

Sorrow's Choice

Rhiann had been there when Iltres struggled into the healing chambers in Jirel's temple, her usually passive face lined with pain. He, though a priest of Ollahm, stood beside her as the delivery came, coaxing her gently, wondering if, though he wasn't nearly as big a man as his father or uncles, he'd managed to give her a child too big to safely deliver. It was one thing he couldn't be sure of. Lisete had handled both of his sons with ease, but she was also human, whereas Iltres was an elvara. If this child was too big, well, that was something that worried him. Mother had had a great deal of trouble with him and his sister. He didn't want to risk that the results of his pleasure these past few years was to damage the woman who had offered herself to him. He wasn't sure how he could handle that.

Wystyl was standing there, her eyes focused on Iltres' body, almost as if she was trying to decide what needed to be done. She would know, though many would not. She had born three healthy sons to Largo, who was not one of the smallest among the Calastis. She herself was not big, though she did have human blood in her. But she also had enhanced healing, the life-energy of Jirel's rebirth coursing through her. She might be stronger than Iltres at this point.

Wystyl tilted her head, then glanced at Rhiann, spreading her hands. "There is something odd about this birth, something that I do not recognize. The child is not so big as the ones I bore, and well within her ability, but, there is something that fights her. I will do what I may, but I need thy aid. Thou are the child's father. It is something that does not often need to be done, but thou must coax the child toward birth. It fights her, and that is why she weakens so quickly. I do not know why that battle is, only that it is clearly there."

Rhiann nodded mutely. Moving up to the place at Iltres' head, he whispered softly to the woman who carried the baby. "Hold on, Iltres. I must do what I can for your child." Then, very carefully, he placed his hands around Iltres' ears, doing something he wasn't sure he could. Wystyl would not have asked this of him if he were not kee-ali-dahlri. She knew what that kind could do. She knew what the power of a shapeshifter could access through holo'nil'talq. Perhaps Largo had even helped her with that, when she herself had borne.

His senses sunk into her flesh, moving slowly down toward her stomach, trying to see into the womb with the insight that was in him. ~Child,~ he sent carefully through the body, ~Your mother weakens. You must come to be. You must leave that protection and find yourself in the world.~ He wasn't sure if the child could understand his coaxing, but he attempted to send the sensation of the little one moving down and out of the birth canal. It couldn't be that hard to convince a child, at least not for any reason he could imagine. It just took a soft awareness, trying to let her, and he suddenly knew that the child was a her, know that the world was safe enough for her.

He could feel as the labor changed, feel it in connection with Iltres. His words were mumbled, not quite audible as he focused on giving her the chance to come here, to be loved. It didn't matter to him what she might look like, what she might choose to be, only that she was his daughter and he already loved her, hoping to share his world with her. And, somehow, he could feel that opening up a response.

Even as the baby moved lower, clearly being pressed into the birth canal, he felt something try to seize at the child, some force that he could not recognize, but something hungry, something that

desired his daughter. He was not a warrior, but in this, he would be. His voice slipped into the soft cadence of his first lessons, his reality as a Singer, a resonant magician. He couldn't affect the world in quite the way his niece and nephew could, but he could drive off a spirit trying to destroy his daughter, their daughter. His voice formed a barrier, forcing the darkness back, the hunger away from the child's weak energies. It felt that the thing, whatever it was, surged back once, then fell away, though there was no physical evidence of what had just happened. Only the sense that whatever had been trying to kill the girl had been beaten back, for now.

There was a cry, and a gasp from Iltres between his hands. He tried to soothe her with the power of his kee-ali-dahlri heritage, tried to make it a little better, a little easier to finish this. Then there was a new sound, an almost pitiful burbling noise, before Wystyl murmured a few syllables in the ancient tongue Rhiann only knew because of his exchange of kisses with Iltres. It was a prayer, a faint one, one designed to give the infant strength. So, she'd been born.

Rhiann did not let go of Iltres until she seemed to relax. It had probably taken time to get the rest of the afterbirth out, to let her stop fighting her own body. He wanted to see his daughter, but he wasn't going to leave Iltres until he knew she was strong enough herself. Wystyl had the girl, and she was probably far better able than he was to keep the child strong and healthy. Indeed, as his eyes raised, he could see her wrapped up quickly in a blanket, something to keep her warm.

Wystyl moved up beside where Rhiann stood after a moment. She seemed somewhat concerned, a frown on her face. Rhiann let go of Iltres, turning his attention to his cousin's wife. "What's wrong? She lives, does she not?"

Wystyl nodded, "She lives, but whatever it was that thou fought left its mark upon her. I could see thy battle, and thou did much, to bring her to birth. But I fear it was not enough."

Rhiann could feel Iltres beside him, trying to force herself into at least a partial sitting position. He took a deep breath and reached out for the cloth wrapped bundle, taking it from Wystyl's hands. "How was she marked?" His words were soft, and he cradled the tiny form next to him, though he knew that she was far larger than his adoptive daughter had been, when she'd been left in his care. Nefta had been gnoroi, and thus would never achieve much height.

Wystyl managed a wry smile. "If it were any other than thou, I would have a greater concern. But thou, well, thou have the understanding to make this work. Look at her, know that what happened was not her fault, nor thine. Thou saved her, when I would not have been able to. And not even the greatest can win every battle."

Rhiann couldn't help but frown, but turned the child, so that he could look at her face. For a moment, she looked like a regular infant, still wet from her mother's juices. Then he saw the eyes open, and knew what Wystyl had meant. Eyes that would, in his family, likely have been green were almost the color of polished obsidian. There was no white around them, no differentiation of color. Only darkness, shadows that could not be penetrated. He wondered for a moment if she could see, if that was merely an outward manifestation of his victory against the hungry darkness that had sought her while she was being born.

Wystyl seemed to know his question before he asked it. "I doubt that she'll ever be able to see. Whatever dark power fought for her, seemed to have claimed that part of her. The strength I have in

healing is not enough to fix this. I'm not certain that the greatest of the Risen One's priests might be able to restore her sight to her. For now, I think I am merely glad that she lives, and seems to have inherited some of thy strength. She will need to be watched, and Iltres, for the bearing was hard, on both of them. But there are enough healers here that it is unlikely that we'll lose either, now."

Blind. That struck him in a way he hadn't considered. Even as he waited while another priestess propped Iltres up so that she would be able to suckle the infant, he tried to force calm upon himself. Of course Wystyl considered that he would be the best parent to one such as that. He had lived for many years with a false foot, movement hampered by a harm he had merely accepted as the price of living. If anyone could give a blind child some reason to believe that this was not a weakness, it would be Rhiann, if Iltres kept to the agreement that they had made, when they had first made the choice to share their pleasures.

Carefully, so that it wouldn't startle Iltres, he laid the child in her arms, bending over to plant a kiss on the priestess' forehead. "Iltres, this was no more your fault than mine, though I sense that perhaps it might be best to consider things I had not given much thought to previously." His instincts railed against what he realized he must decide. The child would need so much more than merely a few decades of his partnership with Iltres. She would need to be protected perhaps all of her life, from anything that came after her. While he would attempt to give her some independence, he knew that she would need much more than either of his sons, or his adopted daughter Nefta, had needed.

Iltres looked up, and Rhiann wondered if she had taken in all that had been said. Perhaps not. As the babe was held to Iltres' breast, and began sucking, he smoothed back that fine white hair, wiped away the sweat from that smoke-colored skin. It wasn't how he'd wanted to make this decision, but for now, the decision on how to best care for the child was more important than his own opinions of wanting to truly be comfortable with what he needed to do.

Bending forward, he tried to smile. "This isn't what either of us expected, but now, perhaps Grandfather is right. The girl will need more than either of us can give her alone, and I do not wish to have her consider at any time that she might be abandoned. I know that marriage, true marriage, was unknown among your people, Iltres. But I must ask you now. Will you marry me, so that together we may care for this child, and any others that might come? I do not think I would be ready to ask this, save that she needs more than what we'd planned. She'll need to know she's safe, and that's best with us bound together."

Iltres' lip quivered a moment, and he couldn't help but feel that, while he was doing this primarily for his daughter, it would be as much for her as well. Then she squeezed the tiny form up to her, almost dislodging the lips from her teat. Her words were almost inaudible. "Thou do this for her, but is it what thou want? I would not have thee bound, even for her."

Rhiann ran his fingers along the child's face, then looked at Iltres. "I know you well enough to be confident in this. If you'll work with me, raising her, I am willing to commit to you. And this is not about what Grandfather would want, though I know it would please him greatly. No, I do this because I feel that we need to find our own way, together, helping her, and helping each other. What happened to her is not your fault. It's not my fault. I don't know what it was that attacked her, but I fought it off as best I could. I just wasn't quite as powerful as I needed to be."

She looked very worn out, but there was a hint of a smile. “Thou were the one uncertain of this decision. I knew, from the moment thy lips first touched mine, when thou gave me thy language, that this was the reward the Goddess promised me. I would have been content to have things remain as they are, but if thou are certain that this is what thou want, I will agree.”

There was a hint of amusement to that. He was the reward that Jirel offered to Iltres for not only bearing the son of Vythen, but also for allowing him to be raised among Daevor’s people. He, a priest of Ollahm, had been chosen by the eldest of gods. He suspected that Ollahm approved, though there was no sense of the Lord of Bards in his mind now, to guide his steps. He wondered, too, if she wasn’t the reward that had been prepared for him, in a way, for the service he’d offered through times of difficulty. He didn’t think that he’d needed any. Nefta’s concern for him was enough of a gift from Ollahm, but perhaps the God had decided that it worked well for what he intended, as well.

He bent over to kiss Iltres, chastely for the moment. More would happen when she had recovered properly from the birthing. He only knew that this was what he would do. “The child needs a name, Iltres. What would you call her?”

She shook her head, gesturing with one hand at him. “The name is thy gift to her, give it with thy own instincts, Rhiann.”

He hadn’t expected that, honestly hadn’t thought about it, but realized that he wouldn’t want to argue with her, not in this condition. So, instead, he looked at the girl-child sitting in her arms, and ran his fingers through the almost silvery down atop her head. While her skin-tone was more like his, there were definitely traits of the mother here. “This is something I had not considered. I didn’t name my prior daughter. Lisete had done that. For this one, perhaps something hopeful.” He closed his eyes for a moment, seeking within.

The girl represented, to him, the choice between living as a whole person, or as one afflicted by harm. His mother had come through so much harm, growing up. He knew that his nephew had done the same. Both had seemingly found balance, so there was a good chance that his daughter would too. That might be the thing to think on. After a moment, he pronounced it, “Iltres, would you mind if I named her Yossa, for I think she will overcome each challenge that is brought to her? I think it might be the best choice of all. The one that surpasses. It will, perhaps, give her the strength to take each day as it comes.”

“As thou do,” Iltres’ voice was soft. “That is not a bad name, and I find it good that thou have such a care, not only for her, but for me.”

He managed a wry smile. “Rest now, Iltres. The healers here will care for you. For now, I go to inform my grandfather of the news he would seek. I cherish the time we’ve had, and hope for the time ahead to be so good.” Then, with a final look at the girl in his soon-to-be bride’s arms, he nodded to Wystyl, and hobbled out of the temple. There were things that needed to be done, before he brought his family into his house permanently.