

Tsabrak sobered instantly. "It isn't your mother is it? Is she well?"

Morgan nodded. "Aye, she's fine. She married Jahlad, and he got me into the guild."

The Lashran's brows lifted. Well, that was unexpected! All the same, he was glad to hear that Charlotte had finally found someone, and he was quite fond of the bumbling sorcerer who had shared adventures with him so many years ago. "Why haven't I heard from you all? I've written, but have never received anything in return," he said, suddenly frightened, "Is Lythas alright?"

Morgan frowned and said, "Well, not exactly, Sir. Jahlad couldn't remember where he kept the pendant he used to keep in touch with you, and we've been searching for you. Coren died four years ago. Mom thinks that you should return to Tariff and visit Lythas. He isn't the same since Coren died, you see."

Tsabrak went hot and cold at the same time. Lythas...his dear, sweet Lythallendar. He hadn't gotten the Lifebearer out of his mind, in all of these years. Now, Lythas was alone, and in trouble, by the sounds of it. "What about his children? Where are they?" he asked, trying to force himself to calm down.

"They're with him," replied Morgan, "well, most of the time they're with him...at least Aurora is. Lyre stays home and manages the weapons shop, and Lythas and Aurora...well, they've got their own ship, now." the lad pursed his lips.

Tsabrak didn't like where this was going...not one bit. "What are they doing with a ship?" he questioned.

Morgan said, "Umm...Lythas has gone rather...illegitimate, if you take my meaning. While his son runs the family business, he's taken to bringing in extra from...well...doing what you're doing. I don't think it's as much for the money as it is a distraction for him. I think you should get to Tariff and try to meet up with him when he comes back from his latest expedition."

Tsabrak's golden eyes were round, indeed. Lythallendar...a pirate?! It was so ridiculous, so insane, that he almost laughed. He did not, however. The look in Morgan's eyes kept his amusement at bay. "There's more, isn't there lad?" he questioned.

Morgan grimaced. "Yeah...there is. Lythas is a little...unstable now. He spoke of taking his children back to Nandar to meet his people, before he went on this latest trip. Mom's scared. She said you told her it would be dangerous to let the Lashran know about Lythas and Coren's kids."

Tsabrak swore violently, and Morgan hastily backed away a step. What in the hells was Lythallendar thinking? That was just it...he wasn't thinking. The lad probably thought that since he was once accepted, they might be as well. Perhaps he meant to prove to his people that their strict rules against coupling with humans were not needed? The Sire knew Lythas well enough to understand that the Lifebearer's heart was in the right place, but his thoughts were not rational. Morgan was right...it was time for Tsabrak to return to Tariff and discover what he could.

That, however, is another story, entirely....

*The End*