



Praise for the writing of Jeanne Barrack

Silver Fire

Silver Fire is a treat for the senses and Ms. Barrack can really write sex! She has created a beautiful, fanciful and dark world filled with magic and magical beings. Ms. Barrack makes excellent use of descriptive language and has created a beautiful and exciting erotic fantasy story that I could not put down.

-- Kim, *Coffee Time Romance*

This is an excellent story. It has all the essential romance elements – romance, mystery, and suspense. Ms. Barrack has begun her new series with a bang. Mirelle and Jareth are fascinating characters that grow from their love. The author has a wonderful sense of humor and writes some very funny dialogue.

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Silver Fire kept my interest from beginning to end. The pages flew by as I became lost in the story and did not want to stop reading...Jeanne Barrack has created a world where visits will be eagerly awaited by the reader. While this is my first time reading a story by her, I look forward to many more.

-- Elise Lyn, *eCataRomance Reviews*

Silver Fire delivers the goods as an erotica, but it also upholds its promise as a fantasy novel... Several unexpected plot twists keep the reader glued to the page.

-- Jeanine Berry, *In the Library Reviews*

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AMBER INFERNO

Jeanne Barrack

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This book is rated:

 SCORCHING

For explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex, some violence).

Amber Inferno

Jeanne Barrack

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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Excerpt of *Tales of Enchantment 2: The Quest* copyright May 2005 by Kai Andersen

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ISBN 1-59632-114-8

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

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Cover Artist: Angela Knight

Dedication

To my wonderful husband, Steve -- my inspiration, my support, and the love of my life

To my mother, whose spirit is still with me

*To Marlene Castricato and Shari Chisholm, loyal fans -- whose naming of Fel's
sweetheart seemed sent from heaven.*

Prologue

Narik set Theran, the most powerful mage in all of Hearthome, crouched over his remnant of the *Book of Tocson*, attempting to glean some additional scrap of information to increase his power.

Nothing. Without the other fragments of the ancient book of magic, he was stymied.

How could everything have gone so wrong? Only a few short weeks ago, control of all the seven kingdoms lay almost in his grasp. Now, he huddled on a primitive wooden stool, a lantern fueled by crude pitch his only source of heat and light in a dank cave in Larbela after fleeing the kingdom of Narwith.

Could this disaster have started with the return of Princess Mirelle from the parallel world of Earth? He'd thought his plan, to spirit her away from Hearthome when she'd been a mere babe, a perfect one. Unfamiliar with the ways of Hearthome, she should have been easy to control when he helped her soulmate bring her over. But she hadn't been. Feisty and clever and cynical, unlike any other princess in Hearthome, she questioned him at every turn.

And Prince Jareth, her soulmate. He should have lusted for her, mated with her, and produced all the lanbeth Narik needed to get a monopoly on the magic essence necessary to run Hearthome. But Jareth had fallen in love with Mirelle with an intensity Narik could never have conceived and had thwarted his plans.

Though Narik had escaped imprisonment by the Council of Mages, he had been forced to move from town to town, in disguise and only able to use his magic powers in brief, infrequent bursts.

Rumors had reached him that Jareth and his two brothers also sought the *Book of Tocson*. Should they get their hands on it before he did, they could destroy over forty years of hard work.

Now, all of Hearthome knew of his designs for global domination and thought his plans were thwarted. But he had them fooled. He had servants to do his bidding. They would bring him the missing portions of the *Book of Tocson*, and all that magical power would be his.

And he would rule the world.

Chapter One

“I’m not going.”

Pentar set Morath leaned back in the chair, crossed his legs, and folded his arms across his chest. His expression bore a strong resemblance to a bad-tempered *thrant*.

Jareth set Morath, high prince of Hearthome, king of Narwith, heir apparent to the throne of Tarnwite, and, unfortunately, brother to the glaring man before him, gritted his teeth and counted to ten.

“You must go, Pen; you made a vow.”

“I didn’t think the vow entailed torture. Can’t Loran go?”

“You consider bearing company with a beautiful woman torture? And remember, Loran can’t go. He’s needed nearby in Mariess. Now that King Belar is dead, there is no one to protect Princess Talea. You know that Narik’s minions may be out there waiting for a chance to gain control of her throne, perhaps kidnap her and hold her for ransom. Loran already has a bond with her and can keep watch over her. Besides, he’ll be exploring the caves of Arlette and Keret to find the last part of the Book. No. You must go. After all, Tran will be with you.” He grinned. “He’ll protect you from Rayne.”

“And who will protect me from her pet? That beast attacked me.”

“Fel? Why, he’s just a big old mop. He wouldn’t harm a baby *bita*.”

“Rayne hates me.”

Jareth raised his eyes and swore under his breath.

“I don’t care! As long as you don’t kill each other.” He paused and cleared his throat. “Pen, there is just one tiny little detail.”

Pen slumped further in his chair. “What?”

“Well, Mirelle -- that is, we -- had this idea that it would raise fewer eyebrows if you traveled with Rayne as her betrothed.” Jareth spewed the last words out and braced himself for Pen’s reaction.

“What!” He stood, overturning his chair and sending it crashing to the floor. “Are you insane?”

“No, he’s not insane.”

Both men turned toward the door. Mirelle set Farielle, Jareth’s wife and soulmate, stood in the doorway, tapping her sandal-shod foot. Standing next to her, hands on hips, Rayne glared at the two men in the room. Not waiting for an invitation, they entered. Rayne strode over to a chair, turned it around, and sat, straddling it. Mirelle righted Pen’s chair, then plopped herself down. She gazed pointedly at him.

“How else do we explain your extended stay in Tarol?”

“Extended?”

“You didn’t think the second portion of the *Book of Tocson* would be easy to find? Rayne knows her country and its people intimately; you’ll need her help to deal with the Jakosai natives.”

Pen stared at her, his mouth agape.

“I don’t know how they treat women on Earth, but here we don’t force princesses to go trekking in the wilderness.”

Rayne spoke, her words making Pen squirm. “No one is forcing me, Pentar. I consider it a privilege and my right as the last remaining member of Tarolian royalty to assist in defending Hearthome.” Her voice dripped sarcasm. “Frankly, I don’t see why I even need you to tag along.”

“Because you’re not a mage, Rayne.” Mirelle laid a placating hand on her friend’s arm. “You know you’ll need Pen’s special abilities.”

Rayne’s hazel eyes glowed with frustration. She flung her long, braided hair over her shoulder and stalked out of the room.

“See. I told you -- she hates me.”

Mirelle threw up her hands. “She does not hate you. Rayne’s frustrated because she hates to depend on anyone. She’s not used to it.”

“Well, she better get used to it, and you, Pen, better resign yourself to traveling with her ... and taking direction from her.” Jareth’s tone brooked no argument. “Tran will meet you both at the stables after you finish the morning meal. Don’t be late.”

He turned to Mirelle, and his whole being lightened. Love filled his eyes and his expression softened. Pen could only look with envy upon the couple as they left his room.

He knew any protestations would be futile. But how could he tell anyone the real reason? Pen found Rayne so hot, he spent his nights dreaming of unraveling that long

chestnut-brown hair, running his fingers through it, draping it on his body, and wrapping it around his shaft. By the Great Maker, the two days he'd spent rescuing her from King Belar's castle had indeed been torture for him.

He laughed aloud.

Rescuing, pah! She'd been tied to a chair, a gag in her mouth, and glaring, her eyes shooting sparks when he'd found her.

His deception spell, good for just a short time, had altered his mage-blue eyes, and he had ruthlessly cut his hair above his shoulders, shorter than mage-length. Passing as a member of the kitchen staff, he'd wheedled his way into bringing the captive princess her evening meal.

When he had approached her, tray in hand, she had lashed out with her foot and knocked it from his grasp. And then, with nary a pause, placed a well-aimed kick to his groin.

Damn. He winced as he recalled the agony of that moment. Bent over in pain, he'd thrown off the spell, revealing his eyes. At least he'd had the satisfaction of hearing her astonished gasp. He'd quickly untied her and, cautioning silence, called in the sentry guarding her.

It took no time to knock out the fellow and tie and gag him. Taking the precaution of placing a binding spell on him, they left the room.

She had followed his directions to the letter, and he'd thought they were home free. No. They had to go to the kennels and release Fel, who took an instant dislike to him. Only Rayne's commands prevented her pet from snatching a bite from his abused body. Despite that, the furry mop head spent the entire trip to Narwith growling at him.

Could the damn beast read minds? How else to explain his uncanny maneuvers to prevent Pen from touching Rayne, much less throwing her down and having his way with her.

Of course, that was impossible. She was a princess and untouched. She'd remain that way until she participated in the joining ceremonies with her soulmate. Whoever that might be. The bastard.

He shoved clothes carelessly into his travel bag. It was going to be a long journey.

* * * * *

"Stop pacing, Rayne. You'll wear a groove in the floor."

Mirelle smiled serenely watching Rayne set Kithera move back and forth like a wind-up toy. Rayne, on the other hand, was anything but serene. Fel lay near the hearth, his head swiveling as he followed his mistress's path.

She stopped and threw herself onto the bed. "Why do only men have magical talent? It's not fair!"

Mirelle shook her head. "You know, I'm not sure that's accurate. For one thing, my harp playing creates strong magical illusions. And when I injured my ankle, I assisted Jareth in healing it. And of course, there's the lanbeth." Her whole body tightened as she thought of the passion that produced the magic essence of Hearthome.

Rayne threw a pillow at her. "No fair! You can have your way with Jareth till his rod falls off and call it your patriotic duty!"

"Be careful where you tread. Just because I've got the best stud in the world making me happy, doesn't mean you won't have your own soulmate some day."

"And who would that be? That slimy, traitorous *partour* Metres isn't even a mage. And neither are any of his brothers! Who's left -- that piece of thrant turd, my cousin Sontar? Or maybe Orath, that bastard offspring of King Belar?"

"You are clearly avoiding one name."

"Who?"

"Oh, come on, Rayne. We both know who's the perfect match for you. Don't be obtuse."

Rayne flipped over and buried her head beneath the pillow.

Mirelle grabbed it away and leaned over her. "Pentar."

"No! He's insufferable! He thinks he's irresistible and so clever and strong and, and ..."

"A hunk. He's almost as big a hunk as Jareth."

Rayne gaped at Mirelle. "Hunk? A hunk of what?"

Mirelle laughed out loud. "It means a hunk of hot, sexy man." She grinned. "Look, just because I've found my soulmate, it doesn't mean I can't admire a nice, tight butt, and Pen ... Hey, on Earth he'd make Brad Pitt look like a constipated *basta!*"

"Brad Pitt? What's a Brad Pitt? Don't tell me; I don't think I want to know." Rayne shrugged, then suddenly turned serious. "Mirelle, do you miss Earth?"

For a brief moment, a shadow passed over Mirelle's face. "A little. But everything I truly love is here; Jareth is here. There is nothing back on Earth that can compare with the love we have." She sighed. "I miss some of my friends, but they think I've moved away. I guess it might be better if they think I'd died; then they'll forget about me sooner." She shook her head as though to throw off the suddenly somber mood. "Look, Rayne, at least let yourself get to know Pen. After all, you won't have any choice. Be nice; behave."

Rayne took a deep breath.

"You're right. I might as well be polite." She smiled lasciviously. "Besides, he does have one fine butt."

* * * * *

"Where's Tran?"

Pen asked the question of an unresponsive sky and checked his gear for the millionth time. One long, narrow leather case never left his grasp. His father, King Morath, had just presented it to him, and he treasured it. It had hung over the archway in the great hall of Tarn castle for hundreds of years. Now it was his to cherish and use for the honor and defense of Hearthome. He only hoped the hours he'd spent honing his skill at an archaic sport would prove sufficient.

Behind him, the sound of skittering nails against the cobbles of the courtyard alerted him to the presence of Princess Rayne and her furry companion. He girded himself to face her. Only one way to deal with his response to her. The best defense was a strong offense. He turned.

"You're late."

"I'm not. Is Tran here? No. I knew he hadn't arrived yet. Look, I promised Mirelle I'd try to be civilized. How about it? Do you wish to try?"

"I ..."

Pen took in Rayne's slim form and long, long legs that seemed to go on forever. He'd never cared for tall, slim women; even his last mistress had been a short, voluptuous Jakosai female. But there was something about Rayne that called to him. Those long legs of hers, perhaps. He kept envisioning them wrapped around him, tightening around his hips. Her nails would bite into his shoulders, gripping him. She'd throw her head back as he thrust his shaft into her, over and over again. By the Great Maker, he could smell her arousal, hear her scream as he made love to her, could see the rainbow-colored lanbeth dust pouring over them as they came together. He could ...

"Pen? Well? Truce?"

He shook himself. Damn. He had to get a grip. This would not do. "Yes. Yes. Truce. Truce."

Rayne took a deep breath. For a second she'd had the weirdest feeling that Pen had gone into a trance. Just for a minute, before he'd agreed to their pact, he'd looked at her ... By the goddess Larakosa, if he had taken one step closer to her, she would have flung him down in the dirt and screwed his brains out. This would not do.

"There's Tran!"

Pen pointed over the top of the stable as the great winged akosa flew down and landed directly in front of them. The pewter-colored creature tossed his mane and whinnied loudly.

"Greetings and salutations, Pen, Princess Rayne. I am pleased indeed to see you again. Finally, an adventure!" He snorted as he caught sight of Fel. "Fel joins us, as well?" Rayne nodded. "'Tis good, then, that I asked Rosta to join us. She should easily carry you and your gear, while Pen rides with Fel and me. I expect her any second."

Pen had no time to protest the riding arrangements. Rosta alighted within moments, and before Pen knew it, Rayne was mounted on her. Pen threw on the bags carrying their

gear and mounted Tran's broad back, tucking his feet behind Tran's wings and belting himself onto the saddle. Fel crouched behind Pen in a special harness.

"Rayne, make sure your pet understands that my neck is not for biting."

Pen couldn't quite contain a shudder as he felt Fel's hot breath fanning his ear. Damn, if only it was Rayne's sweet fragrance teasing his senses; her breasts pressed against his back, instead of that furry canid's body; her arms encircling his waist, not some bloody harness. He closed his eyes and envisioned her hands delving into his trousers and fondling his shaft, her nails lightly scraping him, her fingers caressing the length of his penis. Damn! He was growing hard just thinking of it!

This would not do.

Rayne saw Pen grimace as though in pain. Could Fel have nipped him? No, Fel was too well trained. Now, if she were in Fel's place, she knew she'd never resist nipping Pen's strong, firm neck. By the goddess, he was so sexy. That was the trouble -- he knew it.

From the time of her first cycle, she'd had feelings for the great thrant. When she'd been promised to Deral set Belar at her bride-casting, she couldn't believe it. Surely Pen was her soulmate. She'd been on good terms with Deral, but there had been no deep, passionate connection of one soulmate for another. When he had been killed in an accident, she'd grieved, but only for the untimely loss of his life. Perhaps she was destined to remain alone. Perhaps her soulmate wasn't even a prince. It was now known that bride-castings could be manipulated. But this was not the time for a bride-casting. She would just have to wait and have wild, erotic dreams about Pen.

And that would not do.

* * * * *

Twenty paces to the door. Thirty paces to the balcony. Metres set Manar strode back and forth along a well-worn path in his suite in the royal palace of Narwith. He stared out the open window toward the setting sun.

A binding spell prevented his escape. A trial awaited him in two days' time. He knew the outcome of that trial -- death. And his bowels were weak with the thought. There could be no other sentence for conspiring with the mage Narik.

He thought longingly of all that had been promised to him -- ruler of three kingdoms: Narwith, Tarnwite, and Mariess; unfettered sex with two princesses; the control of lanbeth in each kingdom.

Of course, Jareth's screwing Mirelle and Talea would create the lanbeth, but there was nothing he could do about that. Unfortunately that one little talent was not his; he was not a mage. On his eighteenth birthday, Narik had approached him during his vigil, apprised him of his future, presented him with blue eye discs, and offered him an alternate plan. With an

eagerness borne of utter despair, he had accepted. Using Narik's training in slight of hand, he presented to others the appearance of magical ability.

He sighed deeply, poured a draught of fermented *pommees*, and swallowed it in one gulp.

His father had deserted him. He had had no visitors; no one wished to associate with a traitor. At least they weren't letting him starve in some dank dungeon. His birth as a royal prince gave him some privileges. But he couldn't escape. A knock on his door brought him back to reality.

"Prince Metres? I bring the evening meal."

At last, another human being with whom he could converse, even if it was only a lowly servant.

"Enter."

One of the kitchen staff pushed in a cart with a covered tray. With a flourish, he whipped the domed lid off, revealing a strange, metallic object.

"What, by the Maker, is that?"

The servant slowly straightened and stared into Metres's eyes. His gaze unwavering, he spoke at an even pace, his voice a monotone.

"It is I, Narik, whose words you hear. I have lifted the binding spell and placed you under my protection. Only the power of a master mage can bind you now.

"Your escape is near. The object before you is a weapon from Mirelle's world. It is called a gun. It is not magic, but a mechanical device that kills at close or far range.

"The servant before you is a thrall and, while under my control, will guide you in the use of this weapon. Follow his instructions to the letter. When you are sure you understand all his directions, you may test out the gun and kill him.

"Strip him of his clothes and disguise yourself. He bears a map to the kitchen door that leads to the suppliers' yard, and there you will find a skimmer ensorcelled to take you to Tarol.

"Your task is to follow Princess Rayne and Prince Pentar. 'Tis said they seek a portion of the *Book of Tocson*. Should they find it, take it from them. Kill the prince and do what you will with the princess. Consider her the first part of your reward for fulfilling this task. Bring the Book to the place of refuge of which I told you.

"Do as I bid you, and the rewards will be greater than you could ever dream. May the Bringer of Torment grant you the strength and cunning to complete your charge."

Narik! He had the power to do this?

Metres stared in astonishment at the humble servant standing still as a statue before him. They did look much alike, though the servant's hair was somewhat shorter. Trusting in

Narik's power, he commanded the servant to give him the directions to the kitchen area. He easily memorized them, then tore the small scrap of paper into shreds.

Gingerly, Metres picked up the gun. As though on cue, the servant spoke again. Patiently, he guided Metres through the steps necessary to load the weapon and screw on a device capable of silencing the sound of the small metal object, called a bullet, as it left the gun's barrel.

He practiced handling the gun with a magazine and the silencer. Unloading it, he familiarized himself with aiming and pulling the trigger. He found it simple to do; the gun felt like an extension of his hand. Then came the final test: actually shooting it.

The servant stood mute, waiting for his next directive.

"Strip."

Wordlessly, he complied, letting the garments drop to the floor. He stood nude before Metres, who eyed the man's quiescent rod. He was big even at rest. Metres felt his loins tighten. He remembered the male pleasure slave that serviced him when he would visit Barnite. It had been weeks since he had availed himself of those special delights. Gazing at the thrall's well-muscled arms and full mouth, his desire blossomed. It had been too long; he needed some relief. Would the servant obey him in other ways besides delivering Narik's directions for escape? He could but hope.

"Come to me."

The man complied.

"Now, kneel before me."

He did.

"Undo my pants, and take my prick into your mouth. Suck on it. Pleasure me."

Mutely, the servant unbuttoned the placket covering his shaft. Metres's erection sprang forth, and the thrall took it into his hot mouth. With a skill that led Metres to believe that he had done it before, the servant brought Metres to climax, cum spewing between the thrall's lips.

Metres's rod slipped from the man's mouth. The servant gripped Metres's thighs and looked up for more instructions. How Metres wished he could continue. But now was not the time to indulge his carnal appetites. He took a small linen cloth from his pocket, wiped his penis, and adjusted his trousers. Regretfully, he buttoned his fly.

Picking up the gun, he loaded it, readying himself for the final test.

"Stand up. Embrace me. Kiss me."

Puppetlike, the servant arose and clasped Metres around the waist. He pressed his lips to Metres's. Opening his mouth, Metres invited in the avid tongue of the enthralled servant. Drawing him so close the man's shaft jutted against his belly, Metres pressed the barrel deep into the man's gut and firmly pulled the trigger. A muffled sound, and the bullet pierced the man's body, emerging from the other side and lodging in the back of the couch.

Even as the recoil caused Metres's arm to jerk, the servant's hands clenched convulsively around Metres's waist. He fell backward, pulling Metres forward.

Off balance, Metres toppled down on the bloodied, naked form. With awkward haste, he scrambled to his knees. He stared in awe at the small weapon that killed so easily without the use of magic. Then he noticed the blood covering him.

"Damn! The bastard got my clothes filthy. No matter, they needed to be changed anyway."

Metres gazed at the unmoving body. It had been so easy. So very easy. He bent down and dragged the corpse to the couch, leaving a trail of blood on the polished wood floor. Stripping off his grimy garments, he picked up the dead man's clothes and donned them. He pulled up the corpse and laid it out on the sofa, draping a blanket over the body. Next, he shifted an area rug to cover the bloodstains. That done, he washed the blood from his hands. Ruthlessly, he hacked off his hair above the shoulders.

Gathering the extra clips of bullets, he placed them in an empty money pouch. He hid the gun underneath the domed tray and took a deep breath. Bending his head to conceal his features, he calmly exited the room.

The guard ignored him. No alarm was raised; the spell had indeed been broken.

He met with no problems, made no wrong turns. As he made his way to the kitchen, Metres noticed that no one paid him any attention; as a servant he was invisible -- what an excellent choice for a disguise.

The skimmer stood waiting for him. It recognized his essence and allowed him access. Sliding inside with a sigh of relief, he uttered the word to activate the vehicle.

"Tarol."

* * * * *

They arrived at Koralakai, the capital city of the island nation of Tarol, just as the sun was setting. There were no court members standing in welcome in the courtyard for them. Tarol was a sparsely populated country with few cities; only a handful of lord mayors and their families composed the lesser nobility.

And Rayne's entire family -- parents, brother, grandparents, aunt -- were dead. She was alone and had been alone for longer than she cared to remember.

"Welcome home, Rayne."

Except for her cousin, Prince Sontar of Larbela.

Sontar set Todath stepped forward, waiting for Rayne and Pen to dismount. He was the epitome of a Hearthome fashion plate. His tight, bright blue leggings matched his cobalt-blue mage eyes -- and revealed his thin shanks. His short, opalescent cloth tunic didn't cover his inadequate shaft, cunningly bolstered with a rod roll. His lank hair reached past his shoulders and was braided with thin blue ribbons to go with his outfit.

Pentar found him ludicrous but sly, and eyed him with deep concern.

“What are you doing here, Sontar? I thought you were under suspicion of conspiracy?”

“Oh, those charges were tossed out. I was given a truth test and passed it with ease.” He laughed raucously. “One cannot be tried for ignorance and venality.” He smiled at Rayne. “There is nothing to stand in the way of our being betrothed now.”

“There most certainly is, Prince Sontar.” Tran’s nostrils flared as though smelling something foul. He spat out each word. “You are too late. Princess Rayne and Prince Pentar had a bride-casting before they returned to Tarol. They are now betrothed.”

“Aye. Put your rod back in your roll, Sontar. And leave. Now.” Pen stood in front of Sontar, glaring down on him from his greater height.

“Stay.”

“What?”

Rayne stepped between them.

“This is still my kingdom, and I say who can stay or go.” She turned to Sontar. “You may remain, but confine yourself to your suite of rooms. We will be touring the country before we make a formal announcement. If you wish, you may stay until we return.”

Sontar turned on his heel, his eyes spitting poison. He left without a word.

“Rayne, why in the name of the Great Mage did you let him stay? He may not be part of Narik’s conspiracy, but I don’t trust him. He cannot rule Larbela until King Todath dies or becomes incapacitated, and he is anxious to gain power ... and sex with a princess.”

“You men always think with your penises. Sontar is a weak, vain piece of thrant turd. I don’t fear him.”

Tran frowned repressively. “Enough of this chatter. Rayne, Pen, it would make sense for you both to retire to your rooms and refresh yourselves for the journey we must take tomorrow. I suggest we get an early start. Rosta and I will bed down in your stable, Rayne. I know the way.”

Rayne looked toward Fel and spoke just one word. “Kennel.”

Fel lumbered off as directed to the meal prepared for him by the kennel master. Pen swore that sometimes the damned beast acted as though he could read Rayne’s mind.

Unloading the gear from the akosai, Pen stored all the bags, save the one from his father, near the back door, ready for the next day’s trip. As Tran and Rosta clattered off, Rayne and Pen were alone for the first time that day. Rayne cleared her throat.

“I’ll order the kitchen to prepare a hardy meal and send it to our rooms. You have the suite on the fourth floor; you can see the windows from here. I’m just below you. I’ll see you in the morning at six.”

Pen grimaced. “Can’t bear to be alone with me, eh, Rayne? We declared a truce, remember?”

"It's not that. I'm just tired, Pen. It's been a long day."

"Aye. You're right. I'll just put a binding spell on Sontar's rooms. Don't want him roaming around in the middle of the night."

"Thank you. I'll feel safer knowing he is so secured."

They entered the great hall and stopped. Pen smiled.

"Well, good night, Princess. Rest easy."

"Good night, Pen. Rest easy."

Turning, he mounted the enormous double-winged staircase. Rayne gazed after him and sighed.

He did have the world's greatest butt.

* * * * *

"Damn and blast!"

Rayne walked to the glassed doors leading to her balcony and swore. It was late. Way too late and she still couldn't sleep. Thoughts of Pen flitted through her brain. How she longed to tell him how grateful she had been for his support against Sontar. *Grateful*. What a weak word to describe what she felt for him. She envisioned how she really wanted him. Naked. Ready. Eager to take her in his arms and fuck her till she screamed. She grew wet. Achy. Perspiration glinted on her skin. Her breath quickened. By the goddess Larakosa, perhaps a cool bath would cleanse her of these feelings.

She hadn't yet changed her garments. She'd been too restless. If she figured on any sleep this night, she would need to get comfortable. She looked toward Fel contentedly gnawing on a *coney* bone. He should have remained in the kennel, but she'd felt the need of his familiar presence.

"What do you think, Fel? A bath?"

He barked and hid his head between his paws. Rayne laughed. "Not you. Me."

Her mood lighter, she ordered the household *taisins* to fill the claw-footed tub hidden behind the screen near the hearth, then sprinkled in some lanbeth bath salts. The magic stuff had become so rare lately, she only dared use a pinch of it.

She stripped quickly, sighing in relief as she unwound the cloth that bound her breasts. Ever since her brother's death, she had bound them, trying to be the son her father had lost. In her quest to replace her brother, she'd learned to hunt with bow and arrow, ride and climb, and trained Fel to go after game.

On her thirteenth birthday, she'd received gifts -- one from her father and two from her mother. Her father presented her with an intricately crafted silver dagger, a polished, carved piece of amber set in the pommel. The dagger was part of a Tarolian prince's majority inheritance. One of her mother's gifts, a wide silver wristband, was also set with amber. It

was a Tarolian princess's coming-of-age token. The other was *The Book of Pleasures*, a detailed guide on how to give to and receive pleasure from your soulmate. Passed down from mother to daughter in the royal house of Tarol, it illustrated the many different ways to make love and offered suggestions for self-pleasuring before the joining ceremony. Memorizing it from cover to cover, Rayne had waited impatiently for the day when she could share its secrets with her soulmate. Now it merely served to make her visions of Pen even more arousing.

She had satisfied both her parents, and she was proud of that. But it was harder to be a good son than a good daughter. When her body began to blossom, she ruthlessly bound her breasts and exercised so those soft feminine curves would grow sleekly muscled. Still, she was female, and when she had seen Pentar set Morath, she had known he was her soulmate. And yearned to tell him of her desire. She was glad now that she had been too shy to reveal her feelings.

She stretched and shook off her reverie. It was no use wishing for what might have been.

Stepping into the bath, she sank up to her neck beneath the scented waters laced with lanbeth-enhanced rejuvenating properties. She unbraided her hair and let the long strands float around her. Unbidden, a picture came into her head.

She was naked in the water with Pen, facing him. He, too, was nude. He gently grasped her hair and drew her closer. His gaze never leaving hers, he wrapped the tendrils around his enormous erection. She moaned. Where had that image come from? She tried to take control of her visions. But couldn't.

"Rayne." His voice was deep, seductive. "Turn around."

She did, presenting her back to him. He grasped her hips and raised her buttocks. She looked over her shoulder and watched as he licked his lips in anticipation.

"Grab hold of the edge ... and brace yourself."

Still peering around, she gazed at him as he thrust into her like the wild akosai mounted their female harem members. He pounded into her. Hard. Deep. Fast.

The vision took hold of her and wouldn't let her go. She could feel him. Smell him. She panted, whimpered, moaned. The rainbow-colored magic lanbeth dust gathered above them. She knew that they neared climax. She closed her eyes while stars burst in her head, and she screamed out his name as she came apart, sinking onto his shaft as he sank back with her into the water.

She opened her eyes.

There was no lanbeth.

She was alone.

* * * * *

Pentar prowled the balcony outside his rooms. He'd eaten and changed into a sleeping kilt. The lanbeth lights were concealed, and only a fire in the hearth gave forth any light. The bed was warm, the sheets and blanket soft. The pillow filled with down.

But he couldn't sleep.

Then he heard it. The sounds of a woman in the throes of passion. Where could they be coming from?

He concentrated, shutting out all other distractions. Beneath him. The room below. Rayne's room.

Was she with someone? That bastard Sontar? No. It couldn't be. But someone was giving her pleasure. He couldn't help himself; he listened. His hand crept beneath the pleated material, and he worked his flesh as he envisioned Rayne's slim fingers caressing him. As her cries increased, so did his rhythm. Faster and faster he guided his hand.

He tried telling himself that it scarcely mattered if Sontar was making love to her. To some extent, it was true. All that mattered now was release. And as it came, he heard her shout.

"Pentar!"

* * * * *

"Rayne!"

Prince Sontar stared with dismay at the limp female form beneath him. He had done it again. Pretended he straddled Rayne as he fucked the unwilling Jakosai servant. Using his rank, he had commanded her to pleasure him. At least this time he had taken the precaution of tying and gagging the woman. His binding spells never seemed to work well on Jakosai. He really didn't care. In fact, the physical act of binding made him all the more excited. Fired up his rod and gave him greater staying power. Of course, sometimes he misjudged things. Thank the Great Mage no one had asked him any detailed questions about his sexual adventures with Metres.

He sighed with regret. Metres always knew how to cover up those little accidents that might occur. The pleasure-giver in Larbela. He shuddered to think what his father would have done had he discovered Sontar with a dead pleasure-giver within his own boundaries. If only he could rule Tarol. All those limitless Jakosai women, his for the taking. No one to gainsay him. And Rayne at his beck and call. A royal princess sucking on his shaft. He thought of the silken bindings he had bought for their nuptials. Now they would remain unused.

The nameless woman stirred beneath him.

And he tightened the bindings.

More and more.

Chapter Two

Pen woke up in a foul mood. He had found it difficult to restrain himself last night when he'd thought he heard Rayne utter his name in the throes of passion. But that couldn't be. Could it? After all, why would Rayne even think of him that way? She could scarcely tolerate his presence. No, he must have misheard her. That had to be it.

Still, visions of her writhing in his embrace, clutching his mouth to her breast, had invaded his sleep.

In his vision she shifted, spreading her legs wide to give him access to her sweet clit. In his dreams she arched up against him, letting him taste her, dip his tongue within those soft curls and devour her.

He woke up, his penis in his hands, his cum drenching the blanket. Damn, he hadn't done anything like that since before his first pleasure-giver.

How could he face Rayne when just thinking of her made him hard? He would need to exert a stronger control when he saw her.

It could be done. It must be done.

He bundled up the sheets, hoping that the household tainsins were up to the task of cleaning them. With a resigned shrug, he went down to meet the others.

* * * * *

Rayne gazed at her reflection in the mirror to see if there was any difference. Last night had been a revelation. She hadn't known just how much she desired Pen. Her climax had shattered any remaining illusions that she could ever join with another. She was in love with a man who wasn't her soulmate -- who didn't even like her, much less love her. What was

she to do? She couldn't ask for a bride-casting at this point in time. And Pen's casting certainly did not refer to her.

She adjusted the binding around her breasts and sighed. Taking up her amber comb, she untangled the knots in her long brown hair and braided it. Tightly.

She would have to do the same thing to her emotions. Bind them up tightly.

She belted her dagger and sheath around her waist, clasped her silver band around her left wrist, and picked up her soft leather carrybags.

She was as ready as she'd ever be to face Pentar.

* * * * *

Sontar viewed the departure of Rayne and her entourage with mixed emotions. He could no longer remain at the palace but needed to return to Larbela as soon as possible. Perhaps that was all for the best; the sooner he could remove himself from the little problem in his bedroom, the better.

He reentered his sleeping chamber and gazed without remorse at the lifeless form of the Jakosai serving girl. She had provided him with some relief last night. But not enough. He had grown careless again and tightened the bindings just a shade too much.

She'd died quietly, at least, though she'd emptied her bowels. He pinched his nostrils. He'd had to sleep with the windows wide open even after he'd used some lanbeth odor-quenching spray in the room. He'd tried a minor spell to create a sweeter fragrance, but the stench of death overpowered everything. He doubted anyone would miss the nameless servant, but no need to take a chance and linger.

No, he'd wait till Rayne and the others left, then take his own leave. He gazed around the rooms she had offered him and noted the rich array of amber objects. Perhaps he'd also take some other things. After all, Rayne owed him for dashing his hopes of becoming king of Tarol.

His gaze returned to his open window.

They were leaving, heading off toward the mountains bordering the Hinterlands, should he make a guess.

His stomach rumbled. Yes, he'd wait till after the morning meal.

* * * * *

"Let's load up and be on our way."

"Who made you leader, Pentar?" Rayne's strident tones cut across the courtyard.

"I just assumed ..."

“You assume too much. This is my country and people who we will approach. I know their language and their ways and will not have them accidentally insulted should you do or say something stupid in your ignorance.”

She planted herself in front of him, her fisted hands on her hips, her chin thrust out like a pugnacious basta.

Pen gazed speechlessly into her flashing amber eyes. Should he tell her that he, too, spoke the language and was somewhat familiar with Jakosai ways? Perhaps not. It might be more interesting to conceal his knowledge. He grinned.

Rayne took a step back. What was the unfeathered *thooba* smirking about? Why wasn't he challenging her?

“You're right, Rayne. Lead on.” He paused. “At least for now.”

Tran snorted. “Glad that's settled. Come. Mount up.”

With Rayne in the lead atop Rosta, and Pen and a grumbling Fel seated on Tran, they set off for the farthest Jakosai gathering place in the Hinterlands of Tarol.

* * * * *

“The prince is dead! The prince is dead!”

The frightened servant flung open the door, running straight into the massive, immovable chest of the guard.

“Here, ye, what did ye say?”

“Prince Metres. He's dead! Dead!”

“Ye're insane. How could he be dead? I've been guarding this door all night. Ye're the first person I've let into his rooms. And besides, there's a binding spell on it. Unless ...” He riveted his gaze on the hapless, trembling servant. “Why'd ye do it?”

“What?”

“Kill the prince. More'n that, how'd ye do it? He ain't no unfeathered thooba.”

“Are you crazy? Why would I kill him? And then announce to all that he's dead? Get the captain of the guard; he'll know what to do.”

“Good idea ... and don't ye move. I'm locking the door. Ye better be out here when I return.” The ponderous man lumbered down the hall, the sound of his boots echoing in the morning stillness.

“Where would I go? I can't move.” As the shock took over, the servant slowly sank to the floor, his head slumped, his back against the locked door to Prince Metres's body.

* * * * *

“Jareth. Jareth. It's Loran. Open up. We have a problem.”

The insistent knocking finally penetrated Jareth's sleep, even as he tried his best to ignore it. He settled deeper into the bedding and clasped his wife's naked form closer to his chest, relishing the feel of her satiny bottom against his burgeoning erection. Mirelle squirmed as his grip tightened, her hair tickling his nose and her buttocks pressing harder against his shaft. He smiled in contentment, then frowned as the knocking became a pounding and the voice ever more strident.

"Jareth, are you all right in there?"

With a muttered oath, Jareth carefully slipped out of bed, trying his best not to wake Mirelle. He failed. As he groped for the robe she had stripped off his body last night, he heard her sleep-confused voice.

"What? Jareth? What's that pounding? What time is it? Come back to bed, dream boy. I want you."

He turned. Mirelle sat up in their bed, the sheet fallen below her breasts, her nipples taut. Her fiery, tousled curls glowed in the morning light that seeped through the curtained windows. Her eyes still closed, her arms reached for him. The tip of her tongue peeked out and moistened her lips; he felt his rod stiffen even more as he took a step toward the bed.

The door slammed open, and Loran staggered into the room, propelled by the force of his charge against the door. The momentum threw him toward the bed, and he tumbled into Mirelle's lap.

A shriek tore from her as her eyes shot open, and she pulled up the sheet to cover herself. A grunt escaped Loran as Jareth lunged at him, gripped him by the collar, and threw him off Mirelle. Knocking over a chair, Loran crashed to the hard wood floor.

For a brief moment, stunned silence filled the chamber, then all three spoke at once.

"Jareth, what's Loran doing here?"

"Mirelle, I'm sorry. I never meant to ..."

"Loran, what, by the Great Maker, is going on?"

Pulling himself up, Loran staggered over to a table where a pitcher and cups were placed and poured a drink. It was pomees cider, but in the state he was in, he wouldn't have cared if it were poison. He took a deep breath, knowing that Jareth was not going to like the news he brought.

"Metres is dead."

"What? When? Impossible!" Jareth spoke with utter conviction.

"This morning. Strenker, the kitchen servant who brings the morning meal, found his body. The guard swears he didn't leave the door to the room for a moment after he went on watch last night and that no one visited the prince or approached him until he unlocked the door for the servant who found the body. I was conferring with the captain of the guard about increasing security when Prince Metres's guard came to tell us the news. They've gone

to secure the area until further investigation, but I knew you would want to see everything for yourself. Get dressed. I'll wait outside."

Excusing himself, Loran left the room, shielding his eyes from Mirelle's dishabille.

Mirelle was the first to recover her voice. She spoke only one word. "Narik."

Jareth shook his head. "Why? More important, how? There's a binding spell on that room. No one can go in or out except to bring him his meals. Metres could not have escaped, for the spell specifically binds him from even opening his door. And why would Narik kill him? Nothing adds up."

"We'll probably know more when we check out the murder scene. I'm glad they had enough sense to lock the door so no one could muck up any evidence."

Jareth took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. "There hasn't been a violent crime of this sort in hundreds of years. People kill accidentally in the midst of a robbery, perhaps. Or a spouse murders their mate because of jealousy or infidelity, a crime of passion. But this seems so ..."

"Cold-blooded? Yes. That's why Narik must be involved."

"Perhaps, but you'll wait here while I go and investigate with Loran."

Mirelle sighed. "Haven't you learned yet, dream boy? We're a team, partners, soulmates, and I don't want you to shield me from anything. Besides, I know I've seen more murders than you. I've watched all the crime shows on television."

Jareth shook his head again. "I cannot conceive of anyone making an entertainment from someone's violent death. But you're right, *kiereen*. You are one with me. Get dressed. Loran has never been known for his patience."

They dressed quickly, joining Loran as he paced back and forth in the royal suite's sitting room.

"Finally! Come, Jareth, I wanted your opinion as to who might be behind this heinous crime."

"We think it may be Narik," Mirelle said. "And I'm going with you. Unfortunately, Earth is a far more violent place than Hearthome; I may be of some help."

Loran seemed taken aback for a moment, then rallied admirably.

"Are there any more like you on Earth? You're like no princess I've ever met."

Jareth grinned and shook his head. "She's one of a kind ... and she's mine."

There were few people about in the early morning, only a handful of servants who tried their best to ignore the royal trio. The invisible taisins went about their business, taking care of the more arduous chores and dangerous tasks.

As they hurried through the endless maze of corridors and halls, they sensed a palpable tension in the air.

“Are you sure that no one knows of this save the three you mentioned?” Jareth’s cautious whisper hung suspended around them.

“And us,” Loran said.

“Let’s keep it that way.”

They arrived at Metres’s room. Two men stood before the door, the captain of the guards and the man assigned to the night and morning watch. The kitchen servant hunched fearfully in a chair across from the room. Bowing respectfully, the captain stepped forward and motioned the guard to speak. He had little additional information to offer. Neither did the servant.

Jareth frowned after hearing their sketchy tales. “Did you examine the body?”

All three shook their heads.

“Did you touch anything in the room?” Mirelle questioned.

They all vigorously denied doing so.

“Unlock the door, then remain without.” Jareth’s command was curt.

Taking a key from his belt, the captain briskly turned it in the lock and the door swung open.

As Jareth entered the room, he stopped on the threshold. “The binding spell is gone, someone has removed it.” He paused. “I sense Narik’s aura.”

“Ha! I told you! We shouldn’t touch anything.” Mirelle reminded them and looked around. “Does anything seem out of place?”

Loran spoke with just a drop of sarcasm. “You mean besides the body on the couch?”

Mirelle nodded, answering in all seriousness. “Yes. Has any of the furniture been moved? Are the windows broken? Could someone have come in through them?”

“We’re several floors up, and there is no outside access. No. This must be due to magic. But how?” Jareth slammed his fist against the table that still bore the morning meal brought by the servant, rattling the dishes.

Loran walked toward the couch and crouched near the unmoving form lying on it. “Let’s take a look at the body.”

“Be careful, brother.”

Loran nodded and gingerly pulled down the quilt covering the corpse, baring the head and shoulders.

“What happened to his hair?” Mirelle’s questioning eye immediately noticed the ear-length cut.

Ever more curious now, Loran gently rolled the corpse over to reveal its face and gasped. “It’s not Metres!”

Mirelle’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Not Metres? Who is it?”

“More importantly,” Jareth questioned. “Where is Metres?”

Jareth motioned in Strenker. "Come closer. Do you recognize this man?"

The fearful servant took a few hesitant steps nearer to the body and peered at it intently. His eyes widened and he gasped.

"'Tis Fendler! He serves the evening meal to Prince Metres." He gazed with frightened eyes at the corpse's vacant countenance. "Prince Metres killed Fendler?"

Jareth shrugged his shoulders. "We're not sure as yet, but at least we have an idea when this must have happened." He hardened his voice as he ordered Strenker to his side. "Listen well. I am swearing you to utter silence regarding this incident. Should word of this get out, I will know whom to seek. And you will not be happy when I find you. Do you understand?"

Strenker nodded, his knees knocking.

"Good. Now, go about your regular duties. Should anyone ask you about Fendler, simply say you know nothing."

Strenker nodded once more and fled the room.

Striding into the corridor, Jareth gestured for the guards to draw near. "First, you are both sworn to maintain utter secrecy about this. We don't want anyone to know that Metres escaped; there is more than enough turmoil now dealing with Narik's revelations. If we need your assistance, we will contact you. Return to your posts and act as though nothing is amiss. We will be here awhile longer. Let no one enter the corridor."

The men nodded and went on with their daily routine. Jareth turned back into the room and locked the door behind him.

"Let's take a closer look around and share our observations. Loran, write down all we say for future reference."

Mirelle sighed with frustration. "I wish we had a tape recorder to get it all. It really would save time."

Loran cocked his head. "Tape recorder?"

"A mechanical device that transcribes everything it hears and then repeats it when you press a button."

Loran's eyes widened in amazement. "Can you build one of these things?"

Mirelle laughed. "Not in a million years." She sobered. "When Narik is defeated, perhaps you can figure out the means to devise one."

Jareth cleared his throat, regaining their attention. "Let's examine the body first." He passed his hands in the air over the recumbent form. "It's strange. I can find no magic aura around it."

Loran ran a discerning eye over the corpse's bloodied shirt. "This is too fine a shirt for a servant."

Mirelle nodded. "Yes, and the pants are too long and the waist too tight. They must be Metres's clothes. But why did he switch them?"

"To slip by the guard. All he need do was keep his head bent and not speak." Jareth's mouth thinned into a grim line. "He must have known the binding spell was broken and had no fear of being stopped."

"But how did he kill him?" Loran's voice was filled with confusion.

"He killed him here." Mirelle had lifted the rug to reveal a large, smudged crimson stain some distance away from the couch and a trail leading back to it.

"He dressed him and dragged him to the couch."

Loran's swiftly moving pen took down Jareth and Mirelle's observations.

"Strip off his clothes, Jareth. He's too heavy for me to do it."

Jareth carefully lifted the top over the body's head, pulling the sleeves off its limp arms. The men peered at the entrance and exit wounds and shook their heads.

"Does it look like any wound you've seen before, Loran?"

"It bears no resemblance to an arrow wound or that of a dagger or spear."

Mirelle gazed at both men, her eyes filled with astonishment. "All those years of watching the Discovery Channel ... it's a bullet wound."

"Bullet?" Jareth faltered as he spoke the unfamiliar word.

"From a handgun, I'd bet. It'd be hard to smuggle in a rifle."

Loran stared at Mirelle. "Handgun? Rifle?"

Mirelle's gaze locked with that of the men. "He was killed with an Earth weapon. Narik has brought guns to Hearthome."

Jareth swore under his breath. "Can we defend ourselves against Earth weapons?"

Loran's hands fell helplessly to his sides, the pen and pad slipping unheeded to the floor. Then his hands clenched and his shoulders straightened. "We shall have to find out."

Jareth nodded. "And we shall have to find Metres."

Mirelle took Jareth's hand and grasped it tightly. "And Narik."

Jareth extended his left hand to Loran, who gripped it firmly. Offering his hand to Mirelle, Loran twined his sturdy fingers with her slim ones. They stood in the center of the room, an unbroken circle, and renewed their vow to find the most malevolent villain in Hearthome history.

And bring him to justice.

* * * * *

It was late. All the servants had retired. Sontar cursed as he heaved yet another bag laden with booty from his foraging of the unused rooms in the palace. He'd had to load up the *toron-a* on his own, and he'd grown sweaty from his unaccustomed exertion. His hair was still damp from the shower he'd taken to rid himself of any trace of the dead servant.

He'd finally performed a simple veiling spell around the body that would hold long enough for him to be several hours away from the vicinity of Koralakai.

The unknown skimmer touched down just as he crammed in the last bulky item in the back. The skimmer came from the west, but from where? Sontar decided to wait and see.

It skidded to a stop, almost crashing into the fountain in the center of the courtyard. He heard the voice first before he saw the person spewing invectives.

"By the Great Tormentor, does no one know how to build a smooth-landing vehicle anymore?"

Metres!

Sontar felt an imagined fist punch him in the gut. He stumbled and grabbed onto the toron-a for support. How had Metres escaped?

"Sontar? Sontar, you old bastard. What luck to find you here."

Metres held out his hand. It was as Narik had told him while the skimmer flew over the ocean. Narik's voice had whispered in his mind, feeding him information and guidance while the vehicle took him unaided to Tarol. The mage's eyes and ears were everywhere. He knew that Sontar had left Narwith to travel to Tarol, and he knew that he would have his toron-a to take Metres to the Hinterlands. With some gentle persuasion, of course.

"Metres, how ...?"

"With Narik's aid. He put a spell on the guards to allow me to slip unseen from the palace. The skimmer was waiting for me."

"But why Tarol?"

"There is something I need to do for him. And he knew you would be more than happy to assist me."

He grinned -- the smile of someone not quite right. Sontar shuddered. Somehow he knew that it wouldn't be good for his health to travel with his former crony.

"Love to help you, my friend, but I'm afraid I have a pressing engagement ..."

Metres grabbed Sontar's wrist and twisted. Hard. With his other hand he drew a strange metallic object from beneath his short cloak and pointed it at Sontar's chest.

"Damn, man, you're hurting me! Let go."

Metres snarled. His nostrils flared as though scenting blood, and his eyes narrowed. "I will do more than hurt you; I'll kill you if you don't take your toron-a and fly it where I tell you to."

"How? With that little toy in your hand?"

"Let me show you what this little toy can do. By the way, it's called a gun."

Metres released him and, pointing the gun at a *ratert* crouched unknowingly with a nut in its paws, flexed his fingers. There was a soft sound, and the *ratert* exploded. Blood and

bone dispersed in the air. Sontar felt his gorge rise. He took a deep breath and made a last desperate plea for freedom.

"You can't kill me. If you do who will fly the toron-a for you?"

"You're right. I can't kill you. I can only make you wish I had done so. Like this."

Before Sontar could move out of range, Metres pointed the gun at Sontar's left hand and pulled the trigger. Screaming in pain as the blood gushed from the stumps of two of his fingers, Sontar rolled on the ground, howling, clutching his bloody hand to his chest.

"You bastard!"

"Silence! You'll wake the servants with your caterwauling. Here." He tossed him a tube of wound-sealing unguent. "Use it and bind your hand. Let's go." He clambered into the back of the toron-a, rearranging things till he found a comfortable spot. He gazed at the filthy prince lying in the dirt.

"By the way, if you somehow find a way to leave me, you should know that the deaths of all those pleasure slaves will be linked to you. And you will be judged, found guilty, and executed. Now, get up from the dirt and get us out of here."

Sontar whimpered as he liberally spread the healing ointment on his wounds. Even the lanbeth inherent in the balm only dulled the pain a little. He wrapped a clean cloth around the hand and slowly pulled himself up and into the driver's side of the vehicle. Turning, he directed his question to the vile creature in the back.

"Where to?"

"The Hinterlands." Metres smiled once more, his face filled with malevolence. "I am so glad you decided to join me. I know we shall have a most pleasant journey."

Sontar turned, looked out the front window, and trembled.

* * * * *

"We'll camp here for the night."

Rayne pointed to a small enclosure of rocks, brush, and the stumpy desert *mangela* tree. They had finally cleared the mountain range of Talor and were in the foothills. Night fell like the slamming of a window. The full moon and star-filled sky prevented the darkness from completely obliterating the light.

Pen nodded his head in agreement.

"Good idea, Rayne. No use traveling at night in unknown territory."

Though Rayne thought she heard a note of condescension in Pen's voice, she chose to ignore it. It was only the first day of their journey, and they had spent it in endless arguments regarding directions and how much information to share with the Jakosai. Rayne was tired of it; she would bite her tongue if it meant a quiet night of rest.

"Gather some dry brush and any dry pieces of mangela, and I'll build a fire."

"Wouldn't it be easier for me to make a light-catcher and just expand it within a containment circle?" Pen sounded confused.

"You might as well get used to using as little magic as possible. The Jakosai do not deal well with everyday spells. The only person who has that right is the *shakos*. And he uses that right sparingly."

"Tis true, Pen." Tran confirmed Rayne's statement.

Pen realized that perhaps he didn't know as much as he thought about Jakosai culture, but then, not many people did. Putting any further questions aside for the moment, he gathered the wood, and Rayne, using a flint and steel, quickly got a fire going.

Rosta settled down next to Fel. Pen cast the akosa a grateful look and hunkered down on her other side, keeping his distance from the testy canid.

"To be frank, I didn't know they even had mages."

"Indeed, they do." Rosta nodded her head and nickered. "Each clan has only one shakos, and it may be a man or woman. They act more as a wise elder offering their guidance for tribal concerns. Of course, they also interpret dreams and signs and retell their ballads and legends."

Rayne smiled and her eyes took on a far away cast. Pen needed to know why.

"What brings that smile to your face?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about the first time I saw Jareth and Mirelle in Mariess. I was in the audience when he performed the *Ballad of Melakosai* for King Belar and the other court members." She grinned. "It was quite a performance. Jareth wore tight leggings and an open vest." She sighed. "He was quite delicious."

If Jareth had been in the vicinity at that moment, there would have been no telling what Pen might have done. Suddenly a thought struck him. Could Rayne be in love with Jareth? Was that why she struck out at him so often? Because he reminded her of what she couldn't have?

"I heard Mirelle dressed like a Jakosai pleasure-giver. I know what those outfits look like. Couple of pieces of chiffon placed here and there."

Pen flicked a glance at Rayne's face to gauge her reaction, but couldn't discern any noticeable change in the campfire's dim light.

She leaned over to toss some more wood on the flames. As the sparks soared higher, her braid swung forward, catching the gleam of the firelight. Stray golden streaks glowed like the sun. The urge to unbraid those long tresses and let the silky strands slip through his fingers struck him again. And he instantly hardened. By the Maker, he couldn't keep his thoughts away from his penis.

"I'll get more wood."

He stood up abruptly, turning quickly, and strode off into the blessed cool of the Hinterlands night.

“Pen, you’ll need a torch,” Rayne called after him.

A light-catcher popped out, bobbing along with him, and disappeared in the distance. Rayne watched Pen flee into the dark. What had happened? For a moment they had actually had a conversation that didn’t involve arguments and snarling. Could he dislike her that much that he couldn’t bear to be around her?

She hunched her shoulders against the sudden chill that coursed through her.

Chapter Three

Pen kept moving further away from the campsite as he picked up stray pieces of wood. Toting a hefty bundle of kindling, he was headed back when the sound of running water caught his attention. A stream, perhaps? Maybe a dip in some frigid water would cool off his ardor. Following the sounds, he came upon a meandering creek. Moonlight glinted off the ripples in the water, inviting him in. He dropped the wood, the light-catcher hovering by his shoulder. Directing it to a pile of rocks, he set a small containment spell around it.

He toed off his boots and stripped, casting his clothes helter-skelter on the ground. Making as much noise as a dyspeptic *bant*, he waded into the creek up to his waist. He shivered as the water iced down his body, shrinking that part of him that had a mind of its own. He grinned as he viewed his tamed penis.

“Ah, my friend, if only you were always this well behaved.”

“*Ratzah! Ratzah!*”

Pen whirled around. Rayne stood by the creek bank, grinning from ear to ear and holding a torch made from a mangela branch.

He froze.

Staring pointedly at his diminished rod, Rayne sighed dramatically. “If only you were as well behaved as your prick.”

Shaking off his paralysis, he strode out of the creek, water streaming off his body. “I’ll show you well behaved.”

Rayne turned and scooted away, throwing the torch to the ground and dousing the flame. She scooped up Pen’s shirt, pants, and the light-catcher as she scampered back to camp, her taunting laughter trailing behind her.

Pen hopped on one foot as he shoved on his boots. “Damn it, Rayne, at least throw me my pants!”

Suddenly, his shirt came floating down from the rocky outcropping.
But not his pants.

* * * * *

“Did you find him?” Tran asked.

“Yes. He’s fine. He’ll be back shortly.”

Rayne pushed Pen’s leggings further down into her carrybag; he’d have to beg her for them when he got back to camp. She recalled the scene at the creek. She thought she had hidden her relief well. When Pen hadn’t reappeared after a reasonable time, she’d gone after him, afraid he’d been injured or worse.

Then to find him splashing like a child ... she saw again the incredible image of him standing in the creek, the moonlight gleaming on his skin, turning him into a godlike creature. A god of lust. She wanted to worship him, get down on her knees and idolize his manhood. Caress him till his penis grew firm and engorged. She wanted him to take her. Mount her like the Jakosai males took their women in homage to the akosai.

Her nipples hardened against their restraining bindings until they were almost painful. She thought of Pen’s lips on them, suckling them, his teeth nipping them playfully. By the Great Maker, how she wanted him! Her breath quickened and her loins tightened. She needed some privacy. Now.

“Can you throw me my carrybag, Rayne?” Pen’s voice slashed through her burning need.

“What?”

“My pants. I need a new pair.” He hovered behind the camp’s perimeter, the rocks shielding him from view.

“Pants?” Tran turned his head and looked at Rayne.

“Long and boring story, Tran.” Scooping up his bag, she tossed it in the direction of Pen’s voice. “I need some time by myself. I won’t go far. Rosta, please tell Pen.”

Rayne took her bag and the light-catcher Pen had conjured and hiked a short distance, until the voices from camp faded away. She spread her jacket on the ground, sat cross-legged on it, and took out Pen’s clothes from her carrybag. Drawing the intimate garment to her nostrils, she inhaled its masculine scent. Pen’s scent. Loosening the waistband of her leggings, she pulled them down until her silky curls were exposed to the night air. Spreading her legs wide, she passed the soft leather material between her thighs, rubbing it against her clit.

She moaned low in her throat at the sensation. Letting her fingers stray between her tender flesh, she arched against her hand and closed her eyes, envisioning Pen’s fingers touching her intimately. His tongue dipping deep to taste her.

Her right hand crept beneath her blouse. Her bindings. She cursed them. Drawing her hand from between her legs, she feverishly pulled off her top. She loosened the cloth imprisoning her breasts and shoved the bindings down beneath them, pushing them up so that they swelled above the bunched up material. Her hands massaged her breasts.

She ached; deep within her she burned. She needed more. Something harder, firmer, wider than her own fingers to assuage her hunger.

Her hand dropped to her side and brushed against her sheathed dagger. Unsheathing it, she caressed the rounded, bejeweled pommel. The amber. She had heard that the “burning stone,” as the Jakosai called it, had special aphrodisiacal properties. Reversing the hilt, she thrust it deep between her nether lips. Oh, by the goddess Larakosa, it felt good. So good. She throbbed. She was enflamed. She took up Pen’s clothes and bit down on the buttoned material of his fly. She could almost taste him. Rotating the handle, she moved it rhythmically, faster and faster.

She closed her eyes and let the intense sensations wash over her. How she wished it were Pen’s lips on her, his fingers delving within her. She pulled the handle out and moaned his name aloud.

Pen crouched behind a man-sized boulder near where Rayne lay pleasuring herself. He’d followed her to get back his stuff and indulge in some harmless teasing. He’d figured he would surprise her, so he’d merely observed as she stretched out on the ground and got comfortable. Then he saw her loosen her leggings and take his trousers and rub them between her thighs, and he’d lost his breath and his ability to move.

His penis hardened and pressed against his trousers. He unbuttoned his fly and released his shaft, rubbing the rock-hard length while Rayne fondled herself. When she unsheathed her dagger and plunged the hilt deep between her nether lips, he almost came undone. And then she called out his name, and he was well and truly gone.

“Rayne.” He called to her as he scrambled over the rocks.

Rayne opened her eyes. Stunned, she gazed up and saw Pen standing before her, his midnight-blue eyes filled with lust.

She realized she still clutched his pants in her hand, the buttons cutting into her palm. It was as though someone smacked her in the face.

“Get away from me. Turn around. Move.” She stood, dropping the pants, and hastily began dressing.

He couldn’t move. Clearly transfixed, Pen watched as Rayne pulled up her leggings, adjusted her bindings, and arranged her shirt. She grabbed the dagger, glistening with her creamy essence, and wiped it against her jacket. She scooped up his pants, throwing them at him.

“Here. They’re yours.”

Pen found his voice and grinned. “If you want them, they’re ...”

“Damn you, no! Leave me alone! Don’t ever mention this to anyone. If you do, I’ll kill you.” A sob broke from her.

And she ran back into the darkness.

Pen clutched the trousers Rayne had tossed him. By the Great Mage, what had just happened? Rayne had screamed out his name earlier. She had burst into a million pieces when her orgasm had struck. He knew it; he had felt it. He had watched as she finger-fucked herself. And his fingers had felt the sweet, moist warmth.

And he’d seen her breasts. Those beautiful, succulent, lush breasts. How those bindings she wore must pain her. All these years he had never realized how utterly, totally feminine her form truly was. He had admired her grace and strength and those slim legs. Now he had even more to appreciate. And he was the only one who knew. The other night at the palace she must have been pleasuring herself as she had tonight. He knew without any doubt that no one else had ever seen her so uninhibited. No one else knew how perfect she was.

Now he knew that Rayne desired him. Did she want him as much as he wanted her? Did she dream about him as much as he dreamt of her? Did she ache for him? How could he ask her? By the Great Maker, how could he face her?

He cursed the burden laid upon them. The fate of their world rested upon them finding the portion of the *Book of Tocson* before Narik, that renegade mage bastard, did. They would have to continue their quest; they could not turn back simply because they lusted after each other.

Of course, he would never tell anyone of what had occurred between them.

But how could he keep from thinking of it?

He wished he knew an incantation that would make those images vanish from his mind.

He wished never to forget them.

Rayne raced unheeding over the rocks toward the campsite. She had grabbed the light-catcher when she ran from Pen’s sight, and now it bobbed along with her, casting a clear orange glow.

By the goddess, how could she face him again? He had seen her at her most vulnerable -- naked, writhing in ecstasy -- needy. And heard her calling out his name. There was no longer a way to hide how she felt about him. How she wished she could weave a magic spell of forgetfulness around Pen.

But not around herself.

* * * * *

Metres lounged inside the dimly lit cabin of the toron-a. The lanbeth-lit interior cast the yellowish-green tinge of a bilious thrant upon Sontar's features. Sontar had parked the vehicle behind an outcropping overlooking the Talor Valley. Far below them, a campfire blew indecipherable smoke signals into the night sky.

Sontar cleared his throat, finally breaking the taut silence. "They're down there. I can see the outline of the akosai. Now can I leave? You don't need me if you're going to kill them."

"Who said anything about killing? Narik charged me with following them. No, sorry, my friend. I still need you."

"But as soon as you've reached wherever they're going, you'll let me go, right?"

"Why, of course. I'll have no need of you then. Now, relax. Come, change places with me; you'll be more comfortable. I'll take the first watch."

"Watch? We need to watch them?"

"Of course. They'll probably break camp early. We don't want to miss them." He took out the gun and absentmindedly caressed the barrel. Sontar shifted nervously in his seat. "I'm sure you agree."

His voice frozen, Sontar nodded. Gingerly, he clambered over the front seat while Metres switched places. Curling up in a tight ball, he closed his eyes and prayed to the Great Maker that he would see the sunken gardens of Larbela once more.

* * * * *

Rayne sat huddled by the fire when Pen finally arrived back at camp. He gazed at her hunched shoulders and bent head. Her long, thick braid hung over one shoulder, revealing the slim line of her neck. He yearned to go to her and comfort her. Tell her that he'd make everything right for her. But he couldn't. He was the problem, and there was no way he could eradicate what had happened between them. He could only pretend that it had never occurred. Maybe that would help. But not enough.

Tran raised his muzzle and whinnied a simple greeting. Fel, lying at his mistress's feet, raised his head and growled low in his throat, his gaze never wavering as Pen cautiously inched his way over to the opposite side of the fire and crouched by Rosta's flanks. He threw some of the firewood he had gathered earlier into the flames and, taking a branch, stirred up the embers.

Rosta nickered quietly. "Did you take care of everything you had to, Pen?"

Pen glanced at Rayne's silent form. "Yes." He gazed again at Rayne, directing his next words to her. "Shall I take the first watch, Rayne? I know we can't set up any warding spells."

She raised her head and blinked, as though coming out of a trance. “Yes. Yes, that’s a good idea, Pen. Wake me up for the next one, would you? I think I’ll try to get some sleep. It’s been a long day.”

Tran whickered softly. “We should eat something before we bed down.”

Rayne nodded and opened up a bag containing dried coney meat and fruit. Rayne and Pen drank from canteens filled with lanbeth-laced pommee cider, then poured a healthy draught in waterbags for Rosta and Tran.

Neatly wiping her fingers and mouth with a clean cloth, Rayne folded up the square and placed it back in her bag. Wearily, she rolled her aching shoulders and arched her back.

Pen watched with avid interest as the material of her shirt tightened against her bound breasts. He wished he could free them from their imprisonment and give her more comfort, but his hands were tied.

Rayne opened her bag and took out a tightly rolled fleece blanket. Stretching out, she drew it over her body, covering it from head to toe, with just her long braid draped on top. Fel aligned his body against her, his long-curved fur covering her feet. Facing away from her, he fixed his eyes on Pen as though daring him to approach his precious mistress.

Pen didn’t take him up on it.

Rosta and Tran stood side by side, their wings spread so that they covered each other’s bodies. They nickered softly as their flanks bumped, then bent their heads and closed their eyes. All was quiet in the camp.

As soon as he heard Rayne’s even breathing, Pen moved silently to where their gear was stacked and removed the leather case from the other bags. He opened the narrow end and drew out a formidably long scabbard.

The hilt of a sword gleamed in the flickering campfire. The pommel held an indentation for some sort of stone; it had been lost for ages, and none knew where it might be or what type stone it was. Still, in all it was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. The hilt bore an intricate design in one of the earliest Tarnwitian dialects. Pen smiled grimly when he thought of the translation of the words. He had copied the design and given it to Loran, knowing that his studious, clever younger brother would be able to decipher it. He had. It was the sword’s name -- “Blood Drinker.”

He drew the heavy broadsword from its scabbard and thrust it up to the sky. The flames from the fire seemed to make it glow. It was perfectly balanced in his hand, cleaving to it as though it were joined to his flesh. He began the series of practice movements he had learned from an ancient text he’d found in the family library in the castle. For years he’d practiced in secrecy, using a wooden sword he’d copied from pictures in the book. Then he’d gone to Tolos and sat at the feet of Toledaolos, the master smithy in the city of Lostolos, watching and learning the art of metalworking.

At first, Toledaolos had questioned his interest, thinking it an example of the fleeting search from boredom of a royal prince. Pentar's educated, intuitive questions soon convinced the smithy otherwise, and he took the youth under his tutelage. Though he could never understand why Pentar wanted to learn his craft, Toledaolos taught him all he knew.

No sword had been made in Hearthome for over five hundred years, not since the forgotten times of Tocson. Through trial and error and in the secrecy of night, Pentar finally crafted a crude sword with which he practiced daily. He transformed his personal hunting lodge into a training area for swordplay and cajoled Loran into being his reluctant sparring partner. Loran used the wooden sword, while Pen employed the broadsword he had forged. After several close calls, Loran had devised a padded outfit in which to fight and preserve his skin ... and his life.

Now Pen held in his hand a weapon crafted by a master swordmaker long since dead. He marveled at its beauty and deadliness. Only the empty pommel marred its perfection.

As Pen moved with precision, the blade arced through the air, singing through the night, scintillating in the firelight. Pen felt the power within it waiting to be unleashed, waiting to be sated by the blood of some enemy. Waiting for blood to drip from the blade onto the thirsty earth.

An almost sexual feeling engulfed him. Desire awoke in him. The unsheathing of the sword was compelling him to unsheathe his own blade and fit it into that most perfect sheath of all.

Rayne's body.

His shaft stirred as he remembered their earlier encounter. He had never desired a woman with such intensity. It went beyond mere lust. He felt as though they were of the same flesh. That she was the sheath to his sword. Could she be his destined soulmate? His bride-casting was so cryptic. A woman with two heads? What did it mean? He sighed, picked up his weapon, and continued his practicing.

Rayne moved restlessly. Strange dreams filled her sleep. She viewed the action as though watching a play.

Night. The campfire gleamed like a fiery furnace, sending sparks like lanbeth into the sky.

Moving before it, his features shadowed, Pentar performed exotic dancelike poses. She knew it was he, though she couldn't see his face. She recognized that body, that glorious, finely toned physique. His arms and chest glistened with sweat. The sinews in his forearms tightened and relaxed as he twirled a long, pointed object above his head. He lunged forward with it, his leggings clinging to his taut flanks and outlining his bulging manhood. He sprang upright and saluted some unseen observer, his chest heaving.

Rayne's viewpoint shifted, and she could see whom Pen acknowledged.

It was her.

As dreams are wont to do, the scene changed, and they were no longer at the campsite. She recognized the setting; it was the traditional Tarolian marriage retreat. Dressed in a Tarolian first-month outfit, she reclined on a couch. Her breasts were bare, her high-waisted, sheer garment slit front and back. She knew that, by custom, she would be completely nude beneath the skirt. The time of the first-month was designed to encourage copulation and procreation.

Rayne gazed with interest as her dream counterpart rose from the couch and moved toward Pentar.

His nostrils flared as she drew nearer and her scent caressed his senses. Her nipples were rouged, and her muff had been shaved. Ankle bells tinkled as she drew ever closer to him. She finally stood within arm's reach. Her hair flowed unfettered down to her buttocks. She drew herself up proudly, offering her body to him.

He dropped the pointed metal object; it clanked as it rolled on the marble floor. He took one step forward and plunged his tongue into her mouth, embracing her, his grasp so tight she knew her dream image would have marks on her waist.

Sweeping her up into his arms, he carried her to the couch, a Tarolian first-month couch. Very narrow, with a curved head and footboard, it was designed for the akosai position in lovemaking. Two people could not lie side by side upon it.

She watched as the dream Rayne knelt upon the couch, grabbing the headboard and presenting her rounded behind for Pen's pleasure. The tunic's sheer skirt split to either side, baring her body.

Pen toed off his boots and pulled down his leggings. His erection sprang forth, long, hard, and bedewed. He positioned himself behind her, the head of his shaft hovering near her cheeks. Taking his time, he lubricated her with his pre-cum and then slowly pressed his massive prick into her willing body. Bit by bit, he increased the speed of his thrusts, rocking against her.

As their breathing became increasingly labored, lanbeth gathered above them. It glowed a brilliant amber color. It should have given off heat, the color was so like the flames of an inferno.

As they neared their climax, Pen groaned and called out. "*Kerasoka*, Rayne."

Beloved.

Over and over he called to her. "Rayne. Rayne. Rayne."

"Rayne? Rayne?"

Someone was shaking her. Disturbing her fantasy. Interrupting her journey to completion.

Waking her.

"Rayne, Rayne, wake up. 'Tis your turn for the watch. Wake up."

Pen shook her shoulder.

She opened bleary eyes and squinted up at him. "What time is it?"

"Near dawn."

"Why didn't you wake me up earlier?"

"I tried. Fel wouldn't let me get near you. He snapped and growled if I came within ten feet of you. He finally moved when he had to relieve himself, or I don't think I would ever have gotten close enough. Are you awake? You've only a short time before we break camp."

"Yes. Yes. I'm awake. Go ahead and try to get a couple hours of sleep. I'll have a little talk with Fel and try to get him to ease up with you. You know he's just acting out. He wouldn't really bite you ... I think." She grinned.

She saw Pen gaze at her. She felt satiated, as though she had just finished some sweet morning sex. There was no way around it. This was going to be a very, very long journey.

Rayne rubbed her arms, fighting off the morning chill.

"Give me another second. I'll wash over at the creek and be back in a flash."

Simultaneously, their thoughts turned to the scene last night by the creek and their breaths caught.

Rayne fled as Pen cursed their fate.

* * * * *

"Why don't you take a turn to drive?"

Sontar's whining was driving Metres insane. "Because I can't, you fool. I have no mage ability. I can't drive a toron-a. Why else would I need you?"

"But before ..."

"I used a skimmer with its predetermined destinations or was chauffeured or others drove." He sighed. "Did you never notice this?" Metres sneered.

Sontar refrained from responding. At least Metres wasn't going to kill him any time soon. He motioned to the campsite below.

"They appear to be breaking camp. Should we follow them?"

Metres sighed once more and rolled his eyes.

"Of course. And please, remember to stay out of sight."

Sontar nodded. He would have to try to mask the toron-a with an invisibility spell, never one of his best spells, or they would surely be seen. His maimed hand ached as he tried to concentrate on the proper steps to ensorcell the vehicle. He could only pray that the spell would hold while they followed Rayne and the others during the daylight hours.

* * * * *

Rosta sniffed the morning air and whinnied to Tran. "Do you sense it? There's magic in the air, but I can't tell where it is."

Tran nodded. "Aye. It's faint and wavers, but it is definitely somewhere in the vicinity."

"Could someone be following us?"

Tran scanned the area. "Maybe we're just on edge. Perhaps we're sensing the traces of some old magic."

"Let's tell Pen and Rayne anyway, to keep them alert."

"Aye. They're returning from their morning ablutions now."

Rosta nickered softly. "I don't know why they didn't bathe together. Their emotions were so highly charged last night, I thought they must have made their commitment to each other."

Tran shook his head. "They deny their mutual desire. They refuse to recognize that they are soulmates. They are so hidebound by tradition, they need a formal bride-casting to confirm what they know in their hearts." He shook his head again. "Foolish humans."

Rosta nudged Tran's neck. "Hush. They're here now, and it is not polite to speak in a language they don't understand."

Tran swished his tail with approval. "You show much delicacy of spirit, Rosta-ka."

Rosta dipped her head, thrilled that the noble elder had rewarded her thoughtfulness with a higher status title. "Thank you, Tran-oka."

Rayne and Pen approached the akosai.

"Let me give you a good grooming, Tran." Rayne smiled. "I know you'll feel better for it."

"And this beauty could use some refreshment, I think. I brought some water back from the creek for you, Rosta. Here," Pen said.

Rayne took a currycomb from one of Tran's carrybags and groomed him with brisk efficiency. Pen strolled over to Rosta and offered her the bowl of water. She sipped delicately, and he smiled.

"Pretty lady, if only you were human, I'd marry you in a flash."

Rosta raised her head. "Even if I were human, I would not be your soulmate. But thank you for the offer."

Pen turned to Tran. "I guess she's yours, old fellow."

Tran nodded his head. "You're right." He looked at Rosta. "Though I haven't made my formal request ... until now. Will you be my first harem mate?"

Rosta nodded and presented her flank to Tran. Baring his teeth, he bit her, leaving a deep mark on her smooth hide.

"This brand makes you mine. May our journey together be long and fruitful."

Rayne put aside the comb and bowed her head. "Thank you for sharing this with us. We will bear witness."

"Thank you, Rayne. I know you and Pentar will honor Rosta's mark."

Pentar placed his hand on his heart. "By my heart's honor, I acknowledge her brand. I'm grateful to you for allowing me to participate, Tran. I've never witnessed a branding before."

"It's a very simple tradition, but binding, nevertheless."

The same thought came to both Pen and Rayne -- if only it were so simple for them.

Tran snorted, gaining their attention. "Rosta and I sensed a trace of magic nearby but can't determine from whence it comes or what it may be."

Pen swore freely. "By the Great Mage, why didn't I sense it?"

Rosta pulled back her lips in what could only be called a smile. "Perhaps you were too occupied?"

Pen thought to protest, then changed his mind. Instead, he went on the defensive and looked askance at Rayne. "I thought you said the Jakosai don't engage in magic?"

"I doubt it's Jakosai. Perhaps it's a remnant from earlier travelers who made free with their magic." She frowned repressively. "We also have poachers who hunt down *termants* and other creatures for their fur. They often use illegal magic lures. Perhaps it's from that."

"We should be on guard, in any case." Pen locked eyes with Rayne. "Have you a weapon besides your dagger?"

Rayne's eyes blazed, and her breath hissed between her teeth. Not saying a word, she opened one of her bags and drew out a short bow and a quiver of arrows. She slung them across her back and mounted Rosta. Eyeing Pen up and down with feigned concern, her gaze finally settled on his crotch.

"And you, Pen, have you any useful weapon with you?"

Tamping down the urge to show her just how useful his weapon was, he took up his leather case and pulled out the sheathed broadsword. With one swift, smooth motion, he drew it forth and flourished it. The morning sun glinted off the polished blade and danced along its edges. Giving in to the desire to show off, he twirled it above his head and tossed it from hand to hand, finally lunging forward.

Tran and Rosta stamped their hooves in approval, whickering their enjoyment of Pen's display of prowess.

Rayne nodded curtly. "Good. Mount up."

Pen straightened, the sword dangling impotently from his hand. Could he do nothing right for her? He resheathed Blood Drinker, coaxed the reluctant Fel into his harness, and sighed. He couldn't wait for this quest to end.

With Rayne in the lead, they continued their westward journey, on guard now for the possibility of an unseen adversary.

* * * * *

“Dream hole!”

Mirelle shifted up in the bed, jostling Jareth’s hold around her waist. He opened befuddled eyes, not quite awake.

“‘Dream hole’? Is that a new love name you want me to call you, kiereen? Hmm? I like it. Dream hole. Dream boy. Goes together.”

Mirelle rolled over onto Jareth’s chest, her breasts brushing his skin. Peering earnestly into his mage-blue eyes, she placed a light kiss on his forehead.

“No, silly man. Maybe we can use a dream hole to travel to Earth and get information on guns to give to Loran to study. Am I brilliant or what?” She clasped Jareth’s face, plastering a big, wet smooch on his mouth.

Jareth was fully awake, and Mirelle felt his prick stir as he became aroused. He slid back up against the headboard and cradled her in his arms. “It won’t be that easy.”

Mirelle pulled away and hit his chest with one small fist. “What do you mean, it won’t be that easy? It’s a great idea!” She slipped out of bed, naked as a newborn babe, and strode over to her wardrobe. “I’ll go see what Loran thinks of it.” Throwing open the closet’s doors, she gazed intently at its contents, trying to decide on what to wear.

“Listen, sweet one, I think it’s a wonderful idea; it just may take a bit of preparation to make it work.”

He threw back the covers and moved to join her.

Mirelle felt Jareth’s warmth and leaned back, trusting implicitly that he’d be there to catch her. Feeling his nude body absorb her weight and his arms encircle her waist, she relaxed completely against him. “The sooner Loran receives information, the sooner he can figure out how to make weapons here in Hearthome.”

Jareth mind-merged with her then as his caresses grew more ardent. Pressing her tighter against his growing erection, he sent his thoughts to her.

“Kiereen, I know you’re eager to present your plan to Loran, but wait a bit.”

“Wait? Time’s a-wasting, dream boy.”

“Aye. Time. Look out the window, heart’s love. Daylight is still a few hours away. We’ll speak to Loran then. In the meantime ...” He thrust his fully erect shaft against her buttocks, and Mirelle moaned. *“In the meantime, since we’re up, maybe we can find a way to occupy our time for a while.”* His hands rose to cup her breasts, and Mirelle groaned. He lifted her up and carried her back to the bed, laying her gently on the silky sheets.

“Perhaps I can explore a dream hole on my own, maybe do a little drilling?”

She smiled, and her legs fell open in invitation.

“Drill away, dream boy.”

Chapter Four

“There. Up ahead. I see the village.”

Pen’s voice was filled with excitement and relief. Twilight had fallen, and the itch between his shoulder blades continued unabated. He knew someone was following them, but he couldn’t pinpoint where or how far behind. He couldn’t focus. He was distracted. Following behind Rayne disturbed him. He couldn’t control his thoughts and feelings. Visions of her naked form danced before his eyes and performed erotic acts upon his willing body.

He shifted, seeking to gain a more comfortable position, his hardened shaft making it almost impossible. Thank the Great Mage he had a saddle between him and Tran’s back; he was merely a passenger and didn’t need to guide him. Even Fel’s furry presence failed to intrude on his preoccupation with the Tarolian princess.

“Are they expecting us, Rayne?”

“No, but no matter. The Jakosai are always prepared for company.”

They circled above the cluster of wattled cabins and small vegetable gardens. Pens encircled herds of thrants. Coops of caged thoobas rimmed the edge of the handful of dwellings. Children ran around the village, tossing balls and throwing multi-colored amber beads onto flat platters as they played arkenos, a Jakosai game of skill.

Akosai yearlings, lone stallions, and maidens wandered freely throughout the settlement, interacting with young and old alike. An imposing stable stood at the south end, and the largest building -- the home of the shakos and the village’s gathering place -- stood at the north end. This was where they would stay while in the village.

They glided in for a smooth landing. Rayne slid off Rosta, and Pen dismounted from Tran, releasing Fel from his harness.

After the bags were brought inside, Tran and Rosta followed several akosai to the stable. Tran, as the eldest male in the vicinity, automatically received temporary leadership status, a custom that avoided unnecessary fighting.

First the children gathered around Rayne and Pen, then the adults. At last, the shakos came out to greet them. Tall for a Jakosai, his head reached the ears of an adult akosa male. He appeared to be a mature man in his early forties, for his tanned face was unlined and his dark brown hair showed no sign of silvering. His pulled-back tresses mimicked the akosai tail and were threaded throughout with amber beads in different sizes, colors, and shapes.

Merkatrosa waited with his arms outstretched. As Rayne and Pen stood before him, he grasped a hand of each and brought them to his chest, greeting them in fluent Tarolian.

"I bid you welcome, Princess. It has been too long." He kissed her on each cheek and then smiled at Pen. "You and your heart's mate are welcome."

Rayne reared back, pulling away from the elder's embrace. "This is Prince Pentar set Morath of Tarnwite. He's not my heart's mate, Shakos. We are only pretending so." She shot a glare toward Pen, who was grinning from ear to ear.

Merkatrosa shrugged his shoulders, bobbed his head, and spread his fingers wide, palms upturned. "As you say, Princess." He beckoned to two of the young people hovering near the new arrivals. "Beka and Frankosa will guide you to the bathing springs. I believe a handful of younglings are still there cleansing their bodies. Fresh garments are available for you, and then you may join us in the *jako* for a celebration in your honor."

Rayne instantly demurred. "Please, don't go to any trouble on our account."

"No, no. Any excuse for a celebration!" Merkatrosa grinned broadly. "You cannot deny us the pleasure."

"Come on, Rayne. Enjoy." Pen poked her gently in the ribs.

Whipping around, she instinctively jabbed him with her elbow. Caught off balance, he stumbled back a few steps, clutching his mid-section. Rayne smiled, turned back to Merkatrosa and nodded. "We would be honored."

"Excellent! Now, these young ones may not speak Tarolian, but I am sure they will not lead you astray."

Rayne replied then in Jakosai. "You need not be concerned, Shakos. My Jakosai is fluent; I can translate for my companion."

Pen remained silent, curious to hear what Rayne might say if she didn't need to watch her words. Would she reveal her feelings for him?

The Jakosai female spoke rapidly. "Your heart's mate is very handsome. Is he a good lover?"

Rayne started, surprised by Beka's bold words. She shook her head, answering honestly. "He is not my sworn mate. I have never been bedded."

“So old and still a maiden? With such a *heckosa*, so virile- and strong-looking?” Beka’s eyes raked over Pen’s body, lingering at his crotch. She reached out a hand, trailing it down his arm.

“I would like to bed you, heckosa.”

“He doesn’t understand you.” Rayne frowned, glad that Pen couldn’t know that the woman wanted to mate with him.

“Hush, Beka. You are my first mate; put your hands where I want them!” Frankosa grabbed her hand and brought it to his burgeoning arousal, splaying her fingers so that they cupped him. As she fondled his shaft, his eyes drifted shut, and for a moment he seemed to forget that there were others present.

Pen coughed discreetly, and Frankosa snapped back to reality. “Please, Princess, I beg your forgiveness for our unseemly behavior. Please offer our apologies to your companion.”

“What’s going on, Rayne? By the goddess Larakosa, I thought she was going to strip him naked. And what was all that business with her touching me? It looked like she was sizing me up to be her pleasure slave.”

Rayne thought quickly. “She told you to get some muscle; she likes her men big -- big all over like her boyfriend, Frankosa.”

Pen smothered a grin. So, she likes her men big? “Tell her I’ll work on it -- and then let her judge for herself.”

Rayne snorted. “You just do that. I’ll tell her.”

They finally arrived at a small cabin built up against a sloping cliff face. Upon entering they found the back of the building opened onto the entrance to a cave.

Benches and cubbyholes lined either side of the room, and the smooth-planed walls held shelves with lamps lit by candles made from ground amber mixed with fragrant pertwax. The clean, crisp aroma of the amber and the sweet perfume of the wax pervaded the air. It was both invigorating and sexually arousing.

Towels and fresh clothing lay stacked on a bench. Bowls with amber-colored soap and washcloths were placed near the cave’s entrance.

“You may leave your stained garments here, and someone will clean them for your journey tomorrow. The cave floor is covered with smooth sand; you may walk barefoot if you wish. Beka will guide you to the women’s side, and I will take your companion ...?” Frankosa gestured to Pen.

“Tell him my name is Pen.”

“How did you know ...?”

“Doesn’t take much to figure he wanted to know what to call me and was offering to lead me to where we can bathe.” He grinned. “Do we bathe together?”

“No! Now turn while I get undressed. Then wait. Beka and I will go on ahead.”

Pen offered a mock bow. "As you wish, my princess."

Tugging at Frankosa's arm, Pen turned him around and rolled his eyes. The Jakosai male instantly grasped the situation and grinned.

As soon as Pen heard them leave, he spoke to Frankosa. "Women. I will never figure them out." His simple, accented Jakosai sounded terrible, but easily understandable.

Frankosa started. "I thought you were unable to comprehend our language." The young man ducked his head. "You must forgive my first mate's behavior. She has not yet decided whether to journey or remain here in the village with me." He sighed. "She is hot-blooded; I want her as my sworn mate, but she refuses. She enjoys lovemaking too much." He sighed again. "She may decide to become a pleasure-giver in another village ... or even in Koralakai."

Sighing one last time, Frankosa dropped his loincloth and grabbed up towel and soap. Pen stripped, neatly folding his clothes on the bench and leaving his travel-worn boots with them. He hurried over to the cave entrance, joining Frankosa.

"I learned your tongue from my Jakosai mistress. She has made quite a good living from her skill as a pleasure-giver. Her contract will soon be up, and if I wish to continue her services, I must negotiate a new contract. Beka could do worse than follow her example."

Frankosa laid an admonishing hand on Pen's arm. "Please don't encourage her." He gripped Pen's arm tighter. "I love her. I can't tell her." He shook his head. "I don't wish to frighten her; to overwhelm her with my feelings."

Pen sighed. "I know exactly what you mean, my friend. Exactly what you mean."

The men entered the cave. Pen found the way fairly well lit with the amber candles. The temperature rose gradually as they traveled further into the cave. Finally they came to a forked tunnel. Frankosa chose the right-hand one, and Pen followed close behind as the light grew dimmer and the steam rose higher.

At last they reached their destination -- a large, bright chamber lined with amber of all shades and clarity. Pen gaped. Never before had he seen such a sight -- a fortune in amber, unmined and untouched. He knew he must be among only a handful of outsiders to view such a wonder.

A small group of young men gathered at the far side of a large natural pool. Water spouted from a crevice in the amber wall near where they bathed. They frolicked together, splashing and dunking one another.

Pen followed Frankosa into the warm water, wading further toward the middle where the water reached his waist. He ducked beneath the surface and shot back up. Lathering his hair and body, he noted that when a youth's manhood broke the surface, it was fully aroused. In fact, his own body tingled, and his rod was hard as a rock.

"My friend, I cannot understand it. I have been in a constant state of need since we entered the bathing cabin."

Frankosa gazed at Pen's prick and grinned. "Impressive, but to be expected. Relationships may be entered here. After cleansing, if a youth and maiden wish to pleasure each other, we may do so in one of the cubicles attached to the cabin. Until we become first-mated or sworn, we may freely join with others. The amber smoke and the water in the pool enhance our sexual prowess. It is the same for the females."

Pen nodded. "I wish it were so simple where I come from. A royal maiden may not give herself unless she does so with her soulmate."

"Ah, and you desire the princess. But perhaps she is your soulmate."

Pen shook his head.

"No, wait; there may be a way to determine this." Frankosa pointed to a corner of the chamber. "There, in that corner is the bonding window. It is said that if you peer through its surface, you will see your sworn mate. I saw Beka there. Perhaps you will see the princess. Then you will know she is yours and act accordingly."

The rest of the young men gathered their towels and left, joking and pushing each other as they trailed out of the area. Pen gazed toward the "bonding window." Simply look through a window and see your soulmate? Might as well give it a try.

"Go ahead, Pen. I'll wait here for you." Frankosa gave him a gentle nudge, and Pen threw his hands up in surrender. Sloshing over to the corner, he disappeared from view.

"I hope you see your princess, my friend," Frankosa called.

As Pen turned the outcropping, he gasped. A window, framed with rough amber chunks and glazed with the most translucent amber he had ever seen, covered a corner of the alcove. It displayed another bathing area similar to the men's.

He peered through the opening. Rayne's form appeared, framed by the amber border. She was gloriously nude, her hair unbound and flowing to her buttocks. Her nest of dark brown curls was damp, and he could see her dimpled knees. Her nipples were puckered as though some lover's mouth had suckled them.

As he continued to devour the erotic picture, she turned to the side, presenting the outline of her luscious behind. He watched as she lifted up a twelve-inch string of eight amber beads ranging in size from as small as his little fingernail to the ball of his thumb.

He studied her intently as she passed the string between her thighs. Back and forth, rubbing her clit, the string moved sinuously through her curls. Her hips thrust in rhythm to the seductive movement. Her tongue peeped out and she licked her lips.

His mouth grew dry as he watched her take the largest stone and slowly press it between her nether lips. One by one the amber disappeared within her body until only the last three stones remained visible. Her hips began to move, swaying from side to side and then in a slow, circular movement.

She turned, once more full-face toward the window, and, as Pen watched, she cupped her breasts, her fingers kneading them, her breath coming in loud, harsh pants, her hips

moving in short, hard thrusts. Her body moved faster and faster until she climaxed, convulsing in ecstasy.

Pen watched, transfixed, as her legs buckled and she sank to her knees beneath the water. She rested for a moment, her head bowed, her long hair floating in the pool. Then she rose, carefully pulling the amber string from its shelter. She held the glistening beads to her face and inhaled their scent. Then, her eyes closed and, one by one, she licked each moistened amber piece.

When she finished, she simply turned and disappeared from view.

Pen released the breath he had held.

And burned.

“Did he see you?” Beka giggled.

“What do you mean?” Rayne had joined Beka at the entrance to the female bathing area.

“Your unknown lover. Did he see you through the window? Did you see him? Tell me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Beka. What lover? What window?”

“Come now, Princess. Why else did you take the pleasure beads and work them for release? And why did you do it in front of the bonding window if you were not sure that your lover watched and you wished to drive him mad with lust.”

Rayne blushed to the roots of her hair. “You told me the beads would release any tension I felt, and I saw no one through that amber. It was too clouded. I merely, merely ... oh, by the goddess, you’re right. I did give myself pleasure, more pleasure than I have ever felt before, except in my dreams.” She placed a hand on the smaller woman’s shoulder. “But I saw no one ... at least I think I saw no one. What is the bonding window? Maybe that will explain what I did see.”

“The window shows you your sworn mate. I guess that would be your soulmate?”

Rayne shook her head. “Can’t be. I only saw his features vaguely. But it couldn’t be him.”

“Who did you see?”

“Pentar.”

* * * * *

The men were already clothed when Rayne and Beka arrived in the dressing area, Rayne’s towel wrapped around her sarong-style.

Pen, dressed in the garments of a young Jakosai male, was breathtaking. The knee-length leather kilt showed off his strong legs, and the sturdy sandals displayed straight toes.

And big feet.

Beka giggled and poked Rayne. "Is it true, do you think?"

Rayne couldn't help it. She shook her head and laughed.

Pen finished tying the sandal's thongs and looked up at the women. "Somehow I think I was just insulted."

Rayne coughed and smirked. "You'll never know."

Frankosa interrupted their banter before it got out of hand. "Come, Princess. It grows late. We shall wait for you outside."

Rayne picked up the clothing left for her and paused. The short skirt was, naturally, a female Jakosai one. The back flap barely covered her buttocks and was split down the middle; the front ended just below her muff. The vest rimmed the bottom of her breasts and was held together by a simple knotted leather thong. Rayne clasped on her silver wristband; she had unpacked it from her bag and carried it, wrapped, until now. Beka gasped when she saw the bracelet, then fell to her knees.

"You are the Champion! Forgive my impertinent behavior earlier. I did not know you were She Who Saved the People."

Rayne bent down and helped the trembling female to her feet. Beka stood, her face bowed, still shaking.

"Beka, look at me. I'm not her. This is a family heirloom, passed down from mother to daughter. I'm no goddess. Believe me."

Slowly, Beka raised her head. "Then you are of her blood. And your companion must be the descendant of Melakosai, he who mated with all the females and the Champion and brought peace to our people." She bent her knee. "I am honored to know you."

Rayne sighed. "I doubt that either one of us is related to them. If we were, we wouldn't need the shakos's aid so badly. Please, say nothing of this to anyone. I'll hide the band in my bag for now. Come, compose yourself, Beka." She grinned. "If I were a goddess, would I be hungry?"

Beka shook her head. "I guess not." She paused, then smiled lasciviously. "Then Pentar is still available." She cupped her breasts and thrust out her chin. "I will offer myself to him. I know he will be a strong lover."

Rayne bit her tongue. She wanted to grab her and shake the silly slut, but how could she? After all, she had no claim on Pen.

"Get a move on, Beka." Her voice snapped like a whip. "It's late."

* * * * *

The two couples entered the jako. Incense burners lined the interior walls and emitted a sweet, clean scent, invigorating the senses. Amber candles, tall as an akosa, were placed

strategically throughout the immense chamber. A band of musicians sat in a corner, playing stringed and wind instruments while a drummer kept time on a drum clamped between his legs. In the center of the room, a huge kettle hung above a roaring fire. Delicious odors wafted from it and sent Pen's stomach rumbling.

Merkatrosa, seated facing the entrance, saw them and beckoned them in.

"Come, join us. We shall eat and then celebrate!"

The villagers reclined around small, low tables, only a few inches off the ground. Bowls made of mangela wood and decorated with amber pieces were filled to near overflowing with rich, meaty broth. Cups of fermented thrant milk were kept filled by unattached females. As they bent to pour the powerful drink, their loose vests would swing, offering a glimpse of firm, nubile flesh. As the evening progressed, many a maiden would slip away to engage in pleasure-giving with a grateful drinker.

Finally, the shakos raised his hand. Immediate silence fell upon the noisy group. He stood and, without introduction, launched into a familiar tale. Still feigning ignorance, Pen leaned over to Rayne and asked her to translate. She nodded and brought her lips to his ear, not willing to disturb their enthralled neighbors. Her sweet, warm breath caressed his face, and her words incited his passions.

"He tells a well-known but beloved tale of the Champion and Melakosai, the first peace-bringer. After the death of his heart's mate, he would often wander away from his people to mourn in private. One day he came upon a horrifying scene. A lone female battled a demon; using only her dagger, fitted with a large, carved piece of amber, she kept it at bay. She raised her arm high, and the demon prepared to slice it off. Melakosai knew he couldn't reach her in time, so he threw his wristband toward her. It fell upon her wrist and clasped it as a lover would. The demon's talon was deflected, and the female scuttled out of reach. Melakosai then threw his amber-tipped spear at the demon's eye. It pierced its brain, and the demon fell dead at the female's feet.

"Melakosai rushed to her side and raised her up. He saw her face then, and she was glorious as the morning, her eyes glowing like amber. He knew he was in the presence of a goddess.

"Are you injured, Glorious One?"

"No, thanks to you, Melakosai."

"How did you know my name, for I know not yours?"

"I am the Champion, known as the goddess Larakosa. I waited for you to come out of your mourning, for if our people are to survive, we must join.' She laid her hands on his and raised them to her breasts all streaked with grime and the green slime of the demon. 'You must take me now, in the midst of death, while the heat of the battle still surges within us.' She placed her hands on his manhood, hidden within his loincloth, and pressed. She turned then and presented herself like the akosai. Her short leather skirt parted, revealing her lean buttocks.

“Melakosai hesitated for a moment. Then she turned her head and gazed into his eyes. She arched her back and commanded him. ‘Take me. Now. Now. Now.’

“He fell upon her then like an akosai stallion with its first maiden. He thrust into her over and over, his seed falling onto fertile ground.

“All that day and into the night they mated, until finally Melakosai fell into an exhausted slumber. When he awoke the next day, the goddess was gone and two babies were left for him -- a male child and a female. He gave the female his other wristband and found that the goddess had left her dagger for the male child.

“No one knows what happened to these gifts; they disappeared when the pair made their final journey. After the female entered her first cycle and the male reached his majority, they spread their seed among the Jakosai people, but they did not die among the people. They made their final journey together, trekking over the Tarol Mountains.

“The female bore twins each time she conceived during the thirty years she dwelled among us. The male fathered countless offspring, and it was thought that if a woman had multiple births, he was most likely the father.

“The children of the goddess and Melakosai were, of course, Fire and Pleasure.

“Amber caves exist wherever their children lived, giving to the Jakosai proof of their passion and strength.

“Thus ends the tale of the Champion and Melakosai. Should a time of danger occur, the Champion and Melakosai will return to save the people once more.”

Rayne’s alluring whispers ended. A moment of silence ensued, then erupted in a torrent of cheers. Wild, enticing music burst forth, and Beka pulled Rayne to her feet, urging her to join the other females in the dance.

Pen gazed, mesmerized, as the seductive rhythm washed over him. The seated youths pounded the tables in synch with the musicians. Almost against his will, Pen joined in, the flat of his hands slapping the hard surface.

The steps seemed easy for Rayne to follow. And why not, for they mimicked the movements of a female akosa offering herself to be mounted. The Jakosai maidens circled the room, and when they selected their chosen male, they dropped to their knees, facing toward the inside of the circle, their backsides lifted enticingly, soliciting the attentions of their intended mate. One by one, each couple would leave the jako.

Pen watched as Rayne cupped her breasts, her short vest swinging open to reveal her unbound bosom. She pulled the tie from her long braid, leaving it in an akosa tail, and whipped her hair from side to side. The music had taken her over, and the passionate nature that dwelled chained within her was released.

Pen’s shaft hardened, lifting the kilt and causing Frankosa to laugh and nudge him. “She dances for you, my friend. She is yours for the taking. Take her to the bathing caves. The amber will prolong your vigor.”

Pen shook his head, about to deny Frankosa's words. Then Rayne dropped to her knees and her skirt parted, offering him a view of the most luscious behind he had ever seen, and he was lost. He lifted her in his arms and strode from the jako into the star-filled night.

Chapter Five

Pen strode with Rayne clasped tightly in his arms. His mage strength made her feel light as a dream. Her head tucked beneath his chin, he could feel her sweet, moist breath warming his skin. Her hair brushed against him, and he inhaled its exotic scent, taking it deep within his body. His arousal nestled against her as though it had found a home.

Torches lined the way leading to the bathing caves, making it easy for him to retrace their earlier path. He didn't break stride, entering the cabin and heading for the bathing area with eager steps.

His thoughts swirled wildly. He knew in his heart that Rayne was his soulmate, but how to convince her? If they mated and the lanbeth didn't appear, then he was wrong. And Rayne would be ruined. No matter that times were changing, they still hadn't changed that much. The entire nobility of Hearthome had ostracized Princess Fardretha, King Belar's lover, unjustly or not; her offspring, Prince Orath, was barely tolerated. Though his behavior probably would have led to the same response, since he took after his royal father, enjoying one mistress after another and then leaving them ruined, to fend for themselves once he grew tired of them.

And he sought the throne of Mariess, claiming that since he was now the only male progeny of the assassinated king, the throne rightfully belonged to him. Princess Talea could not rule, and her earlier bride-casting had been declared null and void. Only Orath's illegitimate birth barred him from ascending the throne. Rumor had it that there had been a secret marriage between King Belar and Princess Fardretha, but it couldn't be proved one way or another.

Rayne faced a similar situation with every member of her family gone. She had ruled on her own for several years, but should she reach her twenty-fifth birthday with no

soulmate, her kingdom would be controlled by the Council of Mages. If their joining didn't create lanbeth, what would happen to her kingdom?

She must be his soulmate.

She must.

Rayne clung to Pen. Her eyes shut, her face burrowed against his strong neck, she let herself be carried away. She sensed the direction they were heading -- the bathing caves. She knew what would occur there, and she welcomed it. Whether he was her soulmate or not, he desired her and she desired him. The chances of her finding her destined mate were slim. She had no faith in ever meeting anyone who would care for her the way her parents had cared for each other. Though many a widowed noble remarried or had mistresses or lovers, her father had never looked at another woman after her mother's death. He had focused his devotion on his only remaining child, doting on her. Could Pen love her that much? His reputation as a carefree rogue was legendary. Though generous to his mistresses, once they parted ways he remained still heart whole. Was the attraction he displayed for her now due to proximity? She didn't care. She wanted him much too much to care. Her dreams were no longer enough. She wanted him in the flesh.

Not a dream lover.

"Open your eyes, Rayne. We're here."

Pen lowered her to the ground. The fine sand edging the men's bathing pool shifted beneath her. Pen stood before her, stripped down to the loincloth hidden beneath his Jakosai kilt. His arousal couldn't be shielded now. His breathing was harsh and his eyes ... his mage-blue eyes gleamed with passion. His fists were clenched as though ready to do battle. He had kicked off his sandals, and his bare toes dug into the sand. Tension radiated from every pore of his body.

She lay there, one knee bent, her vest open, revealing her unbound breasts, her nipples tightening as Pen gazed at her avidly. She could feel her woman's core creaming with anticipation. All the myriad erotic visions from her dreams crowded her mind. The rhythm of the dance pulsed within her, and her hips arched up in invitation.

"Rayne," Pen ground out.

And fell upon her.

As his lips ran a path down her body, frenzied words poured from him, as though a dam had been swept away. "You are the most desirable woman I have ever known. I look at you, and all I want to do is throw you to the ground and make love with you. Your scent drives me insane. I want to wrap your hair around my prick and come in your mouth. I want to lick the lanbeth from your body. I want ..."

I want.

The words plunged Rayne into ice. And her dreams shattered. She struggled against him, her hands pushing at his chest.

At first Pen thought she writhed beneath him in ecstasy. As she became more frantic he realized his mistake.

“Off, get off me! Now! Pen, please!”

It was the *please* that finally penetrated his intent. Rayne never begged for anything. He rolled away from her and lay panting by her side.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I can’t. I can’t. It’s only lust we feel for each other, not love.”

He could hear the tears in her voice, and he wisely said nothing. His foolish mouth had only revealed the surface of his emotions for her. How could she believe him if he told her now how much he loved her? And could she be right? It couldn’t be merely lust, not the depths of the feelings she engendered within him. He took a deep breath and finally broke the silence.

“Rayne, I ... forgive me. Please believe me. What I feel for you is more than mere desire, but the dance, the story, seeing you through the bathing window ...”

“You saw me? You spied on me?”

“No! It was a vision, I thought.” He turned toward her, looming over her, his hands gripping her arms, though he carefully kept his naked loins away from her.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted you? You fill my nights and my days. Everything about you does something to me. Your smile, your laugh, your courage.” He shook his head. “Even your temper.”

Rayne gazed deep into his cobalt-blue eyes, mesmerized by the honesty she saw there. She turned her head and whispered so softly, Pen had to bend near her mouth to hear her. “But you’re not my soulmate.”

“How do you know? What if we made love and the lanbeth appeared glittering above us? Would you believe then that we were soulmates?”

“There, you said it -- *if* the lanbeth appeared. And if it didn’t? Until the signs say we’re truly destined to be joined, we cannot.”

Pen turned away and smashed his fist against the ground, the sand abrading his skin. He couldn’t and wouldn’t force her. But he would bargain with her.

“When this is all over and we return to Narwith, will you have a new bride-casting? Will you give us a chance?”

This time Rayne leaned over Pen and placed her slim hand over his heart.

“The day the signs say we are soulmates, I will give myself to you.”

He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"This is a pledge I will honor." He tried to smile. "Let's return to the shakos. We need to get directions from him to locate the cave."

Rayne nodded. "It'll take time to set them down. I'll get my writing materials from my pack, and then we'll find a private place where we can speak freely."

"I agree. We should take every precaution to ensure that no one knows our destination."

They straightened their garments, avoiding each other's gaze, trying to regain some semblance of normalcy. Without looking back, they exited the bathing caves.

Most of the celebrants had left the jako, returning to their own homes. As Rayne and Pen entered, they saw the shakos deep in conversation with Tran. Drawing nearer, they were surprised to hear Merkatrosa uttering a series of sounds mimicking the akosai speech. Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed, his hilarity echoed by Tran's whinny.

Pen grinned as he interrupted them. "Pardon me, but what's the joke? I could use a good laugh."

Tran turned toward Pen and snorted. "It loses a lot in the translation." He snorted again, then sobered. "We didn't expect to see you both until the morning."

The shakos touched Rayne's shoulder and spoke softly. "Something's troubling you, Princess. Can I be of help?"

"We do need your aid. Is there someplace we may speak in private?"

He nodded. "Follow me. We shall go to my personal bathing pool. Tran will be able to join us, and we may speak freely there."

They left the jako through a rear exit and headed a short distance away from the village. A sheltered outcropping concealed a small pool and a waterfall bursting from a crevice in the rock face. Torches of burning amber emitted a fresh, clean fragrance into the night air and gave off a warm glow.

"Come. Sit down and tell me what you need."

Rayne turned to Pen. "Let me speak to him in Jakosai to make sure he fully understands the nuances of what has transpired in Hearthome."

Pen nodded. "Go ahead. He should know exactly what we need from him."

Rayne spoke eloquently, bringing the shakos up to date with the world-threatening events of the past few weeks. His face and body mirrored his feelings.

Hearing of the evil of the mage Narik, he shuddered. His eyes widened with astonishment when it was revealed to him how much duplicity Narik had created. He uttered not a word, his mouth thinning when Rayne informed him that all of Prince Manar's sons were false mages and their bride-castings invalid. He simply nodded when she told him that Mirelle and Jareth were to have been used by Narik to create lanbeth for him to control the supply in Hearthome. But when she revealed that Narik sought the *Book of Tocson* to

perform unimaginable black magic, he was unable to remain silent. He spoke in Tarolian, his accent thickening with agitation.

“He must be stopped! The Book can unleash unbelievable evil into our world! It is the very reason Tocson tore the Book asunder and hid the pieces so carefully. The Shakosa know of the Battle on the Plains of Torment and how close Hearthome come to utter destruction. ’Tis why we avoid the use of magic and why we turned our backs on the written word. But every shakos knows of that time.” He nodded once. “You follow a dangerous path and seek a powerful weapon, for that is what the Book really is. But it cannot fall into Narik’s hands.”

Pen interrupted him. “He already possesses one portion of it, but, thank the Great Master, he is unaware of the location of the two other pieces. My brother Loran studied the history of magic and explored libraries that contain many books long forgotten. He discovered the general whereabouts of the remaining portions. The second part is here, somewhere in the Hinterlands.”

Rayne picked up the threads again, continuing in Tarolian. “In your legends you speak of a cavern deep within the ground.”

“Aye. The Cave of the Burning Stone.”

“We believe the second portion is there. But we don’t know where this cave is located. Can you give us directions to it?”

The shakos shook his head. “I cannot.”

“But why not?” Rayne was baffled.

“In the many hundreds of years since the Book’s concealment, there may have been changes along the trail leading to the cave. No.” He shook his head. “I cannot give you directions. I must journey with you. We will leave at first light.” He sighed. “Now I know why my dreams have been so troubled these past days. I felt as though the very essence of Hearthome had shifted. Unseen evil forces stalked me and threatened the lives of my people.” He stood. “Come. Return to the jako and rest. I will remain here for a while and go over the legends that refer to the Cave of the Burning Stone. We cannot afford to veer off the right path.”

Rayne and Pen headed back to the jako while Tran turned toward the stable where he had left Rosta gossiping with the young akosai females. Wishing them a good night’s rest, he cantered off to join her.

Pen scratched his ear and searched the immediate area. “Where’s Fel? I just realized I haven’t seen him since we arrived. I would never have thought it, but I miss the furry beast.”

Rayne laughed. “He visits with his grandsire and granddam. He was whelped here. I picked out a canid pup the last time I came here. It was Fel.” She tilted her head as though listening to something, then blushed. “He’s mating now.” Her breath caught. “He’s tied with her. This is his first mating; he’s very excited.” Her breath quickened, and she grabbed onto

Pen's arm for support. "He's thrusting into her. They can't be separated now until he has spent his seed in her."

Pen caught her up in his arms as her knees gave way. "How can you know this?"

She spoke in faltering tones even as she clung tighter to him and her nails bit into his skin.

"We are bonded empathically. Once a canid pup is weaned, it will bond with the first female it touches." Rayne's eyes grew wild, and she thrust her hips against Pen's body. She grabbed his shoulders and pressed her breasts against his muscular torso. The flimsy Jakosai vest shifted, and she could feel his chest hair scraping her sensitive nipples. Her hands rose and she gripped his face.

"Kiss me! I must have some release!"

Pen fully embraced her, grinding his lips against hers. His tongue delved deep within her honeyed mouth as he thrust it frantically, panting in short, harsh bursts.

Rayne could feel herself succumbing to the canid's animalistic mating. She tore herself away and ran to the jako as though the Great Tormentor chased her, leaving Pen standing alone in the moonlight.

Alone and frustrated.

Pen stared after Rayne's fleeing figure. His shaft ached. How much more torture could he endure? He flung his head back and cursed aloud.

"Be careful, Prince. You do not wish to draw any evil forces now to you."

He turned, startled.

Merkatrosa stood behind him smiling indulgently as a parent would at an errant child.

Pen sighed.

"The woman drives me insane, Shakos. I love her beyond madness, but she has convinced herself that we aren't sworn mates." He paused. "She's almost convinced me, too."

The shakos shook his head. "Anyone can see that you are soulmates, as your people say." He chuckled. "'Tis the joke that Tran and I shared earlier. He was betting how long it would be before you both recognized your heart's mate."

Pen gripped the older man's hand. "Will you tell her, then, that we are soulmates?"

"She will not believe me without proof." The shakos's eyes took on a distant cast as though contemplating a different place. He gazed at Pen, his ebony-colored eyes as fathomless as the night. "Soon. She will know the truth soon." His eyelids fluttered down. When he opened them again, he had returned to his surroundings. He smiled once more at Pen.

"So, tomorrow we leave. I will travel with you and Tran. Princess Rayne's pet can ride along with her now."

Pen thought briefly of the recent scene between him and Rayne and grasped Merkatrosa's hand in fervent thanks. "You have no idea how grateful I am to you, Shakos. No idea."

Merkatrosa chortled. "Go now. I shall see you in the morning."

"Rest easy, Shakos."

"Rest easy, Prince."

* * * * *

Prince Metres huddled deeper into the warm bant-wool jacket and watched as Sontar scuttled back to their secret camp. The fool made enough noise to alert anyone keeping watch, but he knew the Jakosai were too peace-loving to think about protecting themselves against unknown enemies. The different clans hadn't fought among themselves since the days of their great peace-giver. It made spying upon them all the easier. He gazed at the disheveled, pampered prince and winced. What a useless creature. He sneered disdainfully as Sontar flung himself on the blanket spread near the toron-a.

"Well, did you hear anything? See anything? You were there long enough."

Sontar took a deep breath. He had indeed seen many things; none of them useful. All of them arousing. With all the excitement of the celebration for Rayne and her companions, it had been relatively easy, maintaining his spell of invisibility, to creep up close to the jako where the festivities were going on and peer through the window. What he saw had driven his hand to his rod and given him the strongest hardening he had experienced since killing the Jakosai servant.

He'd then followed Pen and Rayne as they rushed to the bathing cabin, but he had remained without, fearing that Pen might sense his presence. Sloughing off the invisibility spell, he stayed hidden, waiting for their return. While he waited, he drove himself into a lustful frenzy, imagining them mating like coneys.

He trailed them once more, recasting his protective spell, when Rayne and Pen, the akosa, and the Jakosai headman gathered at the small bathing pool. Try though he might, he couldn't clearly hear their conversation. Of course, portions of it were in Jakosai, a language with which he was totally unfamiliar. No, he couldn't tell Metres that.

Not unless he wanted Metres to hurt him again. Badly. He took another deep breath. He was going to have to come up with a tale that would satisfy the most suspicious bastard he had ever known.

"They held a celebration for them." He sighed. "Those Jakosai females are incredible. For small women, they have the biggest tits ..." His voice trailed off.

"Get your mind off of your prick, Sontar. Why are Rayne and Pen here? What is of such great importance that they stopped here?"

Sontar took a deep breath and gulped. "I don't know."

“What?” Metres reared back and flat-handed Sontar across the face. His royal signet ring slashed Sontar’s cheek open, and blood poured forth from the wound. Sontar fell back against the toron-a and slid to the ground.

Metres picked him up by the scruff of his collar and shook him like a canid. “You imbecile! You are worthless! If I didn’t need you to drive the toron-a ...” He flung Sontar back down and stalked over to one of their bags, pulling out a small pot.

“Here. Spread it over your cheek and staunch the blood. I don’t want your scent to alert Rayne’s canid or the akosai. Quickly.”

Sontar caught the small pot of salve with his unscarred hand. He smeared the lanbeth-laden ointment on his cheek with trembling fingers. How he wished he could leave the bastard to die in the cliffs, but he couldn’t chance being attacked with that alien gun weapon. He took a deep breath again and prepared to test his luck with the tale he had concocted.

“I did learn they are leaving tomorrow. Their journey continues with the shakos traveling with them.” He closed his eyes and licked his lips; opening them again, he gave Metres one last piece of information. “Pentar desires Princess Rayne. I believe they are lovers.”

Finally, he had captured Metres’s attention.

“So, lovers, eh? That might prove useful.” Metres laughed viciously. “Idiots in love can be controlled much more easily.” He spoke his thoughts aloud, his voice dreamy. “Perhaps I shall demand that Pentar become my lover to save Rayne’s life.” He shuddered with lust. “He’s big. I saw him when he participated in the spear-throwing event last year at the royal games.” His hand drifted down to his bulging crotch. “His hair was tied back, and he was stripped to his loin-covering. Sweat glistened on his body, and the setting sun cast a reddish glow on his skin.” As though unaware, his fingers began to fondle his shaft. “Yes. I shall kill Rayne and keep Pentar. And I’ll make him watch as I slay her.”

His eyes flew open. Sontar gasped at the pure evil shining within them. And for a moment, he actually pitied the royal pair.

But only a moment.

* * * * *

By the time Pen entered the jako, the torches had been doused, and only the large cooking fire offered any light. The amber incense burners smoking around the room had been heaped with chunks of the stuff and gave forth even more heat and perfumed the air. Off in the far corner he could discern Rayne’s recumbent form. Her hair, now unbraided, spread across her like a protective cover. Scattered here and there like toy blocks were children and couples who had simply gone to sleep wherever they pleased. He gazed at their lack of fear with envy. Moving quietly, he approached Rayne. Was she asleep already?

“Rayne? Are you awake?”

Her eyes were closed, her breathing even. He sighed, thankful not to have to deal with the turbulent events of the day any longer. He unfolded the mattress and blanket left for him and, turning his back to Rayne, closed his eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

In the dark, Rayne opened her eyes and continued her sleepless vigil.

Chapter Six

Rayne awoke to the delicious aroma of simmering *lerou*. The mixture of berries, grains, and sweet *me* danced into her nose and made her tastebuds tingle. She sat up, stretching her arms above her head, and yawned. Though the thin, stuffed mattress was far more pleasant than sleeping on the ground on her bedroll, her rest had been anything but comfortable. She had been aware the moment Pen had finally entered the *jako*, and she'd known that she just couldn't face him again. Putting on the performance of her life, she'd pretended to be sound asleep. If only she had been. The sexually explicit visions of Pentar that had plagued her through so many years were even worse now that she had come so close to making them a reality. She'd finally fallen into a restless slumber near dawn when exhaustion vanquished her waking dreams.

She turned toward where Pen had thrown himself the other night, but his mattress was neatly rolled up and in its case. Heaving a deep sigh of relief, she quickly pulled fresh clothes from her carrybag. Today she would wear the more practical garb of leggings and long-sleeved tunic. She held the lengthy cloth strip that had bound her breasts for so many years and then shoved it back inside. What was the use of going through that torture any longer? Pen had seen her naked; he knew her body almost too intimately. She smiled slightly. One part of her life was over -- she was truly Princess Rayne now, no longer denying her femininity.

Pushing aside the thin curtain shielding their sleeping corner, she entered the *jako*'s main area. Pen reclined on one of the low benches next to a table, the bowl before him brimming with nourishing *lerou*.

Rayne squared her shoulders, deciding to act as though all was well and close the book on the other night. "That looks delicious. How about serving me up a bowl?"

Pen turned and smiled at Rayne's entrance. He ladled some lerou into an empty bowl and gestured to her to sit down. "Sleep well? I hope I didn't disturb you when I came in."

Rayne spooned some of the warm cereal, savoring the taste before she answered him. "Slept like a baby. Didn't even hear you."

"Well, good. The shakos said he'd meet us near the stable as soon as we're ready. I'll pack while you finish eating." He grinned. "Don't dawdle."

Rayne needed no encouragement to hurry; the sooner they were on their way, the better.

Tran and Rosta, harnessed and ready, waited with Merkatrosa by the stable. Fel, looking smug, if that were at all possible, sat on his haunches next to another canid. He urged the female to approach Rayne and barked an introduction. Rayne knelt down and caressed the female's furry head, beaming at the two animals. After a short while, Fel's new mate trotted off.

"Good morning, Princess. We're ready to leave now." The shakos's voice was filled with determination. "I've selected my replacement while I journey with you."

At that moment, a tall Jakosai female strolled from the stable. Her hair drawn back behind her ears, she wore the garb of a Jakosai matron, covering her body from neck to ankle, indicating that her sworn mate was dead.

"This is Treloka. She will fulfill my duties and, should I not return, take my place."

Treloka pressed her palms together and bent her head, acknowledging Rayne and Pen as her equals. Pen smiled as he bowed in return; perhaps Rayne had finally met her match.

"It is my pleasure to greet you, Shakos Treloka. May your work be light." Rayne's Jakosai flowed, and the new shakos inclined her head.

"I wish you success in your quest and a long and fruitful life with your sworn mate."

Pen interrupted before Rayne could correct Treloka's assumption, speaking in his simple Jakosai. "We thank you for your good wishes, Shakos." He smiled mischievously at Rayne. "I hope to make our mating official when we return."

"You speak Jakosai!" Rayne hurled her accusation at him like a spear. "You sneaky, lying ..."

"I never lied. You just assumed I didn't understand Jakosai." Pen touched Rayne's hand. "But since we're no longer keeping secrets from each other ..." His hand drifted up and lightly cupped Rayne's unbound breast.

Rayne pushed him away, frowning. "I don't know whether I should forgive you."

Pen stepped close to her, ignoring the small audience gathered around them. He murmured in her ear, letting his hand caress her cheek. "Forgive me, kiereen. I meant no harm." Soft as a cloud, he brushed his lips against her lobe. "It was just a foolish prank."

Rayne's eyelids drifted closed, and she sighed. Turning her head toward Pen's hand, she kissed his palm.

Tran's discreet cough brought them crashing to earth, and they sprang apart as though bitten by a giant *tragkot*. "Shall we depart now?"

Tran offered no further comment. He merely dropped his wings, and Pen threw on his carrybags and mounted. The shakos clambered on behind, clinging to Pen's waist.

Rayne harnessed Fel, stored her bags on Rosta's back, and swung atop her.

Inclining his head to Treloka, Merkatrosa uttered a final farewell and admonition. "Give no bad advice."

He pointed to the west, off into the arid desert. "There. The first leg of our journey -- the Cup of Tears."

"Where could one find a cup of tears in a desert?" Pen twisted around and shook his head in disbelief.

The shakos smiled. "That's why you need me."

As they lifted into the clear morning air, Tran threw back his head and whinnied his amusement.

* * * * *

"Look, they're heading west. Cast your spell and follow them."

Metres grabbed the bowl of mashed *cantar* fruit from Sontar's hands and tossed it to the ground. The contents spilled onto the thirsty soil, muddying it. Sontar almost wept. His mage power was of the lowest level. The invisibility spell took so much of his energy, he had barely enough to guide the toron-a. As for food, he could only manage a beginner's manifestation of cantar fruit. Now even his meager morning meal had been taken away from him by Metres. He sighed. If only he had left the palace earlier. His greed had given Metres a stranglehold around his neck, and he wouldn't let go.

"Well, why are you waiting? Do it!"

Concentrating all his energy, Sontar intoned the proper spell and made the appropriate hand gestures. The toron-a shimmered and then disappeared from sight.

"Where, by the thorn of the Tormentor, is the damned machine?"

Sontar suppressed a sigh. Metres's lack of mage ability prevented him from sensing the essence of the toron-a still present. The first time he had placed the spell, Metres was inside the vehicle. Now, he'd have to lead him to it. Judging by Metres's temperament, he would not appreciate being shown as inadequate. He took a deep breath and decided not to offer him his hand.

"Take five paces in front of you and you will reach the back hatch of the toron-a. Simply feel along the bottom until you find the handle."

Metres nodded, unwillingly acknowledging Sontar's directions. "Gather up the remains of the campsite and then get in. We want to keep them in sight."

Metres carefully paced off the correct number of steps and disappeared within the shielded vehicle. Sontar impotently clenched his fists, wishing that he were well and truly gone.

"Move it, you lazy bitnap!"

Metres's strident tones quickly brought him back to reality. He shoved the pack of leftover cantar into a carrybag and scrambled into the driver's seat. Taking the control, he guided the toron-a after the receding figures of the winged akosai and their riders.

He heard Metres muttering behind him as though speaking to some unseen passenger. Perhaps Metres was descending into madness? Then he heard a soft, sibilant voice responding. He gasped and, resolutely choosing to ignore the impossible, concentrated on not crashing.

"Everything is progressing, Master." Metres frowned. "I don't appreciate calling you 'master.' My rank is higher than yours."

His lips drew back in a feral snarl, and he gasped for air as Narik displayed his enormous mage power by taking control of Metres's body. He scratched at his throat as though trying to wrench away invisible hands. They finally released their hold. Then Narik gained control of his ability to speak.

"Hear me now, you weak, impaired piece of scum! If I were free to follow the princess and that get of Morath's, I would do so. But Tocson placed a powerful shielding on the Jakosai and akosai lands; no mage with the power I command may enter within them. You are fortunate Sontar is so inept a mage, else you would have had to follow them on foot. You would not have liked that, Prince; trudging in the desert day and night, never resting or eating, so that you could follow their flight, and yet keeping out of their sight by hiding. No, you are not my equal, you insignificant turd. Thank the Tormentor that you have some value for me for now, else I would kill you where you sit. Concentrate on the task given to you, and leave me to do what I needs must do."

Metres felt the connection with Narik break, and his shoulders sagged with relief. He checked to see if Sontar had heard anything. Perhaps not. He lightly touched Sontar's back, startling him and causing him to fight to retain his hold on the control.

"Did you hear him?"

Metres's demand created a sense of panic in Sontar. Should he say yes or no? Metres's next words answered that question.

"I hope you didn't. I'm not a cruel person; I'd hate to have to hurt you again to make you forget what you may have heard." He took out the alien weapon and held it to Sontar's neck. Metres leaned in closer. Sontar felt Metres's spittle spatter against his ear as he

threatened him further. "If you speak of this, I will make your life a well of endless torture. Understand?"

Sontar nodded, sweat trickling down his neck. "I heard nothing, Metres."

"Then the voice that spoke didn't exist? I am crazy, perhaps?"

Sontar's panic increased. What should he do? What should he say? He gulped, stumbling on his words. "I did hear something, but I couldn't discern the words."

Metres settled back into his seat. "Good, good. Relax. You may live another day pain free."

Sontar turned to offer his gratitude and the words died in his throat. Metres sat fondling the weapon with one hand while the other delved within his leggings, vigorously stroking his bulging shaft, his eyes closed in ecstasy, his head flung back against the seat rest.

Sontar wrenched his eyes away from the disturbing though arousing sight and then did his best to ignore Metres's shout as he climaxed.

He didn't succeed.

* * * * *

"We can camp here for the midday meal." Merkatrosa pointed to a small glade of spindly *bertna* trees. Their tiny, succulent leaves held in whatever moisture was available in the area.

"I've some dried thooba; we can mix it with the bertna leaves and enjoy a nourishing repast."

"Glad you thought of it, Shakos." Pen's voice rang with admiration. "Do we have enough for the entire journey?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps you and Rayne can track some wild *eknas*. Are you proficient in preservation magic, Pen?"

Pen started. "Yes. Yes, I am. But I thought the Jakosai didn't advocate magic?"

"Only frivolous or evil practices. It would be foolish of me not to take advantage of a talent that will enhance our survival." Merkatrosa frowned. "I still feel as though there is some negative essence nearby. There is magic in use, though it is weak." He shuddered as though a cold wind blew icy shards down his back. "It isn't the magic that is the true threat. It is something else, something evil." He closed his eyes, then opened them. They gleamed like a piece of polished black *nebo* wood. "We are safe for now. I'll gather the bertna leaves to add to the mixture."

Tran banked for a landing, as did Rosta. Merkatrosa jumped off Tran's back while they were still a few feet off the ground, anxious to collect the leaves.

As soon as they touched down, Rayne opened Fel's harness, and he bounded off to relieve himself.

“Don’t go far, and don’t get into trouble.” Rayne smiled at his eagerness while she unsaddled Rosta and set up a small campfire.

Pen stared off after the furry canid for a moment, then turned to Rayne. “Just how much can you and Fel communicate? I’d heard of the bond between mistress and canid, but frankly thought it exaggerated. There are so few outside of Tarol.”

“We are linked more through our feelings; the greater the intensity, the stronger the tie.”

Pen removed Tran’s saddle, and Tran and Rosta trotted off to take care of their own needs.

“Like the other night when you sensed Fel’s joining ...”

“Yes.” Rayne diverted him from where he was heading. “Yes. Canids don’t do well in urban areas where so much stimulation abounds. That’s why you seldom see any outside of my homeland. The only thing that can sever the tie is death. Injury or illness to either canid or owner presents serious consequences.” She looked squarely at Pen as she set out bowls for their food. “I could never live in a large city like Tarn; too much stimulation for Fel.”

Pen took the bowls from her and set them aside. Lacing his fingers with hers, he brought them to his lips. “I would live with you wherever you dwelled. I’d gladly leave my country if you’d give yourself to me.”

Rayne gently withdrew her fingers. “I am not your soulmate.”

Pen clenched his fists in frustration. “She does not exist! What female has two heads? The signs must have been read wrong.”

“You may be right, but we have no way of knowing. You can’t do a bride-casting in the middle of the Hinterlands!”

Pen ran his fingers threw his hair and sighed. “True. But don’t forget your vow. I’m going to hold you to it, Rayne.”

“I keep my promises. I’m not two-faced!”

Pen looked over her shoulder. “There’s Merkatrosa, thank the Great Maker. I’m so hungry, I could eat a raw bant.”

Merkatrosa laughed out loud as he heard Pen’s words. “You need not worry. The thooba has been cooked and preserved. I wouldn’t think of making you starve.”

Soon, their bellies full, the group relaxed around the fire. Rayne stretched, rotating her head to get the kinks out. “Well, guess we need to get back in the air again.”

Merkatrosa nodded. “You’re right, Rayne. I’ll put out the campfire while you saddle up Rosta and Pen takes care of Tran.”

He made a sign too quick to discern and frowned, his forehead creasing as he concentrated. “The magic is closer, and so is the evil. Let’s put some distance between us.”

They remounted, continuing on their journey.

Trailing behind them, their presence thinly veiled, Metres and Sontar turned the toron-a toward the setting sun.

* * * * *

Merkatrosa clung to the belt around Pen's waist. He sighed inwardly, sensing the younger man's turmoil. Both for the success of their quest and to ease the prince's troubled soul, he decided to break the tense silence.

"So, Pentar, the bonding mirror presented a vision of Princess Rayne to you the other night. When you return to the mainland, will you celebrate your joining?"

Pen started. Lost in thought, he'd forgotten where he was. Merkatrosa's grip was so light, he hadn't remembered that he had a passenger seated behind him.

"Rayne is convinced she isn't my soulmate. She believes that we simply lust for each other. My words and actions the other night didn't help to convince her otherwise." He shook his head. "I made a complete mess out of everything."

Merkatrosa patted his back, offering him what meager comfort he could. "You are both too hidebound by outdated customs. In matters of the heart, we Jakosai follow our feelings. That is why we give our young people so much freedom."

Suddenly, Tran spoke up. "Rosta and I knew you two were bound to each other the first time we saw you together. It is so clear. You offer each other balance." He snorted. "You made me lose my bet with her. I had envisioned you joined by now."

"If someone can convince her to accept her feelings for me, I'll name our first child after them!"

Both Merkatrosa and Tran burst into laughter.

Regaining control of his mirth, Merkatrosa once again spoke seriously. "Princess Rayne respects our customs. If I offer to do a reading of the amber, perhaps she will listen to what the burning stones have to tell."

His next words fell slowly from his mouth, searing Pen's soul. "I see you and Rayne together, battling unseen forces. They come at you from front and rear, draining you of your energy. I cannot see if you defeat them. I do know if you do not join, you surely will not win." He paused. "And both of you may die."

Pen's knuckles whitened as he gripped the saddle horn. "I would give my life for Rayne. Do the reading, Shakos. Make her see the truth," His voice thinned to a whisper. "I beg you."

"You need not beg, Pen. It is something that must be done."

"Rosta and I will serve as witness for you." Tran nickered. "That should make it official for any who would doubt you when you return to Koralokai."

"Thanks, Tran." Pen let out a whoosh of air. "Let's hope that Rayne agrees to all this."

"She will." Tran looked back at Pen. "Rosta is working on her right now."

"You seem downhearted, Princess. If you would share your troubles with me, I may be able to help."

"Thanks for the offer, Rosta, but nothing can help. I just need to face grim reality."

"And that is?"

"I will remain a maiden."

Rosta whickered softly. "I never thought that a Princess would refuse to face the truth."

"What do you mean? That is the truth."

"Hardly. You may be a maiden in all but the final piercing of your shield, but you quiver when Pen comes near you. I can smell your arousal whenever you gaze at him." She nodded her head. "And I saw you dance for him last night. You grow mad for him. I know you haven't given yourself yet. Why do you wait?"

"Because he isn't my soulmate! His soulmate has two heads. As you can see, I only have the one."

Rosta snorted. "Don't treat this lightly. We spoke with the Shakos -- you and Pen must join. Otherwise, the quest will not be successful."

Rayne's knees tightened around Rosta's back. Her voice shook with indignation. "Then our joining merely guarantees reaching our journey's goal?" Her lips drew back in a sneer. "Then, of course, I shall take Pen as my mate. Will you witness his taking my virginity -- just to ensure that we fulfill our destined fate, of course!"

Rosta bucked, causing Rayne to grab hold of the pommel. "Cease your petulance, Princess Rayne seta Kithera! You waste precious time and energy denying what you have known since you reached your first cycle." She flicked her long, thick tail over her back, gently swatting Rayne. Rosta turned her head, pinning Rayne with her gaze. "Merkatrosa knew you would need proof. He will do an amber reading tonight after we make camp. Will you take his interpretation of the burning stones as a surety?"

Rayne's mind raced. She had never witnessed a reading, only heard of them. They never proved false, though sometimes difficult to divine. A shakos could not lie; his spirit was so connected with the stones that should he misread the signs and pick up the stones, his skin would be scorched. That Merkatrosa offered to read them revealed the necessity to prove, once and for all, whether she and Pen were soulmates. She nodded.

"Good. Let's inform the others of your decision."

Rosta put on a short burst of speed and drew next to Tran and his riders. "Rayne has agreed. After we have made camp and eaten, Merkatrosa can do the reading."

Pen turned toward Rayne, leaning precariously on his saddle. "I know you feel bullied into this. I wouldn't have wished it to be this way, either."

Rayne nodded stiffly. "You've gotten your way, Pen. I'll adhere to what the stones reveal, but I doubt you'll like the outcome."

Pen squared his shoulders. "I can face whatever the amber shows. I only hope you have no regrets, Rayne." His gaze softened, and he reached out his hand. "I know you are my heart's mate, kiereen. If our love is fated to help to save our world, I can only be proud. And try not to fail. Join with me, kerasoka. With you in my soul, I know we can succeed."

Rayne gripped the saddle horn tighter and turned her head away.

Letting his hand fall, Pen bowed his head, shoulders slumped. A groan tore from his throat, and he despaired.

"Courage. Her stubbornness will melt away this night, and she will be yours." Merkatrosa chuckled softly against Pen's ear. "She is like her mother; she has too much pride and independence. Even after the bride-casting, she made King Deran give her the position of court advisor -- unheard of for a female. Who better to guide him than someone who loved him, she told me." He chortled. "She spent much time at our village learning the traditions of our people. She wished to learn all there was to know about her new kingdom. Much as Rayne has done." He paused and drew back against the saddle's high back. "It will not be an easy relationship, Prince. It will take much work for her to regard you as her equal."

"I know." Pen turned, looking over his shoulder and grinned. "But worth it."

Merkatrosa's laugh bellowed forth, startling a high-flying winged *threeb*. "We're almost at the Cup of Tears. We'll camp there tonight. There are several caves that can afford us more comfortable surroundings than any we shall encounter later. Tran, veer to the south, toward the notch in those hills. Our destination should lie just over the next ridge."

Tran banked, his wings angling to catch the breeze that surged beneath him, and headed toward the first landmark leading to their final goal.

Cloaked in invisibility, Metres and Sontar trailed behind them.

* * * * *

"Your idea was marvelous, Mirelle!"

Loran's enthusiasm was a palpable force in Jareth's study. Papers littered the floor, and the large wooden table was covered with parchments, books, and scrolls. Loran gathered up some sheets with his own secret coded notes and looked them over again.

Mirelle sat back in her chair, crossing her arms and nodding smugly at Jareth. "See! Told you so!"

Loran cleared his throat. "But ..."

Jareth leaned forward in his chair and grinned. "Told you so, kiereen!"

Sticking her tongue out, Mirelle made a face. "Let Loran talk."

"There is a problem. There's no way to tell where a dream hole may open."

"There must be," Mirelle exclaimed.

Jareth put forth another concern. "And can a connection be made only when some Earth person dreams?"

Loran shook his head. "I don't think so. And there are many different kinds of rifts." He paused and looked toward Jareth. "I call them rifts. I think that name fits these ... openings better."

"We know one opening was in Mirelle's dwelling."

"One must have been in Chicago at the orphanage where Narik left me."

Loran nodded in agreement and then, speaking slowly, reminded them of one more fact they were trying to forget. "And at least one leads to the demon's world."

"Narik must have found more information about these rifts. He had to have made a record or something about them!" Mirelle's voice reeked with desperation.

"We searched his home in Tarnwite, remember. I did it myself. I found nothing of any value regarding the rifts, only the fragments about the *Book of Tocson*."

Jareth strode over and placed a comforting hand on Loran's shoulder. "I know, brother. No one doubts your diligence."

Mirelle spoke contritely. "Loran, please forgive me. I know you tore apart Narik's house ..." Her voice trailed off. Suddenly, she bounced up, dancing a little jig and singing a silly chant. "Oh, I'm so clever. I am so brilliant. I should be on *Jeopardy!*"

Jareth watched her antics with a jaundiced eye. "Would you care to share this profound bit of intelligence with us?"

Mirelle grinned like a demented *bitnap* and danced over to Jareth. Grabbing his hands, she attempted to make him dance with her. He stood as though carved in stone, though she thought she could discern the flicker of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Still twisting from side to side like a dancer from *American Bandstand*, she asked, "Did you search his cabin?"

Loran's eyes gleamed. "His cabin! No, by the Great Mage, we didn't!" Taking Jareth by surprise, Loran pushed him aside, grabbed Mirelle's hands, and pulled her into his arms, hugging her.

"You may let go now." Loran heard Jareth's warning and stepped back as though dropping a hot coal.

"Sorry." He turned to Mirelle. "I'll take a skimmer and check it out first thing in the morning."

"I'll fly you in the toron-a; it'll get us there much faster. Besides, you'll probably need me in case Narik left any ... surprises ensorcelled there," said Jareth.

Mirelle nodded. "And the toron-a is much more comfortable for three people."

Jareth placed a restraining hand on Mirelle's arm. "Who said you were going?"

Mirelle pushed him. He didn't move. Raising one slim foot, she kicked him in the ankle.

Hopping about, Jareth complained at the small hurt, wincing and moaning exaggeratedly. "Ouch! Why'd you do that, kiereen?"

Mirelle sighed. "Lesson one to review. Are we a team? Answer yes or no."

Jareth sat down in the chair Loran had vacated, rubbing his ankle. "Yes." Smiling his most winning smile, Jareth hurried to placate his feisty soulmate. "I sought only to protect you in case Narik's placed evil spells around the cabin."

Flinging herself into his lap, Mirelle hugged him and leaned her head against his shoulder. "You'll learn, dream boy. You'll learn."

Mind-merging, Jareth replied, "*Be patient, dream hole.*"

And got a box in the ear for his teasing, immediately followed by a deep, passionate kiss. Seemingly forgetting Loran's presence, Jareth drew Mirelle even closer in his embrace.

Loran watched the ardent couple and sighed inwardly. How he envied them. Well, he had work to do for the next day.

Gathering up his papers, he silently left the room.

Chapter Seven

They landed in a sheltered vale. Sheer cliffs encircled the clearing, pocked with numerous cave openings. Brambles shielded the entrances, making it impossible for easy access for most animals. Bertnas rimmed the secluded rocky sanctuary.

The akosai landed, and their passengers dismounted. A routine had already been established, and each knew their part. Soon, a fire was lit and food prepared. Conversation stopped while everyone devoured the simple, nourishing meal.

Patting his full stomach, Pen sighed with contentment. He idly poked a piece of firewood into the dying flames, sending sparks flying into the sky.

Rayne lay draped across Fel, her hands buried deep in his fur, scratching him behind the ears. His long, curved tail thumped the ground in rhythm with her caresses.

Pen envied the furry creature.

As though he could hear his thoughts, Fel turned his head towards Pen and smirked.

He's laughing at me! That big fur ball is laughing at me! Pen thought. *Enough of that. Time to attend to the business at hand.*

"Which cave should we camp in for the night, Shakos?"

"The one directly opposite the notch in the clearing. The Cup of Tears is in another one. After the reading, you and Rayne will enter that one alone."

Rayne interrupted them. "No matter what the stones tell us?"

The shakos's eyes twinkled as he replied. "No matter the outcome. Now, let's gather the cooking gear and head into the cave. There are things that must be done before we can begin the readings. Let the fire die down on its own."

Remounting Tran and Rosta, they flew the short distance up to the cave mouth. Brambles covered the opening, preventing their entrance. Turning to Merkatrosa, Pen cocked his head. "May I?"

The shakos nodded and gestured for Pen to go ahead.

Turning back to the opening, he quietly uttered the appropriate incantations. Within seconds, the barrier disappeared, and they entered.

"Why didn't you use your knife and hack away the branches? Afraid to work up a sweat?" Rayne sneered at him, her words dripping sarcasm.

"Just quicker and easier." His voice turned into a velvet caress. "When I want to get sweaty, I can think of much more pleasurable ways ..."

"Don't get your hopes up!"

Pen laughed outright. "That's not what I expect to get up tonight!"

"Joke all you want, but you know I meant what I said."

Pen instantly sobered.

"I will adhere to whatever the readings reveal." He ground out his words. "I, too, mean what I say!"

"Enough!" Tran nudged Pen and nickered impatiently. "If you don't enter the cave, it will matter not what the shakos divines."

Shamefaced, Rayne and Pen walked through the opening, being careful not to get pricked by the sharp thorns on the branches.

The shakos had lit the resinous torches left in notches in the cave walls, illuminating the short tunnel that led to a good-sized chamber. Far above them, a small opening in the rough ceiling offered a glimpse of the twilight sky. A small stack of well-aged brambles lay near the remnants of a long-dead campfire.

"We may safely light a fire to begin the preparations for the burning stones' guidance." Merkatrosa nodded with satisfaction. "Pentar, strip down to your loincloth. And you, Rayne, wear the Jakosai clothing given to you. I took the liberty of packing them in your carrybag."

Rayne nodded and drew out the garments. Carrying them back down the tunnel, she quickly changed, returning to find Pen divested of everything save the modest bit of material concealing his manhood. Merkatrosa also sat in just his loin-covering before the fire he had made.

"Gather around the fire. Pen, you and Rayne sit by each other, opposite me. Tran, sit at my right hand, Rosta, my left. Close your eyes and relax. Fel will guard the entrance and alert us should any unwanted visitors wander too close."

All save the shakos allowed their eyes to drift shut and attempted to relax, with varying degrees of success.

Merkatrosa reached into one of the many pouches hanging from the leather belt around his waist and drew out a handful of ground amber mixed with a trace of lanbeth. With a short, decisive gesture, he flung it into the flames. A thin wisp of smoke coalesced, and a heady perfume permeated the chamber. All inhaled it deeply into their lungs, Pen and Rayne swaying as the fragrance invaded their bodies. They leaned toward each other. As their shoulders touched, they sprang apart and their eyes flew open. As though it was a silent signal, Tran and Rosta also opened their eyes.

The shakos sat cross-legged before them, his eyes still shut, his hands resting on his knees. His voice resonated in the chamber as he spoke. "The burning stones reveal what the soul sees. Our souls shall witness the truth. It is up to us to understand it. And to act upon its guidance."

His eyes opened, the deep, ebony pupils devouring the lighter brown iris. The flames sent shafts of orange, gold, and creamy yellow dancing across them, turning his eyes to amber.

He withdrew six carved amber pieces from a pouch, each piece shaped like a six-sided pyramid and each side bearing a different pictogram.

"I cast these aides to the ground. The side concealed will then reveal the truth. We ask no questions. They know what we seek."

Gazing directly at all in the circle, he spoke once more. "Do you swear to honor the truth given to you this night? Difficult though it may be to understand and accept?"

Akosai and human nodded, Rayne somewhat reluctantly.

"I, too, accept the truth and shall offer it to those who will honor it." He paused and took a deep breath. "Now."

He tossed the pieces to the ground. Rayne and Pen gazed transfixed as the amber rolled around. Finally, they came to rest, forming a perfect circle.

Nodding with satisfaction, Merkatrosa took a slim pointer made of silver and drew lines in the earth connecting the pieces. A triangle with an inverted triangle superimposed on it formed a six-pointed star.

Picking up the first stone at the apex of the star, he turned it over. "This piece indicates a turning point in your lives."

He then selected the amber at the bottom point and looked at its hidden side. "This piece tells us that the chosen road is known to you." He smiled at Rayne and Pen.

He flipped the amber at the top right point. "The female has concealed her true face; she reveals it now."

The one at the top left point was next. "The male's strength lies in his accepting and honoring her character."

The shakos flipped over the stone at the lower right corner. "The path they must take will burn them."

Finally, he turned the last at the lower left position. "If they join heart and soul, they will prevail."

Merkatrosa gathered the amber pieces once more and stored them in their pouch.

"Princess Rayne seta Kithera and Prince Pentar set Morath, this is the truth the stones have revealed.

"You are soulmates, sworn mates. Join all you possess and you will triumph. You will go through the fire, but your powers will be strengthened by it. Go to the cave wherein lies the Cup of Tears and join with each other. I witness this joining."

"And I." Tran's voice rang with conviction.

"And I." Rosta's words echoed his.

Pen took Rayne's hand in his. "And I."

Rayne nodded. "And I."

"Tran and Rosta shall guard you while you join." Merkatrosa smiled, and his eyes returned to normal. "Give each other pleasure."

Pen took up a torch, and Rayne grabbed a fleece blanket from one of the carrybags, and, still clasping hands, they left the chamber.

At the cave entrance, Fel sat on his haunches, scanning the skies. He took in Rayne and Pen's joined hands but merely nodded, returning to his guard duty.

Tran flexed his wings, then lowered them. "Mount me. Rosta will remain behind."

Pen threw his leg over Tran's bare back while Rayne mounted behind him. She clasped him tightly, her hands caressing his bare chest.

"Ready, Tran," Pen said.

And they flew toward their destiny.

Rayne held the torch while Pen dismounted, then tossed it to him. She slid from Tran's back and leaned her head against his sinewy neck.

He whinnied softly. "Give each other joy. I will stand watch."

They turned to the cave entrance, blocked with branches and debris like the others. Wasting no time and using his mage skills, Pen cleared the opening. Taking Rayne's hand in his, he led them into the cliffside.

Initially the cave tunnel seemed like the first one; then it veered sharply to the left, and they gasped in awe.

The torchlight danced upon the walls of a huge four-sided chamber. The walls of polished amber of the clearest mel color arched high above them, coming to a truncated opening. The moon shining through served as the point of the chamber, drawing the eye upward. The floor was opaque, scored to form triangular shapes and offer firm footing. Two

notches in the wall of each side held resinous amber torches waiting to be lit. The entry wall's torches were set to either side of the opening.

But it was the center of the chamber that held the attention of the awestruck pair. The legendary Cup of Tears, set directly under the starry sky, stood before them.

Carved entirely of amber streaked with orange, gold, yellow, and bronze, it was big enough to easily hold two people. Rather wide and shallow, exotic etched designs covered its surface. Rayne smiled tremulously at Pen. "A bed has been provided for us."

He nodded. "Aye. But no tears will be shed there this night."

She shook her head. "You're wrong."

"You disagree with me?" He sighed. "Ever my opponent."

"No, *kierown*. Tears will be shed." She reached up to caress his stubbled cheek. "Tears of joy."

Pen wasted no more time, quickly lighting the torches from the one he carried. Taking her hand, he led her to the Cup.

They peered into it together. Finely crushed amber lined the bottom, as fine as the smallest grain of sand. It was warm to touch and emitted the aphrodisiacal amber scent.

Pen spread the fleece atop it and climbed in. Bending over the rim, he hoisted Rayne into the Cup's loving embrace.

They knelt facing each other. Her eyes never leaving his, Rayne untied her vest and threw it over the side. Her nipples puckered beneath his hot eyes. She undid the thong around her braided hair and freed it from its bonds. It flowed to her backside, concealing her breasts from his sight.

His shaft sprang hard and thick and long when he removed his loincloth.

Rayne's breath hissed through her teeth and Pen preened at her approval.

"Not like that night by the creek, I think?"

"No. Like my dreams."

"But real." He sobered then. "Rayne, you are a maiden. I will try my best not to hurt you too much. But it will hurt." He spoke even more softly. "I will make you ready to take me into your heated core."

She shook her head. "It will hurt more if you hesitate." She took his hands and placed them on her breasts. "Make me yours. Make me burn."

His skin gleamed like amber in the torchlight. The crushed stones in the Cup drew upon their fevered need for each other, and sweat ran down their bodies.

Pen leaned over her to capture a bead of moisture from the tip of her right nipple and lingered to suckle greedily. Rayne moaned.

“More. The other one.” She arched up, thrusting the tight bud deeper into his mouth. His hands drifted down to her waist, then reached behind and clasped her rounded buttocks, the split skirt offering no shield against his seeking hands.

He turned his attention to her other breast and bit first lightly, then harder on the rosy nub.

Rayne gasped and moaned louder as he moved lower upon her slender body. As his lips traversed a path down her hot skin, he licked the sweat glistening on it. He flipped up her skirt flap as he finally reached his destination -- the nest of curls that shielded her woman's core.

“Open to me, Rayne. Lean back and let me taste your sweetness.”

She fell back against the rim of the Cup, sinking into the support of his hands, her legs opening up as he commanded.

He buried his mouth in her curls, licking the creamy moisture that pooled from her. His tongue captured the sweet, salty taste of her sweat and her essence.

Her harsh pants echoed his own, and his prick hardened even more. She writhed beneath his tongue and bucked against his mouth. His lips seared her and she cried out.

“Now, Pen, take me now!”

He raised his head from her body and met her heated gaze with his. “Not yet. I want you mindless, burning to ashes with me.”

She clenched her eyes, tears seeping from the corners. She could scarcely speak. “I am burning. I can't wait.”

“You will. Open your eyes and look at me.”

Her fervid gaze met his.

“When we join, we'll both go up in flames.” He paused and managed to smile. “Now, it's my turn to feel your mouth on my body. Do with me what you will.” He leaned against the side of the Cup. “Make me burn!”

Rayne looked at him, for a moment at a loss. All the years of countless dreams streamed through her thoughts. The pages of instruction she had committed to memory flitted away, and all she could bring to mind was one burning question: could she take his entire big, firm shaft into her mouth and make him scream in surrender?

She crawled the short distance to his prick thrusting upwards from his body. Her long hair trailed over the fleece covering the amber grains as she attained her goal.

She straddled his legs, settling her moist cleft on his thighs. Reaching out, she clasped his penis in her hand. She could barely wrap her fingers around him. He groaned as she tried to encircle his thick rod.

“Your mouth, Rayne. Take me in your mouth.” He ground out the words as though he was being tortured.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Her eyes flashed, taking on an amber glow.

“You want to, kiereen. Why deprive yourself? The sooner you make me come in your mouth, the sooner I’ll regain my strength and come in your hot, wet body.” His mouth thinned. “Stop arguing.” His eyes burned with a carnal fever, scorching her heart.

She gave in, bending to take him into her mouth. She opened wide, slowly sliding the length of him as far as she could. Then her tongue swirled around the salty, sweet taste of the skin stretched so tightly on his prick. She knew when he began to lose control as he thrust inside her mouth, trying with less and less success not to choke her.

She drew back, and he grabbed handfuls of her hair, dragging her face to his.

“Why did you stop?” The words shot from him like darts.

Her response was just as fierce. “Because I don’t want to wait any longer!”

She grasped his face, his rough cheeks abrading her tender palms. She plunged her tongue into his mouth, matching him thrust for thrust. He crushed her body against his, his aching shaft pressing against her belly. He scattered hot, damp kisses all over her as she did the same to him.

And the lanbeth began to gather above them.

It glowed like pulsating amber, the colors that of the Cup of Tears. They paid no heed to the glistening cloud, concentrating on their writhing, entwined bodies.

“Rayne, I adore you! You’re my heart’s mate. I desire no other but you. I burn for you, kerasoka!”

“Yes, Pen! You make me aflame for you, kerasoko!”

As the lanbeth gathered, pulsating like a living thing, they lost themselves in the scorching flames of their desire.

Pen sank back on his haunches, Rayne clasped in his arms, her head lolling back and her eyelashes fluttering against her face.

“Open your eyes once more, beloved. It’s time. I want you to see me when we join.”

She opened her eyes, her head still tilted back, and gasped. “Pen, look above you!”

He raised his gaze, and his eyes widened in awe. “Lanbeth!”

“Like nothing I have ever heard of!” Rayne whispered as though the magic dust had ears. “Mirelle told me when she and Jareth mate, it gleams silver and fiery red.”

He looked at her with unending tenderness. “But we are not Jareth and Mirelle. Our love is not the same as theirs.”

She nodded, her heartbeat calming. “But just as deep and real.”

“Now, kiereen, join with me.”

Slowly, she sank onto his shaft, her body adjusting to accommodate his thickness and length. Her hands gripped his shoulders for support, her nails digging into his skin.

He arched up to meet her, then paused when he felt her maiden's shield. He grasped her waist, his fingers bruising her flesh.

"Don't stop now, Pen! Finish it!"

He took a deep breath. "Kiss me, Rayne. Now!" Then he plunged through to her molten core as her mouth met his.

She bit down as the pain tore through her, bloodying his lips as her maiden's blood bloodied his shaft.

He moved within her, the pleasure intensifying and overwhelming the pain. He tasted his blood on her mouth and licked it.

Tears streamed from Rayne's eyes as incredible desire flooded her soul. Sweat poured from their bodies, the heat in the chamber and the heat from their passion filling the room. The fleece absorbed the moisture, allowing it to seep into the amber sands beneath it.

As they neared their climax, the amber-colored lanbeth grew thicker and glowed even brighter.

Pen dragged his lips from her breasts and drew back. He spoke, his voice harsh with barely contained lust.

"Turn around and grab the Cup's rim. When you reach your release, I want to take you as the Jakosai and akosai do. I want to mount you and brand you." His voice broke. "Are you willing, beloved?"

Rayne lifted from his shaft, still rock-hard and glistening with her blood and creamy moisture. She turned and grabbed the Cup's edge. Her slitted skirt parted, baring her rounded, pink ass.

She looked over her shoulder at Pen. "Do it. Brand me. Take me with you over the edge."

Pen twined his fingers with hers and bent over her. He thrust his engorged penis between her cheeks and, as they climaxed together, bit her on the tender skin between her neck and jaw.

And the lanbeth fell.

Pen licked the small, bruise on Rayne's neck soothing the pain. Letting go of her fingers, his hands slid sinuously down her body, coming to rest on either side of her slim waist. He threw back his head, letting the descending dust trickle down his throat. As he swallowed the spicy, cinnamon-flavored, amber-colored specks, he felt a surge of astonishing energy course through him. His prick hardened once more, and he began a slow, steady pumping into Rayne's hot, damp core.

"Turn your head, kiereen, and catch the lanbeth on your tongue; I want you to be able to keep up with me."

Rayne did as he directed and opened her mouth, catching the drifting magic essence. She swallowed it, then nearly choked.

Pen hadn't spoken aloud; he'd made contact with her in her mind! She concentrated, sending her thoughts to him. *"Pen, can you hear me? We've mind-merged!"*

He stopped stock still in the middle of his thrusting, nearly pulling out. *"Rayne?"*

"Yes, of course it's me. We must stop and talk about this!"

Pen shook his head and picked up speed, pumping furiously, recharging their passion. *"No, damn it! Not yet!"* Then his climax struck, tearing apart his control.

Rayne gasped as the aphrodisiacal energy of the lanbeth surged through her. Forgetting her questions, she let herself be swept away by Pen's forceful lovemaking.

She screamed as her second orgasm hit her, bucking against Pen, causing him to sit back on his haunches, still joined with her. The lanbeth fell again, coating them until they looked like amber carvings.

Pen slid from within her and laid her on her back on the fleece. With the amber-colored dust covering her breasts and the curls between her thighs, Rayne looked like a representation of the goddess Larakosa, the Champion. He bent over her and slowly, carefully, took a coated nipple in his mouth and suckled it.

As he ingested the dust, his loins tightened. Releasing her nipple, he reached the curls shielding her nether lips. He spread her legs, savoring her musky, sweet taste. In the back of his mind, he realized that they had to stop; they couldn't mate all night long.

Or could they?

Rayne writhed in ecstasy beneath the caress of Pen's tongue. She sensed that they were still joined to some degree in their minds, but Pen seemed to be doing a better job of ignoring the tie. Perhaps he was used to it. A mage could mind-merge with others if given permission, but for her it was a new experience. As Pen's thoughts became more clouded with passion, she felt their tie slipping. She'd have to explore this new feature to their joining with him. But later.

Fire raced through her as another climax started to build. "Ah!"

They'd talk about it later.

Much, much later.

Chapter Eight

Rayne heaved a sigh of exhaustion and rolled over on her back. Her heart raced, and her mind was a blur of erotic images of her time with Pen. She turned toward him and, realizing that his eyes were closed, took the opportunity to admire him unobserved.

By the Great Maker, look at him. His arms are so strong -- how did he manage not to crush me? And his shaft, how did I take him in my mouth, much less my body? Now I know what Mirelle meant by a juicy, sexy hunk.

Pen's eyes shot open. "Hunk?"

Rayne yelped. "You read my thoughts!"

And Pen laughed. "How could I help it? You cast them out so loudly!"

Reaching over, Rayne punched him in the ribs. "Out! Ask permission first!"

Swifter than thought, Pen grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. Her breasts crushed against his chest, her nipples pinpoints of fire against his skin. His arms encircled her, and his shaft pressed hard and firm against her thigh. His thoughts washed over her.

"Kiereen, open your mind to me; we're soulmates."

Rayne felt his emotions enter her heart.

"If you wish to shield your thoughts, you can. I'll show you how, but, please, don't shut me out."

A weak tendril slipped into Pen's mind.

"I don't want to, but it's hard for me to let down my guard. I've been on my own for so long."

His thoughts a gentle whisper, Pen responded with care. *"You'll never be alone again, kiereen. Even when we're apart, our hearts will be joined. If you're ever in need, I'll be there."*

Rayne settled deeper in Pen's embrace, his arms supporting her rather than chaining her. *"I haven't had anyone I could count on for quite a while."*

"Remember what the shakos said -- if we join heart and soul, we will prevail, beloved, not only in our search for the Book of Tocson, but in every part of our life. Together, we're stronger than we are apart."

Shifting, Pen stretched out so that he lay beneath Rayne. *"I know this isn't the traditional position for a formal joining, but I want you to have complete control."* He took a moment to gather his thoughts. *"Rayne, I've seen the face you show to most people and the one you share with those few you hold dear. Will you join with me and share your heart with me?"*

Too overcome with emotion to answer either aloud or in her thoughts, Rayne simply nodded.

Speaking firmly, Pen invoked the traditional words of the joining ceremony. "I will love you as I have never loved anyone before. I will love you beyond the grave. I will pledge you my essence, my soul, my life. I will give you my seed, and may it fall on fruitful ground. I will give you shelter, comfort, and sustenance. I swear this."

Rayne bent low over him, her mouth hovering a whisper away from his. "I will love you as I have never loved anyone before. I will love you beyond the grave. I will pledge you my essence, my soul, my life. I will accept your seed, and may it fall on fruitful ground. I will share your shelter and make it more secure, take your comfort and give comfort in return, partake of your sustenance and increase its flavor. I swear this."

Taking Pen's hands in hers, she placed them first on her head, then her heart, and then, twining her fingers with his, placed them on his erect shaft. For a moment their hands remained intimately connected, then slipped apart.

Slowly, her eyes never leaving his, Rayne sank onto his manhood, taking him deep within her molten core.

Throwing her head back, she moved on him. Her unbound hair trailed behind her, touching the fleece beneath them. Her eyes closed in ecstasy as the passion built up. She licked lips suddenly dry, biting down and drawing a bead of blood. Her panting increased, turning harsh and erratic.

Pen reached up, caressing her breasts. He plied her nipples, rubbing the sensitive tips with the base of his thumbs, his rough skin scraping them, causing them to pucker.

Drawing her closer, he slid his hands down to the base of her spine, pressing her even deeper against his body. His fingers strayed down to her trim behind, moving to the crease and slipping between the cheeks. He pressed again and she moaned.

Rayne felt Pen's hands stroke her, doing magical things to her. Her skin seemed on fire, and when he reached the sensitive place between her buttocks, moisture pooled within her, and she moaned deep in her throat. As though he had pulled a lever, the need surged within

her to move more quickly. She pulled back and, bracing her hands on Pen's shoulders, thrust faster and faster, pumping in short, erratic motions.

Pen shifted into a sitting position. Looking up, he saw that the amber lanbeth had gathered above them. Rayne's frantic whimpers drew his eyes back to her. Her long, thick hair had slipped back over her shoulders. Indulging in the need to run his fingers through the satiny strands, he threaded them through the locks framing her face and touched her temples.

And their minds merged.

Rayne gasped. She saw herself through Pen's eyes and heart and marveled at the image he held of her. Could she really be that beautiful? That brave? That sexy?

"You are all that and more, kiereen."

"Pen?"

She felt his smile throughout her entire soul.

"Who else?"

"Am I truly the most passionate lover you ever had?"

"You know how I feel. Look deeper into my eyes and my heart."

Opening her eyes, Rayne gazed at Pen's beloved face. Reflected in his glance was more love than she had ever seen.

"You're still shielding, Rayne. You know I won't go any farther than you let me. I could push my way in ..."

"But you won't." She took a deep, steadying breath. *"Kierown, kiss me and join with me."*

As their lips met, all the barriers between them came tumbling down at last.

Their movements became more frantic as they climaxed together, and wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over them.

The amber-colored dust fell, covering their sweaty bodies, filling the Cup of Tears.

Their lips and tongues swirled over frosted skin. The need to join again consumed them even as they consumed the aphrodisiacal lanbeth.

When Pen lifted Rayne's legs onto his thighs and then drew them over his shoulders so his mouth could delve within her dark brown curls, she offered no resistance. But when he slid her down onto his shaft, she pulled off him, moving back a bit onto his thighs and weakly protested.

"Pen, we must stop."

"Why?"

"We need to share the existence of this new form of lanbeth with the shakos. Perhaps he can do a reading and tell us more about it."

"Later." And he lifted her up again.

"Quit it!" Spoiling her mock anger, she leaned over and kissed the tender spot beneath his flat male nipple. Taking advantage of the proximity to her lips, she slid her mouth up and twirled her tongue around the tight little nub. He moaned and arched against her eager mouth.

"Enough, Rayne. You're right. We can't keep on making love, much as I'd want to. The shakos should know of what we've found here."

Pen lifted her up and gently laid her back against the Cup's rim. Delving under the fleece, he triumphantly held up her skirt and his loincloth.

"Where's your vest?"

She giggled -- a very unRaynelike sound. "That was the first thing to go. I tossed it over the side after we got into the Cup."

She leaned over the rim, affording Pen an intriguing view of her backside, and fished up the vest. She quickly tied it on, and soon they were ready to face the world again.

"Let's take the fleece with us and gather it up so it retains some of the lanbeth."

Pen nodded in agreement, took a closer look at Rayne, and let loose a gale of laughter.

"What are you laughing at, you big thooba?"

"You. You're still streaked with the stuff."

Rayne peered at Pen. "Take a good look at yourself. You're not so spotless, either."

"Well, we'd better not try the tongue method to get rid of it. It'll just have to wait until we can wash it off. Or it wears off."

Rayne blushed. "They'll know we ..."

And Pen fell from the Cup as he broke into loud guffaws.

* * * * *

"Why do you think Pentar and Rayne went off by themselves?"

Sontar gazed at the two small figures as they entered another cave, leaving the Jakosai elder and the female akosai on their own. Even Rayne's furry pet remained at the first cave.

"What do you think, brainless one? They're going to fuck." Metres nearly drooled as he thought of a naked Pentar thrusting his big, heavy rod into that slim body. Soon, he thought, that prick would be his. When he ruled Tarnwite and Narwith, he'd take turns with Pentar and Jareth and make them satisfy his every whim. He'd take their women first and make them watch as he fucked them and then killed them with the gun. He remembered the thrill of taking the weapon Narik had given him and pulling the trigger, slaying the kitchen servant with one bullet.

But maybe he'd do it slowly, by hand, strangling them while their men watched the life force ebb from their bodies. His prick stirred as he thought of forcing Jareth to suck it while Pentar pumped his huge rod in Metres's ass.

His hands stroked his shaft and dipped beneath his leggings. Soon his cum dripped between his fingers. Taking a cloth from his pouch, he wiped off the semen and became once more aware of his surroundings.

Sontar crouched nearby, his eyes riveted to Metres's fingers. Metres thought of the last time he'd had someone suck his prick and uttered one harsh word. "Here."

"What?"

"Come here. You've wanted me for some time now, haven't you? Here's your chance." He loosened the tie around his waist and let the garment drop, revealing his shaft, already hardening under Sontar's gaze.

Sontar couldn't take his eyes from Metres's erection. Had he wanted him? He had never made love to a man. With women, he was the one in control, the strong one.

Metres was so much more powerful than he, even though he wasn't a mage. His personality commanded attention. Whenever they dallied together, he had always gotten the best-looking pleasure slave, the best wines, the best food. He dominated whatever group he was in.

Would Metres dominate him? If Sontar admitted it to himself, he already had.

Sontar stood, took a step forward, and stopped. He tried to take a breath and found he couldn't breathe. He tried to speak and could only manage a thin whisper. "What will you do if I don't?"

Metres smiled. "Why, make you, of course. But I don't have to, do I?"

Sontar took another deep, steadying breath. "No, you don't."

Taking the final few steps, he fell to his knees before Metres.

And surrendered.

* * * * *

"Get up, you big oaf!" Rayne looked down at Pen lying on the floor. Her hands on her hips, she tapped her foot impatiently.

"Am I no longer your hunk, my princess?" Pen gazed up at her, his cobalt-blue eyes wide with innocence.

"Oh, you're a hunk, all right -- a hunk of bad-smelling cheese! Now, stop being silly; we have more important things to do."

Rayne tried to remain angry with him, but Pen could see the corners of her mouth twitch as she attempted to keep from smiling at his antics. "What could be more important than making you smile, kiereen?" He sobered. "I would make you smile every day of your life if I could."

He stood and took the few steps that brought him to Rayne's side. "You're right, of course, heart's love." He gazed around the chamber, noting that the lanbeth had been

absorbed into the amber room's surface. Only the lanbeth on the fleece and on their bodies remained visible. "Gather up the fleece and we'll return to the others."

Their bodies streaked with the remnants of their passion, they headed back down the tunnel to where Tran awaited them.

Tran drowsed, his wings furled, head drooping, eyes shut. Their footsteps roused him from his light sleep. Viewing them with visible approval, he noted the lanbeth striping their skin.

"So, you have reconciled your differences completely and know that you are true soulmates, eh?"

"Let's just say we've made a truce."

"Oh, I think it's more than a truce, Rayne. A surrender agreement, more like it." Pen grinned. "And I enjoyed the negotiating ... every minute of it."

Tran whinnied. "And who surrendered to whom?"

"He did."

"She did."

They spoke together, their words tripping over each other, then glared.

Tran stamped his hooves and neighed so loud, he startled a flock of tokas flying overhead. "Shall we say it was a mutual surrender and leave it at that?"

Rayne nodded. "Ever the diplomat, Tran."

Pen nodded in agreement. "Rayne and I made an interesting discovery. We need to get this fleece back to the other cave and share with everyone what happened in the Cave of the Cup of Tears."

"Not everything!" Rayne protested.

Pen sighed. "You continue to doubt my ... delicacy. Of course not all that occurred."

"Mount up. I sensed the increase in your mage power, Pen. It seemed to go beyond that of a first joining. But perhaps Merkatrosa can offer an explanation."

Rayne sighed. "I hope so."

Pen mounted, offering Rayne his hand, lifting her up easily and setting her in front of him. His arms encircled her as he grasped Tran's mane.

"Ready, Tran. Let's get going."

Tran rose into the air and, flapping his great wings, returned to where the others awaited them.

"Congratulations, my friends. I see it was a successful joining."

Merkatrosa eyed the easy way Rayne relaxed within Pen's embrace. Her unbound hair flowed over the muscular thighs that gripped Tran's back. Their bodies were streaked with

an amber-colored residue that the shakos recognized as powerful lanbeth. He smiled inwardly. If only Rayne and Pen knew that he had sensed each of their joinings as the magical charge within the sheltered vale increased.

Pen slid off Tran and lifted Rayne down. She clutched the fleece they had brought with them -- a heavy coating of amber-colored lanbeth clung to it.

"Yes, it was ... successful." Pen grinned.

Rayne sent him a simmering glance, then looked back at Merkatrosa. "We brought back a fleece full of a strange-colored lanbeth. We think it may have special properties."

"Bring it into the cave and let me examine it further." He looked around the vale, gazing intently at the notch through which they had flown earlier. "I don't wish to be outside when I look more closely at the dust."

Urging them to hurry, the shakos lead them back into the cave.

As they entered the torch-lit chamber, Fel rushed over to Rayne and danced around her legs, welcoming her joyfully. His staccato yelps echoed within the cave.

"Don't I get a greeting?" Pen's teasing drew a mock growl from the prancing canid. Fel sensed the tie his mistress now shared with the two-legged male. Whether he wished it or not, the creature now was joined to him, also.

"Do you think he'll accept me now that we're soulmates?"

Rayne grinned and scratched Fel behind his ears. "Let's see. Give him your paw, Fel. Make friends."

Exhibiting a great show of reluctance, Fel sidled over to Pentar. Pen stretched out his open hand, palm down, and Fel sniffed it. Dipping his furry head, he offered it to be scratched. Taking him up on the offer, Pen scratched and then rubbed behind the canid's ears. Fel wriggled in ecstasy.

"I think he likes it!"

"Of course. He just needed to give you a chance." Rayne laughed at the sight of the two grinning faces.

"I'm glad that you and Rayne's pet are no longer enemies, but we must examine this new variation of lanbeth you've discovered." Merkatrosa squatted on the cave floor and gestured for the others to form a circle once more. "Place the fleece on the ground and I'll cast the burning stones on it."

Emptying the pouch containing the amber pieces, Merkatrosa tossed them onto the lanbeth-dusted fleece. For a moment they lay quiescent on it. Then, suddenly, they glowed, the amber fire scorching the coverlet, making six perfect holes. Carefully, the Shakos lifted the fleece, the stones slipping through the burnt openings and falling in place. Then, one by one, he read the signs.

"The first one confirms your joining; your strength has increased. The second indicates a different path. The third, more enemies. The fourth, injuries ..."

“What about the lanbeth?” Pen asked.

Sending him a reproving glance, the shakos continued. “The fifth and sixth reveal new, stronger weapons already in your possession.”

“Weapons? You mean Pen’s sword and my dagger and bow? But there’s nothing new about them.”

“Let’s travel to the Cave of the Cup of Tears. Gather all your gear. I’ll ride again with Pentar.”

Moving quickly, they were soon remounted and winging to the other cave.

They clattered down the tunnel leading to the chamber containing the Cup, pausing for a moment when they reached the entrance.

Merkatrosa spoke in a whisper hushed with awe. “It is unlike anything I have ever seen before.” He gazed at the huge, carved Cup covered with ancient incised designs. “Did the gods create this? Surely no human could have.”

He reached inside the bowl and drew out a moist finger coated with amber lanbeth. “Take out the wrist band you usually wear, Rayne, and your dagger and bow. Pen, unsheathe your sword.”

Unquestioning, Rayne and Pen complied.

“Give them to me.”

Handing them over, Pen and Rayne merged thoughts for a moment. What could the shakos have in mind?

Examining them carefully, the Shakos read the etchings on Pen’s sword. “Blood Drinker. A worthy name.”

“You can read the signs?” Pen’s voice was laced with astonishment.

Merkatrosa’s eyes twinkled. “You’d be surprised what I can do.”

Smiling, he returned their possessions to them. “It is as I thought. You are the Champion and the Peace-Giver. The artifacts you bear belonged to them.”

“But there’s no mention of a sword or a bow in the story of Larakosa and Melakosai.”

Rayne’s uncertain protest caused the shakos to nod with approval. “You remembered well, Rayne. The sword and the bow were created by the Great Mage Tocson during the war and presented to your ancestors. Now. Look at the sword carefully. What is missing?”

Pen eyed his sword and knew at once the answer. “There’s no amber. There should be a stone in the pommel.”

Merkatrosa clapped his hands. “Yes! The missing piece awaits you in the Cave of the Book.”

“Does that mean my weapon isn’t ready for battle?” Pen’s shoulders drooped with disappointment.

“Not quite. But there is something you both must do to increase their strength. Come, take them and place them in the Cup. Coat them with the lanbeth dust. Rub it into every crevice, every inch of them.”

“My wristband, too?”

“Aye, and your bow.” Merkatrosa delved within one of his pouches and took out six shafts tipped with amber. “These are used for a target game but should fit your bow. Dip them in the lanbeth. Their points will harden, making them stronger than the metal tips.” He held up Rayne’s wristband. “This band deflected the talon of the demon, and it bears a burning stone.”

Placing the items in the bowl of the Cup, they melded the moistened lanbeth into the weapons. The magical specks clung to every surface. As the designs absorbed the mixture, they glowed.

Pen held up the sword and gasped as a surge of lightning raced through him. He swished the sword overhead and playfully lunged at Tran.

“Be careful! You hold immense power in your grasp! In your skillful hands, the Blood Drinker is invincible!”

Merkatrosa’s warning instantly halted Pen’s display, and he sheathed the sword.

Taking up her dagger, Rayne threw it at a torch at the far side of the chamber. Cleaved in half, the torch tumbled to the ground. Inserting a shaft in the bow, she pulled back and released it into the wall. It sank halfway along its length. Pen strode over and, using all his mage strength, pulled it out; the tip was unmarred.

Clasping the band around her left wrist, Rayne felt the same pulsating power energize her. “This is truly wondrous!”

Rayne looked toward Pen as her thoughts raced to join his.

“Do you believe I’m the goddess and you’re Melakosai?”

“I doubt it. Nor do I believe we’re their descendants. But these weapons ...”

“Aye. The weapons.”

“Handed down from my father’s father’s father ... further back than can be retraced.”

“In my family, we have always owned the band and the dagger. Always.”

Seeking physical contact, Rayne clung to Pen’s waist. His arms immediately embraced her, offering her the touch she craved.

Rosta nickered quietly to Tran and Merkatrosa. “I think you both owe me some coins. I knew they would be as one before the seventh day of our journey. They did even better than I thought.”

“I will honor my debt when we return to my village.” Tran whinnied and bit Rosta playfully on the neck.

“When we are back home in Narwith, I’ll give you everything you deserve.”

Rosta twitched her ears and switched her tail at Tran. "Everything?"

His nostrils flared as he acknowledged her flirting. "Everything."

The shakos raised his eyes skyward and chuckled. "The amber lanbeth's power not only strengthens the weapons; it also increases desire." He smiled. "I will guard the cave entrance with Fel. Tran and Rosta, the tunnel should suit you both well, and you two ..."

Pen and Rayne turned passion-glazed eyes toward Merkatrosa.

"Yes?" They spoke as one.

Merkatrosa nodded toward the Cup. "You know where to lie."

Rayne still fumbled for direction. "Should we eat?"

"Are you hungry?" The shakos queried. "No."

"Then why eat?" He studied the two couples before him, akosai and human, and smiled.

"Take pleasure while you may. Who knows what trials await us."

Coaxing Fel to go with him, he left the Chamber of the Cup. Tran and Rosta followed directly behind them, leaving Pen and Rayne alone once more.

"Kiereen, do you wish to join with me again?"

Rayne caressed him, her hands lingering on his strong, sinewy arms. *"You know I do. Don't tease."*

He scooped her up and carried her over to the Cup, gently setting her down. He handed her the fleece, now sadly burned, and climbed into the Cup with her.

Stripping off her vest and skirt, he arranged the soft blanket over her and gaped at the holes left by the burning stone.

The hole by the top point lay at the pulse beating in her throat. The nipples of her breasts peeked through the left and right top holes. The bottom holes lay at her waist and the hole at the bottom graced the entrance to her woman's core. Through Pen's eyes Rayne saw the unique placement of the perforations.

"It's a sign." Her thoughts filled with awe.

Pen shook his head. *"Of what?"*

"Of what you must do ... fill me with your seed."

Pen couldn't help it; he broke the solemn moment, laughing as he sent his amorous intent to her.

"Oh, kiereen, I intended on doing that anyway!"

And he did.

Chapter Nine

Rayne awoke the next morning, hungry and aching in places she didn't know could hurt. Was that her tongue that felt like it had been tied up in knots? Oh, wait, it had been. Tied up in knots around Pen's thick, hard shaft. She had twined it around him while she licked and sucked and tasted every inch of his rod.

Her toes still tingled from trying to write "I love you" in several different languages on Pen's glorious, firm chest.

And her nipples. By the goddess, Pen had suckled them, licked them, bit them, tweaked them, plucked them, rolled them, thumbed them. They were so sensitive now, the thought of wearing anything at all against them seemed wrong.

"Very wrong."

"Pen?"

"Who else? By the way, I totally approve of your decision not to wear a top."

"I haven't made that choice yet. I have some lanbeth salve in one of my carrybags. If I rub my breasts with it, I should be fine."

Pen waggled his eyebrows, leering playfully. *"Perhaps I can rub it in with my tongue?"*

Rayne pushed, shoving him against the Cup's bowl. *"Not a chance."*

"Well, if you're not going to let me have any fun ..."

"Get dressed, Hunk. I'm starved."

"Oh? Can I ..."

She placed a slim foot atop Pen's rampant sex. *"Don't make me hurt you."*

Striking a pose, he clasped his hands beseechingly. *"Hurt me, my princess, please, hurt me."*

"Big oaf!" Rayne shifted and wiggled her toes, tickling his ribs. Using his laughter to escape, she clambered over the Cup's side, grabbing up her clothes. She threw on her vest and kilted skirt and went out into the tunnel.

The trumpeting of an akosai stallion stopped her dead in her tracks. The whinnying scream of a female confirmed what she should have realized sooner -- Tran and Rosta were mating. She turned around, almost bumping into Pen.

"We'll have to wait. Tran and Rosta are ..."

"Mating. I heard." He grinned. "Now, how can we pass the time?"

"No more! Let's discuss the lanbeth and what the shakos told us."

Pen sighed. "As you wish, kiereen. But first, let me set up a sound-barrier spell. It can get rather noisy when akosai mate ... or so I've heard."

Rayne nodded and settled on the fleece Pen had tossed onto the chamber's floor. Observing his spell-casting gestures, Rayne felt something she'd never experienced before when she viewed her father or other mages casting spells -- a tingle that tugged at her inner core. Was that the way it would be from now on? Always aware of him? She closed her eyes and the feelings diminished somewhat.

"Now, where were we?" Pen dropped next to her on the fleece and drew her into his arms.

For a moment, Rayne relaxed in his embrace. Then, steeling herself, she sat up straight and turned around to gaze directly into Pen's eyes.

"Deciding the fate of the world, I think."

Releasing his hold, Pen scooted back against the Cup's pedestal. His eyes darkened to the color of the sky at the blue hour of twilight.

"We have better weapons at our command now and a means to strengthen the blades of every dagger, spear, and arrow in Hearthome. It shouldn't take much time to make more lanbeth."

"Pen!"

Putting up his hands in a mock "don't hurt me" pose, he continued. "I'll share the sword-making with the smiths in the different kingdoms when we return. But will we need all this weaponry?"

Rayne shrugged. "We don't know what Narik plans to do to take over Hearthome. He certainly has enthralled or engaged others in his quest for domination."

"You've the right of it, kiereen. If he could, he'd hire the Demons from Beyond to work for him."

"So, the sooner we leave here, the sooner we find the remnant of the Book and return to Narwith."

“Aye.” He paused, then smiled irrepressibly. “Let’s hope Tran and Rosta are finished. How long does an akosai mating take?”

His smile was so contagious Rayne couldn’t help but tease him. “Hours. Hours and hours.”

Pen picked up the challenge she’d thrown at him. “Longer than us? Let’s just see ...”

Reaching out, he attempted to grab her ankle, trying to draw her closer. Anticipating his actions, Rayne moved quickly, dancing out of reach. Pen surged upward and, snagging her hand, pulled her into his arms.

“Little flirt, you’re lucky we’ve no more time to play.” He took a moment to plant a teasing kiss on the tip of her nose. “Let me take down the sound spell and make sure we don’t interrupt them in anything ... personal.”

With the unbinding of the spell, Pen called out down the tunnel. “May we came through, Tran?”

Tran whinnied, answering his question briefly. “Come ahead.”

The four met at the other end, near the entrance where the shakos awaited them. Exiting into the bright light of day, Rayne noted the bite marks on Rosta’s neck and suddenly realized that she most probably bore some interesting bruises herself. Somewhat self-conscious now, she tried to draw her hand away from Pen’s, but he resisted.

As the soft breeze wafted into the sheltered vale caressing their skin, Pen held her around the waist and played with her unbound hair. Every few seconds, he turned his head and nuzzled her neck. Though she still felt a little shy, Rayne returned his affection, meeting his lips with her own.

It would take some practice getting used to this soulmate thing, but Rayne was always a diligent student.

“So, my friends, are you hungry after your night’s ... activities?”

Pen answered for them. “Starved!”

Laughing, Merkatrosa gestured to a small, flat rock a short distance away from the cave mouth. Covered by one of the fleeces, it bore a hearty repast.

“Eat. As soon we’re finished, we’ll get on our way. I presume Fel and I will be sharing a mount on Rosta from now on.”

Rayne spoke with deference.

“If you don’t mind, Shakos.”

“Of course not. It’s as it should be.” He looked over toward Tran. “We’ll head toward the Journeying Ground, if we have your permission.”

“Of course. The trail to the cave is part of our history, too. It’s told that Tocson refreshed his spirit at the Journeying Ground before he continued on his mission.”

Pen nodded. "I knew there must be a reason for such a strong tie between the akosai and Jakosai."

Merkatrosa patted Tran's strong, pewter-colored neck, drawing a nicker of pleasure from the akosai elder.

"We fought together, our people mounted on the brave akosai when the demons attacked in the last great battle on the Plains of Torment."

Rayne and Pen listened with awe as the shakos revisited those far distant days.

"The canids and their mistresses scouted out the encampments of the demons, the canids relaying the information they'd sniffed out to their bonded females. Then the women merged with their soulmates, sharing all they'd learned.

"They fought side by side with their sworn mates, leading the ranks of all of Hearthome in defense of our world."

Rayne and Pen gazed at Merkatrosa as he spoke. His eyes gleamed with a fierce light. Pen could almost see the winged warriors clashing with unimaginable evil forces.

Rayne envisioned the women fighting shoulder to shoulder with their soulmates. They had vanquished a greater evil than Narik in those far-off days, and if need be, they'd triumph again.

"I never heard these tales before. Had you, Rayne?"

"There are hints in Tarolian history of a time when all the world joined to fight demons, but it's viewed as a parable."

Tran spoke up, interrupting them. "If you study the different folk tales of the seven kingdoms in depth, you'll find similar stories." He nickered softly. "Only the Jakosai and akosai races accepted the reality of these tales. Perhaps because they sheltered one of the treasured fragments of the *Book of Tocson*."

"For whatever reason, we're grateful that you joined us, Shakos. Without your guidance and Tran's, we'd still be wandering around in the Hinterlands!"

"You're welcome, Princess." Merkatrosa acknowledged. "Now, I think you should take my advice; load up the gear and let's be on our way!"

Delaying no longer, Pen, Rayne, and Merkatrosa scooped up the carrybags and loaded them on the broad backs of the akosai.

* * * * *

"Wake up." Metres shook Sontar's shoulder. He had allowed him a few extra minutes of sleep as reward for his vigorous participation in their sex play the previous night. Who would have thought that that simpering fop would have such a talented tongue? Perhaps he would let him live a little longer than originally planned. But now, he needed him to get the toron-a in motion. He shook harder.

“Metres? What’s the matter?”

“They’re on the move. Piss and get your body in the toron-a. We can’t let them get too far ahead of us.” He paused and looked at the shimmering outline of the vehicle. “Is the invisibility spell wearing off?” He frowned. “I thought you said it would hold without any replenishment.”

Sontar gazed at his stylish boots, now filthy with the dust of the Hinterlands, remembering how they got that way while he had taken and been taken by Metres the past evening. He took a deep breath and gritted his teeth. “I didn’t anticipate fucking you, Metres. Screwing women usually reenergizes me.”

Metres peered intently at the slighter man. So, he possessed a backbone. Perhaps Sontar had left more dead bodies behind than he was aware of. He knew from firsthand experience what a thrill it was to kill after sex. He decided to explore this aspect of Sontar’s nature more fully. But not right now. He had more pressing things to do.

“Concentrate, man. And get that thing shielded again. And make it quick!”

Scrambling, Sontar tried to focus on the necessary words and gestures for the spell. He let out a sigh of relief as the toron-a faded from sight. Now he could relieve himself. He crouched behind a man-sized rock and pulled down his leggings, wincing as they brushed against his prick.

He ached in places he’d never imagined. His ass and his nipples felt sore and bruised. And his balls. By the Great Mage, Metres had squeezed them as though they were ripe *tarben* fruit. His prick felt as though it had been used to beat out messages on a drum. He fingered his sensitive rod and took care of business.

“What are you doing back there -- jerking yourself off?”

Metres’s strident tones had him pulling up his clothes and scurrying back to the toron-a.

“You know I can’t sense the damn thing when it’s invisible. Where, by Trahos, is it?”

Metres paced back and forth in front of the shielded toron-a. For a moment Sontar relished the sight of the helpless prince. Then the sun struck Metres’s golden hair, making it shimmer in the morning light, and a shock of sheer lust shot through him. He fingered the cord around his waist and thought of where it had been last night and hurried over to obey the master of his desire.

They watched as the mounted group headed once more toward the west, veering somewhat to the south, then followed at a discreet distance.

Inside the vehicle, Metres lounged comfortably in the back area. Sontar had folded down the seating, hiding it from view and giving them more room.

Metres took out his gun and fingered it. It fascinated him. So small, yet so powerful; so innocuous and so deadly. Sliding his hand up and down the barrel in a hypnotic rhythm, his eyes slowly slid shut.

“About time, you insatiable *trant!*”

Narik!

“This is the first time I’ve been able to contact you.” Metres could hear the sneer in Narik’s voice. “You certainly put all your concentration into fucking. Now, what has occurred since we last communicated?”

Maintaining silence, Metres sent off an update, ending with his informing Narik of Rayne and Pentar’s stay in one of the caves.

“So, Rayne and Pentar must have joined. I thought that ice maiden would never succumb to anyone after her supposed soulmate died.”

“You mean you didn’t foresee this? You couldn’t prevent it? Why didn’t you have Rayne killed? It would have avoided this situation.”

A streak of icy pain lanced Metres’s mind, almost causing him to cry out. He clenched his teeth and sucked in a deep breath, unwilling to show weakness before Sontar.

“Watch your thoughts, you clod! It would have been foolish indeed for her to die. She’s young and vital. Jareth can produce prime lanbeth with her.” Metres heard the derision in Narik’s thoughts. “Of course, you would know nothing about that, you defective trant.”

Forgetting about maintaining silence, Metres smashed his fists down on the back of the front seat, startling Sontar further when he spoke aloud.

“I’m not impotent, damn you! Ask anyone. I’ve fucked more men and women than any prince in Hearthome. I am not impaired!”

His breath heaving in his chest, Metres’s eyes darted frantically around the interior of the toron-a, searching for something to smash. Grabbing one of the amber figurines Sontar had stolen from Rayne’s palace, he threw it with all his might against the back window of the vehicle. It bounced harmlessly off the lanbeth-strengthened glass, landing at his feet. A scream of frustrated rage bubbled up out of him, deafening Sontar.

Metres could hear Narik’s laughter ringing in his mind, and he tore his hair. His eyes wild, he gripped Sontar’s shoulder, dragging his attention from piloting the toron-a. Spittle flew from his mouth as he hissed in Sontar’s ear.

“Set the damn thing down! Do it! Now!”

In the state he was in, Sontar didn’t care to argue with him, but guided the vehicle to earth. As soon as they landed, Metres jumped out of it and, taking the gun from its pouch, aimed it at a mangela tree. In rapid succession, he shot bullet after bullet into the stunted tree, sending splinters flying all around. He emptied a magazine into it and then another until nothing was left save a pile of kindling.

The gun was hot in his hand as he finally began to calm down. Sontar gazed at him with no little fear. Metres had seemed a madman. What would he do next?

Narik’s mind slithered back into Metres’s brain.

“Are you done now? You’re wasting time, Metres. Get back into the toron-a and track down Pentar and his comrades. You’d better not lose sight of them. You know I can make you regret it.”

Menace crept into his thoughts as Narik threatened him.

“Now, keep your mind on your task and away from your prick. Report to me tonight. Don’t forget!”

Metres felt the contact with the mage fade and turned his frustrations on Sontar. Striding over to the cowering creature, he grabbed him by the hair and shook him.

“Get into the damn thing and get us airborne now! If you lose them, I’ll hurt you. Bad.”

Sontar scuttled into the toron-a and, barely giving Metres a chance to settle into the back, sent it soaring into the morning sky. He kept his eyes focused ahead of him on the horizon, praying that he’d catch sight of the akosai and their riders. There! Ahead. He heaved a sigh of relief and, keeping a safe distance, followed them onward.

* * * * *

Pen sighed with contentment. He held his soulmate in his embrace, her breasts resting against his forearms. He breathed in her unique scent of sweet *thoola* flowers and the faintest trace of the aroma from the lanbeth. Her thick, soft hair tickled his face as the strands wafted in the breeze. He had never hoped to know such joy.

“Kiereen, when we return, I will gift you with the finest perfume from Tolos. I shall have the perfume guild create a scent solely for you.”

“What have I done to deserve such a treasure?”

“Merely made me the most well-satisfied man in Hearthome.” Rayne could sense his teasing thoughts. *“I’m glad we’re riding; I could barely walk after last night’s ... shall we say, exercises?”*

“Shall we say, overweening oaf?”

“You know you love me.”

Rayne’s feelings caressed Pen’s heart as her mood softened. *“Yes, I know I love you.”* She settled deeper against Pen’s chest. *“I thank the goddess that we found each other; I never knew that I could desire anyone as much as I desire you.”*

“And I thank the Great Mage I convinced you to take a chance with me.”

“I didn’t take a chance. The shakos read the amber and said we were soulmates.”

“Only confirmed what we both already knew: we were fated to be together.”

“You told me often enough, but I thought it was your overwhelming conceit.”

“It’s called confidence, kiereen. For instance, I’m confident that no matter how much you beg me, I can tickle you until you cry for mercy.”

And, taking advantage of her presence in his arms, Pen lightly brushed his fingers down her ribs, causing her to squirm against him. He sucked in his breath as her futile movements caused her delicious ass to rub against his shaft.

“Pen, stop it! Right now.”

“What’s going on back there?” Tran twisted his head, trying to see the cause of all the movement. His lips pulled back, exposing his teeth in an akosai grin as he realized that the couple was playing.

Rayne smacked Pen’s hands while answering Tran’s query. “It’s nothing, Tran, just some foolishness on Pen’s part.” She looked over her shoulder and glared at him. “He promises to behave.”

Tran’s whinnying laughter trumpeted in the air. “Pen? I doubt it!”

“No, no, Tran. I made a promise to Rayne that I’d be a good boy.” He cupped her breasts and gently squeezed them. *“And I do mean that; a very good boy.”*

“You’d better be, hunk!”

Rayne’s teasing response gladdened Pen’s heart. More than almost anything, it pleased him to make her smile. She was far too serious far too often. He decided to make it his life’s mission to make her laugh at least once a day. Content that he’d made his goal for the moment, he turned his attention to their next destination.

“Tran, what should we expect when we reach the Journeying Ground?”

Tran’s ears twitched as he gathered his thoughts. “When we feel the need to make our Journey, we don’t always know exactly when we will achieve its end. Thus, the Journeying Ground is reputed to be a most pleasant place. Pasture and water abound, and there is shelter available until Journey’s end.

“Very few travel there unless they must. On rare occasions, a family member may assist in bringing the traveler there if they are unable to reach it on their own. And, of course, there is the guardian.” Tran spoke the word in akosai, the nickers and whinnies unintelligible to Rayne and Pen.

“What did you say?” Rayne asked.

“It means ‘guardian.’ It is part of the tradition of the Arkosai clan that a clan member watch over the Journeying Ground. The guardian is decided by a special drawing when the younglings reach three years. When they attain their tenth year, the chosen one travels to the Journeying Ground and joins the guardian already there for ten years. He or she eases them when their final Journey calls.” He paused. “It is quite an honor.” He turned his head and pulled back his lips in a smile. “But Arkosai think their manure doesn’t smell!”

Pen and Rayne burst into laughter. Finally, an akosai one-liner that was actually funny. Considerably more cheerful, they relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

* * * * *

“Ah! Akosai Falls.”

Rosta and Merkatrosa had switched with Tran in leading the way. Pen and Rayne watched them dipping lower ahead toward three hilly peaks and a sheer cliff face.

“Good timing,” Tran observed. “We can replenish the water bags and even bathe.” He wrinkled his nose. “You two stink.”

“We stink?” Rayne caught Pen’s indignant thought.

“We probably do. It will be wonderful to wash up.” Her next teasing image chased away any further protests from Pen.

A vision of them soaping each other’s naked bodies beneath cascading water filled Pen’s mind. His shaft immediately sprang to attention.

Rayne grinned as she felt his manhood poking her in the back.

“I’m happy you’re so ... pleased with showering. Doesn’t take much to make you happy, does it?”

“Now you know; I’m an easy mark. And aren’t you glad!”

Rayne slid her hands down Pen’s muscular thighs, which clenched Tran’s back. Slipping her hands lower, she squeezed his knees and then grasped his hands and placed them on her breasts.

“I’m glad we’re flying behind them.” Her thoughts whispered in his mind. “You have my permission to fondle me.”

Pen’s laughter rang out at her flirting. His princess was learning.

Following Rosta, Tran banked and landed atop the cliff. Pen and Rayne alighted as soon as Tran touched down.

“Shall we set up camp for the day?” Tran asked as he stretched weary muscles.

“We might as well.” The shakos responded, letting out a huge yawn. “The last leg of the Journey is the longest, am I right?”

Tran nodded. “Aye. We can get an early start tomorrow if we retire a bit sooner tonight.”

“Excellent idea. Rayne and I will set up the tents.” He found their food supply bag and handed it to Merkatrosa. “Would you mind preparing the food for the midday meal? You’re a far better cook than either Rayne or I.”

“Speak for yourself! I make a rather tasty coney stew.”

“I’m sure you do, beloved, but since we have no coneys, why not let someone who knows a bit more about cooking take charge.”

Taking him unawares, Rayne turned and gave him a shove. As he lay in the dirt at her feet, she grinned.

“You know nothing about my meal-making ability. I’ll have you know, the castle cook trained me himself. I could prepare a banquet for twenty, should there be the need!”

Scuttling to his knees, Pen touched his forehead to her feet in obeisance. "Forgive me, oh queen of the kitchen. I meant no disrespect."

Helplessly smiling, Rayne pushed him back down again. "You are a silly fool! Behave!"

"I've made you smile. I've fulfilled my vow."

"Make yourself useful and help me get those tents up!" She stalked away, then twirled back. "And no magic! I want to see some sweat!"

Aye. Sweat pouring down Pen's naked back. His muscles bunching and relaxing as the sun gilded his skin. His leggings clinging to his moist legs and thighs. And then, he kicked them off and was wearing nothing but his loincloth. Her mouth went dry. Oh, yes. She wanted to see her hot, sexy hunk sweat.

"I hear you, sweet one."

Rayne jumped. "Pen?"

"Do you know another hot, sexy hunk? If you don't want me to hear your thoughts, kiereen, you must shield them better."

"I don't know how! Show me."

"What will you do if I show you?"

"I'll let you live!"

"And I live to serve you, my princess. I'll teach you tonight."

"Good. Enough dallying. Help me."

They set to, and soon enough, camp was made and tantalizing smells wafted from a small kettle Merkatrosa had set above the campfire.

Pen stretched out next to Rayne, absentmindedly rubbing his full belly. "Where're these falls you spoke of?"

Merkatrosa motioned to the second nearby peak. "There. Once you attain the peak, it's on the other side."

"Shall I fly you over?" Tran dipped his wings in invitation.

"That would be wonderful. Can we take Fel with us?" Rayne asked.

Pen groaned while Fel pranced around Rayne's feet. He had been decidedly put out by her switch in allegiance to the male usurper, even if he was her soulmate.

"He can stand watch for us."

"Who are you expecting? Sontar?" Pen's teasing words caused the shakos to speak up.

"No, Pen. Rayne is wise. I still feel as though something unseen trails behind us. Take Fel."

Pen bowed his head in acquiescence. "We'll replenish the water bags while we're there."

"Excellent idea, Pen. Just leave one so I can clean up the cooking utensils."

Gathering up towels and soap and a change of clothes, the three of them mounted and set off.

* * * * *

"It looks untouched." Mirelle's eyes raked the area around Narik's cabin. The midday sun gleamed off the crystal-bright windows. "Could he have left it unguarded? I know you said there weren't any protective shields in place this far from it, but ..."

Jareth shook his head as he opened the toron-a's doors with a simple touch of his fingers on the controls. Emerging from the vehicle, the trio gathered in front of it.

"I doubt you could get much closer without coming against a shield. It's why I needed to go with Loran. I'll try to disarm any spells left to protect the place." He frowned repressively. "That's why I didn't want you to go in the first place." He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know how you talked me into letting you come with us."

"Idiot man! If you blow yourself up I want to be there with you!"

Jareth turned to Loran. "Hold onto her until I say it's safe to come into the cabin. Watch her carefully. She fights dirty."

"Jareth, wait!" Mirelle flung her arms around him, pressing against his chest. He tipped her head back, placing a kiss on her forehead.

"What now, kiereen?"

She mind merged with him.

"I love you, dream boy. Be careful. If anything happens to you ..."

"Heart's love, nothing will. I promise. Now, stay back." He grinned down at her.

"You'll distract me."

Jareth moved a bit closer to the fenced-in area around the cabin. Concentrating all his energy, he scanned the area for shields. As his powers circled the cabin, his brow furrowed with strain.

Energy danced from his fingers as he tore down first one, then two, then three spells. By the time he had finished, he was trembling with the drain of his powers.

He turned to Mirelle and Loran, weariness etched in his features. "Done."

And he collapsed.

Screaming his name, Mirelle ran over to him. She crouched next to him in the dirt and cradled his head in her lap. No. No." Her voice rose to a keening cry as she mind merged with him, seeking to discern his condition.

"Kierown, join with me! Please!"

His thoughts faint, Jareth responded falteringly. *"I'm all right, kiereen. It just took more energy than I realized to nullify his protection spells. Get Loran to help me up. We can go into the cabin now."*

With Loran's aid, Jareth was soon standing. With a grin for Mirelle, he directed Loran to cut a sturdy branch for him to lean upon. Loran rushed to comply.

Jareth gazed at Mirelle with aching tenderness. "You see, kiereen. Some lessons I do remember. I didn't use my magic to conjure up a cane."

Taking his hand in hers, she kissed his palm and placed it on her heart. She grinned, tears still lurking. "Think you fooled me? I know you're too weak to make one appear out of thin air. Try to be more careful, dream boy. I thought I'd lost you there for a moment."

"Never, kiereen."

Leaning heavily on the cane, Jareth led them up the steps and to the cabin door.

Chapter Ten

Tran quickly conveyed them to the other peak, alighting on a small plateau.

"When you want to leave, send Fel to me." He whinnied raucously. "That should give you enough time to ... get ready. A crevice in the cliff face just big enough to slip through leads into a chamber. Enjoy what you find there. The great mage Tocson created the falls when he paused on his travels to the Journeying Ground."

With a flick of his tail, Tran soared off into the sky.

Pen and Rayne turned towards each other and their breaths caught. Their eyes locked and their minds merged into one thought. "*Soon.*"

Motioning to Fel, Rayne commanded him to stay outside the narrow entry. "Guard us. Let us know if anyone approaches the entrance."

Fel whined, rolling over and offering his belly to Rayne. His tongue lolled out, and he looked truly pathetic.

Rayne didn't buy it. "Behave yourself! You can be on your own for a little while."

"I guess he still doesn't trust you with me." As Pen spoke, Fel growled softly, showing his displeasure. Glaring back at him, Pen bared his teeth in a feral snarl.

Rayne soothed him, laying her hand on his arm. "He'll just have to learn. Give him time; he's been my only love for a long time."

"Not any more!" Snagging her waist, Pen crushed Rayne to his chest. His lips sought hers and delved within them, seeking out the sweetness.

For a brief, delirious moment, Rayne lost herself in his kiss. Reality intruded when a moist tongue licked her free hand.

"Fel!" Rayne broke Pen's embrace, bending down to grasp the demanding canid's muzzle. "Listen up, Felar ben Torkos, you have your own mate now. Leave mine alone!"

Whining and snuffling, Fel moved into a stay position. Sending one last soft growl toward Pen, he set up into a guarding stance.

“That clinches it. Fel is the most spoiled creature I’ve ever seen!” Pen shook his head in disgust.

Rayne sighed, nodding her head in agreement. “I suppose you’re right. After his pups are born, maybe he’ll become a bit more detached from me. He’ll have to attend to his own family.”

“I hope so.” Pen’s tone gentled as he laced his fingers with Rayne’s. “Come, kiereen. We’ve much to do.”

An image of them entwined in each other’s arms filled Rayne’s mind, and she smiled. Leading the way, she pulled him through the narrow slit in the cliff.

Fel gazed after the disappearing forms of the two hairless ones. How he loved tormenting the male usurper.

When he’d bonded with his female ten passages ago, he knew that one day she would find her own bonded mate, but it was hard to loosen the ties that joined them. They would never totally sever them, but the joining had thinned.

If only the male knew how much he understood their speech. It was the one reason why he didn’t injure him. He knew the male would treasure Rayne.

And now that he had tied with his own mate, he understood that joining created the strongest bond of all.

The shakos had directed him to protect the two hairless ones. As if he needed to be told to do that! It was part of his nature. He would share the consequences should anything happen to Rayne.

For now, he heightened his sense of hearing and smell and settled in to his assigned duty.

Rayne and Pen traveled down the long, snaking tunnel. Pen created a light-catcher that led them along the twisting and turning narrow path. Along the way, they passed torches set in crevices in the wall and, using the light-catcher, Pen set them burning. Finally, the darkness thinned, and they saw a faint light ahead. As Pen intoned the appropriate spell, the light-catcher disappeared.

The sound of rushing water crescendoed as they neared the tunnel’s end. At last they emerged from the dark and gasped in awe.

Hidden by a ring of low peaks, a tall, cascading falls spilled from the sheer cliff face. A jutting piece of rock created the illusion of an arching akosai tail, hence the name. The water descended into a shimmering pool.

"This should not be possible."

If Rayne hadn't been standing directly next to Pen, she wouldn't have heard his awe-filled whisper. Concentrating, she responded through a mind merge.

"He was the most powerful mage ever known. Nothing was beyond him."

"Look at all that water! Thank the Great Maker, I can finally have a shave. My cheeks feel as rough as the backside of a bitnap."

Rayne laughed aloud as she envisioned the sharp quills of the bad-tempered creature. *"I hope not. I'd hate to have to pluck them out one by one."*

Pen smiled back.

"Might be fun. C'mon. I'll race you. Last one in is a featherless thooba!"

Tossing aside the towels and clothes, they ran to the glistening water. Reaching it a breath ahead of Rayne, Pen jumped in, creating an enormous splash and quickly came sputtering back up.

Rayne dived in smooth as a baby's bottom, leaving only a ripple behind. She swam deep beneath the surface and grabbed Pen's foot, tugging on it and dragging him under.

Turning the tables, he caught her around the waist, carrying her back up to the surface. Coughing and gasping, they tried catching their breaths. Meanwhile, Pen sent his thoughts winging to Rayne.

"You swim really well for someone whose kingdom is mostly arid land."

"We're surrounded by water. I learned to swim in the ocean. None of your tame mountain lakes for me. I bodysurfed before I reached my first cycle."

"Tame? I'll show you tame."

He headed toward the narrow beach circling the pool. Scrambling out, he stripped off his loincloth, and his manhood sprang free. He fisted his hands on his lean hips and directed his commands to Rayne. *"Come here, slave. 'Tis time I tamed you so you'll learn to obey your master."*

Tapping an impatient foot, Pentar waggled his eyebrows and leered at Rayne. With a mocking, imperious gesture, he pointed to his feet. *"Lick my toes."*

Rayne grinned. If it were anyone else, she would have taken umbrage, but she knew Pen was only teasing. Drawing closer to shore, she rose from the water. Stripping off her drenched garments, she fell to Pen's feet. She touched her forehead to his toes and then snagged his feet and tugged.

Caught unawares, Pen fell back and Rayne jumped on top of him. Straddling him, she bent low, her breasts bobbing in his face. "Ha! Who is the master now?"

Pen rolled, bringing Rayne under him and grinned at her. "Me."

Clasping her hands to either side of her body, Pen moved up so that his rod nestled between her breasts.

"I wonder how good you can pleasure, little slave? Suck my prick, perhaps?"

Rayne's eyes gleamed. "Your wish is my command, o great oaf. I mean, great one."

"Silence, slave. Do as I bid you." And Pen slid his shaft to her mouth.

Needing no further urging, Rayne took him between her lips. He still held her hands prisoner so that she couldn't indulge in the need to fondle his soft balls. Concentrating instead on the feel and taste of his skin, Rayne plied her tongue up and down his prick. He tasted salty and sweet, the water from the pool coating his flesh with a sweet liquid, almost like mel. She took him in as far as he could go, sucking hard.

He groaned, the sound wrenched from deep within his soul. Releasing her hands, he fondled her breasts, kneading them while his thumbs rubbed her nipples.

Rayne cupped his balls and squeezed gently. He surged against her, thrusting his rod deeper within her mouth, and then pulled out.

"Enough!" His voice rasped out the word. He rolled off her, falling onto his back, his prick jutting straight up from the thick thatch of hair at the base. "Ride me, little slave. Make the lanbeth fall!"

Slowly at first, then faster and faster, Rayne rocked on Pen's shaft. Her damp hair flowed down her back, the waning sun sending shafts of fire as it picked out streaks of flame in her brown tresses.

She raised her arms above her head and twined her fingers. Using just the strength of her thigh muscles, she clasped Pen tight and undulated on his body.

Pen gazed with avid eyes as her softly rounded belly tensed and relaxed while she gave him more pleasure than he had ever known. He shifted so that she straddled his lap. Thrusting hard, he moved in short, sharp jabs. His hands rested on her hips, gripping her tightly.

His movements sped up and grew erratic as wild unrestrained passion took over.

Amber-colored lanbeth gathered overhead in a small cloud. It roiled and changed colors, glowing from near-white yellow to deepest orange.

Moaning, Rayne gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin. *"That's it, that's it. Faster. Faster. Harder. Harder, kierown."*

"Yes, yes, kiereen, yes. Scream for me!" Holding her buttocks, he brought her down hard while he thrust up.

And she screamed in ecstasy as they climaxed together, the lanbeth drenching their bodies as it fell.

Rayne collapsed on Pen, her eyes closed, her thoughts hazy. *"I'm glad we needn't speak to communicate; I wouldn't be able to!"*

Pen's mind caressed hers. *"A side benefit of the mind-merge."*

Rayne could tell he was gloating. *"Did I pleasure you, o master?"*

Pen pushed back a strand of damp hair away from Rayne's face and brushed his thumb across her cheek. *"More than I could ever imagine."*

Turning her head into his palm, Rayne murmured against his skin. *"Then I'm happy."*

He held her tight in his arms, marveling anew that in the midst of such great turmoil, he had found his soulmate.

"If only we could stay here forever." Rayne snuggled closer to him. *"Wouldn't it be perfect?"*

Pen tweaked her nose and grinned. *"I think you'd starve pretty quickly or grow tired of my food-conjuring skills. I never did get much past roasted coney and sautéed torn root."*

Rayne's hand drifted down toward his quiescent shaft, where it finally came to rest. Boldly fondling him, she laughed deep and throaty. *"We'll just have to live on love, kiero. Shall we begin our feast?"*

Rolling on top of her, he silently answered her question.

* * * * *

"They disappeared!"

"What!"

Metres shoved Sontar aside and peered over his shoulder as the tiny figures of Rayne and Pentar vanished into the cliff face.

They had caught up to the travelers, keeping their distance and watching them set up camp. When Rayne and Pentar flew off with the male akosa, they'd followed.

Now, all at once, they'd lost them.

"Perhaps they've found the Book?" Sontar hesitantly voiced the question.

"It would please Narik should this be so. But unless we get closer and try to find out where they went, we can't know for certain." Metres sat back and thought for a moment.

"Sontar, can you cloak yourself in invisibility, land on the back side of the peak, and then find out what's going on?"

Sontar's mind raced. There was no way he was going to put himself in jeopardy. Who knew what was lurking, hidden from view?

"Should you not go yourself?"

"What, are you a coward?"

"Nay, but consider, should something happen to me, who would get you out of the Hinterlands safely? Besides, should the Book be found now, you can simply use your weapon, kill Pentar and Rayne, and bring it back to Narik. I can make you invisible ... at least for a short while."

Metres considered Sontar's suggestion. It could work. He fingered the gun, remembering how good it had felt to kill the kitchen servant. He would hold Pentar at bay and fuck his precious Rayne, then make him watch as he killed her. Who was the more powerful prince now?

"Do it. Cast your spell."

Setting down the toron-a on a flat, narrow notch just below the plateau where the couple vanished, Sontar gathered all his mage skills and ensorcelled Metres.

"It will hold for a few hours; I don't have enough energy or talent to maintain a shield on both you and the toron-a for any greater length of time."

"It will have to do. It shouldn't be difficult to climb over to the next peak and find them out. When I've gotten the Book, we'll head back to Koralongai and then bring it to Narik."

Sontar uttered a silent prayer of thanks and held out his hand to Metres. "Good fortune to you."

Sneering, Metres ignored the proffered handshake, turning and striding away from him. "Fortune always smiles on the one who deserve it."

Cautiously, Metres crept around the rocky slope and toward the farther side of the plateau. Clinging to whatever handholds he could find, he finally arrived near the outcropping behind which Pen and Rayne had dropped out of sight. Hauling his body over the edge, he stretched out on the ground to catch his breath.

Drawing up to one knee, he pulled out the gun and flicked off the safety. He hunched forward, sidling along the rough cliff as he made his way around the rocky barrier.

Suddenly, a large, furry shape hurtled toward him, throwing him to the ground. Moving reflexively, his trigger finger twitched and he fired a shot harmlessly into the air, the silencer muffling the sound.

The creature continued its attack, gouging his arm as Metres instinctively protected his throat. Summoning all his strength, he flung the beast away from his body.

Scrambling to his feet, Metres took aim as the canid prepared to attack once more. Its speed astonished him. He fired, but the shot only grazed it. Its scream of pain as the bullet tore off a narrow patch of fur echoed in the hills.

Metres turned and ran. His chest hurt as if a giant *trogan* sat on it. He took great gulps of air into his lungs as he raced back to the toron-a. He couldn't be found now, unprotected, in the open.

He scrambled down the cliff side, loose stones and debris sliding along with him. Not daring to turn around, he gained the spot where Sontar had parked the toron-a. Thank the Demons of Torment, the spell had faded and he could faintly discern its shape.

Flinging open the door, he fell into the seat, startling Sontar.

“Put the damn thing in motion and get us out of here! I was almost killed! They’ll know for certain someone’s been following them now! Move!”

Sontar directed his thoughts, and the toron-a took off straight into the sky, shooting higher than he had ever flown before. He veered sharply away from the hilltops, putting as much distance as he could between them and the others.

Sontar shuddered with fear.

If Pentar and the rest didn’t find them and kill them Narik certainly would.

They were doomed.

Fel winced as he flexed his left shoulder. The evil hairless male’s weapon had fired a projectile, injuring him. If he could have seen his attacker, he might have avoided being hit at all.

It had been difficult to judge exactly where to hurl his body. The creature’s smell of fear had been his only guide.

At first Fel had doubted his senses. He heard the scuttling sounds of the hairless one as it crept nearer his post. And he scented the sour, acrid stench of fear surrounding him.

His first instinct had been to chase after him and bring him down, but he couldn’t leave Rayne and her bondmate unprotected. He had to let her know what had happened.

But he hurt. He whined as he limped through the narrow crevice into the long, winding tunnel. Torches crammed into cracks in the ragged wall cast an amber glow. He scented the pungent aroma of the burning stone as he ventured further into the heart of the cliff. No outside sounds penetrated the depths of the winding passageway.

Glancing down at his wound, he saw that it still bled freely, leaving a crimson trail behind him.

Where was Rayne? He concentrated, strengthening the tie that bound them. He saw her. Her hair damp and unbound, a vest and short kilt carelessly thrown on and her feet bare, she ran down a dimly lit tunnel toward him.

And right behind her was Pentar.

Fel sank to the ground, letting the pain wash over him. His bond female was coming and all would be right.

“Fel’s hurt!”

Rayne sloshed from the shallow pool of clear, clean water fed from the gushing cascade that miraculously sprang from the stony wall deep within the central peak.

As she threw on the clean change of garments they’d brought with them, she mind-merged with Pen.

"Fel's been injured by some unknown weapon. Something attacked him; I can't tell what. The pain is distorting his tie with me. Hurry, kierown!"

Pen didn't question Rayne's knowledge. He had come to respect the empathic bond that the two shared. He dressed quickly, tossing Rayne's sandals in a bag and gathering up the water bags they'd filled after their last time making love and hurried after Rayne.

"Over here. He's over here!"

Pen viewed Fel through Rayne's eyes and heart, marveling at the depth of her feelings for the canid.

She held his head in her lap, her eyes filled with tears. Blood dripped from Fel's shoulder, mingling with the dirty ground.

Pen hunched down and gently touched Rayne's shoulder ... and sucked in a deep breath as she cried out.

"Rayne?"

"The pain. I feel his pain." She turned her eyes, swimming with tears, toward him. *"Use your healing skill, Pen. Help him."*

"I've only done so with another human and myself. How can I reach into his mind and body and heal him?"

"I'll help. Tell me what to do."

Pen cudgeled his brain. Perhaps physical contact might work? *"Take your hand and touch my head. I'll do the same with you. Take your free hand with mine and we'll cup Fel's head. Then, concentrate."* He took a deep, cleansing breath. *"Now."*

Joining with Rayne and Fel, Pen closed his eyes and opened his mind. The strangest sensation overcame him as he saw himself through two pairs of eyes. He delved deeper into the canid's mind. Hairless male usurper, eh? He had been right; that canid knew more than he let on! But now, he had to make a firm tie with Fel's mind.

"Fel, let me in. Please."

Grudgingly, Pen felt the barriers fall from the canid's mind.

"How did you get in here? Why are you in here?"

"Rayne granted me access, and I'm here to heal you, but I need your help."

Pen observed Fel's suspicion. Suddenly, he became aware of Rayne's entrance.

"Fel, do what Pen tells you. You know he won't harm you." Pen sensed the smile in her thoughts as did Fel. *"He knows I'd hurt him if he did."*

Although with some reluctance, Fel opened up.

"Think of your shoulder. Remember the feel of running smoothly across the ground, chasing a coney. Your fur flows behind you as the wind licks your face. There is no pain when you move. There is no blood. Your fur grows thick and long. Your muscles are strong."

Pen's thoughts filtered through Fel's mind. They lulled and soothed him. He envisioned running and chasing game, his fur rippling.

And the pain diminished, fading away. His breath evened out as he settled into sleep, his head drooping deeper onto Rayne's lap. His ties with Rayne and Pen melted away as he slumbered.

And the wound began to heal.

"It grows late, Merkatrosa. Where is Fel? Can Rayne and Pen still be enjoying their time alone?"

Merkatrosa sensed the concern in Tran's voice. He, too, worried that something had happened.

"Let's all fly over there. We need to decide whether to camp here or move on. We can't wait any longer for Pen and Rayne. Let's meet them at the falls."

Rosta spoke decisively, flicking an impatient tail. "You're right. Merkatrosa, if you load up, we'll fly directly to the falls. The thermal winds can make landing right there a little tricky, but I don't wish to wait."

"I agree. The feeling of danger and evil permeates the area." The shakos shuddered as though a walking demon had pierced his heart with its poisonous talon.

Moving quickly, they broke camp and flew to the falls. All three scanned the small plateau, peering down from the sky to the pool and falls below.

No one. Nothing.

"They still live; I sense that. But where are they?"

Merkatrosa shielded his eyes as the midday sun glinted off the water in the pool.

Tran stretched out his wings, dipping even lower. "They must be in the tunnel. Rosta and I can't get through. We'll fly over to the other entrance and let you off there."

Turning, they retraced Tran's earlier flight and alighted in front of the hidden entrance in the cliff. Merkatrosa jumped off, slipping through the narrow crevice and followed the torch-lit path. Soon he heard the quiet voices of Pen and Rayne and the whimpering of a canid in pain. As he drew nearer, he could discern what was said.

"Hush, Fel. I'm sure the others will come for us. Just rest."

Rayne's soothing voice drifted to his ears, and Merkatrosa sped up. Turning sharply, he came upon the trio crouched on the floor of the tunnel.

"Keep him calm, kiereen. When he gets agitated, he breaks the tie with me."

"Pen, Rayne, what's happened?"

They both looked up, relief and gratitude flashing across their faces.

"Merkatrosa, thank the Great Maker you're here!" Pen's voice vibrated with emotion.

“See, I told you they’d come, Fel.” Releasing her control, Rayne let her tears fall freely down her face.

The shakos fell to his knees by the canid and opened one of his many belt pouches. Drawing out a pot of lanbeth-laced unguent, he spread it with a free hand on Fel’s wound.

“You can cut your tie with him, Pen. You’ve done a great deal toward healing his injury. This balm will do the rest.” As he rubbed in the ointment, he repeated his question. “What in the world happened? How did Fel get this wound?”

“We’ve no idea, Shakos.” Rayne’s voice blurred still with tears. “I felt him receive it, but I don’t know who or what gave it to him. He’s been in too much pain to think clearly. At least I think that’s what it is. How else explain his thinking that an invisible hairless one threw a stone at him?”

“Pen, help me carry Fel out of the tunnel. We’ll join Tran and Rosta. We’ll camp here tonight.”

Pen nodded in agreement. “Aye. And I’ll take a look around the area and see if I can find any trace of Fel’s attacker.”

Lifting the heavy, furry canid carefully, Pen and Merkatrosa carried him out, Rayne leading the way with one of the torches taken from the wall.

As they ventured into the waning sunlight, the two waiting akosai took in Fel’s limp form and whinnied with concern.

“He’s not dead?” Rosta whickered and nudged Fel’s head lightly.

“No. He’s been grazed by something. It took a deep furrow out of his fur and skin, and he’s suffering from mild shock. But he needs some more time to rest.” The Shakos shrugged his shoulders after they laid the canid on one of the fleece blankets. “Pen and Rayne are going to search the area for some clues as to what occurred. Fel’s thoughts are none too clear now.”

Pen spoke firmly, directing Rayne on how to do a thorough search.

“I never thought participating in Loran’s archeology digs would ever be helpful in other situations, but it’s the best way to go about a meticulous search. We’ll work our way around the perimeter, making smaller circles as we go along and end up in the middle. Check the rock walls at eye level and three feet above and down near the ground. If you see or find anything unusual, make note of its location.”

Offering no argument, Rayne nodded, and she and Pen began their circuit around the plateau.

The akosai and Jakosai elder looked at each other with astonishment. Tran voiced aloud what the others were thinking.

“I cannot believe it. Princess Rayne seta Kithera obeying the direction of another without a demur?”

Merkatrosa shrugged. “She no longer needs to prove herself. Pen knows her worth and her flaws and loves her. She’s found her soulmate.”

Rayne’s triumphant shout startled them. “I’ve found something!”

Chapter Eleven

Moving as though she carried a wafer-thin thooba egg, Rayne inched her way to where the others gathered. Pen joined her as she reached the campsite.

“I marked where I left off, but I wanted to see what you found, kiereen.”

Rayne unfolded her fingers like a flower opening up in the sun. Lying in the middle of her palm was a small, misshapen piece of metal.

Questions bombarded her from every side.

“Where did you find it?”

“How did you find it?”

“What is it?”

Rayne held up her empty hand to stop the questioning. “I found it imbedded in the cliff; sheer luck; and I don’t have the slightest idea what it is.”

Tran’s nostrils flared as he sniffed the unusual object in Rayne’s hand. “There’s blood on it. It smells like Fel’s.”

The shakos poked at it as though it were a stinging *kyrscha* bug. “It is not from Hearthome. An aura of evil clings to it.”

Pen passed his hand over the air above the alien piece of metal and frowned. “I can’t discern any magic in it. How could something this small deliver such a wound?”

Taking a small linen square, the shakos lifted the tiny intruder from Rayne’s palm and wrapped it.

“It didn’t just appear on its own,” Pen said. “Someone must have conveyed it here. Merkatrosa, will you set up camp while Rayne and I examine the area further? If someone was here, they must have left signs.”

Their eyes now focused more on the ground, Rayne and Pen went back to their exploration. This time Pen called out with excitement.

"Here! Someone entered here."

Leaving Merkatrosa with Fel, Tran and Rosta trotted over to where Rayne and Pen knelt in the dirt. Pen looked up at their arrival.

"Tran, will you and Rosta fly over the peaks behind us and see if you can pick up any trail? It looks like only one set of footprints."

With a nod of his head, Tran winged away with Rosta.

"It looks like a man's boot prints." Rayne placed her hand in the impression left behind. "Average sized."

Pen knelt closer to the ground. "These are expensive boots." He paused and ran his fingers along the edge of the outline. Raising his head, he gazed into Rayne's curious stare. "I recognize the stitching. They come from a boot maker in Narwith. He deals exclusively with the royal families. Whoever was here must belong to one of the seven kingdoms."

"Sontar?"

Pen shrugged. "I don't know. He was still at your castle when we left, but it's difficult to imagine him involved in anything that might be dangerous. Frankly, I can't see him climbing up the side of a hill and attacking Fel."

"But it must be someone who knows magic, and we have no mages in Tarol. Our guild masters learn their own trades and how to work with lanbeth, but that's the extent of their experience." Rayne whispered her worst fear. "Could it be Narik?"

Smiling grimly, Pen responded. "If it were Narik, Fel would probably be dead." He paused. "I hear Tran. Perhaps he and Rosta found some more clues."

Tran and his mate set down light as a *prella's* wing next to Rayne and Pen.

"We found the imprint of a toron-a," Trans stated without any preamble.

Rosta chimed in. "The footprints came from near the vehicle."

Whinnying, Tran added, "And there was another set of footprints, smaller and wearing different footwear."

"Aye." Rosta's voice quivered with excitement. "The person with the smaller feet relieved himself by the side of the toron-a. That's how we found its track. We smelled his piss."

"What did the shape of the shoe look like?" Rayne asked.

"Pointed and quite narrow." Tran snorted. "Rather like a woman's shoe."

"Sontar wears shoes like that. He had them designed especially for him in Narwith. He showed them to me once." Pen sneered. "I told him they'd make good bug killers. He could get into the corners with the points."

Rayne and Pen stood and dusted the dirt from their hands. Pacing back and forth, Rayne said, "So, Sontar travels with someone who bears an unknown weapon and isn't afraid to use it."

Pen ran his fingers through his hair as he added, "Don't forget he's invisible."

Rayne looked over to where Merkatrosa crouched by Fel. She heard him chanting softly as he guarded the injured canid. A wisp of pungent amber resin smoke drifted up from the fire Merkatrosa had built.

"Let's return to the shakos and share this new knowledge with him. Perhaps he can offer additional insight."

Pen nodded. "You're right, kerasoka."

Twilight fell as the group gathered around the fire. A chill wind swept through them, and Rayne cuddled deeper within Pen's embrace. He doled out the fleece coverings to Merkatrosa, Tran, and Rosta, and spread one out over Fel, who was still so weak, his thick fur couldn't totally shield out the cold.

Idly stirring a pot of stew, Merkatrosa hummed a Jakosai love song. He gazed into the flames as though hypnotized.

Picking up a stray piece of kindling, Pen traced patterns in the dirt.

Finally, Rayne broke the silence. "What can we do about these nameless trackers? They've trailed us this far. Are they still around? Who are they? Do they mean to kill us?"

"Good questions, Princess." Merkatrosa stopped humming, setting the spoon in the pot.

"The first thing to do is to see if Fel can offer us more information regarding his assailant. His wound is giving him less pain. Rayne, try to mind-merge with him and Pen. Perhaps now he'll be able to tell us more."

Moving over to Fel, Rayne and Pen placed their hands on the canid's head and merged their thoughts, opening their minds to his.

"Fel, think back to your attack. See if you can visualize it again."

Rayne's gentle thoughts soothed Fel. He sighed and cast his thoughts back to earlier in the day.

"He crept up on me. I smelled him and heard him but couldn't see him."

Pen viewed Fel's thoughts as the canid pictured the scene.

A strangely shaped small object appeared out of nowhere as Fel hurtled in its direction. It pointed straight up and then angled downward toward Fel. Then it disappeared once more as the canid slumped to the ground.

Pen directed his thoughts to Rayne. *"I've never seen such an object before. Have you, Rayne?"*

"Never. This must be the weapon that injured Fel, but I still don't see how."

"And I couldn't see who attacked him. He was shielded."

"Then we've not much more information than we had before."

Pen sighed. *"I guess not. Fel, we're leaving now. Rest easy, my brave friend. You did well guarding your Princess. I'll see to her now."*

Fel's mind hit Pen like a rampaging trant. *"You'd better, hairless one!"*

Rayne and Pen broke their tie with Fel and shared what they learned with the others.

"There's not much we can do," Tran said. "We have to continue on and complete our task."

"Be even more vigilant," Rosta added.

Pen nodded. "Set up wards against magic."

Rayne continued. "Take turns guarding our campsites."

"And travel as swiftly as we can to the Journeying Ground," Merkatrosa added. "How much farther do we have to go, Tran?"

"If we only take short breaks and travel as late as we can, we should make it in two more days."

"Let's settle in for the night," Rayne suggested. "And make an early start in the morning."

"Good idea, kiereen. I'll take first watch."

The order was quickly set up, and soon silence settled over the weary travelers.

Pen picked up Blood Drinker's scabbard and pulled it out. Cleaving to his hand, it vibrated, sending a charge through him. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, he began his patrol.

* * * * *

"How far up are we?"

Metres gasped out the words, his chest heaving as he tried to gulp in air. In the front seat, Sontar panted in a desperate attempt to breathe.

"I'm not sure. Higher than I've ever flown before. I can't keep the toron-a this high much longer. We've got to set down."

"Perhaps it's safe now. With the falling night, they must have made camp somewhere. They may even have stayed where we found them last. I think I may have hit the canid." He gazed at his bloodied left forearm. "I hope so. I sincerely hope so."

"Can you contact Narik and ask him for aid?"

"I have no choice. He expects me to get in touch with him every night." Metres liberally spread some of the lanbeth-laced ointment on the bite marks that trailed down his skin. "Try dropping down a bit. It's freezing."

Taking a deep breath, Sontar brought the toron-a down below the cloud cover. As they neared the top of the jagged peaks below, Sontar was able to direct more of his mage energy to creating some warmth within the cabin.

Closing his eyes, Metres concentrated on reaching Narik. Somehow he found it easier to make contact with his eyes shut.

“Well, for once you’re on time.” Narik’s transmission ceased for a moment. “What’s this? They’re aware of your presence?”

A lance of pain shot through Metres. Even though he expected it, it didn’t diminish the searing agony.

“Rayne and Pentar entered a cave, and I thought perhaps the Book ...”

“Idiot! Do you think they would simply march into a cave and come back out skipping with the Book in their possession? Describe the place you saw them.”

Metres pictured the site as clearly as he could.

“Ah, it seems to be Akosai Falls. Could they be headed for the Journeying Ground? Legend places it in the southwest of the Hinterlands. Listen well, o prince of fools, if you continue in a southwesterly direction, sweeping the area as you fly, you may catch up with them. Maintain a high altitude and only set down at night.” Narik’s thoughts crept into Metres’s brain, tangling around his mind. “Should you lose them one more time, you may as well not return to Narwith. If you do ... you will wish for a speedy death.”

Narik’s contact broke with no warning.

Leaning forward, Metres tapped Sontar’s shoulder. “Narik wants us to continue our flight in a southwesterly path and sweep the area as we go.” He sighed. “Climb again above the clouds to maintain a greater barrier between us. We may set down only at night.”

Sontar turned his head around, gazing into Metres’s eyes. “Can’t we go back? We’ve done our best. We can’t ...”

Metres backhanded him, reopening the cut he’d received earlier. “He’ll kill us. If we return without the Book, he’ll kill us.”

“But he’s not even in Narwith. How could he ...”

“You fool! He could kill us now, but he needs us. He could have one of his minions track us down, should we return, and assassinate us. And trust me, he’ll make us suffer however he does it. We have no choice. We must continue our task. Here.” He threw Sontar the pot of ointment. “Use it sparingly. We’ll need to save some for my wounds.”

Keeping one hand on the control, Sontar smeared the healing balm on his cheek.

For a moment, he took his eyes off the horizon and, baring his teeth in a snarl, he spat out his hatred for Metres. “I curse the day you forced me to join you on this mad quest.”

“Shouldn’t you curse the day you killed that Jakosai servant and stole those amber art pieces and ...”

"You're right. But I should really curse the day I met you!"

Sontar turned his attention forward.

Pulling Sontar's collar down, Metres bared the soft skin of his neck. He bent his head, his lips skimming Sontar's flesh. Metres's tongue darted out, and he licked and then nipped him. A shudder of lust coursed through Sontar, and his breath caught.

"Do you really wish we'd never met, my prince?" Metres's mouth slid up along to Sontar's neck. He sucked the tender spot between neck and shoulder, bit down hard and then released, leaving a deep bruise.

"Do you regret our fucking?"

Sontar moaned as exquisite pain grabbed his prick. For a moment he lost control of the toron-a. Regaining it, he took a deep breath.

"Yes, because now I know how much I'd do to have you fuck me again."

"Tonight," Metres whispered.

* * * * *

"We'll camp here."

Rayne pointed toward a small oasis, the tiny watering hole lit up by the setting sun.

Traveling all day without stop, they had put a good distance between them and the Akosai Falls. Weary now, they looked forward to a well-deserved respite. The shakos, Pen, and Rayne set up camp within minutes, pitching the two small tents opposite each other.

Tran whinnied with satisfaction. "We should reach the Journeying Ground by nightfall tomorrow if we continue this pace."

Rosta sighed as her wings drooped. "I'll be glad when we get there. We shall feed well then."

Merkatrosa dropped the mangela branches he had gathered for kindling, putting on an injured air. "Do you mean to say that you don't like my cooking? I am crushed."

Rosta neighed raucously. "No. I mean to say that there are only so many ways to eat dried coney meat."

"I think there are one hundred and fifty," Pen chimed in.

"And they all taste the same," Rayne added.

Merkatrosa laughed. "Then let Rayne prepare the evening meal tonight."

A chorus of pleas for forgiveness answered him.

"Well! I think I have just been insulted." Spoiling her mock anger, Rayne burst into giggles. Pen grinned. She had been solemn all day. It warmed his heart to hear her laugh now.

Tran stamped his hooves to gain attention. "Tomorrow we shall feast with the guardian. Then we will start the last leg of our journey with our strength renewed."

As night fell, the shakos opened one of his many pouches and took out a wrapped, waxed package. Using great care, he unveiled five small, fragrant squares.

"*Melalan* candy."

Rayne near drooled with delight. "I don't remember the last time I chewed any."

Pen gazed at the innocent-seeming sweet, then looked askance at Merkatrosa. "Isn't melalan addictive?"

"Not if chewed only in small pieces like this. It is only when people overindulge that it may become a habit."

Rosta sighed. "It makes you see things through an amber glow."

Merkatrosa nodded. "After the evening meal, we'll have our treat."

Never was a meal more quickly made and devoured. Merkatrosa offered a piece to each but refrained from taking one.

"Chew the piece slowly; many prefer to let it melt on the tongue. I'll take the first watch, then wake the next sentry. Fel can keep me company."

Tran and Rosta trotted off behind a group of mangela trees, their wings draped over each other. Their soft nickers and whinnies in Akosai drifted back to the campfire.

Yawning, Rayne stretched her arms above her head and heaved a sigh. As soon as she finished, Pen also yawned, his mouth stretching wide.

"Come, kiereen, time for bed. I'd like to get some shut-eye before I take my watch."

"Pen, you needn't worry; you'll have plenty of time to ... relax." The shakos grinned.

"My thanks, Shakos. An easy watch to you."

"And a pleasant night to you both."

Pen flipped the tent flap and ushered in Rayne. She knelt on the open bedroll and rummaged through one of her carrybags, withdrawing a sheer garment made of natural bant wool. Holding it in front of her breasts, she mind merged with Pen.

"*What do you think?*"

A picture flashed through Pen's mind of Rayne totally nude beneath the thigh-high slip. Two thin straps tied at the shoulder held it on her slim body. The rosy aureoles of her breasts were visible, as were the tight curls shielding her woman's core.

"*Put it on, kerasoka, so I can strip it from your body.*"

With an act of abandonment that Pen never expected, Rayne tossed it aside. Pulling her long-sleeved tunic over her head and drawing down her leggings, Rayne stretched out on the bedroll. Untying the chord around her braid, she ran her fingers through her hair and let it drape over her recumbent form.

"*Why waste time?*"

Pen stared dumbstruck, his thoughts a whirling mass of desire, unable to move.

Rayne smiled. *"Well?"*

Pen tore off his garments, letting them fall where they would. He knelt in front of her, his shaft already hardening as he reached out and let his trembling hand trail along her curves. He lingered at the sweet curve of her shoulder, then slipped down toward the swell of her hip. His hand shifted back to cup her butt, caressing the soft flesh.

Rayne's eyes drifted shut, and her nipples tightened as Pen continued his exploration, their minds so intimately merged, she saw herself through his eyes and marveled at his impressions.

He thumbed the dimples in her knees and then began an upward journey toward the damp curls between her thighs. Reaching his destination, he played with her muff, teasing her.

Her legs fell open in invitation as she shifted more toward her back. He leaned over her, breathing in the musky woman's scent that perfumed the air.

"Here, kerasoka, would you like your treat now?" Opening his other hand, he showed her the forgotten piece of melalan.

Rayne nodded.

"Open your mouth, beloved."

Relishing the moment, Pen took the candy and placed it in Rayne's mouth. His fingers still inside her lips, Rayne licked them, swirling her tongue around them as she sucked the sweet morsel of melalan.

Withdrawing his fingers from her mouth, Pen brought them to his lips and lingering, licked each finger. Taking another piece of candy, he popped it in and chewed slowly, letting the juice flow over his tongue.

The effects of the melalan hit them like a sudden gully wash, flooding their senses with heightened colors and scents. An amber-colored tinge limed their vision, and the sharp smell of amber resin filtered through their nostrils.

Rayne fell back on the bedroll, her legs open, revealing her woman's core. Her right hand delved between her nether lips as her left hand cupped her breasts, moving back and forth between them, kneading them and causing her nipples to tighten.

Pen sat back on his haunches, watching her pleasure herself. Her cream slicked her fingers as her movements grew more frantic.

Would she reach her climax without him? He couldn't bear to think of it. He leaned forward and slipped his hands beneath her buttocks, lifting her toward his mouth.

"Take your fingers from your clit, Rayne. Let me give you release."

Her fervid response seared his mind. *"Yes! Now, take me now. Make love to me!"*

Pen buried his face between her thighs and thrust his tongue into her heated core. He suckled her, drawing her cream into his mouth. Shifting a bit, he drew her thighs over his shoulders, gripping her ass.

He gently pulled her curls, licking her mons. His eyes closed, and he moaned as the combined sensations of the melalan and their own desire mingled.

Rayne writhed in his embrace, her body clenching in the beginnings of ecstasy. She sent a frantic, silent plea spearing Pen's thoughts. *"I want to feel your prick in me, kierown. Take me now!"*

Pen nodded, letting her thighs slide down his body until her buttocks caressed his rod. He shifted her again and raised her so that his shaft sprang free between her thighs.

Using his superior mage strength, he lifted her and slowly brought her down until the tip of his penis lay just at her curls. *"Put your hands on my shoulders, kerasoka, and give yourself to me."*

Slowly, Rayne sank upon his rod and began to move. As she rocked back and forth, her grip tightened. The tautened nubs of her breasts brushed Pen's chest, sending darts of fire into him.

As their breaths grew harsh and shallow, the amber lanbeth gathered above them, glowing and sparking like a raging forest fire.

Their thoughts and desire mingled, and they reached out to each other. Love names in several different languages were uttered in silence as their minds merged deeper than ever before.

"Look up, kierown. Open your lips and taste the lanbeth as it falls."

The lovers raised their eyes and threw back their heads as their movements became more frenetic and choppy. Rayne whimpered, and inarticulate sounds fell from Pen's lips.

As their climax roared through them, the lanbeth burst above them, showering them and the interior of the tent with the glistening, sparkling dust. The inside of the tent glowed with an amber radiance created by the lanbeth and the effects of the melalan. The specks fell into their mouths, tasting sweeter than mel and spicier than the fiery peppers of Helar.

Rayne's head dipped to Pen's shoulder, and she breathed in the scent of their lovemaking. His body, sweaty and streaked with lanbeth, lured her to lick the mixture from his skin.

Pen held her as he descended backward to the fleece beneath them. With her body liberally coated with the amber dust, Rayne again took on the appearance of the goddess Larakosa.

He had seen an amber statue of the supreme goddess of the Jakosai people in the rooms of his Jakosai mistress. Carved in exquisite detail, the little figurine had seemed almost alive.

Now he held in his arms the living embodiment of the goddess herself.

"I love you, Rayne, kiereen, kerasoka, my soulmate."

A feeling of utter joy overwhelmed her and her thoughts joined Pen's. *"My soulmate, I love you."*

Rayne lifted from his body and lay by his side. His shoulder-length hair was dusted with lanbeth. His lean, muscular chest was striped with sweat and amber specks, his prick coated with her creamy essence.

She leaned over him, sliding her fingers down his chest, moving them through the thick bush at the base of his rod. Her fingers smeared with sweat and the magic flecks, she encircled his shaft, coating him with the mixture.

He stirred within her fingers, growing firm and hard and thick once more. She bent and took him in her mouth, suckling greedily, her fingers clenched in the fleecy blanket.

Pen sat up, leaning his head back against the pile of his carry bags. He watched as Rayne licked his shaft. His heart beat faster, and he bucked. He gripped her hands, twining his fingers with hers.

The lanbeth gathered. So much lanbeth, he thought, his mind a haze of passion. His loins tightened, and he felt his climax draw near.

Rayne's mind was a mass of roiling feelings. The intensity of the love she bore for Pen was almost frightening. In just a few days she felt more cherished and desired than she could ever have hoped.

Pen's prick pulsated within her mouth, and she knew he neared his orgasm. When he came, she wanted it to be in her body. She raised her mouth from his shaft and gazed in his eyes.

"Why did you stop, pulse of my heart?"

"I want to feel you within me when you come." She shifted onto the fleece, her face pillowed on her arms, and raised her backside. *"Come to me now, my heart's own."*

Pen braced himself on his forearms and slowly entered her. He stroked within her, over and over, faster and faster. The lanbeth hovered over them until, as they climaxed together, it fell.

They collapsed, their hearts racing. As they came down from the pinnacle, their pulses slowed and finally they drifted off to sleep.

Outside the tent, Merkatrosa watched the flashing amber glows rise and fall and smiled.

* * * * *

"Well, it has to be here somewhere."

Mirelle tapped her foot as she stood in the middle of the living area of Narik's cabin.

They had searched the entire cabin inch by inch. None of the books remained untouched in Narik's small study. They had been leafed through page-by-page, revealing nothing of any unusual interest.

Jareth ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Damn, I'd hoped that we'd find something, anything, that could help us in any way. But I can't detect the slightest concealment spell." He kicked aside a stray cushion, sending it to the other side of the room.

Loran paced back and forth, muttering under his breath. "Think. Think. Think like Narik. I come here often. I wouldn't leave everything I'm studying back in Tarnwite. I'd bring my notes with me." He stopped in mid stride and looked over at Mirelle. "At least, I would. Wouldn't you?"

Mirelle closed her eyes, clearing her mind. "Narik knows Earth. Knows they don't have magic running the show there." She paused. "Why not conceal the important material in a manner that wouldn't occur to someone from Hearthome? A concealment spell could be detected by a mage with the skill that you possess, dream boy. Now, where would an Earth person hide something?" Suddenly a gleam came into her eyes. "Wait! I know!"

Turning on her heel, she raced back into the study, Jareth and Loran right behind her. Going to the desk, she pulled out the drawers and felt behind them, peering into each one.

"On Earth, desks like this always have hidden drawers. Let me see ... ah!"

Springing from behind one of the multitude of small compartments, a long, narrow drawer popped open. Within in it, rolled tight, sat a sheet of parchment.

Grabbing Mirelle in his arms, Jareth hugged her to him. "You are amazing, kiereen!"

Carefully, Loran removed the slim cylinder and unrolled it.

"It's a list of some sort. It's Narik's handwriting." He frowned. "I understand some of the words." He looked up at Jareth. "They look like spells. Do you recognize any of them, Jareth?"

Jareth took up the sheet and gazed at the words. He shook his head. "I understand the words in the incantations, but have no idea what they mean." He sighed. "If I knew what the signs next to each spell meant, perhaps I could figure out the spells." He threw the paper onto the desk. "But I have no idea what these markings are."

"Let me look," Mirelle said.

Picking up the sheet Jareth had tossed aside, Mirelle scanned the unknown markings. And smiled.

Immediately intrigued, Jareth pulled Mirelle into his arms. "I know that smile. What have you discovered?"

"It's a list all right. In English."

Loran cocked his head. "English?"

“The language I spoke when I lived on Earth. It’s a list of places from there.”

“Excellent!” Loran did a little dance for joy, grabbing Mirelle around the waist and swinging her around.

Jareth watched the display and shook his head. Somehow he knew that there would be a catch somewhere.

Letting Mirelle go, Loran settled in a heap on the floor. He gazed up at Jareth frowning down on him.

“What? We have a list of places on Earth, and Mirelle can tell us where and what they are. What’s the problem?”

Jareth cocked his head and folded his arms across his chest. “All right, Mirelle, tell us. What’s the catch?”

Batting her eyelashes, Mirelle put on a face of sheer innocence. “Catch? Now why would you think there’s a catch, dream boy?”

“Because you’re trying your damndest to shield your thoughts from me.” He smirked. “And it’s not working. No. You can’t go.”

Mirelle stamped her foot. “Be reasonable, Jareth. You need me. Who’s going to make sure you don’t get arrested for misunderstanding typical Earth laws and customs? You know how to speak English, thanks to Narik’s mind-merge, but he never did give you the knowledge to read it, did he? And you’ve never sought that knowledge from me when we’ve joined our thoughts. After all, mind-merging is not mind-absorbing. Besides, I won’t tell you anything about those places unless you take me.”

Moving over to him, Mirelle placed her hand on his arm. “Remember, we’re a team.” Turning serious, she continued. “Please, kiereen. There’s a phrase from one of the most revered Earth books that says, ‘wherever you go, I shall go.’ I joined you on Hearthome; I’ll join you on Earth.”

Opening his arms, Jareth drew Mirelle into his embrace and sighed. “I seek only to keep you safe, kiereen.” He laughed ruefully. “Perhaps the best way to do that is to keep you where I can see you.”

Jareth turned to Loran. “Let’s take the list back to Narwith. Mirelle can advise us on the best place to enter Earth’s realm to gain access to the information we need.”

Loran nodded and rolled up the parchment, placing it in a tube and then in a pouch he attached to his belt. “Will you reset the protective shields, Jareth?”

“What need to waste time and energy to do that? If Narik should return to the cabin, he’ll know immediately that we were here.” He shook his head. “No. Leave it as is and let’s be off. I want to be back in Narwith by nightfall.”

Mirelle shivered. “I’m with you, dream boy. Let’s get out of this joint.”

“Joint?” Loran asked.

Mirelle laughed. "Sorry. Earth word. Stinky hovel."

Moving at a brisk pace, Mirelle led the way back to the toron-a and home.

Chapter Twelve

“There! See it? That pulsating glow?”

Metres pointed toward a corner of the horizon.

“I see it, and there’s a smaller light nearby. What is it?”

The two men gazed with astonishment as the throbbing fiery radiance burned even brighter and then abruptly vanished.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure that our quarry has something to do with it. Is there anywhere we can set down that can offer concealment? Don’t use an invisibility spell tonight. The less use of magic while we’re stationary, the better.”

Scanning the area, Sontar finally located a low-rising dune.

“I think that rise may be high enough to shield us from the ground. But we’d better be up and above the clouds tomorrow morning, or they’ll see us from the air.”

Metres nodded.

“Land then. And be quick about it.”

As swiftly as possible, Sontar took the toron-a in for a landing. The dune did indeed shield the craft -- barely. Rummaging through the carrybags in the back of the vehicle, Sontar triumphantly pulled out a small container.

“I thought I had a can of *transin* roe. I know we’ve some crackers packed somewhere. Let me look.”

The moonlight breaking through the clouds every now and then shed intermittent light within the interior. Metres shifted back toward the rear door of the craft and watched as his bedraggled companion tossed clothing and undergarments around.

Muttering under his breath, Sontar kept up a running flow of words. "That box is here. I know it's here. I packed it in one of these clothing bags to cushion it. Where, by the Great Mage, is it?"

Metres could stand it no more. Frustration and fear roiled in his gut, and he had to release his tension. He grabbed the unwary Sontar and hauled him over the back of the front seat, tumbling him into Metres's lap, his hand pressing Sontar's face against his crotch.

"Good. Stay there. Perfect. Perfect, just perfect."

Before Sontar could regain his wits, Metres had unbuttoned the flap to his leggings, releasing his prick.

Metres's voice grated like an angry thrant's. "You know what I want. Do it. Now."

Sontar took a precious moment to glance up at the man holding him down. Metres's eyes were clenched, his head thrown back, his free hand fisted by his side.

Suddenly he realized the power he held over Metres. Yes, Metres was stronger, more dominant, more ... evil. But he was needy. Metres could jack off, but it couldn't compare to Sontar's mouth sucking his rod until he came.

He smiled.

"What are you waiting for? And why are you smiling?" Metres's opened eyes impaled Sontar with his gaze.

"Ask me nicely."

"What?" Metres's voice rose with incredulity.

"I said, ask me nicely."

"Ask you ..." Grabbing Sontar's hair, he pulled him up to eye level. "You little prick, I'll show you nicely."

Using his superior strength, Metres flung the slighter man face-forward against the pile of bags stacked against the seatback. With one swift motion he dragged down Sontar's leggings and loin-covering, revealing his lean ass.

"Here, you puny turd. Take me in a hole that won't talk back!"

Metres plunged his shaft into Sontar's dry anus, causing him to cry out at the sudden invasion. He gripped the leather carrybags, muffling his mouth against them.

Metres's body battered against him as he pumped, his movements short and choppy. He grunted like a wild *borag* as he pounded faster and faster.

Sontar bit down on his lip, drawing blood as he fought against screaming in a mix of pleasure/pain. This was what he wanted, after all -- to cause Metres to lose control, to force him to give him the exquisite sensations he had learned so quickly to crave.

He lost himself to the growing haze of emotion washing over him, and, finally, as Metres's cum spilled out and they climaxed together, Sontar screamed into the night.

"Idiot!" Metres roared, pulling out his shaft.

And backhanded him into oblivion.

“What was that?”

Merkatrosa jumped up as a scream rent the night air and then cut off.

Fel surged sluggishly to his legs and barked, his head darting back and forth as he tried to determine the sound’s direction.

Tran and Rosta emerged from the stand of mangela trees. They trotted over, whinnying and neighing in akosai.

Buttoning his leggings, Pen stepped out of their tent, Rayne behind him. She wore one of his loose shirts reaching just above her knees; her hair was tousled and her eyes frightened. Pen broke the stunned silence.

“Did you hear it, Merkatrosa?”

He nodded, his features filled with concern.

“What was it?” Rayne’s voice quivered.

“A man’s scream, I think.” Merkatrosa sounded thoughtful. “Could it be our nameless trackers? But what could have caused one of them to cry out like that?”

Tran laughed shortly. “Perhaps one of them killed the other.”

Pen ran his hand through his hair and turned back toward the tent. “I doubt we’d be so lucky. I’ll dress and see if I can track them.”

“No!” Rayne grabbed his arm, her eyes wide with concern. “What good will it do to go running off into the night? If they’re fighting, let them kill each other. It may not even be them. Stay here. We’ll check it out tomorrow.”

Merkatrosa nodded. “Although Rayne’s concern for your safety is to be expected, I agree with her. We’re shielded by your protection spell, and it makes no sense to seek out trouble. Let us leave any exploring until the light of day. We need the rest more than anything.”

Rosta snorted. “I’m glad you think you’ll be able to sleep after that scream. I, for one, won’t get a wink.”

Pen wrapped his arms around Rayne, sheltering her from the unknown. “I don’t think I could sleep, either.”

Rayne agreed, her voice muffled against Pen’s chest.

Throwing up his hands, Merkatrosa turned to Tran. “Do you think you could find the Journeying Ground if we left tonight? And are you and Rosta rested enough for the trip?”

Tran stamped his hooves. “How soon can you break camp? We’ll get you there.” He drew back his lips in an akosai grin. “If we have to gallop the entire way.”

Drawing Merkatrosa aside, Pen whispered in his ear. “Rayne and I, we, that is when we ...” He gave up. “We can’t get rid of all the lanbeth we created, and I’ll be damned if I’ll

leave it to be found by the bastards who follow us. We washed off the excess lanbeth at the falls. But what can we do about this? Any suggestions?"

The shakos thought for a moment, then smiled. Bending down to one of his carrybags, he withdrew a large, carved amber bowl.

"I was going to bring it as a gift to the guardian when we reached the Journeying Ground. Now I can offer it filled with lanbeth. Use your mage skill to gather the stuff inside."

Offering his thanks, Pen reentered the tent. From without, Merkatrosa viewed a curling, glowing amber stream coalesce and then disappear. He nodded with satisfaction.

With the campfire offering them light, the three humans made ready. Pen threw the last of the carrybags onto Tran's broad back while Rayne belted Fel in with Merkatrosa.

Pen lifted Rayne onto Tran's broad back and mounted behind her. Without a glance behind, they soared off into the predawn air.

* * * * *

"May all the Demons of the Plains of Torment torture them throughout eternity! They're gone!"

The pink-tinged morning sky revealed the empty campsite far beneath them. After last night's incident, they had refrained from speaking to each other.

When Metres had made his report last night, Narik had seemed satisfied but almost disinterested. Admonishing Metres to continue his vigilance, he broke contact after mere moments, leaving Metres wondering what in the world was going on. He knew he'd get no answers from Narik. He only thanked the Master of Torment that he'd not received a lance of pain for reporting in late.

The alarm of Metres's timepiece had awakened them the following morning. Not waiting to eat, they zoomed straight up and, dipping down as low as they dared, checked out their prey's camp.

Gone.

And in what direction, they had not the slightest idea.

"He'll kill us." Sontar's voice quavered as he thought of the power of Metres's master.

"We'll find them. Narik said to continue in a southwesterly direction. We'll do that. And we'll find them." He caressed the back of Sontar's neck, squeezing just a hair too hard, choking him. "Right, lover? Nod your head, like a good boy." He squeezed again, moving Sontar's head up and down. Releasing him, he settled into the back of the toron-a, lounging like a pleasure master waiting to receive his first virgin of the morning.

"Raise the damn thing up and get moving."

His voice too hoarse, Sontar nodded.

* * * * *

Tran and Rosta swooped and dived, soaring high in the air. They whinnied and nickered in akosai, sharing their joy at reaching the Journeying Ground.

Their riders gripped the pommels of the saddles, clinging for all their worth.

Below them blossomed a lush valley. Succulent wild grasses swayed in the soft breeze. A small, secluded lake shone like a sapphire between two of the peaks. A stand of bertna trees circled the perimeter, offering shade and additional grazing. An expanse of dirt and mud for wallowing in was situated near the crescent of low-riding peaks that completed the circle encompassing the Journeying Ground. A large stable hugged the cliffside.

Six akosai, their coats the dark pewter of age, ambled about. A silver-blue akosa lifted its head as Tran and Rosta banked for a landing and trumpeted a greeting.

As soon as Tran and Rosta touched down, Rayne and the others dismounted.

“Welcome, Tran-oka and Rosta-ka, and your companions. Welcome. Your coming was foretold by the guardian. I am Gadalosta.” The female akosa bowed her head and bent her leg in respect.

Each member of the group bowed, returning Gadalosta’s salute.

From within the stable a Jakosai male of middle age sauntered out. He wore leggings of aged akosai skin, the gray so dark as to appear black. A fringed vest displayed a strongly muscled chest. His deep brown hair, in two braids, reached to his knees. He carried a bucket and currycomb that he set down as he fell to his knees upon seeing Merkatrosa.

“Shakos, you honor us with your presence. I am A’ynos, akosai-tan to the guardian and those who journey here.”

Merkatrosa stepped forward, his trembling hand reaching out. He spoke in a whisper as he addressed the prostrate Jakosai.

“A’ynos, do you not recognize me? I am Merkatrosa.” His voice hitched. “Do you not remember me?”

Slowly, A’ynos raised his head. He gazed at the shakos, his dark eyes turning even darker and flashing fire. “Merkatrosa? Why are you here? Why now?”

He stood abruptly, slapping away Merkatrosa’s outstretched hand, and stalked back into the stable, not waiting for any answers.

Bobbing her head, Gadalosta excused herself and hurried after the distraught Jakosai.

Merkatrosa turned his face away from his comrades and spoke. Even without seeing his face, they could hear the tears in his voice.

“He left twenty years ago. We were ... comrades. But he couldn’t accept my destiny to be the shakos. I thought he had left Tarol for the mainland.” He spoke even softer, and Rayne and Pen had to strain to hear him. “I have dreamt of him every night for twenty years. I never thought to see him again.” A sigh rose from deep within his heart. “I can see he still hasn’t forgiven me.” He turned back to the others. “Please excuse me. I never expected to

find him here. Tran and I forgot that a Jakosai may find his way here and remain to see to the needs of the akosai in their last days. Could he have been here for twenty years?"

Tran whinnied. "He has. Those who accompanied the sojourners returned with tales of a well-favored Jakosai serving as akosai-tan."

A huge, pewter-gray male akosa emerged from the stables. His curly mane gleamed in the sun, and his tail, braided with amber, silver, sapphire, and ruby gems, trailed on the ground. As he approached them, the humans fell to their knees and the akosai bowed their heads.

"Arise. I knew of your coming. But I did not know you would cause pain to my akosai-tan. Refresh yourselves and then join me by the fountain beyond the bertnas, and we'll talk more of this. Until then."

Nodding regally, he entered the stable.

Tran spoke quietly, as though afraid a loud sound would shatter the morning. "There should be a small cabin on the other side of the far left peak. It should suit you three during our stay here. We'll head to the stable and join you by the fountain." He paused. "Merkatrosa, I am saddened about this ... situation. Had I known ..."

The shakos shook his head. "No fault should fall upon you. We needed to stop here, no matter what."

Pen offloaded the carrybags, and, with Fel trailing behind, they headed to the cabin. Constructed of smooth planking and containing two bedrooms, a cooking room, and dining and living area, the dwelling was rustic, but adequate for their needs. A small bathing chamber with bath, toilet, and sink was attached to the larger of the two bedrooms.

"Take this chamber, please," Merkatrosa said. "The smaller room will more than suit me. Take your time freshening up." He sighed. "I feel the need for a walk. I'll meet you later when we speak with the guardian."

He entered the smaller bedroom and tossed his bags on the bed. Shutting the door once more, Merkatrosa left the cabin.

Rayne and Pen looked at each other and mind-merged.

"Never have I seen the shakos so affected." Rayne's thoughts vibrated with unspoken concern.

"The akosai-tan looked like he wished to hit him."

"Or embrace him."

"Do you think they ...?"

"Were lovers? No. A shakos must remain celibate; that's why they learn of their destiny at a young age, to curtail the extent of their sexual interaction." She sighed and spoke aloud. "But they were in love, I think."

Pen nodded. "And still are."

They gazed at each other, their thoughts as one.

"I'm so glad I have you."

Merkatrosa headed to the lake. What he needed was some exertion to free his mind from the past that had arisen to confront him.

He gazed around the hidden area. No akosai swam in the glistening waters. He was alone.

He stripped down to his loincloth, neatly folding his loose leggings and suede shirt behind an outcropping and placing his sandals on top. Taking a running go, he splashed into the cool, clear water.

He dove deep, holding his breath as long as possible until he thought his lungs would burst, then shot to the surface. Flinging his hair out of his eyes, he took a moment to catch his breath as he tread water.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Merkatrosa turned startled eyes toward the deep, baritone voice from his past. "A'ynos."

Standing on the sandy beach near the water's edge, the akosai-tan waited as the shakos sloshed out of the water. As he neared the stoic Jakosai male, Merkatrosa became aware of his own near nudity. He glanced down at the loincloth clinging to his hips and then raised his eyes.

His gaze narrowed, A'ynos's eyes riveted on Merkatrosa's burgeoning erection.

The shakos's breath hissed. By the great Peace-Giver, he felt like an akosai yearling, unable to control his feelings. But then, A'ynos had always held that power over him.

A'ynos waited until Merkatrosa stood directly in front of him before he spoke. "Why?"

Not backing down a step, Merkatrosa responded. "Why? Why what? Why did I turn you down and refuse to be seduced by you? Why didn't I go after you when you left after we fought? Why did you never send word that you still lived? Why ..."

"Enough!" A'ynos clenched his hands, his breathing erratic. His eyes flashed as he spoke.

"I did not seduce you. I left because I couldn't bear to see you dismiss me again as you did that night. I didn't send word for I thought the only way I could survive in this world was to sever all ties with the past." His words faltered. "I feared you wouldn't seek after me. I knew you hated me."

Merkatrosa's harsh laughter burst out. "You fool. I loved you. I didn't go after you for fear I would turn my back on my responsibilities." He took a deep breath. "I am not just the shakos of our village; I am the shakos-ai of the Jakosai people." Placing his hand on A'ynos's tense shoulder, he absentmindedly caressed it. "Kerasoko, I wanted you so badly. I know you

didn't try seduction; you didn't need to." His hand dropped. "I was yours from the day you held me and comforted me when my mother found her peace."

A'ynos took one short step and grasped Merkatrosa's shoulders, drawing his damp body against his own. He crushed his mouth against Merkatrosa's and plunged his tongue between his lips.

Offering no resistance, Merkatrosa's arms crept around A'ynos's waist, feeling his shaft hardening against him.

A'ynos pulled back, meeting Merkatrosa's eyes. "Trosa, will you deny our love again? Now, after the gods have brought us together once more?"

Letting his hands drop to his side, Merkatrosa nodded. "I must."

His face hardening, A'ynos turned on his heel and left.

Clenching his fist, Merkatrosa struck his chest and sank to the ground. He bent his head as he pounded the ground in frustration, the tears falling freely, mingling with the soil.

His hair and clothing still slightly damp, Merkatrosa joined the others at the fountain. Gadalosta and the guardian welcomed him as he looked around.

The guardian answered his unspoken question. "He is not here, Shakos. He asked to be excused, and his presence is not really needed. Time is of the essence. You are being followed. Your comrades informed me of what has occurred thus far on your journey.

"When the mage Tocson rested here, he left several items for us to guard. I asked Gadalosta to take you to them and give them to you." He paused. "In this confrontation to which you travel, you will each need to be mounted. I will join you and become your mount, Merkatrosa."

Gadalosta burst into a rush of akosai, speaking too fast for the shakos to follow. Tran and Rosta chimed in. Finally, the guardian stamped his hooves, and the other akosai fell silent.

"This is my decision. The shakos will need an experienced mount. That is the end of it. Now, Gadalosta, escort our guests to Tocson's gifts."

Still snuffling with disapproval, Gadalosta led the way inside the stable. A curtain shielded a rough-hewn entrance into the cliff.

Pen mind-merged briefly with Rayne. *"Did you notice how often we find ourselves within tunnels and caves?"*

"It's to be expected. Tarol is riddled with openings in the earth." Pen sensed Rayne's smile. *"My mother compared our country to her homeland of Tolos's famed cheese -- pungent and full of holes."*

Pen grinned. *"Now I know where you get your sense of humor!"*

A burning torch cast light within a chamber just big enough to contain the three akosai and the three humans. An altar covered with a pure white cloth, on which lay an offering of fruit, vegetables, and wheat, fronted the wall on the left of the room. An amber-tipped spear wrapped in waxed parchment leaned carelessly against the opposite wall.

"Here. Take it, Shakos," said Gadalosta. "It is the spear of Melakosai. It belongs to the Jakosai people. The parchment swaddling it is a map leading directly to the Cave of the Book. The guardian asked me to inform you that he expects to leave at first light. Be ready."

Merkatrosa picked up the spear as if it were a burning piece of amber. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "The amber bowl of lanbeth. Do you have it with you, Pen?"

"I do. I was going to give it to the guardian, but he told me to wait."

"He truly is wise. Give it to me now. I need its contents."

Pen handed over the bowl, first unsealing it. Merkatrosa set it upon the altar, removing the top. The amber lanbeth glittered, filling the room with an added glow. Taking great care, he unwrapped the spear and gave the map to Rayne.

Hefting the spear, he plunged its amber tip into the lanbeth. The magic dust filled the etched designs in its tip and glowed like the morning sun. "Now, I can participate on an equal footing with you and Rayne." All at once he blanched. "Who will protect the Journeying Ground?"

"I will."

A'ynos stepped through the curtain into the chamber. He carried a spear similar to Merkatrosa's and wore a dagger strapped to his waist. A bow and a quiver of arrows angled across his back. He was armed to the teeth.

Merkatrosa's smile stretched thin as he viewed the Jakosai warrior. "In any other instance I would say you were well-armed, but this evil travels unseen and kills with pellets that strike with a force unknown to Hearthome."

A'ynos shrugged. "I will try my best. I can do nothing more."

Merkatrosa took a step toward him, but stopped. What could he say? What could he do? He longed to stay and fight by A'ynos's side, but he couldn't.

He nodded. "May the Peace-Giver and the Champion give you strength." He turned to Rayne and the others. "There is nothing more for us to do but try to gain some rest before we leave tomorrow." He sighed. "I think I'll stay and offer some prayers for strength and guidance. I'll join you later."

In just a few moments, the chamber emptied, leaving Merkatrosa and A'ynos alone; only their soft breathing filled the room.

Finally, Merkatrosa broke the silence. "A'ynos, I hope you know that if I could, I would remain here with you to protect the Journeying Ground, but the guardian himself commanded me to continue our quest."

A'ynos remained stoic. "It is only what I expected. You must put the needs of the many over your own desires." He paused. "I don't expect to see you again, Trosa. I don't want the last words we say to each other to be filled with bitterness. Earlier, I reacted like a spoiled youth." He moved closer to Merkatrosa. A rueful smile crossed his face. "If I put down my weapons, I will embrace you again. I take back what I said before. I'm glad we saw each other one last time. I don't regret kissing you." He smiled once more. "I shall never regret loving you." He paused. "Long life, kerasoko. May you succeed in your quest." His words faltered. "May you be happy."

Turning on his heel, he left before Merkatrosa could stop him. A shaft of pain tore through Merkatrosa and he knew only one thing -- he would never be happy again.

* * * * *

Pen shut the door to their room and turned to Rayne. Without a word he opened his arms and she rushed into them. Burying her face against his chest, she mind-merged with him.

"Promise me you will never leave me, kierown."

"Never, heart's dearest. I will never willingly leave you." His thoughts took on a teasing tone. *"I expect to bedevil you until you can only dine on mashed torno root."*

Rayne giggled at the vision of a white-haired image of herself smacking her lips while spooning the sweet vegetable into her greedy mouth.

"Ah, success! I made you laugh today."

Pressing her body closer, Rayne snuggled against Pen's chest. Her hands slipped lower and cupped Pen's well-muscled backside.

"You made me laugh, kierown; now make me scream."

Sweeping her up in his arms, Pen used his mage skill to lock the door, pull down the blanket, and place a circle of silence around the chamber.

"As you wish, my princess." He grinned. *"Please feel free to scream as loudly as you like."* His gaze scorched her heart. *"I may just join you myself."*

Laying her on the bed, he settled next to her, snapped his fingers, and their clothes disappeared.

Rayne gave him a light shove. *"Show-off!"*

Stroking an imaginary beard, Pen leered at her, waggling his eyebrows, creating a perfect rendition of the late, unlamented, lecherous King Belar. *"Well, m'dear, that won't be the only thing I'll show off tonight."*

His thoughts tickled hers, and an image materialized of him strutting around the room, his massive erection bobbing in time to each rhythmic step.

Laughter bubbled from Rayne as Pen moved over her.

And then the laughter stopped as the room filled with moans and sighs of pleasure.

Chapter Thirteen

Pen caressed Rayne, luxuriating in the feel of skin upon skin. Their minds linked, sharing the feelings that grew as they tasted, touched, and inhaled the essence of their love.

Now that all the barriers between them were down, their awareness grew with each experience. They needed no guidance to know when and where to touch, kiss, caress. The ecstasy mirrored in each other's heart and eyes guided them.

As though they had all the time in the world, they explored every inch of flesh, rediscovering each other.

Pen rolled onto his back with Rayne in his arms, giving her the freedom he knew she cherished to control their lovemaking. She took him into her warm, wet core, moving slowly at first. Her hips undulated as she rocked back and forth. Her unbound hair swept his legs as she moved, tickling him. His smile grew as her tongue peeped out while she concentrated on getting just the right rhythm.

Soon the pace increased. She threw back her head and grasped her ankles, arching her back. Pen gripped her waist, anchoring her as her movements grew more frenetic.

Her hold broke and she leaned forward, her hands fisted in the coverlet on each side of his shoulders. She brushed her breasts from side to side against his chest, abrading her taut, tender tips.

She whimpered as the tension grew and sweat glistened on their bodies. Pen drew her even closer.

Panting, Rayne shifted her hands, grabbing his shoulders, her fingers digging into him. She clenched her eyes shut. Images swirled through her mind as Pen's thoughts merged with hers.

"A goddess. The goddess Larakosa. By the Great Maker, she inflames me. Yes. Yes. To feel her sheathing me, taking me into her body. Ahh, when she squeezes me. Yes. Yes. Like that. Rayne, ride me like that. That's it. That's it."

His eyes closed as he gave himself up to the tactile sensations filling him.

She followed his lead, tightening her inner muscles, thrusting against him faster, her movements short and choppy as she neared her goal.

She raised her head and opened her eyes, gasping as she viewed the amber lanbeth gathering above them like a cloud of fire.

"Pen, open your eyes. Look at the lanbeth."

Pen gazed in awe at the roiling, pulsating cloud. It cast a coppery sheen on their skin, reflecting in their eyes, making them gleam. "I can't believe the power of our desire," he whispered.

Rayne nodded. "I can never get enough of you, kierown. Never. If tomorrow ..."

"Hush, kiereen. Forget about tomorrow. Here and now is what matters. Here." He thrust up, plunging deeper. "And now!"

He moved against her faster and faster until, as they climaxed together, she screamed, her cries echoing within their room.

The lanbeth fell, coating their bodies and the surfaces in the chamber. The scent of flowers mingled with the musky fragrance of their lovemaking.

"Let me catch my breath, kiereen."

"You're not the only one who needs to rest for a moment, my sweet hunk." Rayne teased him silently. *"But perhaps I can help you ... regain your energy."*

She slid down his body until her face drew level with his quiescent prick. With tender care, she cupped him in her hands, fondling his thickening erection. Wiping off some lanbeth from her body, she spread it around the tip of his shaft. Like a *prella* landing on a delicate flower, she licked the amber specks from his prick. Her eyes closed in appreciation as she tasted the salty, sweet cum beading on the head.

She sighed. *"Like the sweetest mel."*

Pen cupped her head, urging her to take him deeper into her mouth. As his rod thickened, he bucked beneath her. Her hand slid lower to fondle his sacs.

He groaned. *"Enough, kiereen. Slide off me and rest upon your belly. I think your back could use some cleansing!"*

The lanbeth had dusted her back and buttocks, clinging to every crevice. Pen smiled at the sight. He would feast tonight, consuming every particle of the magic stuff that he could find.

Taking the pillows from his side of the bed, he placed them under her tummy, raising her ass up. Caressing her sweet behind, he skimmed his hands down her slim legs, slipped his

tongue in the crease of each knee, and, taking the greatest care, licked the lanbeth hidden there. Inch by inch he moved up her body, nibbling her tender flesh and the glittering dust covering her.

By the time he reached the nape of her neck, he ached with the renewal of his lust for her. *“Grab the headboard and don’t let go.”*

She nodded and instinctively pushed up.

Pen twined his fingers with hers and slowly entered her from the rear. She thrust her rump against him, wriggling a bit.

“Can you move in deeper? I want you deeper.”

“As you wish, my princess.” He shifted once more, stroking up.

A long, low moan escaped her. *“Yesss. That’s it. Just right. Yes. Again.”*

Pen moved his hands, cupping her breasts from below and tweaking the tight nubs. His hand slipped lower, playing with the curls between her thighs, pleasuring her even more.

The lanbeth glimmered again, dancing above them, collecting into a billow of glistening pieces. Wildly now, her passion enhanced by the magic stuff, Rayne bucked and released her hold on the headboard.

Pen fell back on his haunches, still imbedded within her. Gripping her around the waist with his forearm, he kneaded her breasts in turn with his other hand.

Their movements grew erratic, more demanding and wild. Their minds joined in one thought.

“Hurry!”

And the lanbeth fell.

* * * * *

“We’ve lost them again!”

Sontar wailed into the night, fear causing his voice to quaver.

“Your fault, you incompetent fop. If you hadn’t insisted on keeping such a distance, it wouldn’t have happened!”

Metres smacked the back of Sontar’s head. His anger knew no bounds. It was almost time to contact Narik. How could he tell him they had lost their prey yet again?

Now they were well and truly fucked.

They passed over the same range of barren peaks that they’d passed over before. Fear grabbed Metres’s guts as he saw the curved grouping of hills. There was no sign of them.

He took a deep breath and made a decision. He would attempt lying to Narik, try burying their mistake deep within his mind. And report to him as late as he could on the slight chance that they might find their quarry before he was forced to make contact.

"Keep sweeping the horizon as we've done before. And fly lower. Maybe we missed something. I'll report to Narik before dawn. Maybe we'll find them by then."

Sontar heaved a deep sigh. "Metres, I grow weary. We made no stops today. My bowels are crying for release, and my stomach begs for sustenance. Can we not set down for the night? We'll get an early start. It's difficult to see without the toron-a lights." He whined like a toddler deprived of a nightlight. "It's dark out there with no moon. Please, Metres."

Metres leaned forward, his forearm catching Sontar around the neck. He squeezed. "It's not you that Narik impales with a lance of pain. Would you like to know how it feels?"

Grabbing the hank of hair that fell over Sontar's forehead, he pulled with all the strength he'd honed from years of muscle building.

Sontar screamed, letting go of the controls of the toron-a. It bucked crazily in the air, dipping and plummeting toward the ground.

"No, Metres, no, no! Stop! We'll crash. No, no, I'll do whatever you say, just stop, stop! You'll kill us both!"

Blood trickled from skin beneath the small wedge of hair Metres had pulled. He fell back in his seat with a grunt.

"Set the damn thing down, you bitnap. First thing in the morning, we'll set off. Now, get some food going, and then, if you beg me nicely enough, I'll let you empty your bowels."

"Thank you, Metres, thank you. But please, it would be better if I took care of my needs first. I don't have the power to mask the odor that would arise in such close confinement."

Metres started. Had the little bitnap made a joke? Probably not.

He sighed. How he longed for a piece of sweet, female flesh. Sontar's bony ass was digging holes in him. The vision of Mirelle in her Jakosai pleasure-giver costume flitted through his mind. Now there was a female worth fucking. He would bind her until the ropes cut into her flesh and Jareth begged him to let his sweet soulmate go. Jareth would be in chains, too. Yes, he liked that idea.

He'd release Mirelle, but not before he fucked her until she screamed for mercy and Jareth cried with frustration. Then, he'd offer to free her if Jareth submitted to him.

He'd force him to his knees, screw his ass, and then, while Jareth watched, shoot the bitch between the eyes. After all, if it hadn't been for her, he would be ruler today. He sighed again, lost in reverie.

"Metres? Metres? We've landed. May I go now?"

"Go, you puny turd, and make it fast."

Metres watched Sontar scurry behind a small hillock. He could hear his grunts as nature took its course.

He sighed. Now was as good a time as any to touch base with Narik. In his mind's eye he built a wall around their failure to locate Rayne and the others. Hopefully, it would hold.

Narik responded immediately to his thoughts. "It's late. Why haven't you reported earlier?"

"We only made camp now. There is nothing new to tell you."

"Odd. They should be at the Journeying Ground by now. Unless they changed direction. Did they?"

Metres responded without thinking. "I don't know."

The pain Narik sent was instantaneous and intense.

"What do you mean you don't know? Did you lose them again?"

"Yes, damn it! We're camped by a crescent-shaped group of peaks. I have no idea where they are camped."

"You fool, they're right there! There must be some sort of a shield surrounding the Journeying Ground, but the one thing all accounts agree with is that a crescent ring of six peaks encircles it.

"You may rest this night. Tomorrow at dawn, fly between the six peaks and land. When you touch down, the shield should yield. Do not lose control! Use the gun to make them take you to the Cave of the Book. They have no magic to protect themselves against its power." He paused. "You may need to demonstrate its killing capabilities. Just make sure you kill no one essential to the success of our goal.

"This is your last chance, Metres. Your luck held once more. It may not hold again."

As a puff of wind blows out a candle, Narik's contact was gone.

Sweat beaded on his brow as Metres settled back more comfortably in the back of the toron-a. Tomorrow would begin the last leg of his quest. Success and power awaited him. He could almost smell it.

No. That stench was Sontar's bowels.

Glory had a sweeter aroma.

* * * * *

"It's still dark!"

"I know, kiereen, but someone knocked on the door. It must be an emergency. Physical contact was the only way to break the silence spell I set. We must open the door."

Rayne sighed. Last night had been the most glorious night of her life. She and Pen had merged together in every way imaginable -- body and soul. They had consumed every speck of lanbeth on each other's skin. Then Pen had gathered the remaining dust into one of the crystal bowls decorating the chamber, and they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Now, harsh reality had literally come knocking. She drew the blanket up to her neck and nodded for Pen to answer the brusque summons.

Merkatrosa stood at the doorway, his hand upraised as though to knock again. "I'm glad to find you awake. The guardian has had a vision. He wants us to leave now, while it's still dark. Gather your bags and weapons and meet me at the stable."

He turned, moving swiftly from the cabin, toting his carrybags.

Pen looked back at Rayne and sighed. "You heard, heart's love. Sounds like we'll have to move quickly."

"It shouldn't take long. It's not as though we unpacked anything save a change of clothing."

Within minutes, they were ready. As they shut the cabin door behind them, Rayne wondered if they would ever return.

"We will, kiereen. I swear to you."

Using a light-catcher, Pen led them to the stable. The others were already there, as were Gadalosta and A'ynos.

Gadalosta was still arguing. "Please, I beg you to remain and allow me to take your place. We need you here. Who will lead the sojourners in the leave-taking ceremony? Who will sing to them as their life force fades?"

"You can, Gadalosta-ka. You have been trained to do so. Merkatrosa will need me when they reach the cave. He'll have need of my strength, which still outstrips yours, youngling."

"Youngling! I am twenty years old! You know my coat has not changed color since my tenth year!"

The Guardian whickered with laughter. "I am teasing, Gadalosta-ka. You also need to gain a sense of humor! I am nearing eighty years; almost everyone is younger than me. And I tell you, I had a vision. Nay, I received several visions over the course of the past few weeks. I know my place in them, and I know your part." His nostrils flared. "Now, you cause us delay. Guard the Journeying Ground and those who sojourn here." He paused. "But know when the cost is too high."

Gadalosta cantered off with a nod of farewell, her gait still stiff and unyielding.

The guardian sighed. "She is still young. I fear she will be challenged before she has attained true wisdom, but there is nothing to be done about it."

"Shakos, may I speak privately with you?"

A'ynos's question startled Merkatrosa. A'ynos's mere presence now shook Merkatrosa more than he cared to admit, but he couldn't see how he could deny him this final interaction.

He turned to the guardian for permission. "Do we have the time?"

“Be brief.”

The two Jakosai removed themselves to the fountain. For a moment silence reigned, then A’ynos spoke.

“I wish to declare myself your sworn mate before those gathered here.” He took a deep, cleansing breath. “If we never see each other again, at least I will know that I had the guts to reveal my feelings for you.” His gaze fell to the ground. “You need not reciprocate.”

Merkatrosa raised A’ynos’s face and gazed into his eyes. “I will be your sworn mate. I will no longer be a coward and deny my feelings for you.” He sighed. “Although we may never meet again.”

A’ynos nodded. “Good. Let’s go back and let the others know.”

Merkatrosa spoke without preamble when they rejoined the others. “A’ynos and I have declared each other as sworn mates. We ask you to recognize this bond.”

“I knew it!” Rayne crowed.

“As did I.” Pen nodded smugly.

The guardian whinnied his approval. “And I am pleased that the akosai-tan has acknowledged his love for you, Merkatrosa. I will honor this bond.”

Tran and Rosta stamped their hooves and then rose a few feet above the fountain, dipping and swirling. They settled to the ground, tossing their heads, their tails swishing.

“Rosta is truly wise in these matters. She sensed the shakos’s incompleteness but made no mention of it for fear of hurting him. Now, he is complete.”

For the first time since their meeting A’ynos, he smiled, though somewhat wistfully. “Not quite complete!”

Merkatrosa clasped A’ynos’s hand and brought it to his lips. “More complete than I could have hoped.”

The guardian stomped his hooves. “Mount up! And let’s be on our way.”

With the stars still filling the sky, the akosai and their riders set off for the last part of their quest.

* * * * *

“It’s late. Damn, my timepiece didn’t awaken us; it’s closer to midday than dawn. Quick, Sontar, replace the invisibility spell on the toron-a and let’s take flight.”

Muttering under his breath, the beleaguered prince concentrated his meager powers and concealed the craft.

No meal today, it seemed. And his head still reeled with the pain Metres had inflicted on it the other night.

The crescent formation appeared before them and, following Narik’s instructions, they set down at the foot of one of the peaks.

The men gaped with astonishment. Before them lay a scene that few humans had ever seen -- the Journeying Ground where the akosai went to spend their final days.

A grove of bertna trees, a field of grain, a fountain of clear, gushing water, a large stable, and a small cabin had lain hidden by some powerful spell.

Narik had been correct. Once they'd set down, the shield was gone.

But where was their quarry?

A silvery blue akosa female trotted from within the stable. Her mane was braided with rainbow-colored beads. She held her head high, her nostrils flared.

She approached them and nodded her head, then spoke in rapid akosai.

Sontar turned to Metres, a look of bewilderment crossing his face.

"Do you understand what the creature is saying?"

Metres frowned. "I haven't the slightest idea. I thought akosai all spoke the human tongue. By the Great Tormentor, now what do we do?"

The akosa stamped her hooves and whinnied loudly.

Metres eyed her carefully, noting the way she seemed to follow their conversation. Could she perhaps understand more than she let on? He'd test her.

He sighed. "If we can't find Rayne and Pentar, we'll just have to burn down the stable. But first we'll kill the akosai quartered there." He shrugged. "What should it matter? They're here to die any way. Sontar, go into the stable and bring out one of the akosai you find there."

Sontar nodded. He could handle old and feeble akosai. He set off at an unhurried pace.

Gadalosta shifted back and forth. She had hoped the hairless ones would leave if they thought that they couldn't get any information from her. She'd been wrong. Would he actually follow through with his threat?

A crash shattered the uneasy silence between Metres and Gadalosta. The sound of hooves pounding against a stall emerged from the stable. Suddenly a scream rent the air. A human scream. Hoarse and filled with fear, it seemed to go on and on. Then it stopped abruptly.

"You better pray that my companion is alive."

Moving at a run, Metres entered the stable. Within minutes, he staggered out, puking up his guts.

"By the Great Mage, I've never seen anything like it! Smashed to a bloody pulp. Nothing left of his face! Nothing!" He wiped his mouth and strode up to the akosa. Reaching into the pouch hanging around his waist, he withdrew a small object. "Do you understand me, you puny creature? This weapon I hold in my hand can kill you. If you understand what I'm saying, you'd better tell me where Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne are hiding. Now."

Gadalosta whinnied and spoke in lightly accented Narwithian. "They are not here."

Metres sneered. "So, you do speak a human language. You know where they went." It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't know."

Metres uttered a sigh of exasperation. "Don't make me force you to tell me."

Gadalosta snorted. "There is nothing you can do to make me tell you what I don't know."

Metres narrowed his eyes as he gazed at her. "I had thought to kill one akosa every time you lied to me. But it will be easier to lock them in the stable and set fire to it."

"No!"

It seemed to happen in slow motion.

Gadalosta reared back on her hind legs, her front legs flailing, prepared to strike Metres with her hooves.

Metres raised his weapon, aiming it as A'ynos leaped out from behind the fountain in front of Gadalosta.

The bullet struck, and A'ynos slammed to the ground, unmoving and bleeding profusely.

Gadalosta brought her forelegs down, her eyes filled with fear. "You've killed him!"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. And we're not going to find out. In fact, I'll shoot him again and burn down the stable if you don't take me to the Cave of the Book."

Gadalosta trembled. She knew now that this madman meant what he said. She had to take him. Perhaps Pen and the others could overwhelm this one. At least she'd get him away from the Journeying Ground and A'ynos. A'ynos. She heard him groan, and she made her decision.

"I'll take you, but promise me you won't hurt A'ynos again or harm the sojourners."

Metres thought for a moment. It would take too long to set the fire and burn the stables, and the Jakosai male was probably dying anyway.

"Take me now. And don't try anything. I can use this weapon to hurt you badly."

Gadalosta nodded. If she took the most indirect route and flew as slowly as possible, she could give the others more time to get the Book. It was the best idea she could come up with.

She could only hope it would work.

"Good. I knew you'd see it my way. Is there riding tack in the stable?"

"Near the front door."

He smiled. "Good to hear you cooperating. Very wise decision."

Metres saddled Gadalosta with the ease of long experience. He had ridden the near cousin of the akosai, the *toko*, since he was a stripling. Soon he was mounted.

“Do you not wish to bury your companion or speak some words over him?”

Metres laughed. “Of what use are words for a dead man? As for burying him, he can wait until I return with the Book. Now, no more delays.”

With a final look of sadness and regret, Gadalosta ascended into the morning sky, carrying the evil prince upon her back.

A’ynos groaned in agony. He felt as though his left side was on fire. Blood flowed freely, muddying the ground beneath him. He must have been struck by the same weapon that had injured Fel, but he knew his wound was more grievous.

He heard the frantic whinnying of the sojourners locked in the stable and knew he had to let out the akosai.

Crawling to the fountain, he drew himself up to its rim and scooped up some of the clear, cool water. In his cabin, he had some medicinal herbs he could use to make a poultice - if he could reach his cabin. Right now, he doubted it.

But first, the akosai. His spear lay on the ground behind the fountain. If only he had just thrown it when those men had first arrived. But he had wanted to hear how much they knew and what they wanted. Now he knew, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Dropping his leggings, he untied his loincloth and wadded it, pressing it against the wound. Using the spear, he inched his way toward the stable.

He unlocked the door and unleashed a cacophony of neighs, whinnies, and whickers. A mixture of akosai and Jakosai words battered against his ears.

Finally, the oldest of the sojourners stamped his hooves, silencing the others.

“The body of the hairless one is in Torska’s stall.” He pulled back his lips and tossed his head. “He thought she was the most feeble. She proved him wrong.”

A’ynos lit the torches along the walls, revealing his wounded condition to the akosai.

“You’re injured, akosai-tan!”

A’ynos nodded. “I need someone to help me to my cabin. I’ve some medicine there.”

“Before you go, akosai-tan, take some lanbeth from the bowl in the chamber. It will help heal you.”

Leaning now on the elderly sojourner, he scooped up some of the glowing stuff from the bowl and packed it in his wound. Taking two of the streamers that decorated the altar, he wadded one, pressing it against the wound, and wrapped the other around his chest, binding the pad in place. Miraculously, the burning faded, leaving a pleasant warmth in its stead.

Supported by the akosa, A’ynos moved down the aisle. Turning his head, he saw what was left of the intruder and shuddered. The corpse bore little resemblance to a human body.

It seemed they had all underestimated the courage and strength of the sojourners.

Now all he could do was try to survive until Merkatrosa and the others returned.

And pray that the madman who had wounded him would fail in his attempt to steal the *Book of Tocson*.

Chapter Fourteen

The trio of riders sped through the breaking dawn. As the sun rose, their hopes did also.

Could the Book lie within their grasp? Rayne and Pen prayed that it was true. The end of their quest beckoned, but their own journey had just begun.

Would it end too soon?

The guardian led them straight as the spear of Melakosai to the Cave of the Book. As they flew over the unremitting harshness of the farthest reaches of the Hinterlands, Rayne and Pen remained mind-merged, unwilling to break the intimate tie.

Rayne's thoughts embraced Pen's. *"You've become closer to me than anyone else in my life."*

"Even Fel?"

Rayne's smile brightened her face and lightened Pen's heart. *"Even Fel."*

"You smiled, kerasoka. I pray that before the day's end, you'll laugh."

Rayne sobered. *"I pray that we'll see the day's end."*

"I vow that we will!" The intensity of Pen's response throbbed through her, revitalizing her spirits.

As the sun reached midday, the guardian's pace slowed. Soon, a high mountain range filled the horizon.

"It's the Demon's Hump!" Rayne exclaimed. "I know where we are. We've crossed the entire continent of Tarol. We've reached the edge of the world!"

Tran whinnied in agreement, managing to find a trace of humor in her words. "I doubt it's the edge of the world, Princess. We haven't fallen off yet."

Rosta whickered with laughter, then turned to the guardian. "I never knew that the mountain chain concealed the cave."

Trumpeting raucously, the guardian threw back his head. "Of course not. It was a secret."

Turning to each other across the distance between their akosai steeds, Rayne and Pen shrugged. Who could understand akosai humor?

The guardian drew their attention once more. "Follow me. The entrance is difficult to find."

He dipped downward as he spoke, aiming for the narrow notch in the middle of the mountain peaks. He banked even lower as he touched down for a landing, Tran and Rosta settling next to him.

Pen and Rayne dismounted, gathering around the guardian and Merkatrosa.

"I know I am too large to easily traverse the tunnel." The guardian turned to Tran and Rosta. "I fear you two may also find it difficult to go the final distance. I hope I'm wrong. I will remain here with the valiant Fel and the vigilant Merkatrosa. Your unknown assailants may still be around."

His wise brown eyes softened with regret. "I wish I could join you in your fight with the demon who guards the Book, but it was not foretold so. The demon can be killed. He is not invincible, if you can find his vulnerable spot."

Rayne exploded with fear and anger. "Demon? There's a demon with the Book?"

Pen tried in vain to calm her. "Rayne, you know that legend tells of a demon sentry." He grinned, trying to lighten her spirits. "How else will I become a hero if I don't fight a demon?"

"I want a live soulmate, not a dead hero!"

Smacking his heart with his hand, Pen pretended to be affronted. "You wound me, my princess. How could I not succeed in my quest?"

The three akosai stamped their hooves and neighed, shaking their heads and flicking their tails, appreciating Pen's feeble attempts at humor.

Merkatrosa threw up his hands and shook his head. "I know you mean to allay Rayne's fears, but Pen, I must warn you: do not let your guard down when you confront the demon. He'll kill you without mercy."

Rayne moved over to Pen and buried her face against his chest. She mind-merged, unwilling to share her most intimate feelings in public.

"Kierown, if it comes to a choice between saving me or saving the Book, you know what you must do. I won't fault you for your decision. I'll honor whatever you do with my last breath ..." Her thoughts died away as though she had raised the barrier between them once more.

"I promise you, kiereen, it will not come to that. And remember Merkatrosa's reading of the burning stones. He foresaw that we would be triumphant."

"Aye, but at what cost?"

As though her thoughts were a signal, Merkatrosa staggered and fell to his knees. Moaning, he clutched his side.

"A'ynos. He's been hurt, badly. By the Great Maker, he's dying!"

Rayne dropped to the shakos's side, laying her hand on his shoulder. She spoke softly, as though talking to a frightened child. "Are you sure, Merkatrosa?"

He raised his head, tears streaming down his face like rivulets of rain. "I felt it. He was struck down like Fel by some unknown weapon. He's fallen." He paused and took in a shuddering breath. "His life force is ebbing." He gave a cry of anguish. "I must go to him."

The guardian stamped his hooves and shook his great head. "You can not, Shakos-ai. Your place is here. Besides, how would you get back? I will not take you, nor will Tran or Rosta. A'ynos's fate is in the hands of the Great Maker. Your fate is to serve the greater cause of your people."

Merkatrosa rose as though his limbs were brittle as glass. He leaned on his spear, using it like a crutch. "I am tired of serving the greater good. I am selfish and weak. I don't deserve the mantle of Shakos-ai. Should I survive this battle, I will remain at the Journeying Ground and serve as akosai-tan to the sojourners."

The guardian bowed his head.

"You wrong yourself, Merkatrosa. You've served your people well, but it is your decision. Should you live, you may become akosai-tan. Do you all witness this?"

One by one the others nodded.

"Now, it grows late. Dear friends, your joined energy and love for your mates will give you the strength to overcome the last remaining obstacles in your path. But don't hesitate or doubt that bond, or you will fail." He paused. "Follow the tunnel path as it winds downward. Choose the right-hand opening if offered a choice. May the Great Maker grant you success."

Merkatrosa took a deep breath and raised his hands, palms up, to the sky.

"May the Champion and the Peace-Giver be with you and guide you in your quest."

Rayne and Pen bowed their heads, as did Tran and Rosta.

Rayne stepped over to Fel, bending down to hug him. Opening her mind, she sought to join with his thoughts.

"Protect Merkatrosa and the guardian. Should the need arise, seek my thoughts."

Nodding, Fel licked Rayne's eyelids, something he hadn't done since he was a little pup.

The guardian whinnied, urging them on their way. "There are false starts at the beginning, tunnels that end abruptly or narrow down to a hole only big enough for a *tergat*. Choose the right-hand tunnel for your first one, and the right ones again after that.

"As you enter, you will find torches of resinous amber. Use them. Pen, don't waste your concentration on creating a light-catcher."

He sighed. "I know so little of what you'll find when you reach the Book. Take advantage of all your powers. Never doubt your soulmate. Never doubt yourself." He turned and looked at the dying day. "Hurry."

And Rayne and Pen with Tran and Rosta entered the narrow entrance into the Demon's Hump.

* * * * *

"Where are they, akosa? Have you led me astray? It's almost nightfall, and still we fly."

Metres pulled sharply on the reins fastened to the proud akosa female. He clamped his knees more tightly around her body, squeezing her sides. She bucked a bit but couldn't throw him. He clung like a blood-sucking leech as though a spell kept him in place. Could that be so?

Metres smiled grimly. He had contacted Narik before he left the Journeying Ground, earning Narik's initial displeasure for interrupting him in whatever nefarious scheme in which he was engaged.

When he learned that Metres had the guardian's apprentice in his power, his mood had changed.

"Excellent! There may be hope for you yet. Perhaps it's as well that Sontar is dead. He was a liability from the first, with limited usefulness. You'll return mounted like a king on the guardian.

"Listen well. I can keep you on the akosa for a short while until the sun sets." Narik's thoughts took on a grim turn. "You'd better have reached your destination by then. If not, you can be thrown. When you meet up with your quarry, use the gun to threaten them to do your bidding and take you to the Book. They will, to save each other. From what I've gleaned from Tocson's writings, a creature may guard the Book. Let them kill it with their Homeworld weapons. Take the Book, and when you are safely out of the mountain, kill all but the guardian."

Metres could feel the triumph in Narik's thoughts.

"The guardian cannot kill you; he is forbidden to harm another living soul. He must bow to your will even after the death of the others.

"For now, after you mount, clench the akosa's sides. You will not be able to dismount until the sun sets." Silent laughter filled Metres's mind. "Make sure you've landed, for you'll slide right off! Remember, this is your last chance."

With his words ringing in Metres's brain, Narik severed their tie.

Metres had mounted the female akosa and gripped her body. He couldn't loosen his legs; he could only clasp her tighter. He sighed. When they landed, he would indeed slide off. He doubted his stiffened legs would hold him upright.

The sun drew closer to the horizon. Twilight colored the landscape an unworldly, freezing blue. It grew harder to discern where they were, but the akosa flew as though guided by some homing instinct.

"There! I think that is the mountain range we seek."

Metres peered into the distance. A massive, misshapen land mass rose before them. He could discern nothing. No campfire, only deepening shadows. He had no choice. They would have to land.

"I see nothing; if you're deceiving me ..."

"No. 'Tis the Demon's Hump. The Book lies deep within it."

Metres clung to the saddle as the akosa flew lower and lower. His thoughts scurried around in his brain like frightened coneys. He needed a change of plan. His quarry must have entered the mountain by now. He would creep up unseen behind them and ...

The akosa bucked wildly. A loud whinny split the night air. A howl of anger tore from something's throat. A scream of rage rang out.

Metres clung for his life as the akosa set down; then he slid to the ground in a heap as a large furry form leaped upon him.

It gripped his arm, as it had gripped it days before. This time it wouldn't let go, but sunk its teeth even deeper. He felt his bones crack under the pressure of its teeth. He tried reaching for his gun with his free hand, but its pouch had slipped beneath him during the landing.

The canid's massive paw, claws extended, raked his face, gouging his eye and ripping a strip of flesh from his cheek. He screamed in agony and emptied his bowels as the shock coursed through him.

"Enough! Fel, you're killing him. Release him."

With great reluctance, the canid loosened his grip.

Metres recognized the voice of a Jakosai male. The shakos. Where were the others?

Rising to his knees, Metres panted like a cornered animal. The stench of blood and feces overwhelmed the fresh air. The bright flare of a torch lit the taut features of those who surrounded him. He could see his fate in their eyes.

He was doomed.

The guardian couldn't kill him, but the Jakosai would.

He reached behind his back, fumbling for the gun, and released the safety catch. His gaze skittered back and forth, trying to conceal his intent.

He had to act now.

As though wading through a thick slick of pitch oil, he drew his weapon. Torchlight glinted off the barrel, and the akosa screamed out a warning.

He ignored the excruciating pain as the canid jumped on his back, crushing his neck. He merely adjusted his aim higher to strike the Jakosai between the eyes.

Suddenly a massive obstacle leaped between him and his target as he squeezed the trigger.

The guardian.

A blossom of red appeared on its chest, and it collapsed before him.

Even as Metres felt his spine sever, a searing pain tore through his gut. He looked down. A spear pierced him, pinning him to the ground like a bug.

The weight of the canid pushed him forward onto the spear, but it didn't break, supporting him like some discarded rag doll.

His fingers grew slack as his life force ebbed, letting the gun slip to the ground.

"Metres?"

"Narik? I've failed. I'm dying. I beg you, can you help me?"

The force of Narik's rage surged through Metres's mind. "Help you? Of course I can help you. Die!"

A blast of sheer power shot through Metres's heart, bursting it. His dying scream shattered the ears of those who heard his cry.

Hidden away in his refuge, Narik collapsed against his chair, weakened by the expenditure of power he'd used to snuff out Metres's life.

He ground his teeth in impotent rage. And consigned Metres's memory to oblivion.

"Off! Off, Fel! He's well and truly dead now."

Merkatrosa's voice finally penetrated the naked rage that surged through Fel. Releasing his grip, Fel sat back on his haunches, panting.

"Merkatrosa, help me!"

Gadalosta's call drew Merkatrosa's attention to the great akosa that lay on his side. Blood flowed from the gaping wound in his chest; his breath came in short, shallow pants.

Running to his side, the shakos grabbed his medicinal pouch, rummaging through it for something that would ease the pain of the guardian.

"Don't waste your time, Merkatrosa. It's too late for that."

"No!" Gadalosta bent her head and brushed her muzzle across the guardian's, nudging him. "I told you not to go, Asoka-ai. Why didn't you listen to me?"

"Because this was my fate." He took a ragged breath and let it out. "And don't call me the guardian any longer. You are Asoka-ai now." His breathing grew ever more shallow. "This must have been the man who trailed you, Merkatrosa."

"It was." Gadalosta replied. "His companion is dead, trampled by the sojourners."

"And A'ynos? Is he all right? I thought I ..." Merkatrosa's voice faded as he saw a look of extreme sorrow cross Gadalosta's face.

"I don't know. I saw him fall. He shielded me from the man's weapon as the guardian did you." She paused. "He was alive when we left. I bargained for his life and those of the others."

The guardian spoke once more, his voice a mere whisper. "There is no longer any reason for you to guard the entrance to the Demon's Hump. Go now and join the others in their fight." He gasped. "Hurry!"

Gadalosta threw back her head and trumpeted, the sound echoing in the evening air. "I should be here when he makes final passage. I should ease his Journey."

Merkatrosa shook his head. "If you would ease his Journey, you'll do what he asked and fight for the Book." He turned to Fel. "Join with Rayne and tell her what happened. Tell her ... we're coming."

Merkatrosa mounted Gadalosta, and with Fel leading, they entered the mountain.

"Are we there yet?"

"You sound like a petulant child, my princess."

Pen's words teased a reluctant croaking laugh from Rayne's parched throat.

They had trekked for days, it seemed.

At first, the tunnels had been high and they could actually ride on the akosai, bent over and clinging to their manes. Whenever the ceiling grew higher, it branched off into multiple openings, some appearing larger and more inviting than the choice already laid out for them.

Each time they looked back, they saw that the opening from which they emerged had been one of three or more -- not the right-hand one at all. At the first opening, Rayne had cut her initials and Pen's at the right side of the correct opening, smiling with satisfaction. "There! Now we'll know which path to take when we return." Since then she'd marked each appropriate one the same way.

The snaking path led deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth, and as it banked steeply, it grew lower and narrower until the akosai's wings were folded tightly to their sides and their muzzles bent close to the ground. With Pen at the head and Tran bringing up the rear, they wended their way down the spiraling road.

Soon, the stench in the air increased, as did the heat. Sweat poured from their bodies. Rayne braided her hair in two and pinned it atop her head. Pen drew back his hair with a leather cord torn from her Jakosai vest.

Eventually, he stripped down to his loincloth and his sandals, carrying his sword unsheathed, ready to strike if necessary.

Her tie given up to Pen, Rayne wore her vest open, her only other garments a Jakosai skirt and her sandals.

She carried her bow and quiver of arrows across her back, her sheathed dagger hanging from a sash around her waist, her armband clasped around her left wrist.

The flickering light from the torches cast dancing shadows along their way. The grotesque formations of black basalt rock gleamed in cracked display.

Suddenly, when they felt they couldn't crouch any further down, and the backs of the akosai were scraped from the low ceiling, they saw a glimmering light ahead.

As the light grew brighter, the stench and heat grew stronger until they nearly vomited.

"Rayne, have you any scent in your bags?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Tear strips from one of your blouses and pour some scent on it. Perhaps it may alleviate some of this vile odor."

Glad to be doing anything that could ease their present condition, she shoved the torch into the ground, wedging it upright, and crept around to Rosta's side, holding onto her to reach into her carrybag. Delving blindly, she felt the small vial of lanbeth-laced scent she had packed and not yet used.

Gripping the vial and one of her tops, she sank to her haunches. The torchlight provided her with just enough light to see as she used her dagger to cut the cloth into strips and seeped some of the scent onto four pieces.

Crawling beneath the akosai's bellies and between their legs, she inched her way back to Tran. He whickered softly as she carefully tied the perfumed cloth around his muzzle, shielding his nostrils.

"That helped, Rayne. Now, go, take care of Rosta."

Soon Rosta also wore a mask.

When she reached Pen, he first cupped her face and kissed her, tenderly cradling her scraped and bleeding fingers.

"My brave Champion."

She smiled and shook her head. *"No. Your scared soulmate."*

His thumb brushed away a rivulet of sweat as it trickled down her cheek. *"We will prevail, Rayne. I know it."*

As soon as the makeshift masks were in place, they found they could breathe easier. The lanbeth in the scent filtered out the most noxious fumes, and they felt rejuvenated.

"Rayne?"

"Fel! Pen, did you sense him? Fel made contact with me."

"Only faintly. Can you increase the tie with him?"

"I'll try." Rayne focused, and opened her mind to Fel's call. *"Fel, what happened?"*

"We were attacked. The guardian is dead. The hairless one who hurt me is dead." She felt the canid's savage feeling of satisfaction. *"His partner is dead, too, killed by the sojourners. Gadalosta was forced to bring him here."* A feeling of sadness washed over Fel's thoughts. *"A'ynos may be dead, too. The guardian commanded us to leave him. We're coming to join you."*

"I'll tell the others. Be wary of the stench and heat in the tunnels. If Merkatrosa has any scent or fragrant water, tell him to douse some cloths in it and wear them as masks." Her mood lightened. *"I'll be happy to have you with me again, my friend. We'll wait for you. Hurry."*

Rayne and Pen hunkered down, too hot and sweaty to touch each other. The light cast by the torch fluctuated, but the stench remained constant. Only taking quick shallow breaths prevented them from passing out.

Soon the clatter of hooves heralded the arrival of the rest of their band. Sweat dripped from the newcomers' bodies mixed and made tracks in the dust covering their skin. Makeshift masks concealed their features.

Sidling past Tran and Rosta, Merkatrosa edged up to Rayne and Pen.

"So," he said, bitterness etched in his voice, "we've lost two of our heroes." His voice cracked. "I cannot believe that A'ynos is dead. Why should he have paid for my weaknesses?"

"Fel told me that A'ynos may still be alive." Rayne touched Merkatrosa's shoulder. "Don't despair yet."

Merkatrosa laughed harshly. "As shakos, I should be above caring for the loss of a single individual -- a shakos should only be concerned for the greater good." He sighed. "I was right to promise the guardian that I would become akosai-tan should I survive. I am not fit to be the shakos-ai of the Jakosai people."

Pen shook his head. "Enough. Let's concentrate on that word you mentioned -- survive. Come, we need to move on. Here, take some liquid from the water bags. I filled up when we were at the Journeying Ground, but we've little left."

Taking a final swig from the dwindling supply, and with Merkatrosa now bringing up the rear, they continued on, one by one.

As they trudged wearily along the winding tunnels, Rayne suddenly felt curious.

"Fel, can you picture the man who attacked you now that you've seen his face?"

His thoughts answered her at once. *"I shall see his evil face forever and remember his death. Here is what the hairless one looked like."*

A picture filled Rayne's mind of a filthy, bloody man kneeling in the dirt, a spear piercing his body. His short, ragged blond hair reached just below his ears; his unseeing eyes were muddy brown. Well-dressed in expensive leggings and soft-skinned jacket, he wore ankle-high boots.

Rayne recognized him.

"Metres!"

"What? Why do you mention Metres, kiereen?"

"Because that's who killed the guardian. Somehow Metres escaped. He was one of those trailing us!"

"And he had a weapon never before seen on Hearthome." Pen paused. "Merkatrosa, what happened to the weapon Metres used?"

"We left it lying in the dirt. I would not touch it for fear its evil would transfer itself to me."

Pen nodded. "I have no fear of it. It's simply a weapon, nothing more. Should we succeed with retrieving the Book, I'll take it back to Narwith for Loran to examine. If anyone can figure out how it works, he can."

"Perhaps the guilds can make more of them should the need arise," Rayne said.

Merkatrosa raised his palms. "I pray to the Great Maker that that should never happen."

No more words were spoken as they inched along the way.

The path angled more steeply until suddenly their feet shot out from under them and they slid ever faster toward a bright light. Clinging tightly to their weapons, and unable to prevent it, the inclined road took them where it would.

Even into the maw of the unknown.

Chapter Fifteen

“By the Great Mage, what a ride!”

Pen caught his breath as the group of akosai, humans, and canid lay in a tangled heap in the middle of a large chamber pockmarked with several tunnels leading who knew where. He’d lost his mask but still gripped his sword.

And somehow, he and Merkatrosa had managed to cling to their torches. Now their flickering flames shed a feeble light in the room.

“Is everyone all right?” Rayne called out. “No broken bones or wings?”

Her body felt as though it had been pummeled by an overenthusiastic housemaid beating a carpet. One of her braids had fallen, and her bow and arrows were gone. Damn! One less weapon!

“Just some scrapes and bruises, I think.”

Tran’s muffled voice cut through her frustration. He still wore his scented mask. Moving over to him, Rayne untied it, using the cloth to wipe away some of the dirt and blood that the akosa now bore. Merkatrosa and Pen took care of the females.

Pen resheathed his sword and wedged his torch between some rocks, as did Merkatrosa.

Before taking stock of their present situation, they doled out the last of the water bags, each human sharing one with an akosa.

Rayne voiced their first concern. “Which tunnel should we choose?”

Pen shrugged and gazed at the openings circling the chamber. “Why change now? Let’s take the right-hand one.”

Picking up his torch and moving close to the tunnel, Merkatrosa angled it, shedding light that the pitch-dark opening tried to swallow up. “This must be the right one.”

“How do you know?” Pen asked.

“Come here and see for yourself.”

Drawing nearer with his torch, Pen added to the light and gasped.

The tunnel was lined with amber blobs. But what made his heart stop were the scattered bones that littered the floor.

Some appeared not human.

Scraps of clothing clung to a few of the human remains, but no weapons of any kind.

The remnants of the creatures were taller and heavier-looking. Lying near each was a shiny carapace like that of a *kyrscha* bug, but bigger.

Much, much bigger.

“What is it?” Tran’s voice, coming from right behind him, startled Pen.

The others had drawn closer without him even realizing it. They all gaped at the carnage before them.

“Look,” Rayne whispered. “That human skeleton, it’s holding a chunk of amber in its hand.”

Pen gave Rayne his torch, bent, and carefully extricated the piece of “burning stone” from the skeletal fingers. Even so, they crumbled at the touch.

Holding the flaming torch close to it, Rayne examined it minutely. “It’s not just a chunk. It’s been carved. There are different symbols incised all around it.”

Taking it back from her, Pen turned it over gingerly. “It’s been polished and faceted. Here.” He offered it to Merkatrosa. “What do you make of it?”

The shakos ran his fingers over the surface and held it up to the light. Entrapped within the translucent piece was a perfect, tiny leaf like that of the mangela tree. It was as though a drop of amber-colored dew had settled on it, surrounding it.

“Where’s your weapon, Pen?”

“Right here.” Unsheathing it, Pen presented it to Merkatrosa.

Holding it with great care, the shakos pressed the amber piece into the mounting on the handle.

It fit as though it once had graced the weapon.

“Take it now, Pen. Tell me if it feels any different.”

Pen reclaimed it and once more felt that surge of energy he’d encountered earlier, but this time it was even stronger.

And for a brief moment, the amber stone glowed.

Merkatrosa spoke slowly. “I know not who that fallen human was, but he gave his life to save that stone. It holds great power.”

Rayne's whispered prayer echoed down the amber tunnel. "May no more lives be lost here today."

Offering a short homage to the fallen warriors, the group bowed their heads and moved single file into the dark.

The tunnel was short. Within a few moments they reached their final destination.

An immense chamber at least four floors high and twice as wide as that, it was a room from the depths of the Well of Tortured Spirits.

Huge, gaping maws in the earth belched forth fire and an odoriferous smoke. The heat consumed every drop of moisture from their skin, burned the soles of their sandals, and seared their lungs.

Amber of all shades and translucency climbed the walls and floors.

And in the midst of it all -- the prize.

The second part of the *Book of Tocson*.

Encased within a huge, smooth, transparent amber bubble.

And guarded by a demon.

The creature stood taller than Pen by a good two heads. A giant carapace, like those in the tunnel, hung on its back. Its outstretched arm ended in a pointed talon. A long, ribbed neck held up a head that looked like that of the kyrscha bug. An extended jointed lower appendage ended in a tri-clawed foot. Its other arm and leg and the major portion of its lower torso and back melded into the rough amber wall behind it.

A narrow bridge as wide as Pen's outstretched arms, composed of rock and the burning stone, led to a shallow ridge where the demon and the Book waited for them.

"Is it real?" Rosta whispered.

Pen shook his head. "It can't be. It must represent those beings whose remains we saw."

"Perhaps it was sculpted to remind anyone who found their way here of the demons from bygone days," Rayne offered.

Merkatrosa gripped his torch even tighter and spoke grimly. "I'm not so sure it's merely a statue."

Gadalosta nickered her opinion. "Would we not be already dead if it were alive?"

Pen took a deep breath of the fetid air. "There's only one way to find out."

Unsheathing his sword, he started across the bridge.

"Pen, no!" Rayne cried out, grabbing his hand. "What are you doing?"

"Getting the Book, of course."

"Wait for me."

“There’s no way you’re coming with me. The bridge is too narrow, and that bug may be alive.”

“Then I must go with you. Please, Pen.”

Pen brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers. “Listen, *kerasoka*, the creature must be dead. I’ll cut its head off and then you’ll see.” He paused and drew her into his embrace. “Listen to me and don’t interrupt. Should something ... happen while I retrieve the Book, I’ll put it in this pouch and throw it to you. Promise me you’ll take it to Mirelle and Jareth. Promise?”

Rayne opened her mouth as though to protest, and Pen brought his lips to hers, plunging his tongue between her lips and delving deep. Her protest became a moan as they forgot for the moment where they were.

Merkatrosa’s discreet cough brought them back to harsh reality.

Pen drew back, clasping Rayne’s wrists. “Stay here.”

Without giving her a chance to recover, he stalked across the span to the demon and the Book.

Fire shot up around him as he put one sandal-shod foot in front of the other. He could still smell the lanbeth-enhanced scent in his nostrils, making it easier to endure the noxious odor belching from the fiery pools.

The translucent amber bubble sat upon a waist-high pillar of opaque amber to the left of the demon. The bubble was as big around as Tran’s rump. The Book itself was smaller than one would think for so powerful a thing, easily fitting in Pen’s palm.

He moved slowly, keeping one eye on the immobile figure. Taking a deep breath, he raised his sword in both hands over his head and brought it down on the amber.

It cleaved through the resinous substance like a knife cuts through butter. The pieces fell to either side of the pillar without shattering. As Pen reached for the Book, several things happened at one time.

The demon turned its head toward him. Rayne screamed and mind-merged with Pen.

“Pen, it’s alive!”

“I know! Here.”

Scooping up the Book, he shoved it in the pouch and, with unerring aim, threw it to Rayne.

The demon followed its trajectory and, as Pen watched in horror, extended the talon of its free arm.

Straight toward Rayne.

“Watch out!”

“Got it!”

She raised her left arm with the bejeweled wristband, deflecting the talon's point. Flinging her free hand up, she grabbed the pouch's handle as it sailed above her. With one smooth motion, she arced it into the air.

"Fel! Catch!"

Using his strong hind leg muscles, Fel catapulted up and snatched the pouch in his mouth.

"Give it to Merkatrosa!"

Thwarted, the demon turned around to Pen. Still melded with the amber at its carapace, it retracted its talon and slashed at his sword.

Parrying, Pen jumped back, teetering at the edge of the narrow ledge.

"Don't move, kierown! The fire's at your feet!"

Pen gazed in horror as the creature's shell started to break away from the wall.

"Look up, Pen"

Soaring high above him, Tran and Rosta swooped and dived, their paths crisscrossing. The demon's attention diverted for a moment, its head turning from side to side trying to follow the pattern of the akosai's flight.

Suddenly, a bilious green stream shot from the creature's maw toward Tran. Instinctively, he raised his wings, shielding his body. The fluid ran down the akosa's feathers, failing to harm it. As the slimy emission splattered on the ground, it ate away at the rock. Suddenly the narrow bridge no longer connected Pen with the others. Fire shot up through the pockmarked surface.

The creature screamed in rage, the sound high-pitched and excruciating to all who heard it.

It raised its talon once more toward Pen who clung to the Book's amber pillar with one hand as he deflected blow after blow.

Sweat poured down his forehead, stinging his eyes. His arm grew weak as the creature continued to pull away a bit more at a time from the wall.

Pen ducked behind the pillar just as another stream of the acidlike fluid shot toward him. Without planning it, he grabbed one of the halves of the amber bubble, holding it before him.

The acid struck the smooth surface, running harmlessly down.

Frustrated, the demon struck out, smashing the amber pillar, shards cutting into Pen's flesh. Only his quick reflexes and the amber bubble saved his face from being shredded. Blood dripped from multiple wounds on his arms and legs.

There was no way out. Pen knew it.

"No, damn it! You will not give up. I won't let you!"

Rayne's powerful cry echoed in his mind.

Taking careful aim, she threw her dagger with all her strength at the demon's talon. It sliced it off at the wrist, a thick, pitch-black stream spurting from the wound.

The talon lay at Pen's feet, twitching and thrashing as though it was still attached to the body.

The demon raised its stumpy appendage and hissed. Another acidic flow erupted from its mouth, aimed at Pen.

A silver blue wing knocked Pen to the ground, shielding him from the deadly ichor.

Rosta shot straight up and out of the way, flying back toward the others.

The creature pulled again, releasing its other arm and swung it around. Pen wasted no time but angled his blade straight down, slicing it off before the talon extended.

The demon screamed again, tipping its head back, exposing its neck.

"Pen! Catch the spear!"

Merkatrosa drew back and released the spear of Melakosai. It embedded in the wall directly behind Pen. Pulling it out with all his strength, he darted in front of the otherworldly evil before him.

Flames shot up behind him. If he slipped, he'd fall into the inferno. He couldn't fail.

As though his hand was guided by another, he flung the spear toward the demon's head.

The howl that emerged from its throat as the point lodged in its brain shook the cavern. Amber pieces fell from the ceiling, raining down upon those below.

Still joined to the amber, it thrashed about, trying in vain to dislodge the spear point.

Pen took one desperate step back, attempting to evade the creature's death throes and the falling amber.

"Mount up!"

Tran hovered above him, offering his wing.

"Can it hold me?"

"Long enough to climb on my back. Do it!"

Pen grabbed hold of Tran's mane, pulling himself up along his wing. Swinging his leg over Tran's back, he bent low to his head.

Dodging and darting over the flames spurting up and the amber showering down, they soared almost to the top of the chamber. Far below, Pen could see Rayne mounting Rosta and Merkatrosa clinging to Gadalosta's back. Fel sprang into Rayne's lap as they cantered back into the tunnel.

"Hurry, kierown! There's rumbling all over!"

"Don't wait for us! Keep moving!"

Tran darted in after the others, his wings scraping the tunnel walls. Pen dug his heels in like a pincher bug clings to the skin. Behind them they could hear huge pieces of rock and amber crash to the ground.

They found the rest of the group in the smaller chamber at the end of the tunnel.

Rayne had used her flint and steel and ignited the clothing remnants found on the skeletons at the mouth of the tunnel, laying pieces of amber on top to keep the fire going.

Sliding off Tran, Pen ran to Rayne, gathering her in his arms. They clung to each other, their minds merged as one.

"Kiereen, you were so brave! I could never have succeeded without you."

Rayne laughed and spoke out loud. "See! I told you so! You needed me!"

"No, you needed each other," Merkatrosa said. "Rayne, Pen, you are the embodiment of the Champion and the Peace-Giver. You slew the demon exactly as they did so long ago."

"But I lost my dagger."

"And I lost the spear."

"But you didn't lose the Book," Tran interjected. "You succeeded in your quest."

"We're not done yet." Rayne sank back into Pen's arms, exhaustion overwhelming her. "We have to get out of here!"

As though on cue, a massive rumble sounded behind them, emitting from the tunnel leading to the Book. A rush of debris shot out from the opening as amber and rock filled it.

Merkatrosa rolled out of the way while Pen grabbed Rayne, jumping to the side. The akosai shot straight up as high as they could. Fel yelped and leaped to the farther side of the chamber as a dust cloud filled the room.

Finally, the dust settled, leaving seven dust-caked forms hacking and coughing.

"Pen? Rayne? Are you all right?"

Merkatrosa's voice was harsh with dust, halting and gasping as he spoke.

Pen tried to take a deep breath before he answered and only succeeded in coughing and gagging.

Rayne, protected to some degree by Pen holding her against his chest as the debris spread, answered for them.

"We're fine. Everyone?"

Three akosai neighed and whickered faintly in response, while a sharp bark confirmed Fel's presence.

"It's dark as the Well of Torment." Pen finally managed to answer drily.

"And forget about getting a torch going. Even if we could, it wouldn't be safe." Rayne added with a sigh.

"May I make a suggestion?" Tran asked. "Pen, perhaps you can try to create a light-catcher."

"I'll give it a try; it doesn't take much energy."

Like a bright ray of promise, a small, dancing light-catcher appeared in Pen's hand.

"Ratzah!" Merkatrosa's shout of approval brightened the spirits as much as did the light.

"At least we've one less problem," Rayne pointed out. "We know which path to choose, since I marked the right ones each time."

"I did, too!" Merkatrosa exclaimed. "Look!"

The light bobbed over, passing along both sides. On one side it revealed a representation of a wing, the symbol for the akosai tattooed on every Jakosai adult's shoulders; Rayne's work showed on the other side.

Pen applauded vigorously. "The correct path is confirmed!"

Rayne sighed and shook her head. "Wonderful! Now how are we going to get back up that steep incline we slid down?"

Merkatrosa laughed ruefully. "That one I'll need to think about."

While Merkatrosa hunkered down near Gadalosta, Pen leaned against the rough walls, Rayne in his arms. A veil of silence settled over the group as they put their minds to solving their most pressing problem. No one wanted to think about the results should they not come up with an answer.

Rayne's thoughts merged with Pen's.

"Kierown, can you do a levitation spell?"

"I can. Why?"

"If we were to merge our energy like we did when we healed Fel, do you think you could raise us all?"

"All? Rayne, I know you think I'm invincible, but ... all?"

Rayne's silent laughter filled Pen's mind. *Do you think you could if we ...* Her thoughts faltered. She took a deep mental breath. *"If we made love, do you think you'd have enough energy, joining your strength with mine, to do it?"*

"I don't know." He paused. *"You know what you're proposing, kiereen? Could you feel at ease to make love with the others so near?"*

"Douse the light-catcher. Place a small shield of silence around us and some sort of enclosure." She laughed once more. *"We're nearly naked as it is!"*

Pen's thoughts teased hers. *"The sacrifices a hero must make to save the day!"*

"You are a hero to me."

Rayne turned in his embrace and lifted her face to his, silently asking for a kiss. As his lips met hers, Pen vowed that he would always be her hero.

But for how long?

Clearing his throat, Pen addressed the rest of their group. "Rayne came up with a rather radical solution to getting up the tunnel." He paused and took a deep breath. "If it's possible, I'm going to try to levitate us all to get us up the slope. It might work. The akosai's innate flying ability should aid me; they may only need a boost." He took one last big gulp of air. "But to do this, I need to create lanbeth, and to do that, well ..." His voice trailed off.

Merkatrosa was the first to recover. "You and Rayne need to mate."

"Exactly," Pen said.

"We're not even sure it will work," Rayne interjected.

Tran whickered softly, stating out loud what they all realized. "If you don't try this, we'll surely die here. And if that should be, you must join with your mate one last time."

"Then may I beg your indulgence." He smiled teasingly at Rayne. "My soulmate is a bit shy. I'll have to douse the light-catcher, place a barrier, and ensorcell a spell of silence around us." He paused. "She tends to scream when she ... oof!"

"Thooba!"

Even as Rayne pushed Pen backward, his hands grasped hers and she fell on top of him. And the light-catcher blinked out.

* * * * *

In the pitch black that engulfed them, Rayne stretched out on Pen's muscular physique. The darkness seemed to enhance Rayne's every tactile sensation. She felt her bones melt as she settled deeper onto Pen. His erection pressed against her belly, and she sighed with pleasure.

Pen lifted their entwined hands and kissed her fingers. Experimenting, he thrust his pelvis against Rayne's cradling warmth and was rewarded by a small moan.

"Feel free to scream, if you like, kiereen. I've placed the silence shield around us."

"Conceited oaf! I told Mirelle that you were too sure of yourself by half!"

"You talked about me?"

Pen reached up and unbraided Rayne's hair which had fallen down around her shoulders.

"Of course." She paused. *"She compared you to a Brad Pitt. I'm not sure what type of Earth fruit that is."* She giggled. *"Obviously something juicy!"*

Pen merged deeper with her, his heart filled with tenderness.

"Ah, heart's love, 'tis good to hear you laugh." His thoughts grew more ardent as the passion that always simmered beneath the surface heated up. *"I love you more than I could ever imagine. I burn for you, Rayne."* He removed her vest, revealing her breasts. *"You enflame me."* His hands cupped her flesh, teasing the nipples, drawing a whimper of desire

from her. His lips fastened on one puckered bud, and he suckled greedily. *"I want to take you every way I can and make you scream my name as you come apart in my arms."* He slid down her body, his mouth lingering at her slightly indented navel. He dipped his tongue there, and she arched up. Her kilt concealed her mound, and he ripped it from her, tossing it aside. Lifting her hips, he thrust his tongue between her thighs, delving between her moist folds. She twisted restlessly in his hands, her breathing becoming more rapid. Anchoring her more firmly, he drew her legs over his shoulders and set to making her beg for his shaft to fill her.

Rayne knew she would die from Pen's lovemaking. Sweat streamed from her, tracking through the dust that covered them. She bucked against his mouth, her body needy and more than ready to feel his prick thrusting home.

"Enough, Pen, enough!"

"Not enough! Not nearly enough! The lanbeth is still gathering. Look, kiereen!"

Rayne gazed above their recumbent forms. Coalescing in the air, the amber sparks roiled and danced. All the varied colors of amber shimmered above them, still collecting, the cloud still forming, lighting the small enclosure.

"I want to touch you, Pen. Let me touch you."

He nodded and let her slip her legs off. He lay back down on the gritty floor and watched her as her eyes caught the glow of the amber.

Rayne's hand glided along his body, pausing at his flat male nipples and smoothing the firm muscles of his chest. As her gaze traveled down his body, they stopped at his massive erection.

She grinned at him. *"Somebody is happy to see me."*

Pen smiled. *"He'd be even happier if you took him in your mouth and milked him dry."*

"Oh? Tell him to ask me nicely, and I'll consider it."

"Take the damn loincloth off me and I'll show you nice!"

Rayne fumbled a bit with the knots, but in moments, Pen's prick sprang forth in her hands. She caressed him, cupping his sacs, running her hands up and down his shaft. He groaned.

"By the Maker, Rayne, enough!"

"Enough? Not yet. Maybe after this." She bent and took him in her mouth, devouring him. She sucked and licked and squeezed his balls. He felt his control slipping. Gazing above, he saw the great mass of lanbeth waiting, hovering.

And he knew it was time.

"Straddle me, kiereen. Take me into your hot core and ride me. Make the lanbeth fall!"

Rayne drew back, releasing him. Raising her hips up, she grasped his rod and slowly sank down on his slick shaft. Lifting her arms, she crossed them above her, letting her wrists

rest on her head. She rocked back and forth, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Her hands fell limply to her sides, and she fell forward.

Pen's hands shot up to support her shoulders until she got her balance once more. She pressed her hands to the ground to either side of his arms, moving in a silent erotic dance.

His hands cupped her buttocks, squeezing and urging her on.

Soon, her silent cries weren't enough.

"Pen? Pen? I ... can't ... can't ..."

"Let go, kerasoka. Scream for me. Scream with me!"

And as they climaxed together, they screamed each other's names.

And the lanbeth fell.

Merkatrosa spoke softly to the akosai. "Do you think they realized that when the lanbeth gathered it would light up the entire room?"

Rosta whinnied back just as quietly. "I doubt it."

Gadalosta spoke admiringly. "Amazing stamina."

Tran nodded. "A most edifying experience."

Merkatrosa spoke with awe. "It was like watching a shadow play of Larakosa and Melakosai mating." He turned to the others. "We will never let them know we saw them. Do you agree?"

Wordlessly, they all nodded.

"Let us pray that their lanbeth will give him enough energy to lift us."

Tran drew back his lips in an akosai smile. "If not, it was still a formidable display."

Chapter Sixteen

The light-catcher winked back on, brightening up the room again, and the concealment spells dropped off, revealing Rayne and Pen fully clothed, the air around them sizzling with energy. Pen held a small glass bowl glittering with amber lanbeth.

Merkatrosa smiled as he discerned specks of lanbeth still clinging here and there to the two soulmates.

“Rayne thought it might help if I dusted everyone with some of the lanbeth.”

Tran nodded. “Why not.”

Drawing close, Pen liberally sprinkled the magic essence over the wings and bodies of the akosai, Merkatrosa, and Fel. Dipping into the remainder, he spread it over Rayne and himself.

“I think it may be easier for me to handle three pairs plus one rather than seven separate bodies. So, let’s mount up.” Turning to Fel, Pen smiled. “You can ride with Rayne for now. Enjoy it while you may, Fel.

“Merkatrosa, you and Gadalosta will lead, and Tran and I will bring up the rear.” Drawing Rayne in his arms, Pen lifted her chin and mind-merged with her.

“Listen, kerasoka, if my powers give out and Tran and I don’t make it up, I want you to deliver the Book to Jareth and Mirelle and put yourself under their protection. I don’t want you alone in Tarol.”

Rayne shook her head. *“Mirelle told me you brothers were stubborn. If you don’t make it, then I give the Book to Merkatrosa and return to be with you. But I know you’ll succeed, kerasoko.”* She reached up and cupped his stubbled chin with her hands and smiled. *“Now, kiss me, my sweet, sexy hunk, and let’s leave this place.”*

Each rider mounted, and soon they were ready. The light-catcher, hovering in the air, danced ahead of Merkatrosa. Taking a deep breath, Pen intoned the levitation spell, drawing

upon the energy surging within him from his joining with Rayne. The most accomplished mages amplified their incantations by visualizing the sought-after results. Thus, Pen brought forth the image of them all floating at a steady pace up the steep tunnel. Rayne joined her mind with his, adding her strength.

The group entered the opening, gradually floating upward against the sharp incline. The sensation was unlike that of flying on the back of an akosai, but more like being dangled like a puppet on a string.

Up, up they rose. Pen was glad the others were ahead of him. He didn't want them to see the strain he endured keeping them all aloft. Sweat beaded upon his brow and dripped into his eyes. Mercifully, he didn't need to guide Tran and could spare a bit of concentration to keep himself mounted.

But he couldn't hide the strain against Rayne's mind-merge.

"Pen, merge more fully with me. Use my power. I'll keep you upright, kierown."

Pen agreed. *"I don't know whether or not you've any mage power in you, kiereen. But you do give me strength."*

Finally, he heard Merkatrosa's voice wafting down the tunnel. "We've reached a level plain, Pen. Almost done now."

With renewed energy, Rayne and Pen concentrated on maintaining the levitation of the remaining members of the group.

At last they all stood together on solid ground. Rayne dismounted and ran over to Pen, just as he slumped over Tran's neck.

Pressing against his leg, Rayne called out to Merkatrosa. "I need your help! Pen's passed out!"

Dashing over, Merkatrosa helped Pen dismount, supporting him on one side while Rayne gripped his waist.

The shakos shook his head. "I feared this might be too much for him. His energy is very weak."

Tears welled up in Rayne's eyes as she sank to the ground with Pen in her arms. "If only we had more lanbeth ..."

Suddenly, her voice trailed off, and she shifted Pen gently to the ground. "By the goddess! We had some lanbeth with us all the time!"

Running over to Rosta, she grabbed her carrybag and brought it over to Pen. Opening it, she took out the swaddled bowl of the magic dust Pen had gathered at the cabin at the Journeying Ground. Unwrapping it, she held it out for inspection.

"We both forgot about this! Merkatrosa, is there water left in any of the water bags?"

"I'll look. The stuff will go down easier if we can mix it with some liquid."

The search took only a little time since there were just two bags left to check. Only one contained any moisture, and not much at that. Rayne squeezed the precious drops of liquid into the bowl and, using one slim, shaky finger, stirred the mixture together. The resulting concoction turned the color and consistency of sweet mel, an amber syrup that glowed with energy.

Rayne knelt by Pen's side. Their fading mind-merge filled her with despair. Supporting his head, she drizzled a bit of the mix on his lips. The stuff dripped from his unopened mouth.

Frantic, Rayne concentrated all her energy to strengthening their tied thoughts.

"Don't leave me, kierown! Who will make me laugh if you leave me? Please, take some of the lanbeth. Open your lips for me."

Suddenly an idea struck her. Sipping some of the syrupy mix, she bent to Pen's lips and pressed her lips against his, forcing his mouth to open and accept some nourishment. She'd seen mother thoobas feed their newborns in this manner. Perhaps it would work for Pen.

His lips moved against hers, his tongue slipping out to lick the substance from his mouth. Encouraged, Rayne continued to offer him the tonic from her lips until she realized that his hand had moved to cup the back of her head and his tongue was delving deep in a kiss charged with passion.

And their mind-merge was once more complete.

"Rayne, beloved. You saved me!"

Pulling back from his mouth, Rayne smiled down at Pen, tears falling onto his dirt-streaked face. *"How could I let you go, kerasoko, when I've only just found you?"*

Shifting from her lap, Pen took the cup from her hands and drank down the remaining mixture. *"I'm glad you remembered the lanbeth from the cabin."* He grinned irrepressibly. *"But I'm happy you didn't remember it until after we ..."*

"Fool! It's a good thing you're still weak, or I'd hurt you badly!"

"Excuse me." Merkatrosa tapped Rayne lightly on the shoulder. "I can see Pen has revived. I fear we should be on our way before nightfall."

Rayne bowed her head contritely, while Pen quickly sobered, answering Merkatrosa. "Forgive us, shakos. We'll be ready in a moment."

"Merkatrosa, please, Pen. I am no longer shakos, remember. I made a vow, which I intend to keep."

Pen bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Your pardon. I forgot."

Still leaning a bit on Rayne, Pen stood up and moved over to Tran. "You'll have to support me, my friend, at least for a while."

Tran smiled. "'Tis the least I can do since you supported me for a little while!"

While Rosta and Gadalosta whinnied with akosai laughter, the three humans groaned in unison.

With Pen and Tran leading, the way back out of the mountain seemed shorter and easier. Indeed, the stench and the heat had dissipated, making the journey that much more endurable.

Tran offered a possible explanation.

"The stink and heat must have emitted from the demon's chamber. When the entrance collapsed, it sealed off the emission."

"Whatever the reason," Rayne responded, "with the marks on the tunnels indicating the correct choice, and the atmosphere a whole lot more bearable, I'm sure we'll make better time."

Soon enough, they came to the entrance and fresh air. The setting sun cast a pinkish glow through the opening like the inside of a perfect shell.

And on his side, blocking the aperture, lay the guardian's winged form.

"Is he dead?" Rosta's whisper echoed in the sudden silence.

Tran and Pen moved over, and Pen bent down. Triumph rang in his voice as he stood and announced, "He's still alive!"

Merkatrosa knelt by the great akosa, placing a hand on his side. "He lives, but barely."

"But lives still."

The guardian's raspy tones stumbled from his mouth. "I'm here through sheer will." He whickered weakly with laughter. "I wanted to hear Tran sing the Journeying song for me. His voice could peel the leaves from mangela trees." He coughed and whickered. "It's time."

Gathering around him in a semi-circle, their wing tips touching, the three akosai faced the rising sun and raised their heads high.

First Tran trumpeted, loud and basso, then Rosta, a clear alto sound, and finally Gadalosta's high, silvery voice joined in to create a three-part harmony. Weaving an intricate pattern of whickers, neighs, whinnies, and assorted sounds that comprised the akosai language, they sang the Journeying song for the fallen guardian.

"What are they singing?" Rayne asked Merkatrosa.

"They sing of green pastures and clear streams. Of open skies and warm nights. Of endless springs. Of unfettered joy." He smiled. "Of the Great Beyond."

As the sun cleared the horizon, the song stopped.

Tran bowed his head. "He's gone."

"Gather rocks and pile them around him to build a cairn," Rayne ordered.

Pen nodded. "Aye. He'll guard the entrance to the mountain from now on."

They moved quickly, interring the guardian's body.

“Where’s Metres’s body?” Pen gazed around the area but couldn’t find it. “I’d like to bring his weapon back for Loran to examine.”

“I hope his body rots in the Well of Torment!” Rayne’s voice cut like a knife through the fresh morning air.

“We dragged the body and tossed the weapon behind those rocks.” Merkatrosa pointed off to the side, and Pen hurried over to retrieve the alien object. He returned carrying a pouch that sagged as though it contained something heavy. Pen held it away from his body as if a live snapping serpent was coiled inside.

“We’ll leave his body for the scavengers.” He shuddered. “I searched his corpse and came up with some other items I couldn’t identify. I put them together with his weapon.”

Merkatrosa made a sign in the air and used one of the beaded ties from his hair to knot around the bag,

“There. I’ve done what I can do to contain its evil. Pen, can you place a containment spell on it?”

Pen nodded. “I don’t know if it will do any good, but I doubt it will hurt.”

After setting the appropriate spell, Pen placed the smaller bag inside one of the carrybags.

Rayne shivered, looking over her shoulder at the mound of rocks behind which lay Metres’s corpse.

“Let’s be on our way. There’s an evil stench coming from Metres’s body.”

Rosta whinnied with laughter. “Of course, he’s dead!”

For once, the akosai humor provoked laughter from everyone.

The mood lightened, they mounted up and set off for the Journeying Ground.

* * * * *

“Look! It’s A’ynos! He’s alive!”

The joy in Merkatrosa’s voice caroled through the twilight. Gadalosta in her exuberance swooped low and then shot straight up, Merkatrosa clinging for dear life to her mane.

Tran and Rosta, too, gave their riders a wild flight. Unfeigned laughter rang out while Fel yelped with enthusiasm. As they came in for a landing, the sojourners emerged from the stable.

Merkatrosa slid from Gadalosta’s back and ran to A’ynos, flinging his arms around him.

“Ouch!” A’ynos winced even as joy filled his heart. “Careful, kerasoko, I’ve a wound the size of my fist in my side.”

Merkatrosa sprang away contritely. “I thought I’d find you dead, kerasoko, instead ...” Moving back to A’ynos, Merkatrosa drew his hand to his lips, kissing it tenderly.

A'ynos looked over at the three akosai and sighed. "The guardian. He's dead."

Proudly, Gadalosta shook her head. "Asoka-ai is dead. I am the guardian."

At her words, all the akosai and A'ynos bowed.

"I vow to fulfill my duties as guardian." She nickered and smiled. "And we have a new akosai-tan. Merkatrosa."

A'ynos started. "Merkatrosa? I don't understand. You're the shakos-ai."

"No longer. I vowed that should I live through the night, I would return to the Journeying Ground and assume your duties." He paused. "I am no longer was capable of fulfilling the role of shakos." Tears filled Merkatrosa's eyes. "I think the guardian knew that you still lived when he accepted my promise to remain at the Journeying Ground." With utmost care, he embraced A'ynos. "Nothing can prevent us now from joining."

Tran stamped his hooves to gain everyone's attention. "And nothing can prevent us from celebrating your joining and the success of our quest!"

A'ynos beamed with happiness. "We've cheese in the pantry and fresh fruits and bread." He grinned. "And pommee's cider. Merkatrosa and I will bring everything out when we meet later on."

"By the fountain?" Rayne suggested. "Can we, kierown, under the stars and unafraid now that Metres and his companion are dead?"

"Metres's buddy, yes. A'ynos, where's the body? I may know him."

"I left it in the stall." A'ynos took a gasping breath. "I hadn't the strength to move it. It's the last one on the right."

He reached out to Merkatrosa and took his hand, bringing it to his lips. "I'll show you my quarters. We'll need to make space for your gear."

Merkatrosa grinned. "Not much there. Just the clothes I'm wearing and my pouches."

A'ynos ran his free hand down Merkatrosa's lean arm, lingering along the way. "Shouldn't take long, then, to show you where to put everything, Trosa." He licked his lips. "Should it?"

Merkatrosa's breath hitched. "No."

And they strolled away, leaving Rayne and Pen alone.

Turning to Rayne, Pen drew her into his arms. "Let me see if I can identify the remains, kiereen. Please stay here."

Rayne shook her head. "You can't shield my mind, Pen. I'd see what you see. I don't think you could stop that image from slipping into my mind. I'd rather be with you and anchor myself so it won't be so hard to face."

Pen sighed. "You're right. Let's get it over with." He brushed his hand over her unkempt braids and wiped a streak of dirt from her cheek. "You need a shower."

Rayne stuck out her tongue as she poked him in the ribs. "You, too. You smell like a grappling ring after a tag-team fight."

Leering, Pen grabbed her hand, pulling her back into his arms. "Later. We'll grapple later."

They entered the stable, empty since all the sojourners were outside enjoying their time in the sun.

"Down here, Rayne. Hold my hand, kiereen."

They moved down the row of empty stalls until they came to the last one. The locked gate hid the corpse from view.

Taking a deep breath, they leaned over the waist-high barrier. It took only a moment for them to know whose battered body lay there.

Rayne's face was ashen as she turned her head away from the horrifying sight.

"Sontar."

"Aye. I recognized his boots." Pen shuddered. "I couldn't identify him from his face -- or what was left of it." He took a deep, cleansing breath. "After the feast, I'll ask Merkatrosa to help me move the body." His expression hardened. "I don't want to bury him in the Journeying Ground. He'd pollute the earth with his evil. I wish I knew what to do with him."

Rayne thought for a moment. "His toron-a must be here someplace. Stuff his body inside, lock the doors, and dump some rocks on it to conceal it."

Pen tugged a braid and pulled her face closer for a kiss. "Excellent!" He sniffed. "Let's get you clean, sweetheart. You really stink."

Rayne laughed. "Aye, You, too, like a piece of Tolos cheese, my smelly hunk!"

Pen winced. "Your hurt my pride, kiereen. But I made you laugh." He sobered. "Come, let's leave this place where death lingers."

* * * * *

The shower stall of Rayne and Pen's cabin was so tiny, you couldn't swing a baby bitnap. With the two lovers, the tight space merely added to the pleasure of getting clean for the first time in days.

Rayne stepped in first, turning the spigots on and letting the hot water steam up the glass enclosure. Pen moved in behind her, his firm chest pressing against her back.

He reached around her, plucking a small container of liquefied soap from a narrow shelf and lathering his hands.

"Let me wash your back, kiereen." His mind merged with hers. She could sense his teasing tone as he added his next thoughts. *"And your front, too."* His slick, soapy fingers slid down her breasts, gently massaging her nipples, turning them to aching points. His hands

slipped further down, toying with the tight curls that shielded her hot, wet core. They delved between her nether lips, bringing a harsh gasp from her mouth.

She moaned, thrusting her backside against his fully aroused prick. Her head fell back against his shoulder, and her eyes closed in ecstasy.

Moving her hands back, she sought his lean, muscled thighs and gripped them, squeezing and kneading his flesh.

Now it was Pen's turn to groan out loud at the feel of Rayne's fingers touching him. He hardened even more, slipping between the cheeks of her buttocks. *"Brace your hands against the shower wall and trust me."*

"Always."

And she did what he asked.

His hands slid down between her thighs to her knees and gripped them firmly. Bending a bit, he lifted her and carefully brought her down on his thick, firm shaft.

She sank down to the hilt, held up by his powerful mage strength. He pressed his back against the shower door for added support and slowly thrust up and then down.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, yesssss."

Rayne moaned as she clenched her inner muscles around him and wrung an inarticulate grunt from Pen's throat.

His passionate thoughts filled her mind as their joining merged deeper. *"Never enough. Never enough. Make love to her. Take her till she screams, till she milks me dry. Rayne, Rayne, you're everything. Yes, yes, like that. Like that. That's it; that's it; that's ..."*

Their shouts as they climaxed together echoed in the shower stall. The lanbeth fell, mingling with the hot water sluicing their bodies. It slid down the drain in a swirl of sparkling amber specks.

And, his legs suddenly weak, Pen slipped down to the floor, still joined with her. *"By the Great Mage, I can't move!"*

Rayne's thoughts filled with laughter. *"I can't breathe!"*

Pen grasped her waist and lifted her off, setting her on the wet tiled floor. *"It's a good thing the lanbeth washed away. I wouldn't have the strength to contain it now."*

She sighed. *"We should dress. The feast ..."*

He sighed even deeper. *"Aye."*

He rose to his knees and, straightening up, stood, offering her a hand. Drawing her up, he held her tight for a moment, then opened the shower door.

The cooler air hit them, and they raced to the bedroom and their bags lying on the bed.

Rayne dumped out the contents with a small frown. *"I've nothing to wear! Everything is wrinkled or dirty!"*

His arms akimbo, Pen shook his head. "Women! Never have anything to wear. Don't worry, kiereen. I'll help you out. This is one spell that's simple to do."

A few words, a couple of gestures, and Rayne's clothes were clean and wrinkle free.

Rayne wheeled around. "Why didn't you do that before?"

Pen shrugged. "It seemed to upset you when I used magic too often. By the time that it didn't matter to you, we had other, more important things to do with it." He smiled. "You'll never have to worry about wrinkled or soiled clothes again. Just let me know what you're going to wear, and I'll make sure your outfit is clean and pressed."

Rayne laughed. "Quite a handy spell. I knew you were good for something."

Pen preened. "Damned good."

And joined her in her laughter.

* * * * *

"And now, my friends, a toast to the happy couple and the success of our mission! Ratzah! Ratzah!"

All within hearing joined in with Tran's cheers. Akosai and humans alike rejoiced in the happiness of A'ynos and Merkatrosa.

They sat around a table set up by the fountain and covered with the remnants of the spontaneous feast. Mugs filled with pommees cider were raised and the contents swallowed with gusto.

Yet a deep well of sadness lay hidden beneath the laughter. One of their number had died to ensure the success of the quest. And this could never be forgotten.

Merkatrosa stood and cleared his throat. "Let us all bow our heads and remember the great akosa who gave his life to save the world of Hearthome. May he find green pastures and open skies. May the name of Asoka-ai be remembered for all time."

A profound silence fell upon the group as they acknowledged the guardian's sacrifice.

Raising his palms face up toward the sky, Merkatrosa spoke once more, his voice grave. "May the blessings of the Great Maker be bestowed upon those who celebrate with us this night. May they live long and happy lives, and may those who sojourn here end their days in peace and contentment. And so it might be."

At first, silence reigned again; then, one by one, the akosai stamped their hooves and trumpeted. The humans pounded the table, and Fel, chewing on a thooba bone, thumped his tail.

Rayne's thoughts touched Pen's mind. *"Never have I been so happy."*

"Aye, kiereen. A task completed with success, and four hearts have found their soulmates."

She laughed. *"More than that. Tran and Rosta are also mated ... and Fel."*

"That's right. I forgot. What is his mate's name?"

"Let me ask ... Fel? You never told me the name of your mate."

"Her birth name is Silakar. Her bond name is Sil."

"Pen, did you catch that?"

"Indeed."

Rayne felt his laughter echo in her mind before he sent out his thoughts.

"Perhaps he'll stay awhile and visit with her at the village. We can always send for him later."

Rayne laughed out loud, breaking their mind-merge. "Oh, no, you don't! Fel stays with us. Learn to live with it."

Pen sighed. "You know he hates me."

Casually, Fel arose and pattered over to where Pen sat.

And lifted his leg.

Pen jumped out of the way, rolling off the bench and falling on the ground. "See!"

Whooping with hysterical laughter, Rayne clapped her hands.

Pen looked over at her bright, happy face and smiled.

Another day had passed, and his vow to make Rayne laugh remained intact.

* * * * *

Hours later, a sleep-tousled voice broke into Pen's dreams.

"What color will Merkatrosa and A'ynos's lanbeth be, do you think?"

"Huh?"

Rayne sat up in bed, the moonlight streaming in through the window and revealing her braided hair partially shielding her breasts.

"Merkatrosa's a mage, maybe not as powerful as a royal one, but he'd create lanbeth, wouldn't he? So, the lanbeth. What color for them?"

Now fully awake, Pen drew her into his arms and leaned back against the headboard. "I don't know."

"Not amber like ours, or silver and crimson like Mirelle and Jareth's. A different color probably. I think a true soulmate's love is unique, so the lanbeth must be unique, too."

Pen hugged her, chuckling at the seriousness in her voice. "I guess we'll never know, because I'm not going to ask!"

Rayne fell quiet for a few moments, then spoke again. "You think Mirelle and Jareth are having as much excitement as we've had?"

Pen laughed softly. "I doubt it. Jareth's probably going crazy dealing with Mirelle and emissaries from the other kingdoms."

Rayne uttered a sleepy protest and pulled away from him. "Don't pick on her. She's my best friend." She sighed and yawned. "I'll have so much to tell her when we get back. She'll be anxious to hear about our adventures."

"Go to sleep, kerasoka. It's late." Drawing her back down with him to the mattress, he kissed the nape of her neck and closed his eyes.

Rayne sighed and followed suit, snuggling in Pen's arms. Soon their even breathing whispered in the night.

* * * * *

"No, I will not have you going off alone through that rift back to Earth!"

"We have no choice, Jareth. I told you the best way to get the information Loran needs is for me to go to my apartment, use my credit card, buy a copy of the encyclopedia, download the info to my laptop, and bring it back for Loran to study."

Jareth threw up his hands. "There you go again! I have no idea what you're saying, Mirelle. You've sprinkled so many Earth words into your speech, 'tis near impossible to comprehend."

"Exactly!" Mirelle's voice rang with triumph. "You know your English isn't that good. You wouldn't know how to find what we need." Her voice softened. "Kierown, please. It will be quick and easy."

Jareth sighed. "I suppose you're right, kiereen. After all, I passed safely through to Earth and brought you back with me. But I must go with you. Only I can invoke the spells to send us there and return."

Mirelle grinned, throwing her arms around Jareth. "There! Teamwork! Now, let's get this thing done. Loran's probably biting his nails, waiting to hear of our success."

Over the past two days, Mirelle had translated the Earth locations into Narwithian. First, she'd suggested a rift that led to the New York Public Library, but Jareth had scotched that idea immediately.

"Too many variables. Is there any other place where you can find the information we seek and gather it for us?"

Loran had thought for a moment. "Yes, what of that recording machine you spoke of? Can you record the information on one and return with it to Hearthome?"

"Let me think." Mirelle paced the floor; the men watched transfixed as she moved back and forth, muttering under her breath. Suddenly, she stopped, a smile lighting up her face.

"I've got it! I'll use my laptop, get the info, download it, and bring back the laptop; just like that!"

Snapping her fingers, she did a little dance of joy.

Loran had applauded her. "I haven't the slightest notion what you said, Mirelle, but I'm sure it will work."

They'd waited until early morning, and now that they'd worked out their differences, they were finally ready.

"Hold my hand, kiereen. Merge your mind with mine while I intone the spell."

"You don't have to tell me that, dream boy; there's no way I'm letting go of you!" She grinned irrepressibly. "Be careful. If you say it wrong, we may wind up in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean!"

Jareth chuckled. "Leave the spells to me. That's my job."

Mirelle closed her eyes and gripped Jareth's hand like an anchor. When he'd brought her over to Hearthome, she'd been asleep and unaware of what he'd done. Awake, she was just a bit leery of how she'd react.

Hearing her thoughts, Jareth sought to soothe her fears. *"Trust in me, kiereen. You won't feel a thing."*

Relaxed now, Mirelle responded quick as a flash. *"That's what I'm afraid of!"* She laughed. *"No, go ahead; it's fine."*

For a split second, Mirelle felt a sense of disorientation. Opening her eyes, she gasped. "We're here!"

Mirelle looked at her bedroom with a strange feeling of disassociation. It was no longer her home. There was nothing of any value left to her. Just the information she needed to save her new world. Without a sense of regret, she bid farewell to Earth.

Jareth watched Mirelle's face. Maintaining his mind-merge with her, he knew when she turned her back on her former life, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Behind a barrier kept up through years of experience lay the fear that she might wish to return to her old life. Though Narik had told them that it was impossible for her to remain, how could he know for sure that Narik hadn't lied?

Now, it no longer mattered. Mirelle had made her decision.

"Find what you need, kiereen, and let's get back."

"Just a minute; my laptop's in the other room. C'mon. And don't touch anything!"

Opening the door, they stepped into her postage-stamp-sized living room. Mirelle flipped a switch and a light flashed on.

Jareth gaped.

Whereas the bedroom appeared pretty much as a bedroom on Hearthome, Mirelle's living room was pure Earth.

A square box with a shiny glass window sat on a long, low shelf. Next to it, slim boxes with small, shining signs of blue and yellow projected unknown messages. A ceiling fixture

bearing globes of unwavering light hung above a desk bearing another box with a blank, black window.

Mirelle moved over to that one, pulled out the chair in front of the desk, and sat down. Pressing a button, the window changed colors and music rang out. Mirelle quickly pressed another button, and the sound shut off. On the screen appeared a picture of a castle with an akosa flying overhead.

"How did you come by a painting of an akosa, kiereen, and how did it suddenly appear?"

Mirelle grinned. "Earth magic. It's a mechanical device, Jareth. And on Earth we call akosai Pegasus." Growing serious, she pressed some more buttons, her fingers flying. "Now, let me get to work."

For a while Jareth peered over her shoulder, unfamiliar signs and pictures flashing in the window. Each time a new image appeared, he gasped and asked questions, until Mirelle could take it no more. Swiveling her desk chair, she gave Jareth a little shove.

"Go sit down on the couch. I can't work with you hovering over me. Besides, I'm almost done."

"But, sweetheart ..."

"Go!"

Jareth moved back, but didn't sit. Restless, he prowled the room, picking up knickknacks and setting them down. A pile of papers caught his eye, and he picked up the top few sheets. The strange designs that were Mirelle's Earth language stared up at him, but the next sheet bore a picture of a fearsome demon! Shocked, he let the pages flutter to the ground.

"Are there demons on Earth, kiereen?"

"Demons?" Mirelle turned and glanced down at the scattered sheets. "Oh, no. That's a sketch submitted for a children's story. It came from the artist's imagination."

Jareth shook his head. "These are fearsome tales to tell a little child."

Mirelle grinned. "You should see some of the moving picture stories. They're lots more scary than that. Now, let me get back to work. I'm just about finished."

Jareth sighed. He did not like this feeling of uselessness! He strolled over to the exotic machines sitting neglected on the cabinet. A film of dust covered them. Bending over one, Jareth ran a finger over the dusty surface.

And raucous noise filled the apartment.

Mirelle jumped up and ran over, touched some control, and the sound cut off abruptly.

"I told you not to touch anything, Jareth! I just hope my landlady didn't hear you. She's so nosy! Now, don't move! I just need to grab some batteries and a few discs, and we're good to go."

Jareth clenched his fists and recited under his breath the twelve elements necessary for a perfect spell. What irked him the most was that Mirelle was right! For the first time, he realized how difficult it must be for her, trying to adapt to a whole new life, and he cherished her even more for her courage and love.

A pounding at the door broke into his thoughts.

“Who’s in there? I’ve called the cops, so don’t try to run. They’ll catch you if you do. No one messes with Sadie Lebowsky’s tenants! Even if they ain’t around anymore!”

Jareth looked around wildly and mind-merged with Mirelle. *“Now what? Will the creatures this Lebowsky woman called attack us?”*

Mirelle closed her laptop with a snap and snatched up the bag she’d packed with extra batteries, a couple of children’s books she’d edited, and a few choice discs.

“Don’t worry, kierown. By the time the ‘cop creatures’ come, we’ll be long gone. I’m ready now. Do that thing that you do so well and get us out of here!”

Jareth grabbed Mirelle tightly, took a deep breath and intoned the departure spell. And they were gone.

Chapter Seventeen

Rayne and Pen awoke the next morning feeling clean and refreshed for the first time in what felt like forever.

Gathering their gear together, Rayne sighed.

"I'll miss my dagger. It's been mine since my first cycle. And my bow and arrows." She fingered the band wrapped around her wrist. "At least I still have my wrist band."

Pen nodded. "And the spear of Melakosai is lost once more." He placed his sword and scabbard around his waist, attaching it to his belt. "But now my sword bears the amber piece destined for it." He smiled with grim satisfaction. "And it's been tried successfully in battle."

Rayne swung her bags across her shoulder and looked around the room to make sure they'd left nothing behind.

"I think we're ready now."

Gathering up his gear, Pen strode out of the cabin, matching his strides with Rayne's smaller steps.

"Aye. Let's be on our way."

They headed out to the fountain where the table from last night's celebration was still set up. A simple meal of bread, butter, and cheese plus cool, sparkling water lay spread out on it. A'ynos and Merkatrosa awaited them, as did Tran, Rosta, and Fel. The new guardian trotted over when they joined the group.

"I must thank you for preserving the sanctity of the Journey Ground, Pen. Entombing Sontar in his vehicle so that his evil would not pollute the earth was a clever solution to a difficult problem."

Pen smiled. "I can't take the credit for that idea. Rayne came up with it." He chuckled. "She's not only beautiful; she's smart, too."

Rayne glanced over at Pen, rolling her eyes at his flattery. "It seemed the obvious choice." She paused. "I only regret that our presence brought this evil so close to you."

The guardian shook her head. "Asoka-ai knew you would come and accepted our part in the quest." She sighed. "I haven't as yet gained my full powers of prophecy, but I do know that although you won this battle, there are more trials awaiting you." She smiled. "But come, break your fast before you leave us."

Devouring the meal with gusto, Rayne and Pen were finally ready to depart. A'ynos and Merkatrosa embraced them with fervor.

"I cannot thank you enough for bringing Merkatrosa back to me. For the first time in twenty years, I feel complete."

Merkatrosa smiled, placing his arm around A'ynos's waist and squeezing it. "No almost about it now!"

A'ynos turned, bringing his hand up to Merkatrosa's mouth. "Hush, kerasoko." He looked back at Rayne and Pen. "I fear you see his true personality now. Never could he resist an opportunity to tease me." His voice took on a caressing tone. "Can you, Trosa?"

Taking A'ynos's hand and kissing it, Merkatrosa brought it over to his waist so that the two lovers embraced. Their eyes locked, and, for a moment, they forgot where they were.

Pen coughed discreetly, and the two drew apart with reluctance.

"I'll tell the villagers you've decided to remain here."

"My thanks." Merkatrosa smiled. "I'm sure Treloka will not regret my decision. She'll make a better shakos-ai than I. As a childless widow, our people will truly be her children and the focus of her life. Tell her I wish her well. Just one more thing."

Returning to the table, he reached under it and drew forth two carrybags. "I packed the bowl with the amber lanbeth in here for the Council of Mages to examine." He grinned broadly. "This way you need not worry about preserving any lanbeth when you ... create it." Merkatrosa hesitated, choosing his next words with care. "I also gathered some of the lanbeth A'ynos and I generated last night. I'm not sure what its properties are, but they seem to be quite ... invigorating."

Rayne eyed the bag with unconcealed curiosity. "What color is it?"

A'ynos responded, his eyes dreamy as he recalled the pleasure of creating the magic dust the previous night. "Green. A beautiful green the color of mangela leaves."

Pen accepted the bag, trying to maintain a grave face. "I shall guard the bag as carefully as I guard the Book."

Tran whinnied for their attention. "We truly must leave now, everyone; otherwise, we won't reach the village until late in the evening."

"You're right, Tran. Mount up, Rayne. I'll harness Fel to your saddle."

One final swift embrace with Merkatrosa and A'ynos, and at last, they were off.

* * * * *

They arrived just before nightfall at the village. Treloka came out of the jako, awaiting their landing with tranquility, Merkatrosa's absence seeming not to distress her.

"I knew he wouldn't return with you. His fate lay elsewhere," she said.

Rayne responded in flawless Jakosai. "Aye. He renounced the position of shakos and shakos-ai. He found his sworn mate, A'ynos, acting as akosai-tan at the Journeying Ground, and they are joined. He wishes you well." She paused. "He is truly happy now."

Treloka nodded. "I accept the role and will do my best." She smiled for the first time in their acquaintance. "Now, come. Your mission was a success and we'll celebrate!"

The festivities that evening were as lively as before. Rayne and Pen sat on either side of Treloka, who cast aside her haughtiness now that she was confirmed as shakos-ai. Once more the maidens danced before the male youths. But their guides from their first visit were not among the group. Both Beka and Frankosa were absent from the festivities.

Curious, Rayne inquired after them.

Treloka grinned broadly. "That was one fruitful result of your coming. Frankosa pushed the question to Beka, and she agreed to become his sworn mate. They are off for their first month's time." She leaned over and whispered into Rayne's ear. "I think she will return with a babe growing in her womb. All the signs seemed positive." She gazed at Rayne's flat belly, placing her hand on it. "And you ..." She stopped.

"What? There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"No, no. Not at all. But you must wait and learn for yourself. But be at ease. There will be no problems for you, your soulmate, and your children."

"Children?"

Pen leaned in, his voice quavering with anxiety. "Is she pregnant?"

Treloka threw up her hands, laughing. "I'm sorry I mentioned anything! Your soulmate is not pregnant. I just told her that when she conceives, there will be no problems. No. That's all I'll say. It's not time for you to know anything more. Please. Enjoy the celebration. Avail yourselves of all that we have to offer." She chuckled. "I know the bathing cave is empty right now."

Rayne and Pen gazed at each other and mind-merged.

"We never did finish what we began there that night, kiereen."

Rayne licked her lips and nodded. "Now?"

"Now."

Rising, they moved through the noisy throng toward the door. Treloka watched as they broke into a run once they were out of the jako, her face bearing a look of smug satisfaction.

"Tonight she will conceive her twins. Larakosa and Melakosai will live again."

"It's the water."

"What, kierown?"

Pen panted, out of breath from their strenuous bout of lovemaking. They had made love by the men's bathing pool, finding no one there, and then had swum in its warm waters, rinsing off the amber dust their orgasms had created. Now they lay on their backs, next to each other.

His thoughts merged with hers. *"The waters give the Jakosai men increased vigor and, well, size."*

"More vigorous than you? And you say it makes them ... larger? Impossible!"

"I'll show you."

He leaped up and strode into the water. Rayne watched his naked butt with unfeigned appreciation. He ducked beneath the water, coming up and flinging his wet hair out of his eyes.

"Look, Rayne," he called aloud.

Rayne looked, her gaze riveting to his prick as he left the pool. His shaft did seem longer, wider. Her inner core turned liquid as he approached nearer.

"Well?" He stood above her, his hands on his hips, arms akimbo.

She looked up. "Even more vigorous?"

He nodded.

"Shall we see just how ... vigorous?"

He dropped to his knees and sat back on his haunches. His rod thrust upward, and Rayne licked her lips in anticipation.

He grinned in open invitation.

"Shall we continue our feast now, Rayne?"

She nodded and, moving like a crouching animal, came toward him. Placing her hands on his knees, she drew herself up his body. Her breasts brushed against his legs as her hands slid up his thighs to his lean, muscled flanks, continuing to his trim waist and further to his powerful shoulders.

Bracing herself on those broad shoulders, she lifted her ass and then sank down slowly onto his rod.

He was, indeed, bigger than normal. She tensed, trying to accommodate his enhanced size.

"Am I too much for you, kiereen?"

Rayne laughed. "Hardly! We'll see who's too much for whom!"

Pen's teasing eased her tension, and she relaxed her muscles, welcoming him deep into her body, deeper than ever before.

"Oh, that feels so good."

She almost purred with satisfaction, closing her eyes in ecstasy, as she moved rhythmically on him. Gripping his shoulders tighter, her nails dug into his skin, drawing tiny drops of blood that trickled down his arms.

Pen drew her closer to him so that he could suckle on her breasts. He loved the taste of her, the feel of her soft, slick flesh in his mouth. He nipped her tight buds, turning his head from side to side to feast equally on each nub.

They knew without opening their eyes that the glittering amber specks were gathering above them. This time they vowed silently to lick every precious particle from each other's flesh and mate until their strength drained from them.

And they fulfilled their vow.

They arose later than they'd wished. Dragging their limp bodies to the jako a few hours before dawn, they fell onto their sleeping mats without changing their clothes.

Now, closer to midday than morning, they ate the two bowls of lerou left for them with a pitcher of pommee's cider. They ate quickly, dressing hurriedly to make up for lost time.

They passed no one as they left the jako, as most of the Jakosai were either in the fields or at their diverse occupations. Rayne knew that some of the youngsters gathered at the private bathing area with Treloka to memorize lessons or stayed with the adults to learn the necessary skills to be a productive member of the village. No one was idle here.

Tran and Rosta waited impatiently for them by the stables, trotting back and forth, swishing their tails.

Tran stomped his hooves. "Treloka told us to let you sleep. Said you'd engaged in some strenuous ... activity."

Rosta was not so polite with her comments. "You mean they screwed like coneys in season!"

"Rosta!" Her mate admonished her. "Your language!"

She trumpeted her laughter. "My language is exact. Besides, the bathing cave amplified their cries." She winked. "I scarce got a bit of sleep listening to their screams of pleasure. Next time, put up a silence shield, Pen."

Rayne blushed red as the sunset and hid her face against Pen's chest.

"Don't tease them any further, Rosta." Tran chided her. "You'll give Pen a swelled head about his prowess."

"His head is not the only thing that swelled."

“Rosta, enough!”

Pen broke out into laughter, coaxing a smile from Rayne.

Rayne looked around, a quizzical expression on her face. “Where’s Fel?”

“I believe he stayed at the kennels last night with his mate,” Rosta answered.

“There he is, kiereen. His mate’s with him.”

Fel trotted up to them, a silvery female canid by his side.

Fel’s thoughts connected with Rayne’s. *“Sil is now my shifra. Her pups will be born in three weeks time.”*

Rayne clapped her hands and announced the news to the others. “Sil will be a dam soon! She became Fel’s shifra the first time tied!”

Tran and Rosta stamped their hooves, and Pen bent over to give Fel a scratch behind his ears.

Sil eyed the royal mage and pranced over to him. Nudging his hand, she insinuated her head beneath it, arched her neck, exposing it, and yelped for attention.

“Why, Pen, I believe she likes you! Give it a chance. Try to connect with her mind. Sometimes the females only touch thoughts with their mates. Perhaps she’ll allow you to join your thoughts.”

Pen shrugged. “I’ll give it a go.”

Continuing to scratch Sil’s throat, Pen directed a simple greeting to her mind. *“Welcome, Sil.”*

“I bid you welcome, also, mate of my shifro’s female human. I like your scent.”

Taken a bit aback, Pen could only acknowledge her comment with thanks and pray that Rayne never found out, or he’d never hear the end of it.

“Well, seems like we have another canid joining us, kierown.”

“Sil can ride with me, kiereen. I’m sure Fel would prefer your company.”

Rayne laughed, nodding in agreement. “You’re just worried that he’ll take a nip from your neck! Come, let’s find Treloka and bid her goodbye.”

They left the village behind them and headed to Koralokai, anxious to return to Narwith with the Book and all the other trophies from their quest.

Tran and Rosta flapped their wings with speed, moving ever more swiftly, and as the twilight hours darkened, they arrived in the courtyard of Rayne’s castle.

Despite the late hour, several members of her court awaited them, while many of the household servants hovered in the background, curious to see her response to the latest events in Koralokai.

The marshal of Tarol greeted them with grim news as soon as they landed. “Your Highness, I bid you and your companions welcome, but regret to inform you that there’s been a murder.”

“Murder? Who? When?”

“Several hours after your departure, the body of a Jakosai female servant was discovered in the rooms reserved for Prince Sontar.” He paused and took a deep breath. “She’d been tied and strangled with elaborately embroidered bindings. She’d been raped. Repeatedly. The last time anyone saw her, she was bringing the evening meal to the prince’s quarters. Without evidence to the contrary, we can only conclude that the prince murdered her. We have asked the assistance of all the local marshals to apprehend him, but at this point he is still at large.”

Rayne acknowledged the information that the marshal provided and responded with immense satisfaction. “You may call off the hunt. Prince Sontar is dead. I’ve no doubt he committed the crime. He joined with the traitor Prince Metres, and together they attempted several times to assassinate me and Prince Pentar and hamper the success of our quest. We’ll inform their families of their fates when we return to Narwith.”

She smiled regally, inclining her head, then turned toward Pentar. “But now, I’ve momentous news. Prince Pentar and I have been formally joined. I ask all in the castle to celebrate this with us this evening!”

A cheer rose up from the crowd, and applause rang through the courtyard.

“I thank you for your well wishes. We dine tonight under the stars. All are welcome. None shall be turned away!”

Leaving the preparations to the willing castle staff, Rayne and Pen went up to Rayne’s chambers.

After a brisk wash, Rayne and Pen changed into fresh garments, Rayne donning a floor-length, amber-colored velvet gown edged with gold embroidery. Her feet, encased in ankle-high boots, peeped from beneath the hem. The short, puffed sleeves of translucent gold material displayed her firm arms and the wristband that graced her left arm. The high-collared neck framed her face, and her hair, braided in a coronet upon her head, accentuated her slender neck. She looked every inch a princess.

Pen wore one of Rayne’s father’s court outfits. The tight maroon leggings clung to Pen’s muscular thighs and caressed his manhood. His knee-high boots outlined his strong calves. He wore an open leather vest, since none of the shirts in Rayne’s father’s closet could span the breadth of Pen’s shoulders. Embossed with intricate gold designs, the loosely tied vest displayed a firm chest that caused the hearts of the females present to flutter with envy.

Seated at the head of the table, Rayne rose and held aloft her crystal goblet filled with the finest amber-colored wine in Tarol. “I give you Prince Pentar set Morath of Tarnwite and now king of Tarol and my consort. Ratzah! Ratzah!”

The crowd erupted into cheers once more, rising to their feet.

Pentar also leaped to his feet, raising his hands for silence. "People of Tarol, I salute Queen Rayne seta Kithera, my soulmate and the most courageous person I know. Hail her! Ratzah! Ratzah!"

The roars of the crowd grew louder than before, rending apart the night air.

The castle folk consumed the food with gusto and then pushed aside the tables for dancing.

Musicians brought out instruments, and music filled the air. Offering Rayne his hand, Pen drew her to her feet, and they led off the first dance, then withdrew to their rooms, urging everyone to remain and enjoy the festivities.

They raced up the stairs to Rayne's quarters. Slamming the door behind them, they stood gasping and laughing before the fire that blazed in the hearth.

Pen snapped his fingers and their clothes disappeared. Rayne looked down and giggled.

"You're full of surprises, my sweet hunk!"

Pen grinned.

"Saved the best one for last." He turned to the bed and, with a wave of his hand, the coverlet whipped off. "Shall we?"

"Wait just a minute."

Pen sat on the bed while Rayne hurried over to the chest at its foot. Falling to her knees, she flung open the lid and started throwing clothes, stuffed animals, and dolls every which way. Finally, with a shout of triumph, she held aloft two slim books.

Throwing herself on the bed next to Pen, she gave him one of them.

"Here, this one should really be yours, and this is mine."

Pen read the title. "*The Book of Pleasures*. And these are?"

"Books given to the male and female heirs in the Tarolian royal family when they attain their majority." A smug grin crossed her face. "I memorized every page. Of both books."

Pen turned to her, a speculative look on his face. "Every page?"

Rayne nodded and slipped off the bed, kneeling between Pen's legs. Cupping her hand, she caressed his love sacs, bent her head, and, just before she took him into her mouth, murmured, "Page twenty-five, my book."

Pen flung back his head as Rayne applied her tongue. Unable to speak, Pen mind-merged with her.

"Kiereen, let's try for a record. Every page in your book tonight and every page in mine when we reach Narwith."

Her mouth filled with Pen's firm shaft, Rayne responded silently. "*It's a deal!*"

She pushed him backward onto the bed and kissed him, thrusting her tongue between his lips and pressing her breasts against his chest.

"Page one is usually done fully clothed, but we'll make an exception tonight."

Pen's thoughts filled with pleasure. *"You're in charge."*

"That's right."

"How many pages are there?"

"Seventy-five."

"Then we've not much time."

* * * * *

Rayne and Pen arose early the next day, strangely invigorated. A cold breakfast of fruits, cheese, and bread had been left for them on a small table outside the room. A brisk knocking at the door alerted them to its presence. He brought the table to the bed and proceeded to feed Rayne the berries left for them.

"Your people are very discreet, kiereen."

Rayne chuckled. She opened her mouth like a fledgling thooba chick as Pen dropped the fruit between her lips. "I'm glad you placed a silence shield around us." She let her robe slip off one shoulder, revealing a plump breast tipped with a rosy nipple.

Placing the plate back on the table, Pen pushed her back, his mouth hovering near her breast. "I believe this is page thirty-three in my book."

As his lips nipped her lightly, Rayne panted and moaned, her words stumbling from her mouth. "How do you know what's on that page?"

"I peeked when you fainted after page seventy-three." With a dexterity she never knew a tongue could possess, he executed a movement that made her keen. "By the goddess, do that again!"

He lifted up his head and grinned wickedly at her. "Sorry. No repeats." He looked over at the clock on her mantle and smiled even more broadly. "I think we can get to page eighteen before we need to get dressed. Shall we try?"

"Do it!"

And they did.

"Careful!"

Rayne's warning almost made Pen drop the amber bowl containing their lanbeth as he carried it over to the bed to wrap it.

"Don't shout, Princess. We almost had a lanbeth explosion ... and not the fun kind! We're swaddling both of the bowls so heavily, you'd think they were made of spun crystal."

"Sorry, kierown, but what we're bringing back may help to save our world; I can't help but be a bit extra cautious."

Pen took Rayne in his arms and kissed her gently. "I know, kiereen. Come, everything's packed, and I think Tran and Rosta are probably champing at the bit."

The two akosai were pacing back and forth in the courtyard when Rayne and Pen arrived. Fel and Sil were playing "chase me" around the fountain. A small group of castle folk were sweeping the last bit of debris left from the previous evening's celebration.

Rosta snorted with impatience when she spied the royal couple. "About time."

"Rosta." Tran chided her. "They're newlyweds, remember."

She sighed. "You're right. Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesties."

Pen laughed outright. "Rosta, if you weren't impertinent, I'd think you were ill! But you're right. Let's be on our way."

With the ease of frequent practice, the carrybags were distributed between the two akosai, the canids were harnessed, and Rayne and Pen mounted.

Rayne turned to her people gathered in the courtyard and addressed them. "King Pentar and I have been engaged in a mission of great importance to our world. We return now to the kingdom of Narwith having successfully completed our goal, but the battle is still not won. We ask for your prayers and support through the uncertain days ahead."

The high marshal stepped forward and threw his cap into the air. "Three cheers for Queen Rayne and King Pentar! Ratzah! Ratzah! Ratzah!"

And to the echoing sounds of the crowd, the band of triumphant travelers took off.

Chapter Eighteen

“They’re here! They’re here!”

Loran flung open Jareth’s study door, knowing he’d find him and Mirelle ensconced there.

As he’d passed a window opening onto the courtyard, he’d seen the forms of two akosai and their riders and knew at once that it had to be Rayne and Pen.

Mirelle looked up from her laptop, pressed a button, and the images and symbols on the screen blinked out too quickly for Loran to try to decipher them. Although he recognized several words, he still found written English difficult to comprehend. Mirelle had brought back several children’s books, and he was studying them diligently, absorbing the language like a sponge absorbs water. His comprehension of the spoken language was greater. Mirelle said his accent was adorable.

“The akosai and riders are back!”

“Rayne and Pentar? Jareth, did you hear?”

“I heard, kiereen, I heard. Come, let’s go down to meet them!”

Racing down the stairs, they rushed to the courtyard.

Rayne and Pen had just dismounted when they heard a clatter from the archway leading into the castle.

Mirelle, Jareth, and Loran dashed out to greet them, making enough noise to raise the demon of the Book from the dead. The women flung their arms around each other, while Jareth and Pen embraced, then gripped each other’s arms.

They all spoke at once, their eagerness overwhelming them.

“We’ve so much to tell you!”

Laughing Jareth urged Pen to tell his tale first. Deciding to save the most exciting news for last, Pen unfolded their story. "We've been to the edge of the world!"

Jareth harrumphed. "We've been to another world!"

Pen glared, but continued. "We brought back the second part of the Book!"

"We brought back all the knowledge of Earth!"

Pen decided to play his crown card. "We fought a demon and killed it!"

Jareth fumbled for words, then laughed. "Well, you have me there. We were almost attacked by 'cop' creatures, but beat a hasty retreat." He grabbed Pen again and punched him lightly in the ribs. "Ah, brother, 'tis glad I am to see you all back safe and well and the Book in our hands."

Mirelle cut in, hands on her hips, tapping her foot. "If you boys are finished playing who's got the biggest wiener, Rayne has some news of her own."

"Wiener?" Pen whispered to Jareth.

"Don't ask. It's one of Mirelle's Earth words. Ever since we came back, she's been sprinkling them even more in her speech."

Rayne cleared her throat. "Pen and I became soulmates during the quest."

Mirelle ran over and hugged Pen, reaching up on tiptoe to plant a kiss on both cheeks. Looking over her shoulder, she directed a smug smile at Jareth. "See, I told you they were meant for each other!"

"I suppose I'll never hear the end of it now."

Mirelle moved back to Jareth's arms and nodded with satisfaction. "Not for a while, dream boy. C'mon over here, Tran, and tell Jareth your good news."

"Rosta and I mated. She is now my first mate."

Mirelle chuckled. "There's more."

Rayne waved her hand at Fel and Sil. "This is Sil, Fel's shifra, the dam-to-be of his first litter of pups."

"And there's still more," Pen said. "Merkatrosa, the former shakos-ai of the Jakosai also found his soulmate. His name is A'ynos. He's the akosai-tan at the Journeying Ground. Merkatrosa decided to stay there with him."

Loran, who'd remained silent throughout Rayne and Pen's announcements, could no longer hold back his astonishment. "Four pairs of soulmates became joined on your quest? What's in the water over in Tarol? A love potion?"

Akosai laughter joined in with human, but soon Tran stamped his hooves for attention. "But we also suffered a great loss. Asoka-ai, the guardian of the Journeying Ground, gave his life to save Merkatrosa. He was murdered by Prince Metres with an unknown weapon at the Demon's Hump."

“Wait a moment.” Jareth held up his hand to put a halt to the chatter. “Let’s take this conversation inside. Tran, will you and Rosta fly up to the balcony outside my study? It’s on the third floor, the one with the double doors leading onto the balcony.”

Tran nodded. “Rosta and I will meet you there.”

Retracing their steps, the two couples, with the canids trailing behind, entered the castle. When they reached the study, they found Tran and Rosta pacing the balcony.

Jareth nodded with satisfaction and opened the doors wide. “Come inside. I don’t want to discuss anything more out in the open.”

Mirelle wasted no time, but as soon as Tran and Rosta entered began to pace the floor, thinking aloud. “I bet Metres got his hands on a gun!” She turned to the others with unconcealed excitement. “I think Metres used an Earth weapon called a gun to kill a servant during his escape from the castle. If only we could get our hands on it.”

“Could this be what you seek?”

Pen brought one of the carrybags over to the table and opened it up. Handling it as though it were a live kyrscha bug, he drew out an object that Loran instantly identified.

“It is a gun, Mirelle, just like the picture!”

Pen gazed at Loran with astonishment. “You know what this weapon is, Loran?”

“Aye. It’s from Mirelle’s world. She and Jareth went through a rift and brought back information on weapons and a great deal more, but this is wonderful -- an actual gun!” He rubbed his hands with glee, then gazed with curiosity at Pen. “Did you find anything else with it?”

Motioning to the other carry bag, Pen handed it over to Loran. “Here. Everything else we found is in the bag.”

Loran opened it, peering inside with unconcealed excitement. “Fantastic! I believe these are additional parts of the gun; now I can take it apart and figure out exactly how it works!”

Rayne gave Jareth two other bags, gesturing to one of them. “The second part of the *Book of Tocson* is in that one, and in the other are two bowls of lanbeth.” She paused and blushed. “Pen’s and mine, and Merkatrosa’s and A’ynos’s. They’re unlike any I’ve ever heard of. Ours is amber-colored and appears to increase the power and strength of objects. We coated our weapons in it, and the energy that surged through helped destroy the demon.”

Pen delved into the bag and produced a bowl of glistening amber lanbeth. “Merkatrosa and A’ynos’s lanbeth fills the other bowl.”

He then drew it out, causing Jareth, Mirelle, and Loran to gasp.

“It’s bright green!” Mirelle’s exclamation voiced everyone’s surprise. “Have you ever heard of such lanbeth, Jareth?”

He shook his head and turned to Loran. "These samples should be brought to the Council of Mages. They're meeting in Mariess. You can take them with you when you go there."

Loran ran his fingers through his short hair in frustration. "I know that finding the third part of the Book is vital, but I wish it could wait so I could further examine this powerful Earth weapon."

Rayne shook her head. "Loran, Narik must be behind Metres's tracking us. He trailed Pen and me to Tarol with a skimmer, then hitched up with my cousin Sontar." She took a steadying breath. "He's dead, too, trampled to death by the akosai at the Journeying Ground. He'd killed one of my servants while he was at Koralongai. Pen and I believe Metres and Sontar were guided by Narik's magic."

Mirelle nodded. "It has to be him. Who else could travel between Earth and Hearthome except Narik?"

Placing his hands on the table, Jareth leaned forward as he spoke in deadly earnest. "We can't take any more time. Our first priority is preventing the last part of the Book from falling into his hands. Loran, you must go to Mariess. Princess Talea knows those caves better than anyone."

Loran interrupted. "There're rumors abounding that she's ill. She hasn't been seen since before Mirelle returned to Hearthome. How could she help if she's not strong enough to explore the caves?"

Mirelle frowned. "Sounds like you just don't want to depend on a female." She sighed. "What is it with you men? Listen to me, Loran set Morath. You may not be comfortable with women. No, don't pretend otherwise. Your brothers have told me that you keep your nose stuck in your experiments and studies, but you are going, and you will be polite and friendly with Talea." Her voice softened. "Loran, she's very shy. She's led a sheltered life, from what Jareth said."

Loran straightened his shoulders. "You're right, Mirelle. I'll get my stuff together and be off tomorrow."

"Oh, no, you won't!" Rayne stomped her sandal-shod foot, placing her fisted hands on her hips. "You're not going to leave until Pen and I are formally joined before witnesses."

Jareth couldn't remain silent. "Rayne, how can we possibly get a ceremony together as quickly as we'd need to?"

Mirelle placed her hand on his mouth, shushing him. "How big an affair do you want? The emissaries from Tolos, Larbela, and Helar are here. Their presence should surely make your joining official. It's too bad we sent Manar to Mariess to keep the kingdom running smoothly until Princess Talea should find a soulmate. He would have loved to see you joined."

Rayne shook her head. "All I want is to declare before anyone who'll listen that Pen and I are soulmates. That's all."

"Then tomorrow morning, we'll meet in the courtyard." Mirelle grinned. "Why don't you and Pen prepare something to read. Lots of couples do that on Earth when they wed."

Rayne smiled and glanced at Pen. "Sounds like a great idea. What do you think, Pen?"

"If it makes you happy, kiereen."

"It will."

"Then at dawn, as the sun rises at the fountain."

All present agreed.

"At dawn."

* * * * *

"What a day!"

Rayne threw her weary body onto the bed in the suite that Mirelle and Jareth had given them. She watched as Pen came through the door from the bathroom, a towel wrapped low around his hips, his hair still damp and clinging to his shoulders.

"Do you mind staying around for a few days, kiereen?"

Rayne yawned, stretching her arms above her head. The towel she'd wrapped around her body sarong-style slipped, revealing the swell of her breasts. She hitched it up and leaned back against the pillows.

"To be truthful, kerasoko, I'd love to spend a few more days in a real bed." She grinned and patted the space next to her. *"Care to join me?"*

Pen ran his fingers through his hair and smiled down on her. *"I hope you don't intend to sleep away all that time?"*

She shook her head. *"Uh-uh."*

"Good." He waved his hand, and Rayne's towel disappeared. His eyes never leaving hers, he untied the towel concealing his aroused state.

Rayne's breath hissed as she watched him stalk toward the bed. His eyes gleamed, and his mouth firmed as he moved closer. Finally he stood by the bedside. His shaft, so near her face, drew her attention, and she licked her lips.

"See anything you like?"

She nodded. *"Everything."*

Pen placed his knee on the mattress and leaned over, drawing his other leg up and crouching at her side. Shifting, he straddled her body, putting his hands to either side of her shoulders, and leaned further over, the tip of his rod hovering near her moist, curly nest. His gaze softened.

"Kiereen, I ..." He shook his head.

She smiled and reached up, caressing his face. *"I know, kierown. I know. Nothing needs to be said."* She grinned. *"Or thought."* Her hand slipped down his arm and rested on his lean hip. *"Just love me, Pen. Just love me."*

"With all my heart."

Jareth, naked as an unfledged thooba, stretched out on top of the coverlet on the bed, hands behind his head, and admired his soulmate's trim behind as she prepared for bed. He still could scarce believe that he had found her. Yet it galled him to think that it was due to that two-faced bastard Narik that they had become soulmates.

"No, kierown, you must believe that somehow we would have found each other with or without his connivance."

Jareth sighed. *"I wasn't doing a good job of shielding my thoughts, was I?"*

Mirelle smiled and moved over to the bed, her gossamer-thin nightgown revealing rather than concealing her figure. She aligned her body next to Jareth's, pressing her breasts against his chest, her fingers playing with his chest hair.

"You'll never be able to keep me completely out, dream boy. I know we would have connected somehow." She grinned. *"After all, I probably would still be a virgin ... no man on Earth compares with you!"*

Jareth tipped up her chin and kissed her mouth. *"I know."*

Mirelle pushed him and he fell back. *"Behave or I won't let you see the book Rayne lent me."*

"Book?"

Reaching under her pillow, Mirelle drew out a slim leather-bound book and placed it in Jareth's hands.

"Hmmm. The Book of Pleasures." Turning the pages at random, he stopped abruptly at one. *"This belongs to Rayne?"*

Mirelle grinned. *"She and Pen each have one."*

"Have you looked at it yet?"

"Page sixty-three."

Jareth flipped rapidly through the book until he found the page. He looked at it for a second and raised his eyebrows. *"The flying akosa?"*

Mirelle smiled impishly and drew off her gown, tossing it carelessly to the floor. *"Want to take a ride, dream boy?"*

Jareth carefully slipped the book under his pillow. *"Spread your wings, heart's love."*

Mirelle rolled over face-down on the bed, her arms and legs wide. Jareth knelt between her thighs and slid his hands beneath her hips, lifting up her derriere until his prick was positioned just right.

With a sweeping motion of her arms, Mirelle brought her hands behind her, gripping Jareth's thighs. With Jareth supporting her, she eased onto his shaft, sinking down until he was seated to the hilt.

Mirelle gasped as she felt his full length thrust into her. Moisture pooled within her, lubricating his flesh.

Moving slowly, at a gentle canter, they began to fly.

Trusting in Jareth's strength, Mirelle released her grip on his thighs and brought her arms forward and up with a broad movement, raising them above her head, arching her back, and thrusting her buttocks hard against Jareth. Repeating both movements created the feeling of akosa wings soaring in the sky.

Their passion increased as they flew faster and faster. As desire overwhelmed them, Mirelle simply held onto Jareth, her fingers digging into his skin.

He leaned forward, grabbing onto the headboard with one hand and gripping Mirelle's waist with the other. Sweat poured from their bodies, and the lanbeth gathered above them.

Their panting breaths filled the room, and their thoughts were a jumble of desire and love.

The glistening silver and crimson particles pulsed, throbbing as erratically as their heartbeats.

Then their climax struck, toppling them from the heights like an akosa plummet to the ground before sweeping up to the heavens again.

The lanbeth fell, covering them with glittering dust, and Jareth collapsed atop Mirelle, quickly rolling off her.

"Do you have to return the book to Rayne?"

Mirelle's thoughts took on an impish tone. *"I can scan the pictures with a handheld scanner I brought with me and transfer them to the laptop."*

"Does that mean you can copy it?"

"Sure does. Shall we try page nineteen?"

Jareth took a deep breath and grinned. *"You read me like a book, dream hole."*

Mirelle turned to her side and pinched Jareth's arm. *"Dream hole! I'll show you, dream boy!"*

His grin even wider, Jareth pinned Mirelle's shoulders to the bed. *"I surely hope you do, kiereen. I surely hope you do."*

* * * * *

The next day dawned bright and clear. Mirelle, Jareth, Loran, Tran, and Rosta waited along with all the castle staff for Rayne and Pen to appear. The representatives from Tolos, Larbela, and Helar sat together on one side of the fountain.

Mirelle, seated next to Jareth, held her *clarsha* in her arms, her fingers poised to strike a welcoming chord.

Suddenly, Rayne and Pen appeared in the archway leading from the castle. The crowd gasped as they moved into the sunlight.

Rayne wore the traditional garb of a Jakosai female. Her short, kilted skirt reached just below her thighs and dipped low on her waist, revealing a flat stomach and a dimpled navel. Her vest, tied tightly with elaborate knots, ended just below the fullness of her breasts. Her wristband gripped her slim left wrist. Her hair, drawn into a high akosa tail, reached to her mid back. Simple sandals graced her feet. Prancing at the end of a short lead was Fel.

Pentar's garments revealed a muscular physique that caused many a female heart to flutter.

He, too, had donned Jakosai garb, but a male Jakosai wore even less than a female. His outfit consisted solely of a knee-length leather kilt. Laced-up sandals displayed large, strong, masculine feet. Belted around his lean waist hung his sword, Blood Drinker. His lean, muscular chest and arms were bare. His shoulder-length hair swung freely, and his mage-blue eyes blazed. In his right hand he held a lead attached to Sil's collar.

Such a sight had never before been seen in Narwith.

As they strode into the courtyard, Mirelle strummed a lively, unfamiliar tune.

"Did you compose this for them, kiereen?"

Smiling and still strumming, she shook her head and tapped her toes. *"It's an Earth tune I arranged in their honor. It's called 'A Hunk of Burning Love.'"*

Jareth smothered a laugh and directed an admonishing thought to her. *"You are very naughty, dream hole. 'Tis a good thing that no one knows the name of this tune. And they'll never hear it from me."*

The couple drew near the fountain and handed off Fel and Sil to Loran. Facing the crowd, Rayne raised her hand for silence.

"Today, I stand before you with my soulmate, Prince Pentar set Morath, dressed in the clothes of the Jakosai people of my country. It was only through their aid that Pen and I are with you today.

"Our love has been tested through trials that most, fortunately, will never know." She turned to Pen. "Pen, I have loved you forever and will love you forever. With you, I am stronger than I am alone." She smiled. "And I know that you are stronger with me. We're a team. Two souls destined to be as one. I entrust my heart and soul and body to you, and the welfare of my people I place in your hands."

Pen cleared his throat and reached for Rayne's hands. "I can't add much more to Rayne's words because she echoes my thoughts and feelings." He brought her hands to his lips and kissed her fingertips. "She is my love and my life. I know no one more courageous or more giving than she." He grinned. "Or more obstinate."

Rayne laughed and Pen continued. "I've made it my vow to bring laughter to her each day, and so far I've succeeded. I only pray that the Great Maker will let me bring love and joy to her till the end of my days."

Jareth stepped forward and raised both hands. "Let us all celebrate Queen Rayne and King Pentar of Tarol! Ratzah! Ratzah! Ratzah!"

The air resounded with unfettered cheers as Rayne and Pen kissed.

And Mirelle played Elvis Presley on the clarsha.

Loran watched the festivities and sighed. He was still torn between the thrill of examining the wonders of Mirelle's Earth and his obligation to discover and reclaim the last portion of the *Book of Tocson*. But he knew where his duty lay. He already had a skimmer ensorcelled to take him to Mariess. His bags were packed, and he need only make his farewells.

He moved to the table where his brothers and their soulmates were seated. Jareth turned as Loran approached and beckoned him over. "So, are you ready?"

"As much as I can be." He paused. "I'm going to look in the cave we found that last summer we were in Mariess as kids."

"The Cave of Arlette and Keret?"

Mirelle overhearing the two talking, piped in. "Oh, yes, the cave." She sighed. "I remember it well." She sighed again and moved her chair closer to Jareth. "I'll never forget it."

"I thought we had explored it pretty thoroughly when we were kids, but that's where the third portion of the Book should be. Let's hope I find it quickly. I really don't want to get Princess Talea involved. Poor girl, she's gone through a lot in her life."

"I know. Her father was a filthy lecher. After all, he invited me back to his apartments for a 'private audition.' That was when the potion Narik gave us turned out to be poison and killed the randy old goat."

"Randy goat? I know, more Earth language." Loran shuddered and made a moue of disgust. "Even her half-brother, Prince Orath, has tried to make free with Talea. Or so I've heard," he added hurriedly. "Now that I think of it, I haven't seen that slimy partour lately. Wonder if he went back to his mother's kingdom of Helar?" He shrugged. "One less problem to worry about. Mirelle, would you mind if I took that book you brought back? I'd like to continue practicing my reading skills."

"Of course not, Lor. In fact, take the other books, too. There are a couple, geared for teenagers, that are more difficult. Just underline whatever you don't understand, and we'll go over it next time we meet."

"Thanks." He looked around the courtyard and realized that now would probably be a good time to slip away, while everyone was preoccupied.

"I'm just going to say goodbye to Rayne and Pen. You'll give my farewells to Tran and Rosta?"

Jareth nodded, started to say something, then stopped, shook his head, and grabbed Loran in a tight hug. "Damn it, man, take care of yourself. Don't underestimate Narik. We don't know whom he has under his control. Find the Book, bring it back, and make it quick."

Loran clicked his heels and bowed. "Yes, sir. As you wish."

"Fool!"

"Mage!"

"Brother!" Jareth held out his hand and Loran grasped it.

"Brother!"

"You called?" Pen drew closer, Rayne's hand in his. "You're leaving now?"

Loran nodded. "The skimmer is waiting." He gripped Pen's hand. "You're a lucky man, my brother, to find not only the Book but your soulmate. I only hope I succeed in my part of the task. Narik is a cunning bastard. I think that gun is just the beginning of his plans. Mirelle showed me even more powerful Earth weapons. Let's pray that he never gets his hands on any of them."

Pen interrupted. "But he'd need an army, and he has none!"

Jareth frowned. "Nor do we." He turned to Pen. "I hate to ask this of you and Rayne, but you're the only ones on Hearthome who have this experience. Can you direct the smith guilds and the fletchers to create more weapons like yours with the added touch of the amber lanbeth?"

"We'll need an army, Jareth." Mirelle reminded him. "We'll send out a call to arms. Tran and Rosta and the other akosai can disperse the message."

Jareth nodded. "And Pen and Rayne can train them. Are you game?"

The two nodded.

Loran gazed at his brothers and their soulmates. Four more courageous people, he'd never known. He grimaced. It took no courage to explore the caves. He sighed. He knew where his strengths lay -- in his mind.

And his mind was a powerful weapon.

Would it be strong enough to succeed in his part of the quest?

He prayed so.

Epilogue

Earth -- New York City

Melvin Stevens, self-dubbed “Lucky,” stopped for a moment to check his appearance in the storefront window.

Safari jacket, clean and pressed. Denim jeans, faded and low on the hip. Hiking boots, just scuffed enough to look well used. His hat, an exact replica of the one worn by Harrison Ford in the Indiana Jones movies, tipped at a rakish angle.

He smiled with satisfaction. Excellent! Slinging his duffle bag over his shoulder, he continued on his way.

He seethed with excitement. Today might be the day he would fulfill the dream he’d had since he was a snot-nosed kid in Brooklyn.

He’d learned every form of hand-to-hand combat, could shoot the eye out of pigeon on the fly, could put together and take apart just about every type of firearm. He spoke Russian, French, Spanish, and a smattering of several Asian languages. He knew about security devices and surveillance equipment.

And all that talent had been going to waste.

Until now.

The ad he’d found in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine had been simple. A call for someone to train a new team in every aspect of security. What enticed him the most was the requirement to be ready immediately for travel if selected. No mention of where, but Lucky didn’t care. At the age of forty, he had endured several boring, dead-end jobs, all while priming himself for this chance of a lifetime.

He reached the address. An unassuming second-floor office in midtown.

It was now or never.

A masculine voice answered the bell and buzzed him up. He noted that the interior was far more clean and expensive-looking than the outside would lead one to believe.

Number 206. Just a number, no company name on the door. He knocked once and entered as the voice on the intercom had indicated.

The inside of the office further astonished him. Plush. Cool and comfortable contrasted with the summer air. Paneled walls. An expensive, sleek mahogany desk, though no file cabinets.

Behind the desk sat a man who matched the interior of the room. Plush, sleek, and cool. Dressed in an elegantly tailored suit, he sat with his hands flat in front of him on the desk. Lucky recognized his resume lying before the man.

He took a deep, steadying breath, cleared his throat, walked over to the man, and stuck out his hand.

"Mr. Belar. Melvin Stevens, known to my friends as Lucky."

The man gazed at Lucky's extended hand, then up at him, and spoke in an accent Lucky couldn't quite place.

"Orath Belar, please. Mr. Stevens, your resume and application impressed us. I'd just like to confirm a few things." He gestured to the straight-backed chair placed at an angle to the desk, and Lucky sat down, setting his duffle bag at his feet.

"What do you want to know?"

"Just checking. You're single, no issue?"

Lucky grinned. "Not even tripped down the aisle."

His light crack didn't draw even a change of expression.

Tough house.

"Yes. No family and presently unemployed?"

Lucky squirmed a bit. "Just between jobs."

"As you say. So, were you to be offered the job, you could leave immediately?"

Lucky nodded, holding his breath.

"I see you've no actual military experience."

Damn. The one big gap in his background and nothing he could do anything about. "Medical. They wouldn't take me."

A raised eyebrow.

Lucky hurried to assure Belar of his ability to fill the position. "Allergies. Under control with medication, but in combat you can't be worrying about breaking out into hives or your windpipe constricting."

Lucky noted the look of fascination on Orath Belar's face.

"I don't think you need be concerned about allergies, Mr. Stevens, not where you'd be going."

Hope soared in Lucky's heart. "Do you mean, you're considering me for the position?"

Belar smiled. At least the corners of his mouth lifted up briefly. "I think I can speak for my employer. Mr. Stevens, you're hired."

Lucky wanted to jump up on the desk and do the dance of joy. Instead, he tamped down his feeling of exaltation and tried to speak calmly. "Where and when do we go, Mr. Belar?"

"Just need you to look over the contract. Make sure you agree to the terms and, of course, the fee." He took several sheets of paper clipped together and read down the page. "Now, the fee. Does this suit you?"

He pushed the top sheet over and Lucky took in the amount with disbelief. "Very generous."

"Good. I see you have your bag with you. Excellent."

Lucky smiled. "I didn't know where I might be going, so I packed for every climate." He paused. "All my shots are up to date, and my passport is, too. Just where is it your company is located? I tried, but I can't quite recognize your accent."

Belar stood and came around to the other side of the desk. He stopped directly in front of Lucky.

And smiled again.

"I wouldn't think you could identify my accent, Mr. Stevens. Now, why don't you take your bag and stand up."

Lucky stood; he couldn't seem to help himself.

Belar reached out and gripped his hand. "Are you ready?"

"Ready?"

"Yes." He grinned.

And for the first time Lucky felt afraid. "Ah, Mr. Belar, I think I might want to think about the position a bit more."

Belar shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Stevens, you're just what we're looking for." He smiled again. "Now, here's something I bet you never expected to hear." He whipped his arms around Lucky, hugging him tight. "Beam me up, Narik."

"Narik?"

And they were gone.



Jeanne Barrack

Jeanne is a native New Yorker, married for thirty-odd years (and they have been odd) to her high school sweetheart. Although they haven't been blessed with children, they still have heard the pitter-patter of little Tibetan Terriers paws all their married life.

She studied voice privately and sings everything from folk music to Grand opera and in ten languages, including Gaelic and Hebrew.

Jeanne's love of fantasy began at the age of ten when she got her hands on her older brother's Ray Bradbury books. Her love of romance started when she read the galley proofs for a steamy Rosemary Rogers romance. Dealt a double whammy six years ago by her mother's death and being downsized from her job, Jeanne turned to her dreams and lo and behold, found Silver Fire which combined her two loves of fantasy and sexy romance. Rewrites and edits and contests followed. Life and other projects put it on the back burner until this year, when, all spiffed up, she sent it off to Loose Id where it found a home.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Tales of Enchantment 2: The Quest

by Kai Andersen

Available Now from Loose Id

Tales of Enchantment 2: The Quest

“There's no need to apologize, Your Highness. We servants learn to take these things in stride.”

Uh-oh. She wished he would go back to calling her *Princess*, anything but that insufferable *Your Highness*.

“Look, Rodin, you know I don't apologize easily. Won't you be gracious and accept it?” She looked at his stiff profile beseechingly.

He saw her expression and chuckled. “All right.”

Relief flooded over her. She hadn't been aware of how much she treasured Rodin's friendship until that moment.

“Thanks.” Her head bent, but the flower was blurred. “It's just the pressure of the past few days, I guess, and then Michael's sent off on a quest, and I miss him, and everything was just too much -- Ow!”

She had pricked her finger on a thorn, and a blurred red dot was blossoming. She dropped the rose and dashed her tears away with the other hand.

Rodin was beside her in a flash, petals flying everywhere as he waded through them. “Let me see that.” He grasped her hand, tipping her fingers toward himself. He wiped the blood away gently and probed for a thorn. With relief in his voice, he said, “You just broke the skin. You're lucky a splinter didn't embed itself in your --”

Giselda knew why he suddenly stopped. He had looked up and seen how his nearness was affecting her, how she couldn't stop the rush of desire rippling through her at his touch. She had always been so transparent.

In that instant, rank fell away. She was just a woman, and he a man.

His green eyes holding hers, he lifted her hand and sucked on the wounded finger. She gasped as molten heat ran through her veins. He sucked alternately on each digit of her hand, feeding the fire burning in her and inciting a strange yearning to have those lips on her lips, on her breasts. His mouth was hot, pulling deeply as he sucked. The raw look of lust on his face and the sight of him sucking on her fingers built her excitement and increased her desire.

Holding her fingers away from his mouth, he sat on the bench and bent toward her. The desire in his eyes slammed into her, making it hard for her to breathe. One hand cupped her cheek as he murmured, “Perhaps this is what you miss,” and then his lips covered hers, dry and firm and intent. The kiss wasn't gentle, but wild and passionate, turbulent and freeing. His tongue stroked across her lips, strong and vibrant and seeking.

At first she was overwhelmed, but then she responded, just as wildly and passionately. Her arms went around his neck, and her mouth opened and invited his tongue to taste her honeyed depths, meeting him boldly and stroking back eagerly.

“So passionate,” he murmured when they came up for air. “Just as I dreamed.”

Before she could even think, his lips had swooped down to reclaim hers for another heated kiss. With his hand supporting her back, she reclined slowly on the bench, pulling him down with her. Their exploration of each other's mouths continued, savoring, lingering, memorizing.

She made a slight sound of protest when he lifted his head to say, “And maybe you missed this.”

His heated mouth captured a painfully tight nipple, sucking strongly, pulling her breast into his mouth. She moaned, not knowing when he had unbuttoned her bodice, knowing only that he mustn't stop. He nuzzled against her bare skin, his hair falling softly and grazing the sensitive skin of her breast. His fingers rolled and rubbed the neglected nipple, twitching it until it was as tight and hard as its twin.

“I will make you forget him.”

She moaned again, both excited by his words and caught in the turbulent sensations coursing through her. He transferred to the other breast, enveloping her nipple with his mouth. He teased the hard nub with stabbing motions of his tongue, causing her to cry out at the intensity, desire pooling between her thighs.

His fingers worked nimbly and dispensed with the buttons all the way down her dress in record time. It was a new fashion created by Madame Beauvoir, and Giselda had worn it that day in an effort to lift her spirits. She'd never imagined that it would pave an easy way for him to access her bare skin, for his lips to dance down her ribs, across her abdomen, teasing at her navel, before burying themselves in the black curls between her thighs, his hot breath toying with her pussy.

She felt ... she didn't know ...

She whimpered.

Cool air feathered across her breasts, and she missed the touch of his lips on them. She brought her hands up and played with her nipples as he had a while ago, pinching hard, intensely aware of another fire kindling in her lower body. His hands lifted her buttocks, and she arched into his mouth, willing him to continue the tormenting pleasure. His tongue reached out and licked her. Her breath hitched. He stabbed against her moist recesses, lapping at her juices. Her whimpering cries echoed in her ears. She was aware of something building within her, a strange and tight tension, pressure ...

His tongue curled around a hard nub, a place she soon discovered was the center of all her pleasure. He sucked repeatedly, strongly, holding her hips immobile as he continued his ministrations, and splinters of pleasure pierced through her. Her pussy spasmed, and she

bucked and arched and writhed in frantic movements against his mouth. She screamed as the sensations overtook her. “Oh, gods!”

Finally, she lay still, complete lethargy invading her muscles. His face was still buried in her pussy, his tongue making soothing swipes among her folds, at her clitoris. She shuddered, a mini-orgasm rippling through her.

Now she knew. She couldn't begin to describe the things she had felt -- it was *that good* -- but she now knew what it was that drove men to seek their pleasure between a woman's thighs. Er, but why did he not ...?

He kissed her thigh, pulling the soft flesh into his mouth and effectively distracting her from her thoughts. Her pussy throbbed. After laying her back down on the bench, he moved until he was sitting beside her upper body. He bent his head, and she tasted her own juices on his lips. Instead of being repulsed, she thrilled to the added dimension of intimacy between them.

“Say my name!” he demanded against her lips.

She moaned and cupped his cheek, loving the rough feel of his skin under her fingertips.

“I want you to know --” His tongue teased the shell of her ear. “-- that it's not the gods who are responsible --” His tongue stabbed into her ear, sending streaks of pleasure through her. “-- for this, but me. Rodin. Say it!”

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Tales of Enchantment 2: The Quest

Ms. Andersen's characters are why this book works so well. *The Quest* is the sequel to *The Question of Royalty* in the Tales of Enchantment series, and I enjoy how true the characters stay to the first book. There is a new depth to Giselda and Rodin, making them very sympathetic... The use of family, court politics, enchantment, and beautifully written sex made *The Quest* an exceptional book, and one I can recommend to anyone.

-- Anya Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*