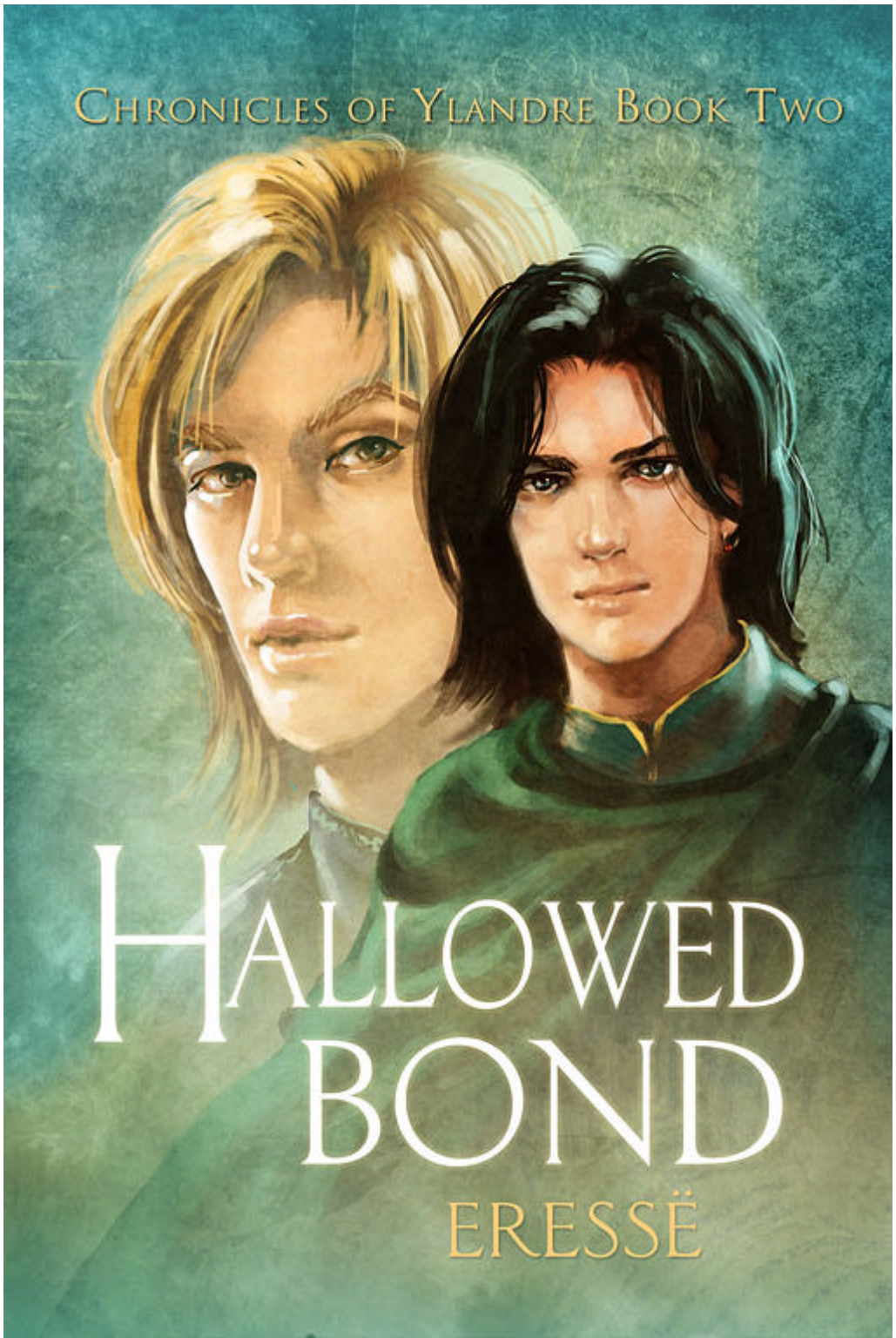


CHRONICLES OF YLANDRE BOOK TWO



HALLOWED BOND

ERESSË

Hallowed Bond

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Eressë

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Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Devin Govaere

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

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Blurb

Time and circumstances may force true lovers apart but the tie that binds them can never be fully severed.

When Dylen Teris and Riordan Leyhar meet one harsh winter in the dual-gendered realm of Ylandre, neither expects the encounter to lead to a fast friendship and abiding love. For a chasm of vastly dissimilar social stations lies between them, and not all Deira could imagine, let alone accept, such a relationship.

Circumstances eventually separate them for what seems forever only to conspire to bring them together once more in the most unlikely of places—at the court of Rohyr Essendri, Ylandre's powerful monarch. Complicating their situation is the attraction that still lingers between them, waiting to flare once more into love. But when one is

unwilling to venture his heart again or wholly forgive its breaker, it may take a king's interference to reunite these star-crossed lovers for good.

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There is a glossary after the last page of the story.

Prologue

Advent

Ylandre, in the 2953rd year of the Common Age

“Sweet Veres, what a beauty!”

“Who sired him? Do tell us!”

“Yes, tell us! How did so gorgeous a Deir manage to elude our notice?”

Hirlen Teris grinned in amusement as his friends oohed and aahed over his infant son. With his thick raven locks and limpid earth green eyes, their irises delicately rimmed with dark grey, three-month-old Dylen was indeed a beauteous child.

“Thank you. He is lovely, isn’t he?” Hirlen said. “But as to his sire, that’s for me alone to know.”

Eldran looked at him in surprise. “Why the secrecy? It’s not as if we blackmail folk for a living!”

Hirlen laughed. “Nay, I am not suggesting that. But the Deir in question is, shall we say, in a sensitive position. It wouldn’t do if his indiscretion were to become public knowledge.”

“Ah, is it someone high in government?” Liave guessed.

“You might say that.”

“Then we shall badger you no more,” Miqar decided. “Though if you ever choose to share your secret with us, you know our lips will be forever sealed.”

Again Hirlen laughed. Miqar spoke the truth. The *hethare* would not have lasted for as long as they had if any of their number were known to tell tales. After all, one of the reasons well-born Deira patronized the famous fraternity of companions—whose services, convivial or carnal, could be had for the highest of prices—was that they could count on the *hethare*’s utmost discretion.

After his friends left, Hirlen settled himself comfortably by the window with his child, leaving his faithful attendant Tarqin to unpack his belongings. He observed the activity on the street below—the comings and goings of the city folk as they went about their business. How he had missed the hustle and bustle of the capital of Ylandre.

He had retired to a remote village in the fief of Ilmaren to birth his son. That in itself was not unusual. *Hethare* routinely had their children away from wherever their sires resided. Dissimulation was an effective way of ensuring that the products of their liaisons were never traced back to the Deira who had begotten them. It was the best protection for patrons whose reputations, for whatever reasons, would suffer severely were it known they had sired children on partners other than their mates or concubines.

What was uncommon was the timing and length of Hirlen’s seclusion. Two months before birthing was exceptionally early and three months after was a long time for a *hethar* not to practice his profession. But if the object was to cover every track that might connect a prominent Deir to his by-blow’s birth, some might even deem Hirlen’s departure too late and his sojourn overly short.

Hirlen looked at his son with pride. Liave was right. Dylen's sire was a gorgeous creature indeed and had passed his beauty to his child in full. Not that Hirlen was plain of face—one who depended as much on his physical attractions as on his social skills and sexual talents had to be much more than pleasant-featured. But he could not compare with the Deir who had acquired his exclusive services for several months despite the exorbitant amount that exclusivity cost him. Not in handsomeness or stature or brawn.

He hoped all was well with his erstwhile patron. They had ended their affair right after the Deir's last visit. The night Dylen was conceived.

Hirlen sighed. The circumstances had been less than ideal. It was not the way he had envisioned the conception of his first and likely only son. Verily, he should have put up more of a struggle when he realized what his patron wanted of him. But he'd never imagined the latter would proceed even when told his desire was not permissible. By the time Hirlen resisted in earnest, his lover's alcohol-driven lust had overcome all prudence and principle. Coupled with his greater strength, he had subdued Hirlen and taken what he wanted.

Hirlen firmly set the sordid memory aside. No matter, it was in the past. And Dylen more than made up for that one unfortunate episode in what had been a pleasant and mutually beneficial liaison.

The bells of Rikara begin to toll. The two Deira glanced at each other wonderingly. That indicated something of great import had occurred.

"Tarqin, find out what has happened," Hirlen said.

"Yes, Teris-tyar."

The servant hurried out. Several minutes passed before he came back, his face flushed with excitement.

"The Ardis has conceived!" he exclaimed. "We shall finally have a crown prince!"

Hirlen shook his head. "So soon. Poor Dyrael. Keldon certainly wasted no time getting him with child."

"Well, the Ardan was under pressure to sire an heir soonest, wasn't he?" Tarqin pointed out.

The *hethar* nodded. "Especially after he refused to name his brother his successor. But they have only been wed a few months, and Dyrael reached breeding age just before the turn of the year. Precious little time to enjoy life before having duty thrust upon him."

Tarqin shrugged. "The wages of being born into the Royal House. And they say Keldon loves him to distraction so he won't be lacking in that at least."

"I know, I know. Still, duty is duty even if softened by the attentions of a loving spouse." Hirlen glanced at his infant son and smiled. "Look at me talk. For that reason as well must I keep my little one's sire ignorant of his birth."

"Will you tell Dylen the truth one day?" Tarqin asked.

Hirlen nodded. "It's his right to know. But only when he is old enough to accept that it must remain our secret."

Dylen chose that moment to wet his diaper. Hirlen rose to his feet and carried his fretting son to the bed.

Chapter One

Unlooked-For

Rikara, in the 2986th year of the Common Age

It was always coldest in the wee hours of the night. This was especially true at the height of a northern Ylandrin winter. Dylen Teris drew his cloak closer around his tall frame as he made his way down the narrow street to his house on the outskirts of the Quarter. As he did, his hand passed over the left breast of his tunic. He briefly patted it, pleased with the thick wad of banknotes secreted in the hidden pocket sewn into the lining of the tunic.

The frosty weather did not discourage patrons from visiting the Seralye. If anything, more Deira were drawn to the establishment and the services it offered during this season. After all, what could drive away the cold more effectively than lively conversation before a roaring fire with good wine or fine ale to loosen the tongue? And for those with deeper purses, a torrid tryst with a skilled *hethar* was more than enough to banish any remnants of the winter chill and fortify the spirit for the short trip home. Perhaps to an empty bed or a lukewarm partner in a frigid one.

With the cold fiercer than usual, the sight of the small porch of his townhouse was a welcome sight especially with the oil lamp over the front door bravely flickering in the gloom. He quickened his pace, eager for the warmth of his home. It was fortunate that he grabbed hold of the balustrade as he hurried up the steps else he might have pitched forward on his face when he tripped over an unexpected obstacle.

Dylen glared down at what looked like a large bundle of clothing in the dim light. *Who in heyas left their trash at his doorstep*, he thought in irritation. A faint movement caught his eye. He bent to take a closer look.

“Holy Veres!” he softly exclaimed and turned the bundle over. He stared into a face whitened by the cold and gleaming hair flecked with ice crystals.

A hasty sweep of the unconscious Deir’s attire told him this was no homeless beggar who had sought shelter for the night. His crushed velvet tunic was of a style the most expensive clothiers alone provided, and his cloak was of finest wool. And only the best shoemakers fashioned boots of such quality and fashion. But warm as the Deir’s garments were, they were not equal to the freezing weather.

Dylen hurriedly unlocked the door then returned to the Deir and lifted him in his arms—despite being a dead weight, the Deir was not all that heavy. Dylen carried him into the foyer and kicked the door shut behind him. The tread of feet on the stairs followed the door’s closing.

Tarqin’s eyes widened when he descried Dylen standing in the foyer with an insensate stranger in his arms. The elderly servant hastened forward.

“Who in Aisen—?” he started to say.

Dylen shook his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea. But we have to warm him up quickly. He’s all but frozen stiff.”

Tarqin nodded and turned to hurry back up the stairs. "I'll draw a hot bath!" he said over his shoulder.

"And tell *Adda* we have a guest!" Dylen called after him, carefully mounting the steps to the second story.

Dylen bore the Deir to his bedchamber and laid him on his bed. He stripped him swiftly, alarmed by the iciness of his hands and the pallor of his skin. He frowned when he noticed a fresh welt on his temple and wondered if it had aught to do with the Deir winding up unconscious on his front steps. Dylen also realized that the other was younger than he'd originally thought. Close to his own thirty-three years, he guessed. The earring at his left ear—pearlescent milkstone set in ley-silver—confirmed his assumption that the latter hailed either from the lesser aristocracy or the landed gentry.

He carried the Deir into the bathing chamber where Tarqin had filled the tub with warm water. Dylen eased his charge in, careful to keep his head above the water.

The door opened, and Hirilen Teris entered the room. He took in the stranger's appearance and instructed Tarqin to reheat the soup from dinner. He knelt beside his son and placed his hand on the Deir's neck, feeling for a pulse.

"Weak but steady," he murmured. "Where did you find him?"

"I stumbled over him," Dylen replied. "Literally. He was huddled on the front steps. *Adda*, he must be well-born. Look at his earring."

Hirilen nodded, examining the Deir's right hand. Palm and fingers were only slightly calloused. "I wonder what circumstances drove him into the cold?"

Dylen shrugged. "What impels some patrons into our parlors rather than our beds? Not all of them come to us to tend their bodies' needs."

"True," Hirilen conceded. "But it must have been something calamitous for him to brave such weather."

The Deir suddenly wheezed then began to cough. Dylen slipped an arm around him to keep him from sliding farther into the water. His color was better, and his lips were no longer this side of blue, Dylen noted with relief. At last, bronze-hued lashes fluttered before lifting to reveal startlingly dark irises. Dylen could not recall seeing eyes of a brown so deep, they were almost black.

They widened in confusion and alarm. The Deir began to flounder weakly.

Dylen quickly restrained him. "Don't be afraid!" he said, imbuing his voice with just enough authority to compel the Deir to listen to him without overly intimidating him. "Be still and let the water warm you."

The Deir drew a shuddery breath then leaned back and rested his head against the back of the tub. But his eyes flicked about fearfully nonetheless.

"What is your name?" Hirilen kindly asked.

The Deir swallowed. "Ri-Riodan," he stuttered.

"How long were you out on our porch?"

"I-I'm not sure... An hour, I think."

Dylen stared at him. "You're very lucky I found you. Any longer and you'd have frozen to death."

Riodan sighed. "I know," he mumbled. "I thought I was going to die when it got so cold." He caught his breath and looked at Dylen. "My deepest thanks, uh...?"

"Dylen Teris at your service. This is my *adda*, Hirilen. And you're welcome, Riodan-tyar."

“Just Riordan will do,” the Deir said, sitting up. “How can I insist on formality when you saved my life?”

He groaned when stiff muscles protested movement. He paused to give his surroundings a once-over. Curiosity replaced some of the fear in his eyes as he took note of the bathing chamber’s modern fixtures and plumbing replete with a commode and hot and cold water taps. And the chamber was located on the house’s second story rather than the traditional ground floor as evidenced by a glimpse of two bedrooms through the connecting doors. Such amenities were costly and generally accessible only to the affluent.

“Can I come out now?” Riordan asked. “I feel warm enough.”

Dylen grabbed the thick robe Tarqin had prepared. Helping Riordan to his feet, he guided him out of the tub and into the folds of the robe.

“Thank you again,” Riordan murmured.

Hirlen shook his head. “There’s no need to thank us for something any decent soul would do. Come, have some hot soup. It will warm you further.”

* * * *

“He isn’t just well-born,” Hirlen murmured.

He looked once more at the cloak clasp Dylen thoughtfully fingered. With its engraving of a beaked delphinid in mid leap over waves of water, the clasp identified their guest as a member of the diplomatic corps or, judging from his age and the lack of the official insignia of an Ylandrin ambassador on the clasp, possibly the son of one. Above the delphinid, a name was engraved in the ancient alphabet of the Deira’s distant ancestors, the Naere. But neither Dylen nor his father knew how to read the runic symbols and could not decipher their guest’s name.

“I wager he’s being groomed to succeed a parent,” Dylen remarked.

“Yes. Which makes his presence here all the more puzzling.”

They ceased their hushed conversation when Riordan stepped out of Dylen’s bedroom clad in one of Dylen’s flannel shirts and loose bed-trousers. The Deir shyly smiled at them when they beckoned to him to join them before the fireplace. Dylen reappraised him now that Riordan’s coloring was back to normal and his hair neatly brushed.

By Veres, he’s quite beautiful, he mused.

Hirlen sank into his great chair while Dylen and Riordan settled side by side on the couch. They had all slept in late to make up for staying up nigh until daybreak. Now it was almost noon and the aroma of the food Tarqin was cooking for the midday meal wafted faintly from downstairs.

“Sleep well?” Dylen asked.

“Yes,” Riordan replied. “Thank you for lending me your bed. I didn’t expect such kindness.”

Dylen simply shrugged.

“Do your parents know you ventured out last night?” Hirlen inquired. “I can send word to them that you’re safe.”

Riordan reddened slightly. His mouth tightened. “They’re the reason I was out in the cold,” he quietly explained. “We quarreled, and I decided to leave rather than be forced into something I didn’t care for.” He hesitated then said, “They tried to betroth me to a Deir I heartily detest.”

He leaned back with a hint of defiance in his face, obviously expecting either of his companions to chide him for acting with foolhardy impulsiveness. After all, it was not unusual for the upper classes to arrange their children's marriages.

"Why do you detest him?" Dylen asked.

Riodan looked at him in some surprise. "Because he's a cold and avaricious bastard who has no compunction about destroying the lives of others to get what he wants," he replied with blunt honesty.

"He's not alone in that," Dylen pointed out. "Especially amongst your class."

Riodan bristled slightly at the mildly critical allusion to his social station. "But I would have to live out my life bearing witness to his cruelty," he countered. "Bad enough to know that such Deira exist. But to marry one of them?"

"Surely he isn't that terrible if your parents chose him," Hirilen gently suggested.

Riodan snorted. "My sire is blinded by ambition. If he deems association with a Deir advantageous, he will ignore whatever flaws he possesses however egregious." He sighed unhappily. "He's not uncaring. I don't want you to think that of him. Indeed he wishes only the best for me. But he doesn't always consider the feelings of others before deciding their lives for them. I try to be obedient, but there are times I simply cannot abide his choices."

"Be that as it may, you have naught with you but the clothes on your back," Dylen said. "What are your plans? Surely you didn't intend to stay away longer than a day."

"Actually, I did," Riodan answered with some embarrassment. "I didn't travel here from Sidona just to spend the night."

Dylen blinked. Sidona was some twenty leagues southwest of Rikara. "You came all the way here with no money or clothing?"

"Nay, I am not such a lackwit to travel so far without any provisions!" Riodan said a little indignantly. "I had money and some clothes. And I intended to draw funds as soon as I arrived—I have an account with Bank Cordona. But the wheel of my hired carriage broke, and I arrived well after dark."

Dylen exchanged a glance with his father. Either Riodan was not gifted enough to journey by translocation or he had not received adequate training to create the mind-generated corridors that allowed travellers to cover vast distances in a matter of minutes.

"And your belongings? What became of them?" Hirilen asked.

Riodan gingerly touched the welt on his forehead. "I was looking for a decent inn, but I got lost very quickly. I've only been to Rikara a few times and never so late or in this part of town. I was set upon a few blocks from here. Some scoundrel shoved me into an alley. When I fought back, he hit me hard enough to knock me down." Riodan looked quite forlorn. "He took my money and bag."

"You're lucky that's all he took," Dylen dryly commented. "The cold saved your virtue." He gestured apologetically when Riodan paled. "How did you wind up at our door?"

"I'm not sure. I think I stayed in that alley for a while. But when it began to snow, I tried to look for help. The next thing I knew I was lying at your doorstep—I must have blundered my way here. It just got colder, and I suppose I lost consciousness then."

"So you intend to stay in Rikara a while," Hirilen murmured. "Wherefore? What do you hope to accomplish by not returning home soonest?"

"It will make my sire realize that I seriously oppose the match he is trying to arrange

for me.”

“And how long do you intend to stay away?”

“Until he comes for me.” At Hirlen’s frown, Riordan explained, “He likely thinks I will return with my tail between my legs. I wager it will be months before he starts to doubt that assumption. Only then will he search Sidona for me. It will probably take even longer before he realizes that I have gone farther afield.”

“And what if he doesn’t come to Rikara?” Hirlen asked a touch reprovingly. “Are you that determined to make him suffer?”

Riordan shook his head. “He will think of Rikara eventually. It’s the only place I have visited outside of Sidona.”

Dylen looked at him curiously, “You’re quite sheltered for a diplomat’s son,” he commented, handing the cloak clasp to Riordan.

Riordan stared at the clasp then clenched his fingers around it. “Not for much longer. I was to finish my collegiate studies at the State University then train at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

“Who is your sire, Riordan?” Hirlen questioned.

“Ambassador Theron Leyhar.”

Hirlen shook his head. “The name is not familiar. But that only means he likely doesn’t frequent the Quarter when he comes to town.”

“The Quarter?” Riordan noticed Dylen’s earring for the first time. A deep red heartsfire stone set within a thin gold hoop. He looked wonderingly at Dylen. “You’re a *hethar*?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Riordan glanced uncertainly at Hirlen, his eyes widening when he espied a similar earring at the older Deir’s left ear.

“I’m not as active as before,” the elder Teris smilingly said.

Riordan was spared making a response when Tarqin appeared bearing a pot of steaming stew. Hirlen stood and gestured to the younger Deira to do likewise.

“Come, let us eat. Riordan, set your problems aside for now. But rest assured Dylen and I will help you as much as we are able.”

Riordan murmured his thanks and followed his benefactors to the adjacent dining room.

Chapter Two

Acquaintance

“When did you begin, um...?”

Dylen glanced at Riordan with some amusement. “Plying my profession?”

“Er, yes.” Riordan had the grace to look embarrassed.

He was seated on the edge of Dylen’s bed, watching the other Deir dress for an evening at his *hethare* club.

“When I reached my thirtieth summer.”

Riordan stared at him. “You didn’t wait for your majority?”

“I haven’t reached it yet,” Dylen informed him.

He pulled a tunic out of his closet. Its sea green hue further emphasized the color of his eyes. Following *enyran* fashion, the sword arm sleeve was cut above the elbow, the hem reached the knees, and the tunic was slit at the sides and up front to mid thigh for ease of movement.

The majority of *hethare* were considered *sedyra* or Half Bloods even when they were not wholly so. Many were the products of illicit unions where an *enyran* or True Blood sire had not acknowledged his paternity. Very rare was the *hethar* who was accounted an *enyr* by virtue of recognition by his sire or sire’s family of their blood kinship. Nevertheless, the *hethare* dressed in the manner of the ruling class regardless of their caste designation, thus setting themselves apart from their lesser brethren, the overwhelming number of whom hailed from the lowest rungs of society.

“It’s the custom for a *hethar* to begin his training at twenty-four summers and receive his first patron once he reaches the age of thirty,” Dylen said as he shook out the wrinkles in the tunic. “It isn’t necessary for us to wait for our majority as long as we’ve attained the age of consent. So until I turn thirty-five, *Adda* acts as administrator of my affairs.”

“So an orphan can’t become a *hethar*.”

“Not unless he has a legal guardian. It’s the reason most street urchins turn to prostitution if they are unable to find other means of livelihood.” The corners of his mouth quirked upward at Riordan’s uncomfortable silence. “You wonder what differentiates me from a common whore.”

Riordan caught his breath. “What? Nay, that isn’t—I mean...”

He flushed deeply. Dylen wondered if Riordan had blushed as often before as he had done this first day of acquaintance with the Terises. He donned the tunic and started to fasten it.

“I took no offense,” he assured the younger Deir. “Not everyone understands the distinctions between *hethare* and *felkar*.”

Riordan shifted uncomfortably on the bed. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? For not knowing?” Dylen snorted. “Besides, *hethare* do not abide in all cities. Just the largest ones. Sidona’s capital is lovely and progressive, but it still has a long way to go before it attains Rikara’s sophistication.”

“You’ve been to Nivare?”

“A few times. At the invitation of one of my patrons.”

“Oh... Well, how different is a *hethar* from a *felka*?”

“Aside from the assurance that dalliance with us won’t result in assault, theft or disease? A whole world. A *felka*’s sole function is to spread himself for any Deir willing to pay his price. Whether he has a brain between his ears or a heart in his breast is irrelevant.” Dylen checked himself in the mirror, running his hand over the tunic to smooth out any remaining wrinkles.

“*Hethare* do more than provide sexual release,” he continued. “We entertain in areas other than bed, and sometimes that is all that’s asked of us.” On went a fine leather belt. “Otherwise, how could *Adda* continue in this profession at his age? And why think you must we begin training ourselves so young? It’s not only the gratification of the body that we address.”

He brought out a flat jewelry box and studied its contents. “We are taught to comport ourselves properly in society and schooled in the politics and cultures of nations whose citizens we may find ourselves providing with our company. Many of our guests come from the High Houses or work in government and expect more than lewd banter from us. For that reason, *hethare* must also finish secondary schooling to gain admittance into the fraternity. Many take collegiate studies as well.”

“Did you?”

“I’ve completed the basic course. I plan to resume my studies next year.”

Riodan blew his breath out. “Fascinating. It’s beyond anything I imagined.”

“It isn’t common knowledge outside of our circle,” Dylen admitted. He selected several wristlets of leather and silver and slipped them on.

“You don’t have to answer this,” Riodan hesitantly said. “I’m just curious. But can you choose your patrons?”

“For the most part,” Dylen replied. “But if my club master assigns a guest to me, I must take him on unless I have a valid reason to refuse. That’s still far more choice than a prostitute has.”

Riodan nodded. “And I suppose your club master doesn’t accept just anyone off the street.”

“No indeed. It’s to his benefit to protect us. Obviously, brothel-keepers aren’t as discerning.” Dylen picked up his fur-lined cloak and drew it on. “Furthermore, a prostitute can’t refuse to couple in whatever manner a client demands. *Hethare* may and often do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Genital penetration is permissible only if a *hethar* agrees to it,” he calmly explained. “Very rarely, one might be persuaded to yield if his patron offers to pay through the nose for the privilege. Or if one desires a child. Otherwise, it’s strictly up the arse for us.”

Dylen grinned. The mirror showed Riodan gaping at him. His frankness had obviously impressed him. He turned around and slipped a finger under the other Deir’s chin. With a smart tap, he compelled Riodan to close his mouth.

“Don’t wait up for me,” Dylen said. “I’m seldom home before midnight.” When Riodan did not speak but only stared at him with wide eyes, he tilted his head questioningly. “What is it? Have I a smudge on my face or something?”

Riodan started. "Nay, of course not!"

"Then why are you staring?"

Once again, brilliant color blossomed in Riodan's cheeks. He abashedly replied, "I was only so stunned. I haven't met anyone as beautiful as you."

Dylen raised an eyebrow. A small smile followed.

"Thank you," Dylen softly said. With a nod at Riodan, he left the room.

* * * *

He had ample time to think about Riodan Leyhar as he made his way to the Seralye. An afternoon's worth of the youth's company had yielded enough information for Dylen to make a fairly accurate assessment of his background.

His sire was not a blueblood but a very wealthy member of the upper gentry. However, Theron Leyhar was not satisfied with mere affluence. He also craved higher social status and worked assiduously toward gaining it, clawing his way up the ranks of the diplomatic corps. That neither Dylen nor his father recognized the name did not mean the Deir was of no importance. Indeed, Riodan could not hide his pride that his sire was one of Ylandre's foremost ambassadors. Rather, it was probably as Hirilen had surmised. Theron Leyhar likely did not care to avail of the *hethare*'s many talents, even the purely social ones.

That was unusual in that diplomats were very urbane as a rule and most made it a point to sample the more sophisticated offerings of the societies to which they were posted. Virtually every bachelor envoy of note frequented the Quarter. Furthermore, they oft hosted social gatherings, and one sure way to guarantee the enjoyment of one's guests was to have a *hethar* or two around to enliven the proceedings with witty banter, erudite discussion and skillfully performed music. Assignations were very rarely part of such arrangements, especially when there were names to protect and reputations to preserve.

Dylen cast his speculation aside. Useless to wonder about a Deir he only knew secondhand. He turned onto the main street of the Quarter and walked into its very heart.

Located in the largely commercial west district, the Quarter was the place to go if one wished to indulge one's self in entertainment and recreational activity. Here were the venerable theaters and music halls of Rikara. Here, too, were the great artisans' studios and elegant *hethare* clubs, far removed from the dingy shops and bawdy houses that littered the seedy south district. The bulk of the capital's various performers resided in the Quarter as well as many a writer and artist both accomplished and merely aspiring, all seeking inspiration from the colorful folk and their goings on.

The Seralye was not on the main street but on a road just off it. It was a three-story edifice with a tasteful but unassuming façade. It could have passed for an expensive inn were it not for the red and black border framing the sign above the slightly recessed door.

There was nothing obvious about the establishment. A liveried doorkeeper quietly welcomed guests when they entered the premises. Unlike in a brothel, no companions loitered in the foyer or on the stairs in various states of undress. The décor was understated and reminiscent of a stylish townhouse.

Uniformed attendants conducted guests up the stairs to the cozy reception room where they had a drink or two while they awaited their *hethar* of choice. Newcomers who looked likely to frequent the club were appraised by Zarael Thanar, the Seralye's proprietor and club master, himself a *hethar* once upon a long time ago.

Guests who came for social companionship were entertained in any of the club's many parlors. There were also four spacious taprooms where groups of Deira could party or unwind after a day's toil. Contrary to popular misconception, carnal activity was not a matter of course among the *hethare*, and it was not uncommon for a companion to pass the night without coupling with any of his patrons.

If desired, however, those particular needs were met in the elegant bedchambers on the third story of the building. Deira who availed of these services were strictly vetted first. Indeed, a guest had to be a regular visitor at the Seralye before Zarael would even consider allowing him to progress to the status of patron. And, more often than not, Zarael gave his *hethare* the option to accept or decline requests for sexual service except when the patron in question was not one he could refuse. The former companion was not about to imperil either his establishment's good name or his *hethare*'s health and general safety by being lax about his rules or standards.

Almost as soon as Dylen stepped into the reception room to let Zarael's secretary Keon know he had arrived, a handsome Deir of middle years rose from his seat before the fire. He smiled expectantly. Dylen smiled back.

The Deir was a wealthy financier who came to the Seralye when the pressures of his profession and the tediousness of his mate's company wore him down. Dylen glanced at Keon. A slight shake of the secretary's head indicated the financier only sought convivial company. Of course, that could change in the course of the evening but, as he was a well-liked patron, seeing to that need should it arise would be no problem for Dylen.

He was one of the least sexually available of the Seralye's companions, preferring to entertain guests in the parlors and taprooms. But when he did accept a patron's proposition, he made certain that he pleased the latter so well, a request for another visit was inevitable. As he had told Riodan, he took on guests at Zarael's behest who were not of his choosing, but these instances were few and far in between, and Dylen had no qualms about bedding them, particularly if their patronage proved beneficial in the long run.

After bidding Keon to have more substantial refreshments sent up, Dylen warmly greeted the Deir and ushered him to one of the parlors. If the visit remained purely social, he would be available to entertain another guest in an hour or so.

* * * *

Dylen stepped out of the communal bath into the large dressing room, toweling himself briskly. It was a little past midnight, and he had entertained his last guest of the day, a *thein* of ancient lineage. The baron had also been the only one of his four patrons to ask for sexual service. Dylen idly wondered if the Deir's consort was aware of the former's proclivity for playing the mare. Then again, if he knew which *hethar* his lord-spouse frequented, it was likely he did. Many of Dylen's bed partners sought him out because they desired domination at his hands.

As he dressed, another companion, Veanthe by name, sauntered in. He was a favorite taproom host due to his raconteur's eloquence and knowledge of the bawdiest songs this side of the Samaran Sea. He was also Dylen's senior by some sixteen years and a veteran of their club.

After they greeted each other, Dylen thought to ask, "Do you know aught about an ambassador by the name of Theron Leyhar?"

Veanthe rolled his eyes theatrically. "Enough to keep a wide berth around him."

Dylen frowned. "Why?"

"He detests our kind. He deems us little better than the strumpets who walk the streets. And he isn't shy about saying so."

"You witnessed this?"

"I should say so. It was at a come-of-age party last year for Minister Pelar's son. He wasn't the only diplomat in attendance, mind you. Jareth Hadrana was there, and he's the highest-ranking ambassador in the land. But that didn't stop that stick-in-the-mud Leyhar from making a fuss about our presence." Veanthe scowled. "He even embarrassed poor Almerin after he sang at a guest's request. He said it was a shame that so venerable a song had been performed by a mere trollop."

"Sweet Veres," Dylen muttered. "In front of everyone?"

"Oh yes! A good thing Hadrana-*tyar* saw fit to chide him for his rudeness. That shut him up quickly enough. But he kept glaring at us for the rest of the evening. Really, is that any way for a grown Deir to behave? And he a diplomat to boot!"

"Hmm, that doesn't seem like a general dislike for *hethare*," Dylen remarked. "More like a personal encounter with one companion that blackened his outlook on the rest of the fraternity."

Veanthe humphed. "That's no reason to be impolite. He should know better than to judge a whole basket by one questionable cranapple!" He looked at Dylen questioningly. "Why so curious about him? It's highly unlikely that he'll ever set foot in this club."

Dylen shrugged. "I know someone who doesn't hold the highest opinion of him, that's all. But he does believe Leyhar is good at his profession."

"I dare say your friend is right," Veanthe grudgingly conceded. "Else Leyhar would never have made ambassador. I understand the evaluation process is quite brutal. Nonetheless, he has the manners of a burhog!"

Dylen grinned and said no more. However, as he departed, he felt a twinge of unease.

It was difficult to reconcile the impression he had formed of Theron Leyhar with what he knew of his son. Riodan did not seem to possess his sire's condescending attitude. Indeed, he showed naught but respect for Hirlen and grateful amicability toward Dylen. It was possible he was behaving thusly only because of his present dependence on the Terises, but Dylen thought it improbable. He was quite accurate in discerning people's characters, and Riodan's geniality and lack of arrogance rang true.

* * * *

"Student lodgings will likely be full," Hirlen said over breakfast three days later. By now the nasty welt on Riodan's forehead had faded to a bruise, and the youth had already learned his way around the west district and also ventured into the finance section of the capital in the central district to draw funds from his bank savings. "I doubt there will be vacancies until the end of the academic year. Have you finished first term?"

Riodan nodded. "I was supposed to complete this year in Sidona then transfer to the University next year. But *Aba* would have hounded me without cease to go through with the betrothal and that I couldn't bear. So I came here forthwith."

"Then you will stay with us until a vacancy opens up," Hirlen decided.

"I can't do that!" Riodan protested. "Surely there are other rooms available."

“Not for your purpose,” Dylen put in. “There’s a reason non-local students seldom look farther than the University boarding houses. Beyond those enclaves, their safety is not as ensured, not even in the better located ones.”

Riodan shrugged. “I may not have travelled much outside of Sidona, but I oft moved about on my own within the fief. I can fend for myself. And I don’t mind less ideal accommodations so long as they’re clean and reasonably secure.”

Dylen opened his mouth to scoff, but a glance from Hirilen shushed him.

“You should avoid the south district,” Hirilen counselled. “It’s the poorest and most unsavory section of the city. The north district, on the other hand, is rich, well guarded and close to the University. But you will find only townhouses and large apartments for rent—hardly what you have in mind I dare say. Now the east and west districts are quite safe during daytime and have a good number of decent lodgings. Dy will help you find something suitable. Until then, you will stay with us. Do keep in mind, however, that Sidona can’t compare to Rikara, neither its beauties nor its dangers. That you were assaulted almost as soon as you arrived is testament to that. Don’t be so quick to trust new acquaintances either. Not even the likes of us.”

Riodan stared at him. “But you saved me!”

“How do you know we’re not just fattening you for the slaughter?” Dylen dryly pointed out. He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes when Riodan gaped in obvious shock. “All *Adda* is saying is that, hereabouts, it’s best to be overly cautious with strangers. You don’t know enough just yet to separate the wheat from the chaff, and that may prove your undoing. Now, what say I take you to our tailor? I have more than enough to clothe us both, and I don’t mind sharing with you. But I don’t think you wish to go about in ill-fitting garments that tell one and all at a glance that they’re borrowed.”

A grimace of embarrassment replaced Riodan’s burgeoning scowl. He mumbled his agreement and kept his attention on his porridge for the rest of the meal. Afterward, he went to Dylen’s bedroom to dress for a day out in the cold.

“So naïve,” Dylen murmured when Riodan was out of earshot.

Hirilen agreed. “Hopefully, he will overcome that soonest. But do be gentler with him, Dy. Your much vaunted tact seems to have gone missing.”

“He isn’t a patron, *Adda*.”

“But he could be a friend.”

“Not if he remains infatuated with me.”

“Ah, you noticed.”

Dylen snorted. “I’d have to be deaf and blind not to. He told me he’s never met a Deir as beautiful as I. And he keeps staring at me when he thinks I’m not aware. He also blushes quite prettily whenever I address him, even for the most trivial of matters.”

Hirilen laughed. “Many of our guests react likewise when you pay them more than due attention, and they’re mostly full-grown Deira. You can’t fault one as young as Riodan for doing the same.” He eyed his son cannily. “Or is it that you appreciate him far more than you like and wish he didn’t feel as you do?”

Faint color warmed Dylen’s cheeks, a charming effect due to the rarity of its occurrence. “Wherefore indulging in something that is forbidden to the fraternity and might lead to expulsion from its ranks?” he softly said.

His father shook his head. “You know full well that love isn’t forbidden to us; only wedlock.”

“But the first oft leads to the second. And, even if it doesn’t, how can anyone ask it of his partner to look the other way whilst he continues to share himself with others? It’s no wonder marriage is proscribed. It isn’t just to keep us focused on our patrons but also to prevent jealous spouses from wrecking the peace.”

“Not every love is meant to culminate in wedlock,” Hirlen pointed out. “If you do come to know such a love, I’ll be the first to encourage you to leave the fraternity and bind yourself in matrimony. But there is no certitude that it will happen. In which case, I see no reason why you shouldn’t indulge in a romantic interlude now and then. I did and came out the richer for having known the affection and concern of those precious few I called lovers.” Again he regarded his son with keen interest. “Are you so drawn to him that you think he will lead you to the marriage bed?”

This time, Dylen went still. He mutely stared at his father for the longest while. At length he said, “Even were I to desire that, one such as he would hardly want the same thing. A one-night tumble, a brief affair, yes, he might propose either arrangement to a *hethar*. But wedlock? Our profession, even if I leave it, will likely get in the way given that I have entertained many Deira he will eventually associate with and even bedded a fair number of them.”

“And that’s your real fear,” Hirlen mused. “You’re afraid to fall in love with someone to whom your past might prove an obstacle too great to overcome.”

Dylen shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? If love comes a-looking, it will find me. I’ll just have to cope with the consequences the best I can.” He warned Hirlen of Riordan’s return with a slight tilt of his head. “Nonetheless, it’s good to get that off my chest, *Adda*,” he said as he rose to his feet. “Thank you for knowing me so well.”

Hirlen smiled. He glanced up at Riordan who looked from him to Dylen with equal parts curiosity and wariness.

He’s naïve but not obtuse, Hirlen thought. Aloud he said, “You might as well make inquiries at the University, Riordan. No sense waiting until the start of second term and risking all the student slots being filled.”

“Yes, I’ll do that,” Riordan replied. “Thank you, *Teris-dyhar*.”

Hirlen’s eyebrows rose at his use of the high honorific. “To what does this humble commoner owe such esteem?”

“You opened your home to me, a stranger in need, and took me under your wing,” Riordan earnestly explained. “You are noble in heart if not in blood, and I count that the more worthy of praise.”

Dylen averted his eyes, but Hirlen espied the gleam of pleasure in them. Hirlen inwardly sighed.

And what will my gallant Dylen be to you, Riordan Leyhar? A mere bed treat as he fears? Or a true desire?

Chapter Three

Progression

Three months, Dylen thought as he readied himself for his next guest. Three months and still Riordan Leyhar remained with them. He had started second term at the State University but, as expected, there were no vacancies among the decent student lodgings in the city this time of the year. And so, the young Sidonan continued to make the Teris abode his home. And Dylen's bedchamber his quarters.

Riordan had persuaded Dylen to return to his room and declared himself happy with the divan beneath the window, claiming it was as comfortable as any bed. Dylen had given in, but suspected it wasn't just his room that Riordan wished to share.

He strove to put the thought out of his mind. He suspected, but he had no concrete proof, that his roommate wanted more than friendship between them. Indeed, his misgivings might very well be merely a reflection of his own mixed feelings about the situation rather than anything Riordan truly felt about him. Better to focus on his duties than engage in speculation.

Dylen chose a subtly aromatic soap from the Seralye's collection and stepped into a bath stall. He thoroughly scrubbed his body, ridding himself of all signs of the just concluded encounter with his second guest of the evening. It was deemed highly unprofessional to present one's self to a guest still smelling of another Deir's scent. That was the province of the bawds whose lot it was to take on as many partners as they could in any given day and therefore did not waste much time washing away the evidence of each tumble. When Dylen headed for the reception room a quarter of an hour later, he looked as if he had just arrived for the night.

The guest who'd requested his company was seated on the couch before the fire, speaking to Keon. The secretary straightened when he saw Dylen. Excusing himself, he went to the *hethar*.

"This is his first time here," he murmured. "He's much younger than your usual guests."

"So long as he's of age," Dylen replied. "He specifically asked for me?"

"Most insistently in fact. He said if you weren't available he would come back another day."

"Did he? Interesting."

Curving his mouth into a welcoming smile, Dylen approached the Deir. About to speak, he hesitated when he got a closer look at his guest. There was something familiar about him. The Deir suddenly turned his fair head.

Dylen's eyebrows all but flew upwards. "What are you doing here?" he asked somewhat warily as Riordan rose to his feet and faced him.

Riordan grinned and said, "I watched Molave's latest play and realized your club was nearby. So I thought to pay you a visit."

Dylen stared at him, a little taken aback not so much by the unexpected visit as by Riordan's appearance. He had helped the other Deir put together a wardrobe sufficient for

his needs. But he had not seen him attired for an evening out until now. Clad in a black dress tunic over a silky white shirt, dark grey long breeches and fine leather boots, Riordan looked stunning to say the least and more sophisticated than Dylen knew him to be.

He firmly suppressed his reaction to the other's beauty. "Rio, we're not allowed personal visits during working hours."

"Oh, I paid for the pleasure of your company," Riordan airily answered.

"So I was told. I hope you mean that in the strictest sense of the term."

Riordan flashed him a sweet, entreating smile. "Don't be angry, Dy. I only offered when I found out that visitors weren't permitted."

Dylen sighed. "Very well, you might as well get your money's worth." Before ushering Riordan to one of the parlors, he spoke to Keon. "Have refreshments brought to the blue parlor."

Keon glanced at Riordan who was gazing quite avidly at Dylen. "Should I have one of the bedchambers readied?" he softly inquired.

"He isn't a patron," Dylen pointed out. "Zarael hasn't vetted him yet."

The secretary snorted. "As if he needs to if you vouch for him."

Dylen shook his head, "Just the refreshments, Keon. No more, no less."

Keon shrugged. "As you wish."

* * * *

As soon as the attendant who brought in the refreshments left the parlor, Dylen settled himself on the couch beside Riordan. He served his friend wine and spiced haronuts. There were also crisp vegetable fritters, slivers of fried boar meat with the rind left on, and raw shellfish drizzled with a piquant herb sauce. Riordan appreciatively tasted each dish, his dark eyes gleaming with pleasure at the toothsome delicacies. Dylen had to smile at his guileless demeanor.

"So, did you watch the play alone?" he asked after taking a sip of his wine.

"Nay, Ithan came with me."

Dylen frowned. Riordan had made the acquaintance of a number of schoolmates since he started at the University but none he yet counted as close friends. Save perhaps for Ithan Soleri. He was the only one Riordan had introduced to Dylen, and the meeting had not been intended but came by way of a chance encounter on the street. Ithan was only a few months older than Riordan and was studying to be a banker like his sire. He did not share many classes with the young Sidonan. Still, Riordan spent more time in Ithan's company than any of his other schoolmates.

"I hope you always maintain some caution with him," Dylen warned.

Riordan leaned back, his expression one of amusement. "He's never made an overture of any kind. I think you're mistaken about him."

"I don't think so. I've seen that look in his eyes many a time amongst the Seralye's guests."

"Well, even if he does feel some attraction toward me, it won't matter if he knows I don't feel likewise toward him."

"But does he know? Have you made it clear that all you desire is friendship?"

"I've never given him any indication that I wish for more."

"Which could easily be construed as mere hesitation to go one step further," Dylen

countered. "Ithan didn't strike me as particularly sensitive to subtlety."

Riodan looked at him disbelievingly. "And you picked all that up in the span of one short meeting."

Dylen hesitated, unsure how to explain the source of his misgivings about Ithan without revealing too much. He liked Riodan and thought him a trustworthy person, but there were certain secrets he did not feel comfortable sharing with anyone other than his father. Perhaps he would eventually tell Riodan, but now was not yet the time.

"One short meeting with any guest can spell the difference between a pleasant evening and a harrowing one," he finally said. "I just want you to be prudent."

"I am! Really, you shouldn't worry so about me." Riodan pouted. "Besides, I'm not that much younger than you."

"In years," Dylen agreed. "But, in experience, there's much I have seen that I hope you never will."

"I thought your club master protected you," Riodan gibed.

"Zarael does his best," Dylen shot back a shade reproachfully. "He's very careful but even he can be fooled by a kind demeanor now and then. Not every guest I've entertained proved as benevolent as they looked."

"You're not saying..." Riodan paled. "Veres! Have you been—?"

Dylen placed a reassuring hand on Riodan's arm. "Nay, though I've come close enough times to make me wary of new guests. And I know *hethare* who weren't so lucky, rare as those cases have been. Rape is not limited in place or victims."

Riodan shuddered slightly, probably remembering his own brush with the possibility his first night in town. "I'm glad you've never been hurt that way," he murmured. "And I'm sorry for making light of your situation."

Dylen gestured dismissively. He poured them both more wine. They spent the next few minutes in light conversation while finishing off the shellfish.

At length, Riodan regarded Dylen curiously and asked, "Do you ever have guests who change their minds and decide they want to sleep with you as well?"

The abrupt shift of topic surprised Dylen, but he answered nonetheless. "Of course, but only patrons of long standing may avail of that privilege."

"Only?" Riodan repeated skeptically. "What if an important Deir wishes to sample this club's more personal services? Like a Herun for example. Or the Ardan himself. Would Zarael dare reject them?"

Dylen shrugged. "It hasn't come to that yet. At least, not since I started here. But I imagine Zarael would make an exception for Rohyr Essendri if he deigned to grace the Seralye with his patronage. It isn't politic to turn down one's own king."

"And what of guests you already know and can vouch for?"

Dylen keenly looked at him. "Like yourself?"

Riodan boldly met his gaze. "Perhaps."

"Would this be your first time?"

"It would. To couple that is. I'm not *that* innocent."

Given Riodan's fairly sheltered upbringing, Dylen was not surprised when the youth admitted most of his previous forays into carnality had been with Deira as inexperienced as he or with household servants who were only too willing to accommodate the heir of the house.

"I know it matters little to others, but *I* don't care to tup folk in my family's service,"

Riodan said. "It's simply not meet. And I don't dare entrust myself to others who know little more about rutting than I do. I should think that would only prove disastrous; maybe even put me off the whole business for life!"

"But surely you know Deira who are seasoned lovers," Dylen pointed out.

"Well, of course, but I can hardly accept their invitations to warm their beds if I don't trust their motives, now can I?"

Dylen could not disagree. "You could have paid for the experience," he murmured. "Quite a number do."

"You mean prostitutes?" Riodan snorted. "Call me maudlin, but I'm too much of a romantic to want my very first bedding to be a mere transaction. I want an emotional connection at the very least, Dy." He leaned back, smiling wryly. "So there you are. I've never gone further than let others use their hands or mouth on me. I dare say it's quite satisfying, but I don't like how it leaves me feeling, well, discontented. Here." He pressed his fist to his breast.

"So you want me to teach you more," Dylen cautiously said.

Riodan grinned. "I want you to teach me everything."

Dylen frowned. "Why, Rio? Why would you want your first bedding to be with someone like me?"

"I wouldn't were it anyone other than you," Riodan said. "I like you, Dy. Indeed, I..." He hesitated then forged on. "I'm in love with you."

Dylen stared at him. He shook his head. "You know that lovers are forbidden to us."

"Your father had a number of lovers in his youth," Riodan reminded him. "Your sire was one of them."

"They were brief affairs, and none of *Adda's* lovers expected more. But you do. You would want me to yourself, Rio."

"Yes, I would," Riodan promptly agreed. "And why shouldn't I? It's only natural that I would want my beloved to belong to me alone."

"Which I can't do for you even if I returned your affections."

Riodan snorted. "Say rather that you could only if you returned my love. I'm no fool, Dy. I know that I can't ask that of you. But it doesn't change how I feel about you. Nor does it change my wish to experience my first coupling with you."

"Rio—"

"I'm not demanding you comply this very night. I only ask that you consider my request."

Dylen looked away to pensively stare at the fire.

The majority of his bed partners were long time patrons of the *Seralye* who desired the thrill or release of reversed sexual roles. But he'd also had his share of patrons who enjoyed the challenge of bedding someone equal in strength to or even stronger than themselves. Seldom however were innocents among these. In their inexperience, they were easily intimidated by a partner with Dylen's confidence and commanding personality. Unless they wished to play the sheath their first time, most neophytes to the love arts chose to be initiated by the gentler and more submissive of Dylen's peers.

A Deir of Riodan's social stature, and one who was an only child as well, would be averse to spreading himself for another of lesser station, let alone doing so on his first bedding. Indeed, if Riodan ran true to form, he would yield himself only to his lawful spouse. Therefore, were Dylen to give in to the youth's wishes, he would likely do the

yielding. Dylen flinched at the thought.

He very rarely engaged in sexual communion and the sharing of his body for any reason other than as a service rendered for the right price. Casual couplings were few and far between, and he always dictated the nature and pace of those encounters. Surrendering himself to Riordan would alter the dynamics of their present relationship—an easy, affectionate one founded on trust and respect. What if the change was not for the better?

“Dy?”

Dylen started then stared at his companion. Riordan in turn gazed at him unhappily.

“You truly don’t want to lie with me,” he muttered. “Am I that repugnant?” His voice quivered as he finished speaking.

Dylen caught his breath at Riordan’s dejected mien. “Nay! Never deem yourself less than desirable, Rio.”

“Except to you,” Riordan despondently replied.

“That isn’t so,” Dylen said. “You are beautiful and sweet and kind besides. No Deir could possibly wish for more in a partner.”

“Yet you obviously do.”

“Rio—”

“I will leave now. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“You didn’t.” Dylen rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Please, let me explain.”

The younger Deir laughed mirthlessly. “Explain what? That I’m not to your taste? There’s no explaining that, Dy. It simply is.”

“But you *are* to my taste, confound it!” Dylen blurted. “Too much in fact.”

Riordan gazed at him in confusion. “Then why do you resist me? I don’t understand.”

“Because I don’t want to ruin what we have,” Dylen admitted. When Riordan looked even more befuddled, he sighed and said, “I would have you as my friend, Rio. Sleeping with you would only damage what we do share.”

Riordan visibly flinched. “Meaning you could never love me as I do you,” he whispered.

After a moment’s hesitation, Dylen said, “On the contrary, I could.”

Shocked, Riordan gaped at him. Then comprehension dawned in his eyes. “But you don’t want to.”

Dylen gestured with his hand to encompass the room. “This is what I do nearly every day of my life. I service Deira who can pay my price. Do you truly think anything more than our bodies’ sating can come out of an affair with me? Yet, I will not leave my profession for anything less, Rio. I can’t.” He gripped Riordan’s hands. “I care for you—more than I’ve ever dared feel for anyone. I don’t want to lose the love that we *can* share just to slake your lust or mine.”

Riordan lifted bright eyes to him. His lips curved in a crooked smile. The sight nigh broke Dylen’s resolve.

“I think it’s best I move out of your house,” he said, his voice breaking as he struggled not to reveal the extent of his hurt. He lifted a hand to forestall Dylen’s protest. “I didn’t tell you because I’d hoped staying on would—” He shook his head. “A vain dream and a foolish one.” He drew a shaky breath. “I found lodgings in the east district two weeks ago. Paid six months rent on it as a matter of fact. It’s time I stopped imposing on you and your *adda*.”

Dylen stared at him, the implications of Riordan's decision rapidly sinking in. "You're saying goodbye," he gasped.

"Yes."

"Rio..."

"I love you," Riordan thickly said. "I can't make do with less."

"Why not?"

Riordan bitterly chuckled. "You might as well ask me why I can't stop breathing." He rose, pulling Dylen to his feet as he did. "I'm glad I met you, Dy. I only wish we could have ended our acquaintance on a happier note."

He seemed to hesitate then drew something from inside his tunic. He silently handed Dylen a tiny parcel covered with gold tissue and gestured to him to unwrap it.

Dylen opened the parcel and winced. A wristlet of beaten gold and woven leather with a heartsfire clasp nested within the delicate wrapper. The significance of the deep red gem struck him hard.

Heartsfire was the stone of lust and passion. The meaning behind the *hethare's* earring of a heartsfire within a gold loop was readily evident given the nature of the profession. And a young Deir upon reaching the age of consent signaled his intention to begin sexual exploration by wearing a heartsfire stud on his left ear. But heartsfire was also the stone of intimacy and commitment. The gem set in gold was indication that the bearer was betrothed or in a long-term liaison. Coupling it with another precious stone signified either of two things: that the wearer belonged to the gentry or aristocracy or was the concubine of a member of the upper class.

The presence of the stone on any other piece of jewelry was the giver's unspoken request for permission to commence courtship and, if he wore it, the recipient's acceptance of the giver's intentions. Dylen looked at Riordan in consternation.

Correctly divining the *hethar's* expression, Riordan softly said, "I don't expect you to wear it. I know it would be highly inappropriate for you to do so now. And you're not one to offer false hope either. But I had it made especially for you, and I can't imagine giving it to anyone else. So please accept it. Even if you never wear it, I will find comfort in the thought that you care enough to keep this gift of mine."

Dylen bit his lip. Swallowing hard, he nodded and pocketed the parcel. Riordan suddenly pulled him into a tight hug, burying his face for a moment in the crook of Dylen's neck. And then he let go and, without a word, hurried out of the parlor.

Dylen felt the weight of loss keenly. He knew Riordan would be gone by the time he got home. He sank down on the couch once more, his eyes stinging from unshed tears.

It was unlikely he would see Riordan again.

Chapter Four

Offense

“Do you regret your decision?” Hirlen softly asked.

Dylen paused in the midst of sorting through freshly laundered clothing. He stared at the shirt in his hand without really seeing it. At length, he tossed it to one side and turned to face his father. Behind them, the late morning sun streamed in through the bedroom window to gather in a pool of light on the now vacant divan.

“I regret it,” he readily admitted. “But not because I think I’m wrong. Only that in doing so I have lost a friend.” He sighed dolefully. “I won’t deny I miss him terribly, *Adda*. But I did what I believe will serve both of us best.”

Hirlen frowned. “There are times you must think of your own needs, Dy. Of what your heart tells you.”

“And listen to it?” Dylen said skeptically.

“Oh yes. It’s only rarely that the heart has anything to say. We live by our reason more oft than not. Therefore, when the heart speaks, it’s best to hearken to it. It mayn’t happen a second time.” Hirlen shook his head. “The chance to love may pass us by and never come our way again.”

Dylen paused in his sorting. “You speak as if...”

“As if *I* know something of it? Don’t we all to some degree?” Hirlen placed a hand on Dylen’s, stopping him from continuing with his chore. He pulled Dylen down to sit by him on the edge of the bed. “I did become very fond of someone a long while ago. But, like you, I thought there was no place for love in our world. Or the likes of me in his. So I let him go. Do I regret it?” Hirlen shrugged. “Sometimes. When I long for the company of a good Deir. But then, what I felt for him hadn’t become a true and mature love yet. And I wouldn’t have had you in any case if I had taken the chance then.”

“Then why do you urge me to do as you didn’t?” Dylen challenged.

Hirlen said, “Because I feel you have given your heart as I never fully did.” He lifted his hand and stroked Dylen’s raven locks. “Whether you wish it or not, Riordan owns it, and none will ever be able to take it from him.” Hirlen tenderly regarded Dylen. “Am I right?”

Dylen looked away. “Would that I could claim otherwise,” he murmured.

* * * *

“And, if you like, we can then go to my—Rio, are you listening?”

Riordan looked at his companion guiltily. Ithan was regarding him none too patiently. He could not blame the other Deir. He had been paying only half a mind to him since they met for the midday meal in the University dining hall. Now they were supposed to be discussing what they would do after classes.

It was the end of the week and the last day of the midterm examinations of the summer term. There were only the oral examinations to endure the following week.

“I’m sorry, Ithan,” Riordan murmured. “What did you say?”

Ithan pouted. "You're leagues away again. What in Aisen are you thinking of? Ah, it's that *hethar* you introduced me to, isn't it?"

Riodan reluctantly nodded. "I can't help it. I keep wishing we'd parted on a better note. As it is..." He sighed. "I spotted him the other day. He was on his way back from the market with his father. I smiled at him when he saw me and he smiled back but, well, he didn't look very happy."

"Not happy to see you?" Ithan pressed.

"I'm not sure," Riodan said. "I hope not."

Ithan threw an arm around his shoulders. "You have to put him out of your head, Rio. You can't go about in a fog all day on account of him!"

Riodan offered him a lopsided grin. "You're right, I can't."

He tried to focus his full attention on Ithan. The latter was quite good-looking with his light brown hair and pale heavy-lidded eyes. And he was warm and amicable, almost brashly so. It was not his fault that neither his looks nor personality could compare to Dylen's dark beauty or his subtly seductive amiability. But, really, who could? Riodan strove to be more appreciative of his friend.

"What was it you were saying we could do later?" he asked.

Ithan smiled, mollified by the interest shown in his suggestions.

"I thought we might watch the mummers perform in Temple Square then have dinner at the tavern near my boarding house. The food is quite good and cheap besides and the servings hearty. And the ale is wonderful. Strong and nutty I tell you."

"That sounds well enough."

"Afterwards we can go to my rooms."

Riodan hesitated. "Your rooms?"

"Yes. You haven't visited my quarters yet. And I have some good wine I'd like to share with you." Ithan smiled at him entreatingly. "Do say you'll come, Rio."

Riodan experienced a frisson of unease. But he could think of no reason for it or a decent refusal of Ithan's invitation. Besides, what harm was there in spending a few hours at the latter's lodgings?

"All right then," he agreed. "I'll meet you in the square at five bells."

* * * *

Hirlen asked one more time, "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

Dylen had to smile at his father's display of protectiveness. "It isn't as if this will be the first time I shall be by myself," he pointed out.

"But never longer than a fortnight. And with no one to serve you."

"Tarqin needs a holiday as much as you. I'll be fine, *Adda*."

He gently pushed Hirlen out the door and urged him down the steps and toward the waiting coach. Tarqin was already seated up front beside the coach driver. Dylen assisted his father into the conveyance and waited until he had settled himself within.

"Now, go and enjoy yourself. But not so much that you forget to write!"

Hirlen chuckled. "And you take care, Dy."

"I will. Veres keep you, *Adda*."

Dylen watched the vehicle as it lumbered down the street, bearing Hirlen and faithful Tarqin away. His father would be on holiday for three weeks in Belthin, a resort town in the north of the seaside fief of Glanthar. Since it took three days to travel to Belthin and

another three to return to Rikara, Hirlen would be away for a month at the very least. Dylen sighed heavily as he returned to the house.

It would be a long and lonely month.

* * * *

Riodan wondered why he had agreed to accompany Ithan to his student quarters after dinner. Truth be told, all he wanted was to go home to his own lodgings and sleep off the effects of the ale they'd consumed in copious quantity to offset the lackluster quality of their meal.

The tavern Ithan had recommended turned out to be a tad more disreputable than Riodan was used to. The food had been neither as cheap nor hearty as Ithan had made it out to be, and the music and japery favored by the establishment's clientele were of the prurient variety aimed at raising the baser instincts of the susceptible of libido. Riodan had departed the establishment in much relief and determined never to grace its premises ever again.

Sipping Ithan's idea of a good wine, he concluded his acquiescence was due to lingering guilt over his general indifference to his friend's attempts to distract him from his melancholy. Riodan grimaced. The wine was insipid and had an unpleasant aftertaste. It appeared that Ithan was singularly lacking in discernment when it came to food and drink.

The other student dropped down beside him on the floor rugs. It was a balmy evening, and there was no need for a fire. But the stone floor of Ithan's ground level rooms was too cool for comfortable sitting without the protective skins.

"I think I've drank too much already," Riodan said, eyeing his cup with little enthusiasm.

"It's only wine," Ithan pointed out. "The ale was much stronger."

Riodan shrugged and took another sip. He shook his head and set the cup down. "I'm sorry, I can't take any more."

He felt Ithan's hand on his shoulder, massaging it soothingly. Or was it a caress? Riodan shivered and eased his shoulder out from under his companion's hand.

"I think I'd better go," he muttered. He attempted to rise, but then his head seemed to spin, and he sat down again. "I feel strange. Dizzy..." he complained.

Ithan looked puzzled. "You do? Hmm, it shouldn't have that effect."

Riodan stared at him. "What shouldn't have what effect?"

"Oh, I gave you something for your nerves," Ithan said with a grin.

"For my nerves?" Riodan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Just to help you relax. You're much too tense, Rio."

Suddenly alarmed, Riodan eased away from Ithan. To his dismay, Ithan closed the distance between them and ran his knuckles down his flushed cheek. It was an intimate gesture that Riodan had never allowed anyone save for his parents. He tried to jerk his face away, but the sudden movement only made him giddier.

Before he could get his bearings, he found himself down on his back with Ithan half atop him. Frightened now, he pushed the other Deir off him. But Ithan only chuckled and, reaching for Riodan's collar, began to unfasten his tunic.

Riodan tried to stop him, but he found his every movement slowed by the drug. Though his mind was in the here and now, it felt as if his limbs were not a part of him,

and he could scarcely make them obey his will.

“Wait, I don’t—” His protest was cut off by an open-mouthed kiss. Riordan thought he would retch. He shoved Ithan away. “Nay, I never said...”

He caught his breath when he felt his tunic open up. Ithan swiftly undid his shirt as well, easily evading Riordan’s aimlessly flailing hands.

“Stop it, Ithan,” Riordan begged, his words slurring as the drug relentlessly overtook his senses. “Please, stop.”

Ithan snickered as he worked on the buttons of Riordan’s breeches. “So shy even now. Just let go, Rio. Enjoy yourself.”

“Nay!” Riordan gasped. He felt a downward tug on his breeches. “Leave me alone!”

He tried to pull away but only succeeded in aiding Ithan to lower his trousers farther. He twisted about and landed on his belly. A mistake he realized to his horror when Ithan laughed and yanked his drawers down, exposing his buttocks.

“For someone who doesn’t want this, you’re quite cooperative!” he heard the other Deir say through the looming shadows over his consciousness. There was a popping sound—as of a stopper eased out of the mouth of a bottle.

As he teetered on the edge of darkness, Riordan vaguely felt something slip between the cheeks of his arse. He vainly struggled against it. Then there was the pressure of entry and the burn of intrusion. With his last ounce of strength, Riordan cried out in despair.

The darkness overcame him at last, and everything faded to black.

* * * *

Dylen swore as he hurried down to the front door. Who in *heyas* was all but hanging onto the doorbell chain? And why did whomever it was choose to visit at this unholy hour?

He unlocked the door and yanked it open, ready to bawl out his insistent guest. The choice words died on his lips as soon as he saw Riordan. Eyes red and cheeks raw, he stood forlornly before Dylen, shivering quite violently despite the warmth of the night.

About to speak, Dylen noticed the state of Riordan’s clothing. His rumpled tunic and wrinkled shirt were both undone, revealing half-buttoned breeches. As if stricken by Dylen’s examination, Riordan tremblingly pulled his tunic close around him. A terrible suspicion struck Dylen. He quickly ushered Riordan into the house and shut the door behind him.

Dylen turned and gazed intently at Riordan. “What happened?” he tersely asked.

Riordan’s eyes moistened with held-back tears, and he lowered them in abject misery and obvious shame. His mouth quivered tellingly before he mastered himself and mumbled the answer. Dylen swore again. He caught Riordan by the shoulders and forced him to look at him.

“Who did this to you, Rio?”

Chapter Five

Reprisal

A sense of foreboding hounded Ithan Soleri as he made his way down the corridor to his room after a barely eaten lunch. The feeling had been there all morning, almost from the moment he awakened, still affected by his encounter with Riordan the previous eve. It had been a lamentable lapse of judgment on his part, and he doubted his relationship with the other Deir was salvageable. He shook his head in self-reproach.

That had been his mistake in the first place. He should have known better than to presume that he *had* a relationship with Riordan. Or that the handsome Sidonan would easily get over his first heartbreak and take a lover soonest to salve his frustration. Well, the opposite had become painfully clear last night but only after—

Ithan blew his breath out shakily. His meal felt like a leaden weight in his belly. There was no excusing his actions no matter how much he justified them to himself. Hard as he tried, he could not banish the memory of a horror-stricken, tear-streaked face and dark eyes glaring at him with distrust and abhorrence.

What will come of it, he wondered uneasily. Riordan was no mere student of ample means but the only son of a distinguished diplomat. Worse, the senior Leyhar was a stiff-necked Deir who would be beyond infuriated by any transgression against his family's name or honor. At least, that was the impression he'd gotten from Riordan's descriptions of his sire.

Wracked by guilt and anxiety, Ithan fumblingly opened his door and stepped into his quarters. So caught up was he in his thoughts that his response proved slow when the door inexplicably closed on its own behind him. He whirled around in belated alarm.

A sharp blow to the jaw greeted him followed by the savage wrap of fingers around his throat. He could not even draw enough breath to cry out. Nigh choking in an unforgiving grip, he struggled for a glimpse of his assailant. He found himself staring into a pair of icy, grey-green eyes.

As Dylen Teris' grip tightened around his throat, Ithan frantically clutched and clawed at the *hethar's* hands and arms. But instead of loosening his hold, Dylen slammed him against the wall hard enough to set his teeth chattering.

He moaned as pain exploded in his head, back and shoulders. Dylen abruptly released him, and he nearly slid to the floor in a heap. He managed to regain his footing but only precariously, his balance compromised by the knock his head had taken.

Ithan drew a ragged breath, his abused windpipe constricted and aching abominably. He stared at Dylen in confusion and fear.

"What-what do you want?" he shakily asked.

"Retribution."

Ithan's eyes widened. Preferring ignominious escape to a potentially lethal confrontation with the irate *hethar*, he darted for the door. But Dylen was faster. He barred the way, grabbing Ithan by the wrist when the latter tried to strike him. He flipped Ithan over on his stomach. Ithan landed hard, his nose and chin connecting agonizingly

with the floor.

Dylen quickly straddled Ithan's back and, grabbing his arms, twisted them behind Ithan at a brutal angle.

"Heyas spawn!" he snarled. "What part of *stop* didn't you comprehend?"

"Wait, you don't understand—!" Ithan yelled, spitting out the blood that trickled into his mouth from his bleeding nose.

"What don't I understand?" Dylen seethed. "That he said *don't* and you still forced yourself on him?"

"Nay, that isn't—Aaahh!" Ithan looked over his shoulder pleadingly. "You'll break my arm!"

"I'll break more than your arm, dog," Dylen told him venomously. "I'm going to snap your spine and cripple you!"

"Nay! Saints above, don't!" Ithan screamed. "I didn't do it! I swear I didn't!"

"Didn't do *what*?"

"I didn't rape him!"

"Bollocks!"

"I didn't! I swear to Veres, I didn't!" Ithan practically blubbered. "You have to listen. Let me explain. Please!"

Dylen glared down at him. He suddenly rose, hauling Ithan to his feet. He dragged Ithan to the couch and roughly threw him onto it. Dylen sat down on the low table before him.

"Talk," he growled.

Ithan launched into his explanation without further ado, stuttering and stumbling through it as fast as he could, acutely conscious of the murderous gleam in Dylen's eyes. When he was done, he was sobbing uncontrollably. Dylen's icy glare had not changed one whit, and he was convinced that life as he knew it was about to end.

"You had better be telling the truth," Dylen coldly said.

"I am!" Ithan yelled desperately. "You have to believe me. I swear I'm not a rapist. I'm not!"

Dylen continued to eye him malevolently.

Ithan whimpered as a strange sensation came over him. His vision narrowed until he thought he was going blind. A weight settled in his chest—he found it hard to breathe, and his heart was virtually galloping. He clutched at his throat, gasping, choking, terrified beyond belief.

*

Dylen did not relent. He had learned long ago to use his gifts to help him tell truth from lie. To know who was upfront and who was operating from behind a wall of deceit. After all, his well-being sometimes depended on his ability to distinguish the normal and harmless from the sick of mind who gained pleasure from inflicting pain or worse on others.

Not that he made it a habit to force himself into another's consciousness. He neither enjoyed the experience nor sought to exploit his ability. Indeed, if he could avoid inflicting such an intrusion on anyone, he did and rarely regretted it. But this time, he did not care. Riordan's shame and anguish remained in the forefront of his thoughts, and he would make the Deir who had done this to the youth pay.

It did not take long for him to summon Ithan's memories of that night. The Deir

could not resist his command to yield his thoughts any more than he could stop breathing though it felt as if he would any moment. Dylen focused on the images and sounds that played out in Ithan's mind.

He saw Riordan as Ithan had—lying partly on his side on the skins before the hearth, tunic and shirt undone, Ithan's fingers unbuttoning his breeches. Riordan pleaded with Ithan to stop as he struggled against the hands that yanked his breeches to his knees. Obviously slipping into a narcotic-induced haze, Riordan rolled onto his belly in a desperate attempt to crawl away. But Ithan caught him by the hips and pulled his drawers down.

The bile rose in Dylen's throat as the unseen Ithan prepared Riordan for his taking. The urge to tear the Deir apart strengthened until Ithan was writhing on the couch in agony, clawing at the invisible hand around his throat that seemed to tighten as Dylen's rage grew.

Before he lost full awareness, Riordan cried out, his voice laden with such grief and despair that Ithan's hands stilled. His words were very slurred but still quite comprehensible.

Help me, Dylen! Help me! Please help me! Forgive me, Dy. Forgive me... Dy... Dy... ariad... forgive me...

Dylen swallowed hard. *Ariad*. Riordan had called him beloved. He was startled when Ithan snatched back his hands as if scalded. He watched the Deir shakily try to pull Riordan's breeches back up. And he heard Ithan's disembodied voice.

All right, it's all right. I won't... Oh heyas... What am I doing? I'm sorry, Riordan. I'm so sorry!

Next Dylen saw was a wild-eyed Riordan sitting up and looking down at his disheveled state in horror. The youth stumbled to his feet, yanking up his breeches and fumbling with the buttons.

A hand landed on his arm, and he jerked away and spun around. His features contorted with rage, fear and loathing.

Don't touch me!

Wait, I didn't—

Get away from me!

Riordan, naught hap—

Face streaked with tears and heartbreaking sobs spilling from him, Riordan shoved Ithan away and lurched toward the door. He opened it frantically and fled the apartment, ignoring Ithan's pleas for him to listen.

Dylen abruptly withdrew from Ithan's mind and released him from thrall. The student slumped into a heap on the couch, gulping in air greedily. He looked at Dylen with streaming eyes, wiping blood and mucus from his nose with a shaking hand.

"Do you believe me now?" he managed to croak.

Dylen glowered at him. "You're very fortunate that you were telling the truth." He ignored Ithan's blanched countenance and rose to his feet. "Stay away from him."

The student forced himself into an upright position. He dared to meet Dylen's eyes. "He wouldn't have been with me in the first place if you'd given him what he desired," he mumbled.

Dylen looked at Ithan incredulously. "What?"

Ithan gulped but pressed on. "I tried to deny it to myself, but I knew I was just a

substitute. And not even for anything more than company. It's you he really wants. But if you don't give in to him, this could happen again. He's fortunate it was I who was with him."

Dylen took a threatening step forward, prompting Ithan to back into the corner of the couch in fright.

"You have a lot of gall to paint yourself so favorably after abusing him," he snapped.

"I did not—"

"Yes, you did, blackguard. He told you to stop, but you continued to touch him."

Ithan looked down, unable to refute the statement. "Stay away from him," Dylen repeated. "If you get close enough for him to catch even a glimpse of your face, I'll come for you. And I won't just break your back. I'll make sure you have nothing left to stick into anybody ever again."

With a final glare at the terror-stricken Deir, he strode to the door, yanked it open and stalked out, slamming the door behind him so forcefully it rattled in its frame.

* * * *

It was nearing sundown by the time Dylen returned home. He had passed by the Seralye to inform Zarael that he would not come to work that evening. To make amends for his absence, he'd helped Zarael screen a number of guests who hoped to become full patrons of the club. Afterward, he'd paid a visit to a regular patron of his. The Deir was a member of the board of trustees of the State University.

Dylen was certain he had convinced Ithan of the wisdom of staying out of Riordan's way. However, he was not above using whatever means at his disposal to ensure that Riordan's erstwhile friend never troubled him again.

He found Riordan anxiously waiting for him in the parlor. The younger Deir rose to his feet when he heard Dylen mounting the stairs.

"Where did you go?" he asked fearfully.

Gesturing to Riordan to reseal himself, Dylen joined him on the couch.

"I paid Ithan a visit," he said.

Riordan caught his breath. "Saints above," he whispered. "What-what did you do?"

"I nearly strangled him," Dylen readily admitted. "But I thought that was too easy an end so I thought of beating him to death instead."

"You didn't..." Riordan half-bleated.

Dylen shook his head. "I decided to give him a chance to explain his side." At Riordan's incredulous gasp, he put a soothing arm around his shoulders. "He admitted that he gave you a philter to make you more receptive to his overtures. When you asked him to stop he thought you were just stalling, that you were still too tense. And he didn't expect you to pass out. The drug was supposed to make you amorous, not lose consciousness."

He held on to Riordan more tightly when the latter began to shake violently and tried to rise from the couch. "You have to hear this," he insisted.

"What?" Riordan said disbelievingly. "Listen to a detailed account of how he violated me? I can't believe that *you* did!" His eyes beginning to tear, he averted them.

"I almost didn't," Dylen said. "I was ready to tear his head off." He lifted a hand and cupped Riordan's chin, compelling the youth to look at him. "While he was preparing you, you began to weep and plead for help. And then you fainted."

“Which is when he raped me,” Riordan spat out bitterly. “When I couldn’t do anything to stop him.”

“But he didn’t.”

Riordan stared at him. “What?”

“He didn’t go on, Rio,” Dylen said emphatically. “He couldn’t. Not when he heard you crying for help and saying how sorry you were. *To me.*” He paused to let the information sink in. “It struck him finally that he was forcing himself on you. That you really didn’t want to couple with him. And, that if he continued, it would make him a rapist.”

“But I felt something... enter me—inside me—” Riordan stuttered. He took a deep breath. “How do you know he was telling the truth? He was probably just so afraid of you.”

Dylen shook his head. “I have my ways. Trust me when I say he didn’t take you. And as for you feeling something... Well, he prepared you, didn’t he? I think that’s what you remember—his fingers stretching you.”

“But it felt like more than that. Bigger.”

“How would you know? You’ve never had anything up your arse before. One finger is intrusive enough; what more two or three?” Riordan considered this then slowly nodded in agreement. Dylen continued. “But you can confirm this for yourself. I didn’t ask you at the time because I assumed that he *had* raped you. Now I want you to think back. When you woke up, were you in pain? Was there any discomfort at all? Did anything leak out of you?” When Riordan’s eyes widened in obvious contrary recollection, Dylen smiled faintly. “The lack of seed aside, even if you had been willing, you still would have felt something—an ache or soreness. Anal penetration always leaves some discomfort, but especially after the first time.”

Riordan gazed at Dylen. “I didn’t feel anything,” he whispered. “No pain, no discomfort. Not even the-the stretching. I was slippery from the oil he used but there was no—Nothing leaked from me.” Riordan gulped. “He did tell you the truth. He didn’t—I was not—” He heaved a shuddery breath. “Merciful Veres...”

He turned and buried his face in Dylen’s shoulder as sobs wracked his body, the full import of his discovery hitting him with storm force. Dylen held him, rubbing his back soothingly. He did not notice how much time passed, and it was only when he felt his arm begin to cramp that Dylen loosened his hold on the younger Deir. By now Riordan’s sobs had subsided, and he seemed to be calming down at last. Dylen squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

“He didn’t rape you,” he reaffirmed. “Thank the Maker for that. But it doesn’t change the fact that he molested you. That he drugged you to make you more compliant and went on doing things to you after you told him to stop. Never go anywhere near him again.”

Riordan shuddered. “I don’t even want to see him. Not ever.”

“You won’t. I warned him not to show himself to you. I told him I would geld him if you so much as complained that you’d caught a glimpse of him.”

A strangled laugh escaped Riordan. “Oh *heyas*, you didn’t,” he sputtered.

“I did,” Dylen said with a slight smile. “I was going to break his back with my bare hands. What makes you think I wouldn’t castrate him?”

Riordan guffawed though it was clearly more an expression of intense relief rather

than humor. At length, he sobered and, drawing out of Dylen's arms, leaned back wearily.

"I feel so drained," he moaned. "So tired."

"Of course you do," Dylen said, ruffling his hair. "Why don't we eat something?" He rose from the couch and headed for the stairs. "Is soup fine with you?"

For a moment, Riordan stared after him, startled by the sudden redirection to so mundane a matter as dinner. But then the wisdom of grounding themselves in practicalities after such a gut-wrenching discussion registered.

"Yes, it's perfectly fine," he agreed, following Dylen downstairs to the kitchen.

He busied himself toasting bread over the fire while above, the flavorsome salted meat and vegetable soup from the midday meal slowly heated up once more. Meanwhile, Dylen put together a simple salad of sliced fruit doused with honey-sweetened cream.

They did not bother to go up to the dining room but ate their meal at the kitchen worktable. Riordan was still in a bit of a fugue and said very little. Dylen let him be. It was only when they were done eating that Dylen broached the subject once more.

Covering Riordan's hand reassuringly, he asked, "For what did you need my forgiveness, *Rio-min*?"

Riordan started then flushed. "Oh, that..." He bit his lip then mumbled, "It was several things actually, not just one." At Dylen's encouraging nod, he said, "I was sorry for not listening to you about misleading Ithan. He called me a tease when I went home with him." He cringed a little when Dylen scowled then hurried on. "I was sorry for stupidly putting myself in that situation after you'd warned me about him." He swallowed hard and looked down at the tabletop. "And most of all, that it would be my first time and—it wasn't going to be with you."

Dylen did not reply. But he patted Riordan's hand before getting up to clear the table.

"Let me do that," Riordan quickly offered.

Dylen regarded him hesitantly. "I think you should come back and live here," he said. When Riordan started to protest that he was fine, he swiftly added, "It's for my sake. I know you don't want to be coddled. But I can see how affected you are by what happened, and it bothers me. So, until I feel more secure about you living by yourself again, I would like you to stay here."

Riordan looked searchingly at him for a while. Finally, with a crooked grin, he replied, "All right. For *your* sake."

Dylen smiled back. "Well then, that's settled. Now I need a good, long soak," he decided. "This is one day I want to forget."

"Not all of it," Riordan muttered under his breath as he set about putting the kitchen in order. But Dylen heard as he walked away.

Chapter Six

Surrender

After washing up, Riordan returned to the parlor and extinguished the lamps. He then went to Dylen's bedroom. He listened for sounds from the bathing chamber, but it was quiet. Had Dylen fallen asleep in the tub? He peeked into the chamber. Dylen turned his head almost as soon as he did.

Riordan blushed, abashed at being caught and affected by the glimpse of Dylen's nakedness. No matter how many times he had seen the *hethar* in the nude, he had never gotten over his shyness. Even now, when much of Dylen's body was obscured by the bath foam, it still had the power to discomfit him.

He looked down in embarrassment. "I thought that perhaps you'd fallen asleep," he murmured by way of explanation.

Dylen chuckled. "I'm not in the least bit sleepy."

Riordan dared to glance at him. "Still tense?" At Dylen's nod, he said, "Ah, I just realized, I didn't thank you for what you did for me."

Dylen gestured dismissively. "By the way, apology accepted," he lightly added.

For a moment, Riordan was confused. And then he realized Dylen was referring to the litany of apologies he'd mentioned earlier. "Which one?" he asked with a crooked grin.

"All of them." Dylen waited for Riordan to recover from his surprise before softly saying, "Care to join me?"

Riordan caught his breath at the invitation. In that instant, he knew Dylen was offering him more than a companionable soak. Suddenly feeling dizzy, he began to strip nevertheless.

Blushing brightly after he shed his drawers, he walked to the tub. Dylen held out a beckoning hand, and he slipped his own into it. Dylen gently pulled him into the tub and down between his legs. Riordan gasped slightly as their limbs and other sundry body parts touched.

Half-cradled in Dylen's arms, he wondered what the other Deir would do next. He did not wait long. A hand snaked behind his nape and pulled him close. Their lips met for the first time. Riordan moaned almost upon contact.

Never before had he known the pleasure of the leisurely slip and slide of bared bodies as they came together in love-play, the thrill of naked limbs unashamedly entangling or the slow-burning build-up of sensation where each and every burst of bliss could be savored to the hilt. Least of all did he know just how potent a kiss could be, let alone the titillating hot-tongued caress Dylen was treating him to with the confident finesse of a practitioner of the love arts and the thrilling passion of an eager lover.

To his surprise, Dylen broke their kiss and slightly drew away. But, even as he started to protest, Dylen smiled and gently shifted him about to lean back against him. He caught his breath when he felt Dylen's shaft hard against his backside. Again he opened his mouth to question the *hethar*, but no sound issued save for a long, low groan. Dylen

had reached down with both hands to cup his seed sac and take hold of his shaft. Dylen proceeded to stroke his shaft to straining, thrumming hardness and fondle the tender pouch beneath until it tingled and tightened.

His whole body shaken by pleasurable tremors, Riordan let his head fall back onto Dylen's shoulder. A moment later, he was moaning helplessly as lips pressed against the side of his throat and Dylen trailed searing kisses up and down its length. A hand smoothed over his abdomen, kneading the firm flesh before it continued its upward journey toward his chest. Riordan's trembling increased as agile fingers rubbed and pinched his nipples until they tensed into little rose-brown peaks.

With sensation threatening to overwhelm him, he wriggled in an unconscious bid to escape. But Dylen held him fast while he continued to play with his nipples and stroke his shaft even as he nibbled on the side of his neck. Riordan wanted to rear and thrash, but trapped in Dylen's embrace, he could only shudder in ecstasy.

"Dy, p-please," he croaked as the pressure in his groin built up to a nigh unbearable degree. "I can't-I can't—hold it—off..."

"Then don't," Dylen whispered. He gave a few firm tugs to Riordan's shaft.

Riordan sobbed harshly as his orgasm crashed through him. His hips bucked forward while his seed spurted over Dylen's fingers into the soapy water. As the last of his climax played out, he sagged into Dylen's arms, his head lolling onto the other's shoulder. It was several seconds before he could think lucidly, let alone speak.

He turned his head dazedly and gazed into Dylen's eyes. "I've never felt anything like that before," he murmured.

"It gets better." Dylen grinned rakishly.

"It does?" Riordan stared in amazement. And then he grinned back. "Will you show me?"

Dylen kissed him long and deeply. "In good time," he murmured against Riordan's lips. "Relax. We don't have to rush anything." He turned Riordan to face him. "I want you to enjoy yourself. Do whatever you like, *ariad*."

Riordan's eyes widened. "Am I truly your beloved?"

"Against my better judgment," Dylen teased.

Laughing softly, he kissed away Riordan's indignant rejoinder.

* * * *

Hirlen hid his smile behind a hand. He did not want young Riordan to feel conscious about being observed, and Dylen would likely send a glare his way that said "look elsewhere". But if they could only see themselves, he fondly thought as he watched them from his great chair in the parlor. One would think them newlyweds if one did not know the truth of their situation.

He had returned from his holiday in Glanthar to find Riordan Leyhar back in residence and not only sharing his son's bedchamber again but also his bed. It had been a great surprise given Dylen's previous resistance to any entanglement with Riordan. But, once he got over Dylen's capitulation, Hirlen heartily welcomed Riordan into their little family circle. Not for all the treasure in Aisen would Hirlen forego the chance to see Dylen in such a state of bliss. And blissful he was if the sparkle in his eyes and his ready laughter were any indication of it.

He stifled a chuckle when the pair bumped into each other while setting the table for

the evening meal. Instead of pulling apart to continue whatever they were doing, they hesitated a moment too long just to look at each other with obvious appreciation and longing. Why, you'd think they didn't daily partake of each other's company the way they were behaving, Hirlen thought with amusement.

He looked up from the book he'd been pretending to read when Dylen came over to sit on the couch. Riordan had gone downstairs and out to the yard to look for a shirt among the laundry that had been hung out that morning to dry. Hirlen regarded his son knowingly and was gratified to see the slow blush that colored his cheeks.

"That wristlet seems to be your favorite piece of late," he remarked. "You hardly ever take it off."

Dylen glanced at his wrist then pulled his sleeve down to cover the gold and leather band with its heartsfire clasp.

"It pleases him when I wear it," he said.

"He is such a dear lad," Hirlen murmured. "I'm glad you and he have found each other. I so enjoy seeing you happy, Dy."

Dylen faintly smiled. "For however long it lasts."

"Still pessimistic I see."

"You know full well why. Would you rather I blundered headlong into this affair without considering the probable outcome?"

"Possible outcome," Hirlen corrected. "You can't know how it will end. Now I agree the chances of success given his future profession are not promising. But it doesn't hinge on that alone. Much will depend on your determination to make it work. And I do mean both of you."

"I understand, *Adda*, and I assure you I'm not leaving matters to chance. But I prefer to be prepared for the worst. I don't believe Riordan will break my heart if that's what you think I fear. He's one of the most considerate and honorable Deira I've ever known. But I am afraid that when he enters the diplomatic corps, our relationship will become a liability to him and, well..." He sighed. "That may force us to part whether we wish it or not."

"And you think you can steel yourself against the hurt?"

"Enough to pick up the pieces and move on, yes," Dylen admitted. "But for now, I am savoring what we have so don't worry about me. While we have each other, I intend to make the most of it. I do like being happy, *Adda*. It's having to give it up eventually that I find troublesome."

Hirlen shook his head. "Only you would couch it in those terms."

Dylen grinned. "By the way, what is this Tarqin mentioned last night about you retiring?"

"Oh, I've been thinking about it," Hirlen admitted. "My holiday was so restful I find myself yearning for more time to do as I wish. I've set aside a goodly bit already so I won't be a burden to you, Dy."

"You are not a burden!" Dylen protested.

"And I intend never to become one," Hirlen firmly said. "I know you have been saving much as well, and I applaud your prudence. But do it for yourself. You'll never know when you may need every little piece you earn. Especially if the fates favor you and you wind up leaving the fraternity."

Dylen held up a hand. "Let's not go there. I distrust false hopes. Will you tell Zaraqel

yourself?

“Of course. He deserves that courtesy after all these years. And he always treated me well even when I had to absent myself frequently during your growing years. But I doubt I’ll be much missed by anyone. Why, I haven’t gone to the Seralye every day this past year.”

“You will be missed, *Adda*, and you know it,” Dylen good-naturedly chided him. “There are very few *hethare* left at the Seralye who remember the old days and all the gossip and intrigues of those times. I wouldn’t be surprised were Zrael to offer his services once more for the taproom parties should guests call for someone who can regale them with stories of years gone by. Retire by all means if you truly desire it, but don’t think you’ll be easily forgotten.”

As he finished speaking, Riordan walked over and joined them.

“Are you truly retiring, *Teris-dyhar*?” he asked.

“I’m seriously thinking about it,” Hirilen replied. “I should like to visit friends, too. Many of them did not settle down in Rikara after leaving the Seralye but went to live with their children in other fiefs. Eventually, I may do so, too.”

Dylen looked at him startled. “Without me? You would leave me behind, *Adda*?”

“Only for a while,” Hirilen said soothingly. “You could join me should you choose to leave our profession.”

“He could?” Riordan blurted. He reddened when father and son stared at him. “I mean I was surprised that you had even considered the thought, *Teris-dyhar*. Dy has always made it seem that he will remain a *hethar* into his later years. That is, he has never given me ho— I mean any indication that he could leave it much earlier.”

His slip did not go unnoticed. Dylen reached for his hand and wove their fingers together. “If I haven’t spoken of it, it’s because I have never given thought to the possibility, that’s all.”

Riordan looked down at their clasped hands. “But you will think about it now?” he murmured.

Dylen pursed his lips. He looked a shade reproachfully at his father. “I will think about it, of course,” he finally said. “Ah, here’s Tarqin with supper. Let us eat, *Adda*, else we’ll both be late for work.”

When Riordan went ahead to help Tarqin set the food on the table, Dylen gave his father a somewhat severe look.

“What ails you?” the elder Teris asked.

Dylen tartly said, “What did I just say about false hopes?”

“Is Riordan’s hope so ill-founded?”

“*Adda*—”

“He doesn’t harbor false hopes nor did I offer it. We simply spoke of possibilities. Nothing is set in stone, Dy, not even the best laid plans.”

Hirilen raised a finger to his lips when they came within earshot of Riordan. Dylen snorted but said no more on the subject.

Chapter Seven

Liaison

The last of the sun's rays cast a red-gold glow upon the two lithe forms on the bed. Soon the lamps would need to be lit to banish the approaching evening's shadows. But Riordan took no notice of the passing time and waning light, too rapt was he in his love play with Dylen.

Riordan groaned helplessly as his ecstasy slowly mounted. He clutched at the pillow under his head, his back arching sinuously in sympathetic response to the unhurried yet unrelenting draw on his shaft. Saints above, Dylen could be such a tease! How long was he going to keep him in this maddening state of pleasurable tension?

He had been serviced thusly before in the alleyways of Sidona's capital of Nivare and the rented rooms of the city's prostitutes; and once in the elegant bedchamber of a friend of his father's when said friend's son importuned him after a dinner party. He'd fled that bedchamber when his would-be seducer made it clear he wanted more than just a taste of him.

In every case, he'd been well sated. But none came close to the near cataclysmic bliss he daily experienced at Dylen's hands.

It was not only skill that made it so, though there was no denying that Dylen was very skillful. For the first time, he was in love, and it was the Deir he loved who now pleased him and this lent every encounter with Dylen an intense intimacy Riordan had not previously known.

His belly tightened, and his toes curled as he was repeatedly enveloped in wet warmth, moist lips wrapped snugly around his tumescent flesh. Again and again, Dylen took him in nigh to the base of his member, maintaining a steady pace that kept Riordan just teetering on the edge of the precipice, occasionally releasing him when he seemed about to burst to run his tongue along the length of his shaft.

"Dy..."

"Hmm?"

"Please!"

Dylen chuckled around his mouthful of hot flesh. The sound and sensation alone nearly overwhelmed Riordan. His hips lifted in reflexive need.

Without warning, Dylen obliged him and quickened his pace. The heretofore gradually loosening coil of pleasure within Riordan abruptly came undone, and he cried out as delicate ribbons of milky seed spewed from his shaft. He shivered deliciously as Dylen all but drank him down. Afterward, he could only weakly settle into the circle of Dylen's arms.

Such profound changes in so short a time, he thought. Take his daily routine for instance.

Each night, he was roused from light sleep when the mattress dipped as Dylen slipped into bed after his evening at the Seralye. He then slid back into slumber snuggled against his lover. Each morning, he awakened to the sight of Dylen's beauteous face and

form at his side. He would quietly rise, draw on a robe and slip out of the room for a mug of milk tea. If he had morning classes, he ate breakfast alone and headed for the University, always briefly rousing Dylen with a morning kiss before he left the house. When he got back after classes, he spent what remained of the afternoon with Dylen until it was time for the *hethar* to leave for work.

On weekends, he could wait for Dylen to wake up an hour or so later. After breakfast, they spent the day together—going to the market to replenish the larder, helping Hirlen tend his tiny garden in the back of the house, discreetly sampling the city's various offerings or just curling up on the parlor couch to read a good book or mend clothing. Then it was supper and time for Dylen to ready himself for the evening. Riordan would doze in bed until Dylen returned, and the cycle would start all over again.

Riordan savored the routine for the sense of belonging it gave him. He truly felt like one half of a couple. Indeed, he found he did not even give much thought to whether Dylen had provided more than simple company for any of the Seralye's patrons. Perhaps he had become so used to that aspect of Dylen's profession during his lengthy residency with the Terises that it no longer had the power to affect him deeply save for the occasional worry for Dylen's safety and well-being.

He lifted his head from its cozy berth on Dylen's shoulder to gaze at his lover with a lazy smile. Dylen smiled back.

"I trust you have no cause for complaint," he quipped.

Riordan snorted. "Only an ingrate would. I do hope that I shall one day be even half as skillful as you if only to equal the pleasure you give me."

"But you do give me as much pleasure, Rio," Dylen protested. "I take joy in the way you offer yourself so willingly."

"Oh? Then perhaps I should ask that you do the same!"

Silence fell abruptly, and the smile slowly faded from Dylen's mouth. Riordan frowned.

"What is it?" he asked. "What did I say wrong?"

Dylen bit his lip. "I'm sorry if I have failed to content you," he murmured.

Riordan stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I know you wish to take things further and that it irks you that I can't accommodate your wish just yet."

"Oh, *that*." Riordan shrugged. "Well, yes, I am surprised at your reluctance to couple with me. One would think with all your experience you would have no inhibitions about it left. I mean, it's natural for me to hesitate when you teach me something new; I'm no seasoned lover. But you are and more besides."

"All the experience in Aisen can't make certain acts more palatable," Dylen countered. "I'm so sorry, Rio, but I can't grant your wish just yet."

Riordan huffed. "What is it about bugging me that you dislike?" he blurted, his frustration overtaking his usual aversion to crude language. "Do I have to pay for the privilege as well?"

It was Dylen's turn to stare. "You want *me* to take *you*?"

His reaction was initially lost on Riordan. "Wasn't that what I asked you to do that night at the Seralye?" he pointed out a little tartly. An instant later, however, he started and asked, "You thought I wanted to take you?"

"Don't you?"

“Well, eventually, of course,” Riordan admitted. “But my first time, I would much prefer to be led.” He regarded Dylen curiously. “Is it because I’m inexperienced that you don’t wish to yield? Do you fear that I’ll hurt you?”

The *hethar* shook his head. “It has naught to do with your lack of skill. I could guide you well enough to ensure that you don’t hurt me overmuch.”

“Then what stops you?”

Dylen sighed and lay back. Riordan watched him, wondering at his uncharacteristic lack of assurance.

“Most of my patrons prefer that I take them,” Dylen suddenly said. “Many are the heads of their families or business holdings and, more oft than not, it is they who sire their heirs and hold the purse strings. Allowing another Deir to dominate them sexually is a means of letting go.”

“It relaxes them?” Riordan ventured half incredulously.

Dylen faintly smiled. “Strange as that might sound, yes. However, there are Deira who want the opposite. Who wish to control and dominate. Some possess that privilege and seldom give it up even for the space of a tumble. But more do not and thus seek it elsewhere. Such patrons never yield, only take, and they make it very clear that they are in control.”

Riordan’s eyes widened in sudden comprehension. “You associate yielding yourself with subjugation.”

Dylen hesitated then nodded. “I am constrained to do so if it is what a patron desires,” he haltingly explained. “And my pride is much salved by the considerable fee I can command for it. But, outside of my profession, I have never consented to play the mare. It isn’t that I think it demeaning, mind you. It’s just that I prefer not to. What I mean is I have little choice when I’m at work. So I’d rather not bring home that sense of having no say in the matter. Away from the Seralye, I am my own person, and none can demand of me what I have ever surrendered only for the highest of prices. Oh plague take my tongue! That sounded horrible! Forgive me if I offended you, Rio. Please believe me, it has naught to do with you and—”

Riordan lifted his hand to cover Dylen’s mouth and halt the flow of explanations and apologies. He smoothed a finger over Dylen’s lower lip.

“I’m glad you told me this. I don’t wish to make you do anything that would discomfort you.” He followed the stroke of his finger with the caress of his lips. After a slow, lingering kiss, he murmured, “I won’t deny that I would dearly love to take you. But not until you desire it yourself. Until then, I’ll happily yield. Indeed, if it is all I can ever do, if it is all you can abide, I’ll be content. More than anything, Dy, I just want to be one with you however we achieve it.”

Seeing the tension seep out of Dylen’s features, he smiled and, lying back, he pulled the latter atop him and between his upraised knees.

“Please, *ariad*, have me now. Love me.”

Dylen gazed at him, something like wonder in his eyes. And then that passed, and he bent to seal their mouths together in a kiss that quite took Riordan’s breath away.

“You should know,” he murmured. “This is a first for me as well.”

“How so?”

“I have lain with many but never in love. To you alone do I yield my heart, Rio.”

Riordan thought *his* heart would burst right out of his breast, so full did it feel after

Dylen's quiet avowal. Moisture gathered in the corners of his eyes, and his throat tightened. Staving off a potentially mawkish display of emotion, he pulled Dylen into another molten kiss while curling one leg behind the latter's thighs in wanton invitation. He felt Dylen smile into their kiss.

Fingers traced their way down his throat to his chest and the taut wash of his belly, succeeded by lips that marked their passage southward with scarlet bruises. Riodan's excitement mounted once more with every moist tug at his nipples and every lash and nibble of Dylen's tongue and teeth across the expanse of his abdomen. He closed his eyes in anticipation when Dylen reached between his legs to cup the tender sac beneath his shaft. But, if he thought he would be treated to a repeat of Dylen's previous pleasuring, he could not be more mistaken. He stiffened when Dylen's fingers ventured behind his seed pouch to touch the small lipped opening it concealed.

The seed channel, more commonly called the sheath, was the most telling evidence of the Deira's direct descent from their forebears, the ancient Naere who long ago fled their dying world and found a new home for their dual-gendered race on Aisen.

Riodan's eyes flew open, and he looked down in some dismay.

"You don't mean to—" he started to say.

Dylen met his anxious gaze. "Of course not. I'm well aware that the privilege is reserved for your lawful mate alone." He shook his head when Riodan would have protested his statement. "Trust me, Rio. I want this to be a memory to savor, not regret."

Riodan regarded him curiously then nodded. "I shall never regret this," he declared. "Have me as you wish."

A smile was his answer, devastating in its sweetness. Riodan groaned and let his head fall back on the pillow. He wondered if his sanity would survive his first coupling with Dylen. Veres almighty, even the *hethar's* smile was enough to send his senses swimming if one could call their frantic floundering thusly.

He caught his breath as Dylen drew his fingers along the delicate ridge of his sheath. Every stroke of the sensitive flesh sparked a fresh frisson of pleasure. And set in motion the bodily change that turned a Deir, enabling him to take his partner inside him in reproductive union. Riodan's seed pouch contracted and slightly receded upward to fully expose his sheath. Glistening with the slippery essence of Riodan's arousal, it easily accepted the inward slide of Dylen's finger. Riodan moaned.

"Did you feel the change?" Dylen murmured, gingerly thrusting his finger into the slick passage.

Riodan nodded, his eyes wide with awe. His whole body was thrumming. The need to be deeply penetrated had awakened and waxed steadily until it was all he could think of. All he desired.

"I want you," he pleaded.

"Patience, my Rio," Dylen said soothingly.

He withdrew his hand and reached for something on the bedside table. Riodan stared at the crystalline bottle of oil in Dylen's grip. He'd wondered for a long time now when Dylen would finally use it on him.

Dylen removed the stopper of the bottle and drizzled a little of the oil on the fingers of his right hand. Replacing the container on the table, he rubbed the oil between his fingers. Meeting Riodan's tense gaze, he caught and held it while he lowered his hand between the youth's legs. He slid his fingers into the cleft between Riodan's buttocks.

Before Riordan could react, he pushed a finger into him. Riordan gasped, his body jerking a little. He recalled at once the intrusive sensation from his encounter with Ithan. His breathing quickened, and he struggled to slow it. This was Dylen, he reminded himself. And Dylen was readying him to receive his shaft, an act Riordan had yearned for longer than he cared to remember. The thought wrought him a measure of peace. With a tremulous smile, he parted his legs farther to make it easier for Dylen to breach him.

That earned him an approving grin. "Do you realize how utterly irresistible you look?" Dylen huskily said, inserting another finger. "You tempt me as I have never been tempted before."

Riordan managed a small laugh. "Do I? Splendid. That will keep me uppermost in your mind then."

"Lackwit," Dylen fondly replied, turning the gibe into an endearment. "You're always uppermost in my mind. Even when I'm with others."

Surprised by the admission, Riordan opened his mouth to reply, but the caress of something inside him robbed him of speech. Staccato gasps escaped him instead as bursts of sensation accompanied every stroke of Dylen's clever fingers.

"What-what are you doing to me?"

Dylen only chuckled and removed his fingers. Riordan watched with bated breath as he thoroughly anointed his shaft with oil, deliberately sliding his hand down the whole length of it. Riordan gulped at the sight.

He allowed Dylen to guide his legs high up around his waist. Dylen shifted forward to lean over him. Riordan let out a shuddery breath when he felt the prod of Dylen's shaft against his backside.

"Are you sure you want this?" Dylen asked.

Riordan glanced down at the flesh that would fill him. Dylen was impressively endowed in girth as well as length. Riordan swallowed in some trepidation at the thought of taking that formidable shaft up his backside. But his fear was not enough to overcome the elation at finally being in union with the Deir he adored. He looked at Dylen with eyes brimming with trust and anticipation.

"Oh yes," he whispered. "I'm very sure."

Again there was the pressure of entry but a much greater one than before. Riordan gasped as Dylen's shaft pushed into him in one fluid motion. He whimpered as he was slowly but steadily filled. His breath came in ragged fits while he struggled to adjust to the burning sensation. He stared up at Dylen, finding solace in the grey-green eyes that regarded him with love and desire. He managed a small brave smile.

"I don't wonder that Ithan couldn't restrain himself," Dylen murmured. "You're so beautiful it's almost unfair." He bent low to kiss the trembling youth, sliding his arms beneath him to hold him close.

The affectionate gesture soothed Riordan immeasurably, and he relaxed enough to allow Dylen to slide into him completely without further discomfort. Dylen shifted his hips as he delivered a thrust. Another slight movement and another thrust and suddenly Riordan felt pleasure explode in his belly, a sharp, indefinable pleasure that he had not thought possible. He moaned against Dylen's lips, his body arching upward, seeking that wonderful sensation.

Dylen complied. He drove into Riordan repeatedly, always angling his thrusts to ensure Riordan's enjoyment of the act.

“Do you understand now?” he softly said. “Turning heightens the pleasure. I wanted you to enjoy this to the hilt.”

“Always my needs first,” Riordan shakily replied. “What of yours, Dy? I want you to enjoy this, too.”

Dylen’s smile was more tender than Riordan had ever seen it. “Think you there can be anything more enjoyable for me than this? To wholly have you, Rio, and be the first accorded the privilege is an honor I never thought to know. And gaining your love is a joy beyond compare. There can be no greater bliss, *ariad*.”

He maintained his steady rhythm, subtly striking that point of pleasure within until Riordan thought he would go mad from the ecstasy. He tightened his legs almost frantically around Dylen’s waist, wordlessly begging him to bring his exquisite torment to a close. Dylen quickened and deepened his thrusts.

Stimulated almost beyond bearing, Riordan began to shake with the onset of another orgasm.

“Veres preserve me!” he moaned, his breathing harsh to his ears.

Dylen smirked. “Good?”

“Oh, *heyas*, yes!”

Dylen reached between them to grasp Riordan’s shaft. He briskly stroked it in tandem with his thrusts. It proved too much for Riordan.

His climax ripped through him, the double sensations of being filled and stroked amplifying it beyond what he’d previously known. And when Dylen stiffened then shuddered and gasped repeatedly at the moment of his own release, Riordan thought he had never seen anything as beautiful as the sight of his lover caught in the throes of rapture. Liquid warmth seeped deep into him, lengthening the ecstasy that continued to wrack his body.

Riordan was sobbing by the time the sensations ebbed. He had not known that release from intercourse was lengthier and far more intense than completion gained by other means. He placed a trembling hand on his heaving abdomen and was surprised by the absence of semen on his skin. His climax had been spectacular. Where was the evidence of it?

“A turned Deir doesn’t produce seed,” he heard Dylen explain, amusement limning his voice. “A rather efficient way to minimize the mess, don’t you think?”

Riordan had to chuckle at Dylen’s typical frankness. It was then he realized that Dylen was making no move to withdraw from him. The other Deir was still deeply imbedded inside him, and even more remarkable, his shaft had not subsided completely. Indeed, it felt as if it were firming up once more!

Riordan opened his eyes to stare disbelievingly at his lover. Dylen’s smile was positively wicked.

“I’m going to show you what it means to be pounded into the mattress,” he informed Riordan. “I promise you won’t be able to walk straight for a few days.”

“Saints above,” Riordan whimpered, caught between apprehension and elation.

Chapter Eight

Crossroads

C.A. 2987

Spring in the north of Ylandre was heralded by scattered showers and moist cool breezes. Grey and gloom gave way to color and light as the myriad flora and foliage that adorned the capital made their first appearances, and the sun shed its winter veil and grew ever brighter and warmer as the season progressed. Rikara in this time of reawakening was beauteous to behold and a veritable feast for the senses, particularly when the city's vibrancy and cultural variety emerged from hibernation.

But all these were lost on Riodan for reasons he was less than pleased to acknowledge.

The notion of celebrating one's begetting day is highly over rated, he crossly decided as he passed through the gates of the University grounds. Only children derived any pleasure from such celebrations. Then again, only children were supposed to. He was way past the age at which any sensible Deir would still care to remember the anniversary of his birth. So why did he feel neglected?

He shook his head and chided himself for being childish. Really, what had he been expecting? He tried to wipe the scowl from his face as he strode down the pedestrian path flanking the main avenue that serviced this sector of the north district.

"Why such a long face?"

Riodan came to a sudden halt to avoid colliding with Dylen as the latter stepped out from behind one of the old silver oaks that shaded the path. His eyes widened at his lover's unexpected appearance.

"Dylen!" he exclaimed. "Have you been waiting long? What are you doing here?"

The *hethar* smiled. "Not so long. And I thought you would like to spend the rest of the day together. It is your begetting day."

Riodan's dark mood abruptly dissipated. Gazing happily at Dylen, he smiled with all the pleasure of a child who'd been granted his dearest wish.

"Ah, I would love to. But why so furtive?" Riodan noted how Dylen stayed in the shade to obscure his features. "Even now you hide your face. You'd think we were engaged in a clandestine affair."

"We are."

"Dy!"

"I don't want to hide what we have, believe me," Dylen assured him. "But for your future's sake, it's best to be prudent."

"My future is with you," Riodan stoutly said.

Dylen's smile turned a shade pensive. "I wish the same, but life does not always cooperate with our plans. Now, hush, let's not ruin your day with useless debate. Come, tell me what you'd like to do."

Riodan opened his mouth to protest further, but Dylen brushed a placating kiss

against his lips, and he promptly forgot what he was about to say. He chuckled ruefully at the ease with which Dylen could distract him.

"Very well," he conceded. "First, you can buy me a few meat tarts. I'm starving. Then I should like to watch Ivara's latest satire. Everyone says it's very good. And then you can treat me to the riverboat dinner you keep telling me about. Let's see if the food is as good as you claim it is!"

* * * *

It was dark when they stepped ashore after a leisurely cruise down the Azira, the great river that bisected the city. By now, Riodan had completely revised his opinion of begetting day celebrations.

Dylen chuckled when Riodan told him of his earlier sentiments. "It all depends on the quality of the company you keep," he teased.

"Does that mean I've had the benefit of the best of the best in company?" Riodan said with a grin.

"Your words, not mine."

About to retort, Riodan noticed they were passing by an apothecary. He stopped and said, "Wait, I need to buy something." He hastened to the shop.

Dylen had only waited a few minutes when Riodan returned with a slender package wrapped in brown paper. Dylen eyed the package curiously.

"I'd think you had bought yourself a bottle of wine if I didn't know you'd gone to an apothecary," he remarked.

Riodan shook his head. He partially unwrapped the package to reveal a bottle. Dylen stopped short when he saw the color of the bottle's contents—a deep blue akin to a midsummer sky. The color of the potent Deiran conception suppressor.

"Why in Aisen did you buy *mirash*?" he said. A moment later, he stared at Riodan in dismay. "Nay, you don't expect me to... Rio!"

"Why not?" Riodan countered, his cheeks coloring. "You've had me already. What difference would this make?"

"A whole world," Dylen replied. "You're no ordinary commoner. It's barely permissible as it is for you to yield your arse outside of marriage. But the only Deir you may sheathe genitally is your lawful spouse. You know this, Rio." He took the bottle and rewrapped it. He heaved a rueful sigh. "You don't know how hard it is to refuse your offer. I count it a great honor that you should want to give me this privilege. But I won't compromise you any further than I already have."

"Compromise me?" Riodan frowned. "Are you saying this is all you want?" he unhappily asked. "A mere affair?"

Dylen pulled him into his arms and held him fast, their foreheads touching.

"If it were only up to me, we would always be together," he murmured. "But your life is not mine to direct, and we can't tell where fate will take us. Nay, listen to me, *ariad*," he pleaded when Riodan stiffened and tried to pull away. "As Veres is my witness, I love you with all my heart and soul. But I dare not hope overmuch about the future. We cannot indulge in foolhardy ventures. Not while our circumstances remain as they are. Were we to part—and the chances are great that we will, we can't pretend otherwise—you will probably make a good match with a Deir of equal if not better standing. How think you would he respond were he to discover that you had already

given all of yourself to another? He would likely take offense, and that could affect your marriage adversely from the very start.”

Dylen waited while Riordan digested his words. Finally, Riordan relaxed and leaned into his lover’s embrace.

“Why do you have to be so practical?” he muttered.

Dylen sadly smiled. He released Riordan and slipped an arm around his waist to draw him close as they resumed their stroll.

“I remember you said you have never serviced a patron thusly either,” Riordan said after a while.

“I have never yielded myself thusly,” Dylen corrected. “But some of my patrons have.”

Riordan looked at him in some surprise. “Truly? There are Deira who take the chance?”

“Only a very few. And none of them bachelors with marital prospects. Indeed, the Deira I have bedded that way are all wed. They say the pleasure is different, and one they greatly enjoy.”

“But why not just turn to their spouses for that purpose?”

“Skill and experience matter. And also societal strictures. Particularly if the Deir in question requires his spouse to only play the mare. A childbearer is also expected to come to the marriage bed completely untouched save if he has been initiated by his intended beforehand.”

At Riordan’s wide-eyed gape, Dylen laughed mirthlessly. “You’d be surprised how many amongst your class adhere almost obsessively to the roles they have been assigned by their families. Take our Ardan’s own father. Dyrael was forbidden sexual encounters with anyone before he wed Keldon Essendri. For all that he was of the same line of descent and as royal of blood, the mere fact that he was to be consort required that he reserved himself for Keldon alone.”

“How awful for him.”

“Indeed.”

They paused to hail a public coach. As they boarded the conveyance, Dylen added, “Mind you, I’m never comfortable when it’s requested of me. Even with the use of *mirash*, the risk of conception is always present.”

“Yet you proceed,” Riordan mildly sniped.

“For the right price,” Dylen countered. “And on the condition that the patron will take sole responsibility for any and all consequences.”

“But you’d still refuse me even if I made the same assurances.” When Dylen nodded, Riordan pouted. “How I do wish you were less honorable about these things.”

“You wouldn’t love me if I were,” Dylen pointed out.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t,” Riordan reluctantly conceded. “Still...” He reached for Dylen’s hand and wove their fingers together. “I won’t stop hoping that we might bind to each other one day. If we could, if that were possible—Dy, would you leave your profession?”

Without hesitation, Dylen replied, “Yes, I would.”

“But if it isn’t possible, if I’m forced to bind to someone else...” Riordan bit his lip then asked, “Would you consent to be my leman?”

Dylen did not reply at once but stared out the coach window. Riordan fought the urge

to press him for an answer. At length, Dylen looked back at him with a crooked smile.

"If you ask it of me," he said. "*And* if there is no love between you and your mate. I've never come between spouses before. I won't start now. Not even for you, *ariad*."

Riodan said no more. His eyes gleaming, he pressed a tender kiss to Dylen's lips then leaned against him and rested his head on his lover's shoulder. They rode back to the Quarter in companionable silence.

* * * *

The first inkling of something unusual in the offing was the elegant carriage parked in front of the Teris townhouse. Few conveyances plied the narrow street and one as expensively appointed as this carriage starkly stood out. They gave it a cursory, if curious, once-over before turning to mount the stairs to the porch.

A Deir in livery peered out at them from behind the carriage. The Deir gasped and hurried forward in obvious relief.

"Master Riodan!" he called.

Riodan froze and looked over his shoulder at the retainer in disbelief. His eyes widened in recognition. Barely mustering a nod and a faint smile of acknowledgement, Riodan turned to look at Dylen in alarm.

"I take it your parents have found you," Dylen said.

Riodan cursed under his breath. "So it seems."

They entered the house quickly and promptly bumped into a scowling Targin. The elderly servant merely gestured upward then discreetly retreated to the kitchen.

The lovers hastened up the stairs to the parlor. Riodan almost froze again when he espied the elegantly attired Deir standing by the hearth engaged in stilted conversation with Hirlen. Dylen took him by the elbow and urged him forward. The movement drew the Deir's attention, and he straightened, his countenance stern and disapproving. Save for the bronze hue of his hair, there was little resemblance between him and his son.

"Good evening, *Aba*," Riodan politely said.

Theron Leyhar did not waste time on pleasantries. "It's about time you arrived," he scolded. "By Veres, you led me a merry chase!"

Riodan pursed his lips. "It's hardly my fault that you didn't think me bold enough to leave Sidona," he retorted. "How did you find me?"

The ambassador's eyes narrowed at his son's belligerent tone. "My agents discovered you had enrolled at the University and spoke with some of your schoolmates. One of them said you had befriended a *hethar* and that he might know where you were." Theron did not quite conceal his distaste. "I perforce visited his club in the hope of locating you."

"Leyhar-*dyhar* went to the Seralye and asked for you," Hirlen informed Dylen. "Zarael directed him here."

Giving Dylen his full attention for the first time, the ambassador studied him briefly. "So you're the *hethar* my son's friend mentioned," he said almost accusingly.

"Was it Ithan Soleri you spoke to?" Riodan brusquely asked.

"Why yes, that was his name."

"He's no friend of mine!" Riodan spat.

Theron stared at him in some surprise. "I see. Well, no matter, he was right about how I could find you." He turned to Hirlen once more and said, "It was kind of you to

take Riordan in. And let it not be said that the Leyhars are ingrates. I will compensate you for whatever help you extended to him.”

“Nay, *Dyhar*,” Dylen corrected him. “What aid we gave Rio was out of fondness for him and not for gain of any kind.”

Theron visibly bristled at Dylen’s use of the shortened form of Riordan’s name. “Of course,” he stiffly replied. “But I will take him off your hands now. Gather your things, *Rio-min*. Let us go home.”

Riordan snorted. “Home? To what? To be shackled to a sadistic blackguard only a few years younger than yourself? Nay, *Aba*, I’m staying here with the Deir I love.”

Theron’s eyebrows rose in obvious disbelief. “Love? You mean him?” He glanced disdainfully at Dylen. “You should know better than to squander your affections on mere riffraff.”

Taking his cue from Hirilen, Dylen stifled the impulse to throttle the ambassador for his inexcusable rudeness.

“You will not speak thusly of my lover!” Riordan hotly objected.

Theron scoffed. “You will end this nonsense immediately, Rio. Do you wish to taint your future? It’s one thing to be known to frequent *hethare*. A distasteful way to spend one’s time I must say but commonly practiced enough to be deemed acceptable behavior. But an actual affair with one is out of the question if you value your position in society.”

“I don’t care,” Riordan mulishly responded. “I intend for Dy to be my leman.”

“Are you daft?” Theron exclaimed. “Deira of good repute neither wed nor take *hethare* into their households! You bear a respected name, Rio. Your concubine must be above reproach—either a biddable virgin or a virtuous widower. He must not have consorted with many partners before or during your affair.”

Riordan rolled his eyes. “In other words, only one who has never been tuppé except by a dearly departed spouse is fit to be a respectable Deir’s partner. Well, that should disqualify me as a suitable candidate for the marriage mart unless it’s for some unfortunate dupe below us in station.”

“What do you—?” Theron gaped in horror and stabbed a finger at Dylen. “Saints above! Do *not* tell me you’ve yielded yourself to *him*!”

Riordan raised his chin defiantly. “Irrevocably and frequently. So you see it’s useless to nurse illusions about the state of my backside, *Aba*.” He smirked. “It has been thoroughly speared, plowed and ridden.”

“Rio, there’s no call for crudeness—” Dylen started to say reproachfully.

But the ambassador interrupted, his face scarlet with umbrage. “Deity’s blood, Riordan!” he exploded. “Are you mad? Giving the likes of him the privilege of—”

“Deflowering me,” Riordan finished for his sputtering sire. “On the contrary, I counted it an honor to shed my virginity in his bed.”

“You fool! Do you realize how much that diminishes your worth? Veres almighty, if Ramil Barath learns of this, he will withdraw his suit forthwith!”

“He will? Then I should send him a detailed account of how vigorously Dylen buggers me that I may rid myself of that knave soonest!”

“Impertinent whelp!”

With the pair’s argument escalating into a full-blown quarrel, Dylen and his father moved to impose calm. But before either could speak, Riordan gave his ire full vent.

“Ever have you given thought to your wishes alone without a care for mine!” he

shouted. "Well, I'm done with you and your damnable ambitions!"

"You have not yet reached your majority, Rio!" Theron angrily reminded him. "I still have a say in your life!"

"Only if I remain within your reach!" Riordan threatened, "Force your wishes on me, *Aba*, and I swear I shall conceal myself so well you'll find yourself snug in your grave before you ever see hide or hair of me again!"

Riordan stormed off, entered Dylen's room and shut the door with a deafening crash. Theron tried to follow him but found his way blocked. He glared at Dylen.

"Get out of my way," he snapped.

Dylen did not budge. "He won't listen to you, *Dyhar*. Not while he's in that state. I advise you to wait until his rage has waned. I'll see what I can do then."

Theron's eyes narrowed. "If you love him, let him go," he declared, his voice hard. "There can be no future together for the both of you."

"I'm well aware of that," Dylen quietly replied. "Riordan, however, has not yet seen as much of life as you or I have. What he desires he believes he can attain even in the face of censure. And you of all people will not convince him to accept otherwise."

"But you think you can?"

"Given time and if I do it my way."

"By bedding him into capitulation?" Theron growled.

"If need be," Dylen readily admitted. "Honey trumps vinegar in the art of persuasion. Surely you know that, Ambassador."

When Theron scowled at the tacit rebuke, Hirlen quickly added, "I would also suggest that you don't require him to return to Sidona. At least, not until he has finished his studies. Riordan has settled well at the University and gained many friends. To force him to leave will only set him more firmly against you."

After a tense while, Theron gave Hirlen the barest of nods. "Send word when he is ready," he crisply said.

He stalked away and went down the stairs.

Dylen looked at his father. Hirlen's gaze was sympathetic. Sighing with resignation, Dylen headed for his bedchamber.

* * * *

Dylen allowed a few days to pass before broaching the subject to Riordan. It was time enough for his lover to be calm himself and listen to counsel he did not like the least bit. But listen he did when Dylen finally discussed the matter with him the one evening of the week when he did not report for work. Hirlen had already left for the Seralye while Tarqin busied himself with mending and sorting the laundry.

Riordan stood up and paced around the parlor restlessly. Dylen let him be. At length, the young Sidonan stood before the window and stared out at the street below. Dylen joined him, pulling him into his embrace to lean back against him.

"I can't believe you agree with *Aba*," Riordan whispered.

Dylen held him tighter. "I told you, it's only because you still have to establish yourself in society and our liaison might prove a hindrance for you in certain circles," he softly said. "Much as we don't want to believe it, there are many Deira like your sire who see *hethare* as little better than opportunists or, worse, lowly whores. You don't want it known that your first love affair—"

“My *only* affair!”

“—was with a *hethar*. Indeed, you must never let it be known that I had you. Always claim it was the other way around.”

“So I must sustain a falsehood to uphold my reputation,” Riordan bitterly said.

“It won’t be a complete falsehood,” Dylen murmured. “Not after tonight.”

Riordan looked back at him, startled. “What-what do you mean?”

Dylen released him and went to the glassware cabinet. He took out a drinking glass then led Riordan into their bedroom. From the back of the wardrobe, he brought out the bottle of *mirash* Riordan had impulsively purchased just days earlier. Riordan watched speechlessly as his lover poured himself a glass of the cerulean-hued liquid.

“Dy?” He gulped. “I didn’t mean that you should—”

Dylen eyes glittered. “This is my gift to you, Rio. No matter how many Deira I lie with, I shall never allow another to own me as you will this night.”

He raised the glass to his lips and drained it. A thoughtful smile curved his lips.

“I didn’t expect it to be so sweet,” he remarked. “In any case, it needs time to take effect. Strip, *ariad*,”

Riordan stared at him disbelievingly. But when Dylen doffed his clothes, he quickly followed suit.

They came together on the bed with the ease of lovers who knew each other well. Neither shyness nor doubts hindered their loving. Limbs sensuously entangled, their bodies all but melted into the other, and mouths and hands roamed and ravished until the room resounded with the sounds of their joy and pleasure.

Riordan slid down Dylen’s sleek form until he reached the hard flesh that had oft cleaved him these past many months. No longer a novice in this manner of pleasuring, he eagerly wrapped his lips around Dylen’s shaft. A sharp gasp followed by a lingering groan was his reward. Dylen reached down and gripped his shoulders.

“Turn around,” he ordered. “I want to taste you, too.”

Smirking, Riordan swiftly complied. Resting his head on Dylen’s hard thigh, he parted his legs to allow Dylen to do likewise. He nearly cried out when Dylen summarily caught his hips and dragged him forward to engulf his shaft in the moist warmth of his mouth. Riordan almost forgot what he was supposed to do for a delirious moment as he was drawn upon so edaciously, he almost spent himself within seconds of the first suckle.

Riordan possessively cupped Dylen’s buttocks to pull him closer. When the muscles in the firm mounds tightened under his touch, he ran his hands soothingly over them and applied himself to banishing Dylen’s instinctive response to being held thusly. His efforts proved most effective, and before long, Dylen was trembling with the onset of a climax. His completion swiftly triggered Riordan’s who greedily swallowed his lover’s spending before he, too, spilled himself into Dylen’s mouth.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Riordan crawled his way up to lie full-length against Dylen. Sated for the present, they lay in comfortable silence. The flickering light cast a gentle glow of color on their glistening bodies and entwined limbs.

At length, Riordan stirred and said, “That was—that was...”

“Yes,” Dylen murmured.

He ran his knuckles down Riordan’s flushed cheek then reached for his hand. Riordan caught his breath when Dylen guided his hand between his legs. He gulped when his fingers came into contact with the delicate orifice concealed by the seed sac.

“You’re sure?” he whispered.

“Absolutely.”

Taking a calming inhalation, Riordan set to turning Dylen as the *hethar* had often turned him during their bouts of lovemaking, stroking the tiny opening until the seed pouch contracted out of the way and thrusting his finger tentatively into the now slippery passage beyond. It did not take long before he judged Dylen ready for his taking. But he still hesitated, keenly aware of his lover’s distaste for obligatory submission.

Sensing his uncertainty, Dylen sat up and settled himself astride Riordan’s groin. Exhaling, he slowly lowered himself onto Riordan’s primed shaft. A slight wince and faint hiss marked the moment when the vestigial protective membrane within gave way. With the fragile barrier gone, Dylen eased down until he had taken the whole of Riordan’s shaft into his body.

Riordan stared at him, quite overcome by the indescribable pleasure of being snugly gloved by slick heated velvet. It was beyond anything he had ever imagined, and the instinct to bury himself as deeply as he could in such exquisite confines impelled him to buck up and drive his shaft into Dylen. The quick, stabbing thrusts nearly overcame Dylen, the sensitive walls of his sheath reacting sharply to the friction wrought by the slide of firm flesh against them. He grabbed Riordan’s hips and held him still.

“You’ll undo me too soon,” he gasped. He closed his eyes, willing back a premature unraveling. “Slowly, my love. Slowly.”

He opened his eyes and, holding Riordan’s gaze, began to ride his shaft, taking him in repeatedly until they were both breathing roughly. Following Dylen’s lead, Riordan set a steady, measured pace as he thrust upward.

Dylen leant down and brushed his lips along Riordan’s jaw before trailing open-mouthed kisses down his throat and sucking hard at the smooth flesh. Ignoring Riordan’s inarticulate pleas, he moved southward to drop kisses on his lover’s nicely muscled chest before tonguing his nipples to tiny, throbbing peaks. Just as Riordan started to beg that he end the sweet torment, he closed his lips around one nipple and forcefully drew on it.

This proved too much for Riordan. He pulled Dylen up and sealed their lips in a bruising, hot-tongued kiss that mimicked the movements of their joined lower bodies. At the same time, he gripped Dylen by his buttocks to keep his groin flush against his, enabling him to drive deep and hard into him.

Shuddering from the onslaught, Dylen let Riordan take over. He clutched Riordan’s shoulders and matched the swift, almost brutal thrusts with equal passion and vigor.

Pleasure mounted, erupted and spilled over. Riordan tensed then cried out as, with one last upward lunge of his hips, he speared Dylen deeply and spilled his seed inside him. At once Dylen experienced a rush of warmth within that made its way inward and precipitated a series of pleasurable spasms in his belly. The sensations pushed him over the precipice into a rolling climax that seemed to go on forever and left him spent and winded after. He perforce rested atop Riordan a while before he weakly lifted himself off him and collapsed at his side.

When his heartbeat returned to normal, Dylen extended his arms to Riordan in mute invitation. Riordan hurried into his embrace. He pressed his face into the crook of Dylen’s neck and curled his arm tightly around him. Dylen gently stroked Riordan’s hair.

“I’ve never been happier than in this time I spent with you,” Riordan whispered at length. “I can’t thank you enough, *ariad*.”

Dylen sighed. "All I ask is that you always deem me a friend if naught more," he murmured.

"There's no need to ask for what is already yours." Riordan spoke earnestly. "I swear, Dy, when I have made my way, you'll be more than that and plague take any who oppose us."

Dylen did not gainsay him. Time would tell if such a future was possible. Time and the vagaries of society's demands on its members.

Riordan drew a ragged breath. "To be parted from you," he said, his voice catching. "How will I bear it?"

"It needn't be forever. Not if you wish for us to meet again," Dylen assured him. "You aren't returning to Sidona. And I will be at the Seralye. When you're secure in your profession and your place in society, seek me there. You'll always be welcome."

The prospect cheered Riordan up considerably. "Yes, I will seek you soonest," he promised.

About to snuggle against Dylen, he gasped when he was suddenly rolled over onto his belly. Riordan looked over his shoulder, a playful protest springing to his lips. It died when he saw Dylen reach for the oil on the bedside table. With an anticipatory groan, he raised himself on his elbows and knees. Dylen chuckled.

"So wanton," he teased.

Dylen plied his oiled fingers, eliciting a litany of soft moans. Riordan laughed somewhat breathlessly as rapturous sensation smote him with each twist and slide of Dylen's fingers up his backside.

"Is that a complaint?" he panted.

Dylen moved into position and pressed into him.

"Nay. Consider it high praise."

Gasping, Riordan held still as he was breached with a slow, steady thrust. Once Dylen was fully seated inside him, he draped himself over Riordan's back, reaching around to hold and fondle even as he began to drive deep into him. Riordan buried his face in the pillow though he knew it was a waste of effort to try and smother his cries. Dylen always made mincemeat of his control.

"I love you, my Rio," he heard Dylen say, his voice rough with lust and emotion. "Come what may I will always love you."

Tears pricked Riordan's eyes. Awash in joy and gratitude, he gave himself up to the bliss of his yielding.

Chapter Nine

Adversity

C.A. 2999

Dylen opened the window to let the night breezes into the bedchamber and banish the scent of spent passion. He pensively looked at the street below—it was still a-bustle with traffic despite the late hour.

Twelve years had passed since he bade Riordan goodbye. He had markedly changed in that time. Gone were the sweetness of countenance and slender form of early youth. The angles of his face were more defined and his features sharper. His body had likewise been further honed as evidenced by sleek muscles and strong, lean limbs that were no less graceful. Only his eyes remained the same—wary, shrewd and knowing.

He glanced back as movement on the mussed up bed drew his attention. A fair-haired Deir almost a decade older rolled over, eyes squinting in the dim light. A sleepy smile curved his mouth, and he pushed himself up on one elbow.

“Deity’s blood, but you’ve worn me out,” the Deir said with a groan. “Thank Veres I had my carriage wait for me else everyone would know from my gait how well I’ve been plowed this eve.”

Dylen chuckled. “Shall I be more gentle next time, Shiran-tyar?”

“Heyas, not at all! Where would be the pleasure in that?” The Deir sat up. “What time is it?” He glanced at the timepiece on the bedside table.

“Enough time for one quick tumble if you wish. Unless you ache too much for another round?” Dylen turned to face him, letting the robe fall open completely.

The Deir riveted his gaze on what he could see of Dylen’s body. He licked his lips then grinned.

He said a little breathlessly, “I’m a tad sore but not so much that I can’t take another spearing. Besides, with you it will be worth the discomfort!”

Shrugging off the robe, Dylen returned to the bed.

He had no trouble getting his shaft into the right state of firmness. Not when he imagined the Deir beneath him as the dark-eyed, bronze-haired youth who won his heart all those years ago and whose face and voice still haunted his dreams and peppered his waking moments with maddening regularity. Dylen believed his performance between the sheets had improved considerably because of his propensity for mentally supplanting his bedmate of the moment with Riordan Leyhar’s image.

When it was Riordan he saw spread before him or seated astride his lap, his lust and yearning for his lover would flare into a bonfire of need and he would all but bugger said bedmate within an inch of his life.

It was just approaching midnight when he arrived home. He mounted the stairs to find Hirilen curled up on the couch before the fire, reading a book.

Retired for many years now, the former *hethar* was still comely to look at despite the scattered strands of grey that bedecked his chestnut hair and the faint lines on his face

that bespoke a life well lived. And he had not lost any of his sharpness of wit or elegance of gait or impeccable taste in clothing. Hirlen was aging very gracefully and could still elicit appreciative glances when he strolled down a city street.

Dylen went to his father and bent to plant a kiss on his forehead. Doffing his cloak, he sat at the other end of the couch and sat back with a sigh that signified his gladness to be home. Hirlen eyed him curiously.

“Did you have a difficult guest?” he asked.

“Nay, it’s only that my last patron’s hair was a nice shade of—” He stopped and looked at his father. “It was easier than usual to bed him quite thoroughly.”

Hirlen frowned. “I take it he didn’t come today?”

Dylen shook his head.

“Perhaps tomorrow then.”

“I doubt it.”

“Surely you haven’t lost hope,” Hirlen said with concern.

“Haven’t I?” Dylen stared into the fire. “It isn’t the least bit surprising that he hasn’t shown himself to me again. We move in different circles now.”

“Yet we have known our circle and his to touch and even merge at times.”

“Please, *Adda*, you know what I think of false hopes.”

Hirlen regarded his son sympathetically. “At least he’s based in Rikara,” he murmured at length. “A comforting thought, don’t you think?”

Dylen only shrugged. His father knew that he had spotted Riordan around the city now and then though always at a distance. Save for that one evening three years ago.

Riordan had been to dinner with a group of distinguished looking Deira his age. Dylen saw him as he exited the restaurant, looking more beautiful than Dylen remembered. The sight of him had nearly stolen Dylen’s breath away. He had stayed in the shadows of the neighboring building and eagerly watched Riordan as he walked by.

He’d clearly been the center of his party’s attention. That had gladdened Dylen for, if the company he kept was any indication, Riordan had risen in importance in society. All his companions were richly attired as befitted scions of upper crust families. And most bore the mantle clasp of the diplomatic corps with its graven image of a leaping delphinid similar to the one Riordan had inadvertently left behind when he departed the Teris abode. It was Dylen’s most prized keepsake.

The temptation to greet Riordan had been almost overwhelming. But Dylen determinedly fought the impulse. After convincing Riordan of the necessity of keeping their affair a secret, he could hardly be the one to now put his lover in an awkward position.

A well-born Deir could address and even be cordial with a social inferior if he so chose. It was seen as a sign of graciousness by most. But the reverse was considered highly improper. For a lesser-born Deir to initiate public contact with a member of the upper class bespoke a familiarity that went beyond the typical limited interaction that might take place between Deira of disparate social classes. Such behavior almost always stirred curiosity and roused suspicion. Dylen did not wish to subject Riordan to potentially damaging scrutiny by his peers.

Thus, he had remained hidden and contented himself with ascertaining that his lover was hale and happy. He also kept the incident to himself rather than reap the results of his father’s optimism. Much as he appreciated Hirlen’s attempts to keep his hopes and spirits

up, there were times the effort to respond in similar fashion took too much out of him and he avoided such discussions as much as he could.

Discouraged by Dylen's reticence, Hirilen announced that he was for his bed and rose from the couch. As he took a step away, he lurched forward slightly. Dylen was on his feet in a flash and caught him by the arm. Hirilen grimaced then righted himself. He slowly made his way around the couch and headed for his bedroom.

Dylen frowned. "Your limp seems to be growing worse, *Adda*."

"Actually, it's getting better," Hirilen assured him. "My leg no longer aches as much and only feels numb sometimes."

"Numb?" Dylen's frown deepened. "How odd. I really think you ought to see a physician."

"What, for something as trivial as a sprain?" Hirilen scoffed.

"Is it a sprain? I sometimes wonder whether it was the limp that caused you to fall that time and not the other way around," Dylen suggested.

Hirilen snorted. "Ah, that is nonsense, Dy. I am perfectly—"

Dylen cried out as his father's leg suddenly gave out under him. Hirilen fell heavily to the floor.

"*Adda*!" Dylen hurried to his side and dropped to his knees beside him. "Are you hurt?" he anxiously asked, helping Hirilen up to a sitting position.

Hirilen did not speak at first but sat there panting slightly. Finally he looked up, his face quite pale. His eyes were wide with consternation.

"I can't move my leg," he whispered. "Saints above, I can't even feel it!"

Dylen stared at him, his anxiety blossoming into dread.

"Tarqin!" he bellowed.

His shout easily roused their retainer whose quarters were just below the stairs. The elderly Deir came up the stairs hastily, alerted to possible trouble by the fear in Dylen's voice.

"Go to Aron's house at once," Dylen instructed him. "Hurry!"

He watched Tarqin depart then turned back to Hirilen. To his alarm, Hirilen's eyes had half-closed, and his skin had blanched to a startling degree. Dylen caught up his father's hand. It was frighteningly limp and clammy. Tendrils of terror clutched at his heart.

"What ails you, *Adda*?" he whispered. "Veres almighty, what is wrong?"

* * * *

The physician Aron straightened up after ministering to Hirilen. He had also extensively interviewed Dylen and Tarqin regarding the initial symptoms both had observed in the retired *hethar*. Now he instructed Tarqin to rub Hirilen's benumbed leg as often as he could to bring feeling back into it and to always keep the room warm. Even the slightly lower temperature of a summer night could trigger an attack, he warned.

His expression as he signed to Dylen to follow him out of the bedroom was cause for much apprehension. It was clear Aron had treated Hirilen's affliction before and found it difficult to cure.

Dylen insisted on serving the healer a cup of fortifying tea and buttered bread slathered with honey. Tarqin had roused Aron from sleep just an hour ago, and the physician had to stifle an occasional yawn. He gratefully if tiredly munched the simple

snack and downed the steaming beverage. Afterward, he began to speak

Dylen listened with disbelief as the physician explained his father's ailment.

"He is ill with blight," Aron heavily said.

Dylen stared in confusion. "But isn't blight just a minor ailment? And there are no lesions in his groin. Besides, *Adda* has been retired these past ten years. Where would he have contracted it?"

"Ordinarily, it *is* a minor illness, more bothersome than anything else," Aron explained. "Especially since anyone who's stricken is forbidden sexual contact for months even after the lesions have dried and faded into scars. Of course, there is the possibility of infertility if it isn't treated early. And because unsanitary practices coupled with extreme promiscuity promote its circulation, it is most prevalent in the brothels and among street prostitutes. Occasionally, however, indeed only very rarely, thank Veres, it can turn virulent. And interestingly enough, this happens when the disease doesn't manifest itself at once but lies dormant in the body for years. Many of my colleagues suspect that there *are* lesions present but they don't appear on the surface and therefore aren't visible. In any case, I fear this is what has happened in your father's case."

"*Adda* would have refused a patron with even a suspicion of blight scars," Dylen said. "That must mean one of them was infected with this strain and passed it to him."

"Or he may have borne the ordinary strain but only suffered mild scarring from the lesions that swiftly became indiscernible," Aron added. "The disease then altered into its deadlier form in your father's body."

"But why?" Dylen cried. "How is it possible?"

"We don't know," Aron honestly replied. "Ailments sometimes evolve, and it's all we can do to keep up with those changes and find ways to counter them. Unfortunately, we don't always succeed. Ordinary blight is easily healed and when treated early doesn't leave lasting damage. But this other form of it—" The physician shook his head. "I only pray that I shall live to see the day when a cure is discovered."

Dylen was aghast. "What? But you heal Deira afflicted with blight every day!"

"The common form of it, yes, but not this strain," Aron heaved a frustrated sigh. "There have been a few cases where its progress was retarded for a while but not completely halted. And it was only because the disease was discovered early."

A few minutes of quiet passed while Dylen digested the information. "What will happen next?" he asked apprehensively. "What can we expect?"

Aron pursed his lips then said, "This disease goes through stages. The protracted limp you described or extended aches in other parts of the lower body are the most common symptoms during the first stage. Numbness of the extremities ensues at the onset of the second stage as well as fainting spells. According to your servant, Hirlen began experiencing these symptoms at least a fortnight ago. In the third stage, the body sickens easily. By then, your father will be bedridden for the most part. The fourth and last stage..." Aron looked pensively over his shoulder at Hirlen's bedroom door. "Everything will slowly fail—his heart, his breathing, his vision, even his ability to keep food down. He'll be unconscious more oft than not and in considerable pain when he is awake. The end won't be far off when that happens."

Dylen's earlier incredulity turned into anger at himself.

Seeing his expression, Aron kindly said, "Don't blame yourself for not coming to me sooner. You didn't know enough to realize what his symptoms portended. And, in any

case, no matter how early it's discovered, there is no cure."

There was a painful silence "How long?" Dylen finally asked.

"A few months at most."

Dylen paled. "Holy Veres... So soon," he whispered.

Aron placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "I'm so sorry, Dylen," he murmured. He rose to his feet. "I must go. I have a surgical case later this morn, and I must get some sleep. But I'll pass by every day to check on him."

Dylen mumbled his thanks as he saw the physician to the door. Returning upstairs, he took a few steps toward his father's room. But he felt an overwhelming sense of horror and helplessness, and he stumbled into the parlor instead.

Shaking badly, he sank into Hirlen's great chair before the hearth. For the longest while he stared at the guttering fire, shorn of all coherent thought and besieged by turbulent feelings, none of them able to lend him hope or strength. At length, he glanced at the couch and saw a book resting on it. It was the book Hirlen had been reading while he awaited his son's arrival from work.

Dylen reached for it and resettled himself in the chair. But though he stared at the cover, he could not make out the title. Not when his hands trembled so much that he could not hold the book steady enough to read. He dropped it, heedless of its tumble to the floor.

He buried his face in his hands as great sobs wracked his body and tears streamed down his cheeks. He did not notice Tarqin's approach until the old servant knelt before him and gently stroked his hair, his own eyes wet with tears.

They wept together while the night slowly gave way to dawn.

Chapter Ten

Blow

Dylen watched as Aron examined Hirlen. His father had taken a turn for the worse right after the evening meal, vomiting everything he'd eaten until all he could do was curl up in bed and feebly retch in vain. Tarqin hastily fetched the physician who thankfully was at home. Now dread that Hirlen was at death's door cast a suffocating pall on the Teris residence.

"It's as I feared," the healer murmured. "He's in the fourth stage of the disease. He can't last much longer. A month perhaps."

He took a small phial containing a translucent liquid out of his physician's pack. Deftly parting Hirlen's parched lips, he tipped a few drops onto the Deir's tongue. Though only semi-conscious, Hirlen reflexively swallowed the medicament, grimacing as he did.

"That should keep the pain tolerable," Aron said. "I'll return tonight to give him another dose. You must feed him only bland foods from now on, preferably boiled or poached. Nothing rich or greasy. By the way, do you eat rice grain? Yes? That's good. Save the water you use to wash the rice, boil it and let him drink it. He should be able to keep it down."

Aron slowly straightened up, obviously weighed down by the all but hopeless situation. While Dylen sorrowfully stared at his father, Aron quietly bade him goodbye and made to leave. But as the healer passed him by, Dylen grabbed at his arm. Aron stopped and looked at him questioningly.

Still gazing at Hirlen, Dylen said, "I can't stand by and just let him go."

"There isn't anything else to be done," Aron gently reminded him.

Dylen turned to face him, frustration thrumming in his very bones. "Are you absolutely certain nothing more can be done?" he defiantly asked. "Surely there must be a healer somewhere who's managed something, anything, even if it's just to prolong life, stave off the end. Please, there *must* be something!"

Aron hesitated. Dylen could tell the Deir was torn between the reluctance to purvey false expectations and the desire to assuage some of his desperation. But Dylen refused to relent.

"I don't want to raise your hopes in vain but..." Aron started to say.

"Then there *is* something?" Dylen pressed.

The healer sighed and cautiously proceeded. "There is one physician who has succeeded in halting the progress of this disease—Eiren Sarvan, the Ardan's own cousin and physician."

Dylen stared at him. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I only heard the tale a few nights ago from a colleague lately arrived from Edessa."

"Edessa—"

"He spoke to a number of us over dinner," Aron explained. "Told us that a few years ago, one of the Mesares, a brother of the Herun of Edessa, I think, sickened with this

strain. They asked Eiren Sarvan to attend to him. Sarvan did what he could though he made no promises. After all, even if he is fulsomely gifted—the most talented healer to emerge in centuries I dare say—well, even he has his limits. But, according to my friend, he achieved the impossible. He actually cured the Herun’s brother.”

“He cured him...” Dylen frowned. “Then why hasn’t this news been spread farther afield? Why keep it a secret?”

“Because it may have been a fluke,” Aron pointed out. “Sarvan would never announce something of which he himself is not certain just yet. Think of the many dashed hopes were he unable to repeat that feat. I didn’t tell you for that same reason.”

Dylen nodded. “I understand. But I would rather cling to any possibility than just give up. How can we contact Eiren Sarvan?”

Aron was startled. “He usually divides his time between the Rikara Public Hospital and the Order of Hospitallers’ Health Center,” he said. “But I believe he is abroad right now.”

“Where?”

“On a medical mission in Arvalde, on the behest of the royal family of... Sarmatia I think.” Aron shook his head. “He won’t return to Ylandre for anything less than a summons from the Ardan himself.”

“Then I shall find someone with close ties to the Ardan,” Dylen decided.

Aron stared at him. “To what purpose?”

“To secure an audience with him.”

“You would dare ask Rohyr Essendri to send for his cousin?” Aron asked, shocked.

“I will dare anything!” Dylen declared. “This is my *adda*’s life at stake!”

As soon as a skeptical Aron departed, Dylen entered his bedroom and grabbed his cloak. After flinging it on, he brought out his jewelry case. From a small compartment he took out a mantle clasp.

He stared long at the leaping delphinid on the clasp, a name inscribed in the ancient Naeren alphabet just above the engraving. Finally, he closed his fingers tightly around the precious piece.

* * * *

He had no trouble locating the Leyhar residence in the affluent north district. Riordan had pointed out the house when Dylen walked home with him from the University one late afternoon. After dropping by the Seralye to inform Zaraqel that he would be absent that evening, he hailed a coach plying the main avenue and headed north.

In this section of Rikara where the majority of the capital’s upper crust resided, the houses tended to be large and multi-levelled with spacious lawns in back and high elaborate rail fencing in front. But typical of most Ylandrin city or town homes, there were no gardens or gates out front. Main entrances opened right onto the street, usually with a porch or stoop leading up to the door. The Leyhar abode was no different though it was obviously a cut above many of its neighbors in size and costliness.

The house was well lighted, and a number of carriages were parked along the street fronting it. That meant the Leyhars were entertaining tonight. No matter, Dylen thought. His need was too great to be set aside for mere propriety.

A liveried servant responded to the sharp rap of the heavy doorknocker. He was quite taken aback by the cloaked and hooded figure at the doorstep. In his haste, Dylen had not

bothered to exchange his long-sleeved, collarless undershirt for a regular shirt nor had he donned a tunic. He now hid his state of dishabille under his cloak.

"I wish to see Riordan Leyhar," he announced in as authoritative a voice as he could muster.

Looking Dylen over doubtfully, the servant asked, "Who shall I say asks for him?"

Dylen did not give the Deir his name but instead said, "Leyhar-*tyar* told me to seek him should I need his help." He held up the cloak clasp. "He said to show this as proof of his bidding."

He handed the ornament to the servant.

The Deir stared at the gleaming piece in some awe. Markedly more courteous, he bade Dylen to enter. He ushered him up the stairs and led him to a large parlor.

"I seem to have intruded on a party," Dylen murmured apologetically as he was shown into the predominantly grey-hued room.

"It's a dinner in honor of Master Riordan," the servant answered, unable to resist imparting his knowledge of the household's affairs. "He's leaving tomorrow for his first posting. As Ylandre's Ambassador to Tehara."

Dylen smiled with genuine pleasure. "That's wonderful! It says something about his abilities that he's been entrusted with such a sensitive assignment."

The servant looked at him with interest. "Is it?"

"Very. The Teharan royals are terribly fractious and fickle to boot. But a skilled diplomat can keep them friendly to Ylandre."

"I didn't know that." The servant regarded Dylen with more respect. "I shall tell Master Riordan that you are here," he said and hurried out of the chamber.

Dylen did not wait overlong. Hardly had he given the well-appointed chamber an appreciative once-over when the door opened and Riordan stepped into the parlor. Dylen could not help gazing hungrily at him.

Maturity had chiseled his warm and youthful comeliness into a refined and somewhat remote beauty. That beauty was further emphasized by his attire—a midnight blue dress tunic over a silken shirt of palest cream, coal black long breeches and formal boots. This first sight of him at close quarters recalled to Dylen the tumultuous feelings he'd experienced the eve Riordan visited him at the Seralye.

The young diplomat looked at him questioningly. Realizing Riordan did not recognize him, Dylen dropped the hood of his cloak. Riordan stared at him in shock.

"Saints above!" he softly exclaimed. "Dylen?"

Dylen thought his heart would burst from his chest. He had not spoken with Riordan since they parted twelve years ago. Just hearing his voice once more was a wondrous balm to his yearning heart. He bowed his head briefly.

"I'm sorry for misleading your servant," he said apologetically. "But I doubted he would have let me in otherwise."

After a slight pause, Riordan nodded. "Understood. But wherefore this visit?"

Under other circumstances, the abrupt allusion to his intentions would have puzzled Dylen, not to mention roused his suspicions. But desperation clouded his perceptions and he ignored the rather peremptory question.

"I need your help, Rio," he said.

Bronze eyebrows rose in surprise. "What has happened?"

"*Adda* is terribly ill. He is stricken with blight."

“Blight? Then it’s not serious.”

“He has a lethal form of it,” Dylen explained. “I’ve been told there is no cure.”

Riodan looked shocked. “Sweet Veres,” he said with a shake of his head. He regarded Dylen curiously. “But, if there’s no cure, why did you come to me?”

“I heard you’ve grown close to the Ardan,” Dylen bluntly stated. “I want you to secure an audience with him for me.”

That took Riodan aback. “You wish to speak with Rohyr? Why?”

“So that I can plead with him to summon Eiren Sarvan back from Arvalde. He’s the only physician who’s succeeded in curing a patient of this disease.” Dylen took a step forward, raising his hands in supplication. “Please, Rio, I beg you, help us. You know I would never trouble you for anything less than—”

“What is *he* doing here?”

Theron Leyhar strode in, his face a picture of righteous indignation. Slamming the door shut behind him, he hastened to Dylen and Riodan and thrust himself between them, forcing Dylen back a step.

“Rio, go back to our guests at once. Your father can’t entertain them all by himself.” He glowered at Dylen. “How dare you besmear our home with your presence,” he growled. “Leave at once! You will get no favors from us.”

Dylen stood his ground. “I came to ask Rio for aid, *Dyhar*,” he retorted.

Theron grew angrier. “You have no right to address him so familiarly!”

“On the contrary, I do have the right as his friend!” Dylen countered.

“Dylen, *Aba*,” Riodan pleaded as he glanced anxiously at the door. “For Veres’ sake, keep your voices down.”

Dylen frowned. Riodan appeared troubled by the prospect of being overheard. He looked uneasily at his one-time lover.

“Rio, I don’t wish to rake up the past,” he said. “But I truly need your help. *Adda* needs your help. If you value what we shared—”

“Don’t be a fool, Riodan,” Theron sternly interrupted. “I heard what he asked of you. It’s out of the question! Can you imagine what questions will be raised? No one will believe that simple compassion drove you. Why, everyone will immediately assume that there was intimacy between the two of you if you approach Rohyr on a mere *hethar*’s behalf.”

“But if I act for a friend, surely—” Riodan tentatively suggested.

“That’s no better! We don’t make friends with the likes of him. It’s simply not done! And lest you’ve forgotten,” Theron barreled on, “mayhap *hethare* are respected in Rikara and other great cities but that isn’t the case in more conservative areas and certainly not in Tehara. Gossip can make or break your career. And there are also a goodly number of highly placed Deira who will take exception to any sordid tales from your past. That includes the Baraths. It would be the height of folly to give them a reason to repudiate you now that you’ve come to an agreement with Guyon—”

The door opened once more, and a servant peered in after a discreet while. “Barath-*tyar* wishes to enter, Your Excellencies,” he announced.

Giving both Riodan and Dylen a warning glare, Theron gestured to the retainer to permit the newcomer entry.

An elegantly clad Deir walked in. Of medium build and blandly handsome, he carried himself with an air of being someone. But Dylen did not recognize him despite

having seen or met just about every young Rikaran of real consequence in the course of his profession.

“So this is where you disappeared to,” the Deir said, coming to Riordan’s side.

“What’s so important that you had to abandon your guests?”

Theron quickly replied, “Nothing important at all, Guyon-*min*. Rio, let us return to our guests.”

Dylen caught his breath when he noticed the matching elliptical gold earrings at Riordan and Guyon’s left ears with opalescent milkstone at one end and deep red heartsfire at the other. There was no doubt about it. The Deir was Riordan’s betrothed.

He had long braced himself for the probability that Riordan would go on with his life and find someone worthy to stand at his side as he moved up and forward in the diplomatic community. Still, the evidence of it hurt, and he struggled to hide his feelings.

Riordan must have spotted his reaction for he suddenly flushed and turned his head sideways, obscuring his earring from Dylen’s sight. Dylen wanly smiled at the concern his erstwhile lover apparently still held for him.

Guyon looked more closely at Dylen. “A *hethar*?” he said in surprise upon recognizing Dylen’s earring. “Did you bring one in to entertain us? But I thought you didn’t approve of them, Leyhar-*dyhar*.”

The ambassador shook his head. “No more than you do, Guyon. This one had the impertinence to importune us here just because Riordan once visited his club with some friends.”

Dylen scowled at being spoken of as if he did not have enough wits to realize he was being insulted, not to mention blatantly lied about. He looked at Riordan, wondering why he did not defend him.

Guyon wrinkled his nose in distaste. He glanced frowningly at Riordan. “Why in Aisen did you go to a *hethare* club, Rio?”

“A mere indulgence of youthful curiosity,” Theron interjected before Riordan could reply. “He had not yet fully developed good taste or sound judgment.”

“*Aba*, stop it,” Riordan said through gritted teeth. “That was a long time ago.”

“Yet this *hethar* dared come to your home to ask for a favor,” Guyon commented, his frown deepening. “Whence his gall? Or was there more to your acquaintance than a mere evening’s entertainment that he feels entitled to such familiarity with you?”

“*Of course not!*”

Dylen froze at the vehement response. He stared speechlessly at Riordan.

“I don’t have the faintest notion why he came here,” Riordan flatly said. “I was kind and generous that night. I suppose he thought that sufficient reason to dare seek my help now.”

“Then nothing untoward happened between the two of you?” Guyon pressed. “Nothing to give him reason to feel entitled to your assistance?”

Riordan snapped, “All right, I admit I had him that night. I was curious and had a bit too much to drink, and he was one of the *hethare* who entertained us and, well, that is part of their services. But that was all there was to it. Really, Guyon, think you I would carry on with someone below me in station?”

Dylen could not believe his ears. Better that Riordan had stabbed and gutted him. The pain of it would not compare to the agony he now felt. He stared in anguished incredulity at Riordan until the latter lowered his eyes. But though apparently discomfited by his

declaration, Riordan did not retract it.

Guyon's frown vanished. "I suppose were I in my cups as well I wouldn't pass up the opportunity either." He smirked. "So, how was he?"

Color rose in Riordan's cheeks. "What do you expect?" he muttered. "There's a reason their talents are usually extolled."

The dam of Dylen's restraint finally broke.

"I was so wrong about you," he spat. "You're nothing more than a craven, status seeking upstart. Just like your sire."

Riordan paled but said nothing. Affronted, Theron bellowed to the servant who waited outside the door. "Throw this scoundrel out!"

The retainer obeyed. He grabbed Dylen by the arm and tried to drag him away. But Dylen turned so fierce a glare on him that he let go and stepped back in alarm.

That incensed Theron even more. "I ordered you to get him out!" he thundered.

"Nay!" Riordan shouted. "There's no need to use force, *Aba!*" He looked entreatingly at Dylen and said, "Dylen, please."

Dylen stared back at him icily.

"Oh, I'll go peacefully," Dylen replied, his voice silky soft yet laced with such contempt Riordan visibly flinched and even Theron was rendered speechless. "I don't make it a habit of forcing myself where I'm not welcome. I bid you farewell, Riordan Leyhar, but I can't wish you joy or fair fortune."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room, head held high and shoulders proud and straight. He did not look back.

Chapter Eleven

Meeting

Dylen only half-heartedly readied himself for work. Try as he might, he could not put from his mind the heartache and disillusionment of his meeting with Riordan barely a sennight past. Nor could he forget that his former lover—nay, his treacherous erstwhile friend!—had left for his first major posting abroad. And that posting had spurred not only Riordan's denial of everything that had been between him and Dylen, but also his refusal to give aid. There lay the crux of Dylen's anger.

The first he could understand however bitter it was to swallow, but the second was beyond comprehension. Hirilen had taken Riordan under his care all those years ago, opening his house and heart to a stranger and treating him like a son. Riordan's lack of gratitude and betrayal of Hirilen's belief in his honor and goodness were to Dylen's eyes beneath contempt and thus unforgivable.

He checked on his father before heading for the Seralye. Hirilen looked so pallid and frail, Dylen feared he already had one foot in the grave. Dylen leaned down and kissed his clammy brow.

Hirilen opened his eyes and gazed tiredly at his son.

"I'm sorry," he said in the barest of whispers.

"There's naught to apologize for, *Adda*," Dylen softly replied. "This isn't your fault. Now put such nonsense out of your mind and get yourself some rest, all right? And I shall bring home a box of sweetmeats just for you."

Hirilen managed to curl his lips into a faint smile at the loving but ridiculous offer before sliding back into the half conscious state that had been his lot since Aron began dosing him with opiates to ease his pain. Dylen straightened up, his eyes stinging as he gazed long at his father. Would Hirilen survive the night? Deity's blood, would he even be alive when Dylen came home from work?

Tarqin quietly came to his side and touched his elbow. "You'll be late," he murmured.

"Send for me at once if-if he..." Dylen swallowed.

"I will," Tarqin promised.

* * * *

Dylen walked briskly to the Seralye, forcibly shedding the aura of sorrow and anxiety that shrouded him. It would not do for the club's guests to be troubled by his problems. That was not why they frequented the Seralye.

Reaching the club, he was surprised to find Olfen the doorkeeper apologetically turning away guests. The Deir explained that he'd been instructed to do so but he had no inkling of the reason. All he knew was that a group of richly attired *enyra* had arrived about a half hour ago, and shortly after, Keon had come out and told him not to accept any more guests for the evening.

Dylen entered the premises, frowning in puzzlement. As he did, he glimpsed Deira in

what appeared to be soldiery garb standing unobtrusively in the shadows of the alleys flanking the club. That piqued his curiosity further.

He was mounting the stairs to the second floor when Keon came rushing down to meet him halfway. The secretary excitedly grabbed him by the arm.

"Thank Veres you've arrived!" he exclaimed in hushed tones. "Hurry now, we have important guests. *Very* important guests!"

Keon all but shoved him up the stairs ahead of him.

Intrigued, Dylen said, "Olfen claims you aren't accepting any more guests."

"They had us close the club," Keon confirmed. "Paid for its use for the whole night. You should have seen Zrael's face when they made the request!"

"I can imagine. Where is everyone?" Dylen asked when they reached the second floor. There was a marked absence of people moving about.

"Readying the bedchambers," Keon told him. "They said they'd heard naught but high praise for our *hethare*. That they wished to sample their skills. If only you'd come earlier, I wager there would've been a fair fight for your services."

"Who are *they*?" Dylen asked as he and Keon headed for the Seralye's best and largest taproom.

"*Royalty*, Dy! The Ardan and his kin, can you believe it?"

Dylen sucked in his breath. "And they came because—?"

"A cousin of the Ardan is celebrating his majority and, I heard, the inheritance of a considerable fortune, too. I think he's the son of the Chief Counsellor. What's his name now? Oh yes, Rysander Seydon."

"The Chief Counsellor's son... But of course, he's one of the heirs of Azrael Cordona."

"Cordona?" Keon's eyes widened. "As in Bank Cordona?"

Dylen nodded. "Counsellor Yovan Seydon is wed to Mered Cordona. In any case, it's not surprising they took the entire Seralye for the night. Can you imagine the scandal soup the gossip mongers would dish out were they to get a peek at a slew of rich and royal relations, all of them in their cups or in various states of undress?"

Keon chuckled. "Nay, the Ardan brought his leman with him. A real beauty, that one. I doubt Rohyr will care for any sport we have to offer. Well, I must see to the refreshments."

Just as Keon dashed off, Zrael slipped out of the taproom, closing the door behind him. The strains of a gittern and merry laughter emanated from within. Zrael brightened when he spotted Dylen.

"Ah, you're here," he said, his eyes sparkling with his elation. "Keon told you? Good, good. Go on in, Almerin and Silve are already inside. I will send Veanthe as soon as he arrives. Now I had better help Keon. The kitchen staff is in an uproar!"

Dylen shook his head as Zrael hurried away. It was rare to see the usually unflappable club master thus affected. He started to open the taproom door.

It was then that it came—a feeling he had never thought to experience. He paused a moment to calm himself then cautiously peered into the room.

He swiftly scanned the guests, taking note of the sumptuousness of their clothing and jewelry and their refined speech even in banter. Royal kin indeed. And not a plain face among them. Indeed, for the first time in a long time, Dylen felt his own oft lauded looks paled in comparison to the comeliness of these scions of House Essendri.

His eyes homed in almost inexorably on the Ardan.

Sable-haired, with eyes of slate grey, and exceedingly handsome—far more than mentioned in the descriptions Dylen had heard of him—Rohyr Essendri was every inch the young monarch of Ylandre. Though he was not more elegantly garbed than his cousins, one immediately knew he was their preeminent relation even if one did not realize he was king.

Taking a moment to steady his nerves, Dylen entered the room. Almost at once, even before either Almerin or Silve acknowledged him, Rohyr paused in mid-sip of his wine and looked up. Searching for him, Dylen guessed. An instant later, Rohyr saw him. The Ardan's eyes gleamed with curiosity. The others, on the other hand, regarded him with open appreciation.

Dylen bowed low before Rohyr while Almerin introduced him. Putting on his most charming manner, he set himself to entertaining the members of the party.

They formed a sophisticated and well-educated group—sharp-witted, fluent of speech and earthy enough to appreciate bawdy humor and subtly suggestive parlor games. They were the kind of guests whose company Dylen enjoyed very much and would have done so now if not for his encroaching anxiety.

Aside from Rysander Seydon, there were the Minister of Internal Affairs, Keosqe Deilen, and Gilmael Calanthe, the head of Intelligence. To Keosqe's right was a noble of striking and foreign countenance. Reijir Arthanna, the young Herun of Ilmaren, he learned from Silve. He engaged in a long and lively discussion with a Deir whose hair caught the eye due to the rarity of its red-black color. Aeldan Mithani was the heir apparent to the seaward fief of Glanthar. Beside him was a younger Deir of very similar features—his brother, Ashrian. The latter seemed intent on teasing a blueblood of soldiery bearing. Almerin identified him as Ranael Mesare, a high-ranking officer of the Royal Army.

The last member of the party was as surprising in appearance as he was beautiful. He was obviously no blood relation to the others nor was he an aristocrat. Seated beside Rohyr, he wore his fair hair in a thick plait that reached past his shoulders, a style that markedly contrasted with the loose nape-length tresses of the others. He was clearly a *sedyr* and a stunning one at that.

So this was the much talked about Lassen Idana, the Ardan's Half Blood leman.

Dylen surreptitiously watched as Rohyr slid an arm around his concubine's shoulders to draw him closer to his side. Lassen obliged with a warm smile and a tender gaze meant for his lover alone.

The *sedyr* was not in royal service out of mere duty, Dylen realized with a pang. Lassen Idana was deeply and hopelessly in love with the Ardan.

Stifling a sigh, he concentrated on pouring drinks for Keosqe and Reijir. As he finished, he looked up and happened to meet Keosqe's gaze. The golden-haired noble stared at him in surprise.

"Am I imagining things or are your eyes just like Rohyr's?" he remarked. He gestured to Reijir to take a look as well. "Well, what say you, Rei?"

Reijir frowned. "You aren't imagining things." The Herun looked over at his royal cousin. "His irises are rimmed just like yours, Roh."

The Ardan disbelievingly said, "That's impossible."

"Yet the impossible stands before us," Keosqe insisted.

“But how could this be?” Rysander wondered when he got a confirming glimpse of Dylen’s eyes.

Noting Dylen’s discomfort, Silve came to his rescue. “Perhaps one of His Majesty’s forebears had a liaison with a *hethar*,” he suggested. “It’s not unheard of for generations of the same line to continue in the profession.”

Ashrian chuckled. “Oh shame. And here I thought such eyes were exclusive to the immediate family, Roh!”

Smiling, Dylen plucked two nearly empty platters from the table. He extended them to Almerin and Silve.

“Please have these replenished else our reputation for hospitality will suffer,” he quietly ordered.

He sensed the guests’ surprise when the pair took the platters and left without so much as a huff of indignation at his peremptory tone. Except for Rohyr, he noted. The Ardan’s demeanor did not change save to observe him with even more interest and, Dylen quickly sensed, mounting suspicion.

Dylen looked sideways at Ashrian. “They *are* exclusive, *Dyhar*,” he said. He managed not to flinch when all eyes turned to him. Taking his courage in hand, he faced Rohyr squarely. “It wasn’t a distant forebear I took after, Your Majesty, but my sire.”

Rohyr’s gaze became watchful. “And who was your sire?”

Dylen drew a deep breath and said, “Your father, Dyrael Essendri.”

Stunned silence met his statement. Everyone stared at him in varying degrees of shock and incredulity. Reijir was first to find his tongue.

“Holy Veres, you must be jesting!” he exclaimed.

Though he’d expected it, Dylen could not help feeling stung by the general air of disbelief regarding his claim. “I’m not,” he retorted. “And this is no matter to jest about, my lord.” He looked at Rohyr. “Surely you felt our kinship, Ardan-*tyar*.”

Rohyr pursed his lips then nodded. “As soon as you entered.” He coolly studied Dylen. “How old are you?”

“I was conceived on the eve of Dyrael’s binding to Keldon Essendri,” Dylen replied.

“Only months separate us then.” Rohyr narrowed his eyes. “Yet in all these years you never approached either him or me. Why?”

Dylen tactfully ignored the Ardan’s challenging tone. “Wherefore? The Ardis came to my father in secret, wishing to play the sword before he was forever relegated to being your sire’s sheath. To reveal that he had begotten a child would have exposed his lack of innocence at the time of his marriage. Besides, I was not conceived in love,” he quietly added. “Dyrael was intoxicated the night he visited my father for the last time. He didn’t take kindly to being refused genital intercourse with *Adda* and took him unprotected.”

Rohyr scowled. “Are you saying he forced himself on your father?” he sharply asked.

Dylen hesitated then nodded. “He asked forgiveness from *Adda* the following morn, when he realized what he’d done. *Adda* understood and accepted his apology. He also chose to keep their affair and my birth a secret lest either became cause for dissension in the Royal House,” he added. “We are loyal subjects first and foremost, Your Majesty.”

The last words were uttered with pride and dignity. Rohyr’s scowl vanished to be replaced with a faint smile.

“So why have you revealed yourself now?” he asked. “What need have you that is

dire enough to require this unmasking?"

Uncertainly replaced pride. Dylen swallowed hard and said, "Your help, *Dyhar*. My father is dying, and you have the power to save him."

Dark eyebrows so alike to his own rose in surprise. Rohyr leaned back in his seat, his expression thoughtful. Dylen waited with bated breath.

He watched in some disbelief when Rohyr suddenly got to his feet, saying to the others, "Stay on and enjoy the evening. But speak of what you've heard to no one."

When the others assented, the Ardan glanced at his leman. "Would you like to come?" he asked. Lassen nodded and stood up. Rohyr looked once more at Dylen. "Take me to him."

Chapter Twelve

Elevation

Dylen gestured to a pop-eyed, tongue-tied Tarqin to make space for Rohyr at Hirlen's bedside. The servant obeyed, darting disbelieving glances at Rohyr all the while. Indeed, he had been the very picture of shock when Dylen entered the room with the Ardan of Ylandre at his side. Tarqin hurriedly joined Lassen who stood unobtrusively in a corner.

Rohyr bent over Hirlen, touching his fingers to the ailing Deir's cheek. Hirlen's eyes fluttered open at his touch. He squinted in confusion at Rohyr.

"Dyrael?" he whispered.

Rohyr stilled and gazed at him. He stroked Hirlen's cheek with his knuckles until the Deir slipped back into unconsciousness. Dylen caught his breath a few minutes later when Rohyr pulled back the covers and laid his hands on Hirlen's withered legs.

Dylen thought he saw an unearthly glow in Rohyr's eyes but before he could look more closely his attention was drawn to the Ardan's hands. Was it his imagination or did the pale flesh under his palms shine with faint light? He quickly peered at his *adda's* face. The lines that creased Hirlen's brow and framed the sides of his mouth had eased almost to the point of vanishing. His father looked very much at peace, his sleep unmarred by constant pain.

Rohyr straightened and pulled the covers back over Hirlen. He looked across the bed at Dylen.

"He mistook me for my father," he commented.

Dylen nodded. Rohyr was said to resemble his birthing father in countenance. "What you did—" Dylen stared at Rohyr in awe. "You took away his pain."

"And lent him some strength," Rohyr admitted. "I sensed that he was failing fast. It would be a pity were he to succumb before Eiren gets here."

Dylen swallowed hard. "Then you'll...?"

"Of course." Rohyr moved toward the door. "I need a quiet place where I can focus on calling him."

"Call—? Ah, this way."

Leaving Tarqin to resume his watch over Hirlen, Dylen led Rohyr to his own bedchamber. Lassen joined them. He beckoned to Dylen to stay beside him by the door, out of Rohyr's way. The Ardan stood by the bed, staring ahead unseeingly. After a while, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Dylen sensed it the moment Rohyr began to contact his cousin. There was an unnatural stillness, a silence that came close to oppressive. He looked nervously at Lassen. The *sedyr* had paled slightly but did not react further. It seemed he was used to the sensations wrought by his lover's usage of his mental skills.

He looked back at Rohyr. This time he could not stifle a gasp. The Ardan was enveloped in a wavering light so faint that had the room been more brightly lit, the glimmer would not have been visible.

Dylen stared in fascination, his curiosity overcoming propriety. He did not habitually use his inborn talent to read the minds of others—not unless he thought it absolutely necessary———but but curiosity now impelled him to extend his senses just that extra bit to ascertain what was going on.

He only intended to catch a glimpse, not intrude into Rohyr's mind. For one, he knew Rohyr would be instantly aware of any attempt to dip below the surface of his consciousness and would justifiably take exception. For another, entering another Deir's mind was a procedure so intrusive it often left him with intense feelings of regret afterward. Thus his preference for quick, unobtrusive peeks if and when he needed information. To his shock, he felt a sudden tug on his mind, one he had never experienced, and before he knew it, he was on the same plane of consciousness as the Ardan.

A bluish-hued luminescence suffused what appeared to be a windowless chamber of sorts. Rohyr stood in its center, awaiting something. Dylen remained as motionless as possible in the shadows at the periphery of the chamber, wondering what would happen next and what Rohyr would make of his unwitting intrusion if he discovered it.

Suddenly, another Deir stepped into view, seeming to materialize out of the light. Brown-haired, dark-eyed and dressed in a physician's smock. It could only be Eiren Sarvan

You must come back to Ylandre at once, Eiren, Rohyr informed his cousin.

Eiren frowned. *Why? What requires my presence?*

A Deir is dying of a strain of blight only you are known to have cured.

I see. One of your courtiers?

Nay, I only met him this eve. He's a retired hethar.

Eiren's eyebrows rose. *Since when did you start doing favors for complete strangers, Roh?*

Since my brother asked it of me.

Brother?

The physician's shock was so resounding Dylen actually felt the force of it. Hardly had he recovered from the unsettling sensation when Rohyr glanced over his shoulder at him, drawing Eiren's attention as a result. Abashed, Dylen hastily yanked himself out of the link, stumbling backward as he returned to the here and now.

Someone caught and steadied him, and he realized Lassen had kept him from falling. He was mumbling his thanks when Rohyr came out of his trance and at once turned to regard him curiously.

"You were in the link with us," the Ardan remarked. "You heard every word."

Dylen hesitated then realized it was ridiculous to deny what Rohyr already knew. "Yes," he admitted. "But I don't have the slightest notion how I did it. I've never experienced anything like that before."

"You are Dyrael's son and of the direct royal line," Rohyr pointed out. "You carry the Essendri potential in your blood and in far greater degree than even Uncle Imcael it seems." He eyed Dylen thoughtfully. "It only needs proper training to bring it to complete fruition. Quite unlike others who must toil long and hard to unleash their gifts to the fullest. What say you to that, Dylen Essendri *il Teris*?"

Dylen was struck speechless. He had not been expecting Rohyr's formal recognition of their relationship and even less his acceptance of Dylen as a member of the Royal

House. Yet Rohyr had given him leave to take the royal surname as his own, appending Hirilen's family name in due respect to Dylen's birthing father. Overwhelmed, Dylen went down on one knee before Rohyr, struggling to keep his tears from flowing. He took his brother's hand and kissed it. Rohyr looked at him in surprise.

"What's this?" he protested. He drew Dylen to his feet. With a smile, he laid his hand on Dylen's shoulder and squeezed it. "Never are you to bow or bend your knee to me, brother mine, save in ceremony." He let go and turned toward the door. "Now come, let us wait for Eiren."

* * * *

Half an hour had passed when a translocation portal blossomed right on the empty street before the Teris townhouse. The late hour precluded much pedestrian or vehicular traffic, but the Ardan's people had cordoned off the entire stretch nonetheless.

Dylen blew his breath out as the very air before them rippled. A pinpoint of light suddenly appeared in the darkness and rapidly expanded into an opening large enough for a mounted Deir to pass through. The opening was a-swirl with shifting brightness and shadows that blurred whatever lay within. But Dylen sensed the high level of energy generated by it. Small wonder only specially gifted *enyra* could create these transient corridors.

Of a sudden, a cloaked Deir emerged from the portal, astride a speckled steed. The portal immediately closed behind him, its soft radiance quickly fading away. Rohyr approached the rider as he dismounted. He caught the Deir in a welcoming hug. The newcomer then turned to Lassen and took his extended hand in a warm grip. They murmured greetings before Rohyr gestured to Dylen to come forward.

Eiren Sarvan dropped his hood and glanced at Dylen.

"I take it this is he?" he ascertained.

"It is," Rohyr affirmed.

Eiren carefully looked Dylen over. He suddenly smiled. "Welcome to the family, cousin," he said then swept past and entered the house. Rohyr grinned at Dylen before following the physician.

Dylen stared after them in astonishment.

"Most of them are like that," Lassen softly said.

Dylen glanced at him. "Most of them?"

"'Twould be prudent to tread warily around the Ardan's uncle," Lassen cautioned. "Imcael Essendri is not as accommodating of outsiders. 'Tis fortunate he doesn't reside year-round in Rikara. But the others are kind and welcoming. You won't feel a stranger amongst them." He turned a reassuring gaze on Dylen. "Eiren has wrested many from the very arms of death. He will do his utmost for your *adda*."

Forcing himself to relax, Dylen allowed Lassen to usher him back into the house.

* * * *

Dylen wondered if he had ever been as exhausted as he was this day. He all but collapsed on the couch in the parlor. Lassen was slouched at the other end fast asleep, the signs of strain around his mouth. Dylen grimaced. He knew what Lassen had gone through. Never had he felt so drained, not only of strength but also of will.

Eiren had battled all night and the following morning to save Hirlen, drawing not only on his own considerable store of energy but also on Rohyr and Dylen's and even what Lassen and the captain of Rohyr's escort could lend. In addition, he had brewed a number of potions in the kitchen with Tarqin's assistance. Those had ranged in odor from refreshing to noxious. But he had made Hirlen drink them all, studiously ignoring the Deir's piteous whimpers when forced to imbibe the foulest tasting concoction. In between doses of the various medicaments, he had poured healing energy into Hirlen, topping his strength with what he took from the others. Dylen shook his head as he recalled the sight of Eiren bent over his father, eyes and hands eerily incandescent as he directed energy into Hirlen's body.

First the Ardan; then his cousin. Dylen wondered if all the members of House Essendri were as prodigiously gifted.

He'd always been aware of his difference from other *sedyra*, endowed as he was with mental skills that were no longer accessible to the majority of Half Bloods. That was his legacy from Dyrael. He doubted however that he possessed anything near his Essendri kin's level of power.

He glanced back when Rohyr and Eiren came out of his father's bedroom. Though both looked a little tired, Dylen suspected it was more from lack of sleep than the effects of expending their strength. He shook his head, amazed all over again.

They walked over to the couch. Dylen watched Rohyr cover Lassen with his cloak then lean down and press a kiss to his leman's forehead. It gave Dylen reason to suspect that Rohyr was as smitten with Lassen as Lassen was with him. He smiled to himself, pleased that the *sedyr's* love was not all that one-sided after all.

Eiren dropped a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at the physician. His cousin, he reminded himself. How strange to suddenly find himself part of an extended family and a family of such prominence at that.

"He won't die," Eiren assured him. "I think the disease has been arrested if not totally destroyed."

Dylen frowned, trying to think clearly despite his weariness. "Might it recur then?" he anxiously asked, forcing himself to sit up straight.

Eiren sank down on his haunches before him. "There is no overnight cure for this disease even in its original form. It takes months to cleanse the body of blight. This strain will take even longer given its severity. Treatment may take as long as three or four years before he regains most of his strength."

"But *Adda* will be cured?"

"I see no reason why not. However..." Eiren paused and eyed him so somberly Dylen knew there was some bad news in the offing. He gestured to Eiren to continue. "What damage has been done to your father's body can't be undone. I can't restore his legs for instance; he'll be confined to a wheeled chair from here on." He squeezed Dylen's knee sympathetically when the latter paled. "And he'll need constant monitoring all the way to convalescence for signs of any recurrence of blight or complications caused by it." He allowed Dylen a moment to mull over the information. "The care he'll need isn't cheap," he warned.

Dylen closed his eyes. He raised his hand and rubbed his forehead as if to ease away a headache. At length he opened his eyes and looked from Eiren to Rohyr.

"I will manage," he stoutly replied.

“How?” Eiren pressed. “Only the rich can afford to hire trained caregivers.”

“I’ll take on more patrons,” Dylen decided. “The earnings are much greater when we take guests to bed.” He swallowed then sighed. “And I’m rather sought after for that particular service so it won’t be difficult to solicit more of them,” he added, trying to smile.

“Don’t even consider it,” Rohyr firmly interjected. “I can’t possibly allow you to continue working at the Seralye.”

Despite his fatigue, Dylen could not help bristling a little. “Mine is a legitimate profession,” he pointed out. “I’m not ashamed of what I am.”

“Nor am I,” Rohyr replied, coming to stand before him. “But you’re an Essendri and a prince of the blood. That alone is enough to preclude you from carrying on and mayhap unwittingly breeding by-blows down the line.” He paused when Dylen flinched, stung by the reminder of the circumstances of his own conception. “And even were it not prohibited, there are also the matters of security and propriety. Would you have me post guards outside the Seralye while you received patrons? Or ask me to ignore the gossip that will arise once it becomes known that you’re my brother?”

Dylen colored. At length, he stood up, ignoring his exhaustion as best as he could, and boldly met Rohyr’s gaze.

“Then what would you have me do, *Dyhar*? Sit around court and wait for your largesse?” Dylen shook his head. “Forgive me but I can’t just do nothing. I’ve never been idle, and in any case, it wouldn’t be wise. Bad enough when it gets out that you have a bastard brother who sold his services for the right price. The talk will worsen were I to become your ward when I am well past my majority and able-bodied to boot.”

Rohyr eyed him thoughtfully. “What would I have you do? Well, first I would have you address me by name.” When Dylen reacted with some dismay, he pointed out, “It would be ridiculous to have my one and only sibling behaving so formally with me when all my other kin have never done so except in ceremony. Second, I don’t wish for you to be idle either. It neither suits your temperament nor my purposes. Do you remember Gilmael?” he abruptly asked.

Dylen easily recalled the dark-haired noble who had first called attention to his eyes. He nodded.

“Gilmael is in need of an adjutant he can trust absolutely. His last was recently imprisoned for treason.” Rohyr grimly smiled when Dylen gasped. “Yes, it can be a perilous position if one doesn’t know the meaning of loyalty. But you do. You kept our kinship a secret all these years to protect the Crown when you could have used the knowledge to benefit yourself and your father early on.”

Dylen stared at him then glanced uncertainly at Eiren. The physician shrugged, a faint grin curving his mouth.

“Gilmael can be a taskmaster sometimes,” he disclosed. “And Veres knows how willing he is to put himself at risk for duty’s sake and that he expects the same of his people. But he’s no harebrained daredevil either and he’s fair almost to a fault.”

“And the pay is very good,” Rohyr added.

“I should think so considering the working conditions,” Dylen dryly said, a touch of his humor returning. “But do I qualify for the position?”

“I wouldn’t have offered it if you didn’t,” Rohyr assured him. “Your training as a companion is very similar to what any Deir in Intelligence undergoes, especially with

regards to ferreting out information and discerning hidden motives. And I warrant you've got more experience in either area than many of Gilmael's younger agents. You'll be an asset to his Ministry and to the Crown. And eventually, when the dust has settled around your arrival, I'll turn *Adda* Dyrael's properties over to you." He chuckled when Dylen stared at him incredulously. "You're legally entitled to them as his eldest born. And he had land all over the country though he favored his coastal estates most. I dare say your father's health will vastly improve from the sea breezes of Glanthar and western Vireshe."

It took Dylen quite a while to recover from the shock of discovering the extent of his inheritance. But when he did, for the first time, he smiled brightly and without restraint. Even Rohyr was not immune to the charm of his smile. The Ardan grinned back broadly.

"Very well, I accept your offer, *Dyhar*," Dylen said. "And you'll just have to give me time to adjust to the idea of calling my sovereign by name," he added when Rohyr started to protest.

"You sound like Lassen did when he first came to me," Rohyr grumbled good-naturedly with a fond glance at his leman.

Dylen followed his glance. "He's exquisite. And so kind, too. You're very fortunate to have found him. I hope you'll always treat him well." He hastily covered his mouth with a hand to conceal a huge yawn. Lassitude was fast overtaking him now that the immediacy of crisis was past. "Forgive me," he mumbled. "The both of you may not need rest but I do!"

With that, he sat down again and slumped on the couch. He was asleep before either king or physician could respond.

Chapter Thirteen

Kinship

“He looks quite hale, doesn’t he?” Lassen murmured as he and Dylen watched Targin take Hirilen for a turn in the royal gardens. Rohyr had gone back ahead into the keep after their morning walk.

Dylen nodded. Save for his confinement to a wheeled chair, Hirilen looked almost as he had before his illness. He had regained his normal weight, and his color was good. He had also not lost the use of his upper body as previously feared. His caregivers had seen to that, assiduously carrying out the program of exercises that went with the aggressive medication Eiren had prescribed for the elder Teris.

Deira kindly greeted him, responding to the former *hethar*’s warmth and infectious amicability. None treated him with scorn or snide amusement much to Dylen’s continued relief.

It was that prospect that had most worried him when Rohyr insisted that they reside in the Citadel. Not so much for himself as for his frail *adda*. Well, it turned out there was little to fear for Hirilen. Dylen, however, was another story.

Surprise was great to put it mildly when Rohyr brought them home to the royal keep. Even more startling was Dylen’s appointment as one of Gilmael Calanthe’s aides. It puzzled all and sundry that a *hethar* with no previous connection to House Essendri should be so elevated, especially when he seemed to have come right out of the blue. That was in large part due to the lack of information about Dylen’s background beyond what was known of his career as a *hethar*.

Rohyr had agreed to keep their kinship and Dylen’s position as Gilmael’s adjutant a secret until Dylen formally received his inheritance and the honors that went with it. This was at Dylen’s behest for he needed time to come to terms with the new course his life had taken. Naturally, the secrecy bred speculation about him.

Initially, some conjectured that perhaps the Ardan was tiring of his leman and the former *hethar* would be Lassen Idana’s replacement. But that was quickly disproved when Rohyr’s desire for Lassen’s company showed no sign of abating and, even more intriguing, Dylen and Lassen were seen to be on very good terms. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Dylen’s demeanor toward Rohyr’s concubine was that of a protective older brother rather than a rival for the king’s favor.

With that theory debunked, talk then circulated that it was one of the Ardan’s relations who was Dylen’s patron and gained him his present lofty position. It even became something of a game to try and guess which of Rohyr’s cousins fit the role. Still others postulated that he had some hold over Rohyr or one of his close kin and the largesse bestowed on him was in exchange for his silence. What his silence was purportedly for was harder to imagine but that did not stop the notion’s promulgators from spreading it.

Regardless of which assumption they adhered to, the prevailing attitude of the upper crust toward Dylen did not vary overmuch. Though they concealed their feelings when in

his presence, Dylen easily sensed their suspicions and disdain for him not so much because of his former profession but for the dubious ease with which he had entered the circle of Rohyr's intimates.

Had it been up to him, Rohyr would have set the record straight forthwith rather than expose his brother to such sordid talk. But Dylen convinced him to wait. Having anticipated just such behavior toward himself, he simply shrugged it off, thankful it was seldom applied to his father as well.

Because of his age and frailty, Hirlen was merely seen as a beneficiary of royal patronage and that was usually enough to mitigate any dismay the more straitlaced might feel about his son's abrupt ascendancy. The only time perceptions about him wavered was when his kinship to Dylen became very apparent. For this reason did Dylen refrain from being seen with his father too often in public, opting to visit with him in the privacy of Hirlen's apartment or joining him when there were few folk about.

"Thank you for standing up for me yestereve," he said to Lassen, referring to a mild confrontation the previous night with a courtier whose courteousness had been somewhat reduced by too much ale.

Lassen smiled. "We Half Bloods should take care of each other. Though technically, you're *enyr* now. And will be deemed thusly when Rohyr formalizes your position."

Dylen snorted. "I may be deemed a True Blood because of that. But I'll always be *sedyr* in heart and soul. Certainly Imcael thinks so."

Lassen curled his lips in mild exasperation. Rohyr's closest cousins had accepted Dylen with few reservations and readily conspired to suppress his true identity until such time they were given leave to reveal it. The king's uncle however had all but gone apoplectic when Rohyr brought Dylen to the Citadel and introduced him to the rest of the clan.

"What in Aisen was Dyrael thinking when he sired a bastard on a *hethar*?" Imcael Essendri had roared, oblivious of Dylen's presence.

"*Adda* didn't know he had sired a child," Rohyr tartly pointed out. "Nor had he intended to. But that doesn't make Dylen any less my brother than if he'd been conceived with everyone's full consent."

"And how do you know he *is* your brother?" Imcael quizzed, eyeing Dylen suspiciously. "You should know better than to take some stranger's word for it!"

"I felt our kinship at once, Uncle," Rohyr riposted. "Even before he spoke of it."

"Strange but I feel nothing!" Imcael huffed.

"Well, that's hardly Dylen's fault," Rohyr curtly replied.

Imcael turned nigh purple with indignation over the subtle jab at his less sensitive faculties. Apart from what Rohyr had earlier intimated to him, it was the first inkling Dylen had of the inequality of the Essendri potential's manifestation in the members of the royal family. He also noticed that, while there was a marked resemblance between Rohyr and his uncle, their coloring in particular, Imcael did not bear the rimmed irises of a royal scion. No wonder his own eyes had drawn attention that evening at the Seralye.

Rohyr ignored Imcael's protestations and installed Dylen and Hirlen in the Citadel, giving them apartments in separate wings at Dylen's request. Dylen asked this in the hope of sparing Hirlen any possible fallout from being his father. Thus Hirlen lived in a spacious and comfortable apartment on the ground level of the north wing where the senior household staff had their lodgings. Refurbished especially for his use, Hirlen's

suite not only provided easy access to the gardens through an adjacent patio, it also adjoined his caretakers' quarters and his bedroom was large enough to accommodate a cot for Tarqin who kept faithful watch over him. No longer required to do household chores, the elderly servant poured all his energy into helping care for his ailing master.

Dylen on the other hand was given an apartment in the wing reserved for members of the Ardan's extended family and Deira he counted as good friends. He would be moved to a suite just two doors away from his brother's when the truth of their kinship was revealed, Rohyr informed him. Of course, Imcael had not shied from voicing his objections once apprised of this plan either.

"Speak of the... Nay, never mind," Dylen muttered when he spotted a familiar figure approaching Hirlen.

He took leave of Lassen and hastened across the wide lawn to his father's side. He arrived almost at the same time as Imcael.

"Good morning, *Dyhar*," Hirlen softly greeted the Herun.

Imcael grunted a reply. A nod of acknowledgement sufficed for his nephew. Not that he ever treated Dylen or addressed him as such. Indeed, he always showed his discomfort when in Dylen's company. Initially offended, Dylen had started to take some pleasure in discomfiting his reluctant uncle instead.

"I trust you had a good night's rest," Dylen said pleasantly, noting the dark circles under Imcael's eyes.

When Imcael looked at him uncomfortably, Dylen could not help a fleeting sense of malicious pleasure. Imcael was obviously aware that he knew of the Herun's argument with Rohyr the night before over the Ardan's intention to give Lassen his own personal zentyr, the horned warsteed reserved only for bluebloods and high-ranking military officers. Imcael made it a point to question just about every gift or privilege Rohyr bestowed on his leman. Nothing was too petty for Imcael to complain about if it had to do with Lassen Idana. Dylen oft wondered how his brother managed to endure their uncle's tiresome and oft vociferous company.

"I slept well, thank you," Imcael replied. He looked down at Hirlen, regarding the latter's plain woolen jerkin with distaste. "I only wished to remind you that it's considered unseemly to show one's self in public improperly dressed."

Hirlen flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize my attire was unsuitable," he murmured.

"How is it unsuitable, *Adda*?" Dylen interrupted. He looked coldly at Imcael.

"Excuse me, Your Grace, but since when is it improper to wear a jerkin in public when it is the garment of choice for picnics and other outdoor functions?"

Imcael stiffened, taken aback by the younger Deir's challenge. "A picnic is a casual activity," he retorted. "One is not expected to dress up for it."

"And a simple stroll is a formal exercise requiring court wear?" Dylen sarcastically asked.

"Dy..."

"Nay, *Adda*, I wish to be enlightened as to the necessity of dressing up for a morning out in the gardens."

"Impertinent pup!" Imcael growled. "You have the manners of a peasant. I heartily rue the day Rohyr discovered your existence!"

"Better the manners of a peasant than the discourtesy of an ill-humored stuffed shirt," Dylen shot back.

Hirlen groaned in resignation while Imcael stared at Dylen in shock and umbrage. He opened his mouth to unleash a scathing rejoinder.

“Scrapping again?” They all turned to face a none too pleased Rohyr. The Ardan reproachfully remarked, “Really, must this fine morning be spoiled by rancor?”

Dylen bowed briefly to his brother while Imcael closed his mouth but stuck his jaw out pugnaciously. On the other hand, Hirlen murmured apologies. Rohyr smiled at him.

“You are the last person expected to apologize for anything, Teris-tyar,” he said. “These two however...” He glanced at Dylen.

Dylen shrugged. “If defending my father is cause for censure then I beg your pardon, Dyhar.”

Rohyr frowned at Dylen’s use of the high honorific. He looked at Imcael. “Uncle?”

“I was only trying to teach them proper court dress,” Imcael testily declared.

“So I heard,” Rohyr dryly said. “But as Dy pointed out, Teris-tyar’s attire is perfectly suited for a turn in the gardens. You need not be so strict about these things, Uncle. It serves little purpose and only encourages unnecessary friction amongst us.”

Imcael humphed. He stiffly said, “It seems doing one’s duty is considered unfashionable nowadays. I bid you all good day.”

He turned on his heel and stalked off, ignoring the small groups of folk who had gathered nearby, drawn by yet another altercation between the Ardan’s mystery ward and ill-tempered uncle. After staring them into dispersing, Rohyr sighed with some irritation.

“I’m sorry,” Dylen softly said.

Rohyr shook his head. “Nay, it wasn’t your fault. His behavior was uncalled for.”

“It usually is,” a scowling Tarqin muttered behind them. He turned scarlet when Rohyr looked at him with a rueful grin.

“You didn’t come back by coincidence,” Dylen commented.

“Lassen fetched me.”

“There was no need to trouble you. I could have dealt with him myself.”

“I’m sure you could,” Rohyr easily agreed. “But neither as swiftly nor quietly. Uncle Imcael is proud as they come. He doesn’t like to back down even when he’s in the wrong. And you don’t want to distress your *adda* with his incivility.”

Dylen looked guiltily at Hirlen. His father smiled and reached for his hand to squeeze it reassuringly.

Rohyr said to Hirlen, “If you will excuse us, Tenryon Hadrana is here, and we must confer with him.” When Dylen looked at him surprised, he added, “I asked him to come. It’s time he assessed you.”

Dylen frowned. “For what?”

“Come with me and find out.”

* * * *

Dylen curiously studied the Herun of Ziana as he softly discussed their just concluded interview with Rohyr.

Tenryon Hadrana was not only the lord of the wealthiest city-fief in Ylandre and a great friend of the Ardan, he was also the sole Deir in the kingdom openly known to be a templar, one of that secretive brotherhood of extraordinarily gifted True Bloods. It was he who identified prospective templars and initiated them into the rigorous training entry into the brotherhood entailed. Indeed, he was purported to be the chief of all the North

Continent templars.

He was handsome and well built, but there was a remote quality about him that could be intimidating to the less stout of heart. Dylen wondered if there were any who could withstand the Herun when he trained his cold piercing gaze on them. He looked at Rohyr questioningly when the two were done talking.

"It's an honor to be of such interest to Hadrana-tyar," he said. "But I'm still at a loss as to what he's supposed to assess in me." He suddenly thought of something. "Surely you don't suspect me of being a templar like him!"

Rohyr nodded. "I did wonder if you were a latent one," he admitted. "But Tenryon says there's no way you could have eluded our notice if that were the case."

"Your notice?" Dylen was struck by Rohyr's choice of words. "You speak as if—" He stared at the Ardan. "You—Are *you* a templar?"

Rohyr and Tenryon exchanged a glance. Rohyr met and held Dylen's startled gaze. "I am."

"Holy saints!" Dylen stared at his brother in awe. "But it isn't known? I mean, this is the first I've heard of it."

"Outside of the brotherhood, only Eiren knows," Rohyr answered.

"Because he's your physician," Dylen guessed.

Rohyr smiled approvingly. "You're very perceptive."

"Nay, it was the logical conclusion." Dylen frowned. "So not even Imcael knows?" When Rohyr shook his head, Dylen looked at him wonderingly. "Why keep it a secret? Hadrana-tyar doesn't. About what he is, I mean."

"Ten is the face of our brotherhood; the one known to take and train our acolytes," Rohyr explained. "But secrecy serves my interest best. The knowledge that I possess such power can inspire fear and sow distrust and can also encourage malcontents to use them to challenge my rule. Imagine what the separatists in Tenerith could do with the knowledge. They'd claim that I would use my power to reduce the people to thralldom."

"Which only goes to show how highly you templars are regarded," Dylen said.

"Or suspected," Tenryon wryly remarked.

Dylen's frown deepened. "Does this mean your power isn't solely derived from the Essendri potential?"

"Say rather that I have two wellsprings of power," Rohyr clarified. "One for strength and the other for depth and range."

"I don't understand."

"In addition to the usual skills possessed by gifted *enyra*, templars are blessed with abilities exclusive to the brotherhood alone," Tenryon explained. "When properly trained, a templar can wield those abilities with utmost precision and tap the depths of his personal store of power as well. But to sustain the use of any skill for a length of time requires additional strength and the level of it differs from templar to templar. Rohyr is one of the most gifted templars alive because of the boost he receives from the Essendri potential."

"Fascinating." Dylen leaned forward, intrigued. "So you thought I might be one as well."

"Yes," Rohyr replied. "But, as Ten pointed out, it isn't possible."

"Even if an infant's nature doesn't resound at birth, it can't be suppressed come adolescence," Tenryon said. "We would have sensed your presence then."

"I see." Dylen looked at Tenryon wonderingly. "But if I'm not a templar, then *what* am I?"

"A rogue adept," the Herun answered.

"A what?"

"Rogues comprise an extremely rare breed of gifted Deira that straddles the divide between the templars and born healers," Tenryon elucidated. "Three skills mark the templars as such. First and foremost is the ability to recall their past lives. You have no such memories. Even had you blocked them, either Rohyr or I would have been able to unlock them if they were there. Second, you can't meld your mind with another to the extent of controlling his body and will. But you *can* direct your mind's energy with a remarkable degree of precision and strength. Now that's a trait templars share with healers. You can also enter another Deir's mind and completely immerse yourself in his innermost consciousness without fear of stranding yourself within. It's a power healers possess and templars don't." He eyed Dylen speculatively. "I wager you used that particular talent to good effect with your patrons."

Dylen shrugged. "I saw no harm and much profit in discerning their deepest desires and meeting them if I could."

"And it afforded you protection from those with less benign intentions," Tenryon assayed.

"It did," Dylen admitted.

"Thank Veres for that," Rohyr said. "Well then, will you help me train him, Ten?"

"Most definitely," the Herun replied. "Such talent must not be left untapped or, worse, misused." He smiled at a wide-eyed Dylen. "What say you to a lesson in translocating?"

Dylen caught his breath. He abruptly rose to his feet, eyes sparkling with anticipation. "How about right now?" he challenged.

Rohyr and Tenryon chuckled. "First rule: No generation of corridors indoors or within populated areas," Tenryon said as they headed for the door. "The energy of a blossoming can tear stone and steel apart. Imagine what would happen to a Deir caught in its midst."

"I'd rather not," Dylen said with grimace. He glanced from the Herun to his brother. "Though I wager you've both seen your share of accidents."

"Would that we hadn't," Rohyr affirmed. "It's something one doesn't ever forget."

Chapter Fourteen

Reunion

C.A. 3004

It's good to be back in Ylandre, Riodan Leyhar thought when he rode into Rikara with his parents. Five years in a foreign land made for interesting living, but nothing could fully dispel homesickness when it struck hard and settled deep in one's bones. Despite all the excitement and tension of handling diplomatic relations between his country and oft turbulent Tehara, he had not been distracted much from his yearning for home.

As they rode down the main avenue, he looked about him avidly much like a long immured prisoner might draw in great draughts of fresh air upon being freed. There was nothing really new to see, but his long absence from the capital made everything seem strange and new all over again.

When they came to the first major fork in the avenue, his *adda* parted from them and headed for the north district. But Riodan and Theron rode down the street leading to the east district. They would not enter it but turn onto a wide road on the outskirts that was the beginning of the long drive up to the Citadel. As one ascended the wide curving lane, one got a bird's-eye view of the city. Riodan felt a faint pang when he caught glimpses of the shingled rooftops of the tallest homes of the west district's fabled Quarter as well as its many entertainment halls and museums. Memories of a pair of storm green eyes gazing out from under thick raven locks assailed him without warning, and he looked away before he was overcome by them.

Nonetheless, he could not help wondering what Dylen was doing and if he still lived with his father in the townhouse where Riodan had learned the joys and wonder of first love. A part of him cautioned him to expect the worst, but the other part would not listen and continued to hope for the best.

He set aside his pensive thoughts when they approached the gates of the Citadel. Passing through the outer gate, they came to a stop in the spacious bailey. Steeds were not permitted beyond this point, and so they dismounted and walked the rest of the way through the courtyard and up the stone-paved path to the heavy double paneled door of the Citadel.

It was a typical day at the royal keep, which meant an almost never-ending flow of Deira through the main entrance. As they made their way from the octagonal reception hall with its domed stained glass ceiling and mounted the stairs to the second level, Deira of all stations welcomed them back. But, though they saw many passing acquaintances, they did not meet any whom Riodan counted as friends.

Only in the main audience chamber did he finally spot some of them. Rysander Seydon hailed him almost as soon as he entered the great hall. Riodan happily greeted the Chief Counsellor's son then stared in amazement at the slender, dark-haired Deir at his side.

“Shino, is that really you?” he said disbelievingly as he looked young Shino Essendri over. The orphaned son of one of Rohyr’s untitled relations, Shino had visited the Citadel often enough to have befriended many of his Essendri kin. “Why, last we met you were little more than a gangly child!”

Rysander clucked mirthfully. “Fie on you to remind us all of Shin’s age, Rio, when he’s been doing his best to appear older than he is. For a diplomat, you are severely lacking in tact!”

“Really?” Riordan looked questioningly at Shino. “But why are you in a hurry to grow up, Shin? Believe me, adulthood isn’t as glamorous as you may have been led to believe.”

“Oh, it isn’t glamour he hankers for but the attention of someone who has an abundance of it,” Rysander interjected with a guffaw.

Shino blushed but gamely grinned at the raillery. “Pay Rys no mind,” he advised Riordan. “He’s just so relieved that there’s now someone younger than himself he can torment with his utterly dull jests.”

“Keep a civil tongue, cub,” Rysander declared sententiously. “You should know enough to defer to your elders. By the way,” he quickly added before Shino could reply. “Rohyr decided to take him under his wing. So, as of last year, he’s been our esteemed Ardan’s legal ward.”

“Is he now?” Riordan delightedly said. “My felicitations, Shin.”

“Thank you, Rio.”

“And I dare say, Rohyr is regretting the impulse,” Rysander said with a snicker. “A veritable whirlwind Shin is. He’s got energy enough to outlast any ten of us, and saints above, it’s a wonder the Citadel is still standing!”

Shino started to stick his tongue out at Rysander, but he caught himself. He settled for giving his cousin a playful poke in the ribs instead.

Riordan was still chuckling a few minutes later when he located Theron. The senior Leyhar was chatting with Jareth Hadrana, Ylandre’s preeminent envoy and foremost ambassador-at-large. Not long after, Gilmael Calanthe joined them. As head of the most extensive intelligence network in the North Continent, it was not surprising for him to take an interest in what recently returned diplomats had to report. But he was also Riordan’s good friend, and he heartily greeted the younger ambassador.

“How do you like diplomatic work now?” Gilmael giped. “I hear it was sheer horror dealing with the Teharan rulers. Mayhap you’ll change your mind and join Intelligence instead. At least, you won’t have to bite your tongue when you’re actually aching to give some royal dunce a piece of your mind.”

“But you run the risk of having more than your tongue ripped out if you join Gil’s passel of spies,” Jareth pointed out. “Espionage may give you a freer hand but only for so long as your true identity remains secret.”

“Hush, Jath,” Gilmael protested. “I’m trying to recruit an agent here!”

Jareth snorted. “And take away one of my best and brightest envoys? In your dreams, Gil!”

Grinning widely, Riordan remarked, “I see some things haven’t changed.” He looked around at all the familiar faces. “Indeed, it seems like nothing has changed while I was away.”

“On the contrary,” Gilmael cryptically said. “And some bigger than others. Changes,

I mean.”

Theron scrunched up his forehead and said, “I beg your pardon?”

At the same time, Riordan asked, “What do you mean?”

Gilmael started to address the Leyhars’ bewilderment but suddenly beckoned to someone to approach instead. A tall Deir clad in black and earth green emerged from a nearby press of courtiers.

“Ah, Dy, do join us,” Gilmael said. “It’s as good a time as any for you to meet the Leyhars.”

Riordan almost stopped breathing. Shocked speechless, he thought his heart would give, so furiously did it beat in the wake of his first sight of Dylen Teris. It was not only the total unexpectedness of finding his former lover here of all places that spurred his heart into a virtual gallop. There was also his appearance. When last they met, Dylen had been distraught and it had shown in his dress and demeanor. But, even then, his comeliness had been apparent. Now, impeccably attired for court, his bearing one of courteous aloofness, he was indescribably beautiful.

“This is Theron Leyhar, our present ambassador to Siryana,” Gilmael said to Dylen. “And this is his son, Riordan. Rio is lately arrived from Tehara, his first major posting and a very successful one I’m happy to say.”

It did not escape either Leyhar that Gilmael appeared to have committed a breach in protocol by presenting them to Dylen rather than the other way around. Riordan wondered how so seasoned a courtier could make such a serious gaffe.

Beside him, Theron was staring at Dylen, an indignant scowl knitting his features. The scowl turned quite ferocious when Gilmael urged Dylen to stand between him and Jareth with a warm smile ordinarily reserved for close kith and kin. Dylen silently took the indicated place. Gilmael addressed the Leyhars once more.

“Let me introduce my adjutant—” he started to say.

“Who appointed him to the position?” Theron interrupted.

Taken aback by Theron’s unwonted impoliteness, Gilmael did not respond at once but looked at the ambassador curiously. Dylen’s steady gaze did not falter, however, but remained cool and distant. Riordan, on the other hand, inwardly cringed at his sire’s behavior.

“I appointed him at the request of Rohyr,” Gilmael finally replied, frowning slightly.

“Is His Majesty aware of what this Deir used to do?” Theron demanded, eyeing Dylen suspiciously.

“*Aba!* That isn’t important!” Riordan protested under his breath.

“On the contrary, I think it *is* of supreme importance!” Theron shot back.

Gilmael exchanged a surprised glance with Jareth. He looked at Dylen questioningly. When Dylen shook his head, he turned his attention back to Theron and said, “I assure you, Leyhar-tyar, His Majesty is very aware of his brother’s former profession.”

The Leyhars gaped in shock. “Bro-brother?” Theron fairly bleated. He stared incredulously at Dylen. “*You* are His Majesty’s brother”

“Half-brother,” Dylen coolly clarified.

While Riordan and his sire struggled to absorb the information, Jareth raised an eyebrow at Gilmael and said, “Rather loose-tongued today, aren’t you? Really, Gil, how you manage to keep your Ministry’s secrets is beyond me.”

Gilmael pursed his lips sheepishly. “It won’t be a secret much longer,” he reasoned.

“Everyone will know the truth after tomorrow.”

Meanwhile, Riordan found his tongue. “It’s a great a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness,” he said.

Dylen dipped his chin in acknowledgement. “Your Grace will do. I am only the late Ardis’ son and a mere by-blow at that.”

“Neither only nor mere,” Jareth mildly objected. “I do wish you would claim your rightful place, Dy.”

The barest trace of color stained Dylen’s cheeks. Riordan swallowed hard at the sight. He averted his gaze lest he be affected further by the tempting image before him.

“By tomorrow, I will have no choice,” Dylen replied with a faint smile. He looked apologetically at Gilmael and gestured to him to continue.

“As I was about to say, this is Dylen Teris—well, rightfully Essendri *il* Teris,” Gilmael said. “He’s my adjutant and also a member of the Ardan’s Council. And tomorrow morn Rohyr will formally recognize him and invest him with the honors and properties due him as the eldest born son of the late Ardis Dyrael. But Jareth is right,” he ruefully conceded. “This must remain a secret until then. Can we trust you to keep this to yourselves?”

“Veres almighty, Dyrael’s son!” Theron whispered. He stared at Dylen, his face a picture of chagrin and anxiety. Riordan could just imagine what his sire was feeling after the way he had once heaped scorn on Dylen. Managing to regain some of his composure, Theron said, “But of course. If that is His Majesty’s wish, we will abide it.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” Dylen said. “Now if you will excuse me.”

He courteously bowed his head before walking away.

“Such a fine Deir,” Jareth warmly said as they watched Dylen leave the hall. “Rohyr is very fond of him. And rightly so I must say.” He glanced at Riordan. “By the way, Rohyr requested that you stay for dinner tonight. He would like a full account of how you managed to keep the Teharan royals from each other’s throats as well as yours.”

* * * *

It was shortly before the evening meal that Riordan came upon Dylen once more. The former companion was by himself at one end of the open gallery in the west wing—the gallery ran parallel to the hallway that led to the dining hall. He was gazing out at the west district, which was barely discernible in the rapidly failing light. Stopping a short distance away, Riordan studied him, taken all over again by the Deir’s sensual beauty. But he was also troubled by his melancholic expression. He wondered what thoughts darkened Dylen’s mood as he stared at his former home.

The latter suddenly turned his head and looked at him as if he expected to see him standing there. Caught, Riordan decided to approach the Deir who had taught him everything about intimacy of the body and spirit.

Dylen greeted him cordially enough, but Riordan sensed a distinct lack of warmth in his manner. He stifled a sigh and tried to break the ice by asking about recent events in the capital. Dylen obliged him even though he must have known Riordan would have already garnered the information earlier. Almost inevitably, their conversation touched on the shroud of mystery surrounding Dylen.

“However did you manage to keep word of your presence here from getting around?” Riordan asked.

“Of what significance would an obscure courtier be outside of Rikara?” Dylen said. “Even if someone thought it worth mentioning to you that Rohyr had taken in a *hethar*, I think you would have regarded the news as mere gossip—interesting but not important.”

“But why withhold the truth at all?”

“I wanted to remain anonymous until I felt comfortable with all the changes my life has undergone. Especially this whole business of being an Ardan’s brother.”

“But, after tomorrow, you’ll be news not only in Ylandre but also abroad,” Riodan said. “And you’ll be treated as a member of the royal family. Are you ready to take your place now?”

“Can any outsider ever truly be ready for such a thing?” Dylen wryly asked.

“Surely you don’t feel yourself an outsider any longer,” Riodan objected. “You’ve been accepted by the Essendris, and thus far, all speak highly of you.”

“Not all. And one doesn’t necessarily cease to feel different just because of a change in one’s circumstances,” Dylen countered.

“I’m sorry, I meant no offense,” Riodan hastily apologized.

“None taken,” Dylen blandly replied.

Riodan flushed, mildly abashed by Dylen’s distant courtesy. “By the way, how is your *adda*?” he asked after an awkward silence.

“Alive,” Dylen curtly answered.

Riodan hesitated, unsure how to proceed. “I trust he is well?”

“If no longer having the use of his legs counts as being well.”

That took Riodan aback. “I see,” he murmured. “But he was cured? Of blight, I mean.”

“Eiren saved him.”

“So you found a way to get him back to Rikara,” Riodan said with relief.

Dylen shook his head. “Not so much found a way as had the good fortune of a chance encounter with Rohyr.”

“And he recalled Eiren.”

“Yes,” Dylen said, affection and reverence in his eyes. “And owned me his brother as well.”

Riodan smiled. “I’m glad he found you. Mayhap someday you’ll tell me the whole story of how you met.”

Dylen turned a cool gaze on him. “It needn’t be me. Gilmael was present. So was Lassen. They can recount it to you.”

“But of course,” Riodan quickly agreed. He fell silent for a space as he searched for a less contentious topic to talk about.

“I hope you enjoyed your posting in Tehara, all the problems and intrigues notwithstanding,” Dylen unexpectedly said.

The gracious opening gave Riodan cause to hope that perhaps Dylen would not hold the past against him overmuch. Whether Dylen was being civil in order to preempt the speculations of curious passersby he avoided dwelling on.

“I did enjoy it,” he replied. “The Teharans are warm and friendly at heart. It’s only their rulers who don’t seem to know how to maintain peace amongst themselves. It’s probably for lack of a sense of humor. They take offense so easily, even the king himself. And his consort and brothers are even more sensitive than he.”

“You must have had to walk on eggshells each time you were in their presence.”

“Indeed. But as I’ve come home quite whole, I think I managed to do my duty adequately.”

“More than adequately,” Dylen averred. “Jareth has done naught but sing your praises to Rohyr.”

That brought a blush to Riordan’s cheeks. “That’s very kind of him,” he said. “I only hope I truly deserve his accolades.”

Dylen faintly smiled. “Well, I believe you do.”

Riordan’s blush deepened. “Thank you,” he almost stammered. “That means so much to me.”

Another silence fell but a more comfortable one, or so Riordan thought. Emboldened by Dylen’s unlooked-for civility, he attempted conversation once more.

“You’ve changed,” he assayed. “Not physically, though you look better than ever if that’s possible. There’s just something about you that wasn’t there before.”

Dylen shrugged. “Perhaps it’s because I no longer peddle my services.” Before Riordan could protest the disparaging comment, he added, “You’ve changed as well. Not so much from when I last saw you, but certainly a great degree from when we parted ways.”

Riordan laughed nervously. “For the better I hope.”

“Well, you were already beautiful when we first met,” Dylen pointed out. “It was only to be expected that you would grow more comely as you fully matured.”

His heart starting to soar at the compliment, Riordan beamed at Dylen. “Thank you. But I’m no match for you. I confess, when you came to our house that day, it was all I could do not to throw myself at you. You were breathtaking even then.”

Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, Riordan knew he had blundered spectacularly. The chilly silence that followed confirmed his fear. He looked cautiously at Dylen, almost holding his breath as he awaited his one-time lover’s response. A smile curved Dylen’s lips. A tight smile that did not reach his eyes. At length, he turned his gaze on Riordan, the coldness in his eyes dashing the diplomat’s hopes of a swift reconciliation between them.

“But you *did* restrain yourself,” Dylen dryly said. “Such control is commendable. Now, if you will excuse me, Your Excellency.”

Riordan forlornly watched him glide off with the catlike grace so distinctive of him. *Idiot*, he berated himself. What had possessed him to dredge up that lamentable encounter and remind Dylen of his cowardice and perfidy?

Chapter Fifteen

Impasse

C.A. 3009

Riodan did his best to keep his expression neutral. But a fierce scowl was threatening to mar the serene cast of his features. If he had any sense, he would walk away as quickly as he could and not burden himself with the sight of Dylen in company with one of the Citadel courtiers. But, try as he might, he could not leave. Not when he feared capitulation on Dylen's part to the obviously non-platonic overtures of his companion.

Sereth was a good match for anyone. That much Riodan had to admit, albeit grudgingly. The courtier was pleasant looking, well-born and possessed enough savvy and ambition to have come so far in society. It was that ambition that troubled Riodan, however, for he could not help suspecting part of Sereth's courtship of Dylen was due to his desire for the rewards that went with being wed to the Ardan's one and only brother. That was not something to sniff at even if it meant putting up with the talk that seemed to accompany Dylen now that the truth of his identity was out.

As expected, the news had rocked the upper echelons of Ylandrin society. Rikara alone was abuzz with the discovery for months after and not always in a positive way. Riodan could only imagine what was said of Dylen elsewhere, especially in more conservative circles and particularly with regards to his illegitimacy. Even now, he knew that Dylen was still treated unevenly by some—utmost friendliness and ingratiation to his face, wariness and grudging deference behind his back. And overshadowing it all was interest in how his kinship to Rohyr could be used to advantage. Small wonder Riodan harbored suspicions about Sereth's motives.

He shook his head. Who was he to judge the other? One could say he was doing much the same thing in his efforts to rekindle his friendship with Dylen. He sighed and began to turn away to cross the street. He would have a harder time finding out which tea-room Guyon had entered if he lingered any longer. On the heels of that thought came the feeling that he would not mind failing to catch up with his fiancé in the least. It was not the first time for him to feel thusly, and he suspected it would not be the last. And he had begun experiencing it with a frequency that boded ill for any betrothal.

Movement to his right caught his eye, and he turned his head in time to see a Deir in a wheeled chair emerge from the draper's shop at the other end of the street. Riodan's eyes lit up while his stomach did a little flip-flop of apprehension at the same time. He hurried to the Deir, catching up with him before he made the turn around the corner.

"Teris-dyhar!" he called out.

Hirlen Teris looked back over his shoulder and, upon espying Riodan, broke into a warm smile. "Good day, Rio! When did you arrive from Qatare?"

Riodan let out a breath of relief as he neared the retired *hethar*. It seemed Dylen still had not told his father the full story of their falling-out.

"Just two days ago. The timing of His Majesty's summons left something to be

desired however,” he ruefully said. “It came just as Qatare’s crown prince ordered me to broker a marriage between him and Rohyr. Why he thought Rohyr would desire wedlock with a Deir barely out of diapers I can’t fathom though.”

Hirlen burst out laughing. “Presumptuous of him, isn’t it?” he remarked. “What did Rohyr say to that?”

“Well, he left it to Lassen to make a response. Unfortunately, I can never let the prince know what Lassen said. It would burn his ears right off his head!” Riordan waited for Hirlen’s mirth to subside. “You certainly get around, *Dyhar*,” he lightly teased.

Hirlen beamed. “This marvelous contraption makes it possible,” he said, fondly patting the armrest of his chair.

“But where is Tarqin?” Riordan asked, looking around for the elderly servant. “Surely you’re not alone.”

“Oh, I’m never alone,” Hirlen corrected, a slight tilt of his head indicating his and Dylen’s guard escort waiting discreetly nearby. “Tarqin is visiting with some friends lately come from Fenycia. Dylen is taking care of me in the meantime.”

Riordan could not stop himself from fishing for information. “But I saw him with someone just now,” he casually stated. “I thought they were out together.”

“Oh, do you mean Sereth?” Hirlen shook his head. “They met on the street. I had business at the draper’s shop so I told Dylen to go ahead and entertain his friend. Rest assured, *Rio-min*, they were *not* out together.”

The warmth in his cheeks told Riordan he was blushing, as did Hirlen’s knowing smile. But, before he could say more, Dylen suddenly arrived. He briefly nodded at Riordan then laid an affectionate gaze on his father.

“Gossip for tea, *Adda*?” he lightly inquired.

“Nay, but I would indulge in some if there were any scandals worth talking about,” Hirlen cheerfully replied. “Where is Sereth?”

Dylen shrugged. “He’s returned to the Citadel.” He looked at Riordan again. “Lost your intended, *Rio*?”

Riordan managed not to wince. “Nay, he’s in one of the tea-rooms across the street,” he replied.

He was aware that Dylen was waiting for him to take his leave. But he could not bring himself to cut short a close encounter with his former lover. And so he made no move to excuse himself.

Dylen shook his head and, taking hold of the handgrips at the back of his father’s chair, asked Hirlen, “Where to next, *Adda*?”

“I’m only going to the tailor’s shop two doors down,” Hirlen replied. “I ordered a new court tunic,” he informed Riordan, his eyes sparkling. “I’m not about to appear in some shabby old thing at Rohyr’s nuptials! Now do let go, *Dy*,” he said, waving his son away. “I don’t want to be late for my fitting.”

“But *Adda*—”

“I can manage such a short distance on my own,” Hirlen firmly declared. “Really, you mustn’t coddle me. Eiren said it isn’t good for my health. Stay here and keep *Rio* company,” he added imperatively. “I shan’t take too long.”

Dylen sighed in resignation as his father set off. He faced Riordan with palpable reluctance. Riordan tried not to let Dylen’s lack of cordiality discourage him.

“It’s kind of you not to tell him about what I did,” he rather diffidently said.

Dylen shrugged. "What would it serve to disillusion him as well?"

The comment stung, but Riordan swallowed it without protest.

"Nonetheless, thank you. I don't think I could have borne his disappointment."

"But you certainly can bear mine," Dylen remarked derisively.

Riordan flinched. "I have no choice," he softly said. "Much as it pains me each time I feel your disdain anew, there is little else I can do."

Dylen snorted. "Don't seek my company then," he rejoined. "After all, you have *his* to keep you occupied."

Riordan nearly swore under his breath when Guyon appeared at his side, sliding a proprietary arm around his waist. Dylen gave the gesture a pointed look, nodded at Riordan, and left them without a word. Riordan watched him go in frustration. Guyon, too, stared after Dylen with displeasure, giving Riordan reason to wonder how much he had heard of the conversation.

"He thinks highly of himself," Guyon said with a huff, thereby providing the answer. "Just because he is brother to Rohyr, he deems himself above bestowing his pardon on any who's ever wronged him."

Riordan pulled away from Guyon in irritation and turned to face him none too patiently. "Dylen is the humblest of Rohyr's relations," he protested. "The way he carries himself, one would never guess his position at court."

"Yet he repeatedly spurns your attempts to befriend him," Guyon insisted. "Such arrogance considering his origins!"

"You know full well that he has just cause to be aloof with me," Riordan retorted. "I refused him aid when he most needed it. Indeed, he must think me the worst of opportunists that I should try to make amends for that offense and acknowledge our previous association now that he is a prince of the realm. And he's right in his thinking," Riordan said in a more subdued tone. "I can be brave because an alliance with the Ardan's brother is the surest way to fulfill all my ambitions." He shook his head. "He has every reason to be wary of me and keep his distance."

"And you defend him at every turn," Guyon accused. "Indeed, you relentlessly pursue his forgiveness and accept his rebuffs with such meekness one would think you nurse more than mere regret." He petulantly added, "I do hope you always keep our compact in mind, Rio. Neither your sire nor mine will be pleased were you to suddenly renege on what they so painstakingly arranged."

Riordan barely managed to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. "Rest assured, I am perfectly aware of all my obligations," he dryly replied.

He was not the least impressed by Guyon's show of jealousy; not when he knew full well that it was not a lover's possessiveness that prompted it but rather Guyon's desire for the royal connection a binding with Riordan would bring him. Guyon deemed it propitious that Riordan's star should be in ascendancy at Rohyr's court when the Baraths' own political fortunes were slowly dwindling.

Whatever made me think Guyon would be a suitable spouse? Riordan crossly asked himself. He had known from the start that Guyon's ambitions and his place in society would always come first. Yet he had decided at the time that he could stomach being third or fourth on his future mate's list of priorities. That had changed when he came into close contact with Dylen again. It was inevitable once he started comparing the two. Guyon was as different as could be from Dylen and not in a favorable way.

Now he wondered how he could possibly endure a lifetime with a Deir he was beginning to heartily dislike.

* * * *

There was good reason indeed not to show up in some shabby old thing at Rohyr's nuptials, Riordan conceded a sennight later. Unlike in his first binding celebration where his rather muted wedding garb had betrayed his reluctance to wed under duress, the Ardan was majesty personified tonight. And majesty deeply in love, too.

That Rohyr truly desired this union with his longtime concubine showed in the sumptuousness of their attire. They appeared as their temple binding had made them—Ylandre's Ardan and his lawfully and lovingly wedded spouse and royal consort.

Riordan watched Dylen wheel his father across the reception hall so that Hirilen could personally congratulate the new Ardis. Lassen did not stand on ceremony but leaned down and enfolded Hirilen in an affectionate hug. Rohyr soon joined them, and before long, they were talking and laughing merrily.

They look like a family, Riordan thought. Nay, they *are* family, he amended. Rohyr had made no secret of his delight at gaining a brother. And he probably saw Hirilen as a surrogate parent having lost his own when he was quite young. Riordan felt a sudden pang as the realization came to him that he could have been part of their intimate group had he stayed true to Dylen. And to himself.

He stifled a sigh and put on a smile just as Guyon came up to him with a couple of acquaintances—younger sons of landed gentry from Sidona. His smile nearly disappeared when he heard the tail end of what Guyon was telling them. "And Riordan is very close to our Ardan—why, he's practically kin. Mind you, it isn't as if we need the royal connection, but it would be ridiculous to refuse any benefits that come our way, wouldn't it?"

Trying his best not to grit his teeth, Riordan demurred, "That isn't quite right, Guyon. His Majesty deems me a friend, no more, no less."

"You're being too modest," Guyon said a trifle patronizingly.

"Nay, I'm being honest," Riordan retorted. "Rohyr has kin enough by blood and marriage to have no need to look outside House Essendri for Deira to call relations."

"But what of Tenryon Hadrana?" one of the pair asked. "He's no relation to the Ardan, but he's treated like one."

"True, he's not a blood relation," Riordan agreed. "But his half-brother Jareth is a cousin of Rohyr's and that makes Tenryon kin by affinity."

"Speaking of half-brothers," the other Deir cut in, his eyes suddenly riveted on something behind Riordan. "The Ardan's brother is a feast for the eyes, isn't he?"

Riordan looked back over his shoulder. Dylen stood a short distance away chatting with some guests. Before he could avert his gaze, Dylen turned his head and saw him. He politely dipped his head before resuming the conversation. Meanwhile, the two youths continued to ogle Dylen appreciatively and with much excitement.

"Please, Your Excellency, could you introduce us to him?" the second Deir hopefully asked.

Riordan tried to make an excuse of not wanting to intrude only to have the first Deir eagerly say, "Oh, but look, *Dyhar*, he's taking his leave of them!"

Left with no recourse, Riordan reluctantly headed toward Dylen, the two Sidonans

and a pouting Guyon in tow. Dylen looked at him in some surprise when Riordan intercepted him. But the surprise quickly changed to cool courtesy when Riordan asked if he could introduce his companions. Dylen made all the correct responses, a gracious smile illuminating his comely face, which thereby nearly reduced the young Deira to speechlessness.

"And, of course, you're already acquainted with Guyon Barath," Riordan said in a barely audible voice.

Dylen briefly nodded to Guyon then turned his attention back to the youths. "I trust you're enjoying yourselves?" he politely said.

"Oh indeed, Your Grace! It's not every day we get to witness a royal binding!" enthused one.

"Not to mention see so many notable Deira gathered in one place," chimed in the other.

"Then I take it you deem it worth travelling all the way here from southern Sidona."

The pair gaped at him in awe. "Oh, how did you know we hail from the south of the fief, *Dyhar*?" the first Deir asked.

"Your accent," Dylen explained. "It's similar to Rio's."

To his embarrassment, Riordan felt his cheeks heat up in a blush. He strove to dampen the surge of pleasure brought about by Dylen's implied acknowledgement of their previous closeness. But it must have shown in his face nevertheless, for Guyon suddenly scowled. He looked at Dylen, eyes gleaming unpleasantly.

"I was going to show my friends around after the reception," he announced with a sly grin. "I thought they might appreciate the more sophisticated diversions our city has to offer. A visit to a *hethare* club for instance."

"Guyon!"

"Oh come now, Rio," Guyon snidely said. "I'm sure Essendri-*dyhar* can recommend a decent club considering his intimate knowledge of such places." He smirked at Dylen, his tone just this side of a sneer. "Or perhaps you would care to join us for a night of debauchery—I mean indulgence, Your Grace."

There was a concerted gasp at his insolence. The Sidonans glanced nervously at Dylen, wondering how he would retaliate. But, while Riordan elbowed Guyon in the ribs and furiously glared at him, Dylen remained virtually expressionless.

As if only just realizing the severity of his offense, Guyon's eyes widened, and he gestured apologetically. "I beg your pardon," he said, seemingly abashed. "What was I thinking, assuming Your Grace would wish to revisit your old haunts or mingle with former associates?"

Dylen's answering smile was frosty yet ever so polite. "On the contrary, I frequently return to my old haunts and keep in touch with my former associates," he coolly said. "I don't care to lose the affection of folk who stay loyal to me come what may. It's more than I can say for others who forsake their friends as soon as there's naught to be gained from them." He looked pointedly at Guyon. "But you know all about that, don't you, Barath-*tyar*?"

The sudden crimsoning of Guyon's cheeks told of Dylen's sure aim. He took leave of the now hushed group and disappeared into the crowd.

Forgetting all tact, Riordan growled, "Dolt! That was beyond the pale! You should be thankful Dylen never brings such matters to Rohyr's attention." He recoiled when a smug

smile curved Guyon's mouth. "And you knew that!" he exclaimed in disgust. "Saints above, Guyon! You're little better than dog excrement! Excuse me while I get some fresh air to rid my nostrils of your stench."

Guyon found himself protesting to thin air when Riodan angrily turned his back on him and stalked off.

He was still fuming when he wandered onto one of the balconies. Taking in the balmy night breeze, he struggled to bring his temper under control.

Deity's blood, he thought, *Guyon's conduct is inexcusable!* If word were to reach Rohyr, Guyon would be barred from court. Indeed, all the Baraths could be subject to royal censure just for being related to him. Really, what had that imbecile thought to achieve? The humiliation of a perceived adversary? Well, Dylen had certainly put paid to that attempt and neatly turned the tables on him. Now all Riodan could hope was for Dylen to be magnanimous enough not to report Guyon's behavior to Rohyr.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily. If he were truly honest with himself, it would be a blessed relief were Guyon banned from the Citadel. Then there would be one place at least where he could be confident of not encountering him. He closed his eyes and sighed. How had his relationship with Guyon deteriorated in so short a time? They were friends—or supposed to be friends. He would not have consented to the betrothal otherwise.

Someone stepped out onto the adjacent balcony. It was Dylen.

Riodan saw him turn briefly to gaze at something inside the great hall. He looked in the direction of Dylen's gaze and realized he was watching his brother and law-brother. Lassen stood in the circle of Rohyr's arms, leaning back against him while Rohyr spoke to his counsellor uncle Yovan Seydon and his spouse Mered. The royal couple's easy intimacy was wonderful to behold. *But it can be painful for some*, Riodan thought, when Dylen's face took on a wistful expression.

He impulsively headed over to the other balcony.

Dylen had turned back to look up at the star-flecked sky and did not notice his arrival. But when Riodan came up alongside him, Dylen visibly stiffened before training an inquiring stare on him. Riodan wondered not for the first time how Dylen usually managed to sense his presence.

He hesitated, unsure what to say. But, slightly unnerved by Dylen's steady gaze, he said rather inanely, "I see you needed some fresh air as well."

Dylen regarded him frowningly then nodded. "Why did you join me?" he abruptly asked. He glanced at the balcony Riodan had vacated. "The air is just as fresh yonder."

Riodan flushed. "I wished to speak to you," he admitted.

"So—speak."

Damn it all, Dylen made it so hard! Riodan exhaled and said, "I want to apologize for Guyon's behavior."

Dylen scowled. "Why are you apologizing for that thickhead? It's a useless exercise and not worth the words or effort wasted on it. Or are you expressing remorse for the motives that led you to accept wedlock with someone like him?" he taunted. "In which case, I'll thank you not to foist your self-inflicted troubles on me."

Riodan stared at him, shocked by Dylen's open rancor. "Can't you let the past be?" he blurted. "Must you always have it stand between us? What in Aisen will it take to soften your heart, Dy?"

He fell back a step when Dylen visibly bridled.

"You dare say that to me?" Dylen scathingly said. "You call me hard-hearted for refusing your overtures? You who would have rather let my father die a wretched death than forego a proper match and a plum assignment. Why in the name of all that's holy should I forget the past and risk putting myself through that misery once more? And at your so very capable hands may I add."

Riodan averted his face as if struck. His throat tight from Dylen's crushing disdain, he could not muster a reply.

"It took me years to recover from your treachery, Ambassador," Dylen continued, his voice dripping with pain and scorn. "And now you think I can just set that aside and take you back as if my heart never broke and my soul didn't wither from your denial of our friendship and your refusal to help *Adda*." He smiled bitterly. "I think not."

With a curt nod, he departed the balcony. Riodan listlessly turned around and, resting his elbows on the balustrade, buried his face in his hands. He wondered if he would ever manage to win Dylen's friendship anew.

That would suffice. It would have to. He had forfeited his right to regain what had once been his alone and lost it for the least of reasons.

"Must I intervene, Rio?"

Startled, Riodan whirled about to find Rohyr at his side. The Ardan was regarding him with open compassion.

"I mean no offense, Rohyr, but why would you want to?" Riodan dully asked.

Rohyr's eyes followed his brother as he made his way among the guests. "I wouldn't bother if there was naught to work with," he admitted. "But there *is* a spark of something and it's high time Dylen knew some happiness."

"I betrayed him," Riodan raggedly said. "Wounded him terribly. He wants nothing to do with me."

"So he claims," Rohyr replied. "But, were that true, would he still keep the wristlet you gave him?" When Riodan responded with obvious disbelief, he added, "Beaten gold and woven leather with a heartstfire clasp."

Riodan gaped at the accurate description. "You-you've seen it?"

The Ardan raised his left hand. "He never exposes his wrist when you are present. What think you does he conceal from you?"

Hope flared in Riodan's heart. But, a moment later, it dimmed, and he sighed and shook his head. "Dylen deserves far better than the likes of me," he morosely said. "I let fear and ambition rule me and my choices."

Rohyr shrugged. "An error in judgment."

"An unforgivable one," Riodan insisted. "It's not a thing to take lightly."

"It's not," Rohyr agreed. "But neither is it irredeemable. After all, are there any amongst us who have never made a like mistake?"

Riodan shrugged. "I would think you for one."

Rohyr snorted. "You would think wrong. I allowed my choices to be dictated by what I thought was proper rather than what was right. Had I abided my own judgment I would have bound myself to Lassen long ago and not left the door open to a forced marriage that led me to shed the blood of my own kin."

Riodan grimaced at the reminder of Rohyr's first brush with matrimony. One that had nigh ended in disaster for king and country and led to death in the royal family.

“I didn’t fear the unrest that might have occurred had I wed him then,” Rohyr grimly admitted. “But I disliked having to deal with the unpleasantness I expected would follow. And I thought that if I did my duty, it would ensure the peace and Ylandre would be safe.” His grey eyes glittered with pained remembrance.” Well, that certainly wasn’t how it turned out, was it? And the irony of it all is that Lassen had acquitted himself so well as my leman that few would have opposed his becoming my consort after all. Even amongst the nobility.” Rohyr sighed regretfully. “Think of the misery and rancor that could have been averted had I read the people’s sentiments correctly. Not to mention spared Uncle Imcael the grief of losing a son.”

The Ardan clapped an encouraging hand on Riordan’s shoulder. “You made a mistake, that’s true, but you can make amends for it. As for Dylen, he can claim all he wants that he no longer holds affection for you; his actions say otherwise. Fear rules him as well. But, as I said, it’s time he was happy. And you can make it so, Rio. *If* you are willing to fight for him.”

Riordan considered the suggestion. He turned his head to search for Dylen. Catching sight of his quarry at the other side of the hall, he regarded him for a long while. He looked back at Rohyr, his eyes a gleam with renewed determination.

“I will fight for *us*.”

Chapter Sixteen

Intervention

Lassen braced himself against the bath stall wall as Rohyr repeatedly drove into him from behind, filling his arse to the brim with every inward slide of his shaft. As if to further remind him of his ownership, Rohyr reached around and down between his legs to caress his thighs, smearing them with the semen that trickled out of Lassen's sheath. A breath-stealing moment later he proceeded to stroke the delicate passage, his fingers easily sliding along and into the copiously lubricated opening.

Lassen gasped as the exquisite sensations mounted. But, just as he thought he would unravel, something dampened the sensual tension just enough to keep his impending orgasm from erupting. That sudden tempering intensified his need for release to an almost excruciating degree. Lassen wondered not for the last time at the way his inordinately gifted spouse could enter his consciousness and control his reaction to pleasuring and even delay the onset of sexual completion. Rohyr did not do it all the time but even once in a very long while was an experience of unparalleled bodily bliss.

"Roh, please!" he begged. "Finish this!"

"Not yet," Rohyr demurred. "I want to stay in you a while longer."

Lassen shakily chuckled. "You've been in me all night!"

Rohyr sealed his mouth to the side of Lassen's throat and sucked hard on the sweet flesh. "Forgive me then, *ariad*, but nothing can compare with the bliss of being inside you. I find it addictive."

Lassen cried out when Rohyr gripped his shaft and stroked it as well. The inability to come undone became even more acute.

Every thrust into him impelled his hips forward and drove his shaft into Rohyr's possessive grip. And, all the while, Rohyr continued to finger him as well, tripling Lassen's pleasure. In happy retaliation, Lassen pushed back as well as he could to take Rohyr's shaft in as deeply as possible, deliberately clenching his muscles around the hard flesh to caress it from within.

So pleasurable a rhythm could be sustained only for so long even with the control imposed by one as iron-willed as Rohyr, and he finally released Lassen to the demands of his tightly wound body. Sobbing helplessly, Lassen climaxed, overwhelmed by nigh shattering pleasure coming at him from three different points. He struggled against the overwhelming rapture, refusing to be alone in it, and ground his buttocks backwards, thereby wrenched Rohyr's mastery away. The Ardan smothered his cries against his consort's back, holding Lassen's bottom flush against his groin until he was done spending inside him.

With a satisfied groan, Rohyr uncoupled their bodies. He turned on the taps and warm water gushed from the bathing chute above them. Smirking at each other, they finally got on with the reason they were in the bath stall in the first place.

Snickering, Lassen lazily lathered Rohyr's body, paying particular attention to the Ardan's shaft.

“What is there to laugh about?” Rohyr mildly inquired as he likewise washed Lassen, cleansing him of the leavings of their previous exertions.

“’Tis just I find it amusing that, when it comes to us, bathing doesn’t always signal the end of a night’s rutting.” Lassen tugged suggestively on Rohyr’s shaft while he rinsed it. “I wager you’ve still got enough in you for another bout or two.”

Rohyr did not reply but leaned forward and nuzzled the side of Lassen’s neck before kissing his way to his throat. Lassen responded by tossing back his head, giving the Ardan full access to the smooth flesh. Rohyr chuckled against his throat.

“And who makes certain that I’ll be up for another bout or two?” he teased.

When they were done, they retreated to the bed once more. Rohyr drew the bed curtains then pulled Lassen down beside him to lie within his embrace. Snuggled against his king, Lassen contentedly sighed.

“Prudent of you to let Vyren sleep alone tonight,” Rohyr murmured.

Lassen snorted. “I seem to recall the suggestion came from you.” He raised his head and eyed Rohyr with mock severity. “Indeed, you insisted on it and scarcely gave me time to tuck him in.”

Rohyr shrugged. “I was tired of having to hold back for fear of waking him up. It’s been a while since I’ve heard you scream loud enough to awaken the entire Citadel.”

“I don’t scream—”

“And even longer since you’ve thrown discretion to the four winds and pleased me as ardently as a wanton strung out on a love philter.”

“I beg your pardon—”

“And, Veres almighty, you can’t imagine how much I missed it.”

That effectively brought Lassen up short. He gazed anxiously at Rohyr.

“Why didn’t you say so? I would’ve seen to your needs forthwith had you told me.”

Rohyr grinned. “You *have* been seeing to my needs, Las. Don’t think you’ve neglected me. I only meant that I missed making love with you as riotously as we did before you birthed Vyren.”

Lassen regarded him thoughtfully. “You restrained yourself because you could see how caught up I was in his care,” he murmured. “I’m sorry, Roh.”

“For what? For being a doting father to our son?” Rohyr shook his head. “I’ve been as obsessed with Vyren’s care as you.”

“That’s not surprising given that he’s your heir as well as your firstborn.” Lassen gazed contritely at his spouse. “Perhaps there is naught to apologize for, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try to improve on what we do have.” He pressed tender kisses to Rohyr’s mouth. “I’m glad Vyren is old enough to leave in Josel’s care most nights. Now I can attend to you as much as you wish.” He brought their lips together in a longer, more heated kiss. “And you needn’t restrain yourself any longer, my love. Tonight or any other night.”

“I shall hold you to that,” Rohyr said, breaking into a rakish grin.

Lassen softly laughed and laid his head on Rohyr’s shoulder again. “I didn’t think it possible for anyone to be so happy as we are. How I wish others could also know such joy.”

Rohyr ran his fingers through Lassen’s hair. “Are you thinking of anyone in particular?”

“You know I am,” came the muffled reply as Lassen nuzzled his shoulder.

“Dylen.”

“Don’t you wish that as well?”

“Of course.” Rohyr sighed. “But so long as he nurses his anger towards Riordan, I fear he will never have joy or peace. Much as he still despises what Riordan did, he hasn’t stopped caring for him either. I warrant he’s furious with himself for feeling thusly, and that only serves to deepen his resentment.”

“He wants to hate Riordan but finds that he can’t?”

“Worse. He feels himself forced to love against his very will.”

“And so his anger is further stoked.” Lassen blew his breath out. “To be so torn... How terrible for him.” He frowned and looked at Rohyr. “What *did* Riordan do? Or are you forbidden to talk about it?”

Rohyr hesitated. “If there’s anyone to whom Dylen confides his deepest secrets other than myself, I think it’s you,” he slowly said. “But this strikes at his pride as much as it wounds his heart, and he is loathe to expose what he deems a weakness. You see, he’s ashamed of his failure to realize that Riordan probably couldn’t have acted otherwise and that if he’d had his wits about him at the time, he wouldn’t have been so surprised by Riordan’s duplicity. Or as disillusioned. And so he keeps the hurt to himself and holds the one person who has the greatest chance of healing it at bay. Ironically that person inflicted the hurt in the first place.” Rohyr exhaled in frustration. “It’s like a festering sore from which he can find no relief. And Riordan is faring no better. Each time Dylen refuses his overtures, he shrivels up a little more inside. If Dylen’s anger hardens his heart, Riordan’s guilt corrodes his soul.”

Lassen stared at him. “Tell me what you can,” he finally said. “You needn’t go into details if you don’t wish to betray Dylen’s confidence but tell me the bare bones at least. I want to help them. Veres knows they need some and soonest.”

He listened carefully to Rohyr’s spare account of his brother’s history with the young diplomat. When Rohyr was done, Lassen was rendered quite speechless.

“I knew something had gone wrong between them, but nothing so devastating,” he said at length. “Saints! I can’t imagine Riordan doing something as reprehensible as that. And then for Dylen to blame himself for not anticipating so great a change in Riordan...” He laughed mirthlessly. “You really *are* brothers. Only the two of you would hold yourselves responsible for what is beyond anyone’s ability to control!”

Rohyr looked away in some embarrassment. Lassen guessed he was remembering that terrible day when he’d blamed himself for not foreseeing the unforeseeable. It had high cost Lassen his life and all but guaranteed that the rest of Rohyr’s would be spent in misery. Lassen cupped his face and kissed him.

“Don’t, Roh,” he gently chided. “Dwelling on what might have been is fruitless. We won that fight and reaped the spoils of it. And now that we have secured our happiness, we can ensure the same for others.”

Rohyr smiled faintly. “Ensure? Are we deities to grant wishes and answer prayers?”

“Nay, but you have the power to set circumstances in motion that might bring them together once more. If not as lovers, then at least as friends.”

“You have so much confidence in me.”

“I have perfect reason to.”

“Why thank you, *ariad*.”

Lassen placed his clasped hands on Rohyr’s chest and rested his chin on them. He

looked hopefully at his spouse. Rohyr laughed and shook his head.

“Why do I feel that I must come up with a plan right now or lose your high esteem of my abilities?” he rhetorically asked.

Lassen huffed a chuckle. “But you do have something in mind, don’t you? Else you wouldn’t have delayed so long in deciding who to send to Asmara.”

Rohyr’s eyes widened then softened as he gazed at Lassen. He raised his hand and caressed Lassen’s cheek.

“How well you know me,” he murmured. “Small wonder I feel I can accomplish anything with you at my side. Yes, I did delay my decision for that reason. I was debating whether their having to work together on a mission might help things along. Dylen would never allow his personal prejudices to interfere with the performance of his obligations. He would force himself to be accommodating with Riordan for duty’s sake. And, Veres willing, he just might make a habit of it.”

“Thereby opening himself to Riordan’s attempts to reconcile with him,” Lassen mused out loud. “Yes, ’twould be a point from which they could start anew. Provided Riordan takes advantage of the opportunity. But think you he’ll stay the course?”

Rohyr nodded. “To the bitter end. I think the outcome will lie in Dylen’s hands. In whether he can forgive Riordan or not.”

Lassen bit his lip. “Saints, I hope he can,” he whispered.

They lay in comfortable silence for several minutes. Lassen shifted a slender limb and laid it across Rohyr’s lap. Within seconds, he felt Rohyr’s shaft stir and firm up against his thigh. Before he could tease his mate, Rohyr rolled him over and lodged his hips between his splayed legs. Lassen moaned as his throat was nibbled and sucked and his nipples thumbed to tiny peaks while down yonder, Rohyr thrust against him, sliding their hardened shafts against each other.

Rohyr reached down and gingerly stroked Lassen’s sheath until his body was ready for reproductive intercourse once more. He slid a finger into the slippery passage, caressing it from within.

Lassen let out a shuddery exhalation. “Yes,” he whispered.

Rohyr withdrew his finger and pressed the tip of his shaft against the glistening entrance.

“I won’t restrain myself,” he huskily promised. “And neither will you.”

Aflame with anticipation, Lassen raised his legs and wrapped them around Rohyr’s waist. He gasped Rohyr’s name as he was deeply penetrated then braced himself for a nice hard ride.

* * * *

Rohyr watched Dylen and Riordan’s faces as they listened to Gilmael explain the current situation in Asmara.

The country spanned the main route between Ylandre and the South Vihandran nations. All travellers passing through Asmara had to gain permission to do so from its government first. Ruled by the powerful Halvan clan, the wealthy and influential South Vihandran kingdom had become a cause for some worry thanks to the marriage of the reigning Asmaran king’s son to the heir of the current Varadani pretender Jubal Ferrenda.

It was an ongoing thorn in the Ylandrin monarchy’s figurative side, this constant cropping up of Ferrenda claimants to the rulership of the defunct nation of Varadan.

Despite having lost both crown and country in the war of conquest they instigated centuries ago, there seemed no end to rebellious Deira who clamored for the restoration of the Ferrendas to the Varadani throne.

They abided for the most part in the northwest of the Autonomous Province of Tenerith, which, along with the royal fief of Vireshe, had been carved out of Varadan. Though few, and largely lacking cohesiveness in method and purpose, the separatists tended toward violent means of achieving their goals. So every few years, the royal armies were sent to crush them before they had a chance to swell to less manageable numbers.

Rohyr had led more than one campaign to “clean house” as his forebears had put it and never lowered his guard against them no matter how few remained after. But neither he nor his predecessors had yet managed to eradicate them completely for they fled into the bordering hills and mountains after every defeat, and it was all but impossible to rout them out of the subterranean labyrinth of tunnels in which they hid themselves until the next attempt at insurrection.

So the Ferrendas remained without kingdom or throne, but not resources or prestige. Though stripped of a physical realm, they had managed to retain extensive properties in other lands whence they derived much income. And they were still of the blood royal and therefore remained respected in some countries, particularly in the south. After all, their former aggression had never touched the South Vihandrans. Thus to this day wedlock with House Ferrendas was still deemed acceptable by not a few southern clans, especially those whose ranks the Ferrendas entered in the days before Varadan’s conquest by Ylandre. The Halvans were among the royals who counted Ferrendas among their ancestors. And still wed with them as evidenced by Prince Sivar’s marriage to Jubal’s son Malkon.

Now that had not made Asmara unfriendly to Ylandre. On the contrary, relations between the two countries remained stable and lucrative. But no Essendri worth his salt would ever discount the possibility of a hostile in-law meddling in the kingdom’s affairs and influencing Asmara against Ylandre.

At present, Asmara had not put an embargo on Ylandrin goods or restricted passage through the realm between Ylandre and the countries down south. Nor had there been any hint of animosity on the Shaja Amir Halvan’s part. But there were signs that Jubal was trying to gain influence through his son’s entry into the royal family.

“There is a possible indication of interference,” Gilmael said. “The approval of contract renewals between several Ylandrin and Asmaran corporations and guilds has been considerably delayed. There’s a great chance that some may not be renewed at all even after years of smooth relations and fruitful cooperation. And it’s rumored that Malkon is cultivating close ties with various heads of government. The Asmaran Minister of Trade is oft seen in his company.”

Riodan asked, “What does our ambassador to Asmara say?”

Gilmael shook his head. “He was recalled last month after Foreign Affairs received reports of too much carousing in the stews and not enough attention to duty. Another will be posted to Asmara when his current assignment is done. In the meantime, we can make do with an interim consular team.”

“And may I presume that I will be part of that team?” Riodan ventured.

“You may,” Gilmael confirmed. “You and Dylen.”

Silence met his statement. Dylen and Riodan looked at each other in surprise then stared at Gilmael.

"You approve of my inclusion in the team?" Dylen asked disbelievingly.

Gilmael nodded. "It's a judicious choice."

"Judicious? Just how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Gil didn't make the decision," Rohyr interrupted. "I did."

He glanced ruefully at Gilmael. He was not really surprised by Dylen or Riodan's respective reactions. Dylen was glaring at him with incredulity coupled with suspicion while Riodan's expression revealed a jumble of emotions, astonishment and the faintest tinge of hope among them. Nay, he was not surprised and neither was he sanguine that Dylen would accept the mission unquestioningly.

Sure enough, Dylen eyed him with barely concealed displeasure. "So you want to find out if Malkon is behind the recent problems in trade relations between Ylandre and Asmara," he said.

"That is correct."

"And we must tread carefully because he is wed to Amir's son."

"Yes."

"But why me?" Dylen asked. "It makes sense to send Riodan—he's proved his mettle as a diplomat. But I'm untried whereas Gil has any number of seasoned agents at his beck and call. Not to mention far more competent than I."

"Hardly more competent," Rohyr demurred. "It was you who helped uncover no less than three instances of burgeoning disaffection amongst the least suspected of the nobility."

"Minor achievements," Dylen said dismissively.

"On the contrary," Rohyr countered. "Disaffection can easily evolve into insurrection if not nipped in the bud. Besides, you displayed a knack for discerning the beginnings of the problems before they developed into serious threats. And you have a great talent for getting people to open up. Pardon the term, Dy, but you virtually seduced them into talking."

"Those were local cases," Dylen protested. "This involves international relations best left in a diplomat's hands."

"But a diplomat's hands can be tied in ways an agent's are not," Gilmael interjected. "Rio will be constrained by his position insofar as discovering what Malkon is about. But he'll be the shield behind which you can act as you see fit."

"Which doesn't explain why you want me to accompany him," Dylen retorted.

"Besides, how do you propose to explain to the Halvans why your adjutant is part of a supposedly diplomatic mission? Wouldn't it be better to covertly seed Rio's team with agents rather than openly have someone from Intelligence in it?"

Rohyr raised a hand to forestall the spate of questions.

"It's my prerogative to send who I want where I want, and no one can question my reasons," he reminded Dylen. "But, if you feel a need for one, it's because you *are* largely untried. Why shouldn't I desire my only brother to gain more experience abroad? And wouldn't that allay suspicions on Malkon's part about the real intent of this mission? Save for your kinship to me, little is known about you even in Rikara itself. Not your stealth or your skill at extracting information or your talent in the mind-arts. Malkon won't be on his guard and Amir will be flattered that I esteem him highly enough to send

my own brother to his kingdom for his very first mission abroad.” He locked gazes with Dylen. “Any more objections?”

Dylen glared back but only shook his head. Rohyr smiled faintly then looked at the others. “We are agreed on this then,” he declared. “When can they leave, Gil?”

“No later than a sennight,” Gilmael promptly replied.

“Very good,” Rohyr said. “You may go. Except you, Dy.”

Dylen seated himself once more, eyeing Rohyr warily as he did. The Ardan waited until the others had left the chamber. He looked at Dylen, studying him until the latter began to scowl.

“Why did you ask me to stay, Ardan-tyar?” he stiffly asked.

Rohyr sighed at the use of his title. “You’re displeased.”

“I have no right to be.”

“Dy, please...”

Dylen leaned forward, eyes flashing with hurt. “Why did you do this? You know what came of our previous association. Rohyr, I trusted you!”

“And I haven’t broken your trust.”

“Haven’t you?” Dylen challenged.

“Do you hate him that much?” Rohyr said instead.

The question rendered Dylen speechless. He abruptly stood and walked to the windows. For a long while, he stared out, viewing stately Mount Sarak in the distance. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and rough.

“Nay, I don’t hate him,” he admitted. “But it smites my very soul to be in the same room with him.” He blinked his eyes as if the bright sunlight dazzled him. “Bad enough to meet him now and then and perforce act civil to keep gossip at bay. But to work closely and keep company with him for most of a day for Veres knows how long...” His voice trailed away to a pained murmur.

Rohyr rose and went to him. He put a protective arm around Dylen’s shoulders and pulled him close.

“Do you love him?” he softly asked.

“Love?” Dylen shook his head. “I no longer know what I feel. But I do know I can’t trust him.”

“Can’t? Or don’t wish to?”

“Does it matter?”

“If it affects you so much then, yes, it does.” Rohyr gently made Dylen face him. “He’s suffering, too.”

Dylen grimaced. “I know.”

“And he repents of his sin against you. Even that benighted intended of his knows it, and that’s saying a lot considering what an obtuse wantwit Guyon Barath can be.” That elicited a fleeting smile from Dylen. Rohyr forged on. “Can you not give him a chance to make amends for what he did? He’s humbled himself before you more times than I can count. Doesn’t that move you?”

“And how hard can it be to humble one’s self before a king’s brother?” Bitterness shadowed Dylen’s eyes once more. “Were I still a *hethar* with antecedents of no particular importance, think you he would try to win my regard anew?”

“Dy—”

“It was because I was nobody that he refused me his help!” Dylen pulled away,

anguish limning his words. “Deity’s blood, Roh, he denied even our friendship! Made me out to be a one-night tumble and a liar for claiming to be more than that! Tell me, why should I trust him now? And why are you so bent on pushing us together when you know how deeply he hurt me?”

Rohyr pulled Dylen into his arms, holding him tightly and saying, “I’m sorry, Dy, I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to cause you more pain. I hope you know that.”

Fighting for calm, Dylen tried to relax in his brother’s soothing embrace.

“Tell me why,” he whispered.

Rohyr took a deep breath. “Because you still care for him though you fight it,” he softly said. “If you would only admit your feelings—”

“And give him the chance to break my heart anew?” Dylen bleakly said.

“Nay, to relieve you of the strain of denying what it still yearns for,” Rohyr asserted. “It will calm the turmoil in your soul. Believe me, it’s far more difficult to keep stoking one’s anger than it is to forgive and move on.”

“Ah, so that’s how you manage to keep sane with Uncle Imcael,” Dylen murmured with a watery smile.

Rohyr smiled back, heartened by the stab at humor. “Now you know my secret.” He reached up and cupped Dylen’s face in his hands. “Riodan despairs of ever regaining your love, but I see how much he hopes for your forgiveness. Surely you have it in you to grant him that at the very least. And perhaps restore something of what you once shared with him. Friendship, if not love.”

Dylen shuddered ever so slightly. “You don’t say it but verily you would have me try for more,” he said, his voice catching.

“Nay, I would have you take one step forward, no more, no less.” Rohyr touched his forehead to Dylen’s. “I would have you happy, brother.”

Chapter Seventeen

Truce

Asmara, South Vihandra

A land of contradictions, Dylen thought as he gazed out at Asmara's capital of Shenze from the wide windows of the east gallery of the royal palace.

In the north and central regions of the kingdom, the climate was pleasant with none of the seasonal extremes found in most of Ylandre save in the east where a massive mountain range, its craggy windswept peaks more forbidding than any battlement, protected Asmara from its sometimes contentious neighbors. Toward the south, the climate became progressively warmer and the seasons less numerous and varied—wet, dry and cold. The southwest was lush with swamps and rainforests, the arid southeast rife with barren rocky plains and small deserts.

Shenze itself, or at least its architecture, seemed to follow the pattern. Massive domed buildings competed with thin, spire-topped edifices so delicate in appearance one almost expected them to crack and crumble at the slightest gust of the strong easterly winds. There was no homogeneity in the materials of which the city was wrought. Red brick, blue slate and moss green stone meshed and clashed in glorious profusion. The result was a vibrant metropolis alive with color, shape and texture.

Its citizens were more alike to each other than the structures they had built. They were little different from the people of the North Continent in physical appearance. But evolution had taken the sunnier climes of South Vihandra into consideration and consequently its folk were slightly darker in complexion with skin tones ranging from olive to coppery.

He'd felt the charm of this gateway city and its environs almost as soon as he and Riordan came out of translocation three days ago on the wide, gently undulating plain that lay before Shenze. If he now strove to keep Asmara allied to Ylandre, it was no longer out of duty alone, but also because he genuinely appreciated the land and its people.

At length he sauntered into the long open gallery that overlooked the open-air, mosaic-floored courtyard that was the center around which the palace had been built. The Halvan residence was as different from the Citadel as could be. Golden in hue and quite decadent in appearance, it sprawled rather than soared, with the main audience chamber housed under a massive dome that formed most of the north wing of the palace. Keeping the warmer climate in mind, its builders had provided many open courtyards and terraces within the complex, as well as numerous doors and windows to allow for maximum air circulation.

Like all royal keeps, the palace was enclosed within thick high impregnable stone walls. But an extra defense and a most effective one was the sheer drop in back of it. From the ramparts on the palace's rear wall, one gazed down into a deep jagged chasm too wide to bridge and too long to skirt. It was a dizzying sight and a frightening one as well.

From his vantage point, Dylen spotted Riordan down below talking with the Minister of Trade by one of the three fountains that adorned the courtyard. Riordan had earlier told him that he intended to corner the Deir and put not so subtle pressure on him to get on with the business of approving the contract renewals that were the purported reason for their presence in Asmara. The Minister seemed rather red-faced at the moment and was mopping his face with a kerchief. What in Aisen was Riordan saying to the Deir to make him so uncomfortable?

He recalled the bit of gossip he had come across the night before after he and Riordan had parted for the evening. It had come to his ears by way of the loosened tongue of his drinking partner, one of the palace officials. Perhaps he should communicate it to Riordan now while he had the Minister's full attention. After all, what good was all his training under Rohyr and Tenryon if he did not put it to practical use? He focused on Riordan and, taking a deep breath, reached out and connected with him, mind to mind.

* * * *

Ask him how he did at the gaming tables last night.

Riordan did not so much as bat an eyelash at the unbidden message. He only nodded his head slightly to let Dylen know he had heard. He looked at his companion, Thael Dimas, Asmara's Minister of Trade.

"I've heard quite a lot about the gaming halls of Shenze," he casually said. "Is it true the stakes are higher here than in most other cities?"

Dimas glanced at him, obviously startled by the sudden change in topic. "Yes, it's true," he admitted. "You can win a lifelong fortune with one roll of the dice in our halls."

"Or lose everything but the shirt on one's back I imagine."

"Well, that is a risk of gaming," Dimas said with a shrug.

Riordan looked him straight in the eye. "And how did *you* do last night, Minister? Did you win a fortune or lose one?"

The Deir started. He grew pale. "A little of each," he grudgingly admitted.

"Then it must be very reassuring that you have ample resources to pay off any debts you incur," Riordan murmured.

Dimas grew red-faced all over again. "I assure you there have never been defalcations at my Ministry!"

Riordan softly chuckled. "Ah, I never implied that. What I meant was that you must have friends in high places who are generous enough to lend you what is needed."

The Minister seemed taken aback. "I—that is, I have been fortunate, yes," he stammered slightly. "But I, er, pride myself in paying back all I owe."

"In kind as well as coin, I suppose," Riordan said.

"On occa—" Dimas stopped mid word, his eyes widening. Riordan clearly saw fear in them. "What-what are you suggesting, Your Excellency?"

"Nothing at all," Riordan replied with wide-eyed innocence. "A fair exchange does not always involve money after all. Now, about those trade contracts—may I expect progress on them very soon? Within the week perhaps?"

"I—yes, yes, I will work on them at once," Dimas nervously assured him. "That is, they are being, ah, processed even as we speak."

"That is good to hear."

"Yes." Dimas' kerchief was out again, and he wiped his face as before. Except now

his hands visibly trembled. "If you will excuse me, Ambassador, I have an appointment to keep," he mumbled.

"Oh, with Lord Malkon perhaps?" Riordan was gratified to see the other Deir turn deathly white. There were times a calculated guess could be as effective as an investigation of the facts. "Why, Minister, are you unwell?" he solicitously asked. "Perhaps you should get some rest."

Dimas was by now sweating profusely. "Yes, I-I think I must," he stuttered. "Good-good day, Your Excellency."

"Good day, Minister. Expect me at your office this afternoon."

"What? Oh, but I—Yes, of course," Dimas finished incoherently.

He hurried away as if a pack of hunting hounds was after him. Riordan watched him go then looked up to where Dylen waited. Their gazes met for an instant, and then Dylen stepped back out of sight while Riordan headed for his first official audience with the Shaja Amir and his nephew and heir Laral.

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Riordan's meeting with the Asmaran monarch proved illuminating and confusing at the same time in one particular capacity. Amir's only son Sivar also attended and spoke with as much authority as his sire and cousin. Riordan noted Sivar's demeanor with Laral. There was little deference toward a higher-ranking personage either in his speech or behavior. Understandable had the situation been a familial one; not so much when it was an official occasion where protocol was expected to be strictly observed even among members of the same family.

He soon realized he wasn't the only one affected by their behavior. Amir's head counsellor and the scribe and attendants present looked discomfited by Sivar's apparent lack of propriety. Amir, however, was not, and tellingly, neither was Laral. Indeed, not only did the crown prince not seem affronted by his cousin's behavior, he even appeared to encourage it. Riordan tucked the intriguing discrepancy away for examination at a later date.

"I regret the anxiety caused by the new policy implemented by Minister Dimas," Amir said toward the end of the meeting. "He's not to blame since I did approve his revision of the process of contract renewals, but he was very remiss in not informing you of it. Rest assured I shall have a word with him on that, Ambassador. And I give you leave to discuss the matter with him directly as well."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Riordan replied, choosing not to reveal that he had already done so.

Amir left the audience chamber ahead with his chief advisor while Laral and Sivar lingered a while to chat with Riordan.

They were a handsome pair and very much alike in height and facial features. This was not surprising given that they were first-degree kin. But Sivar's hair was dark brown while Laral's was a deep honey shade.

Laral asked, "Are the Ylandrins truly accepting of Rohyr's binding to his leman?"

Riordan refrained from raising his eyebrows. "For the most part, Your Highness," he said. "There will always be those who resist the crossing of lines between social classes."

"I understand his uncle of Qimaras is of that thinking."

"The Herun is retired from court," Riordan informed them. "His opinion on the matter

no longer carries much weight.”

Laral chuckled. “You certainly don’t mince words, Ambassador. Or have you a particular dislike for Imcael Essendri?”

Riodan lightly said, “I only find such close-mindedness tiresome.”

“Ah, then you don’t oppose the blurring of lines between the well-born and the rabble?”

Riodan hesitated. “I would not advise wedlock between a blueblood and a peasant,” he cautiously clarified. “The disparities on just about every level would almost inevitably doom such a marriage. But I see nothing wrong with, say, a well-mannered commoner marrying into a noble family or an educated working class Deir wedding someone from the gentry.”

“And, in any case, you don’t face that choice,” Sivar murmured. “Royal blood is royal blood even if it flows in the veins of a by-blow.” He smiled when Riodan stared at him, startled. “You hide it well, but every now and then, you can’t help but betray your attraction to Lord Dylen.”

Riodan reddened under their knowing regard. “I’m not alone in finding him attractive,” he said as blandly as he could manage.

“He is very comely,” Laral agreed. “Essendri blood runs true in him.” He eyed Riodan curiously. “You didn’t wait for my uncle to give you leave to speak to Minister Dimas. I saw you talking with him earlier. And he looked most uncomfortable with what you were discussing.”

“I only alluded to his fondness for gaming,” Riodan evenly replied.

“So you’ve heard tales of his frequent visits to the halls,” Sivar said. He shook his head. “I have cautioned him oft enough to be more prudent with his wagers. His family is well off but not so much that he can afford to make a habit of such a ruinous sport.”

“I hear Lord Malkon also enjoys the occasional evening trying his luck at the tables,” Riodan idly mentioned.

“Does he?” Sivar shrugged. “Perhaps he does. I don’t keep track of Malkon’s activities. He has his own pursuits, and I have mine.”

Riodan said no more, but he did not miss the furtive glance Laral sent his cousin’s way.

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He and Dylen compared notes during the midday meal back at the Ylandrin embassy. They fell into the habit without ever saying a word, something Riodan hopefully thought was a sign that their affinity of long ago was still intact.

Riodan watched with fond indulgence as Dylen attacked his meal with delight. Despite all the pressures and tension of fulfilling their mission, Dylen was enjoying what he could of Asmara to the hilt. It was a conscious decision born of the twin reasonings that the experience might not come his way again, and though it had been against his will, he might as well make the most of it now that he was here.

Perhaps nothing had made it as easy for Dylen to appreciate the culture of the southern lands as the cuisine. And, having been exposed to sophisticated dishes for years, he was quick to enjoy the differences in flavor preferences. Slightly spicier than most North Continent fare and given to more adventurous combinations of ingredients and seasonings, the food south of the continental divide was pleasingly exotic for a Deir who

had not sojourned abroad before.

Today, they dined on fillets of whitefish poached in a surprisingly tart and piquant broth followed by peppery herb-encrusted roehart medallions roasted to a rare turn with mashed purple tubers garnished with sweet-tangy garnet plum puree on the side. And to end the meal, there was a rich cake of sweetened curd cheese in a biscuit crust topped with a *mélange* of fruits cooked in syrup.

They proceeded to discuss what they had learned thus far as they sipped the southerners' favorite post-prandial beverage. *Kahvi* was a hot aromatic brew with a rich, slightly bitter flavor and was equally delicious taken with or without the sweetened condensed milk the Asmarans were fond of using in their various desserts and confectionery. Riordan grinned when Dylen displayed his predilection for the sweet version, adding the milk to his *kahvi* with a lavish hand.

"What did Amir have to say?" Dylen asked after taking a sip.

"He's aware of the problem," Riordan reported. "And he did question Dimas about it after we lodged our complaint. But apparently Dimas' explanation for his actions satisfied Amir, and so he didn't press the issue further."

Dylen pursed his lips. "What explanation did Dimas give?"

"Officially? That it would be in Asmara's best interests to periodically reassess such agreements, and rather than do a shoddy job of it, he thought it wisest to take as much time as needed to study each and every contract."

"How very patriotic of him."

"And so very reasonable sounding, too."

"Except that it shouldn't take forever to go over those contracts," Dylen commented. "Unless he's taken it upon himself to personally study each and every one without any help whatsoever."

Riordan smiled mirthlessly. "That is probably what he's doing to slow down the process. And it appears your source was right about Dimas' gaming habit. Sivar mentioned that he's talked to Dimas about it as well. But he didn't seem aware of a possible connection between him and Malkon. Either that or he's a very good actor," Riordan wryly posited. "Though I can't imagine why the pretense at ignorance if that is so. I'm inclined to believe he really doesn't know. Or care."

"He doesn't appear to take much interest in Malkon's affairs," Dylen agreed.

"Which says a great deal about the state of their marriage."

It said a lot as well about the Deir they had come to Asmara to keep an eye on. Malkon Ferrenda had proved far from impressive. Glib and often pompous, he was given to preening himself on even the most minor of accomplishments. Not least of these self-proclaimed achievements was his binding to Sivar Halvan. That this had come about after careful negotiations between his sire and Sivar's—negotiations he'd had close to no part in—he blithely ignored. Indeed he had gained a not so charming reputation for embellishing stories about himself if by doing so he could further puff up his already swollen head.

Dylen summed him up within minutes of meeting him as shallow and vain and too clever by half. A thoroughly untrustworthy character who needed close watching as much for his propensity for harassing any Deir unlucky enough to catch his eye as for his suspected meddling in Asmaran politics. Both Dylen and Riordan heartily sympathized with Prince Sivar for having to bear with so unlikable a spouse.

Riodan put down his cup and sat back. "In any case, let's assume that Malkon encourages his debtors to gamble away their fortunes and therefore borrow far more than they can ever repay within the time he stipulates. He would then threaten them with a stint in paupers' prison if they don't do as he says. I warrant he used that against Dimas to force him to delay the approval of those trade agreements. But what the Ferrendas have to gain from the delay, I don't know."

"Profit, of course," Dylen said. "And not always in the short-term. I studied the information Gilmael sent regarding the contracts in question and checked who the competitors of the corporations and guilds concerned are. Well, surprise, surprise, they're either owned by the Ferrendas or Jubal and Malkon have considerable interests in them. I warrant Malkon is trying to get a foot in so to speak by slowly dislodging rivals and supplanting them eventually with Ferrenda-backed companies. If he's successful with Asmara, he'll probably try to do the same with other southern nations. The prejudice against the Ferrendas isn't as strong down here as it is in the north."

"That's very sound reasoning," Riodan conceded. "I should have thought of that. Gilmael and our Trade Minister, too."

Dylen shrugged. "They've got more on their plates than just this one problem. And you've been busy with your own investigations as well." After a pregnant pause, he said, "I also learned something that is unknown outside of the immediate royal circle. There was an attempt on Laral's life late last year."

Riodan sat up straight. "On Laral? That is news indeed. But why did the Halvans suppress it?"

"Partly because they feared it would encourage other attempts but also because too many questions would be asked, and the answer to who instigated it might lead to an open rift with Ylandre if not outright war."

"Why would it—?" Riodan sharply drew in his breath. "Sweet Veres, they think Ylandre was behind the attempt?"

"They're not sure," Dylen said. "The would-be assassins escaped, but one left behind *evidence* of their affiliation—a cloak pin bearing the insignia of an Ylandrin foot soldier."

"Rather too obvious for credibility I should think," Riodan scoffed.

"But with lack of proof to the contrary, the Halvans can't simply absolve us, can they?" Dylen countered.

"I suppose not. Where did you get this information?"

"Captain Talvas."

Riodan frowned. "But if Amir ordered that the attempt be suppressed, why did he tell you?"

"Likely because we're kindred spirits," Dylen replied. "Talvas is a bastard, too."

"That's no secret. The son of one of Amir's cousins they say."

"Nay, he was sired on a Shenzen minstrel by Amir himself."

Riodan's eyebrows rose in surprise. "So Talvas is Sivar's half-brother? Small wonder he's fanatically loyal to the family. He's actually one of them."

"Precisely. And therefore he knows just about all there is to know about the Halvans' history." Dylen took a long sheet of parchment from the sheaf at his elbow and pushed it toward Riodan. "He helped me draw this up."

Riodan scanned the document. "This is the Halvan ancestral tree." He looked at Dylen questioningly. "What did you hope to find?"

“A possible motive for Malkon to do away with Lalar.”

“And did you find it?”

“I believe so. And it might also explain what you observed of Sivar’s demeanor toward Lalar,” Dylen added thoughtfully. “Do you recall the inheritance law Imcael concealed from Rohyr when he forced him to marry Tyrde?” Riodan nodded, grimacing at the memory of the Ardan’s unhappy first marriage. “Well, that law originated here, in South Vihandra. But we discovered the Southerners don’t abide the law of primogeniture only after extensive research. Now, if even Rohyr’s scholars and lawyers didn’t know that the line of descent around here is through a monarch’s brother, it stands to reason the Ferrendas weren’t aware of it either.”

Riodan fell silent for a space. When he spoke again, his eyes gleamed with excitement. “Then Malkon was betrothed and wed to Sivar on the assumption that Sivar is the heir to the Asmaran throne.”

“Exactly. Imagine his dismay when he discovered it is Lalar who is crown prince. Since he married Sivar in fane rites, he can’t dissolve their union and go after Lalar instead. Neither dare he do away with Sivar since he would likely be the first suspect, especially if he proceeds to court Lalar afterward.” Dylen grimly said, “What think you might he do to win himself the rule of Asmara?”

Riodan pursed his lips. “But how could Lalar’s death achieve that?”

Dylen glanced down once more at the sheet of parchment. “Lalar is an only child like Sivar. His heir would have been Arfen Halvan, the ranking member of the most senior cadet line of the Halvan clan. But Arfen died after a sudden illness. So the next in line to the throne was his nephew, Gavan, who was conveniently killed in a hunting accident a few months later.”

“Conveniently?”

“Gavan’s only brother died in childhood so, with his own death, the line of succession shifted once more—to the eldest son of the next highest-ranking royal descendant after Arfen.”

Riodan quickly perused the pertinent information. He looked up with a jerk, his eyes wide with consternation.

“Saints above!” he softly exclaimed. “Amir’s late consort, Sivar’s *adda*. Then Sivar is now Lalar’s heir!”

“Yes. Quite an interesting family tree I must say,” Dylen wryly remarked.

“Convolutd is more like it,” Riodan retorted. “Thank Veres mine is more straightforward.”

“You think this is convolutd?” Dylen scoffed. “It doesn’t even come close to the Essendris’ ancestral lines. I only lately discovered that most of our cousins are related to Rohyr and me twice or thrice over. Even Reijir and Keiran whom I thought were kin to us only through their sire are cousins through their *adda* as well.”

“How is that possible? He was a noble from Qindala in western Khitaira, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, but it turns out that *his* grandfather was the half-brother of our grandsire, the Ardan Joren through *their* father the Ardis Levare’s first marriage.”

Riodan closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead vexedly. “This is giving me a headache,” he muttered. After a while, he took a deep breath and looked at Dylen again. “So you suspect Malkon of engineering Gavan’s accident?”

“Gavan was reportedly gored by a swylboar after he was thrown from his steed. He

and Malkon had ridden ahead in pursuit of the beast. They were virtually alone when the accident occurred. Easy enough for Malkon to push Gavan off his steed into the swylboar's path. And if the boar didn't kill him, he could have finished off Gavan with his hunting pike, which is very similar in size and shape to a swylboar tusk." Dylen paused and frowned thoughtfully. "If you think about it, why couldn't Arfen's death have been helped along as well?"

Riodan stared. "He had a seizure," he mused aloud. "He died before the royal physician arrived. You think Malkon poisoned him?"

Dylen shrugged. "Perhaps, but that would have been an extremely big risk to take. The physician might have recognized the symptoms. The Asmarans are probably the most knowledgeable about poisons in the two continents. Besides, Arfen was known to have seizures on occasion though nothing fatal. Nay, I think it was simpler. The story goes that he was drinking with Sivar and Malkon in his apartment the night the attack happened."

"That isn't common knowledge," Riodan said, shaking his head. "Where you get your information..."

"The old fashioned way," Dylen replied. "I engage people in conversation. Sooner or later, they talk more freely than is prudent. As I was saying, the three were having a round of drinks when Arfen had his seizure. Sivar and Malkon carried him to his bed and then Sivar went out to the hall to instruct the servants to fetch the physician and also to inform Gavan of the incident. Since the attack didn't appear serious, he didn't go back at once but waited for the physician to arrive. So it was a shock when they entered the bedroom and found Arfen dead and Malkon attempting to revive him. Or so he claimed. What could have prevented him from smothering Arfen while he was alone with him?"

"And no one suspected anything?"

"Arfen was already having some difficulty breathing during the seizure. If he was suffocated, his appearance would have been in keeping with someone who'd been fighting for breath."

"Didn't they wonder why Malkon failed to call for help?" Riodan wondered.

"He said he knew the physician was on his way so he decided to exert his energy in trying to revive Arfen."

"Hmm, it sounds logical enough *if* one isn't suspicious in the first place."

"He probably counted on that," Dylen agreed. "It was likely a spur of the moment decision. The opportunity presented itself, and he snatched it."

"It must have encouraged him," Riodan guessed. "Hence Gavan's *accident* and the attempt on Laral's life."

"But he has to be very careful now lest suspicion does fall on him," Dylen said. "Talvas dislikes him and, I dare say, so does Laral. Have you noticed how cold he is toward Malkon? They seem barely on speaking terms."

Riodan nodded. "Some of our consular staff were present at the time of Sivar's binding to Malkon. They say Laral opposed the marriage so much that he absented himself from the ceremony and only briefly showed up at the nuptial dinner afterward."

"So there's already a precedent for their distance," Dylen remarked. "Well then, under the circumstances, Malkon will likely bide his time until he feels it's safe to strike again."

Chapter Eighteen

Overtures

The initial spate of educated conjectures and enlightening discoveries was followed by the business of following up on everything from the Trade Minister's promises to the various intrigues of the Asmaran court that might have some effect on the country's relations with Ylandre. It was tedious going for the most part for neither Dylen nor Riodan wished to offend their hosts by being too open in their investigations of Malkon Ferrenda.

Dylen and Riodan did not believe the Halvans completely trusted Malkon either, but the Deir was wed to one of their own and thus had to be treated with due respect. And so all inquiries about him had to be conducted as discreetly as possible, and that meant a lack of directness and therefore speed.

Fortunately, there was the exploration of a land new to both of them to alleviate some of their frustration at the slow pace of their investigation. And, if their occasional absences from the capital served to alleviate any suspicions regarding their inquisitiveness, so much the better. Not to mention it allowed them the freedom to lower their guard just that tiniest bit and thus relax enough to enjoy whatever discoveries came their way.

Such was the case during their brief sojourn in the mountaintop lakeside town of Varthe. The lake was unique in that it was the crater of an ancient extinct volcano. Looking at the tranquil deep blue basin, one found it hard to imagine that once upon a very long time ago, it had been a seething cauldron pockmarked with pools of steaming water, boiling mud and molten rock. Now the cold depths of the lake teemed with a dizzying variety of aquatic life and the slopes of the former volcano were thick with trees and other vegetation.

Varthe was a bucolic town—a perfect getaway from the frenetic rhythm of life in the cities of Asmara. It was also close enough to Shenze that one did not have to plan weeks in advance for a trip to the town. And, if one was gifted with the skill of translocating, the journey thence took no more than a few minutes.

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Riodan grinned at the sight of Dylen standing knee-deep in the murkier waters along the lakefront as he examined a fat silvery fish. Fishing was a major livelihood in Varthe, and if one came down to the lake right after daybreak, one could buy directly from the fisherfolk. Interestingly, not all the fish for sale were caught. The hardier, more prolific species were cultivated in fish pens that dotted the deeper portions of the lakeshore.

His smile widened when his companion proceeded to haggle with the fishmonger then charmed the latter into cleaning his purchases as well. Before long, he came back with a basketful of assorted fish all ready for the pot or spit as the case may be.

“Are you planning to invite all the guests at the inn to lunch?” Riodan mildly inquired.

Dylen shook his head. “Nay, only two will be cooked for our meal. I shall ask the kitchen staff to cure or smoke the rest and send them to *Adda* and *Tarqin*.”

“They’ll be greatly pleased. But will these keep?”

“The kitchen staff said they would.”

They walked up the stone path to the inn where they were billeted. It was a small and charming establishment that overlooked the lake on one side and offered a breathtaking view on the other of the valley and mountains behind.

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After leaving the fish in the capable hands of the head cook, Dylen went for a quick wash in the common bathing room on the ground floor of the premises. It was the one feature of the inn he particularly disliked, having become accustomed to the more advanced plumbing systems of the big cities where, if one was willing to spend for it, one could install modern facilities in one’s home complete with hot and cold running water and indoor commodes.

Dylen first came across the luxury when he started working at the *Seralye*. Having experienced the comforts and convenience of these modern baths, he had insisted on having one at home as soon as he and his father had earned enough to afford it.

He was quite spoiled for rougher living, Dylen ruefully conceded. Oh, he could get by with the most rudimentary of accommodations, but he had to admit, it would take much effort on his part to bear with them and that would considerably lessen his enjoyment of such a place.

Not so Riordan, he mused. His former lover had borne his share of more primitive living conditions in the course of his travels abroad during the years before he was appointed a full-fledged ambassador. Strange how they had started their acquaintance with Dylen the more travelled and less sheltered of the two.

Riordan had long left his naïveté behind. He was not as open as he used to be and indeed was inclined to reticence where once he had been quite talkative and cheerfully so. Of course, such changes came with maturity and the tempering force of experience. Dylen tried not to think about the other possible reason for Riordan’s less than sunny outlook these days—especially when a faint sense of guilt nagged at him.

He angrily shoved the thought aside, indignant that he should feel guilty about anything. But when he joined Riordan on the veranda at the back of the inn, he found it difficult to sustain his irritation.

Riordan’s face lit up with pleasure as soon as Dylen appeared. It always did. And fast on its heels came a diffidence that was uncharacteristic of a *Deir* who had a reputation for speaking and acting with confidence even in the presence of powerful foreign rulers.

When he was with Dylen, Riordan tended to walk on eggshells, his unspoken fear of resurrecting the past and triggering Dylen’s resentment over it shadowing his every word and deed. Though he had not admitted it to anyone, it left Dylen feeling uncomfortable and not a little wistful for the expressive plainspoken Riordan of old.

It was their last full day in *Varthe*. The following afternoon would find them back in *Shenze*, ready to be embroiled once more in the intricacies of *Asmaran* politics and the difficulties of a clandestine investigation of a royal in-law. They lounged on the veranda, their conversation desultory for the most part, until the innkeeper brought them the day’s mail, forwarded to them by the embassy in *Shenze*.

These were personal correspondence—official communications were conveyed by

embassy couriers. Nonetheless, Riordan's sire affixed his diplomatic insignia to his missive. And Guyon Barath was not above stamping his family's crest into the wax seal of his letter. Riordan's lips curled in displeasure at such petty posturing.

Meanwhile, Dylen read his four letters. One was from his father, another from Rohyr by way of Lassen and a third was from Gilmael updating him on minor changes he had made among personnel in their Ministry. The fourth letter caused him to stiffen and abruptly sit up.

The sudden movement attracted Riordan's attention.

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Riordan surreptitiously observed Dylen's expression then dropped his eyes to the topmost envelope on the low table between them. The sender's name was clearly visible, and he easily read it. He looked up to meet Dylen's watchful gaze. Riordan stole a peek at the adjoining sitting room, wary of eavesdroppers.

"You can speak freely," Dylen said.

Riordan sensed the sudden presence of invisible walls around them. He wondered once more about the extent of Dylen's abilities. But now was not the time or the place to probe.

"What has Sereth written that bothers you?" he asked as casually as he could muster.

Dylen looked pensive. "Not bothersome exactly," he murmured. "I am only at a loss as to how to respond to him as kindly and inoffensively as possible."

"Why? Did he ask a favor of you?"

"Nay, not a favor." Dylen suddenly rose and stood at the balustrade enclosing the veranda. He stared somewhat broodingly at the nearby mountains. Finally, he turned around and somberly regarded Riordan. "He wants a definite answer to his offer."

Riordan felt a stab of apprehension. "What offer?" he cautiously asked.

"Sereth asked me to bind to him just before we left Ylandre," Dylen quietly said.

Riordan drew in his breath sharply. He turned his face away, swallowing hard as he did. When he looked at Dylen once more, his eyes were moist and slightly reddened, but he managed a crooked smile.

"Congratulations are in order then," he ventured.

Dylen shook his head. "I didn't accept his proposal." After a moment's hesitation, he whispered, "I don't think I can."

Riordan stared at him. "Why do you say that?"

"I'm afraid," was the unexpected answer.

"Afraid of what?"

"Of entrapping myself." Dylen fell silent for a fraught while. At length, he said, "I was right all those years ago. I shouldn't have allowed myself to fall in love."

My doing, Riordan bleakly thought. He stood up and approached Dylen. "Don't let what I did ruin love for you," he softly entreated. "If taking a mate will make you happy, grab the chance and hold on."

Dylen laughed mirthlessly. "But it won't make me happy."

"Why not?"

"I don't love him." Dylen squarely faced Riordan. "I took the chance once before against all good sense and..." A sad smile curved his lips. "I'm not sure I have it in me to risk it again."

Riordan could only mutely gaze at him. Dylen's smile faded.

“Your sire was right though,” he said. “You were better off leaving me.”

Riodan’s brow furrowed. He asked, “What did he say?”

Dylen’s eyes glazed over a bit in recollection. “That if I loved you, I’d let you go,” he tonelessly said. “Your future was at stake, and a *hethar* couldn’t have given you much of one.”

An anguished groan escaped Riodan. He grabbed Dylen by the arms and gave him a little shake. “He was wrong, Dy,” he hoarsely said. “When he took me away from you, I lost the most beautiful—nay, the one perfect thing I could ever hope to know in my whole life. I lost your love.”

“Yet when we met again, it was plain you were unhappy I had sought you out,” Dylen snapped. “Deity’s blood, none of my patrons ever demeaned me the way you did that night, Rio!” He jerked back, compelling Riodan to let go. “I have reproached myself all these years for being such a fool to believe that you loved me. And an even greater fool for returning what was so obviously false.”

“It wasn’t false!” Riodan protested.

“Then why, Rio?” Dylen harshly asked. “Why did you pretend that I was no more than a mere whore you’d bought to pass the night?”

It was not Dylen’s anger or contempt that nearly broke Riodan’s resolve. Rather it was the grief and disillusionment in Dylen’s earth green eyes that almost wrenched Riodan’s courage from him. But Dylen had lived with the torment of his betrayal for far too long. Riodan owed him the truth at the very least. Even if the truth destroyed all chances of rapprochement between them.

Riodan drew a shaky breath. “It is as you accused me,” he softly explained. “Public knowledge of our affair would have seriously compromised my reputation in some circles. You know full well *Aba* is not alone in his disapproval of liaisons between well-born Deira and members of your fraternity.”

“I had no intention of revealing our affair,” Dylen bitterly retorted. “I held no hope for anything more between us save our friendship which *you* swore to uphold evermore. And I dared to trust you, Rio. I believed you. And you betrayed that trust without a second thought.”

Riodan swallowed hard. “Out of fear,” he admitted, shame roughening his voice. “I had learned to be as ambitious as *Aba*. Guyon is over proud. He would have broken our betrothal forthwith had he learned the truth.”

Dylen abruptly turned his gaze away. “You esteem him so greatly,” he muttered, unable to keep his hurt from limning his voice. “I suppose you love him as much.”

Guilt-stricken at Dylen’s obvious pain, Riodan placed a hand on his back in an awkward attempt to soothe him. Dylen stiffened but did not move away.

“I have loved only one Deir with all my heart, and he isn’t Guyon,” Riodan whispered. When Dylen glanced at him skeptically, he sadly smiled. “I did place much importance on my family’s connection to the Baraths. You probably don’t know, let alone care, but the Barath baronetcy goes back many generations. And a *serl*’s son is considered a very good catch amongst the gentry. More to the point, it was due to Guyon’s grandparents that my sire came to the Ardan Joren’s attention when he was fresh out of university.”

“Is that why he tried to betroth you to Guyon’s uncle? To pay a debt of gratitude?”

“You might say that.”

“So you declined the older but accepted the younger.” Dylen’s voice dripped with scorn. “He is more to your taste I take it.”

Riodan shook his head. “Guyon is not cruel like his uncle. When we came to be friends, I found it easy to get along with him. And I’m not proud to admit it but I chose to ignore his less admirable traits for the sake of keeping the peace.” He bit his lip then murmured, “I held some affection for Guyon, but I never loved him as I love you.”

Dylen narrowed his eyes. “Why do you speak of him in the past tense?”

“Because my regard for him vanished when he belittled you,” Riodan admitted. “I’ve realized that he isn’t worth the cost of losing you. And neither is rank nor reputation. What good is acclaim if the price for it is loneliness and a loveless union?”

“You were once more than willing to pay that price,” Dylen reminded him.

Riodan pulled his hand away as if scorched. “And you would have me pay it.” He sighed. “But, after all, what more fitting punishment could you mete one as contemptible as I?”

Dylen grimaced. “That is not—” he began to say.

But Riodan cut in. “I’ve troubled you enough. I won’t do so again. You have my word, Your Grace.”

He turned to go, shoulders drooping, his head bowed. But Dylen caught him by the elbow and drew him back. Riodan’s eyes widened in surprise.

Dylen released his arm and looked away, his cheeks coloring. Riodan’s worry gave way to wonder.

“Dy?” he murmured.

“I’m sorry, Rio,” Dylen unexpectedly said. He met Riodan’s gaze. “That was uncalled for. You took the risk and humbled yourself before me. And I would never...” He took a deep breath. “I couldn’t take the burden of such a marriage upon myself. How could I wish it on anyone else? Least of all you.”

Giving Riodan no time to ponder his words, he hurried on. “And contrary to what I have led you to believe, I don’t seek to avenge myself on you. Indeed, I weary of our rift.” He reached out a conciliatory hand. “I would put the past behind us. I would that we called each other friend again.”

Riodan stared at him in speechless amazement for several moments. Then a faint smile curved his mouth. He eagerly grasped Dylen’s hand and the possible reconciliation it signified.

“Yes!” he said, his voice light with hope. “Yes, I would like that very much.”

Chapter Nineteen

Gambit

Dylen studied Riordan curiously as the diplomat sat down to breakfast the first morning after their return from Varthe. He seemed more light-hearted than was his wont. From the moment he entered the dining hall, he exchanged unusually cheerful greetings with everyone he encountered, even reducing a newly bound aide to blushes with a bawdy quip. A quick look around told Dylen he was not the only one to notice.

Furtive glances in their direction there were aplenty for Riordan had not been seen to smile so openly or indulge in mischievous remarks since his arrival in Shenze. For that matter, his reputation in diplomatic circles was that of a witty, tactful Deir who seldom, if ever, let others see any side of him but the one carefully crafted for duty. The one exception to the rule, Dylen knew, was when a situation had to do with him, something he had heard a few observant Deira comment on before now. But obviously most assumed it was a matter of two personalities not quite getting along and therefore even fewer appeared to suspect there was more to their oft fractious encounters than that.

Riordan blithely piled his plate with glazed gammon and steamed spicy sausages, poached egg topped with a delicately seasoned sauce, richly buttered toast, sweet nut rolls and assorted South Vihandran fruit such as flavorsome golden manga, fleshy finger-shaped sunfruit, and a verdant variety of melon. Dylen's eyes widened at the rather gargantuan meal. Whence Riordan's hearty appetite this morning?

He continued to watch the ambassador over his cup of *kahvi*. He had started breakfast much earlier and could now observe his companion at his leisure. Halfway through his meal, Riordan finally noticed his intent regard. He glanced up, smiling inquiringly around a mouthful of sausage.

Dylen put his cup down and gestured to Riordan's plate. "I thought only adolescents and breeding Deira ate so much."

Riordan glanced down at his food and let out an amused huff. He took a swig of honey sweetened citrus juice then shyly beamed at Dylen.

"I do seem to have overdone it," Riordan conceded. "But if you recall, I always had a hearty appetite. Your *adda* used to warn me to slow down if I didn't want to grow to the size of a barge."

That further lifted Dylen's already raised eyebrows. Riordan avoided reminiscing about the past lest the memories stirred Dylen's volatile temper where he was concerned.

"Yes, I do recall those days," Dylen cautiously agreed. "But surely you haven't been eating thusly since then. You'd be as large as a battleship if you have."

Riordan chortled. "You're right. I haven't eaten like this in ages. I just woke up with a keen appetite, and I don't know why." He paused, his smile faltering slightly. "Or at least I do know why though it seems wicked to take pleasure in it," he murmured.

"Take pleasure in what?"

Dylen wondered as color rose in Riordan's face. The ambassador bit his lip then looked almost self-consciously around the hall before turning back to answer.

“I sent a letter to Guyon yestereve,” he quietly said. “I ended our betrothal.”

Dylen stared at him. “But it was for the sake of that betrothal that you—” He broke off and just looked at Riordan incredulously.

Riordan shook his head. “It isn’t worth it. It never was. Why should I maintain an arrangement that isn’t right for him or me?” He gazed at Dylen, his heart in his eyes. The sight nearly stole the breath from Dylen’s breast. “And it barred the way for me to ever fully make amends for the wrong I did you.”

“But what of his parents? *Your* parents? Rio, I...” Dylen trailed away, unsure just what he wanted to say.

“I haven’t felt so light and free in a long time as when I sent that letter,” Riordan said with a small smile. “It seemed the weight of all Aisen had been lifted off me. I’m just... For the first time in years, I’m actually happy, Dy.” His gaze turned earnest, almost pleading. “Won’t you, can’t you be happy for me?”

Dylen blew his breath out. After a tense moment, he reached across and covered Riordan’s hand with his own. He looked warmly at Riordan and the corners of his mouth turned up.

“I am,” he gently said. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

Riordan’s smile grew brighter, and he tightly clasped Dylen’s hand.

* * * *

A sennight later, they were invited to dinner at the palace with the Deir they suspected of being behind the recent deaths in the royal family. Malkon’s invitation came as a surprise given that the Ferrenda heir had shown no interest whatsoever in being around Dylen or Riordan, much less socializing with them. Far more worrying for Riordan was that the invitation had been initially addressed to Dylen alone. Thus, he was relieved when Dylen very politely requested that Riordan be permitted to accompany him, claiming it was an Ylandrin custom that a member of the royal family never attended a formal dinner by himself. Riordan was fairly sure no such custom existed, but he prudently kept his mouth shut.

“By the way, why did you insist I join you?” he later asked Dylen when they arrived at the palace. “Do you think something is afoot?”

“Don’t you?” Dylen countered.

Riordan nodded. “He looked at you differently during our meeting with Amir this morning.”

“As if he were amused by something.”

“Would that were the case.” Riordan frowned. “Nay, there was something more to it. One doesn’t openly look a guest over as if he were inspecting him. It wasn’t merely impolitic of him. He was disrespectful to you, Dy. I didn’t like it.”

“Neither did I,” Dylen soberly admitted. “Why think you did I invent a ridiculous custom just so you could come with me?”

They ceased talking when a palace attendant came to escort them to the dinner venue. It was one of the small dining chambers reserved for occasions when the Asmaran royals wished to entertain guests in private. Riordan was more relieved than ever that he was with Dylen when they entered the room and found Malkon not alone as they’d been led to believe but in the company of three other Deira. Somehow, he felt uncomfortable at the thought of Dylen having to deal with more than just the Ferrenda lord’s attentions.

The others were friends of his from the Terazan embassy, Malkon told them. He duly apologized for not informing them in advance that there would be other guests present. Riordan believed neither statement.

These Deira did not comport themselves like diplomats nor did they behave like upper crust folk who alone would pass as suitable company for someone as class conscious as Malkon. It was possible they really were from Teraz, but as that country had once been old Varadan's staunchest ally—its ruling family was closely related by blood and marriage to the Ferrendas to this day—he deduced that these were sympathizers of the deposed royal house of the defunct nation. He also suspected Malkon had not felt confident about meeting with them alone and thus had provided security for himself accordingly. As for the apology, Riordan set it aside for the obvious insincerity that it was.

The meal started out pleasantly enough. Conversation ran along strictly conventional lines. As Riordan expected, Malkon's so-called "friends" contributed little in the way of sparkling repartee and let him do most of the talking.

The food was surprisingly lavish for such a small dinner. Malkon obviously wanted to impress his guests with his wealth and sophistication. Riordan had to refrain from rolling his eyes several times during the course of the evening as their host took it upon himself to regale them with stories of his extensive trips abroad, conveniently forgetting that Riordan was far more travelled than he and therefore knew when his recollections were no more than tall tales.

They were just finishing the sweet course, a spiced fruit ice served with a splash of sparkling wine, when Malkon turned his full attention to Dylen. He was a handsome Deir, Riordan grudgingly admitted to himself. If one favored small blue eyes, mousy brown hair and somewhat spotty skin, he uncharitably concluded.

"I heard a most interesting rumor, Essendri-tyar," Malkon all but purred. "Is it true that you were once one of the most sought after *hethare* in Rikara?"

Riordan felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. Quickly collecting himself, he managed to remain expressionless. He glanced at Dylen. If he was startled by the less than delicate allusion to his past, the Ardan's brother did not show it either.

"It is true," he coolly said, ignoring the leers of Malkon's cohorts.

Malkon smirked. "How fascinating. And I imagine you haven't forgotten your skills. Unless, of course, you haven't put them into practice lately."

"Why this interest in Essendri-tyar's former profession?" Riordan cut in.

Malkon shrugged. "Oh, I'm merely intrigued. I've never availed of the *hethare*'s services."

"Never?" Riordan repeated in obvious disbelief.

"I have no need for paid companionship," Malkon smugly said. "Deira freely seek my bed."

"Is that what they tell you?" Dylen said, amusement limning his voice.

Malkon could not conceal the hint of annoyance in the sudden downward curve of his mouth. "But perhaps I have missed something in foregoing the company of the *hethare*," he allowed. He let his eyes rake Dylen's sleek frame more blatantly than he had earlier that morning. "And perhaps you would not be averse to educating me, eh?"

"Educating you?"

Spreading his hands expansively, Malkon smiled and said, "You are a beauty. I can see why many desired your company. I wouldn't forego a chance to benefit from your

talents.”

Before an indignant Riordan could speak, Dylen responded with a bland smile. “You enjoy being fucked within an inch of your life then?” he crudely asked.

While Riordan stared at him, Malkon gaped in shock. “I beg your pardon?” he managed to say after collecting himself.

Dylen leaned back in his chair. “Didn’t your source inform you that I was most known for that particular service? There are many Deira whose partners aren’t as endowed as they would like or who play the sword out of duty but would prefer sheathing it in truth. Which one are you?”

Riordan dabbed his lips with his napkin to cover a grin. Malkon’s expression was priceless.

“I am neither,” the Deir finally replied after an awkward silence. He recovered his composure somewhat and slyly smiled. “And surely you cultivated other skills for those like myself. I have never yet heard of a *hethar* who didn’t spread himself for his patrons’ pleasure.”

Dylen shrugged. “It is part of the profession,” he agreed.

“Sweet Veres, but you’re a cool one,” Malkon remarked admiringly. The desire in his eyes intensified to Riordan’s dismay. “So, what say you to my proposal?”

“May I remind you that Essendri-tyar retired years ago,” Riordan pointed out, barely keeping the ire out of his voice.

Malkon chuckled. “Well, surely he would consider briefly un-retiring for the sake of international goodwill.”

“Are you suggesting that our Ardan’s brother service you?” Riordan shot back, no longer troubling to hide his anger.

“Service?” Malkon said in mock horror. “Nay, I was merely inviting him for, shall we say, a night of mutual pleasure.”

About to retort, Riordan stopped when Dylen flashed him a warning look. He gritted his teeth and sat back, folding his arms in patent disapproval.

Dylen gazed at Malkon from under half-lowered lids, his mouth curving ever so slightly upward with just a trace of a pout emphasizing the lushness of his lips. It was a look that very rarely failed to beguile whoever it was bestowed on. Malkon did not prove the exception. He caught his breath and licked his lips, his eyes sweeping over Dylen’s body with even more blatant lust than before. Riordan bristled inwardly, wondering what in *heyas* Dylen thought he was doing.

Of a sudden, Dylen sweetly smiled. “I dare say you’ll have need of Prince Sivar’s attention tonight, judging from the state of your nether parts.”

His smile widened as the others all but spat out their drinks. Malkon stared incredulously at him. Dylen smoothly rose to his feet, prompting Riordan to do the same.

“Leyhar-tyar and I must retire for the night,” he said apologetically. “It’s been a long day, and we face an even longer one tomorrow.” He suddenly leaned over Malkon as he passed him, preempting whatever vituperative words the Deir might have uttered with a huskily murmured, “I will think on your suggestion. It has been a while since I last *educated* anyone.”

He swept out of the room. Riordan followed him, chancing a backward glance at Malkon as he exited the chamber. The Ferrenda heir was red-faced and looked fit to burst, as much from sexual excitement as fury if the painfully prominent bulge in his

crotch was indication of his wretched state.

Riodan hurried to catch up with Dylen. They did not talk until their carriage left the palace grounds. Riodan could not help grinning at the memory of Malkon's discomfiture.

"Malkon was on the verge of a bout of conniptions," he commented. "You've probably put him off from importuning you again."

Dylen shrugged. "Perhaps. It will depend on whether he wants my backside more than he hates my guts. No matter. I can always seduce him if necessary."

"Seduce—" Riodan's grin vanished.

"And I confess to some curiosity as to whether his arse is as untried as he claims."

"Dy! How can you jest about such a thing?" Riodan protested.

"But I'm not jesting," Dylen replied. "Sivar doesn't strike me as submissive in bed even if he's generally soft-spoken in public. Verily, I believe it's Malkon who plays the mare in their marriage, his claim to the contrary notwithstanding."

"Well, surely you're not serious about finding that out for yourself."

"And why shouldn't I be? It isn't something I haven't done before."

Riodan stared at him. "You're actually considering it?"

Dylen nodded. "We need to know what he knows. It's very easy to plumb someone's mind when he's lost in sexual pleasure. Were it not for the possibility of offending Sivar beyond repair, I would have propositioned Malkon long before this. In any case, it may still come to that if we want to discover the truth soonest."

"Saints, I hope not!"

"Here we are."

Riodan started when he realized they were at the embassy. They both alighted and entered the building. They did not speak again until they reached their quarters. Dylen courteously opened Riodan's door for him and gestured to him to enter.

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Dy—"

"Good night, Rio."

He strode off, seemingly oblivious of Riodan's anxious gaze.

Chapter Twenty

Atonement

Three-quarters of an hour later, Dylen answered the insistent knocking on his door. He had been wrestling with indecision since he returned to his room and had just determinedly snatched up his tunic again when someone rapped loudly on his door. Slinging the garment over his arm, he strode to the door and opened it. He looked in surprise at a slightly red-faced Riordan.

"May I come in?" the ambassador asked.

Dylen stepped aside to let him in, taking note that Riordan was dressed for bed in a loose shirt and drawstring trousers. He wondered why the latter had come to his room when he had never done so before. Riordan strode past him, his manner somewhat distracted. Dylen closed the door and turned to silently wait out Riordan's restless pacing.

At last, Riordan came to a stop and faced him, his expression slightly irate yet entreating at the same time.

"You were serious?" he asked. "About tugging Malkon for information?"

Dylen regarded him cautiously. "If it will make him talk," he replied. He approached Riordan and caught him by the shoulder. "You're angry. Why?"

Riordan started to pull away then stopped and looked at Dylen pleadingly. "I just can't believe that you would go so far as to use your body. You left that life behind when Rohyr recognized you. Why resort to it once more?"

"We came here for a reason," Dylen reminded him. "If taking Malkon to bed will help us find out what we need to know, then I have no qualms about doing so."

"Oh Veres..." Riordan put a hand to his forehead and rubbed it agitatedly then ran his fingers carelessly through his hair. He looked at Dylen with pain-filled eyes. "Is it so easy for you? Deity's blood, Dy, it was years before I bedded anyone after you! And even then it didn't feel right." He swallowed and lowered his eyes. "It never felt right again."

Dylen could not stop himself from asking, "What about Guyon?"

*

Riordan looked up quickly. Had there been displeasure in Dylen's voice?

"It never felt right again," he repeated. "You spoiled me for others, Dy."

Dylen gazed at him then nodded. "I suppose I should be flattered," he softly remarked. He smiled a little crookedly. "Ah, why deny it? I *am* flattered, Rio."

Riordan suddenly drew his breath in sharply, his gaze riveted on the tunic on Dylen's arm.

"I was going to—" Dylen started to say. He broke off when Riordan grabbed the garment and flung it aside.

"Please don't bed anyone out of some ridiculous sense of obligation," Riordan almost angrily begged.

Dylen looked at him thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed. "And what if I *want* to?"

Riordan dumbly stared at him. At last he muttered, "I won't object if you truly want to-to..." He sighed with resignation. "Very well, I'd best leave you to it then."

He headed for the door. But, when he reached it, he suddenly turned around, his eyes blazing with wounded disbelief, and blurted, "It's not for me to question your taste, but I never imagined you would care for the likes of Malkon Ferrenda! It beggars belief that you should want—" Riordan abruptly stopped, his cheeks flaming. "I'm sorry, I have no right to—No right at all..."

Again, he turned and started to open the door. A hand shoved it closed once more then grasped him by the shoulder, swung him around and pressed him against the cool wood. He found himself staring into Dylen's *terre verte* eyes.

"Did I say I wanted Malkon tonight?" Dylen asked, his voice warm and smooth as newly drawn milk.

Riordan almost stopped breathing. "Don't you?"

Dylen's eyes gleamed. "Do I want to pound someone into the mattress right now? Oh yes. But not offal such as that pathetic excuse for a Deir. Besides, his arse is nowhere near as enticing as yours. As I was about to say before you interrupted me, I was going to *your* room."

"My room—! But the tunic? I thought you were going back to the palace."

"My intentions would have been less obvious had anyone seen me knocking at your door at this hour. But you seem to care little for discretion coming to me dressed as you are."

Before Riordan could respond, Dylen caught him in a sweet, enticing kiss that was all about taking that first exploratory step. Riordan moaned and promptly melted into Dylen's embrace with a fervor that bespoke desire and anxiety at the same time. When Dylen gently ended their kiss, Riordan refused to end their embrace as well.

Dylen lightly licked his lips then looked closely at Riordan.

"You took *mirash*," he murmured.

Riordan faintly blushed. "Just before I came here," he admitted.

Dylen regarded him intently. "Are you certain?"

"All those years ago, I asked to be wholly yours," Riordan softly reminded him. "I never stopped wanting that. Don't deny me again, Dy."

The gleam in Dylen's eyes gave way to a purposeful glitter. In answer, he pulled Riordan back into another kiss, this one as hard and demanding, as the first had been gentle and inviting. He reached between them and roughly tugged Riordan's shirt open. Elated, Riordan returned the favor. Quickly shedding their shirts, they resumed the molten seal of their mouths, Dylen raising his hands to cup Riordan's face possessively.

Through the corner of his eyes, Riordan saw the gleam of metal on Dylen's left wrist. He broke their kiss and stared at the woven leather and beaten gold wristlet on Dylen's arm. He gripped Dylen's hand and turned it over. A small but perfect hearstfire adorned the clasp of the wristlet. Almost reverently, Riordan pressed a kiss to Dylen's wrist, savoring the feel of the gem against his lips.

Dylen cupped his face once more and pulled him into another long kiss. He began to walk Riordan backward to the bed, completely undressing him along the way. Riordan hastily followed suit.

The back of his knees hit the edge of the bed, and he fell back onto it. Dylen followed him down, purposely fitting his slim hips between Riordan's outspread thighs. Riordan gasped as their shafts slid against each other. He lifted his hips to further press their groins together.

“So eager,” Dylen murmured as he trailed kisses down Riordan’s throat.

“It’s been like a famine,” Riordan said, arching up eagerly.

Dylen chuckled. Apparently addressing Riordan’s need, he wrought a sensual path down the length of his body, leaving crimson bruises wherever he plied his lips and teeth. Riordan moaned and trembled under the onslaught but did naught to hinder him. But when Dylen nibbled the tender skin where leg met groin, he reflexively tried to turn away, so acute were the sensations.

Laughing softly, Dylen held his hips down, saying, “I see you’re still sensitive here. What about here?”

He ran his tongue down Riordan’s shaft to the tender sac beneath. Riordan bit back a cry as Dylen plied his tongue on the soft pouch.

“Dy, please—!”

He sighed with relief when Dylen ceased the maddening caress only to cry out once more when Dylen took his shaft into his mouth. This time there was to be no respite for Dylen held his legs firmly apart while he sucked Riordan to ecstasy with a fierce possessiveness that left Riordan dizzy with shocked joy.

The tight coil of pressure in Riordan’s belly threatened to unravel. He frantically clutched Dylen’s shoulders. “Not like this,” he panted. “Please—inside me.”

Dylen released him and the pressure subsided somewhat. Riordan closed his eyes and breathed deeply to reduce it further. He became dimly aware of Dylen reaching for the bedside table and heard the slide of a drawer opening followed by the sound of a stopper being eased out. He opened his eyes quickly and stared as Dylen poured oil into his palm. Riordan raised his knees in tacit submission.

He watched Dylen generously anoint his shaft, licking his lips in anticipation of finally sheathing this Deir he adored once more. But Dylen did not simply shove his length into him as he expected. Instead, he reached between Riordan’s legs and caressed the cleft between his buttocks before slipping a slippery finger into him.

Riordan willed himself to relax. He let out a shaky breath as Dylen’s finger pressed deep into him, stroking the satiny walls within. Arousal mounted again, and he found himself even more sensitive to sensation—almost excruciatingly so. The feeling grew sharper when Dylen inserted more fingers into him.

“Ah, don’t make me wait,” he breathlessly said.

Dylen hesitated. Riordan felt inexplicably untried. “How long?”

Riordan smiled. “Since you last had me.”

“But I thought you—” Dylen stared at him. “Not even Guyon?” He exhaled disbelievingly when Riordan shook his head. “I must ready you more then,” he murmured.

He repeatedly pushed his fingers in, gingerly twisting them to loosen up the snug passage. Riordan gasped at the exquisite incursions.

“Nay!” he moaned, parting his upraised knees in wanton invitation. “Have me now!”

Riordan saw Dylen force himself not to look down, obviously fearing the sight of his fingers steadily breaching Riordan would wrench all restraint from him. Riordan deliberately contracted his muscles around Dylen’s fingers. Dylen shuddered and fought for control.

“Please, Dy,” Riordan begged. “I want you inside me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Dylen protested.

“I don’t care,” Riordan insisted. Raising himself up on an elbow, he reached down for

Dylen's hand and pulled his fingers out. Lying back, he wrapped his legs around Dylen's waist and insistently drew him down until Dylen's straining length slid into the cleft of his backside and nudged the snug opening between. "I just want to feel you again!"

*

"Sweet Veres!" Dylen groaned as the head of his shaft slipped into intoxicating softness and warmth.

Even for a Deir of his experience, the sensation was tempting beyond resistance, especially after his lengthy bout of abstinence from copulation. Trembling with the effort to master himself just that one bit longer, he slowly eased in until he was fully seated inside Riodan. Drawing a shaky breath, he began to thrust into him, gently at first lest he unwittingly abraded long untouched flesh.

Riodan hissed with each inward stroke. He raised shining eyes to Dylen. "It's been too long," he whispered. "I missed this so much."

Dylen gazed at him in wonder. "I can't believe Guyon did not demand that you yield to him," he said, every thrust further confirmation of Riodan's long abstention from playing the mare.

"He did," Riodan said, half sobbing with delight with each thrust. "But I refused. I told him I wouldn't yield to anyone outside of the marriage bed." He tightened his legs around Dylen's waist. "Except you, Dy. I am yours when you want me, however you want me, whether you want me or not."

His control already under siege from the sheer bliss of being inside Riodan once more, Dylen felt it shatter completely at the other's admission. Restraint and method were abruptly abandoned, and he gave himself over to his desire.

He kept his promise and, quickening the forward lunge of his hips, drove forcefully into Riodan until the bed for all its size and sturdiness was virtually shaking beneath them. Trying to keep his release back longer, he saw Riodan's hand creep down to touch his shaft as it repeatedly entered him. Joy and gratitude glowed in Riodan's eyes as he felt the evidence of their bodies' first union after so many years.

Feeling his control wear thin, Dylen growled, "Touch yourself."

Riodan obeyed and grasping his shaft, started to pump it. He gasped when Dylen wrapped his fingers around his hand so that they stroked Riodan's shaft together. The intimacy of it all proved too much for Riodan. Milky semen covered their fingers and stippled his belly as nigh shattering pleasure ran amuck within him.

An instant later, Dylen drove hard and deep into him, gasping harshly as he spent himself.

*

Riodan caught his breath at the no longer familiar sensation of warm seed spilling inside him. Tears threatened to flow, and he pulled Dylen down into a rough kiss before he made a maudlin spectacle of himself.

Dylen lingered a while inside him before gently withdrawing. Glancing down at the pearlescent streaks on Riodan's rippled abdomen, he leaned down and licked the taut flesh clean. Riodan moaned at the sensual gesture.

When Dylen lay down beside him, he hurried into his embrace and nestled his head on a hard shoulder. He wrapped his arms around Dylen, savoring the closeness as intensely as he had their bodies' coupling.

At length, he lazily draped a leg across Dylen's thighs. Feeling the nudge of Dylen's

stirring shaft against his limb, he felt his lust swell once more. One coupling was utterly inadequate to make up for the long years of loneliness. He lifted his head and looked at Dylen.

When Dylen met his gaze he hopefully asked, "Has the *mirash* taken effect yet?"

Dylen chuckled. "Let me wash up," he huskily said, sliding out of Riordan's arms and off the bed.

Riordan watched him enter the bathing chamber. Of a sudden, impatience struck him hard and he lay on his back, spread his legs and reached behind his seed sac to finger the tiny orifice it concealed. Images of Dylen taking him thusly spurred him on, and he continued to caress himself, initiating the process that would enable him to receive Dylen genitally. So rapt was he in the pleasurable exercise of turning himself that he did not notice when Dylen came out of the other room.

*

Dylen paused to watch Riordan. The young ambassador made a spectacularly sensual sight as, head thrown back and legs splayed, he stroked himself to readiness. Dylen clenched his hands and willed his lust to abate lest he went and sank himself into Riordan with little preamble.

He walked to the bed and, without a word, drew Riordan's hand away. Riordan opened his eyes and stared up at him, eyes dazed with desire but questioning nonetheless. Dylen did not respond.

Still silent he pushed Riordan's thighs up and spread them farther. For a moment, he locked gazes with Riordan. He dropped his eyes to the earthy delights before him. Riordan's seed pouch had contracted, exposing his sheath completely. He dipped his head and sealed his mouth to the moist lips of the rosy opening.

Riordan's shocked gasp was soon followed by a spate of moans and soft cries as Dylen plied his tongue on the tiny folds that guarded the sensitive channel within, sucking the delicate flesh ever so gently now and then. When the entrance was slick and ready for penetration, he pressed his tongue inside to taste deeply of his lover's sweetness. Riordan almost reared then, but Dylen held him down and continued to breach him thusly.

Dylen felt Riordan's fingers tangle distractedly in his hair. Judging from his alternating attempts to push up and pull away, it seemed Riordan was torn between the instinct to escape the much too intense sensation and the desire for more of it. Desire apparently won out, and Dylen smirked when Riordan urgently pressed himself against the tongue that speared him. When Riordan's moans evolved into helpless sobs, Dylen rose above him and wedged his hips between his thighs. Leaning down, he kissed Riordan as he pushed into him, tearing the vestigial membrane inside in one smooth slide.

He heard Riordan's startled whimper as he was thoroughly filled, and it seemed the sweetest sound to him, heady proof that Riordan had truly saved the taking of every vestige of his innocence for Dylen. He almost brusquely dipped his tongue into Riordan's mouth in possessive mimicry of his shaft's repeated ingress into Riordan's body.

Riordan held tight to him, curling one leg behind Dylen's thighs to urge him ever more deeply into him. He moaned Dylen's name in between kisses, sometimes crying out as he was steadily cleaved, visibly overcome by the exquisite frictional contact between hard invading flesh and soft sensitized skin. And still Dylen maintained a measured pace, keeping them both just on the edge of completion, and thus heightened every rapturous

sensation between them.

“Dy, Dy, finish it,” Riordan shamelessly begged. “Please, *ariad*, no more, no more. Ah, I’ll scream the embassy down if you don’t!”

Dylen cut him off with a hard kiss, relishing Riordan’s strangled cry as he was lifted up to straddle Dylen’s lap, deepening his impalement. Hardly giving Riordan time to adjust to the new position, Dylen wrapped his fingers around the column of flesh trapped between them.

“You’ll scream anyway,” he roughly said as he boldly stroked Riordan’s shaft and bucked up into him. “And I don’t care if the entire city knows I’m the reason for it. Now ride me, Rio. Ride me hard.”

Instinct overriding all thought and any remaining reservations, Riordan obeyed. They moved together in an act as ancient as Aisen itself, and the world without seemed to lose substance as they focused entirely on achieving ultimate bodily union and the incomparable ecstasy that came with it.

Riordan shattered first, his whole body shuddering with the force of his orgasm. His sobbing cries resounded in the chamber. Dylen watched him keenly, mesmerized by his utter collapse.

The sight of Riordan’s undoing wrecked his own self-control, and he finally gave in to his body’s plea for release. It was no less explosive, and he ground himself upward into Riordan and spilled his seed into him in what felt like an endless stream. He rasped out Riordan’s name with the last of his spending, holding Riordan in an embrace so hot and tight, one would have thought he was trying to fuse their very bodies together.

Long minutes passed before Riordan lifted his head from Dylen’s shoulder to look at him with gleaming eyes.

“I felt it,” he whispered. “The heat in my belly—had I not taken *mirash*...”

“Yes, a child,” Dylen murmured.

“Your child,” Riordan said with wonder. “And mine. I almost wish—”

“Don’t say it,” Dylen interrupted, shaking his head. “It’s not the time or place. Not yet.”

Riordan gazed at him searchingly. At length, he cupped Dylen’s face in his hands with reverence and softly said, “I love you. While I have life and breath, I will always love you.”

Dylen sealed his mouth to Riordan’s in as tender a kiss as he could muster, savoring the taste and texture of his lover’s lips as if he had never known them before. Without breaking the kiss, Dylen turned them over and eased him down beside him, slipping from Riordan’s body as he did. For several minutes more, they simply held each other, their lips never parting for long.

“Have me again,” Riordan pleaded. “Have me all night.”

Dylen smoothed his hand possessively down Riordan’s back. “With pleasure.”

* * * *

He would be unable to sit down for long tomorrow, even on the softest of cushions, Riordan thought as hard flesh plowed into him over and again. His sheath was deliciously raw from its repeated ravaging, which explained why he was on his knees and his face half buried in a pillow while Dylen made good use of his upraised arse. Saints, but Dylen was indefatigable!

Not that Riodan wanted a reprieve from his ravishment. Not when it was Dylen who ravished him with a concupiscence that hinted at deep-rooted affection the former *hethar* had not yet admitted harboring for him still. If Dylen would not say the words, Riodan would happily settle for what his body communicated to him.

He cried out hoarsely when completion overtook him once more then groaned with pleasure as liquid warmth filled him. Fighting for breath, he swiftly reached behind to stop Dylen from withdrawing from him.

“Stay,” he breathlessly said, peering over his shoulder at Dylen. Saints, but how beautiful he looked with his raven locks tousled just so, his cheeks flushed, and lips enticingly swollen. And his eyes agleam with appreciation and—dare he hope?—affection.

“You’ll be sore,” Dylen quietly warned him as he carefully eased them both down on their sides. He pulled Riodan closer into the curve of his body to keep his shaft securely embedded up Riodan’s backside.

Riodan wriggled back, relishing the continued presence of Dylen’s flesh inside him. “I don’t particularly care,” he said, tiredly taking Dylen’s arm and wrapping it around his waist. Much as he yearned for them to continue making love, his body refused to cooperate. “I just want to feel you... after so long,” he drowsily added.

“You weren’t jesting when you said all night,” Dylen murmured, kissing Riodan’s shoulder.

Riodan shivered at the sweet caress, but sleep beckoned more insistently. “All morning, too, if you like,” he mumbled, exhaustion finally blunting the sharp edge of desire.

“I’ll take your word for it,” was the last thing he heard before he drifted into slumber.

Chapter Twenty-One

Setback

Riodan studied the coffered ceiling as he lay amidst the stained and crumpled sheets of Dylen's bed. Saints above, but his body ached. As did his sheath. And as for his arse... He closed his eyes as he remembered the reasons for his present discomfort. And his deep felicity.

He had awakened ever so slowly to the sensation of flesh sliding into him from behind. Full awareness came when his stirring shaft was clasped and stroked until it was hard and throbbing with need. He opened his mouth, but nothing intelligible came out, and he could only gasp and moan as Dylen slowly and maddeningly wrung another climax out of him.

This time, he winced when Dylen pulled out of him afterward. Like it or not, there was a limit to what his body could take, and he had finally reached it.

He listened to the gush of water from the bathing chamber. From the sound of it, the tub was almost full. He turned his head to see Dylen emerge from the other room.

Dylen reached a hand to him, saying, "Come, a hot bath will do you good."

Riodan grasped his hand and, groaning, sat up. "Only if you join me." He did not let go of Dylen's hand as he slipped off the bed. "I dare say it would do you good as well after riding me all night."

A smiled curved Dylen's lips. "I do hope I didn't wear you out overmuch. It would be a pity."

Riodan's eyes widened. "A pity? Why?"

Dylen only chuckled and pulled him toward the bathing room. Chafing a little at the lack of an answer, Riodan promptly set it aside when Dylen settled in the large tub of steaming water and motioned to him to join him. He quickly did so, settling between Dylen's legs and leaning back against him.

Memories of their first bath together assailed him, and he closed his eyes in regret. How many lazy morning soaks would they have shared all these years if he had only been braver and true to his heart's wishes? He turned around and kissed Dylen briefly before reaching for the soap. Determined to make the most of this intimate interlude, he lathered Dylen's body, relishing the feel of every plane and contour of his lover's body under his palms and fingers.

Perhaps Dylen understood what drove him for he did not question him but returned the favor, massaging the aches and kinks out of Riodan's body even as he soaped him. Riodan closed his eyes when Dylen gently cleansed him of all remnants of his semen. He was sore, but the intimacy of the gesture more than offset his discomfort.

He returned to his apartment afterward to dress for the day, taking care to avoid being observed leaving Dylen's rooms by any embassy personnel. He might not mind being romantically linked to Dylen in staff gossip, but the same could not be said for Dylen. Not at the moment. It simply was too soon to define just what it was they were to each other.

They met in the dining hall, studiously ignoring the curiosity of the other diners as to why they were rather late this morning, and proceeded to discuss their respective schedules over breakfast.

"I was promised the contract renewals would be approved today," Riordan said. "I think I'll stay close to Dimas to ensure he keeps to our agreement. What about you?"

"I shall visit the craftworkers market this morning," Dylen replied. "The chair I ordered for *Adda* is ready to be picked up. Afterwards..." He pushed a note across the table to Riordan. "This arrived while I was waiting for you. Malkon invited me to have lunch with him. In his apartment. It seems his interest in me got the better of his pique over last night."

Riordan stared at him in consternation. "Dy, you can't mean to—"

Dylen shook his head. "We'll do no more than talk and dine. It isn't easy for me either, Rio," he somberly said. "It never was even when it was part of my duties as a *hethar*. And it became harder after I met you."

Riordan was abashed. "I'm sorry. What I said was uncalled for."

"Perhaps," Dylen said. He reached for Riordan's hand and gave it a squeeze. "But the reason for saying it was not."

* * * *

Dylen returned to the embassy after his visit to the craftworkers market to change into more proper attire for his lunch appointment. As he entered the lobby on his way out once more, he saw a Deir in royal livery talking to one of the embassy aides. When the aide saw him, he informed the messenger of Dylen's arrival. The Deir hastened over and, after uttering the usual courtesies, handed Dylen a folded sheet of parchment, the insignia of the crown prince stamped on its wax seal.

"His Highness Prince Laral desires that you and Ambassador Leyhar join him for high tea," the messenger said as Dylen broke the seal and unfolded the sheet. "He said it is very important that you come."

"Did he say why?" Dylen asked, swiftly reading the short note.

The messenger shook his head. And then he hesitantly said, "But he seemed quite perturbed when he gave me this letter to deliver."

Dylen frowned then handed the invitation to the waiting aide. "Please make sure that Ambassador Leyhar is informed of this. Tell him I will return for him."

He walked out of the building and boarded the waiting carriage outside. He arrived at the palace just as the midday chimes sounded.

Dylen proceeded to the visitors' audience hall whence he would be fetched and conducted to Malkon's apartment. To his annoyance, several minutes passed by, and no attendant came for him. *Trust that pompous ass not to be considerate of other folks' schedules*, he sourly thought.

A rather large group of Deira entered the hall—diplomatic folk it appeared from the clasps on their mantles. Dylen recognized three of them from the dinner last night. Terazan embassy people then. He idly wondered who they were meeting with and why. He could not help feeling indignant, however, when they were met by an attendant just minutes after their arrival. Dylen watched them leave the hall then decided he had waited long enough.

Just as he started for one of the stewards to inquire about Malkon's tardiness, a Deir

seemed to appear out of nowhere and fell in step with him. Dylen stopped and looked inquiringly at Talvas Halvan *il* Moran, Captain of the Guard. Amir's bastard son carried himself with the dignity of a scion of the Royal House and the martial grace of a seasoned warrior.

"You have an appointment with Lord Malkon, *Dyhar*?" Talvas ventured.

"At his invitation, yes," Dylen replied.

"Ah! Well then, I hope you enjoy yourself. That is, if Lord Malkon is fit to entertain anyone."

Dylen regarded Talvas more closely. "Is there anything I should be aware of, Captain?" he asked.

Talvas's smile was faint and humorless. "Only that little more than an hour ago, Prince Lalar visited Lord Malkon in his quarters and they appeared to argue about something."

"I see. Do you know what it was they argued about?"

"I only gathered that they did because they raised their voices enough to be audible in the hallway outside. But His Highness was obviously displeased about something when he came out of Lord Malkon's apartment. And, as for His Grace, I have not seen him so white of face and shaking quite badly to boot."

"I wonder what could have frightened him so," Dylen mused out loud.

Unexpectedly, Talvas said, "Then you haven't spoken yet with Ambassador Leyhar?"

"About what?"

"This morning's events at the Ministry of Trade." Talvas' expression turned grim. "Minister Dimas killed himself." Dylen stared at him in shock. "He was discovered by Leyhar-tyar," the captain added.

"Holy Veres," Dylen murmured. "Why? Do you know why?"

"He left a letter for Prince Lalar. I don't know its contents, but judging from Lalar's reaction afterward, I have my suspicions."

Dylen pursed his lips, deeply disturbed by Talvas' news. "What do you suspect, Talvas? Or is it who?"

"I'd rather not say until I have more information. But I think you know this touches quite closely on the royal family." Talvas paused. "And surely you can guess Lalar's reasons for wishing to meet with you this afternoon."

An attendant suddenly approached Dylen. He was breathless and looked quite harried. "Essendri-*dyhar*?" he addressed Dylen. "His Grace Lord Malkon begs your pardon for keeping you waiting." He paused and glanced at Talvas somewhat nervously.

"A good day to you, *Dyhar*," Talvas courteously murmured. With a slight bow, he strode away.

Dylen turned his full attention to the attendant. After a short while, he murmured an appropriate reply to the Deir. As the latter hurried off, he quickly looked around the hall for Talvas. Finding the Captain, he briefly dipped his chin to him then turned on his heel and left the hall.

* * * *

Riodan was tempted to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't imagining things. He frowned at the embassy staffer who was his acting aide. The young Deir paled, aware he

had displeased the ambassador but not quite sure how.

“Why did you bring him here?” Riordan softly demanded, briefly eyeing the visitor who was currently ensconced on the couch in his bedroom sitting area. “You know our private quarters are off limits to non-embassy personnel.”

The aide nodded. “Yes, Your Excellency, but I thought it was permissible to let him in since he’s your intended.”

“*Was* my intended,” Riordan corrected him. “And just how did you know who he is? Are you acquainted with Barath-tyar?”

The aide gulped. “Nay, I have never met him. But he showed me your latest letter to him. And-and you wear matching earrings.” He stopped abruptly upon noticing that Riordan no longer bore his betrothal earring but had reverted to the plain milkstone set in ley-silver that had identified his standing in society before his betrothal. “That is, you used to wear...” The Deir said anxiously, “I’m so sorry, *Dyhar*! I—I didn’t realize— Shall I show him out?”

Riordan sighed. Taking pity on the hapless aide, he said, “Nay, I might as well speak with him and find out why he has come. Fetch me some food—bread and cheese will do and a cup of *kahvi*, no milk. I’ve had naught to eat since breakfast. Then stay close by. I expect I will need you to escort him out of here before too long.”

“Yes, *Dyhar*.”

Riordan scowled then entered his suite. He had arrived back at the embassy following a most distressful day at the Ministry of Trade. After spending the past few days alternately cajoling and bullying Dimas into promising that the trade contracts would finally be ready, the last thing he’d expected when he arrived at the Minister’s office was to find Dimas hanging from one of the rafters. No one at the Ministry, not even his adjutant, had had any inkling of tragedy in the offing. Dimas’ mood had seemed as usual that morn, they informed him.

Adding to the bewilderment over his suicide had been the promised contract approvals all signed and neatly stacked on his desk. It appeared Dimas had hanged himself after preparing the documents.

Riordan had found a sealed letter addressed to Prince Lalar between two of the documents. Suspecting Dimas had wanted to ensure that it would reach its intended recipient, Riordan ordered several ministry guards to escort the adjutant he’d charged with delivering the missive to Lalar. Having done what he could, Riordan took the documents he had come for and returned to the embassy, shaken by Dimas’ death and angered at whatever had driven the Deir to end his life.

His mood could hardly be improved by the unexpected and unwelcome appearance of his former fiancé. Even more annoying, Guyon had used their betrothal—the betrothal Riordan had broken just a week past—to get the embassy staffers to give him special treatment. Riordan decided the entire staff would need a severe lecture on the impropriety not to mention dangers of laxness with visitors to the embassy.

Guyon stood up, an expectant smile curving his mouth. But Riordan evaded his attempt to pull him into a hug. He faced his erstwhile intended with a discouraging scowl.

“Why are you here?” he tersely asked.

Taken aback by Riordan’s curtness, Guyon gaped at him for several seconds. Riordan rolled his eyes and said, “I don’t have much time, Guyon. I repeat, why are you here?”

Guyon recovered himself and answered, “I received your letter regarding our

betrothal.”

“Well, what about it? Was there anything that wasn’t clear to you?”

“Oh, it was clear enough. Which is why I came here soonest. To ask you to reconsider. I shouldn’t want your recklessness to be cause for regret later on.”

“I beg your pardon?” Riordan slowly said.

“You should know better, Rio,” Guyon chided. “It isn’t wise to make such an important decision in haste.”

Riordan stared at him incredulously. Had this Deir he had almost bound himself to always been such a thickhead? He shook his head in exasperation. “Guyon—”

Guyon quickly cut him off. “Look, I understand your fascination with Dylen Essendri. He was the first Deir you’d ever bedded. And he’s certainly an exotic creature even to this day. But, Rio, you deserve a mate who is your equal in all ways.”

“My equal,” Riordan repeated.

“But of course! You need someone who can match you in name, education and social standing,” Guyon asserted. “Someone with an unblemished background whom you can openly and proudly talk about.”

“Meaning you,” Dylen wryly said.

Guyon made a deprecating gesture. “Well, you have to admit, you won’t ever have to worry about being dished scandal-broth with me. And you need never fear stumbling across who knows how many Deira who’ve been on intimate terms with your mate or, worse, by-blows coming out of the woodwork to beg financial support of him.”

Riordan scowled at the all too obvious allusions to Dylen. About to make a scathing retort, he noticed the quick sidelong glance Guyon directed toward the door. The corners of his mouth then quirked upward in the beginnings of a smile. Riordan apprehensively turned his head and saw Dylen leaning slightly against the doorframe with his arms folded, his face devoid of all expression. But there was no doubt that he had heard Guyon’s every word. As Guyon had intended him to hear, Riordan knew from the satisfied smirk on Guyon’s face.

Forcing down the impulse to punch his former betrothed, he gestured to Dylen to enter. Dylen complied.

“You heard about Dimas?” Riordan asked.

Dylen grimly nodded. “Talvas told me when I arrived at the palace.” He regarded Riordan with some concern. “I hope you weren’t overly upset at being the one to discover him.

Riordan swallowed. “It was unpleasant,” he muttered. “What about your meeting with Malkon? Did you learn anything?”

“Nay, he suddenly begged off.”

“But he’s the one who asked you to join him,” Riordan said in surprise.

Guyon snidely suggested, “Perhaps he realized he preferred the company of Deira more alike to him in station.”

Riordan opened his mouth to rebuke him, but Dylen acted as if he had not heard and interposed himself between Riordan and Guyon, deliberately turning his back on the latter. He dropped his voice to a confidential murmur, making it clear that Guyon was not privy to what he had to say to Riordan. Following his lead, Riordan ignored Guyon’s aggrieved reaction and drew Dylen a little farther away.

Dylen said, “Talvas told me Malkon had a heated argument with Loral just before

midday.”

Riodan frowned. “Not Sivar?”

“Nay, Lalar went to Malkon’s apartment and demanded they talk. Those outside heard raised voices after a while, and when Lalar came out, he was obviously angry. As for Malkon, he was ashen and all a-tremble. He started to come after Lalar but retreated back into his quarters when he saw there were other folk outside.”

“Saints, what did they quarrel about, I wonder?” Riodan’s eyes narrowed. “Think you it had to do with Dimas’ death?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Dylen added in a normal voice, “In any case, we mustn’t keep the prince waiting. I shall meet you at the palace.” He briefly tilted his head in Guyon’s direction. “You’d best finish your business soonest.”

He strode out of the room without so much as a glance at Guyon. The Deir stared after him in self-righteous dudgeon then swung around to confront Riodan. But Riodan busied himself dressing more formally, donning his court tunic and pulling on his dress boots. Guyon stubbornly sought his attention nonetheless.

“You can’t let him get away with—”

“I have no time to talk,” Riodan curtly said. “Prince Lalar awaits us.”

Guyon tried again. “But, Rio, he—”

Riodan cut him off with a brusque, “You must return to Ylandre at once. I’m on official business and can’t entertain you.”

“Not until that insolent cur has been put in his place!” Guyon shrilly declared.

“Watch your tongue, Guyon,” Riodan snarled. “It is the Ardan’s brother you slander.”

Stunned by Riodan’s reaction, Guyon whined, “But he insulted me!”

“How?”

“He didn’t greet me!”

“You’re not a part of the consular team and furthermore got in here on a falsehood,” Riodan icily pointed out. “Dylen is under no obligation to acknowledge you, speak to you or even look at you.”

“You defend him?” Guyon said disbelievingly.

“Yes. Oh, and by the way,” Riodan maliciously added. “I slept with him.”

Stupefaction rendered Guyon speechless for several seconds. “You-you what?” he sputtered.

“He’s as potent and well-endowed as I remember,” Riodan remarked with a pleased grin. “I can still feel him inside me. Indeed, I haven’t been able to sit down properly all day. But that’s not surprising given that he had me several times last night and again this morn.”

“You gave him what should have been mine?” Guyon shouted.

“Nay, I gave him what has always been his,” Riodan retorted. “I was his leman, Guyon.” He smiled broadly at Guyon’s horrified expression. “It was he who deflowered me and taught me all there is to know about coupling.”

Before Guyon could muster a reply. Riodan turned on his heel and left him standing in the middle of the room, pop-eyed and mouth agape. He saw his aide coming down the hallway bearing a tray of his requested food.

“Make certain Barath-tyar leaves Shenze forthwith,” he instructed the Deir, taking the tray from him. “Oh, and inform the necessary parties that we are no longer betrothed.

I don't want him using that excuse to show up here again."

Riodan reentered the apartment, stalking past Guyon with nary a glance or word. He settled himself at the small dining table in one corner of the sitting area and set to consuming his simple meal. Biting deeply into a warm slice of thickly buttered bread, he listened to Guyon's protests as he was politely but firmly ushered out. The corners of his mouth tilted slightly upward at this small blessing in the midst of tragedy, uncertainty and potential peril.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Offensive

He found Dylen waiting at the main terrace from which several stone paths branched out to various sections of the palace gardens. Laral's personal pavilion was at the far end of the east section, and they would take the right most path to reach it. Riordan dismissed the attendant who had conducted him thence, briefly explaining that he needed to discuss something with Dylen in private.

But, almost as soon as Riordan approached him, Dylen turned to step off the terrace and onto the path. Riordan caught him by the wrist and pulled him back.

"We have to talk," he said.

Dylen's face was unreadable. "There is nothing to talk about."

"Guyon—"

"Was right."

"Nay!" Riordan protested. "Nothing he has, not even all the wealth and power in Aisen, did he possess them, could make him right. It's you I want, Dylen. It's you I love."

"Being a king's brother does not erase my past, Rio," Dylen pointed out.

"Your past?" Riordan huffed in frustration. "Veres almighty, Dy, I lived with you for a year, waiting for you to come home to me, knowing you might have taken one or all of your guests to bed before you returned to ours! It didn't bother me then, so why should it bother me now?"

A glimmer of emotion showed in Dylen's eyes. "You turned your back on me because of it," he dryly reminded Riordan.

"In my idiocy, I feared it would hinder me in my profession, but I never felt repugnance for what you did." Riordan spoke earnestly. "You likely don't believe me but even were you not Rohyr's brother, I still would have sought you when I returned from Tehara, *Aba's* will be damned," He gripped Dylen's wrist pleadingly. "I regretted what I did as soon as you left that night, but I was still ruled by ambition, and so I let you go. But the contempt you showed me then—it haunted me all my years in Tehara. Yet I couldn't forget you; couldn't stop wanting you. I would have asked your forgiveness on bended knee and begged you to give me a second chance."

"But you didn't," Dylen countered. "Not when we met again and not in all the time since. You didn't even break your betrothal to Guyon."

Riordan looked down, his cheeks flushing. "I would have done it had there been even the faintest hope of reconciling with you," he said, his voice hushed. "But you were so distant, so cold. Even when you dealt kindly with me, there was no warmth in you. I tried so hard, Dy. But you put a wall between us that I couldn't scale or breach. I came to believe that you loathed me. Worse, that you no longer cared. Without the certitude of your love, I had neither the courage nor the strength to cope with the consequences of breaking the engagement." He looked up shamefaced. "There, I said it. I'm a coward and a weakling. You have every right to detest me after all."

He held his breath when Dylen did not reply but looked at him uncertainly. At length, Dylen's lips tightened, and he averted his gaze.

"I tried to stop," he whispered. "I failed."

Riodan swallowed hard. His grip on Dylen's wrist turned into a caress as he slid his hand into Dylen's and laced their fingers together.

"Tried to stop...?" he anxiously probed.

Dylen opened his mouth to reply. But the palace chimes suddenly tolled the time, startling them into awareness of their surroundings. Riodan swore under his breath at the untimely interruption.

"We have to hurry," Dylen said. "We're late."

"Very late," Riodan reluctantly agreed.

They hastened down the garden path and walked as rapidly as they could toward Laral's pavilion.

* * * *

"Strange," Riodan murmured as they neared the fairly ornate structure. "Where are the guards, the servants?"

"Perhaps Laral ordered them to be discreet and—" Dylen started to say. He stopped when the sounds of clashing metal reached them. They glanced at each other then raced for the entrance.

"Holy Veres!" Riodan blurted. He stared in shock at the sight before them.

Bodies littered the floor and slumped against the walls, some feebly moving, others deathly still. All were garbed in royal livery. Their assailants however were attired in Ylandrin uniform. Unaware of the newcomers, they stood around watching the last Asmaran standing, their faces smug.

Laral still battled on, fending off two attackers. But he clutched his side and blood seeped between his fingers. Before either Dylen or Riodan could act, Laral uttered a curse as his sword was struck from his hand. The Deir behind him lashed out at his legs, and the prince fell heavily to his knees.

The soldier in front of him laughed and jeered, "Tired so soon, O Prince? And here I thought we'd get more sport out of you!" He raised his sword and started to bring it down on his helpless victim.

The Deir stopped in mid swing. He dropped his sword, his mouth open in a soundless cry. He toppled over, a carving knife embedded in his back. His comrades whirled around in shock just in time to bear the brunt of Dylen and Riodan's charge. Once more, the sound of swords meeting in combat rang through the pavilion.

Taking advantage of his guard's momentary inattention, Laral grabbed the sword that would have decapitated him and swung it across the Deir's legs, hewing them from under him. He staggered to his feet and rejoined the fray.

Riodan caught sight of a large dinner gong at one side of the room. Realizing they were seriously outnumbered and Laral badly wounded at that, he slew his opponent and dashed toward the gong. But more assassins blocked his way. Riodan grabbed a metal pitcher from atop a nearby table and flung it with all his might at the gong. The resulting clang was deafening and discordant, startling the other combatants into brief immobility. Riodan barged past his distracted adversaries and reached the gong. He managed to strike it a second time before he was forced to engage the enemy once more.

His effort was not in vain. In a matter of minutes, a commotion outside heralded the arrival of more palace guards. Talvas burst into the pavilion, his warriors right behind him. For a moment, they stared in some confusion at the sight of the Ylandrin king's brother and the Ylandrin ambassador defending their crown prince from Ylandrin soldiers. Then Dylen ran his opponent through, and all confusion evaporated. Talvas led his people into the fray.

With the arrival of reinforcements, the tide swiftly turned. The ambush turned into a rout for its initiators save that there was no disorderly retreat for them. The would-be assassins fought tooth and nail to escape or die in the trying. Talvas obliged them and led his people in their slaughter. By the time the fighting ended, only one assassin remained to tell the tale of his people's defeat. He was subdued and taken aside to await questioning.

*

Before too long, the royal physician arrived with his assistants. Dylen helped Laral to one of the benches and made him sit down. He summoned the physician and waited while the Deir examined and then bound the prince's wound.

"Your tardiness saved the day," Laral told him with a pinched smile when the physician was done. "Had you arrived on time, you would have been caught in the ambush."

"Yet it astounds me that they didn't realize you were waiting for others. It was quite obvious that you had guests." Dylen gestured toward the dining table and the shambles of what had been place settings for three Deira.

Laral gingerly shifted his position to a more comfortable one. "Let's just be grateful for their limited powers of observation."

Dylen nodded then looked about the pavilion for Riordan. He saw him several paces away helping check for survivors from the first attack. Judging from his expression, there were not that many, especially among the defenseless servants. His mouth tightening in anger, Dylen did not wait for permission from Laral but stalked up to the sole prisoner and grabbed him by the collar. He slammed the Deir against one of the wrought iron posts from which lanterns hung.

"You're not Ylandrin," he growled. "Speak! Who do you serve, dog?"

The Deir struggled at first, clawing at the hand at his throat. But, after several seconds, he began to breathe harshly. His eyes bulged with terror, and a ragged whimper soon escalated into a strangled wail.

"Get out of my head!" he shrieked. "Ah, save me!"

"Who sent you?" Dylen's voice, low but commanding, overrode the prisoner's cries. "Who is your master? Tell me or I swear by all the saints, I'll leave you a gibbering wreck!"

The Deir closed his eyes in an apparent attempt to fight Dylen's incursion into his thoughts. But there was no ejecting Dylen's presence from his mind, and after an agonizing while in which he wheezed and wept, the Deir broke down.

Slumping against the post, he blubbered, "His M-Majesty... J-Jubal Ferrenda."

*

Hearing the Deir's confession, Riordan felt a surge of elation at this first solid evidence of Ferrenda treachery. He started to walk toward Dylen when, through the corner of his eye, he spotted someone just outside a narrow side entryway a short distance

from where Lalar was seated. The stranger was hefting something in his hand.

It was a bottle filled with a liquid that gleamed with a reddish hue. A burning cloth wick protruded from the stopper in the bottle's narrow mouth.

For an instant, Riodan froze, shocked that anyone would use an incendiary weapon within the palace grounds. Such devices were forbidden in all Aisen for they were indiscriminate in the damage they caused. Innocent bystanders were injured or killed alongside intended targets.

The Deir flung the explosive at Lalar. Racing forward, Riodan called out a warning to Talvas who stood nearby. The captain lunged forward and instinctively used his arm to bat the bottle away from the prince. The bottle's trajectory changed. As if in a nightmare, Riodan watched it tumble through the air. It would land on the floor near Dylen.

Without a moment's hesitation, Riodan swerved toward his lover and threw himself at Dylen, bringing him down beneath him just as the bottle smashed on the floor.

Riodan cried out as searing heat suffused his back. He dimly heard Dylen's savage imprecations as the latter scrambled out from under him. Riodan blacked out momentarily. When he became aware of his surroundings once more, all he could make out was a confusing welter of noise and motion. Someone was screaming in agony. Another was shouting for help.

A length of cloth had been thrown over him and hands beat down on it. In the midst of his pain, he realized his back from his nape and shoulders to his thighs were aflame. The smell of singed hair added to his fear when he thought for a moment that his head had also been set on fire. The blistering heat diminished somewhat as the flames were put out, but the pain did not, and his breath came in agonized gasps.

There was the sound of running feet and then someone dropped down beside Dylen. He cried out once more as the charred ruins of his tunic were hurriedly peeled from his burnt flesh. A cool hand touched his cheek, and he turned his head and looked blearily into Dylen's anxious eyes.

"Hold on, Rio," Dylen whispered. "The physician is here."

Something was smeared on his back, and he moaned from the initial contact with his overly tender skin. But very quickly, the pain receded to something more bearable, and he sighed with a little relief. He could feel the physician's hands on his back, slowly and thoroughly stroking the damaged flesh. Wherever his fingers lightly pressed down, there was a tingling sensation followed by sparks of feeling alike to the maddening jabs of a needle. But in their wake was a further lessening of pain.

"Why, Rio?" Dylen said, his voice catching. "You would have avoided the worst of it had you stayed where you were. Yet you—" He paused and let out a frustrated exhalation. "Why did you do it?"

Riodan managed a small, tired smile. "Why else?" he murmured. At Dylen's stricken expression, he reached for his hand and squeezed. "Don't worry about me, Dy. You're alive and well; that's all that matters."

"Deity's blood, Rio..."

Riodan did not hear the rest of Dylen's anguished response for he finally slipped into blessed oblivion.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Inquiry

The physician's healing touch brought him some relief. But in between visits he endured the incessant aches and relentless discomfort of mending flesh and knitting bones. Only after they had seen to his burnt flesh did the healers discover that one shoulder had been dislocated and an ankle broken. Small wonder it felt like pain would be his constant companion from now on.

Riodan turned his head from the stifling softness of his pillow seeking one thing alone. He exhaled in relief when he found Dylen seated beside his bed, watching with concern and not a little fear. He reached out a shaky hand and feebly smiled when it was immediately caught in a strong, comforting grip.

"Don't leave me alone," he whispered, forgetting that he had pleaded thusly a number of times since regaining consciousness in the palace infirmary.

Dylen quietly said, "I'll be here, I promise."

Riodan slid back into slumber, keeping his face turned toward Dylen that the first thing he would see when he awakened would be his beloved face.

* * * *

It was only on the fourth day since the incident that Dylen deemed it permissible to leave Riodan's side. The ambassador had finally fallen into a deep, restful sleep unlike the previous days when the slightest movements or faintest sounds disturbed his fragile slumber.

Dylen gazed long at him, relieved that Riodan would have some respite from the almost interminable pain of his injuries. He grimaced as he recalled the prior evening's ghastly proceedings and Riodan's suffering. True, Amir's physicians had prevented more serious damage. But even they could not alleviate the excruciating discomfort wrought by the process of healing from severe burns.

Last night, the healers had tended to an infection in Riodan's lower back, perforce cutting away flesh that threatened to turn gangrenous. They gave him a sleeping draught beforehand. But even the strongest dose could not completely render him oblivious to the pain of the procedure, and he'd awakened several times before the physicians were done. Dylen flexed his fingers in involuntarily response to the memory of how tightly Riodan had held on to his hand, gripping his fingers so hard that Dylen thought his bones would break. Yet despite the pain, Riodan had not cried out.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, and at one point, he'd been reduced to gasping sobs and whispered imprecations. But he did not shout or bawl as might be expected of a Deir in his situation. And all the while he stared at Dylen, as if drawing strength and courage from him. It was all Dylen could do to keep from lashing out at the physicians for doing what they had to do.

He ran his fingers through Riodan's hair. The bronze locks were lank from oil and sweat and the strands at Riodan's nape were dark and uneven where the singed ends had

broken off. Dylen stroked Riordan's cheek. Thank Veres the burns went no further and the ambassador's face was unmarred.

Not that Dylen would have found him less beautiful had his face been burned. If anything, Riordan seemed more exquisite in Dylen's eyes, even to his ruined back.

Dylen sighed. Riordan had saved his life and deemed the consequences of that act worth it. Dylen would never forget their conversation after the healers had finished their task.

"I wish I could take your pain away, Rio," Dylen said, guilt underlining his voice.

Riordan weakly smiled and murmured, "You already did." He briefly placed his hand on Dylen's chest. "It's gone—the ache I've borne these many years. When you let me in again, you took away my pain, Dy."

"Oh, Veres..." was all Dylen could say. He pulled Riordan's hand to his lips and reverently kissed the knuckles. Riordan's smile turned even more luminous before he slid into exhausted slumber.

Dylen bent and dropped a kiss on Riordan's cheek. Then, after getting the reassurance of the physician on duty all over again, he left the room and went to keep his appointment with Lalar Halvan.

* * * *

He met Lalar in the sitting room of the latter's apartment. The prince was almost recovered from his injury. The only indication of it was the occasional wince when a sudden movement pulled at the wound.

Lalar ordered everyone out of the apartment and took it upon himself to pour Dylen some wine and serve him salty roasted nuts and crisp cracklings dipped in spiced vinegar, a snack of which the Asmarans were inordinately fond.

"I hear Leyhar-tyar is mending well," Lalar said as he sipped his wine.

"He is mending but not without suffering for it," Dylen replied a little bitterly.

"Yes, that's to be expected." Lalar shook his head. "He highly esteems you to have exposed himself to such peril."

Dylen looked away, eyes suddenly veiled. Lalar sighed.

"And you feel the same way though you deny it to yourself. Ah well, that is none of my business, as you undoubtedly would say." He helped himself to a handful of nuts. "Still, I do hope you resolve whatever it is that divides you. You work so well together, and it would be a pity were such an enviable partnership be riven by past grievances."

After a moment, Dylen returned his gaze to Lalar. "It will be resolved," he said.

Lalar smiled faintly. "Good. Now, on to more urgent matters." Lalar's mouth tightened. "Malkon."

Dylen sat up, immediately alert.

"Talvas' people caught him outside the pavilion," Lalar told him.

"Did he throw the explosive?"

"There was no one else around."

"Then he must have arranged for the ambush as well."

"Probably. Though it must have been an impulse on his part. Set off most likely by our confrontation earlier that day."

"About that—" Dylen regarded the prince wonderingly. "What did you confront him about, Dyhar?"

Laral refilled their cups. "It seems your ambassador succeeded in convincing Dimas to do his duty," he said. "Dimas admitted the extent of his gaming debts in his letter to me as well as his inability to repay them. He named Malkon as his creditor."

Dylen caught his breath. "Did he mention what Malkon had demanded of him in lieu of coin?"

Laral shook his head. "Unfortunately, he only said Malkon had threatened his family with harm, his children in particular, if Dimas did not do as he bid."

"And that's what you argued about?"

"Yes. It's one thing to threaten someone with exposure or debtor's prison in order to force him to pay what he owes. That is but right and lawful. But to endanger the lives of his family—" Laral's eyes narrowed in anger. "That is beyond the pale. None of Dimas' children have reached their majority yet. I know what you're thinking—that he demanded Dimas reject as many of those contract approvals as possible. Well, I have had my suspicions as well. But Dimas didn't outright say what it was Malkon had asked in repayment and so I can hardly accuse him of that."

"But he tried to have you killed," Dylen pointed out. "You believe that he did even if he hasn't confessed to it."

"Yes and yes," Laral agreed. "And that is telling. Methinks he feared I knew the full truth and would expose him to my uncle as soon as I had more evidence of it."

"Then you are aware of his ambitions and how he had to revise his plans to fulfill them."

"That Sivar is my heir and therefore will come to the throne if I am removed?" Laral smiled mirthlessly. "Oh yes, I have long suspected. Ever since Uncle Arfen and then Gavan died so conveniently. And with Malkon always on the spot. But there was no proof, you understand?"

"Completely. But that last assassin named Jubal as the instigator of the plot against you," Dylen reminded him.

Laral softly said, "Malkon denies he knew what his sire planned."

Dylen scoffed. "A likely claim!"

"But there is no concrete evidence linking him to Jubal's scheme beyond their kinship," Laral said. "And the one Deir who might have been able to reveal the truth is dead. Killed by an explosive Malkon may or may not have thrown." Laral huffed in exasperation. "He denied he threw that device by the way, and once again, the evidence against him is circumstantial. He was the only Deir in sight, but no one actually saw him do the deed. Even Ambassador Leyhar only glimpsed the figure of someone, but he won't be able to identify Malkon as the culprit, will he?"

Dylen shook his head. "So there is no way to charge him with this?"

"Only if we can force him to talk. And this is where things get interesting." Laral leaned forward, his eyes aglitter with interest. "We tried to read him, Uncle and I. But his mind is protected by layer upon layer of shields."

"Saints, is he so powerful then?" Dylen asked with consternation.

"Nay, we don't think they are of his making. They were likely placed there by a skillful adept, if not a templar."

Dylen was taken aback. "That is troubling. No templar would involve himself in murder and the sowing of mayhem."

"Unless his loyalty to his sovereign exceeded his oaths of fidelity to the brotherhood

and its laws,” Lalar pointed out. “We can’t discount that possibility. Even templars have their weaknesses.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” Dylen reluctantly conceded. “I shall have to report this to Tenryon Hadrana. He will want to discover him whoever this Deir is. The templars won’t risk harboring a renegade in their ranks.”

Lalar nodded. “Do as you must. But in the meantime, we have Malkon to contend with. Unless he talks, the most we can charge him with is misconduct with regards to his dealings with Dimas. As for colluding with Jubal, all we have are suspicions. That isn’t enough cause to bring him to justice. And he is of royal lineage even if the Ferrendas no longer rule a realm.”

Dylen brought a clenched hand down hard on the tabletop. “Then we must get confirmation of those suspicions,” he growled. “Tell me what you can about these shields.”

“Uncle Amir believes that together we could breach them eventually,” Lalar related. “But he fears that the force of our attempt could break Malkon’s mind and render him useless for our purpose, which is to gain information. Furthermore, even if we managed to keep Malkon from losing his sanity, we would have to stay in his consciousness longer than is safe for us. We did consider asking one of the physicians to try for they can remain in Malkon’s mind long enough to extract the information. But none of them have the strength to take down the shields. They are different from anything I have encountered.”

Dylen fell silent for a space as he considered the risks and possibilities. “Perhaps I can be of help, Your Highness,” he softly said.

* * * *

Despite his current straits, Malkon had lost none of his bombast or arrogance. *But why should he when he’s obviously banking on the more lenient treatment accorded a prince of the blood to save his pitiful hide*, Dylen thought with disgust

Even if evidence against him was found, he could claim immunity from punishment by execution by dint of his royal heritage. Except in war, royalty did not kill fellow royalty as much from fear of setting a precedent that might prove fatal in the future as from an inherent reluctance to treat a peer like a common criminal. So the worst Malkon could expect even if found guilty of the charges brought against him was comfortable imprisonment or possibly exile from Asmara.

He and Lalar had walked in on an interrogation conducted by Malkon’s own mate Sivar with the Shaja Amir and Captain Talvas in attendance. The interrogation seemed likely to go nowhere as all the other sessions had.

Malkon fumed, protested his treatment and refuted every accusation against him save one. And that one—his threats of reprisal against the unfortunate Dimas—he claimed to be no crime at all. He had been within his rights to regain what was owed him by whatever means necessary.

When Dylen came to Sivar’s side, the Ferrenda lord scowled and said, “What, is he going to question me, too? Sivar, you should know better than to allow some bastard half-breed the privilege!”

“Lord Dylen has every right to question you,” Sivar snapped. “His colleague is a victim of your family’s perfidy.”

Malkon sniggered. "You mean his lover," he sneered. "Oh, I saw Leyhar's face that night at dinner. He looked most murderous when Lord Dylen started to try and seduce me."

Dylen lifted his eyebrows contemptuously. "*I tried to seduce you?*"

"And why not when you undoubtedly have the skill to loosen a Deir's tongue by way of bedding him," Malkon retorted, sidestepping the improbability of his earlier statement. "Doubtless had the Ambassador not been present, you would have lured me between your sheets forthwith."

Eyes narrowing, Dylen took a step forward. Malkon flashed him an insolent grin. Dylen looked at him as a merlion might regard a flea. And then he suddenly smiled. But the smile was far from pleasant and did not reach his eyes

"I won't deny it," he said unexpectedly. "I would have buggered you senseless that night if it would have gained me the information I sought." Ignoring Malkon's startled expression, he bowed briefly to Sivar. "My apologies for such crude language, Your Highness," he said. "But truth be told, I would have used every means at my disposal to get what was needed. Even if it meant bedding a Deir of little charm and even less beauty."

"There! You see? He admits it!" Malkon bellowed, whether out of self-righteous rage or piqued pride it was difficult to say. "It is the Ylandrins who were contemplating treachery, not I!" he declared. "He would have had me cuckold you, Sivar, for his own purposes. If not for my great love for you—"

"Oh, do shut up, Mal!" Sivar sharply ordered. "You have the gall to play the innocent when we all know so well how you chased after every shapely arse you took a fancy to in Shenze!"

He turned to Dylen, uncaring of Malkon's incredulous gape.

"You have my full consent to bugger him to death if need be," Sivar said. "That is if you have the stomach for it."

"Previously I did," Dylen replied. "But not anymore. I would rather use other methods." He looked at the Shaja. "I understand he is resistant to normal modes of interrogation, *Dyhar*."

Amir inclined his head. "I've never personally encountered multiple shields before," he said. "But I do know what is needed to circumvent them. Force is out of the question. Each time we break through one layer, we run the risk of damaging his mind bit by bit."

"Making it impossible to retrieve information at all."

"Exactly. The only way to get past such a defense is to locate each layer's weakness and ease one's self past them. But none among us possess the skill to do so. It is wholly the province of templars."

Dylen eyed Malkon thoughtfully. The Ferrenda heir was smiling smugly once more. It was his overweening demeanor that decided Dylen on his course of action once and for all.

"Perhaps not templars alone," he softly said. "The Essendris of the direct line of descent are known to possess gifts beyond the ordinary."

"Of the direct line," Lalar echoed. "Do you mean to say you have the skill for this?"

"I might," Dylen averred. "And I may as well find out now."

"Then you have our permission to test your skills on him," Amir declared.

"What!" Malkon sprang to his feet. "Nay! I won't allow this. You have no right—"

Talvas shoved him back onto his seat. “You have no say in the matter,” the captain told him, his voice hard and threatening. “I suggest you make it easier on yourself and be still!”

Dylen silently approached Malkon. In the instant before he placed his hands on either side of the Deir’s head, he saw fear spark in his eyes. Buoyed by that evidence of knowledge worth uncovering, he took a deep centering breath and took the plunge into the realm of another being’s consciousness.

Between one heartbeat and the next, he found himself in a wide hazy tunnel. Darkness loomed before him, and he cautiously walked toward it. Several steps forward and he suddenly came up against a barrier the likes of which he had not seen before. It had no concrete form but was like an impenetrable black fog that shifted in every direction. It soared up to the apparent nothingness above and extended from one side of the tunnel to the other. There was no apparent opening in it. Dylen thrust a hand into the fog and touched something hard within. The barrier looked like a thick inky mist but felt like a solid unyielding wall.

He studied it closely. He knew he was seeing what either Malkon or whoever had created the shielding wished him to see. That made sense for how could anyone discover a way through this amorphous yet impermeable mass? But that it was confined to a space of definite dimensions indicated a limit to its creator’s skill.

Dylen hearkened back to his training under Rohyr and Tenryon. He would not abide the rules of this world. He would change them to suit his needs instead.

He focused on altering the very nature of the barrier, ridding it of its foggy exterior and turning it into something recognizable and therefore comprehensible.

At once he felt resistance. Malkon fought him fiercely, the strength of his desperation making up for what he lacked in talent and power.

Their battle for control manifested itself in a series of convulsions in the barrier. The entire mass trembled and shifted this way and that as if subject to the whims of a mighty wind. And from lightless black, the fog lightened to dark grey and then to storm blue only to darken once more to indigo.

Back and forth the barrier changed. Dylen wondered how much longer he could sustain his assault on it. And then, of a sudden, he heard an angry wail in the distance.

The fog shivered horrifically then seemed to collapse into itself. Suddenly, the violent heaving stopped, and the barrier solidified into a stone wall of an indeterminate shade of grey.

Dylen exhaled in relief. Malkon had given way. The barrier now appeared as Dylen desired it. For there was no wall in existence that could not be breached. And this wall would be no exception if he had anything to say about it.

He scanned it thoroughly, searching for any sign of weakness. He suddenly smiled. Forcing the wall’s coloration to lighten further, he took a closer look at a section of it.

Tiny fissures had become visible thanks to the paler hue of the structure. Dylen reached out with his senses and swiftly deduced that he had found a spot in the wall that was not as solid as it appeared. It felt—hollow was the closest he could come to describing it. Indeed, he now discerned numerous areas that were as vulnerable. Small wonder the barrier had been cloaked in fog. The misty covering had made it harder to perceive its weaknesses.

Dylen placed a hand on the center of the network of fissures and firmly pushed

against it. The wall slowly gave way before the pressure. And then the whole section cracked and crumbled on its own accord. A gap opened in the wall large enough for Dylen to slip through.

As he stepped past the opening, the wall shuddered and groaned to eerie effect. Though a cold shiver snaked its way up his spine, Dylen ignored the frightening sounds and forged on.

Another barrier soon loomed before him. Armed with the knowledge of his subduing of the first barrier, Dylen set to defeating this one as well. It did not prove as difficult nor did it take as long to locate its weak points. Dylen quickly selected one and soon passed through into the space beyond. And again he heard a howl of protest in his mind.

He did not bother to count the number of barriers he passed but concentrated on getting closer to his goal. Besides, he was beginning to tire. He could not afford to waste his strength on needless exercises.

The next barrier he confronted had a different feel to it. Not only did it transform fairly quickly, he sensed something like despair beyond it. He felt a jolt of elation. He knew he had reached his quarry.

To his surprise, he had hardly touched the wall when it gave way before him. He quickly clambered over the resulting rubble.

Several paces away, Malkon cowered like a cornered rodent. He stared at Dylen with a mixture of disbelief and terror. As Dylen got to his feet, the Ferrenda lord bleated out a frightened cry and turned on his heel to flee. Dylen raced after him. He caught up with Malkon, grabbed him by the collar and threw him down to the ground. He rolled Malkon onto his back and punched him hard enough to nigh break his nose. Dylen straddled the dazed Deir, hooking his ankles over his splayed legs and pinning his hands to the ground with a brutal grip on each wrist.

"Talk, treacherous dog," he growled. "Did you force Dimas to delay approval of Ylandrin contracts?"

"I only suggested he pay me another way," Malkon whimpered. "It's no crime to ensure that he did."

"By threatening the lives of his children?" Dylen scornfully said.

"It was my right! He owed me!"

"And so you drove that poor wretch to his death. You are truly vile, Malkon Ferrenda!"

"I'm not to blame for his actions. I'm no—!"

Dylen grabbed Malkon by the hair of his crown and slammed his head down hard enough to stop the latter's blubbing.

"Who set those assassins on Loral?" he brusquely asked.

"You heard," Malkon croaked. "My sire ordered it,"

"And you abetted it."

"Nay! I had naught to do with it!"

"Liar! How did those knaves enter the palace grounds? Someone let them in and guided them to the pavilion!"

"It wasn't I!" Malkon shook his head frantically. "I tell you I had naught to do with that!"

Amidst Malkon's attempts to evade meeting his gaze, Dylen caught a glimpse of something in the Ferrenda lord's eyes. It was enough.

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “They came in the guise of Terazan delegates!”

Malkon’s eyes bulged in shock.

“How did you know—?” He gasped, horrified by his slip.

“If I investigate the visit of a rather large delegation from the Terazan embassy that day, what will I find, Malkon?” Dylen closed a hand around Malkon’s throat menacingly. “That they never left the palace afterward? Indeed, will I find their discarded clothing hidden in your room?”

“You are insane! I hid nothing in—”

Dylen backhanded him into shutting up. He reached down and, ripping the crotch of Malkon’s trousers open, clenched his fingers cruelly around the Deir’s seed sac.

“They came to the palace at your summons, didn’t they?” he snarled. “Now tell me. Where did you hide their clothes? Speak or by Veres I will geld you bit by bit and feed the pieces to the palace hounds!” He tightened his grip.

Malkon screamed, “Under my bed! Beneath the floor boards!”

“And where did you have them pass to get to the gardens?”

“Servants’ hall—”

Dylen caught his breath. The passages to and from the servants’ hall wended their way along the back of the palace. The hall itself overlooked the chasm.

“How?” he pressed. “Did no one notice a whole contingent of Deira in Ylandrin livery?”

“Only a few at that hour,” Malkon wheezed painfully. “Killed them—”

Dylen swore. “The bodies?”

“Threw-threw them down the chasm.”

“*Heyas!*” Dylen muttered. “Heartless scum!” he said through gritted teeth. His eyes narrowed. “That explosive—did you throw it?”

Malkon’s eyes suddenly blazed with malevolence. “Yes!” he spat. “A pity your fool of a lover got in the way!”

Dylen smashed Malkon’s head down. He rose to his feet, feeling as if he had just wallowed in a pit of miasmic filth. He could not get away from the cesspool that was Malkon’s mind fast enough.

He staggered as he came to. Laral caught him and led him to a chair. The Shaja Amir thrust a cup of strong brandy into his hand. Dylen quickly drank it, welcoming the invigorating burn of its descent down his throat.

He looked across at Malkon. The Deir was slumped in his chair, moaning softly. Dylen noted that the latter’s throat was mottled and the crotch of his trousers rent. It seemed his threats had not wholly been undertaken in the realm of Malkon’s mind.

Sivar burst into the room, followed by some of Talvas’ soldiers. They carried bundles of clothing. The prince viciously flung a handful of mantle clasps at Malkon. The Deir yelped and opened bleary eyes to stare at his furious spouse.

Dylen glanced at the scattered clasps. All bore the delphinid engraving of the diplomatic corps. And inscribed above each delphinid image was the insignia of the House of Havare, the ruling family of Teraz.

“You heard?” he asked Amir.

“Every word,” the Shaja grimly confirmed. He nudged a clasp with his foot. “We should have suspected given the blood ties between the Ferrendas and the Havares.”

“Yes,” Laral somberly agreed. “Shall we have the rest of their consular team

arrested, Uncle?"

"Immediately," Amir grimly said. He addressed Talvas. "Question them well. I want to know what else they've been up to. Meanwhile, we have this dungworm to deal with."

"I say we quarter him alive and send the parts to his sire!" Sivar snarled. He was trembling with rage and looked quite ready to carry out his choice of sentence then and there.

Malkon lurched to his feet with a fearful gasp, staring at his mate in shock. He had apparently never seen this side of the normally quiet and reserved prince. Dylen observed that Talvas did not force him down again but instead stepped to one side.

The captain silently yanked out his long knife from its sheath on his leg. He nodded at Lalar. The crown prince dipped his head once in answer then placed his hands on his cousin's shoulders.

"You know we can't just dismember him much as we would like to," he said. "As that craven cur pointed out, and he is right unfortunately, it won't serve us to set a precedent of openly torturing and killing a fellow royal. So do calm down, Siv."

"Calm down?" Sivar angrily said. "He nearly killed you! How can you expect me to remain calm about that?"

Catching the undercurrents of something other than cousinly concern in his tirade, Dylen carefully studied Sivar. He caught his breath as comprehension struck him. Here was the true explanation for Sivar's lack of obeisance toward Lalar.

"But I wasn't killed, thanks to Lord Dylen and Ambassador Leyhar," Lalar said soothingly, reaching up to run his knuckles down Sivar's cheek. "And, if we are agreed on our course, there will be no more threats to my life." He glanced over his shoulder at Malkon with chilly disdain. "At least from some quarters."

That Malkon was puzzled by Sivar and Lalar's behavior showed in the frown that creased his brow. Seeing his expression, Sivar promptly forgot his rage and suddenly smiled, albeit derisively.

"You never suspected? Yet I can tell Lord Dylen has already guessed our secret." Sivar regarded his mate mockingly. "The reason I stopped inviting you to my bed was because I'd been frequenting his." He let his eyes run up and down Lalar's body in covetous fashion. At Malkon's shocked expression, he laughed. "I didn't particularly care to wed you, my dear Mal. But you brought with you not only a considerable marriage settlement but also your shares in several Ferrenda companies. Shares that are now conjugal property and will come to me after your death."

He raised his eyebrows in amusement when a horrified Malkon gaped at him. "And you didn't suspect that either, I gather. Really, Mal, such an obtuse fool you've turned out to be! Well, no matter. Verily, we weren't going to allow you to live long enough to interfere with *Aba's* rule or Lalar's. But we would have waited a decent while before arranging for your demise. Your actions however have forced us to do it much sooner. We do have to put our interests first after all."

As he listened to Sivar's discourse, Dylen saw Lalar slip behind Malkon next to Talvas. The Ferrenda heir noticed his stare and half-turned with a jerk. Dylen caught a glimpse of Talvas' knife blade as he passed it to Lalar. He jerked his attention back to Malkon as the Deir tried to back away from Lalar. There was the sound of another blade sliding out of its sheath behind him. Malkon whirled.

Fine metal flashed. Dylen could only stand by as Malkon screamed.

His scream ended in a gurgle as he was skewered front and back. Sivar and Laral held him there between them, uncaring of the blood that stained their garments.

Laral chuckled. "Goodbye, Malkon," he murmured into the mortally wounded Deir's ear. "Rest assured we shall accord you all the burial honors of a member of the family."

With that, he yanked his blade out and rammed it up and into the base of Malkon's skull. The cousins withdrew their knives and stepped back. Malkon slumped to the floor in a heap amidst the pooling crimson of his blood.

Amir grunted approvingly and said, "Well done." He gestured to his guard-captain son and instructed, "He died from a fall. See to it, my good Talvas."

Talvas obeyed with grim satisfaction. Two of his soldiers dragged the corpse out of the chamber. Another was tasked with quickly mopping up the blood, erasing all signs of Malkon's execution.

Amir laid a steady gaze on Dylen. "A walk along the cliff wall when one is in his cups is very reckless, don't you think, *Essendr-tyar*?"

Dylen looked from the Shaja to Sivar and Laral. He let out his breath and, addressing Sivar, said, "You have my deepest condolences, Your Highness."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Aftershocks

Riodan listened intently as Dylen related the events that occurred while he was unconscious. He grimaced ever so often as more of the Ferrendas' perfidy came to light and stared wide-eyed when Dylen described his battle to gain entry into Malkon's consciousness. Finally, he winced at the tale of Malkon's slaying.

A day and a half had passed since Riodan fell into a deep refreshing sleep. He'd awakened to find Dylen drowsing in his chair by the bed. When Riodan attempted to turn on his side to face Dylen, the motion pulled on his still tender back, forcing a sharp hiss out of him. The sound, soft as it was, roused Dylen at once and prompted him to call a physician to Riodan's bedside.

With most of his discomfort alleviated, Riodan had demanded a detailed account of what he had missed or been too distracted by his injuries to notice. Dylen obliged, and when he was done, Riodan half-closed his eyes and fell silent while he mulled over everything he had learned. At length, he sighed and looked at Dylen.

"Laral and Sivar," he murmured. "To kill anyone with such cold-blooded efficiency... I confess I don't know whether I'm impressed or horrified."

"They will make a most formidable pair when Laral comes to the throne," Dylen concurred.

"And they were lovers all this time," Riodan said with some wonder. He chuckled wryly. "I truly did not see that."

"Neither did I until that very moment."

Riodan's brow furrowed. "But Amir's counsellor, his scribe, the servants—do you think they know?"

"Most likely."

"Yet Malkon didn't. Why did no one tell him, I wonder?"

"Do you really? Malkon was generally disliked even by his own retainers," Dylen reminded him. "The only folk who were loyal to him were his family's supporters."

"Then it wasn't disapproval of Sivar's demeanor I witnessed that day but rather discomfort that they were being so open in front of me." Riodan frowned. "Did they worry that *I* might carry the tale to Malkon myself?"

"Possibly," Dylen replied. "They didn't know your intentions yet. But Sivar and Laral must have believed you could be trusted else they would have been discreet. And Amir apparently agreed with them."

"I suppose you're right," Riodan conceded. "But how very foolish of Malkon not to cultivate affection for himself amongst the royal household at least."

Dylen shrugged. "Foolish and overly conceited. I wager he thought himself much too high to care for the sensibilities of common folk."

"He was beyond stupid then," Riodan dryly concluded. "Will the Ferrendas believe the official story of his death?"

"I highly doubt it. Several Terazan delegates gone missing in the space of one night

will definitely raise suspicions,” Dylen pointed out. “But they will have no grounds to protest. Or rather they’re in no position to do so given Malkon’s role in the murders of two Halvans and the attempted assassination of Laral.”

Riodan nodded. “Who will you inform of the truth? Aside from Rohyr that is.”

“Gilmael, of course, as my superior,” Dylen answered. “And Tenryon will have to know if it can aid him in searching for the templar who shielded Malkon. As for Lassen, well, Rohyr tells him everything in any case.”

That made Riodan grin. “He trusts Lassen completely.”

Dylen sighed. “Because he loves him utterly,” he softly said.

Their eyes met. Riodan’s grin turned wistful.

“Despite everything, I enjoyed our stay in Asmara very much,” he whispered.

“So did I,” Dylen agreed. “Against my better judgment.”

Riodan’s eyes widened as he recalled the same words spoken just so more than twenty years ago. And then they twinkled.

“Perhaps your better judgment isn’t all you’ve touted it to be,” he teased.

Dylen tried not to smile and, failing quite miserably, huffed a chuckle instead.

“You’re probably right,” he lightly said.

* * * *

The Shaja summoned Dylen a few days later.

He sat with Amir in the long trellis-shaded terrace adjacent to the royal apartments. Dylen looked about him appreciatively. There were many such airy spaces built into the upper levels of the palace. And the view of Shenze from this particular spot was spectacular to say the least.

After the usual preliminary courtesies, Amir immediately broached the reason for his summons.

“What you did—that was extraordinary, Lord Dylen,” he remarked. “The Essendris are indeed to be feared if they are all so gifted.”

“Rest you, *Dyhar*, not all the Royal House are as blessed,” Dylen assured him. “And Rohyr was trained by Tenryon Hadrana himself.”

“Meaning to say he has been imbued with a sense of honor and responsibility in the owning of such power. Thank Veres for that.” Amir nodded. “Yes, Hadrana-*tyar*’s reputation precedes him even here in the south. Would that the same could be said of all adepts. The templar who aided the Ferrendas for one.”

“I have already sent word to Tenryon regarding that matter.”

“That is good.”

They quietly viewed the city for several minutes. Dylen could easily imagine the extent of the Shaja’s relief that his country had been spared much turmoil and his House the threat of internal strife, at least for the moment. Eventually, Amir sighed with apparent contentment and looked at him again.

“And now, what will you do?” the Shaja asked. “Sivar tells me you wish to take Ambassador Leyhar back to Ylandre soonest.”

Dylen inclined his head. “He will recover faster amongst family and friends. And besides, this posting was only temporary,” he added. “The designated ambassador to your country will be here very shortly.”

“I see. Well, in any case, we are indebted to both of you. If you require any

assistance, you need only ask and we shall grant it.” The corners of Amir’s eyes crinkled unexpectedly. Grinning quite suddenly, he added, “And you may bring back as much *kahvi* as you wish. I hear you both took a great liking to it.”

Dylen laughed. “Indeed, I would have missed it badly. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

* * * *

The story that would come out of Asmara in later days was that Malkon had gone for a late evening stroll along the cliff wall behind the palace. He had apparently been inebriated—several palace sentries as well as a number of servants testified that they had seen him walking none too steadily close to the parapet edge. So sloshed had he been that he had not even had the wits to scream when he slipped, tumbled over the wall and plunged to his death in the rocky depths below. It took almost a fortnight before they managed to retrieve his corpse, and by then, it was badly decomposed, it being the height of one of the hottest summers to afflict Asmara.

Teraz cautiously inquired after their missing people, but Jubal Ferrenda dared to insinuate that his son’s demise might have been no accident. The Varadani pretender went so far as to say that it was too much of a coincidence that Malkon had died so soon and suddenly after the arrival of two prominent Ylandrins.

Asmara’s response regarding the missing Terazans was that they did not know anything about their fate save that last they were seen they were being escorted by one of Malkon’s retainers to the late lord’s apartment. Where they had gone thence was hardly Asmara’s responsibility given that their visit had neither been official nor expected by the palace stewards.

As for Jubal’s veiled accusation, the Shaja himself responded with a stern letter chastising the Ferrenda patriarch for even hinting that the Halvans had not provided adequate protection for Malkon. For what else could he glean from Jubal’s suggestion that someone had somehow managed to penetrate or circumvent the more than ample security provided all members of the royal family? Now murder from within by a member of the royal household—that was more feasible. But surely Jubal was not suggesting that the Halvans were capable of such skullduggery!

Teraz asked no further questions, and Jubal hastily backed off. After all, it would not do to antagonize the Halvans and lose an ally in the process. He very reluctantly however handed Malkon’s shares in Ferrenda-backed corporations over to his widower. His misgivings proved correct when Prince Sivar promptly sought and eventually wrested considerable control of several of those corporations within a few years of inheriting his late spouse’s estate.

When Sivar wed his cousin Lalar a mere eleven months after Malkon’s death, Jubal was all but livid with fury. But already overthrown by the canny Sivar as principal administrator of two of the richest of his family’s holdings, he could do little other than vent his spleen on his unfortunate underlings and stew in impotent rage.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Mending

Rikara, Ylandre

The gentle creaking of a rocking chair broke the early morning quiet in Hirlen Teris' apartment. Dylen grinned at his father's blissful expression as he relaxed by the entrance to the small, sun-dappled patio that adjoined his sitting room, comfortably tucked into the new chair Dylen had purchased for him in Shenze.

Well worth its price, Dylen thought with satisfaction. The craftsmanship was excellent, the chair as beautiful as it was sturdy. Its armrests and rockers were artistically inlaid with iridescent nacre and the woven cane seat and back provided ventilation, a welcome feature during the warmer days of summer. Hirlen had been most elated upon receiving such a handsome present from his son.

It was now a month and a half since his return from the south, and autumn was coming to an end. He had brought Riordan home, snugly bedded down in a converted coach. The Halvans' personal physician had accompanied them and ridden with Riordan throughout the short journey. Prince Loral had also insisted on an armed escort whose captain was gifted with the ability to translocate. This was so Dylen would not be overly taxed generating a passage back to Ylandre. Now Riordan was recuperating in his parents' home.

Rohyr's physician cousin Eiren Sarvan had attended to him at once. His skill and the considerable healing energy he wielded ensured an even swifter recovery for the young ambassador. Last Dylen had heard, Riordan was already up and about though Eiren had forbidden him to return to work, as that would only sap his newly returned strength.

Dylen's contentment waned somewhat. Last he had seen Riordan was the week right after their return when he visited him with Rohyr and Lassen. Gilmael also joined them, and they had not been alone with each other the whole visit. Thus, no personal talk beyond Riordan's health had ensued.

But Riordan looked at him questioningly several times during the visit. Almost pleadingly, truth be told. Dylen had been at a loss how to respond.

Their stab at reconciliation in Asmara felt unreal. It was almost as if the entire affair had been one incredible dream. Their one torrid night together was particularly disturbing to Dylen for he feared he had reopened himself too much, too soon to Riordan. He simply was not sure if he was ready to resume the deep, all-consuming relationship he'd shared with him.

Dylen sighed. There lay the rub. Would he ever be willing to be consumed by love again? He had allowed it to happen once and look where it got him. Nay, he scolded himself. He had to put the past behind him. Otherwise, he would not know the peace of heart and mind and soul that came with letting hurts and ill will go. Peace such as he had known from the moment he agreed to call Riordan his friend once more. That peace had lasted until he overheard Guyon Barath's venomous aspersions on his character and the

reasons for his unsuitability as a friend to Riordan.

It had hurt deeply though he refused to let Guyon see it. It hurt because it was true, and much as Dylen loathed thinking about it today, what he had once been was at the root of Riordan's denial of their relationship. For after all, had he not persuaded Riordan to leave him and return to his parents for that very same reason?

But Riordan had repented of his actions and ceaselessly humbled himself in the hope of gaining Dylen's forgiveness. More, he had taken the unprecedented step of breaking a long-standing betrothal to prove his intentions to Dylen. That could have adverse repercussions insofar as Riordan's reputation; the upper classes did not take kindly to one of their own breaking faith with another of similar station in favor of a Deir of dubious origins. For why would anyone do so unless it was for mere gain?

King's brother he might be, but Dylen knew there were many Deira of good name and family who would hesitate to align themselves by marriage with a former *hethar*. Such a liaison was not unheard of among the common folk—many prostitutes supported partners and families by selling their bodies after all. But such was not the case with the aristocracy and gentry except if wedlock with one such as him would be politically advantageous. A way of breaking into the Ardan's close-knit circle of trusted advisers and confidants.

That was the main reason Dylen had been wary of every suitor since Rohyr formalized his status as an Essendri. He did not want to be anyone's convenient stepping-stone to political elevation. But that was the feeling he got with every Deir who wooed him, even gentle, good-natured Sereth. Only Riordan did not make him feel like a mere rung up the ladder for the politically ambitious.

It always came back to Riordan. But if one thought about it, Riordan had displayed his remorse only when he learned of Dylen's entry into House Essendri. Despite Riordan's protestations to the contrary, Dylen could not help wondering if he would have done so had their circumstances remained the same. What guarantee did he have that Riordan had really intended to look for him, make amends for the hurt he'd dealt him and join himself to Dylen in wedlock, society's opinion of such a union be damned?

Yet ambition alone could not have driven Riordan to nigh sacrifice himself for Dylen's sake. Only one force could impel anyone to offer his life for another.

Dylen shook his head vexedly. Why was it so hard to accept that one thing had not changed between them?

Tarqin entered the room, beaming brightly, and announced they had visitors. The servant deferentially showed Rohyr and Lassen and their son Vyren in.

Hirlen brightened with pleasure, and he held out his arms to the infant prince. Vyren happily crowed, "*Oda!*" and eagerly leaned down from his father's arms toward the closest Deir he had to a resident grandparent.

Lassen chuckled and planted his son on Hirlen's lap whereupon the two embarked on a conversation comprehensible only to a babbling babe and a doting grandfather. Dylen shook his head in amusement and grinned at Rohyr as the Ardan seated himself on the couch opposite Hirlen.

"I wonder, did I make any sense at that age?" he remarked.

Hirlen looked up and laughingly said, "Nay, but I managed to understand you just the same. It's a skill most fathers learn somehow."

"Whether they want to or not," Lassen quipped. "But it's learn the language of babes

or muddle one's way through parenthood."

He yelped when Rohyr suddenly pulled him back by his belt. He landed with a grunt on the Ardan's lap. Lassen half turned and lightly swatted his smirking spouse before settling himself more comfortably between Rohyr's hard thighs.

Dylen observed them with a touch of melancholy. It was then he noticed Rohyr regarding him sympathetically. He raised his eyebrows quizzically at his brother.

Rohyr asked, "Have you visited Riordan recently?"

Dylen leaned back, shaking his head. "There's been no pressing need," he blandly replied.

To which Rohyr snorted. He nuzzled Lassen's ear but kept his gaze on Dylen. "Yet I wager certain needs were duly tended to in Asmara," he murmured.

Dylen colored. "I thought you were against invading people's thoughts, Roh," he chided.

"I am, and I didn't."

Rohyr moved lower to kiss the side of his now blushing consort's neck. Lassen would have肘ed him but his arms were snugly pinioned by Rohyr's embrace. Rohyr grinned when Dylen shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"I glimpsed a few of Riordan's thoughts when we visited him," he smugly informed Dylen. "As I'm sure you did, so strongly did he project them as soon as he saw you. There was no need to plumb his mind at all." Rohyr slipped a hand down to lightly rest on Lassen's thigh, perilously close to his crotch. Lassen gasped and slapped his hand away. Rohyr only snickered.

"The images I saw were quite incendiary," he continued. "If that's how you take care of a friend, I shudder to imagine what you would do for a true love."

"Roh!" Dylen finally barked. He glanced at his father and was chagrined to find Hirilen smirking at him. "One night of—of rutting does not a love affair make!" he protested.

"Nay, but it can be the start of one," Rohyr countered. "Or a second beginning."

Dylen scowled, but there was little ire behind it. "Did you come to visit or to vex me?" he muttered.

He groaned when Lassen looked at him keenly then. If Lassen was going to start in on him, too, he would go and seek less inquisitive company.

"I saw him the other day," Lassen related. "He looks so much better now. He had the ends of his hair trimmed, and he was hardly limping."

Hirilen dimpled. "Then he is truly on the mend. That is good to hear."

"Yes. And his burns have also healed though there is much scarring," Lassen said. "Eiren told him the scars will fade and become smoother over time. But the skin on his back will always be a little rough and patchy. I thought that of little consequence, but I fancy Riordan does not."

"What do you mean?" Dylen sharply asked.

"He was quite self-conscious about them," Lassen explained. "He kept tugging at his collar to hide his nape. And he said he would probably give away all his collarless shirts since he would no longer have use for them."

"But that's absurd!" Hirilen exclaimed. "Someone should tell him so. After all, it isn't his face or form that makes him such a beauty but his goodness of heart and fidelity to those he loves."

"Fidelity?" Dylen abruptly scoffed. "Much that you know, *Adda*."

Hirlen frowned at him. "What? That he hurt you terribly at one time or another?" At Dylen's stunned expression, he said, "Oh, I may not know the specifics of your quarrel, but I'm not blind, Dy. I felt your grief even when I was at my sickest, and I noticed how assiduously you kept your distance from him when he returned. I also saw how you dealt harshly with him when you couldn't avoid him. And one more thing I saw that you refuse to see," Hirlen added. "He loves you, Dy, and he blames himself without cease for your rift. You told him he was unworthy of you, didn't you? Well, behold! He has come to believe it and contents himself with the crumbs you deign to toss his way!"

"*Adda*, please..."

"You hurt him, but you also hurt yourself," Hirlen plowed on implacably. "For how can you ever be whole if you refuse to accept the other half of your heart?"

Dylen stared at his father speechlessly. Seldom had he heard Hirlen so impassioned and even less had he ever raised his voice to his only son. Hirlen must have noticed his stricken expression for his stern demeanor promptly vanished and he gentled his voice when he spoke once more.

"Forgive me, Dy," he contritely said. "I had no right to speak that way and in front of others." He glanced at Rohyr and Lassen in some embarrassment then looked at his son once more, his eyes pleading. "I just—I just want you to be happy," he professed, frustration tingeing his voice.

Dylen swallowed. He looked at Rohyr. "You said the same thing," he whispered. He bowed his head, his eyes shut tight against impending tears.

"I told him," he hoarsely murmured. "I said I was afraid. How do I get past that? Tell me, how do I conquer this fear?"

He heard a sob and realized with horror that it was his. He leapt to his feet and stepped out onto the patio. Dylen stared up unseeingly at the cloudless sky, his body trembling with the effort not to cry. It proved a futile attempt when tears streaked down his face and his throat tightened painfully.

Someone tugged at his hair, and he turned with a start. Lassen stood behind him, Vyren in his arms. The child was gazing curiously at him.

"Nunky!" Vyren cooed. Dylen smiled through his tears and stroked his nephew's plump cheek. He looked at Lassen, a little ashamed that his law-brother had seen him weep. Lassen looked back at him, his aquamarine eyes aglow with compassion.

"It isn't easy to conquer fear, Dy," he murmured. "But with a little help, it is possible."

"Whose help?" Dylen asked though he already suspected Lassen's answer.

"Whoever brings you peace," was Lassen's reply. "Of heart and soul and mind."

Dylen sharply inhaled, startled by the mirroring of his earlier musings. He glanced sideways and saw his father and brother watching him with concern. He faced Lassen again.

"Such as you have," he said.

"Such as you had," Lassen pointed out.

"For a while."

"But it can be longer than a while." Lassen placed a fist against Dylen's chest.

"Listen to your heart, Dy. What does it tell you? What is its plea?"

Dylen bit his lip. He noticed Vyren reaching for him demandingly. He took his

nephew into his arms and rubbed noses with him until Vyren shrieked with glee.

“By the way,” Rohyr said, coming to Lassen’s side. “He’s moved out of his parents’ house.”

That surprised Dylen. “He has? But whither did he go?”

“A smaller house up Marsden Way.”

Dylen stared at his brother and law-brother. He caught his father’s entreating gaze. He held Vyren closer, taking in his sweet baby scent.

Drawing a shaky breath, he said, “I want to be happy, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Restoration

Time had never seemed to pass so slowly as it did this afternoon. Or so Riordan groused to himself. And his sire's presence did not improve matters for Theron's visit was most unwelcome at the moment.

He only half listened to Theron's account of some junior diplomat's mishaps in his first posting. *Since the young fool didn't precipitate a war in that part of Aisen, why bother recounting every detail of his blunders?* Riordan thought with irritation.

Realizing he was fidgeting, he stood up and walked to a window to stare at the quiet street below. The traffic in this portion of the north district, vehicular or pedestrian, was not as heavy as in the more fashionable sections farther east. Long minutes ticked by before passersby or carriages came into view. Riordan sighed, chiding himself for his impatience. It was still early, and in any case, Dylen had not specified the exact time of his visit.

Riordan felt his heart start to race as it was prone to do each time he recalled Dylen's message. The note arrived just after he finished his solitary breakfast, informing him that Dylen would come by later in the day. He had not known a moment's calm since then.

His correspondence was neglected, lunch was left largely uneaten, an appointment with Eiren was promptly cancelled, and his plan to drop by his parents' residence on his way back home was discarded. Furthermore, all callers were told he was indisposed or not at home, whichever excuse was deemed appropriate by his butler. Only Theron was sufficiently thick-skinned to be oblivious of his son's very clear desire not to have company and had insisted on coming up to see him.

He sighed again. It was not charitable of him to resent his sire's wish to visit him. Now that he no longer resided with his parents, the times they saw him were considerably reduced. And Theron had not been at all pleased by his decision to move out of the family house and away from the virtual battery of caregivers hired to attend him during his convalescence. Riordan was grateful to his parents for that and had often told them so.

But gratitude could only go so far. Eventually all the fuss and attention became stifling. And being immured in his sire's residence hardly encouraged a certain Deir to come and see him. Riordan was not so naïve as to believe that was the only reason for Dylen's failure to visit again after that one time more than a month ago. But it was still one reason too many.

Riordan absent-mindedly scratched the back of his neck—it tended to itch there as his skin continued to recover. The scrape of his fingers against unevenly textured flesh gave him pause, and he pensively caressed the rough patch of skin that peeked out from his collar. What would Dylen make of his scars? A moment later, he bitterly laughed to himself. What reason had he to hope that they would be intimate enough once more for Dylen to see his blemishes, much less touch them?

He almost jumped when the parlor door opened and the butler appeared. Theron stopped mid-story and looked at the servant questioningly. The Deir proceeded to

announce the arrival of His Grace, Dylen Essendri *il* Teris.

Riodan felt the color rise in his face as he gave the butler leave to usher Dylen up to the parlor. He glanced at his sire. Theron's mouth had tightened, and he looked at Riodan reproachfully.

"Is he the reason you cancelled your visit with us?" he inquired peremptorily.

"Yes," Riodan tersely answered. Hearing the tread of footsteps mounting the stairs outside, he added, "I have missed him so, *Aba*. Don't begrudge me this one small joy."

Whatever Theron would have replied was preempted when the door opened again. Dylen entered, briefly hesitating when he espied the elder Leyhar. But, though his eyes turned wary, he did not let the latter's presence deter him. He walked to Riodan who eagerly met him halfway.

For an awkward moment, they looked at each other uncertainly. And then Dylen held out his hand and said, "Am I welcome?"

Riodan clasped his hand and firmly replied, "You always are, Dy." He turned his head and looked defiantly at his sire. "*Aba* was just leaving,"

Theron's face reddened slightly, but he did not rebuke Riodan. He stood up, stiffly saying, "Yes, I must be on my way."

He moved toward the door. But to Riodan's dismay, he abruptly stopped and turned around and headed back toward them. Riodan held his breath as his sire faced Dylen, his mien worryingly stern. Theron's throat worked jerkily, as if he found it hard to speak.

The senior diplomat said, "I hope you can forgive an old dog his bad habits, Essendri-*dyhar*. I wronged you, and for that, I am sorry."

Riodan gaped at him in shock. He quickly glanced at Dylen. His beloved was visibly surprised as evinced by the startled lift of his eyebrows. But Riodan thought he also glimpsed a flicker of respect in Dylen's eyes,

"Bad habits are the hardest to break, Ambassador," Dylen quietly replied. "I won't hold your errors against you if you don't hold my past against me."

He held Theron's gaze. The ambassador was the first to waver.

"Fair enough," Theron gruffly agreed. He bade them both goodbye and walked out of the room.

Riodan blew his breath out. He glanced at Dylen, his eyes still wide with amazement.

"I didn't expect that," he admitted.

"Nor did I," Dylen said. "But it's good to have that out of the way." He ran a searching gaze over Riodan. "You look very well."

"I *am* well," Riodan assured him. "And itching to get back to work."

"Has Eiren given you leave?" Dylen asked as Riodan led him to the hearthside couch. They sat in cozy warmth before the crackling fire.

Riodan shook his head. "He says another sennight or so. It better be for, if he confines me any longer than that, I swear I shall start climbing the walls."

Dylen smiled. "Why did you move here?" he curiously asked. "Did you have a falling-out with your parents?"

"Nay. But, saints above, Dy! You can't imagine what it's like to be nigh smothered with care. They were all but coddling me to death," Riodan darkly muttered.

Dylen chuckled. Even better, his earth green eyes danced with mirth.

Elated, Riodan said, "You will stay for dinner, yes?"

"I would like that," Dylen smilingly replied.

The butler returned and served them a light afternoon repast—hard cranapple cider, spiced haronuts, dainty blackgrape leaf rolls stuffed with forcemeat and, to Dylen’s amusement, crunchy Asmaran cracklings and bite-sized batter-coated quintail eggs fried to a golden turn.

“You seem to have developed a taste for southern cuisine,” he remarked as he popped a quintail egg into his mouth.

“Not all,” Riordan mildly demurred. “I don’t mind blood soup and sautéed fish tongues too much—actually, they’re quite delicious. But you will never get me to try roasted ram bollocks!”

“Nay? But it’s considered a great delicacy,” Dylen said. “And purported to do marvels for one’s potency.”

Riordan wrinkled his nose in distaste. “I’m quite satisfied with my level of potency, thank you. And, verily, were I forced to eat so repulsive a dish, I would more likely shrivel than swell up down yonder.”

Dylen burst out laughing. The sound of it thrilled Riordan to the core.

“Why, Ambassador, I never knew you hid a salty tongue behind that demure exterior of yours,” Dylen teased. “Who would have thought it?”

Riordan snorted. “You shouldn’t be so surprised. After all, it was you who got me started down that road.”

“Ah, by dint of my sterling example?”

“Hardly sterling. Really, Dy, some of the terms I learned from you would reduce a worldly-wise harlot to blushes.”

Dylen’s eyebrows rose in tacit skepticism. “And you know this because you’ve bandied lewd words with bawds?”

Riordan hesitated. “Well, actually... yes...”

“You did?” Dylen grinned with abject delight. “For shame, Riordan Leyhar. How came you to keep company with such disreputable company?”

“It was an accident!” Riordan protested. “There was this ball in Qatare. The host actually brought in whores to entertain his guests, but he didn’t inform us of their professions. I thought the Deir I was talking to was only a particularly filthy-mouthed, questionably dressed blueblood and so I matched him jest for bawdy jest. How was I to know he was the premier attraction at the biggest brothel in the city?”

After they laughed over Riordan’s misadventure, Dylen suddenly said, “We got along so well in Asmara, didn’t we?”

Riordan felt his heart go *thump*. He had not expected Dylen to speak so soon of their time together in the southern kingdom.

“Yes. Yes, we did,” he murmured, conscious of how breathless he sounded.

Dylen sat back, a faint smile curving his lips. “Thank you for granting my belated request that we be friends again,” he said unexpectedly.

“You thank me?” Riordan swallowed. “I’m the one who’s deeply grateful. If you count me even as the least of *your* friends, it will be enough for me and so much more than I deserve.”

He nearly choked when Dylen reached across the small distance between them and gripped his hand. Dylen gazed at the fire a while before speaking again.

“Rohyr told me it was more difficult to nurse my resentments than to forgive you and move on,” he softly said. “He was right. I found it easier *not* to keep my distance from

you. The effort it took to stoke my anger far outstripped being civil with you. And I didn't feel as lonely." He drew a deep breath then slowly released it.

Riodan turned his hand over to weave their fingers together. When Dylen did not balk, he tentatively asked, "Then... may I assume that you've forgiven me?"

Dylen's smile warmed considerably. "You may."

His heart beating madly, Riodan assayed another question. "Could you also learn to trust me again?"

"I think I already do," Dylen admitted.

"Merciful Veres..." Riodan closed his eyes, willing his heart to slow down a bit that he might think a little more clearly. He opened his eyes and looked at Dylen, hope and fear and barely leashed wanting colliding with each other inside him. "And...love?" he whispered hesitantly. "What of love?"

Dylen shook his head. "Nay. That I can't do."

Riodan was crestfallen. Swallowing hard, he mumbled, "Of... Of course... That was... presumptuous of me."

He started when Dylen pulled his hand to his mouth. He mutely stared as Dylen pressed a kiss to his fingers.

"It would be a waste of time learning something I already know." Dylen looked squarely at Riodan. "What I've always known. Don't you agree?"

Riodan could not speak or move, so thunderstruck was he. But when Dylen's mouth quirked upward in an affectionate smirk, an irresistible urge to kiss that mouth overtook him. He suited action to thought and, leaning forward, caught Dylen in a kiss that was equal parts emotion and bodily desire.

Dylen suddenly pulled him astride his lap. Their lips met again, parting and slanting against each other in a spate of blistering open-mouthed kisses. The sounds of a coach passing by drifted in through the window, abruptly reminding Riodan that they were in the parlor and not the privacy of his bedchamber. He broke their kiss and touched his forehead to Dylen's, panting as he strove to catch his breath.

"Perhaps..." he murmured thickly. "Perhaps we should continue in the bedroom."

"And of course closeting ourselves this early in the afternoon won't give your butler notions about us," Dylen remarked with a chuckle.

"Better we leave that to his imagination than provide him with a full show!" Riodan shot back. He kissed Dylen once more. "I wouldn't care were you someone else. I've had servants walk in on me before."

"Well then, why so shy with me now?"

"Not shy," Riodan demurred. "I just don't want anyone else to get an eyeful of your charms, much less a taste of them. I never want to share you again, Dy."

Dylen blinked in surprise. He bit his lip then met Riodan's gaze. "And you haven't," he quietly assured him. "Not since the night I revealed myself to Rohyr."

Riodan stared at him. "But I thought—When you spoke of seducing Malkon, it gave me the impression that..."

"That I'd been bedding others," Dylen finished for him. He shook his head. "Malkon wouldn't have had the full benefit of my experience. If it had come to that, I would have found other ways, used other methods save for the coupling of our bodies, to get what we needed from him. Once I no longer needed to sell my services, I became so selective that no one could meet my standards. And then you came back, and my desire awakened once

more.” He reached up to run his thumb along Riodan’s lips. “Truth be told, Rio, even when I tried to hate you, I still wanted you and badly so.”

“Is that why you kept your distance?” Riodan asked, his voice rough.

Dylen sighed. “Among other things. I told you, I tried to hate you as well. The mere sight of you was enough to undo all my efforts. What more your scent, your voice, the mere brush of your hand against mine?”

Riodan gasped as he was suddenly stroked between his legs. He glanced down and groaned at the sight of Dylen’s hand on his crotch, gently kneading the hard bulge therein. With a shuddery exhalation, he pulled away and got to his feet, drawing Dylen up as well.

“Bedroom,” he hoarsely said. “*Now*.”

Dylen softly laughed and let him conduct him thence. Almost as soon as he kicked the door shut behind him, Riodan all but pounced on him, kissing him hard as he started to undress him. He returned the favor.

But when Dylen had him down to his shirt and had loosened its collar, Riodan abruptly stiffened. A deep flush heated his cheeks.

Dylen paused and looked searchingly at him. “Rio?”

Riodan gulped. “I should have warned you,” he said, his throat tight. “My back—”

“Yes, I know.”

“It’s just that... It’s not a pretty sight.”

Riodan knew a twinge of fear as Dylen thoughtfully studied him. He caught his breath when Dylen resumed undoing his shirt, going behind him as he drew the garment off his shoulders. Riodan closed his eyes, agonizingly conscious of Dylen’s gaze on his blemished flesh. The press of soft lips against his nape startled him, as did the sensation of Dylen’s tongue ghosting a moist trail across the uneven landscape of his back. Fingers caressed rough patchy skin before smoothing around his torso and reaching down to fondle his subsiding erection through his breaches into renewed firmness. Riodan shakily exhaled, not quite certain what to make of Dylen’s ministrations.

“Pretty is an understatement,” he heard Dylen murmur. “You’re so beautiful, Rio.”

Riodan shook his head and turned around to face Dylen. “I’m not—” he started to protest.

Dylen cut him off with a hard swift kiss. Pulling away, he slipped his own shirt from his body.

“You are beautiful,” he firmly repeated. “And to my eyes your scars make you even more so. Now—are we going to make love or not?”

Riodan slowly smiled.

They swiftly undressed each other, nigh tearing off the rest of their clothes in their haste to have naught but skin between them.

Sensing that Dylen seemed inclined to let him take the lead, Riodan allowed himself to be more aggressive. In light of their conversation, he suspected that Dylen wished to be mastered that he might forget his years of mastering others. Enflamed by the prospect, Riodan pressed Dylen down to the bed with nigh indecent haste. He paused only long enough to grab a bottle of oil from the topmost drawer of the bedside table and place it within easy reach on the bed.

He eagerly explored Dylen anew, thrilling to the sounds of his groans. Steadily moving downwards, Riodan sucked at his neck, kissed his chest and teased his nipples

while his hands caressed every inch of skin within reach. He felt Dylen's fingers run through his hair; heard his breathing growing more uneven with every ardent assault on his flesh. Reaching Dylen's groin, he eagerly enclosed Dylen's hard length in his mouth, drawing upon it as if he had just emerged from a lengthy fast and been served a veritable feast.

"Turn around, Rio!" Dylen suddenly demanded.

Grinning widely, Riordan quickly changed his position. Dylen grabbed his hips and made him straddle his face. Riordan yelped as he was engulfed in Dylen's talented mouth before he set to lavishing his attention once more on the seductive flesh before him. To be steadily drawn upon even as he likewise employed his lips, tongue and mouth on Dylen's shaft—the feeling beggared description.

It turned into a sensual race as both strove to undo the other. Soon they were both wracked by rapture. Riordan cried out around his luscious mouthful when he felt the pulsing in his groin that rapidly spiralled into an orgasm of explosive proportions. So ardent did his suckling become as he rode out the waves of his spending that Dylen soon climaxed as well, gasping raggedly as Riordan hungrily milked him dry.

Still panting from his release, Riordan crawled back up into Dylen's arms. He pressed their lips together at once, feeling the need to be in constant intimate contact with his lover. He moaned in delight as his mouth was pillaged and he was lured into a hedonistic duel of lips and tongue and teeth.

Riordan drew away slightly, his eyes pricking with grateful tears. Gazing at his hard-earned prize, he whispered, "I love you, Dy."

With a sweet smile, Dylen snaked his hand behind Riordan's nape and pulled him back down into an even more voracious kiss. At once, Riordan set to ravaging him anew. Dylen happily succumbed to his desire.

Supple fingers played with his nipples, pinching and tweaking them until he was squirming with delight beneath Riordan's withy form. As their members surged back to life, Riordan thrust against him, sliding the hardening columns against each other until they were both gasping in ecstasy into each other's mouths.

Riordan snatched up the bottle of oil and poured a goodly amount onto his palm. But Dylen stopped him just as he was about to smear Dylen's shaft with the unguent. Riordan stared at him, eyebrows lifting in question.

"I want you to take me," Dylen whispered. He firmly guided Riordan's hand to his own member. "Anoint yourself, *ariad*."

Riordan's hand shook as he lubricated his shaft. "Are you certain?" he anxiously asked, remembering the former *hethar*'s aversion to yielding thusly outside of his professional assignments.

"Very certain," Dylen huskily said. "Have all of me, Rio. Own me." He drew a shuddery inhalation. "I want to forget all the others. Make me think only of you. Of us."

Riordan could have wept from being blessed with so precious a gift as Dylen's utter trust and complete surrender. Almost holding his breath, he moved between Dylen's thighs. Dylen lifted his legs and wrapped them around his waist. Swallowing hard at the thought of berthing himself inside Dylen once more, Riordan carefully pressed his aching shaft home.

He barely stifled a cry as he was sheathed to the hilt. He stared at Dylen in joyous disbelief. He had ceased to entertain the thought of taking Dylen thusly long ago and after

their last union before their rift he had expected to never again have Dylen at all. But now, here he was buried deep in Dylen's heated sweetness after so very long. He had not thought such bliss possible.

"Saints above," he whispered as rapture coursed through him like a molten river. "Veres preserve me."

He waited for his lover to adjust to his embedded shaft. Dylen was as tight as an untried innocent, evidence of his many years abstention from playing the mare. Riordan watched him will himself to relax his muscles further. He knew Dylen was ready when he curled a leg behind Riordan's thighs and pulled him closer.

Riordan experienced a sharp surge of possessiveness. An urge to stake his claim on his beloved overcame him, and he began to drive into Dylen, thrusting into him as deeply as he could. Dylen's moans and gasps sent prickles of delight simmering along his skin, and he applied himself to delivering them both into ecstasy.

It was as glorious as it had been that one time more than two score years ago when he'd had the pleasure and the honor of taking Dylen in genital intercourse. With none of his subsequent partners had it ever felt like that or as it did now. None had looked as exquisite as Dylen did as he lay beneath him, lips parted invitingly, eyes gazing up at him in open love and lust. And for all the others' willingness to submit, only Dylen's surrender meant the world to him.

For in yielding all that he was and had, Dylen had given him the greatest gift of all. His hard-won devotion and trust.

This knowledge sent Riordan's lust soaring. Rough cries escaped him with every lunge of his hips, the feel of wonderfully snug satin softness making him near giddy with joy. Desiring to see Dylen lose himself just as completely to pleasure, he grasped the shaft that pressed against his belly and stroked it hardily.

Dylen cried then shuddered helplessly, the sensations of being caressed from within and without conspiring to unravel him. Coming completely undone, he called out Riordan's name and spent himself copiously into his hand. So stunning were his features in rapture, the sight finished Riordan as well.

Breathing harshly with the force of his release, Riordan buried himself as deeply as he could, his entire existence in that instant reduced to the ecstasy of at last wholly claiming Dylen. As the last of his seed filled his lover, he felt his limbs give way, and he collapsed onto Dylen. Strong arms enclosed him, and with a happy sigh, Riordan nestled his head on Dylen's chest. He smiled broadly upon marking the unsteady up and down of Dylen's breast as he breathed, evidence that his lover's climax had been as powerful as his.

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Riordan waited for them both to calm down before he carefully pulled out of Dylen. Snatching up a discarded shirt from the floor, he used it to wipe their seed-stippled torsos. Tossing the shirt aside, he slipped out of the bed.

Dylen watched him head for the small liquor cabinet by his wardrobe. His eyebrows rose when Riordan took out a bottle of *mirash*. Riordan looked almost shyly at Dylen as he poured himself a glass of the conception suppressor.

Seating himself on the edge of the bed, Dylen grinned and said, "Curious that you have *mirash* on hand. Methinks you expected more than a simple visit from me."

Riordan chuckled with some embarrassment. "I didn't expect anything," he corrected. "I only hoped."

Holding Dylen's gaze, he downed the *mirash* then returned to the bed and climbed onto Dylen's lap, straddling him. Dylen held his warm body close, kissing his throat and reaching for his buttocks to knead the firm mounds suggestively. Riordan moaned as an enterprising finger slipped into the crease of his arse and nudged the tight entrance within. He wiggled his hips, caressing Dylen's slowly rousing shaft in turn.

Dylen groaned then softly laughed. "You've learned much, *ariad*," he remarked, pulling Riordan into a plundering kiss.

"I had a good teacher," Riordan murmured against his lips. "The very best in fact."

"Is that so?" Dylen chuckled. "Well then, what say you demonstrate how well I've taught you?"

He plucked the bottle of oil from its nest among the pillows. Keeping his eyes on Riordan, he deftly eased some of the lubricant up his backside, caressing him within until Riordan was arching sensuously against him even as he bore down on Dylen's embedded fingers. Dylen latched onto a nipple, sucking it to a hard peak, which elicited a litany of soft cries from Riordan.

"Dy, please..." Riordan pleaded.

Dylen cast the bottle aside and lazily coated his shaft with oil. "Do you want me inside you so badly?" he huskily asked.

"Yes!"

"Then ride me, my love. Let me in."

He lowered Riordan onto his shaft. The stretch and burn of his entry fetched a slight wince from his lover. But it did not take long for lingering groans and ecstatic whimpers to supplant it as discomfort gave way to pleasure. Riordan began to move as bidden, riding the flesh that cleaved him so fulsomely. Dylen gazed at him, completely enraptured and consumed with love. He wrapped his hand around the proud member that jutted up between them and stroked it with every slide of his shaft into Riordan's core.

For several heartbeats, all that could be heard was the symphony of their ragged breathing and drawn out moans.

They climaxed nigh simultaneously. Semen dappled their chests and bellies and flowed from one to fill the other. Sobbing his bliss against Dylen's mouth, Riordan wrapped his arms tightly around his lover's shoulders and held fast to him, yearning for emotional intimacy as much as his body had been in need of sexual satiation. Dylen embraced him tightly, lifting a gentle hand to smooth his tousled locks. With the other he stroked Riordan's back soothingly, tenderly rubbing his fingers over the uneven flesh that was palpable testament to Riordan's great love for him.

They bathed together afterward, washing semen and saliva from their bodies. But Riordan did not expect to be tumbled back into bed as soon as they came out of the bathing chamber.

"You-you're indefatigable!" he half stuttered, half laughed when Dylen promptly reached down between his legs to begin the process of turning.

"What can you expect when so splendid a feast has been spread before me?" Dylen quipped as he fingered the tiny orifice hidden behind Riordan's seed pouch.

He grinned salaciously when Riordan could only writhe in speechless rapture. A glance down told him his lover's body had turned

Dylen pushed Riordan's thighs up and spread them wide. His eyes homed in purposefully on the glistening entrance that was Riordan's sheath. He locked his lips onto

the sensitive flesh, laving Riordan with his tongue before penetrating him in mimicry of what was to come. As soon as Riordan started to lift his hips to press up against him, Dylen shifted above him and entered him in one smooth thrust. Moaning wantonly, Riordan threw his head back, enraptured by the sensation of thick, firm flesh sliding into him.

The sight of Riordan abandoning himself to pleasure aroused Dylen even further. But he restrained himself and initially delivered only slow, shallow thrusts, refusing to let their rutting end too soon. Holding Riordan's hips steady, he bent low to kiss his lover's throat, occasionally teasing the hollow at its base with tantalizing dips of his tongue. He moved lower to gently maraud Riordan's dusky nipples to hard nubs. Riordan pressed up, arching his body in willing complicity in his ravishment. Dylen abandoned restraint and gave himself over to mounting ecstasy.

It was never less than wondrous whenever their bodies joined, a feeling alien to Dylen for all his experience. It was not in any way like this with all the Deira who had passed through his life, not even those for whom he had held some affection. He could not think of a logical explanation except that they had been made for each other.

*

Riordan clutched at the beddings as Dylen steadily speared him. Everything seemed reduced to the singular sensation of hard flesh repeatedly plunging deep inside him.

He pulled Dylen down to him to seal their mouths in scorching union. A moment later, he was shuddering uncontrollably as rapture swept through him in a nigh endless torrent of sensation. His sheath contracted around the flesh that breached him, triggering Dylen's climax in turn. Riordan moaned joyfully when he felt Dylen's semen fill him to overflowing followed by the swift rush of heat in his belly—Dylen's love made tangible.

Neither spoke for some time afterward. They were content to simply lie close together, Dylen resting his head on Riordan's shoulder. Riordan gently wove his fingers through Dylen's hair. When Dylen pressed kisses to the shoulder beneath his cheek, Riordan's body responded with a faint tremor of delight.

Their post-coital reverie was rudely interrupted when the door opened suddenly, banging sharply against the wall as it did. Quickly pulling the covers up higher over both of them, Riordan stared incredulously as Guyon Barath barged in over the protestations of his butler. The butler on the other hand gaped in horror when he realized what he and the uninvited visitor had stumbled upon.

"I'm so sorry, *Dyhar*!" he anxiously told Riordan. "I told him you were indisposed, but he wouldn't heed me!"

"I can see that," Riordan grimly said. "You may go. I will tend to Barath-tyar." He regarded Guyon with annoyance as the butler hurried out. "What in *heyas* are you doing here, Guyon?" he snapped. "You were told I wasn't available."

Guyon was staring at him and Dylen in turn, eyes bulging in disbelief. "What am I doing?" he blurted. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"I came here to forgive you!"

Riordan almost choked. "Forgive me?" he repeated.

Eyeing Dylen with dudgeon, Guyon scrunched up his nose in disgust. "I was ready to overlook your indiscretion and reinstate our betrothal," he huffed at Riordan. "And this is how you reward me?"

“Reward—” Riodan glared at him. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with my rumored elevation to ambassador-at-large, would it?” he sarcastically suggested. “Verily, I find it hard to believe that you want to renew our troth out of mere affection.”

“I do hold affection for you!” Guyon cried. “That I am willing to disregard your sordid affair with *him* should be proof enough of that.”

Riodan grabbed the heavy timepiece on his bedside table and hurled it straight at Guyon’s head. Guyon yelped as it hit him squarely in the face. He gingerly rubbed his bruised nose, wincing as he did.

“How dare you!” Riodan shouted at him, indignation thrumming in every word. “It wasn’t sordid, and it was no mere affair, I’ll have you know! We loved each other and even more so now.” He snorted disdainfully as Guyon continued to stare at him in apparent refusal to believe his assertion. “And I seriously doubt you’d still be willing to wed me were my appointment withheld.”

Guyon’s mouth fell open. He looked like a fish out of water gasping for breath. “Withheld?” he finally croaked. “Then it hasn’t been confirmed?” He uttered an imprecation. “Confound your sire. He assured me it was a sure thing and—” Guyon stopped in dismay, realizing his error. “You misled me!”

Riodan smiled. “And you wouldn’t be interested in binding to me any longer were that true. How predictable.” He snuggled suggestively against Dylen, turning his face into his lover’s neck to nuzzle it. “Now would you mind?” he murmured. “Dylen was about to fuck me again.”

*

The slam of the door was deafening. Dylen listened to the petulant stomping of feet outside until it was abruptly cut off by the closing of the parlor door. He let out a relieved sigh then looked at Riodan. He noticed his lover was shaking rather violently and kept his face hidden against Dylen’s neck. Concerned, Dylen slipped a finger under Riodan’s chin and lifted it to look closely at his face. He burst into chuckles when he saw that Riodan was only snickering helplessly.

“Again?” he archly inquired.

Riodan grinned impishly. “Why not? Unless you aren’t up for another bout?”

“You may rue your words, *ariad*,” Dylen mildly warned him.

Dark brown eyes gleaming with devotion met his gaze. “Nay, I will never regret being yours,” Riodan softly said, his words punctuated with tender kisses. “I love you, Dy. Veres knows how much I love you.”

Dylen pulled him flush against him and crushed their mouths together.

“Don’t leave me again, Rio,” Dylen whispered against his beloved’s lips.

“Never,” Riodan promised.

And he pulled Dylen once more into his body’s heated embrace.

Epilogue

Pledged

The Citadel, in the 3010th Year of the Common Age

“Ah, never have I seen capes so fine before!”

“Can it be—? Hirlen, is this Asmaran cashmere?”

“It can’t be. It’s nigh unavailable north of the border.”

Hirlen Teris smiled indulgently as his old friends oohed and aahed over the dress capes displayed on his bed. One was of a rich burgundy shade, another a sumptuous cobalt blue and the third an elegant terre verte.

“Actually it can,” Hirlen said. “The Shaja of Asmara sent them to Dylen and Riodan as binding gifts.”

“But why three of them?” Eldran asked curiously.

Hirlen grinned. “One is for me.”

“What?” Miqar exclaimed. “Whatever did you do to deserve such a gift?”

“I birthed Dylen,” Hirlen smugly replied. “The Shaja was so grateful for a service my son did for them, he rewarded me for bringing him into the world!”

“Well, I never!” Miqar huffed. “Why hasn’t anyone rewarded me for birthing my children?”

“Because neither of your sons have done anything extraordinary for a filthy rich monarch,” Liave pointed out. “So which is yours, Hirlen?”

“I haven’t decided,” Hirlen admitted. “Riodan insists that Dylen have the green one because it matches his eyes so well. He left it to me to choose between the others since either color will suit him perfectly.”

“Choose the burgundy then,” Miqar said. “It’s absolutely stunning!”

“Nay, the blue,” Liave insisted. “It will contrast wonderfully with your hair.”

“When his hair was all chestnut, it would have,” Miqar retorted. “Choose the burgundy, Hirlen.”

“Don’t be daft, Miqar,” Eldran giped. “Hirlen still has more brown than grey on his head. Which is more than can be said of yours!”

Hirlen laughed as the three good-naturedly squabbled among themselves. He glanced up when Rohyr Essendri came to his side. Eldran, Miqar and Liave promptly shushed up, awed and a little abashed to be in the same room with their king. And in such close quarters at that.

“Don’t mind me,” Rohyr affably told them. “I’m a little envious myself over those capes.”

“Are you?” Hirlen smilingly gestured to the garments. “Then have your pick, *Dyhar*.”

Rohyr shook his head, grinning. “I was only jesting. And I think you should take the green. Let Dylen wear another color for a change.”

Hirlen chortled. His friends laughed as well albeit diffidently. At that moment,

Tarquin appeared at the door and announced he had brought in some refreshments.

They filed out of the bedroom, Rohyr wheeling Hirlen after them. A delectable array of savory snacks and tempting pastries awaited them along with fragrant freshly brewed *kahvi*.

A child's happy cry caught their attention, and they looked toward the terrace where Rohyr's son and heir Vyren gleefully rolled on the ground with a trio of lively pups. A tongue in cheek wedding present from the Princes Laral and Sivar, they were of a rare breed of hounds exclusive to the royal families of the south.

His father bent to wipe slobber from the baby prince's face, but otherwise Lassen did not interrupt his child's play with the puppies. Behind them, Dylen and Riodan stood side-by-side, arms around each other, oft exchanging adoring looks and tender kisses in the manner of newlyweds the world over.

We wanted him to be happy. And now he is.

Hirlen glanced at Rohyr, just a tad startled. Despite having been exposed to Dylen's abilities through the years, he was still awed when he experienced mind-speech.

He beamed at Rohyr, nodding in agreement. Looking at his son again, he saw Dylen gazing back at his brother, his rare sweet smile gracing his lips. He'd heard Rohyr's message, the elder Teris realized with even more wonder.

Hirlen sighed with contentment and utmost felicity. His son was indeed happy. For he and the Deir of his heart were finally one in an inviolable union.

Theirs was a bond that had withstood the test of trials and time. Their love would prevail in this lifetime and beyond.

Glossary of Terms

- Aba* ‘sire’ Parent who functions as the head of the family.
- Adda* ‘father’ Parent who functions as the principal caregiver of the family.
- Ardan* North Continent hereditary monarch or potentate of a large sovereign realm or ruling overlord of an aggregate of internally autonomous states
- Ardis* An Ardan’s consort.
- ariad* ‘beloved’ An endearment.
- by-blow* An illegitimate child
- Deir* (*pl. Deira*) Member of the race of hermaphrodites that populates the world of Aisen.
- dyhar* High honorific applied to Deira of noble blood or high-ranking profession.
- enyr* (*pl. enyra*) ‘True Blood’ A Deir whose antecedents kept their breeding with the gelra to the barest viable minimum and thus retained much of the physical strength and endurance and most of the mind gifts of the Naere.
- felka* (*pl. felkar*) Prostitute who works in a brothel or walks the streets for patrons.
- Herun* (*pl. Herune*) North Continent ruling aristocrat. Herune may govern sovereign principalities, fiefdoms, city-states or great urban centers.
- hethar* (*pl. hethare*) ‘companion’ Deir who provides sexual services and/or social companionship for a considerable fee. Unlike common prostitutes, *hethare* are well-educated and highly cultured and, in most cities, generally accepted in polite society.
- heyas* A common expletive.
- il* Designates the birthing parent’s surname when an illegitimate child carries his biological sire’s name, e.g. Dylen Essendri *il* Teris.
- mirash* A conception suppressor
- min* Diminutive form of address applied to a Deir of junior years or station. Usage warrants mutual familiarity whether familial, platonic or professional.
- Naere* The Deira’s hermaphroditic race of origin.
- Oda* ‘grandfather’ Grandparent who functioned as caregiver of his family.
- sedyr* (*pl. sedyra*) ‘Half Blood’ Deir whose antecedents bred indiscriminately with the gelra, which resulted in the diminishment or disappearance of many of the characteristics of the Naere in succeeding generations.
- serl* ‘baronet’ Non-noble holder of the lowest hereditary North Continent title.
- Shaja* South Vihandran hereditary ruler
- templar* Extraordinarily mentally gifted Deir.
- thein* ‘baron’ Non-ruling member of the North Continent nobility.
- tyar* General honorific for someone of higher years or station or whose profession warrants more than general courtesy.

The End

About the Author:

As far back as her college days, Eressë enjoyed writing stories set in historical times or, even better, fantasy settings. A good number turned into homoerotic romances because many of her male lead characters wound up having more chemistry with each other than with the female leads.

Whether Eressë subconsciously wrote them that way even she does not know. In any case, this penchant for fantasy M/M romance became the wellspring of Ylandre, the world in which her seminal piece *Sacred Fate* and its sequel *Hallowed Bond* take place.

Eressë lives in Southeast Asia with her husband, three sons and one dog. An AB Journalism graduate, she started her writing career as an advertising copywriter. She is now a freelance writer and a contributor to a number of publications. She also enjoys cooking and baking and tries her hand at everything from pasta to pastries. But her first love is, and always will be, writing stories.

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