

YARULE'S DUTY

Legends of the Tauma

Vicktor Alexander

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

YARULF'S DUTY

By Viktor Alexander

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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YARULF'S DUTY

By Viktor Alexander

Photo Description

2 drawn images

- 1) A man with a naked upper torso. Long wavy red hair, purple eyes, wearing a leather thong necklace with a large red pendant. The background is a grayish sky.
- 2) A royal portrait of a man with blue eyes and dark bluish hair. He's wearing a white shirt with frills down from the neck and flared frilly sleeves. Over the shirt is a royal blue coat with gold detailing. His left hand holds the handle of a sword.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We are a very strict, conservative race. We are deeply formal, and decorum and honor are most important to us. So I'm sure you'll understand my utter dismay upon being married to one of those savages, those long-haired barbarians we had been fighting for centuries. And to a man, no less. I was to broker peace by bringing shame to my family and to my kingdom.

That was how I married into this happy, weird clan, this race of freedom and warmth that wouldn't know propriety if it hit them in the face. And I'm terrified. Terrified that that my dark, deviant, twisted desires will be brought to light for all the worlds to see. Not that my new family seem to care. From what I've seen, men holding hands or women kissing in the streets are as common as sunrise in this land.

And what am I supposed to do with my gorgeous, warm husband, who looks at me with such kindness in his eyes and a smirk I just want to kiss punch off his face? Or with that red-haired band of lunatics, with absolutely no concept of personal space, they call the royal family?

I'm starting to believe I could finally find myself here, and yet it is my duty to betray those that I've come to hold dearest. When I'm made to choose between duty and love, when the hour comes when I must favor a side, how will I do it without losing a part of myself?

Note: Please no D/s, BDSM, ménage or cheating. I'd absolutely love a sweet, funny story, more focused on quiet intimacy rather than scorching hot sex.

Sincerely,

Filipa

Story Info

Genre: historical/fantasy

Tags: magic, violence, alternate universe, royalty, warriors/soldiers, first time, enemies to lovers, in the closet, arranged marriage, HFN

Word Count: 24,440

YARULF'S DUTY
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Prologue

Deep within the Kingdom of Nerandra, there lives an ancient power. It is a magic gifted to the people who live within the kingdom's boundaries, giving them the ability to heal, to grow plant life, to have amazing strength and speed, to feel the emotions of the animals and vegetation around them.

And it is a magic that gives them the ability to procreate and grow the kingdom, even when outside forces try to prevent such a thing from happening.

This power is not unique and given only to the people of Nerandra. It exists within the other kingdoms as well. However, while the Kingdom of Troalath, with its people known as the Hery, had a healthy respect for the ancient power, they had long ago begun to deny its true power. The people of the Kingdom of Ereari, with the Gerey people, lost sight of the beauty of magic as they became more conservative and began to breed with the Rardierians, people from the Kingdom of Adethiel. The Jamunds, from the Kingdom of Jeravia practiced the ancient power, but were known for using their magic for selfish gain. However, the Kingdom of Nerandra and her people respected the power, honored the magic and were thankful to the Goddess Sadita, whom they called Shadita Lyra, for blessing them with it.

And still, as with most legends, the Kingdom of Nerandra was not without its enemies, for the Kingdom of Adethiel found the people of Nerandra to be barbaric, classless and undeserving of the lush, beautiful land they inhabited. The fact that the people of Nerandra also embraced, and even celebrated, same-sex unions was also cause for much discord and strife between the two kingdoms.

Greed, envy, and bigotry led to centuries of fighting between the two kingdoms, causing blood to be spilled all over the planet, seeping into the soil and causing the ancient power much distress. The people of Nerandra could sense the ancient power thrumming, growing, and becoming angered by their constant battles with the people of Adethiel, and so the royal family sought the wisest scribes to find a solution.

Before an answer could be found, however, the magic within Nerandra surged, causing her people emotional pain, though they did not know why. Seeking the source, the royal army rode out of the gates of the kingdom and found a family, sobbing, bruised and seeking revenge, huddled over their daughter.

Seeking vengeance, the army was dispatched towards Adethiel where the murderers of the child were from. Rage filled their hearts and clouded their minds making them unable to feel the prompting of the ancient power. Their magic, for once, being overwhelmed by their own emotions.

And so this army forged on, surrounded by magic that hid them from their enemies until it was too late, with their minds and hearts turned towards retribution.

And yet, the presence of one child of Nerandra, who was not really a child, but a man, within that army, changed things forever. For his magic still burned brightly within him, coiling and spinning, expanding and breathing life to all those he touched. He was a prince of Nerandra. A healer. And the ancient power, that magic which had begun to retreat from the other kingdoms and started to swell within the walls of Kingdom of Nerandra, began to grow within him.

His story, and that of the prince of Adethiel who had to choose between his duty and his heart, is where this legend really begins.

The legend of the Tauma.

Chapter One

Prince Yarulf Cossobberth, heir to the throne of Adethiel, sighed as his manservant, Biumula, moved around him to adjust the shoulders of his royal blue coat, grunting when the short, brown haired man stuck him, again, with a sewing pin.

“That is fifteen, Biumula,” Yarulf growled.

“I am sorry, Sire,” Biumula apologized with a squeak. Yarulf rolled his eyes and tried to keep his body as still as possible as Biumula tugged on the bottom of the coat to make further adjustments. He still could not comprehend why his father, King Gilrad, insisted on him wearing such an ugly garment. Yarulf wasn't sure if it was the gold detailing, like sharply angled leaves woven into the cloth, or the belt that just *had* to go with it, but Yarulf had the insane urge to rip the blasted garment from his body and hurl it across the room.

“Your Highness? You must cease from twitching if I am to finish the adjustments in time for your sister's wedding,” Biumula said softly.

Yarulf sighed in disgust and stopped moving, even though he hadn't been aware that he was doing so.

“I don't even understand why I have to go to this blasted wedding, Biumula,” Yarulf grouched. “It is Sumardea's wedding, not mine. I had absolutely no say in her marrying the Jamund. If I'd had the chance to give my opinion, she would be marrying a Rarder, someone worthy of her position as one of the princesses of Adethiel. Hell, even a Gery would be preferable to a Jamund.” Yarulf did not consider himself a snob, but the Jamunds, people from the Kingdom of Jeravia, were loud and crass. While the Gery, from the Kingdom of Ereari, were educated and conservative, even if they did have the misfortune of having pointed ears. And then there was that whole same-sex business. They were almost as bad as the Tauma, people from the Kingdom of Nerandra. Then again, nothing could be as bad as a Tauma.

Biumula gasped at Yarulf's use of profanity. Yarulf wanted to growl and grab the smaller, round man and shout out all of the profanity he'd heard spoken in the taverns by the peasants and the commoners. The ones he'd heard on one of his many secret escapes from the stifling restrictions of the life of a royal. But he did none of those things. Instead he sighed and lifted his head, adopting an air of decorum. Glancing down at Biumula, who hadn't moved

from his position in front of Yarulf, still looking up at him in shock, Yarulf inclined his head.

“Forgive my errant tongue, Biumula. I misspoke. I’m afraid having the soldiers constantly underfoot in the castle, what with the wedding plans and the increase to security, has caused me to pick up some rather, unpleasant habits,” he apologized. While he knew that apologizing to a servant was beneath a royal, he did not need Biumula gossiping about his use of the word “*hell*” to the other servants. Gossip like that tended to get back to his parents, and Yarulf had to try his hardest to stay away from his father’s assessing eye, lest the man discover Yarulf’s darkest, deviant desires.

Biumula nodded his head quickly. “It is quite alright, Your Highness. I am just a servant. You don’t need to apologize to me. I was just surprised that you would speak in such a way. It is quite unlike you.”

“Yes, well,” Yarulf straightened the bit of fluff that made up the ruffles at the collar of his stark white shirt and stared across his dressing room to a point on the wall. “I am afraid that there are many things that are not quite as they once were.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Biumula agreed though he sounded confused.

Yarulf tuned out the little man and continued to stare at the wall as Biumula continued with his tailoring. Yarulf was still flabbergasted that his parents were not only allowing his sister to marry the Jamund, Prince Dugezuu Caehigh of the Kingdom of Jeravia, but they were encouraging the match. All of his life, Yarulf had heard nothing but how he should be proud to be a Rardarian, how the Rardars were a proud race of people, noble, strong, moral, and conservative. They did *not* under any circumstances, mix with races that didn’t meet their strict conditions. There were only two other kingdoms that came close, the Kingdom of Ereari, where the Gerey people lived and the Kingdom of Troalath, where the Hery people came from. The Kingdom of Adethiel had a longstanding treaty with the other two kingdoms, and an unspoken agreement to find consorts for the royal offspring from among either the royal family or the members of the lords and counts. It had worked for millennia. Why would his father change his mind now? It made absolutely no sense.

“I guess I should be glad that he isn’t trying to marry her off to those Taumas from the Kingdom of Nerandra,” he muttered to himself.

“What was that, Your Highness?” Biumula asked.

Yarulf waved his hand at the servant and went back to his own thoughts.

The Kingdom of Adethiel had once been nothing more than a small patch of grass. Only large enough for a home, a barn and a few animals, when Yarulf's ancestor, Orazil Cossobberth, first inhabited it with his wife, Marikke, and their five children. They worked the land tirelessly, praying to the Goddess Sadita for prosperity and a plentiful harvest. The Goddess had done so much more. During a particularly bad storm, the mountains that surrounded the Cossobberth home crumbled down around them, giving the family more land, and buried deep inside of the rocks were gold and the most beautiful diamonds, rubies and other jewels. Orazil and his sons mined the mountains for years, while his wife and daughters worked the land. Before long, others traveled to the land, paying Orazil in order to be able to live on his property and to have the opportunity to mine the crumbled mountains as well.

Builders, blacksmiths, healers, teachers. They all came, and it was not long before there was a town where once there had only been a home and a barn. When a fight broke out between two men over a piece of gold and one of the men wound up dead, Orazil knew that he needed to establish laws. Soon he and a group of men he hand-picked were the rulers of this country. Adethiel, which meant "*Sadita Will Provide*" in Rardarian. The town continued to grow, and it wasn't long before Orazil's son, Zhall, a wise and very shrewd man, had become king and turned the town into a kingdom. The Cossobberths had been in power ever since.

"I am finished, Your Highness. You may remove the coat," Biumula stated, breaking into Yarulf's musings.

Yarulf blinked and looked down at his manservant, a little taken aback that he'd allowed himself to lose focus in such a manner. As a soldier and heir to the throne, he was supposed to be aware of his surroundings at all times, never allowing himself to become distracted. Shaking off the cobwebs from his mind, Yarulf unbuckled the belt around his waist and pulled the coat off, handing it off to Biumula. He walked through the doorway into his bedroom and picked up the black coat with the red embroidery around the cuffs and pulled it on, sighing at the bland colors that were once again wrapped around him. He knew that no one in his family understood why he loved wearing black and dark brown, for they all loved to be extravagantly dressed in an assortment of colors and patterns, but it made him feel better. Able to blend in with his surroundings more, which was something he would not be able to do once he was king.

When he would be forced to take a wife.

And provide the kingdom with heirs.

Yarulf pressed his closed fist to his mouth as nausea curdled in his gut, willing away the reaction. He would not allow himself to give into that physical weakness. Especially not while Biumula was in the other room. The man was nose-y and would want to know if Yarulf was ill. There was no way that Yarulf would confess his deepest, darkest secret.

The things he dreamed about late at night.

The reason he touched his throbbing shaft in the pitch black.

And the real reason he snuck out of the palace every few months.

He hadn't done anything yet. He never would. But he liked to go out and see others who *did*.

"Yarulf! Yarulf!" his brother, Dubair's voice sounded frantic as he raced into the room. "They're here!" Seconds later the warning bells sounded, alerting the palace and the kingdom to invaders. Yarulf's heart pounded as he heard battle cries, shouts, and screams drifting up through his window and echoing throughout the halls of the castle.

Yarulf dropped his hand and turned to face his brother, shoving away his deviant thoughts of sweaty, hard limbs tangled together in sheets, and grabbed his sword and scabbard from where they lay on the bed.

"Who is here?" he asked, his tone firm even as he strode forward, his boots echoing loudly on the wooden floors of his bedroom. He struggled to remain calm and steady even as he trembled internally, his blood thrumming with the promise of battle. His palms grew sweaty and his mouth dry as he prepared himself for the inevitable: *To kill or be killed*.

"The Tauma, those savages! They are accusing Father of sending an army into their kingdom's territory and attacking them. They are saying that a child was murdered and are demanding retribution!" Dubair said breathlessly as he raced behind Yarulf. Yarulf's mind rebelled at his brother's words, at the accusation of the Tauma. His father would never do such a thing. He growled at the false claim as rage flooded him. He ignored the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him there might be some truth to the Taumas' claims.

Yarulf raced from the room, heading through the corridors of the palace towards the courtyard where the sound of yelling and the clanking of steel could be heard. Soldiers raced alongside him, running down the stairs to launch themselves into battle. Servants headed towards the lowest part of the castle to hide and wait for the battle to end. Yarulf's blood began to pound in his veins,

the thrill of battle rushing through him, even as his soul and heart mourned for the murdered child.

“What are they demanding in retribution?” he asked his brother as they raced down the stairs.

“They want Sumardea.”

Yarulf slipped on the step in front of him at his brother's words, tumbling headfirst down the stairs. He could hear his brother yelling his name, as he continued to fall until he finally came to a stop at the bottom with a grunt.

Looking up at the stone ceiling, Yarulf struggled for breath, his entire body a knot of pain and agony, though whether it was from the tumble he'd just taken or because those barbarians, those *fucking* barbarians, wanted his little sister, he didn't know.

“Yarulf! Are you alright?” Dubair asked.

Yarulf pushed to his feet with a groan, allowing his younger brother to help him, and nodded. His body protested his moving, but Yarulf had a duty to fulfill, not only to his people, but to his sister. Dubair's bright blue eyes, which looked so much like Yarulf's, were filled with concern.

“I am fine,” Yarulf told the younger man, reaching up to smooth his thick, dark-blue hair into some semblance of order and turned towards the doors. “Let us go and protect our people, Dubair, and more than that, let us go and defend our sister from those barbarians.”

Chapter Two

Milenther Dagorn, a proud Tauma Prince of Nerandra, rode his stallion into the middle of the melee a grimace on his face as his eyes swept over the battle erupting around him. He hated fighting. He wasn't a warrior. He was a nurturer, a healer. It was what he was born to do. The fact that his father, King Fiacus, had commanded him to ride out with the army was beyond preposterous. Even his mother, Dravica, had tried to reason with his father against sending him with his brothers, but his father had been adamant.

"Milenther! Pull your head out of your *dulanthar*!" His older brother, Reprimuric, his flaming red hair pulled back tightly into a ponytail, yelled as he brought down the handle of his sword onto the head of an enemy soldier.

Milenther shook his head and nodded before he threw himself into the battle. His hand shook as he pulled his own sword from its scabbard and let out a yell before shutting down his mind and slashing the steel at the torsos of the advancing enemy. He knew what they were fighting for. There was a dead child in their village. A family in mourning. All because the Rarders thought they were superior to the rest of the world, but the thought of fighting still tied Milenther's stomach in knots. Only remembering the broken, bleeding body of the Tauma child, who, while out in the kingdom's territory with her family, distant cousins to Milenther's family, was struck down by the Rardarian army, kept him engaged in the battle.

Milenther turned his attention back to the fight but found his attention arrested by the appearance of a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-blue-haired *god*. He raced out into the battle. His blue eyes blazed like fire as he took in the scene. His mouth pulled down into a frown before he raced headlong into the middle of the skirmish, and Milenther had the urge to send his horse towards him to protect him. Him, the stranger, the Rarder.

It made no sense. Milenther was not sure who he was, though he knew they fought for opposite sides. Which made them enemies, and judging by the other man's attire, he was a royal, which really made him Milenther's enemy. And yet, Milenther's heart sped up at the sight of him. His cock hardened, and he found himself hoping, wishing, longing for the other man to look up at him, to smile at him, to come to him and ask for his name.

Milenther let out a grunt when he felt someone grab his hair and tug it. His healing powers flared within him rushing to his scalp, and Milenther turned his

head to look at the perpetrator. Didn't they know anything about the Tauma? Did they not know how special, how precious the hair of a Tauma was? The hair of the Tauma contained their power, their strength, and their very life's essence. The Rarder pulling on his hair was tugging on the very core of who he was. Seeing the ice cold rage in the Rarder's eyes, Milenther pulled back his sword and ran the tip of his sword through the other man's belly.

He heard his brother, Catillawn, let out a victory squall and jumped slightly as the Rarder released his hair and fell to the ground.

"Milenther has made his first kill!" Catillawn exclaimed.

Milenther's face flamed, and he looked around as the Tauma army continued fighting but with renewed vigor, their yells and shouts louder as they took pleasure in his kill.

I'm going to be sick.

Recalling his halted training as a warrior, Milenther shoved the image of the fallen Rarder into one corner of his brain. He needed something else to focus on, to think about. He needed something that was going to remove the lifeless gaze from his mind's eye, if only for a moment.

"Milenther! Look out!" Catillawn shouted.

Milenther blinked and ducked just as an ax came flying towards his head. Sighing in relief, he firmed his jaw and returned his attention to the battle raging on around him. He had no time for daydreaming. He was in the middle of a battle. He could put his hand to his groin later and think about the dark-blue-haired beauty, when they had won this battle and made the Rarders pay for the grief they had caused the Taumas. Right now he had to fight.

Yarulf winced as his head was yanked back by the Tauma prince, Reprimuric.

"We do not want your land, or your palace. We do not even want your paltry money. We want an eye for an eye. We want what you have taken from us."

Yarulf trembled, his body weak as blood flowed from the cuts on his body. He glared at the Tauma army that held his own army in a similar submissive fashion. His father and mother were kneeling in the middle, in the dirt. His sister was the only one standing, her head raised in a sign of defiance as she glared at the Tauma prince.

Yarulf wanted to leap up from where he knelt on the ground and drive a knife through the barbarian's chest, but his father shook his head. They had been beaten, bested, and while Yarulf knew that his father was cunning and smart and undoubtedly had a trick up his sleeve, he would not go against the rules of the spoils of battle.

"You have bested us, it is true, Prince Reprimuric. However, my daughter, Sumardea is with child. It is why we were having such a hasty wedding," Gilrad said.

Yarulf's eyes widened, and he looked at Sumardea, who blushed and looked away from him, her eyes darting up to Dugezuu before looking away. Yarulf could scarcely believe it. The Rarders were a moral, conservative, noble race. The women did not engage in pre-marital relations unless they were lightskirts and then only if they were women of ill-repute and were paid handsomely to do so. For his sister to be pregnant before she was married was unheard of. It was cause for scandal, for her to be shunned, for her to be sent away.

Yarulf shook his head. No wonder his parents had been so frantic about the wedding.

Reprimuric laughed loudly. "You Rarders and your rules and restrictions. Your moral code. Fine. We will not take your daughter. But we will take someone from your palace. The little girl that you killed was promised to the palace. She was to marry one of the princes when she came of age. You have prevented that from happening and so, whomever we choose will be married to one of us."

Gilrad gasped and so did the rest of Rarders. "But Your Highness, I have no other daughters..."

Reprimuric shrugged. "I don't give a fuck." Yarulf grunted as he was passed over to another soldier who held him by the hair just as tightly as Reprimuric.

Yarulf's jaw dropped, whether from the man's profanity or from the fact that the prince was going to marry two men together, he did not know. His heart pounded and his hands grew sweaty. He tried to wiggle out of his captor's grasp but winced when the Tauma soldier only clenched his hand tighter in his hair. Yarulf watched as Reprimuric turned and gathered a group of men together for a discussion, their red heads clustered together as they talked. Yarulf tried to listen to them, to hear what they said, but from this distance he could hear nothing.

When Reprimuric's shoulders tensed and he glanced over his shoulder and stared directly at him, the bottom dropped out of Yarulf's stomach.

"No. No, no, no, no," Yarulf whispered.

Reprimuric turned back around and continued to talk to the other men, his movements seemed frantic and agitated now, and Yarulf was desperate to know what was being said. Moments later they separated and Reprimuric turned around, crossing his arms over his wide, naked torso. He glared at Yarulf before turning to Gilrad. He pointed at Yarulf.

"My youngest brother, Milenther, has requested him. In order to bring peace between our two kingdoms, Adethiel and Nerandra, your son Yarulf will fulfill his duty and marry my brother, Milenther."

Chapter Three

Milenther had never been so nervous in his entire life. He stood, surrounded by his twelve brothers, and watched as Yarulf's trunks were loaded onto a carriage.

"Have you ever seen a man who had so many clothes?" Cunedith asked with a sneer.

"It won't matter how many clothes he brings with him. He won't need them once he gets back to Nerandra," Evien, Milenther's second oldest brother said, cleaning the dirt from beneath his nails with the tip of his dagger.

Milenther glared at his brothers and turned to face them with his hands on his hips. "Are you all going to be nice to him, or are you going to be complete assholes the whole time?"

Milenther watched as his brothers looked at each other before they grinned and said simultaneously, "Assholes." He rolled his eyes and laughed. His brothers were overprotective and overbearing, it was true, and they were all huge, broad-shouldered warriors, Princes of the Kingdom of Nerandra. When Milenther had been born, his parents had been positive he was a girl for the first three years because he'd been so small. He was just a girl with a cock. When he'd shown no affinity or desire for fighting, the outdoors, or physical activity growing up, his father had despaired, seeking the elders and the shamans to see if they could tell him what was wrong with his youngest son. It was only when Milenther had placed his hands on Pertink's open wound, his fourth oldest brother, and the wound had healed, that the family had realized Milenther didn't have a desire to fight because he was a healer.

Now, as Milenther watched his much larger, dark-haired *husband* walk towards the carriage, he wondered, for the first time in his life, if he wasn't good enough.

"Do you think he wishes that I was a warrior like the rest of you?" Milenther asked quietly.

Silence greeted his question for a long time, and growing concerned, Milenther looked around at his brothers and saw the way they all looked at him, worry etched on their tanned faces.

Ioellenan placed his large paw on Milenther's shoulder and squeezed slightly. "Milly," he said, using Milenther's nickname, something he only did

when he was trying to soothe Milenther's emotions. "I think you could be the fiercest warrior and that Rarder would still be one pissed *volke*."

Milenther looked over at the carriage where Yarulf was talking with his parents, his face pulled into a scowl as he glared at Milenther and his brothers, his arms folded across his chest and then back at Ioellenan. "Why?"

"Because, Little One, the Rarders do not believe as we do. They believe that only men and women should lay together. For a man and a man to lie together, or a woman and a woman, is disgusting and an abomination. Yarulf is bringing dishonor and shame to his kingdom and his family by marrying you. But he is doing it to bring peace. He does not like it. So you may want him, but you are fighting an uphill battle."

Milenther's eyes widened at his brother's words. He looked over at his new husband, a new understanding flooding his being. He did not know much about the Kingdom of Adethiel, having spent most of his life in the apothecary, the palace, the hospitals, and the schools caring for the sick and spending time with the children. He was not really cut out for the cutthroat world of politics and the bloodthirsty world of the military. He was a healer. He was a *zemitushu*. A homebody. A lover, not a fighter. So he didn't know a lot about the outside world. That had apparently done him a disservice when it came to being married to a Rarderian soldier. While he knew many other *zemitushus* who were just as fierce, or could be just as bloodthirsty in battle as their spouses, his being a prince and a healer had not afforded him the same courtesy. Now, his marriage to Yarulf, the Rarderian prince of Adethiel, was going to suffer for it.

What had he gotten himself into? How was he ever going to get his new husband to like him, much less love him, if the man thought the idea of the two of them being together was inherently wrong?

"And more than that, the fact that his father agreed to it, makes me suspicious," Reprimuric said, his tone suspicious, as he narrowed his eyes in Yarulf's direction. "I'm all for you being happy in your new marriage, little brother. However, until your new husband shows that his loyalties lie with the Tauma, I will not trust him."

"Does that surprise anyone?" Grote said with a laugh. The closest to Milenther in age, Grote's hair was cut short, stopping to just above his ears. His eyes were a bright purple, and he was the jokester of the group. He always knew what to say to make Milenther laugh.

Milenther chuckled and cuddled into Grote's side when his older brother wrapped his arm around him.

“Come on, Milly. I’ll give you a quick lesson on pleasing a man,” Grote said.

Reprimuric spluttered. “You will not! That is for Father to do!”

Grote shrugged. “We have two days of riding ahead of us, and we do not need to use the magic wielders to keep us hidden as we do so. Once we return home, Father is going to give Milly a beautiful, romantic lesson about love and emotions. I’m going to tell him about nipples, cum, cocks, balls, and swallowing.” He wagged his eyebrows, and Milenther’s face flamed at his brother’s crassness even as he hurried after him curiously.

Yarulf focused his attention on his father, his arms folded across his chest as he struggled to not scream out against the injustice of it all.

“My son, I know that you are infuriated and disgusted by the circumstances you currently find yourself in, but, believe me, we can work this to our advantage.”

Yarulf narrowed his eyes, trying not to show how much he doubted his father’s words, but also trying not to show how incredibly turned on he was by his new *husband* either. *Cyalni* above! Was he actually married to a Tauma barbarian? Granted, their wedding ceremony had merely consisted of signing the peace treaty and acknowledging in front of the holy eunuch that they would be wed, but still, in the eyes of the Adethiel kingdom, he was married to Milenther Dagorn. Well, Milenther Dagorn-Cossobeth or rather he was now Yarulf Cossobeth-Dagorn, since his kingdom was the one that had been conquered.

“How shall we work this to our advantage, Father?” Yarulf asked.

“You will of course be allowed to correspond with your family. Whether it is through visits home, or through letters and messengers. Either way, you will use the ancient language that your grandfather created for battle to communicate, and you will provide us with secrets, intel, weaknesses. And when the time is right, when they are at their most vulnerable, you will let us know, and you will join with us and help us to not only defeat the Tauma but to completely wipe them from existence.”

Yarulf looked into his father’s blue eyes, shivering at the cold, unholy, calculating glee that gleamed within them and then to his left, where his new husband stood surrounded by his brothers. Milenther and his twelve brothers

stood surrounded by the Tauma army, their red hair gleaming in the waning sun, their chests shining with sweat, and Yarulf's throat went dry with lust. His stomach clenched as he thought about betraying these people, especially as he watched them smile and laugh, patting each other on the backs, teasing and shoving each other, Milenther the smallest and thinnest one of the bunch. They wore brown leather kilts around their waists, and though Yarulf would deny it, they seemed a lot happier than he had ever been in his entire life.

And that pissed him off.

"I'll do it."

Chapter Four

Milenther glanced over his shoulder at the carriage for the fourteenth time and sighed before he turned back around to face forward.

“You know, for a soldier, your new husband is a bit of a pussy.”

Milenther glared at his brother Daimiro and growled. “He was injured, Daim,” he offered in way of explanation, “and would not allow me to heal him as you all did. So allow him to travel in his carriage with his manservant. Besides, I am sure he needs this time to come to grips with the fact that he is leaving his kingdom behind and coming to Nerandra. If the shoe were on the other foot, I know I would want my husband to extend me the same courtesy.”

Daimiro snorted. “If the shoe were on the other foot, Milly, you would have figured out a way to escape with your manservant without him being the wiser, while your new husband rode with his brothers ahead of you on his horse.”

Milenther chuckled before a feeling of dread filled him. His eyes widened and he turned to look at Daimiro. His brothers ceased their chatter and all conversation came to an abrupt halt. Milenther turned his mount around and maneuvered him back towards the carriage. Easing down off the side of his horse, Milenther wrenched open the door of the carriage, worry flooding his body at the possibility of finding it empty.

He gasped when he found himself face to face with his husband, the blue eyes filled with a sort of cold amusement. Yarulf's lips pulled up into a smirk as he leaned forward and stared at Milenther.

“Did you expect to find me gone, *husband*?” Yarulf asked.

Milenther swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat from embarrassment and scratched the back of his neck as he looked over his shoulder at his brothers, who all whistled and walked away. He stammered as he looked back at his new husband.

“Or perhaps you merely raced back to the carriage to check on the well-being and the countenance of your new *husband*?” Yarulf asked, his lip raising in disgust as he put emphasis on the word husband.

Milenther's face grew hot, but he tried to smile reassuringly at Yarulf, to placate him. However, he caught sight of the wince on his new husband's manservant's face. It gave him pause. Perhaps this type of behavior was normal

for his husband. Maybe this highhandedness was his normal way of behaving. If it was, Milenther was not going to put up with it. He may be smaller than his new husband; he may not be a warrior or a soldier, but he was Tauma, and it was engrained in his genetic makeup to stand up for what was right, for what was good and pure, and he would do just that.

“No, actually, I came to tell you that since you are a soldier and I am not, you are to ride the horse. I am going to ride in the carriage,” Milenther told him.

Yarulf's eyes widened. “What?” he stammered.

Milenther nodded. “Or we could both ride the horse.” He shrugged. “It's really up to you. But either way, as a soldier, you are not to ride in the carriage. It is not fit for the husband of a Tauman prince to ride in the carriage unless he is at the *River of Zenith*, preparing to enter into the Great Beyond. Even then he is to try and ride a horse. You are to ride a horse at all times. So, get out of the carriage and get on a horse. You can either ride my horse alone and let me ride in the carriage with your manservant, or we can ride my horse together.”

Milenther grinned at Yarulf.

“The choice is yours.”

Yarulf clenched his jaw as he stared at Milenther's smug face and then glanced over at Biumula, who looked back at him fearfully. He knew that his manservant did not want to ride with Milenther in the carriage alone, but Yarulf also did not want to ride on a horse with Milenther. The thought of being pressed against the other man's naked back, or having Milenther's naked chest pressed against his back made Yarulf's groin tighten. He wouldn't be able to keep his twisted desires a secret that way. But what choice did he have? He couldn't put his manservant into the unpleasant position of having to sit with the barbarian.

Yarulf growled, opened the carriage door and stepped out. He climbed down the steps. “I will ride with you,” he said between clenched teeth.

“Oh look, the prissy Rarder is actually going to ride a horse!” one of the Tauma soldiers mocked him.

“Cieron!” Milenther yelled, his face flushed red. Yarulf's eyebrows rose in the face of his husband's anger. “He may be a Rarder, but he's still a prince of Adethiel, and as such, he outranks you. Not only is he a prince, he is my

husband, which means he commands respect. I may not be a warrior like my brothers, but I am still a prince.”

Cieron bowed his head from where he sat atop his horse, glaring at Yarulf before he looked apologetically at Milenther. “Apologies, Your Highness.”

“*Seken.*” Milenther said, thanking the soldier for his apology, then looked over at Yarulf. “Shall we?”

Yarulf nodded, a small seed of respect for his husband burrowing itself inside of his heart. As he followed Milenther towards his horse, Yarulf found his eyes drifting down over Milenther’s naked back to his pert, round ass. Yarulf’s mouth went dry, and his mind filled with salacious images of himself kneeling behind Milenther, his tongue buried in the red-haired man’s bum.

He was pulled out of his dark musings by the sound of someone clearing his throat. Yarulf glanced up to see Milenther’s older brother Madita staring at him with a smirk on his face.

“Better get on the horse, Rarder,” Madita said with a chuckle.

Yarulf cleared his throat hoping no one saw his hardness pressing against the front of his breeches as he walked over to the horse, placed his right foot in the stirrups, swung his left foot over the back of the horse, and settled himself in the saddle.

Milenther stared up at him and smiled. “How do you want me?” he asked softly. Yarulf swallowed and shoved away the images that filled his mind, sure that Milenther didn’t mean his words the way Yarulf had taken them. He shook his head and wondered which position would wreak less havoc on his senses. Knowing that if Milenther were sitting in front he would feel Yarulf’s hard shaft, Yarulf pressed forward and gestured behind him.

Milenther nodded and held up his hand. Huffing out a breath of annoyance, Yarulf reached down to help Milenther up into the saddle behind him. When Milenther’s toned arms wrapped around his waist, and the other man’s warm breath blew against the side of his neck, Yarulf shivered slightly, and realized that he may have made a mistake.

“Milly? Can we go?” Yarulf looked over at Milenther’s brother Nusaces and scowled. The broad shouldered man looked as if he were exasperated with Milenther and, for some reason, that irritated Yarulf. Pulling Milenther tightly against his back, Yarulf glared at Nusaces.

“Perhaps you could be a little more patient with your youngest brother? As I understand it, he is a healer, not a warrior and soldier like you, your brothers, and I. He has fought in a battle, survived, gotten married and ridden half a day astride a horse with nary a complaint. I have heard some of your own soldiers, who are currently bringing up the rear of your caravan, who cannot boast of the same fortitude. So before you dare show that impatient glower towards my husband and your brother again, remember that he has matched you in endurance this day, without being trained to do so.” Yarulf picked up the reins of the horse’s bridle and, after clicking his tongue, lightly pressed his heels into the horse’s side. Leaving a stunned Nusaces staring after him and Milenther as they went to join Milenther’s other brothers at the front of the returning military caravan.

“Wow,” Milenther breathed against Yarulf’s neck.

Yarulf shivered. “What?” he croaked out.

Milenther shook his head against Yarulf’s shoulder. “N-no one’s ever really stood up for me before.”

Yarulf looked over his shoulder at Milenther, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Really? I find that hard to believe. You and your brothers seem very close.”

Milenther shrugged. “We are. Extremely close. No one really messes with me outside of them. They tease me all the time and my parents are always telling me that I just need to grow a thicker skin because my brothers are joking with me. But do you know what it’s like to be surrounded by warriors and not be one? No one’s ever really pointed out to them that, even though I’m different from them, I still keep up. That was—wow.”

Yarulf didn’t want to examine the warm feeling expanding in his chest. He couldn’t feel anything for this barbarian. For this... Tauma. He wasn’t going to be in Nerandra for long. He was only going to be there long enough to get information. For the family to trust him and reveal their weaknesses. Then he would convey the information to his father, and at the right time, Adethiel would strike and wipe the Tauma off the map. Yarulf would walk away and forget that he’d ever been married to Milenther.

He’d forget that Milenther’s arms had ever been wrapped around him.

That Milenther’s breath ever feathered the hairs at the base of his skull.

That he could feel Milenther’s heartbeat.

He'd forget all about the fact that the thought of Milenther *not* being his husband caused his stomach to clench and bile to rise in his throat.

He had a duty to fulfill and he was a Rarder. A Rarder always fulfilled their duty.

Chapter Five

Milenther yawned and opened his eyes, looking around blearily when he felt the horse come to a stop. He lifted his head from Yarulf's back and wiped the drool from the side of his mouth, blushing furiously and hoping his new husband didn't find his drooling disgusting. He tried to figure out where they were, but the inky darkness, coupled with the large trees of the forest that surrounded them, made that impossible.

"We'll sleep here for the night and continue in the morning," Reprimuric stated loudly.

Milenther noticed the way Yarulf stiffened as he looked around and wondered what was going through the Rarder's head. Deciding that he would wait until they were bunked down for the night, Milenther kept his mouth shut. He leaned forward, allowing his hair to touch Yarulf more fully and made sure that as they had been riding, his hair and healing magic had been healing Yarulf's injuries. Satisfied that Yarulf's wounds were sealed and had become new flesh, Milenther sighed in exhaustion and relief.

"Milly, you and your *husband*, can take the tent. His manservant can sleep in the carriage, that way we don't have to hear the carriage rocking," Milenther's older brother Jacoun teased him.

Milenther flushed and felt Yarulf chest vibrate as he growled.

"Do you all always speak in such a manner?" Yarulf asked.

Jacoun looked at his brothers and back at Yarulf. Milenther felt confusion fill him, what was wrong with what his brother had said? He knew that he'd complained about his brothers teasing him, but he'd been talking about them teasing him about being a healer, or being smaller. This was them showing their support for his marriage. What was Yarulf's problem?

"You got a problem, Rarder?" Silain, another of Milenther's brothers, said, scowling at Yarulf.

Yarulf sighed, and Milenther unwrapped his arms from around the other man's waist and watched as Yarulf climbed down off the horse, steadying the large animal. Before he turned to face Milenther's brothers, he folded his arms across his chest, the fabric of his jacket pulling taut across his biceps and shoulders. Milenther's mouth went dry at the sight, and he dropped his hand to his lap to hide his hardening erection.

“I understand that the Tauma are a... classless society. You lack morals and dignity, but what I may or may not be doing with your brother is not something that you should be thinking about, much less discussing in public,” Yarulf said.

Milenther's eyes widened at his husband's words and he could tell from the way his brothers all slowly lowered themselves from their own horses and walked towards Yarulf that things were about to get really ugly, really fast.

“Sil! He is not like us. Let us remember this. Mother would not have you behave this way,” Milenther pleaded with his brother in their native tongue.

Yarulf's head swung towards him when he heard Milenther speak, and it was that moment of distraction that cost him. Milenther's brothers pounced on him when his head was turned and lifting him above their heads, they walked with him, shouting and demanding to be put down, through the forest towards parts unknown. Milenther hurried down off the horse, tumbling ungracefully to his face with a grunt of pain. The cluster of trees was too close together for his horse to get through, and he wondered for a moment why his brothers had chosen this place to stop. Until he passed through the trees and came to a breathtaking beach.

His eyes took in the sight of the rolling blue waves and the clean sand that pressed sensuously against a wide grassy meadow. Milenther inhaled deeply, the salty sea air filling his lungs and calming his anxious spirit. For the first time since his father had sent him with his brothers to fight against the Rarders, Milenther felt himself relax and become at peace. He'd always felt a closeness with nature and being here on this beach made him feel as if a part of his soul were being cleansed from the filth of battle.

A harsh yell pulled him out of his spiritual introspection, and Milenther turned to see his brothers toss Yarulf into the sea. Milenther gasped and ran forward. He stopped at the edge of the water and watched as Yarulf stood, spluttering, his thick, dark-blue hair dripping and plastered around his face and head. His fancy clothes clung to him like a second skin, and Milenther swallowed back the moan that threatened. He could only hope that none of his brothers looked his way right then, because he had a serious problem going on beneath his kilt in that moment.

His brothers chortled at Yarulf's discomfiture, and as Yarulf raced towards them each individually, they easily evaded him. Milenther stood at the edge, watching as his brothers essentially teased his new husband, and wondered if Yarulf knew that his brothers were welcoming him into the family.

After racing past Evien and having the man use his momentum to lift him and toss him back into the water, Yarulf stood, squaring off against Milenther's twelve brothers, and glared at each of them. Milenther gnawed on his bottom lip, realizing that his husband didn't understand that this was the way many Tauma men welcomed a brother-in-law into the family. He stepped forward to explain when he saw Yarulf's blue eyes settle on him.

Milenther froze when that cool gaze traveled up and down his form, before resting on his groin. He watched Yarulf's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed and looked back up into Milenther's eyes. He regarded Milenther intensely before looking back at Milenther's brothers. Then, to Milenther's complete surprise, Yarulf began pulling his clothes off piece by piece until he only wore his trousers, having tossed everything up on the beach near Milenther. Crouching into a fighting pose, one leg behind the other, he beckoned Milenther's brothers mockingly.

"I am ready Tauma bastards. Bring it on."

Yarulf finally understood that Milenther's brothers had, in their own way, been welcoming him into their family. He wasn't exactly sure how he felt about it. Whenever someone married into a Rarder family there was a huge banquet, a formal celebration with well-dressed people as they welcomed the new member of the family. Of course, the Tauma were not as cultured as the Rarder so he should have expected that their way of welcoming him into their family would be completely different.

He watched as Milenther's brothers traded looks before they smirked at him. Letting out battle cries they came at him one after the other. Grappling and wrestling in the water ensued, and Yarulf found himself laughing as he tussled with the muscled Tauma warriors. He was tossed into the water more times than he cared to think about, but before long, he and all of the other men rested on the beach on their backs, chuckling.

Milenther stood above them, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared down at all of them, his eyebrow quirked.

"Are you all done with your display of brawn?" he asked.

Yarulf felt a surge of lust and adrenaline rush through him, and he had to fight the urge to leap to his feet and sweep Milenther up into his arms and kiss the other man senseless. Or to give into his other, darker desires and push his erection deep into the slender man's body.

“Oh Milly, calm down. Your new husband has done well. Father will be proud of the match that you have made,” Daimiro said.

Milenter scoffed. “Yeah well, that is not the point. The point is, that we stopped so that we could eat, cleanse our bodies and sleep, so that we could continue our journey tomorrow. Yet you all are acting like children.”

Yarulf pushed himself up into a seated position and turned to look at Milenter, his eyebrows raised at the other man's tone. He would have thought that Milenter would have been happy that Yarulf had been bonding with his brothers. Instead, it seemed as if he were annoyed.

Silain chuckled. “Fine, Milly. We'll act like adults and get the camp set up.”

Milenter nodded, turned on his heel, and walked off. Yarulf watched as he walked away before turning to the man's brothers, opening his mouth to question them. Grote shook his head and held up his hand.

“Milly isn't really upset that we were having fun with you. He's just upset that you were having fun without *him*. I think you need to go and talk to your new husband, Rarder,” Grote said.

Yarulf nodded, nervousness settling in his belly as he stood, brushing the sand from his ass. Could he trust himself to talk to Milenter without pulling the other man to him tightly and ravishing him in the middle of the forest? Regardless of the fact that they were essentially wed, Yarulf had been raised to believe that two men lying together was inherently wrong. A depravity, a dark and perverse desire. It was one of the reasons that his father wanted the Tauma exterminated. It was the reason Yarulf hid his own desires so fiercely. Milenter made those desires extremely hard to ignore.

I am a soldier and prince of the Kingdom of Adethiel. I can talk to a Tauma male and not be ruled by my flesh.

Squaring his soldiers, Yarulf marched after Milenter. He found the other man standing by his horse, removing his saddlebags and directing the army towards the beach to set up the camp. Yarulf stood and watched the play of muscles in the other man's back for a moment. His mouth grew dry, and he imagined himself walking over to Milenter and licking the naked skin from the man's neck down to his round, pert ass.

Swallowing back his groan, Yarulf walked up to Milenter and cleared his throat. He saw Milenter stiffen for a moment, but the other man continued his earlier actions without turning around or even acknowledging Yarulf's

presence. Realizing that he was going to have to actually speak to his husband, Yarulf sighed for a moment. Yarulf tried to figure out what to say.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Milenther turned to assess him, his gaze traveling up and down Yarulf's body for a long moment before he stared deep into Yarulf's eyes. “Do you actually want to help, Rarder, or are you merely asking to be nice?” Milenther asked. “Because your manservant did the same thing.”

Yarulf looked over to where Biumula sat on the edge of the carriage, watching as one of the Tauma warriors carried the supplies through the forest towards the meadow, his tongue tracing his lower lip, and raised his eyebrows in amazement. When Biumula's gaze swung over to Yarulf he blushed furiously at being caught and looked away ashamedly. Yarulf knew, when he got a chance, he would be talking with his manservant about more than just his unwillingness to assist with setting up camp.

“I will talk with him later, Milenther, but I really would like to help,” Yarulf assured the Tauma.

Milenther nodded and handed Yarulf his saddlebags. “Well then, I thank you. Can you take this to the clearing?”

Yarulf nodded and accepted the saddlebags from Milenther. Their fingertips touched and Yarulf inhaled sharply at the zing of awareness that coursed through him. He took a step back and looked down at his hands before glancing at Milenther to see if the other man was similarly affected. When he noticed Milenther rubbing his fingers together, as if confused by the shock, Yarulf was pleased that he wasn't the only one who had experienced the sensation. When Milenther looked up at him, Yarulf smiled at him feeling an urge to lean over and kiss the other man's full lips. He might have done just that if his father's voice hadn't penetrated his mind at that moment, reminding him of why he was there. Straightening to his full height, Yarulf nodded to Milenther and turned to walk away.

“Yarulf?” Milenther called. Yarulf stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Milenther, his heart pounding as he watched Milenther free his hair from the ponytail he'd had it in and run his fingers through the long strands. “I look forward to tonight.”

All of the air in Yarulf's lungs left him in a rush, and turning back around, he hurried through the forest to the clearing to place the saddlebags into the tent he would be sharing with Milenther.

The Tauma.

A man.

His husband.

Chapter Six

Milenter shook his head as he watched Yarulf rush away from him. He didn't understand what had just happened. He'd seen the desire in the Rarder's eyes, darkening the blue orbs. It had pulled him in, making him want to ignore all of the warriors and animals around them and strip his clothes as he begged Yarulf to fuck him. Shivering as the image of Yarulf and him locked in such an intimate embrace rose to his mind, Milenter cleared his throat and turned back to his horse, rubbing his hands along the animal's side in an attempt to calm his racing heart.

"You should not get your hopes up, Tauma," a voice said behind him. Milenter turned and found himself looking into the eyes of Yarulf's manservant, Biumula if he remembered the man's name correctly. Milenter's eyes took in the sight of the other man as he tried to figure out if the warning came from friend, foe, or jealous lover.

Biumula was a few inches shorter than Milenter, with the dark hair that was common with most Rarderians. But his ears were slightly pointed, which spoke to his having a Gerey heritage. Where Milenter was slender, Biumula was round, though not in an entirely unpleasant way. Where Yarulf's eyes were a gorgeous, dark-blue color, Biumula's were an interesting blend of blue and green. Milenter found himself intrigued by them, probably more than he should have been. Shaking his head mentally, he placed a hand on one of his hips resting the other on the back of his horse while he regarded the manservant carefully.

"I don't know what you mean, Rarder," he said with a tight smile.

Biumula scoffed as he walked closer and gestured with a tilt of his head in the direction where Yarulf had just ran off. "Yarulf is a proud prince of the kingdom of Adethiel. He follows the rules and customs of our people without fail. Two men lying together is against our laws. That is not something that he would ever go against. Even if he has been forced to marry you."

Milenter glanced over his shoulder towards the forest, his thoughts swirling as he contemplated Biumula's words. Could the manservant be right? Yarulf had run away from him quickly. Perhaps theirs would not be the marriage that Milenter had been fantasizing about for the past few hours.

No sooner had that thought entered his mind, than he remembered the way Yarulf's blue eyes had darkened with desire as he'd looked at Milenter. Yarulf

may be trying to fight against his attraction to Milenther, but that attraction was still there. And Milenther would do everything he could to make sure that his husband saw that two men being together was not wrong but was, indeed, very beautiful.

Turning back to Biumula, Milenther smiled and nodded at him. “*Seken* for your advice, Rarder. I shall take it under... advisement. Now, if you will excuse me. I find that I have need to wash myself.”

With that, Milenther walked away from the speechless Biumula and made his way through the forest and to the sea. He heard his brothers and the other Tauma warriors teasing each other as he approached them, and he smiled at them when they asked him to come and join them in a game of shaconr. It was a game of skill, not brawn, and it was one that Milenther had beaten his brothers at numerous times over the years. Usually he didn't pass up a chance to display his mental prowess, but he had more important things on his mind.

He was acutely aware of Yarulf standing just outside of the tent they would be sharing that night. It sat on the edge of the grass, away from the rest of the camp. Milenther walked past the tent before stopping at the edge of the water and inhaling deeply to prepare himself for what he was about to do. He wasn't as bold as his brothers. It came from being a healer, and the youngest. He'd spent his life being coddled and babied, sheltered from most things, almost hidden away. But, if he wanted to make sure that he and Yarulf had a chance at having a real marriage, he was going to have to show the man that being with another man was not wrong.

Resolved in his actions, Milenther nodded and reached down to remove his belt from around his waist. He dropped it to the sand even as he reached up to pull his baldric over his head and lay it on the ground next to his belt, carefully, since it held not only his sword but some healing potions and herbs within the leather pouches, and they were quite delicate. While he was bent over, Milenther pulled off the leather sandals that were strapped up his legs to his knees. Once that was done, he released the fastening on his kilt and let it fall on top of the rest of his things. He heard a choked gasp and smirked. Yarulf sounded a lot closer than the tent and it gave Milenther hope.

Stretching his arms up above his head, making sure to put his body on display for his husband, Milenther ran his fingers through his hair, before he bent back over, his ass pointed directly at Yarulf, as he pulled out his bar of lye soap mixed with strips of bergamot and cinnamon. Without a backward glance,

Milenther headed straight into the sea water to bathe, knowing that Yarulf would be watching him the entire time.

As Yarulf sat with the Tauma that evening, eating the elk some of the soldiers had hunted and skinned earlier for the meal, he was acutely aware of Milenther sitting on the log next to him. Watching Milenther undress for his bath earlier had been the most foolish thing that Yarulf had ever done. No. No. Watching Milenther bathe was the most foolish thing he had ever done, watching him undress was the *second*. Yarulf's shaft was still hard in his breeches, in spite of the fact that he'd shot his load twice during his own bath. He had no idea how he was supposed to sleep in the tent with the red-haired siren without giving into his depravities and fucking him until they both expired from bliss.

The thought of dying from too much pleasure caused Yarulf's lips to twist up into a smile and he turned to Milenther when the other man nudged him.

"What is that smile for, Rarder?" Milenther asked.

Yarulf shrugged. "Nothing. It was my own private thought, Tauma, or am I not allowed those?"

Milenther blinked and nodded, his cheeks colored slightly. "Apologies. I just wanted to share in whatever would bring a smile to your face."

Yarulf sighed. He'd been short with the other man, which hadn't been his intention. He would never be able to fulfill his duty to his father if he couldn't get close to these people, and the way to do that was through Milenther. He reached out to touch the back of Milenther's hand.

"No need to apologize. I must admit that my shortness with your question was not because I did not think you allowed me to have my own private thoughts or because I feel as though you and your family have caused me some offense. It is merely due to the... nature of the thoughts. They are of a more... intimate nature."

Milenther's eyes widened as he listened to Yarulf, and he glanced around, as if he were afraid that someone would overhear their conversation, then he looked back at Yarulf. He leaned closer. "I understand. I'm the same way. I don't like to share my sex fantasies with my brothers either."

Yarulf chuckled. "Well, these thoughts would have caused me much problem back home had anyone been aware of me having them. Because they were of me with another male. They were of me and you."

Milenther gasped and Yarulf's grin widened even more, perhaps this wouldn't be as hard as he'd originally thought. He watched as Milenther's pale cheeks reddened and a pleased expression came onto his face before the man looked over at him shyly. Yarulf had the insane urge to sweep Milenther into his arms and kiss him passionately, but he resisted, but only just barely.

He turned to look out across the fire and noticed that Milenther's brother Laselni watched them closely, rolling a piece of bark between his teeth. Yarulf scowled at the other man and glanced away from him, only to find Milenther's gaze trained on his face. He raised his eyebrows and hoped his expression was open and not too surprised.

"You think my brothers and I are truly barbarians, don't you?" Milenther asked with a tight smile on his face. It wasn't a happy smile. It was an expression that made Yarulf nervous when he saw it. Nervous and yet, still aroused.

Yarulf felt his own face heat. He opened his mouth to apologize but stopped when Milenther raised his hand and shook his head.

"Our people may not dress and act the way your people act, Yarulf, but that does not make us barbarians. We are free people. We laugh. We love. We are not bound by the restrictions that are placed on your people. That tell them, if they do not act a certain way, or if they do not speak or dress or live or even *love* a certain way, then that means that they are worthless." Milenther stood and glared down at Yarulf, his eyes flashing purple fire, and try as he might to resist it, Yarulf's dick leaked a bit of pre-cum. He found Milenther irresistible in his fury. "To you we may be the barbarians, but to us, you are the animals."

And with those words Milenther turned and marched off in a fury. Yarulf watched him and knew that had they been in Adethiel, in the Royal Theatre, at that very moment the crowd would have surged to their feet to applaud Milenther's impassioned speech. Yarulf himself was hard-pressed not to find a dozen *poszumus* flowers and toss them before the flame-haired beauty.

"So do you plan to sit there looking like a *dulanthar* for the rest of the evening, or are you going to go after him like the *chrabivina* that we think you are?" Brylir questioned Yarulf from across the fire, though he never once looked at him.

Yarulf's eyes widened at Brylir's use of the word *chrabivina*. Being called a *dulanthar*, an ass, was something he expected as a Rarder. But a *chrabivina*? A man of integrity and honor? A Tauma gentleman?

Guilt settled like a lead weight in Yarulf's gut. He nodded his head, pushed shakily to his feet, and, without another word, went after Milenther. What had he done to merit such quick trust and understanding from the Tauma? Was it engaging in their playful brawl in the sea? Was it assisting them in setting up camp? What had he done to gain such favor in their eyes?

Centuries of fighting between Rarders and Taumas had led to thousands of lives lost and hundreds upon thousands of families broken. There was no trust, no love lost between the two people, and yet, here he was, married to a Tauma prince, chasing after the man, with not only the blessing of the other Tauma princes to aid his cause, but their trust behind him.

Yarulf stumbled. Why were Milenther's brothers so supportive and encouraging? Perhaps this was all a part of their plan? To get him to chase after Milenther so that the Tauma could kill him out in the darkness.

"I don't know what you are thinking about so intensely, but I assure you, whatever it is, you are wrong." Milenther's soft voice drifted in the wind to him, and Yarulf turned to see him standing just to the left, leaning against a tree. Yarulf walked closer to him, his steps measured as he tried to assess if the other man was on the verge of attacking him or was merely in a contemplative state.

"How can you be so sure that whatever I am thinking is incorrect?" He asked.

Milenther shrugged. "You have been wrong about most things concerning me and my people. Since you are chasing after me, I naturally assumed that I was on your mind. Or my brothers." He tilted his head to the side as he regarded Yarulf silently. "So how about it, Your Highness? Was I correct in my thinking?"

Yarulf grunted and glanced away but did not answer. Instead he stepped closer to Milenther, so close he could feel the other man's breath on his skin. The warm air on his flesh caused Yarulf's skin to prickle and his nipples to harden. He stilled, the witty remark he'd been about to make locked inside of his chest. He stared down at Milenther, watching as the other man's eyes darkened.

When Milenther's tongue peeked out between the seam of his pink lips to wet the bottom one, Yarulf groaned. His hand lifted to tangle itself in the strands of Milenther's hair, even as his brain shut down. He gently pulled

Milenther's head back and lowered his down to inhale the intoxicating scent of Milenther's body.

His father's angry voice reminding him of his duty to his people was a distant hum in the back of his head. The rules and laws he'd grown up with, that he wrapped around him as a shield and flayed his spirit with whenever his groin tightened at the sight of another man, was just a tiny itch beneath his skin. One he easily ignored when Milenther's hands came up and fisted themselves in the back of his shirt.

Yarulf pushed out his tongue and licked a line up the side of Milenther's neck to his ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth. He growled at the taste of Milenther flooding his mouth even as his other hand dropped to wrap around Milenther's waist and pull them flush together. The feel of Milenther's erection rubbing against his own made Yarulf shiver, and he released Milenther's earlobe to kiss along Milenther's jawline to his chin. He nipped the skin there gently before lifting his head and staring down into Milenther's eyes.

What he saw there caused his heart to stutter and his lungs to expand quickly. Milenther's eyes had darkened to such a degree they almost seemed black. Yarulf knew it wasn't black magic or anything to fear, it was lust, desire... *need*. He knew, because he felt the same emotions echoing deep within himself.

With a snarl, angry at himself for being weak, angry at Milenther for being so fucking beautiful and desirable it made him weak, angry at his people for making same sex relationships wrong, and angry at the Tauma for not having an issue with it, Yarulf took Milenther's lips in a hungry kiss. The sounds of the forest stopped around them, as if someone had closed the door trapping Yarulf and Milenther inside a cavern, alone. Only the sound of Yarulf's frantically pounding heartbeat penetrated the harsh breathing, groaning, and whimpering that flowed up between him and Milenther, passing from one mouth to the other.

Milenther tasted sweet and slightly smoky, the food roasted over the fire combining with his natural flavor. Yarulf couldn't get enough, and he pressed himself even closer to the man. He slid his hand from around Milenther's waist to clutch the side of his ass. Yarulf trembled at the feel of the flesh filling his palm, and he pushed his tongue deeper into Milenther's mouth.

Their tongues dueled for dominance, something which thrilled Yarulf. None of the women he'd lain with back in Adethiel had ever fought with him for the upper hand and, although Milenther eventually conceded, melting into Yarulf's

arms, the fight for it, for control, thrilled him. Yarulf pushed Milenther against the tree, turning his head as he continued to plunder the man's mouth, biting gently on his lower lip, and licking away the sting.

Milenther's hands on the front of his breeches, fumbling with the fastenings, made Yarulf's mind fill even more with the fog of lust, and he slid his hand beneath Milenther's kilt just as the other man's hand slid down into the front of his open breeches to grip his shaft. Yarulf wrenched his mouth away from Milenther's and leaned his head back as he groaned. It was such a delicious feeling, his entire body felt aflame with need and yearning.

He gave himself a moment to bask in the feeling of Milenther's hands on him before Yarulf lowered his head to kiss and lick the base of Milenther's neck.

"I need to be inside of you," he panted. It had been a long time since he'd gone deep into the darkest parts of Adethiel to deal with his deepest desire. To stroke himself as he watched other men share their bodies with each other, but even if it had been just the day before, he still would be trembling with need. Lifting his hands from Milenther's body, Yarulf fisted them and pressed them on the trunk of the tree on either side of Milenther's head.

They stared into each other's eyes, sharing their desires without speaking, exchanging breaths as Yarulf inhaled, Milenther exhaled, and vice versa. Neither of them moved for long moments, until Milenther finally held up a vial of liquid. Yarulf flicked a glance at the gleaming blue substance inside and looked back at Milenther.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It will help you ease your way inside of me," Milenther told him.

The air locked in Yarulf's lungs, and he slowly released his breath before accepting the vial. He would worry about the implications of laying with the Tauma on the morrow. Perhaps then he would agonize about how what he had done was *wrong*. Right now he was going to stop fighting himself and give into the fire blazing throughout his body.

He pulled Milenther to him tightly for another kiss even as his hands pulled at the stopper in the vial. This oil was different from what he usually used, but as long as it worked...

Milenther pulled away from the kiss and brushed a hand against the side of his face. Not only did Yarulf's cock twitch, but his heart as well, and it gave

him only a moment of pause before he was once more back in the arms of his Tauma husband.

Chapter Seven

Milenther was nervous about finally giving himself to a man. And while he would have preferred to be in their tent, or rather in a bed back home, in the forest, alone, could work too.

Or at least that was what he was telling himself.

When Yarulf's fingers, slick with the stretching oil Milenther had brewed in the apothecary shop, moved over his hole, Milenther shivered. He moaned and tightened his fingers around Yarulf's shoulders. The firmness of the Rarder's body sent a thrill through him even as the cloth of his tunic, dampened from his sweat, chafed against Milenther's skin. His body was on the verge of bursting apart at the seams and he was helpless to stop it. He wasn't sure he wanted to. Instead he hissed out Yarulf's name and delighted in the feel of his broad fingers moving up, down and around his hole. Milenther's head pressed against the trunk of the tree, and he whimpered when Yarulf pushed the tip of one finger into his body.

"You are so tight. How is that possible? Has it been a while for you?" Yarulf sounded awed by that fact, and Milenther gave him a tight smile.

"I have never... been with another man, that is why," Milenther confessed.

Yarulf froze and he pulled his finger free. Milenther opened eyes he wasn't even aware of ever having closed and looked up into Yarulf's blue ones. How had he ever thought Yarulf's eyes were shards of blue ice? They blazed with a blue fire, and Milenther felt scorched, warmed from the inside out. He was desperate to be filled by Yarulf, to be stretched by his hardness.

"You are an *inxoten*?" Yarulf asked. Milenther was taken aback by the surprise and... possessiveness he heard in Yarulf's voice. The possibility that Milenther was a virgin obviously thrilled Yarulf, which sent an echoing shiver of delight to course through Milenther's body. He nodded, unable to speak, enflamed by the heat of desire in Yarulf's voice.

Yarulf's eyes closed for a moment as he exhaled, but when he opened them, he appeared to be a little more in control, though his eyes still gleamed with dark pools of passion.

"I will not take you against a tree in a forest for your first time," Yarulf promised. "Though we will revisit the idea. I find the idea of you naked in nature very attractive."

Yarulf's hand grabbing onto his own and tugging him forward, prevented Milenther from speaking. Shock warred with desire within him, his body flushing hot and cold as he tried to make sense of Yarulf's actions. He walked dazedly, stepping over branches, as Yarulf led him from the forest with neither of them speaking another word. As they drew closer to their tent, Milenther could hear his brothers and the Tauma soldiers sharing tawdry stories and singing bawdy songs of women with large tits and men with tight asses and huge cocks. Milenther's face flamed, and he looked up at the back of Yarulf's head wondering what the Rarder thought of the revelry.

Yarulf didn't say a word or mention what was happening at the fire, instead, he held up one side of the tent's opening so that Milenther could step within. A fact for which Milenther was both relieved and surprised. Perhaps Yarulf was growing accustomed to his people and their enthusiasm for life and laughter. Or perhaps, Yarulf was so aroused and intent on consummating their relationship that he paid the Tauma soldiers and Milenther's brothers no mind. Either way, Milenther kept his mouth shut as well and fixed his gaze on the back of Yarulf's head, happy that no one stopped them. Relief warred with his aching groin and clenching hole. He wanted to talk to Yarulf, to discuss things, and yet, he desperately wanted them to be joined together.

Once Milenther was inside, he removed his sandals and turned back to Yarulf to watch as the other man sat down on the animal pelts that made up the floor of the tent to remove his boots. Milenther inhaled sharply, a soft groan spilling out as his eyes watched the muscles in Yarulf's forearms constrict and move as he undressed completely. Yarulf continued, not stopping until he knelt on the bed in the center of the tent, completely nude. Milenther followed Yarulf's lead and removed all of his clothing, until he too stood bare in front of Yarulf. Fear caused his hands to shake as he took in the sight of Yarulf's naked form. Now that they were here, together, naked, Milenther was nervous and afraid. What if he did something wrong? What if he disappointed Yarulf? Would the Rarder cast him aside? What if Yarulf hated sleeping with him because he was a man? What if it hurt? Milenther had been told countless times that lying with a man would be painful.

Yarulf held out a hand to him, and Milenther stepped forward to accept it. He let out an exhalation as Yarulf tugged him against his broad, muscled torso, their chests colliding and erections rubbing against each other. Milenther trembled as Yarulf's hand moved up and down the skin of his back, soothing him. While still nervous, Milenther's fears were slowly being replaced by

excitement and anticipation. A sort of cautious excitement and hesitant anticipation, but it was there, nonetheless. He pushed himself as close as he possibly could get to Yarulf, rubbing his lips along Yarulf's neck. He smiled when Yarulf groaned and lifted his own hands to tangle them in the strands of Yarulf's dark-blue hair.

Milenther lifted his lips from Yarulf's neck and stared up into his husband's gaze. He lifted his lips as if Yarulf's mouth were drawing him in and pressed them against Yarulf's again. This kiss wasn't as punishing as the one in the forest, but it was still infused with passion and desire. Letting his instincts control his movements, Milenther moved up until he straddled Yarulf's lap. Milenther hissed when Yarulf licked and nibbled his way down his neck to his hardened nipples. He fisted Yarulf's hair and pushed his chest up as Yarulf lashed the pebbled nubs, his blunt fingertips back between the globes of Milenther's ass, rubbing, stroking and pressing gently at the entrance to his body.

"O-oh," Milenther breathed. His mind was awash in desire. Tendrils of passion licked at his skin, causing it to turn pink. His ears filled with his own whimpers and moans, a beautiful accompaniment to Yarulf's harsh breathing and deep groans, as he slid his finger deep within Milenther's body.

Milenther felt as if he were falling and realized, only when he felt the softness of the animal furs against his back, that Yarulf had effortlessly laid him down upon the bed. Yarulf's blue eyes gleamed in the firelight that penetrated the tent's covering as he looked down at Milenther.

"You are beautiful," Yarulf whispered. Milenther's eyes burned at the feeling in the other man's words and he wondered why Yarulf sounded almost saddened by what he'd just said. He opened to ask but his words were cut off by the press of Yarulf's fingers upon something deep within his body that caused Milenther's back to arch.

"Yaaaruulffff," he groaned as Yarulf continued to push against that small, glorious spot within Milenther's body. Milenther fisted the animal furs on either side of his hips as Yarulf continued to send his pleasure skyrocketing to new heights.

"I'm trying to be gentle with you," Yarulf growled.

Milenther looked up and noticed the way the other man's arm trembled as he held himself aloft over Milenther's body.

"I never asked you to be," Milenther pointed out. And as if that were the only thing he were waiting to hear, Yarulf began pushing his fingers in and out of Milenther's body, harder and deeper than before. He kissed and licked all over Milenther's torso, biting his nipples before digging his teeth in the base of Milenther's neck. Milenther gasped and arched his back.

Sweet, agonizing pleasure spread throughout his body from the point of that bite, his magic flaring within him as it recognized he was about to join his body with another, and he felt his balls draw up towards his body. Milenther wasn't sure if his brothers' magic reacted the same way, since they were warriors and the Tauman magic within them was merely a fraction of what it was within Milenther. But if their magic sizzled beneath their skin as well, it was no wonder they spent so much free time finding people to sleep with. He began panting, his hands moving from the back of Yarulf's head to the furs, trying to find something to keep him grounded.

Yarulf finally pulled his fingers from Milenther's body and rose up onto his knees between Milenther's legs. He stared down at Milenther, unspeaking, and Milenther was frozen by the conflagration of lust that burned within Yarulf's gaze. He was aware of movement, and he glanced down to see Yarulf pouring some of the oil onto his *quoxpine*.

"You have a *quoxpine*, not a cock," Milenther gasped out. His eyes taking in the long, thick shaft between Yarulf's legs and the large, heavy balls that hung beneath it. While he hadn't seen many cocks in his life, Milenther knew a *quoxpine* when he saw one.

Yarulf let out a choked chuckle and looked down at his hard shaft. "*Rucopa*," Yarulf said thanking him and smiling at Milenther.

Milenther shook his head. *Quoxpines* were only found on the most blessed of men. How Yarulf thought he would get such a thing inside of Milenther's channel, he did not know. Milenther's body tensed as he considered it from every angle but stopped when he felt Yarulf's hand on his chest soothing him.

"You have to relax so that I will fit, Mil. Do not worry," he said calling Milenther by a nickname that caused his insides to warm. He nodded up at Yarulf and tried to relax as he felt the head of Yarulf's *quoxpine* against his wrinkled pucker.

"Breathe out," Yarulf instructed him and Milenther did as he was commanded, groaning when Yarulf's erection pushed past his guardian muscle and the head popped inside of his body.

“Oh Shadita Lyra, preserve me,” Milenther groaned, praying to the goddess, as he took Yarulf fully within his body.

Yarulf pushed himself into Milenther's passage until his balls rested against the curve of Milenther's ass and Milenther pressed his head into the furs he lay on. He felt so full, so incredible, that there were no words. He groaned, whimpered and pleaded with Yarulf, though he wasn't sure for what. Yarulf seemed to know what he needed, however, for he pulled his hips back until only the head of his *quoxpine* remained within Milenther's body, before sliding back inside of him deeply.

Milenther reached up to bury his fingers in Yarulf's hair and yanked the other man down to him, taking his lips in a hard kiss. He could taste blood and wondered if it was his own or Yarulf's, though even that thought was driven from his mind as Yarulf began to grind his hips against Milenther's own for long moments. The sounds of his brothers and the other Tauma soldiers sitting around the campfire outside, dozens of feet away became a hazy buzz as Milenther's ears were filled with the sound of harsh breathing and groans. Soon even his breathing and moans, a mellifluous harmony to Yarulf's own, were drowned out by the sound of skin slapping against skin as Yarulf slammed his *quoxpine* in and out of Milenther's chute.

Milenther's eyes flooded with tears as bliss snatched him beneath the tide of passion. When Yarulf lifted Milenther's legs and placed them over his shoulders, Milenther let loose a loud groan. Clear fluid, the evidence of his own desire, leaked from the head of Milenther's own cock onto his belly, and since his body was practically folded in half, the fluid created a puddle that streamed down towards his neck. He ran his fingers down over Yarulf's slightly hairy chest, feeling the muscles there, his fingertips tingling at the sensation and the proof of Yarulf's power and strength.

“O-oh!” Milenther's mouth opened as a tingling began at the base of his spine racing throughout his entire body. He gripped Yarulf's shoulders, digging his nails in the flesh there as fire spread through his veins.

“Give it to me, Mil. I want it,” Yarulf growled as hips sped up, thrusting his *quoxpine* deeper and faster within Milenther's channel.

At Yarulf's words, Milenther released a shout to the heavens as the head of his cock spurt volley after volley of his seed through the air to land on his torso and even up onto his cheek. Milenther felt as if he were soaring through the air and dying all at the same time. His heart was pounding, his mind wiped of

anything that wasn't Yarulf. His hole clenched around Yarulf's shaft, pulling him into Milenther's body harder and he felt Yarulf tremble above him as wet heat filled his passage.

Milenther's stomach clenched as he realized that he and Yarulf had consummated their marriage and he now truly belonged to Yarulf. He didn't feel any remorse about it, however. All he felt was contentment and a need to sleep. He resisted the darkness that tried to tug him under and wrapped his arms around Yarulf when he fell forward. He ran his hand up and down the planes of Yarulf's muscled back to his rear, palming the globes before drifting his hands back up. He opened his mouth to ask Yarulf if making love was always that explosive and all-consuming but the snoring that reached his ears stopped him. With a tired smile, Milenther found his own sleep.

Chapter Eight

At some point, after he'd fallen asleep on top of Milenther, Yarulf's *quoxpine* had softened enough that it slid out of Milenther's body. He'd rolled to his side and pulled Milenther with him so that when they woke up the next morning, to the sounds of the Tauma soldiers growling at each other and splashing in the sea as they bathed, Milenther was lying on top of him. Yarulf had been stunned by the almost crushing embrace he'd been holding Milenther in and the way he'd felt so... complete and content lying there with the Tauma prince in his arms. He hadn't had too long to consider why that was before Milenther was waking up and staring at him with a small smile on his face.

Yarulf had found himself snared by Milenther's purple-eyed stare. They were guileless and so open that Yarulf felt guilt eating away at his stomach like a snarling beast. He'd inhaled sharply and when Milenther had asked if they could "come together" again, Yarulf had shoved the vile emotion deep into the farthest recesses of his mind and had taken Milenther again, though this time it was much gentler. Perhaps it was an attempt to make things as pleasant as possible for Milenther before Yarulf was forced to betray him and his people and then participate in their slaughter.

Whatever you have to tell yourself Yarulfsian. He winced at his conscience's use of his full birth name. *You know that you were gentle this morning because you wanted to be. Because you are starting to fall for the Tauma you married, and if you believe you can still betray him, you are a fool.* Yarulf shook his head to dislodge the troubling thoughts and rubbed a hand across his forehead.

"Get up you two. We need to get back onto the road," Reprimuric's voice penetrated the silence of the tent, and Yarulf attempted to smile at Milenther. The concerned glance he received, as well as the gentle hand upon his shoulder, let him know that he was not successful.

"Come. Let us dress," he said to Milenther and rose without another word to do just that. They dressed in silence, Yarulf's eyes constantly straying over to Milenther as he dressed. When Milenther pushed his fingers through his hair, Yarulf found himself striding forward and taking Milenther's lips in a heated kiss.

"Yarulf. We don't have time," Milenther panted out when Yarulf lifted his head. Yarulf smiled and began kissing down Milenther's jaw to his neck, desire

snarling in his ear and passion breathing down his neck as lust gripped him in a firm embrace.

“We will make time,” Yarulf said and licked Milenther’s neck, where the heady taste of his sweat, his seed and a deeply masculine taste that was all Milenther, burst over his taste buds. Milenther’s soft whimper enflamed his senses, and he lowered Milenther back to the furs. A voice shouted in his mind, reminding him that what he was doing was wrong in Adethiel, but he reassured himself with thoughts of duty. His father wanted him to get close to the Tauma, to learn their secrets so that the Rardorian army could strike. What better way to get close to them than this way?

Ignoring the clenching in his gut and the softer voice that called him a liar, Yarulf set about trying to get as close as possible to Milenther.

Yarulf groaned, exhaustion and guilt waging a battle inside of him, making him have the urge to vomit or to slam his fist into something.

“Are you okay, Yarulf?” Milenther asked from where he sat atop the horse behind Yarulf, his arms wrapped around Yarulf’s waist, his chest pressed tightly against Yarulf’s back.

“Yes. I am fine,” Yarulf lied. “I am just tired from last night.”

Milenther let out a choked noise, and Yarulf could not help the smug grin that spread across his face.

“I am tired as well,” Milenther stated. He mumbled something beneath his breath, and even as close as they were, Yarulf couldn’t understand what he’d said.

“What did you say?” Yarulf asked.

“I said that I am in pain in my ass as well,” Milenther hissed out, and Yarulf coughed in order to disguise the laugh that threatened to escape.

He waved his hand at Milenther’s brother Evien, who looked back at them, to assure him they were fine, before freeing one hand from the horse’s reins to pat the back of Milenther’s hands.

“I am sorry that I have caused you such discomfort,” Yarulf said, returning his hand to the reins.

“I’m not,” Milenther confessed. Yarulf was surprised by Milenther’s words so he said nothing and hoped Milenther would explain. “I would endure much

more discomfort to feel you moving within me again.” Yarulf was so shocked by Milenther’s honesty he couldn’t speak. So, even though he knew it would cause his already twisted, complicated thoughts to become further entangled, Yarulf lifted one of Milenther’s hands to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on the backs of his fingers.

When he lowered Milenther’s hand back to his waist, Yarulf found himself being hugged and swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. Milenther was so innocent, so giving, and Yarulf was going to betray him. Because, even though a part of him didn’t want to, another part, a larger part knew that he would because Yarulf had been raised to follow the orders of his father, the king.

They came to a stop on the top of a hill and Yarulf’s breath caught in his lungs as he looked down on the splendor of the Nerandra kingdom. While Adethiel was filled with gorgeous buildings, it was also quite congested and filled with people. The roads had been paved and were now cobblestone instead of dirt, and the trees that once filled Adethiel had been cut down to make room for more buildings and more people. He couldn’t remember a time when Adethiel hadn’t been filled with buildings and people, however, and wondered if the stories of a more beautiful Adethiel were told merely by old Rardarians longing for something more.

Looking down into Nerandra he realized just how much he was missing.

Nerandra was lush. Filled with trees, flowers, and gorgeous plants that lined the sides of the dirt road that ran throughout the kingdom. Animals loitered just outside of the edge of the kingdom, some of them brave enough to enter the kingdom where they were treated with kindness. In the center of Nerandra sat the palace, which was magnificent in its glory. The outside gleamed white, shining brightly in the sun, the turrets, and roofs were all a brilliant dark lilac, and Yarulf could see a gorgeous blue pool in the center that, even from a distance, looked extremely refreshing.

“Wow,” he breathed. While he’d been engaged in a number of skirmishes with Tauma soldiers or their allies, he’d never been to Nerandra since the Tauma were determined to keep their fighting away from their kingdom. Yarulf had never figured out how they’d been able to do such a thing, but as he looked down at the kingdom’s beauty, he was very glad they had.

“She’s beautiful isn’t she?” Milenther asked softly behind him.

“Who?” Yarulf replied, just as quietly.

“Nerandra,” Milenther stated as if the answer should have been obvious.

“You refer to your country as a she?” Yarulf was amazed. Rarders spoke of Adethiel as an inanimate object. It was just land. It wasn't sentient. It didn't breathe or grieve and yet as he looked at Nerandra he couldn't help but accept the country as a living, breathing entity.

“Of course. Nerandra has blessed the Tauma with a place to live, love, grow, and return into the arms of Shadita Lyra. While Shadita Lyra is our goddess, Nerandra is our mother. So we are careful with her. We treat her other children, the animals, fairly when we take their lives for sustenance. We do not bring battles onto her land so that we do not contaminate her soil with the blood of soldiers or the innocent.” Milenther placed his lips against the back of Yarulf's shoulder and he trembled slightly as he heard the way Milenther spoke of his country, with such reverence and awe. “We are the keepers of Nerandra. The Goddess Shadita Lyra chose for us to make our home here, and we will not dishonor her, nor the mother, in any way.”

Yarulf shook his head as he listened to Milenther speak and felt shame curdle in his gut making him ill. His father planned to not only bring a large-scale battle into the Kingdom of Nerandra, he planned to spill the blood of every Tauma upon her soil. How was Yarulf expected to help his sire complete such a task having heard Milenther speak so passionately about his kingdom?

“Come,” Milenther said, happiness filling his voice. “Let us enter Nerandra. I am anxious to see my people and to introduce you to my parents.”

Yarulf nodded to Milenther and gripped the reins tighter in his hands, turning the mount's head to join up with the rest of the Tauma party.

“You know that not all animals need such a firm hand,” Milenther said softly and Yarulf glanced over his shoulder at the other man.

“You think I hurt the animal?” Yarulf asked incredulous. “He is a very large beast; I am sure that he can handle it.”

Milenther shook his head and dropped one of his hands from around Yarulf's waist to pat gently at the horse's neck. He made a few unintelligible noises in the back of his throat, and Yarulf felt confusion fill him at the other man's actions.

“Tauma animals are not beasts. They are our brothers and sisters, in a way, here in Nerandra.”

Yarulf snorted. “And does everyone in Nerandra feel as you do?”

Yarulf could feel Milenther shaking his head side to side and shivered when the other man sighed sadly. "No, unfortunately this sentiment is not shared by all Tauma, though most of us believe this way. But still, a gentle hand, yet a firm tone will get the same result. Especially with a Tauma-trained animal. Especially with my horse."

Yarulf looked down at the back of the large horse's chestnut head, his eyes moving over the thick, black mane and realized that to Milenther, his horse was more than just an animal. His horse was a pet. A friend. And Yarulf had offended him with his handling of the bea... uh... animal. Just another offense to add to his list when it came to Milenther and his people. At this rate, he was going to be making amends to Sadita until the day he died.

"Apologies," Yarulf said contritely.

"*Rucopa*," Milenther said.

"Are you two *filepas* going to spend the rest of the day making eyes at each other or are you going to join us?" Daimiro yelled from the back of his own mount, and Yarulf's face burned. Did he and Milenther really look like sweethearts? Like lovers? Yarulf couldn't suppress the way his chest expanded with pride at the thought of someone seeing him with Milenther and recognizing they were together as more than just friends or traveling companions.

The laws of his people and his father's harsh voice burst that happy feeling seconds later, and Yarulf's shoulders dropped as he nodded his head.

"Yes, we are on our way."

Yarulf grew more and more unnerved the closer they got to the gates of the kingdom. As if there were something, or someone, compelling him to turn around.

"It's the ancient magic that surrounds our kingdom," Milenther told him, and Yarulf stiffened. He had heard word that the Tauma and their allies used magic in their kingdom, but being confronted with it made him edgy.

"Why do you need magic to surround your kingdom?" Yarulf questioned him.

"To keep out all of those who would seek to do harm to Nerandra." Milenther's voice was confident and determined. Yarulf found himself growing aroused by the sheer masculinity that threaded through his words. He pushed away thoughts of Milenther, naked beneath him, and instead wondered if he

would even be able to pass through the gates of the kingdom with the magic surrounding it. As they passed over the drawbridge into Nerandra, Yarulf released a sigh.

Milenther chuckled behind him. "Were you concerned that you would not be able to enter, *Yeluh*?"

Yarulf startled at Milenther's use of the Rarderian term of endearment for husband and took a moment to clear his throat. "Certainly not, *S-Shinaw*." Yarulf stumbled over the Tauman endearment but the pleased sound that came from Milenther's lips made him happy at his attempt. While his brother and his sister had not been required to learn the languages of other cultures, Yarulf, as the heir, had spent countless hours learning Tauman, as well as Jamudian. He was inordinately pleased that Milenther, even as the youngest Tauman prince, seemed to know Rarderian as well. Especially since the Tauman had fought so hard to keep their language over the past few centuries. Only three languages had survived all of the many battles and wars, with Rarderian and Tauman being the most widely known throughout the planet. With the smile on Milenther's face, Yarulf was very happy for those extra lessons he'd had to endure.

"Well that is good. I would hate to think that you were concerned about such a thing." Milenther grew silent, and Yarulf wondered why until he heard the sounds of laughter, cheering, and music.

"Is there a party?" Yarulf asked.

"They are welcoming us home victoriously," Milenther said softly. "I have always been in the crowd celebrating with my people. This is the first time I have been the one celebrated."

Yarulf squeezed Milenther's arms where they wrapped around him. His eyes widened as they rode deeper into Nerandra and his gaze took in the sight of numerous couples, arms wrapped around each other, holding hands, or kissing, who were of the same sex. Yarulf yanked back on the reins of the horse and looked around. While *lukoshefs*, or same-sex relationships, were not the only relationships he saw within the kingdom of Nerandra, they were plentiful. His mind was abuzz with the reality that the Tauma were not only accepting of a *lukoshef*, but they were comfortable and almost encouraging of them.

"Yarulf? Are you okay?" Milenther asked.

Yarulf nodded. "Y-yes. I'm fine. I just..." He paused and surveyed the area again before nudging the horse's sides with his heels. He shook his head and

refrained from speaking further. When Milenther's hand rubbed his stomach reassuringly, he knew the Tauman prince was quite possibly well aware of what he'd seen that had so affected him.

"It is fine, *Yeluh*. Nerandra is extremely accepting of *lukoshefs*. I know this is different for you, but you'll grow used to it in time."

Yarulf nodded and focused back on where they were going. They rode through the streets of Nerandra, and Yarulf took in the sights of the small, rustic homes, the lush and thriving trees and other flora that surrounded them. He was aware of the press of Milenther's groin against his backside and could feel the man growing aroused, a matter which ramped up his own arousal. Yarulf swallowed back the groan that threatened and focused on the palace that they rode towards.

Standing outside of the palace, garbed in the lightweight, sophisticated garb of the royals, stood a man and a woman, their red hair shining like fire in the sun. Yarulf knew, without needing an introduction, that they were Milenther's parents, and he felt himself grow ill.

They pulled their horses to a stop, and Yarulf climbed down off the horse before turning to help Milenther. Milenther chuckled and patted Yarulf's chest, affectionately.

"I am not a Rarderian woman who needs your care and assistance with all things, Yarulf. I am a man. A Tauman man. I may not be a warrior, but I am still all man. Do not treat me as if I am weaker than you just because I am not a soldier."

Yarulf nodded at Milenther's words and turned when he heard the Tauma's name being called.

"*Onod! Omafwe!* I have missed you!" Milenther said with a smile rushing towards his father and mother and accepting their embrace. He turned back towards Yarulf and gestured him forwards. "May I present to you my *kukis*, Yarulf Cossobberth, prince of Adethiel. Yarulf, these are my parents, King Fiacus and Queen Dravica Dagorn of Nerandra."

Yarulf bowed to Fiacus and took Dravica's hand with one of his own, placing a kiss on the back of it. "It is an honor to meet you both."

"Milenther, you are m-married? To a R-Rarder?" Dravica asked, and Yarulf released her hand to step back.

Milenther nodded. "Yes Mother, it was a part of the treaty that Reprimuric agreed to when we defeated Adethiel. Unfortunately, the sister is *ohfo*. She

didn't look as if she would give birth soon, but still, she is with child, else she would be here and married to him as originally planned. But we felt as though this was an even better trade, since Yarulf was the heir to the throne." Yarulf was uncomfortable, knowing they spoke about him as if he weren't there, but when Dravica looked at him in an assessing manner, he realized that it was probably for the best that he did not bring any more attention to himself than absolutely necessary. He thought of his brother who was now the heir to the throne and wondered how Dubair was going to handle his new responsibilities, just as he wondered how he would handle his own new position.

Fiacus stepped close to him and sniffed at him deeply before stepping back with a grunt. Yarulf's eyebrows lowered at the man's actions wondering what that meant, but smart enough not to remark on it.

"Not all of his motives are pure, though much of that could probably be attributed to his lust for Milenther without love being involved, and his presence within Nerandra proves that he means our kingdom no ill will." Fiacus nodded. "Welcome to the family Rarder."

Yarulf exhaled and bowed to Fiacus and then to Dravica. "Thank you."

When he rose to his full height, he glanced over at Milenther and felt his heart leap. He was in Nerandra and had been welcomed into the family. Everything was going according to his father's plan, but Yarulf was starting to care about the Tauma. When the time came, would he choose duty to his people or the man his heart was trying to connect itself to?

Chapter Nine

Milenther nervously led Yarulf into his quarters and turned to face him with a smile. "These are my... our quarters," he pointed out needlessly, watching as Yarulf stepped further into the room. Milenther stared into Yarulf's eyes, unmoving as Biumula and other Tauman servants brought in Yarulf's trunks and chests.

"It suits you," Yarulf replied and Milenther looked around, nodding. The walls of the room were painted a soft orange color. The pillows, cushions, furniture, and bedspread were all a plethora of colors. Milenther never felt as at home as he did in his quarters.

"Will there be anything else, Your Highness?" Biumula asked Yarulf.

"No, Biumula. That will be all. Please find your room and settle in," Yarulf directed the other man, and Milenther watched him leave before turning his attention back to his husband.

"We have a few hours before we need to be downstairs for dinner," he hedged. "I can show you around the palace or—"

Yarulf shook his head. "A tour that can wait for later. I find I have an appetite for something much different right now."

Milenther's body heated and he smiled as Yarulf pulled him closer. "And what are you hungry for, *Yeluh*?"

"You." Yarulf growled as he pulled Milenther to him and kissed him passionately, ceasing all further conversation.

Milenther led Yarulf into dinner that evening with a wide grin on his face, feeling extremely relaxed and satiated. While it had only been his third time having sex, he was fairly certain that he was an expert at it by this point.

"You look quite pleased with yourself, little brother," Catillawn said as Milenther and Yarulf stepped into the dining room. Milenther turned to his older brother with a wide grin and shrugged.

"I find married life to be quite agreeable," Milenther responded.

"And it seems to agree with you as well," Catillawn said with a grin before wrapping his beefy arm around Yarulf's neck. "So, *Thykuwu*, now that you are

officially a part of the family, tomorrow I shall take you out to the stables and let you choose a horse.” Milenther’s chest swelled at Catillawn’s calling Yarulf by the term of endearment for brother-in-law. He knew that his family would be accepting when it came to Yarulf, but he could only hope that things went both ways. He sensed a hesitation, a guilt, on his husband’s part, and it concerned him. For once he wished his magic was a little more precise, like that of a few of the elders. Then perhaps he would know what troubled Yarulf. He wasn’t exactly sure why Yarulf would feel guilty, but he knew that he would do whatever he could to help the man ease that guilt.

“*Seken.*” Yarulf bowed to Catillawn, pushing and wiggling in an attempt to escape the tight hold. Milenther grinned. He knew how tight Catillawn’s embraces could be, even when he was teasing. He would not want to be in Yarulf’s place right then.

“Come now, Rarder, we are family. No need to be so formal,” Catillawn said.

“Apologies,” Yarulf replied.

“Catil, leave Yarulf alone. I’m sure that he is not used to our ways,” Milenther’s mother said as she breezed into the room, her blue gown made of *fukoye* material swirling around her legs. “We must give him a chance to settle in. Then you can toss him around the room all you want.”

Milenther tried not to laugh out loud at the wide-eyed look on Yarulf’s face at his mother’s words. When Catillawn released Yarulf’s head, Milenther stepped up to Yarulf and touched his arm. “She’s teasing,” he reassured his husband. He chuckled at Yarulf’s sigh of relief. “She would never let Catillawn toss you around the dining room. She’d make him take it outside.”

When Yarulf twisted around to look at him, Milenther let out a laugh of delight and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. “Calm down, *Yeluh*. You will get used to us in time. I promise.”

He led Yarulf over to the large dining room table that was surrounded by his entire family and sat down on a pillow, gesturing for Yarulf to sit down next to him.

“You do not sit in chairs?” Yarulf asked.

Milenther shrugged. “Why? This way we’re much closer to each other.” Milenther demonstrated what he meant by laying his head on Yarulf’s shoulder. He tried not to take offense when Yarulf stiffened beneath him, reminding

himself that where his husband had come from affection and love between two men was against the law, so it would take some time for the other man to warm up to him. With a mental sigh, and an internal pep talk to give his husband some time, Milenther kissed Yarulf's shoulder and sat up fully.

"Tonight's dinner is doubly blessed," Milenther's father stood at the head of the table, raising his goblet of *ekanan*, which sloshed and spilled over the edges of the golden rim. The dark purple liquid rolled down Fiacus's fingers to drip onto the wooden tabletop, and Milenther was thankful that it wasn't the day they set aside to use a tablecloth. Otherwise, Pertink would have had a slight fit over the stain.

"Not only are we celebrating our victory over Adethiel, we are celebrating the marriage of our youngest, Milenther, to the heir of Adethiel, Yarulf Cossobberth, who has become a Dagorn on this day."

Milenther raised his goblet along with everyone and smiled at his father before turning his attention to Yarulf, who had a stunned expression on his face.

"You did know that you would become a Dagorn, didn't you?" Milenther whispered to him.

Yarulf shook his head. "I have... *taken* you each time we have lain together. I did not think that I would be taking your name."

Milenther snorted. "Just because I like having you inside of me doesn't make me weaker, Yarulf. Besides, my family and my people were the victorious ones. Why would I take your name?"

Milenther stared at Yarulf and waited for him to reply. When he shook his head, Milenther leaned forward and kissed him gently, giving him what he hoped was a smile but what he knew probably came across as more of a smirk. When he looked up, he realized that his entire family was staring at them.

"Everything is fine. Thank you for the toast, *Onod*. Can we eat now? I am starving!" He said with a grin.

"I bet you are. All the energy you've been using up with the Rarder, I'd be starving too," Grote teased.

Milenther's face flamed and he picked up a roll of bread to toss it across the table at his brother. "Shut up, Grote."

"*Omafwe!* Milly is throwing food at the table," Grote whined with a smile, calling out to their mother.

“Boys, if you don't stop, I will send you both to bed without dinner,” Dravica said with a grin.

“Hey! No fair. If you send Milly to bed, he gets to have the Rarder for dessert,” Grote pointed out.

“Perhaps you should stop being such a *dulanthar*. Then someone will want to marry you. That way you will have someone waiting for you at the end of the night as well.” Milenther stuck out his tongue.

He turned to Yarulf when he heard a choked sound coming from the man and grinned at him. As his family started to carry on conversations around them, Milenther found his gaze trapped by Yarulf's, and he wondered what the Rarder was thinking. He wasn't left wondering for too long.

“I don't think I've ever been to a family meal that was so... free and warm before.”

Milenther's heart broke for Yarulf's upbringing and grabbing the Rarder's hand, he kissed his knuckles before staring into the warm blue eyes that watched him intensely.

“Welcome to my family, Yarulf. Welcome to what it means to be a Tauma.”

Chapter Ten

Yarulf walked with Catillawn, Daimiro, and Silain towards the stables, a few weeks after that first dinner, listening as they told him everything they thought he would need to know about being married to a prince of Nerandra. "There are fourteen members of The Rangers of Tahyrst," Daimiro stated, rubbing his hands along the neck of a black stallion.

"The Rangers of Tahyrst?" Yarulf questioned looking over at the red-haired man.

"They are a group of special Tauma soldiers whose sole purpose is to guard the royal family."

Yarulf nodded and looked back at the horse he stood in front of. The chestnut gelding stared at him with an implacable gaze, as if he could see deep into Yarulf's soul, and he had the urge to confess all to the animal.

"So they were with us on the road then?" he asked.

"Some of them were," Silain remarked. "We couldn't take them all. Some had to stay here at the palace."

Yarulf agreed. "How long does it take to become a ranger?"

Daimiro chuckled. "If you ask them, they will tell you that they have been training since they were children, but they are chosen from among the army. They do not train especially for it. The most dedicated, the strongest, the quickest, the most loyal are chosen, and then they are given additional training."

"They have to sign The Covenant of the Arcane Arrow in order to actually become part of The Rangers," Catillawn stated.

Yarulf looked over at the other man and lifted his eyebrows. "There is a covenant?"

"Of course there is! They must pledge themselves to the royal family. To our safety and well-being until they draw their last breath," Silain said.

Yarulf looked between the three men and waited for one of them to recite it but neither of them did. He burst into laughter. "Well? Aren't one of you going to say it?"

Daimiro blushed. "I don't actually know it."

“Neither do I,” Silain stated with Catillawn agreeing.

Yarulf rolled his eyes. “So how do you know what the covenant actually says?” He asked them.

The three brothers shared a look before looking back at him in surprise.

“Thibaud!” Daimiro shouted, crossing his arms across his broad chest. Yarulf turned to see one of the Tauma soldiers who had been with them out on the road step into the stable. Though his face showed no expression, Yarulf could see amusement lighting up his green eyes and felt his own lips twitching.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Thibaud responded.

“What is The Covenant of the Arcane Arrow?” Silain asked. Yarulf noticed the way the prince’s voice seemed extremely husky when speaking to the soldier and wondered if there was something going on between the two of them.

“Would you like me to recite it for you, Your Highness, or tell you its purpose?” Thibaud questioned.

“We know its purpose, Thibaud, we just don’t know what it says,” Silain said.

Thibaud nodded and bowed to Silain, his stare so intense that even Yarulf was uncomfortable. He watched as Thibaud reached over to remove his sword from its sheath and hold it in front of his face, before twisting his wrist so that the sword was in profile to his face. He pulled it down until the tip of the sword touched his chin, twisted his wrist again, and laid the steel of the sword over the left side of his chest, where his heart was.

“I vow from now until the second the Goddess Shadita Lyra takes my final breath from my body to protect, serve, live and die for the safety and well-being of the royal family of Nerandra. I pledge my body, my blood, my breath, my life and my death to the Dagorn line. I give my word that I will do everything in my power to ensure they are happy and safe from those who would seek to do them harm. May the Goddess spill my blood upon the sand and send me into *gejrbo*, if a member of the royal family dies while in my care. This I pledge. This I vow as a Ranger of Tahyrst,” Thibaud recited solemnly, his gaze trained on Silain as he spoke.

When he finished, the air was thick with tension, and Yarulf was afraid of moving, though he wasn’t exactly sure why. It wasn’t until he noticed Thibaud’s sword darkening that he realized it was shining like a torch. Yarulf’s

breath froze in his lungs, and he felt fear racing through him. The Tauma had extremely powerful magic on their side. His people did not. They had denied their magic for so long now that there was only the faintest trace of it, and only in the scribes, elders and some of the healers. If he gave his father the information he was obtaining, would the Rarderian army be any match against the Tauman army?

“Yarulf? Are you okay?” Daimiro called out, and Yarulf jumped slightly, blinking his eyes. He looked at the man and nodded his head.

“Yes. S-sorry. I was just... stunned. It was really... p-powerful.”

Thibaud bowed. “I will return to my post outside, Your Highnesses.” Without a further word, Thibaud turned on his heel and walked out of the stable. Yarulf turned to look at Silain and noticed the way the prince watched the soldier walk out. How long did the two men have together before his father, Gilrad, decided to gather the Adethiel army to strike?

And what could Yarulf do to stop him?

Yarulf stepped into the suite of rooms that he shared with Milenther and found his husband standing in the middle of the room, completely nude, reading a book. Yarulf almost swallowed his tongue at the gorgeous image Milenther made. He swiftly shut the door and pulled off his boots before walking towards Milenther.

He wrapped his arms around Milenther's waist and laughed when the other man gasped.

“Sorry if I scared you.” He placed a kiss on Milenther's shoulder.

“It's fine,” Milenther said breathlessly.

“What are you reading?” Yarulf asked.

“I am studying about The Order of the Dagger and Scepter,” Milenther replied sounding distracted.

“What is that?” Yarulf looked over Milenther's shoulder and noticed the images on the page looked as if it were a ceremony of sorts.

“It is the wedding ceremony between a Tauman healer and a soldier from another kingdom,” Milenther stated off-handedly.

“Are there different wedding ceremonies for different people?” Yarulf asked.

Milenther turned to face him. "Of course." He sounded surprised. "You wouldn't expect two soldiers to have the exact same wedding ceremony and wedding vows as, say, two farmers. That's just silly."

Yarulf nodded and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, of course it is."

Milenther shook his head and pushed Yarulf until the back of his legs came into contact with the loveseat in the room and he sat down. Milenther then set the book down next to Yarulf and straddled his lap.

"It doesn't matter anyway. We can't get married for a while." Milenther ran his fingers through Yarulf's hair. Yarulf's eyes started to droop as his *quoxpine* thickened at the pleasant sensation of Milenther's hand on his head, in his tresses.

"We can't? Why not?" He wondered if his words sounded as slurred and thickly aroused to Milenther as they sounded to him.

"Because The Order of the Dagger and Scepter can only be performed if we are truly in love. If we try to do it before we are, then we'll both be killed."

Yarulf's eyes snapped open and he stared at Milenther. "Are you serious?"

Milenther bit his lower lip, then burst into laughter. "No! You should have seen your face. Of course not." He collapsed into a fit of giggles, and Yarulf stared at him for a moment before he lifted his hands and set them to Milenther's sides. He started to tickle the other man, laughing along with him, the two of them falling to the floor, rolling and wrestling with each other.

After a while, their laughter turned into groans and gasps of pleasure and tickling turned into caresses. Yarulf licked and kissed his way down Milenther's neck, his hand stroking down the man's body to his thigh. He stroked his fingers up and down the inside of Milenther's thigh, kissing Milenther gently.

"Y-Yarulf," Milenther moaned his name, sending shivers up Yarulf's spine. He cupped Milenther's groin then ran tender fingers up to the head of Milenther's cock. He lifted his head, releasing Milenther's lips from his own, and looked down into his eyes. Seeing the happiness and the unadulterated pleasure shining in his purple gaze, Yarulf swallowed the lump that rose in his throat. Kissing his way down to Milenther's nipples he sucked and licked them, still swirling his finger around the head of Milenther's cock.

As Milenther lifted his hips, trying to press himself closer to Yarulf's touch, Yarulf closed his hand around Milenther's cock, stroking it slowly up and

down. He pressed his lips against Milenther's, moaning the other man's name as he stroked him. When Milenther moaned into his mouth and his cum spurt over Yarulf's fingers seconds later, Yarulf's *quoxpine*, which had been pressing insistently against the front of his breeches, twitched and released a torrent of spunk into the fabric.

Yarulf sighed and leaned his forehead against Milenther's, waiting for his heartbeat to slow. He shared a number of slow, drugging kisses with Milenther, neither of them speaking. When Milenther wrapped his hand in Yarulf's hair, he knew that his duty to his father and his people was going to be at war with his affection for the Tauma prince.

Chapter Eleven

There was something in the air and it was making Milenther nervous. He wasn't exactly sure what it was, but he'd been on edge ever since he'd awoken that morning and found Yarulf missing from their bed. Walking into the room of The Jaded Guild of Lyra, Milenther looked around to see if perhaps his husband was within. The man had seemed completely fascinated with the magic of the Tauma people. Milenther thought it was adorable, though Reprimuric thought it was suspicious. But he thought that of everyone.

Not seeing Yarulf in the room that was completely furnished in jade and thick with the power of magic, Milenther turned and left. He stepped out into the hallway and right into Biumula, who looked disheveled and nervous. Seeing Reprimuric only feet away, also looking disheveled. Both men's lips were swollen, and Milenther noticed that Biumula's eyes were glazed. He smirked at his brother before turning his gaze fully back to Biumula. "Biumula, have you laid eyes upon Yarulf today?"

Biumula glanced back at Reprimuric and blushed before returning his gaze to Milenther. "N-no, Your Highness. I have not. But I believe that he was going to meet with his family outside of the kingdom."

An icy, hot shiver wormed its way up his spine. Knowing that it was his husband's meeting with his father that was causing him such distress, Milenther turned and hurried away from Biumula and Reprimuric. He was determined to tease them about their liaison later.

"Milly! Where are you going?" Reprimuric called after him.

"Something is wrong with Yarulf! Or he's about to do something wrong. I don't know. I just feel something in the air. I have to go to him," Milenther fired back. Sensing the thrum of magic, or even the change within the ancient power, was something Milenther was used to, but being this acutely aware of another person caused his insides to tremble. Was there more to what he thought was a spontaneous decision to marry Yarulf. His skin prickled as his hair brushed against his swinging arms. His magic was pulsing and Milenther felt as if there was something he was supposed to understand, something he was supposed to see, that he just wasn't.

"I'm coming with you," Reprimuric promised and raced to catch up with Milenther. Milenther didn't argue with his brother, too busy racing down the steps of the palace and out towards the stables.

He was aware of the members of The Rangers of Tahyrst running alongside them, but he paid them no heed. There was a driving force inside of him, thrumming, screaming at him to find Yarulf, save him, before he did something they both regretted forever. He didn't know what was going on between Yarulf and his father, but he knew that whenever they had discussed Yarulf's father, Yarulf's face had leached of all color and he appeared ill.

Milenther had questioned him about it more than once, only to be told that it was nothing. Yarulf had told him it was only him thinking about how much different his life could have been had his father not ordered their marriage. But Milenther had always known that there was something more to it than that. And now? Now, there was a knot in the pit of his stomach that was growing tighter and telling him that his husband was in danger and didn't even realize it.

"What is the Rarder up to?" Reprimuric asked as they waited for their horses to be saddled.

"I do not know," Milenther replied, quickly twisting his hair up at the nape of his neck and tying it off with a strip of leather. He watched as Reprimuric did the same and smiled, sadly when Biumula raced out after them and headed straight towards his older brother.

"I am not sure what is going on, but please be careful," Biumula panted out, before looking around and lifting up on his toes to place a gentle kiss on Reprimuric's lips.

"I promise that I shall return to you," Reprimuric said.

Milenther turned away from the two of them and instead, focused his attention on climbing up onto the saddle of his horse. Once he was settled, he waited for Reprimuric to climb up onto his own horse. Then Milenther turned toward the main gates of the kingdom. He had to get to Yarulf, and he had to do it as quickly as he possibly could. He could feel the magic inside of him clawing, trying desperately, to get out, but he didn't know why. He just knew he had to get to Yarulf.

"It is a blessing to see you looking alive and so well *Orebebo*," Gilrad said to Yarulf as they sat around on top of the hill overlooking Nerandra. It felt good to hear his father refer to him as "my son". Especially since Yarulf was pretty sure that was not going to last for too much longer. They rested atop of the blankets laid out by the Tauman servants and the two members of The Rangers

of Tahyrst who had ventured out with him. Yarulf glanced over at the warriors, standing dozens of feet away and wondered, not for the first time, if he was making the right decision.

“*Rucopa, Yawe*. I admit that living with the Tauma people is not as heinous as I expected it to be,” Yarulf admitted, using the Rardarian word for father in an attempt to soften the blow of his actions. He lifted a handful of *iyuta* to his lips and popped them into his mouth one at a time. The succulent, sweet juice of the fruit burst onto his taste buds, and Yarulf closed his eyes at the flavor. How he wished Milenther was with him at that moment. He would feed the man the *iyuta* slowly, rubbing the small, round fruit around Milenther's lips, then along the seam of his mouth before slowly pushing it inside.

Yarulf cleared his throat and squirmed where he sat on the blanket before returning his attention back to the conversation with his father. He could not allow his mind to drift away on daydreams about his lover. That wouldn't do at all. Especially not in front of his father. Not with what he had to do.

“That is good, *Orebebo*. But, your *Uvela* and I are happy this matter is drawing to a close today.” Gilrad smiled as he mentioned Yarulf's mother. “I have our soldiers waiting at the bottom of the hill. Tell me what you have learned and we will strategize throughout the night and strike when the Tauma barbarians least expect it.”

“I'm sorry, *Yawe*. I can't do it. I won't do it.” Yarulf shook his head.

Gilrad's eyebrows lowered, and he rose to his feet, towering over Yarulf. “What do you mean you *won't* do it?”

Yarulf rose slowly, knowing his father had a very violent temper and knowing, also, that what he was about to say was going to incite his sire to react.

“I am saying that I have gotten to know the Tauma, the people, the royals, my husband, and I will not betray them. I know you are going to tell me that my duty is to the people of Adethiel, but when you married me off to Milenther Dagorn, my duty shifted. My duty is now to him. To protect him and his family. His people and his kingdom.” He took a deep breath. “Even if that means protecting them from my own father.”

All of the air was forced out of Yarulf's lungs when his father's large hand shot out to wrap around his throat. Yarulf choked and grabbed at the fingers that cut off his breath. He reached up to free himself, to fight back, but was surprised at what felt like invisible bands wrapping around his wrists,

preventing him from doing so. His father was using magic? When had his father begun to use magic? Unlike the pure, sweet magic that thrummed in the air surrounding Nerandra, Yarulf's nostrils burned at the stench wafting up from his father's body. He could hear scuffling and knew his father's soldiers were fighting with the royal guards who had been sent to protect him.

Yarulf's face heated, his eyes felt as if they were about to pop out of his head, and his thoughts swirled with a cacophony of Milenther's name and regrets over all the things they would never get a chance to do together. His father suddenly released him, and Yarulf fell to his knees, wrapping his hand around his throat as he fought to take in air. He coughed repeatedly, wheezing as he struggled to take in a deep breath. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he sniffled, since even his nose was running. His throat felt raw, his limbs weak, and for the first time in his life, he was afraid, truly afraid, of his own father.

Gilrad squatted down in front of him and yanked back his head, staring down into his face, his blue eyes hard. "Had I known that marrying you to the barbarians would make you betray us in such a way, I would have sent your brother. I never thought you were so weak, Yarulfsian. I am glad that I know now. Your weakness shall lead to the downfall of the Tauma people, and when I destroy Nerandra and all who live within, I will consider you among them."

With that Gilrad pushed Yarulf away and rose to his full height. He snapped his fingers and even Yarulf jerked as the sound of fighting stopped almost immediately. Turning his head, he was alarmed by the sight of the Tauma Rangers, unharmed and once again standing as they had been before. He looked at his father in alarm. Who *was* this man? How did he have such magic and how strong was the magic in Nerandra that he couldn't penetrate it? "Leave this *rovemugu* here. He is no longer a prince of Adethiel." Yarulf's heart broke at being called an abomination by his own father, but he lifted his chin and refused to show how much the word had hurt him.

Hearing a gasp behind him, Yarulf turned and saw Milenther, Reprimuric, and a handful of The Rangers of Tahyrst coming up over the side of the hill. He lowered his head, trying to hide the shame that reddened his face at his father's slight. While he'd been prepared for his father's wrath, he hadn't been prepared for his husband to see it.

"Get the fuck away from my husband." Milenther's voice was angry as he hurried off the back of his horse and over to Yarulf's side. Yarulf wrapped his arms around his husband and ignored his father as the other man left.

“I am so sorry. I could feel that something was about to happen, but I didn't know where you were to get to you,” Milenther murmured into the fabric of Yarulf's tunic. Yarulf pulled away and looked down into Milenther's face.

“You could sense that something was going on with me?” He was astonished, no one had ever been that connected with him before.

“Of course. You're my husband.” Milenther shrugged as if that explained everything.

Reprimuric patted Yarulf on the shoulder and gestured back at Nerandra. “Well, *Thykuwu*? What do you say we head home?”

Yarulf looked at Reprimuric and back at Milenther before a wide grin spread across his face. Home. That had a nice ring to it.

“Yes. That sounds like a good idea.”

Chapter Twelve

“Wake up,” a voice sang in Milenther’s ear. He blinked his eyes open, blearily looking up into the gorgeous blue eyes of his husband.

“Good morning, my beautiful Tauma prince,” Yarulf said with a grin.

“Good morning to you, my handsome Rarder prince,” Milenther replied.

Yarulf shook his head. “No longer.”

“Always.”

Yarulf sighed and rolled his eyes, an action that shocked Milenther. It was so unlike his very conservative husband and so similar to something that Grote would have done, that Milenther instantly knew that his husband and his brother had been spending *way* too much time together.

Looking towards the window of the bedroom, Milenther noticed the sun had not yet risen. “Yarulf? Why did you wake me up so early? It’s still dark outside,” Milenther pointed out.

“I know, but I do believe I made you a promise right after we were first married.”

Milenther’s eyebrows lowered as he tried to remember every promise Yarulf had ever made to him.

“To cherish me?” he asked.

Yarulf shook his head. “No.”

Milenther huffed and crossed his arms. “Does that mean you’re *not* going to cherish me?”

Yarulf poked his nose and climbed off the bed, holding his hand out. “I am going to cherish you. It just means that’s not the promise I meant.”

Milenther nodded and continued to think. He pulled on the green kilt Yarulf handed him and pulled on the white tunic to go over it. Though it wasn’t officially *temefu* yet, the weather was definitely starting to turn colder and the leaves on the trees, plants, and flowers were turning colors, going from their usual brilliant greens, oranges, golds, and whites to purples, blues, and reds. Though most Tauma hated the colder seasons, like *temefu* and *rumalezi*, Milenther loved them. Especially now that he was married to Yarulf. He

couldn't wait to curl up in front of the fire with his husband while it snowed outside.

"Is the promise about you not snoring in bed?" Milenther asked. "Because if not, it should be."

Yarulf turned and glared at him. "I do not snore."

Milenther chuckled. "Yes you do."

He followed Yarulf down the stairs of the palace and outside. They walked past the stables, waving to the servants who were already awake and starting their work for the day. Milenther was aware of the rangers who walked with them, though they were discreet and hidden from plain sight. He wanted to laugh when Yarulf turned to glare at one of them, but he wisely held his tongue.

"Is the promise about you trying *mucetni*? Because I will tell you, Cook is extremely hurt that you refuse to at least try it."

Yarulf shuddered. "No. It's not about the *mucetni*."

Milenther laughed. The first time they'd had *mucetni* after Yarulf had come to live in the palace, Yarulf had made the fatal mistake of asking what was in the meal. Finding out that *mucetni* was a dish made up of chunks of numerous animal tongue, marinated in their own juices and served over the leaves of an *ifubo hire* flower, had made Yarulf sick. He'd refused to eat the meal ever since. In spite of always saying how good it smelled.

"Okay, I give up," Milenther groaned. "What is the promise about?"

Yarulf finally came to a stop in front of a tree that was buried in the forest on the palace property. They were far enough away from any buildings that no one could hear their passionate moans but close enough that if they needed help, they could get it easily. Milenther looked at the tree and his face grew hot, his palms sweating and his heart racing.

He looked up into Yarulf's eyes and felt his lips stretch into a wide smile.

"I promised that I would take you against a tree in a forest like you wanted me to. Do you remember this?" Yarulf asked, running the fingers of his left hand down Milenther's cheek, causing him to shiver.

Milenther swallowed and nodded his head. "I remember that entire night vividly."

"As do I," Yarulf said with a smile. He stepped forward into Milenther's body, pressing his back up against the tree before dipping his head and rubbing

his lips up and down the side of Milenther's neck. "We haven't had a chance for me to fulfill my promise, but now we do. And as I told my father, my duty is now to you."

Milenther lifted his arms and wrapped them around Yarulf's neck, pulling him closer until their lips pressed against each other. "Well then, *Yeluh*, fulfill your duty."

"With pleasure," Yarulf said before taking Milenther's lips in a deep kiss.

The End (?)

Author Bio

Viktor Alexander (everyone calls him "Vic") is a southern gentleman by day, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man-on-man (sometimes on-man-on-man-on-man-on-man-on-man) sex by night. He started out writing about his sister destroying the world with her breath, then went on to writing steamy, erotic interracial historical romances in the middle of his classes but noticed the guys seemed to enjoy each other's company much more than being with the women. He now enjoys writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, subs, and anything else that catches his fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. He is a huge fan of the "happily-ever-after" ending, but while all his characters ride off into the proverbial sunset, sexually satisfied and in love (because it's the least he can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, he doesn't believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, by sexuality as well. He loves to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when he's not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, he's reading, playing the Sims 3, talking to his adopted daughter whom he calls Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle his crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by pictures of John Barrowman, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men in the role of "Future Husband(s)" may apply, auditions are being held every night... multiple times.

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