



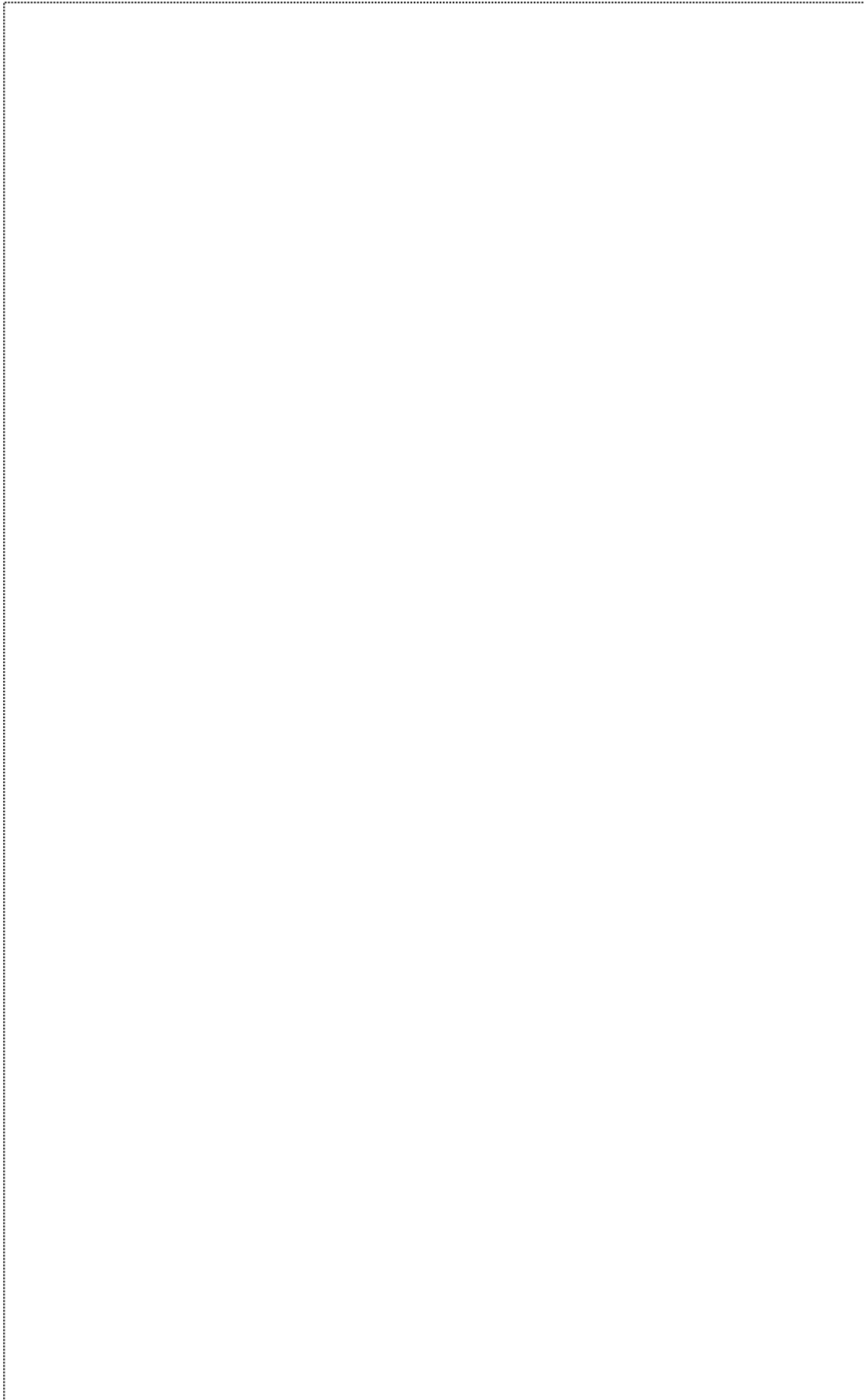
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Kushiel's Legacy

Kushiel's Dart

Kushiel's Chosen

Kushiel's Avatar



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Warner Books

Time Warner Book Group

1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com.

First Edition: June 2006

ISBN: 044650002X

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to everyone
reaching for the sunlight,
everywhere.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Montrevè's Household

Phèdre nó Delaunay de Montrève—Comtesse de Montrève

Joscelin Verreuil—Phèdre's consort; Cassiline Brother (Siovale)

Imriel nó Montrève de la Courcel—Phèdre's foster son (also member of the royal family)

Ti-Philippe—chevalier

Hugues, Gilot, Marcel—men-at-arms

Eugenie—mistress of the household, townhouse

Clory—niece of Eugenie

Benoit—stable-lad, townhouse

Purnell and Richeline Friote—seneschals of Montrève

Charles, Katherine, Denis Friote—seneschals' children

Ronald Agout—falconer

Artus Labbé—kennel master

Members of the D'Angeline Royal Family

Ysandre de la Courcel—Queen of Terre d'Ange; wed to Drustan mab Necthana

Sidonie de la Courcel—elder daughter of Ysandre; heir to Terre d'Ange

Alais de la Courcel—younger daughter of Ysandre

Imriel nó Montrève de la Courcel—cousin; son of Benedicte de la Courcel (deceased) and Melisande Shahrizai

Barquiel L'Envers—uncle of Ysandre; Royal Commander; Duc L'Envers (Namarre)

House Shahrizai

Melisande Shahrizai—mother of Imriel; wed to Benedicte de la Courcel (deceased)

Faragon Shahrizai—Duc de Shahrizai

Mavros, Roshana, Baptiste Shahrizai—cousins of Imriel

Members of the Royal Court

Ghislain nó Trevalion—noble, son of Percy de Somerville (deceased)

Bernadette de Trevalion—noble, wed to Ghislain, sister of Baudoin (deceased)

Bertran de Trevalion—son of Ghislain and Bernadette

Amaury Trente—noble, former Commander of the Queen's Guard

Julien and Colette Trente—children of Amaury

Marguerite Grosmaine—daughter of the Secretary of the Presence

Nicola L'Envers y Aragon—cousin of Queen Ysandre; wed to Ramiro Zornin de Aragon

Raul L'Envers y Aragon—son of Nicola and Ramiro

The Night Court

Nathalie nó Balm—Dowayne of Balm House

Emmeline nó Balm—adept of Balm House

Didier Vascon—Dowayne of Valerian House

Sephira—adept of Valerian House

Alba

Drustan mab Necthana—Cruarch of Alba, wed to Ysandre de la Courcel

Necthana—mother of Drustan

Breideia—sister of Drustan, daughter of Necthana

Talorcan—son of Breideia

Dorelei—daughter of Breidaia

Sibeal—sister of Drustan, daughter of Necthana, wed to Hyacinthe

Hyacinthe—Master of the Straits, wed to Sibeal

Grainne mac Conor—Lady of the Dalriada

Eamonn mac Grainne—son of Grainne and Quintilius Rouse

Tiberium

Master Piero di Bonci—teacher of philosophy

Lucius Tadius, Aulus, Brigitta, Akil, Vernus—students of Master Piero

Deccus Fulvius—senator

Claudia Fulvia—wife of Deccus; sister of Lucius

Anna Marzoni—wido

Belinda Marzoni—daughter of Anna

Canis—beggar

Master Strozzi—teacher of rhetoric

Master Ambrosius—incense-maker

Erytheia of Thrasos—painter

Silvio—assistant to Erytheia of Thrasos

Denise Fleurais—DAngeline ambassadress in Tiberium

Ruggero Caccini—ruffian commander

Priest of Asclepius

Titus Maximius—princeps of Tiberium

Oppius da Lippi—captain of the Aeolia

Lucca

Publius Tadius—father of Lucius

Beatrice Tadia—mother of Lucius

Gallus Tadius(deceased)—great-grandfather of Lucius

Gaetano Correggio—Prince of Lucca

Dacia Correggio—wife of Gaetano

Helena Correggio—daughter of Gaetano and Dacia

Bartolomeo Ponzi—enamored of Helena

Domencio Martelli—Duke of Valpetra

Silvan us the Younger—commander of Valpetra's mercenary company

Arturo—captain of the Luccan guard

Orfeo, Pollio, Calvino, Matius, Adolpho, Baldessare, Constantin—soldiers in the Red Scourge

Quentin LeClerc—captain of the D'Angeline embassy guard

Romuald—soldier in the D'Angeline embassy guard

Marcus Cornelius—commander of the Tiberian contingent

Others

Maslin of Lombelon—unacknowledged son of Isidore d'Aiglemort (deceased)

Lelahiah Valais—Queen Ysandre's surgeon

Emile—proprietor of the Cockerel

Quintilius Rouse—Royal Admiral

Favrielle n^o Eglantine—couturiere

Bérèngere of Namarre—head of Naamah's Order

Amarante of Namarre—daughter of Bérèngere

Brother Selbert—chief priest in the Sanctuary of Elua (Siovale)

Gilles Lamiz—Queen's Poet

Roxanne de Mereliot—Lady of Marsilikos (Eisande)

Gerard and Jeanne de Mereliot—children of Roxanne (Eisande)

Historical Figures

Baudoin de Trevalion(deceased)—cousin of Queen Ysandre; executed for treason

Isidore d'Aiglemort(deceased)—noble; traitor turned hero (Camlach)

Thelesis de Mornay(deceased)—Queen's Poet

Waldemar Selig(deceased)—Skaldi warlord; invaded Terre d'Ange

Fadil Chouma(deceased)—Menekhetan slaver

The Mahrkagir(deceased)—mad ruler of Drujan; lord of Daršanga

Drucilla(deceased)—Tiberian prisoner in Daršanga; chirurgon

Kaneka—Jebean prisoner in Daršanga

Jagun(deceased)—chief of the Kereyit Tatars

Ras Lijasu—Prince of Meroe in Jebe-Barkal



Prologue



What does it mean to be good?

When I was a child, I thought I knew. It was easy then. I knew nothing of my birth or my heritage. My childhood was spent in the Sanctuary of Elua, where I was a ward. My days were spent in worklike play: scrambling the mountainsides and tending goats with the other children of the Sanctuary, climbing trees and swimming in the swift stream while our charges grazed.

I was steeped in the precept of Blessed Elua: Love as thou wilt. And I did. I loved without reserve, freely and easily—my playmates, the priests and priestesses of the Sanctuary, the goats I tended, the earth beneath my feet and the sky above my head. I am a D'Angeline; I loved Terre d'Ange, the country of my birth. With all my heart, I loved our gods, Elua and his Companions, and I knew myself loved in return. I was happy. I never thought to be anything else.

When I was ten years old, everything changed.

I was stolen by Carthaginian slave-traders and sent on a journey into hell. And I thought I'd die there, but I didn't. I was rescued. I was brought out of damnation into safety.

And everything changed again.

In a distant fortress on the far verges of Khebbel-im-Akkad, the D'Angeline Queen's delegate bowed his head and greeted me as Imriel de la Courcel, Prince of the Blood.

All that I knew of myself was a lie.

I learned my father was Benedicte de la Courcel, the great-uncle of Queen Ysandre. For many years, he was her closest living relative in House Courcel. But by the time I heard the news, he was long dead. He was a traitor to the throne, and if he'd lived to be tried, he would have been convicted of it. He didn't, though.

My mother was another matter.

When I was eight years old, before I knew who she was, Brother Selbert took me to La Serenissima to see my mother. He had told me that my parents had been D'Angeline nobles who had died of an ague during a ship crossing, bequeathing me with their dying breaths to the priest as a ward of the Sanctuary. He told me that this woman had been a friend of my parents and would stand as my patron when I came of age. And he told me that she had dangerous enemies and that I must never speak of her, for it would put her in grave danger.

That last bit, at least, was true. I believed him. Why shouldn't I? I'd spent my life trusting him. But everything else was a lie. And he didn't tell me that she had earned each and every enemy she made. My father's treachery pales in comparison to her deeds. In all its history, Terre d'Ange has never known a deadlier traitor than Melisande Shahrizai de la Courcel.

My mother, whom I learned to despise.

In hindsight, it seems strange that I didn't recognize her at the time. And yet how was I to know? There were no mirrors in the Sanctuary of Elua. Betimes we children used to lean over the goat-bridge and peer at our wavering reflections in the stream's surface, but that was all. I was as ignorant of my features as I was of my identity.

Of course, that was before the slave-traders took me. Then I had ample opportunity to hear myself described. In the country of Drujan, they were looking for perfect, unblemished sacrifices. I was sold to one of the bone-priests who served the Mahrkagir, the ruler of all Drujan. The Mahrkagir was cruel, ruthless and utterly mad. And I was bought for his foul harem, the zenana in the palace of Daršanga. Beauty is scant comfort on a descent into hell.

I resemble my mother.

I know it now. I see it in mirrors—there are always mirrors, in my foster-mother Phèdre's household—and I hate it. I wear my mother's face. My eyes are her eyes, a deep twilight blue. My skin is her skin, a shadowed alabaster, the color of old ivory. I see the generous curve of her mouth reflected in my lips. My hair, like hers, grows in gleaming, blue-black waves.

The resemblance cannot be denied.

There are those—even now, after all she has done—who marvel that I don't welcome it. Although she was the greatest traitor our nation has known, Melisande Shahrizai was one of its greatest beauties, too. A deadly beauty, bright as the sun, keen as a blade. In certain circles, she is still admired for it. If there is a nation on the face of the earth with a people more vain than Terre d'Ange, I've yet to find it. And in my twelve years, I've seen more of the world than most D'Angelines will ever glimpse.

But I have seen beauty, and it does not wear my mother's face.

When I gaze in the mirror and see her features reflected in mine, I am filled with uncertainty. What does it mean to be good? When I look inside myself, I see only darkness and confusion. I do not know why

what happened to me, happened. I do not know what I did to deserve it, or if I am bearing the price of my mother's sins. I fear the resemblance between us. I fear that one day I may prove to be like her. But when I look outside myself, it is easy to point to goodness. I was stolen out of paradise and sent into the depths of a depravity the likes of which decent folk couldn't begin to comprehend, but I was rescued. The ones who rescued me... when I think about what it means to be good, I think about them.

Phèdre.

Joscelin.

Phèdre.

I don't know—I will never know—where they found the courage to do what was needed to save me. Phèdre says that although it is my mother who charged her with the task, it was the will of Blessed Elua himself that sent her forth across that terrible threshold. I cannot reckon the cost. I know what the Mahrkagir did to her. All of us who were slaves in the Mahrkagir's zenana knew what he did to his favorites. I don't know how she endured it. And I don't know how Joscelin, Phèdre's consort and protector, survived knowing the abuse she suffered at the Mahrkagir's hands without succumbing to madness.

I love them so much that it hurts inside.

I am theirs, now; their foster-son. Queen Ysandre allowed it, although she has little liking for the arrangement. My mother consented willingly to it; indeed, she made a concession that it might come to pass. As far as I know, it is one of the only concessions my mother has ever made in her life. Although they have been opponents in her intrigues, there is a bond of long standing between her and Phèdre. I don't understand it, and I don't want to; I think, somehow, that I will rue the day I ever do. My mother remains in sanctuary in the Temple of Asherat-of-the-Sea in La Serenissima. Unlike my father, she was tried and convicted of high treason long before I was born. Her life is forfeit if ever she sets a foot beyond the temple walls.

She writes me letters, which I don't read. I tried to burn the first letter she sent, but Phèdre snatched it from the brazier. After that, she began keeping them for me. She says that I will want them one day, and mayhap it is true. In my short life, I've seen many things no one would have believed possible. But I cannot ever imagine wanting to read my mother's words.

It doesn't happen often, but sometimes Phèdre is wrong.

It is strange, now, to think how I despised her at first. In the zenana of Daršanga, Phèdre *nó* Delaunay, the Comtesse de Montrève, did not look like a heroine bent on my rescue. She looked like a D'Angeline courtesan, delicate and lovely, and willing to wallow in the foulest depravity the Mahrkagir offered. It was true, too. For that, I hated her. I hated her so much I could barely stand to look at her. And Joscelin... Joscelin, too. I thought he had betrayed all that was noble and good about Terre d'Ange, sinking as low as a warrior can go.

I was wrong.

They were more, so much more. They were my salvation, and the salvation of many others. Not all, but many. A deadly evil was removed from the world the night that we—all of us together in the zenana—overthrew the Mahrkagir's forces. It was Blessed Elua's will, Phèdre says. Perhaps that, too, is true. I wish to believe it. In the daylight, enfolded in their affection, it is easy. We are a family. We

emerged from the terrible stronghold of Daršanga, the three of us, damaged and broken, and healed ourselves into a new whole.

I pray that what befell us will never come again, not so long as I live.

Whatever becomes of me, I will live my life in the shadow of greatness, but I will never begrudge it. When all is said and done, I do not think I have greatness in me. I would like to, but I don't. Not like Phèdre; not like Joscelin, whose role was even harder in some ways, who ever stood at her side, whose scars bear testament to his courage and valor. All I want to do is come to manhood in a manner that does not disgrace those I love.

This, I pray, is not too much to ask.

In the daylight, I can be happy and filled with hope. Sometimes the emotions well within me so strongly—love, joy—that it feels as though my skin is too tight, as though my heart will burst out of my chest. And I am happy, and glad to be alive.

But the nights are different. At night, I remember. I remember the Mahrkagir and his fathomless black eyes; the things he did to me, and the things he made me do. I remember his voice, whispering joyous promises of agonies to come. I remember the others, the warlords who made a plaything of me. I remember the lash against my skin and the agonizing sizzle of a branding iron, the stink of my own seared flesh. At times I dream and wake myself screaming.

It is hard, then, to believe in goodness.

Still, I try. I try not to think too hard about the tangled threads of destiny that led me into hell as a child, and out the other side as something at once more and less. I lost my childhood in Dar anga, but I have reclaimed bits of it, here and there. Most of all in Montrève, Phèdre's estate. She inherited it from her lord Anafiel Delaunay de Montrève, who bought her marque when she was but a child, who adopted her as she had adopted me. But that is a long story and not mine to tell.

Montrève lies in the foothills of the D'Angeline province of Siovale. It reminds me of my childhood at the Sanctuary of Elua. There, I am at home. I am Imriel of Montrève, not Imriel de la Courcel. I have the mountains, the mews and the kennels, and even friends—the seneschals of the estate have a clan of good-natured youngsters. I would be content to stay there always. So too, I think, would Joscelin, for he has little love for Court intrigue. But the Queen demands her due and betimes we must return to the City of Elua and attend her. Joscelin is her acclaimed Champion, and Phèdre is one of her most valued confidantes.

And I am a Prince of the Blood, third in line for the throne.

It is the blood of Blessed Elua that runs in my veins, at least on my father's side. I have never boasted of it. Elua and his Companions spread their seed widely; there is no one in Terre d'Ange who cannot claim descent from one or another. But the Great Houses have kept their lines pure, or so they claim. It is a source of pride and vanity, and at times, intolerable prejudice.

I should know. I was conceived because Benedicte de la Courcel wished to provide Terre d'Ange with a purebred D'Angeline heir. He thought the goal worthy of treason.

To her credit, Queen Ysandre does not subscribe to this vision. Her marriage was a love-match to Drustan mab Necthana, the Cruarch of Alba. Together, they rule over two countries. I like Drustan very

well, and wish that I liked the Queen better. It is hard for me. I travelled with Phèdre and Joscelin for a long time after I was rescued. Ysandre was angry, so angry, that it took them so long to restore me to Terre d'Ange. She didn't understand that I needed to be with them. And I didn't understand her anger.

It was a cold anger. Phèdre, who forgave her for it long ago, says it was the Queen's right to be concerned about the safety of her kin. Still, I am uneasy with Queen Ysandre. It is unfair, I suppose, when she had championed me against the united mistrust of the peers of the realm. There are those who would gladly see me dead, despising the fact that Melisande Shahrizai's son is three heartbeats away from the throne.

Such is the dubious gift of my mother's legacy. The mistrust of these nobles is deserved. If my mother had triumphed, if her intrigues had born fruit, even now I might be sitting upon the throne of Terre d'Ange, a boy-king with a treacherous regent.

And yet I have no such desire. I would be content to be left in peace, to be Imriel nó Montrève, would the world allow it. To spend my days hawking and hunting and fishing, learning from Joscelin the fighting skills of the warrior priests of the Cassiline Brotherhood, listening to such tutors as Phèdre lures to the estate, bickering and coming of age among the children of her seneschals. This, I know, is not to be. Yet I will cling to it for as long as I may.

Until I can't, anyway.

I fear my mother's legacy will make it difficult. It is only on my father's side that I am descended from Blessed Elua. My mother's lineage is different. The Shahrizai are among the Great Houses of Terre d'Ange; but they are not descended from Blessed Elua, but from one of his Companions. Their blood is very old and very pure, and it is that lineage that frightens me. They are Kushiel's scions.

Kushiel's name means "the rigid one of God," and he was once charged with administering punishment to the damned, but abandoned his post to accompany Blessed Elua in his wanderings. It is said that he had an excess of compassion for his charges. It is said that they, in turn, loved him so well that they wept with gratitude beneath his lash. This I find difficult to believe. And yet, in Terre d'Ange, his temples endure.

Sometimes Phèdre visits the temples of Kushiel. What absolution she finds there under the lash, I cannot comprehend. I know that when she returns, she is tranquil and at peace. Joscelin says it is a mystery in the truest sense of the word. Although he will never be easy with it, there are things he grasps that are beyond my ken.

Me, I cannot fathom it. I know that she is an anguissette, Kushiel's Chosen. She was marked by it for all the world to see; Kushiel's Dart, a mote of scarlet in her eye. I understand that she is condemned to find pleasure in pain, and that somehow this redresses an imbalance in the world. I know, too, the source of this imbalance: my mother, Kushiel's greatest scion, born without benefit of a conscience.

It is whispered that Kushiel's lineage carries its own dark gift, the ability to perceive the flaws and fault-lines in another's mortal soul. To discern those forms of cruelty that are kindnesses unto themselves, to administer an untender mercy. And like all gifts, it can be used for unworthy ends.

I hope it is not true.

But at night, I sense its presence like a shadow on my soul, waiting. And I lie awake in my bed, clinging to the brightness I have known, fighting back the tide of darkness, the memories of blood and branding and horror, and the legacy of cruelty that runs in my own veins, shaping my own secret vow and wielding

it like a brand against the darkness, whispering it to myself, over and over. I will try to be good.

Chapter One



We were attending a country fair when the news came. For a while, a long while, after our final return to Terre d'Ange, life was blissfully uneventful. Having had enough adventures to last me a lifetime, I was grateful for it. Whether in the City or at Montrève, I tended to my studies, immersed in the daily business of living and content to let the affairs of the world pass me by untouched. Phèdre and Joscelin did all they could to allow this respite to endure, sensing there was healing in it for me.

There was, too. As the slow months passed and turned into years, I felt things knotted tight inside me ease. My nightmares grew less and less frequent, and the times of happiness longer.

Still, even Phèdre and Joscelin couldn't protect me forever.

It was my third summer in Montrève. I had turned fourteen in the spring, though I looked younger, being slow to get my full growth. The Queen's surgeon claimed it was due to the shock of enslavement and what had befallen me in Daršanga, and mayhap it was so. I only know that I chafed at it. My parents were both tall; or so I am told. I cannot say, having never known my father. If it's true, it is the only gift of theirs I'd ever wished for.

The fair was held in an open field on the outskirts of the village, alongside the river. It was a small gathering. Montrève was not a large estate, and the village it bordered—which was also called Montrève—was modest in size. But it was a fair, and I was young enough to be excited at the prospect of it.

We made for a merry entourage as we rode forth from the estate;

Phèdre, Joscelin, and I, accompanied by her chevalier Ti-Philippe, his companion Hugues, and a few other men-at-arms, all of them clad in the forest-green livery of House Montrève. The Friote clan was already there, tending to our wool-trading interests. The bulk of our wool would be shipped elsewhere for sale, but there were always small landowners looking to buy.

There were other goods available for purchase or trade, too; fabrics and yarns, livestock, produce, spices, and other uninteresting items. Of greater interest, at least to me, were the crafters' booths, which displayed a fascinating array—leather goods, arms and bits of armor, jewelry, mirrors, mysterious vials of unguents, musical instruments, and intricately carved toys. Not all of them were meant for children, either.

Best of all, there were Tsingani, with horses for sale. Not many—the pick of the lot sold at the great horse fairs in the spring—but a few. We spotted their brightly painted wagons from the road, and I saw Phèdre smile at the sight. There was a time when the Tsingani wouldn't have been welcome at a small country fair, but a lot has changed since those days. In Montrève, they were always welcome.

There were a few good-natured cheers and shouts of greeting as we arrived, which Phèdre acknowledged with a laughing salute. She was always gracious that way, and well-loved because of it. We tethered our mounts at the picket line and Joscelin gave a few coins to the village lads who hung

about to attend them.

Ti-Philippe and the others remained mounted. "I'll take Hugues and Colin and ride a quick circuit," he said to Joscelin, who gave a brief nod in reply. "Marcel and the others will cast an eye over the fair proper."

I hated hearing that sort of thing. It cast a pall over the day's brightness, knowing it was because of me. Queen Ysandre was insistent that my security was paramount, and a fair brought strangers into the area. They were only being cautious; but still, I hated it.

Joscelin eyed me, noting my expression. "Take heart," he said wryly. "When you come of age, you'll be free to take all the risks you like."

"Four years!" I protested. "It's forever."

A corner of his mouth twitched. "You think so?" He tousled my hair lightly. I hated when almost anyone else did it—I didn't like people touching me—but my heart always gave a secret leap of happiness when Phèdre or Joscelin did. "It won't seem it, I promise." He glanced at Phèdre then, and something passed between them; a shared and private understanding.

There are those who laugh at their union, although not many. Not now, after all they have endured together. It's true, though. 'Tis an unlikely pairing, Kushiel's Chosen and a Servant of Naamah in love with a Cassiline warrior-priest.

Phèdre was a courtesan, sworn to the service of Blessed Elua's Companion Naamah, who gave herself to the King of Persis to win Elua's freedom, and who lay down in the stews of Bhodistan with strangers that he might eat. It is a sacred calling in Terre d'Ange, though it is not one practiced by many peers of the realm. But Phèdre was a Servant of Naamah long before she inherited Delaunay's title and estate, and although she has not practiced it since Daršanga, she has never renounced Naamah's Service.

And Joscelin—Joscelin was a Cassiline Brother when they met, although he left the Brotherhood for her sake. From the age of ten, he was trained to be a warrior-priest, sworn to celibacy. Alone among the Companions, Cassiel claimed no territory in Terre d'Ange and begot no offspring, but remained ever at Blessed Elua's side. That is the vow of the Cassiline Brotherhood: To protect and serve.

The Cassilines are very good at what they do; but Joscelin, I think, is better.

"What will you, love?" he asked Phèdre, indicating the fair with the sweep of an arm. His steel vambraces glinted in the sun. "Pleasure or the duties of the manor? The Tsingani or the Friotes?"

"Ah, well." She cocked her head. "We could glance at the fabric stalls on the way to either one. If there's aught of interest, it won't last long."

I groaned inside. I hated looking at fabric.

Although I made no audible sound, Phèdre's gaze settled on me, dark and unnerving. Her eyes were beautiful, deep and lustrous as forest pools, with a mote of scarlet floating on the left iris, vivid as a rose petal. And she was capable of a look that saw right through one. There were reasons for it.

"All right." She smiled and beckoned to another of the men-at-arms. "Gilot, will you accompany Imriel to—to the Tsingani horse-fields, is it?"

"Yes, please!" I couldn't help the grin that stretched my face.

Gilot swept an extravagant bow. "Lady, with a will!"

He was my favorite retainer, after Ti-Philippe and Hugues, who were almost family. He was the youngest—only eighteen, the age of majority I coveted. But he was good with a sword and quick-thinking, which were qualities Joscelin looked for in hiring retainers. I liked him because he treated me as an equal, not a responsibility.

Together we plunged into the fair and began forging a path toward the horse-fields. "They've got one of those spotted horses from Aragonia, did you see?" Gilot asked. "I spied it from the road. I wouldn't mind having one."

I made a noise of agreement.

"Whip-smart and smooth-gaited, they say." He shrugged. "Next year, mayhap, if I save my coin!" A stand of leather goods caught his eye. "Ah, hold a moment, will you, Imri? My sword-belt's worn near enough to snap near the buckle. It was my brother's anyway. I ought to buy new."

I loitered at Gilot's side while he perused the goods available, and the leather-merchant made a great show of exclaiming over my own belt. It was a man's belt, though it held only a boy's dagger. "What have you there, little man?" he asked in a jovial, condescending tone. "Boar-hide?"

"No." I smiled coolly at him. "Rhinoceros."

He blinked, perplexed. Gilot gave a sidelong glance, nudging me with his elbow. The belt had been a gift from Ras Lijasu, a Prince of Jebe-Barkal. Gilot knew the story behind it. The merchant blinked a few more times. "A rhinoceros, is it? Good for you, little man!"

"Imriel!"

I turned, recognizing the voice. At an adjacent stall, Katherine Friote beckoned imperiously, shoving up the sleeve of her gown.

"Come here and smell this," she said.

I went, obedient. Katherine was in the middle of the Friote clan, a year and some months my elder. In the past year, she had begun to... change... in a fascinating manner. The skinny, bossy girl I had met two summers ago had become a young woman, a head taller than me. She thrust her wrist beneath my nose.

"What do you think?" she asked.

I swallowed hard. She had rubbed a dab of perfumed ointment on her skin, and the scent was strong and cloying, like overblown lilies. Beneath it, faint and elusive, I could smell her own scent, like a sun-warmed meadow.

"I think you smell better without it," I said honestly.

The perfume-seller made a disgusted sound. I thought Katherine would be annoyed with me, but instead she wore a look of amusement. She bobbed a teasing curtsy in my direction. "Why thank you, Prince

Imriel."

"You're welcome." My face felt unaccountably warm.

"Prince, is it?" The perfume-seller turned his head and spat on the ground. Obviously, he was a stranger to Montrève. "Prince of sheep-dung, I'll warrant!"

At that moment, Gilot appeared at my side, wearing a sword-belt so new that it creaked over his Montrévan livery. "Well met, Demoiselle Friote," he said cheerfully. "Would you care to accompany us to the Tsingani camp? His highness has a fancy to see the spotted horse, and the Comtesse has given us her blessing."

Now it was Katherine who blushed at Gilot's chivalrous attention, while the perfume-seller opened and closed his mouth several times, fishlike, then squinted hard at me. I muttered somewhat under my breath about spotted horses, which all of them ignored.

"Shall we?" Gilot asked Katherine, extending his arm and smiling at her. He had a lively, handsome face and brown eyes quick to sparkle with mirth. Still, it irked me to see Katherine dote on him.

We made our way through the stalls, pausing for Gilot to purchase a sweet of candied violets for Katherine. Through the crowd, I caught a glimpse of Phèdre at a cloth-seller's stall, examining bolts of fabric. The merchant was fawning over her. At her side, Joscelin observed the process with an expression of long tolerance. He stood in the Cassiline at-ease position, arms crossed, hands resting lightly on the hilts of his twin daggers.

I mulled over my irritation as we continued walking, kicking at clumps of foot-churned grass. "I wish you wouldn't say such things," I said at length. "Not here."

"What things?" Gilot gave me a perplexed look.

"Prince," I said. "Highness."

"Well, but you are." He scratched his head. "Look, Imri, I know—I mean, I understand, a bit. But you are who you are, and there's no changing it. Anyway, there's no call to let some tawdry peddler insult you. I'm not one to let it pass unnoted."

I shrugged. "I've heard worse."

"You didn't mind so much when I said it." Katherine glanced at me under her lashes. The sun brought out golden streaks in her glossy brown hair, and sparkled on tiny crumbs of sugar clinging to her lips.

I looked away. "Please, forget I spoke of it."

These new feelings Katherine evoked shouldn't have disturbed me. In Terre d'Ange, the arts of love came to us easily and young; or so it should be. I was different. It wasn't that I was immune to the promptings of desire—in the past several months, I had grown uncomfortably aware of desire stirring in my flesh. But in the zenana of Daršanga, death and desire were inextricably linked. I couldn't think about one without the shadow of the other hanging over it. So at a time when boys my age were conducting fumbling experiments with one another and begging kisses from girls, I kept myself aloof, afraid and untouchable.

Gilot sighed. "Come on, let's go."

I forgot my grievances in the Tsingani camp. There were two kumpanias present with three wagons between them. The wagons were drawn in a circle, with their horses tethered at the rear. At the front of the wagons, women tended cooking fires where kettles of stew and pottage simmered. The unwed women wore their hair uncovered and loose and made long eyes at the Tsingani men, and all of them wore galb displaying their wealth, necklaces and earrings strung with gold coins. A few of the men were engaged in haggling with potential buyers, but most of them idled in the center of the circle. Bursts of music issued forth as one or another began to play—fiddle or timbales, accompanied by rhythmic clapping and snatches of song.

It would be a good life, I think, to be one of the Travellers; or at least it would be for a man. It was harder for Tsingani women, who must abide by a stringent code of behavior lest they lose their virtue; their laxta, they called it. If that happened, they were declared anathema.

It is better, now, than it once was. Much of that is due to Hyacinthe, who is the Master of the Straits and wields a power beyond the mortal ken. I know, for I have seen it; seen wind and wave answer to his command. He was one of them, once—a half-breed Tsingano, born to a woman who lost her virtue through no fault of her own. In the end, they would have had him as their king, but he refused it. Still, he has urged change upon them and many of the Tsingani have eased the strictures they impose on their women. Hyacinthe has reason to be concerned with the lot of women, since it is to Phèdre that he owes his freedom.

I shivered in the warm sunlight, remembering the day she spoke the Name of God and broke the curse that bound him to an immortality of dwindling age on that lonely island. There are some memories so profound they cannot be conveyed in words.

Some of them, for a mercy, are good ones.

Gilot let out a low whistle, breaking my reverie. "Look at him, will you! What a beauty!"

There was an admiring crowd around the spotted horse staked on the outskirts of the circle. I had to own, the horse was a beauty—a powerfully arched neck, strong, straight legs, a smooth back. His coat was a deep red-bay, speckled with white as though, in the middle of summer, he stood amidst a snowstorm. He basked in the adulation of the crowd, tossing his head and stamping his forefeet, almost as though to beat time with the nearby timbales.

"Imriel, Katherine!" Charles Friote detached himself from the throng of admirers and waved us over. He was my age, though to my chagrin, he too had grown in the past year, overtaking me by a head. "Hello, Gilot," Charles added belatedly, then dropped his voice to a whisper. "He's not for sale, the Tsingani say. But maybe for Lady Phèdre...?"

I was opening my mouth to reply when the Tsingano holding the spotted horse's head beckoned to me, calling out. "Hey, rinkeni chavo! Come meet the Salmon!"

It was the spotted horse's name, I guessed. While Charles squirmed with envy behind me, I moved forward. The Tsingano who had beckoned me grinned, his teeth very white against his brown skin.

"Here, chavo" he said, pressing something into my palm. "Give him a treat."

It was a bit of dried apple; the end of last autumn's stores. I held my hand out flat. The Salmon eyed me,

lordly and considering, then bent his head to accept the tidbit, his lips velvety against my palm. I began to think about what a glory it would be to ride him—to own him—and wondered if perhaps the Tsingani might sell him to Phèdre after all. I could repay her for him. There were monies that were mine to spend, held in trust for me; the proceeds of estates I had never seen, nor cared to.

"A gadjo pearl, with black hair and eyes like the deep sea," the Tsingano horse-trader murmured.

I jerked back, startling the horse.

"Peace, chavo." The Tsingano raised one hand, palm outward. His dark eyes were calm and amused. "We remember, that is all. Does it trouble you?"

It was the second question of the day I had no chance to answer. On the far side of the field, familiar shouts arose—the battle-call of House Montrève, giving an alarm. I turned to see a single rider departing from the road to race hell-for-leather toward the fair. Whatever his intentions, the sight didn't bode well. I was abruptly aware that I had only Gilot for protection.

Ti-Philippe and his men were on a course to intercept the rider, but they were too far away. The rider would reach us first. Gilot swore and drew his sword. In three swift steps, he reached me, grabbing my arm and yanking me behind him. Katherine and Charles were round-eyed with fearful awe. The spotted stallion reared against his tether, trumpeting, while his Tsingano owner sought to soothe him.

In the midst of the fair, pandemonium broke loose. A handful of villagers sought to rally to our aid, seizing weapons from the arms-sellers' stalls. Protesting merchants blocked their way, grabbing at their purloined goods. Here and there was a struggling knot where one of Montrève's retainers sought to shove a path through the throng.

I watched the rider loom nearer and drew my dagger, flipping it to hold it by its point. At fifteen paces or less, my aim was good. In front of me, Gilot maintained a defensive stance, legs planted, sword tight in his fist. A muscle in his jaw trembled. Katherine's fingers dug into my left forearm. I pried them loose, shoving her toward Charles.

"Take care of her," I said, the words coming harshly. He nodded, his face pale, brown hair flopping over his brow.

A single voice, raised, called my name. "Imriel!"

I raised mine in reply, and though it cracked, it carried. "Joscelin, here!"

There; bursting free of the crowd. He came at a dead run, crossing the horse-fields to the Tsingani camp, passing Gilot. The rider thundered toward us, Ti-Philippe and the others following hard behind, a few seconds too late.

Not Joscelin.

His sword sang as he reached over his shoulder and drew it; a high, keening note. Tradition holds that Cassiline Brothers draw their swords only to kill. When it came to my defense, Joscelin observed no such niceties.

"Stand down or die!" he called to the rider, angling his sword across his body in a two-handed grip.

The rider drew rein, hard, turning his lathered, hard-ridden mount. Froth flew from its bit. A hafted pennant, now visible, fluttered from a hilt mounted on the pommel of his saddle—a square of rich blue with a diagonal bar of silver.

"Queen's Courier!" he shouted. "In the name of Queen Ysandre, hold your hand!"

Joscelin did not shift, his voice remaining taut. "Stand down, man!"

In that moment, it seemed everyone else converged. Ti-Philippe, Hugues, and Colin arrived in a thunderous flurry of hoofbeats, blocking the rider's retreat. Tsingani armed with light hunting bows emerged from the circle of wagons. Villagers armed with sticks, cudgels, and appropriated swords ran into the field.

And Phèdre.

She stepped lightly past me, touching my shoulder briefly in passing. At her appearance, everyone grew quiet. She wore a gown of vibrant blue, the color of the summer sky; the color of Joscelin's eyes. It was trimmed with gold embroidery, a handspan deep, and a caul of gold mesh bound her dark, shining hair.

"Queen's Courier?" she asked, frowning slightly. Joscelin adjusted his stance, angling his sword to protect her. "What news is so urgent?"

The rider dropped his reins. His mount lowered its head, blowing hard, its nostrils flaring. "My lady Phèdre nó Delaunay de Montrève?"

"Yes." She regarded him calmly.

He raised his hands, showing them to be empty. "I bear an urgent dispatch from the Queen," he said. Reaching slowly into a pouch slung over the crupper of his saddle, he drew forth a sealed missive. "Here."

Joscelin took it from his grasp, examined it, then handed it to Phèdre. It was a slim envelope, sealed with the swan insignia of House Courcel. She cracked the wax seal and read the single sheet of parchment within. I watched the frown lines reemerge between her graceful brows. "The Queen requires our presence in the City of Elua," she said. "There is a situation."

"What is it?" Joscelin asked brusquely.

Phèdre handed him the missive, but it was on me that her gaze settled, pitying and grave. "It is Melisande," she said gently. "It seems she has vanished."

Chapter Two



We made the return ride to the estate in silent haste, all thoughts of the fair forgotten. One new thought preyed on my mind, over and over. I gnawed on it like dog with a bone, until I could stand it no longer. I brought my mount alongside Phèdre's.

"Her letters," I said. "The ones she wrote to me."

Phèdre nodded. "Do you think there may be somewhat in them?"

"I don't know," I said miserably. "Do you?"

She was quiet for a moment, gazing at the road ahead. "I don't know," she said finally. "I think not. But one may never be certain, with Melisande." She turned her head to look at me. "Do you want to read them?"

I shuddered. "No." I waited, hoping she would offer, until it was clear she wouldn't. "Will you?" I asked. "Please?"

For a long moment, Phèdre studied me. "If you're sure it's what you want, love."

I sighed with relief. "Yes. I'm sure."

"All right, then." She shifted in the saddle, squaring her shoulders. "I will."

I felt guilty then, thinking on it. I didn't like to be a burden to anyone, and least of all to Phèdre, who had borne so many. I'd asked out of selfishness, little thinking how it might be painful to Phèdre to read words my blood-mother had written to me. When all was said and done, Melisande could claim what Phèdre could not—she was my mother, whether I liked it or no. And yet I could not bear to read them myself. My stomach churned at the thought. "You don't need to," I said. "We could give them to Queen Ysandre."

"No." Phèdre's reply was swift and certain. "Not unless we must."

I looked away. "Why do you always protect her?"

"Imriel." She waited until I looked back at her. "I made a promise," she said. "I am keeping it in the only way I know."

It was that simple for her. I wished, sometimes, that she had never made a promise to my mother, never extracted one in return. She had, though. My mother had promised not to raise her hand against Queen Ysandre and her daughters. In turn, Phèdre had promised to adopt me into her household, to deliver such letters as Melisande might send, and never to seek to turn me against my mother. To allow me to make my own choices. How she could bear it, I do not know. I didn't know, for a long time, the whole of what my mother had done to her—how she had betrayed her, twice. It was a long time before I grasped the whole of my mother's infamy.

And yet they understood one another.

My mother had been one of Phèdre's patrons, once. The very marque inked on Phèdre's back, the vast and intricate briar rose that signified she had paid her bond-debt as a Servant of Naamah, was completed thanks to Melisande's patronage.

What that entailed, I never wished to know.

Upon our return to Montrève, Phèdre retreated into her study to read my mother's letters. Elsewhere,

the household was a flurry of activity as our staff and retainers began to prepare for the unexpected journey, packing trunks and loading provisions. I prowled the manor in a state of nervous anxiety, until I was shooed out of every room I entered.

It was Joscelin who took me in hand, finding me making a nuisance of myself in the pantry where Katherine was helping her mother. "Come with me." He beckoned with one hand, holding a pair of wooden swords in the other. "Let's have a bout."

"Now?" I protested. "I'm in no fit mood for it."

"You're wound up like a top," he said pragmatically. "It will do you good."

I followed him out to the courtyard, beyond Richeline's herb gardens. Joscelin practiced there every morning, flowing through the forms of the Cassiline discipline. Although he had been teaching me for over two years, I didn't know them all, nor ever would. For ten years, until the age of twenty, Joscelin had studied little else—and he practiced every day.

He is not as good as he was, once. I saw him at his finest, on that terrible night in Daršanga, when he built a wall of corpses in the Mahrkagir's hall. That was before his left arm was shattered by a blow from a morning-star mace. I don't think anyone will ever match what he did there, and I pray no one ever need to. Still, it wasn't Joscelin who struck the blow that mattered the most that night.

That was Phèdre, who killed the Mahrkagir with a hairpin.

"Come." Joscelin tossed me one of the practice-blades and took a stance. "Have at me."

I struck a halfhearted blow which he parried with ease, unbalancing me.

"Watch your feet." He pointed toward them with the blade's tip. "Your weight was on the rear."

Scowling, I shifted my weight to my lead foot, raised my sword, and drove a straightforward strike toward his unprotected face; or as near to it as I could reach, given the disparity in our heights. Our blades clattered as he reacted, startled, and brought his up in an awkward horizontal parry. "I told you I was in no fit mood!" I shouted.

Joscelin grinned at me. "Better," he said. "Now again."

We practiced in earnest, then. The Cassiline fighting style was a circular one; spheres within spheres. There was the inner sphere of one's own space, and the outer sphere encompassing one's opponent's. If there were multiple opponents, there were multiple spheres. Each sphere was defined by its own quadrants, marked and measured like hours on a sundial. It was a hard thing to keep in mind, and only long practice made it possible.

There was also the sphere of one's ward, which was integral to the philosophy of the Cassiline Brotherhood, and in many ways the most important of all. It was the essence of their training—to protect and serve. Indeed, the final strike the Cassiline Brothers were taught—the ultimate blow, the last resort—was called the terminus. It was one of those performed with the twin daggers, not the sword. In it, the Cassiline throws his right-hand dagger to slay his ward, slitting his own throat with the left-hand dagger.

Joscelin came within a hairsbreadth of performing it on Phèdre once. So Gilot told me, not realizing I had

never heard the tale of what happened on the battlefield outside Troyes-le-Mont, where the Skaldi warlord Waldemar Selig attempted to skin her alive.

I'd never told them I knew.

My mother was Selig's ally.

The sphere of the ward was one that Joscelin never tried to teach me, reckoning I would be best served by learning to protect myself, which was true enough. But he taught me the others. So we circled one another in the courtyard, testing one another's spheres, probing at each angle of every quadrant with quick, flickering two-handed blows.

I watched his face and his body, too.

This, Phèdre taught me. She was trained by her lord Anafiel Delaunay in the arts of covertcy—how to watch and remember, how to listen to what is said and unsaid. How to discern the tell-tales of a lie. How to move in silence, how to pay heed to those senses beyond sight, and how to find the deeper patterns linking one thing to another.

I saw, as we sparred, that Joscelin was careful on offense, taking only the obvious openings I afforded him, pressing them hard enough to make me aware of my errors, but gently enough that he did not injure me unwitting. Wooden or no, our practice-swords carried a considerable sting at best; at worst, they could crack heads.

And I saw, too, what Joscelin did not realize. Mindful as he was, waiting for my attack, he was slower to parry on his left. Although his broken arm had long since knitted, his speed lagged.

Sweat dripped from my brow into my eyes; impatiently, I shook my head. I had forgotten Phèdre in her study, reading my mother's letters. I had forgotten that I didn't want to spar. I circled, paying heed to my footwork on the slate tiles of the courtyard, waiting for a chance.

When it came, I feigned an error, leaving myself open. Joscelin moved to press me. I took a quick step backward, feinted left, and spun. He parried and missed, and I came around hard, completing the circuit of my inner sphere and leveling a hard blow with the edge of my wooden blade against his upper left arm. He winced, left hand going numb, losing its grip on the hilt. His sword, wielded in his right hand, swept up and past my guard, the wooden tip coming to rest beneath my chin.

Feeling the point dent my skin, I laughed. It was the first time I'd ever breached his guard to provoke an unintended attack.

"Very clever." Joscelin smiled, lowering his blade. "You'd have had my arm off."

"Well, you'd have had my head," I replied. "Did I hurt you?"

"Gave me a bruise to remember," he said, flexing his hand and shaking off the stinging residue of pain. "That will teach me to be soft on you."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Joscelin shook his head. "It means you're learning and improving. Anything that might save your life one day is worth a thousand bruises." He grinned. "Which is likely what my future holds. You've

got a lot of promise. You're quick, and you think."

I felt my face flush with pride at the praise. "Thank you."

Joscelin regarded me with affection. "Feeling better?"

To my surprise, I realized I was. I was hot and tired and sweaty, but the lump of tension that had sat heavy in my belly since the Queen's Courier had delivered her missive had grown smaller. "Yes," I admitted. "A bit."

"Good." He nodded toward the manor. "Let's go wash up."

Inside, I scrubbed down at the washbasin in my room, stripping off my shirt and plunging my whole head in the cool water. It felt good. Most of my clothing had already been packed for travel, but I rummaged in the clothes-press and found a clean, loose shirt of unbleached cotton, well worn and much mended. It was one I wore for mucking about in the kennels with Charles. I'd not worn it yet this summer, and I was pleased to find that the sleeves were inches too short.

Thus fortified, clean and dripping, I went to find Phèdre.

The door to her study was open, but I paused before speaking. She was seated at her desk, gazing at nothing, her chin propped in her hand. A pile of unsealed letters sat beside an open coffer on the desk before her, neatly refolded.

"Phèdre?" I asked hesitantly.

She lifted her head. "Come in, love."

I entered and pulled a chair over to sit across from her. "Was there... anything?"

"No." Her voice was gentle. "Nothing to hint at her plans. Nothing to suggest you might have known, or might know now."

"Oh," I said. "Good."

Phèdre gazed steadily at me. "Do you want them?"

I shrank under her gaze. It was hard to hold, sometimes. Lypiphera, one of the Hellenes in the zenana called her; pain-bearer. She looked weary, her eyelids shadowed and bruised. I wondered whose pain she bore today and suspected, with an uncomfortable certitude, that it was my mother's. "No," I said. "I don't... no." Ducking my head, I fidgeted with a loose thread on my too-short sleeve. "What does she say?"

"A lot." A wry note crept into her voice, coaxing a reluctant smile from me. "Imri, it's not for me to say. Her words were written for you, and if you ever wish to understand your mother better, you'll read them." She was silent for a moment, then added, "If you're wondering if she attempts to justify her deeds, no, she doesn't. She does say that there is much she would have done differently, had she known what would happen to you."

I looked up at her. "But that wasn't her fault."

It was true, though I was surprised to hear the words come from my mouth. My mother had me hidden away in the Sanctuary of Elua, yes, while all of Terre d'Ange searched for me. That was her doing, and there was a deep plan behind it that would have taken years to come to fruition. Still, it was no fault of hers that I was kidnapped by Carthaginian slave-traders and sold into hell. I was taken at random. That, not even my mother Melisande could have foreseen.

"No." Phèdre smiled. "It wasn't." With deft motions, she straightened the stack of letters and returned them to the coffer. "They'll be here for you."

"Thank you," I said, meaning for reading them. Meaning for many things.

"You're welcome." She closed the lid, locking the coffer with a tiny key. With my mother's presence banished, the air within the study seemed to grow easier to breathe. Phèdre pushed her chair back, tucking an errant lock of hair behind her ear with the sort of absentminded grace that was as deeply ingrained in her as Joscelin's Cassiline reflexes were in him. "We should go," she said. "Richeline has everything in readiness, and I'd like to put a few hours of road behind us before sunset."

Obliging, I stood. "I'm ready."

"Good." Phèdre glanced at me, then glanced again, her brows rising. "Imriel nó Montrève, what in the name of Blessed Elua are you wearing?"

I grinned at her, plucking at my shirt-front. "What, this? It's only for travel."

Phèdre shook her head, but the shadow had gone from her eyes, and I was happy to see it. "Sometimes," she mused, "I think Joscelin Verreuil is a bad influence on you."

"I'll change," I promised.

Coming around the desk, Phèdre gave me one of her mercurial smiles; the rare ones, the ones that came from the deep and mysterious reserves of her being, where her own peculiar sense of humor made the unbearable bearable. "Not too much, I hope," she said lightly, dropping a kiss on my cheek. "I'm rather fond of you as you are, love."

"No," I whispered. "Not too much."

Chapter Three



We were on the road in short order. I daresay few households in the D'Angeline peerage were capable of mobilizing as quickly as Montrève's. For all that she enjoyed her luxuries—and she did—Phèdre was able to forego them on a moment's notice.

As for the rest of us, we thrived on it.

No one entered the service of Phèdre nó Delaunay de Montrève out of a craving for security and a staid lifestyle. Ti-Philippe, who had been with her the longest, pledged his loyalty after the battle of

Troyes-le-Mont. There were three of them, then—Phèdre's Boys, they called themselves. I never knew the others, Remy and Fortun. They died in La Serenissima, where I was born, killed on my father's orders.

But the others I knew. Like Gilot, they were a high-spirited lot, men who sought service with the Comtesse de Montrève because they had heard the stories and the poems. Some of them, I think, were hoping to bask in the glory of further adventure. And if they were disappointed that it was not forthcoming, still, life in our household was never dull.

It would have been a pleasant journey, were it not for the purpose. The weather was hot and dry, but the breeze of our passage rendered it comfortable. I would have been content to have it last forever. The City of Elua was a buzzing beehive of gossip, and I had little desire to confront the results of my infamous mother's latest piece of infamy.

"You could always run away and join the Tsingani," Gilot offered helpfully, sensing my mood. "Think of the horses!"

"I wouldn't mind," I said, remembering the Salmon. "Want to come with me?"

"Why not? I've a fancy to see the world." He laughed, then glanced uncertainly at me. "You are jesting, I hope. Joscelin would skin me alive."

"Yes." I shuddered. "And no jests about skinning, please."

"Oh." He fell silent, chastened. "Right."

It wasn't Gilot's fault. He was only four years older than me. It was only a story to him; something that had happened when he was still clinging to his mother's skirts. But I, who had not yet been born at the time, had seen too much horror not to feel it deeply. I was glad, actually, that Gilot forgot at times—that he told me the stories others feared I couldn't bear to hear. I would rather know, always. Still, there were times when I felt myself the older of the two of us.

Travelling light, we made good time and came within sight of the white walls of the City of Elua within several days, arriving in the late morning. Despite the circumstances, I could see Phèdre's mood lighten. Unlike the rest of us, she was City-bred to the bone, and it was where she was most at home.

To be sure, the City of Elua returned the sentiment.

The City Guard at the Southern Gate hailed her with a clamorous salute, shouting and whistling. One of them importuned a flower-seller within the walls, and lavender sprigs came showering down from the guard towers as we passed through the gate. The news of my mother's disappearance, I thought, must not yet have been released. They wouldn't greet us so if it had been. I watched Phèdre's eyes sparkle as she caught a sprig of lavender and tossed it back with a blown kiss; watched the guardsmen scramble for it, and Joscelin's amused, long-suffering patience.

I thought of the shadow descending over that happiness, and I hated it.

We made our way to the townhouse, where Eugenie, Phèdre's Mistress of the Household in the City of Elua, was expecting us. After greeting Phèdre and Joscelin, she turned her prodigious affections on me.

"Sweet boy!" she cried, enfolding me in her considerable embrace. "Name of Elua, I swear you've grown a handspan since you left!"

I smiled, hugging her unreservedly in return. I still remembered my first encounter with her. To this day, she is the only person I have ever seen who dared take Joscelin by the shoulders and shake him. But she dealt gently with me for a long time, until I grew fond enough to suffer her affection gladly. "It's only been a couple of months, Eugenie."

"Ah, well." She patted my cheek. "'Tis ever too long."

Although we had ridden hard and fast to arrive within mere days of receiving the courier's message, the Queen's summons awaited us. Phèdre dispatched a messenger to the Palace with word of our arrival, and by the time we had changed from our road-dusty attire and partaken of a light refreshment, a reply was waiting. Phèdre read it and sighed.

"Now?" Joscelin asked.

She nodded. "Now."

For this last, shortest leg of the journey, we took the carriage, with the arms of Montrève etched and painted on the doors. There were protocols to be observed. Ti-Philippe, Hugues, Gilot, and another of our men-at-arms served as outriders, guarding our passage.

Upon our arrival at the Palace, we were ushered directly into the Queen's presence.

It was a formal reception, which I had not reckoned on. Although I was seldom able to forget my parentage, I forgot, betimes, that it meant I was a Prince of the Blood, and entitled to due courtesies. Drustan was present, which was not always the case. But during the summer months, the Cruarch of Alba crossed the Straits to abide with his wife, the D'Angeline Queen.

When it came my turn to greet them, I bowed; the courtier's bow that protocol dictates when acknowledging those whose rank is higher than one's own, yet within the same echelon. "Your majesties."

"Prince Imriel." The Queen inclined her head. "Thank you for coming."

Drustan mab Necthana smiled. "Well met once more, Prince Imriel."

They were an unlikely couple, as unlikely as Phèdre and Joscelin—more so, in appearance. Ysandre was tall and fair, a quintessentially D'Angeline beauty, with pale gold hair and violet eyes. She resembled her mother's side of her family, House L'Envers.

Drustan was one of the Cruithne, the Pictish folk of Alba—dark-haired and dark-eyed, his skin tattooed in whorls of blue woad. Even his face was decorated thus. Although it was strange and barbaric to the D'Angeline eye, I thought there was an odd beauty in it.

There were three others present, one of whom made me grit my teeth. I didn't like Duc Barquiel L'Envers, who was the Queen's maternal uncle. He had proved himself a hero twice over, which I knew. It was Barquiel L'Envers who launched a daring rescue from behind fortress walls onto the field of Troyes-le-Mont, where Waldemar Selig wielded his skinning knife and Joscelin had begun the terminus. And it was Barquiel L'Envers who held the City of Elua some two years later against the forces of Percy de Somerville, another pawn my mother duped into treachery.

For that, Duc Barquiel was made Royal Commander, but I still didn't like him. When he looked at me, he saw a threat to Ysandre's throne, nothing more. Also, I was certain it was his daughter who tried to have me killed in Khebbel-im-Akkad, far from D'Angeline justice.

Whether he suggested it to her, I didn't know, but I had no doubt he would gladly see me dead. I didn't think he would be so foolish as to try anything here in Terre d'Ange. Ysandre made it clear that a crime against me is a crime against House Courcel. But I still remembered the words with which Barquiel L'Envers greeted her proclamation.

So don't assassinate the little bugger.

I bared my teeth in a smile, inclining my head. "My lord Duc."

By rights, he should have responded with the same courtier's bow with which I had greeted the Queen and Cruarch; instead, he lifted one hand in a lazy, languid gesture. "Hail, Prince Imriel."

If the gesture was meant to offend, it was somewhat undermined by what followed, for the other two present were Drustan and Ysandre's daughters, my young cousins.

"Imriel!" Heedless of the protocol of adults, Alais, the younger, launched herself at me with a shout of delight. "Welcome back! I missed you!"

I caught her, staggering a bit under her weight, and tried to fend off her kisses. Slight though she was, at ten years of age, her exuberance carried an impact. "Hello, Alais."

"Did you bring me a puppy?" she demanded. "You promised you would, from the spring's litter in Montrève."

"I forgot," I said honestly. "But I wasn't expecting to be here so soon."

"Oh." Her violet eyes, like unto the Queen's, darkened. It was her only resemblance to Ysandre. For the rest, she looked purely Cruithne, like her father. "Of course. I'm sorry, that was thoughtless."

"That's all right," I said. "I'll remember, next time."

"Well met, cousin." Sidonie, the elder, greeted me, extending her hand with a coolness that belied her twelve years of age. I bowed over it.

"Well met, Dauphine," I said politely to her. If there was any other way to deal with the Dauphine Sidonie, the Queen's Heir, I hadn't found it.

"Have we done here, Ysandre?" Duc Barquiel asked pointedly. "May we dispense with the children and proceed? There is a matter of state at hand."

The Queen leveled a look at him that would have quelled a less insolent soul. "And it is a matter of importance that House Courcel stands united in this time," she said. "You know my feelings on this, Uncle."

He grimaced. "All too well."

I didn't give Ysandre enough credit. There was treachery and betrayal and blood feud in her history, too. She had always stood above it and sought to break the cycle that continued it. That was why she wanted me found—to bring me into the fold of House Courcel, to acknowledge to the world that the innocent should not be persecuted for the sins of their parents. I should have respected that, and I did; still, it was hard to be grateful for a gift I would rather not need.

Ysandre beckoned to an attendant. "Please escort the princesses forth and seal the room."

"Oh, please!" Barquiel L'Envers gestured at me in disgust. "You don't mean to—"

"Barquiel." It was Drustan who spoke; one word, uttered in his soft Cruithne accent, but there was the full weight of the Cruarch's authority in it. The Duc subsided. The attendant escorted Alais and Sidonie from the room, closing the doors firmly behind them. Drustan took a deep breath. "Please, my friends, be seated."

We all sat.

Without preamble, Ysandre related the news. In truth, there wasn't much to tell. A little less than a week ago, she had received a letter from Lorenzo Pescara, the Doge of La Serenissima. He had sent one of his swiftest couriers; there, it seemed, his sense of urgency ended. In the letter, the Doge wrote that he regretted to inform her majesty that he had received notice from the Priestess of the Crown that Melisande Shahrizai de la Courcel was no longer present in the Temple of Asherat.

I felt sick.

Joscelin uttered a violent oath. "That's all?"

"Nearly." Ysandre sighed. "He claims to have had the Priestesses of the Temple questioned. They disavowed all knowledge of Melisande's disappearance, and he was satisfied with their answers."

"A priestess may lie as well as a priest," I said, remembering Brother Selbert.

"I know." There was kindness in Ysandre's regard. I looked away, finding it hard to bear. "But Lorenzo Pescara reckons it is a D'Angeline matter, and little concern of his. He will not challenge the Temple of Asherat over it."

"Well, someone aided her," Phèdre mused aloud. "It's her way. She wouldn't leave without a plan in place, not after fourteen years of biding her time." She glanced at Joscelin. "Do you remember Allegra Stregazza's warning?"

He muttered under his breath.

"What?" Barquiel L'Envers' voice cracked.

"There were rumors." Phèdre glanced at me. "She took the Veil of Asherat, claimed sanctuary, and made herself into a mystery. A legendary beauty, bereft of her child, condemned by her country—"

He stared incredulously at her. "A cult of worship?"

I felt sicker.

"Well, a very small one," Phèdre said. "She wouldn't cultivate it, that would skirt too close to blasphemy."

"No." The Duc shook his head. "Oh, no! Not even Melisande—"

"Oh, she would. It's a means to an end." Phèdre rose without thinking, pacing the room. She wore a familiar look, vivid and distracted. "Have you sent for Duc Faragon?"

"Yes. He's coming from Kusheth. He should arrive in a few days." Ysandre watched her. "Do you think the Shahrizai are involved?"

"No." Phèdre frowned. "On the balance, no. Melisande hasn't trusted them fully since Persia's betrayal. She didn't trust them with the knowledge of Imriel's whereabouts, and I doubt she would with this."

"Mayhap," Ysandre said. "I'd like you to be there when I discuss the matter with him."

"As you wish, my lady." Phèdre tilted her head, thinking. "I'll write to Allegra today; and Severio, too. Among the Stregazza, they're two I trust. If we leave immediately after speaking to Duc Faragon—"
"No."

Joscelin's voice cut through hers like a blade, flat and implacable. Among the four of us in the room, only Phèdre, lost in thought, failed to startle at it. She blinked at him, uncomprehending. Barquiel L'Envers opened his mouth to speak, then closed it as Drustan shook his head in warning.

"No," Joscelin repeated, sounding weary this time. "No. We are not going to La Serenissima. We are not embarking on another search for Melisande Shahrizai. No."

"But I can find her," she said simply.

"I don't care." He held her gaze. "Isn't this why you extracted a promise from her? You claim to understand her. You thought it worthwhile. Do you have so little faith in your own claim? Will you once more risk everything we have?"

Everyone was silent.

Phèdre closed her eyes briefly, then opened them and looked at me. I clenched my hands into fists, afraid of what she would say. I didn't want her to go to La Serenissima. I didn't want her to chase after the damned spectre of my damned mother. But my heart was in my throat, choking me speechless.

"No," she whispered at last. "You're right."

I unclenched my hands and breathed a sigh.

"Well, and that was hardly my intention!" Ysandre's voice was acerbic in the aftermath of tension. "What I want is your counsel and your wits, Phèdre. Here, beside me, in Terre d'Ange, serving the interest of the nation. Do you understand?"

She inclined her head. "Your majesty."

"Oh, stop that!" Ysandre said irritably. Gathering herself, she turned to me. "Imriel, heed me. I have kept the news silent for some days, but I cannot for long. The members of Parliament must be notified. There

may be... renewed suspicion."

Barquiel L'Envers raised his eyebrows.

"I understand," I said to the Queen, ignoring him.

"Good." Ysandre nodded. "I wish you to know, also, that we do not share this suspicion. The throne of Terre d'Ange stands behind you, privately and publicly."

To my annoyance, I felt tears sting my eyes. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of the courage and nobility in Ysandre that inspired such loyalty in those I loved. Once again, I had to look away. "Thank you, my lady."

"No thanks are needed," she said. "But there may be duties in the bargain. You are a Prince of the Blood and a member of House Courcel. There are those who should be reminded of this." The Queen of Terre d'Ange stood, and we all stood with her. "We will speak more of this anon," she said to me, and to Phèdre and Joscelin, "You will abide in the City of Elua?"

Joscelin gave his sweeping Cassiline bow, arms crossed.

"We will, my lady," Phèdre said.

With that, the Queen dismissed us. It was a quiet ride back to the townhouse. What Phèdre was thinking, I could not guess. Joscelin looked stoic. I reached over and squeezed his hand in silent thanks. He gave me a brief nod and the hint of a smile, and I felt better.

In the small courtyard at the front of the house, our outriders dismounted and the stable-keeper Benoit came to unhitch the carriage horses. It was crowded with all of us present and so much horseflesh milling around. Benoit squeezed past one of his charges as Phèdre made her way toward the door.

"My lady," he called. "A man came while you were gone and gave me somewhat for you."

Phèdre turned. "What man?"

Benoit shrugged. "He wouldn't say, so I didn't open the gate to him. He handed me this through the portal and said it was for you. Then he left." Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a small parcel wrapped in oilskin and tied with twine. "Here."

"Ah, Blessed Elua," Joscelin muttered. "Not again."

"Should I not have taken it?" Benoit asked anxiously. "I didn't let him in."

"No, that's fine, you did right." Phèdre took the parcel and caught Ti-Philippe's eye. He nodded and beckoned to Gilot and the others. "Benoit, tell Philippe exactly what the man looked like. How tall, how old, the color of his hair, what he was wearing—everything you can remember. Did you see which way he went?"

"No." He sounded miserable. "Sorry, my lady."

"That's all right. Just tell Philippe everything you can remember." She glanced at Joscelin with a trace of defiance. "We do have to look."

He crossed his arms. "You'll notify the Captain of the City Guard," he said to Ti-Philippe. "Not that I expect it will do much good."

"Yes." Ti-Philippe looked a trifle bemused. "Notify him of what, exactly?"

Joscelin eyed the parcel in Phèdre's hand as though it were a live adder. "I've no idea, but we're about to find out."

With careful fingers, Phèdre untied the knots that bound the parcel and unwrapped it. Inside the oilskin wrapping was a velvet pouch with a drawstring. She opened it and spilled the contents into the palm of her hand.

Gilot gave a low whistle.

It was a large diamond, strung on a length of black velvet cord, old and worn, fraying at the ends. Phèdre stared at it without speaking, her eyes wide and dark. There was a slip of parchment caught in the mouth of the pouch. She withdrew it, smoothed it flat, and read what was written on it.

"Is it signed?" Gilot asked.

"No," she murmured. "It didn't need to be."

"Well, what does it say?"

She looked up. "I keep my promises."

Chapter Four



They found the messenger in a wineshop that day, deep in his cups, and learned that a stranger had paid him a gold ducat to deliver the parcel. All he could say was that the man wasn't D'Angeline. From there, although they searched the City, the trail went cold.

I learned the story from Gilot, who had it from Ti-Philippe. The diamond had been a patron-gift from my mother, long ago. Phèdre had worn it until the day she gave the testimony that condemned my mother to execution.

"In front of the Queen and the peers of the realm," Gilot related with relish. "She dropped it at your mother's feet and said, 'That is yours, my lady. I am not.' After so long, can you believe she kept it?"

"Yes," I said shortly. "I can."

I could, because Phèdre kept things for remembrance, too—painful things. There is a small carved dog of jade that was the Mahrkagir's gift to her. I was the one who brought it out of Daršanga, but she kept it, along with an ivory hairpin.

It is important to remember.

Phèdre told me as much the night of the slaughter there, in the small hours, before the Tiberian chirurgeon Drucilla died. Remember this, she said. Remember them all.

I thought about that in the days after the diamond was delivered, and wondered what it was that my mother remembered, and if she had learned anything by it.

The news of her disappearance was released quietly. There was no great outcry of shock and condemnation, for which I was grateful. She had been gone for a long time, and most people's memories are shortlived. Still, wherever I went in the City, there were whispers of renewed speculation.

On the fourth day, the Shahrizai arrived, and we were summoned back to court.

It was the first time I had encountered my mothers kin.

The meeting was held in the Queen's formal chambers. Duc Faragon had brought an impressive retinue, and there must have been a score of the Shahrizai among them. The stamp of my mother's House was unmistakable.

Duc Faragon was venerable, his skin wrinkled like parchment, his hair a rippling silver. Still, he was solid and doughy, and his eyes were undimmed. The kindred who ranged behind him were younger. The women wore their black hair loose, while the men wore theirs in a myriad of small braids, falling like linked chains to frame their faces. All of them were clad in black velvet adorned with gold brocade, the colors of the House.

They looked beautiful, proud, and dangerous.

One of the young men glanced over at me and smiled as we entered the chambers. It was a friendly smile, and a clever one, too. He winked at me. His eyes were a deep, starry blue.

I took a step closer to Phèdre.

If she was perturbed by the Shahrizai, she gave no indication of it. We made our greetings to the Queen and Cruarch, and took our places standing beside their thrones. Joscelin, as the Queen's Champion, provided a note of quiet menace, vambraces glinting, his daggers at his belt and the hilt of his broadsword over his shoulder.

"My lord Duc." The Queen inclined her head. "I trust you know why I have summoned you here?"

"Your majesty, I do." Duc Faragon's voice was melodious and resonant. With a grace that belied his years, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head before Ysandre. As one, the other members of his kindred followed suit, the men kneeling, the women sinking into deep curtsies. "In the name of Blessed Elua and merciful Kushiel, House Shahrizai proclaims its absolute loyalty to the throne."

On the far side of the Queen, Barquiel L'Envers stirred. Several of the other peers assembled murmured. Ysandre glanced once at Drustan, then rested her chin in her hand and contemplated Duc Faragon and his entourage.

None of the Shahrizai moved.

"Very well," Ysandre said at length. The Duc rose, the others following. He met the Queen's gaze without fear. "Have you had any communication from your kinswoman, Melisande Shahrizai de la Courcel?"

"Yes," he said calmly. "Several times, over the years." He beckoned, and a woman came forward with a small packet of letters. "That is everything," Duc Faragon said. "There is no sedition in them."

"And the rest of you?" Ysandre raised her brows. "Are there any among you who possess any knowledge of your kinswoman's latest deeds?"

There was a faint rustling sound as they shook their heads in denial.

"We are at your service, majesty," Duc Faragon said. "We place ourselves before you, trusting to the wisdom of your justice."

Ysandre sighed. "What does the Cruarch say?" she asked Drustan.

"Alba's justice is more direct than that of Terre d'Ange." He smiled slightly. There was nothing reassuring about the expression. "Did I believe them, I would accept their oath of loyalty. Did I not"—he touched the hilt of the ceremonial sword at his belt—"they would not leave these chambers alive."

Someone drew in a sharp breath. Several of the Shahrizai raised their heads, eyes blazing. Not scared, I thought; angry. They had come in good faith. Still, members of the Queens Guard posted around the room took a watchful stance, and Joscelin's hands, resting on his dagger-hilts, twitched.

"Phèdre?" Ysandre glanced at her. "What does Kushiel's Chosen say of Kushiel's scions?"

Phèdre considered the Shahrizai. Some of them, the younger ones, the angry ones, returned her gaze with a hint of mocking challenge. Duc Faragon did not. He inclined his head to her, grave and respectful.

I thought about the diamond lying in her palm, the note.

I keep my promises.

"I would accept their oath, my lady," Phèdre said thoughtfully. "One at a time."

So it was that the members of House Shahrizai came forward, one by one, and swore oaths of loyalty to the throne. I watched them all, searching for the tell-tales of a lie, and knew Phèdre did the same.

There were none, and I was glad.

Afterward, Duc Faragon approached us, with several of the younger Shahrizai behind him. "Comtesse," he said courteously to Phèdre, and to Joscelin, "Messire Verreuil." To me, he gave the courtier's bow. "Prince Imriel."

I inclined my head. "Your grace."

"I have a favor to ask." He drew a breath, addressing Phèdre. "It is in the letters I gave to the Queen, but I do not ask for my kinswoman's sake alone. I ask for all our sakes, and the boy's."

Phèdre frowned. "Yes?"

"Let him know us," Duc Faragon said simply. "We are kin. Let him come to Kusheth for a summer to be fostered among the Shahrizai."

I felt a lurch of alarm in the pit of my stomach, mixed with a dark excitement that was unexpected. Behind the Duc, the young man who had winked at me nudged the young woman beside him and grinned.

"No." Phèdre's response was gentle, firm, and immediate. "Forgive me, your grace, but I cannot consent to that; nor, I think, would her majesty allow it."

"Then consider this." With a sweep of his arm, Faragon indicated the young Shahrizai nobles behind him. "Mavros, Baptiste, and Roshana are yet of an age to be fostered. It is why I brought them here. Will you consider extending the hospitality of Montrève to them for a summer?" He paused. "I do not request an offer of threefold honor. Only a chance for the boy to know his kin."

Phèdre looked at me.

I wished I knew what to say. A part of me wished to decline; another, to accede. I was afraid of the dark tide that stirred in me. I did not want any part of my mother's blood. And yet it called to me.

"I will consider it, your grace," Phèdre said formally. "Will that suffice?"

He smiled. "It will."

"Prince Imriel."

The Queen's voice, cool and commanding, summoned us. Taking our leave of the Shahrizai, we approached the throne.

"When last we met," she said, "we spoke of duties. Now that this matter is settled, it is time to speak further."

I bowed. "Your majesty."

"You hold estates in title," she said, her violet gaze resting on me. "Estates which belonged to my great-uncle, Benedicte de la Courcel."

"So I understand, your majesty." I remembered the Salmon, and thinking about how the proceeds from those estates might purchase the spotted horse. In two years, that was as much consideration as I had given them. "I do not need them, if you wish to bequeath them elsewhere," I added honestly.

"No." Ysandre smiled. "I do not. But I think it would behoove you to make a tour of your holdings. It is important that they know you. And it is important that they understand the support of the Crown is behind you. To that end, I have asked the Royal Commander to prepare an escort. With, of course, the consultation of House Montrève."

I looked at Barquiel L'Envers with dismay.

He gave a short, wry bow.

It was in my heart to protest. In truth, I needed no estates. I was Imriel nó Montrève; Phèdre's heir, her adopted son. That was all I sought to be, all I wanted to be.

But it was not the hand I was dealt.

And there were such things as duty and honor.

I bowed to the Queen. "As her majesty bids," I murmured.

Chapter Five



So it was that we spent the balance of the summer of my fourteenth year touring my holdings in Terre d'Ange, rather than spending it as I would have chosen, hunting and fishing and hawking in Montrève. It was not ill done, I suppose. To my profound relief, while Barquiel L'Envers delegated a squadron to escort us, he didn't deign to accompany them. They were good men—Montrève's retainers ensured it, for Ti-Philippe maintained ties to the Royal Army—and seemed to welcome the light duty.

There were three estates, all told; two in L'Agnace, and one in Namarre. We visited HeuzÇ in L'Agnace first, where I admired the grain-fields and prize-winning cheeses, and from thence rode to Namarre.

Namarre was Naamah's territory. There was a shrine there, where the River Naamah rises from beneath the ground. Phèdre visited it upon our travels. It was sacred to the Servants of Naamah, and Joscelin and I were not allowed to enter.

She went.

What transpired there, I do not know; only that there was a brightness about her when she came back. Hugues sighed a great deal afterward, and wrote more of the abysmal poetry he dedicates to Phèdre, which we had ample time to hear him recite on the road.

We made our visit to the duchy of Barthelme, the largest of my holdings, where I discovered I was responsible for producing, among other things, a very fine red wine. All of the estates, truth be told, ran themselves. They had done so for many years, for my father had dwelled in La Serenissima until he died. The Queen had appointed wise seneschals.

They made their accounts to her factors, and those monies were held in trust. It was all very exacting. I shook the hands of the seneschals and they bowed, putting a face to the name, taking heed of the squadron of the Royal Army that stood behind me. At each estate, we spent a day or two touring the holdings and an evening exchanging social courtesies, and then rode onward.

The third estate we visited was different.

Lombelon, it was called. It was in L'Agnace, no more than a half-day's ride from the City of Elua, which was why we saved it for last. There was little more to it than a manor house and a handful of outlying orchards, but it bore a strange history. It had once belonged to my mother, who had inherited it upon the death of her first husband as part of his holdings. Some years later, she deeded it in turn to Isidore

d'Aiglemort, the Camaeline traitor, doubtless as a gift to seal their alliance.

When d'Aiglemort betrayed the realm, his holdings were declared the property of the Crown. Ysandre bestowed Aiglemort itself on the Unforgiven, those Camaeline warriors who have dedicated themselves in perpetual penitence to defending the border of Terre d'Ange against the Skaldi. But the tiny holding of Lombelon she deeded to my father, Benedicte, as a gift upon his second marriage. Thus it came to me.

It was a pleasant place, dedicated to growing pears. We toured the pressing-yard, where they made perry cider, and then the distillery shed. That was where I first saw Maslin, though I did not know his name.

He was tending to the gleaming copper alembic that distilled Lombelon's perry cider into brandy. It was the rapt concentration with which he did it that I noticed; that, and the way a shaft of sunlight from the doorway caught his hair, a blond so pale it was silvery. But he averted his head and slipped away when we entered, and I thought nothing of it.

All of us endured a lengthy discourse on harvesting, pressing, and distillation techniques, for which we were rewarded with a sample of Lombelon's pear brandy. It was heady stuff. I sipped mine with care, while L'Envers' soldiers quaffed theirs with a good will. Afterward, the seneschal took us on a stroll through the closest orchard, boasting of the healthy crop. The air was warm and sweet with the scent of pears, alive with the drone of bees.

That was the second time I saw Maslin.

He was working in the orchard, wielding a wicked-looking pruning hook on a long shaft. It was one of the older trees, one the seneschal informed us they were trying to prompt to bear further fruit in the years to come. The silver-haired youth circled it, shirtless and barefoot, working the pruning hook with savage grace. Although the rapt look was gone from his face, as in the distillery shed, his focus was absolute. He assailed the highest branches, the muscles in his arms bunching and gliding with the effort. With each stroke, a flurry of twigs and green leaves descended, and his strokes were so fast and unerring, it was as though the tree shook itself, shedding a hail of detritus.

I envied him.

I envied his assurance of his place in the world, his height and broad-shouldered strength. I envied the simplicity of the task, and his utter concentration on it. I gauged him to be some two years older than me, and I envied that, too. I found myself lagging as the seneschal moved on without me, more than happy to have Phèdre's ear to bend. Our escort was scattered, Montrève's retainers and soldiers of the Royal Army wandering amid the orchard.

Within a few moments, the silver-haired youth sensed my presence. He lowered the pruning hook and fixed me with a dark-eyed stare. "What do you want?"

"Nothing." The surliness of his tone took me by surprise, but human nature is a peculiar thing. Because I had admired him, I wanted him to like me. I came forward, extending my hand. "I'm Imriel."

He didn't move. "I know who you are... Prince."

I felt a touch of unease, like a cold finger on my spine. "Then you have the advantage of me," I replied in a calm tone. "Will you give me your name and render us at quits?"

"Maslin." He spat the name. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"No." I shook my head, genuinely perplexed. "Should it?"

"It should." He smiled grimly and took a step forward. The pruning hook in his right hand cast a long shadow on the grass. "I had it from my father. It was his father's name."

In my mind, the pieces fell into place like a puzzle—the strange history of Lombelon, the genealogies of the peerage, the youth's pale hair. I had heard the stories of Isidore d'Aiglemort, the traitor-hero. Kilberhaar, the Skaldi called him; Silver-hair. Though my mother led him into treachery, he redeemed himself at the very end. It was he who slew Waldemar Selig on the battlefield of Troyes-le-Mont, though he got his death-wound doing it.

"You're Duc Isidore's son," I said.

"His bastard"

"There is no shame—" I began, bewildered.

"He would have acknowledged me!" Maslin shouted, cutting me off. The pruning hook lowered like a spear, aimed at my heart. "This was to have been mine, Lombelon, mine! But there was no time!"

"I'm sorry, Maslin." I took a step backward. "But it's nothing to do with me."

"Puling princeling." He spat on the ground. "My father died a hero. By what right do you, the son of a bitch-whore-traitor, lay claim to Lombelon?"

"By right of the Queen's will," I said coldly. I had no intention of defending my mother, but Maslin had succeeded in making me angry. My hand strayed to the hilt of my dagger. The pruning hook made a vicious weapon, but I reckoned I could throw faster than he could lunge. "Will you challenge it?"

There was shouting, somewhere, and the muffled sounds of footsteps racing through the long grass toward us. We both ignored it, staring at one another. Maslin was breathing hard, his bare chest heaving. He wiped the back of his free hand over his brow, leaving a dark smudge.

"Will you?" I repeated.

"No." Gritting his teeth, he put up his impromptu weapon. "Not here, princeling, not now. But one day, when we are men, there will be a reckoning. I mean to make something of myself. And you will rue the day I do."

I nodded. "So be it, if it must. But I do not seek your enmity."

"No?" His mouth twisted. "Nonetheless, it is yours."

My escort arrived in belated, thunderous array, swords drawn, clad in the livery of Courcel and Montrève. The seneschal of Lombelon lumbered in their wake, puffing. There was nothing to be seen by then. Only two youths, conversing beneath a pear tree. I made light of the exchange, and we moved onward.

Phèdre knew, of course.

There was little that escaped her attention. Still, she was angry at herself for being careless, and I found myself reluctant to discuss it. I begged her not to speak to the Royal Army Captain of it, reckoning it not worth his trouble. In that, she acceded, saying only a quiet word to Joscelin and Ti-Philippe. We did not speak of it that day, not until the next day, as we rode toward the City and she drew the details of the encounter from me.

"Isidore's son," she murmured. "I wonder who his mother is."

"I don't know." I shook my head. "It didn't seem prudent to ask."

"D'Aiglemort was reckoned a hero until he turned," Ti-Philippe commented. "There's any number of L'Agnacite lasses might have lit candles to Eisheth on his behalf."

Gilot laughed. "You ought to know, chevalier!"

At that, Phèdre smiled. There are a good many children in the area surrounding Montrève who bear a certain resemblance to the last of Phèdre's Boys, although not so many in the years since Ti-Philippe took up with Hugues. "Well, Isidore d'Aiglemort didn't strike me as a man given to casual dalliance. There must have been somewhat in it if he was willing to acknowledge Maslin as his heir, at least to Lombelon."

"There's always somewhat in it, my lady!" Ti-Philippe sounded aggrieved. "You of all people should know."

Joscelin cleared his throat.

"Well, yes." Phèdre glanced at her Cassiline consort with amusement. "But betimes more than others."

Despite all the years they have been together, Phèdre and Joscelin have never wed; nor, I think, will they. He was her consort, declared and acknowledged, but he did not share her title. It had to do with the vows he swore as a Cassiline Brother. Although he had broken all of them save one—the one that mattered most—he would not exchange them for the vows of marriage. There was somewhat in it that his sense of honor could not abide. This, Phèdre understood in him.

"Well, that's true enough," Ti-Philippe said, mollified. "Still, whoever the lad's mother was, why blame Imriel? No one forced d'Aiglemort's hand to treason. He was offered a gambit to seize the throne from a young, untried Queen, and he took it."

I was silent, listening to them argue the matter with half an ear. I understood full well why Maslin of Lombelon hated me. We were both the sons of treasonous parents. The difference was that he was landless and poor, laboring in the orchards that would have been his inheritance, while I strolled through them and claimed ownership; a Prince of the Blood, clad in silk and velvet, with the Queen's Champion and a squadron of the Royal Army at my side.

"He's bitter," I said aloud. "Do you blame him?"

Phèdre gave me one of her deep looks. "For being bitter, no. For drawing a weapon on you, yes."

I shrugged. "A pruning hook."

"You can do a lot of damage with a pruning hook," Hugues offered cheerfully, "I could."

"But he didn't," I pointed out.

I thought about it for the remainder of the journey. Once we were within the walls of the City, we dismissed our Royal Army escort. I thanked the men by name, having memorized them as Phèdre had taught me to do, and gave a purse to the Captain to share among them. They saluted me with a good will, and I was glad of that, at least. Any tales they carried to Barquiel L'Envers would be benign. I'd always gotten on well with soldiers, given half a chance.

Therein lay the challenge.

I thought more about Maslin.

He might be a friend, if he knew me. If he gave me a half a chance. Why it mattered, I could not say, except that we shared the heritage of a tainted lineage. And because I had envied him; admired him. He could not know that in some ways, I would gladly trade places with him; that I would happily surrender my claim to Lombelon and the other estates in exchange for the childhood I had lost in Daršanga.

For two days, I mooned around the townhouse, fretting and neglecting my studies, until I came to a decision. When I did, I went to find Phèdre.

She was in her bathing-room, which was the one altar to sheer luxury that she maintains in her household. I paused and would have gone away without knocking, but Eugenie's niece Clory opened the door, her hands glistening with oil.

"Imri." Phèdre's voice, coming from beyond the door, was mild. "Will you out with it now, or later? 'Tis yours to choose, love."

The mingled scent of lavender and mint made me wrinkle my nose. "Now?"

"Come in, then."

I entered and took a seat on the low stool there, hooking my heels over the last rung and propping my chin on my fists. The bathing-room was warm and humid. Candles flickered, burning low in waxen pools. Phèdre lay on the cushioned massage-table, draped only in a short length of finespun linen. Her head was pillowed on her arms. She looked heavy-lidded, languid and indolent, which would have deceived anyone who did not know her.

"Is it Maslin?" she asked.

I nodded. "Do you promise you won't laugh at me?"

"Yes," Phèdre said. "Do you want Clory to leave?"

"No, that's all right." I shook my head. Among those who served in Phèdre's household, discretion was paramount. Women know how to keep secrets. I learned that in the zenana. "I don't mind."

Clory, resuming her duties as masseuse, clicked her tongue against her teeth; doubtless responding to some slight tension in Phèdre's body. She had trained at Balm House, and she took a great deal of pride in her skills. It was soothing to watch. In the warm candlelight, Phèdre's skin glowed like new cream, the black lines and crimson accents of her *marque* in stark contrast. I perched on my stool in silence,

watching Clory's strong, clever hands at work, while Phèdre watched me, patient and waiting.

At last I met her eyes. "I want to give him Lombelon."

Phèdre folded her hands beneath her chin. She didn't look surprised. "You know his claim will have to be substantiated."

"Yes." I took a deep breath. "I know. Do you doubt it?"

"No." She smiled wryly. "Not really. He looks like d'Aiglemort."

I watched a candle gutter and die. "Could you see to it, then? That part?"

"Yes." She shifted one shoulder. Clory halted and, without a word, went to wash her hands in the basin. Wiping them dry, she picked up Phèdre's silk robe, spreading it open and obscuring my view. With the ease of long practice, Phèdre stood and slid into it, knotting the sash. "Thank you, Clory."

"Always, my lady." Clory's smile was warm. As she left, she touched my shoulder lightly with one fragrant, oil-scented hand. "Young highness."

When she had gone, Phèdre sat cross-legged on the thick cushions of the table. She arranged the graceful folds of her robe, studying me. "Why, love?"

"Because I don't need it." I picked at some pooled wax with my thumbnail. "I don't even want it. And if it was meant to be his—it's not fair, that's all." I lifted my chin. "That's a good thing, isn't it? To set right something that's wrong?"

"In theory, yes," she said. "It doesn't always work as simply as it ought. For one thing, the Queen may not approve."

I frowned. "But it's my decision, isn't it?"

"Yes." Phèdre twisted her damp hair into a coil, smiling with a trace of rue. "And mine, since you've not reached your majority."

"She'll be angry ax you." I hadn't thought of that.

"No more than usual." A flicker of genuine amusement crossed her features. "I was thinking of you, love. Ysandre does not like to have her generosity rebuked. And then there is Maslin."

I found her jeweled hairpins and handed them to her. "What of him?"

"He may not be grateful," she said. "He may even be angry."

It made no sense, and I felt my frown deepen. "Why would he? He loves Lombelon, I could see it. And it's nothing to me."

"You answer your own question," Phèdre said softly, affixing her hairpins.

I sat and thought about it until I came to understand how Maslin of Lombelon might hate me for giving him his heart's desire. For caring so little that I could afford to toss it to him as a sop, the least of my

undeserved holdings. How my careless charity might be a hateful reminder of the disparity in our status. How he might hate me for being forever in my debt, and how his pride would gall him at the sight of me.

"Do you see, Imri?" Phèdre asked after a while.

I nodded.

"Do you still want him to have it?"

"Yes." I rubbed my eyes with the heel of one hand. "It's still the right thing to do, isn't it?" I blinked at her, clearing my stinging eyes. "Isn't it?"

Phèdre shook her head and slid from the table. "Come here," she said, opening her arms. I walked into her embrace, resting my chin on her silk-clad shoulder. I had grown tall enough to do that now. She hugged me hard, kissing my temple. "Yes."

After a moment, I freed myself. "Phèdre? What would you have done?"

"Me?" One corner of her mouth curved upward. "Ah, well, love... remind me, sometime, to tell you the story behind Favrielle *nó* Eglantine and her notorious ill-temper."

I smiled at her. "Joscelin told me that one."

She ruffled my hair. "Then you know."

Chapter Six



In the months that followed, the matter was slowly concluded. Phèdre sent Ti-Philippe to make discreet inquiries in the area of Lombelon, where he learned that Maslin's mother was one Anne Livet. Her father, who had died some years ago, had been the master gardener in d'Aiglemort's day. The dalliance had been an earnest one, well-known by the L'Agnacite folk in the area, and d'Aiglemort had claimed the child in the womb. No one doubted that he would have acknowledged Maslin had he lived to see his birth.

Autumn came, and Drustan the Cruarch sailed back to Alba. Phèdre sought a private audience with the Queen to discuss the matter. What she said, I do not know, but if Ysandre was angry or hurt, she held her tongue.

I had to sign the deed before the Chancellor of the Exchequer, sealing it with the stamp of the signet ring Ysandre had given unto my possession after we returned from Jebe-Barkal, with the swan insignia of House Courcel. It felt very strange. Phèdre signed it, too, pressing the seal of Montrève with its crescent moon and mountain crag below mine. When it was done, the Chancellor wrote out a fair copy, signing and stamping it with his own seal. This he gave to me. One way or another, it was mine to deliver.

I agonized over the decision. How to do it? A courier would be impersonal; and yet, if there was hatred in Maslin's eyes, I wouldn't have to see it. And yet, if he were pleased—if he were willing to accept the

gesture in the spirit of goodwill and kinship I intended it—I would miss that, too. I would miss that half a chance to befriend the only person I had met who labored under a burden of unwanted heritage similar to mine.

It was Alais who forced the matter, although not, in the end, who decided it.

"You're not paying attention," she said, rapping the back of my hand with the fan of cards she held. "I played trumps, Imriel! You're not paying attention at all." She paused. "Will you tell me why?"

I raked one hand through my hair. In truth, I didn't mind these days, when the Queen bade me to Court and decreed the scions of House Courcel must further their acquaintance. I was fond of Alais, and Sidonie—well, Sidonie left us well enough alone, content to read a book while Alais and I played cards under the watchful eyes of the Queen's Guard.

"I'm sorry," I said to Alais. "I was thinking of somewhat else."

"Yes," she said impatiently, "I know. What?"

I told her, then; a shortened version, one fit for a child. Alais listened gravely. She could be serious, when she wished; sometimes she had dreams that came true. That came from Drustan's side and his mother's blood.

"I think you should tell him yourself," she said. "It's nice, what you're doing. What are you afraid of?"

I explained, as best I could. Alais knew a good deal of what I had endured—Ysandre did not want her daughters sheltered from knowledge of the world's ills, and Alais had heard it long ago. But she was born of a love-match, and young, and it was hard for her to understand.

"Well, I think he should be happy," she said.

"Yes," I said. "But we do not always do what we should."

Sidonie's voice intervened, cool as water over rocks. "I have heard many things of you, Cousin Imriel, but never that you were a coward."

I stared at her, furious.

She raised her brows; gold, a deeper hue than her mother's. Unlike Alais, the Dauphine looked almost wholly D'Angeline. Only her eyes were pure Cruithne, dark and unreadable.

"That," I said coldly, "I am not."

"Well, then." Sidonie returned to her book, dismissing me.

By what right a twelve-year-old girl who had never known a day's fear or hunger or want of any kind thought to insult the courage of a fourteen-year-old boy who had endured a hell that would break many a grown man, I cannot say. It was, however, singularly effective. I was still chafing at the condescension in her tone when I made my decision to go to Lombelon.

There was a good deal of discussion. I wanted to go alone, with only a pair of men-at-arms, which Phèdre adamantly refused to allow. In turn, I argued against the entire household appearing in a show of

force. Sidonie had pricked my pride, and I did not want Maslin to think I was afraid.

In the end, I was allowed to go with a handful of men-at-arms under Ti-Philippe's command, although Phèdre did not like it. Neither did Joscelin, but he understood.

The day was blustery, with a chill edge to the wind hinting at the winter to come. We departed in the early morning under dull grey skies. It was strange to see the City quiet and empty; the shop doors bolted, the streets almost deserted. Only a few scattered members of the City Guard were about, and a few weary revelers weaving their way home from a late night's debauch. One of them greeted Ti-Philippe, calling out a slurred salute.

He grinned in reply. "To the flowers of Orchis!"

I felt myself redden. Orchis was one of the Thirteen Houses of the Night Court, where Naamah's finest Servants plied their trade. Phèdre was raised in one such—Cereus House, First among Thirteen.

"Philippe?" I cleared my throat. "What's it like there?"

He glanced at me. "Orchis House?"

"The Night Court."

"Well, it depends on the House." He shrugged. "I like Orchis. They're lighthearted; merry. It suits me."

"What about the others?" I asked.

"They're all different." Ti-Philippe smiled. "Heliotrope's nice. The adepts there will make you feel like the only man ever to touch their hearts. And Eglantine—it's worth visiting for the poets and players alone. Jasmine... ah, there's adepts at Jasmine will leave you limp as a dishrag, half-drowned in the sweat of desire."

Phèdre's mother was an adept of Jasmine House, but she left. And when she sold her daughter into indentured servitude, it was to the First among Thirteen; to Cereus House. "What about Cereus?"

"Ah." His gaze sharpened. "Well, all beauty's transient, so they say; but I'm not one to ache at its passing—or at least not to relish the ache."

"No," I said slowly. "I suppose not."

Ti-Philippe chuckled. "Ah, don't worry, Imriel, you've got plenty of years to choose."

The men in earshot laughed, and I blushed deeper. "That's not why I asked."

"I know." He grinned, but nicely. "Well, if you choose to visit Cereus House one day, you'll see where her ladyship got her manners, but that's about it. Anyway, it's not the House I'd pick for you."

"Which one, then?" I was curious despite myself. The Night Court wouldn't accept me as a patron until I'd gained sixteen years, but the mere thought of choosing among the Thirteen Houses made my stomach feel unsettled with a sick excitement.

Ti-Philippe opened his mouth to reply, then paused and shook his head. "I'm not sure." His eyes had

gone grave and thoughtful. "For you, I'm not sure."

"Well, what do think you might fancy?" Gilot asked cheerfully. "I'll tell you, I hear Bryony's more fun than you might reckon. If you like to wager, you're a lad will have the coin to spare. Or maybe Alyssum, eh? A little modesty, a little hesitation?" Leaning over in the saddle, he nudged my leg. "That might suit you, Imri."

Unaccountably, I shuddered. Something in his words summoned a memory of the zenana, so powerful that I could almost smell the stagnant water in the abandoned pool. I remembered the Bhodistani women fasting there, hollow-eyed and serene. Somehow they had maintained dignity and modesty alike in that terrible place. It had carried a cost. One of them had died at the point of a knife rather than consume a morsel of food in the Mahrkagir's hall.

"No." My voice was thick. "Not that."

"Ah, well." Gilot was oblivious. "There's Dahlia if you like 'em haughty instead; or Camellia, they're a proud lot. Or, of course—"

"Enough, Gilot." It was Hugues who intervened. His voice was mild, but there was somewhat implacable in his pleasant blue eyes; and too, the set of his broad shoulders. "As Philippe said, Prince Imriel has years to choose."

I smiled my thanks at him.

"Sorry, Imri." Gilot shrugged. "I meant no offense."

"None taken." I shook my head. "It's no matter."

It was, though. I did not want to hear him name the other Houses—not Balm or Gentian; healers and dreamers I did not mind—but the other two. Mandrake and Valerian, those given over to the sharper pleasures; the one giving, the other receiving. Their clientele was smaller, but it was select.

They played with dangerous toys, there.

I knew too much about those.

We passed through the Northern Gate and turned up the collars of our cloaks against the cold wind. I felt it whip against my cheeks, scouring away the City's clinging touch, and I was glad. Although a part of me yearned for it, I was not ready, yet, to be a man among men, speaking casually of desire and the pleasures of the flesh. Not yet, not really.

Besides, there was Maslin.

What was the truer test of manhood? To know another, to plumb the depths of desire? Or to face one's fears and accept the burden that responsibility entails? Anyone could do the former. It was in the latter that the challenge lay.

We reached Lombelon before midday. The seneschal, Jerome Bargout, greeted us with startled good manners, calling for mugs of hot perry cider and ushering us into the great room, where we might warm ourselves before the fire.

"Welcome, Prince Imriel," he said when we were settled. "Forgive us for not being prepared to better receive you."

"No matter." I smiled to put him at ease. "The fault is mine for coming without notice. But have no fear, we will not trouble you long."

"As you will, highness; it is no trouble." He paused. "How may I serve you?"

I cupped my mug, feeling its warmth seep into my cold hands, and took a sip of perry cider. It was sweet and spicy, blazing a trail of heat into my belly, and I felt stronger for it. "I wish to see Maslin," I said. "Anne Livet's son."

Jerome Bargot, who was a florid man, turned pale. "Has he... has he given offense, highness?"

"No." I shook my head. It was strange to have so many people worried about offending me; although I suppose the seneschal had cause for concern. I reached into the pouch at my belt, withdrawing the sealed deed. "I have come to set right a certain matter. Will you summon him?"

The seneschal's eyes bulged. "Highness!" he croaked. "He is... he is in the orchards, tending to the fall mulching. Perhaps you would prefer to wait until—"

"Bring him," I said simply.

Jerome Bargot bowed. "As you will."

We lounged in the great room and waited while Maslin was summoned. The fire crackled. We grew warm and threw off our cloaks. Hugues brought out his wooden flute and played a simple, merry tune. A serving maid brought a plate of bread and meat and strong mustard, and Gilot caught her eye, grasping her hands and convincing her to dance a measure with him until she drew away, laughing and protesting.

It reminded me of Montrève, and I was smiling when Maslin arrived.

He brought with him a strong whiff of dung. I rose when he entered the great room. We took each other's measure at a glance. Hugues' flute fell silent. Firelight laid a ruddy crown on Maslin's pale hair. He clenched his fists, with half-moons of dirt under the crescents of his nails, and inclined his head. His voice, when he acknowledged me, was grating. "Your highness."

I saw him, and for the first time, it was as though I stood outside myself. I saw the fierce pride and the anguished betrayal. I saw the fault-lines in his soul and where they lay, and how they could be exploited. There was a game to be played. He hated me, yes, but we were victims in common. I could play to that, speak cunning words, turn his hatred to a shared target. One whose justice was too harsh for his angry soul, whose mercy galled my unrestful one.

Ysandre, the Queen.

Or I could wound him with disdain, and earn his undying enmity, sealed and immaculate. There was power in that, too. Those whose hatreds are simple are easy to manipulate. He could become my creature, all unwitting.

I trembled at this knowledge. It was my mother's legacy, Kushiel's gift, and I did not want any part of it.

What I wanted was to make a friend of him.

It was not to be. That, too, I saw; and I was grateful to Phèdre for her warning.

"Here," I said, thrusting the deed forward. "I cannot undo what is done. I know only that this is right. Lombelon is yours."

Maslin grabbed the parchment and broke the seal. For a long moment, he read, lips moving silently. At last, his dark eyes met mine.

"Why?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Because I could."

It was not answer enough; it would never be answer enough. But it was all the answer I could afford him. Maslin shuddered, his dung-stained nails tightening on the deed. "Shall I bow and scrape in thanks, princeling?" he asked harshly. "Is that what you wish to see? Groveling gratitude, a sop for your miserable soul?"

Someone's breath hissed between their teeth, and I motioned my retainers to be still. I gazed at Maslin. "You do not know me," I said to him. "Do not presume that you do."

He looked away. "Nor you me," he muttered.

"Fair enough," I said evenly.

"What is it?" He looked back at me, scowling. "What do you want?"

I considered the question. "I want to be good."

This was an answer he understood. I saw the flicker of recognition in his eyes. His scowl eased and he nodded, half to himself, as though I had spoken his thoughts, thoughts no one else in the room save we two could know. "People make it hard to do," he said.

I thought about my mother who had borne me, the priest who had lied to me. I thought about the Carthaginian slavers, the Mahrkagir, the mocking, distrustful face of Barquiel L'Envers. And I thought, too, about Phèdre and Joscelin—and strangely, Sidonie, with her cool, disdainful words. "Some do," I said. "Not all."

"Most," said Maslin.

"Too many," I agreed.

What the others in the room made of our conversation, I cannot guess. But we understood one another, we traitors' sons. It was not friendship, but it would do. I put out my hand, and this time, Maslin clasped it. His grip was callused and strong.

"My thanks," he said. "I didn't mean..." He shrugged, wordless.

I nodded. "I know."

So it was done, and I was glad. We took our leave in short order, leaving behind a manor abuzz with the news. The folk of Lombelon seemed well enough pleased with my decision, and I was glad of that, too. I had not made a friend, but I had not made an enemy, either.

I thought a great deal about Maslin on the homeward ride, wondering about those people in his life who made it hard to be good. His life seemed so much simpler than mine—it was one of the things I had envied him. And yet I had complicated it.

Was it right? I believed it was. Was it good?.

I thought so, yes; but I was not certain. I had acted out of self-interest. In the end, I could not say. And I thought, too, about my own perceptions—about the fault-lines and flaws I had discerned in Maslin, and how they might best be exploited. It was not so different from the arts of covertcy which Phèdre had taught me; and yet it was.

I had seen how Maslin could be used.

I was my mother's son.

But I had seen, and I had walked away from it. It gladdened my heart to know this. That was the secret of Kushiel's gift to his scions—power, to be used for good or ill. Even so, it could be rejected. It need not be used.

Therein, I thought, lay true strength.

Dusk was falling by the time we returned to the City of Elua, the long shadows tinting the white walls of the City with blue. We were all of us cold and hungry, blowing on our chilled fingers as we rode into the narrow courtyard. All the windows of the townhouse were ablaze with lights, awaiting our return. For the first time, I felt a strong sense of homecoming; here, in this place. We poured through the open door into the welcoming parlor, set about with warming braziers and the bust of Anafiel Delaunay on its marble plinth, smiling his subtle smile.

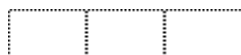
"Well?" Phèdre set her hands on her hips, eyes sparkling. I could see so many things in them—relief, concern, curiosity. And love; always love. So much it made me dizzy, so much it made my heart ache. "How was it?"

"Good." I smiled at her; at Joscelin, who stood beside her, his Cassiline stoicism not hiding his own vast relief at my safe return. It had cost him, letting me go without his protection. "It was good. I'm glad I did it."

We celebrated that night with a long meal around a crowded table. What exactly it was that we celebrated, I could not say. I only knew I was glad to have gone and glad to be back, and I felt lighter in my heart than I had since setting foot in Lombelon.

I held on to the moment, and wished nothing would ever change.

Chapter Seven



That winter, in the City of Elua, I grew.

It was as though I had crossed some invisible threshold in giving Lombelon to Maslin, crossing out of boyhood and toward manhood, and my body sought to keep pace. My bones seemed to lengthen daily, and betimes they ached. My voice, which had been breaking for the better part of a year, settled into a deeper register.

I felt strange to myself. Though I had longed for it, when it came, I felt uneasy in my own body. My limbs seemed too long, my hands and feet oversized. Never in my life had I been clumsy; now I found myself bumping into objects, careening off balance.

Joscelin laughed at me.

We kept up our practice in the Cassiline drills, training in the chilly inner courtyard. Although he still had the advantage of me in height and reach, it had lessened; yet now I found myself overreaching, flailing and floundering, my feet slipping on the frosty flagstones.

In contrast, Joscelin never made a misstep. Every move was controlled and precise. Time and again, I measured myself against his fluid grace, and found myself sorely lacking.

"This never happened to you," I complained.

"Oh, it did." He grinned, his summer-blue eyes crinkling. "Colts' Years, we called them in the Brotherhood. Everyone goes through it. Don't worry, you'll grow out of them."

It was a good term. It was how I felt; half-grown and gangly with it. It gave me a shock the first time I looked at Phèdre and realized I was taller than her. I saw the knowledge reflected in her face, along with a bittersweet sorrow.

"Ah, love," she whispered, touching my cheek. "Don't grow up too fast."

It is an awkward thing to be caught between one state and another. When I went to court, I felt newly self-conscious. I was no longer a child, and people looked differently at me, speculative and assessing.

In the self-absorbed way of the young, I had supposed the news that I had given Lombelon to Isidore d'Aiglemort's son would be on everyone's lips; but that had passed without remark. No one, it seemed, was particularly interested in the fate of a minor untitled holding, and a nobleman's bastard get was hardly news in Terre d'Ange. If d'Aiglemort had lived to acknowledge and adopt him, it might have been different, but he hadn't.

After all, it wasn't as though Maslin were a Prince of the Blood.

Not like me.

There was no news of my mother, which was a mercy. Wherever it was she had gone to earth, she showed no signs of resurfacing. There were no further letters from her, no correspondence. Phèdre exchanged a regular correspondence with her acquaintances in La Serenissima and elsewhere, and no news was forthcoming on any front.

Still, her memory lived, and where I went, whispers followed. At Court, I treated everyone I met with unflinching politeness; but I was wary, and I got a name for being aloof.

Midwinter came upon us, and with it an invitation to the Masque at the Palace. It was one of those rare things that showed up the divide between Phèdre and Joscelin. I hated to see them argue; but over this, they did.

"Will you not accompany me?" she asked. "Surely, Blessed Elua can spare you."

He shook his head. "It is the Longest Night, Phèdre. I ask for little. If nothing else, let me keep his vigil."

"Even now?" she said. "What of Imriel?"

It was the first year I had been invited to attend; a courtesy of Ysandre's, recognizing that I was no longer a child. There was a part of me that yearned to do so. Long ago, before Daršanga, the idea of a grand fete with fancy dress would have delighted me. Even afterward, I'd held a fondness for it. I still remembered plotting with Favrielle n^o Eglantine to make Joscelin splendid, wearing the lion's mane that had been a Jebean queen's gift. But, too, there was a part of me that abhorred the idea, yearning for something simpler, clean and pure.

"What of Imriel?" Joscelin retorted. "Have you asked him?"

Both of them looked at me then. I squirmed under their scrutiny.

"What will you, love?" Phèdre asked gently.

I opened my mouth and blurted, "I want to go with Joscelin."

Phèdre raised her brows. "Are you certain?"

I wasn't, not at all. And yet Joscelin looked surprised and pleased; and proud, too. I imagined the two of us, kneeling side by side in the Temple of Elua, stern and disciplined. It was a picture I very much relished.

"Yes," I said. "I'm certain."

That got me one of Phèdre's deep, searching looks; one of those that owed nothing to the arts of covertcy, and everything to the fact that she had held the Name of God in her mind, and there was little or nothing in the human soul that could be concealed from her.

"As you will, love," she said simply.

"What of you?" Joscelin asked her, and there was an edge to his voice. "You know there is... speculation."

Somehow, word had gotten out that Phèdre had made the pilgrimage to Naamah's shrine. Ysandre's court, which was not overly concerned with the disposition of my holdings, was keenly interested in whether or not the most famous courtesan in Terre d'Ange would return to Naamah's Service.

"I know." Phèdre smiled, touching the bare hollow of her throat. "Let them wonder. You keep your vigil in your way, and I in mine."

What it meant, I could not say; but Joscelin seemed satisfied with it.

And so it was that on the Longest Night, when all of Terre d'Ange celebrated the sun's return and the lengthening days to come with a riot of love and libation, that I found myself in the Temple of Elua, shivering and miserable.

We rode there alone, Joscelin and I, while the setting sun threw long streaks of red fire in the western skies. Elsewhere in the City, the revelry had already begun. Twilight settled over the streets, challenged by music, shouting, and torches. Above the river, the Palace was ablaze with light; farther inland, Mont Nuit echoed its brilliance. There would be a fate there, too, hosted by Cereus House, welcoming all the adepts of the Night Court.

The streets were crowded with early revelers; most on foot, making way for the carriages that forged a path through them. Overhead, the sky grew dark, stars emerging. I marveled at Joscelin's composure. He sat at ease in the saddle, starlight glinting on his steel vambraces, the hilt of his sword jutting over one shoulder. Everyone who passed gave us a wide berth.

I wanted to be like that.

It was cold. Our horses snorted, their breath frosting in the cold air. Near the Temple of Elua, the streets grew quiet. We dismounted, giving our mounts to the ostler, then passed through the gate into the vestibule. There we were met by blue-robed priests and priestesses. They welcomed us, smiling, giving us the kiss of greeting.

"Cassiel's child," said one, old and venerable, laying his hands on Joscelin's shoulders. "You have ever chosen truly. Be welcome on this Longest Night."

Joscelin smiled. "Thank you, my lord priest."

An acolyte knelt before me, drawing one foot into her blue-robed lap, unlacing my boot. I balanced awkwardly on the other foot, meeting the old priest's gaze. It was amused and kind, deep with unspoken wisdom.

"Kushiel's scion," he said to me. "What seek you here on this Longest Night?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. My foot freed, I stood, half unshod. The marble floor felt like ice. "What will I find, my lord priest?"

The wrinkles around his eyes grew deeper as he smiled. "Love, child! What else? You will find it and lose it, again and again. And with each finding and each loss, you will become more than before. What you make of it is yours to choose." He laid a hand on my cheek, and a shadow of sorrow darkened his expression. "Ah, lad. I would that your path was easier. But rejoice that you have loving guides to set you on your way."

I nodded, not knowing what was expected of me. "I do."

"Yes." He patted my cheek. "I pray that you do."

It was not entirely reassuring; but with that, he left us. The kneeling acolyte removed my other boot and rose, pointing the way with a smile. Unshod, Joscelin and I ventured into the Temple proper.

There was no roof over the inner sanctum; Blessed Elua's temples were always open to the heavens. In the Sanctuary of Elua in Landras, where I spent my childhood, his altar was in a field of poppies. Here it was contained within a vast walled garden with pillars marking the four corners and ancient oaks flanking the altar.

In other seasons, it was a lush and verdant place. Now the oak trees lifted crowns of stark bare branches against the night sky. Nothing remained of the weeds and flowers that had once flourished here save bent stalks, brown and brittle. Only cypress and holly lent a semblance of life.

Before us was the effigy of Blessed Elua on his altar, carved from a massive piece of marble. It is one of the oldest ones in existence. The workmanship is crude by today's standards, and yet there is a raw power in it. Elua stands, smiling, gazing downward, both his hands open in offering. The left bears the mark of Cassiel's dagger, the wound with which Blessed Elua answered the summons of the One God.

My grandfather's Heaven is bloodless, and I am not.

We approached, soundless on bare feet. The ground was frozen hard beneath our soles, so cold it burned. There were already two others maintaining vigils, kneeling on the cold earth; Cassiline Brothers, both of them. They wore the ash-grey garb of their order, the vambraces and twin daggers, hair bound into a club at the nape of their necks. No swords, though. Cassiline Brothers are no longer allowed to carry swords in the City. Both of them lifted their heads at our approach and favored Joscelin with long, silent stares.

He ignored them. For a long moment, he stood before the altar, gazing on Blessed Elua's face. I stood behind him, shivering in the still, frosty air, and wondered what he thought. Although Cassiel's order declared him anathema, Joscelin has always honored the one vow that mattered, his loyalty as unswerving as Cassiel's devotion to Elua himself. Drawing a swift breath, he stooped to kiss the effigy's feet, then stepped away. Finding an open space to one side, he knelt and composed himself, arms crossed over his breast.

I followed suit. The marble was icy beneath my lips, worn smooth by thousands upon thousands of supplicants' kisses. I made my way toward Joscelin and knelt beside him. The frozen ground was rock-hard, uneven and lumpy. Already I could feel the cold seeping into my bones, and my bare feet were chilled through. I sat back on my heels to warm them, rubbing my palms on my thighs.

The Longest Night was going to be long indeed.

No one spoke. In the distance, we could hear the City rejoicing, but within the Temple walls, all was quiet and still. I glanced sidelong at Joscelin. He knelt, head slightly bowed, motionless as the effigy. His expression was calm and grave in the starlight.

I tried my best to emulate him.

I willed my mind to silence, seeking to find a small, still place within myself to contemplate Blessed Elua's gift to his children; love, in all its myriad glories. Once upon a time, I had it. But that was before the slave-traders, before Daršanga. It was harder to believe, now; harder to worship. And yet, by the same token, who had greater cause than I? If Elua allowed me to be cast into a living hell, he had not suffered me to be abandoned.

I gazed at Elua's enigmatic visage, wondering, for the thousandth time in my life, why. Wondering if what had befallen me had been necessary. Wondering if it were true, after all, that we had defeated a terrible

darkness in Daršanga. Ill thoughts, ill words, ill deeds; such were the tenets of the Mahrkagir and the priests of Angra Mainyu, who sought to conquer the world. And there was power in them—I had seen it. I had witnessed the bone-priests there wield death and madness as weapons, killing with a thought. A mighty army of Akkadian warriors had been destroyed by the dark sorcery begotten there.

And against this legion of horror, where other gods sent forth armies, Blessed Elua had sent an unarmed courtesan and a single swordsman.

Love.

It had been the Mahrkagir's undoing. He had loved Phèdre in the end. So much that she would have been his perfect sacrifice, the offering that would have sealed his power. So much that he allowed her within the circle of his trust. And there, she had killed him.

My knees were beginning to ache. I shifted, trying to find a more comfortable patch of ground. I wondered how Joscelin could bear it. Surely his old wounds must ache in the cold. He has earned enough of them in his lifetime—the shattered bones of his arm, the long scar that curves around his ribcage, the myriad lesser gashes he has sustained. But if they did, he gave no sign of it. No sign that his joints were stiffening. No sign that the cold was leaching all the warmth from his body, leaving him shivering to the core.

The others did. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see them move from time to time. I could hear them rustle, and the occasional cough. Only Joscelin had gone so deep inside himself that he scarce seemed to breathe.

Once, Phèdre told me, he sat cross-legged in the snow all night long. That was in Skaldia, where my mother betrayed them into slavery. And yet Joscelin says it is Phèdre whose will sustained them there; who goaded him into hope when he despaired.

Rejoice that you have loving guides to set you on your way.

Did Elua's priest think me unaware? Ungrateful? I knew it all too well. I was not worthy of the sacrifices they made. No one mortal could be. I didn't forget it, ever.

I didn't rejoice in it, either. Not often. Joy came hard for me.

Perhaps, I thought, that was priest's meaning. Not a reminder, but an injunction. All darkness, even that of the Longest Night, gives way to dawn. I had passed through darkness, but I had emerged. Not unscathed, but alive.

I bore the scars of Daršanga, though only a few were visible; a handful of faint lines cross-hatching my back where the deeper welts healed, and the Kereyit rune branded on the flank of my left buttock. That one wasn't the Mahrkagir's doing. It was Jagun, a warlord of the Kereyit Tatars, who marked me for his own.

He died for it, one of many Joscelin slew there. We made our way out of darkness together and found brightness on the far side of hell.

Rejoice.

It was hardest at night. There was no daylight in the zenana, never. Not until the day Phèdre found a way

to pry open the boards sealing the walled garden there. I remembered how it had felt to see the sky, cold and grey, and found my eyes filling with tears.

Somewhere in the distance, a horologist was crying the hour. It was later than I had thought. I tilted my head to gaze at the night sky, remembering. The stars were cold and bright. They had seemed closer in Saba, where we had followed the constellations across the Lake of Tears in search of the Name of God. That night, too, had been terrible in its way. And yet we had succeeded in the end.

I thought about what the priest had said of love.

You will find it and lose it, again and again.

It seemed a harsh fate, and yet, strangely, there was comfort in it. The priest had not offered me false kindness. I preferred a hard truth to a well-meant lie. There would be love, and while it was mine, I could cling to it. I could rejoice—in life, in the existence of love. In the existence of people like Phèdre and Joscelin. Although the standards they set were impossibly high, still, I could rejoice that such courage and compassion existed in the world.

I could hope and aspire.

Blessed Elua, I thought, forgive me. I am unlike them, and my faith is imperfect. There is a part of me that cannot forget. There is anger in my heart, and a darkness within me which I fear. And yet I have come here tonight. Lend me strength, and I will try, wherever my path leads me.

There was no answer, but as I gazed at Elua's gentle smile, a sort of peace settled upon me. My anger, my fear, my pride—Blessed Elua was above these things. It felt good to confess to them in my thoughts, to lay them before him and ask his mercy.

I resolved, then, to offer up this night's suffering as a sacrifice; a penance for my doubt, for my anger. Three hours of shivering and freezing had dispelled any romantic illusions of my own fortitude. I had come in pride and vanity, and whatever foolish whim had prompted my words. I could not hope to match Joscelin's discipline.

But I could suffer and endure. That, I could do.

Much of what followed that night fades in memory. Hour by slow hour, the faint cries of the horologists tracked time's passage. I grew colder, so cold I began to tremble violently. Since I didn't want to shame Joscelin with my weakness, I wrapped my arms around my body and bent over double, my brow touching my knees. I felt the presence of Blessed Elua looming over me, filled with compassion and regret. A sense of mystery touched me, like the brush of a vast wing. Perhaps, I thought, even gods must make difficult choices. Without words, I told him that I forgave him what had befallen me, that I understood it had been needful.

Then the mystery went away, and there was only endless misery. I huddled and held myself, rocking and shaking on the frozen ground. My bones ached to the marrow. All my joints became locked and rigid save my jaws, which I could not stop from chattering. Using my chin, I worked a fold of my woolen cloak between my teeth to silence the noise.

At some point, the cold went away.

There was a mighty clamor in the City when dawn's first rays pierced the eastern horizon. In the Palace,

in the Night Court, everywhere across the City, people cheered and drank joie. In the Temple of Elua, there were only stifled groans of relief from the two Cassiline Brothers, and the slow lift of Joscelin Verreuil's bowed head.

This, I sensed without seeing. With my own head pillowed on my enfolding arms, I smiled drowsily at a clod of soil. The sparkle of frost was beautiful in the grey light of dawn.

"Imriel!" Joscelin's voice was hoarse and alarmed. He was on his feet in a heartbeat, stooping over me. "Name of Elua, what was I thinking?"

"I'm fine," I said; or tried to say. My lips were too stiff to move and my mouth was clogged with wool. With an effort, I worked it free and spat it out. "Let me sleep."

"You're freezing to death," he muttered. "Why didn't you say something?"

I felt his arms slide under me then, preparing to lift me, and I struggled, waking. "No!" I croaked. "I can do it."

"Messire Verreuil." It was one of the Cassilines who spoke in a flat tone. "Permit us to assist you with the Prince."

"No," I whispered, raising my head. I met Joscelin's eyes. "Please."

After a moment, he nodded. Rising, he took a step backward. "The Prince," he said, "does not require your aid."

It hurt to awaken. The cold returned, and with it came pain. I unfolded my arms, placed my palms on the cold hard earth, and pushed. My spine crackled as I levered myself to kneel upright, and I gasped aloud. I tried to get to my feet and found my legs would not obey me.

Silently, Joscelin extended his hand. I hesitated, then clasped it. His hand felt warm to my frozen touch, firm and callused. With a single, seamless effort, he hauled me to my feet.

There I stood, wavering, on numb feet and nerveless legs, only his careful grasp keeping me upright. Every muscle in my body was protesting. I drew a deep breath, feeling it sear my lungs with cold. My sluggish blood began to move in my veins, bringing pain like fire. But the Longest Night had ended, and I had survived it. I grinned at Joscelin, as nearly as my frozen lips would allow. "I did it, didn't I?"

"You did." Joscelin regarded me. A corner of his mouth twitched. "Phèdre is going to kill me for this."

"I know." I glanced at the hovering Cassiline Brothers, and gave them a regal nod of dismissal; the sort of thing I had seen Sidonie do. It worked, for they went without a word. I looked, then, at the effigy of Blessed Elua, and remembered the edge of mystery that had touched me, vowing silently to keep my resolve. At last, I looked at Joscelin, patient and waiting. "Let's go home."

It was a slow process. I limped over the frozen ground, supported by Joscelin's strong arm. Once we reached the vestibule, warmed with braziers, the agony of my thawing flesh grew unbearable; I was only glad the Cassilines were no longer there to see it.

In the end, Joscelin hired a hackney to bring us home, for my hands trembled too hard to hold the reins. He wrapped me in a carriage blanket, folding his arms around me and sharing the warmth of his body.

For the moment, with no one watching, I was content to feel myself a child under his protection once more. In Daršanga, Joscelin's presence at my side meant no one could touch me; no one could hurt me. Here, it made the pain diminish. I lolled against him, feeling loose-limbed and warm, thinking about how calmly he had endured this travail, thinking about the stern beauty of his bowed profile against the night sky. "Joscelin?" I asked sleepily. "Do you think I'll ever be like you?"

He looked down at me. "Who said you should be?"

"No one," I said. "I just want to, that's all."

I felt his lips, then, touching my brow, and his arms tightened around me, a promise of safety and security. "Ah, love!" he said roughly. "Don't wish for that. You're too much like me for your own good."

"Never enough," I murmured. "Never be that."

"Mayhap," Joscelin said, stroking my hair. He gave me a wry smile. "Never fear, love. It seems being you is dangerous enough."

Chapter Eight



Afterward, I was ill, with bouts of chills and a fever that refused to abate.

Joscelin's prediction proved true; Phèdre was angry. At him for his thoughtlessness, and at me for my folly. The surgeon who examined me ordered a period of extended bed rest, extra braziers, and vats of weak tea sweetened with honey, but I heard them quarreling while I lay in bed, their voices fading in and out of my fevered dreams.

"It's not his fault," I said to Phèdre in one of my lucid moments. "I wanted to do it."

She perched on the edge of my bed, wringing out a cloth in a basin of cool water. "I'm aware of that," she said, laying the damp cloth on my brow. "But you took it too far, Imri."

"Like you do," I whispered. "In Kushiel's temple."

Phèdre opened her mouth to reply, then shook her head. "Somewhere," she murmured, "Anafiel Delaunay is laughing at me."

Once word of my illness reached the Queen, my plight worsened. It wasn't that my condition grew worse; it remained unchanged, merely fluctuating on an hourly basis. If anything, I thought, it was improving. But Ysandre was angry, too; angry and worried, enough so to order me brought to the Palace to convalesce under the care of her personal surgeon.

I protested to no avail. It was a royal command and not to be disobeyed. The Queen's carriage was sent round, and I was bundled in blankets and carted off to the Palace, where I was installed for the duration. If it was a punishment, it was an effective one. Lelahiah Valais, the Queen's Eisandine surgeon, examined me with humiliating thoroughness, poking and prodding, peering into my ears and eyes and

open mouth, even a sample of my urine and stool.

In the process of examining me, she discovered the brand on my left flank. Lying helpless on sweat-soaked sheets, I felt her cool fingers brush over the scar tissue and shuddered with shame and revulsion.

"What caused this?" Lelahiah asked, frowning.

With fever-heightened perceptions, I could see the thoughts flickering across her mind. I had come from the household of an anguissette, to whom such pain was pleasure. I bared my teeth at her. "His name was Jagun," I said. "And he is dead."

After that, she withdrew, but she left orders for administering a series of foul-tasting brews. Whether they proved effective or the illness merely ran its course, I cannot say, but within three days, the fever broke for good.

It left me weak and irritable. There are worse things than being confined to a sickbed, but from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy, not many. Gilot and Hugues had been allowed to accompany me, which was a mercy, but it was dull duty for them, and I dismissed them as often as they would go.

I had visitors, of course. The Queen herself came to see how I was progressing, and Phèdre was there every day. She brought me books to read, and we played many of the study-games that she had either invented or learned from Anafiel Delaunay. We shared the same favorite, which was one of her own—the game of tongues, which involved reciting famous works of poetry to one another, back and forth, line by line, translating each line into a different language. It was fun, for there was a dual challenge in it. One could hope to stump the other in choice of poem, or outwit the other in strength of language. When pressed, both of us would resort on occasion to zenyan, the pidgin argot spoken in the zenana. It was not a proper language, but it was a private one, and it made us laugh in the way survivors do. Otherwise we played in polyglot tongues: D'Angeline, Caerdicci, Hellene, Cruithne, Skaldic, Jeb'ez, Habiru, Akkadian, and Aragonian.

Mostly, I lost; Phèdre was very good at languages. But every now and then I won. My Jeb'ez was as good as hers, and she spoke little Aragonian, which I had been studying.

There were other memory games, and those I knew were Delaunay's, having to do with the arts of covertcy. We played it on the Cassiline Brothers who had been present in the Temple on the Longest Night, and Phèdre made me speculate on their history.

"Their garments were worn and mended," I said. "They were older, in their forties, and unhappy to see Joscelin there." I shrugged. "At a guess, I would say they are two who found service with the Palace in their youth, and still resent its loss. Since they remain in the City, probably they found service with one of the lesser Houses of nobility, or one of the Great Houses fallen upon ill times. Still, they resent him for their dismissal."

She nodded. "Any danger?"

I thought about it. Once, the Cassiline Brotherhood had enjoyed considerable prestige. Old King Ganelon, Ysandre's grandfather, had been attended by two Brothers at all times. So had Ysandre, until one of them tried to assassinate her. It was Joscelin who prevented the assassination; but that was after the Brotherhood had declared him anathema.

"I don't think so," I said honestly. "Just a trace of ill will."

"Good," Phèdre said, knitting her brow. "You'd tell me if there was more?"

"Yes." I wrapped my arms around my knees. "Are you still mad at him?"

"Joscelin?"

"Yes." I rested my chin on my folded arms. "Are you?"

She sighed. "A little."

"It was my choice," I repeated, still stubborn. "He let me make it. Is that so wrong?"

"No." Phèdre's gaze deepened to that uncomfortable level of acuity. "I know, Imri, you need to make your peace with Elua. Believe me, I know. But until you reach your majority, your choices are not wholly your own. And Joscelin knows that as well as you do."

At that I squirmed, knowing it was all too true. "Where did he learn it?" I asked, casting out a question to distract her. "Delaunay, I mean. Where did he learn the arts of covertcy?"

It worked. She frowned, thinking. "I don't know," she said at last. "I've wondered at it, too. What he taught us, Alcuin and me..." Phèdre shook her head. "It's not taught in any academy nor army, not in Terre d'Ange. I cannot think he learned it here. That leaves—"

"Tiberium," I whispered.

"Tiberium," she agreed, favoring me with an absentminded smile. "He attended the University there. But who, and why? It's no part of the official curriculum." She gazed into the distance, remembering. "I asked Maestro Gonzago about it, once."

"What did he say?" I had never met the Maestro Gonzago de Escabares, but I knew his name. He was an Aragonian historian who had been one of Delaunay's teachers at the University of Tiberium. He had also been chosen by my mother as an unwitting messenger, many years later.

"Nothing," she said. "He disavowed any knowledge."

"Did you believe him?" I asked.

Phèdre smiled at me again. "No," she said. "Not for a minute."

I had other visitors, too. Alais came almost as often as Phèdre, and I was glad of her company. We played cards together and she chattered freely of Palace gossip. For a young girl, she overheard a great deal.

Most of it was inconsequential. Ysandre was a strong ruler; even I, who found it hard to love her, was willing to admit it. For as much as her early reign was fraught with challenge and upheaval, she had since presided over great peace and prosperity. Her marriage to the Cruarch of Alba lends strength to both realms.

And yet it was also the greatest abiding source of contention, for in Alba, the lines of succession were

matrilineal.

So it had been from time out of mind among the Cruithne. There had been efforts to change it—indeed, Drustan's throne was usurped in one such. He reclaimed it at the battle of Bryn Gorrydum, triumphing over Maelcon the Usurper as the true and rightful heir of the old Cruarch, his uncle.

It was a sticking point, and a hard one. In accordance with Cruithne tradition, Drustan's heir should be his sister's son; and it was in his heart that it would be a betrayal of his people to do aught else. There was reason for it—Maelcon the Usurper was the old Cruarch's son. To violate tradition now would undermine the legitimacy of his own claim. Although Drustan had made no formal declaration, in Alba, his nephew Talorcan, the eldest son of his sister Breidaia, was widely regarded as his heir.

D'Angelines held a different view.

It sat ill with them to give the succession of Alba over to a complete and utter stranger, a Cruithne with no blood ties to Terre d'Ange. And it sat doubly ill because my cousin Sidonie, Drustan and Ysandre's daughter, had been, from the moment of her birth, the acknowledged Dauphine of Terre d'Ange. It was a double standard, and one that did not favor Terre d'Ange.

If the peers of the realm were willing to accept Sidonie as Ysandre's heir, half-Cruithne though she was, they wanted somewhat in return. They wanted Drustan to name an heir with D'Angeline blood, preferably Alais. They feared that if he didn't, Alba's influence in Terre d'Ange would grow, while our influence in Alba would dwindle.

"What is it your mother wants?" I asked Alais one day, curious.

She sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed, her small face serious. "Truly? She agrees, although she's not willing to say it publicly, not yet. She wants Father to name me his heir."

"Do you think he will?" I asked.

Alais shook her head. "No," she said somberly. "I don't think he can." She paused, furrowing her dark brows. "They're not like us, are they, Imri? Their women don't light candles to Eisheth."

"No," I agreed. "They don't."

We were silent a moment, both of us pondering the mysteries of procreation, of which we had no firsthand knowledge. It was one of Eisheth's gifts to the women of Terre d'Ange—they did not conceive ere they chose, lighting a candle in her name and praying that she open the gates of their wombs. But there were no guarantees, even so; a prayer might be years in the granting.

And a prayer, once made, could not be rescinded.

There were D'Angeline women who had gotten unwanted children.

Not many, for rape was a crime of heresy and punishable by death. Still, it happened; as did errors in judgment.

"What do you want?" I asked Alais.

She rested her chin on her propped hands. "I wouldn't mind," she said. "Alba, I mean. But it won't

happen, so I don't know... do you know what I would like?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "Tell me."

"I'd like to learn to use a sword." Alais' face brightened. "Would you teach me, Imri? No one else will."

I opened my mouth to demur, and the royal guards in attendance snickered. I watched the eager light fade from Alais' face. I thought about the stories I had heard; about Grainne of the Dalriada, who had ridden to war alongside her brother in her wicker chariot, fighting as fiercely as a man. I remembered Daršanga and the women there. I saw Kaneka's hand covering Gashtaham's mouth from behind, her dagger flashing. Blood spurting from the ka-Magus' throat, and Phèdre dragging me out of its spray.

"I would be honored," I said, drawing my bedclothes around me and bowing. "Princess."

Alais beamed.

The following day, I sent Gilot to fetch a pair of wooden practice-swords from the townhouse, but it was Joscelyn who brought them. I was so happy to see him, I clambered out of bed and flung my arms around him.

"Gently, love!" He laughed. "You're meant to be a-bed still."

I made a face. "I'm weary of bed rest. Are you in disgrace? I've missed you."

"Only a bit." Joscelyn lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He grinned at me. "I know. Well, now we've both been punished for our folly. What's this about teaching Princess Alais to use a sword?"

"She asked," I said simply. "And I said I would."

Joscelyn nodded as though it were the most reasonable thing in the world. "I brought the daggers, too," he said. "Better to start with those; the swords are a bit heavy."

So it was that I regained my strength by teaching my young cousin to wield a blade. I started with the simplest rudiments, reckoning her interest would flag. If nothing else, I could teach her how to hold a weapon, and those areas on an opponent which are least guarded and easiest to strike.

To my surprise, I found it was fun. Alais was a quick study, and neat-handed. One I had taught her a few basic thrusts and parries, we made a game of it, playing out roles of villains and heroes, chasing one another around the bedchamber under the amused gazes of her guards. At first I found them galling, but it brought Alais such joy, I was hard put to resist. In time, I learned to forget their presence.

And she was clever; skipping around charcoal braziers, ducking behind hanging drapes, vaulting atop the bed. I stumbled after her in pursuit, dizzy and easily winded. On a few early occasions, I was forced to surrender, laughing and gasping for air. It took several days before I was steady enough on my feet to catch her without a considerable effort.

It was in the midst of such a game that the Princess Sidonie paid a visit.

The guard announced her at the precise moment that a cornered Alais let out an earsplitting shriek and launched an attack at me. I was laughing too hard to hear aught else. I took the brunt of her onslaught, staggering and catching her dagger-hand. We both fell backward onto the bed and I twisted, falling uppermost and pinning her.

"Surrender, villain!" I cried, raising my wooden dagger.

Alais giggled breathlessly, hiccoughing.

"Let her go!"

The words rang with the unmistakable tenor of command, brittle and furious. I turned my head and saw Sidonie standing in the doorway. Her slight frame was rigid, and her face was pale and taut. Her black Cruithne eyes were stretched wide, blurred with terror and fury.

I knelt on the bed, opening my hands and dropping the dagger. The guards moved forward uncertainly.

"Hold," I said to them, and to Sidonie, carefully, "Greetings, cousin."

She drew a short, sharp breath and looked past me. "Alais?"

"I had him!" Alais complained. "Or I would have, anyway." Scrambling to her knees, she smacked me hard on the shoulder with the wooden blade of her dagger. "You ruined it, Sidonie!"

"Ah, you weren't even close." I ruffled her hair and gave her a nudge. "Go on to your sister, villain." I watched her flounce her way off the bed. "It's a game," I said to Sidonie. "One we've been playing for days." I rapped my knuckles against the wooden dagger. "See?"

She nodded, slow and wary. "I see. Forgive me, cousin."

"Highness?" one of the guards interjected, sounding nervous. "We've been watching all along. There's been no cause—"

Sidonie held up one hand. "I see," she repeated. "Cousin Imriel, I'm pleased that you are convalescing. Perhaps it would be best if I came another time."

I felt at once tired and sad. "Why would you think it was anything else, Sidonie? Who told you to be afraid of me?"

Alais glanced between us and kept wisely silent.

"Too many," Sidonie murmured. "I'm sorry, Imriel." For a moment, her slender shoulders slumped; with an effort, she squared them and reached out a hand to her sister. "Come, Alais."

I watched them go, two small figures, fair and dark. I wanted to be angry, yet I was not. At that moment, anger seemed too heavy a burden to lift. Their guards trailed after them, casting dubious glances behind at me.

Once they had gone, I packed my things. There was not much—a few items of clothing, including a luxurious robe of deep blue silk that had been the Queen's gift, two books Phèdre had left, and the

wooden daggers, the blades chipped and splintered, the hafts polished and smooth. I stroked the worn grain, hearing Alais' giggles echoing in my memory, seeing the look of shock and terror on Sidonie's face.

When I had done, I left my chamber. There was a guard lounging in the hallway outside my door, clad in the blue livery of House Courcel. On the smallest finger of his left hand, he bore a ring of solid silver, a subtle indicator that he was one of the Queen's personal guard. As I emerged, he came to attention with a start. "Your highness! You're not supposed—"

"Yes," I said wearily, cutting him off. "I know. Where are my retainers?"

"The... the Hall of Games," he stammered. "B-but..."

I gave him a long, hard stare. "Take me there."

He obeyed without arguing, escorting me down the long hall with its fretted balustrade and down a broad marble stair to the main floor of the Palace.

The Hall of Games was a vast, bustling space, surrounded by a colonnade for strolling. There were tables reserved for all manner of game-playing and wagering, and other areas for conversing, made intimate with chairs and low couches. Other than the theatre, it was the single largest space within the Palace proper, larger even than the Hall of Audience. It was said that half the business of Terre d'Ange is conducted within its confines.

"Prince Imriel!" The head guardsman saluted me, exchanging a wary look with the guard who accompanied me. "Shouldn't you—"

"Montrève's retainers?" I asked coolly.

He shut his mouth and pointed. Following his finger, I made my way through a host of royal peers toward the Dicers' Corner, Ysandre's guardsman trailing in my wake.

It was a familiar sound; the rattle of shaken dice, the tumble of the cast. All around the world, men dice for pleasure and wager on it. But I used to hear it in the zenana, where the women would consult Kaneka's oracle, to determine when the Mahrkagir would summon them. She used to draw circles in a tray of sand; a day, a week, a month.

Only Phèdre threw all ones, ever.

The sound and the memories it evoked made me unsteady. I'd overtaxed myself, and it had taken its toll. I wobbled, brushing against a tall nobleman clad in a maroon velvet, with golden silk showing in his slashed sleeves. He cast an irritable glance at me, then checked himself, features turning smooth with diplomacy. I knew too well what he saw; me, gaunt and pale, knobby-limbed, my eyes sunken into dark-hollowed sockets. A traitor's ill-gotten son to whom he was forced to pay respect.

"Your highness," he said, inclining his head a scant inch. "Forgive me."

"My fault," I said hoarsely. "Sorry."

One immaculate brow arched. "As you say."

It made me angry, at last. Ysandre's guard hovered ineffectually behind me. The unknown nobleman

looked down his nose. I wanted to spit at his feet, on his glossy, shining boots, and wished I were a commoner who could do so.

"Cousin!" A voice cleaved the crowd, light and friendly. I looked up to see one of the Shahrizai approaching. It was one I had seen before, a few years older than me. He reached out to clasp my forearm. He was smiling, filled with assurance, midnight braids framing his face with its high cheekbones. "Remember me?" he asked, winking.

"Yes," I said, remembering. "You're Mavros."

"So I am." He turned his smile on the nobleman, at once pleasant and dangerous. A kind of heat seemed to emanate from him, playful and predatory. "I suggest you be gone, Messire Bauldry." He paused. "Or... forgive me... did you wish to offend?"

"He jostled me!" Bauldry spat.

"Oh?" Mavros raised his brows, still smiling pleasantly. "As you say."

Somehow, he had turned it all around, and I was grateful to him for it. I returned his arm-clasp; glad, for the first time, to see a face that echoed my own. Both of us laughed as Messire Bauldry stomped away. "Who is he?" I asked.

"No one," Mavros said, amused. "A minor lordling with aspirations. Look, highness—"

"Imriel!" At the dicing table, Gilot broke away, hurrying toward us. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "You're supposed to be resting."

"I've rested," I said irritably. "I want to go home."

Gilot ran a hand through his disheveled brown hair. "Queen Ysandre—"

"Surely the Queen would not deny her kinsman the comfort of his own home," Mavros remarked, sounding eminently sensible. "Not after he has been given insult under her very roof!" He laid a hand on my shoulder, still smiling. "The Shahrizai do not countenance such treatment of their kin."

Gilot eyed me dubiously. "Given insult? Is that so?"

"Yes," I said. It was, though not for the reasons Mavros thought. Still, it felt good to have an ally at my side, one who understood how to negotiate the treacherous shoals of Court intrigue with effortless ease. I sighed. "Gilot, let it be. I'm fine. The Queen's surgeon will attest to it. I don't want any fuss. I just want to go home, that's all."

"All right, Imri." His expression softened. "Let me find Hugues, and we'll fetch your things. Stay put and I'll come for you." Patting his pockets, Gilot grinned. "Time enough, any road! I've precious little left to wager."

As Gilot plunged into the crowd, Mavros steered me toward the colonnade, sensing my discomfort. "Here," he said. "Walk with me." We strolled together. Away from the sound of rattling dice, I felt my head clear.

"Thank you," I said to him.

He shrugged. " 'Tis nothing." He gave me a sidelong glance. "Your retainer is familiar with you. Is he a lover?"

Heat rose, scorching my cheeks. "Gilot?"

"No, then." Mavros laughed softly. "Ah, well... Imri, is that what you are called?"

"Sometimes." I drew away from him.

"Forgive me." Mavros halted, turning his hands outward. Everything changed; his tone, his demeanor, all of it turning somber. "Cousin Imriel, you are the last person on earth I wish to offend. I forget that you were not raised as I was. What you have suffered, I cannot begin to guess. I spoke out of turn. Can you forgive me for it?"

I studied his face. He let me measure his expression. I did, and found no trace of a lie in it. Whatever his reasons, he was sincere. I nodded, slowly.

"Good." Mavros blew out his breath in a sigh of relief, shaking his braided head and grinning at me. "So it's girls for you, then, is it?"

I thought about the Thirteen Houses of the Night Court, and I thought about Katherine Friote, and the scent of her flesh, like a sun-warmed meadow. The memory was overlaid with the odor of the zenana, the fecund stench of its stagnant pool. And still, all of it stirred desire. Something in my throat grew tight.

"Yes," I said thickly. "Someday."

"You have desires you fear?" Mavros asked.

All I could do was nod.

He smiled, nodding in return. "Don't be afraid," he said. "There are reasons, and Kushiel is merciful." Once again, he laid his hand on my shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Think on our offer, cousin. It yet stands. It would be good for you to know your kin."

With that, he left me.

I watched him go, swaggering with insouciant grace, his thumbs hooked onto his belt. Left alone with my thoughts, I walked slowly along the colonnade, accompanied only by Ysandre's worried guardsman.

In time, Gilot and Hugues came for me, and I dispatched my escort with a terse message of gratitude to the Queen. If Ysandre learned what had transpired earlier, she would know why I left; if not, well, it was true. I was on the mend, and there was no reason to stay at the Palace throughout my convalescence. If not for Alais, I might have left sooner.

There was some commotion upon our arrival at the townhouse, though not as much as I feared. Phèdre took one look at me and ordered me back to bed. I obeyed without arguing, feeling bone-weary.

She got the story out of me that evening, after I had slept for a few hours and eaten a light dinner. There are some things it was easier to tell Phèdre than anyone else, and this was one of them. It seemed almost silly now, and I felt foolish telling it, even to her. Still, when I closed my eyes, I could still see the look on

Sidonie's face, stricken with the utter, terrified certainty that I was murdering her sister. Phèdre understood. I didn't have to tell her that it had hurt, or why.

"I'm sorry, love," she said when I had finished. "I'm so sorry."

I shrugged, sitting propped against pillows. "I shouldn't blame her, not really. She saw what she saw." Resting my chin on my knees, I smiled a little. "She was brave, actually, shouting like that. Like you did in the zenana that time, remember?"

"I remember," Phèdre said quietly. "But I had cause."

We were both silent, then, remembering. It had been one of the times I had been sent to attend Jagun; afterward, when a few of the Chowati women were tormenting me. There was no reason for it, save that cruelty begets cruelty. Phèdre does not raise her voice often, but it had cracked like a whip that day. It was the moment, I think, when the women of the zenana began to believe that perhaps the gods of Terre d'Ange were not as soft as they had reckoned.

Thinking about the zenana, I remembered the rattle and cast of dice in the Hall of Games, and Mavros Shahrizai coming to my aid. "Phèdre?" I asked. "Has Duc Faragon pursued his request to send some of the Shahrizai to summer in Montrève?"

"How did you know?" She cocked her head, regarding me. "He sent a letter the other week. I was waiting until you felt better to discuss it. We can speak of it later, Imri. You need to sleep now. There's time enough to think on it."

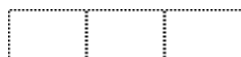
"I know," I said. "But I don't need to think. If you're willing, I'd like them to come."

Phèdre looked surprised. I hadn't told her about the Hall of Games. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I'm sure."

"All right," she said, bending to kiss my cheek. "We'll talk about it." As she straightened, a glimmer of deep amusement lit her eyes. For some reason, it made me think about my vigil on the Longest Night, reminding me that darkness fades, and there is reason in life for rejoicing. "This," she said, "ought to be interesting."

Chapter Nine



Winter gave way to spring, and I turned fifteen. My favorite gift on the occasion came from Joscelin, who commissioned a pair of daggers for me modeled after the Cassiline style. With Phèdre's aid, he even contrived to have scabbards made to fit my rhinoceros-hide belt, which was one of my most prized possessions.

The Queen hosted a small private dinner in my honor, which might have been pleasant, if not for the awkwardness. Sidonie and I were polite to one another. The incident was never discussed. I felt worst for Alais, who didn't wholly understand why her favorite cousin had begun avoiding her. Perceptive

though she was, there were some things she was simply too young to grasp.

"I wish you would visit more," she complained. "You're better now, aren't you?"

"Much better," I said. The lingering aftereffects of my sickness had vanished at last, leaving me thin but hale. "I'm sorry, Alais. I've been busy, that's all."

She wrinkled her nose. "Doing what?"

"Practicing," I said. "Fighting villains."

That earned me a look of disgust. Alais had a child's keen sense of when she was being humored. "You will, you know."

"Will what?" I asked.

"Fight villains." She nodded. "I dreamed it. You were helping a man with two faces."

I almost laughed, but I didn't. Alais had dreamed true things before, though never anything so fanciful. Small things, usually, that came to pass. "Two faces? Did he have a face on the back of his head?"

"No." Alais shook her head. "He didn't wear them both at once."

"Ah," I said. "He wore a mask, then?"

"No," she said patiently. "He had two faces. And you were older."

"Why was I helping him?" I asked. "Was he a friend?"

She considered the question. "One of him was."

Though I questioned her further, I got no more from her on the subject of the man with two faces; instead, she extracted in turn a promise from me to visit before we left for Montrève. I gave it gladly enough, though I could not help glancing at Sidonie as I did. There was a pink flush on her cheeks as she met my eyes, but she held them as coolly as ever.

It was galling, but at least it was a familiar annoyance.

Once the ordeal of my natality was behind me, I set my sights on Montrève. Summer could not arrive soon enough for me that year. I was tired of the City, and yearned for the freedom of the countryside. I longed for open air, to scramble over the mountains and swim in the brisk streams. I wanted to see the puppies from last year's litter, grown into young dogs, long-limbed and gawky. I wanted to see Charles Friote and measure my growth against his; I wanted to boast to Katherine how I had endured Elua's vigil on the Longest Night. I wanted to be surrounded by people whose loyalty was as solid and dependable as the earth itself; villagers, country folk, the manor household.

And of course, there were the Shahrizai, who were none of those things.

They were coming. The matter had been discussed at length. Joscelin, predictably, disliked the idea. Although he would never say it, betimes I think he would not mind if the province of Kusheth fell into the sea, taking every last member of House Shahrizai with it.

"I made a promise," Phèdre said to him. "Would you have me renege on it?"

He gritted his teeth, and I knew he was thinking about a diamond strung on a frayed velvet cord and a note reading, I keep my promises. "Unless her kin have lied, this has nothing to do with Melisande."

"It does," she said. "I promised to let Imriel make his own choices."

"Unto the point of folly?" Joscelin asked. Phèdre raised her brows at him, and he had the grace to look abashed. "All right," he grumbled. "But they're not bringing their own guards to be lodged at Montrève."

"They're not asking to," she said dryly. "It seems they have confidence in the ability of the Queen's Champion to ensure their safety."

It wasn't a real argument, though. They had made up their quarrel over the Longest Night, for which I was glad, having been the cause of it. When Joscelin looked mortified at the thought of defending the Shahrizai, Phèdre laughed and kissed him until he forgot his concerns, and all was well between them.

Afterward, she consulted Ysandre, that the arrangement might be made openly with no hint of intrigue. I daresay the Queen shared Joscelin's misgivings, but she had accepted the Shahrizais' oaths of loyalty, and there was little she could do without giving insult. So it was decided, and letters flew back and forth from the City of Elua to Kusheth, until all was agreed.

They would not come until midsummer, and I was just as glad. I wanted Montrève to myself for a while. I chafed my way through the long spring, awaiting word of Drustan's arrival. After the Cruarch of Alba had returned, we would be free to take our leave of the City. It seemed later than usual this year; although perhaps that was due to my own impatience.

At last, the red sails of his flagship were sighted, and the City made ready to receive him. Since their marriage, it has always been a joyous occasion. While that had not changed, there was a measure of reserve. Not among the D'Angeline commonfolk, who adored Drustan mab Necthana. They never forgot that he and his Cruithne, with the aid of the Dalriada, saved our nation in its direst hour, falling upon the forces of Waldemar Selig.

Among the peers of the realm it was different. They muttered about the line of succession in Alba, and the imbalance of power that might ensue. And they muttered about how to redress the inequity, and the line of succession here in Terre d'Ange. Although my thoughts were fixed on Montrève, I kept my ears open as we attended the procession, and I heard the muttering. Not a lot, but here and there it was evident.

Cruithne half-breeds.

That was the term that made me break into a cold sweat, for it was the one they used for Sidonie and Alais; especially Sidonie, for she was the Dauphine. I shouted and clapped and threw petals with the others as Drustan entered the gates, and wondered if she knew. I guessed that she did, and felt sorry for her. In some ways, perhaps, her lot was no easier than mine.

If Sidonie felt the disapproval, she never showed it. It was a piece of irony. When impetuous Alais flung herself on her father and Drustan caught her up with a smile, setting her on the pommel of his saddle, everyone cheered. How not? Though her features were pure Cruithne, she was a lovable child—and she was not the Queen's Heir. Sidonie, though... she was so much the mirror of her mother, from her upright

carriage to her clean-cut profile, her chin raised in cool defiance. And yet it earned her few cheers. The commonfolk liked her well enough, after a fashion. They remembered Ysandre's ride toward the walls of the City of Elua, when Percy de Somerville had sought to make it his own. They remembered how she faced down an entire army through sheer courage.

So did the peers, who muttered. Because Ysandre was pure-blooded D'Angeline, and Sidonie was not, and there were powerful people in several of the Great Houses of Terre d'Ange who mistrusted her for it, who despised the fact that the sacred bloodlines of Elua and his Companions had been rendered impure. Because some of them supported Percy de Somerville's goals, although they would never say it aloud in earshot of anyone loyal to the Queen.

I saw them glance my way, sometimes.

Not often, and not for long. The shadow of my mother's infamy hung over me. But I saw the speculation in their eyes, and I knew they were asking themselves, which is less tolerable? Melisande's son, or a Pictish half-breed?

Thus far, the answer yet favored Sidonie. After all, my mother's machinations nearly gave Terre d'Ange into the hands of Waldemar Selig. An alliance through marriage with Alba, even one that favored the Cruithne over time, was preferable to conquest by Skaldia. Still, I hated knowing anyone thought it.

It would help if Ysandre would promise Sidonie's hand in marriage to some pure-blooded young D'Angeline nobleman who could trace his lineage back in an unbroken line to Elua or one of his Companions. She wouldn't, though. It was politics, in part. It might silence the muttering, but those who disapproved were too few to pose any meaningful threat. There were too many favorable alliances to be made while the possibility yet dangled, and Sidonie was only thirteen. And too, it was idealism; Blessed Elua's precept, Love as thou wilt. Ysandre did not, I think, cling fast to the conviction that her daughters would make love-matches to equal her own. But she had every intention of allowing them the opportunity to do so, insofar as the pragmatic constraints of politics permitted.

I wished them luck; especially Alais, since it was hard to imagine that Sidonie would grow into the sort of woman apt to inspire true ardor. But perhaps that was true of her mother at that age.

For my part, I was glad to be well out of it.

We attended the welcoming festivities for the Cruarch at the Palace, the last of our courtly obligations. I didn't mind overmuch, as I was pleased to see Drustan. Since it was not a formal audience, he gave Phedre the kiss of greeting and hailed Joscelin as a brother. Me, he greeted as an equal, gripping my arm in a strong clasp. I was startled to realize we were of a height.

Drustan noted it, too. His teeth flashed in a grin, unexpectedly white in the mask of blue woad. "You've grown, young Prince."

"So I'm told," I said, feeling awkward. Somehow, it didn't seem right that I should be as tall as the Cruarch of Alba. But Drustan's presence was greater than his stature. One forgot it, as one forgot that his clubfoot makes him half a cripple.

"Don't know what to do with it yet, do you?" He laughed, patting my shoulder. "Never fear, you'll make sense of it."

"I hope so," I said, meaning it.

"You will, lad." There was an unexpected gentleness in his eyes; dark eyes, warm and compassionate, so like and unlike Sidonie's. "Never doubt it." Drustan turned to Phèdre. "Phèdre nó Delaunay, I bear greetings to you from Grainne mac Conor, and somewhat more."

"Oh?" Phèdre smiled, one of her small, inward-looking smiles. "How fares the Lady of the Dalriada?"

"Grainne is well, as ever." Drustan smiled back at her. For reasons unknown to me, Joscelin rolled his eyes. "She sends her affections. Also, she is minded to send her second son to be fostered in Terre d'Ange for a time. Ysandre has agreed to welcome him to the Palace. Still, it is in Grainne's thoughts that you might open your home to him. I have spoken to her of your household, and she is much intrigued."

"Her second son," Phèdre murmured. "Is he—"

"Quintilius Rousse's son," Drustan said, pronouncing the words with care. "So Grainne says, yes."

"Why us?" Joscelin asked bluntly. "Why not the Admiral's folk?"

Drustan turned his dark, masked gaze on him. They were not equals, not in a physical sense. Joscelin stood head and shoulders above the Cruarch of Alba. But Drustan shifted his weight onto his good leg and tilted his head, not in the least intimidated. He was accustomed to carrying the burden of rulership and all its attendant responsibilities. "Because you are two of the best people she has ever met, my brother," he said calmly. "That is Grainne's reasoning."

At that, Joscelin flushed.

"Also." Drustan's smile returned, crinkling his eyes. "Admiral Rousse has no family, only a fleet to command. It is impractical."

Phèdre gave me an inquiring look. I shrugged, feeling at once curious and dismayed. "As long as it's not this summer."

"No," Drustan agreed. "Not this summer, but perhaps next. Will you consider it?"

"Grainne's second son," Phèdre mused aloud. "How is he called?"

"Eamonn," Drustan said.

I felt the word drop like a stone into the pool of conversation. All of them looked at one another. I knew the stories. Eamonn mac Conor had been Grainne's twin brother; together, they were Lord and Lady of the Dalriada. He had died on the field of Troyes-le-Mont.

"Yes," Phèdre said. "Of course."

Although I chafed at it, I raised no word of protest. I knew that Phèdre carried a burden of guilt for his death. She was the Queen's ambassador in a desperate time, and it was she who convinced the Lord and Lady of the Dalriada to go to war. If fostering this second Eamonn would help alleviate it, I would suffer his presence.

"Well," Joscelin said philosophically. "At least he's likely to be less trouble than the Shahrizai."

Drustan chuckled. "Do not be certain of it."

Afterward, he and Phèdre spoke at greater length; mostly, I think, about Hyacinthe. The Master of the Straits was wed to Sibeal, Drustan's younger sister. They had a child—a girl, born over a year ago—and Sibeal carried another in her womb. It was a matter that could further complicate the issue of succession in Alba, although it had not done so yet. They had remained silent on the matter, and no one, Alban or D'Angeline, was likely to intrude on the Master of the Straits' private affairs. If Hyacinthe were to put his and Sibeal's daughter forward as the Alban heir... well. That was another matter. It would be hard to negotiate with a man who possesses arcane powers and single-handedly wards the safety of both our nations' shores.

But Phèdre did not think he would do so, ever, and she knew him better than anyone. And in truth, the greater question was whether or not he would train a successor.

Hyacinthe spent ten long years in bleak isolation learning his trade. The Straits had another Master, once; for eight hundred years, in fact. It was a curse that bound him to it—the curse of Rahab, Lord of the Deep, one of the One God's angels. The curse passed to Hyacinthe, but it was broken now. Phèdre broke it with the Name of God, compelling Rahab to release him. Hyacinthe was no longer condemned to his lonely isle, shackled to an immortality of decrepitude.

Still, such power was a fearsome burden, more fearsome than ruler-ship. I didn't know the Master of the Straits well, but I'd seen the awful strain of it in his eyes. No one knew, not even Phèdre, if Hyacinthe would see fit to pass it on to another, or let the knowledge die with him. I suspect even Hyacinthe does not yet know.

Sometimes I thought it would be best if it passed from the world forever. Power is a dangerous tool to wield. In the wrong hands, it is deadly. What I saw in Drujan, I can never forget.

Then I thought about Phèdre, and the day she spoke the Name of God.

It is a thing I will never forget. No one who saw it will; how Hyacinthe made the waters bear her weight, and she stood upon them before the terrible, bright presence and spoke the Sacred Word. Her, I would trust with almost any power on earth, but there are few people born capable of making the choices Phèdre has made.

There were no easy answers, and I was glad the matter is not mine to decide.

Indeed, as the days lengthened and we made ready to depart for Montrève, I felt the simpler burdens I carried lighten. I visited Alais, and promised to bring her a puppy, as I had forgotten to do last year. I said my good-byes to Eugenie and the rest of the household staff.

"Ah, lad!" Eugenie embraced me, then took me by the shoulders and shook me. "You needn't be so happy to leave."

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling a moment's flicker of guilt. "It's just—"

"I know what it is." She patted my cheek. "Go on, it will do you a world of good to get away from those nattering nobles and breathe fresh country air. Put a few pounds on that skinny frame of yours, and come back!"

I laughed. "I will, Eugenie."

It was a lighthearted trip, unlike the one that had brought us to the City. We travelled at our leisure, staying at inns along the way. Phèdre liked to sit in the common room and listen, taking the tenor of ordinary D'Angeline folk from all walks of life. Invariably, someone would recognize her. The scarlet mote of Kushiel's Dart made it hard to hide her identity, and Joscelin was not exactly inconspicuous with his Cassiline arms. Then there were songs and poems, and the wine would flow freely into the small hours of the night.

I wondered, sometimes, what it must be like to be thus beloved.

Make no mistake, I did not begrudge either of them, not for a single heartbeat. I knew, better than anyone, the price of their heroism. Daršanga nearly destroyed them both; nearly destroyed all of us. In the City, some envied them and accused them of false modesty. It was no such thing. If Phèdre accepted praise with a quiet smile, or Joscelin shook his head and demurred at telling the story of his duel against the Cassiline traitor-assassin, it was because they were mindful of the true story that lies beneath the poems; the blood and toil and sacrifice. Still, I wondered.

They were my stories, too; some of them. But there was scant heroism in my role. I was abducted and sold into slavery; I was rescued, and stowed away on my rescuers' ship. For the most part, I was baggage.

Not everyone is meant to be a hero.

I did stab a man once, on Phèdre's behalf. It was in Saba, on the isle of Kapporeth, on the very doorstep of the Temple of the Holiest of Holies. I spilled blood on sacred ground. The Sabaeans would have killed me for it. It was Phèdre who intervened. She offered herself in my stead, and they accepted it. I remember sunlight gleaming on the bronze blade, and turning my head to see the door of the temple opening, and the tongueless priest framed in the dark doorway, clad in a robe of white linen.

I cried out, and the Sabaeon captain stayed his hand. And Phèdre walked into the temple, and when she emerged, she held the Name of God, and the glory of it shone in her face.

I wondered, sometimes, what would have happened if the door had not opened. If I would have let it happen. If I would have had the courage and the swiftness to throw myself in front of the blade.

I wondered about a lot of things.

Well, that was what passed for lighthearted, at least for me. When we reached the borders of Montrève, I put such thoughts from my head. Remembering the lesson of the Longest Night, I gave myself over to rejoicing.

The estate of Montrève was beautiful. It lay upriver from the village and the manor was nestled in a green valley, surrounded by low mountains. The valley held gardens and a small olive grove. The lower slopes were terraced, and given over to chestnut orchards; the province of Siovale was famous for its chestnuts. A bit farther up, there was pasturage for the sheep that were Montrève's primary source of wealth, and a cluster of stone cots perched on a plateau for the shepherds who tended them.

Beyond that, the mountains were wild. Forests of spruce and oak grew there, and there were unexpected meadows filled with flowers. There was a spring-fed lake, round and perfect, that Joscelin and I found my first summer, and there were caves, too. Although Montrève was a small holding by some standards, it was large enough to contain secrets.

There was an escort to meet us. We had been spotted on the road, which was as it ought to be. Denis Friote, the oldest of Purnell and Richeline's clan, was leading them. And among them, to my surprise, was Charles, his younger brother.

"Charles!" I shouted his name.

"Imriel, hey!" He rode over to me, grinning. Leaning over in the saddle, he thumped my shoulder with his fist. "Well met, your highness. What have you been up to? You're skin and bone."

I thumped him back. "Nothing you'd understand, I reckon."

"Oh, aye, the secret doings of nobility." He nodded, brown curls bouncing on his brow, and ran his thumb over the hilt of his sword in a casual gesture. "I'm perishing with envy." He paused, eyeing the daggers at my belt. "Those are nice, though."

"These?" I asked carelessly, and saw Joscelin's head turn slightly, one corner of his mouth lifting in amusement. "They are, aren't they?" I added with haste. "So, you're riding with the guard now?"

"Sometimes." Charles shrugged, then burst out laughing. "Ah, Denis let me come, he knew I was pining after it. Otherwise, they say I've got to wait until next year. But it's good to see you, Imri."

"And you." I thumped him a second time, his shoulder solid and meaty under my fist. Charles, too, had grown in the past year. "How are you? How is the clan?" I paused. "Katherine, and the others?"

He grinned. "Come and find out."

Chapter Ten



We found Montrève in fine fettle, as always. The chestnuts were thriving, the high pastures were lush and green, the sheep grazed in placid good health, lambs gamboling at their side. Every surface and every item within the manor house had been dusted and polished and waxed to a fine gleam. The stables and the kennels and the mews were immaculate. All the accounts, as always, were in order.

And Katherine Friote was infuriating.

For a start, it was the way she hugged me. She ran into the front courtyard and flung both arms around me as I dismounted, crying, "Imriel!" I held her in return, breathing in the scent of her hair, like new-mown hay. "I'm so glad you're here," she whispered, her breath warm against my ear. "I've missed you."

"And you." My words came huskily.

Then she let me go, and looked me up and down. "Name of Elua!" she exclaimed. "You're thin as a lathe. What do you get up to in that City?"

I drew myself up. "Actually—"

With a friendly smile, Katherine thumped me on the shoulder. "It's good to see you, Imri," she said, then turned to give a nice curtsy to Phèdre and Joscelin. "Welcome, my lady, my lord," she said, and gazing past them, simpered. "Hello, Messire Gilot."

Gilot coughed and avoided my eye. "Demoiselle Friote."

And that was that.

During the days that followed, Phèdre gave me leave to run wild, sensing my need for freedom after the constraints of the City and court. As long as I remained within the generous boundaries of the area patrolled by Denis Friote and the guard, I was free to wander.

I spent most of my time with Charles. He and Katherine and I had become fast friends during my first summer at Montrève, being the closest in age. At thirteen, Katherine had been willing to spend hours in the mews, listening to Ronald Agout, the old falconer, or tussling with the puppies in the kennels. She still had a little white scar on one hand where a hound-bitch snapped at her.

But now she was sixteen, and a young woman. It was beneath her dignity to play children's games. This, Katherine made abundantly clear.

She regarded Charles with the amused condescension of an older sister. By virtue of my status, I warranted a measure of respect, but only a small one. It was not that I minded, exactly—one of the things I cherished about Montrève was that my status as a Prince of the Blood was held in light regard—but I wanted her to see me as more than an old playmate yet to grow up.

I wanted her to see me as... what?

Not a man, exactly; but not a boy, either. I wanted Katherine to look at me as someone worthy of regard in my own right. It didn't have to be the way she looked at Gilot, which was downright foolish, but... well, perhaps a little bit.

I told her the story of Joscelin's and my vigil on the Longest Night and my dramatic illness that followed it, but women have a pragmatic streak when it comes to such things. Katherine merely cast an acerbic eye over me and said, "Boys and their folly! I hope Lady Phèdre had his hide for it."

Charles, at least, was properly impressed.

We had measured ourselves against one another, standing back-to-back in the stables. I was the taller by a good two inches, though I daresay he outweighed me. I envied his solid frame, the breadth of his shoulders. Colts' Years, Joscelin had said, but Charles was as sturdy as a plowhorse.

"Ah, well." He shrugged when I complained of it. "It's hard work that does it. But you wouldn't know about that, would you, highness?"

I thought about the hours I spent drilling with Joscelin. "Oh, indeed? Would you care to spar a few rounds with the Queen's Champion, farm boy?"

"Swordplay and scholarship," Charles scoffed. "You want to speak of hard work, try clearing a pasture or chopping wood."

It made me think of Maslin in the orchard, attacking a pear tree with a warrior's skill. "All right," I said. "I will."

Charles eyed me as though I'd gone mad. "Why? You don't have to, Imri."

"So?" I said stubbornly. "I want to. Set me a chore, and I'll do it."

He eyed me for a minute longer, then grinned. "Swear it?"

I nodded. "I swear."

I had cause to regret it within a day. Charles' father, the seneschal, had set about a plan to expand the pasturage of Montrève in order to increase its flocks. By my oath, I was bound to help with the task.

It was backbreaking work. Most of it was done by smallholders; crofters willing to do the labor and pay a tithe from their proceeds to the lord or lady of the estate. But in Siovale, there is a long-standing tradition of the manor-folk and crofters working side by side to the betterment of all, carving out fresh portions of pasturage or arable land. Not all the peers, obviously; few of them deign to dirty their hands.

I did.

The first day, we cleared rocks. Not small ones, either, but great chunks of stone that must be dug out from the earth and carried to the verges of the new pasture, where they were used to build meandering stone fences to mark its boundaries. I sweated and swore and dug. I worried rocks loose from their deep beds, tugging at them until my nails bled, hearing my sinews crack as I wrenched them free. I carried them, staggering under the weight, to drop them on the mason's piles.

By the end of the first day, every fiber of my body was in agony.

Phèdre very nearly forbade me to continue. It was Joscelin who eyed me at the dinner-table, hunched in misery, and dissuaded her.

"It's his will," he said to her, raising his brows. "You did promise to let him make his own choices, did you not? Besides, he'll take no harm from honest work."

So I continued, laboring under the hot summer sun. Like the crofters, I threw off my shirt and labored bare-chested. Charles worked beside me, laughing and jesting. Together, all of us cleared the pasture of nearly all the stones small enough to carry. It took many days, but I grew hardened to the work. There was a certain satisfaction in seeing the land open to new growth, and watching the fence lengthen, stone by stone, foot by foot. When it was done, I thought surely we were finished, but Charles shook his head.

"Those have got to come out," he said judiciously, pointing at a pair of monstrously tall pine trees that jutted at an angle from the sloped ground. "That one and that one."

"Those?" I looked incredulously at him. "They're trees, Charles. Other pastures have trees. Can't the sheep graze around them?"

"Look." He led me uphill to the far side of one. "See how the ground is bulging and the roots are pulling loose? They grow shallow, you know. A hard rainfall or a strong wind, and they're ready to topple. Besides," he added, "where do you think the firewood that cooks your supper and warms your

bathwater comes from?"

I sighed. "So they come out?"

Charles grinned. "They come out. And then we chop."

Felling the trees was a spectacle unto itself. The work was undertaken by an expert woodsman, and Charles and I were ordered to stand well clear of the site. Joscelin came, too. We all watched as the woodsman wielded his axe, swift and deliberate. It cut through the air, thunking deep into the wood, over and over. Chips flew fast and furious, and yet the woodsman moved with calm efficiency, not a single motion wasted.

"Could you do that?" I asked Joscelin.

"Me?" He shook his head, amused. "A sword's not an axe, Imri. Strange, though. I was just minded of Waldemar Selig."

"Selig?" I asked. "Why?"

Joscelin nodded at the woodsman. "Selig wielded a sword the way he does an axe. As though he were born to do it."

"Was he the best swordsman you ever saw, Joscelin?" Charles asked eagerly. "Other than you, I mean?"

"On the field of battle, yes, he was one of them." Joscelin was quiet a moment, and I knew he must be thinking about his duel against a fellow Cassiline. "Not the best, though, in the end."

"Isidore d'Aiglemort," I murmured.

"D'Aiglemort," Joscelin agreed. "He was like that, too. Born to it."

"He wasn't better than you, though," Charles said in stubborn defense. "No one is."

"Selig was." Joscelin smiled gently at him. "He beat me the first time we crossed blades. And Isidore d'Aiglemort defeated him. Who can say?"

"I can," I said. "You're the one left alive."

Joscelin glanced at me, thoughtful. "True," he said. "There is that."

The woodsman stepped away from the tree and pointed downhill, then stepped back to the mighty trunk. Once, twice more his axe bit into the wood. With a groaning creak, the tree toppled. It fell exactly where he had pointed, with a massive and resounding thud that shook the earth. Charles and I shouted, jumping about with unrestrained glee. Even Joscelin grinned like a boy at the sight. The woodsman allowed himself a small nod of satisfaction, then shouldered his axe and trudged toward the second tree.

It came down as handily as the first, though there was little cause for glee afterward as we set about the hard labor of removing the felled trees. Charles and I were given hatchets and charged with the task of trimming large branches to be used as rollers. I chopped away at the springy branches, thinking about the woodsman, Selig and d'Aiglemort; and Maslin, too. That was part of what I had envied in him—the effortless ease, the sense that he had been born to the blade, even if it was a pruning hook.

And I thought about Joscelin, too. His skill was harder-won. He had a gift for it—it was impossible to believe otherwise—but it was years of training and discipline that had made him what he was, instilling it in every muscle and sinew.

When the field was clear, I resolved, I would practice harder. For now, I would apply myself to this task as though it were a sword-bout. With the sun beating down on my bare back, I bent to the work, grasping branches, chopping and hacking with as much precision as I could muster, until I lost myself in the rhythm of it.

"Hey," Charles said, surprised, glancing at the pile of smooth shafts I had accumulated. "Nice work, your highness!"

I grinned at him. "A fair match for you, farm boy."

The task didn't end there. We moved one of the huge trunks that day, lashing it with a dozen ropes and hauling it in fits and starts over the rollers, pausing every few yards to move the shafts. It was grueling work, but we managed to get it into the manor's wood-yard before the day's end. There it lay, hulking.

"We chop?" I asked Charles dubiously.

He clapped my shoulder. "Tomorrow. Let's go sluice off."

Montrève's well was in the courtyard. It was a deep well and gave good water, clean and icy cold. Both of us were filthy; sweat-drenched and stuck all over with bits of pine bark and needles, our skin scraped and bruised, our hands stinging from the rope's burn. As the lowering sun cast a warm honey-colored glow over the courtyard, Charles drew the first bucket.

"Ready?" he asked, and without waiting, hurled the contents at me.

"Charles!"

I heard Katherine's voice at the same moment the water struck, and gritted my teeth against a gasp of shock. When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me.

"It's all right," I said. "We were working." I felt foolish, half-clad, runnels of cold water streaming over my bare skin and soaking my breeches.

"So I see," Katherine murmured. She raised the kettle she held. "May I?"

"I'll get it for you." Glad to have something to do, I took the bucket from Charles and lowered it. The crank seemed to turn more easily these days. My sodden hair dripped into my eyes, and I tossed it back as I straightened, lifting the refilled bucket from its hook. "Here," I said, pouring it carefully into her kettle.

A little smile played over Katherine's lips. "Thank you, Imriel."

"You're welcome." I watched her go.

"Elua's Balls!" Charles exhaled explosively. "Did you see the way she looked at you?" He punched my shoulder. "Watch out, or she'll be lying in ambush for you, highness."

I glanced at him. "You're not serious."

"Oh, aye." He grinned at me, pine bark stuck in his curly hair. "I told you hard labor would put meat on your bones." His grin faded, eyes turning serious. "Whatever you do, just don't hurt her, Imri. She's my sister, and I'd have to kill you for it."

"I wouldn't," I said automatically. "I would never."

"You'd better not." Charles refilled the bucket and handed it to me. "Here, my turn."

In the morning, nothing had changed. Using a double-handled saw, Charles and I set about the task of cutting the monster log into manageable sections. These we split into firewood with axes and wedges. It was more grueling work, resulting in new blisters and a fresh set of aching muscles, and once it was done, the second log awaited.

And yet, things were different.

It took several more days to complete the work of clearing the field. To my vast disbelief, we even pulled the stumps, which made hauling the logs look easy. The Siovalese prided themselves on their ingenuity and despised waste. The tough, gnarled wood of the roots was slow-burning, ideal for smoking chestnuts.

When it was done, I felt different. It was true, the long hours of solid labor—and the ravenous appetite it had given me—had given me a measure of strength. For the first time in almost a year, I felt at ease in my own body. I even grew to relish the lassitude and deep muscle-ache of fatigue.

It was more than that, though. It was a sense of pride and accomplishment, and a truer grasp of the workings of the estate, the division of labor and profit that made it all function to sustain its folk. I found myself inexplicably interested in knowing.

And then, too, there was Katherine.

Once the field was cleared, Phèdre suggested mildly that I might resume my studies, at least for a portion of each day. For as long as I had summered at Montrève, Phèdre had always welcomed the Friotes—and indeed, any of the crofters' children as might be interested—to attend lessons at the manor.

It was always different, depending on the day. There was a Siovalese scholar in the village who was well-versed in the basic elements of grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, and geometry, and she often came. Other times, it was a master musician, or an astronomer, or an engineer. Those times were more interesting, although I did enjoy the study of logic.

The best times were when Phèdre played tutor.

She taught us what Delaunay had taught her—the art of covertcy. One day, when Charles and Katherine and I were all in attendance, she blindfolded all of us and bid us wander the manor estate for an hour's time. We were to report back on all we had observed while deprived of sight, including each other's doings.

I will own, I had an advantage. I had long since memorized the layout of the manor house and the surrounding area—it was the sort of memory game that Phèdre and I played often. And I had more practice than the others with moving in stealth. There is a certain trick to it, walking on the balls of one's

feet.

Also, I knew them.

I knew Charles would make a beeline to spy on the maidservants in the laundry. Katherine. . . Katherine, I thought, would make for the gardens.

I made an audible exit toward the front of the manor, then changed course soundlessly, heading for the kitchen. There I hovered in the doorway, listening and sniffing the air. I marked the rattle and clamor of luncheon dishes being scrubbed in a pan. It was too early for the aromas of dinner cooking, but I could smell sage and onion. I could hear the damp thud, slap, and roll of dough being kneaded, and the steady sound of a knife chopping. Root vegetables, I thought; carrots or turnips.

"One of her ladyship's games, is it?" Although I couldn't see her, Richeline's voice held a smile. "Are my youngest at it as well?"

"It is and they are," I said, edging my way through the kitchen, trying not to bump into anyone. On the far side, there was a door onto the herb garden. "You won't tell them you saw me, will you?"

Richeline laughed. "Go on, and stay out of my kitchen! And mind you don't trample my herbs."

Outside, I stood for a moment, basking, turning my blindfolded face toward the hot sun. The rear courtyard of Montrève was a delightful place, even unseen. I knew its configuration by heart. Richeline's herb gardens nestled comfortably against the manor walls.

Beyond was the well, and the laid-slate square where Joscelin and I often sparred. Flower gardens surrounded the area, bringing forth a profusion of blooms in every season. There were footpaths through them, set with simple stones.

I picked my way to the square, mindful of Richeline's herbs. Once I felt smooth slate beneath the soles of my boots, I stood and listened. It was easy to detect Katherine. Her skirts rustled. I heard her exhale softly as they caught on a flowering shrub, and the rasp of fabric as she tugged them loose.

Smiling to myself, I set out on a course to intercept her.

Silent and stealthy, I removed my boots. It was easier to move quietly in bare feet, and I could feel my way unerringly. I crossed the slate courtyard and plunged into the gardens, feeling the way along the footpath with my toes and listening to her passage. Katherine was making for the stone bench in the rose arbor. I placed myself in her way, and listened to her approach.

With outstretched hands, she blundered into me, and gasped.

"Katherine." I grinned beneath my blindfold. "It's me."

"Imriel!" She pounded my chest with one soft fist, then laid it flat against me. "How did you get here?"

"Through the kitchen." The pressure of her touch was unbearably sweet. All around us, the heady mingled scents of a dozen species of flowers perfumed the air. I inhaled, my chest rising under her hand. "I guessed you'd come here."

"I can feel your heart beating." Like her mother's—and yet not like, not at all—Katherine's voice held a

smile. "It beats fast."

"It does for you." The words seemed impossibly daring, but there they were, emerging from my mouth, sounding far more confident than I felt. Somehow, with both of us locked into our own private darkneses, it was easier.

Katherine's outspread fingers curved, the tips digging into my linen shirt, bunching the fabric. "You're a sweet boy," she whispered, and I would have taken offense at the words, except her tone said somewhat altogether different. I sensed her rise onto her toes. There, blindfolded and shrouded in darkness in the sun-shot beauty of the garden, I felt her soft lips touch mine in a brief, fleeting kiss.

I drew a sharp breath.

A world of wanting opened like an abyss beneath my feet.

Katherine laughed, dancing away from me. And in that moment, I understood better how swiftly games may change, how quickly power shifts from one to another in the games that men and women play with one another.

"So," she said, her voice lilting. "We are here, you and I. Where is Charles?"

I breathed deeply, willing my pulse to subside. "The laundry," I said, sounding harsh to my own ears. "That's where he will have gone."

"Then let's follow him," Katherine said.

We did, and found him there, crouching in a hallway, listening to the maidservants stirring the vats with their paddles, laughing and jesting, the air moist and warm, fragrant with the scent of soap. What he imagined in his private darkness, I can only guess.

Afterward, there seemed no point in continuing, so we peeled off our blindfolds and tramped back to Phèdre's study to make our reports. She listened to them with a bemused look; especially to Charles, who was red-faced and stammering. I made a better job of it—I was at least able to hazard a guess regarding our dinner menu—but I still felt the unexpected thrill of Katherine's lips touching mine, and Phèdre was not easily misled.

"Well," she said when we had finished. "Next time, perhaps, I'll seek a less... distracting... game."

I felt myself flush to the roots of my hair.

Phèdre glanced at me. "After all," she said, "the Shahrizai will be here in a week's time, Imriel. And if you think this a distraction..." She shook her head, and the expression on her lovely face hovered between mirth and rue. "Blessed Elua have mercy on us."

Chapter Eleven



It was raining the day the Shahrizai arrived. Not a hard rain, but a gentle one; scarce more than a dense mist. The Montrèvan border patrol spotted them on the road and gave them an escort, sending a single rider to the manor to report. We turned out to meet them in the courtyard.

Three were coming: Mavros, who was two years my elder; Roshana, a year older than me; and Baptiste, who was a year younger. I was not yet entirely clear on the exact nature of their kinship to me, save that they were cousins. House Shahrizai was clannish, and the ties that bound it were intricate and complex.

As if to fulfill Joscelin's anxieties, they came with an entourage—armed retainers clad in the black-and-gold livery of the House, surrounded by Denis Friote and the Montrèvan guard, who looked uneasy at it.

My young cousins showed no evidence of discomfort. They rode bare-headed astride their richly caparisoned horses, comfortable in the saddle, chatting with one another as they approached. Raindrops clung like diamonds to their blue-black hair. Mavros and Baptiste wore theirs in a myriad of braids; Roshana's hung free, loose and rippling.

Joscelin grimaced as they entered the courtyard.

"Comtesse de Montrève!" Mavros saluted Phèdre from the saddle, then dismounted gracefully and accorded her a deep bow. The others followed suit. "Lady Phèdre," he said, rising, "we are grateful for your hospitality."

"Montrève welcomes the Shahrizai," Phèdre said, smiling.

"Lord Joscelin." Mavros turned to him, inclining his head in a gesture of respect. "To you, too, we give our thanks. And rest assured, our men-at-arms do but guarantee our safety in the passage. They will depart anon, and return for us in a month's time."

I think Joscelin very nearly rolled his eyes; and yet it was courteously done. He gave his Cassiline bow in return, fluid and precise. "Your men are welcome to pass the evening here, Lord Shahrizai. There is ample room in the guardhouse."

"My thanks, Messire Cassiline, but we will not strain your hospitality." Mavros turned toward me. "And you, cousin!" He strode forward, then paused to deliver an elaborate courtier's bow. "Your highness, I should say."

"Imriel," I said. "Just Imriel, here."

"Imriel, then." Mavros grinned as he straightened, his teeth flashing white in the muted daylight. Our eyes met on a level. I had grown since we had met in the Hall of Games. He reached out to clasp my forearm in a strong grip. "Mayhap I might aspire to Imri, one day?"

I returned his grip with more strength than he expected, enough to make him wince. "Mayhap, cousin."

Mavros laughed with unabashed delight. "Ah, well, I'm pleased to see you in excellent health! You remember Roshana and Baptiste?"

"Cousin Imriel." Roshana's voice was melodious. Though I seek to avoid memories of my mother, that is one thing I have never forgotten—her voice, as sweet as strong honey. When I was a child of eight,

before I knew aught of who or what I was, I had loved her for it. Before I could flinch, Roshana stepped forward. "Well met, once more," she said, giving me the kiss of greeting as though we were both adults. Her lips, brushing mine, were soft and full.

Two kisses in as many weeks. I glanced toward Katherine, who was near the entrance to the manor. She was staring, wide-eyed. I sensed, without fully knowing why, that the nature of the game had shifted once more. Charles, standing beside her, glowered.

"Well met, indeed!" I laughed, extending my hand to the third member of the party. "Baptiste, is it?"

"Aye, cousin!" The youngest Shahrizai nodded exuberantly, braids flying. He clasped my hand with boyish goodwill, his face alight with eagerness. "So," he said cheerfully. "What do you do for fun here?"

Over the course of the days to follow, Baptiste's question was answered. For the most part, we roamed and hunted, spending hours afield. I had feared the Shahrizai would disdain the pleasures of the countryside. I had been wrong. Kusheth is a harsh land, and they understand vigorous pleasures. There was nothing soft about my Shahrizai kin.

They were skilled.

They were skilled, and they charmed the folk of Montrève with their skills. Not Phèdre, no, who beheld them with an amused tolerance—and of a surety, not Joscelin. But the others, yes. They charmed the manor-folk with unfailing courtesy, and Richeline conceived a particular fondness for high-spirited young Baptiste. Within days, they charmed most of the men-at-arms; even Ti-Philippe, who had been almost as dubious as Joscelin about their arrival. They charmed Katherine and Charles, who regarded them with reluctant fascination.

They charmed the old falconer Ronald Agout, and Artus Labbé, the kennel-master. The hounds of Montrève were a distinct breed; wolfhounds, they were called in Siovale, although they will hunt almost any game. Our dogs hail from Verreuil. Joscelin's brother Luc sent one to us my first summer here, a pregnant hound-bitch ready to whelp. Since then, her offspring have stood us in good stead, interbreeding with other Siovalese wolfhounds.

They were loyal dogs, majestic and fearless. Betimes, when we rode out with them, we would pass one of the shepherds in the hills. They kept a different breed of dog; tawny-haired herders, small and tireless, with quizzical faces. It made me smile to see the shepherds' little dogs stare after the lordly, pacing wolfhounds, wondering if they posed a threat and what in the world could be done about it if they did.

Seeing the Shahrizai in Montrève was similar.

They seemed a breed unto themselves. It was something beyond the strong familial resemblance; I, who looked much the same, didn't have it. It was in the way that they moved through the world at their own pace. It was in the way they seemed to share a deep private jest among them, one that made life's pleasures sweeter. It was in the aura of danger that clung to them—not menace, no, but somewhat different.

It wasn't something I could readily identify. In the end, I asked Mavros about it.

We were hunting in the high meadows, coursing hares and other small game. He smiled at the question and did not answer, watching Baptiste struggle with a goshawk's tangled jesses.

"Should we help him?" I asked at length.

He shook his head. "Roshana will do it," he said. "She's neat-handed." He turned his intent gaze on me. "Do you remember what I asked you in the Hall of Games?"

In the bright sunlight, I felt my throat tighten. "You asked if I had desires I fear."

Mavros nodded. "Everyone does, Imriel. You, I suspect, more than most. You're one of us, Kushiel's scion. But after what befell you, well..." He paused. "The difference is, among the Shahrizai, we're taught to gaze upon them without fear."

"Why?" My voice was blunt.

"Because Blessed Elua bid us to," he said simply. "Love as thou wilt. We do. And betimes it makes others... uneasy... because in so doing, we hold up a dark mirror that reflects their own desires."

"To hurt people?" I shuddered, thinking of the zenana. "But I don't, Mavros. Not anyone, not ever."

"No?" He smiled, leaning over in the saddle. "Take my hand."

I did, and felt his clasp tighten. Mavros bore down hard, exerting a painful pressure on the web of flesh betwixt my thumb and forefinger. His mocking gaze dared me to retaliate. I bared my teeth in an involuntary grin, squeezing back. My stint of hard labor stood me in good stead. I burrowed into his flesh with the ball of my thumb and squeezed his knuckles until I could almost hear the small bones grinding.

We swayed in our saddles together, locked in foolish combat.

"See?" Mavros gasped. He laughed, disengaging, and shook out his hand, eyeing it ruefully. "Ah, Imriel! It's a part of you. And there's pleasure in it, isn't there?"

Across the meadow, Baptiste crowed in triumph as Roshana succeeded in untangling the goshawk's jesses. At the same moment, one of the wolfhounds flushed a ptarmigan, nosing the air in vague, dignified perplexity as the bird took flight. The goshawk burst from Baptiste's fist in a feathered blur, striking hard and fast, landing in a tumble.

"It's not the same," I said eventually.

"No?" he asked. "How does it differ?"

How indeed? It was a game, a moment's challenge, one we entered willingly. How, truly, did that differ from love-play that tested the boundaries between pleasure and pain? Since I could not say, I asked a question instead. "You told me there were reasons for it," I said. "That Kushiel was merciful."

"There are." Mavros grimaced, massaging his hand. "And he is."

I watched Baptiste swing the lure, calling the goshawk off her quarry. He managed it nicely. The disinterested hounds ranged farther afield, seeking prey of their own. "Tell me more," I said. "I want to understand."

"Imriel." Mavros sighed "Ah, Imri! How can I explain it to you? It is purging, Kushiel's gift. In the loss of self, there is expiation, and grace. Like a bright fire, it purges all, and makes everything new. It is a gift,

and it is ours to give. And to receive, betimes. All of us will know it at least once, that we might better understand Kushiel's gift."

I ignored him for a moment, whistling for the hounds. They came, loping and obedient, jaws parted and tongues lolling. My horse snorted through its nostrils as they crowded around. I dug into my game-bag, quartering one of the hares they had caught earlier, tossing bits to them.

"It's not enough," I said tersely.

"No?" Mavros smiled. "What does Phèdre say?"

I glared at him, my heart filled with sudden fury. "You know nothing of her!"

"No." He swallowed then, hard. "Forgive me, I do not. Once again, I have overstepped my bounds, Imriel." He was silent for a moment, thinking. "I only want you to understand. What you are... there is beauty and majesty in it. But perhaps..." He glanced across the meadow. "Perhaps it is better if I let Roshana explain."

We spoke no more of it that day, and for several days afterward.

They were sensitive to such things, the Shahrizai, and capable of great delicacy. I knew why. It was what I had experienced with Maslin in Lombelon when it seemed I stood outside myself and saw into him—they saw the fault-lines in my soul, my flaws and weaknesses, and trod gently near them.

For a time, at least.

And that, I thought, was what truly made them dangerous. It was a comfort to know that my kin were capable of kindness, and not necessarily wont to exploit Kushiel's gift for personal gain or vaunting ambition. But they saw too much, and they were drawn to what they saw. In time, Mavros—or perhaps Roshana—would prick me once more where I was sore.

In the meanwhile, we spoke of less consequential matters.

I learned a great deal of my heritage. House Shahrizai was the oldest family in Kusheth; one of the oldest, indeed, in Terre d'Ange. Their holdings were extensive, lying on both coasts of the province. For all that, theirs is not the sovereign duchy in Kusheth—that falls to Quincel de Morhban, who holds the Pointe d'Oest. To hear Mavros speak, it was by choice; although I didn't wholly believe him. I suspect it has long served the Crown's interest to keep House Shahrizai in check. They were powerful and numerous enough to be a threat, if they chose.

But it was true that they were a strange and insular clan in their own way. Cousins often wed within the family, and they held their own traditions. Other than the ruling Duc de Shahrizai, they did not use land-titles among themselves—only the Shahrizai name, as though it superseded any holdings. And they were fearsomely loyal to one another.

Mavros claimed that my mother acted without her House's blessing or knowledge. Whether or not it is true, I cannot say, but he believed it to be so. He thought she did so in order to protect the Shahrizai, should matters go awry. Perhaps he was even right. They held her in a strange mix of awe and... I did not even know a word for it. Regret, perhaps?

"I wish I had known her," Baptiste announced when we spoke of her late one evening, sitting in the

manor's great room. "I do, truly."

Roshana, who was unbraiding his hair, smiled quietly. "She was dangerous to know, my heart. Even for family."

It was a cardinal sin among them, to endanger the well-being of the family; and yet their greatest disdain was reserved for Marmion Shahrizai, who accidentally caused the death of his sister Persia. It was she who aided my mother in escaping from Troyes-le-Monte, loyal to the end.

Roshana spoke truly; my mother was dangerous to know.

"Why did she do it?" I asked my cousins that night. "Why did she do what she did?"

They exchanged glances and shrugs. There was a moment of silence, broken only by the soft sound of Roshana running a boar-bristle brush through Baptiste's unbound hair.

"Did she never tell you?" Mavros asked me.

"No," I said, and thought of Phèdre seated behind a pile of unsealed letters, looking pain-bruised and weary. I was abashed. "I don't know. She sent... she used to send letters, before she vanished. But I never read them."

"I would!" Baptiste raised his head, an eager light in his eyes.

"Hush, my heart." Roshana stroked his cheek, until he subsided under her touch. "Imriel must make his own choices." She set about the work of rebraiding his hair. They were half-siblings, both of them born to my mother's first cousin, Fanchone. That much I had learned. Mavros was the youngest son of Sacriphant, who was my mother's uncle. "Do you still have the letters?" she asked me.

I glanced involuntarily toward Phèdre's study. It was there, somewhere, the coffer containing every letter my mother had written to me. Phèdre hadn't spoken of it since my mother vanished, but she always travelled with it. She still believed I would want them one day. "Yes," I said. "I have them."

"Well, then." Roshana smiled. "Mayhap they hold the answer."

"Mayhap," I muttered. "Her answer." I watched her deft fingers fly, the miniature braids taking shape beneath them. Baptiste had his eyes half-closed, luxuriating under her touch. If he was a cat, he would have purred. "Why do you do that?" I asked. "Why only to the men?"

"This?" Her smile deepened. "It teaches patience, cousin. It is a lesson all men need to learn." Roshana ran one finger along Baptiste's nape, making him shiver. "And for us, it improves dexterity," she added, a note of mischief in her tone.

"He's your brother!" I exclaimed, half-horrified.

Mavros chuckled.

"Oh, aye." Roshana laughed softly. "We're not meant for one another. Still, we may learn from the game. And who knows who will reap the benefit of it? Such is the purpose of such games." She glanced sidelong, sensing a presence, and somewhat in her voice shifted toward composed politeness. "Is it not so, my lady?"

Standing in the doorway, Phèdre regarded her mildly. "Indeed, so they say in the Night Court. I did not know they said it in Kusheth."

"Ah, we Shahrizai are adepts after our own fashion, my lady." Mavros, sprawling on a sheepskin rug, propped himself on his elbows and flashed a lazy white grin. "Surely, no one would deny we pay Naamah her due and honor her to the fullest."

Phèdre smiled despite herself. "Surely not," she said. "Imriel, 'tis late, and I've dismissed the household. Will you be sure to snuff the lamps?"

"Yes, of course." I found myself on my feet. It was still disconcerting to look down at her. I laid my hands on Phèdre's shoulders. "Thank you," I said. "Don't worry, all is well here. These are things I need to understand, no more."

"I know, love." There was a shadow of sorrow in her gaze. She touched my cheek gently. "Good night to you. I'll see you anon."

When she had gone, Mavros flopped back down on the rug, blowing out his breath. "Name of Elua!" he sighed, folding his arms under his head. "Kushiel's Chosen, alive and in the flesh. Surely, Imri, you must have wondered—"

Roshana made a warning sound.

"No," I said. "And don't. Just... don't."

Mavros blinked at me, his eyelashes long and sooty. "Ah, but surely..."

There was a high-pitched ringing sound in my head. I hunched my shoulders against it, tensing. Memories haunted me; the pervasive stench of stagnant water in the zenana, the searing odor of my own flesh. Phèdre's voice, aboard a ship bound for La Serenissima, where she granted my deepest wish, warning me that it carried a danger.

You've Kushiel's blood in your own veins. One day, you will know it.

"No," I said firmly. "Never."

"No?" Mavros sounded disappointed. He closed his eyes. "I do," he murmured. "I cannot help it. I wonder and wonder."

I glanced toward Roshana for aid, but she averted her head, concentrating on Baptiste's braids. The youngest of my Shahrizai kin was oblivious, lost in the pleasure of her grooming. "I wish you wouldn't, cousin," I said to Mavros, hearing a note of despair in my voice. "Please. I truly wish you wouldn't."

"I know." His eyes opened, slitted. He regarded me through his lashes. "But it is who I am. I cannot help it. And it is who you are, cousin."

Another voice swam to the surface of my memory, accompanied by a gust of frosty air and the image of stars, cold and distant, glittering above the Temple of Elua, where the old priest had spoken of my fate.

What you make of it is yours to choose.

"You don't know me," I said, my voice trembling. "What I am. Who I am."

"Do you?" he asked.

"Mavros." Roshana spoke his name like a command. He turned his head and stared at her. "Let him be."

"I'm only—"

She shook her head at him.

"Oh, all right." With a single motion, he unfolded himself from the floor and stood upright. "I'll take myself off to bed, then, since it seems I'm not fit for pleasant company this evening."

"You would be if you'd stop baiting me," I said.

"Don't be angry at me, cousin." Mavros gave me the disarming smile he used to charm kitchen-maids and stable-lads. "I'm only trying to help." When I made no reply, his smile faded, replaced by something deep and wondering. "What did they do to you in that place, Imriel?" he asked, genuinely curious. "What did they do to make you so afraid of what you are?"

I had never told him any of it; I have never told anyone all of it, except for Phèdre.

"You don't want to know," I said.

"I do, though." He touched my arm. "We understand these things."

Ill thoughts, ill words, ill deeds.

"No," I said gently, no longer mad at him. "You think that you do, but believe me, Mavros, you don't. Not these."

After a moment, he nodded. "If you ever want to speak of it, I've a willing ear."

When he had gone, I sat down and watched Roshana's deft hands at work. There was something soothing in the rhythmic motion of it. Baptiste had fallen into a peaceful doze, his half-braided head drooping, lips parted. The sight made me smile.

"Patience, is it?" I asked Roshana.

"Well." She smiled back at me. "Patience, like love, takes many forms."

Chapter Twelve



Although I had made peace with Mavros, his words made me restless.

In truth, the Shahrizai themselves made me restless. To their credit, they had been perfectly well-behaved during their time at Montrève. What I had expected, I cannot say—perhaps, in the recesses of my mind, I half feared there would be some rampant manifestation of orgiastic behavior, or at the least, that I would find Mavros doing somewhat unspeakable to a chambermaid in a dark stairwell.

But no; although they flirted and charmed, they kept their behavior within the bounds of propriety. And yet it was there. It was present in the careless sensuality with which they interacted with one another, in the sense of desire simmering beneath the skin, predatory and... well, patient. Even in young Baptiste, it was there.

To gain a respite from it, I went to visit Phèdre in her study, where I found her reading through a pile of correspondence. A courier had come from the City, bearing a packet of missives which had arrived for her there. I stood in the open doorway, watching her read, her face alight with pleasure.

"Imri." She noticed me and beckoned. "Come in, love."

"I won't trouble you?" I asked. I had not seen her much; I had been busy with my cousins, and I thought she was merely being generous in giving me leave to spend time with them. After Mavros' words... I was not so certain.

Phèdre smiled. "Never. Where are our guests?"

"Ti-Philippe and Hugues are escorting them to the village. Roshana had a fancy to see it." Entering the study, I seated myself on the floor beside her chair. "Who's the letter from?"

"Nicola L'Envers," she said. "She's coming to the City to spend the winter at Court this year, with her younger son Raul."

I made a noncommittal sound. I knew the name well enough; she was a kinswoman of the Queen on her mother's side. She was wed to an Aragonian nobleman, and her influence there had been instrumental in aiding Phèdre and Joscelin in tracking down the Carthaginian slavers who had kidnapped me. I also knew she had been one of Phèdre's favorite patrons.

"What is it?" Phèdre stroked my hair with cool fingers. "Trouble with the Shahrizai?"

"No." I leaned against her chair and closed my eyes. For a moment, I could pretend I was a child again. After Daršanga, I used to wish Phèdre was my mother, but I always knew it was impossible. She wasn't. She had saved my life, and I would lay my own down for hers in a heartbeat, but she was not my mother.

"What, then?"

Reluctantly, I raised my head and met her gaze. Her eyes were dark and lustrous, the scarlet mote vivid against the iris. A slight line of concern was etched between her winged brows; otherwise, her skin was creamy and flawless. In Terre d'Ange, one would say Phèdre was in the full summer of her beauty—past spring's fresh charms, not yet touched by the sere frost of autumn.

"Nothing," I said. "I've missed you, that's all." I hesitated. "Have you been avoiding the lot of us?"

"A little bit." Her face held a look of candor. "I thought it would be easier for you."

Mavros' words haunted me. I wonder and wonder. I looked away. "Why? Do you... think about

them?"

"Your cousins?" Phèdre sounded surprised. "Not at their age!" She laughed. "I do have some measure of self-control, you know."

"Mavros is seventeen," I said.

"Yes, with a head full of a seventeen-year-old's thoughts, and a belly full of a seventeen-year-old's desires." She touched my cheek. "I know. He cannot help it, and the others are not far behind him. That's why I thought it would be easier this way."

"It scares me," I murmured. "I don't want... I don't want things to change."

"Ah, love. Life is full of change. Not all of it is bad." Phèdre tugged a lock of my hair, making me look at her once more. "Imriel no Montrève, you have a heart as true as an arrow's flight, and courage enough for ten. Whatever manner of man you will become, it will be a worthy and good one. Believe me, love, there is nothing in you that you need fear."

"There is, though," I whispered. "No." She shook her head. "Only shadows." "How can you be so sure?" I said.

Phèdre raised her brows. "You question the word of one who knows the Name of God?"

It made me laugh, as she intended. We did not jest about such matters; indeed, we seldom spoke of them, for they ran too deep for speech. But today, somehow, it was needful and right, reminding me of what we had shared together.

Rising, I stooped to kiss her cheek. "Thank you." Nothing had changed; and yet I felt better. I went to the kennels and spent time talking with Arms Labbé. He had helped me choose the pick of the spring's litter for Alais, a bitch-pup with lively brown eyes and a curious disposition. We discussed the finer points of training dogs. It pleased me to think of the wolfhound pup at Court, where lap-dogs were the order of the day. When this one was full-grown, she would stand nearly shoulder-height to Alais. I had brought an old chemise of Alais' with me, that the pup might get to know her scent.

Afterward, I sought out Joscelin and asked him to spar with me, which he did willingly.

I didn't bother to ask if he had been avoiding us; I knew full well that he had. If danger threatened, he would honor his vow. He was Phèdre's consort and the Queen's Champion; he would protect and serve. But so long as it did not, he would absent himself insofar as courtesy allowed. Out of consideration to me, he didn't flaunt his antipathy to the Shahrizai; yet he couldn't altogether hide it, either.

We had a good bout, one that left me dripping with sweat. First with the wooden daggers, then with the swords. I was handier with the latter. Something about the singularity of the weapon appealed to me. It cleared my mind, and I could perceive more acutely the spheres of defense and opposition in which we moved, back and forth, to and fro.

Somewhere in the middle of the bout, I heard the sound of the Shahrizai party returning. They were in high spirits. There was laughter and chatter, and I could hear Charles' and Katherine's voices among them. It gave me an unexpected pang of envy. I pushed it aside, focusing on my swordplay.

It worked, until Roshana and Katherine came into the garden to watch us.

I saw Joscelin's gaze flicker sideways, and missed a chance to attack him. I began to lower my wooden blade to greet the girls, and he pressed me harder, forcing me into a retreating defense. Anger stirred in me, and I fought back, circling around to get at his left side.

"You're right," Roshana whispered behind me. "He is quite good!"

That did it.

I put a foot wrong and missed a parry. Joscelin's blade battered it aside, sweeping inside my guard to score a gouge over my right eyebrow.

"Imri!" Katherine said in alarm.

Joscelin winced. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I clapped one hand over the gouge and glared at him. "I'm fine."

"Let me see." He pried my hand away. "Ah, you will be, just wash it well." There was a hint of amusement in the curve of his mouth. "Sorry, love." He turned, then, and gave his Cassiline bow. "Ladies."

I sat down on one of the stone benches. Katherine hurried to the well and drew a bucket, soaking a handkerchief, then set about dabbing my bleeding graze. Roshana watched Joscelin stride toward the manor house.

"He doesn't like us, does he?" she murmured.

"It's not your fault." I cleared my throat. Katherine was bending over me, the tops of her breasts swelling against the bodice of her gown.

I snatched the handkerchief from her, clamping it to my brow. "Here, I'll do it."

"I don't mind." She smiled at me.

My face grew hot. "Did you have a nice excursion?"

"We did." Roshana came alongside Katherine, laying a hand on her shoulder. "We were thinking, Imriel. Mayhap tomorrow we should take an excursion of our own, the three of us. The boys may not be tired of hunting, but I am. Katherine says there's a lake up in the mountains you promised to show her."

"We could take a picnic luncheon," Katherine added.

I stared at them, wondering if I looked as stupidly befuddled as I felt. "The three of us?"

Roshana smiled lazily. "Why not?"

My mouth worked, but no sound emerged. I swallowed hard. "All right."

"Good!" Katherine clapped her hands. Her grey-blue eyes sparkled, and her color was high. I wondered what in Elua's name they had discussed during their trip to the village, and decided I'd rather

not know. "I'll take care of luncheon."

"All right," I repeated, pressing her kerchief to my bleeding head.

Definitely befuddled.

I slept poorly that night, lying awake, tossing on my sheets. It seemed to me a strange and remarkable thing that I could have survived what I have undergone, that I could have seen horrors and marvels, and still have my composure thoroughly undone by a pair of sixteen-year-old girls who had suggested nothing more daring than a picnic on the surface of the matter. It was the promise, the hint of somewhat more that undid me.

I wanted... ah, Elua! I wanted.

But with desire came the shadow. And mayhap Phèdre was right, there was nothing to fear from shadows. I believed it when I was with her. But she had gone into Daršanga of her own volition, a grown woman, already knowing what darkness she carried inside her, the terrible urgings of Kushiel's Dart. I had been a child. What had it done to me?

Mavros was right; I didn't know myself.

I wasn't sure I wanted to.

In time I slept. The day dawned fine and bright. I still felt muddle-headed. Katherine had undertaken all the arrangements with cheerful efficiency; the luncheon was packed, and our mounts were saddled and ready. Amid promises not to stray beyond Montrève's guarded border, we took our leave.

I led them along the prettiest route I knew, up the terraced slopes of the chestnut orchards, winding past the high pastures, where grazing sheep dotted the hillsides. I pointed out the new pasturage which Charles and I had helped clear.

"It's hard to believe you're the same age, Imri," Katherine observed, turning to Roshana. "He seems so much younger, doesn't he?"

"All younger brothers seem thus to their sisters," Roshana said pleasantly.

I eyed her. "Does Baptiste?"

"Well." Her smile brought out a dimple. "Yes, in his way."

My cousin was looking lovely that day. In truth, both of them were. Roshana wore a deep blue gown that brought out the hue of her eyes, her hair loose over her shoulders. It fell the way mine did, in blue-black waves. Katherine wore a pretty linen gown of golden yellow, that made one think of flowers blooming. She had a little coronet of braids, and in the sunlight her brown hair gleamed with honey-colored streaks.

A distant shepherd raised one hand in salute, and I waved back.

It was a long trek into the mountains. There were places where we had to ride in single file, our mounts picking their way with care amid the scattered boulders. I led the way, trying to recall in which direction the spring-fed lake lay, listening to the girls' easy conversation. I had not known, until yesterday, that they

had bothered to befriend one another.

Women are a mystery.

At the summit, I paused to rest our mounts. While our horses stood along the mountain's crest with lowered heads and heaving barrels, blowing through their nostrils, we gazed into the valley below. The manor house and its sprawl of outlying buildings looked small and snug in the distance, held fast in the cupped green hand of the valley, while the river meandered through it like a silver ribbon.

"Oh, Imri! I'd forgotten how pretty it is in the mountains." Katherine drew a deep breath of fresh air and looked at me, eyes shining. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

In an instant, I felt ashamed of the thoughts I had harbored, and of how little consideration I had showed her this summer. Katherine was the seneschal's daughter. Since she had left childhood behind, it was duty that had bound her to the manor house, not disdain of my company. "Yes." I smiled at her. "It is."

Roshana gave me a curious glance. "You love this place, don't you?"

"Very much so." I thought about Montrève, and all its inhabitants, then gave myself a little shake. "Let's go. 'Tis this way, I think."

Although it took the better part of an hour, I found the lake without too much difficulty. It lay in one of the high, hidden meadows, where the grass and wildflowers grew in unchecked profusion. The lake was as I remembered it, perfect and round, surrounded by a stony ledge of sun-warmed granite, a blue eye giving a secret wink unto the heavens.

After letting the horses drink their fill, we tethered them. I unloaded the saddlebags and spread our blankets in the meadow, pressing the grass flat. It was truly an idyllic spot. All around us, flowers nodded on tall stalks, and insects flitted on translucent wings. Katherine removed her leather shoes and peeled off her stockings. Her bare feet were fine and white. Hoisting her skirts, she crossed the rocky ledge, dipping a toe into the lake.

"It's cold!" she cried in dismay.

I laughed. "I told you. It's spring-fed."

Her chin lifted, and she nodded toward the lake. "I dare you!"

Somewhat in her tone reminded me of the children's dares we had once undertaken together, that first summer in Montrève; and somewhat, to be fair, did not. But I was weary of my own caution and cowardice.

"All right," I said recklessly, standing and stripping off my shirt. "I will."

"Imriel." Roshana, reclining on the spread blankets, roused herself. "Are you sure—?"

I ignored her, shedding my boots and untying my breeches and linen undergarments, kicking them loose until I stood naked beneath the vast blue sky. In the bright daylight, the faded weal-marks on my back and the pale brand on my flank must surely be visible. Pretending they were not, I ran the few paces to the lake's verge and launched myself in a shallow dive.

The water was cold.

It was very cold.

I came up sputtering, my teeth already chattering. "Satisfied?" I gasped.

They stood on the edge, peering at me while I trod water. "Well, you've proved you can swim," Roshana said. "Was there some other point to this?"

I splashed a bright spray of water at them until they retreated to the blankets, laughing. I hauled myself out of the water onto the stone ledge. There I stood, dripping in the warm sunlight, my skin prickling with gooseflesh from the lake's chill. Though I stood on solid ground, I still felt strangely bouyant, suspended between the carefree child of the Sanctuary I had once been and the confident adult I wished to become.

"I don't know," I said to them. "Was there?"

Roshana chuckled, and Katherine ducked her head, a curtain of her honey-brown hair swinging forward to conceal her smile. She groped for my clothing and tossed my shirt at me. "Go on, dry off! You don't want to take ill again."

At that I made a face, but I did as she said. My clothes clung to my damp skin. I wrung out my soaked hair, leaving it to hang in a sodden mass down my back. "So," I said, joining them to sit cross-legged on the blankets. "What now?"

"Lunch," Katherine said, eyeing me sidelong.

We ate well, our appetites honed by the long ride and the clean air. The food was shepherd's fare, simple but good—Richeline's crusty bread, sharp cheese and sausage, seasoned ham and oil-cured olives sprinkled with rosemary. We ate everything we had brought, sharing a skin of crisp white wine to wash it down.

When we had finished, I felt replete and lazy. The sun had dried my clothing, and I was warm and content. I lay on my back, closing my eyes, listening to the hum of the meadow, the long grass rustling. It didn't matter why we were here, what scheme the girls had concocted. The world was good, which was reason enough to rejoice. I let go of desire, content to relish the moment and my own sense of well-being.

"Mavros says there are things you wish to understand," Roshana said softly.

I opened my eyes, squinting.

Her deft fingers were at work, plucking stalks of tall grass and weaving them into a neat plait. "We were talking," Roshana continued. "Katherine and I, on the ride back from the village. About the games that we learn to play in Kusheth and Siovale, and the differences between them."

I sat upright. "What games?"

"You know!" Katherine blushed. "Games, Imri!"

I shook my head. I had an idea of what she was trying to get at, but I had no experience in such matters. "You'll have to teach me."

Katherine sighed. Leaning over, she grasped a handful of trailing bindweed, tugging the blue-flowering vines loose and gathering them into a loop. "I cast a net to catch true love," she chanted, tossing the impromptu noose aloft. It fell onto the blanket, half draped over my foot. "You never learned that one?"

"No." I frowned at the length of vine. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing!" Katherine's voice held a trace of acerbity. "I didn't catch you. If it had landed over your head, you would have owed me a kiss."

"So—" I began.

"This is a game we play in Kusheth," Roshana intervened. "It has a sharper edge than those you play in Siovale." She gave her grass-plaited quirt an experimental snap, and smiled when both Katherine and I jumped involuntarily. "There's no harm in it, Imriel."

"For whom?" I asked uneasily. "And why?"

"For anyone." Her smile deepened. "'Tis a light game." She touched the trailing end of her grass quirt to my cheek. "You're afraid, aren't you?"

I brushed away the plaited grass in an irritable gesture. "Of you? No."

"Of your own desires," Roshana said calmly. "Of those things you crave and fear to give voice to. This is only the merest taste of them, and one you should enjoy." She turned to Katherine. "You understand, do you not?"

I opened my mouth to answer for her, to say, No. But Katherine raised her chin as she had when she dared me; this time, daring my cousin. "I'm not afraid," she announced.

"So we play." Roshana trailed the ticklish end of the grass quirt along Katherine's cheekbone, circling her ear. "This is the nature of the game. If you squirm or make a sound," she whispered, "you earn a lash. If you don't... you win a kiss."

Katherine whimpered.

The grass-plaited quirt cracked.

I winced at it. Katherine's eyes flew wide open, and she gasped, startled and half-laughing. It was a teasing blow, landing harmlessly on her upper arm, but even so, it was sharp enough to raise a faint pink welt. The sight of it stirred dark unease in me. I knew, altogether too well, how deep a welt a real whip left. I still bore the scars. It had taken a measure of bravado to bare them today; a bravado I no longer felt.

"Let's not do this," I said, finding my voice. "Roshana, please don't."

"It's only a game." She let the grass quirt trace a path down Katherine's throat, tickling the hollow at its base where her pulse beat visibly. "But it is a game of resistance and surrender." She traced a delicate pattern on Katherine's skin, watching her pulse quicken. "You ask why, Imriel. Because in a game of wills, the stakes are raised and pleasure is heightened. And in the playing of it, we come to know ourselves—and each other—more deeply." The quirt trailed lower. "Already, I'll wager Katherine has

learned something new of herself since first we met," she said, meeting her eyes. "Is it not so?"

Katherine returned her gaze with mute, sparkling defiance.

"You see?" Roshana smiled. "She has won a kiss." Rising on her knees, she leaned forward, laying down the quilt. With my mouth agape, I watched her deliver on her promise. It was a real kiss, deep and lingering, and Katherine returned it ardently. I felt a rush of desire so intense I ached. It left me feverish, lightheaded and sick. When they parted, strands of their hair remained caught together, blue-black and honey-brown, shimmering in the sunlight like spider's silk.

"Your turn, cousin." Roshana picked up the grass quilt and placed it in my hand. "You may choose either one of us."

I clutched it hard, feeling the neat plaits press against my sweating palm. I envisioned myself swinging it, the smart snap and the ensuing welt. Both the girls regarded me with amusement. It was true, it was only a game; a silly game. And I, who had reveled in the sense of being suspended between childhood and adulthood only an hour ago, now felt at once too young and too old to play. I couldn't do it. As much as I wanted them—both of them, either of them—I couldn't. Not like this. My mouth went dry, desire shriveling.

"I can't." I tossed the quilt onto the blanket. "I'm sorry, but I can't."

Katherine colored and looked away, and I knew I had embarrassed her. Whatever, exactly, had been offered here today, I had spurned it. She would not be quick to repeat the offer in any form. I wished we'd played the Siovalese game instead. I put my head in my hands and sighed.

"It's all right, Imriel." Roshana's voice was surprisingly gentle. I lifted my head and saw concern in her face. "You know we mean well, don't you?"

I nodded. "I do want to understand. It's just..." I tried to find words that would encompass the enormity of it, that would explain how and why, here in the open air of a flowering meadow, I was haunted by the fetid stench of stagnant water. How plaits of fragrant grass evoked the shadow of knotted leather crusted dark with old blood. "Daršanga," I said.

It was the first time I had said the word aloud to anyone but Phèdre. They exchanged a glance.

"That was the name of the place?" Roshana asked.

"Yes," I murmured.

"I'm sorry, Imri," Katherine said impulsively. "I forget, sometimes. You seem, so..." She shrugged, giving me a sweet smile. "Well, like a brother, only not."

I smiled back at her. "I try to forget, too."

"Try harder," she said, teasing.

So at least a day that bid fair to end in disaster ended in goodwill. We gathered our things and made the long trek down the mountain, arriving at the manor house in ample time for supper. Afterward, Katherine bustled about her duties, while I sat and spoke with my cousins in the great room, as we had done every evening since they arrived.

Nothing had changed.

Save that once again I lay sleepless. And this time it was not the fevered conjecture of my imagination that made me wakeful, but memory, and the piercing desire that accompanied it. When I closed my eyes, I saw Roshana and Katherine, kissing. I sweated and tossed, tangled in my sheets, and cursed myself for an idiot.

Try harder.

Would that it was so simple.

Chapter Thirteen



In the final days of their visit, I quarreled with Mavros. I own it freely; the fault was mine, although Mavros played his part. In truth, after the day at the lake, I was wound tighter than a child's top. Montrève, my respite and haven, had become fraught with tension and desire.

It was not the fault of the Shahrizai. They were what they were; they sought to deal fairly with me. The shadow on my soul was no fault of theirs. I was the one who was unfair. I beseeched them for understanding, and fled when it was offered.

After the lake, Roshana understood. She had caught a glimpse of what I had undergone in that single word: Daršanga. She did not press me, for which I was grateful. And Baptiste... Baptiste was a joy. I saw much in him of what I might have been, had it not been for Daršanga, by turns merry and indolent, partaking in life to its fullest. No priest of Elua would ever need remind Baptiste to rejoice; it was part and parcel of his nature.

But there was Mavros.

In some ways, we were the most alike. He was older, and understood the burden of obligation imparted by his birth, even as I was forced to contend with my status as a Prince of the Blood. Over the course of their visit, he had given a good deal of helpful counsel on dealing with Court intrigue and nobles who looked sideways at me and muttered under their breath. But Phèdre had spoken truly; he was seventeen, with a head full of seventeen-year-old thoughts, and a belly full of desire.

And he was living under her roof.

We were outside the mews when it happened, watching Ronald Agout transfer the hawks to their blocks, where they crouched and sidled, hooding their eyes and preening in the warm sun. I was telling him about keeping Elua's vigil with Joscelin on the Longest Night.

"It sounds perishing dull if you ask me." Mavros laughed. "And to think, your mother once—" He broke off his words, glancing toward the manor house.

"Once what?" I asked when it became evident that he wasn't continuing.

"Nothing." Mavros stroked the peregrine's speckled feathers with one careful finger, avoiding my gaze. "If Phèdre never saw fit to tell you, it's not my business to do so."

"Saw fit to tell me what?" I bristled. The peregrine shifted restlessly, ruffling. Across the yard, Ronald made a disapproving sound.

Mavros shrugged, taking a step backward. "It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago, Imriel, before either of us were born."

"But you know," I said, growing increasingly irritated with him.

"Well." There was an edge to his smile. "It's family lore, you know. I daresay half of Kusheth knows."

"So tell me," I said. "There's no point in being coy."

"You wish to know?" Mavros gave me a long look. "All right, I will, then. Better you should hear it from me than some backwater Kusheline lordling. Your mother contracted Phèdre for the Longest Night and brought her to the Duc de Morhban's fete on a velvet leash."

"No," I said automatically. "It's not true. You're lying."

"I'm not lying!" he said impatiently. "Name of Elua, Imri! Phèdre's an anguisette, and she was sworn to Naamah's Service. What do you think that meant? It's what she does to earn a livelihood—or did, at any rate, before Queen Ysandre made her a peer. And yes, it's true. On the Longest Night, your mother paraded her before the Duc de Morhban, in order that he might be consumed with envy and understand that in certain matters, the Shahrizai will always be his betters. Melisande put a collar around her neck, a velvet collar with a diamond the size of—"

He got no further, for I lowered my head and charged him.

Mavros grunted under the impact, and I bore him down hard. The two of us flailed in the dust while Ronald shouted ineffectually and the birds, alarmed, bated and strained at their tethers. We rolled over and over, and I came up on top. Hugues, kindhearted as he was, had taught me well. In Siovale, wrestling is reckoned a science. I clamped both of Mavros' legs with mine and braced one forearm across his throat.

"Take it back!" I hissed, leaning my weight on him.

He glared at me, eyes slitted. "I won't lie for you, cousin!"

"Imriel!"

It was Joscelin's voice—his battle-voice, clear and carrying. I had scarcely time to process the fact before his hand descended, grabbing the back of my shirt and lifting me by main force off Mavros.

I dangled briefly in mid-air, meeting Joscelin's furious summer-blue gaze. "I didn't—"

He slammed me down onto my feet. "Intend to disgrace the hospitality of Montrève?" he asked, hard and intent.

"No," I said in a small voice.

Mavros sat up, coughing. Joscelin turned to him. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you." He sounded subdued. "It was a misunderstanding, that's all."

"He said—" I began.

Joscelin cut me off. "It doesn't matter, Imri. He's your guest, and you're responsible for honoring the rules of hospitality. They don't extend to throttling visitors." He let go of my shirt and wiped his hands, eyeing me with disgust. "Phèdre will not be pleased."

"Do we have to tell her?" I asked in dismay.

Folding his arms, Joscelin glanced around the yard. Mavros was on his feet, beating dust from his clothing, trying to appear unobtrusive. The hawks were still in an uproar, and poor old Ronald Agout bustled from block to block, trying to calm them. Two young goshawks were near-frantic, and I knew such an incident could set their training back by weeks or months.

"Oh, I think we do," Joscelin said coldly.

It was a rare thing to see Joscelin truly angry. It was not that he lacked the temper for it—indeed, I have gathered from things I have heard that he was fairly ill-tempered during his younger days as a Cassiline Brother. Perhaps it was the celibacy that caused it; or a surety, it had done little for my mood. But I believed that the trials he has undergone since those days were so severe that they established a threshold for anger, true anger, that was much higher than it is for ordinary mortals.

In some ways, Daršanga was harder on Joscelin than anyone.

So it was rare, and frightening; but it was doubly rare to see Phèdre angry. Joscelin marched us to the manor house, and there, in her study, he made me relate the incident. She listened to my account without expression, then turned to Mavros.

"My lord Shahrizai, please accept my deepest apologies on behalf of House Montrève," she said, her voice grave and sincere.

"Yes, of course," he said awkwardly. "It was just a misunderstanding."

"He said you let my mother parade you on a leash!" The words burst from me in anguish. "It's not true, is it?" At the back of the room, Joscelin made a small, unintelligible sound. Phèdre turned her head to regard me.

I wanted so badly for Mavros' words to be a lie. Under the weight of her dark, luminous gaze, I knew they were not. She had done what he said. And yet, somehow, she bore no shame for it. She was Kushiel's Chosen; an anguissette. Shame could not touch her. She rose above it, beyond it. It rolled off her and clung to me, and I could not even say why.

In the zenana, they called her Death's Whore. Every depravity the Mahrkagir visited upon her, she bore willingly. I knew that. In the zenana, everyone did.

The first time I met Phèdre, I spat in her face.

Across the study, Mavros began to smirk.

"Oh yes, it's true," Phèdre said quietly. "I made my marque that Longest Night." She turned her gaze back to Mavros, and his smile ebbed. "But I do not think," she said, "that House Shahrizai has had cause to boast of it since."

He looked at her for a long moment, his face naked beneath her steady regard. I knew what he saw. The whole entangled history of their Houses—of Phèdre, my mother, Anafiel Delaunay—lay between them; and yet, it was somewhat more. Phèdre nó Delaunay walked into hell willingly, and walked out alive. And somehow—Blessed Elua alone knows—she retained the ability to love. She carried the Name of God in her thoughts, and there was nothing in the human soul that could be concealed from her.

There were times when all she needed to do was lay it bare.

"Forgive me, my lady." Mavros' voice was hoarse. "I was cruel."

"Youth is cruel." Phèdre caught Joscelin's eye. Something passed between them and she sighed, shaking her head. "Go on, get out, the both of you. And mind, no more fighting."

We went with alacrity.

For a time, by common accord, neither of us spoke. We walked together, wordless and aimless. I stole a glance at Mavros and found him looking uncommonly pensive. As we departed from the manor grounds, our unplanned course took us to the river. We walked alongside, following it toward the northern end of the valley. I found a sturdy stick and slashed at the reeds that grew along the river's edge, watching them bend without breaking, springing upright as we passed.

"I'm sorry," Mavros said abruptly, breaking our long silence.

I halted, watching the water tumble over gleaming rocks. "The fault was mine."

"Not entirely." He stood beside me. "I begin to think mayhap the Shahrizai have an imperfect grasp of what it means to be Kushiel's Chosen."

I prodded the ground with my stick. "It's true, though. What you said."

"You wish it were not?" he asked. "Why?"

I nodded. "I can't help it. Mavros..." I sighed and tossed the stick away. "It's hard. I cannot explain it."

He sat down on a dry tussock of grass. "I told you that Kushiel is merciful," he said slowly. "It is a hard and demanding mercy. If we are the dark mirror of the world's desire, then I think mayhap Phèdre is the bright mirror of ours, showing us those things we cloak in pride and vanity. I beheld my own pettiness in her gaze, and I did not like what I saw."

"I'm familiar with the feeling," I murmured.

"And yet you are ashamed of her?" he asked, curious.

"No." I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. "I don't know! Why did it have to be my

mother?"

"Oh." Mavros' tone changed. "Yes, well... yes. That must be awkward."

I lowered my hands and glared at him. "Awkward?"

He shrugged. "What do you wish me to say, Imri? The situation is what it is; I cannot change the past, any more than you can. You're carrying around a world of fear. I cannot help you if you refuse to confront it. No one can," he added, "not family, not Phèdre. You have to face the mirror yourself."

"Which one?" I asked dryly. "Bright or dark?"

"Both of them." He laughed. "Listen to me! Deigning to speak to you of fear."

I smiled a little. "Ah, well, you're not wrong."

"No." Mavros rose, dusting his hands. "But you're not ready. And as Roshana reminds me, I am supposed to practice patience." He held out his hand. "Are we friends?"

"Friends," I said slowly, clasping his hand. "All right, yes."

"Good." He grinned. "I don't fancy going another round with you! You're a nasty fighter, cousin."

So it was that our final days passed in amity. In the end, I was both saddened and relieved to see the Shahrizai depart. I had grown fond of them, fonder than I had reckoned. Mavros had spoken truly; they were a dark mirror, and there was much of myself I saw in them that I did not disdain. But too, there were other things.

Their escort came for them on the appointed day, and we gathered in the front courtyard to bid them farewell. They looked as splendid as they had when they arrived, and I could not help but feel a certain pride at their beauty. Baptiste whooped and shouted, standing in his stirrups and turning his mount in a tight circle; Roshana smiled and blew me a kiss. Mavros raised his hand in farewell, winking.

"I'll see you at Court, cousin!" he called.

Once again, nothing had changed, yet everything was different. I had a sense of myself that was different and new. I was a member, albeit at a distance, of a strange and exotic family. And if I was not prepared to embrace this bond wholeheartedly, neither did I regard it in abject horror.

Other things had changed, some to my sorrow. In the month of my Shahrizai cousins' visit, I had grown apart from Charles. Although our friendship endured, he seemed to me younger than he had before, and simple and rustic in his desires. At the same time, Katherine had grown more mature. Whatever else had transpired in the meadow, Roshana had spoken truly; Katherine had learned somewhat of herself during their visit that she had not known before. She moved with a new surety, aware of her own blossoming sensuality and confident in the knowledge. It made me wonder at the cause.

After the Shahrizai had gone, I watched her set her sights once more on Gilot.

This time, there was no simpering. She stood, easy and sure, and crooked her finger at him; and he trailed after her, blindsided and besotted.

It would have made me laugh, had it not hurt. I'd had my chance, there in the meadow, and I let it slip through my fingers. There beside the lake, Katherine had offered herself, had dared to make herself vulnerable, and I had spurned her. And yet she accepted it without blaming me and moved on with ease. It was no more and no less than the old priest of Elua had foretold when he spoke to me of love on the Longest Night.

You will find it and lose it, again and again.

With a heart full of youthful rue, I watched it go.

We finished the summer at Montrève. After a month's indulgence with the Shahrizai, I flung myself into labor. I helped Charles with chores around the estate, and if our camaraderie was less than it had been, still, he was glad to have my aid. I sparred with Joscelin, who spoke well of my progress. And I resumed my studies with Phèdre.

There were no more tutors, and we did not practice the art of covertcy. Instead, sensing my need to lose myself undisturbed, she gave me a series of texts to read—histories and philosophies, for the most part. I liked reading the arguments of old Hellene philosophers.

After her anger, I was careful with Phèdre. It was not that she held a grudge, not by any means. There was no one in the world quicker to forgive. But it was because she understood human failing all too well; and in the bright mirror of her regard, I was reluctant to gaze upon my own shortcomings.

I spoke to Joscelin about it one day after we had sparred.

"Well," he said judiciously, "You did act the fool."

"Yes, I know." I flushed. "It's just—"

"I know." Joscelin's gaze softened. "Your mother." He sighed and ran a hand through his wheat-blond hair, darkened with streaks of sweat. It was hot and we had fought hard. "Imriel, I don't relish the knowledge any more than you do."

I traced a pattern on the slate with the toe of one boot. "How do you bear it?"

"I tried doing without Phèdre once." His voice was light and wry, but I lifted my head to meet his gaze, and his expression was not. "I discovered anything else was preferable."

"Even Daršanga?" I asked.

"Yes." Joscelin was quiet for a moment. "Even Daršanga," he said at length, and gave his half-smile, reaching out to tousle my hair. "Even her inexplicable affinity for your cursed mother. And if you ask me which of the two is worse, love, I would be hard put to answer. But we got you out of it, didn't we?"

It was one of those moments that made my heart soar. I grinned foolishly. "You reckon it was worthwhile?"

"Of course," Joscelin said simply. "Don't you?"

I thought a good deal about his words. It was not only that they warmed my heart, but they held a double meaning. Like Drustan mab Necthana, when he speaks, it is to good effect; like the Cruarch,

Joscelin is more subtle than he appears. When all was said and done, I did reckon it worthwhile. They had found me, and redeemed me out of hell.

It was enough; it was more than enough.

Still, I did not know how to make my peace with Phèdre.

The strain persisted between us until the day she caught me browsing in her study. She has an extensive library, both at Montrève and in the City, but it was a common text that had caught my eye—an edition of the Trois Milles Joies, which is a famous D'Angeline compendium.

It was Enediël Vintesoïr, the founder of the Night Court, who compiled it; or so legend claims. It contains every form of lovemaking in which men and women may partake, in every possible form and combination. All of them were illustrated by finely cut woodblock prints.

I scanned its pages in appalled fascination, dry-mouthed and taut with desire.

"Do you wish to borrow it?"

Phèdre's voice broke my reverie. I dropped the volume, wincing at the sound of parchment crackling, and stooped and caught it up quickly, holding it before me to hide the swelling in my breeches.

"No!" I said, quick and high-pitched. "I'm sorry. I was only looking."

"You may, you know." She turned away in a graceful gesture, scanning the shelves. "You probably should. Here." Phèdre handed me a leather-bound copy of The Journey of Naamah. "This one, too."

I felt the blood rise in my face, which was an improvement. "It's not necessary."

"They're only texts, Imri." Phèdre leaned against the bookshelves, a delicate frown knitting her brows. "You're curious. It's good to learn."

"Did you?" I asked, clutching both volumes.

"I did," she said gravely. "For a long time. You need not put it into practice. I didn't, not for years. But all knowledge is worth having."

"My thanks," I whispered, and fled.

I read the books she had lent me, and I learned. Strangely, it broke the long tension between us. The Trois Milles Joies dealt wholly with erotic instruction, but The Journey of Naamah examined the divine aspects of carnal love. When I read about how Naamah gave herself to the King of Persis to win Blessed Elua's freedom, and how she lay down with strangers in the stews of Bhodistan to earn coin that Elua might eat, I began to grasp an inkling of the link between desire and divine compassion—and in so doing, I gained a deeper understanding of Phèdre. What she had done was not so different. Both of them gave of themselves, and somehow gained in the process. And there was no shame in it, only love.

As for the rest of it, I felt easier knowing that such desires as plagued me were simply part and parcel of the human condition. I spent many hours poring over those tomes, yet when I returned them to her, although they'd made me restless with yearning, I felt a bit easier in my skin.

"So," Phèdre murmured. "Do you have questions?"

I shook my head. "No," I said honestly. "Not yet." I thought of Mavros' words, and laughed. "I'm not ready."

"All right." She smiled at me. "You know you may always ask."

"I know," I said. "And I'm grateful, but to be truthful, I'm not sure you're the best person to give me answers."

A flicker of pain crossed her face. She drew a deep breath and released it. "That may be true. But I would always try."

I nodded. "I'll think on it."

When summer began to give way to autumn, we made ready to return to the City. It was the first time that I did not do so with a heavy heart. Montrève had grown smaller, and I had changed. When I thought about showing myself at Court, there was something in me that regarded the challenge with grim satisfaction. Let the peers mutter and wonder; I would meet their sidelong glances with a direct gaze.

I was tired of being afraid.

Chapter Fourteen

