

# *Prelude to Fate*

## *By Eressë*

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When conflict breaks out in the southeast of his kingdom, Rohyr Essendri decides to use a plea for help as a way to increase the Crown's presence in the area. Impulse pushes him to journey to distant Tal Ereq with the delegation assigned to negotiate terms with the small town's citizens. But destiny has something in store for the powerful Ardan of Ylandre. An unlooked-for merging of memory and reality and a second chance long hoped for. *Prelude to Fate* is set just before the events described in Chapter 1 of *Book One: Sacred Fate*.

*Ylandre, in the 2996th year of the Common Age*

The letter was just one of several delivered to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It looked no different from the rest—a sheet or two of parchment in a sturdy envelop sealed with a blob of wax bearing an impression of a crest. Indeed, the only thing that possibly set apart the missive was its provenance—a small town in the Autonomous Province of Velarus.

Close to the easternmost bounds of the southern province nigh to a region currently afflicted by armed conflict and plunder, Tal Ereq had territorial jurisdiction over land ideal for establishing a military outpost. Even if the permanent presence of trained and well-armed soldiers did not deter incursions into the kingdom, Ylandre would be able to check neighboring Cattania's aggression before the principality's forces could set foot across the border.

Incidentally, Tal Ereq had declined a similar request several years ago due to its population's unease with lying so close to a garrison with all its implications. But now was another time and this was a different situation. Perhaps the townsfolk would finally be persuaded to change their minds.

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Whenever he sat down to council be it with all the heads of government or just a pertinent few, Rohyr Essendri always took care to observe the formalities. Doing so was a way of keeping order and maintaining discipline. And considering a good number of his officials and advisors were also close kin, it was an effective way to minimize overfamiliar behavior and improper banter for it served as a reminder to all that they were meeting with their king in an official and therefore professional capacity.

Thus Rohyr sat at the head of the table with his uncle Imcael Essendri, Herun of Qimaras, to his left while his other uncle, Chief Counsellor Yovan Seydon, was seated opposite him. On either side were his cousins Keosqe Deilen, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Gilmael Calanthe, head of Ylandre's intelligence group.

As there were only the five of them, one of the Citadel's smaller audience chambers had sufficed for the meeting.

Keosqe had earlier handed him the numerous missives from the Velarusian communities affected by Cattania's latest attempt to destabilize the region and retrieve what they had lost to Ylandre almost four centuries before. Rohyr read the Tal Ereq petition last. Thankfully, it was no long-winded document as several of the other letters were.

He returned the letter to Keosqe, leaned back in his chair and gestured to his cousin to speak. It was Rohyr's habit to let his advisors and ministers put forth their opinions and suggestions first before letting his own be known. This way, there was little chance of inadvertently intimidating anyone into suppressing his honest thoughts on the issues at hand.

Tapping the aforementioned letter, Keosqe said, "We can use their petition as leverage. In their need, it's unlikely the townsfolk will once more refuse the Crown's request to establish an outpost in the area."

"Let's hope they've overcome their resistance to having soldiers stationed nearby," Yovan commented.

“If we position the outpost as the basis for a constabulary garrison, I’m sure they’ll capitulate,” Keosqe replied. “Velarus is vulnerable to outlawry due to the absence of an organized police force in the province. This is particularly true of the more isolated areas to the east. Given the current situation, it would be in Tal Ereq’s best interest to allow us to build an outpost close by. We need not inform them of our actual plans. Indeed, I doubt they will care in the long run so long as they are well protected. In any case, I intend to include the matter in my reply to them.”

An impatient harrumph signaled Imcael’s entry into the discussion. Rohyr sensed the effort the others made to listen to the fief-lord as graciously as his typical haughtiness made possible.

“This is but a small and insignificant town we speak of,” Imcael pointed out a touch scornfully. “Who are these folk that we must deal so gently with them? Why waste time negotiating with them when the Crown has the right to take what it desires?”

“Technically, yes, we could just take what we want from them,” Yovan said. “But the Autonomous Provinces owe no liege fealty to the Crown as the fiefs do. Were we to match the Cattanians in their utter disregard for the Velarusians’ rights and well-being, we would risk losing the trust and loyalty of these people. That’s no small matter when you keep in mind that most of eastern Velarus was once part of Cattania. Any disaffection can be used against us—if not by the Cattanians, then by would-be insurrectionists.”

“Nonsense!” Imcael scoffed. “The only insurrectionists are in Tenerith.”

“On the contrary, Your Grace, they can be anywhere,” Gilmael said. “Where there are malcontents, there is always the possibility of insurgency. And there is no shortage of Deira dissatisfied with their lot who will blame the government for their misfortunes no matter how able or accommodating government has been.”

Yovan agreed. “Therefore, it would behoove us to treat Tal Ereq as we do other nations—with diplomacy and respect.”

“Though a forceful nudge won’t hurt if applied with prudence,” Keosqe added with a wry smile.

“Prudence being the key word,” Rohyr said.

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, his hands loosely clasped under his chin. It was the sign that he was ready to speak his mind and the others fell silent accordingly.

“I won’t dispute your contention that we could take the land without leave, Uncle,” he said to a still piqued Imcael. “Indeed, the Crown’s constant interference in Tenerith contravenes the laws covering the provinces’ presumed autonomy yet thus far no one has protested overmuch. There are always loopholes in the law and we have no compunction about using them if necessary. However, we have no monopoly in the use of those loopholes. Unasked-for royal intervention in a region that has never displayed disloyalty or disrespect to the Crown can become a cause around which the disaffected or the mercenary of mind could be persuaded to rally. So, nay, I will *not* bring my royal privilege to bear on Tal Ereq. However, I give Kes and Uncle Yovan leave to use any and every other means at their disposal to gain what we need so long as we can sufficiently justify those means.”

Rohyr glanced at Gilmael. “I want you to go with them, Gil. Since the Cattanians are coming perilously close to declaring war on us, I think it would be best if you got personal confirmation of all the reports you’ve received regarding the situation. And, yes,

you may join the delegation, Uncle,” Rohyr added when Imcael made a motion to speak. “What happens in Velarus oft affects Qimaras and you have an obligation to protect your fief as well as you can.”

Imcael frowned. “Not just Qimaras. It’s only that my fief is the largest and most progressive in the southeast. But there are other fiefs that will be similarly affected by events in Velarus. Oxon, Anju, Turras. I must look after their interests as well.”

Rohyr took care not to glance his cousins’ way lest their expressions caused him to reveal his own dismay and skepticism.

“Understood.” He turned his attention back to Keosqe. “How soon will you be able to depart for Velarus?”

“Three days if the others are as ready.”

“Excellent. Veres willing, we shall gain more than a peaceful border from this exercise.”

Yovan smiled. “Well, I’ve never been to Velarus, I’m ashamed to say. It should be an interesting visit. Are the folk as fair as some say?”

“If you mean in coloring, yes,” Gilmael replied. “And they have a most attractive way of speaking. Quickly with a lilt to their speech and deceptively gentle. I once listened to a conversation between two Velarusians and I didn’t realize they were quarreling until they started to curse each other.” He mimicked one of the combatants. “May the scourge of a thousand plagues be on you and yours forever!”

Yovan laughed while Keosqe snickered at the accurate portrayal of a Velarusian spewing a malediction. Even Imcael could not help chuckling. But Rohyr did not join in the mirth.

*You and yours forever.*

Veres almighty, why did that memory surface now? He closed his eyes and leaned back. A whisper of a voice drowned out all the sounds in the chamber. Soft, sweet and melodious. The ache he’d long suppressed came surging back with a vengeance and he covered his mouth to conceal the downward curve of his lips.

“Rohyr! Are you well?”

He opened his eyes and realized the others were looking at him with concern. Yovan repeated his question.

Rohyr softly exhaled. He said, “Rest you all, I am well. I just recalled something. My apologies for causing you worry.”

He straightened and picked up the Tal Ereq missive once more. He read it again, ignoring the exchanged glances of the others. When he was done, he looked at Keosqe, a sense of urgency pushing him to speak.

“I think I shall join you,” he said. At Keosqe’s obvious surprise, he hastened to add, “Not that I think you incapable of negotiating a favorable outcome for us.”

Keosqe shook his head. “I didn’t think for a moment that you doubted my abilities. But I own myself surprised at the suddenness of your decision.”

“As do I,” Imcael said. “Why the change of mind, nephew?”

Rohyr shrugged. “It occurred to me that though I have visited Velarus before, I’ve never gone so far east. I think it’s time I saw with my own eyes what land we wrested from Cattania long ago. And whether it’s worth fighting to keep.”

He doubted they believed his reason but they were seasoned enough courtiers not to question him any further. Nonetheless, he drew their attention away from his uncharacteristic lapse by discussing the details of the journey to Velarus.

It was one thing for a minister or noble to travel to so remote a place; quite another entirely when one's sovereign was part of the company.

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Almost as soon as his steed set foot on the wide meadow before Tal Ereq, Rohyr started to regret his decision to come along.

The earthen-walled town was surrounded by grassy, flower-dappled fields, a number of lush thickets and several small outlying farms. There was a large orchard of laden fruit trees and shrubs just outside the east wall and he glimpsed a small lake some distance away, its banks lined by golden elms and drooping willows. Saints! It was almost *too* bucolic for a Deir who had lived most of his life in the sophisticated capital city of Rikara.

Rohyr stifled a sigh. He could not let the others know he now rued his impulse to join them. Instead, he soothed his single-horned zentyr with a few strokes along its thick dappled neck while he waited for the rest of the party to regroup behind him. He heard Imcael mutter his displeasure at having to put up with rustic living for the length of their stay in the town. Perversely, though he'd harbored similar misgivings, Rohyr bade his uncle to be more forbearing.

"They likely put much effort into ensuring our comfort," he said. "I won't have them shamed because they have neither the money nor resources to offer us more."

He led the contingent across the meadow to the town. They entered Tal Ereq and rode down the cobbled main road to presumably the town hall. As many townsfolk lined the street as had gathered in front of the walls and at the gate. The majority were fair-haired and bright-eyed and all were clad in the short, loosely belted tunics favored by the Half Bloods, their long locks tied back, arranged in thick plaits or hanging loose about their shoulders or down their backs. Had he not seen *sedyra* from this part of Velarus before, Rohyr would have thought they'd come to a foreign land by accident.

The townsfolk were a warm and friendly lot. Though tension showed in their eyes—quite natural under the circumstances—they nonetheless smiled and greeted the delegation with many a heartfelt "Welcome, my lords!" and "The Maker's blessing upon you, *Dyhar!*"

When the party reached the town hall, Rohyr's initial impression was that it was small but aesthetically pleasing with wide shuttered windows, a graceful arch over the entrance and a spacious courtyard in front. Apparently, there was also a garden behind if one were to go by the narrow hedge-lined stone path leading around the building to the back.

The delegation dismounted once all had entered the courtyard. But while his companions let down the hoods of their cloaks, Rohyr kept his up. The concealment of his identity allowed him to freely assess the people, place and situation. Only when he had satisfied his curiosity did he pull back the hood and show his face.

The people's response was not surprising. A hush descended on the courtyard and all the townsfolk got down on one knee, heads lowered in obeisance. Rohyr gestured to the town Elders to rise whereupon all the rest followed suit. The introductions swiftly commenced.

Dael Idana, Tal Ereq's First Elder, was a handsome Deir with fallow hair and gentle eyes. His spouse Mithre, on the other hand, was flaxen-haired and, Rohyr suspected, a touch fiercer than his mate.

Immediately after the introductions, Mithre returned to his place in one side of the courtyard where the Elders' families had assembled. Meanwhile, Dael and his fellow Elders invited the delegation to enter the town hall.

As he approached the door, Rohyr felt a tug not only in his mind but also inexplicably in his heart. He stopped and turned his head, letting his senses guide him. His gaze alighted on the gathered families of the Elders. He quickly looked them over until his eyes were drawn to a youth at Mithre Idana's side.

The young Deir shared the First Elder's fineness of features but his hair was pale gold and his eyes were a wondrous aquamarine. Was he kin to the Idanas? Their son perhaps?

Rohyr felt the pull on him grow stronger. Casting prudence aside, he reached out with his mind to "read" the lad, delving deep enough to scan his subconscious. It took but a few heartbeats to find what he sought.

He caught his breath. A feeling of elation such as he had not felt in so long swept through him. Determination followed even as he withdrew his probe.

Rohyr finally entered the building with the Elders, ignoring the confusion his actions had caused. But he did not speak as they mounted the stairs. And when they reached the second floor, he strode to one of the windows and looked out at the dispersing crowd below. He easily located the youth as he left the courtyard.

In that instant, Rohyr knew what he would demand in exchange for his protection of this small town in this distant corner of Velarus. And once he gained his prize, he would hold tight and never let go.

*You and yours forever.*