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Gift of the Goddess

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Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

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GIFT OF THEGODDESS

Denise Rossetti

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Chapter One

Hssrda (sing. Hssrdan):

Hybrid race, saurian-human. Most authorities believe the Hssrda were created as slave-soldiers by the Firsters, using the magical craft referred to in the ancient texts as “gene-splicing”. (See Firsters—Magic) However, popular legend recalls a single individual, the so-called “Mad Mage”. (See Ballads, Traditional).

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriel the Burnished.

There was a beautiful man below, bathing in the pool. Anje settled herself against the warm rock at her back and stared down into the sheltered valley. Mother be praised, there was nothing wrong with her eyes!

He'd sauntered out of a fancy tent, naked as the day he was born, and paused on a sun-baked rock for a luxurious, rib-twisting stretch. The action lifted his ribcage in an elegant sculpture that flowed from chest to flat belly to slim, strong thigh. With his fists held high over his head, she could even make out the soft patches of auburn hair tufting his armpits.

Then he'd plunged into the tawny mirror of the pool, creating ripples that lapped gently against the shallow banks.

When his head finally broke the water, his red-gold hair was wet copper, plastered to the strong shape of his skull. He huffed out a laugh, sporting like an acrobatic fish, and Anje's lips curved with pleasure. Just a little longer, a very private indulgence. Then she'd do her duty and warn the idiot he was Hssrda-bait.

She studied the tethered vranee cropping contentedly at the underbrush, their feathered necks gleaming in the afternoon sun. Two sturdy pack-beasts and two stallions, one black, the other that turquoise under smoke color so prized throughout the Ten Nations. Either animal was worth more gold marks than she'd see in her lifetime.

The man stroking across the pool was a fool. She'd crossed the spoor of a Hssrda hunting party three days ago. Give the cold-blooded monsters one glimpse of such careless wealth and beauty and he'd be on an auction block before he could blink—shaved, bound and helpless.

Despite herself, she shivered.*Hssrda* .

Millennia ago, a dark mage had desired a race of slave-soldiers, so he'd tampered with the very stuff of life, twisting and forcing it to his own fell purpose. The mage was successful beyond his wildest dreams—or nightmares. As they climbed from the vat, his reptilian creations devoured him with relish, piece by screaming piece.

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And now, thousands of years later, the Hssrda still feasted on human flesh and misery, so alien, soother, as to be beyond understanding.

Anje scanned a full circle, seeking with her scout's senses. It was still, save for the jingle of harness and an occasional splash.

Such sheer exuberance was engaging. It had been a long time since she'd seen joy unabashed.

Three years to be precise.

Deklan used to laugh like that when she rode him hard, raking his skin with her nails, loving him, loving the brutal climaxes she wrung from him. She'd not met another man who pleased her so.

But Deklan was long gone, his throat a fountain of blood in the clawed fist of a Hssrdan. Swallowing hard, she put the hideous memory aside, replacing it with the delicious sight of taut, muscled buttocks, gleaming like ivory as the swimmer turned and dived. He emerged shaking the drops from his hair in a great plume of spray.

Anje leaned forward, her mouth watering, and the hard twist of old grief receded, like a scar settling soft and deep in her flesh. The breath drummed in her chest, rucking her nipples to needy points.

On the order of the Matriarchs, she'd been scouting three long months in the Empty Lands. Mother, how she longed for home! Her lips twisted. Not long now. She'd reached the final leg of her circuit, having learned more about the Hssrda than she'd ever wanted to know.

She had no time for dalliance, no matter how enticing the object.

But for now... Sweet Mother, just a glimpse, a taste of real man, of warm, hard cock to take with her to her solitary bedroll beside the campfire.

When he paused, treading water, and glanced back over his shoulder, her gaze followed his. A second man emerged from the tent. The breath left her in a gusty rush.

Mother have mercy!

Where the first man was lithe and compact, this one was a giant, as dark as his companion was fair, with black hair that fell to his shoulders, soft and straight as rain. He wore black leather trousers that clung to his body like a second skin. Even at this distance, Anje could see the snug way they molded his powerful thighs and the bulge of his groin.

His chest was massive, furred with dark curls, his shoulders the width of a temple door. As he strode to the water's edge, Anje glued her eyes to the high, firm shape of his ass, the muscles shifting fluidly as he walked.

He stood on the projecting rock and reached down a hand as Red stroked to the edge to meet him. With no discernable effort, he grasped the other man's forearm, hauling him out of the water and hard into his arms, the fair skin a piquant contrast to his bronzed chest.

Anje stifled a whimper.

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But the dark warrior merely steadied Red and said something she was too far away to hear. He swatted him on the rump and strolled back to the tent.

Red stood on his rock, a grin splitting his face. Still enjoying his private joke, he stretched out on his back and closed his eyes, turning his face up to the Sun and its Shadow. The light glinted gold on the fine hair on his chest. His cock lay quiescent, curving sweetly, nestled in coppery-brown curls.

Anje smoothed a hand over her aching breasts and pressed her thighs together. Gods, he was as lovely as a pleasure slave! Now if he'd only lie still long enough for her to fix his image in her mind. What a wonderful plaything this memory would be until she returned to Mother's Hearth!

Then, oh then.

One hand snaked beneath her loose, mud-stained trousers. She'd hire the prettiest male in the Pleasure Quarter and demand he dye his hair red-gold.

All of it.

Red's fingers strayed across his chest, over the ridged muscles of his stomach and down to his groin. Idly, he took hold of his cock in one hand and caressed it. Anje couldn't drag her eyes away. Almost as though he felt the weight of her gaze, he rolled his hip toward her so her view was unobstructed. His fingers smoothed up and down and his cock stirred, swelling slowly, beautifully.

Red circled his palm over the broad head and it jerked against his belly. He pressed two fingers under the glans and worked the foreskin up and over. His eyes fluttered open and Anje thought his chest rose and fell in a sigh. The muscles in his throat corded. Languidly, he ran his palm down the full length and back up again.

She could see a shiver run over his skin. The sculpted muscles of his chest expanded as he dragged in a breath. Panting, she leaned forward.

Red grasped his cock firmly in one fist and began to pump in earnest. Gods, she wouldn't be so rough with such a pretty toy. His head fell back and his eyes slid shut. A flush climbed from the level of his nipples up to his throat and cheeks. His brows drew together in concentration and his free hand clenched and opened, clenched and opened.

Beneath her grubby clothing, Anje smoothed trembling fingers over her belly and furrowed through her pubic hair until she found slick, hot flesh. She was so wet her thighs were smeared with her own juices. Swallowing a moan, she circled her fingertips over the swollen bead of her clit, pressing hard. Red was gasping now, his hips arching, buttocks hollowed with tension, his hand a moving blur.

Anje bit her lip, concentrating. Almost, almost... Together... Beads of sweat sprang up on her forehead, she didn't need to look down to know her breasts would be flushed, the nipples stiff and distended.

What was that?

Something had moved on the periphery of her concentration. She froze, listening, extending all her senses. Yes, there...

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Anje drifted back into the brush, abandoning her pleasure with no little regret. It was a sad truth that careless scouts led short lives of unbearable excitement.

When the attack came, it was from behind. She barely saw him coming, he moved so fast. She spun around, but before she could take another step, the bruising impact of a big body jolted the breath out of her.

A steel band circled her ribs, clamping her arm to her stomach and a hard hand clapped over her mouth. She was lifted clean off her feet. The man grunted with satisfaction, his breath warm against her ear, and strode off down the slope as if she weighed less than nothing.

The shock of it held her immobile for an instant.

Mother strike her for her stupid lust!

More furious with herself than with her captor, she twisted her long, lithe body with the agility of a trained warrior, reaching for the knife strapped to her forearm. But the man merely grunted and jammed a brawny arm across her throat. Cursing, she dug her elbow into his midriff, but she might as well have assaulted a wall.

By the time they reached the clearing around the pool, Anje realized how truly stupid she'd been. Red came out of the tent, wearing trews and lacing his shirt, still grinning his damn head off. She growled, deep in her throat, almost beside herself with rage and self-disgust. Oh, but they'd fooled her finely! Fear ran chilly fingers down her spine, but she set her jaw and ignored it. Panic would profit her nothing.

"What did you catch?" Red stepped forward. Amusement shone clear in his face and it seemed to her it was an expression he wore often. His features were made for laughter, from the absurd splash of freckles across his nose and cheekbones, to the quirky tilt of his red-gold brows.

Only a knotted scar on the side of his jaw and a seriously carnal lower lip belied the first impression. That, and the hard perfection of the warrior's body she'd studied in all its masculine glory.

The dark one dropped her in the dust at his companion's feet. She still hadn't got a clear look at his face. "See for yourself," he grunted.

"A boy?" Red's brow creased as he stared at her. "But what would a boy be doing alone in the Empty Lands?"

"Nothing." The giant wrapped a big hand around her upper arm and hoisted her to her feet. "Because this is not a boy."

He grabbed one end of the rag she'd wound around her head and pulled. The rough coil of her hair sagged and came slowly free, unraveling until it fell almost to her waist.

Anje was too preoccupied to register Red's expression. She palmed her knife and slashed at the hand on her arm, but the dark warrior shifted his grip to her wrist and the blade clattered to the ground. Before she could set herself again, he'd pinioned her arms, pulling her back against his chest. She was accounted tall among her peers, but

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the top of her head reached only to the middle of his massive chest. Mother, he was huge!

She caught a whiff of man-sweat. For one who had won the palm two years running at the Games of the Mother, such a casual display of strength was galling to her pride. She bit her lip. A warrior she was, as well as a scout, but it wasn't physically possible for her to fight like a man.

Let alone think like one, Mother be praised!

Her center of gravity was different, her strengths and skills all her own. She knew how to wait. It was a question of having the nerve to bide her time and then... She smothered the snarl in her throat.

“And you say the gods ignore your prayers.” The giant’s deep voice purred from behind her. She couldn’t place the accent, a soft burr. There was a laugh in it, though he did sound a trifle short of breath.

“Ay,” breathed Red, his eyes shining. He wasn’t much taller than she was. “Hold her steady, Brin.” He picked up the knife.

Anje writhed, her guts heaving, and the big man’s grip tightened. “Don’t panic, lass. We won’t hurt you. Gods, what a stink! Do it, Trey.”

Red gripped her shirt at the neck and in one motion, sliced it straight down the middle. Then he cut the drawstring holding up her baggy pants. She wore nothing beneath but a breastband, loincloth and soft boots.

A cold wave of terror followed the point of the knife, something so primitive and quintessentially female, she wasn’t able to will it away. A moan spilled out of her. “No...don’t...”

Brin growled. “And the rest.” Anje felt the reverberations where her shoulder blades were pressed to the hard, furred wall of his chest. His flesh was furnace hot against hers.

Trey took her breastband between forefinger and thumb and slit the lacings, careful not to touch her skin. For a hideous moment, spots danced before her eyes. When she fought the fear, clenching her fists, her fingers were icy cold against her own palms.

Her breasts bobbed free, nipples crimping in the open air. The body at her back went completely still. Before her, Trey was as rigid as a temple carving.

Brin imprisoned both her wrists behind her in one big hand and she cursed, flinging her head back, trying to bite him. He simply swayed out of her reach and tugged at the knot of her loincloth with his free hand. It slithered down to pool with the pants at her feet.

Trey stepped back. “Sweet Lufra!” The freckles stood out clearly against the fair skin of his cheek.

A warrior of the Mother could not be cowed. Anje gripped her fear by the throat, though the effort had her panting like a runner. With sheer force of will, she

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straightened her spine and glared. “What’s the matter, sonny? Not seen a real woman before?”

Brin was so tall that his grip had her on tiptoe. The posture made her breasts jut out hard.

“Oh yes.” Trey ran a hand over his damp hair. Beginning to dry, the rebellious locks coiled playfully at his temples. His gaze traveled up the length of her legs and locked on the dark curls between her thighs. “But not one the image of Lufra.” His voice was a near whisper.

“Who the hell’s Lufra?”

Brin rumbled, “Wait.” She heard the rasp of his belt as he drew it through the loops of his trews and felt the leather tighten around her wrists. When he moved away from her, she staggered without the support of his body. “Let me see.”

“I am not some animal at market!” Anger gave her strength. Her voice hardly shook. “Will you check my teeth?”

Anje glared as Brin moved fully into her line of sight for the first time. She had to tilt her head back to do it and that should have pissed her off—except she couldn’t think.

Her brain gibbered.

She’d thought Trey eclipsed most first-grade pleasure slaves, but Brin stopped the very breath in her lungs.

He wasn’t pretty, not even close. Nor handsome.

He was pure power, primal domination. The sheer size of him was impressive enough, the strong column of his throat, the muscled slabs of his pectorals, the long, brawny thighs. His physical presence alone was intimidating, but his eyes!

They were long-lidded, fathomless. Midnight eyes, framed by inky lashes. The tiny part of her mind still functioning noted slashing cheekbones, a high-bridged nose and a firm, beautiful mouth. But she couldn’t drag her stare away from his, from the cool intelligence shining there, the adamantine will.

If Trey was warm, sweet fire, this man was night. Deepest, darkest, midnight and velvet. Beautiful.

And infinitely dangerous.

Her soul stirred, recognizing his strength. Even Deklan would have accorded him wary respect. Something feral within her reared up and growled a challenge.

A dark brow winged up in response. “No,” said Brin softly. “We wouldn’t sell you.”

He stepped forward and put a gentle hand on her hip, pushing her around. She felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck. “But there are others who would do that and worse. A woman wandering alone in the Empty Lands becomes the spoils of war.”

“That makes you a saint, does it?” A hand caressed the curve of her buttock fleetingly. She thought it trembled. “Who’s Lufra?”

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Brin murmured, “Turn around.”

Slowly, Anje shuffled back to face him. His onyx eyes were fixed on hers, hard and inscrutable. “Lufra is the goddess of the Feolin people. You haven’t heard of Her?”

Feolin. She knew little of them, though they were counted among the Ten Nations. She shook her head. “The world is full of minor deities.”

“True.” Brin inclined his head, not at all disturbed. “But Lufra is known through all the lands of men. She is the Lust Dragon, the desire at the core of flame. There’s not a man alive who doesn’t dream of Her, long to worship between Her thighs. For we of the Feolin, she is mother, lover and protector among the pantheon of gods. Our patron.”

Anje shrugged, using the movement to test her bonds. Damn him, he knew what he was about. "So?"

Graceful as a dancer, Trey moved forward. He cocked his head to one side, his attention focused on her left breast. Infinitely slowly, he raised one finger and stroked the pad across her nipple, featherlight. Anje gasped and her nipple budded.

Had he come, out there on the rock?

Oh, this was insane!

She took a step back, but Trey followed. He glanced at his impassive companion. "What do you think, Brin?"

"I think we've found her." The dark warrior grasped her chin in hard fingers and lifted it. He stared into her face, his gaze traveling from her eyes to her mouth. There was a flush on his high cheekbones, a curve of satisfaction to his lips. "Now I can sleep in peace."

"*Sleep?* What—"

"I've dreamed of you, your face, your body." He touched her lower lip with his broad thumb, very gently, and she shivered. "Every night for a month. The Goddess has led us to you. You're Lufra's Gift, the salvation of our people."

A cold, gray void blossomed beneath her breastbone. She could barely breathe. "You've lost your mind! I'm no one's *gift*!"

Without releasing her from his stare, he growled, "You're the poet, Trey. Tell her about the Goddess." His eyes were enigmatic, compelling, sucking at her soul, her self-possession. Despising herself, she squared her shoulders and fought to keep her nerve.

"Silver flames burn white-hot in Lufra's violet eyes," said Trey. The way he spoke weighted the words with the cadence of poetry. Or a hymn. "The man who feels Her perfect mouth on his cock may die, but he gives up his soul with joy. There have been poems written solely for the clouds of Her hair, spun of the night."

Brin sifted long fingers through the dusty tangle of Anje's braids. When she jerked her head aside, his lips twitched.

Trey pressed his warmth against her side. He smelled clean and masculine. "Her neck is like the stem of a flower and Her breasts..." His knuckles glided over Anje's collarbones and for a moment, words seemed to desert him.

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She clenched the whimper behind her teeth. It must be some kind of magic. The richness of his cool, sweet voice was like a sensual spell.

Holding her gaze, Trey drifted a fingertip to her areola and circled. Anje flinched. "She has broad dark nipples, like yours. And when She is brought to arousal, they stand long and proud and they beg." He glanced down again and one corner of his luscious mouth kicked up. "Like yours."

“I’m frightened, you fool. What did you expect?”

“That’s as may be.” Brin’s deep voice was dry. “But I wonder how much is fear and how much fury?”

Anje’s eyes flew to his and for a second, she let her rage slip the leash and burn, clear to see. Brin looked pleased.

“Mmm.” Trey made a noise of appreciation deep in his throat. Slowly, he ran both hands over her ribs and her hips and a tingling wave of sensation followed his touch. “The curve between Her waist and Her ass is like music.”

He moved behind her and cupped her buttocks in his hands. When his thumbs ran down the soft cleft, she jerked away, only to collide with the warm wall of Brin’s body in front of her. His eyes gleamed, almost as if there were flames hidden in the black depths. “Nothing is forbidden to Lufra,” he rumbled in his dark baritone. “Nothing.”

Anje dragged in a breath. Her heart thundered. “So what?” she said. “You can buy a Lufra any night in the Pleasure Quarter of Mother’s Hearth.”

Brin stared at her in silence. Then he bowed his head in an oddly respectful gesture. “I’m sure you’re right, Child of the Mother.”

Gods, she hadn’t meant to give so much away! Anje clamped her lips together. She’d never been a diplomat. Action was more her forte—direct, violent action.

Trey broke in. “But there’s more. You have...” The words dried up and he pointed, hazel eyes wide and unblinking.

Brin said, “Lufra carries the mark of the dragon on Her body, the shining wings.” He laid both broad palms over the notches where her thighs met her pelvis. His touch burned.

“Don’t be ridiculous. They’re birthmarks.”

He stroked and tremors ran up and down her thighs as nerves fluttered beneath the skin. “Unusual to have a matching set, don’t you think?”

“No! Yes!” Her nerve broke. “*Stop it!*”

“Here, let’s get rid of these.” Brin tossed her ruined trews aside and threw a heavy arm across her shoulders. “You smell revolting,” he said amiably. He turned her toward the pool and gave her a gentle shove. “What is it? Swamp mud for the bitemes?”

“Yes.” Anje shut her mouth hard.

“You’re a scout, aren’t you?” They’d reached a patch of sand, washed by golden-brown water.

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It was true. A scout was what she was, through and through. The very best among the Children, the Matriarchs had told her. She was content with her own company, a superlative tracker, a hunter cunning

as a ghost.

Tucked safely away at the bottom of her pack in a hide cylinder was the map she'd risked her life to make. It was marked with the whereabouts and movements of every Hssrda raiding party she could track.

When the Hssrda launched their summer raids, her people, the Children of the Mother, would need that information for their very survival. The knowledge that the hunter was now the prey was bitter indeed. Her carelessness had been unforgivable.

Anje folded her lips into a thin line. "What are you going to do?"

Brin's dark brows rose. "Nothing very terrible. You're Lufra's Gift. First, we're going to get the mud off. Then we're going to fuck you."

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Chapter Two

Drown me in your night-dark cloud,

Drown me, drown me, drown me.

And I'll be glad to go,

Wrapped in your hair, my silky shroud.

Ah, softly, softly, softly.

"Lufra's Cloud", Song of the Feolin (trad.)

A gentle fist took Anje's loins and squeezed. Holy Mother, she'd never had a man Brin's size! Two heartbeats later, the full sense of what he'd said caught up with her and for an instant, all the strength leaked out of her knees. She stumbled and Brin steadied her.

"*We?*" Her voice cracked. "What do you mean, *we*?"

"Exactly what I said. Ah Trey. Good." Trey laid a rough bar of soap and a clean shirt on the rock. Brin moved behind her and untied her hands. Over his shoulder, he said to the other man, "You start at her feet. I'll meet you in the middle. And *scrub!*" He sounded amused. "How long since you had a bath, scout?"

"Look, you wouldn't—" Anje lunged away in mid-sentence. Two steps later, she was sprinting. The forest was the Mother's. It would hide her.

But before she could really hit her stride, a long arm snagged her elbow and spun her around to smack into Brin's powerful chest. Clucking his disapproval, Trey knelt and grasped her ankles, fumbling with the laces on her boots. He was bare already, the sunlight sparkling cheerfully on the knobs of his spine, on firm, creamy flesh.

Ah, Mother help her! Anje kicked hard with her heel, putting all the strength of thigh and hip into

straightening her leg and catching him viciously on the collarbone. He disappeared with a muffled curse and a splash.

Abruptly, her legs were swept out from under her. She landed in the shallows with a tremendous, smacking splash and a mountain fell on top of her.

She swore, bucking like a fellwolf in a trap, squirming against the weight of Brin's body. He had her caged, pressing her into the soft sand, his chest spreading her breasts beneath him. His huge hands were wrapped around her throat, the fingers set firmly against her thundering pulse. The threat was clear, but the pressure was not at all uncomfortable.

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"Listen to me, scout." He trapped her legs under his, the wet leather of his trews slick and slippery on her thigh. He wasn't even breathing hard. "I may have been a little blunt."

"Blunt?" She glared, wondering why the heat of her rage and terror hadn't boiled the blood in his veins.

Inky lashes swept over his eyes. When he looked up, she lost her train of thought for a second. "We won't hurt you, I swear. We can't. Lufra's Law does not permit it."

The water lapped cool over her limbs, kissed the back of her neck.

Trey's voice came from beside her, cajoling. "Think how good it'll be to be clean. Come on, sweeting."

"Lufra's Law?" she croaked, her gaze still tangled with Brin's.

Slowly, he peeled his body away, his dark face impassive. But she thought he was well pleased with himself. "Show some sense, scout. You're more than outnumbered and I've given my word we won't hurt you."

"Gods! How stupid do you think I am?" Her face twisted with scorn, while her heart galloped like a runaway vran. She'd never felt so small, so helpless.

So very, very female.

"For the last time, we won't rape you!" Brin's lips thinned. "What is it about Feolin honor you don't understand?"

"Feolin honor...?" Words failed her. Carefully, she sat up.

"Lufra's Law does not permit a woman to be taken against her will." Brin showed his teeth. "Lufra is a goddess of pleasure, of love. The use of force in the act of sex is sacrilege to the Feolin."

"But you said you were going to..." She had to drag in a breath. "Fuck me."

The tension went out of his shoulders. He enveloped her wrist in one hand and carried it to his lips. "And we will." His tongue drew tiny circles over the flutter of her pulse. "With great pleasure. Yours too."

"But you said—"

“Without before within,” said Trey. He rubbed his shoulder against hers, like a temple cat.

“For the Mother’s sake, speak plainly! What do you mean?”

“Plainly? Very well,” said Brin. His voice was deep and dispassionate. “The Law of Lufra states that no man may take his pleasure inside any part of a woman’s body, unless she has offered to the Goddess first. Each time, every time. Without before within. You see?”

“Offered to the goddess?” Anje stared. “Oh.” Comprehension dawned. “You mean if I don’t come, you can’t fuck me?”

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“Crudely put, but true. Lufra cares only for pleasure, freely given.” This time, he did smile—a crooked smile, true, but devastating for all that. She wondered if he knew what a lethal weapon he had. Hah! Of course he knew, the calculating bastard.

Anje looked from one grinning face to the other. The tide of her panic receded slightly, allowing her to breathe. Inside her, a sliver of dark arousal tangled with the fear and fury. Ruthlessly, she stamped it out.

The arrogance of them, the smug, unmitigated... To hold a Child of the Mother and expect her to—Men serviced her, not the other way around.

“Go to hell!” So furious she was panting, she snatched up the clean shirt.

Brin actually chuckled, a dark and wicked sound that made her belly clench. “Mind you, the Law of Lufra is not fussy as to ways and means.”

He lunged.

The scuffle was short and sharp, and she had the satisfaction of hearing him grunt when she elbowed his inner thigh, perilously high. But the end was inevitable.

“Come on, scout.” She ignored the seductive whisper. “You’re safe as long as you control your...urges. I give you my word.”

Trey scrambled closer and took her hands. “You might as well get clean, darling. We aren’t letting you go.”

Brin stood and tugged at the laces of his treads. Anje looked away, but not before she caught a glimpse of a nasty bruise, riding low on one hard hip. He chuckled.

Trey removed her boots and pulled her down until she was reclining on the sandy shelf. As he arranged her feet on his thigh, she heard splashing and Brin settled behind her. A big, muscled arm slid beneath her neck. “Lean your head back, scout.”

For an instant longer, she held firm. Ah Mother, Trey was right, it would be wonderful to bathe properly. Among the Children, a warrior’s word was her bond. Why it should be she couldn’t fathom, but instinct told her she could trust the Feolin to be no different.

She knew she couldn’t expect them not to push Lufra’s Law to its limit—and hers. Gods there wasn’t

anything she'd put past them! Nonetheless, this body was hers to control. She could be strong.

And after she was clean and fed—it had been hours since she'd eaten—she'd be on her way with the precious map. They had to sleep sometime. Through half-closed eyes, she caressed Trey's shoulders with her gaze. She might even arrange a meeting later, on her own terms, between clean sheets.

But which man? How... piquant.

Feeling confident for the first time since Brin's hard hands had grabbed her on the hilltop, she relaxed and let herself be held.

The water felt wonderful on her scalp, Brin's fingers unraveling her braids and swishing her hair back and forth, sifting and stroking. The soap smelt spicy, astringent, a masculine smell. She liked it.

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"Good?"

Anje groaned. Trey rubbed the soles of her feet and worked lather between her toes.

She allowed herself to drift. Ah, Mother of the world, she was tired. Three months was a long, lonely time. The relaxation pulled her under, turning her limbs to honey. A warm mouth whispered over her cheek, traced her eyebrow.

So very tempting. No pressure. As long as she didn't climax, she could relax and enjoy being pampered. The Children had no time for pampering. What utterly wicked luxury.

"What's your name?" Brin murmured in her ear.

"Anje," she said and groaned again, this time with disgust at her own stupidity.

"We haven't finished telling you about Lufra." His powerful fingers were on her scalp, circling, massaging. She'd been wrong about Brin, she thought muzzily, he'd make a superb pleasure slave.

"Don't bother." She could scarcely form the words.

"But this is the best part." There was a smile in his voice. "Well, from the male point of view." Meditatively, he ran his tongue around the shell of her ear. Her flesh was cool from the water and the caress felt shockingly hot. His hair swung forward, brushing her cheek. "Finish it, Trey."

Trey ran hard thumbs along the arch of her foot and up to her ankle. "Lufra's divine cunt is soft as velvet and strong as a fist. All pink and wet, like a jungle flower. Always ready."

Brin cupped water in his free hand and rinsed her hair. She felt the clean mass of it float out behind her. "You have lovely hair." One broad thumb stroked water across her cheek, toward her lip. Her head began to turn, like a baby seeking the breast, before she stopped herself with a smothered oath.

"Good muscle tone." Trey had reached her calves. "You've worked this body hard, haven't you, Anje? What's this?" He licked the scar puckering the flesh above her knee.

She hadn't known the nerves there were still so sensitive. "Hssrda arrow."

“Impressive.” Trey nibbled around her kneecap and her inner thighs quivered.

“Wait for me.” Brin ran soapy hands over her breasts and she yelped, rearing out of the water.

Her eyes snapped wide open. His face hung over hers, focused and intent. Someone had broken that arrogant nose for him, there was a small bump on the bridge. Fiercely, she wished it had been her. His black hair was loose about his shoulders and his eyes glittered. Maddeningly slow, maddeningly light, his thumbs rasped across her nipples.

“Stop,” she croaked, clamping her hands over his.

The devilish gleam deepened. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, scout?” His lips curved, taunting her. “You don’t think you’re strong enough.”

What, did he think she was stupid? She’d have to be, to fall for a jibe like that.

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Wait a minute. Strong fingers massaged the muscles of her thigh and she glanced at Trey’s merry, confident face. Anje bit her cheek to keep the smile on the inside. Over their years together, she’d tussled with Deklan for sexual domination and mostly, she’d won. His voice would be hoarse with begging before she’d set that sturdy cock pounding inside her. And he’d never been able to make her come without her permission.

What a wonderful way to serve them out. Their balls would turn blue with frustration. And she? She’d take care of her own needs later. It would be a small price to pay.

How very satisfying.

“Mmm.” Closing her eyes, she turned toward warm questing lips. They rubbed lightly across hers, to and fro, to and fro, sending tiny tingles down her spine. Sweet.

Calloused fingertips moved over her collarbones, drew tiny patterns on the upper slope of her breast. A hot, firm tongue slipped into her mouth and caressed, finessed. She sighed with delight. She’d had erotic dreams that weren’t as good as this.

Brin’s hand shifted to stroke the underside of her breast. Her flesh swelled, the nipples lengthening, stiffening.

Begging.

But that was fine. Trey hadn’t even arrived between her legs. It was as well. She could feel the juices trickling down her thigh, warm against water-cooled flesh. Trey stroked her stomach, making the nerves flutter and twitch like drunken flutterbyes.

She was hot, her labial lips swollen and puffy, but she was safe. No need for self-discipline yet. Just enjoy the heat, the spreading heat.

Gods, it was gorgeous! They had to be better than any pleasure slave in the Ten Nations.

Anje angled her mouth to curl her tongue gently around Brin's and heard him make an involuntary sound in his throat. She smiled in triumph beneath his kiss. He knew. In retaliation, he took her aching nipples between his fingers and tugged, an exquisitely light touch. A wash of heat joined the fire banked low in her belly.

But that was all right. She was in control.

A broad, warm wave rolled up gently from her loins. It whispered over her like a placid tide, washing back and forth, in and out, in tune with the caressing rhythm of Brin's tongue and fingers, the feel of Trey's soft lips nibbling and laving the skin of her belly.

It was a lovely, drifting dream, being bathed in slow, sumptuous pleasure. Immeasurably good.

Deep within her, something dark and rich hung suspended, quivering for endless moments. With a sweet little tremor, it gave way, all of a piece, like a sigh drawn out of the heart. Long, luscious ripples spread from behind her clit up and down her spine, her belly, her breasts. Delicious, seemingly infinite, like warm honey-wine in her veins.

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Her breath whispered out unobtrusively, a long, slow exhalation. She fought the need to smile, feeling shaken. Mother save her! She'd never had an orgasm like that before, so deep...so all-encompassing. It had stolen up on her so quietly, she hadn't even tensed, let alone made a sound. And gods, they hadn't even touched her sex!

They'd never know.

Even her toes felt mellow.

"Was it good?"

Reluctantly, Anje peeled her eyes open. Brin eased her back against his shoulder, his lips a smug curve. "What?" she asked, her brain thick and stupid.

"You offered to the Goddess, scout." He pressed a kiss to her temple. "You came."

The mists cleared abruptly. "No, I didn't!" She sat up, pulling out of Brin's arms.

Trey chuckled. "You can't fool Brin, Anje. He's a shaman of Lufra." He was crouched between her thighs, his face alight with anticipation. One hand grasped his cock, stroking slowly from balls to tip. The smooth head was flushed a pretty shade of rose pink.

"Here, lean on me." Brin pulled her back into his chest. His heavy forearms came down firmly over hers, long fingers wrapping around her wrists.

Trey bent forward and licked her lower lip. "You ready for me, sweetheart?" With the tip of his finger, he traced the softness of her labial lips, the entrance to her vagina. Humming with approval, he feathered the touch over her clit and all the way back to her anus. When she twitched and cursed, he grinned and did it again, finishing with that debonair twirl at the top.

"You're so much hotter than the water, Anje. And wetter, so much wetter." Then he leaned forward and

sucked one nipple deep into that luscious mouth.

All the air went out of her with an undignified grunt. The stimulation was unbearable and now Brin was kissing the side of her neck, nibbling on a tendon, his breath searing her skin. Something like a bar of hot iron was welded to the small of her back.

“If you’re going to do it, for the Mother’s sake, bloodydoit!” she snarled, driven almost insane with lust and fury.

A deep laugh rumbled through the chest pressed up against her spine. She set her teeth. She was going to kill him! Kill *them* !

After it was over.

“Get on with it, man,” Brin growled, but the humor lingered in his voice. “I’m dying back here.”

Trey lifted her thighs over his. The tip of his cock kissed her labia, nudged the lips aside. He hissed at the initial resistance of firm flesh, sighed as he twisted his hips and pushed further into her resilient tissues.

Then he slid all the way home.

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Buried to the balls, his eyes drifted closed and he swallowed, breathing hard. “Lufra’s tits, you feel gorgeous.”

He impaled her beautifully, stretching her channel just enough to make nerves jump and flutter. Oh, but it was marvelous to be so crammed with heat and hardness. Involuntarily, Anje’s flesh clamped down and they both groaned.

A dark voice murmured in her ear. “Tell me.”

“What?”

Brin’s long fingers cupped her breasts from behind, rolling and pulling at her nipples. The sensations streaked straight to her clit, straight to the depths of her sex, full of Trey’s beautiful cock. She moaned.

“He’s in there and I’m out here. Tell me what you feel.”

Trey pulled out, a dragging friction.

“Uh. Can’t,” she gasped, her head tossing from side to side.

Trey pushed in, a long glide.

“Tell me or I’ll make him stop.”

“No, no!”

Trey was slowly building a steady rhythm, shoving her back into Brin’s chest with every stroke. She gulped for air.

Trey lifted her hips and slung her higher. Brin braced her with two big hands under her buttocks. His fingers bit hard into her flesh, but Anje was beyond caring. The new angle deepened Trey's penetration and he hit her clit full-on with every thrust. She gasped and writhed.

"How's that?" came the diabolical voice in her ear.

"Shut up! Oh, oh!"

Trey slammed into her, pushing her higher and higher, closer and closer. His neck and cheeks were mottled with a sexual flush. He groaned, deep in his throat. "Sorry— Ah, Lufra!"

His cock swelled hard and high within her and he collapsed, shuddering with the force of his climax, driving her back into Brin's unyielding body with the urgency of his final thrust.

Anje let out a wail of frustration and Brin rasped, "Mine now, scout. All mine."

His big hand grabbed Trey's shoulder and shoved. With a groan, the smaller man landed on his back with a splash. His chest heaved, but the smile on his face was beatific.

Brin set his hands to Anje's waist and spun her around. He lifted her so he could take her nipples into his mouth, one after the other, in a quick, pulling suck. Then he began to lower her.

When she reached down to guide him, he growled, "No. Put your hands on my shoulders."

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Anje glanced down. "Look at me," he commanded.

This was man pared down to the predatory, powerful essence. He was utterly intent on her, on fucking and possessing her. His eyes were completely, fiercely black, but she could swear she saw tiny flames dancing there.

His cock nudged her weeping pussy and thought blew away like leaves on the wind.

He was hot. And huge.

No wonder he wouldn't permit her to look down. Probably thought he'd scare her to death.

Frowning with concentration, he worked the head into her. "Gods, you're tight." The breath hissed from between his teeth. "I don't want to hurt you," he said and he sounded irritated. "Don't you use this cunt the way Lufra intended?"

If she hadn't been so needy, Anje would have laughed. Instead, she wriggled down another inch, puffing with the effort.

His eyes brightened and he grunted with pleasure, letting her drop another fraction.

Anje rested her head on his shoulder, panting. Brin turned his head and kissed her, long and luxuriously, tangling their tongues, exploring the inside of her mouth.

Trey's wet hands stroked soothingly down her ribs and over her buttocks. Kneeling beside her, he murmured, "Don't be frightened, sweet. You'll get used to it, you know. They all do."

The dark warrior's glare was so frankly murderous, she had to smother a chuckle against his shoulder. But Trey was right. Though she was stretched tight around Brin's girth, every nerve and muscle quivering, it was all pleasure—a pleasure so acute, it was almost pain. The sort of pain that is darkly addictive.

Brin slid his hands around to her buttocks and squeezed, mashing her flesh more firmly around his massive cock. She could feel every beat of his heart, transmitted to her engorged tissues through his penis. "Gods, you have a luscious ass." He licked the corner of her mouth, sucked the tip of her tongue. "Not much more, scout. All right?"

At Anje's nod, he surged upward until he was seated to the hilt. She huffed out a breath, refusing to panic. "I think I can feel you in my throat."

"Don't worry. You're stronger than you look." He began to rock into her, deep inside.

Insulted, Anje reared away from the heat of his body. "I'm a Child of the Mother!"

"I know." He anchored her with his hard hands.

The change of angle had the head of his cock strafing a sweet spot she hadn't known she had. She lurched. "Gods!" Her voice came out half strangled.

"Hold on, little one." He picked up the tempo, gradually changing the rocking motion to thrusting, until he had her digging her fingers into his shoulders, crying out with pleasure at every jolting stroke. The sweet tension built again, but this time it

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spiraled up to a dark, ferocious need that seared and burned, whipping her on and on toward a pinnacle she couldn't quite reach.

Now he had her flat on her back on the bank, her legs wrapped as tightly around his waist as she could manage. She sank her nails into his skin and tilted her pelvis, matching him stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust, moaning and tossing her head.

He was killing her. She couldn't. She was going to die. She'd kill him.

"Open your eyes!"

She looked straight into his midnight eyes, straight into the flames dancing there.

"Come for me, Anje!"

She whimpered.

"You're Lufra's Gift!" He was panting, sweat and water slicking his skin. "Now, Anje!Now!"

The blaze reached out and engulfed her. Dark fire exploded from her clitoris, licked up her spine. Her womb clenched hard and she screamed. The spasms went on and on, jerking her about as if she was

boneless. Dimly, she heard Brin's guttural roar and felt him jam hard up inside her.

After a long interval, Trey's voice whispered, "Brin, you haven't killed her?" Fingers fumbled for the pulse in her throat.

Brin's arms tightened into a steel cage, then loosened. With a long groan, he rolled away. "No, but I think she's killed me. Lufra, what an offering!"

Without the blanket of his big body, her skin stippled with gooseflesh. Blearily, she forced her eyes open.

Brin knelt beside her. "Come on, scout, up with you." He slid strong arms under her shoulders and thighs. When he rose to his full height, he didn't as much as grunt, curse him.

"Wait a minute." Trey's voice. "She's cold and wet." Gentle hands patted her skin with soft fabric. Ah yes, the shirt.

She tried to bat him away, shrivel him with an oath, but the words were swallowed by a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Don't fight it, Anje." Brin was walking, carrying her with ease. She smelled canvas and a drift of incense. His chest was warm and hard against her cheek.

"I'll put the bedrolls together," said Trey.

"Good." Brin began humming, deep in his throat, the noise oddly soothing.

Her consciousness lurched and she grabbed it back. "No, I—"

"Yes, you can." Brin laid her on a blessedly soft surface. He stretched out beside her.

"No..." She struggled through thickets. "Mustn't."

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She felt Trey settle on her other side. He took her hand and held it to his cheek. Brin sighed, turned his head into her neck and started the humming again. It vibrated through her, weaving a heavy blanket over her senses.

Anje slipped into velvet darkness.

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Chapter Three

Feolin—Religion—The Great Rite:

Shrouded in secrecy, the Great Rite of the Feolin is performed infrequently, and only on the Day of the Dark (See Sun and Shadow—Celestial Movement). Participants are driven literally mad with lust, the object being to engender a spiritual connection with the Goddess that will gain her favor. Death or insanity usually results. Little more is known, save for salacious speculation.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

She slept on her stomach, stretched boneless across both bedrolls, so strong and beautiful she made his throat ache. Cautiously, Brin bent and pushed aside the tangle of her hair. There was a scar on her shoulder, another marring the satiny smoothness of her hip, nicks on her capable hands. He wanted to soothe each one with his tongue, like a fellwolf comforting its mate. He gave a wry grin. She'd be more likely to kick him in the teeth than purr.

His miracle.

A Child of the Mother. A fiery warrior from a tribe of matriarchs.

He snorted. If nothing else, it proved the divine Lufra had a devilish sense of humor.

He'd woken at first light, his cock flexing with a firm, reminiscent twitch. Now the Shadow had caught up with the Sun, high in the sky, and he was still hard. He could have done a meditation exercise, willed it away, but the anticipation was too luxurious to spoil. As for Trey... The lad had looked so hungry, he'd sent him out to check the perimeter wards twice already.

He rose to rummage in a saddlebag. Though he knew he was a sentimental fool, he never traveled without the Bond torques that had belonged to his parents. Untying the drawstrings of the velvet pouch, he shook the braided circlets into one big palm.

So light to be so strong.

"She awake?" Trey's square shoulders were silhouetted against the light at the entrance to the tent.

"Not yet. Keep your voice down." Brin rubbed his thumb over the plaited locks of hair that comprised the torques.

Trey came to lounge beside him. "Gods, I'm dying to fuck her again," he whispered hoarsely.

Brin chuckled. "Your finesse should sweep her clean off her feet."

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Trey flushed, the curse of the fair-skinned. He looked down at the treads tented over his groin. Then he glanced at the sarong around Brin's hips and smirked. "Don't give me that, you hypocrite." He reached out to tap his friend's erection with a forefinger.

It leaped.

So did Brin's pulse.

"Sorry," murmured Trey. His fingers closed, gave a quick, soothing squeeze and released.

Brin cleared his throat. When he shot a glance at Trey, his young friend was frowning at the torques. Imagination, nothing more. He let go the breath he was holding and disciplined himself to put the shameful lick of heat aside.

"I have a bad feeling," said Trey, "but I'm going to ask anyway." He gestured at the torques. "What are they for?"

"Can you think of a better way of keeping an experienced scout somewhere she doesn't want to be? We have to sleep after all."

Trey's beautiful eyes flew to his. They looked wide and golden in the clear light that spilled into the tent. "But Brin—"

Brin shrugged. "If Lufra refuses, it's my risk. Will you help me?"

Trey sat back on his heels and his lips firmed. "No, I don't think so." He stood abruptly and stalked out.

Brin stared after him.

Perhaps he was jealous. Ay, that could be it. By Lufra, Trey certainly had more to offer a woman. He was the son of Feolin's Queen; his Bond torques were encased in gold filigree, dotted with fire opals. And he was young, with all the energy and enthusiasm of youth. His life was still before him.

Brin frowned down at his thick wrists and broad palms. He was a blacksmith's son, not a prince. All he had was generations of his family's love, in hair every shade of black, brown and gray, braided together and finished with a plain silver twist. It was simple enough, but the power of it was formidable. It would hold her.

It had to, if he was to save his people.

He fetched his dagger and crouched to cut a lock of her shining black hair from underneath, where it wouldn't show. The nape of her neck was tender, pale. Leaning forward, he drew the warm scent of her into his lungs.

Anje snuffled in her sleep.

He ran the lock through his fingers. It was so smooth and slippery, he had to concentrate hard to plait it into the torques, together with strands of his own. When the task was complete, he slipped the larger collar around his neck, the smaller around hers. Placing a hand on each, he pressed the silver clasps closed between finger and thumb. It wasn't orthodox by temple standards, but he didn't have much time.

Kneeling, he bowed his head and slowed his breathing, 'til all he could hear was the steady throb of the blood in his body. Deep inside, he formed an image of the living

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flame that was Lufra. Humbly, he laid his soul bare before Her, all that he was, and begged Her blessing.

The seconds passed excruciatingly slowly. Divine Mistress, don't turn Your loving face from me. Not now, when I'm so close. I beg You.

He sagged with relief when Her heat answered his call. It started at the base of his spine and spread, licking his buttocks and genitals, warming his belly and cradling his heart. Lufra's song vibrated deep in his throat; the silver melted under his fingers, flowed, folded and joined.

It was done. For good or ill, it was done.

“What are you doing?”

Anje’s narrowed eyes were cold as amethyst and as hard. She put a hand to her torque and tugged. “What’s this?”

How long had she been awake? It took him a moment to shake free of Lufra’s warm embrace. He blinked once, slowly. “A torque. To keep you with us.”

Anje pulled harder, fingers fumbling for a catch. They trembled. “Magic?”

Her struggles were leaving a pattern of fine red lines on the clear skin of her throat. Brin leaned forward and laid his big hand over hers, stilling it. He made his tone deep and soothing. “It’s shaman’s magic, Anje. But I swear I mean you no harm by it.” He held her gaze. “On my life, I swear.”

“What does it do?”

“Walk away and find out.” Brin smiled thinly. “It has a range of about a hundred paces.”

All the animation smoothed from her face. It was a fair effort at concealment. Others might find her hard to read, but to him, her thoughts showed clearly in those violet eyes. He could see the anger there, the fear and confusion, but also a glimmer of arousal, a white-hot ember. She was fighting not to drop her gaze below his chin. Poor sweet warrior, they’d stripped her of a measure of self-control yesterday and she’d learned to doubt herself. And they were going to do it again and again.

As many times as it took to ready her for the Great Rite in the temple of Lufra.

Though his soul ached for her pain, he could hardly wait to begin again. But she had to come out of it alive and heart-whole. He’d make sure she did.

Even if he didn’t.

Anje uncoiled long, supple limbs and rose. Her breasts trembled with each shallow breath and Brin let his insolent gaze wander. His palms itched.

As she stalked past, he scooped up a shirt and tossed it to her. Without pausing, she snagged it in midair and left the tent, head held high.

Anje pulled the shirt on over her head as she emerged into the sunlight. It was Trey’s. Funny, she could tell immediately by the light masculine scent that clung to it. Brin smelled darker, spicier.

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Huffing with irritation, she strode past the pool. Her boots sat in the sun, stuffed with grass to hold their shape as they dried. Tugging them on, she was too thankful to spurn the thoughtfulness. Because she was going to run, and run. And run.

She wasn’t a fool. Brin made Deklan look like a fumbling boy and as for Trey... There was something about him, a bravado and a vulnerability, that made her mouth water.

So she was leaving, as fast and as silently as possible. And once she'd completed her duty and delivered the map, she'd track them down, one at a time, and take them apart.

On her own terms.

She increased her pace up the slope until she was almost running. Brin, the arrogant fool, would allow her enough time to relieve herself and wash. She'd retrieve her pack from its hiding place on the ridge and fade into the forest.

Magic torques! She snorted as she shoved the undergrowth aside, snatching up her pack to check on the map. Turning to survey the peaceful camp one last time, she backed away down a forest path.

Safe. The breath whistled out between her teeth and her stride lengthened.

A brisk five minutes later, she came out on the far side of the camp. Nothing moved in the sun, save the pod of grazing vranee.

Muttering an oath, she plunged back into the trees. She must have got turned around somehow. Embarrassing for a scout, but it happened sometimes.

After half an hour of effort, she leaned against the trunk of a tree, the shirt plastered to her back with sweat and her heart hammering. It didn't matter which direction she chose, whether she walked, trotted or ran, her feet turned her around and brought her back to the camp.

Sobbing with frustration, she pulled out her spare blade and wrenched it from the scabbard. It was razor sharp, but she'd gone beyond caring if she cut her own throat. Slipping it beneath the torque, she sawed with increasing desperation.

A firm hand stayed hers. "It won't work, Anje." Trey stood beside her, kindness in his hazel eyes. "Nothing does, except trust."

She spat an epithet and gave him her back. The Matriarchs would be expecting her. She needed to be gone.

Now.

"The greater the trust, the greater the distance."

At that, she glanced over her shoulder. Trey smiled, cocky and sweet. "You could try it, you know."

"Trusting Brin?" She meant it to sound derisive, but it came out as a wistful croak.

"There's no one like him." Trey's smile faded.

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Anje let herself slide to the base of the tree. She stretched her legs out in front of her with a sigh. "Thank the Mother for that." She slanted a glance at Trey. "Who is he? What is he?"

"He's the most powerful shaman among our people, dragon-anointed." Trey settled neatly beside her.

“By a real dragon?” she queried scornfully.

“No.” Trey’s lush mouth curved and for a moment, she let herself be distracted. “You’ll see.” He leaned his head back against the tree, gazing up into the canopy.

In repose, his features were not boyish after all. There was dignity in the broad, clear forehead, strength in that stubborn jaw. Commitment. She had a sudden insight. “You’d die for him, wouldn’t you?”

He shot her a glance. “Yes.”

The sound of the vranee tearing at the tough grass was loud in the silence. A harness jingled.

“Would he do the same for you?”

“He almost has.” Trey’s smile was wry. “More than once.”

“Tell me.”

“Ah.” The smile broadened to a grin. “There’s a price to be paid for stories.”

She knew that expression. Heat roiled in her belly. “Fine. So don’t tell me.”

Trey drew his knuckle down her cheek in a feathery caress. She shivered and slapped him away. “But it’s such a small price. A trifle.”

When she pointedly refused to ask, he chuckled. “A kiss, sweetheart. Just a kiss.”

“Don’t be adolescent.”

Trey shrugged.

After a few moments of breathing silence, she said, “One?”

“One. After the story.”

Know your enemy, she thought. “Tell me then.”

Trey sat up and faced her. His eyes sparkled, more gold than green, even under the trees. He laced his fingers over his knees.

“I met Brin when I was sixteen. I’d heard of him, of course, who in Feolin hadn’t? The greatest warrior, the greatest shaman and still only twenty-six. And Lufra, the offerings he made! Unsurpassed!”

“Offerings?”

“We told you.” He shifted his hips. “Yesterday.” He cupped himself, almost absently. “Orgasms sustain Lufra and in return She stands between the Feolin and the might of the Sky Father and the other gods. She feeds on love, the more powerful the sensation the better—and what is stronger than a climax delayed beyond bearing?”

Anje’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound emerged.

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Trey went on, "Any Feolin man may offer his cock to be milked by the body of a priestess, but the shamans of Lufra are trained to resist. Endlessly."

Mother of Mercy! She had a vision of Brin, wrists bound with silken ropes, his huge, muscular body oiled and gleaming, that meaty cock shuttling in and out of succulent, gripping flesh. It was all she could see, not the rest of the woman, just that junction. His thighs were corded with tension, his buttocks hollowed as he pumped.

Endlessly.

"How long?" Her throat was so dry she could barely speak, but her sex was drenched.

"It's more a case of how many. He exhausted twelve once. Made them offer before he did."

Anje gulped. Twelve. It didn't seem humanly possible. "Is that a record?"

Trey laughed outright. "Even Brin's human. He says he couldn't walk for a week afterward. Others have done better, but only with drugs to numb the sensations. Brin wouldn't pollute his offering."

"Do women—" she husked.

"Oh yes. Some of the priestesses are famous for their endurance. They argue that a woman's offering is more pleasing to Lufra than a man's. Bless 'em." Trey spread his hands. "Who knows? I think all She cares for is the emotion of it, the pure passion."

"Speaking of which, I'm hard as a spear. Come here." He reached for her, but Anje planted a hand under his breastbone and shoved.

"I haven't heard how he saved your life."

Trey grimaced as he leaned back. "That's easily told. I was only a lad, more balls than sense. And I was insufferably proud."

His expression shuttered and she wondered what he wasn't telling her. "I guess I was spoiled. Brin was given charge of three of us, to be our mentor. It's a common custom among the Feolin."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I burned to impress him. So I took a half-broken vran from the Palace stable. I didn't know it was in rut. Gods, what a fool!" His lips thinned. "It got away from me, of course. We were nearly at the cliff above the river before he caught up."

He shook his head and fell silent. Anje gripped his forearm. "*What happened?*"

He roused. "Brin drove his own mount into mine. We went down in a great tangle a dozen paces before the edge of the cliff."

"Mother!" She looked at the vranee below. The turquoise-feathered stallion was taller at the shoulder than her head, with a deep chest and withers. The sunlight glinted on three wicked horns as it grazed contentedly. In the wild, rutting males disemboweled each other with those razor-sharp weapons. What a

killing risk he'd taken—and all for a green boy.

“Were you punished?”

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He nodded. “Brin refused to tell my parents. Said it was his responsibility because I was in his care. But for six months, I mucked out his stable every day and sparred with him besides. He didn't hold back either. I got a brilliant collection of bruises.”

Unshed tears shone in his eyes. “But that wasn't the worst. My vran stood so hard on his thigh, it was a miracle the bone wasn't broken. He limped for a year and I had to watch, knowing it was my fault. He still has the scar.”

Anje stroked the firm flesh of his arm, the light, golden hair silky-rough under her fingertips. “I'm sure he's forgiven you.”

“Yes.” The word came out as a sigh. He squeezed his eyes shut and when they opened again, that purely male expression of speculation was back, spiced with mischief. “You have a price to pay, love.” A red-gold brow arched. “Lean back.”

Warily, Anje did as she was bid. “One kiss. We agreed.”

“I remember. Put your palms flat on the ground.” He waited patiently 'til she complied.

“Now...” He unlaced her shirt, spreading it so her breasts were exposed. “One kiss. But where?” His gaze was considering.

Anje's clitoris gave a convulsive ripple that spread sensation from her belly to her breasts in a single, swift wave. “Trey. That's not what—” She swallowed as he drifted a fingertip over her areola.

“I love women's tits, their nipples,” he said dreamily. “They're so soft, so tender. I could play all day. Look how beautifully they stand up.” He pinched her pouting flesh between two knuckles and tugged.

Anje took her bottom lip between her teeth. “Get on with it.” Her clit burned.

“Mind you...” His gaze drifted down and he bunched the hem of the shirt with one hand and pushed it up her leg. “This would be a good place.” He nudged her thigh aside and ran a finger over the satin smoothness of her sex, gathering moisture, leaving fire in his wake. “Mmm.” He put the digit in his mouth and his tongue crept out, cleaning it as neatly as a cat.

“What do you think, Anje? Shall I kiss you here?” His fingers returned, petting without penetrating.

Her heart had migrated to a new home between her thighs. It beat and beat. He was so young, so sweet. Mother, what had the shaman taught him? She shook herself out of her daze. “I thought...”

Trey moved to kneel between her legs. His lips hovered a breath away from hers. “I never got to kiss you hullo properly.” He cradled her cheeks in the palms of his hands and his tongue traced her lower lip. “Hullo, Anje,” he whispered. “I'm so glad we found you.” He slanted that carnal mouth lightly over hers. “Don't go away.”

The softness of his lips settled, molded to hers. The tip of his tongue dabbed at the corner of her mouth, licked over her lower lip, ventured within. It flicked and teased,

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sending tingles chasing up and down her spine. Anje growled in her throat and her fingers sank into his shoulders.

He drew back. "Easy, darling, easy." Then he returned, the blessed heat of him filling her mouth, sinking into her by slow degrees. He didn't rush, didn't hurry or push, he kept it remorselessly tender. Her hands slid up over his neck and into his curls. His tongue was so firm, his lips so soft. He kissed like a master, exploring the interior of her mouth, tangling his tongue with hers in a spiral dance.

His body pressed into hers from chest to groin, and he set up a languid rocking motion with the ridge of his erection, rasping her clit with every stroke.

Sweet, it was so sweet. Anje hooked one leg around his hips, pressing him closer. With a moan, she arched her pelvis and Trey echoed her pleasure deep in his throat.

The sounds shook her out of her sensual trance. She tightened her grip in his hair and wrenched. They stared at each other, gasping.

"No more." She put her fingers over his lips. When he licked them, she swallowed. Gods, she'd nearly—!

Trey watched her intently, eyes shining with unslaked desire. "Anje." His voice was quiet, steady. "I only meant it as a welcome kiss. Truly."

"All right." She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. What was it about these two? "How did you know?"

"How close you were?" She nodded.

Trey smiled, his mouth deliciously swollen. "The flames of Lufra burn in your eyes, just as they do in Brin's."

There was something odd in his voice, something off-kilter, but she set aside it to puzzle over later. "The flames of Lufra?"

He grinned and stood. "There's a mirror in my saddlebag. Want me to get you hot so you can check?"

When he reached down to pull her up, Anje hooked his feet out from under him. As he sprawled, she grabbed her pack and marched back to the camp, head high.

Trey's laughter rang out behind her.

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Chapter Four

Decorative Arts—Tattoo:

Among sailors of the Leaves of the Sea, a tattoo is a symbol of courage as much as a personal enhancement. Elaborate designs, taking years to complete, may cover the subject from waist to knee. The Feolin, in contrast, look on the pain of the procedure as a homage to their goddess. Only shamans or priestesses have their bodies decorated in this manner.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

She barreled into the camp to find Brin sitting cross-legged, placidly sewing a button on a shirt, dark brows drawn fiercely together in concentration. The needle was lost in his big fingers. The sight startled a bark of laughter out of her.

“Someone’s got to do it,” he pointed out. “And Trey hasn’t the patience.”

“You have?” She propped a hand on her hip.

“I can wait for what I want.” Brin set the shirt aside and rose slowly to his full height. He was still wearing the sarong, knotted loosely about his hips. Anje set her teeth and planted her feet. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of glancing at all that hair-dusted, olive-toned flesh. Not even once.

One corner of his mouth lifted. “I see you discovered the limits of the torque.”

She cast him a killing glare. “It makes me a slave.”

“No.”

“Then take it off.”

“I like to see it on you.” The thick lashes fell over his eyes and he reached out to touch it lightly with his fingertips. “Give me your trust and the range increases.”

The Mother only knew how she was going to get away from him. She’d never met a man so formidable, so hard to read. “Not likely!” she spat.

Then her stomach growled, rather spoiling the moment. Anje tossed her head. “Your slave needs feeding, oh great master.”

Brin slid a hand under her hair and turned her around. “I’ve lit the fire. There’s hot water for robbery brew and last night’s leftovers.” His light clasp on her nape was almost brotherly, comforting.

He bent his dark head to whisper in her ear. “I like hearing you call me master. Shall I hold you on my lap and feed you, beautiful slave?”

Anje snarled and pulled herself away, her brain working furiously. What if he was unconscious, would the magic of the torques still work? If she could knock him out...

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Feeling better with a bowl of porridge warm in her belly, she dug out her bag of powdered babybane. She wasn’t stupid. If she didn’t take her daily dose of the contraceptive herb, she might yet pay the consequences for yesterday’s weakness. Luckily, she preferred the sweetness of babybane to the bitter

bite of robbery, so it was no hardship.

She took the steaming mug with her to the tent, kicked off her boots and settled down to take stock of the contents of her pack. Stroking her thumb over the hilt of her knife, she was considering its precise placement against Brin's skull when his long fingers lifted the weapon out of her hands. He studied it. "Aetherian work?"

When she grunted assent, he hefted it. "Nice balance. And a handle of vran horn, no less. Very pretty."

He handed it back politely, hilt first, and Anje saw amusement gleaming in his eyes, the patronizing bastard. "I won it at the Games of the Mother," she said stiffly.

A dark brow winged up. "We should spar, you and I."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"There can never be enough tricks and I warrant you know some good ones," he said tranquilly. "I like to learn, scout."

Mother, Trey had been right! It hadn't been her imagination, yesterday. There was fire in his eyes, tiny flames that flickered in the inky depths of his pupils. Heat stirred in her loins.

"This isn't robbery." He'd lifted her cup to his lips.

For the first time since Brin had carried her into the camp, Anje grinned. "It's babybane."

Brin choked and spluttered. She chuckled. "Don't fret, mighty warrior. You could drink gallons of the stuff before your balls shrivel."

But when she saw his face, the spurt of humor died. The goddess light in his eyes had faded, leaving them flat and bleak. He stepped to the tent flap. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the contents of the mug away. "You won't need it." Spotting her bag of the powdered herb, he flung that out too. "Nor this." She heard a faint splash.

"What the hell—? *Brin!*" Outraged, Anje leaped forward, but his arm barred the way.

His jaw set. "No Feolin seed has quickened for four years now."

"What?"

"You heard me. Lufra has turned Her face from us." He moved away, but Anje followed.

"Brin, wait." He stopped.

She pushed the hair out of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said awkwardly.

He shrugged his massive shoulders.

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"You mean no children, none at all?" She couldn't imagine it. She wasn't maternal, had never been. It

was one of the reasons she was so fit to be a scout. But her people adored their children and Anje had a real affection for her sister's brood of three. Zulie's little ones tumbled like puppies at clan gatherings, attracting dirt and disaster in equal measures.

Brin returned to stand before her. She hadn't realized she'd stretched out a hand 'til he took it in both of his and cradled it against his heart.

"Seventy years ago," he said heavily, "the king of the Feolin committed a great sin in the eyes of Lufra. He raped her High Priestess. The woman killed herself and the Goddess abandoned us." His fingers tightened bruisingly on Anje's. "The birth-rate has been dropping for decades. I am an only child. Trey has but one sister. The Feolin are dying, Anje."

Under her palm, she could feel the steady thump of his heart. How could such vitality, such energy, cease to be? "Do you have—?" She couldn't go on.

He shook his head. "I am especially cursed." His lips twisted and he let her hand drop. "I'm barren, Anje. So many women, so many years..."

"And Trey?" she whispered, putting her hand back.

"Trey also, though he's still so young. There's more time in hand for him." He paused. "Thank you, scout."

"What for?"

"For caring."

She snorted. "I don't!"

"Where are your hands?"

Anje stifled a curse. She'd been smoothing one palm across his chest, again and again. The other cupped the warmth of his hipbone. Right on that terrible bruise.

"Gods, sorry!" She leaped away.

He caught her by the elbow. "It's all right. It's not what you think."

"Then..." She frowned in puzzlement.

"See for yourself." He pulled the knot free and the sarong swished to the ground.

"Holy Mother!" All the air punched out of her lungs.

Dragon-anointed.

The tattoo girdled his loins, in a writhing pattern of black and red, every tendril, scale and claw rendered in exquisite detail. The beast rose high over his trim hips, swooping to undulate over a ridged abdomen. The long reptilian head with its gaping mouth was angled at the glossy black thatch of his pubic bush.

His penis was half hard and rising to meet her regard, the heavy testicles tightening below. Anje knew

without meeting his gaze that the goddess flame would be blazing in his midnight eyes.

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“Want to see the rest?” He pivoted slowly, presenting her with a broad back tapering to a neat waist and high, rounded buttocks. The dragon’s tail dipped into the cleft between those firm cheeks, the tip of one canted wing caressing the crease where his ass met the back of his thigh.

Anje closed her teeth on a whimper as Brin turned to face her again.

How cleverly he’d concealed this glory from her yesterday! Now she came to think of it—and to be fair, she’d done little but think of it—they’d wrapped her so tight in their sensual web, she’d had no time for contemplation before she was swamped with pleasure.

She collapsed on the bedroll, sitting on her hands so they couldn’t get away from her, and gobbled him with her eyes. She’d never seen a man so big who was so perfectly proportioned, graceful as a temple dancer. And he had the most beautiful skin, smooth and olive-toned, radiant with health and virility. The curve of his biceps struck her like the strong, spare beauty of a plainchant, the melody echoed in the heavy planes of muscle on his shoulders and chest. A light mat of black curls stretched from one small dusky nipple to the other. They were tightly erect. Her tongue crept out to moisten suddenly dry lips and her own nipples ached for relief, tingling with need.

“I like you looking at me, scout.” His voice was husky, his hands fisted on his hips. “Don’t stop.”

Her gaze dropped, following a line of silky hair to his groin. His cock jumped. It was massively erect, but as she looked, it grew another impossible half inch. She swallowed and could have sworn it stretched again, nudging his navel.

Now it appeared as though the dragon was watching Brin’s penis too, with proprietorial interest. “Did it hurt?” Her voice was a thread.

“Yes.”

Flinching, she squeezed her eyes shut, thinking of his pain, the fiery bite of the needle, over and over.

“Keep looking, I said!” He didn’t raise his voice, but the tone flicked like a lash.

Her eyes flew open and she gasped. An oily bead oozed free of the deep slit on Brin’s cock head. It trembled, slithering its way across the smooth, rosy flesh, until it hung on the collar. Then it flowed across corded tendons and slid down, coursing slowly over the veins throbbing under the skin of the distended shaft, disappearing under his scrotal sac.

Brin shivered and Anje licked her lips. She was drowning, and not only between her legs.

“Gods, you’re beautiful,” she murmured. The words caught her unawares and she bit her lip, feeling a scalding flush of embarrassment heat her neck and cheeks.

Brin smiled crookedly. “I’m glad you think so,” he said gravely.

“She’s right,” said Trey from where he stood in the opening of the tent, “you are.”

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Brin's high cheekbones reddened and his cock jerked as another droplet swelled and followed the first down his length. "Touch her, Trey," he said curtly and the younger man dropped to the bedroll and stroked Anje's hot cheek.

"Poor love," he crooned. "Give her what she wants, Brin."

The shaman ignored him. "Do you know, scout, I have only to will it to spurt now? Simply from the touch of the flame in your eyes."

Trey's fingers rasped the fabric of Anje's shirt over her stiff nipples. His soft lips nibbled the tendons in her neck.

"Shall I do that, Anje?" asked Brin.

"Don't waste an offering," Trey advised.

"Anje?"

She couldn't breathe. The tissues of her pussy felt impossibly swollen. "No," she whispered.

"Are you wet, scout? Show me."

She was so dazed that she froze, gaping. Brin said, "Help her, Trey," and the younger man pulled the shirt over her head.

"Up on your knees, scout," said Brin. Trey slung an arm around her waist and raised her. "Show me."

For the first time, the shaman touched himself, running his forefinger in a firm press from tip to balls. The muscles in Anje's thighs turned to liquid and her knees fell apart of their own volition. Brin's dark stare delved between her thighs, caressing her slick flesh with fire.

She shuddered and arched her pelvis, exposing her damp curls, the wet pink of her labial lips, the dark, mysterious entrance to her body. The knowledge that two men looked and lusted was more potent than any aphrodisiac.

Brin dragged in a breath and his hand fisted at the base of his cock. "Now, Trey!"

With a deep hum of pleasure, Trey sank two fingers into her sheath, at the same time dragging his thumb across her clit.

With a shriek, she exploded, the orgasm rolling over her in a cavalry charge of sensation, pounding through her body. Trey cupped her sex, murmuring loving nonsense in her ear, his fingers caressing her deep inside, rubbing and gentling her through it. Finally, he cuddled her into his chest, letting her rest.

Panting, she opened her eyes and looked up, straight into Brin's face. He gave her that half-smile again, the one that could fell a woman at a dozen paces, and murmured, "You're perfect, scout. Simply perfect."

Again. She'd done it again.

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Chapter Five

In closing, my dear Richard, I beseech you—beg His Grace to call me home. Missionary work among the Children of the Mother (the very name is a blasphemy!) is a lost cause. Truly, I fear for my immortal soul. My Way is Straight. It's their eyes, Richard. I cannot sleep; my nights are full of dreams—such [words obscured by a blot]

Addendum to a report from the Most Reverend Gandy, priest of the Straight Way, to Richard, Secretary to the Bishop of the Square Cathedral, 9998 ATF (After the Firsters)

Anje tried to scramble to her feet, but Trey's fingers were still trapped deep inside her body and Brin loomed directly in front of her, his chest an implacable wall. A sliver of fear cooled the furnace of her arousal.

"But I didn't—" She broke off. "How do you *do* that?" Only the most severe exercise of self-discipline kept the words from emerging as a wail.

Brin picked up her hand and pressed her palm against his cock. He purred with pleasure. Gods, he was enormous and so hot to touch! She could barely close her fist around his girth. "I've been trained to gauge the finest gradations of a woman's pleasure," he said. "And as for Trey—"

"I'm naturally gifted," said Trey modestly, flexing his fingers against a spot sweet enough to make her breath hitch.

If they'd wanted to hurt her, they could have done so at any time, but all they'd done was gift her with overwhelming pleasure. Suddenly, the fear disappeared as if it had never been, leaving behind only a delicious trepidation.

What would they do next?

Mother of the world, how could a warrior be so weak? But there it was. She masked her foolishness with a show of irritation.

"It's not fair!" she snarled.

She'd expected Brin to laugh, but instead he said seriously, "No, scout, it's not. You're fighting the will of a goddess. I'm sorry." He paused for a heartbeat. "But not that sorry."

His dark head swooped and he took her mouth like a marauder, insinuating his tongue, sucking and nibbling. Her head fell back and she clutched his hair, the weight of it shifting cool and silken across the backs of her hands. Her thighs clenched on Trey's wrist.

By the time Brin drew back, her vision had hazed and she could barely breathe. He transferred his attentions to her collarbones, licking the hollows and dips, while Trey engulfed one nipple in his mouth, so that she arched and cried out. At the hoarse

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sound, Brin lifted his head and chuckled. Then he wrapped his tongue around her other nipple and tugged.

Forcing her eyes open, Anje stared down at the two heads bent to her pleasure, one red-gold, the other dark as night. Their mouths were hot and wet, but qualitatively different, and the eroticism of it made her insane. Trey hovered on the verge of rough, suckling her deep, pulling at her sensitive flesh. Brin's mouth was firm and gentle, rolling and tugging, compressing her against his tongue and releasing, over and over.

Trey's fingers were still crammed deliciously hard into her sheath. It must be Brin toying with the cleft between her buttocks, gathering the flooding moisture from her labia and massaging it into her perineum and back over the rosette of her anus.

His touch was featherlight, but she wriggled with discomfort. He stopped, but he didn't shift the pad of his finger from its resting place over her bottom. With a last, lingering lick, he released her breast.

"Trey." There was no response. "Trey!"

"What?" Trey hummed over her nipple and fluttered his fingers. Anje breathed deeply. She would not beg, she wouldn't. But if someone didn't fuck her soon, she was going to break bones.

"Move your hand. I've got to taste her." As if the words had tweaked a nerve, her sex contracted.

"*Lufra!* Anje, be careful!" Trey lifted his head abruptly and her nipple slid free with a plop. "That's my sword hand!" He pulled his fingers out, and pretended to examine them anxiously. They glistened with her juices. He cocked a mischievous eye at Brin and popped them into his mouth. "Mmm."

Brin growled and knocked him out of the way with his shoulder. Trey laughed as he rolled over, but Brin took Anje's buttocks in his big hands without a word. He lifted her to his mouth.

And devoured.

Shoving his shoulders under her thighs, he swiped his broad tongue through the creamy wetness of her slit, avoiding her clit at the top of the stroke. He did it again and again, with great deliberation, each time drawing slightly closer to the bundle of quivering nerves. Holy Mother, it must be the size of her fist!

His tongue was as hot as a brand, igniting every fold and muscle in her sex.

Cursing viciously, Anje sank her fingers into his hair and yanked. "Ow!" His head came up and his eyes met hers over the slight curve of her belly, the rise of her breasts. The inferno of the goddess filled his pupils with flame.

"Make me come!" she gritted. "*Now!*"

For the first time, she saw Brin smile with his whole heart and the sight of it stopped her breath. Mother save her, he had a dimple! Oh, she was lost, lost.

He licked his lips, shiny with her juices. "My pleasure," he purred and sucked her clitoris into his mouth.

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Anje went rigid, her back arching until only her shoulders were touching the bedding. He pressed one

long finger into her vagina, massaging her clitoris from the inside. Time seemed to stop as she rode the edge of her culmination. Brin rubbed another finger over the tight hole of her bottom, exerting a steady, gentle pressure. The ring of muscle yielded and he sank in up to the first knuckle.

Anje yelped, her eyes snapping open at the unfamiliar sensation. Brin stroked and sucked and stroked and sucked. So many sensations experienced simultaneously created a firestorm of desire that made her writhe helplessly. High, panting cries jerked out of her, one after the other.

Trey cupped one breast in both hands and fed it into his hot mouth as if it was a ripe gaeta fruit. Then he clamped his lips over the distended crest, pulling it taut with lingering relish.

She had no breath left to scream. The climax rolled over her like a procession of earthquakes, pulverizing her bones, leaving her limp and fractured.

With a moan, she let her eyes fall shut, luxuriating in the delicious aftershocks. A warm, hard hand cupped her mons, holding her firmly while she shuddered, and she murmured her appreciation.

Her head was lifted and pillowed on a brawny thigh and she turned her head to kiss it, smelling male musk. Brin.

Trey's hands parted her knees.

By the Mother, Brin had played her like a fiddler's jig! He must have hypnotized her. A warrior of the Mother didn't take orders like a pleasure slave. Shegavethem.

Anje sat up. "No," she said with decision.

"You offered, Anje. Twice." Trey ran his hands through his hair 'til it tufted. "We told you about Lufra's Law." His eyes were a little wild.

"That's not what I mean." She shook her head impatiently. "You were first yesterday."

Brin leaned over to press a kiss to the tip of her nose and fondle her breasts in both hands. "It's best for you if Trey's first, scout."

"You don't mollycoddle a warrior!" she snapped. "What I want is...what I want. And that's you," she stood and kneed Brin hard in the chest, "beneath me, mighty shaman." Grinning, he toppled over on to his back, his shaft rearing clean and eager out of the tattoo on his belly.

As she swung her knee over his hips, she heard Trey sigh loudly. Anje fixed him with a dark glare. "As for you, Red—" He brightened and his cock wagged. "You wait 'til I'm settled. Understand?"

"Ooh yes, mistress. I hear and obey." He wagged his eyebrows and leered. "I can watch though, can't I?"

His face was alive with merriment, but when she snapped, "And don't touch yourself!" the chuckle died and he tucked his hands quickly behind his back.

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Brin curled his long fingers into her waist and held her steady. "You'd better be good and wet, scout."

Anje's lips quirked. "You're a real mother hen, you know that?" she teased. She heard Trey's smothered laugh behind her and then his indrawn breath as the smooth head of Brin's cock kissed her folds and burrowed.

She braced her hands on Brin's shoulders. Trey panted, the warmth of his breath stirring her hair. Anje had a thought so carnal, it had to be divine inspiration. She let herself slip back a little and Brin cursed.

"Help me, Trey," she murmured and he clamped his hands around her hips. "No, not like that. Brin can hold me. I need you to guide him in."

After an instant's charged silence, both men spoke together.

"No need," rumbled Brin.

"All right," said Trey.

Anje smiled, creamy with satisfaction. "Good."

Brin's cock twitched convulsively against her thigh and his face went completely blank.

Anje's evil genius made her say, "Wait." Drawing out the moment, she leaned forward to pinch Brin's tight nipples and nip at the tiny, engorged peaks. His fingers tightened on her skin. The new position canted her buttocks up high, exposing her damp curls and the swollen pink folds of her sex to Trey's appreciative gaze.

She administered one last lick. Mother, he was sweeter than spiced wine! The pulse beat so hard between her thighs, she would not have been surprised to learn her heart had migrated there.

Payback time.

Dropping a kiss on the tip of Brin's nose, she smiled seraphically, knowing he'd recognize the echo of his own patronizing caress. She watched his eyes turn molten and couldn't be sure how much was anger and how much lust. "Do it," she said softly to Trey, drawing back to observe Brin's expression.

She'd thought he'd gasp at the first touch of the other man's fingers, but she found she'd underestimated his control. Instead, the shaman's breathing deepened until he'd achieved a regular rhythm, and his face retained that curious immobility.

Anje couldn't see what Trey was doing, but she could guess. He must have Brin's cock in both hands, because the broad, satiny head was slipping back and forth along her labial furrow, nuzzling her clit, teasing her entrance with its mouthwatering heat. Trey's curly head brushed the back of her thigh and he turned his head to nip the curve of her ass.

The change was so minute, she almost missed it. Brin's lower lip relaxed a fraction and his breath hitched, stumbling over the rhythm. His lashes swept down, concealing the goddess fire in his eyes. Anje felt a dark flare of triumph. She longed to push until she discovered his limits, but Trey's play was making her crazy.

“Hold him steady,” she ordered.

In the end, Trey’s assistance was only necessary to maneuver the head of Brin’s big cock into her body. A few gentle rocks and he slid halfway home, her sheath so oiled, it was superbly slippery.

“Lufra’s tits, that’s a beautiful sight,” muttered Trey. “You should see it, Anje. Your cunt’s so sweet, so small, and he’s pushing that great pole inside you. You’re stretched like a little drum around him, you’re so tight. Lufra, you’re killing me!” He reared up and wrapped an arm around her from behind, crowding close, pressing his chest into her spine.

Anje hung half-impaled, panting. The fleshy walls clasp Brin’s penis flexed with panic and arousal.

The shaman said between his teeth, “Let go, Trey. I’ve got her now.” Turning her head, she caught a flash of the younger man’s wicked grin and realized he hadn’t removed his other hand.

“Anje?” asked Trey and she wanted to crow.

She nodded and Trey nudged the cloud of her hair aside to lick her neck, just above the torque. He moved reluctantly to lounge at Brin’s shoulder, all flushed and rosy and beautiful. He breathed, “Go on, love.”

Anje inhaled carefully and dropped, sheathing Brin to the balls. He growled his satisfaction and arched up another fraction, nudging her cervix. “Ride me, scout, ride me hard.”

“Gods, yes!”

He felt like a tree trunk inside her, a forest giant, wedged clear up to her womb. His hands supported her and she began slowly, savoring the rub of his unyielding heat against the resilient walls of her sheath. Tremors of delicious sensation radiated through her belly and spine and she picked up the pace, using the strong muscles in her thighs, plunging up and down, drawing out to the head and ramming herself back to the root.

Brin fixed his flaming onyx eyes on hers. “Yes, scout. Yes!” His hips arched.

“*Anje!*” Trey rose to his knees, one hand pumping furiously. “Wait!”

He scrambled to his feet and stepped across Brin’s massive torso to face her. Involuntarily, she braced her hands on his firm thighs. It put her eye to eye with his cock, the head purple with frustration and wet with leaking desire.

She froze, Brin pulsing inside her like a well-tended furnace, and licked her lips.

Trey’s chest heaved and his shaft trembled in supplication, weeping clear fluid. The musky scent of his arousal invaded her senses.

Anje raised her gaze to the pleading hazel eyes. She cleared her throat. “A warrior of the Mother doesn’t...she doesn’t...”

Brin swiveled his hips and stroked gently in a circular motion. Anje moaned. Her clit burned. She could no longer see the shaman’s face, but his deep voice was full of greedy interest. “*Never*, scout?”

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“Lufra’s cunt and clit!” swore Trey, tormented beyond endurance. “A virgin mouth! Just a lick, darling, please, please. I swear I’ll pull out before I offer. I swear.”

“No, no. I don’t...”

Brin growled, “Lean forward and open your mouth. I’ll do the rest.” He ran his hands over hers, up the outside of Trey’s thighs, his tanned fingers very dark as they bit into the other man’s fair skin. “Don’t thrust, Trey.”

“No,” agreed Trey shakily.

A warrior of the Mother didn’t service a man. But a warrior of the Mother took her pleasure as she willed.

Anje stared. Trey’s cock was long and beautifully formed. If it hadn’t been for Brin, she’d have said he was seriously hung. What the hell, he *was* seriously hung by any normal standard. Brin was simply awe-inspiring.

Her mouth watered. She extended her tongue and ran it over the smooth cap. Hot, salty. Trey whimpered.

The delicious prodding that was keeping her pussy just short of the boil stopped. “Get on with it, scout.”

She thought of what Brin could see through the vee of Trey’s spread legs. Her pubic curls and her belly, the lush hang of breast flesh if she leaned forward and took Trey in her mouth. She thought of him staring at Trey’s muscular body, the delicious indentations in the small of his back, his ass cheeks, tense and round with lust. He’d see the swing of the other man’s testicles, drawn up tight in their sac and the columns of his hard thighs, dusted with fine golden hair.

“Yes,” she whispered and did exactly as Brin had instructed.

The rewards were immediate.

Brin began to stroke gently and she was tipped forward, her lips sliding down Trey’s shaft. The sound he made was a cross between a groan and a sigh and it was the most lascivious thing she’d ever heard.

Encouraged, she wrapped her tongue around the head on the next pass. He sank his fingers into her hair. “Fuck, yes! Oh, sweetheart!”

Brin clamped his hands on her thighs and powered into her with long, steady thrusts. Her pussy heated again and glowed, vibrating with pleasure. Trey’s scent, his moans of joy, went straight to her clamoring clit. She tightened her lips, increasing the pressure, and Brin racked up the pace.

When Trey hit the back of her throat, she choked. “Pull back, man,” said Brin. “You’re too deep. Anje love, relax.”

Trey fisted the lower half of his shaft and Brin began fucking her in earnest, his magnificent cock ramming in and out of her pussy, jolting her mouth over Trey’s smooth solidity in a carnal rhythm. Anje hung on, her head reeling, her whole body screaming with pleasure. Great Mother, she’d never done anything so

lewd in her life! With all her heart, she wished she could watch as well as participate.

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The thought of the erotic tableau they must present pushed her arousal up another excruciating notch.

There was no sound save gasps and curses and the wet suction of flesh on flesh—three minds, three bodies striving for the same culmination, utterly focused on a common goal, yet exquisitely aware of each other. Her heart lurched. Such a purely physical activity, but her soul soared with exhilaration. It wasn't in a warrior's life to gift another with outright joy. But she knew she was doing so now and elation surged through her.

Trey's mumbles had become incoherent, his hands shaking against her scalp. Brin's breath came in harsh rasps, his bronze skin sheened with sweat, the dragon curled around his loins glowing as if it was alive.

Anje's orgasm gathered, building inexorably, a dark tide she could no longer gainsay. As if he knew, Brin grunted and thundered into her at a more acute angle. Her clit flared and the climax exploded. She screamed around Trey's flesh, remembering at the penultimate second not to clench her teeth, and came and came like the world was ending.

Trey jerked free, groaning as though the heart was being torn from his chest, and splattered warm cream over her breasts and neck. Brin swelled deep inside her sheath, pulsing with every jet as the seed blasted its way the length of his shaft. The spasms were spaced seconds apart, each separate and distinct. She'd never felt anything like it in her life.

Long before he finished, she lurched forward and collapsed against Trey's knee, the eyes rolling back in her head.

As if from a long distance, she heard Trey say, "Oh sweetheart," in a voice choked with tenderness. "Here." Warm hands laid her flat across Brin's chest, helpless as a newborn babe. Someone stroked the length of her spine, drew idle patterns on the knobs of her vertebrae. When Brin finally slipped free of her body, she murmured a protest and was hushed and petted.

She roused when the shaman shifted her gently to her back and a warm, wet cloth swiped over her breasts and belly. "What?" She batted at his hands. "I'm all right."

He ignored her, rinsing the cloth in the bowl Trey was holding. "Are you sore?"

"I don't think—" The words dissolved in a gasp of pleasure as he parted her thighs and pressed the cloth over her sex. Then he wet it again and cleansed her thoroughly, as though she was an infant. Anje wriggled, certain she was blushing.

"Humor me." Brin smiled crookedly. "You said I was a mother hen."

"Lufra, look!" The urgency in Trey's voice was so compelling, she was up on her knees looking for a weapon before she knew it. "*It's started!*"

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Declaration 3

The Interim [Council?] names this planet Phoenix [note: meaning unknown] in recognition of the hope it represents. In this new world, may humanity rise from its own [ashes? fire? ruins?].

Translation of a Firster text by Miriel the Burnished. (The fragment is preserved in the Royal Library in the Kingdom of the Leaves of the Sea.)

“What? Where?” Water slopped over the rim of the bowl when she jogged Trey’s arm.

Brin rescued it, setting it aside. “Gods man, why don’t you frighten the life out of her?”

Anje cast him a scathing glance. “Don’t be stupid. I’m not scared.” Brin glared back, returning her look with interest.

“What are you talking about, Trey?” she asked.

“The wings.”

“*Wings?*”

“Lie back for a minute.”

“Forget it,” she said flatly. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Your birthmarks, Anje.”

She looked down. “What about...” The words dried up. She’d never given much thought to the birthmarks below her hips. They were small and shiny and caused no trouble. She had neither the time nor the inclination for vanity.

Now they’d spread, both of them, but not in a blotchy way. Fine silver lines radiated across her belly and snaked over her hipbone toward the small of her back.

Dumbfounded, Anje’s gaze arrowed straight to the shaman. “What have you done to me?” she husked. “Am I sick?”

Brin slung a heavy arm around her shoulder and tried to draw her close, but she shrugged him off. “*What have you done?*”

“You’re perfectly healthy, Anje. Never better.” He rose and strode across the tent, the dragon riding his buttocks. Scooping up his discarded sarong, he knotted it around his hips. Thus armored, he said, “*We* haven’t done anything. It’s Lufra’s will.”

“Right.” What a typically male justification. Frowning, Anje licked her forefinger and rubbed at a silvery line. It didn’t come off, but a gentle tingle coursed through it.

She rose and faced Trey. “You tell me,” she ordered.

Trey's mouth opened and closed. He glanced at Brin, who watched the byplay with sardonic amusement. Then he shook his head. "Brin's the shaman."

"And you're the big mouth," said the dark warrior.

Trey bristled. "She's not blind! She was going to notice sometime."

"When I was ready."

"For the one who's supposed to be such an expert on women, you haven't—"

"Tell me!" Anje roared, pushing her way between them. "Or I swear someone's going to die!"

After a short, stinging silence, Brin sighed. Eventually, he said, "I had a vision."

"You've said that. So?"

He picked up a leather thong from the camp table and wound it around his long fingers. "A vision of a woman who resembled the Goddess.

"Once would have been portent enough, but the dreams wouldn't leave me." He shrugged. "So we came after you, with the dreams as a guide. We've been tracking you a while, scout."

"You're joking!" How had she missed their presence? They must be superb at forest craft.

"No." He dragged his hair back and secured it with the thong. The line of his jaw showed strong and severe, set hard. Suddenly, he looked older. Weary.

It might be ridiculous, but all this mumbo jumbo obviously meant something to him. Anje stalked to her pack and retrieved her last pair of trows. As she bent to pull them on, the torque shifted on her neck. With an uneasy twist in her gut, she remembered the way its magic had prevented her from leaving the camp. Leaving Brin.

She looked down at her body and her mouth went dry. "What about these?" Hands frozen on her laces, she indicated the silvery marks.

"Lufra's claimed you, Anje. Those are Her wings. I was right about you." The shaman's dark brows drew down. "I almost wish I wasn't."

"Why not?" she asked, feeling stung. Was there something wrong with her?

Brin put a large hand under her chin and tilted it. "Because of what you are."

She jerked her head aside and glared. "And that is?"

His lips twitched. "A warrior. Independent, bloody-minded. A true Child of the Mother." She heard Trey's snicker from the bedroll where he was lounging, unabashed and beautiful in his nudity.

"My people are honored among the Ten Nations!" She stuck out her chin.

"That may be so, but it's a dangerous journey back to the lands of the Feolin. There can be only one

leader.” He took her cheeks between his palms and stared deep into her eyes. “When I command, you must obey instantly, scout. No thought, no hesitation. Our lives will depend on it.” He paused. “And our souls.”

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There were so many things Anje wanted to say, they tangled together on her tongue. She drew a sanity-saving breath and exerted her will. Ticking the points off on her fingers, she gritted, “One, I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re lunatics. I have my duty. I’m a scout, with a report to deliver. Two, command is a matter of respect and trust. It has to be earned.”

Brin grew very still. He dropped his hands. The air sizzled. “How have we forfeited your respect, Anje? Have we treated you with aught but honor?”

Anje refused to take a step back, though her feet wanted to. Intimidation had no effect on a Child of the Mother. But how was it he made her feel so small? Surely, he wasn’t hurt?

“By your own lights, I suppose you have.” she admitted. She met his eyes. “But trust is something else entirely.”

“True.” Brin took a step closer, until his body brushed hers. His fingers trailed over her shoulder blade and she shivered. “A few minutes ago, you had both of us buried inside you, Anje.” His voice dropped to a rough purr. “To the hilt. You gave yourself freely. If that’s not trust, I don’t know what is.”

She licked her lips, resisted the silken pull of his will, his certainty. “It was... I’ve never... You’re very good.”

She shook her head to clear it, grabbed her shirt and pulled it over her head. Mother, what *was* it about this man? Rolling up the too-long sleeves, she strove to sound brisk, rather than bemused. “And three. Three...” She cleared her throat. “I don’t believe you. All this nonsense about dreams, the goddess... Read my lips. I. Don’t. Believe. It.”

“Sweetheart?” Trey stood at her elbow. “Look here.”

In his hands he held a small round mirror. He angled it so Anje caught her own reflection. She sighed. She should have braided her hair before they...

Her eyes looked strange. Frowning, she peered, and snatched the mirror out of Trey’s hands. Deep in each pupil, a tiny flame danced, a white-hot flicker.

The mirror dropped from her nerveless fingers.

Speechless, she stared from one man to the other. Brin stood poised, every muscle tense, but Trey was grinning. “You should see it when you offer, Anje. It’s a wonder you don’t burn us all to a crisp.” He blew on his fingers. “But what a way to go!”

Fury and terror boiled within her. She was a Child of the Mother, not a plaything for some divine slut! Baring her teeth, daring them to stop her, she slung her pack over her shoulder and stamped into her boots.

Hands on hips, she seared them with her glare. “I’m going to set snares,” she snarled. “If you’re lucky,

I'll get to kill something that's not human!"

Trey stood frozen, but Brin followed her out of the tent. He clamped long fingers around her biceps and swung her around. "Don't push me, Anje. You won't like the results." The fire in his midnight eyes blazed.

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Anje growled deep in her throat, ripped her arm free and took off at a dead run.

Brin watched her go, her long legs eating up the distance. As she disappeared over the ridge, he rubbed at the crease between his brows.

At his shoulder, Trey said, "That went well."

Brin grunted dismissively. But Trey had never been able to let well enough alone. "You didn't tell her about the Great Rite," he pointed out.

Brin rolled a dark eye at him. "And you would have?"

The lad had the grace to flush. "I need all my working parts."

"Ay, she'd serve us our guts for breakfast if she knew."

He had no doubt of it. But the Great Rite was the last chance, the final cast of the dice for the Feolin. If they lost, if they failed to placate the Goddess, his people would die. Not gloriously in battle, but slowly, their empty hearts aching for the babes that never came.

The priestesses were so eager, they'd determined the most auspicious time already, the Day of the Dark, when the Shadow swallowed the Sun, a few weeks hence.

Feolin legend was rife with hero shamans and brave, wanton priestesses who abandoned themselves to the sexual excesses of the Rite, their passion an acceptable libation to the Goddess. By their sacrifice, their submission, so the stories went, they invoked Lufra's protection against some dire evil, thereby saving the world. Time and again.

Heroes indeed.

Brin stared blankly at the ridge above the valley. She was up there somewhere, fuming—his insoluble problem, the woman he wanted more than life. The darkness of his thoughts gathered like storm clouds behind his temples. His head ached.

Reality was grimmer by far than myth. Three centuries ago, the Rite had ended in disaster. Contemporary accounts were garbled. No one knew whether it was human error or divine wrath that caused the conflagration, but the temple was consumed by a fireball so massive it was leveled to the ground and all within it perished. Not surprisingly, the ritual had not been performed since.

"A couple of weeks," said Trey, echoing his thoughts in that uncanny way he had. "Can you turn her around in time? She's your match, I think."

"Nonsense, she can't be. No training."

“Don’t be so sure, mighty shaman. I was there, remember?” Trey’s eyes sparkled. “You pushed and she pushed right back. You almost had her for a moment there, at the start, but then she turned us both inside out and she wasn’t even trying.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Trey grinned and elbowed him in the side. “Since when do you let another man wrap his hands around your cock?” The grin became a chuckle. He slapped his knees. “Lufra, you should see your face!”

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Brin wasn’t worried about his face, because there was an iron band constricting his chest. He couldn’t breathe.

The realization hit him hard, and not pleasantly.

She had known.

Trey’s touch, so firm and knowing, so unlike a woman’s, had driven him closer to the edge, faster, than anything since he’d been a temple boy in training.

Somehow, even if she wasn’t actually conscious of it, *somehow*, she had known.

And like an idiot, he’d Bonded himself with her. He’d been absolutely certain of her, of himself, this morning. He hadn’t been wondering about his domination, her submission. He’d assumed it.

After the vividness of his dreams of her, after her blazing response in the flesh, he’d fooled himself into believing he *knew* her, that she could fill the hollow place inside him, the one that ached.

The temptation had been too much. Goddess knew, he was so very tired of being alone. It must be something to do with getting old. For Lufra’s sake! He couldn’t even have Trey to love, though the lad was his constant companion.

What had he done to deserve such torture? He’d spent years disciplining himself to ignore that lithe, compact body, to deny himself the love he thought he saw in his prince’s eyes. It wasn’t because Trey was royal. Though Brin’s origins were humble, he was more than his friend’s equal. Without vanity, he knew he was the greatest shaman of his age.

But Trey was his responsibility, had been since the day Brin had saved his life. The shaman’s lips twisted. He was all too familiar with hero worship and he refused to take advantage of it. To do that was more than simply unfair, the very thought of it sickened him. Those who preyed on the vulnerability of the young committed a grievous offence before the Goddess.

Besides, this silken tug had to be an aberration. No other man had stirred even the slightest flicker in him, though, to be sure, he’d been presented with numerous opportunities. And what if he was wrong? Trey would be appalled, insulted.

Was he a coward or a noble fool? He clenched his fists ‘til the nails dug crescents in his palms. Lufra, what a tangle! Bitterly, he hoped She was amused.

Trey was still talking. "She wants control, Brin, same as you. It's very entertaining."

"Bastard. You're enjoying it."

"What's not to enjoy?" The lift of Trey's eyebrow was a challenge. "It's the closest I've come to seeing you crack."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Trey's lashes swept down. He shrugged. "I just do what I'm told."

Please Lufra, Trey wasn't flirting with him. The thought of all that muscular, creamy flesh at his mercy was too intoxicating. He drew a deep breath, inhaling the

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musky scent of the other man's skin, the smell of sex. He refused to drop his gaze below Trey's shoulders. There were freckles there. He wanted to count them with his tongue.

Goddess help him, he was beyond redemption! Wrenching his thoughts away, he said, "If I do crack, if I fail to gain Anje's trust, her complete and absolute submission, I won't be able to keep her safe in the Rite. We'll both die. And so will the Feolin."

Trey gripped his forearm. His face was intent, absolutely serious. "I'm sorry, Brin. I shouldn't have laughed. I'll do whatever you want. Just tell me."

"Then put some clothes on, for Lufra's sake! And find me that Aetherian brandy!"

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Chapter Seven

Fareng:

Brightly colored, carnivorous lizard, generally found in wooded areas near water. Fareng mate for life and both sexes incubate the eggs. Fareng venom is secreted on spikes in the tail. By paralyzing the lungs of the victim, it produces a quietly painful death. It is therefore a popular tool of the trade in the Assassins' Guilds.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

Anje stood under the whispering canopy of a sorrowtree and stared down at the two figures squatting at the small fire. Now dusk had fallen, it was so still, she could hear Brin's distinctive rumble, Trey's clear laugh.

Why weren't they more concerned about Hssrda? She'd scouted all around the valley, working in widening circles, until the torque interfered with her feet again. She was pretty certain she'd got a little further this time. Perhaps the magic was wearing off.

There'd been no sign of the Mother-be-damned creatures, though she'd found some curious

arrangements of feathers and stones and bones. Each was seemingly random, but strangely beautiful on further inspection. Hssrda weren't capable of such flights of fancy, but she had a suspicion who was, so she'd left them alone.

She'd snared three bunrats and dressed their fat, furry little carcasses. Her stomach rumbled as she gathered the wherewithal for a fire of her own. Roast bunrat was tastier by far than the dried jerky stew her Feolin warriors would be eating. Served them right. Nothing could induce her to go back there. Trey would soften her up with sweet words and Brin would touch her cheek and smile his crooked smile and she'd be lost.

Lost.

She had to get away, put her map in the hands of the Matriarchs. *She had to* .

Or her soul would no longer be her own. They were simply too tempting, too beguiling. Already, her weaker self was cajoling, *one more time, just one more* . Pleasure beyond her comprehension, tenderness she hadn't known she craved.

She had a lot of thinking to do.

By the time she'd licked the grease of one bunrat from her fingers, packed the other two and laid out her bed bag at the limit of the torque's range, her head ached with tension. For some reason, she couldn't forget Brin's grim expression. He was angry, she knew that, but it wasn't what she found most disturbing. The focus of his will was entirely on her. *On her* .

Why that should be so starkly thrilling she couldn't fathom, but it was, and her own reaction made her want to rend and tear.

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Anje fixed her eyes on the glittering arch of stars as she slid into the bag and stretched out. She'd slept alone in the wilds times without counting. Why should tonight be any different?

Holy Mother, have mercy on me. Show me the way.

As she finally drifted off, she put a hand out to touch his skin, jerking it back with a curse when she remembered he was a hundred paces away.

It was a curious dream, fragmentary, yet vivid. The Mother sat in a meadow of wildflowers, Her back against the broad trunk of a majestic tree. As Anje crouched at Her feet, She towered above, her glowing coronet of golden-brown braids brushing the highest branches.

In the dream, Anje had the temerity to touch the hem of Her garment, to slide the warm, silken fabric between her fingers. She couldn't speak, tears of awe trembled on her lashes. With every fiber of her being, she longed to climb into that great lap and take sanctuary in the Mother's arms. But she didn't dare.

The Mother looked down, down, and Her round, gentle face creased in a smile. "*Child?*" It was a vast whisper, sweeping tenderly over Anje's soul, compelling her to speak.

"Holy Mother, what shall I do?" she pleaded.

“Do? Sweet child, you—”

The Mother looked up as a dark shadow swept over the meadow. The shape of an enormous wing passed over Her spread skirts. Still smiling, She tilted Her chin to watch the creature’s flight.

But by the time Anje found the courage to follow Her gaze, it had gone.

The Mother put a finger to Her lips. *“Sshh,”* She murmured, with a roguish twinkle. *“Don’t tell.”*

She faded away. Anje frowned in her sleep and a tear slipped over her cheek. Rolling over, she dreamed no more.

Not long after dawn, she woke knowing she was no longer alone. Feigning sleep, she clenched her fingers around the hilt of her knife.

“I know you’re awake, scout.”

Scowling, she opened one eye to see Brin’s strong white teeth tearing the flesh off a bunrat leg. She snapped upright. *“Hey! That’s mine!”*

Unperturbed, he said, *“I left you one. You can eat it on the way.”* He looked relaxed and untroubled, his hair tied back, dressed in his leather trews and a sleeveless hunting vest with many pockets. It left the beautiful, biteable line of his arms bare, revealed an enticing slice of tawny skin on his chest.

Anje averted her eyes. *“The way where?”*

“Go get washed.” He nudged her thigh gently with the toe of one big boot. *“We’re going hunting.”*

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Her mouth fell open. Hunting? So he wasn’t going to swing her up in his arms and kiss her senseless and give her to Trey to—

Hunting. Alone with the shaman. She glanced at him sidelong. For all his size, he was as neat as a cat in his movements, one of the huge jungle cats of legend. It would take a tree branch to knock him out. Or a boulder. And she didn’t want to kill him. But it wasn’t as though she had a lot of choice.

“Fine.” She got moving.

But when Brin removed the hobbles from the huge turquoise vran and a smaller packbeast, she balked. *“You ride, Feolin, I’ll keep up on my own two feet. A warrior of the Mother doesn’t—”*

“There’s a first time for everything.” He kicked the brown vran gently in the back of the knee and it knelt. *“Up you go.”* Setting both hands about her waist, he lifted her on to the back of the pack-vran before she could do more than let out a startled squawk. *“Hold on to the harness.”* As he wrapped her nerveless fingers around the leather strap, the animal turned its head and lipped at his hair with its beaky mouth. Brin sank his fingers into the feather tufts at the base of its horns and scratched. The vran gave a prolonged hiss of pleasure.

But the second beast, the monstrous stallion, objected, bending to shove its head under his arm, nearly

eviscerating him with its longest horn. Anje gasped, but Brin pushed it summarily aside. "Wait your turn, Twink, you stupid beast."

Sunlight struck blue-green gleams off the plumage of its massive shoulder, as high as Brin's head. A clawed hoof, big as a dinner plate, stamped impatiently.

"Twink?"

The shaman swung into the saddle. "It's what his stable maid calls him. He's got a pedigree name as long as your arm, but old Brownie runs rings around him in the brains department. Looks aren't everything." He picked up the lead rope and the vranee walked sedately out of the camp.

Anje clutched at the harness, her knuckles white. Brownie might be smaller than Twink, but she felt an alarmingly long way off the ground, perched astride the broad back. The saddle was nothing more than a padded blanket.

"Dig your toes into his ribs," said Brin. "You won't hurt him."

She discovered the ridges of Brownie's ribs, hidden under his mud colored feathers, and braced her boots there. The beast plodded on and she began to feel more secure.

"Are all the vranee yours?" she asked.

"The black belongs to Trey. But I bred the whole pod."

"You breed vranee?"

"I can't be offering to the Goddess every moment of every day." One corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "No matter how tempting the prospect might be. So I breed vranee. Among other things."

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Anje bit her lip. What other things? The more she knew of Brin, the more involved she would become. She fought a brisk internal battle with her curiosity and won.

Changing the subject, she asked, "Where's Trey?"

Brin cut her a sidelong glance. "Miss him?"

"Of course not, I just wondered. You seem to do everything together." Her tone was pointed.

He ducked his head to avoid a hanging branch as they entered a forest trail. Twink stepped ahead and Brownie followed, drawn by the lead rope tucked under Brin's thigh. "Not always," he said calmly and a tremor rippled through her belly.

His body swayed with the swinging gait of the big vran, all supple grace and absolute confidence. The neatness of his waist contrasted with the breadth of his shoulders made her palms itch. If she were seated close behind, she'd be able to slip her arms around him, rest her cheek on his back, hear the soothing rhythm of his heart.

Five minutes of staring as the leaf shadows slid over his body like water made her so jittery she felt

impelled to break the silence. "Where are we going?"

He half turned in the saddle. "There's a fareng nesting ground, about two hours away. We need fresh meat."

That would be right. Two healthy males, one of them decidedly oversize, would take a power of feeding. Fareng lizards were sweet eating, though their flesh was hard won. Their intelligence coupled with flexible, spiked tails made them a formidable quarry.

Somewhat cheered at the prospect of vigorous action, Anje fixed her gaze on Brin's back and surrendered to the rhythm of Brownie's sure-footed gait. The woods were not dense, sunlight penetrated the trail, edging the gray-green of the foliage with a bright, buttery light. The odd, musty smell of vranee plumage mixed pleasantly with the dry odor of the forest litter kicked up by the broad hooves.

It was a good half hour before she roused from her daze sufficiently to recognize two startling facts. One, she was...content...at peace in a way she'd rarely experienced. That was odd enough, but what shocked her most deeply was that she'd abandoned her customary alertness for a pleasant reverie. She wasn't worthy to be a scout! Danger could have pounced at any time.

Though... Her glance fell on Brownie's lead rope, secure in Brin's grasp. Holy Mother, she'd abrogated her responsibility to the Feolin!

Drawing herself upright, she scanned her surroundings with a bright, suspicious gaze. They were climbing a long, steady incline, the trees opening out. "How much further?" she called. Gods, she was numb! Surreptitiously, she flexed her thighs, squeezed her buttocks.

Brin tugged on the rope until Brownie paced next to his huge stablemate. "Not much more," he said, so cheerfully she knew he lied. "Are you sore?" He rolled a dark eye at her. "Come up here with me and I'll take your mind off it."

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When she cast him a cutting glance, he rumbled with amusement.

Anje said the first thing that came into her head. "What's it like being a shaman?"

That sobered him. He took a moment to answer, picking his words with care. "Difficult. Humbling." He paused. "Exhilarating."

"I'll bet," she hissed, thinking of Brin stroking one priestess after another to climax. Twelve! Holy Mother!

Something vicious twisted inside her. "You're not very discriminating are you? How many women do you think you've had?"

His face shuttered. He shrugged. "I lost count of the offerings years ago."

The urge to hurt drove her on, made her reckless. "And men?"

Brin drew the vranee to a stop and stared down at her from Twink's back, darkly intimidating. His jaw was set, his shoulders rigid with tension. "Such offerings are acceptable to Lufra, don't assume

otherwise.” He rummaged in a saddlebag and tossed her a package wrapped in broad leaves. “Here, eat your bunrat.”

She snagged it out of the air. “Answer the question.”

He stared straight ahead. “No, Anje, no men.”

“I can’t imagine why not.” She raised a brow. “Given that you’ll fuck anything that moves.”

At that, he turned his head to stare at her in silence, until she had to fight the need to look away. An ember flickered in his hard eyes and was gone. “You insult me, Anje.” He nudged Twink back into motion. “It’s not a good idea.”

The last part of the trip was accomplished at a trot that had Anje rocking in the saddle, hanging on to her harness for grim death. She seethed with dark satisfaction. She’d succeeded in drawing blood without the use of a weapon.

By the time they came to halt in a clearing, she was certain all her teeth were loose. Brin slid down gracefully and made Brownie kneel. “We’ll go on foot from here.”

Anje clambered off the vran and found her legs would no longer support her. Gritting her teeth, she straightened painfully, fingers sunk in Brownie’s feathers.

Brin huffed out an impatient breath. “For Lufra’s sake, you foolish woman, why didn’t you say something? How bad is it?”

He ran his hands over her flanks as he spoke, brow furrowed. “Is that better?” He flexed strong fingers in the muscles of her thighs, kneaded her buttocks.

Anje flinched, but nodded, stifling a sigh. It was uncanny, the way he hit the right spots.

His touch slowed, became a caress. “Gods, how can you be so soft? I know you’re made of muscle.” He fitted his palms to the curve of her ass and drew her into his body. Bending his dark head, he nibbled down the side of her throat.

Tiny shocks ran through her flesh, firming her breasts, making her spine tingle.

“Mmm.” His tongue wet the throb of her pulse. “Scout?”

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“What?” she snapped, turning her head away.

“You’ll do as I tell you today.”

She stiffened. “I’ve hunted fareng before.”

“Nonetheless.” He loomed over her. “We’ll be working as a team. Put a foot wrong and you’ll pay.”

Mother, he was tying her in knots! She wet her lips and saw his nostrils flare. “Pay? How?”

Brin cradled her cheeks in his calloused palms, but he took a step back, giving her space to breathe. "I'd never hurt you, Anje. Or let you come to harm. Do you believe that?"

He waited without any sign of impatience 'til she nodded. No, he'd never hurt her physically, but there were so many other ways to wound.

"Ah, you're a wicked, wicked woman." Brin shook his head in sorrow, but now his eyes danced. "I may have to punish you regardless."

Then he backed her into a tree and kissed her mouth 'til the curses died in her throat and her knees turned to water.

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Chapter Eight

Forgive me, brother, for I have need of your death. Go in peace to the gods, and tell them all is as it should be on this earth.

Feolin prayer for the prey. (trad)

The fareng had found the ideal site, a streambed in a narrow valley choked with boulders and tangler ferns. Brin selected a pair near the water, the female sprawled on the mounded nest, dozing in a shaft of sunlight. The striations of purple and coral on her leathery skin glowed and her tail switched slowly back and forth, the lethal spikes tipped with a tarry, poisonous secretion.

To Anje's surprise, she and Brin combined as though they'd hunted together all their lives. She let him take the lead, since it seemed so important to his masculine pride. At his gesture, she worked her way to the downwind side of the nest, placing her feet with the utmost care, noting the tracks of dozens of beasts. She kept a wary eye on the tree canopy. Fareng mated for life. Where was the male?

Her patience was rewarded when a slight movement revealed a second animal, lying high on a branch, keeping a lordly eye on his brood. She pointed and Brin nodded, indicating she was to take the female, he the male.

She took two razor-sharp throwing stars from a pouch on her belt, running her fingers over their smooth faces. On Brin's signal, she let fly, the stars humming through the air with lethal purpose. Her aim was true, hitting her target in the throat with meaty thunks, an instant apart. As the creature's body convulsed, the male launched himself from his perch with a bloodcurdling hiss.

Instantly, Brin was on him, sword flashing in a deadly arc. The fareng died in a fountain of blood, tail thrashing impotently, as the dark warrior danced out of the way.

He watched the animal closely, waiting for the last twitch. "Good shot, scout," he said. Then he crouched and laid a hand on the fareng's long snout. He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Puzzled at first, Anje watched in silence, until it dawned on her he must be thanking the fareng for the gift of its flesh, blessing it. It was an angle she'd never thought of before, but there was a courtesy, a *rightness* to it she liked. She thought the Mother would approve.

As she glanced at the dead female, she caught a glimmer of movement out of the corner of her eye.

Instinct and training took over. Before she had time to think, she was exploding into action, dagger in her fist.

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Anje and the third fareng met a few feet from Brin's unprotected back. The impact of the animal's heavily muscled body knocked her flat, but she managed to get her blade up and into its throat, twisting and gouging with all her strength. Mother, would it never stop hissing, never die!

Dimly, she heard a guttural roar of fury and the fareng was yanked away. Brin straightened, holding its writhing body at arms length, his biceps bunching with the effort. Before the lethal tail could snap around, he flexed his powerful wrists and gave a brutal twist. A grating snap and he'd flung the twitching corpse aside and snatched her into his arms. "Anje! Where is it?" He was patting her all over, searching for the wound. "*Tell me!*"

She sat up and coughed. "Not my blood."

"You're not hurt?"

She flexed her limbs. "No, thank the Mother."

His fingers clenched painfully on her shoulders. "What the *hell* did you think you were doing?"

It was a good question. Anje considered it and her heart sank. Stupid, *stupid!* "It would have spiked you." She shrugged.

Brin was white to the lips, his eyes black pits in a face pale beneath the tan. He opened his mouth then shut it with a click. Spinning on his heel, he stalked into the forest and disappeared.

Anje stared at his retreating back, the shoulders rigid with fury. What bite had stung him on the ass? He hadn't even said thank you. Shrugging at the incomprehensible nature of man, she stripped and washed in the shallow stream, rinsing the blood from her clothing. Shivering, she dressed again.

So much for hitting him over the head and running. She'd had the perfect opportunity to escape and what had she done? Risked her life to save his.

Shit, shit, *shit!* Sweet Mother, what was the matter with her? Where was her honor?

Her lips twisted in a wry smile. It could have been worse. She was alive, wasn't she? Exertion and sunlight would dry her out soon enough, but Fareng venom made for an unpleasant death.

She was about to start the butchering when a hand reached over her shoulder and lifted the knife from her grasp. "We'll do that at camp." Brin hunkered beside her. "You go sit." He jerked his head at a patch of sunlight.

"But—"

"Go."

She went. Turning her face to the Sun and its Shadow, she let her lids droop shut.

“Come on, scout.” Her eyes fluttered open to find Brin waiting for her, the three fareng slung from a pole across his broad shoulders. Their amputated tails lay in a spiky tangle on the ground.

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Without a word, he led the way back to the vranee. Anje watched him pack the fareng on Brownie, still grim and silent. Her uneasiness grew.

When all was to his satisfaction, he turned to face her. “Are you bruised? Or sore?”

“Not really. A scrape over the rib and I think it kicked my calf, but that’s all.”

“Good. Your things are wet.” His face was impassive, his thoughts hidden. “Strip.”

She laughed. “No.”

His voice dropped to a silky rumble. “Every stitch. Or I’ll do it for you.”

She’d already turned to flee, but he was on her in two strides, his arms caging her like iron bands. No matter what she did, and she tried every dirty trick she knew, he was ready for her. In no more than a few minutes, he’d pulled the leather thong from his hair and trussed her hands behind her back.

She was pleased to note the bruise blossoming on his cheekbone when he stepped back to survey his handiwork. “I promised you a reckoning, Anje.” His crooked smile grew slowly and her blood ran cold.

“No,” she whispered, despising herself for the shudder of terrified arousal.

“Yes.” With steady hands, he unlaced her shirt and pushed it back over her shoulders, immobilizing her upper arms and exposing the tender mounds of her breasts. Her nipples peaked under his regard.

“What was I supposed to do?” she demanded. “Let it spike you?”

“It was only half grown. I could have taken it.”

He gave her a little shake, as though she was a disobedient puppy. “Anje, it’s not your place to protect me.” Kneeling to pull off her boots, he fixed her with a cold, dark glare. “Don’t even think of kicking.”

“This is about your pride.”

“No. Step out.” He pulled her trews down to her ankles, holding her steady. “I can’t keep you safe when you’re stupid.”

“No one asked you to!”

He left her standing in the open shirt while he spread her garments across Brownie’s saddle. A warm breeze toyed with the loose fabric, slithering over the skin of her back and buttocks like a caressing hand. The silver trails on her skin tingled pleasantly, but a chilly pool of panic blossomed under her breastbone.

Ignoring her, Brin packed both beasts, every movement methodical and unhurried. When all was ready, he strode back to her, studying each feature with cool deliberation. He ran a fingertip across her lower lip. “You’re mine, scout. And in your heart of hearts you know it.” His mouth twitched. “But you’re

nothing if not stubborn. An admirable trait, but very irritating.”

He shepherded her toward Twink.

“What are you going to do?” It came out as a croak.

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Twink knelt, Brin settled himself in the saddle, then reached down and plucked her from the ground, swinging her up on the vran to face him.

“I’m going to punish us both. You for your stupid courage and me for putting you at risk. You want to play games with me, scout? It’s two hours back to camp. Let’s see how well you play.”

Anje gurgled with outrage, her eyes wide. Mother of Mercy! He had her spread-eagled near naked across the saddle of a vran while he was fully clothed. She’d never felt so vulnerable in her life. “I’m not in the mood,” she grated.

Brin grinned so broadly, the dimple flashed and her open sex quivered with longing. “You will be, scout. Now relax.”

He ran warm, hard hands the length of her spine, took her knees and pressed them further open, handling her as if she was a doll. Humming under his breath, he cradled her buttocks and lifted her closer, so that her thighs were splayed across his, the warm cleft in her dark curls kissing the unmistakable ridge in his leather trews.

“Perfect,” he growled. “Just...” He put a broad palm on her waist and exerted pressure until her spine arched. With her hands bound behind her back, the posture made her breasts jut proudly, the tips already stiff, the skin flushed and rosy. “Ah, mouthwatering.”

Brin nudged Twink with his knee and the vran entered the forest path, its stride majestically slow. Anje wobbled, gasping with alarm.

“Sit still, scout.” He nibbled the side of her jaw. “I won’t let you fall, I promise.” Keeping one hand spread across her lower back, he held her steady, while with the other he undid his trews. Anje stared resolutely over his shoulder, the green of the forest blurring in her vision.

The shaman’s chuckle vibrated through their point of contact at the thigh. “You know you want to look.”

Her glance darted down, then away. His shaft was hard and ruddy, shockingly real in the sunlight, rearing up to his navel.

His voice lowered to a seductive purr. “And you know what it does to me when you watch.” That’s right, she did.

Brin slid his hands under her ass and shifted her forward, so that his cock nestled the length of her labial furrow. With each step of the vran, their flesh slid together, the lubrication seeping from her folds oiling his way.

Breathing hard, Anje held her upper body away from his, but the rocking motion had her nipples brushing his chest every third or fourth step. Brin tsked and shrugged out of the vest, leaning past her to

tuck it into a saddlebag.

The action thrust the root of his cock hard up against her clit and she caught her breath. But it was no better when he eased back, because a delicious expanse of warm muscle spread before her like a feast, topped off with small, dark nipples, already fiercely erect. Mother, she was starving! And they'd scarcely begun!

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She cleared her throat. "Are there rules to this...game?"

"Of course." He toyed with her breast, stroking his knuckles along the soft weightiness of the underside.

"Brin!"

"Ah yes, the rules. You have to ask for what you want, scout. That's all."

"Ask?" Her nipples tingled, a pleasant itch.

"You have to say the words. Nicely."

"What does that mean?"

The devastating half-smile flashed. "You could beg. That would please me."

Anje scorched him with a look.

"Or you could simply say please."

She folded her lips together and strained against her bonds.

Twink ambled on, and her cleft slid over Brin's hard flesh, his hot skin growing slicker with her juices at each jolting stride. Anje regulated her breathing. If this was the torture, she could endure it. Her loins thrummed with delight.

But she'd calculated without Twink. At unpredictable intervals, the big vran would miss a step, or lean sideways, or lift a hoof high to step over a log. Each time, their joined flesh slithered at a different angle and she had to stop breathing until the tremors faded.

The random nature of the stimulation made it worse, because if she wasn't coping with one sensation, she was anticipating the next. She had no thoughts to spare for anything else.

She stared grimly at the pulse beating at the base of the shaman's strong, brown throat and willed herself to feel nothing.

Gods, it was impossible! Brin explored her body with his mouth and fingertips, learning her by feel, murmuring praises against her hair. He licked her throat, bit gently then blew on her wet skin. Goose bumps rose all over her torso, her nipples tightened painfully. He hadn't even touched them.

"How do you like the game so far, scout?"

Anje snarled. He drew her closer, so that her nipples rasped his chest at every step. "Kiss me and I'll take the edge off," he said.

She felt more like biting—huge, hungry chunks. "I won't beg!"

"I know that, but the offer stands." He chuckled. "You wound me with your doubts."

Twink stumbled. Her sex quivered and wept. "Well?" inquired that diabolical voice.

Stubbornly, she endured for more endless minutes before muttering "All right," and lifting her chin.

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Brin didn't move. "No, scout. I want you to seduce me with your mouth. Slowly." Setting both hands on the curve of her waist, he waited, giving her nothing.

But sweet Mother, he couldn't conceal the fire flickering in his midnight eyes!

"I hope your precious Lufra incinerates your balls!" she grated, stretching up to touch her mouth to his.

Instantly, he dipped his head to meet her. "Why don't you do it for Her?" he murmured against her lips.

Anje ran her tongue from one corner of his mouth to the other. Gods, how could such a hard man have such soft lips? She traced their shape, over and over, bemused by the sweetness.

What was wrong with her? She nipped sharply. Brin grunted and administered a stinging slap on her ass. "Seduce me, remember?"

Grimly, Anje returned to her task, slipping her tongue inside his mouth, rubbing it against his. Brin had a heavy hand. Her bottom prickled with heat and moisture oozed out of her as if to douse the fire.

But each time she tried to force the pace, the shaman pulled back, making her start again. In the end, she gave up and simply luxuriated, nibbling at his lips, tangling her tongue with his in a slow, sensual dance, sinking more deeply with every caress, every flick and pull.

Her heart beat slow and thick, her sex quivered with empty desperation and all she could think was sweet, *unbearably sweet*.

After what seemed like an age, Brin raised his head. His chest rose and fell with his hard breaths. "Lean back." One brawny arm tightened behind her, holding her rock steady.

His tanned fingers trailed over her belly, dark against her satiny skin. Mesmerized, Anje watched as they reached his cock and fondled. It thrust boldly from her cleft, as if her clit had blossomed into a rosy-red, heart-shaped head, glossy with its own clear fluid.

Around and around Brin stroked, until his fingers were wet and shiny. Then he placed a broad, slippery thumb over her clit and began to slide it back and forth, building an inexorable rhythm, working with the rocking stride of the vran. His forefingers pressed the bulk of his shaft hard into her folds.

Anje squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the sight of the small frown that creased his brow as he concentrated on her pleasure. So when his mouth engulfed her breast, she cried out with the shock of it,

the heated, suckling pressure. The tension in her clit exploded, all of a piece, and she shook so hard, Brin had to clamp her against him so she wouldn't fall. At his murmured command, the vran halted.

The wave still had her panting in its grip, when he lifted her clean off him and brought her down, arching his hips, thrusting into her with his rigid length.

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He groaned, a sound of relief, but Anje shrieked. With her hands tied behind her, she was utterly helpless. She clenched her buttocks, trying to raise herself, but without the use of her arms it near impossible. Relentlessly, he filled her, inch by inch, while her sheath fluttered around his girth in involuntary welcome.

"Now we play, you and I," Brin growled as he let her slide down another fraction.

"You...youbastard!" She bared her teeth and he swayed back out of the way.

"Bite and you get my hand on that juicy little ass."

He lifted her legs, one at a time, and placed them around his waist. Then he urged her forward, wrapping his arms around her back, so that they were plastered together from groin to belly to chest. His skin was like a furnace against hers.

He stared deep into her furious eyes and smiled benignly. "I'd like to keep you like this forever." Long fingers loosened her braids, sifting the soft strands, fluffing the hair over her shoulders, her breasts.

Seduced by so much sumptuous pleasure, she fought. Pride came to her rescue. She set her jaw. "Mother, how I hate you!" He wasn't going to win.

He nudged Twink and the vran lurched forward with a jerk that made them both gasp. Brin recovered first. "I should spank you for telling lies, scout."

"No," she gasped, shaking.

"Lucky your gorgeous little cunt tells the truth." He tilted his pelvis the slightest bit and her internal muscles bit down hard in reflex. "Uh-huh, like that. And Lufra's fire burns so hot in your eyes, you scorch me with it."

"No." It was almost soundless. She couldn't look at him, she *mustn't*, or she would be the one begging for the flames. It didn't matter if it looked like surrender, she had to rest, regain her equilibrium. Wearily, she laid her head on his chest and inhaled. Gods, he smelled wonderful, like pure sin spiced with honey and male musk. She let herself snuggle, just a little bit. If she could relax...

"Good girl." His fingertips wandered over her ribs, the sides of her breasts. "Only another hour or so."

Mother of Mercy, give me strength.

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Decorative Arts—Bond Torques:

Bond torques are not common even in their Feolin culture of origin, the majority of couples choosing a less binding form of marriage. Whether jeweled or plain, a matched pair of torques will be made of the braided hair of the Bondmates and their immediate ancestors. The torques are said to create a psychic connection between the partners.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

Fifteen minutes later, neither of them had said a word and Anje was convinced all the nerves in her body had relocated to her sexual organs. Every pulse of Brin's cock was greeted with quivering acclamation. With each step, the vran massaged him against her sheath. The occasional stumble shoved the meaty strut of him against her womb or pressed his rock hardness into her clit.

Her nipples actually ached and her loins were engorged and tender, like a storm cloud full to bursting with rain. Slow tears of frustration slipped down her cheeks and her jaw hurt because she'd been clenching it so hard.

She'd tried milking him with her internal muscles, working with the gait of the vran. She knew she was strong, but the gorgeous, masculine solidity of him, the feel of him crammed into her, spreading her helpless flesh wide, had defeated her.

Where her cheek was pillowed on the heavy bands of muscle across his chest, his heart beat, strong and steady. The regular thump of it was echoed in his cock, as though a second heart beat there. It reverberated like a great temple bell through her screamingly sensitive flesh.

Anje sniffed and wiped her damp cheeks against his skin. Gritting her teeth, she reminded herself of who she was. A Child of the Mother. She was strong enough to push.

Delicately, she extended her tongue and flicked one tight, brown nipple. Brin's cock jerked inside her. Encouraged, she took the tiny, blood-filled peak between her lips and nibbled, keeping the touch excruciatingly light.

"Good?" she whispered.

"Of course." The shaman's voice remained calm. "Don't forget to keep me balanced."

Sighing, she switched sides, redoubling her efforts, knowing it was useless, wanting to lick and mouth every inch of his glorious chest, the dragon on his belly, his ass...

Brin cupped her buttocks, massaging, kneading, pressing her enveloping flesh around his shaft. He slid one finger up and down the crease between her taut cheeks,

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spreading her own moisture, making it satiny and slick, teasing the rosette of her anus with a light, circling touch. The sensation forced a moan from her and he dropped a kiss on her temple. "Like that?"

Holy Mother!

Anje discovered sheer desperation could be inspiring.

She snugged her head into the curve of his neck, bit the inside of her cheek and humbled herself. "Please."

His hands stilled, his breath stirring her hair. "Yes, scout?"

"Take the torque off and I'll do whatever you want."

She thought he sighed. "No."

Avoiding the braided circlet around his neck, she dragged her open mouth across his pulse, barely resisting the impulse to sink her teeth into the firm flesh. "I hate knowing—" Her voice cracked.

"That you have no choice?"

Her nod was almost imperceptible.

Brin's hand speared into her hair. "Neither do I. Has it occurred to you that your torque is one of a pair, Anje?"

She thought it over, frowning. "Then why did you do it?"

He tugged against her scalp, so that she was forced to meet his eyes. "I can't afford to have you run. Lufra gave you to me for a reason."

"Yes, as a pleasure slave!"

His molten gaze was brooding. "The owner of a pleasure slave cares only for his own gratification."

"And you don't?"

"This isn't about ownership." He hesitated and she had the sense he was making a decision. "It's about Bonding."

"Bonding?"

"Can't you feel it?"

She almost laughed. He had her bound and spread, at the mercy of his mouth, his hands, his hard cock. "I'd have to be dead not to," she said dryly.

Brin watched the smile tug at her beautiful mouth, swollen with his kisses. A primitive brand of possession, his beard burn marked the soft skin of her cheek, her neck. His soul exulted and he circled his hips, savoring her wet, warm clasp. Like a beast in rut, the hunger roared inside him, almost out of control. But if he let the leash slip now, the firestorm of Lufra might well consume them both.

Anje sank her teeth into that lush lower lip. She was planning another move, he knew it. He waited, almost shuddering with anticipation.

By Lufra, he admired her nerve!

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Her wide, violet eyes met his, strangely shy despite the goddess flame flickering silver-hot in her pupils. As a shaman, he'd played these games of sensual torment with temple women whose skills made his sweet warrior appear a complete innocent, yet never before had he doubted that eventually he would be sated, satisfied.

Now he wondered if it was possible to get enough of her.

As if she caught the echo of his thought, Anje dragged in a breath and clenched the powerful muscles of her thighs and buttocks, developed by years of scouting on foot. The action took him unawares, raising her half off his shaft in a glistening ride. His balls tightened agonizingly and he groaned.

She managed three exquisite strokes before he recovered sufficiently to stop her and by then it was nearly too late. The hot blast of his seed boiled from his balls, erupting into his cock. He had to resort to a hard, strangling pinch at his base. The effort was killing, the effect excruciating. His breath came in short gasps.

Lufra, she was untutored!

Anje dropped her forehead to his chest, panting. He could feel the ripples surging through the walls of her sheath. A measure of his masculine pride returned. She suffered too.

"Do I win?" she husked into the hollow of his throat.

From somewhere, he found the strength to dredge up a low chuckle. "No, scout."

"But I came close?"

Honesty compelled him. "You play well."

She licked the sweat from his collarbone. "Do I get a reward?"

Lufra's tits, she was something!

He raised her chin and kissed her eyelids, one after the other. "Yes, scout, but no offerings. Not yet." She kept her gaze lowered, concealing her thoughts from him, the lashes lying against the golden skin of her cheek in a delicate fan. He had a sudden vision of her bending over a child, using them to brush fluttering kisses against a bare, round tummy. Delicious baby giggles, deep-throated and full of joy.

The pang that ran through him was pain-bright with hope and longing. "You're burning with questions. Ask."

"Bastard." She set her jaw. "Tell me..." She paused to swallow a whimper as Twink ambled up a slope, forcing her harder on to Brin's impaling shaft. "Tell me about the torques. Everything. I want to know—*sweet Mother, Twink!*" Breathing hard, she sank her teeth into the cushion of her lower lip. He could see her gathering her scattered thoughts. "Tell me what you left out."

He temporized. "You may not like the answers."

"The truth, Brin, all of it."

Honor whispered that he owed her something, if only for her guts and determination, but the whole truth was an unacceptable gamble and it pricked at him

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like a burr beneath the saddle. All the future generations of his people depended on his control of this woman, his finesse in handling her.

He concentrated, picking his way through a morass of half-facts. "The torques are woven of braided hair." He twined one of her long curls around his fingers then made a brush of it to stroke her cleavage. "Mine has been in my family for generations. I had only to add a lock of your hair and my own."

He kept his head bent and his eyes down, concentrating on producing goose bumps of lust on tender breast flesh. "If the blessing of Lufra is given, the torques create a Bond." A Feolin warrior could not be a coward—by definition—but he had to fight to keep his face impassive. If she had even the slightest inkling of the way he really felt...of the way she tempted him almost beyond endurance, not only with her magnificent natural sensuality, but with the well of sweetness buried beneath the tough façade... Even her dry humor delighted him.

Ay, she'd have him wrapped around her smallest finger in an instant, his control shredded, his soul exposed. He'd be escorting her back to Mother's Hearth before he knew it. It galled him to have her think he'd use something as precious, as fine, as a Bond torque for a crude shackle. He'd Bonded her because he'd had no choice. Everything he was, everything he ever would be, reared up and growled Mine! whenever he looked at her.

With exquisite gentleness, he ran the rope of her hair through his fingers, testing his control, a hairsbreadth away from seizing her shoulders and showing her the depth of his desperation, his need.

Her straight, silky brows drew together. "Then there's magic in them? Truly?"

"Only if the Goddess approves."

"But what does it *mean*?" Her eyes snapped with frustration.

He smoothed the hair over her shoulder, noting with a strange detachment that his fingers actually trembled. Strange, he'd always adored women, loved everything about them, their weakness and their extraordinary strength, their endearing quirks and fascinating thought processes. He was the shaman of a goddess of love. He'd thought he understood females as well as any man could do.

But now? So much hung on the response of this single amazing woman that he actually felt himself lose the high, strong edge of his arousal. Lufra! He slid up and down in her succulent sheath and felt the rush of blood return.

He said, "I'll always have a sense of where you are, sometimes of how you're feeling if the emotion is very strong."

She snorted. "I don't feel that about you."

Brin smiled slowly. "You do, but you refuse to believe it. Besides, I'm blanketing most of it. A shaman's training is very useful." He distracted himself by watching her pulse jump when he mouthed her earlobe.

“Remember what I told you? About trust? Give enough trust and you can wear my torque half a world away.”

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She moved her head aside. “Might as well sign on as a life-partner and be done with it.”

“Is that what the Children of the Mother call it?”

Intimately entwined as they were, he felt the exact second she comprehended his meaning.

“Brin, what have you done?” It was an appalled whisper.

He drew Twink to a halt and stared deep into her eyes, letting her see the flames in his, showing her his ravening hunger. “Lufra sent you, Anje. First in my dreams, now in the flesh. I’m the shaman of a goddess. I have my duty. She wants you to come to Feolin and the Bond ensures you will.” He shrugged. “But I’m selfish. I want you too.”

Her honey-toned skin, flushed rosy with passion, went dead pale with shock and fury. Her mouth opened and closed. Watching her work through it was like teetering on a precipice. His gut clenched with tension, but through it all he stayed rock hard inside her, wrapped in a hot, tight glove that sheathed him perfectly. It was perverse, but somehow no more than he’d grown to expect. She had the most extraordinary effect on him, his sweet warrior.

“You bastard!” Anje bit out the words. “So I’m a pleasure slave after all? After all the fine speeches?”

“No.” He began to feel irritated. There was nothing he could do to change matters.

“You talk of duty.” She spoke through gritted teeth. “What of mine? The Children need my map. I’m honor-bound to put it in the hands of the Matriarchs.”

Tears of rage glittered in her amethyst eyes. With a sigh, Brin ran his hands down her arms to the thong binding her wrists and loosed it. The game didn’t matter anymore.

“A map is it? I’ll have someone deliver it for you, as soon as we get back to Feolin.”

The tears disappeared. She rubbed her wrists and treated him to a narrow-eyed glare. “I’ve never failed in my duty. I don’t intend to now.”

He shrugged. “I’m sorry, scout,” he said, meaning it. “The Feolin need you too.” He circled his hips, reminding her.

“I’m no one’s property. And what is it they need me for? You didn’t say.”

“No, I didn’t.”

As he let the silence run on, her lips thinned with temper. “You’re going to pay for your arrogance, mighty shaman.” She sank her fingers into his upper arms, the nails biting into his skin. “Pay ‘til you weep. How much further?”

The challenge in her expression heated Brin’s blood. “Ten minutes.” They were in an open area of the

foothills, grassy and flat.

Twisting her lithe body like a fareng, she turned and punched Twink hard behind the ear with her closed fist. “Yee-hah!”

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With a high-pitched whistle of alarm, the vran reared, dropped its forelegs back to the ground with a bone-jarring thud and took off at a panicked trot.

“Lufra!” Brin blessed his trained reflexes. He’d arched in time to prevent his testicles from being crushed, but now his cock was thundering inside her slick, grasping pussy. Every stride slid his rigidity over wet satin, muscular walls, up and down, fast and gut-punchingly hard.

It was insanely dangerous and she was pressed up against him, clinging for dear life, her crazy laughter tattered by the wind of their passage.

“Woman, you’re mad!” It was all he could do to ride Twink in the right direction, while Lufra’s Gift rode *him*, whooping like a lunatic, her hair whipping across his jaw.

His cock burned with an ecstasy so hot it was painful. A bubble of feeling grew in his chest and burst out of him in a great bellow of laughter. Who knew whether it was insanity or joy?

Twink was heading for camp, Brownie laboring in pursuit. The mightiest shaman of the Feolin, a man famed for his iron control, abandoned himself to mad impulse. He dropped the reins, wrapped his arms around his warrior woman and let her ride him into a climax that shredded his spine, fogged his vision and had his excruciated cock spurting in rapture.

He was barely aware that Twink had skidded to a stop, sides heaving. From somewhere very far away, he heard her gasp, “I won!” She rippled around him as he softened.

A hard hand gripped his knee. “I’d say it was a dead heat, love,” said Trey.

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Chapter Ten

Hssrda—Anatomy:

The scaly, armored bodies of Hssrda are vulnerable at two points only—under the jaw and in the armpit. Their sheer bulk and strength, together with natural armaments of talon, fang and spur, make them almost impossible to kill.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

Anje didn’t wait for Twink to kneel. Ignoring Brin’s wince, she swung her leg over and slid down the vran’s feathered side—straight into Trey’s arms.

“Brin’s gone all strong and silent. What did you do, you bad woman?” He kissed her enthusiastically, paying no heed to the rigidity of her spine, her lack of response. When she turned her head away, he guided it back with a gentle palm against her cheek.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, believe me." He rubbed his nose against hers. "Later." He looked over her shoulder at the shaman, removing the fareng carcasses from Brownie with grim efficiency. "Brin, I've got something to show you."

"Later?" she asked, though she told herself she shouldn't.

Trey laced up her shirt like a fond parent. "Don't worry, I promise we'll finish you off."

Anje stared. The man was surely mad. *Finish her off?* He'd just seen her screaming in the throes of a climax so brutal she'd nearly passed out and he was saying she needed *more* ?

The flesh she'd thought sated pulsed hard and she realized with a shock that she'd never felt more alive. Her body buzzed with energy, so hot she could have sworn she had a fever. Appalled, she clenched her fists against her sides, lest she seize Trey and wrestle him to the ground.

Through a fog, she heard Brin's dark chuckle. "Ay, but me first. We have a score to settle, Anje and I." Surely that wasn't pride in his voice?

Trey gave her a brisk pat on the bottom. "It breaks my heart, truly it does." His smile twisted. "But you need to see this, Brin." He led the way past the tent to the grove of candlewood trees.

The heavy body of a Hssrdan lay sprawled in the shade, its eyes with their slit pupils half-lidded in death, the fanged snout drawn back in a snarl. A trail of bitemes trekked toward the pool of greenish-black blood soaking into the leaf litter beneath it.

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Anje's stomach lurched. She stared from one face to the other. The Feolin warriors studied the fallen Hssrdan in thoughtful silence. They looked pleased, but only mildly interested.

"You killed it?" she asked. Trey nodded.

"*By yourself?*" He nodded again.

She laid an urgent hand on his arm. "Gods, you're not hurt?"

Trey's brow creased as though he was puzzled. "No," he said at last.

The ornate handle of a slim blade blossomed from the soft skin under the Hssrdan's jaw like an improbable accessory. It had been a precision blow, delivered with masterly skill.

Anje estimated the creature was not much taller than she was, but its girth was bigger around than her arms could reach, its tail longer than her leg. Its scales ranged from sewage brown on the back to a mottled khaki underneath.

"I'm still winning though," said Brin. "Four to three." He shoved the heavy tail with his boot. "This one's such a tiddler, I'm not even sure we should count it."

Trey put indignant hands on his hips. "Not fair," he argued. "It's hardly my fault it wasn't the biggest in the clutch."

“What—*exactly*—are you talking about?” she grated.

Two masculine faces stared at her with identical expressions of surprise.

“We’ve been ridding this part of the Empty Lands of Hssrda,” said Brin finally. “While we waited for you.”

Anje gritted her teeth. “You’ve been killing Hssrda?” Her voice rose. “*Indiscriminately?*”

“We didn’t know you were so fond of them.” Brin arched a brow.

Anje tugged at her hair.

Trey said, “We’ve given them every chance, Anje, if that’s what worries you. But if they go for us—” He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

No wonder they’d shown no signs of apprehension. She would have wasted her time warning them they were Hssrda-bait. Because that was exactly what they wished to be.

“Mother save me,” she husked, “you’re mad, the pair of you!”

Steeling herself against the carrion reek already emanating from the carcass, she crouched and used two hands to tug Trey’s blade free. “How much do you know about them?”

“Enough to know the world’s a better place without the bastards,” said Brin. “They deal in human bodies. There’s nothing lower than a slaver.”

“I agree.” With the blade, Anje indicated one of the Hssrdan’s clawed hands. “See that?” A finger was missing, the knuckle joint red raw and weeping. “This one’s been punished. Recently, by the look of it.”

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She stood and faced the Feolin. “I’ve learned more about the Hssrda in the last few months than I ever wanted to know. Gods, they’re foul creatures.” She swallowed. “This one is low caste, to judge by its size. Do you know how Hssrda grow bigger?” Two heads shook.

“They eat,” she said grimly. “Anything. And that includes each other. A high caste Hssrdan will bite and swallow chunks off an inferior, to intimidate or to punish. See where its tail’s regrown?” She pointed. “This Hssrdan offended someone important.”

“It came barreling into camp,” put in Trey. “The wards gave me plenty of warning. Not very bright.”

Brin touched her shoulder. “What are you getting at, scout?”

“I’m guessing our hideous friend here is a TailSoldier, the lowest of the low, the smallest of the small. Expendable. Or perhaps it was young and stupid, out for glory. Were the others you killed bigger?”

The men exchanged glances and nodded.

“Alone or in groups?”

Brin frowned. "I met two of mine in a valley just south of here. Then there was the raiding party of three who thought we'd make nice trophies. And a couple of others." He bared his teeth. "It passed the time, scout."

Anje studied Brin's massive form with new respect. Despite their strange goddess, the Feolin must be warriors without peer. Holy Mother! How could he speak so casually of such a vicious foe?

"The Hssrda caste system is based on brute strength and cunning," she went on. "There are four castes—Tail is the lowest, then Spur, Claw and Fang. Within those, they use military ranks. I saw a SpurSergeant kill a man once." She shuddered, remembering the hot spray of Deklan's blood as the creature tore his throat out. "Using that one as a gauge, a FangGeneral would be about nine feet tall and three feet wide."

There was a thoughtful silence.

"A raiding party is usually around a dozen strong. I'd say this TailSoldier was all the commander had left," she said. "Congratulations, you've just about cleared the sector."

"But?" Brin took the long knife out of her hands and cleaned it on a grassy tussock. "Say it, scout. But?"

"The commanding Hssrdan has no choice, not now you've humiliated it. It's got to destroy you or be eaten for incompetence." She rubbed her forehead. "Once it realizes stupid here isn't going to waddle home with a full belly, it'll call for reinforcements."

Brin scanned the peaceful camp, the pool glinting a calm, golden-brown in the early afternoon light, the gray-green of the surrounding hills. "We couldn't hold off a whole raiding party, not here. How long, scout?"

"Who knows?" She shrugged.

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Trey leaned gloomily against a tree. "I knew it was too good to last. Ah well." He shot Anje a rueful glance. "I had such plans for you, love."

Brin gave his shoulder a consoling pat. "Save it for later. It's about time we made a move anyway. The Shadow's nibbling at the Sun already. Look."

Anje squinted, shading her eyes with her hand. It was true. The merest smudge encroached on the bright disk of the Sun, so slight it was barely perceptible.

The shaman said, "I want us back at Feolin before the Day of the Dark."

"Youdo. I don't."

Brin tossed the blade hilt-first to Trey, who plucked it neatly out of the air. Then he took Anje's shoulders in his big hands, dwarfing her with his bulk. His face had that implacable expression she'd grown to dread, his stare impenetrable, hard as polished onyx.

Before he could speak, Anje twisted out of his grasp. She caught Trey's arm. "Trey, Trey! If you care,

let me go. Make him let me go!” She wrenched at the torque around her neck.

Trey’s face was a picture of misery. He patted the hand gripping his forearm. “I would if I could. But Brin’s right, you’re Lufra’s Gift. You have to come to Feolin. You have to—” He stopped, biting his lip. “Brin, can’t we—?”

“No.” The single word was flat, uncompromising.

Anje whirled. “You said you’d send someone to the Matriarchs with the map. If Trey leaves now,” she dragged in a breath, “I’ll come with you to Feolin. Willingly.”

“No.”

She stepped right into the shaman’s broad chest and plastered her hips against his. “*Willingly*, Brin. Think of it, you won’t have to share.” She stood on tiptoe to cushion his cock against her cleft, uneasily aware that feminine wiles were not her greatest gift. But she had her duty. She tried. “I’ll do anything you want.”

One hand gripped the tender curve of her ass. “You’ll do that anyway, scout.”

When she spluttered, he tipped her chin back with a big fist. “We need Trey with us, Anje. He’s an essential part of your education.” The force of his will was palpable.

“I’m going to have your very soul.” His voice deepened to a velvet rasp, tingling the length of her spine. “For all that you know nothing, you’re strong, the strongest I’ve ever known.” He ran the pad of his thumb over her lip. “But that only makes it sweeter. You’ll surrender, scout, and you’ll glory in it. You’ll abandon yourself and adore it. Because you trust—trust absolutely.”

When he let her go, she stumbled. “You’re mad,” she whispered, her voice thready. “Out of your head.”

Brin smiled his devastating half-smile. “No.” He gave her a stinging slap on the buttock, right where her tender flesh still smarted. “You start striking camp. We’ll get rid of the evidence.”

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He and Trey bent to the Hssrdan. Grunting with the effort, they dragged it away toward the brush.

Anje growled, but she stalked over to Brownie to retrieve her clothing. Muttering curses, she dressed and began work in the tent. She dismantled the light table, rolled up bedding. As she bent to retrieve Brin’s sarong, a silvery glint caught her eye.

Trey’s mirror.

Thoughtfully, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands. It was small, no bigger than her palm, but exquisitely crafted. The handle was a silver dragon with fire-opal eyes, its tail curved to form the circular frame.

With an odd sense of detachment, she noticed her fingers weren’t steady. Heart thumping, she raised it and squinted cautiously.

The breath left her in a gusty sigh. Normal. Just Anje eyes, the way they’d always been—a blue so dark

it verged on purple. Dark, no-nonsense brows, the level, horizon-scanning gaze of a scout.

The rumble of masculine voices came from outside. Someone muttered a string of curses. A vran whistled softly.

She touched a finger to her swollen lips, tilted her chin to examine the fading beard burn on her cheek.

Well-fucked, that was how she looked.

Nothappy—not precisely. Her brow furrowed as she puzzled it out.

Glowing.

That was it. Her entire being fairly thrummed with vitality and excitement. The blood tumbled through her veins in a singing rush, surging with life and health. She rose on her toes, flexed her spine.

There was a shout, cut off abruptly by a mighty splash. Anje smiled. Brin must have thrown Trey in. A few seconds later, male voices bellowed again, followed by another splash.

They'd be naked, the water slipping across broad shoulders and hard thighs, first concealing then revealing treasures of hair-roughened muscle. Mother, they were beautiful men. Brin's concept of honor didn't march with hers, but she could swear he was as fine within as he was without. The most dangerous temptation she'd ever faced.

Anje met her own stare in the mirror and froze. Deep in each pupil, a silver flame flickered, a white-hot ember at its core.

The glass dropped from her nerveless fingers and clinked into a tent pole.

Anje sank to her knees, her head bowed, fighting for breath. Frantically, she scrabbled after the mirror. Gripping it so hard her knuckles went white, she lifted her shirt and shoved down her trews. Then she angled the shiny surface, craning her neck and twisting her torso.

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Sinuous, silver lines snaked over her lower back and swept up to kiss her spine in a pattern as intricate as a formal dance. Barely able to keep the mirror steady, she traced them around to her belly and hips, where the birthmarks had been.

It wasn't easy to tell with such a limited view, but she suspected the marks resembled wings.

She pressed a clenched fist to her mouth. There is nothing stronger than You, Mother of all the world. Save me, save me from Lufra's will. Set me free to do my duty.

The fleeting memory of a huge shadow gliding darkly overhead slid into her mind. She breathed deeply, regularly, trying to get a fix on it. Had it been a dream?

"Anje? Are you all right?" Trey touched her shoulder and the thought shattered. She spun around, ready to bite his head off. But his boyish face was so concerned, she shut her mouth with a snap.

When she gave a grudging nod, he said, "There's not much more left to do. Why don't you go bathe?"

I'll finish here."

"Yes." Courtesy wouldn't kill her. She pulled in a breath and added, "Thank you." As an afterthought, she asked, "Where are we going?"

"To Feolin, via the Mountains of Morn." Brin's voice came from behind her. For such a big man, he had an extraordinarily light tread. "It's not the easiest way, but it's shorter by days. And I've not heard of Hssrda raiding into the mountains. I'd guess it's too cold for them."

Brin moved slightly closer. If she inhaled, she'd breathe the spicy smell of rough herbal soap, warmed by his skin. He waited as though he expected her to speak. When she did not, he ran a pulse-fluttering finger down the side of her neck. "I'll let you ride with me, scout," he said in seductive rumble. "If you ask nicely."

Trey laughed at the murder in her eyes. "I think not," he said. "She's coming with me, aren't you, darling?"

"Mother save me from idiot men!"

Anje jerked herself out of their grasp and darted out of the tent, ripping the shirt off over her head as she ran. If she didn't hit the water this very minute, she was going to combust.

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Chapter Eleven

The First Law of the scout is to be in control of yourself and your environment at all times.

It is also the Second Law.

And all the others.

Address to graduating scouts, Zenobya, Chief Scout, Mother's Hearth, 10346 ATF

In the end, Anje loped alongside the vranee with the easy, ground-eating stride of a scout. She could feel the gaze of the Feolin warriors touch her every now and then, no more than a light brush of sensation. They were puzzled, she knew, and it gave her childish glee to think of it.

As her muscles warmed, she ranged further, testing the limits of the torque. Invariably, she would barely get out of sight before her feet brought her back.

Trust! Hah! It was obvious Brin trusted her no further than the length of her magical leash.

But the thought wouldn't leave her. "Trust enough and you can wear my torque half a world away," he'd said. And straight after that, he'd made her so angry she could have strangled him and then he'd given her such heart-stopping pleasure she could have died of it.

Bonding! The arrogance of it made her breathless with fury.

Anje waited 'til they stopped to eat and drink. Murmuring that she needed to pee, she faded into the trees, withdrawing until she could mark the exact limit of the torque, the place where her body refused to

obey her will. She scuffed a mark in the soil with her toe.

Leaning against a tree trunk, she set herself to put her anger and frustration aside. Deliberately, she recalled the sheer primal attraction of Brin's huge muscular body, the grace and strength of his movements. Her nipples rucked and she smiled. Gods, she'd sat astride him on Twink, her hands bound, his cock buried so deep inside her it nudged her heart. She'd been powerless to stop him and it had been beyond wonderful.

He was made of hard muscle all over, but the skin at the pit of his throat was deliciously soft. She'd pressed her nose there and drawn his essence deep into her lungs.

Cautiously, she slid away from the tree, eyes closed.

The shaman was so complicated, a fascinating blend of the earthy and the honorable. Mother, what a warrior, what a man! And yet, inner demons plagued him. If only he'd open up, tell her, she'd help and do it gladly.

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She took another step. And another.

He'd give his life to protect her, she had no doubt. Or Trey. It was part of the code that drove him, something true and deep that ran all the way through.

Anje half-slitted her eyes. Twenty paces. She concentrated harder.

And what of Trey? Why had she given her body to two men, two strangers, so freely? She wasn't indiscriminate, rather the reverse.

Gods, Trey was so sweet, so cajoling. What was it about him? She'd met pretty young men before, but not one so at ease with his own beauty, so grounded.

He was meant for joy, Trey, but somewhere deep within there was a shadow in his soul. She'd seen it, flickering over his face in moments of repose when he thought he was unobserved. An abiding grief. The power of that need tugged at everything loving and compassionate within her, as tempting as his compelling charm.

Ah, but his body was lovely!

Heat bloomed between her thighs, made her clench her teeth on a whimper. She saw herself as if from the outside, writhing in an extremity of pleasure, her mouth wrapped around Trey, Brin powering deep inside her with that magnificent cock. They could have taken her life at any time, but she'd never had a moment's doubt she was safe.

Thirty paces.

Ah Mother, she'd loved it! And she wanted to fuck them again, and again, endlessly. She wanted to sleep in a tangle of limbs and wake to their mouths on her skin. She wanted to soothe aching shoulders with her hands, offer comfort and understanding. She wanted to love them forever.

Anje walked into a tree.

The shock of her thoughts addled her wits more effectively than the collision. Luckily, she hadn't been moving fast.

She rubbed her shoulder, her head whirling. Mother of Mercy, she'd needed that! She must be going soft in the head! With an effort of will, she buried the foolishness at the back of her mind.

Looking back, she brightened. Her reverie had achieved an extra fifty paces.

But she'd had to concentrate so hard to do it she hadn't been able to watch where she was going, which rather defeated the purpose. She sagged. She would simply have to improve her mind control. Or get the torque off another way. Grimly, she forced her thoughts back to her earlier plans. She had to get the shaman alone and then somehow—only the Mother knew how—she had to render him unconscious. If she had any skill with herbs, she'd drug him. But she didn't.

Which left force.

He probably weighed twice what she did. A wave of depression swept over her.

As though her thought had called him, Brin hurtled out of the brush like the wrath of the gods, leaning low over Twink's neck, a naked blade in his hand. When he saw

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her, standing there with her mouth open, he sprang down and hauled her into his arms. "Are you all right? Where does it hurt?"

"Get away from me." Anje fended him off. "I'm fine."

"But you felt pain, I know you did. The torque—"

"It was nothing." She held his eye, daring him to make something of her denial. "Take the damn thing off if it bothers you."

His mouth thinned and he gripped her arm. "You're riding with me."

Anje shrugged him off. "No, I'm not." Her spine ramrod stiff, she strode past him to where Trey sat on his black vran, grinning. When she held up her arms, he leaned over immediately and swung her up behind him.

"That's my girl. Cuddle close." He waited until she'd wrapped her arms around him, his back warm and solid against the softness of her breasts, before he cut a sly glance at Brin. "Ready when you are, mighty shaman."

Brin scowled, but he nudged Twink into motion without a word.

Anje rested her cheek on the apple of Trey's shoulder and relaxed. She loved the elegant solidity of him, his slim, red-gold beauty. Beneath her ear, his heart thumped steadily. On an impulse, she slid a hand up over his chest, resting the center of her palm over the tiny bump of his left nipple. His pulse reverberated through her whole body and she had his heart cupped in her hand. Infinitely precious.

As they swayed with the smooth gait of the vran, Trey put a hand over hers, clasping her to him. His nipple was a hard pebble burning into her palm.

“That feels so-o-o good.” He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissed the palm and put it back. “Want to drive Brin crazy?” he whispered.

He must have assumed she did, because he tugged the shirt out of his waistband before she could speak. “Touch me, love, put your hands on me.”

Why not? With a sigh of gratitude, Anje slid both palms under the shirt and ran them over the hot, hard planes of his stomach and chest. His skin was satiny smooth over the density of muscle and bone, except where the fur on his chest rasped her fingertips. A narrow line of silky hair arrowed down to the waist of his trews and she closed her eyes, pressed her cheek into his shoulder, and followed it, learning him as though she was blind. Trey let out a shaky breath.

So much beauty and it was all hers, to explore at her leisure! She felt half drunk with delight.

The sight of Brin, riding alongside, staring grimly straight ahead, his shoulders tight with tension, only made the power of it sweeter.

A wicked idea slithered into her mind.

She walked her fingers back up over Trey’s ribs, tracing each curve and dip. Then she reached down, bunched the hem of his shirt in her fist and slid it up. “Take it off.”

“Gods, yes!” Trey ripped the shirt straight over his head and handed it back to her to put in a saddlebag.

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“The Hssrda should enjoy the show.” Anje hadn’t realized such a deep voice could sound so waspish. Brin glared, his features stiff with disapproval.

“But you’ll be watching for them,” Trey assured him blithely. “And you’ve set traveling wards, haven’t you?”

Anje sat up, mischief bubbling within her. She hadn’t had so much fun since... Well, she couldn’t remember when.

“You’ll keep us safe, won’t you, mighty shaman?” She fluttered her eyelashes. She suspected she was a woeful flutterer, but Brin reacted by shooting her a look calculated to chill the blood of a lesser woman. How gratifying!

Holding his stare, she unlaced her shirt and spread it wide. Her breasts bobbed perkily to the rhythm of the vran’s stride, the nipples already peaked. Brin’s eyes widened a fraction and he growled something under his breath.

Her blood singing, Anje leaned forward as slowly as possible until her nipples brushed Trey’s bare back. He jumped. “Feel me?” she murmured in her smokiest voice.

Trey moaned, but Brin jerked his gaze away and urged Twink on until he was several paces ahead, giving her nothing but his stiff back.

Anje bit her lip, cursing under her breath, but Trey turned his head and whispered, "Talk to me, darling girl—loud, so he can hear." He pressed a kiss into her hair. "And for Lufra's sake, don't stop. This is heaven."

"I can't. I feel stupid," she whispered back.

"Well, you're not." She caught the edge of his infectious grin. "Just talk dirty and watch Brin."

Anje cleared her throat. "Do you like this?" She scratched lightly at the hair on his chest.

"Yes." Trey arched into her touch and repeated, more loudly, "Yes!"

She ran her palms over his pectorals in a figure-of-eight pattern. "Are your nipples sensitive, Trey?"

He grunted.

"Shall I touch them?"

"Love, I'm all yours."

Brin shifted slightly in the saddle and a rush of heat liquefied Anje's sex.

Using the pads of her fingers, she rolled the tiny peaks, flicking gently, rubbing. Trey's hands went slack on the reins.

"What's better, fingertips? Or..." She circled both palms over the blood-engorged flesh, rotating with the lightest friction.

When Trey didn't speak, she nipped the side of his neck. "Talk to me, Trey, or I'll stop."

He swallowed. "All. I like it all. Anje, please—"

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The shaman half turned in the saddle and she said hastily. "I'm melting for you, Trey. I've never been so wet."

Brin slowed Twink until they were riding abreast. He was wearing his stone face, his jaw set like a cliff. "You're pushing, scout. You know what happens when you push."

Anje swallowed a giggle. Suddenly, she felt light, joyous, full of power. Letting her insolent gaze rest on the hard ridge bulking out Brin's trews, she slid her hands down to Trey's groin and plucked at his laces.

Long fingers covered hers, bit down. "What do you think you're doing?" Brin grated.

"What does it look like? I'm going to play with Trey's cock." She grinned. "For as long as I want. Or as long as he can stand it."

"Lufra!" Trey's head dropped back against the curve of her neck. Peering down, she could see his glans jutting out of the opening in his trews, like a shiny fruit, pink and bursting ripe.

Anje's mouth watered and she paused, startled. She was actually contemplating contorting her body on the back of a moving vran in order to service a man with her mouth. She, a warrior among the Children. Holy Mother, what had they done to her?

"Shall I take you in my mouth, Trey?" she growled in his ear.

He quivered and his cock bobbed beseechingly. "Do something!" His hips rocked upward. "Lufra, do *anything* !"

A heavy hand grasped her shoulder in a firm, gentle grip, holding her back. "That's a trifle ambitious, scout. It's a long way to the ground."

"I want to give Trey pleasure," she said stubbornly.

The hard lines bracketing Brin's mouth disappeared, though his body still radiated tension. He raised dark brows. "Do you, scout? Will you pay my price? Both of you?"

"Lufra, *please* !" gritted Trey, grabbing Anje's hand and jamming it on his cock.

Brin's words slid straight out of her head. Trey's skin was hot under her fingers, so smooth and hard. With both hands, she burrowed into the opening of his trews, lifting him out, curling her fingers around his girth.

Because it was difficult to see, she squeezed experimentally and Trey whimpered. Intrigued, she stroked her fingertips from root to tip and down again. He quivered. "Good?"

"More," he husked and his cock reared in her hands, furnace hot.

Remembering how he'd masturbated himself on the rock, she massaged his foreskin up and over the cock head, pressing and rolling it, spreading his own lubricating moisture until her fingers were slippery with it.

Trey's breath came in hard rasps against her hair and she was intoxicated, drunk with the musky smell of his desire, with the sheer pleasure of pleasure given to the beloved.

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She pressed her aching nipples into the hard muscle of his back and took a two-fisted grip, working him hand over hand.

Trey stopped breathing altogether. His spine curved like a bow and his hands clenched on her knees with bruising force.

A big hand fell over hers and gripped hard. Trey moaned deep in his throat and Anje froze. "Slow down, scout. Make the offering worthy." Brin's voice had dropped to such a low register, it was a subterranean rumble.

Catching the reins of Trey's vran with his other hand, he brought both beasts to a halt. He looked down at his long, bronzed fingers wrapped around hers, at Trey's cock head emerging from their joined hands as smooth and flushed as a fat, pink rosebud. His sigh was so deep, it seemed dredged from his very

soul. He lifted his hand away and leaned back.

Trey turned his head toward the shaman and his eyes snapped open. Anje caught her breath. For a split second, his expression was unguarded and the brief blaze of love and lust was so intense, so powerful, she felt scorched.

Numb with shock, she relaxed her grip and Trey murmured a protest.

“Lift your hips, Trey.” Brin tugged at the other man’s treads. “There now. Cup his balls, Anje.”

She slid one hand under the warm, hairy nest of Trey’s sac and his thighs tensed.

“Good girl. Gently now, there’s a spot just behind...” The skin of Trey’s perineum was hot and resilient. She rubbed a slow circle with her longest fingers, while she stroked her thumb across his testicles.

Trey gurgled and his cock pulsed in her grasp. Brin slid a hand down her spine, his hair brushing cool across their shoulders as he leaned forward to watch.

“Keep that going while you work his cock. Harder at the root, lighter near the head. It’s very sensitive there.” His voice had sunk to a whisper, his cheekbones flushed with hectic color.

Trey arched and shook, deliciously helpless in her grip. Her sex wept and fluttered to the rhythm of her stroke.

She must have imagined it, that expression.

“Look at him, scout.” Brin’s fingers sank into her hair. “He’s yours now. Take it up a notch. Hold his balls taut and stretch his cock away when you pull.”

The slit in Trey’s cock head dribbled clear fluid. She could feel the sweat on his stomach, slippery against her forearms. He was trembling hard, teeth sunk deep into that luscious lower lip.

Anje glanced up at Brin. “He—” She had to clear her throat. “He’s very close.”

Brin gave her his crooked smile. “You have a natural talent.” He rose in the saddle and ground a hand over his genitals, circling them hard into his pelvis. The action was completely unconscious. A flare of triumph hit her like glory and she pressed her lips to the freckles on Trey’s shoulder, hiding her face.

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“If you touch the head, scout, he’ll be gone.”

“Perhaps I won’t then.”

“Anje, if you love me, please.” Trey’s voice was a hoarse rasp.

She scraped her nails up the underside, stopping at the soft, wrinkled collar of skin at the neck. Putting her lips to his ear, she breathed, “He’s watching, Trey. Come for him.”

On the words, she raked her fingertips across the domed, spongy surface, pressing firmly into the slit.

Trey's spine stiffened and his mouth opened soundlessly as the spasms took him. She could feel them begin in his balls, pulled up high and hard into his body. They raced the length of his shaft and exploded in jets of creamy white that splattered over his belly and chest and dribbled over her fingers.

She had her answer.

Trey was in love with the shaman. Desperately, miserably in love.

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Chapter Twelve

The Mountains of Morn separate the Sitariat-Gillen Tableland from the Empty Lands. Running roughly east to west, they stretch for fifty miles. The highest peaks remain snow-clad and cloud-wreathed, even in summer.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

Brin watched her doze off and on the rest of the way, curled like a languid temple cat into Trey's back, her cheek resting trustingly on his shoulder blade. Youth called to youth. The lucky young bastard.

He stifled a grunt as he shifted for the umpteenth time. He couldn't afford to meditate the arousal away, not here on the trail. Instead, he distracted himself with planning.

It was time to take her to the next level.

Actually, it wasn't, but he couldn't wait any longer to see her unravel. Lufra, *hecraved* it!

And as for Trey... He glowered at his friend only to get a slow wink brimming with cheek and satisfaction. Brin's cock rippled with dark expectation and his stomach clenched. Trey could smile now, but he deserved everything he was going to get. It would take all his shaman-trained control to bend both of them to his will and not betray his feelings for the lad, but ah Lufra, it was going to be good! He raised both hands above his head, directing Twink with his knees, and flexed his spine in a luxurious stretch.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Trey go completely still, so he did it again, just to spite him.

He spent the next half hour berating himself for his woeful lack of self-discipline, but gods, it had felt fine!

The long twilight was creeping in by the time they reached the foothills proper. The Mountains of Morn spread before them, a long, rambling range rising from the earth like the half-buried bones of some gargantuan, prehistoric creature. If he remembered aright, there was a cave complex not far ahead that would be perfect for their needs this night. The largest opened into a spacious chamber after a narrow right-angled passage. No light would escape to advertise their presence to passing Hssrda.

And that was pleasing, because he wanted to be able to see what he was doing.

He stared into the shadowy distance. Home was there, beyond the barrier of the mountains and the Sitariat-Gillen Tableland. His ranch, where the rasa grass blew silver before the wind and the vranee grazed down to the river. He missed Djalen the cook's

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noodlecakes, he missed the bed he'd had specially made to accommodate his length. It was broad enough to fit three. He could imagine lying there blissfully sated, comfortably tangled with Anje and Trey. Brin sighed. There could be no doubt he was growing old.

Anje roused as the vranee splashed through a shallow stream. She was a good sleeper, his sweet warrior. One soft cheek was creased, her eyes dazed. She looked young and vulnerable, as though she needed petting with a gentle hand.

The illusion lasted until she focused on him. She sat up, pursed her lips and blew him a mocking kiss. Almost purring with anticipation, Brin smiled calmly back, delighted when she froze, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Are you well rested, scout?" he enquired politely.

"Well enough."

He showed his teeth. "Excellent."

He let her stew.

The caves were as he remembered, with a busy stream chuckling over a rocky bed thirty paces away. Ideal.

In the almost dusk, he circled the area, setting a double ring of wards with exquisite attention to detail. Tonight he would be concentrating on the knife-edge between pleasure and pain. He could not afford to divide his attention.

By the time he returned to the cave, Trey had hobbled the vranee and started supper. He looked up, the firelight kissing his hair like a lover. "All done?"

Brin grunted an affirmative. "Yes. Here." He tossed a bunch of reddish stalks at Trey. They had thick, white bulbous stems. "I found a stand of trintri."

Trey brightened. Trintri had a sweet, nutty flavor. They'd go well with fareng.

Brin looked around. "Where's Anje?"

"Said she wanted to wash. I volunteered to scrub her back, but—" He made a face.

"She'll keep. Did you find enough bracken for bedding?"

Their eyes met in perfect understanding and Trey grinned broadly.

"Don't look so thrilled," said Brin grimly. "I'm none too pleased with you."

Trey's expression turned devilish. "Can't win them all," he said.

Brin dropped his voice to a sibilant rumble. "But I intend to." Trey's knuckles whitened on the trintri stalks. "Go get your oldest shirt."

“What for?”

“Do it.”

A flush so delicate it could have been a girl's stained Trey's cheek, but he rose and disappeared into the depths of the cave without a word. When he returned, he had a balled-up garment in his fist. He thrust it at Brin.

“No.” The shaman stopped him with a growl. “Tear it up. I want strips long enough to use as ties.”

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Trey's tongue flicked out to wet his lips and the breath clogged in Brin's throat. “How many?” Trey husked.

Brin smiled and knew it was an evil expression. Lufra, hewasevil! “Eight,” he said, for the simple pleasure of watching Trey think about it.

Trey's lashes swept down and his fingers tightened on the fabric. Brin turned and walked away before the other man could notice the tremor in his hands. Standing on the shallow ledge before the cave, he dragged in greedy lungfuls of the crisp air. If he didn't keep an iron grip on his control, he'd betray himself, sacrificing his honor and self-respect. Absently, he rubbed at his throat, his skin felt as though it burned.

Behind him, cloth ripped in a long, rasping tear that shivered along his nerves in a brutal caress. Trey pushed him to the brink simply by existing. Anje was his goddess-sent match. How easily he could lose himself in them!

If he took care not to let Trey touch him this time, if he could bear to cause Anje pain to give her pleasure... Ah Lufra, but he wanted to, he wanted to do those things! Within him, self-loathing battled with dark desire.

Another rip, the sound of Trey's grunt as a seam resisted. Brin squared his shoulders.

In the Great Rite, he and Anje would be drugged and anointed with aphrodisiacs and stimulated to screaming point by teams of shamans and priestesses. They had skills his poor sweet warrior had never dreamed of and their purpose would be to drive her out of her mind with lust.

Literally.

His balls cramped as he imagined her lithe, muscular body stretched and bound on the sacred bed of Lufra, tongues and fingers and cocks all over her, while she begged and screamed and pleaded for relief.

But if she resisted, if she fought too hard, refused his help, his support, she would shatter. Instead of leaping from her body, rising to Lufra in glory, her soul would implode. Fracture and die.

And if she didn't take his soul with her when she went, he knew he'd wish she had.

Tonight, he had to teach her, had to use his body and Trey's as the instruments of her education, her submission. The only way for her to learn was through experience.

And in the process, he had somehow to keep from betraying Trey's trust. He snorted. He was a fine one to talk of trust! One day soon, Trey would grow up and recognize his infatuation for what it was. Though a part of him mourned, Brin knew he would rather die than give the younger man something to soil the memory of their friendship.

So all he had to do was mete out enough dark pleasure to earn his sweet warrior's trust, meanwhile ensuring Trey couldn't touch him.

Simplicity itself.

Without turning his head, he said, "Go shave, Trey. I don't want you to mark her."

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"Why?"

A dark curl of amusement lit Brin's mood. Trey would stare death in the eye and ask why. He turned. The younger man stood a yard away, firelight glinting on the light golden stubble on his chin.

"Because I'll be doing all the marking necessary."

Trey's brow quirked and he salaamed. "Yes, mighty shaman."

That startled a laugh out of him. As Trey passed, he swatted him hard on one delectable cheek.

"Bastard," said Trey amiably but he didn't stop.

Shaken, Brin stared after him. His palm tingled with the curved imprint of a muscular buttock.

So much for his fine resolutions!

He raised his voice. "Send Anje up."

"I don't need a keeper."

His head jerked around. She stood a few paces away, poised on the balls of her feet, watching him, her eyes unreadable. Gods, she must be a superb scout! How much had she heard?

She leaned over the pot bubbling on the fire and sniffed. "This dinner?"

Brin grunted assent, bemused by her athletic grace, the fine curve of her ass as she hunkered down. His gaze sharpened. "What's that?"

"Nothing."

In two strides, he'd grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. "There's blood on your neck. Get in here." He hustled her down the long passage and into the dark cave. "Don't move from that spot."

She sighed theatrically, but stayed where he'd put her.

Fumbling for his tinder box, he lit the traveling lantern on the camp table and trimmed the wick. When he

turned, she was standing with a hand on her hip, an ironic lift to her straight, dark brows.

With a rumble of irritation, Brin pushed her jaw up so he could see. His stomach turned over and he hissed between his teeth. "Those are cuts."

Her eyes fell, the lashes lying like fans on her cheek.

"I thought I felt something." He gave her a gentle shake. "You tried to cut the torque off, didn't you?"

Her mouth compressed into a stubborn line.

"Didn't you?"

She glared. "What did you expect?"

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"Don't try it again." Brin unbuckled the clasp of his saddlebag and fished out his small medical kit. "Put your head up." Carefully he dabbed the shallow cuts with the liquid from a small vial.

Anje inhaled sharply. "What the Mother is that? It stings like a bitch."

"Serves you right," he said without sympathy. "It's a cleansing potion."

He released her and returned the vial to the kit. As he did so, he caught sight of a jar of soothing balm. Everything within him went still and hungry. Slowly, he drew it out and placed it on the table near the heat of the lamp so it would warm.

Anje's eyes shifted to it. Gradually, her pupils dilated and she paled beneath her honey gold tan. The wicked desire inside Brin danced with glee and anticipation.

Blandly, he said, "We should eat."

There was something darkly addictive about wide eyes and trembling lips.

"It's ready." Trey emerged from the passage with a bowl of steaming stew in each hand. "We've only got two bowls, Anje. Sorry."

"She can share with me. Trey, douse the fire and bring the hot water." He waited a beat and added, "And that shirt."

Trey's eyes glittered. "Right." As he placed the bowls on the table, he noticed the jar of balm. He stood motionless, his throat moving as he swallowed. Then he turned and darted out of the cave.

Brin didn't speak. The silence dragged out. He watched Anje's eyes flick away from his. Her breasts rose and fell, quivering with the rapidity of her breathing. He smiled inwardly when her gaze snagged on the deep heap of fragrant bracken with their bedding spread over it. Now she knew she wasn't sleeping alone tonight.

"You wanted my attention, didn't you, scout?" he asked silkily. "And you had no problem persuading Trey to help you out." His mouth quirked. "Now you have it. Tell me what you want."

Her violet eyes fixed on his. To him, her face was so expressive, he could watch as she drew anger around her like armor. When she made her decision, she used it to fuel her courage.

Her jaw firmed and she set her hands on her hips. "You know what I want."

Brin folded his legs and dropped to the bedding. He leaned back against the wall and propped one elbow on his bent knee. "No," he said, "I won't know unless you tell me."

A spark flared in her amethyst stare. "I want to leave you. Tomorrow. But tonight, I want..." She swallowed and Brin raised a gentle brow.

"I want you..." Her breath huffed out as Trey skidded to a halt, a large stoppered gourd in one hand, a bunch of fabric wadded in the other.

"Go on." It was the softest whisper he could produce, the one he used to coax nervous vranee.

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"Both of you... What we did last night..." The words trailed off into a tingling silence.

"Are you sure, Anje? Both of us?"

She stood her ground, Lufra bless her. "I just said so, didn't I?"

Ruthlessly, he quelled the tenderness. There was no time for that now. Instead, he stared deeply into her eyes and showed her the roar of his hunger, the depth of his greed. "One at a time? Or together?"

Trey set the heavy gourd down with a thunk. "Stop it, Brin." His voice was steady and cold. "Leave her be."

Never in all their years together had he heard that tone from Trey. Brin covered his reaction by resting his head against the wall and studying his young friend through half-closed eyes. He supposed he should be hurt, jealous even. Trey had slipped his arm around Anje's waist and they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, shining with youth and defiance. But instead, he had to fight an almost overpowering urge to leap his feet and pull them into his arms and babble Lufra knew what nonsense. That he never wanted them to leave him, that he'd do anything, anything if they'd stay, if they'd warm his bed forever.

He inhaled deeply. "You want me to torture you in her place?"

Trey's gaze was level. "If that's what it takes."

Brin had to let his lashes fall, lest the other man see the goddess flame blazing in his eyes. After a moment's struggle, he had himself under control. "I'll take care of her, Trey. I promise on my honor, no more than she can take."

Trey stared so hard, Brin felt the back of his skull sizzle. Finally, the younger man gave a curt nod and stepped back.

Brin wanted to sag with relief. Instead, he patted the space next to him. "We should eat. Come and sit,

scout.”

Warily, she picked her way across the cave and sank down next to him. Brin held out a hand and Trey slipped a tie into it.

In a single, swift move, he grasped both her wrists and bound them together.

An outraged gasp and she was twisting in his grip, bucking like a wild vran. “Take her—*Lufra!*—feet, Trey!”

After a brisk five minutes, Brin had her sitting sideways in his lap, rigid with fury. Trey leaned panting against the wall, rubbing his thigh and grinning.

“What’s it with you?” she hissed. “Arrogant, stupid—”

“I know.” Brin ran his forefinger down her neck and over the thunder of her pulse. He pressed his lips to the spot. “But I can smell you, scout. Those trews must be soaked through. Shall we check?”

“No!”

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Trey handed him a bowl and a fork. Brin went on, “I know what you asked for, scout. But Lufra, in Her love and generosity, provides an infinite variety of ways to fuck. They are all delightful. And we’re going to try them all.”

For all her length and lithe muscularity, she wasn’t heavy. Her spine was stiff, but the hair drifting free of her braid tickled his cheek and his nostrils were full of her scent—cool and clean from her wash in the stream, but warmed through with the feminine honey of arousal. He remembered her taste. She’d been delicious, tangy and musky on his tongue. His mouth watered.

“I’m hungry,” he said. Lufra knew that was no more than the truth. The sulky droop of her cushiony lower lip was so tempting, the drool was practically dripping off his chin. “Aren’t you?”

She scowled. “You know I am.”

Gratefully, he inhaled her fragrance and popped a small forkful between her lips. “Eat for me, my beautiful slave. You’re going to need your strength.”

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Chapter Thirteen

Loincloths, 3

Sarongs, 2

Blanket, 1

Inexpensive oil, suitable for massage, 1 bottle

Cockring (please ensure correct fit) and small bells

Soft leather straps, one inch wide, 6

Soap and towel

Hymnal

“Shamanic training: what to bring”, from “Feolin Temple Instruction 24”, revised 10339 ATF

Brin’s lap was surprisingly comfortable, despite the fact that Anje refused to lean into his chest the way her body urged her to do. Because she was seated side-on to him, his access to her was unsettlingly complete. His thighs felt hard and warm beneath her, but he kept her steady with a hand in the small of her back. Its casual presence burned through her shirt like a brand. Between bites of stew, he’d stroke her cheek or her hair, as if she was a pet.

He’d bound her wrists in front of her, in such a way that she had about six inches of free play.

He took scrupulous care of her, ensuring each forkful was the right size, wiping the occasional droplet from her lip with a broad thumb. Trey brewed her a cup of roberry and doled it out in measured sips, grinning.

“Traitor!” she hissed, but the grin only widened and he swooped down to kiss her eyebrow, cheerfully unrepentant.

“Quiet!” ordered Brin.

Something had shifted in him since they’d arrived at the cave. She’d never seen the shaman look so stern, so full of brutal purpose. She pressed her thighs together, shamed and furious. The harder the expression in his midnight eyes, the more her sex glowed with happy expectation.

The Mother only knew what he’d done to her. She must be insane!

As the level in the bowl they shared dropped, her apprehension grew. By the time the last scraps disappeared, she could no longer keep the words between her teeth. “What are you going to do?”

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She’d meant it to sound like a challenge, but it came out all wrong, cracked and desperate.

“Did I give you permission to speak?”

Anje opened her mouth and saw the gleam in his eye. No one had ever called her stupid. She shut it with a click and shook her head.

Brin gave a predatory smile that chilled her blood. “We’re going to take you to your limits, scout. And on the way there, I’ll be settling my score with you.” His eye fell on Trey. “Both of you.”

Trey scowled, but his lips quivered on a suppressed smile. As he shifted to ease the bulge in his trows, Anje smirked. Serves him right, she thought, with a shudder of anticipation.

“Don’t look so pleased.” The shaman set aside the bowl, put a finger to her cheek and turned her to face him. “We’ve been gentle with you, scout. Positively restrained. Think of it, we could have taken turns with you for hours, days.”

He shook his head in mock sorrow and a lock of shining sable hair flopped into his eyes. She only realized she’d raised a hand to smooth it away when the bindings brought her up short. Swearing inwardly, she bit her lip.

“And so much of you is virgin, scout. Your gorgeous ass. Your mouth...” He nibbled at her lower lip, slicked his tongue over it. “You haven’t even swallowed yet.” His palms produced a wave of shivers down her spine and over the upper slopes of her buttocks. “You have the sweetest dimples. Just here.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Fuck your ass?” He took her cheeks between his palms and stared into her eyes. Deep in the midnight of his pupils, the goddess fire blazed. “Of course I would. I will. So will Trey.”

“It takes a little getting used to.” Trey drew off one of her boots as he spoke. “But you’ll like it.”

“Mother of Mercy, you’re perverts, both of you!”

Her eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. “Trey, how would you know what it feels like?” she demanded.

He flushed a brilliant scarlet. Ducking his head, he busied himself with the second boot.

“Sweet Lufra!” The shaman’s long fingers clamped on to his shoulder, dug in. “Who?”

The high color ebbed from Trey’s face. He tilted his chin and gave Brin a steady look. “Why do you want to know?”

As the silence stretched, Anje stole a glance at Brin. His face was impassive, but under the bronzed skin of his throat, a pulse ticked to a wild rhythm. The fire of the goddess was a conflagration in his dark pupils. At last, he said, so slowly it was as if the words were dragged out of him, “I just want to know he cared.”

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“He was...kind.”

Beneath her, Brin relaxed, one muscle at a time. His exhalation whispered past her ear. She’d be willing to bet her best blade Trey’s lover had been tall and broad and dark-haired. She opened her mouth and shut it again. It wasn’t her secret to tell.

“Get the treads off her,” said the shaman. When she writhed in protest, Brin took her face in his hands, bent his dark head and plundered her mouth. She tried to hold firm, but his tongue was so persuasive, so cajoling, her complaints turned to a gurgle of delight. Ah Mother, there was nothing better than a man who loved to kiss. And she had two of them! Her bound hands flailed about until they found a fold of his shirt and clutched.

She barely registered the leggings being removed, only gasping into Brin’s mouth when she felt Trey’s warm hands slide up her calves and over her thighs.

The shaman pulled his lips away and she moaned.

“Not yet, Trey,” he growled. “Strip. And stand where we can see you.”

Grumbling, Trey did as he was bid. When he was bare, Brin rumbled, “How’s the view, scout? See anything you fancy?”

Resting against the hard wall of Brin’s chest, she drank Trey in, from the cheeky grin, now a trifle shaky, to the whorls of silky hair on his chest and the intriguing dip of his navel. He was spike hard, rearing, his balls drawn up tight to his body. Anje sighed in appreciation. “Make him turn,” she whispered.

“You heard.”

With a glare, Trey shuffled around. The warm, gentle light of the lamp caressed the high, proud curve of his ass, shadows pooled lovingly in the cleft. Anje’s mouth parched.

“Trey?” she whispered.

“Yes, love?”

“Move your feet further apart.”

He threw her a startled look over his shoulder. Slowly, he widened his stance until she could see the furry pouch of his testicles, as tight and tempting as ripe gaeta fruit.

His thighs were corded with tension, quivering. He slid both hands down the front of his body in a luxurious stroke.

“Don’t touch!”

Anje and Brin exchanged a startled glance. They’d spoken together.

Trey laughed. He turned. “You see, Brin? I told you. Your match.”

“You think?” Brin considered her for a chilling moment. He gripped the front of the shirt that was all she was wearing and jerked hard.

It ripped down the middle and Trey groaned. “Have a heart, man! I only have so many shirts.”

Brin ignored him. “Bring me the cream from the table.”

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Anje’s guts turned over. “No, no!” She raised her bound wrists in a defensive gesture.

“Sshh.” Brin wrapped them in one big fist and licked between each knuckle in turn. He was leisurely about it and very thorough. All the while, his fiery, onyx gaze caressed her bared breasts, the dark nipples already so distended they ached. Anje didn’t think it possible, but her breast flesh engorged, rising further under his stare. It felt as if some mad magician had swapped her nipples for heated stones.

She writhed, unconsciously arching her spine, offering herself.

The shaman smiled, not his usual charming half-smile, but a satisfied curl of the lip. Without warning, he bent his dark head and engulfed her breast in the hot cavern of his mouth. Simultaneously, he thrust one broad finger straight into her dripping sex.

Anje screamed.

Her spine arched, as tense as the strongest hunting bow. The orgasm burst over her like a summer storm, painful in its intensity. She rode it out, bucking on Brin's hand, gasping for breath.

"Magnificent." Trey's whisper was awestruck. Anje's eyes fluttered open. He crouched beside them, the jar lying forgotten in the bedding. With his fingertips, he stroked her trembling thigh. He leaned his shoulder into Brin's. "Both of you."

Brin released a long breath. "Goddess-sent." Then he grinned, the dimple flashing in his stubbled cheek. It was the last thing she saw before he flipped her over his knees.

She reared back, swearing, but Trey caught her shoulders and held her immobile. Brin murmured, "You're glorious, scout." His massive erection pressed into her stomach and his rough, warm hands ran up under her shirt and down the length of her spine. They curved over her buttocks in a proprietorial way that made her grit her teeth.

The next instant, he'd delivered a ringing slap that jerked a shriek out of her. Before she had time to recover, he'd dealt with the other cheek the same way.

Her flesh stinging, Anje snarled, "What thehellare you doing?"

His fingertips moved soothingly over the skin he'd abused. "Payback time, scout. I told you not to push."

"But I thought—*Shit!*" The crisp sound of flesh on flesh echoed off the walls. By the Mother, he had a heavy hand! She pressed her lips together. It wasn't so bad. They wouldn't hear her whimper. Another blow made the breath clog in her throat.

"You thought I was going to fuck your sweet ass?" He nudged her thighs open and ran a fingertip over the succulent folds of her vulva. "Look at you, scout. The very idea makes you so wet, your pretty little cunt is swimming."

"No."

"Yes." He cupped her mons firmly, tucking a broad thumb into her vagina and bracketing her clit with two fingers. Anje squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on her breathing. The prickling heat in her bottom was spreading. Now her sex glowed and throbbed like a tight fist of fire.

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"I hate to see a woman in suspense." Brin's deep chuckle was full of relish. "So I'll tell you what we're going to do." He waited, but she remained stubbornly silent.

Unperturbed, he went on, "You're going to get the beating we both deserve, Anje. The day we found

you, you stood there with fire in your eyes and defied me. I made myself a promise then. Guess what it was?" His breath washed hot over her ear and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"No?" He chuckled darkly. "I swore I'd smack your gorgeous ass 'til it was as pink as your pussy. But I'm a generous soul. No suffering without reward." He flexed his thumb, hitting a sweet spot that made her swallow hard.

"Brin?" said Trey. "You promised me."

Anje tried to lift her head, but the pressure on her shoulders meant that all she achieved was an eyeful of stiff cock, bobbing hopefully out of a nest of glossy reddish curls. The perspective sent her cross-eyed, but gods, it was tempting! Her nose was full of the musky scent of aroused male.

She felt the shaman's thighs shift beneath her. Finally, his deep voice said slowly, "I remember. No more than she can take. Trust me, I'll know."

They must be staring at each other over her prone body. The air crackled with tension. Mother, how she wished she could see their faces!

Trey said, "And what about me?"

"I know how much you can take too." It was a velvet rumble and Trey sucked in a sharp, startled breath. His fist appeared in her vision, gripping his cock so hard it surely must hurt.

"Brin, I—"

The shaman cut him off. "Don't— Just don't." She felt the muscles of his belly move against her with the force of his sigh. "Step through her arms and get her hands behind you. That's it. Anje, now's as good a time as any to learn the right way to suck a cock. Open your mouth."

"Bastard! No!"

His hand cracked across her ass. She gasped and Trey slid the head of his cock between her lips. His taste was exactly as she remembered. Hot, salty. Exciting. He stroked her hair, coaxing. "A little more, sweetheart. Just a little."

Brin pressed with his thumb and squeezed his fingers together, compressing the hood of her clit. His timing was uncanny. Anje jolted, moaning, and a good half of Trey slid into her mouth. He sighed with pleasure. "That's more like it."

It was the oddest sensation, feeling his thickness against her palate. His skin was hot and ridged with veins. When she pressed her tongue against his length, he shivered and his shaft twitched.

Now Brin was stroking her tender rear and rocking his thumb deep in her sheath. Anje felt faint with pleasure and pain. She drew on Trey's flesh and he grunted.

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The shaman's deep voice said, "Remember how you used your hands on him, Anje? Now do that with your mouth."

He smacked her, right on the curve where her ass cheek met her thigh. Tears sprang to her eyes. "If you make him offer, scout, you're to swallow every drop. Understand?"

Another blow, fair on the meat of her buttock, but lighter. "Understand?"

Frantically, she nodded her head and Trey yelped with alarm. Brin laughed aloud, full-throated.

She heard his hand swish through the air an instant before the stinging impact on her rear.

He spaced the blows carefully, interspersing them with the nerve-tingling pressure of his thumb in her sex, driving her insane with the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain. There was enough play in her bonds for her to dig her fingers into the back of Trey's thighs and hang on. The heat in her ass spread to her sex and washed back and forth in an escalating tide of sensation.

Trey kept up a muttered litany of praise, his hands moving in her hair, and she sucked his iron-hard length as deeply as she was able. Remembering the blood-pink beauty of his cock head cradled in her fingers as they rocked to the stride of the vran, she dragged the flat of her tongue over it in a spiral dance that reduced him to incoherence.

The slaps grew lighter, coming at longer intervals, just enough to keep her simmering. Brin pressed his fingers and thumb together in a firm pincer movement, massaging her clit from inside and out. Anje groaned and swallowed another inch of cock flesh. Unconsciously, she spread her legs and arched her back, pushing back into the pleasure.

Trey's fingers clenched in her hair. His cock swelled in her mouth. "Oh love, love!"

Brin became motionless, one hand buried deep in her body, the other splayed across a fiery cheek. Trey arched his hips, his buttocks hollowed under her hands. A long ripple shuddered up his shaft and he spurted into her throat, warm and slippery and musky.

It was swallow or drown, so Anje swallowed.

She thought she heard Brin groan.

As Trey's cock softened, she gentled it with her tongue. A last greedy lick and she sighed and let him go. Really, that hadn't been so bad.

Gentle fingers lifted her chin. Trey knelt and pressed his lips to hers, obviously unfazed by his own flavor. "Sweetheart, that was heaven." All the little muscles around his eyes and mouth had gone slack. His skin was rosy, smooth with content. He smiled at her and warmth suffused her heart.

She had created that stunned expression of pleasure. *She* .

Her lips quivered so hard, she could barely manage to smile in return. A long ripple of longing coursed through her sheath. She wanted to rub her face all over Trey's

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body—arm, shoulder, chest—it didn't matter so long as she could mark him as hers, inhale his essence.

As Brin drew her up and settled her across his chest, she sniffed deeply. Ah Mother, sumptuously

masculine. She licked her lips.

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Chapter Fourteen

The seat of sexual pleasure is in the mind. This is the one incontrovertible fact no shaman or priestess may be permitted to forget.

Precepts of the Lady Chelisand, High Priestess of Lufra.

Brin slid his hands deep into her hair and gave her scalp a soothing rub. "Catch your breath, scout." Gratefully, Anje dropped her head to his broad shoulder, panting. Her bones felt as limp as steamed noodles, though her bum still radiated heat like a baker's oven.

The shaman bent his head and brushed his lips over her eyebrow. "You were born for this, you know." He lifted her chin, put his mouth over hers and kissed her with slow relish and a lot of tongue.

The moment he freed her lips, she blurted, "Wasn't!" and grimaced. She sounded like a petulant child.

"Are you going to listen?" His palm glided over the curve of her ass, the threat implicit.

Anje opened her mouth and shut it hard. Brin raised a brow and rearranged her limbs so she straddled the long ridge in his trews. Holy Mother, the arrogant bastard was still fully clothed, while she was near as naked as a pleasure slave!

He took her face between his palms. "I've told you before, Anje, you're perfect. Well, almost." He shrugged and a wry smile quirked his mouth. "You've got a filthy temper, but life's nothing without a challenge."

When she growled a curse, he smiled seraphically. "See? You're brave and quick and strong. Goddess lovely. But then I'm sure you know that."

Anje looked down at her rangy, athletic body. Lovely? He thought she was lovely?

To her horror, the tears took her unawares, welling up and spilling down her cheeks. Furiously, she scrubbed them away with her bound hands. Trey patted her knee, but she wrenched herself away from his consoling touch with a snarl.

"That's what I mean. More guts than sense." Brin sighed. "Hold still." He loosed the ties around her wrists.

"Strong is what you are, Anje, and greater strength is what excites you." He glanced down at her vulnerable sex, stretched damp and open over his mountainous erection. Casually, he laid the very tip of his index finger inside the pouty little mouth of her vagina. She jerked.

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"Every slap made you wetter, scout. And the thought of getting your virgin ass fucked made you flood. Your eyes are bright with Lufra's fire."

The spit dried in her mouth. She shook her head.

“We’ll put it to the test, shall we?” Gently, he slid his finger all the way into her sheath, cupping her sex in the palm of his big warm hand.

“What next?” He sighed theatrically. “Such an infinite range of possibilities.”

He lounged back, completely at ease, the dark stubble on his jaw giving him the look of a barbarian lord. “Your first duty will be to undress me.”

He stroked her deep inside and she clenched her fists. “That seems to meet with your approval, scout.”

His voice dropped to a rumbling purr. “Then you can show me what you’ve learned about cock sucking.” The walls of her sheath twitched against his finger. Smiling, he pressed the heel of his hand lightly into her clit and she caught her breath.

“While you prepare me with your mouth, Trey might be kind enough to prepare your ass. We’ve got a whole jar of cream.”

“Delighted.” The width of Trey’s grin said he told no more than the truth.

“You’re utterly depraved!” Anje snapped.

Brin opened his eyes very wide. The goddess fire blazed deep in each dilated pupil and his grin had pure devil in it. “Really, scout?” He pulled his hand free of her body and showed her his glistening palm. “Then so are you.”

He relaxed against the wall and stretched out his long legs. “Trey, get these boots off for me, will you?”

When Anje sat frozen, he grinned at her. “Don’t you want me naked?” he asked and to that, there was no possible answer. Her pulse thudding, she ripped the shirt off over his head and he lifted his arms to help her in a lazy stretch of muscle and bone and sinew that made her heart lurch with longing.

When his hair fell into his eyes, she brushed it back with an impatient exclamation. He seized her wrist and kissed it.

The tears threatened again, but she bit them back and concentrated on unlacing his treads. With an odd detachment, she noticed her fingers trembled. Brin’s cock sprang into her hands, huge and hot, and she clutched at it.

He grunted a warning and Trey murmured, “Gently love, don’t strangle him.” His fingers unlaced hers and she thought he got in a subtle stroke of his own. She was sure of it when Brin’s cock leaped in their grasp and he grated, “Stick to the boots, Trey!”

Between them, she and Trey wrestled the treads off the shaman’s long legs. Brin didn’t help, but he didn’t hinder them either. His passivity, his barely leashed control, only increased Anje’s confusion. On the one hand, she felt like a small, tasty, woodland creature, a predator’s dinner. On the other...

Her heart hammered.

The urge to hurl herself at that indolently beautiful body and devour it in a couple of greedy bites was overwhelming. She was determined to resist, but Holy Mother, she thought she might die of it.

She was conscious of Trey beside her at the shaman's feet, his warm shoulder touching hers, his breath shallow with excitement. Without shifting her gaze from the magnificent prospect of Brin laid out before them like a feast, she put out her hand. At once, Trey kissed the palm and then pressed it to his groin. But he didn't turn his head by the smallest fraction. She cupped his balls, ran a gentle thumb up the side of his shaft.

Poor Trey. So lost in his desperate hunger.

A slither of something astonishingly perverse blossomed within her. Shocked and titillated, she examined it from all angles and found it so bad, it was marvelous.

The shaman wanted to play domination games, did he?

He was flaunting himself for her, the bastard. She stared at the dips and hollows of all that splendid masculinity, the drift of hair down his center, the glow of olive-toned health. The dragon on his belly snarled and his cock reared in delightful invitation. It was so high, it strafed his navel.

He loved it.

She was dying for him.

If it was bad for her, how must Trey be suffering? Poor love, she owed him whatever satisfaction she could give.

And she knew what he wanted.

She sat back on her heels and raised a brow. "Now what, your high and mightiness?"

Brin's lips went tight. "Remember what happens when you push, Anje?"

Indeed she did. Her empty flesh ached and wept.

His eyes narrowed. "Take the shirt off," he ordered. "And get up here. I want your mouth."

Anje shrugged out of the tattered shirt and slid her hands up his long thighs, hair rasping under her fingers. Trey had the most beautiful legs she'd ever seen on a man, slim and sturdy and graceful, but Brin's were columns of muscle. His thigh was nearly thicker around than her waist. Her hands encountered a curved depression, and she paused, puzzled, tracing it with the pad of one finger.

"I told you about that," murmured Trey. She stroked the shape the vran's hoof had stamped in Brin's flesh. On impulse, she dipped her head and laid her lips to the scar.

"Forget that." Brin's hard hand tugged at her shoulder. "Get up here."

Trey gave her a shrug and an aching half-smile. Determination firmed inside her. Blinking hard, she shuffled forward and bent her head.

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As the dark curtain of her hair drifted over his thighs and stomach, Brin hissed and his hips arched. He took a handful and dragged it across the head of his cock, the soft strands sticking for an instant before slipping away with a last reluctant caress.

His fist bunched in her hair and she stilled, her head at an awkward angle. His voice was a harsh rasp. "On your knees. Get that ass in the air." He tugged her down into the musky, enticing forest of his genitals. "Start with the balls. Get them good and wet."

Working slowly, Anje laid the flat of her tongue on his testicles and laved him up and down, round and round. She rolled his balls inside their sac, like round, ripe fruits in her mouth.

When Trey slathered cream over the burning flesh of her buttocks with generous fingers, she moaned with relief and pleasure. It felt blessedly cool and his touch was so gentle. His erection nudged her side as he dotted kisses down her spine. "That better?"

Brin's balls were drawn up so tight and hard, Anje suspected they must be painful. She hoped so.

She ran her tongue up the underside of his cock and over the sweet spot under the head, hoping she'd made it worse. He remained completely still beneath her touch, his whole body rigid with tension, only the veins in his shaft throbbed against her lips.

Trey murmured, "Your wings are so pretty." He traced a sinuous pattern over her back with his forefinger, dipping it down occasionally to the cleft between her buttocks. Anje wriggled. Juices slid down her thigh.

Brin fisted the base of his cock. "Open wide, scout."

His girth stretched her lips, rubbed against her palate. He was so gorgeously smooth, the skin of the heart-shaped head like taut velvet.

"Lufra, that's good!" Luxuriously, he tilted his pelvis and she took another inch. "Suck me."

Her inner muscles clenching with greed, Anje increased the suction. Her head bobbed and Brin inhaled deeply. "Don't stop."

Behind her, Trey worked ointment down the cleft in her ass cheeks. He presented a finger loaded with cream to the pucker of her anus and circled it round and round.

Anje yelped around the thickness of Brin's cock, but his fingers tightened mercilessly in her hair. "Don't stop, I said!"

"Bear down, Anje love," said Trey. "Work with me." He probed gently, remorselessly. With a pop, his finger disappeared to the first knuckle. "Good girl." As he worked the cream deeper into her, he crooned encouragement, dropping kisses on her shoulders, rubbing his cheek against her skin.

Anje's mouth was full of the quintessential taste of man, hot and salty and hard. She could barely breathe. The blood-heating sensations in her ass made her head spin.

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Her buttocks bobbed and jerked, but Trey was ruthless. Another finger joined the first and she cried out around Brin's flesh in arousal and distress. The shaman leaned forward and shifted his grip to her jaw, guiding her up and down at a more acute angle.

Trey scissored his fingers, stretching her wide. Simultaneously, he drove two fingers of his other hand into her sopping vagina, directly into the soft pad of flesh behind her clitoris.

Anje clamped her mouth over Brin's cock as if it was the one fixed point in her universe. Breathing hard through her nose, she came and came until her vision grayed out.

When it was over, Brin let her lift her weary head off his flesh. She lay panting on his thigh, Trey's hands still buried in her body.

"She only gets better, doesn't she?" Trey sounded positively gleeful. Slowly, he withdrew his fingers and her flesh released him with a reluctant plop. She moaned.

"That she does," agreed Brin. He sighed heavily. "Go ahead, Trey, she's all yours. It'll be easier with you."

Anje's eyes shot open. Brin's erection towered in front of her, slick and shiny with saliva. It was dark with blood, the cock head an angry-looking purple, unappeased. It looked terrifying. Wonderful.

She braced her hands on the rock hardness of his thigh and sat up. Her lower body throbbed with a slow insistent beat, like a ritual drum. The blood fizzed in her veins. She had the exhilarating sensation of walking a knife's edge. Holy Mother, she must be mad!

She opened her mouth and sealed her fate. "Coward," she said.

The silence chilled her soul.

"What did you say?" Brin's voice was bland, mildly curious.

Her guts heaved. "You wanted my ass. Aren't you man enough to take it?"

"Anje love—"

"Let her finish, Trey."

Her courage almost deserted her. "You're afraid to put your self-control to the test, mighty shaman."

This time the silence lasted an eon. "What do you want, Anje?" It sounded as if the words were forced out between clenched teeth.

She tossed her head. "Everything you're man enough to give me."

"All?" His tone was very peculiar. Uneasiness snaked through her. "You want *it all*?"

"Yes?" Provoking him hadn't been one of her better ideas, but it was too late. Pride would not permit her to withdraw. "I mean, yes!"

Brin stared at her for endless moments. His pupils were so dilated, his eyes were all black, save for the flames of Lufra leaping in a devilish dance. A wolfish smile broke

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slowly over his face until he was grinning so broadly, the dimple in his cheek flashed among the stubble.

She was lucky she wasn't standing. Her knees wouldn't have been strong enough to support her.

"Lufra, I love it when you push!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and dropped a kiss on her nose. "You ready?"

Before she could say no, he'd flipped her over flat on her stomach. He shoved a big hand between her shoulder blades and held her down while he explored the hot, pink globes of her ass. "Perfect," he growled.

A broad finger furrowed between her cheeks and tunneled into her anus. As she whimpered, it withdrew and returned, cool and slick with balm. He was merciless about slathering it on and working it well in, while her bowels cramped with strange, dark pleasure.

She was panting by the time Brin finished, biting her lip to hold back her cries. Turning her head, she watched him scoop a glob out of the jar and smear it generously over his stone-hard shaft. Trey was hypnotized, one hand on his own cock, pumping slowly as he watched. His lower lip drooped, plump with desire.

Brin slid a brawny arm under her waist and hauled her back and up. He shoved her knees open with his own, gripped one cheek in each hand and opened her up like a soft fruit. "You've got the cutest asshole, scout. All pouty and puckered. It looks like it wants to be kissed." Something smooth and hard nudged her flesh. It burned. "Do you need Trey to hold you?"

"No." She dragged in a breath. "But I'd like him to."

Trey gripped her hands, while Brin dug his long fingers into her hips. The cruel pressure at her rear increased unbearably and she gasped aloud.

"Push back, scout." He huffed out a laugh. "It's what you're good at, after all."

Incensed, she pushed, the pressure eased and Brin's cock head surged inside her with a solid squelch. "Mother of Mercy!"

The shaman chuckled, dark and wicked in her ear. "She can't help you now." He pushed in another inch, and rocked back, working her in short strokes that took him remorselessly deeper by slow degrees. Anje panted, crushing Trey's fingers in her own, her sphincter stretched so tightly it was on fire. Tears stood in her eyes.

After an age, Brin stopped. He dropped his head to her shoulder and she could feel the effort it took for him to discipline his breathing. "Lufra, you feel fabulous! So silky and hot—" He broke off and went absolutely still.

The panicky tremors in her internal muscles subsided. Experimentally, she tightened them on the intruder and felt a flare of heat.

Brin pulled back in a slow drag and the temperature increased. Her pussy fluttered in sympathy. Ah gods, it was a disgusting act, but it was beginning to feel sinfully

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good. The tenderness of her buttocks echoed the hot pinch of pain in her ass and Brin pumped slowly in and out, filling her to overflowing with dark pleasure.

“Better now, scout?” he rumbled.

When she gave a jerky nod, he pulled her harder into his chest and sank back on to his knees. Embedded deep within her, he nipped her neck and fingered her nipples, tugging them deliciously hard, sparking bolts of lust that made her clit throb with demand. Then he leaned back against the wall and ran his hands down over her belly and into her pubic bush. He widened his knees, splaying her open, and spread her outer lips with his fingers.

“Now, Trey!”

“Gods yes!” Before she had time to protest, Trey had covered her mouth with his own and slid a fat, urgent inch into her pussy. There he stopped, blocked by Brin’s bulk.

Anje choked and shoved Trey’s face away. “What are you doing?” Her voice rose on a shriek.

Brin laughed, low and wicked. “You wanted it all, scout. We can’t give you more than both of us. Further, Trey.”

Ignoring her curses and pleas, Trey angled and pushed and finessed his way inside her until he was embedded as high in her sheath as he could go. His eyelids drooped with pleasure, the lashes tipped with gold in the warm light. “Lufra, this is the best—”

Mother help her, she was going to faint! The sensations were incredible, the heat and hardness of two masculine bodies pressed against her, hemming her in, overwhelming in their solidity. For the first time with the Feolin, she felt truly, utterly helpless. All her life, she’d been aware of her strength, the power of her long, lean limbs. Now she was acutely conscious of the softness of female flesh, its delicacy, its yielding dampness and giving heat.

The two cocks crammed inside her pulsed in time with the rasp of male breath. Every drop of blood in her body had descended to her loins. She was one huge, insistent throb, so sunk in sensation, she wasn’t sure that she wasn’t climaxing continuously at a low level, her clit tensing and fluttering, as hard as a berry.

She braced her thighs, trying to move herself on the impaling shafts, but they held her down.

Brin gave her nipple an admonitory tweak. “Hold still, scout. We’re doing the fucking.”

Anje stared into Trey’s wide hazel eyes, seeing there a tiny reflection of the white-hot flames in her own pupils.

The words came out slow and thick. “Let Trey do it. It’s what he wants.” Her lower body clenched with greed, feeling the two cocks jammed incestuously together inside her.

She licked her lips. "Fuck me, Trey. Fuck Brin through me."

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Chapter Fifteen

The Dragon King ran his forked tongue over Her divine breasts, as round and rosy as gaeta fruit ripe on the vine. Holy Lufra sighed Her pleasure and the Dragon's soul took flight, for in Her starry eyes he saw the lick of the flames he desired more than his hoard of burning gold—more than life itself. Shuddering, he abased himself, crouching to lay his heavy head at Her dainty foot.

Lufra and the Dragon King, a Feolin folk tale. An extract.

With a low, inarticulate cry, Trey broke. He reached past her to sink his fingers into Brin's shoulders, his hips surged and he thrust and thrust.

The eyes rolled back in Anje's head. She simply couldn't imagine what Brin must be feeling, the thundering massage of Trey's rigid penis transmitted through the smooth walls of her flesh.

Trey buried his sweaty face in the curve of her neck. He was chanting her name with every stroke, as though it was an invocation. Then his voice dropped to a guttural murmur and it was "Love, ah love," as his buttocks hollowed with effort and his hips churned.

Anje was certain he no longer spoke to her alone.

"Trey, stop," groaned Brin.

Trey's cock hammered.

Brin stroked his open palm over the taut globe of Trey's buttock. He flexed his fingers into the resilient flesh while he arched harder into Anje's ass. "*Stop, I said!*"

Trey's eyes glittered with love and lust. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He slowed, but his hips continued a slow, instinctive shimmy, as though he was helpless to prevent it.

Brin's breath rattled past her ear. "It's too good. I've got to move. You're making me—" he rasped. "I can't offer and not be fucking her when it happens. Match me."

He eased out of Anje's ass, waited a spine-tingling second and pushed in again. Trey followed the motion, pulling out as the shaman surged in. Rapidly, they built the rhythm, sliding in turn through the channels of her body. She could feel them rub each other through the walls of her sheath and the eroticism of it forced a thin sound from her mouth. She'd never imagined she could make a sound like that, so desperate, so wanting.

Her head thrashed. "Holy Mother, I'm going out of my mind!"

"About time!" Brin panted against her neck, the ebb and thrust of his cock creating a dark fire of pain and pleasure.

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She writhed and mewled and begged without shame, scarcely knowing what she did.

Trey threw his head back. "Gods, I'm close!" His throat corded. "Brin!"

As if his strangled cry was a signal, Anje's flesh convulsed in an endless heave that took her down and rolled her soul under a dark wave of shattering sensation. Trey groaned and pumped and pumped, shuddering until he was spent.

Vaguely, she felt the warmth of his semen wash into her. Behind, Brin's body went rigid and his cock spasmed in long, tortured ripples that lasted forever. Her bowels cramped a last, greedy time and a piercing sweetness took her by surprise as she came again, right on the heels of the first climax.

Gradually, she became aware of where she ended and they began. She was sagged into Trey's shoulder, gasping, her mouth plastered open against his skin. Brin's hands cradled her breasts and his stubbled cheek pressed against her upper arm. His hair lay with hers in a great tangle, black on black, and Trey's hand was buried to the wrist in the combined mass of it.

Anje's heart still galloped like a vran at full stretch. She sucked in a long breath. The air was sharp with the smell of sex and sweat, underlaid with the green freshness of the bracken.

Brin sighed and opened his palm flat over her breastbone. She felt her heart rise to meet his touch. "You're shaking," he said. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." She lifted her heavy head and Trey released his hold on their hair. "That was... I've never..."

Trey's shaft slipped from her body. He kissed her cheek. "Amazing's the word you're looking for."

A little sliver of hurt pierced her. "Don't tell me you haven't shared a woman before." A reminiscent shiver raised the hair on the back of her neck. "You're too damn good."

"Oh yes." Trey's thumb caressed her cheek. "But it's never been like this. Has it, Brin?"

"No," agreed the shaman. Gently, he disengaged himself from her burning flesh. Gods, he was still half hard! "But then, we've not fucked Lufra's Gift before."

As he spoke, he made room for her to straighten her limbs. She stretched luxuriously, then winced.

"Open up, scout." Brin nudged her thigh.

Anje squinted. "What for?" she asked suspiciously.

"We'll be riding all day tomorrow. Open up."

He wet a cloth with water from the gourd and cleansed her meticulously. Then he did the same for himself, completely unselfconscious as he handled his heavy cock, washed around his testicles.

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Finally, he tossed the cloth aside, and lay down between her legs. His shoulders shoved her thighs apart.

“What are you—?” Anje’s head fell back as he set his mouth on her.

He dragged the flat of his tongue slowly through her slit. It felt warm and wet and muscular against her aching flesh and she arched into his touch. With a grunt of satisfaction, the shaman slid his hands under buttocks and lifted her for better access.

Strangely enough, it didn’t feel as though he was trying to arouse her. The tongue bath was soothing rather than titillating. His fingertips drew tiny circles on the outside of her thigh. A couple of times, she nearly drifted into a languorous sleep. Mother, he was skilled!

As if from very far away, she heard Trey’s irritated voice, continuing a conversation. “Why not?”

Brin paused in his ministrations, but he didn’t lift his head. “I told you,” he said, “payback,” and blew lightly over her swollen folds. Anje squirmed as he chuckled. “Anyway, you’re one ahead of me. Don’t be selfish.”

Trey swore, but she lost the sound in the delicate sensation of Brin’s pointed tongue, lapping gently at her clit. She sighed with pleasure, her sex humming with joy, and rubbed the sole of one foot over his ribs.

Brin crooned, a deep rumble, and reached up to feather her nipples. Anje gasped and set both feet on his shoulders, opening herself fully. The shaman’s tongue flickered over her abused anus in a warm, tender circle, then furrowed all the way back to her clit. Very slowly, he sucked it into his mouth. The pressure was light, no more than the barest sweep, but a lovely little frisson tingled through her sex and down her thighs. She sighed, replete.

He inserted a fingertip into her vagina and pushed it in a scant inch. “Sore?” he asked, his dark eyes meeting her dazed ones over the slight mound of her belly.

She took a moment to think about it. “Not there.”

“Good.” Smoothly, he rose and straddled her, taking her ass in both hands and notching his cock head in the mouth of her pussy. With a grunt of pleasure, his buttocks flexed and he sank to the hilt in a single glide.

Anje’s eyes flew open, but before she could speak, Brin slid his forearms beneath her head and kissed her deeply. She was comprehensively pinned, anchored at mouth and sex by his muscular body, so much bigger and stronger than hers. Even his hair fell around her like a soft screen.

He lifted his head to stare into her eyes, the goddess flame dancing in his pupils. Sweet Mother, he was a shaman! How many times could he do it? How long would it take to satisfy him fully?

“Put your legs around me, scout.”

“Brin, I—”

“Wrap me up. Do it.”

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She tilted her pelvis and did as she was bid. Brin sank another luscious half-inch, his eyes half closed

with pleasure.

Without another word, he set up a long gliding rhythm, drawing out the wet friction against her sensitized tissues. His brow furrowed with concentration and she realized with a shudder of delighted comprehension, that this was solely for him, his pleasure.

Instinctively, she knew he didn't indulge himself this way often and she pressed her calves into the hard curve of his waist. The angle was wrong for her, she'd never climax, but she didn't care. What she wanted was to hear Brin's groan of rapture, to feel his seed gush inside her, wet and warm, to know his offering to his strange goddess gave him true ecstasy.

She arched her hips and sank her fingers into his hair, pulling him down to her shoulder. Pressing her lips to his rough cheek, she whispered, "Hard, Brin. Fuck me hard."

"Lufra!" His hips surged so powerfully, she was shifted several inches across the bedding. His cock thundered into her, slamming out to the tip and back to the root in a brutal rhythm.

Anje exulted, panting.

Over Brin's heaving shoulder, she saw Trey kneeling, his shaft held in a no-nonsense grip. His fist moved in time with the shaman, but he was having a harder time controlling the swelling tide of his lust.

On a half-strangled gasp, he closed his eyes and threw his head back. His face flushed scarlet. Semen flowed over his clenched fingers, not in spurts, but in vicious, desperate dribbles, hard-won.

The shaman bellowed as he jetted inside her, his big body shuddering and jerking with the force of his climax. Lufra would be a demanding mistress indeed if she failed to be pleased with such an exquisitely brutal offering.

He lay completely still for a moment, blanketing her, the breath rasping in his throat. Then he rolled them both over and draped her limbs over his. "Thanks, scout." With a long sigh of satisfaction, he settled her head on his shoulder.

"No more, Brin," she mumbled into hard, sweaty flesh. Strangely enough, though she hadn't come, she felt a bone-deep sense of completion. Exhaustion tugged at her in a dragging wave. "No more. I'm done, you hear?"

As if from a distance, she heard his dark chuckle, imagined his crooked smile. "You certainly have been."

She felt Trey draw up a blanket, though Brin's body spread beneath hers generated heat like a furnace. "Sleep, sweeting. You deserve it." Trey's lips brushed her cheek.

Anje wriggled until she was comfortable, ignoring Brin's halfhearted rumbles of protest. He wrapped an arm around her waist, cupped the back of her head with the other hand. "Mine, scout."

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Drifting off the edge, she heard Trey say softly, "Ours."

There was a long, long pause. She felt Brin's throat move as he swallowed. Anje cranked her eyes

open.

Trey was leaning forward, almost nose-to-nose with the shaman. Muzzily, she watched their stares tangle and mesh, the shaman's midnight gaze hard as flint, Trey's gold and unblinking.

"I Bonded her." Brin's tone was uncompromising.

"I know that." Trey didn't shift an inch. His lips set in a stubborn line.

After an age, Brin's lashes fell and he murmured, "Go to sleep." Trey's grin was blinding.

She was still puzzling it out when she fell into the abyss and sleep claimed her.

They took her again in the dark hour before dawn, Brin teasing a soft, lazy climax from her with his fingers, Trey sucking dreamily at her nipples. After a fierce whispered discussion, the shaman rolled her on to her stomach and pushed into her relaxed, receptive sheath from behind. The intrusion, steady and gentle as it was, woke her sufficiently to notice Trey lounging at her elbow with a hard-on that looked positively painful.

Breathing hard through her nose as Brin hit a particularly delicious spot, Anje stretched out a commiserating hand. Trey seized it and clamped her fingers around his shaft, huffing with relief.

The broad head of Brin's cock slid smoothly over a bundle of nerves deep inside her and Anje's fingers flexed in reaction. Through half-shut eyes, she watched Trey move their joined hands up and down, cramming her palm against his hot satin skin, pressing it into the iron hardness beneath and demonstrating the rhythm that was the key to his pleasure.

Basking in warm sensation, she pushed back into the shaman's long thrusts, letting him dictate their shared rhythm. She relaxed into a gentle climax as Trey cried out and spurted over their laced fingers, Brin following without fuss a few heartbeats later.

With a long sigh, he rolled away and Trey tucked her against his side. He skated his fingertips over her ribs. "Gods, I could wake like this every morning of my life."

Brin sat up, casually magnificent in his nudity. "Not 'til after the Day of the Dark," he said. "And for that, we have to be in Feolin."

He swooped to drop a kiss on Anje's parted lips. "Don't ask, scout. I won't answer." He rose and reached for his trews, seemingly oblivious of two pairs of hungry eyes tracking every graceful move. "I'll get the fire going."

Trey held her a little longer, mumbling extravagant nonsense into her hair, petting and patting, making her chuckle. She stretched in his arms, feeling the fragile beauty of the moment, knowing it was fleeting. Perhaps, if she used his pretty little mirror, she could pick the catch of the torque with her knife without decapitating herself. Brin would be massively pissed if she hurt herself again.

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Darkly amused by the foolishness of her train of thought, she hugged Trey one last time and rose to dress and find the robbery.

The morning air was crisp and cold. A remorseless chill seeped from the rocky walls of the cave and invaded the very bones. Brin brought a gourd of hot water and filled the mug Anje held out to him, watching her shiver as she cradled it between her palms. Without hesitation, he reached for the Bond link between them. Ah. The calm, set purity of her features was no reflection of the turmoil inside. She was deeply shaken and determined not to show it.

Wryly, he acknowledged he was no better. He'd done his morning meditation as he watched the Sun and the Shadow rise, tangled together in the sky.

He'd felt the fleeting warmth of Lufra's benediction, but he didn't feel calm. Not at all.

Brin glanced at Trey, propped on one elbow under the covers, all firm and fair and elegant despite the tousled curls. Honor dictated he should treat him as the younger brother he'd never had, experience said he could resist an untutored scout. But by Lufra, between them, they'd had his famed control hanging by a thread!

Not for the first time, serious doubts assailed him. He'd been cruel, he knew it. He wasn't generally so clumsy, but he'd been desperate. The thought of Trey giving his innocence to some stranger! He ground his teeth with hurt and fury, even as his head reeled with lewd images. Trey kneeling, offering that delectable ass, a cock shoving his virgin flesh aside, powering home. Trey's face, contorted with pain and pleasure. Trey, opening his mouth, swallowing him whole and hot. Trey fucking him, kissing him, owning his soul.

He couldn't suck enough air into his lungs. Goddess, for all his sexual experience as a shaman, Trey knew more about fucking a man than he did!

The memory of Trey's cock, the ridge under the head, stroking his again and again through Anje's sweet flesh, made the eyes roll in his head. There'd been a moment there, when he'd looked into Trey's eyes over her shoulder—he could have leaned forward a hairsbreadth and taken the lad's mouth.

Lufra, it had been close!

And every sensation was intensified by Anje's presence, amplified by the Bond link. Brin watched, his fists clenched, as she bent to fling the covers off Trey's naked body, snickering at his bellow of outrage. Her unconscious sensuality was like a conduit for lightning between the three of them. The sense of *connection* had been incredible.

As if she felt the weight of his hooded gaze, she turned and propped her hands on her hips. "What?"

Brin forced his lips to relax. Not for the world would he let her glimpse his confusion. "Nothing."

By Lufra, she was *his* ! His to teach, his to pleasure. She wasn't supposed to test his honor, show him the dark side of his own soul. It must be the Bond link, he decided.

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Because her every action last night had teased him unbearably with the possibility of mastering both of them.

Gods, he didn't think he could take another session like that without cracking. He wanted her again already, with an urgent desire. But he couldn't have Anje without Trey, because she had to learn to

submit to many cocks, many mouths, many hands, in order to survive the Great Rite.

Darkly, he watched her ferreting through her pack for heavier garments, muttering under her breath. She'd thrown out a challenge, his sweet warrior, and inexperienced as she was, she'd homed in on the only instrument he could barely resist.

Trey.

So be it.

Brin turned and wrenched his saddlebag open. He wouldn't succumb if it killed him.

But even as he made the vow, his balls tightened and his cock reared in wicked expectation of failure.

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Chapter Sixteen

The wise trainer capitalizes on the typical behavior of the wild vranee. In the initial stages of rutting contests, males use their weight against each other, straining shoulder to shoulder. As the battle escalates, hooves and horns come into play and death or serious injury can result. Using the "Four Reinforcements" method described in the following pages, vranee may be trained to use their formidable natural weapons on command.

"Battlefield training: first principles", Page 45, Chapter 5, Barrett and Taten's Vranee Training Manual, 10197 ATF.

Anje stiffened as Brin dropped a heavy coat over her shoulders. It was made of vran hide with the feathers left on and it swamped her, falling below her knees. Her brows rose as she stroked it. "What's this?"

"You haven't traveled in the mountains, have you, scout?"

"No, it's out of my range. Why?"

"We've got two days in the high passes ahead of us. It'll be bitter cold."

The coat smelled of vran and of him. "But what about you?"

The crooked smile flashed. "I'll have you to keep me warm."

He spoke no more than the truth. Seated snug before the shaman as Twink picked his way up the high trail, Anje was bracketed by his hard thighs and the bulk of his big body. As they climbed higher, she stared across the vista of the Mountains of Morn, eyes wide with awe. The air was crisp and chilly, though mercifully, no snow fell. All about was dark rock, stark and bold, jutting into the pure blue of the sky. Peak after peak marched away, until they were lost in the mists of distance. The silence was absolute, save for the jingling of harness and the rattle of pebbles under the hooves of the vran. It even *smelled* cold, of ancient stone and frozen water.

At her back, Brin swayed easily to the stride of the vran, a blanket thrown over his shoulders, his body warmth keeping her comfortable. He didn't speak and Anje fell into the comfortable silence she was

accustomed to as a scout. She checked on Trey, riding a pace behind on his big black, the pack-beasts following, and then leaned her head back into Brin's shoulder. He slid a gloved hand across her belly, under the coat and pressed a kiss into her hair as they rode on.

Anje felt as though they moved enclosed in an enchanted bubble, but it was several minutes before she realized why.

She was happy.

Truly, deeply content.

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Mother of Mercy, her duty, she'd forgotten her duty! The thought was so shocking, it forced a startled grunt from her. Bleakly, she wondered if she'd have to kill him. On the heels of the thought, his nearness became too much too bear. She straightened her spine, shifting away from the heat of his body.

"What's wrong?" His breath plumed in the air.

Heart thudding, she shook her head. "Nothing. I should ride with Trey."

But Trey would fight to the death for Brin. She knew he would. Nauseated, she closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

Brin's arm pressed her closer. "Look, that's where we're going tomorrow. Between those two peaks and down to the Sitariat-Gillen Tableland."

"Is that where Feolin is?" She squinted into the sky. Nothing moved save for a highhunter circling, wings spread to catch an updraft. But the Shadow had nibbled another thin slice out of the Sun.

"It's days further. Plenty of time to see to your education, scout." His hand cupped her mound through the layers of clothing. "How's that pretty ass? Need more padding?"

Irritated, she wriggled on the soft pad of cloth he'd fashioned to cushion her on Twink's broad back. "I'm fine," she snapped and immediately felt churlish.

"Good." He nipped her earlobe. "Hope we find a good cave for tonight."

Anje growled, but she couldn't help glancing at Trey.

Brin lowered his voice to a diabolical whisper. "That's right, he's dying for your ass, Anje. Should we give it to him, do you think?"

In the end, the question was academic. The sky grew darker, pregnant with ominous cloud. The first snow flurries began just before dusk and a ring of huge boulders was the best they could find for a camp. They made the grumbling vranee hunker down in a close circle and huddled together in the center, protected by the bulk of the animals' large feathery bodies. Once the snow ceased, the temperature dropped and the cold grew killing. It made for a miserable night, though Anje had the best of it, sandwiched between the two men.

She couldn't believe how quickly her body had trained itself to respond to their proximity. Dozing and

waking through the endless night, she craved bare skin and hard cock with a keenness that amazed and appalled her.

Sometime after midnight, she furrowed a hand under her clothing and sought out the wetness between her thighs.

“Uh-uh.” Trey’s hand clamped over hers. “That’s ours.”

“Well done. You’ll be a shaman yet,” rumbled Brin. He rubbed his bristly cheek against hers in a sleepy caress. “You’re a bad girl, Anje. Trey, you caught her, you choose the punishment.”

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“Mmm,” murmured Trey. Though it felt as though they were on the roof of the world, there were no stars visible through the cloud cover. His voice whispered out of absolute darkness, seemingly disembodied. “Two punishments.”

“Two? But—”

“Shush, love. I’d freeze my cock off before I got it in you. So—tomorrow night, you’re mine, to do with as I will. But for now, I think I’ll tell you a story.”

“Hey!” Brin protested. “You’re not supposed to punish me too!”

Trey’s chuckle was full of lechery. “Ah, but I want to, you big bastard.”

Anje frowned. “Why is a story punishment?”

The shaman said dryly, “Trey’s a poet, Anje. He has a way with words.”

He spoke no less than the truth. Trey’s husky, golden voice floated out of the dark, weaving word-pictures so delightfully salacious, Anje was at first shocked, then darkly titillated. He chose the tale of Lufra and the Dragon King and by the time the goddess had accepted the forked tongue and gigantic cock of her dragon lover into every orifice of her divine body, Anje was biting her lip, her sex heated and swollen.

The two men were sealed to her, one on either side, and the heat they generated kept her almost warm. Even through the layers and layers of clothing, she could feel two magnificent erections.

“Want to try?” Trey nudged her hip, his breath harsh in her ear.

“Save the offering for tomorrow night,” growled Brin. “It’ll be spectacular.”

Holy Mother, he couldn’t mean better than last time? Anje gulped.

Could he?

Brin wrapped his arms around both of them. “Go to sleep.”

In sheer desperation, Anje shut her eyes and drifted into heated dreams of claws and wings and raging lust.

The following day, she rode with Trey, as promised. But it wasn't peaceful, not at all. Trey insisted on whispering in her ear, describing in relentless detail all he was going to do to her, everything she was going to do to him, to Brin. It was worse than the goddess story, because it was real—all deliciously possible.

Anje shifted. At this rate, she'd arrive at camp a helpless puddle of lust. "Trey, for the Mother's sake, shut up! You're driving me mad!"

"Good." He ran a hand lightly over her front, all the way from her neck to her pubic mound. "I'll leave you to think about it."

She did nothing but think about it, while they wound their way out of the mountains and down toward the tableland. The occasional clump of green appeared, clinging to the rocky terrain, then small copses of wind-tortured trees and sparse grass. It grew warmer and she shrugged off Brin's big coat. As the landscape opened up, the shaman began ranging ahead, drifting in and out of sight.

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Anje was all but drowsing when a small, distinct ping! sounded in her ear. "The wards!" Trey spat a vicious curse and pulled up his black. With a ringing rasp, he unsheathed his sword, glaring around with narrowed eyes.

There was no real cover close by. They traveled through what must have once been a streambed. A straggly line of candlewoods marked one boundary and a wall of mountain rock the other.

With a snarling whistle, a crossbow quarrel shot out of the trees and slammed into the chest of Trey's vran. The animal shrieked and stumbled to its knees. Anje swung her leg over and slid down, landing on the balls of her feet while Trey leaped clear. Blade in hand, she looked up to see a wave of Hssrda scrambling out of the trees. They covered the ground on all fours, in an ungainly shamble that ate up the distance with amazing speed.

"*Lufra!* Quick!" Trey hurled her behind the prone body of the vran and leaped to meet the first Hssrdan, skewering it neatly beneath the jaw as it reared up in its fighting stance.

A heavy tail swept her feet out from under her, but Anje rolled away before another of the creatures could pin her down. The bulk that gave it power made it slow. Springing up, she slammed her foot into its armored neck and bent to drive her knife into one yellow eye. The Hssrdan gave a guttural scream as the blade grated against bone and the serrated halberd dropped from its grasp. As it thrashed about, she danced out of reach, searching for the next threat.

Trey had accounted for another. His sword dripped with green ichor. But blood streamed down one thigh and two Hssrda lolloped toward him, with another approaching cautiously from an angle, its hideous mouth agape.

"Run!" he shouted. He dodged a blow from a taloned fist. "Anje, run!"

She did, but only as far as the pack-beasts. Still tethered to the corpse of Trey's black, they plunged and reared, whistling with terror. Grabbing Brownie's halter, Anje wrestled him down and slashed the line free. Clambering up the vran's feathered side, she fell into the saddle all anyhow. It took all her strength to haul Brownie around and start him back toward Trey.

A heavy arrow whizzed over her head and struck the second packvran in the neck. It gurgled and died.

As the flanking Hssrdan charged Trey, she gave Brownie a mighty kick in the ribs. With a honk of rage, the vran surged forward. One clawed foot sank into the Hssrdan's belly with a meaty thunk. It tumbled end over end. Brownie followed, reared and came down with both front hoofs. Uttering a shrill squeal of triumph, he stamped and trampled, while Anje gritted her teeth against the carrion reek.

Clinging to fistfuls of mud-colored feathers, she shouted, "Trey!*Come on!*"

From over a rise came the rapid drumming of a vran at full gallop. Brin burst into the clearing, leaning low over Twink's withers, sword flashing in a lethal arc. With a

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bellow of rage, he ducked the wicked thrust of a halberd and all but decapitated its owner.

"Go!Go!" he yelled at them as Twink thundered past.

The remaining Hssrdan whirled to meet the new threat and Trey sprang on to Brownie's back behind Anje. "Showoff!" he muttered, grabbing the reins and urging the vran after Brin.

The Hssrdan straightened. It was a head taller than any of the others. A string of colored scales gleamed a violent magenta on one shoulder. It gave a sibilant whistle and over a dozen of the creatures boiled out of cover ahead of them.

Holy Mother, there were too many! Too many for ten warriors, let alone two and a scout.

The shaman pulled Twink up so hard, the beast was flung back on his haunches. Glaring back over his shoulder, Brin bellowed, "Get going!*Now!*"

The leading Hssrdan reached up to claw his thigh and got a sword in the gullet. Twink's hooves flashed as he kicked and slashed and the creatures fell back to a wary circle. For the first time, Anje realized Feolin vranee were trained for battle. Even old Brownie hadn't forgotten his glory days.

A halberd jabbed Twink in the withers and he stumbled. With a sobbing curse, Trey kicked Brownie toward the mêlée, but the shaman leaped from the foundering vran and charged the Hssrda on foot. Eyes wide with horror, Anje watched him interpose his body between them and the enemy. "No," she whispered.

But it was true.

"*Run!*" roared Brin, as his sword arm rose and fell.

Buying them time.

The Hssrda surged forward. Brin's strength and skill were formidable, but not even he could hold off so many armored enemies indefinitely.

Trey sobbed and swore in an agony of indecision.

Another hissing command from the Hssrdan with the colored scales and the creatures swarmed forward. Brin disappeared under a pile of scaly, thrashing bodies.

Deep inside Anje, something she'd hardly been aware of winked out. Mother, *ithurt* ! With a thin cry, she sagged forward over the vran's neck. As though the movement was a trigger, Trey screamed, "Yee-hah!" and dug his heels into Brownie's sides.

The vran broke into an ungainly trot, then a rocking gallop. They thundered out of the clearing, cannoning into the shoulder of the Hssrda commander, sending it spinning as they headed for the trees.

A moment later, they heard the scream of an enraged vran and the pounding of hooves. Twink caught up, drew level and surged past, his horns dripping green with Hssrda blood, eyes white with terror. With a grunt, Trey leaned sideways, supple as trick rider, and snagged a flapping rein.

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Anje clenched her teeth against the welling nausea. Brin, ah Brin! Her very bones ached and the wrenching, empty space in her soul whimpered and bled.

Propelled by fear, the vranee galloped on together for a long time before they flagged. "We've lost them, I think." Trey drew the beasts to a halt under a huge sorrowtree. He turned his head, listening.

There was absolute silence, as if the forest creatures crouched stricken in their burrows.

"Oh, Anje." He tightened his arms around her waist and dropped his head to her shoulder. "The stupid, stupid—" Every muscle in his lithe body shook with the violence of his reaction. His teeth chattered.

Shock, she thought dully. Shock. She should do something.

Moving like an old, old woman, she scrambled off Brownie and held up her arms. She couldn't speak. She thought it likely she'd never utter another word in her life.

Trey came willingly, sliding down into her embrace. Together, they collapsed into the bracken, holding tight as they drew comfort from each other, from simple human warmth.

Anje drew her trembling fingers across his bloodless lips and kissed his eyelids, tasting the salt of his tears. How could she tell him? It wasn't possible that Brin was dead, not Brin with his lethal half-smile and deep, teasing voice. Not the Brin who'd Bonded her without so much as a by-your-leave and then given his life for hers. Theirs.

Holy Mother, it couldn't be so!

But there was nothing there. She probed the dark space in her soul as if it was a sore tooth she had to explore with her tongue.

She hadn't really believed him when he'd insisted they were linked by the Bond torques, but now she knew he'd spoken truly. Because he was gone.

And he'd taken a part of her with him.

The psychic pain was horrible, a rent in her soul. And she couldn't touch it, couldn't soothe it. Her head

pounded.

“Gods, what will I do without him?” Trey’s voice was hoarse with anguish.

“Trey...” Anje coughed and tried again. “We should go on.” She didn’t care much for herself, but she recognized the desperate, reckless glint in his eye. He wouldn’t last long without her, not before he did something suicidally brave.

“It tore me apart.” Trey continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Die with him or run with you.” He set his hands to her shoulders and drew her up in front of him. The strength of his grip was painful, but she scarcely felt it. His hazel eyes were wild, shiny with tears. He shook her a little. “Don’t leave me, Anje. Never.”

“Never?” It came out as a croak.

His smile was bitter. “It’s not much of a time to tell you, but I’ve learned my lesson. Our little lives are dice in the hands of the gods. I need to say this now, before some

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other bloody thing happens.” His face softened and tears sparkled on his lashes. “I love you, Anje. I just didn’t know how much until I saw that Hssrdan come up behind you.”

“But you’re in love with Brin,” she said dully.

Pain contorted his features. “Yes,” he said steadily. “I am. Was.” He shook his head as if to clear it. “Am. And with you.”

“Oh, Trey.” Anje pressed her face into his shirt and willed the tears to come, but it was as if some well within her had dried up. She clutched his biceps and shuddered, breathing hard. He rubbed her back in soothing circles, as though she was a child.

Finally, she pulled back. “We’re not safe yet. We need more distance.”

Twink’s wound was deep in the haunch muscle, but he limped on gamely enough, followed by a weary Brownie. Anje and Trey walked.

No word was spoken for hours, wrestling with misery so total required concentration. As dusk drew down, Anje glanced around. “This looks all right. Get me some branches and I’ll make a scout’s shelter.”

By nightfall, they had a low, rough bower and Trey had lit a small, smokeless fire. The fine tent, the camp furniture and the bedding had been on the dead packvran, but Brownie still carried the cooking equipment and food, Twink the saddlebags. Anje dug out Brin’s medical pouch, gritting her teeth against the memory of his hands on her skin. She bathed the shallow slice on Trey’s thigh and dosed it liberally with the stinging cleansing potion.

Over his whistling protests, she did the same for Twink, hoping the medicine intended for humans wouldn’t do him harm.

Trey found some dried meat strips, so salty and spicy she gagged. But there was a water gourd, and roberry, so she swallowed grimly. She was going to need her strength until she knew Trey was safe.

After that... Well, she still had her scout's duty. But that was all there was, all there'd ever be. She cradled her forehead in her hands, trying to dull the throbbing ache.

The night was cool, but not unpleasantly so. Anje stretched out, her head pillowed on Trey's rigid shoulder. He'd found Brin's blanket rolled up behind Twink's saddle, but with a restless movement, she shoved it away. It was more than she could bear. Like everything that had touched the shaman's skin, it carried his dark, spicy scent.

Trey's tears dampened her hair, though he made no sound, but Anje lay dry-eyed. As she stared at the stars twinkling through the crevices of their leafy canopy, a tiny spark flickered and died in that horrible, aching void inside her.

She shot bolt upright with a gasp.

"What is it?" Trey sat up beside her.

"Nothing." She rubbed her eyes and lay back slowly, her stomach knotted with tension.

A few minutes later, it came again and this time it steadied to a feeble glow, faint and faraway.

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Anje put a hand to her head. "Trey." Her voice was a thread. "I can feel... Sweet Mother, he's alive!"

"*What?*" Trey's fingers dug into her arm. "Are you sure?"

"I think so. The torque..." Her throat closed up.

"Lufra!" Trey flung his arms around her and hugged her so hard she couldn't breathe. He began to babble, a mix of prayers and curses, tears and laughter.

A bubble of joy expanded inside her, laced with trepidation. She wasn't used to this Bond stuff. What if her mind was playing tricks on her? She wanted so much for it to be true. She pinched Trey's arm. "Shush. Let me concentrate. It's very faint."

Curling her fingers around the smooth braid of the torque, she tried to calm her racing thoughts, open her mind. Slowly, she developed a vague impression, though it was like locating one particular cloud hidden in a vast mist. "He's hurt," she murmured, "and angry. Very angry."

Whatever had been frozen inside her cracked. Relief exploded through her in a torrent of hot tears. Trey held her through the hard, wrenching sobs, patting her back. Within her, the piercing agony of loss muted to the dull ache of separation. Bearable.

As the storm eased, he wiped her face with the tail of his shirt and kissed her softly. "He was right, love. *You are* perfect."

Anje pulled him close and kissed him back with enthusiasm. She felt exuberant, dizzy. Running a hand down to his groin, she found him stiff and throbbing. When she squeezed hard, he gasped, "Gods, yes!" and dug his fingers into the waistband of her trews.

He peeled them off, unlaced himself and plunged into her without preliminaries. By the third stroke,

lightning sizzled at the base of her spine. By the sixth, she'd climaxed so hard, the stars blurred above her. At the seventh, Trey froze, shuddering in release.

The entire act had taken no more than a few minutes.

Trey clasped her ass to keep them joined and pulled Brin's blanket over them both. Hugely comforted, Anje relaxed into a boneless stretch. Then she chuckled.

"What?" asked Trey sleepily.

"You forgot Lufra's Law."

"Shit!" Withdrawing from her body, he sat up with a jerk. "So I did." Cupping a protective hand around his privates, he closed his eyes and began mumbling under his breath. It sounded like a prayer.

Anje yawned, rubbing a hand over the back of her skull. "Doesn't matter. I absolve you." The link itched, urging her to leap to her feet and go now. *Now!* But it wasn't practical. They had to rest.

"It matters to Lufra! Shit, *shit* !" Trey's face was a pale smear in the darkness. She could feel a faint tremor run through the firm thigh pressed against her.

"It won't drop off, you know," she said, caught between concern and amusement.

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"It might," he said darkly.

"Don't tell me people never forget, Trey. What about the heat of the moment? What about life partners?"

"Maybe," he admitted. "Lufra allows true love a lot of leeway."

"Then..." She spread her hands and shrugged. "Under the circumstances, I'm sure She'll forgive you." She leaned up to drop a kiss on his shoulder. "I have."

"Yes, but—"

"If you're still worried about it, you can owe me. Two tomorrow."

Tomorrow.

"We'll find him, Trey. And get him back."

"Ay, that we will." His voice was no less determined than hers.

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Chapter Seventeen

Fellwolves:

Predators of the plains and forests, fellwolves hunt in packs. The beasts are hunted for their magnificent pelts, particularly the so-called “twilight” furs, a dark gray with blue undertones, shading to silver on the belly. A common motif in folk tales is the character who is cursed to live as a fellwolf until released by the power of true love. (See Ballads—Traditional). Fellwolves mate for life.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriel the Burnished.

They made love again at dawn. Trey used his mouth on her, at first gently, then with ruthless efficiency, until she peaked. Twice.

Then he pulled her limp body over his and they flowed together like music. Afterward, he stacked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. Anje hung over him, running her fingertips over every inch of creamy, hair-dusted skin, the planes and hollows limned with golden light.

Trey purred with pleasure. Without opening his eyes, he said, “Is Brin all right?”

Anje hesitated, cupping the curve of his hipbone in her hand, while she reached tentatively for the link. “He’s asleep, I think.”

Trey exhaled softly, but he didn’t speak.

His nipples were pink, not brown like Brin’s. She swooped to brush one with her lips and asked, “When did you know you loved him?”

He levered one eye open, the hazel gleaming green in the light washing through the leaves of their bower. “Remember I told you how he saved my life?”

She nodded.

“His vran was screaming with pain. Gods, it was a horrible noise. I remember he stroked its head, whispered to it, before he cut its throat.” She heard him swallow. “He had his stone face on. You know?” He shot her a glance and she nodded again.

Trey shivered, goose bumps rising on his skin. “Lufra, I can still see him! He walked toward me holding the dripping knife and I nearly wet myself. I thought I was next for sure. But he kneeled and checked me all over and his hands were so gentle.”

Trey smiled crookedly. “Then he picked me up and shook me ‘til my teeth rattled. That was it. Forever.”

He sighed, his ribs expanding under her hand. “It took me five years to understand what it was, what it truly was. And that he didn’t love me back.”

Anje frowned. “But Trey—”

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He broke in. “Oh yes, he’s fond of me, he cares for me as a friend, a companion, his prince. But Anje—” He sat up and took her hands in his, forestalling the question on the tip of her tongue. “Gods, I want him! As much as I want you. When he looks at me a certain way, I get hard, and I seem to go soft in the head at the same time. I can’t help it.”

Aprince? What prince? Her brain teemed with questions, but she could only ask them one at a time. She chose what interested her most. “What way? How does he look at you?”

Trey shook his head helplessly. “His eyes laugh, you know? Or they flame with the light of Lufra.”

“He makes my knees shake,” she confessed, feeling the heat creep over her cheeks.

“I watch him with you, Anje, and it hurts.”

“But you’re a part of it.”

His laugh was shaky. “I know what you’ve been trying to do. It’s a beautiful gift you’ve given me, to share the one you love.”

“But I don’t—” She stopped, her mouth hanging open like a fool.

“Yes, you do,” said Trey gently. “How could you not? Lufra sent you. And She approved the Bonding.”

The world tilted on its axis. Anje sank back on her heels, completely flummoxed. How could she have missed it? What was it Brin had said?

“You’ll surrender, scout, and you’ll glory in it. You’ll abandon yourself and adore it. And you’ll do it because you trust—trust absolutely.”

Sweet Mother, she’d done all those things! And why? Because she loved Brin, more than life, more than breath, more than—

No, *notmore* ...

She stared wide-eyed at Trey, his compact body dappled by sun and shade, and saw through the sweet, cocky façade to the rock-solid strength at his core. It was Trey’s love that kept Brin grounded, lightened the darkness in his soul, ensured his humanity.

And her own.

Even before she’d had Deklan, she’d lived her life alone. And to be honest, Deklan had made little difference, though she’d been fond of him. *Fond!* Inwardly, she rolled her eyes. She’d needed no one and been perfectly content.

What sort of cosmic joke had the gods played on her? Not once, but twice.

She was so deeply tangled with the both of them, she’d never get free. Wryly, she acknowledged that her solitary existence was gone forever.

“What are you thinking?” Trey took her hands in his. “The flames leap in your eyes.”

“I—” She stalled. Mother, the words were hard to say!

Trey kissed her knuckles. “Go on, Anje. Say it aloud, say you love him.”

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Her mouth was dry. "That's not it." She shook her head. "I mean, I do. I do love him, but..."

"But what?"

She got it out in a single breath. "I love you too." Gulping, she added, "I must be mad. Completely insane."

There was absolute silence. Trey stared as if he'd been poleaxed. Then he laughed with delight. The ringing, exuberant sound echoed among the trees.

"Yes!" He punched a fist in the air. "Lufra, yes!" Hauling her into his arms, he kissed the life out of her.

"Trey, you idiot!" She struggled without much conviction. "I can't breathe."

His grin was blinding. "When? When did you know?"

"About three minutes ago?"

"Oh." He looked taken aback for a second, but recovered quickly. "When do you think was the first moment then? When you fell?"

"Gods, you're vain."

"No, I'm not. I just need reassurance." He wagged his eyebrows and leered. "Was it when you saw my cock?"

"No-o-o." Smiling, Anje considered. "It was when you kissed me hullo. Remember?"

His face softened. "Like this." He took her face between his palms and gazed deeply into her eyes. "Hullo, Anje. I'll love you all my life."

His lips whispered over her cheek, her eyelids, her nose, drifted to her mouth. Anje let her head fall back and he pressed her down. She relaxed beneath him and it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to ease a small, sweet climax from her with his fingers, before slipping inside her and stroking them gently to completion.

The silken glide of his thrusts, the slow rise of her hips were a benediction, an act of love so exquisitely beautiful that they sipped each other's tears, whispering foolish words of comfort and joy.

As she reached the crest and slipped over, Anje felt the link glow far, far away, like a blessing.

She ran her hands down Trey's spine and over the curve of his fine ass, brushing her palms over downy hair and taut muscle. She took his earlobe between her teeth and breathed, "He's awake."

Trey arched a dark gold brow. "We'd better get on with the rescue then." With a sigh, he disengaged himself from her body. Then he chuckled. "I can't wait to see his face."

Anje shrugged into her shirt. "It won't be easy."

He grunted as he pulled on his boots. "More like impossible. But we can't leave him to the Hssrda."

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She shuddered. "Mother, no! I'd rather die. In fact, I know I would."

Trey crawled out of their shelter and stood, stretching 'til his shoulders creaked. "Agreed," he said and the bleakness of his expression was worthy of Brin at his grimmest.

As she joined him, sniffing the green freshness of the morning, something shifted in Anje's perceptions—and there it was.

The price in pain. The gods' price for the love of two such extraordinary men.

Her duty and her honor.

There was no question about what she was going to do next. She couldn't abandon Brin to slavery or death, nor could she leave Trey to die in a single-handed rescue attempt. Her guts clenching, she acknowledged the simple truth.

If she had to, she would sacrifice her life for theirs, because life without them wasn't worth living. She loved Brin and Trey more than her duty as a scout, more than her professional pride. Ah, Mother of Mercy, more than the welfare of her people!

Bitterness rose in her throat and she closed her eyes, breathing hard. Holy Mother, forgive me, forgive me! But I can't leave him to the gelding knives of the Hssrda! I cannot!

Like the Mother's blessing, another thought came to her. All was not completely lost. If she could get her map to a fast rider, a messenger she could trust... Her reputation as a scout would never be the same in Mother's Hearth, but that hardly mattered when the Matriarchs would have all the intelligence they needed to plan the Children's defense.

Biting her lip, she worked with Trey to strike camp, worrying at her problem like a fellwolf with a carcass. Soon. It would have to be soon.

She cast a speculative glance at her companion, at his grim face as he strapped the saddlebags on the vranee. A smile trembled on her lips. Such a beautiful warrior, the Children would love him. He'd be safe once he reached Mother's Hearth. She stole another look from under her lashes and sighed. His jaw was set rock hard, that luscious mouth thin with resolve. No, he'd never go and she couldn't make him.

She lifted her arms so Trey could swing her up and settle her in front of him on Brownie. Twink still limped, so they'd decided to spare him the weight of a rider. "Which way?"

Anje closed her eyes and sought the tiny spark. Gods, she hoped she got better with practice! Deliberately, she relaxed, breathing the tension out of her muscles. The link tugged at her. "Through there." She pointed and they set off.

After a little while, a thought occurred to her. "Trey, can you set wards?"

His brow creased. "It's shaman's magic. I don't have the gift. We'll just have to be very careful. How far away are they?"

“That’s just it!” Anje spat out an oath. “I know they’re not really close, because my head still hurts, but apart from that I can’t tell.”

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Trey brushed her cheek with his lips. “It’s the link, love. It’ll get better as we get closer.” He hesitated. “We’re still somewhere on the tableland. My guess is the Hssrda will head for The Hollows.”

“What are they?”

Again the pause. “It’s the last settlement before the forest and the mountains. Though settlement is a polite description. The Hollows is more like a stationary blood bath, with lots of rotgut liquor thrown in.”

Anje’s heart leaped. There might be a rider there she could hire. It sank again. Scouts lived off the land. She had only a few coins.

Trey ran a hand through his hair until it stood up in red-gold spikes. When he spoke again, his voice was tight. “There are almost always Hssrda there, because of the slave market.”

Anje’s guts roiled. She knew what the Hssrda did to male slaves, especially the strong, potentially dangerous ones, but she couldn’t bear to say the words aloud. Instead, she asked, “He won’t do anything stupid, will he?”

Trey thought about it as Brownie waded through a shallow stream as delicately as a maiden lady. “I don’t think so. But if there are others, women or children...” She felt him shrug. “Lufra only knows.”

For another two days, they traveled through the forest of Sitariat-Gillen and every hour, the glow of the link grew imperceptibly brighter and the ache eased infinitesimally. Sometimes, Anje could even distinguish emotions. Once or twice, Brin’s rage had been so violent, it had actually hurt her in a vague sort of way, like grit in the back of her skull. But he wasn’t provoking punishment, because he was not in pain, only fretting under a low level of discomfort. She wondered if he was dampening the effects somehow, to spare her. She wouldn’t put it past him.

Early on the second morning, the link flared out of nowhere, boiling with a dark blend of excitement, aggression and rage. Gasping, Anje clutched Trey’s arm. “Something’s happening! An escape! He’s breaking out!”

Trey pulled the vran to a halt. For heart-pounding minutes, they sat in silence, Trey’s cheek pressed to Anje’s as if he could feel the Bond link through the bones of her skull.

“Shit!” She reared back, clapping a hand to her upper arm. It burned with the distant echo of a bright, slashing pain. “Brin, it’s not working! Stop, stop!” A dull ache bloomed at her temple and the link winked out. “Mother!” Anje slumped forward over Brownie’s neck.

“Anje, Anje!” Trey pulled her back into his arms. “What is it? Is he—?”

She drew a shaky breath. “He, he’s—” Like a cloud-covered moon reflected in deep water, the link shimmered back into being. “All right. Thank the Mother.”

Trey hugged her tight. “I swear I’ll strangle him with my bare hands! He shouldn’t take such risks.”

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Anje laughed weakly. “Brin accept captivity? Not possible.” She twisted in his arms to drop a kiss on his cheek. “Relax, the Mother gave him a mighty hard head.”

Thereafter, Anje scouted ahead on foot, though when they heard fellwolves howling in the distance, it made Trey furious with fear for her. Late in the afternoon, they tethered the vranee under the trees and she led him, slithering on their bellies, to the edge of an escarpment.

Cautiously, they peered over the edge. “There.” She indicated with her chin.

Far below, the Hssrda caravan wound down a well-marked trail. Two moving pinkish-brown knots of bodies must be the slaves, naked, bound together and driven like beasts. Sunlight glinted on halberds and the air was so still, they could hear the occasional whistled command and once, a thin scream.

“Lufra’s tits!”

Anje turned to Trey, but he was squinting at the sky. She followed his gaze. The Shadow had eaten a quarter of the Sun.

She wriggled back out of sight. “What?”

“We’re running out of time.”

“You mean for Brin?”

He cut her a glance from under his extravagant lashes. “Well, yes, but the Day of the Dark is getting close awfully fast.” She opened her mouth and he said hastily, “I’ll explain later. Come on.”

He tugged her arm, but she planted her feet. “Don’t mess with me, Trey. The link aches and it makes me cranky. Explain now! And while you’re at it, I want to know about being a prince.”

“All right, alright!” His lower lip jutted and he glared. “Get on the bloody vran, woman, and I’ll tell you.”

She waited until Brownie was picking his way down the slope toward the trail. Trey hadn’t spoken. “Well?”

His knuckles tightened on the rein. “My mother is the Queen of Feolin,” he said baldly and stopped.

Gods, it was like drawing teeth! “Go on.”

“It really doesn’t matter,” he said and fell silent.

How the gods must be laughing! For an instant, she had a vision of the Mother’s wise, gentle face, a finger held to her lips. “Will you be king?” she asked, her heart sinking.

Trey let out a gusty breath. “Thank Lufra, no. I have a sister. There have been no kings since—” He broke off.

“Brin told me. Since the king raped Lufra’s priestess.”

“Yes,” he said heavily. “My great-grandfather, gods rot him.”

“Is Brin royal too?”

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“Brin?” Trey laughed. “He’d be insulted. Brin’s father was a blacksmith. Everything he’s achieved has been without the benefit of privilege.” There was pride in his tone and fondness. She thought he would speak just so of a gifted, much loved son and her heart turned over.

Before she could drown in her own honey, she steeled herself to ask, “What has the Day of the Dark got to do with anything?”

Trey pulled Brownie up. “Better shut up now. I can see the trail through the trees.”

Anje twisted to stare into his face. He looked so bland as to be positively shift. “I won’t forget, Trey.”

He sighed. “I know. Just remember you promised you’d never leave me.”

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Chapter Eighteen

The Queendom has no diplomatic contact in this lawless part of the Sitariat-Gillen Tableland. Feolin citizens are strongly advised to avoid The Hollows. Those intending to travel despite this warning should take their own guards and, if possible, an experienced healer.

Travel Advisory for the Sitariat-Gillen Tableland, issued by the Her Majesty’s Diplomatic Office, Feolin, 10351 ATF.

They waited a few hundred yards off the trail until near dark, but whenever the wind shifted, they could smell the stench of The Hollows, an amalgam of uncured hides, crowded humanity and mud.

“Look tough and keep moving,” Trey advised, boosting Anje onto the big, turquoise vran. He loosened his sword in the scabbard. “But don’t hold anyone’s eye too long. We don’t want them to get ideas about Twink, or us.”

Privately, Anje thought Trey would fit right in. The auburn beard shadowing his jaw was complemented by a scowl that curled his lip in a vicious sneer. His clothes were so torn and filthy, it was impossible to tell they’d once been fine. He looked capable of anything, a perfect thug. She wondered that she’d ever thought him merely pretty.

The first signs of habitation were rough shanties. Some boasted scrubby vegetable plots, a few a skinny herdbeast. The only person they saw was a sullen woman bowed by the weight of the two buckets she carried on a pole across her shoulders. Setting them down, she stared without expression then retreated into a tumbledown shed.

The Hollows itself straggled along under the shadow of the escarpment, bracketed by the outfall of a stream on one side and the trail on the other. The water flowed merrily enough down from the tableland but it stalled on level ground, smearing into a chain of marshy pools.

The trail grew muddier and the vranee lifted their hooves, whistling with discomfort as the filth caked their leg feathers.

Anje wrinkled her nose. “By the Mother, what *is* that stench?”

Trey chuckled without humor. “Take your pick. There’s a tannery, a mine, a nice swamp and any number of liquor stills. Or it could be the slave pens.”

Anje’s guts knotted. She shut her mouth and tried not to breathe.

The single main street was bordered by a rough wooden boardwalk and unlit save for the feverish wash of light from the windows of the shabby buildings. Most of them seemed to be taverns or brothels or both.

125 Denise Rossetti

She’d thought there might at least be music, but the only noise was a low, constant rumble of conversation, punctuated by the occasional shout or the crash of something breaking.

Anje shivered. Mother, what a hideous place! No wonder the Hssrda liked it.

Instinctively, she reached for Brin, only to encounter a blank wall, almost as if he’d turned his back. Puzzled, she pushed at it with her mind, only to gasp as he shoved back—hard.

Holy Mother, he was trying to send them away! The ungrateful, arrogant—

“Look out!” Trey’s shout jerked her head up.

A knot of men boiled out of a doorway and tumbled off the boardwalk into the mud, kicking and gouging. She caught a glimpse of a pale, skinny leg, mottled with bruises, but unmistakably feminine.

The tangle of bodies resolved itself into three men and a girl, all liberally spattered with filth. One of the men straightened, both hands wrapped around the girl’s throat. He was tall and cadaverously thin, but his grip was powerful enough to keep her on tiptoes.

“Garn, Fettle!” called one of his companions. “Kill the thievin’ slut!”

The girl raked at the throttling hands, leaving bloody furrows. Her eyes bulged and blood congested her face.

Metal rasped and Anje glanced at Trey in time to see him free his sword, his face grim and set. The two men watching were skinny, with the stunted build of the undernourished, but their arms were roped with muscle. She thought they might be tanners or miners. They urged Fettle on, yelling obscenities, faces alight with excitement and self-righteous fury.

The girl gave a hideous, choking gargle. Anje palmed her forearm blade and flipped it neatly into Fettle’s biceps.

As he howled with pain and surprise, all hell broke loose.

Fettle dropped the girl and she fell into the mud, a limp, unmoving bundle. Trey leaped off Brownie and moved to intercept the man's friends. And from out of nowhere charged a yelling fury, brandishing a heavy skillet.

It was a woman, the most enormous woman Anje had ever seen, nearly as big as Brin. The pan connected with the skull of one man with a resounding clang. His knees buckled and he collapsed without a sound. As Trey advanced on the remaining man with drawn sword, he broke and ran.

But Fettle was made of stronger stuff. Jerking the knife from his arm with an oath, he closed the distance to Twink in a couple of loping bounds. He was on Anje before she had time to blink, clawing at her thigh.

She heard a roar of rage. Fettle grunted and his back arched as the tip of Trey's sword emerged from his chest. For a moment, he stared down, startled. Then his eyes rolled up and he folded up limb by limb, like a marionette.

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"Don't stand there, ye silly fookers! Git!" The monstrous woman slung the girl over one shoulder as if she was a roll of carpet and disappeared down an alleyway at a lumbering trot. Her hoarse voice floated back to them. "Coom on!"

With a swelling rumble of noise, the door of the tavern banged open and half a dozen dark figures streamed onto the boardwalk. Trey vaulted onto Brownie in a single, fluid motion and they took off down the alley at a racking canter, following the pale shape of the woman's baggy trousers in the gloom.

For ten minutes, she led them through a maze of narrow, jinking paths, until she turned into a patch of darkness and disappeared. Anje slid off Twink and scanned her surroundings. She faced a scabrous hovel, clinging like a poultice to the side of a larger building.

The woman's head popped around the door. "Git in here!" she hissed. "An' bring yon beasties wit ye!" She disappeared again.

"I doubt they'll fit," said Trey dryly, but the approaching sounds of pursuit prompted him to dismount, sword still naked in his hand, and lead a reluctant Brownie forward. "Let me go first, love. You watch my back."

Coaxing and swearing, he got the vran through the door. At the sound of his startled exclamation, Anje tensed, but then he called softly, "Come on. It's safe."

Twink objected to small, dark doorways and he made his displeasure known with piercing, whistling honks. In desperation, Anje applied her shoulder to his feathered rump and shoved as Trey pulled. Like a cork in a bottle, Twink was squeezed through the opening and Anje slid in after him and pulled the door to.

Her jaw dropped. A sullen fire burned on the hearth, but what it revealed was completely unexpected. The lean-to was no more than an antechamber. Someone had knocked a man-sized hole through the wall of the larger building adjacent to it. Peering, Anje thought she could make out a broad staircase, an echoing hall.

"Hold this." The woman thrust a candle at her and lit it with a taper from the fire. As it flared, she crouched over the supine body of the girl, her broad buttocks straining the seam in her trousers.

Her ham-like hands patted the girl's limbs. She wasn't particularly gentle. "Stupid bint." She prized up an eyelid and grunted. "She'll live, though."

Rising, she stared at them through narrowed eyes. "I owe ye." Her face was as doughy as the rest of her, with eyes set deep in the flesh, like dark stones in a pudding. A braid of thick iron-gray hair fell over one broad shoulder. Despite the words, there was no gratitude in her expression, only calculation.

"I'm Nilda. Yon gormless whore's Braithie." She jerked her head at the limp figure on the floor. "She ain't quite reet in the head, thievin' from such as Fettle."

Setting her hands on her hips, she stared at them, taking in every detail. Her lips were surprisingly thin in all that flesh and they curved with satisfaction. "But ye settled his hash fer good an' all." She paused. "Yer strangers here. What d'ye want?"

127 Denise Rossetti

Trey shot Anje a glance. "For tonight, we need a place to stay."

"I pay me debts," said Nilda. "Tonight. And that's it."

Braithie stirred, coughing. "Ma..."

Anje's stomach lurched. Surely, the girl wasn't Nilda's daughter?

"Nah, it's me, Nilda." The big woman hunkered down and held a gourd to Braithie's lips, supporting her head with the other hand. "Slowly," she said, as the girl gulped.

"Agreed," said Trey. "But tomorrow we're going to buy a slave from the Hssrda. We'll pay for another night's lodging and your silence."

"Trey!" Anje grabbed his arm. What was he talking about? *Buy* Brin? With what? And she'd rather wrestle farengs on the nest than trust this woman.

"Well, Nilda?" he pressed. "This is a good squat. I don't suppose you want others to know of it, men like Fettle?"

Nilda stood, towering over them. Anje felt Trey loosen his shoulders, rock on the balls of his feet. "Ye got money then?" said the big woman.

Trey nodded. "Show me a pawnbroker."

Nilda spat on one palm and held out her hand. "Tonight fer the debt. Tomorrow a gold half-mark." Without hesitation, Trey shook. "But fer me silence and Braithie's. Weel." She scratched her head. "A gold mark."

"Nonsense," said Trey sturdily and they settled down to bargain.

Shaking her head with amazement, Anje took her candle and stepped through the hole in the wall. Even when she lifted it high, the ceilings of the hall remained shrouded in gloom. It must once have been a grand whorehouse, but now the windows were boarded over and there were dark gaps in the

floorboards where things rustled and squelched. Anje shuddered and started up the stairs, testing each step at a time.

The floor above was a rabbit warren of rooms, those close to the front of the building larger than the others. No wall was unstained, no door hung straight. There was not one stick of furniture.

The echoes of lust and greed and ancient violence hovered in the dank air. The hair on the back of Anje's neck stood up. Shielding her candle with a careful hand, she turned to retrace her steps.

Two small rooms under the staircase were obviously inhabited by Nilda and Braithie, because the doors had rough bolts.

By the time Anje had carried the saddlebags up to the room she'd selected, Nilda and Trey had come to an agreement. Apparently it included stabling for the vranee in the hovel, bowls of some stewy stuff that was barely edible and a moldy mattress. Trey seemed well pleased.

Anje could hardly wait to get him alone. "Mother of Mercy, are you mad? *Buy* Brin?"

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"Think about it, sweetheart. Why else would they let us in?"

Put that way, it did make sense.

"We'll have to sell the vranee," she said, her heart sinking.

"Twink's worth more than Brin is." Trey's sharp bark of laughter had shards of pain in it. "But I won't sell Brin's most valuable sire. His bloodlines are priceless." He wrestled with his boots. "There's another way."

"Then it'll have to be Brownie." Anje sighed. She'd grown fond of the sturdy old vran.

Trey pulled out his dagger and dug it into the heel of his boot. "No it won't. Anyway, how do you think we're going to get away? Aha!" With a flourish, he pulled off the heel and extracted a roll of gold leaf from the cavity. He waggled his eyebrows. "See? Not just a pretty face."

Anje laughed as he started work on the second boot. Then she sobered. "I don't know anything about the slave trade. Will it be enough?"

"Gods, no! But I'm thinking if we can muster up a deposit to get the Hssrda's attention, we might be able to...improvise the rest."

"So why did you want a pawnbroker?"

Trey drew a velvet pouch from his saddlebag and shook the contents into his hand. "For this."

She recognized it at once. It was a pair of Bond torques, breathtakingly beautiful, inset with fire opals nestled in whorls of fine gold filigree. The locks of hair in them ranged from auburn to brown, to Trey's own red-gold. "Trey, no! You can't sell those!"

He worked the point of his dagger under the largest stone and pried it loose. "You want Brin back?"

On the verge of tears, Anje slid an arm around him and rested her head on his shoulder, watching as he desecrated something sacred and precious.

“We can’t go to the Hssrda dressed like this,” she said slowly. “One of them might recognize us.”

“I know. I’ll see what I can find.”

When she would have spoken, he laid a finger across her lips. “Listen, sweetheart, you’re a scout, right? When it’s about tracking or the lay of the land, I listen to you, but I know more about places like The Hollows than you do.”

Miserably, she nodded. “You stay here,” he went on. “That way, if something happens to me, Brin still has a chance.” Tucking the pouch of stones into the front of his shirt, he dropped a kiss on her hair and ran down the stairs.

The dusty room seemed very empty without Trey’s cheerful presence. Anje curled a tendril of thought around the Bond link. Mother, she missed Brin! This must be what it was like to lose a limb. Still, it was infinitely better now than it had been. He was close.

129 Denise Rossetti

She caught him with his guard down. He was bored and still furious, with a grim dark anger that frightened her with its intensity. But when she reached out for him, he was there instantly, with a warm blast of love and lust so powerful that heat tingled all through her body from scalp to toes. Almost immediately, the warmth was replaced by angry concern. She had no difficulty discerning the emotional flavor of his thoughts. What the hell were they doing?

She projected reassurance as best she could, but once again, Brin pushed her away. *Leave me*, he seemed to be saying, *for Lufra’s sake, don’t risk it!*

Irritated and restless, Anje shut her thoughts off with a decisive snap and went down to check on the vranee. They’d been provided with tubs of water and feed and though she was sure it must be the poorest quality, they chewed placidly enough. Nilda and Braithie were nowhere to be seen.

Two hours of pacing later, she heard a welcoming whicker from Twink, then a light, firm tread on the stairs. Faint with relief, she stared as Trey entered the room, his body almost concealed by parcels and rolls of cloth.

“Mother of Mercy, Trey! Did you buy the shop?”

“Very nearly.” He chuckled as he dropped the parcels and held out his arms. “Kiss me.”

Anje hurled herself at him and bore him down to the mattress. She kissed him with all the artistry of which she was capable, playing with that soft, carnal lower lip, licking and nibbling. When she finally lifted her head, he gazed at her with eyes half-lidded with desire, his thumbs gently rasping her nipples.

“Have you ever had a pleasure slave, Anje?”

To her annoyance, she flushed. “Me? Not on a scout’s pay.”

Trey spread his arms. "Behold, Mistress. Here I am."

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Chapter Nineteen

BARGIN—Make yer own likker. Workin still, all bits.

Notice in pawnshop window, The Hollows.

Anje frowned and sat up. "What are you getting at?"

Trey tugged her down again. "Anje—" He stopped.

Alarmed, she pulled back to look into his eyes. All amusement had fled. "What's wrong?"

"Do you know what the Hssrda do to the males they sell for heavy work, like in the mines?"

Her guts turned over. She wet her lips. "They...they geld them, don't they?"

"Yes. The only way we'll get Brin out of there intact is if we buy him as a pleasure slave."

"How do we do that?"

"*You* do it, sweetheart. Dressed as a noble lady from the Kingdom of the Leaves of the Sea."

Anje clutched his arm. "Trey, I'm no actress. Couldn't we just fight our way in?"

"You'll be fine." He ripped open a package and drew out a short, supple cane and a length of filmy material in a midnight blue, threaded with knots of silver. "Here, look. It's hardly marked. We can drape it to hide the stain and it goes with your eyes."

Anje barely glanced at it. "What about you?"

"This is for me." Trey picked up a bundle about the size of his hand. Out of it spilled a studded metal collar, a tangled nest of leather straps and a squat, dark jar. "Standard wear for a pleasure slave."

Appalled, she husked, "No! Let me do it."

Trey cradled her face in his palms. "Listen to me, Anje. Pleasure slaves have no will, no rights. If you have to hurt me to show the Hssrda you're really who you say you are I want you to do it. If it was the other way about, I couldn't cause you pain and be convincing. I know it."

"But I can't—"

"Yes, you can." He smiled crookedly. "Deep inside, you're as much of a master as Brin." Leaning forward, he darted the tip of his tongue over her lower lip. "I can't resist you. Either of you."

131 Denise Rossetti

With nimble fingers, he began unlacing her clothes, while she sat frozen. "For tonight, let's play, Anje

love. Tomorrow will come soon enough.” He took her hand and curled her fingers around the collar and straps.

Arousal slithered through her. “What’s in the jar?”

Trey buried his nose in her cleavage and inhaled deeply. For answer, he held up the vessel. Anje twisted off the lid and sniffed cautiously. The cream inside was a delicate pink and it smelled of summer and hot grass. Underneath lurked a sharp, metallic odor.

Trey murmured, “It’s a depilatory.” The gentle puffs of his breath made her nipples bud up tightly. “A pleasure slave must be bare and smooth. I found an apothecary who keeps it for the high-class whores.” His tongue swept over the inner curve of her breast.

Anje arched into the caress as heat shot through her like a lightning flash. Suddenly suspicious, she brought the jar to her nose. Mother! Lust washed over her in sheets, stinging and electrifying. Her sex swelled and throbbed and a growl rumbled in her throat.

Before she knew it, she’d grabbed Trey’s cock through the fabric of his treads, loving the hardness of it in her palm, the way it filled her fist.

Sweet Mother, the cream had an aphrodisiac in it!

Breathing heavily, she sat back on her heels, exerting every ounce of willpower she possessed. Trey lay beneath her, rumped and gorgeous, grinning.

Gods, he didn’t know!

Mischief ran through her on little demon feet. The sensation of power made her giddy with lust. She licked her lips slowly and Trey watched, the grin fading. “I’m the mistress, am I?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Say it! Am I?”

His erection jumped in his treads. “Yes,” he whispered.

Anje bared her teeth. “Then strip. Every stitch.”

“Wait, I—”

“Do it!”

Trey remained frozen for a moment. Then he ripped off his clothes with more haste than grace.

“Come here.”

But he hesitated. “Will you do something for me?”

Anje raised a cool brow. “If you ask nicely I might. What is it?”

“I got a bodice.” He flung garments aside until he unearthed something in purplish-blue velvet. “Your tits

will look gorgeous in it.”

“So?”

Trey swallowed and Anje’s excitement intensified. He dropped to his knees and shuffled closer. “Wear it for me?”

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He waited a beat. “Please, Mistress?”

Anje let the silence drag out. Trey’s cock jutted from his body, long and thick, swaying with his breath. Finally, she said, “Very well. Undress me.”

Trey smirked. “At once, Mistress.”

Remembering Brin’s tantalizing indolence, she remained passive, allowing him to draw off her garments, wrestle with her boots. As she leaned forward to settle her breasts into the bodice, she noted with dark satisfaction that his hands weren’t quite steady.

Behind her, Trey whispered, “It’s a shame to cover your pretty wings.” He nibbled a line across her shoulder blade and down her spine before he tied the last lace. “There.”

Anje shivered. The caress traveled across the silvery pattern on her skin in looping, sinuous trails, tingling over her rib cage, her belly, down to her dripping sex.

At the back of her mind, a tiny flame grew where the Bond link was. Brin.

As she rose and turned to display her body to Trey, Anje opened her inner self to the shaman. The result was all she could have wished for. A wave of warm, greedy interest that was not her own washed through her mind and body.

Trey’s eyes widened at the sight of her and he gasped, “Lufra!” A drop of moisture seeped from the slit in the rosy head of his cock.

“Don’t touch!” she said sharply and his hand fell to his thigh. The link hummed with approval and hard, driving lust.

Looking down, she blinked. The swelling mounds of her breasts were thrust upward by the boning of the bodice in a sumptuous display, bared right to the dark edge of her areolas. The velvet hugged her waist and flared over her hips, stopping above her buttocks at the back and just shy of her mons in the front.

“You like?” she asked, for the sheer pleasure of hearing the reply.

“Gods, yes! Can I taste? Let me make you come.”

“Not yet. Lean against the wall and spread your legs.” She had to stop to gasp for air. “Put the cream on. And take your time. I want to see everything.”

“Anje, give me something! I’m dying here!”

“No.” Sweet Mother, she could hardly wait! The link throbbed hard, once, and went still, crouched like a predator. “Do it.”

Trey dipped two fingers into the pot and spread a thick layer of cream across the reddish curls in his crotch.

Anje held her breath.

“*Lufra’s tits!*” He arched so hard the back of his skull hit the wall with a solid thunk. “*Shit!*” His cock wagged, congested with blood.

His eyes meet hers, stretched wide and golden with arousal. Helpless.

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Anje smiled slowly and ran her hands over her waist and down to her hips. “You got something extra for your money, Trey.” She was so wet, the honey on her thighs slicked her fingers. As she put them to her mouth and licked, Trey made a low, desperate sound. “Do the rest,” she said. “Balls and cock too.”

“I’ll explode!”

“I’ll do it for you.” She took a step forward.

Hastily, he slathered more of the substance over his testicles.

“Don’t miss any places,” Anje warned. “Your ass should be all bare too.”

Trey’s breath sobbed, but he ran his slippery fingers back over the crease of his ass. The heat of the link intensified and she wondered how good Brin really was. Could he see through her eyes? Or just sense her emotions? Mother, she hoped he had some privacy!

“How long, Trey?”

“He said,” Trey writhed, “five minutes and wipe it off. Gods!” Sweat popped on his brow, ran over his collarbone. “My balls are so tight I can feel them in my throat.” He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Look at me.”

The expression on his face was so fierce, so agonized, Anje braced herself for the bruising impact of his body. But he sank his teeth into the cushion of his lower lip and held on, quivering. His hands gripped the mattress with such force, the threadbare covering shredded under his fingers.

Her knees trembled so hard she could barely stand, but she asked quietly, “Where did you put the pieces of that torn shirt?”

“Saddlebag,” he forced out. “Behind you.”

Anje turned her back and heard him curse. As gracefully as she could, she knelt and bent over slowly, exposing her wet, flushed labia. There was total silence, save for the sound of his labored breath.

She let the tension build, feeling the hot slide of moisture slippery on her inner thighs. When she turned

back, holding the cloth, Trey had his hand on his cock. His head was tilted back and he was gasping.

“Stop!” she rasped, but then she realized what he was doing. His fingers pressed so brutally into the base of his shaft that the flesh was white.

Deeply moved, she dropped to her knees and kissed his open mouth. “Don’t hurt yourself, love. Not for my sake.”

Trey buried a shaking hand in her hair. His eyes shone with unshed tears. “You never called me that before.” His lips curved. “I like it.”

Anje blushed. “Hold still.” She wiped the cream away.

Though her touch was gentle, Trey flinched. He took the cloth from her and finished the job himself, swearing continuously under his breath.

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He flung the cloth away and they stared down. His tender skin was pink and satiny, his balls plump and rosy, drawn up tight beneath his glistening cock. Naked as never before.

“Oh.” Entranced, Anje reached out, but he caught her wrist in a strong grip.

“Touch me and it’s over.” He blew out a breath. “Mistress.”

“Can you go on?” she asked.

“No. Yes. Let me make you offer.”

She arched a brow. “Lufra’s Law?”

“Anje, I’m burning alive. If I don’t get my cock into you soon, I’ll rupture something.”

“Lie back.” She straddled his shoulders and arched over his mouth. “Service me, slave. No hands.”

With a growl, Trey launched himself at her dripping folds. There was no finesse about his desperate hunger, he lashed and stabbed with his tongue, sucked and devoured, making noises like a starving fellwolf. It was messy and near violent and utterly glorious.

Anje’s head fell forward, too heavy for her neck to support. A whisper of masculine triumph bloomed in the back of her mind and it triggered a convulsion in her sex, a ripple of dark sensation. As she slumped over Trey, suddenly boneless, she could have sworn she felt a phantom hand caress her breast, a voice murmuring, Sweet, sweet.

“Now?” came a desperate rasp in her ear.

She rolled over and smiled. Trey’s cock head shone with lubrication, very nearly purple with frustration. Anje touched it with a gentle fingertip and it vibrated, straining toward her body. She stroked over the taut velvet of his bare testicles and he quivered. “Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.” She raised her arms. “Fuck me ‘til I faint, slave.”

“Lufra, yes!”

But instead of spreading her legs and entering her, as she expected, Trey wrapped his hands around her waist and flipped her over facedown. He pulled her knees up and shoved them wide open with his thighs. “Yes!” His entire length slid into her in one luxurious plunge.

A deep groan racked his body and he froze, gloved to the hilt by succulent flesh. His fingers dug into her hips with bruising force. Abruptly, he pulled out and rammed back in, over and over, faster and faster, giving her every inch of his hard cock with each stroke.

Anje screamed. He was burning over her flesh. Her sheath, even her buttocks, stung with arousal. Ah Mother, the cream! His cock was rubbing the remnants of it all over her labia and up inside her channel. He struck the sweet spot behind her clit without mercy and it knotted up so hard it hurt.

Her head thrashed on the mattress and Trey bellowed and came inside her in long, wet spurts, moaning with each spasm.

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“No, no,” she whimpered, rigid with frustration. Brin’s dark pleasure bloomed along the link.

Trey laid his cheek on her quivering shoulder. “What’s wrong, Mistress?”

“Gods, I’m burning!” She squirmed under his body and realized he was still hard inside her. “Make me come, slave!”

“How would you like it, Mistress?”

“I don’t care!” She twisted her head to glare. The orgasm had steadied him. His eyes twinkled at her and his smile was bland. “Just do it!”

“Your wish is my command, Mistress.”

Anje was so distracted by the delicious friction when he pulled out slowly and pushed back in, that she almost missed the glee in his tone. Trey reached past her and picked up the jar. Panicked, she blurted, “Stop! Trey, don’t—!”

“Too late now, Mistress.”

Brin’s lip-licking amusement floated across the link and she knew she was in trouble. A slick thumb pressed against the rosette of her anus and popped inside. For a moment, it felt cool and greasy, then it began to burn. And burn.

Anje writhed, but Trey held her steady for protracted, gliding thrusts, timing them exquisitely with short, circling strokes of his thumb in her ass.

“Must...thank the apothecary. So hard... Could fuck...you for...hours.” He dropped a kiss on her spine.

Ah Mother of Mercy, she’d die! She was on fire, throwing her hips back at him in a demand for more, but he kept up the remorseless rhythm, driving her closer to the brink in steady increments. She gritted

her teeth, sobbing. Hold on, hold on. Nearly there.

He stopped.

Anje teetered on the edge and slipped back. Snarling, she called him every foul name she could think of.

“There, there.” He patted her bottom. “Don’t be angry, Mistress. Leave it to your faithful slave.”

Abruptly, he pulled out of her body, leaving her bereft. Before she had time to do more than gasp, his cock butted at her anus and the head tucked past the tight ring of well-greased muscle. Simultaneously, he impaled her pussy with two fingers.

Anje moaned and shuddered.

Trey slung himself a little further inside her. His cock rubbed and fretted at her burning flesh, profoundly satisfying, filling a need she hadn’t been aware of. The more he fucked her, the better it felt, each outstroke a dragging pleasure, each thrust back in an edgy, painful delight. Every jab of his cock in her tight ass forced the flesh of her core back on to his fingers, curled deep inside her.

As Trey possessed her body, the shaman’s emotions swirled through her soul, a shadow of grief and yearning coloring the bedrock of his love and hunger. The

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combination of sensations was so potent, Anje was terrified she’d burst, fly apart, her skin too small to contain all she felt. Unintelligible sounds fell from her lips, as she jerked and writhed under the double assault.

What must Brin be feeling, riding inside her as Trey reamed her ass so comprehensively? Did he know now how it felt to be fucked by a man? Gods!

The thought was too much to bear. With a throttled scream, Anje threw herself back into Trey’s driving cock and impaling fingers. Time was suspended for an instant, as she ground herself frantically against him. Then, with a lurch, reality returned and she was released, in a storm so high and vicious, so totally gripping, she ceased to think at all.

Gasping, she jolted under Trey’s body, lost in the paroxysm, almost fainting with the intensity of it. As if from miles away, she heard his hoarse shout, felt the hot wash of his seed in her greedy bowels.

Her knees slipped from under her and she collapsed. As Trey followed her down, warm and heavy over her back, she thought she felt strong arms receive her in a comforting clasp, a whisper of love and approval in her mind. Gratefully, she closed her eyes and lay unmoving.

It seemed a long time later that Trey kissed her cheek. “Anje love?”

She cranked one eye open. “Uh?”

“That was... That was...”

Anje laughed weakly and rolled over. “Fucking gorgeous is the phrase you want, poet.” She ran her hand over the hard planes of his chest and leaned up to nuzzle one freckled shoulder. “Ow!” She winced

at the twinge in her ass and gave him a nip. "Some slave you turned out to be!"

He smiled crookedly and patted her hip. "I aim to please, Mistress. Here." He held out a damp cloth. "This will help."

"Don't suppose there's running water?"

Trey snorted. "Nope. I had to go downstairs." An expression of profound discomfort crossed his face. "I ran into Braithie." He rolled his shoulders as though dislodging something. "She said I'd saved her life. Gods, Anje, she hoisted her skirts then and there and offered me a free fuck. It was pathetic." He sighed. "Poor, stupid little thing. What a life."

Privately, Anje thought Braithie wasn't as dim as she seemed. She'd never have the chance to touch a man as beautiful as Trey again—let alone one as clean. She frowned. An idea teased at the back of her mind. "Do you think we could trust her?"

Trey shrugged. "Don't know. I'm not convinced she's all there, anyway." He snuggled Anje's head into his shoulder. "Why?"

Anje pulled free of his grasp and sat up. "Don't you see?" She clenched her fists on her thighs. "We have to have a diversion or we'll never get out of the Hssrda camp alive. And if we're both inside, who's going to create it?"

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Chapter Twenty

Mother keep you warm in the cold.

Mother keep you fed in the famine.

Mother keep you safe among your foes.

Mother keep you always in Her arms.

The Matriarchs' Blessing, Children of the Mother.

Anje sat stiffly on Twink in the near dusk, her scalp pulled so tight, it itched. She longed to dig her hands into her hair and dislodge the coiffure it had taken them hours to construct that afternoon. She'd been amazed at Trey's dexterity as he twined ropes of cheap blue beads into her braids and secured the heavy mass in a crown on the top of her head. "I used to make a point of watching my sister being dressed for state occasions." He'd chuckled. "Her maid was very gifted with her hands. And her mouth. Funny, what things turn out to be useful."

On the other hand, the link no longer caused her such physical discomfort. There was no question that Brin was near. Soon, she'd see him again, touch him. Her soul wanted to sing, despite the risks they were taking.

They'd reached the outskirts of The Hollows, a mile out of town, where the swamp was at its most noisome. The lights of the Hssrda camp twinkled in a boggy depression at the base of the escarpment. The occasional gleam sparked on the blade of a halberd or reflected sullenly off a patch of oily water.

Anje glanced down at Trey, leading Twink, as befitted a slave. Privately, she thought he looked beautiful. Even the shaven scalp suited him. He looked older, more formidable, without the cap of red-gold curls. After all, he was a warrior, he'd killed the revolting Fettle without a blink. As for the rest... She sucked in a breath. He wore only the collar, the straps and soft boots. The dark lines of the straps went first around his waist and then bisected the cheeks of his ass. They cradled and presented his genitalia, circling his smooth, bare balls and holding his cock upright, flat against his belly.

When Braithie had seen him, her mouth had fallen open, the eyes starting from her head. Anje glanced behind them. There was no sign of the girl, nor of Brownie. Gods, hopefully she wasn't too addled to perform the simple sequence of actions they'd drilled into her.

Trey caught her eye. "Ready?"

Her laugh was shaky. "Mother, no! But let's go anyway." But as Trey stepped forward, she said, "Wait!"

He looked up.

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Anje leaned down and caught his shoulder. "Promise me," she said fiercely. "After we get him out of there, promise me you'll tell Brin how you feel."

Trey shook his head. "He doesn't want me, Anje."

She snorted. "Don't be stupid. He can barely control himself whenever you touch him."

The hope in his face was painful to see. "What would you do?" she asked quietly. "What would you do if you were free to love him?"

"Ah, Lufra, I'd do everything!" Trey leaned into Twink's shoulder and gazed unseeing at the Hssrda camp. "Get him to rest, for a start. My blasted mother and the Council ask so much of him and he never refuses. He should be on his ranch, with the vranee. That's where he's happy. I'd rub the knots out of his shoulders." He grinned up at her, his teeth flashing in the fading light. "And I'd fuck both of you 'til we were all too sore to move."

He hesitated. "Last night, when I was up your gorgeous ass, you turned and looked at me. Anje, I saw Brin's flames in your eyes, like a shadow behind yours. Do you think the link—?"

"He was there." She ran her palm over the smooth, hard curve of his skull. "Feeling what I felt. He knows, Trey. He knows what it's like. But he doesn't want us anywhere near. I can feel him pushing us away."

"Always the noble idiot. Tell him we're coming anyway." Trey's chest expanded as he inhaled. "Right, Anje love. Let's go buy ourselves a pleasure slave."

They moved forward.

The SpurSoldier on sentry duty at the rough stockade didn't seem to have any human language, but it assessed them shrewdly enough, a third eyelid flicking across its slit-pupiled eyes. As Anje glared down

from her vantage point on Twink, trying to look imperious, it hissed and gestured with its serrated halberd.

Trey tied the vran to a post in the palisade and assisted Anje to alight, handling her as if she was made of spun glass. Restricted by her voluminous skirts and tight bodice, she moved cautiously. One major disadvantage of Trey's costume—or lack of it—was that he had nowhere to conceal a weapon save in his boots. In contrast, Anje was a walking armory. A single unwary move and she'd bleed right through her finery.

She took the light cane Trey handed her and slashed his forearm with minimum force and maximum noise. "Gently, you fool!"

Another Hssrdan, this one short enough to be a TailSoldier, led them along a muddy path toward the black gloom of the cliff. Squinting, Anje made out a massive, reptilian shape, waiting. Her heart began to thump erratically. They'd gambled that the Hssrda wouldn't be able to recognize the details that distinguished one human from another. Who knew if they even saw in color? Suddenly, she remembered the magenta scales on the commander of the force that had captured Brin and her stomach turned over. Thank the Mother for Trey's shaven head! His coppery locks were far too distinctive.

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She straightened her spine and tried to walk the way he'd taught her, shortening her stride to a gliding mince. Holy Mother, the creature was huge! It cocked its head, watching them, and her guts knotted with atavistic terror.

Anje began babbling from several yards away. "I have need of a tall, muscular slave. What do you have in strong males?" She wrinkled her nose as she looked around. "Faugh, this place stinks! I won't take anything unless you bathe it first."

The Hssrdan surveyed her, its scaly face unmoving. Skeins of chartreuse and carmine twined over one massive shoulder. Behind her, one pace to the left, Trey dropped to one knee and lowered his gaze.

After an aching silence, the creature's mouth opened, exposing an impressive array of teeth. "Yess," it said, forming the words with difficulty. "Have sstrong sslaves. Thiss way, flesshy one." It lumbered toward the dark entrance of a cave tunneled into the base of the escarpment, without looking back to see if they followed.

Anje didn't dare glance at Trey. They'd seen the slave pens from a distance already, enclosures of stout poles in the open air. But a cave! That complicated matters considerably.

Complaining in a shrill monotone, she swept into the gloom, followed by Trey. A couple of SpurSoldiers fell in behind. The passage was damp underfoot, but well lit with slow-burning torches thrust into the floor at intervals. The big Hssrda turned a corner and stopped before a chamber fenced off with metal bars.

After a moment's silence, during which it seemed to be thinking hard, it said laboriously, "Am ClawCaptain." It thumped its chest with a taloned fist.

Anje let her lip curl. "So I see." Deliberately, she turned away and stared into the slave pen. Mother of Mercy! She gripped the cane so hard it creaked in her hands. There were about a dozen men crowded into it, all tall and muscular, and all naked and filthy.

As soon as they saw her, they rushed the bars, shouting, hands reaching through in clawing desperation. Anje leaped back, her forearm knife falling neatly into her palm. It was only when Trey thrust her behind him that she remembered who she was supposed to be.

At least she didn't have to conceal her disgust. She shrank away, one hand pressed to her breast. "You're wasting my time, ClawCaptain," she shrilled. "These are scum!"

"But sstrong!" it pointed out.

"Well, yes, I suppose so." Anje turned back slowly, ignoring the pleas and catcalls.

Only three men weren't pressed against the bars. Two lay unmoving in the furthest corner. One had a rough bandage around his head. The other didn't seem injured, but he was curled up in a fetal position. The third was Brin.

He sat cross-legged, bolt upright against the wall, his face expressionless. The dark beard shadowing his jaw made him look both scruffy and menacing. One thumb stroked the braided circlet around his neck, over and over. The soothing rhythm of the caress slowed—the only indication he was aware of their presence.

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But the Bond link fairly hummed with his fury that they had dared to put their lives at risk for his. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Anje's lips quirked. She put a hand to her own torque, concealed beneath a gauzy scarf that drove her crazy with its trailing ends. Same old Brin, she thought as loudly as she could, concentrating on her exasperation. His mouth thinned.

"I want to see that one." She pointed. "Bring him out."

"You ssure, fleshy one?" The ClawCaptain's armored scalp shifted back a fraction, showing its surprise. "That meat iss disscolored."

"Among humans, a tattoo is considered decorative, ClawCaptain." Anje raised her brows, striving for the hauteur of the privileged. "And please do not call me that."

"Fleshy one?" The ClawCaptain scratched delicately behind an eye ridge with one talon. "Iss what you are." Awkwardly, it bent its thick knees to peer more closely into her face. It had to be over seven feet tall.

The fanged snout did not lend itself to smiling, but Anje had a horrible feeling the creature might be trying. Finally, it said, "A meat with money, yess?"

"Yes," she agreed curtly. "Are you going to show me or not? I'm sooo bored with this one." Gritting her teeth, she turned to Trey, back in position behind her, and slashed his shoulder with the cane.

He grunted, absorbing the pain. She'd pulled it at the last possible second, but it had to have hurt. A hand flew to the stripe scoring his fair skin, but her hard stare captured his hazel one. Slowly, the hand dropped and his head sank.

The ClawCaptain hissed its approval and waved a taloned hand. The SpurSoldiers waded into the naked bodies in the cage, serrated halberds jabbing right and left.

Brin rose slowly to his full, imposing height, the snouts of the SpurSoldiers reaching only as high as the middle of his chest. Presumably they could grow as large as the ClawCaptain if they got enough *meat*. Anje suppressed a shudder.

She heard Trey's quick, rattled breath. Brin's torso was mottled with bruises and a long slash on his upper arm seeped blood. A nasty-looking knot marked his temple. They'd taken everything from him except the torque, but a thin, angry welt on the strong, brown column of his throat showed where they must have tried to wrench it off and failed.

Anje's heart pounded, but she forced herself to assess his condition dispassionately. It wasn't as bad as it looked. Who knew better than she the strength in that huge, muscular body, the sheer power of his will?

One SpurSoldier stood directly behind him, halberd pressed to his spine. The other flanked him, weapon at the ready.

"Thiss way." The ClawCaptain stumped off, leading them further into the cave complex. The link thrummed with shock as Brin got his first real sight of Trey. It was followed by admiration and amusement and a thread of something else that made her lips tilt. She wasn't the only one who thought her pleasure slave looked edible.

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Their destination was a well-lit chamber with a mud wallow at one end. It steamed gently, exuding a stagnant marsh-like smell, harsh enough to make the eyes water.

"Fassten the meat." A SpurSoldier stepped forward with a length of chain and a lock. There were two wooden poles set deep into the earth, facing the wallow.

The very sight of them made Anje queasy. "No!"

The Hssrdan fixed her with an unblinking yellow stare. "Insspection, yess?" It hissed another command and the second SpurSoldier left the chamber at a lumpy trot.

"I've seen enough." Anje put a hand to her belt pouch. "This one will do. Let's bargain."

"Hssrda traderss have good name! Insspect meat now!" The ClawCaptain slid into the wallow until only its eyes were exposed. When it heaved itself up again, acrid clouds billowed into the cave.

The SpurSoldier returned with a bucket of water and slung it over Brin. "Wassh," said the Hssrdan triumphantly as the shaman gasped and swore, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes. "Insspect."

"Uh, yes." Anje laid a tentative hand on Brin's dripping shoulder. "Right."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

She ran her hand over his biceps, squeezed. "Rescue," she whispered.

The ClawCaptain shifted. Mud squelched and popped beneath its enormous weight. "Iss sstrong meat. Work fieldss. Throw in gelding for free."

Brin's mouth opened then clamped shut. His face was dark with fury.

Anje cupped his heavy testicles in the palm of one hand. "Definitely not," she said firmly and heard him exhale.

"Pleasure slave?" Despite the rigidity of its facial scales, it wasn't difficult to see the ClawCaptain calculating an increased margin of profit.

"Yes."

"Satisfaction guaranteed. Inspect." With a loud clink, the SpurSoldier fastened Brin's wrists behind the pole. "Working parts, yess?"

Anje literally didn't know what to do next. Surely the creature didn't mean... But apparently it did. Waves of panic made her head whirl. She couldn't, not here. *Couldn't*. But if she didn't, they'd all die.

A piece at a time.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Darling Letts,

You'll never guess what Mama gave me for my natal day—a pleasure slave of my very own! She says I'm a grown woman now, with a woman's needs. He's the most gorgeous thing—dark gray eyes and a lovely body—especially the you-know-what!!!

But he's dreadfully sullen. He's been tongue-trained, but he shows little enthusiasm for pleasuring ME. Do you think it's too soon for a whipping? I don't want to ruin him.

Are you going to the Sea Harvest masque? I have such a cheeky idea for a costume ...

Extract, letter from HighDuchess Willimela d'Agostin to NobleLady Lettalefa van Pinzfest, Kingdom of the Leaves of the Sea, 10332 ATF.

Warm fingers touched her calf. "Mistress?"

Trey crouched at her feet. He pressed his lips to her boot. "Let me do this for you." Even the shape of his shaven skull was strong and beautiful. The fluid line of his back and buttocks gleamed in the lamplight like gold-washed ivory. The woman who owned a pleasure slave like Trey would be mad to look for another.

Unless it was Brin.

Tears of relief prickled behind Anje's lids. "Yes," she husked. "Please."

No, the tone was all wrong for a pampered aristocrat. She squared her shoulders. "Some privacy, ClawCaptain!" she demanded.

“Sss?”

Better rephrase. “Send these...” she indicated the SpurSoldiers, “away.”

The Hssrda grunted and waved a clawed hand. Stolidly, the SpurSoldiers dropped to all fours and shambled out. She heard them ground their long halberds outside in the passageway.

“Tesst working partss,” insisted the ClawCaptain and Anje wanted to scream.

Trey reached around Brin as if to check the strength of his bonds. Averting his face from the yellow stare of the Hssrdan, he whispered into Brin’s neck, “Trust me.*Please* .”

When Brin’s mouth opened, Trey clapped a hand over it. The Bond link roiled with apprehension, rigidly controlled. The dark warrior’s gaze remained impenetrable. Slowly, Trey released him.

“No,” Brin rasped. “Don’t—” Anje trembled with the impact of the shaman’s emotions. His appalled comprehension of what Trey was about to do was underlaid with dark desire.

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Trey’s lips twisted in the ghost of a smile. He huffed out a breath, sank to his knees and ran a shaky hand up Brin’s flank. The two heads turned to her, Trey’s shaven scalp shining pale in the yellow light, Brin’s black locks hanging in disheveled glory around his jaw. The goddess flame flickered deep in his black eyes.

Time seemed to stretch like taffy. Mother, how she loved them! Fear swarmed over her and she beat it off. She turned her back squarely on the ClawCaptain and reached up to stroke Brin’s cheek. “Trust us,” she breathed.

The inferno in the shaman’s eyes leaped with hungry power. The charge of it fair burned her alive. Her response hummed under her skin, ran tingling through the silver lines of the wings clasping her loins, to her sex.

Mother, give me courage!

Raising the cane, she brought it down sharply across Trey’s buttocks. He reared back and the breath whistled out between his teeth.

“I want to see him hard, understand?” she snapped.

Brin’s eyes slammed shut as Trey reached out to cradle his heavy balls in both hands. He handled them gently, rolling and stroking, hefting their weight. Then he bent his head and ran his tongue over the seam and back and around and under, mouthing and nibbling. His touch was delicate, light, but his own cock had risen brutally, stiff in its nest of straps.

Brin’s jaw set so hard, she heard his teeth click. His shaft stirred and swelled though Trey hadn’t touched it and the link swamped her with delight and shame.

Anje moved to interpose her body between the two men and the ClawCaptain. But the Hssrdan was picking its teeth with one long talon. When it yawned, a gust of carrion breath wafted her way.

The Hssrda didn't copulate with anything they considered food. Only the Mother knew how they obtained sexual satisfaction. And She probably wished She didn't.

Hastily, Anje turned back to Trey and Brin. They made an insanely erotic tableau, ferocious in its intensity.

Trey had wrapped one hand around the base of Brin's magnificent cock and slid his mouth over the rest. He grunted with each greedy pull, his cheeks hollowed with effort. Brin's hands gripped his chains so hard, he had to be leaving bruises. He was gasping, sweat damping the hair on his chest, his nipples swollen into small, jutting peaks.

Anje was utterly transfixed. She'd never seen anything so unapologetically, brutally male. These were the two men she desired more than life itself. She stifled a moan, deep in her throat, and juice trickled into the fabric of the trows she wore beneath her skirt. Her intimate flesh was slick with it, dripping.

Brin fought, struggling against his own pleasure. And she realized, with a bolt of dark lust that nearly took her to the floor, that he was a virgin.

The shaman of a lust goddess, the sexual athlete, the one who'd taught her to pleasure him with her mouth and given her the dark rapture of being taken anally. The

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lover who'd shared her and made her scream and beg. He'd stripped away her self-control, emptied her very soul and filled it to the brim with himself.

He'd never had a man.

And he hated the helplessness of his pleasure.

Love he would never reject, his divinity was all love and joy. But the loss of control—that flayed his soul.

The trust they were forcing from him. The utter vulnerability.

Brin possessed and protected those he loved. Not the other way about. Never.

His brows drew together, his face stark. "*Gods!*" The dragon on his loins writhed.

Trey only crooned around Brin's cock, and when he pulled back, it was to wrap his tongue around the smoothness of the broad head in a spiral lick that dragged a tortured groan from deep in the big man's chest.

With a last, lingering swipe, Trey raised his head. "Mistress?" he whispered.

Brin said hoarsely, "I can't— That's enough."

They were poised, shaking, both of them, sweat beading their skin. Waiting for her command. She swallowed, exquisitely moved, unbearably aroused.

Brin's cock was towering now, the skin slick and shiny with Trey's saliva. It pulsed rigidly against his

muscled belly, the veins visibly throbbing, an oily bead sliding over the broad smooth head, trembling on the collar beneath the glans.

The urge to impale her soft, swollen flesh on his rigid length was overpowering in its intensity, a relentless consuming fire. But it was no greater than the aching need to rock him in her arms, to ease his pain and confusion and keep him safe.

Anje risked a glance over her shoulder at the ClawCaptain. It lay back in the wallow, only its eyes exposed, the third eyelid drawn across. It could be watching or sleeping, who knew? Either way, it was clearly indifferent.

She turned back with a muttered prayer. Licking her lips, she nodded. "Finish him."

Trey lifted one hand toward her. Guessing what he wanted, she bent and laved his index finger with her tongue. She was exceedingly thorough, her eyes locked on Brin's as she did it.

The hectic flush receded from his cheekbones, leaving him near as pale as Trey. "No!" he snarled. The chains rattled as he writhed, muscles bunching under the bronzed skin. The link burned with lust and an aching sense of loss.

Trey blew lightly across Brin's plum-colored cock head and the muscles in the shaman's thighs corded. So slowly it was excruciating to watch, Trey lowered his mouth over the shaft and drew it into the warm, wet cavern of his mouth, eyes sliding shut with the luscious solidity of what he was doing.

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Anje watched his hand glide between the firm cheeks of Brin's ass, his progress clear to read on the shaman's face. As Trey's finger probed and wriggled, Brin tried to control his breathing, hissing between his teeth, gasping bloodcurdling curses.

Unable to prevent herself, she stepped close and laid her fingers against Brin's cheek. The flames of the goddess raged in his eyes when Trey hit the spot he was aiming for.

"Lufra!" Brin pressed his jaw hard into her hand as the groan was torn from him like heart's blood. His beard prickled her palm.

Tears filled her eyes. She licked the corner of his gasping mouth. "We love you, Brin," she whispered, knowing he would feel the truth of it in the link. "Give yourself to us. Everything you are."

He shuddered violently, every nerve and muscle, but his eyes didn't shift from hers.

She took the final risk, committed her heart. "I love you."

His pupils dilated and Lufra's fire blazed.

With a roar like a dragon in torment, he flung his head back, his hips bucked and the seed jetted from him in long, vicious spurts, hard into the greedy depths of Trey's throat.

The release was so complete, so devastating, Anje's knees went to water as the link surged. She staggered, supporting herself on Trey's shoulder. He let go Brin's cock with a last, gentle lick and pressed his forehead into the notch of the other man's hip, his chest heaving.

But when he raised his head to look into the shaman's eyes, Brin turned his face away.

Mother save her from men and their precious honor!

"Don't move, either of you!" she snapped. "You look pretty." Deliberately, she shifted her gaze to Trey's left boot and arched a brow. He nodded infinitesimally and Anje raised her voice, walking toward the wallow. "ClawCaptain!"

The Hssrdan opened one eye. "Finished?"

"He'll do." Anje opened her belt pouch, extracted two gold marks and held them up. The ClawCaptain's gaze followed the glitter of the yellow metal and Anje moved closer, praying that its peripheral vision wasn't good.

"Slave iss fifty markss."

"Your gall is astonishing."

"Sss?"

Anje sighed, shifting subtly to block the Hssrdan's view of Brin and Trey. "That is too much for a slave in such a damaged condition. I will pay a deposit of two gold marks on a total price of twenty."

"Fifty."

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On the very threshold of her hearing, there was a tiny snick. Anje let out a huff of relief and hurried into speech. "Twenty-five marks then."

She thought the Hssrdan's eyes gleamed. It said flatly, "Forty."

Anje risked a look over her shoulder. The two men were frozen as she had ordered, Trey's arms wrapped around Brin's hips, his face buried in the dragon on the shaman's belly. The lock pick in his fingers was out of sight, behind the post.

She moved to the very edge of the wallow and raised her voice to cover any incidental noise. "You drive a hard bargain, ClawCaptain. Thirty."

"Miness pay thirty. Do better."

Anje glanced back. Trey sat on his heels at Brin's feet, hands folded neatly in his lap. Her heart soared. "Very well. Thirty-five. And that's my final offer."

The Hssrdan considered her in silence, its stare fixed on her belt pouch. "Cassh?"

She tossed the gold coins into the air above the wallow. With astonishing speed for a creature so bulky, the Hssrdan snagged them, one after the other, in a taloned fist. Anje drew herself up and curled her lip. "You must think me a fool, ClawCaptain. I have guards waiting a hundred yards beyond your camp. They have my strong box." She clicked her fingers and Trey came to kneel at her feet. "I will send the

slave with a message.”

“Cassh disscount, yess? Thirty-five markss.”

Anje bared her teeth. Killing the ClawCaptain would be a pleasure. “You have two already. Thirty-three. Agreed?”

“Yess.” The Hssrdan’s teeth showed in what could have been a smile, but looked more like a hungry leer. “You wait here, fleshy one.”

Anje beckoned to Trey. “You know what to do.”

He pressed his forehead to her boot. “Yes, Mistress.” A last glance, flicking between herself and Brin, and he left the chamber at a trot.

Anje released the breath she’d been holding. Silence fell, as thick as the warm mud in the wallow. Slowly, she turned to face Brin. He’d lost weight in the pen. His face could have been carved from stone, it was so hard and gaunt. His cheekbones and the line of his jaw were starkly defined, his eyes dark pits where the goddess flame still smoldered.

The shaman was in a killing rage.

Anje sauntered back to his post and reached up to brush her knuckles across the hardness of his chest, just above the tight, brown nipples. The muscles bunched. Very slowly, she put out her tongue and licked a drop of sweat from his collarbone. Into his skin, she breathed, “Not long. Wait.”

“Run,” he whispered. “Now!”

“No.” She circled behind him, trailing her fingertips over hard biceps and around to his shoulder blade. Cupping the firm cheeks of his ass in both hands, she said loudly, “Very nice.”

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The loose chains at Brin’s wrists clattered as he shifted. He had them held fast in one fist.

As she knelt to nip at skin between buttock and thigh, where the dragon’s wing flew, she slipped her forearm knife into the fingers of his other hand. Immediately, they clenched over it so hard, his knuckles went white.

The ClawCaptain rose from the wallow, mud flowing thickly over its scales. The shaman tensed. A fierce warrior’s joy suffused the link, together with a surge of instinctive protectiveness. He wanted to shove her behind him and kill and kill and kill.

From beyond the chamber, there was a muffled thump, a long way away, followed by two more in quick succession. Anje exhaled with a whoosh of relief. Braithie and the miners’ blast powder had done its work. After a second of silence, a wave of noise rolled through the cave complex—the thud of running feet, the hissing of Hssrda, angry human voices shouting and swearing.

Trey erupted into the cave, the two SpurSoldiers on his heels. His eyes were wide with fear and excitement and his chest heaved. “Mistress! An attack!” He grabbed her arm and made as if to hustle her toward the passageway. “Come, come, quickly!”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Majesty,

You have charged me with the duty of selecting candidates for the post of Bodyguard to the Royal Person. I respectfully append a list of the winners at the Games of the Mother. In my opinion, their fighting abilities and aggression are equal to those of any man presently in your Guard. Diplomatic skills, however, are not so evident.

Memorandum to Emilena XIIth, Queen of Kingdom of the Leaves of the Sea, from HighColonel Kam Kahili, retired commander of the Honor Guard, 10235 ATF.

They'd never have a better chance.

"Now, Brin! *Now* !" Spinning around, Anje hurled her knife at the nearest SpurSoldier. She'd aimed for the throat, but the weapon struck its armored shoulder and clattered to the floor. As the Hssrdan turned, startled, a whirlwind of berserker fury roared past her.

Brin took the creature before it had time to raise its halberd. Grasping its snout in one huge hand, he slashed his knife across its throat with the other. Green blood sprayed over his broad chest and all hell broke loose.

The ClawCaptain opened its fanged jaws in a shattering bellow and surged out of the wallow, incredibly fast for such a hulking creature. Towering over Brin, it advanced shoulder-to-shoulder with the remaining SpurSoldier, two monsters from a nightmare. The shaman snarled, lips lifting over strong, white teeth. He dodged and spun, the blade flickering as he feinted and taunted, drawing the Hssrda away from Anje and Trey.

Time seemed to slow and stretch. He must be a fine dancer, she thought in a small, detached corner of her mind, as she pulled another blade from her corset and tossed her cane to Trey. He caught it neatly and wrenched it apart to reveal a short sword. With a vicious grin, he pulled a small dagger from his boot and advanced on the fray, a blade in each hand.

Impatiently, Anje ripped off her trailing scarf and tore her skirts away. Underneath she wore her trews. Reaching around to the laces in the small of her back, she tugged a throwing star free. For the moment, she was completely ignored, the men and the Hssrda intent on each other. So she took her time, flipping the evil, razor-sharp thing into the eye of the remaining SpurSoldier with chill precision.

It screamed with the pain, the sound carving though her brain like an ice spike. But it didn't fall immediately, instead its tail whipped around with incredible force, smashing Trey's knees out from under him. Brin darted forward, almost into the

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Hssrdan's embrace. He flexed his knees and thrust, the long muscles of his thighs rippling with power. Skewered through the throat, the SpurSoldier toppled and fell, its bulk pinning Trey's ankles.

As Trey thrashed and swore, Brin straddled his body, swaying back from a blow of the ClawCaptain's

fist that should have removed the head from his shoulders.

The noise of human shouts, reptilian hisses and the clashing of metal increased in volume. Anje cast a hopeful glance at the dark opening to the passageway. It sounded as if the male slaves were on the loose. Chaos and confusion. Exactly what they'd intended.

But only stupid Hssrda got eaten young. As Anje turned back, she saw the ClawCaptain wrap its huge paw around Trey's jaw. It hauled his head back, exposing his throat, dug a single gleaming talon into his flesh and froze, its head angled up at Brin. The message was clear. Brin growled, but he lowered his blade. Keeping a wary eye on the shaman, the Hssrdan pushed the corpse of the SpurSoldier off Trey with its tail. It lifted him as if he were a child and began backing toward the passage.

For the merest second, it had its back to Anje, its attention fixed on Brin. He stood with his massive chest heaving, a green-stained blade naked in his hand and bloody murder in his eyes. Without hesitation, she took her chance. Sprinting hard, she launched herself at the creature's back with a wordless scream.

The impact with its scaly body rattled her teeth. The Hssrdan roared and shook itself like a dog, but she clung, knowing it couldn't dislodge her without losing its grip on Trey. Her fingers slipped. She dug in with her toes, thrust the point of her dagger into the notch between its neck and shoulder and shoved.

The blade bowed and bent in her hand, then fell with a clatter. Mother! The Hssrdan hissed with rage.

"Jump!" roared Brin.

As she leaped aside, he lunged forward with a SpurSoldier's halberd. The serrated edge dug viciously into the soft skin of the ClawCaptain's armpit and lodged there. The Hssrdan bellowed with pain, dropped Trey and wrapped both taloned fists around the shaft of the weapon.

The creature's maddened gaze met that of the shaman as it clutched the halberd, holding off the killing blow. Green ichor dripped from the wound and coursed down the shaft. Brin bared his teeth, reduced to the elemental warrior, an awesome killing machine. The muscles in his chest and shoulders bunched, his massive biceps swelled. He took a step forward, grinding the metal point deeper.

The ClawCaptain hissed its agony.

Brin's fists clenched on the slippery shaft. The muscles in his thighs corded. Another step.

In her ear, Trey's voice whispered, "Come on!"

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Anje shook herself out her trance and grabbed the dagger he offered. At his nod, they leaped on the Hssrdan, one on each side, clambering up its huge body, stabbing and cutting, distracting it.

The ClawCaptain hissed, swatting at Trey with one paw. Brin twisted the halberd an inch deeper. Hanging on with all her strength, beating at the scaly hide, Anje muttered, "Die! Die, Mother damn you!"

Brin's face set in a rictus of effort. With a grunt, he leaned forward, bringing all his enormous strength to bear on the halberd.

The ClawCaptain's fanged jaw opened and it gave a long, bloodcurdling bellow as the point of the

weapon powered relentlessly through its flesh. A violent shudder ran through it and it staggered.

As the Hssrdan swayed, Anje and Trey dropped to the floor. It seemed to fall in slow motion, the slit-pupiled eyes shining with hatred before they glazed over and it hit the floor with a bone-shattering thud.

With one accord, they ran for the door, scooping up discarded weapons on the way. The passageway was empty, but the battle noise reverberated down it, amplified to a deafening degree. "This way." Trey led, trotting back the way he and Anje had come, a lifetime ago.

As they sped past the barred slave pen, the door swinging open, he punched the air, panting. "They got out! Lufra be praised!"

"They'll be outside," Brin grunted. "Freeing the women and children." He grinned at Trey. "You did that?"

"Tossed 'em the lock pick and a knife," said Trey with satisfaction. "They did the rest themselves." He snatched up a flaming torch as they burst into the open air.

The scene resembled Anje's idea of hell. Torchlight gleamed on sweaty skin and armored scales. The carnal reek of battle washed over them, an unholy combination of blood and excrement, terror and mud. Figures darted back and forth, some disappearing into the darkness and not returning. Here and there, others fought in heaving knots of violence. Occasionally, a shrill scream carried over the din.

"Brin?" A stocky, naked man barreled past them and skidded to a halt. "They didn't get you then?" He reached out to clasp the shaman's forearm. Blood streamed down the side of his head. It looked as though his ear had been sheared off. Anje shuddered.

"As you see." Brin's teeth gleamed as he gestured at the confusion. "How are you doing, Raidle?"

"Second time lucky, huh?" The man grinned, then shrugged. "About a dozen dead that I know of. Not as bad as it could have been. The ClawCaptain was skimping on guards, the arrogant, scaly shit." He spat.

"Not anymore."

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"Yah!" Raidle whooped and thumped Brin on the shoulder. "Bet that took some doing."

"All three of us," said the shaman and Anje's heart swelled. "What of the outdoor pens?" he asked.

"We got 'em. Women and kids have all run by now.

"Do you need us?"

Their companion considered, leaning on his halberd. Finally, he shook his head. "Don't think so. Look at it." He jerked with his chin. Only one mêlée remained, and men were running toward it from all parts of the camp. "We're down to the mopping up. We owe you for leading us that first time. Go with your gods, Brin." He hefted his weapon and glanced at Trey. "And thanks for the help, mate." With a last glance at Anje's exposed bosom and a casual salute, he trotted toward the fighting.

“Come on,” said Trey, heading toward the darkness beyond the palisade.

Brin raised a brow. “You’ve got it all worked out, have you?”

“Possibly.” Trey threw his torch into the first patch of moonlit swamp. It died with an angry hiss. “Possibly not. Anje, love?”

“Bear left and stick to the trail. It’s all bog here,” she said. “Trey, you’re limping.”

He grunted. “You try having a SpurSoldier fall on your ankle.”

Brin slid an arm around Trey’s waist, despite his protests. “Lead on, Anje. We’re right behind you.”

They emerged from cover onto a small dry patch under a giant sorrowtree, right under Braithie’s nose. Anje was so certain the girl was going to faint, she sprang forward, hands outstretched. But Braithie was made of sterner stuff. Confronted with the sight of two warriors, both stark naked, one of them a giant, her eyes went as round as a full moon. She swallowed, her stare running over Brin’s body, lodging at his crotch. “I dinna do noothin’ else, even if ye pay me,” she muttered.

Anje giggled, light-headed with relief, but Brin stepped forward and took Braithie’s hand as if she were a noble lady. He bowed over it with unimpaired dignity. “I owe you a great debt for your courage. What I can do, I will.”

Braithie’s grimy fingers clutched his. She sniffed and wiped her nose on her shoulder. “Git me away from Nilda. That’d do.”

Brin smiled, the dimples flashing, and Anje saw Braithie’s knees tremble beneath her ragged skirts. “My word on it,” he rumbled. He rolled an eye at Anje and Trey. “Nilda?”

“It’s a long story,” said Trey. “Anje suggested we use Braithie to create a diversion. When I went out to get the rest of the money, I gave her the signal.” He grinned like a boy. “Miners’ blast powder tossed into a fire makes a lovely bang, doesn’t it, Braithie?”

The girl blinked. “Ay. But ‘twas ye took the risks. Ye and her.”

“Don’t worry, Braithie,” murmured Brin, his voice absolutely expressionless. “They’ll get their reward.”

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Hastily, Anje fumbled for the Bond link. He’d closed it down to the barest flicker, but she could still detect the anger lurking beneath. When his hand smoothed her hair in the most controlled of caresses, she knew he’d caught the flash of panic and arousal.

“Can we go now? I have yer beasties,” said Braithie.

“Lufra, yes!” Suddenly, Brin grinned broadly, raised his hands above his head and stretched until his spine popped, completely unconscious of three pairs of hungry eyes. “Ah, that feels good!”

One long arm jerked Anje into his chest and he hugged her until her bones creaked. From Brin’s other side, she heard a masculine grunt and knew he’d gathered Trey in as well. She turned her nose into his

skin and breathed the spicy essence of Brin beneath the slave pen reek. Her cheek pressed against something rank and slimy smeared over his chest and she didn't care.

He released her so abruptly she staggered. "Come on, we're not out of this yet. Anje, you're with me. Trey, you take Braithie."

The ride back to The Hollows was a nightmare. Anje cursed herself for not thinking of the human parasites who made their living out of the Hssrda slave trade. The shadowed streets seethed with the dark bodies of escaping slaves and those who pursued them for profit. In the shanty-town slums, they had to fight off two different bands of marauders. If it hadn't been for the battle skills of the Feolin warriors and their vranee, the Mother only knew what might have happened.

Once they'd enticed the animals through the narrow door of Nilda's squat, Braithie slipped away into the bowels of the building, reminding Anje of a small, beady-eyed animal in desperate search of a burrow.

Brin dived on Twink's water bucket and upended it over his head, scrubbing at his skin. When Trey laughed and handed him Brownie's, he tossed the wet hair out of his eyes and did it all over again, swearing as the cold water stung the gashes on his body. The worst was the slice on his arm. Blood and water trickled over his biceps. Anje eyed it with concern. "Brin, come upstairs. I should doctor that."

"Upstairs?" It was the first word he'd spoken since they'd entered.

Anje stepped aside from the hole in the wall and Brin's brows rose. "I see." He looked around. "Is there any food? Ah!" He pounced on Nilda's cooking pot, peered inside and grimaced. But he snatched up a crusted spoon and devoured cold, scummy stew with amazing rapidity, while Anje and Trey watched in silence.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he smiled tightly, his eyes as black as onyx. "Now we will go upstairs and you will tell me precisely why and how you lost your minds."

The trip up the steps seemed to take an age. With Brin looming darkly behind her, Anje's spine prickled with awareness. The cheeks of her ass heated, as if she felt the heavy weight of his hand. The worst thing was that a perverse part of her could hardly wait. Her sex moistened.

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Brin shut the door of their shabby room behind him with a decisive click and leaned against it, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. He looked exhausted. Trey moved toward him, but Anje drew him back with a hand on his arm. She shook her head in warning.

Brin was no longer masking the link and she felt him gathering his strength, honing his furious purpose. Mother, she couldn't breathe! He dominated the room, the weight of his silence sucking all the air out of her lungs.

Trey took a step forward. Anje couldn't see how he found the courage. "Aren't you going to say thank you?" he asked. Gods, he must be mad! Her heart lodged in her throat.

Brin's long-lidded eyes glittered with anger. "Certainly." He bit out the words, his voice rising with each syllable. "I value my balls, not to mention my life. I am exceedingly grateful for my rescue. Accept my humble thanks."

His chest expanded as he dragged in a breath. When he spoke again, his voice was very low. "Sorry," he said. "Thank you. Truly."

He blinked and abruptly, his eyes blazed. Pushing away from the door, he paced across the room. Trey jumped aside before he was mown down. "Sweet Lufra, I have never, NEVER, been so frightened in my life! And there was nothing I could do! Nothing!"

Brin ran a hand through his wet hair and the drops trickled over his thick wrist. "You took an insane risk, both of you." He whirled around. "For me! What if you'd been killed—or captured? How could I live with that?"

Trey limped forward to block his path. "How could we live without you?"

Brin shut his mouth with a snap. His hands shot out to grasp Trey's shoulders as if to shake him. Just as abruptly, he let him go. "I swear I'm going to beat you bloody."

Trey arched a brow. "Anytime." He smiled.

The shaman cut him an evil glare. "How dare you take such a risk? *How dare you?* "

The desperation that boiled across the link, the yearning—Sweet Mother, the loneliness!—tore her apart. Anje couldn't bear it. She stiffened her spine. "I told you why we dared. In the cave."

Brin stalked over and sank his hands into her hair. He began unraveling her beaded braids, as if he knew how much they irritated her. But though his fingers were gentle, his expression was anything but. "So you did," he growled. "While Trey—" Abruptly, he pressed his lips together. Two spots of color burned high on his cheekbones.

"You aren't going to talk about it, are you?" Trey said to the shaman's broad back.

Brin didn't turn. "No." He tossed the string of beads aside and sifted his fingers through Anje's hair, fluffing it over her shoulders. For a moment, she thought his hands trembled.

"Why not?"

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Brin tucked Anje under his arm and turned slowly. She had the strangest feeling he was holding on to her for support. But he treated Trey to a stare cold enough to freeze the blood in his veins. "Don't ever, ever, touch me like that again."

"Why? Because you loved it?"

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Children of the Mother—Government:

The Children of the Mother are ruled by an elected Council of five Matriarchs. All citizens over the age

of twenty-five may vote, both male and female, but only women over the age of fifty are eligible for the Council. The Matriarchs employ advisors on an ad hoc basis and gender is no bar. In fact, the Battle Commander of the Children is often male.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

The shaman shrugged. "A reaction of the body. Any mouth would have done."

Trey's lashes fell, shuttering his expression. He pushed a clenched fist against the wall and rested his forehead against it.

Anje didn't need to be Bonded to feel the depth of his hurt. "Trey, you promised me! Don't give up." She flung her arms around Brin's waist and dragged in a preparatory breath. All hell was going to break loose. "He's lying."

"*Anje!*" With an outraged roar, Brin tried to prize her loose, but she hung on tight.

"You Bonded me, mighty shaman." She nipped him on the meat of his chest. "Deal with it."

Brin lifted her off her feet and bent his head to growl in her ear. "I'm going to beat you, scout. I swear."

Anje's laugh was shaky. "Anytime." She unwound her arms and looked at Trey, frozen with the painful return of hope. "Do whatever you like, Trey. I'll know if he's lying. Body or soul."

"Anje, don't do this."

"That's not what the link's saying, Brin."

"But *I can't*! I mustn't! It's a matter of honor and trust. Lufra, I'm *irresponsible* for him!" His voice thickened. "Taking advantage of this..." He hissed in frustration. "This infatuation—what would that do to him? What would I become?"

"*Hullo?*" They looked up. Trey stood with his hands on his hips, his head tilted to one side. "I'm still here, remember?"

"Trey, you know I don't fuck men. I'm not interested."

"True for every man except you, Trey," said Anje and Brin cursed under his breath.

Trey's lips set in a thin line. "It's been years since you were my mentor, Brin. Tell me, how old am I now?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You've forgotten, haven't you?"

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"No, I haven't." Brin frowned. "I just don't think about it. You're...you must be..." His eyes widened.

"Twenty-four."

All trace of expression disappeared from Brin's face.

"Only three years younger than me," said Anje, enjoying herself. It was the only time she'd seen him nonplussed.

"But you're a woman!"

"That's true," she said and Trey chuckled.

He stepped forward and slid a hand up over the shaman's shoulder. Brin's gaze followed the goose bumps that sprang up on the bronzed skin. As he inhaled, Anje felt him shore up his resolve. He held the other man's eye and said steadily, "Look, Trey, you're my friend. I admit I feel...affection for you."

"True," said Anje promptly. Brin shot her a filthy look from under inky lashes and she swallowed a nervous giggle.

"But this nonsense, it's just lust and proximity." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "You'll regret it later. If you have to have a man, go back to your lover."

Trey's fists clenched. "Don't tell me what I feel, you patronizing bastard! I'm a man grown and I know when I love someone." His eyes narrowed. "If you feel nothing for me, prove it."

Brin looked wary. "How?"

"Let me kiss you." Trey shrugged. "I've wanted to since I was sixteen."

"Sixteen!" Brin sounded so appalled, the other man laughed outright.

"I'm not sixteen now, remember? Are you scared?"

"No! But I don't want—"

Trey glanced at Anje, one brow quirked. She shook her head, smiling. "He's a terrible liar. Why don't you push a little, Trey? It always works for me."

Brin snarled and the Bond link shut down so abruptly, Anje swayed on her feet. Trey slid both hands around the shaman's neck and tugged. "Bend your head." His hazel eyes shone gold with love and lust. As he reached up to fit his lips to Brin's, his lashes swept down.

Anje leaned against the wall, panting with shock and arousal. Brin stood rigid, fists clenched at his sides, while Trey pressed up against him, that luscious mouth working, his hips flexing in a sensual rhythm. They looked like two barbarian lords, locked in a rough, carnal embrace. Ah Mother, they were so beautiful, her men! And they were going to love each other if she had to tie Brin down and get Trey to ravish him.

She smiled at the thought. Then she sought the flickering ember of the Bond link. Shut himself off, would he? Hah! All those headaches had taught her more than he knew. Relentlessly, she pushed at the barrier, focusing her love, her joy, her exasperation at his pigheaded honor.

Trey moaned and Brin grasped his wrist as if to push him away.

But he didn't.

The link blazed and Anje fed the inferno with love, with lust, with memory. Let him love you, she willed the shaman. *Sweet Mother, let him love you as I do!*

Brin wavered, then steadied. But he'd shifted his grip to cradle the back of Trey's skull and his mouth was moving.

Dark joy suffused her. She burrowed a hand into her trews, seeking out her sex, dripping with honey. She fixed her gaze on Brin and Trey, and stroked the throbbing knot of her clitoris. As she hovered on the peak, she forced the link open wide. Then she surrendered to her release, plunging luxuriously deep, flooding the link with her ecstasy.

Over her own gasping breath, she heard Brin's tortured groan as her orgasm shoved him hard onto the agonizing cusp of decision. A moment of shattering suspense and she felt him gather his will and make his choice.

He broke so hard, so comprehensively, the walls of his resistance collapsed with a roar that was almost audible. The brutal, masculine surge of emotion swept over her like a huge wave of water, dragging her under, drowning her in a second climax.

He had one arm hard around Trey's shoulders and the other hand splayed across that fine ass, wrapping him up, devouring the younger man like a starving fellwolf. And Trey was giving as good as he got, his hips grinding against the shaman's.

Anje slid down the wall to the floor, tears prickling her eyes. *Thank you, Mother of all the world. Thank you, sweet Lufra.*

Vaguely, she wondered what would happen first. Would they spurt all over each other or simply pass out from lack of air? But Trey pulled back, his breath coming short and choppy, his smile blinding. Brin's arms fell away. Trey stepped back and they looked down together.

Trey tapped the head of Brin's massive erection with his forefinger. It jerked violently. "Affection, huh?"

Brin clamped both big hands on the other man's shoulders. His fingers dug into the muscular, creamy flesh with brutal strength. "Trey, are you sure?" It was a gravelly rasp, barely audible. "Be sure."

Trey lifted his chin. "I'm sure I love you. I always have. But—" He glanced at Anje and his lips firmed. "I love Anje too. And she loves me."

Brin's grip tightened. He glared into Trey's eyes. "She's mine."

The other man stared straight back. "Lucky you." One corner of his beautiful mouth quirked. "You have us both."

"Treat her right, Trey. I won't have you breaking her heart."

"It won't be me who does that."

Brin's jaw clamped shut so forcefully, Anje could swear she heard his teeth click. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

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"Nothing." Brin's lashes fluttered down and he dragged in two deep breaths. "Mine, by all the gods!" His lids lifted and Anje gasped at the inferno raging there. Every coherent thought fled. "Mine! Both of you." The crooked smile flashed as he tugged Trey close and reached down to scoop Anje up under one arm. "You ganged up on me from the beginning, the pair of you. As for you, scout, you pushed again. I could have—"

"Maybe." Rising on her tiptoes, Anje stroked his lower lip with her tongue. "But your soul didn't want you to." She smiled into his midnight eyes, straight into the flames. "We're good for you, Brin. Learn to live with it."

She kissed him, sinking into the welcome heat of his mouth, feeling his cock press hard into the soft flesh of her belly. Behind her, Trey's body warmed her skin as he unlaced her bodice and drew it away. His hands stroked firm and knowing over her ribs and her breasts and she moaned into Brin's mouth, a tingle running through the silver lines on her back.

The shaman pulled away, his chest heaving, and looked from Anje to Trey. He licked his lips. "Gods, it's a banquet!"

"Who do you want for the first course?" husked Trey.

Brin cupped his rampant sex and looked down ruefully at the broad, flushed head. "I wish I had two cocks."

"Well, between us we do," said Trey. A quick exchange of glances between the two men and he exploded into action, tugging Anje's trews off without ceremony. "Come lie down, sweetheart." He had her settled on the mattress before she could blink. "That's right."

Brin laughed, the sound deep and joyous and somehow carefree. Then he dropped to his knees and pulled Trey into his arms across Anje's supine body. Leaning up on her elbows, she watched him bend his head, concentrating on the buckles of the other man's slave harness. It seemed to take him an eternity to get it undone, slapping Trey's hands away when he tried to help. They all breathed a sigh of relief when Trey's shaft bobbed free, proud and naked above his tight, velvety balls. Brin held his gaze as he reached out and wrapped long fingers around it. The shock of the contact produced three gasps.

Trey gurgled, deep in his throat, and Brin squeezed, grinning. "I like you all bare." He flexed his fingers and his voice dropped to a sensual rumble. "Is this mine? Say it!"

"You know it is," said Trey in a hoarse whisper.

"Lufra, I can't wait!" Brin swooped and took Anje's mouth in a short, fierce kiss. "Anje, I love you more than my life, but I'll die if I don't have him."

Holy Mother, he'd said the words! The strangest declaration of love any woman had ever had. Anje's heart turned handsprings.

Her smile wobbly at the corners, she murmured, "Do it." She licked her lips. "I'll know... The link..."

There's still some balm left." Trey inhaled sharply as the shaman tightened his grip to the point of pain.

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"I love the way your mind works, scout." Trey whimpered as Brin fisted his shaft, stretching and releasing the hot, satin skin, handling it with a brutal certainty that was totally male. "Trey, are you listening?"

"Yes." It was a croak.

"I want you to plant that pretty cock as deep in Anje's cunt as you can get it. Then you wait for me. Understand?"

"Mmm. The Law?"

Brin released Trey to run an admiring hand over the curve of his taut buttock, making him quiver like a high-strung racing vran. He administered a crisp slap before scooping up the jar of balm. "Go ahead. Anje's two offerings ahead of us." He grinned, stunning her with delight and dimples as he flipped off the lid. "We can punish her for that later."

Anje purred with pleasure and challenge. Then she held out her arms to Trey, kissing the freckles on the bridge of his nose when he settled over her. "This is what you wanted, love."

"I know." As she spread her thighs, he slid into her with a single lavish plunge and his lashes fluttered with relief. "Ah, thank Lufra." Nuzzling her neck, he whispered, "It's going to hurt before it feels good."

"You got that right," growled Brin from over Trey's shoulder. "Hold him tight, Anje." He shifted forward, twisting his hips.

Trey's eyes stretched wide and he gasped, but inside her sheath, he swelled impossibly. Anje murmured with pleasure—her own and Brin's.

"Pull out of her, Trey," rasped Brin. His soft lower lip caught in his teeth, Trey obeyed, rocking himself into the shaman's body. Brin shoved forward again and Trey slid deep inside Anje's sheath.

"Are you sure you haven't done this before?" Trey panted.

"Not to a man." Trey groaned as Brin slung himself deeper. "Want more?"

Trey's eyes rolled. "It's too good. I won't last."

"Doesn't matter." Brin's gaze met Anje's over Trey's freckled shoulder and the link sang with love and lust and laughter. "I won't either. Gods, I've been starving forever!" His neck corded with tension, he set up a powerful rhythm, driving himself deep, pummeling Trey's cock deliciously hard inside her sheath.

The sensation was ferociously good, the link pulsing with dark rapture on every jolting stroke. Anje wrapped her legs around Trey's waist and sank her teeth into his shoulder. The multiple layers of feeling, love, lust and pain, rocked her soul to its foundations.

This was everything. This was what it meant to be complete.

Trey moaned, driven to the brink.

Panting, Anje flexed her internal muscles. Brin's face flushed dark with passion and tears stood in his eyes, making the goddess fire shimmer as if behind a veil.

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He threw his head back, the hair whipping across his jaw, and hammered harder. Trey gave a strangled scream and slumped into her body, shuddering. Through the Bond, the boiling flood of Brin's release picked Anje up and tossed her over the edge into a well of lightning. Her soft wail was lost in his bellow of ecstasy.

No one moved for endless, tingling minutes. Brin dropped his head, resting his brow on Trey's shoulder blade. Finally, Anje stirred. "Mother, I can't breathe!" She squirmed.

"Sorry," mumbled Trey.

He and Brin untangled themselves. Brin spooned her against him and stretched a long arm across Trey's chest. He yawned. "Gods, that was good." Between one breath and the next, he slept, his lips curved in a smile of bone-deep satisfaction.

Trey sat up. His mouth quirked. "Does this mean you won't respect me in the morning?" Brin slumbered on and Trey laughed, running an admiring hand over the big man's ribs and belly, skirting the bruises. He traced the scaled head of the dragon with a fingertip. "I can touch him whenever I want." He closed his eyes, savoring. "It means so much."

"Happy?"

Trey sobered. "Yes." He leaned over to kiss her. "Thank you, Anje love."

She glanced at the shaman, fathoms deep in the sleep of utter exhaustion, and cocked a brow at Trey. "It won't be easy loving him, you know."

Trey settled, sliding back under Brin's arm. He huffed out a laugh. "What makes you think it's easy lovingyou?"

Anje was still searching for a reply when sleep claimed her.

An hour after dawn, her elbow slipped off the mattress and hit the cold floor. Swearing, she levered her eyes open. Brin had rolled onto his side, with Trey plastered against his back. If they shifted another inch, she'd find herself lying on the floor. Sleep became an impossibility. Sighing, she got up and dressed.

A foolish smile on her lips, she leaned against the wall and watched her men sleep for the sheer pleasure of it. Gripping her hands together, she muttered a quick prayer of gratitude to the Mother. Then she said another for Lufra. If her soul wanted to sing a paean of thanks and joy, surely it couldn't do any harm to include the Feolin goddess?

Slipping out the door, she went to find Braithie.

The girl was hauling water from a pump in the alley, bowed under the weight of the buckets, her long, bare feet pale with cold. Anje had to take the buckets out of her hands, and sit her on a rickety stool to

get her attention. Then she talked and talked, while Braithie's eyes grew rounder and rounder.

Returning, she met Trey at the top of the stairs. He wrapped her up in an exuberant hug, ignoring the large bowl she was holding. "Morning, sweetheart. I love you." He peered at the sloshing contents. "What's that?"

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"I think it's porridge." Anje peered at the glutinous mess. "The Mother only knows. But it's hot and there's enough for us all. Is he awake?"

Trey shook his head. "I let him sleep. He's exhausted."

"We have to plan, Trey."

The door creaked open. "So we do. The Day of the Dark is only eight days away." Brin leaned against the doorjamb, magnificently naked, scratching his bare chest and yawning. "I missed you, scout." He favored Anje with a half-smile that reduced her brain to the same consistency as their breakfast and tugged her into the room.

"Here. Eat something." Anje shoved the dish into his hands and brushed her lips across his uninjured arm.

Trey grinned and took advantage by swatting Brin across the backside. Then he gripped and squeezed. Spots of color burned on the shaman's high cheekbones and his hands clenched around the bowl. He cleared his throat. "Do you actually have a plan?"

"Sort of," said Trey. "We didn't know if we'd come out of the rescue with whole hides." Brin's brow darkened and Trey hurried on. "So we thought we'd lie low for a few days. Only..." He ran a hand over his scalp and looked startled at its smoothness. "I don't trust Nilda. If she decides there's more money to be made by turning us in to the Hssrda..." He shrugged.

"And I promised Braithie I'd get her away from the woman, didn't I?" Brin swallowed a spoonful of porridge and made a face. "That'll teach me to be noble. How much money do we have?"

A search through garments and belt pouches produced thirty gold marks and a few coppers.

"What's all this for?" asked Brin, staring at the haul.

"A pleasure slave, that's what for," said Trey. "And the blast powder and Anje's clothes and—"

"I understand." Brin held up a hand. "We have to get out of here and soon. Thank Lufra, you saved the saddle bags." He upended one and shook it. "Where are my old boots?"

"If we had enough..." Anje's voice trailed off.

"What?" asked Brin, eyeing a pair of worn trews with profound disfavor.

"We could send Braithie to Mother's Hearth," she said in a rush. "With my map."

"So we could." Brin paused, his hands on his laces. "But would she go?"

“She says she will.”

He raised a brow. “How did you manage that?”

“I told her about the Children of the Mother.” Anje smiled and patted the heavy band of muscle on his bare chest. “Do you know who the Children are? How they began?”

“No.”

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“There’s a story.” Anje sank cross-legged to the mattress. She gazed up at the Feolin. “More than a thousand years ago, five women banded together. Their names are lost in time, so we call them the Sisters of Desperation. They’d all been beaten, raped, diminished by cruelty. The laws of the society they lived in tied them to brutal men.”

Brin frowned and Trey shifted his feet. Anje went on, her voice lifting, “But they were strong. They escaped. Took their children and fled across the Empty Lands. They were the founders of Mother’s Hearth, the first Matriarchs. Don’t you see?” She rose. “The Children are strong now, but Mother’s Hearth is still a refuge. If she wants to work in the Pleasure Quarter, fine.” She shrugged. “But no one can force Braithie to do anything against her will. Not where women rule.”

“And men?” asked Brin.

“Men are valued. They have an equal voice in all things, save the final decisions. The Matriarchs make those, but they welcome male counsel.”

“It’s not a bad idea, scout. Let me think.” Brin stamped into his boots, all grim purpose. The beard gave him a dark, piratical air. At last he said, “We could send her with a merchant’s caravan. They come through The Hollows all the time for the hides. There’ll be someone taking a route that crosses the Empty Lands for sure. I can only see a single problem, but it’s a big one.”

“Isn’t thirty gold marks enough?” asked Anje, her heart sinking.

“Not by half.” Brin quirked a brow. “Unless she earns the rest of the passage on her back.”

“No!”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. I’ll take care of it.” He glanced at Trey. “You say this Nilda knows her way ‘round the town?”

Trey nodded and Brin said decisively, “Right. I’m going out. You two stay here and pack. I want us ready to leave when I get back.”

“But—” Trey took a jerky step forward.

Brin overrode him. “That shiny head makes you a marked man.” Trey snorted, but he pressed his lips together. “And once they get a decent look at Anje, she’ll be hip-deep in potential slave-masters. Scout?”

“Yes?”

“Make a copy of your map.”

“I get to bandage your arm first.” She pushed up her chin.

He submitted with barely concealed impatience while she dabbed the wound with cleansing lotion and taped it up as best she could.

“How long before we come looking?” asked Trey.

Brin’s jaw set. “I’ll be back before dark. You wait. Whatever happens, whatever you think, you wait. Understand?” His tone was uncompromising, his expression implacable. He’d diminished the link to a mere spark, a tiny, warm presence in the back of her mind.

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Trey grunted, clearly unhappy.

“It’s all right, Trey. I’ll know if it’s bad or if...” Anje trailed off. She squared her shoulders. “What are you going to do?”

The shaman’s lips quirked. “Something only I can do. You’re better off not knowing.” At her curse, he cradled her chin in one big, warm palm and tilted it. “You’ll do what you’re told.” He fixed a midnight stare on Trey. “Both of you.”

“Who’s going to watch your back?” Trey’s brows pulled together with concern.

Anje sighed. Mother save her, but reasoning with him would be useless. She could feel the strength of his resolve hum across the link. She dragged his head down for a kiss. “Be careful.”

One dark brow arched. “Always.” Brin punched Trey lightly on the arm, pulled the younger man into a brief hug and set him aside just as quickly. Then he walked out the door without a backward glance.

The shabby room felt empty without his presence. Sighing, Anje patted Trey’s shoulder and opened her pack.

The hours dragged interminably. Occasionally, something would leak across the link, a flavor of controlled aggression, of exhaustion, of satisfaction. Occasionally, there’d be a flash of pain, almost instantly suppressed. Anje whimpered and got up to pace. She couldn’t sit still. The blood danced in her veins, though her stomach was knotted with tension. Trey came to drape his arm over her shoulders, the limp barely perceptible now, and they paced together, across the little room, out the door, down the passage. Back again.

It was late afternoon before they heard his step on the stair, not as quick or light as when he’d left. The shaman’s dark head was bowed, his hair swung in a black curtain across his face.

When he stopped halfway up and looked up at them, Anje couldn’t suppress a small shriek. “Holy Mother, Brin! What have you done?”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Guards wanted for caravan to Empty Lands. Ex-soldiers or good street brawlers preferred. Fair wages—quarter on leaving, rest on arrival. Ask for Captain Tenzal at the Miner's Arms.

Poster on wall, The Hollows.

Brin grinned then winced, touching one finger to his puffy lip. "Went to a dive Nilda knew and picked a fight. I got her to hold the bets."

"Mother of Mercy, *why*?" Anje wrapped her hand around the splintered balustrade so she couldn't hit him. It wouldn't have been fair. Blood dripped from a cut over his eyebrow and seeped from beneath the bandage on his arm. A dark bruise bloomed across one cheekbone and the knuckles of both big hands were scraped raw and bloody. His shirt was a ruin.

"For the money." Trey ran down the stairs. "For us. Don't tell me your knee got done again." He inserted his shoulder under Brin's arm.

The shaman grunted. "Bastard kicked it out from under me." He began to climb, slowly, trying not to put his full weight on the other man.

Anje found her voice. "You're mad," she said with conviction. "Completely and utterly demented."

"It was the quickest way." Brin reached the top of the stairs and stood, towering over her. He grinned again, a purely masculine expression of satisfaction. "Anyway, *Ineeded* to hit someone."

"Gods, I wish I'd been there!" Trey's eyes shone. "How big was he?"

"There was more than one. The miner was about my size. The tanner was shorter, but he had his smell fighting for him, not to mention a knife."

Anje growled and shoved Brin toward the mattress. "Sit," she said through clenched teeth and he folded his long legs and sank down.

"What did you do to him, the tanner?" asked Trey and the shaman's face shuttered.

"He won't pull a knife in a bare-knuckle bout again," he said flatly and Trey shut his mouth with a snap.

Anje said, "I'm going to heat some water," but Brin wrapped long fingers around her calf and drew her back.

"Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"There's *more*?"

"Oh yes." The onyx eyes glinted with satisfaction. "I paid off Nilda and found a merchant to take Braithie to the Children of the Mother. I'm not saying he's completely

honest, mind, but he has a regular run into Feolin. He's well known there, so he has a reputation to lose."

"Sweet Mother!" Anje's throat closed and her heart began to knock against the cage of her ribs.

"Remember Raidle?"

"Who?"

Brin waved a hand. "Last night, at the Hssrda camp."

The stocky man who'd lost an ear. She nodded. "What about him?"

"The Hssrda took him on the other side of the mountains and he wants to go home." The shaman shifted, straightening his bad knee. "But for the price of a decent mount and a bit more, he's prepared to detour to Mother's Hearth. And he'll move much faster than Braithie and the merchant's caravan. He'll double your chances, scout. Better make a second copy of the map."

Anje stared, speechless. Slow tears welled up and spilled over to slide down her cheeks.

"What? What is it?" Brin patted her on the shoulder as she threw herself over his chest. "Anje?"

As the shaman of a goddess, he knew it shouldn't bother him, but female tears had always filled him with unease. Gods, it was as well he had no daughters, they'd tie him in knots with the first snuffle. His guts clenched.

He rolled an eye at Trey who shrugged. "Don't ask me."

No daughters, no children. Ever.

The Great Rite was the last hope. A wave of longing swept through him, painfully acute, followed a heartbeat later by a dark tide of self-contempt. He gritted his teeth. No choice, no damn choice at all.

Anje sat up. "You give me back my honor." She sniffed and scrubbed at her wet cheeks. "I never cry. Sorry."

Brin felt the color heat his cheeks. "Honor." The stubborn way she clung to her duty filled him with scalding shame. He'd promised to treat her with honor, but it hadn't been possible, not if he was to save the Feolin from a bitter, childless decline. Gods, it was hardly possible for a man to sink any lower! How could he say he'd hated what he'd done, when he knew he'd do exactly the same again if he had to?

But he hated it, he loathed it with every particle of his being.

Lufra, but he loved her! There was a sort of fell, dark humor to it, a kind of awful symmetry. In his arrogance and stupidity, he'd promised himself he'd keep her heart-whole. Instead, he was going to get her killed. And his punishment would be his own destruction.

At least, he hoped it would be.

Lufra's tits, he owed Anje the truth! Anything less was an insult. His lip curled. Conceited bastard that he was, he'd insisted she learn to trust him.

Instead, she'd said she loved him.

When she'd thrown the link open wide last night, there it was, her love—a gift beyond price, grounding his soul while his heart soared.

Love might be given, but trust had to be earned.

What he was going to tell her would destroy that precious gift. By Lufra, she'd risked her life to save his miserable hide! And her only reward would be pain and possibly death. The sheer cruelty of it robbed him of breath.

Living inside his skin at this moment made him physically ill.

He rasped a hand over his bristly chin, willing his guts to behave. "Anje, I need to talk to you. About the Day of the Dark."

Her smile was wobbly, but genuine. "After I've patched you up."

"Forget that. Let Trey do it. You sit and listen." He scooped her up, arranged her on his lap and took both her hands in his.

As Anje looked at him, her eyes narrowed. "Why are you holding my hands?"

"I'm not stupid." When he tried to smile, his lip hurt. "You know most of it, anyway. You know you're Lufra's Gift."

"So what is that? Your...Bondmate?"

Facing his tormented conscience, he admitted to himself he'd Bonded her as much for himself as for the Feolin. Life without her was no longer possible.

He glanced at Trey, leaning against the wall with his ankles crossed, the shaven scalp lending him an edgy air of danger. The challenge of the man called to him irresistibly, to master, to ravish him to his knees. And yet, the hunger was entwined with a depth of tenderness that shook him to the core. Confusing as hell, but he was certain of one thing.

Life without Trey wasn't possible either.

He'd found them. He had them.

His lovers. The ones he loved with everything that was in him.

He'd belonged to Lufra, body and soul, since boyhood, given Her everything that he was. How could She do this to him? Gods, it hurt.

"No. I'm a selfish bastard. I just...took advantage." He lifted their joined hands to press a kiss to her knuckles, his guts a rigid ball of tension. "Remember I said I dreamed of you?"

She nodded.

“Lufra sent me visions, dreams, of a living woman created in Her image. You, Anje.”

She shifted her delicious bottom on his thighs. “Nonsense.”

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“No, it’s not,” said Trey, crouching to dab at the bandage on Brin’s arm with a damp cloth. “Lufra’s holy fire burns in your eyes, darling, and Her wings stripe the skin of your back.” He frowned over his task. “Let’s get it over with, Brin.” Gripping one corner of the dressing, he gave a swift tug.

The pain forced a grunt out of him. A welcome distraction.

“Sorry,” muttered Trey, rummaging in the medical pouch. “Hold still.” He swabbed the wound with cleanser.

Brin gritted his teeth against the sting. “Haven’t you wondered why Lufra chose you, Anje?”

“If She did.”

“Believe it. Everything’s meant.” He kissed her eyebrow, willing her to understand, to forgive him. Knowing she wouldn’t. “You’re a deeply passionate woman who fucks like a goddess.” When he bent his head to nibble her earlobe, Anje quivered. “Gorgeously responsive. Your beauty is Lufra’s made flesh.” He shifted his attention to the soft skin below her ear, inhaling great gulps of that essential Anje smell, fresh and strong and feminine all at once. “You’re exactly what She needs, a woman with the strength and courage to risk her life.”

Anje snorted. “As if I haven’t done that already.”

“That’s not the risk he means,” put in Trey.

“Anje.” Brin stilled, waiting ‘til her eyes lifted to meet his. The connection was a visceral tug, pulling him into the violet depths, tangling him in the white-hot embers of the goddess fire. “On the Day of the Dark, we will perform the Great Rite to please Lufra, you and I.” He became aware of the pulse drumming in his neck like a battle drum beating a death knell.

“The Great Rite? What’s that?”

“It’s the last chance for the Feolin to placate the Goddess. Lufra has a long, long memory.”

“This is about the rape, isn’t it? The long ago one?”

“Ay,” snorted Trey. He pressed a folded cloth to the cut over Brin’s eyebrow. “My pox-rotted great-grandsire, remember?”

The wound stung like a bitch, like a whip wielded by an angry goddess. Brin tweaked the cloth out of the other man’s fingers. “Lufra’s justice was terrible. She took the gift of life from the Feolin. Think of it, Anje, fewer babes year after year until there are none at all, a whole people growing old alone, without children. Think of the silence, the tears, the empty arms.” The words hung in the air, stark with loss and despair.

“That’s cruel,” Anje whispered.

“So was the offence.”

Anje licked her lips. “You said there was a risk?”

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“It was done successfully, many centuries ago.” His guts had solidified into a ball of ice. Gods, she was going to hate him. “But no one’s survived in living memory. Last time, the temple exploded in a fireball. Everyone in it died.” Beside them, Trey made a small, distressed noise. Anje paled.

Brin released one of her hands to sling an arm around the other man’s shoulders, pulling all that warm muscle against his skin, drawing strength from the contact. He held Anje’s gaze. “We’ll be tortured sexually, stimulated to the point of insanity.”

Her jaw sagged. “What?” she whispered. “But why?”

“To force our souls to leave our bodies and mate. If we please Lufra...” He shrugged. “Well, no one knows exactly. But we cannot afford not to please Her. Not if the Feolin race is to continue. Children...” He broke off.

She didn’t have his skill at shielding. The link flinched away from his mental touch as though he’d struck her with his big fists. His stomach turned over so viciously, he could barely breathe.

Anje was so pale, the shadows under her eyes showed like bruises. She stiffened, the knobs of her spine rigid under his palm. “You weren’t going to tell me, were you?”

Heat prickled beneath his beard. “I had to get you to trust me first.” Her level gaze shamed him, but the intensity of his purpose drew him forward, until they were nose to nose. “You have to submit during the Rite, Anje. Not just to me, but to many. Strangers’ hands, strangers’ bodies. You’re a fighter, sweet warrior, but if you struggle for control in this, you’ll kill us both.” He gripped her hands hard and was a little comforted when her fingers curled around his. “And if we die, so does the Feolin race. Slowly.”

“So that’s why Trey...” She was very, very still.

“Yes, we’d always planned to fuck you together. Though once he saw you...” He glanced sideways.

Trey smiled, though his face was full of pain. He stroked Anje’s cheek. “He couldn’t have stopped me, sweetheart, not with a platoon of shamans.” His hand slipped under her hair to clasp her nape, while he flung the other arm around Brin’s neck.

Anje’s mouth twisted. The link exploded, blew up in a storm of baffled hurt and gut-wrenching fear. Before he could master his instinctive reaction, Brin recoiled, and in that instant, she ripped herself out of their grasp and leaped to her feet. She glared.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Her eyes shone with unshed tears, even as her hands clenched. “Good enough to fuck, but not good enough to trust.” Words strangled in her throat. “Sweet Mother, if you want to die that bad, you can do it without me!” Spinning on her heel, she hit the door at a dead run. Her light tread echoed in the hall as she ran down the stairs two at a time.

“Anje!” Brin shot out the door. In sheer desperation, he dropped all his shields and let his naked emotions boil over her in a scalding wave.

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She'd reached the ground floor when it hit her. Her knees gave out and she staggered, clutching the rickety banister. He was on her like a fellwolf on a bunrat, hauling her up into his arms.

Trey tried to shoulder him aside. “Here, give her to me.”

Brin's lips drew back in a snarl he was powerless to prevent. “No.”

“You're hurting her.”

“I don't have a choice. You know I don't.” But Trey refused to drop his gaze and they glared at each other, breathing hard.

“Stop it!” Something struck Brin's upper arm a stinging blow. He looked down. Anje's fist. “Just—stop it, both of you.” But her whole body trembled.

Taking his time, he set her on her feet.

She squeezed her eyes shut and dragged in a breath. When she looked at him again, he nearly cried out. All the life had fled, leaving them flat and empty.

Her hand slid over his biceps and dropped away. “Your precious goddess is going to kill you. Had you thought of that, mighty shaman?”

He nodded, hating how helpless he felt. “It's a risk worth taking.”

“Tell me why I should help you die, Brin. Give me a reason I can understand.”

“You have to, scout,” he said heavily. “Lufra's spoken, curse Her.”

“Not enough,” she said. “Not nearly enough. Lufra's nothing to me.”

“The Feolin will die if you don't,” put in Trey.

She shrugged. “Why should I care about them? It's you I know, you I—” She broke off, her features so rigid she could have passed as a statue of the wrathful goddess.

Brin tugged at his hair. His temples throbbed and his knee ached like a bitch. Then his eye fell on the door to the street and for a moment, he yearned to leave them standing. Just walk away from the whole fucking mess.

It was the hope of success that held him there. Shining with faint possibility, it elbowed its way to the front of his mind, insidious, tempting, luring him onto the horns of a hideous dilemma, where all his protective instincts stood up and screamed in protest.

Looming over Anje, he framed her face in his hands. “I'll keep you safe, scout. On my life, I swear it.”

Unimpressed, she tilted her chin. Her eyes weren't flat anymore. They were glittering chips of amethyst ice. "Really?" she said. "How noble. And if you're so busy rescuing me who'll save you?"

But deep in her soul, the link shuddered and wept, inconsolable as a terrified child. Something snapped inside him. He felt it go. Brin clamped his hands around her shoulders and hauled her to her tiptoes. He thrust his face into hers. "Anje, you fool, don't you understand? I love you!"

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She put both hands against his chest and shoved. "You've got a strange way of showing it, shaman."

He couldn't bear to let her go immediately. Instead, he relaxed his grip a finger at a time and she stepped around him, her face cold and composed. "I'll find another room." As the two men turned to watch her go, she walked up the stairs, head held high, and disappeared down the passage.

Trey took a step as if to follow, but Brin gripped his arm. "Stay." He'd meant the words as a command, but they came out a plea.

The younger man scanned his face, feature by feature. Strange, he'd never noticed so many flecks of green in the hazel before. Brin wasn't aware he'd been holding his breath until Trey stepped into his arms and hugged him, rib-crackingly hard. "She had to be told." He pressed his lips to the pit of Brin's throat before drawing back. His breath was warm and moist. "You get started on the packing. I'll make sure she's all right."

He gave a wry grin. "And now she doesn't trust you anymore, the torque will keep her closer than ever."

Brin grunted, because his throat had closed. Words were beyond him.

"You won't die, either of you." Trey's lush mouth thinned with determination. "I won't permit it." He closed in for another hug, patted Brin briskly on the ass and ran up the stairs.

Brin stared after him, too weary to feel surprise, too fucking depressed for amusement. Thank all that was for Trey—who never changed, who'd face the wrath of the gods armored with nothing but a cocky grin.

If only he could believe him.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Feolin—Economy:

The Feolin economy is essentially agrarian. The citizens are ranchers and herders, though they have a thriving industry in luxury art goods like jewelry and fine fabrics. Settlement is decentralized and so is the economy, with no large market centers. The Feolin have a fiercely independent streak which does not lend itself to over-regulation.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

It was a mad, miserable ride, the first night tense with the need to avoid Hssrda patrols and get Raidle and Braithie launched on their separate routes to Mother's Hearth. Once away from The Hollows, the journey became a grim test of endurance for the vranee.

For Anje, it was sheer torture.

Each night, she made a point of constructing a small scout's bower, where she slept in lonely, aching splendor, listening to the quiet rumble of male conversation, feeling like a voyeur, wanting so desperately to see, to touch.

She despised herself.

And she wasn't at all sure she wasn't going mad. Her head whirled with visions of Brin's strong body twisting in agony, eaten alive by hungry flames. The tips of her fingers tingled, her palms were clammy. She couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep. Sweet Mother, she couldn't *think* !

Brin barely looked at her, the link a solid wall of self-loathing, laced with both guilt and resentment. Trey hardly opened his mouth, a worried crease between his brows.

By the second night, Anje knew she couldn't bear to be with the shaman for another second. She'd passed through rage, to hurt, and out the other side to rage again. But then the fear began, and each time she looked at him, it grew blacker, deeper. She thought it was like watching a fine building disintegrate, one strong stone at a time. A fine trembling began in the long bones of her thighs and she couldn't seem to control it.

Bitterly, she castigated herself as a coward. True enough, she didn't want to die, but her greatest terror was reserved for witnessing Brin's death. Which would be followed shortly thereafter by Trey's, she had no doubt. Her soul hung in bloody strips. Flayed.

Holy Mother, she'd been cursed! Cursed with love.

They loved her. She knew that.

But they didn't love her enough to save themselves from the anger of their bitch-goddess.

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She blinked. If she wasn't there—if they didn't have Lufra's Gift... Her lip curled with scorn while her thoughts raced on. They couldn't do it without her. Could they?

They wouldn't die if she wasn't there.

It was well after midnight by the time she'd brooded herself to the point where she was utterly drowned in the inner darkness. Driven to action by the sucking depths of her misery, Anje snatched up her pack and scrambled out of her shelter, extending her scout's senses into the quiet of the night. She shook in earnest now, shudders running through all her limbs.

She heard nothing save the rustle of leaves tossing in the wind, a small creature scuttling in the undergrowth, the sound of even breathing from the other side of the banked fire. Her pulse thundered, sickeningly loud in her ears.

With one hand curled tight around the Bond torque, she gritted her teeth and slid into the forest.

Fifty paces. One hundred.

The tugging began in her head. She pressed her lips together. She couldn't watch them die, she simply couldn't.

Half a mile.

The warm liquid running down her chin must be blood from where she'd bitten her lip. Her vision clouded. She staggered, leaned against a tree for a moment and forced her feet forward.

The link burned, filling her skull with pain. Barely conscious, she stumbled on, a litany pounding in her brain. *She wouldn't watch. She wouldn't watch.*

A bellow of rage came from behind her, the noise of crashing in the brush. Her eyes nearly shut with pain, Anje moaned, lurching on through the forest.

Hard hands grasped her shoulders and spun her around. Brin lifted her clean off her feet and crushed her into his chest. "Anje—don't—"

The agony in her head disappeared as though it had never been. It was replaced with the rough warmth of overwhelming concern, threaded through with terrible fear. "You fool! You're not hurt?"

She ignored it all, driven by her litany of terror. "Won't watch," she mumbled. "Won't watch you burn. Can't—"

Brin let out a huge breath. "Then for Lufra's sake, *help* me!" he said, low and hard.

Anje turned her back and his hands fell away. An instant's throbbing silence and he faded into the darkness without a word.

"Anje love?" Trey.

With a sob, she hurled herself into his arms and hung on, shuddering, while he ran soothing hands up and down her spine.

In the safety of his embrace, Anje's world truly began to tilt on its axis. All it took was a single question. Trey kissed the soft skin below her ear and murmured, "What if

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it was the Children of the Mother who'd offended the Goddess?" Then he led her back to her bower, dazed and wrung-out with emotion.

She fell into sleep as though it was a deep well, his words ringing in her ears.

Two days later, Brin turned off the trail and nudged Twink up a long, gentle slope. "There," he said in a dark rumble, his breath stirring Anje's hair as she sat stiffly before him, held close in his powerful arms. "Home."

They were the first real words he'd spoken to her since the night she'd run.

Anje gazed in silence, leaning back against the shaman's massive chest.

Feolin.

Flutters beat fiercely in her belly. Her destiny lay somewhere there, in that broad, shallow valley.

The destruction of everything she'd grown to hold dear.

And her death.

Though it was still afternoon, shadows pooled in the distance, a gentle blanket laid over a cultivated landscape. She glanced up. A few rays of light poured from the last sliver of the Sun, penetrating the dimness with shafts of luminescence. As if in answer, a solid cluster of lights twinkled at the far end of the valley. All those households, gathering together around the supper table, the lamps lit, the children—

She cut the thought off and fought the urge to lay her hand over Brin's where it rested under her breasts. The effort required to shield herself from the Bond link sapped her energy. The shaman battered at her relentlessly, waves of love and near-irresistible tenderness alternating with a despair so dreadful, it threatened to suck away her sanity again. He was so strong.

Noble fool. Bastard.

Savior of his people, said a small voice. She ignored it.

"Lufra's tits, we made it," said Trey. "Who'd have thought?" He gave a short laugh.

Twink's great dark eyes were sunken in his head and he favored his injured leg. Anje bent to smooth his dusty turquoise plumage between her fingers. As for Brownie, the old vran looked more like an untidy pile of mud-colored feathers than ever. He blew hard, whistling softly with distress on each breath.

Anje twisted to look up at Brin. "How much further?" she asked, doling out the words like a miser.

"Two hours to Quaremel, where the temple is." He jerked his chin in the direction of the lights. "Where we should be. Half an hour to my ranch. Where I want us to be." She gritted her teeth as Brin stroked his palm the length of her braid before dismounting. He pulled her down into his arms, letting her slither down the front of his body, flush against all that warm muscle.

"Scout." He bent his head to kiss her, but she clenched her fists and turned her head aside. Every muscle in Brin's great frame went rigid, as though he held himself together with willpower alone.

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Trey shifted her braid aside and his lips pressed softly to the nape of her neck. "Chelisand will be fit to be tied. We're days late."

Brin straightened and his brows drew together. "Too bad," he said brusquely. "We're having one more night." Still on foot, he turned onto a narrow downward track, leading the weary vranee.

“Who’s Chelisand?” asked Anje.

“High Priestess,” said Trey. “My cousin. Terrifying woman.”

After that, conversation lapsed again. Anje’s thoughts circled endlessly in a litany of desperate curiosity and paralyzing dread. Her fists clenched so hard, her nails dug into her palms. No matter how many times she thought of it, her mind couldn’t encompass the physical possibility of her own death, but she could imagine Brin’s in an infinite variety of hideous ways. And she could visualize Trey’s desperate grief only too clearly.

Because she’d seen it before.

It occurred to her for the first time that it took more courage to stay and wait than to ride forth to battle.

Brownie’s horns glinted in the fading light as he lifted his head and whickered. Abruptly, he and Twink surged forward and Brin sighed deeply as he held them back with a firm hand. “Home.” He boosted Anje onto the big vran and mounted behind her. With Trey and Brownie bringing up the rear, they trotted smartly down the track, across a landscape of softly waving rasa grass. “My lands start here,” he said, pointing at a copse of candlewoods and fell silent once more.

A group of low buildings came into sight, strategically placed for a view down the valley toward a wide river. They were painted a creamy buff shade, the thatch of the roofs glinting a golden-brown in the last rays of the sun.

As they thundered into a dusty courtyard, a door flew open and a small, round elderly woman came out, shading her eyes with her hand. From another direction, a tall stick of a man loped into sight, wiping his hands on an apron.

Brin leaped off Twink and caught the woman up in a hug, while the man thumped him on the shoulder, a broad grin lifting his long mustache. “You made it!” he said and strode over to Brownie. “Trey, good to see you.”

Trey smiled as he dismounted. “You too, Djalén,” he said as the man slapped his back.

Djalén turned toward Anje, still grinning. “I see you found...” The words trailed away and all the color ebbed from his face. “Lufra’s tits!” He grew even paler. “Uh, sorry, Lady.” He drew the old woman to his side. “Sasreela, come see.”

The woman continued forward slowly, her gaze never leaving Anje’s. When she drew level with Twink’s shoulder, she sank painfully to her knees in the dust. “Lady, you honor us,” she whispered.

Deeply uncomfortable, Anje slid hastily off the vran and bent to assist the woman to her feet. Brin came to stand behind her, laying his hands on her shoulders. His touch

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steadied her. “Anje, this is Sasreela, my housekeeper and healer for the neighborhood. And this old reprobate...” he gestured at the thin man, “is her husband Djalén, who does the cooking and rules us all with an iron fist.”

Shifting one hand to her throat, he rubbed her torque between his fingers and thumb. Sasreela’s gaze

sharpened. He turned to the elderly couple. "Anje's as human as you and I. And just as bloody-minded." The grimness about his mouth relaxed a little. "My Bondmate."

Sasreela's hands flew to her mouth, stifling a squeak. Her faded blue eyes grew very round in her wrinkled face. "Oh," she said. "Oh." Then she recovered. "Come inside, do. Quick, before the hands see you or you'll be up drinking all night." Tears shone on her cheeks as she glanced up at the Sun and its hungry Shadow. "You've cut it awfully fine, Brin dear."

They entered the house, the interior cool and sweet with the smell of polished timber. "I know," said Brin heavily. He smiled, but no warmth reached his eyes. "Djalen, send someone with a message for Chelisand, will you?"

Djalen nodded and bustled away, while Anje looked around, frankly curious. Her first thought was that the house echoed the colors of the landscape, cream, buff, green and gray. It wasn't especially tidy, or particularly grand. There were comfortable chairs scattered around and a pile of huge, squashy cushions in one corner. The floor was covered with a selection of rugs, woven with sinuous designs in varying shades of muted green on a cream background. A large fireplace, unlit, took up one wall and in the other was a niche containing a statue and a vase of wild flowers.

Intrigued, Anje went closer. The statue, no more than a foot tall, was of a draped female figure holding a child. Even to her untutored eye, the workmanship was exquisite. The craftsman had used the grain of the golden-brown timber to delineate the flowing lines of Lufra's garments. For Anje had no doubt it was She, from the love shining in Her beautiful face to Her dainty toes.

"My father made that. Lufra as mother."

Anje turned, startled. "I thought he was a blacksmith?" she said without thinking. She pressed her lips together in annoyance.

Brin ran a gentle finger over Lufra's sandaled foot. "He was, but he loved wood. It was his hobby." He shrugged. "He and my mother died before I was twenty. Since then, it's been me and Sasreela and Djalen."

"And Trey," she added.

"Yes, thank Lufra." Djalen's voice called something from another room and Brin curled a hand around her upper arm. "Let's get fed and bathed. I want you two in my bed."

Anje snorted and pulled her arm away.

When he ushered them into his suite an hour later, she thought the bed was more like a lake than a place to sleep. The room was large and airy, with blinds of woven rasa-grass at the windows, and it needed to be, because Brin's bed seemed to occupy

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acres, low to the floor, swathed in some flowing, blue fabric. A heavy dresser of that same golden-brown wood, sat under the window and on it was another statue, much smaller than the other, made entirely of some pale glinting stone. The subject was a woman, kneeling, completely nude, with her head thrown back and her back arched, frozen at the point of climax. Each breast, every voluptuous curve of flesh, was depicted with brilliant artistry.

Trey picked it up and placed it on Anje's palm. "She's lovely, isn't She? Turn Her over."

The stone felt warm in her fingers. Inset around the figure's spine and ribs were silver lines in a sinuous pattern that was very familiar. Anje's heart stumbled and tingling rivers of sensation ran through the wings on her back. Fingers trembling, she set the little goddess back on the dresser.

"It's an omen," said Trey. "Lufra wants you to succeed."

"Maybe." Brin lounged back in the bed, a mound of pillows at his back. Like Trey, all he wore was a sarong knotted low at the hip. Anje had insisted on tying hers under her arms, despite Trey's vocal disapproval. The shaman had said nothing. He held out a hand. "Scout?"

She put her hands behind her back, knowing she was being childish. Ah Mother, but she ached all over! Her neck and shoulders were one huge knot of tension and something deep inside her felt bruised and battered. She supposed it was her heart.

Brin stared into her eyes for so long, she grew uneasy. "What?" she demanded.

"Forgive me," he said, his voice so low it was no more than a half-heard rumble. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "This—" Springing to his feet, he strode to the window, giving her his back, his shoulders rigid. His fists bunched at his sides, all the tendons and veins in his arms standing proud.

"Fuck," snarled Brin, who never swore. "Fuck.Fuck!" He rammed a fist into the wall and Anje jumped. Trey put a gentle hand on her shoulder and she subsided, her heart hammering.

The shaman spun around, dropping his shields, and she gasped aloud. The link was alive with his pain, the starkness of it a punch to the gut. "It's tearing me apart. Gods, not even the Hsrdra could devise a better torture. If you ran again..." He drew a breath. "I'd have to stop you. And...and I'm not sure I could." His inky lashes swept down as if he couldn't bear the sight of her. "Even with the torque...I might be able to get it off."

In the silence, she could hear the clink of a bucket, a vran whickering, a low buzz of voices. A vast hollow seemed to open up inside her.

"But it's the future of your people," she said. Holy Mother, she must be losing her mind! Trey's question had set inside her, provoking as a pebble in her boot. "In your place—" she had to swallow hard before she could finish the sentence, "I'd do the same."

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"The Feolin mean nothing to you. Lufra's price costs me my honor." Brin's hand closed on hers so tightly, the bones creaked. His voice went very low. "But I swear to you, Anje, you'll survive this. Whatever the cost." He let her go.

She had to blink to hold back the foolish tears—she, a scout and a warrior! But the Mother knew he meant it, every word. She didn't want to contemplate the sort of quixotic nobility he'd think was necessary.

Dropping her head, she pressed the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. It couldn't be so. It couldn't! Surely, there must be a way out!

Sparks bloomed behind her eyes as she sank onto the bed. *Think, think!* She'd been so stupid, allowing panic to blind her. There was something she was missing, there had to be. "Do you truly believe Lufra chose me?" she asked, feeling her way.

"I could hardly miss it," Brin growled. "She hasn't exactly been subtle."

"So if there's a fault, it's not yours, it's Lufra's."

Next to her on the bed, Trey inhaled sharply. "Lufra can be stern, Anje, but She's never unjust," he said. "She wants the Feolin to be happy."

"Just like the Mother. In fact..." She frowned, remembering the wooden figure in the niche. "Isn't motherhood one of Her aspects?" When they nodded, she went on, "Why would She desire the death of Her favorite shaman, Her child?"

Excitement widened her eyes, made her heart falter and skip a beat. "Don't you see?" The words tumbled out. "Trey got it. It's a setup. She regrets the severity of Her punishment, but She can't take it back. She's a goddess, after all. She's got a reputation to maintain." The return of hope was so acute, it hurt. "So She's arranged everything to give us the best possible chance. Lufra's on our side!"

Trey stared at her in frank astonishment. Brin's lips quirked and a few of the shadows left his eyes.

She faltered. "Maybe?"

"Anje, you're amazing." Brin shook his head and sank down next to her on the bed. "And I thought I understood the female mind. I don't see it, but go ahead and believe if it helps."

The beat of her blood was edgy, intense. She shifted, the mattress firm beneath her, the tight sheets polished and cool under her clenching fingers. "It's still about trust," she insisted, "but it's not me, Brin—it's your own goddess asking for a leap of faith."

"Maybe you're right and maybe you're not. My soul's been Lufra's since I was a lad." He took her hand and pressed his freshly-shaven cheek into the palm. His skin was warm and smooth. "But—" The breath hissed between his teeth. "I hate Her for this. What She's done to you. Me."

The words echoed in the airy space. Trey said, very softly, "Brin, don't." But the shaman shook his head and growled under his breath, his face dark with suppressed emotion.

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"If I...left," Anje went on, filling the awkward silence, "the Rite would be impossible, wouldn't it?"

"I gave my word to the Queen and Council," said Brin.

After a short pause, Trey said thoughtfully, "You could try Chelisand. Or one of her priestesses. It wouldn't be a hardship. They're all eminently fuckable. And highly trained."

Anje snatched her hand back, the fingers crooking into claws. "I see."

"It won't work without you, scout." Brin smiled painfully. "I've told you that. You're Lufra's Gift. And

my heart.” Cradling her cheeks in his big hands, he stared deep into her eyes. “You have superb natural instincts and we know the Goddess favors you. But you’re not a puppet. Love or hate. Choose.”

“What do you mean?” Her brain still racing, she let him draw her into his lap.

Brin stroked her cheek. “You can perform the Rite with love in your heart or with hate. Guess which gives us the better chance, scout.”

Anje sat frozen. There was no doubt at all that she’d lost her reason. She knew what she was going to do.

What she always did.

Fight.

Fight for those she loved.

The shaman glanced at the other man, standing frowning by the dresser. “Trey?”

“Yes?”

“Will you come with us to Quaremel tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Trey sank his teeth into his lower lip. “I’m taking every minute I can get.” He sighed and desolation swam in his hazel eyes. “Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not.” Anje leaned forward to touch his hand. Their last night. The words hung heavily. Unspoken.

She glanced from one masculine face to the other, both equally tormented. For her.

Anje’s spine stiffened and a growl rumbled deep in her throat. What sort of warrior was she? Holy Mother, she loved them! They were *hers* and no slut goddess was going to hurt them!

Trey caught her fingers in his. “We haven’t...not since The Hollows...*please*, Anje.”

The Bond link throbbed with the shaman’s desire, bittersweet and poignant. Brin nibbled at the soft skin below her ear and goose bumps raced over her throat and down to her breasts. Her nipples stiffened, tingling in a maddening way. He murmured, “Tomorrow will take care of itself. Let’s not waste tonight.”

Anje shivered. “I don’t think I...”

“For Trey, scout. Do it for Trey.”

She cast him a scathing look. Love was one thing, forgiveness another. “And nothing for you?”

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A grin tugged at his mouth and the dimple flashed. “I won’t say it wouldn’t please me. Very much.” He grew serious again. “Anje,” he said softly. “I’m begging you. One last time. Make your choice now. For love.”

She stared at him in silence, remembering the powerful, enigmatic man who'd captured her in the Empty Lands and possessed her utterly. Now his soul was plain for her to read in his face, in the Bond link. Suddenly, and with absolute clarity, she saw the face of Zulie's youngest, slack and rosy with sleep against her mother's breast.

And her decision was made. Irrevocably.

"Yes," she whispered, "but I'm..." She hesitated and tried to smile. "A little tense."

Brin dragged in a breath so deep it expanded his massive chest to an alarming degree. Then he released it in a gusty sigh. "I can take care of that. Come here, Trey, and hold her hands." The other man did as he was bid and the shaman slid his arms around her from behind and cupped her breasts in his warm palms.

He began a slow humming, deep in his throat, so low it was almost inaudible. It vibrated through his chest and set up a reverberation deep in her bones. The warmth of the Bond link washed over her, soothing, stroking, and her lashes fluttered down. The breath whispered out of her lungs. "That's right," the deep voice murmured, seemingly inside her skull. "Breathe, Anje. Breathe down to your soul."

He held her there like that for what seemed like hours, or minutes, a time out of time, suspended in a crystal bubble. As the wordless chant deepened, he began to feather his thumbs over her nipples, working with the fabric of the sarong, forcing her to breathe to his slow, even rhythm. Trey bent to run his tongue over the delicate veins in her wrists. The sensation was not unlike floating in a warm bath, relaxed and unstrung.

When the first whimper forced its way out of her throat, he whispered, "Now is all there is, Anje. Say it."

Slowly, a tingle began in her loins, the intimate folds swelling and pouting, ready for impalement, longing for it. She moistened her lips. "Are you a magician?" she husked.

A laugh rumbled in his chest. "No." He tugged at her nipples, sending a delicious arrow of sensation directly to her clit. "I'm a shaman. Say the words, scout."

"You're right." Anje twisted in his lap. The anger and the pain were still there, but now they were walled off in a part of her mind she was able to ignore. "Now is all we have. And it's what I want." She sank her fingers into the black silk of his hair and drew his head down for a long, incendiary kiss. Trey ran his hands up her calves with a murmur of pleasure.

Gently, Brin drew away. "Are we agreed then? Tonight is ours?" When the other two nodded, he leaned forward to rub his palm over the short, red-gold pelt on Trey's head. "In that case, I say we give Trey the ride of his life." He arched a brow in the other man's direction.

Trey blew out a breath. "Will it involve pain?"

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Brin's dimple deepened and Anje shifted to accommodate the slow rise of his cock beneath her. When he shot Trey a glance full of menace and mischief, prickles of anticipation blossomed at the base of her spine. "No more than you can take," he purred. "You game?"

“Yes,” said Trey curtly.

“You’ll give yourself over to me? Do it my way?”

A pause. “Yes.” It was a husky whisper.

Anje abandoned herself to her darker instincts. She walked two fingers over the bulge tenting Trey’s sarong. “Remember that night in The Hollows, Trey? You didn’t turn out to be a very good slave after all.”

He grinned and his cock twitched under her touch. “I’ll do better this time.”

She squeezed hard enough to make him grunt. “I’m sure you will.”

Brin gave a dry chuckle. When she glanced at him, hesitating, he nodded. “Keep going, scout, you’re doing fine.”

Trey’s lips compressed. “Both of you? What am I supposed to do if you want different things at the same time?”

Brin ran his palm down Trey’s body from his throat to the line of the sarong. He slipped his fingers under the knot. “If you value your pretty hide, you’ll work out a way to please us both.” He tugged and the sarong fell away. “Stand up.”

Slowly, Trey got to his feet. Anje stared, imprinting him on her memory. He was beautifully proportioned, all cream and silk and masculine fire. The short stubble of his regrowing hair exposed his forehead and hardened his jaw, making him look older, grimmer. His body hair was a shade lighter—except, of course, for his genitals where there was none at all. She sighed with pleasure and anticipation, watching his cock tremble with his rapid breath.

A flush rose up his throat and over his cheeks. “What about you? Why am I the only one...?” The words trailed away when he looked full into Brin’s eyes. “Gods, man, you’ll burn me alive.”

“I intend to.” Brin bared his teeth. “Walk over to the dresser. Slowly now.”

In complete silence, Trey did as he was bid, until he was standing with his back to them, his hands braced on the wood.

Brin hummed his appreciation. “Now that,” he said, “is the most biteable ass in the known world, except for yours, scout.”

Anje laughed, while honey slipped down the inside of her thigh. “The rest of him isn’t bad either.” Trey swore under his breath.

Brin said, “Patience is a virtue Trey’s never had. I think he should learn some.” Anje murmured her agreement. “But he has a fine imagination. You’re not to turn around, Trey, no matter what you hear, understand?”

Trey grunted.

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“Understand?”

The muscles in Trey’s shoulders twitched. “Yes.”

Brin loosened the knot and Anje’s sarong puddled around her hips. “That better?”

“Much.” She reached up and pulled his mouth to hers, smiling, ready to play, to make enough noise to drive Trey crazy. But in the doing, the game became real. Brin’s tongue dueling with hers, his fingers rolling her nipples, the feel of his hair-roughened skin against hers, the heat of his magnificent cock against her thigh, it all had her humming her pleasure, gasping with each successive erotic shock.

Brin nipped the side of her neck. “There’s nothing sexier than a hot woman. Can you smell her, Trey?”

Silence.

“*Can you?*”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“Don’t sulk. It’s going to get better.” Brin slid a long finger over her folds and into her sheath.

The air evaporated from Anje’s lungs. “Holy Mother!” When he added a second finger, crooking them so he was massaging her clitoris from the inside, she let out a small shriek.

Trey lowered his head to his folded arms and groaned.

Brin chuckled, deep in his throat. “Hear that?” He pumped his fingers slowly in and out of her slick flesh, producing a wet, succulent sound. “That’s the most beautiful cunt in the Ten Nations, weeping for you.”

“Bastard.” Trey slid one hand down and gripped his cock.

“Keep your hands on the dresser!” The tone bit like a lash and Trey snatched his hand back. Brin grinned down at Anje, his eyes dancing with devilment. “You’re pretty well primed, sweetheart. Ready to play?”

Anje struggled to her elbows, panting. Trey’s ass was canted up at the most enticing angle, his bare balls tight and rosy with lust. The lamplight washed his skin, glinting on fine golden hair, warm creamy skin. Her mouth watered and her brain reeled with carnal possibilities, all of them deliciously wicked. “Oh, yes.”

“Go on then. Your turn.”

Suddenly, she knew exactly what she wanted. “Don’t move, Trey.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Trust and love the Mother gives Her Children in abundant measure. So when misfortune brings you low,

do not rail against Her. Your little life is part of Her Grand Design.

Enough trust, enough love, and you will see. But it's a damned shame it has to be so hard.

Remarks of the Third Sister of Desperation, on the tenth anniversary of the establishment of Mother's Hearth, 9219 ATF.

Softly, Anje closed the distance 'til she was directly behind Trey. Rising to her toes, she leaned her body into his and kissed her way over his shoulder blades, pressing her breasts into his back, rubbing her mound over his buttocks.

Wicked impulses tempted her, each more wanton than the last. Trey's tenderness made her feel deliciously cruel, his strength told her she was safe. Mother, how she loved him!

As if he'd read her mind, Trey groaned, "Anje, if you love me—"

"I do, I do." She smiled and nipped his shoulder. Then she stepped back and delivered a ringing smack to one muscular cheek, putting all the strength of her arm into it.

"Hey!" Trey reared up, back arching, and his eyes flew open.

The muscles of her sex contracted so hard, it was a moment before she could catch her breath. "Very good," she purred, trying to sound menacing. As she shook her hand to get the sting out, she became aware of Brin, leaning against the wall, choking with laughter.

"Not as simple as it looks, is it, scout?"

Anje admired the pink handprint on Trey's beautiful ass and grinned back. Suddenly, all the delight and fun of it hit her like a thunderclap. Brin had been right when he'd said she was born for this. Born for *them*.

In the part of her mind where fear had gibbered, determination bloomed. She refused to let go of this soaring joy.

Fuck you, goddess-bitch. I won't let you take them from me.

I. Will. Not.

On the thought, she squared off and administered another cracking blow, this time to the other buttock.

Trey cursed. Then he laughed. "Are you sure that's not you, Brin? Hits like a girl."

Anje growled.

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"I've got a riding crop somewhere," offered the shaman. Trey said no more, though his lips twitched.

"Fair enough," said Brin, when it became clear Trey was too wise to speak. "I always think the flat of the hand is more personal. Like this, scout." The blow jerked Trey up on to his toes and had Anje wincing in sympathy. "Consider this a delayed punishment."

“Bastard. What for?”

“For risking what’s mine without permission.” With slow deliberation, he worked Trey’s ass until it glowed. Through it all, the other man didn’t make a sound and his erection never flagged. In fact, she was willing to bet he got harder, though drops of sweat beaded his forehead.

“Last two,” growled Brin.

“Wait.” Anje knelt and took Trey’s cock in two hands, just for the delight and comfort of holding the throbbing, satiny flesh. The musk of his arousal was strong in her nostrils. “Now,” she said. Brin murmured his approval and Trey took his final blows cradled firmly in her grasp, shuddering.

“It’s over,” said Brin. “Turn ‘round.”

He wiped a tear from the corner of Trey’s eye with his thumb. Licked it. “You did very well.”

A ghost of the cocky grin returned. “I get a reward, right?”

“Depends.” Brin’s glance tangled with Anje’s and lust and dark desire hummed down the link. Shock slammed through her when she realized what he wanted, followed immediately by such a superlatively wicked wave of lust, that she staggered. Mother save her, he was magnificent!

“Do it,” she said softly. She touched Trey’s arm. “You’re to put your hands behind you and stand still. Don’t come without permission and keep your eyes shut or I’ll blindfold you.”

Trey cleared his throat. “I think I’d prefer it.”

“No.” Anje shot him a teasing glance. “You’ll have to control yourself, won’t you?”

“Scout, you’re a natural.” Brin stroked her bottom. Then he stared at Trey, standing obediently with his eyes closed. His smile faded and his expression grew so naked with yearning, Anje felt she should look away, but she couldn’t.

When he sank to his knees at Trey’s feet, she put her hand on his shoulder, putting everything she had into the link, all the pleading, the love, the unconditional support.

Brin patted her hand and leaned forward to engulf Trey’s cock in one swallow.

“Lufra!” Trey staggered, only Brin’s grip on his hips keeping him upright. His eyes shot open, wide and golden, as he stared down at the mouth pulling hungrily at his flesh. “Brin, you don’t have to—I never expected—” His fists clenched at his sides. “Ah gods.*Fuck!*” The shaman gave no sign he’d heard. He sucked much harder than Anje, more brutally than any woman, his cheeks hollowed with the effort.

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Trey’s chest heaved. Slowly, he buried his hands in Brin’s hair. His eyes fluttered closed and he gave himself over to the luxury of his pleasure, grunting softly with the rhythm of the shaman’s strokes.

Anje sank to her knees and spread her thighs. She was so hot, so ready, all she had to do was press the heel of her hand against her clit. As the release roared through her, she fought to keep her eyes open.

She couldn't bear to miss a moment, not even for her own pleasure. Brin stumbled in his rhythm, picked up again. Between his open thighs, his cock reared, long and thick, so heavy with blood, it barely trembled when he moved.

Trey's buttocks were clenched, tight and hard as stone. Her breath still coming hard, Anje touched Brin's shoulder. "I don't think he can take much more." The shaman murmured his agreement and slowed his pace, varying his strokes, licking and nibbling.

Trey groaned. "For Lufra's sake, finish me!"

"No." Brin lashed Trey's cock head with his tongue. "Can you hold out?"

"No. Yes. Gods, Brin, you don't have to—"

The shaman cut him off. "I want to." He ran his tongue over his teeth. "I like it. Can you go on if I give you an incentive?"

Anje's breath stuttered in her lungs. She couldn't wait. By Lufra, she thought she wanted this as much as they did! Possibly more.

Trey's lids lifted and the light sheened his eyes with gold. "What is it?"

"If you don't offer before I tell you, you can have me." He paused. "Any way you want."

Trey's mouth dropped open. "You're not serious. Anyway?"

"It's your duty." Brin smiled, the dimple flashing. "I can't go to the Great Rite with a virgin ass." His expression grew serious. "I can never repay you for what you've given me. And this is my joy to give."

"Don't be stupid," said Trey roughly.

"Trey, do you want it? There's a price."

"Gods, yes!"

"Well then. Think you can last another five minutes?" He rummaged in a drawer and came up with a sand clock and small box. "I guarantee you'll remember tonight for the rest of your life." He set the clock.

Then he bent to recommence the torture and Trey's eyes rolled back in his head.

By the three minute mark, Anje was dancing with anxiety. Trey didn't have a shaman's training and his moans were taking on a hoarse, desperate quality. She nipped his shoulder. Hard.

Steadying, he muttered his thanks. He blew out a breath and gritted his teeth, while Brin hummed with pleasure and sank hard fingers into his tender ass.

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At four minutes, she wrapped her fingers around Trey's balls and squeezed. Beads of sweat rolled down his chest. "Careful," he grated, but he hung on.

It seemed like an eternity before the last of the sand trickled through the clock and Brin drew back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He sat on his heels and eyed his rampant handiwork with no little pride. "I think I'm good at this."

"Where?" asked Trey, his chest heaving like a bellows.

"What?"

"The bed?" The younger man's face was stark with the effort of control. "Choose quick."

Brin took one look, grabbed the box from the dresser and ripped the lid off, revealing a pale creamy ointment. He shoved it into Trey's hands. Then he picked Anje up bodily and dropped her in the middle of acres of bed. As he came down over her in a rush of masculine heat, her thighs fell open and he sheathed himself with one smooth, remorseless thrust. Anje squeaked with the shock of his stone-hard shaft furrowing through her tight folds, pushing her flesh aside, high and hot and hard, almost as far as her womb.

"You all right, scout?" He grinned. "I'm in a bit of a hurry." He glanced over his shoulder. "What are you waiting for, man?"

Trey bit his lip so hard, the flesh went white. "You sure?" he husked. "Last chance."

The goddess fire blazed in Brin's black eyes. He smiled, the most heartbreakingly beautiful smile Anje had ever seen. It smoothed the grim lines from his face, made him look younger, tender and vulnerable. "Go on. Do your worst."

Trey gripped the shaman's hips, where the dragon rode. "Can't be gentle. Sorry." He set himself and thrust.

Brin inhaled sharply and his eyes opened wide. He paled, then the blood rushed back, running up under the olive skin of his cheeks in a hectic flush.

Anje kissed him, quick and hard, and flexed her internal muscles against the hard bulk wedged inside her. Deep in each dark pupil, the goddess fire writhed like a living thing and the link glowed with an excruciating mix of pleasure and pain.

The muscles of Trey's neck and shoulders bunched with the effort he was making to restrain himself.

"Trey?" Brin's rumble was so soft, it was more like a vibration in his chest than actual speech. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"What?"

"I won't break."

"Hot." Trey's throat moved. "Gods, sohot."

His hips surged. Within seconds, he was powering into Brin, shaking the bed with hammer blows.

The link flared so violently, Anje's vision grayed out. Brin's meaty cock jolted back and forth over the muscular walls of her sex and she splayed her thighs, tilting her hips to offer herself, craving every hot, hungry inch. She couldn't catch her breath, her entire being was keyed to the shaman's, to the hard, high point of his ecstasy as Trey struck an exquisitely pleasurable spot deep in his body.

Again and again, without mercy.

The younger man worked toward a crescendo, pushing Brin with him. Like an echo of the link, she felt the infinite depth of his desperate, despairing love for both of them, expressed in every push, every dragging pull. She was awash with it, vibrating in concert, all thrust and slide, sumptuous pleasure and luscious tension.

Trey cried out, the tendons in his neck and shoulders straining. He slammed one last time into Brin, as if he couldn't bury himself deep enough. The link trembled, shimmered and exploded in a dark fireball of release.

No more than a heartbeat later, Brin arched his back, grinding his cock into her so deep, Anje thought she'd die with the joy of it. His spasms lasted endlessly, the convulsions rippling through her soul as much as her body, dragging her with him into a vortex of lightning-shot rapture.

The panting silence lasted an eon. Shakily, Trey disengaged himself and collapsed beside her, snuggling his head into her neck. As she caressed his trembling shoulder, his tears slid damply over her skin and pooled in the pit of her throat.

Brin sat up slowly, the expression on his dark face fierce with concentration. He ran a hand through his hair. "It's not possible," he said. "I'm sure it's not." He nudged Trey's thigh with his knee. "Do you know what that felt like?"

Trey opened one eye. "Like death and glory all mashed together?"

The shaman huffed out a laugh. "True enough." He sobered. "I could have sworn I felt you in the Bond link." Idly, he ran his palm over Anje's flank and she purred. She drifted, her mind a mellow pool of content, recalling the experience, piece by gorgeous piece, extracting every bright memory and stringing them together like glowing beads on a necklace, something to take out whenever she wanted to savor at leisure.

"Never mind," said Brin. "Up with you, scout." He scooped her up from the bed and headed for the adjoining ablutions chamber, where hot water was piped from the furnace in Djalen's kitchen.

As he stepped with her into the deep bath, Anje sighed, replete. Save for one thing.

"Trey?" she called. "Will you rub my feet like you did—?" She broke off, feeling a flush heat her cheeks.

"The first time?" Trey leaned against the door, grinning, all sweaty and elegantly rumpled. "Only if you'll scrub my back."

The link hummed with fondness, a light, tender touch.

It wasn't Brin's.

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Anje shot bolt upright and water surged in a wave that slopped over the rim of the bath. Behind her, Brin grunted with surprise.

"I felt him!" she exclaimed. "I felt him, Idid!

"Lufra, that's good." Trey lowered himself into the water, eyes half closed with pleasure. "'Course you did," he said. "Give me a minute and you'll feel me again." Though his chuckle sounded weary, it was brimful of anticipation.

"No, no," insisted Anje. "That's not it."

Brin reached past her to grip the other man's forearm, his face intent. "Trey," he grated. "Close your mouth and shut your eyes."

"What, again? I'm not ready yet, I—"

"Shut up and do it!"

"All right, all right!" Trey sighed and leaned back, a sponge in his hands. His lashes fluttered down, absurdly delicate against the masculine strength of his face.

"Your thoughts are all over the place. Breathe, Trey. Slow and deep. That's it." Brin put his palm flat in the middle of the other man's chest, almost spanning him from nipple to nipple. "Breathe with me, feel me."

Trey hummed deep in his throat. His fingers opened and the sponge floated away.

The shaman laid his hand over Anje's thundering heart. "You too, love. Match your soul with mine. Breathe."

Anje let her lids slide shut, focusing her senses on Brin's palm, warm and damp on her skin, sinking into the rhythm of his breath. His and Trey's. Calm stole over her like a golden-pink mist, suffusing her soul, slowing her racing thoughts.

Brin's voice dropped to a deep murmur, infinitely soothing. "Trey, I want you to recall what we just did. You were buried as deep in me as you could get, remember? And I was buried in Anje. Tell me how it was."

"But you know. Wonderful."

"And what else?"

"I was fucking you, but I felt you fucking me. No, that was Anje. Gorgeous." He sighed.

"And in your heart? Not your cock, not your balls?"

Anje levered her eyes open. Trey lay, completely relaxed, the water lapping at his ribs. The smile that played on that luscious mouth made her clit throb in memory. Brin loomed over him, looking deliciously predatory, eyes narrowed with concentration. "Tell me."

Trey's red-gold brows drew together. "You. I could feel how much you—" His eyes snapped open, wide and shocked. He lurched up, creating a wave. "Lufra's tits! I feltyou !" he struggled. "The—the—essence of you." He stared at Anje. "And you."

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Brin grabbed him by both shoulders, his fingers digging cruelly into the fair skin. He thrust his face into Trey's and words exploded out of him. "Do you know what you've done, you idiot?"

Trey's mouth fell open. "What?" he whispered.

"You." Brin shook him. "Bonded." Another shake. "With us." Trey's head rocked on his shoulders.

"Both of us!" The roar rattled the walls.

"I thought you said that wasn't possible," said Anje, shocked.

"It isn't." The shaman sank both hands into his black mane and tugged. "But he's done it. I can feel it and so can you, can't you?" She nodded her assent. "Sweet Lufra, what a mess!" He squeezed his eyes shut. "Shit, shit, *shit* !"

Anje's brain felt clogged with conflicting emotions. She'd be happy to be Bonded to Brin and Trey 'til the end of time. But what about the Rite? Surely, they'd told her it required only two participants? Her heart sinking, she recalled the anguish she'd felt when she thought the shaman was dead. Holy Mother, she'd barely survived it. What if she and Brin—? She couldn't bear to complete the thought.

"Are you sure?" she asked in a husky whisper.

"I don't see why you're so pissed," said Trey. His lips trembled for an instant before he firmed them and Anje flinched at the whiplash of hurt that flickered across the link. "Unless you don't want me."

"Oh Trey, no!" She flung her arms around him.

"Don't be a fool," said Brin brusquely, but he stroked his palm over Trey's shoulder.

Trey blew out a breath. "Good." His gaze turned accusing. "You don't think I can take it."

Brin stood abruptly. Water streamed down his powerful torso, slicking the hair on his chest and groin. The dragon's eyes gleamed balefully. "Chelisand's got three days left, Trey. Three days for the work of ten. How do you think she's going to do it?"

The younger man licked his lips. "Drugs, she'll use drugs."

Brin smiled without humor. "Ay. And every trick in the book. It's going to hurt like hell." He stepped forward, into Trey's chest, his heavy shaft inches from that pouty mouth. He was half hard. "And you'll live it too, Trey. Every screaming, gut-wrenching second. The Rite as well." Anje gasped, but the deep voice went on, relentless. "If we die—"

Trey's hands slid up the back of his thighs. Gripped. "You can't."

Brin pushed him away. "Get your torques." He stepped out of the bath and grabbed a drying cloth. "We can still go through the motions."

But when Trey shook the desecrated collars out of their velvet bag, the shaman's expression became thunderous. "What, in Lufra's name, happened to these?"

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The ghost of a smile quirked Trey's lips. "We went to buy a pleasure slave."

Brin snapped out a curse, looking so frankly appalled that Anje had to stifle a chuckle. Then she watched with intense interest as the shaman prepared the torques, adding the dark strands of her hair and his own to the auburn braids in Trey's. He muttered darkly as he dismantled and rebuilt them, turning the two collars into three.

Finally, he had the three of them kneel close together on the floor, on a thick rug beside the bed. Once he had their bodies arranged to his satisfaction, he clipped a new torque around each throat. Now he and Anje had two each. Frowning with concentration, he curled their fingers together around his own extra collar and reached out one hand to Anje's new torque, the other to Trey's. Thus linked, he gathered them with his dark gaze. Already, the goddess flame flickered brightly in each fathomless pupil.

"Empty your mind and breathe," he ordered. "It may be a while before you feel anything."

Fascinated, Anje watched his lashes sweep down. By slow degrees, calm spread over his face, smoothing creases, relaxing the tiny muscles around his eyes. As he sank visibly further into trance, he seemed to her both timeless and extraordinarily powerful, a portrait of perfect masculinity. A velvety croon rumbled out of his chest, soothing and exciting her all at once, pulling her into his dark aura. It seemed almost as if he were...calling, beseeching.

On the thought, a wave of warmth spread over the base of her spine, like the caress of some great hand. Under her fingers, the gold wire fastening Trey's torque around the shaman's throat rippled like a living thing. Shocked, she began to snatch her hand away, but before she could move, the tide of heat reached her heart and she was transported to a place of such light, such ineffable beauty, that her soul simply hung, luxuriating.

The sensation lasted for no more than a few moments, but she knew she'd been marked forever. As it faded, her heart yearned, stretching toward it, running, stumbling, in vain pursuit.

Very gradually, she became aware of the cramp in her limbs, the cushioning depth of the rug beneath her, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Here, scout, drink." A mug was thrust into her slack fingers and she drained the water in a couple of grateful gulps. "You all right?" Brin crouched in front of her, peering into her face. Behind him, Trey knelt, frozen, staring at nothing, his face as pale as milk. Tear tracks marked his cheeks too, she noted.

Brin turned to run his knuckles over the other man's jaw. He smiled crookedly. "No escape, now, Trey. It worked."

"Gods, it was Her." The hazel eyes were very wide, green lights flickering in their depths. "It really was."

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“Yes.” Brin pulled him to his feet. “She’s pleased with you and Anje. As for me...” He shrugged. “We’re not exactly on the best of terms.” He planted a big hand in the middle of Trey’s chest and shoved. The other man tumbled back on to the bed.

The shaman turned his dark gaze on Anje and she shivered, her nipples stiffening in a sensual rush. As she put her hand up to stroke the two torques around her neck, her clit began to throb, ripe and heavy, in time with the thudding of her heart. Her tongue crept out to moisten her lips and Brin’s eyes flared.

“For this one night, you are both truly mine,” he growled. “Collared. Linked.”

“Works both ways, mighty shaman.” Trey sat up and put his hands on his hips. “No escape. Lufra, I want to try everything!”

Some sort of silent communication passed between them and their heads swung around, eyes locking on Anje. Alarm and arousal sparked within her. Her thighs were wet. “Oh no, you don’t.” She rose and backed away, only to come up hard against that dratted dresser.

Trey laughed. “Oh yes, we do.” He cocked a gleeful brow at Brin. “How long do you think we could keep her on the brink?” She would never have thought someone as sweet-natured as Trey could look so evil.

The shaman’s dimpled grin was blinding. “With the link? Hours, easy.”

Anje dodged his grasp and ran.

Slowly.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

There is little to interest the traveler in Quaremel itself. Although it is the capital of one of the Ten Nations, it remains a small administrative seat. The only buildings of note are the Royal Council Chambers and the Temple Offices. However, the Temple of Lufra, located two miles beyond the settlement, is a natural wonder well worth seeing, though permission is difficult to obtain. Apply to the Temple Offices.

“Feolin and environs: a traveler’s guide”, 3rd ed, Miriliel the Burnished, 10353 ATF.

Perched high on the broad back of Trey’s vran, Anje turned her body full circle. Her brows drew down. They’d passed the small, neat settlement that Brin said was Quaremel proper and headed out to the temple.

Except that there were no buildings to be seen, only a sheltered valley, cloaked with an ancient forest of sorrowtrees and candlewoods, the biggest she’d ever seen. Though it was mid-morning, the light was twilight dim, full of gently shifting shadows. Three days to the Day of the Dark.

“Where’s the temple?” she asked.

“Right here,” replied Brin. They’d barely slept, but she thought he looked more weary than

sleepless—weary right down to the heart. He dismounted and Trey lowered her down into his waiting arms. As he tucked her hand into his big, warm one, Anje became aware of the murmur of voices and a gawky lad loped out of the trees and skidded to a halt in front of them, eyes saucer-round with excitement.

“B-Brin,” he stuttered, coloring as his tongue tripped him up. “Lady Chel s-said to s-say she’s been expecting you.”

“I’ll bet she has,” muttered Trey as he handed the reins of their vranee to the boy. He squared his shoulders and took Anje’s free hand, his own firm and faintly moist. “Let’s go, then.”

Go where? Her puzzlement increased as they entered the verdant dimness of the forest and the voices grew closer. The path opened up into a clearing and her mouth dropped open.

Brin’s grip tightened. “Behold,” he said softly. “Lufra’s temple.”

Before them stretched a vast, shadow-dappled expanse, bracketed by two lines of simply enormous sorrowtrees, their graceful, weeping branches interwoven to form a roof of living green. The forest floor beneath them was carpeted by a rippling sea of grass dotted with small flowers, their white starry faces upturned to the stray shafts of light piercing the canopy above. The whole space rustled and swayed on unseen currents of air.

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Anje inhaled deeply. The air felt crisp and clean in her lungs. It smelled green, of rising sap intermingled with a piercing sweetness.

“Goddess daisy.” Brin indicated the flowers and at once she recognized the perfume. It was in the herbal soap the Feolin used, the one she liked so much.

About a dozen people were clustered at the far end of the temple, dwarfed by the soft, cavernous volume of it. As she walked down the nave with the men she loved more than life itself, the grass yielded under Anje’s boots, clinging to her ankles, before slipping away, almost reluctantly. What would it feel like brushing against her bare skin? She shivered.

“Brin!” A tiny woman wearing a long, tightly fitted gown detached herself from her companions and rushed forward, her hands outstretched. “You’re dreadfully late.”

The shaman stepped forward to catch her up in a hug, her head pressing against his ribs, but Anje didn’t hear his rumbled reply. She couldn’t drag her gaze from the statues gleaming in the shifting shadows. There were four of them.

Maiden, Mother, Crone and Harlot. Lufra smiled at Her worshippers, depicted as a slender girl barely old enough to have breasts. And there She was as a crone, her wrinkled face stern with wisdom. As the Mother, Her lovely head was bent to the child in Her arms, Her belly proud with new life.

They were made of the same pale stone as the figure on Brin’s dresser, inlaid with silver and gold and colored gems that splintered the light, but it was the final statue that dragged the breath from Anje’s lungs and made her head swim.

The goddess embraced a dragon, not much bigger than She. Her smooth limbs were twined around the

scaly torso. The creature's gold-tipped claws dug into the soft flesh of Her hip and its leathery wings wrapped Her up. At first glance, it appeared the beast was devouring Her, but a more careful inspection revealed that Lufra was laughing, Her head thrown back. One hand she clasped the dragon's rigid, pointed phallus, while its forked tongue slid over Her milky throat.

It was the most beautiful, frankly sensual thing Anje had ever seen. A deep burning warmth suffused her belly. Trey's arm curled around her waist. "The Lust Dragon," he murmured. "Her most popular aspect."

Gratefully, she leaned into his solidity, only gradually becoming aware of the silence. Four men wearing snowy white sarongs and six women in gracefully clinging gowns stood frozen, staring.

At her.

Not a limb moved, not an eyelash flickered. She folded her arms and tilted her chin at an aggressive angle. "What?" she demanded. "Haven't you seen a Child of the Mother before?"

"Well, no." The small woman released Brin and held out her hands. Automatically, Anje bent to catch them in hers. "But know you are welcome." She must have been well into her forties, but she was lovely still—her powerful, natural presence enhanced by a mature, confident beauty. It could only be Lady Chelisand, the cousin Trey found so

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formidable. The resemblance was there in the set of her cheekbones and her auburn hair, several shades darker than Trey's. The High Priestess cocked her head to one side and scanned Anje's face, feature by feature. But when their eyes met and tangled, Chelisand snatched her hands back as if they'd been singed.

Pressing her lips together, she stepped away and bowed her head, a dignified, graceful gesture that conceded very little. "You honor us."

She turned to Brin, the gown parting on one side to reveal a slice of creamy flesh, all the way to her hip. She wore nothing beneath. "You were right, shaman," she said. "She's the one." A delicate brow arched in Anje's direction. "What's your name, Child of the Mother?"

The link flared with warmth and Brin's calloused palm came to rest hard and comforting on Anje's shoulder. Some of the tension whispered out of her. "This is Anje," he said, his deep voice carrying clearly in the soft air. "My Bondmate."

The silence rang like a thunderclap. One of the young women shifted abruptly, then stilled. Another gasped audibly, her hand over her mouth, eyes stretched wide with shock. Chelisand turned to frown them down. Her gaze traveled to the torques nestled in the collar of Anje's shirt and her brow furrowed. "An unnecessary complication." Her lips compressed again. "The Rite will be harder on you. Maybe even impossible. Brin, how could—"

"Chel." Trey cleared his throat. His hand tightened on Anje's waist. "That's not all." He stroked his fingertips over the battered torque that circled his neck.

Chelisand's smooth brow creased as her eyes narrowed. "I don't understand." Her tone remained absolutely even, but Anje thought the admission irritated her.

Ah Mother, they were fine, her loves! No woman had ever been gifted with so much. An echo of Trey's rueful laughter ghosted through the link and she knew what she had to do. "Trey is my Bondmate also," she said. Let Chelisand and her priestesses make of that what they willed!

The High Priestess whirled on Trey, her skirts flying. "That's impossible," she said flatly.

Trey just looked at her, a small smile playing over that carnal mouth.

Chelisand dragged in a breath. "If they fail—"

Trey shrugged. "I know."

"Chelisand." Brin's dark baritone jerked the woman's head around. A flush darkened his high cheekbones, but his gaze was level, uncompromising. "There's more." His hand closed hard enough on Anje's shoulder to make her gasp. "Trey is mine also. They both are. And I am theirs."

Chelisand's beautiful face went slack with surprise. Her mouth opened and closed. "What?"

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A ripple of reaction ran through the shamans and priestesses. Someone gave a sharp bark of nervous laughter, swiftly stifled. A woman whimpered, deep in her throat.

The High Priestess pushed a lock of hair out of her eye. Her hand trembled. She swallowed. "Tell me," she said in a thready whisper.

"The Bond is three-way," said Brin. "We did it last night." He indicated the statues with a jerk of his chin. "It wouldn't have happened without Her approval. You should know that."

Chelisand shook her head. "Of all the men in the world, I would never have believed—"

"Believe it," growled Brin. He tucked Anje under his arm and swooped on Trey, kissing him hard enough to make him stagger.

He drew back, still gripping Trey's jaw. "Go." His hand fell away. "Go, before I—" The link rang with love and grief, reverberating like a temple gong. Brin inhaled sharply and turned his back on the other man.

His dark eyes seemed to penetrate to the depths of Anje's soul. "Scout." The kiss was deep and swift. Before she had a chance to respond, he was striding away into the forest, followed by a gaggle of priestesses, tripping over their long skirts as they broke into a trot to keep up.

Anje swayed with shock as the link shut down and Trey's arms circled her from behind. "I'll be with you." His voice was warm against the side of her throat. "Remember it, Anje. Always."

Chelisand put a hand on his arm. "Come, little cousin. You can't help them now."

Slowly, Trey released Anje and stepped back. The despair in his expressive face wrung her heart. She tilted her chin and forced a smile, though her belly roiled with fear. "Go," she said. "I love you." Then she turned and walked after Brin into the dimness of the forest.

Behind her, she heard Chelisand say, "Let's have a cup of robbery and a chat." Trey's noncommittal grunt made her lips quirk.

Before she could reach the shade of the trees, a stocky man stepped in front of her, forcing her to a halt. "Lady Anje." He bowed deeply. "I am Laran, your team leader."

"Team?"

His teeth gleamed as he smiled, but his dark brown eyes were very serious. "We will be responsible for your care until the Rite commences." He gestured. "There are four of us who have been honored. This is Ged." Ged was young, lean and lithe, with a wide, laughing mouth and a long tail of dark blond hair hanging down his back.

"Berde." As he bowed his greeting, she thought Berde might be another relation of Trey's. There was a distinct glint of red in his thick curls, though his expression was so grave it didn't resemble Trey's at all. The overall impression was of dignified composure.

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"Jasha." This one had dreamy eyes and a poet's mouth. His cheeks were flushed with excitement. He was brown and compact, no taller than she was.

"This way." Laran ushered her down a different path.

"Brin had six."

"Your pardon, Lady?"

"Brin had six," she repeated. "But I only have four."

"There's a lot of him to go around." Jasha laughed. "Four is customary, but so many of the priestesses volunteered, Chelisand increased the numbers and drew lots."

"I see." As she relaxed her fists with an effort of will, she caught Laran and Berde exchanging a glance over her head.

"Here we are, Lady." They'd reached a low building set in a lovely clearing. The gentle chatter of running water filled the air as a small stream cascaded over a set of pinkish rocks, setting lacy ferns nodding. It was very pretty and it filled Anje with the darkest suspicion.

"Come in, please." Ged held a door open for her, his smile guileless.

"This way." Gently, Laran took her arm and guided her into what was clearly an ablutions room. It was far more luxurious than Brin's, with a huge bath big enough for...

Anje came to an abrupt halt.

"Lady Anje?" It was Laran again.

"What?" she said gracelessly, her heart banging against her ribs.

“Do you understand what we are to do here?”

“I think so.”

“Nonetheless, I will make it clear.” Laran looked past her shoulder and nodded. Immediately, Ged knelt to remove her boots and Berde unlaced her shirt and pushed it back, baring her breasts. Jasha was swishing a hand in the bath water, cheerfully naked, displaying a taut, muscular ass.

Anje choked. “No. Stop. I—”

Laran ignored her instinctive protest. “In order to participate in the Great Rite, you must be at an absolute razor’s edge of sexual tension. Powerful enough to send you mad. We have only three days to get you to that point.”

Berde pulled down her treads. Anje fought the urge to cross her arms across her body. Her mouth was as dry as dust. Submit, she thought, *don’t fight*. But it was so hard, when they *smelled* wrong. She gritted her teeth, wanting Brin and Trey so badly it hurt.

“Each of us has been chosen for a particular gift.” For the first time, Laran smiled and the effect was beautiful with his earnest brown eyes. “The only prohibitions are that we may not hurt you unless you wish it and that you must not offer to the Goddess until the Rite. If it’s any consolation, we may not offer either.” He stepped back and scanned her from head to toe. A strange expression flitted across his face. It looked very

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much like regret. “You are exquisite, Lady Anje. The Law means that we cannot fuck you, but it will be our privilege to pleasure you to madness. But first you must be clean.” He nudged her toward the bath.

“I bathed last night!”

“You must be clean, inside and out.”

After a startled second, Anje perceived his meaning and her self-control shattered. “No!” she growled and palmed the knife from her forearm sheath, the only thing she was wearing.

But not even a Child of the Mother could hold off four determined men indefinitely. Half an hour later, she lay panting on a high, padded table, rigid with humiliation, every orifice sluiced, every crease scrubbed. They’d enjoyed it, the bastards. Every one of the four was naked and they were all hard. The odor of male musk hung heavy in the air. She jerked her attention away from all that jutting flesh, from intriguing differences in length and girth and list. Tastes lingered on her tongue, Brin’s imperious bulk, spiced with heat and darkness, Trey spilling into her eager mouth, hot and metallic and beloved.

As if to add insult to injury, her nostrils were also teased by the scent she loved, reminding her painfully of Brin’s herbal soap, of the smell of his skin. Goddess daisy, he’d said.

Mother of the world, if this was what was happening to her, what were those women doing to him? She fumbled for the Bond link, searching desperately, but he’d shielded himself so completely, it was like beating her head against a wall. Trey she could reach, a tiny green ember at the back of her mind. He was exposed, raw and trembling, feeling all that she felt.

Shit.

Drawing on all she'd learned, she emulated Brin, pulling back into herself, erecting a wall to protect those she loved. *Lonely*, she keened, deep inside. It was so lonely being brave. She barely felt Jasha rubbing her hair with a towel, Berde's hands spreading warm, fragrant oil over her back.

There could be no doubt about Berde's gift. He had superb hands, hands that tortured and soothed, titillated and teased. By the time he'd finished her shoulders and neck, she was so unglued, she could barely remember her name.

Jasha crouched by her head and fed her sips of a chilled fruit drink through a straw. It was delicious, tangy and refreshing. As he set the cup aside and began to comb out her hair, Berde shifted his attentions to her lower back and buttocks. The gentle friction, the delightful pressure, heated her flesh, beginning at the base of her spine. The tingle was like the taste of iced sherbet on a hot day.

At Laran's murmured command, they rolled her over and Jasha and Ged began massaging her feet, pulling gently at her toes. Berde stood back, sucked in a breath and flexed his fingers. Anje tensed, but he grinned and bent to her upper arms. Her nipples had stiffened, moisture leaked from between her legs.

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"Drink." Laran proffered more of the golden fruit juice and she gulped thirstily. He followed it with small cubes of fruit. It was all luscious.

Her head began to swim. Unconsciously, she arched her back, but Berde's talented fingers slid past her breasts and traveled to her ribs. Anje bit her lip.

By the time he reached her thighs, she was at a slow boil, shifting restlessly under his touch. A pulse beat in her sex, teasing and tightening her clit. Runnels of fluid trickled down the inside of her thighs.

"Drink," insisted Laran, and suddenly, she knew.

"Drugged," she gasped and was horrified to discover she could barely speak.

"That's right," he agreed. "It's herbs. An aphrodisiac mixed with an inhibitor. There's so little time." Now she recognized the expression on his face. It was pity.

"No." With an enormous effort, she raised a hand and pushed the cup aside.

"For the moment, then. But it's working." Laran studied her with a narrowed gaze. "Your eyes are flaming." Turning to Berde, he asked, "Finished?"

Mother, no! She opened her mouth and snapped it shut again. Her nipples throbbed for a touch, her sex was swollen and wet as a ripe fruit.

But Berde nodded. He was.

Anje moaned as he stepped away. When she glimpsed a beautifully sturdy cock springing out of a nest of brown curls, she slammed her eyes shut.

But the torture had only begun.

Jasha's tender touch as he massaged her hands and shaped and buffed her fingernails made her breath come short. When he slipped her forefinger into the warm wetness of his mouth and sucked, she choked, her hips lifting off the table.

It didn't seem to matter where they touched her, every contact, every brush of flesh on flesh electrified her skin, swamped her mind. She writhed.

"Lady Anje." Laran swung her up in his muscled arms and strode into an adjoining room. As he lowered her to a vast bed, she got her hands around his neck and plastered her lips against his, thrusting with her tongue, desperate for relief.

He froze for a second, then sank his fingers into her hair and kissed her back with bruising force. Just as abruptly, he ripped his mouth from hers and pushed her away. "Gods!" One hand slid down to his cock and squeezed hard. Over his shoulder, Anje saw the other three ranged, their eyes wide, cocks rampant in their fists.

She wet her lips, forced out words. "Do it. Please."

Laran shook his head, breathing hard. "Lufra's tits, you're something! Are you sure you've had no training?"

"Only Brin." Her head thrashed. "Want them. Trey."

Laran crouched by the side of the bed and took her hand. His brown eyes were soft, but determined. "My dear, I'm sorry." He looked over his shoulder. "Someone get the blue vial."

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When he removed the lid and the familiar summer-grass perfume wafted out, it took three of them to hold her down, while Laran spread the pink cream in a thick layer all over her sex, from her pubic mound right back to her anus. He was meticulous about the application, his dark brows drawn together in concentration, as he anointed every fold and crease.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Judge carefully. Pain in the right measure produces pleasure. But too much pleasure is pain and too much pain just—hurts.

Precepts of the Lady Chelisand, High Priestess of Lufra.

Anje had only a few seconds grace before waves of hard, driving lust rolled over her in a flood of sensation. Inside her, the tiny portion of her mind that retained some semblance of sanity watched in horror. Blood rushed to the petals of her sex, until they swelled and puffed, a dark sexual pink. Heavy battle drums set up a beat in her pelvis and her whole body shook to the rhythm of her frantic heart.

Ged and Jasha held her legs open while Laran wiped the cream away with a warm, damp cloth, just as carefully as he'd applied it.

Then they all stepped back, four masculine gazes riveted to her naked sex, four cocks quivering, gripped in hard fists.

Ged let out a gusty breath. "Lufra, what a gorgeous cunt." He ran admiring fingertips over her outer labial lips and she whimpered. "Smooth as silk. All plump."

"Hotter than the flames in her eyes," agreed Jasha. "Gods, this is killing me!"

Completely beyond shame, Anje splayed her legs open and tilted her hips. With a cry of triumph she plunged two fingers into her flooded sheath, pressing her thumb against her engorged clit. With the first violent rub, she felt her climax approach, thundering down her nerves like a stampede of vranee down a valley.

Not one of the men moved so much as a muscle. Their faces were stark, intent. The orgasm swelled over her in a soaring chorus of ecstasy. Anje stiffened all over.

It stopped.

Mother damn it, it stopped!

She threw her head back and screamed her rage and frustration. Then she leaped to her feet and hurled herself at the door. It was a matter of self-preservation. If she couldn't touch Brin and Trey in the next two seconds, immerse herself in them, she was going to implode.

Laran and Ged caught her after two strides. Jasha tossed them a length of black leather. Before she could collect her shattered wits, Laran had bound her hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're dangerous. Look what you did." He jerked his head. His face scarlet, Berde was mopping his belly and genitals with a cloth.

It got worse after that, much worse, the hours merging into a kind of delirium of pleasure so acute it was agonizing. Jasha whispered filthy stories of the Goddess in her

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ear, his voice husky with lust. Ged would lie and kiss her for hours—tender, nibbling touches over her face and neck, deep and drugging kisses on her mouth. Or he'd drag the hot, satiny skin of his cock over her ribs, her belly, her breasts. Berde massaged every muscle into satiation, every nerve into excruciating expectation.

Laran orchestrated the torture. He was an expert at judging when she about to reach complete sensory overload. Then they'd let her sleep for a few hours. But inevitably, someone would wake her from fevered dreams in which Trey pummeled her without mercy, while Brin devoured her mouth as though the world was ending. Each time, she'd open her eyes smiling, her lovers' hoarse endearments ringing in her ears, confident her release was only seconds away.

Though the men shook with desire, they avoided touching her aching nipples or her naked, quivering sex. By the third day, their faces were grim with frustration, every cock rock-hard, each set of balls drawn painfully high. But they remained relentlessly tender.

It grew harder and harder to rise above the frantic demands of the weeping void within her, until it was

all but impossible. An animal, she was an animal, a beast in heat, her hips jerking, her sex weeping torrents of desire. All she wanted was to rut, to be penetrated. Again and again and again.

Primitive terror mixed with the mindless, hammering lust. What if she wasn't human anymore? She was all straining nerves and wet, empty flesh. Where was Anje? All the Anjes she knew—the scout, the fond aunt, the canny hunter, the woman of honor?

They would know—Brin in his shamanic wisdom, Trey with his groundedness, his perception.

Berde stuck his head around the door. “Lady Chel just sent a lad with the one hour warning.” He leaned against the doorframe, staring, the hunger stark in his face. “She’s not quite there yet. What are you going to do?”

Laran rubbed his chin. “She’s part of a three-way Bond. Some visual stimulation, I think,” he said. “Jasha, would you and Ged...”

The two young men exchanged a glance. “Just us?” asked Jasha, a flush running up under his tanned cheek.

Laran shrugged. “Let’s see what develops,” he said diplomatically, bending to secure Anje’s restraints to the bedposts.

Ged clambered over her spread-eagled body, his dark blond hair brushing her cheek. Gently, he kissed her cheek. His words whispered past her ear. “Is this how they do it, Anje?”

Her eyes widened as the mattress dipped and Jasha positioned himself, his brown hands gripping the fair skin of Ged’s hips. Ged went on, “Do you know, I dream of Brin and his fabulous cock? Gods, he’d split me in half.” He swallowed as Jasha slid into him. “But I’d die happy.”

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Anje’s teeth pulled back from her lips. “Mine.” The growl was so entirely beast, a fellwolf could have done no better.

From the foot of the bed, Laran murmured, “Keep going.”

Jasha pulled Ged back into his chest and reached around his body to grasp the other man’s cock in both hands. He tugged at it brutally, pulling it away from Ged’s belly and releasing it, again and again. His hips jerked rhythmically as he timed his thrusts, maximizing the sensations for his partner.

Ged gurgled, deep in his throat, but he kept his eyes fixed on Anje’s, refusing to let her look away. “Do you watch them fuck, Anje?” he gasped.

“Don’t—” Eyes squeezed shut, she thrashed beneath him, the leather straps biting into her wrists and ankles.

Ged lowered himself until the satiny head of his cock rubbed her naked, slippery cleft. Her entire body went into a racking spasm and she shrieked. They waited her out. When she stilled, panting open-mouthed, Jasha set up a careful rhythm that kept Ged’s delicious hardness sliding over her slickness. The relentless murmur started up again. “I could take them both at once, Anje. Think of it.”

Mother help her, she could see it! Ged servicing them both, Trey's gorgeous cock jammed down his throat, while Brin powered ruthlessly in and of his tender ass. All that hard, hot, masculine muscle and power.

No! Love and possessiveness and lust swelled into a mighty conflagration. It exploded. *Not yours! Mine. By Lufra, mine!* She arched hard into the unyielding body above hers and Ged groaned. He dipped his head and plastered his mouth to hers, his tongue stroking deep, while his cock caressed every screamingly sensitive, sucking fold.

"They could have me for the asking, Anje. Jasha too. Four of us, Anje. Sucking and fucking. Offering."

No! Every muscle in her body went rigid with rage. *They are MINE!*

On the mental shout, the Bond link split wide open and every nerve, every organ, every cell, flooded with exquisitely excruciating sensation. Brin's powerful presence swamped her and she rode within his massive body, experiencing pleasure so overwhelming it was agony beyond endurance. His balls ached as though they were crammed in a heated vise, muscles cramped all through his back and thighs, even his jaw hurt. And his cock was so swollen, so tight with the desire to blast its seed, that it wept blood with the torture.

She hissed as she absorbed with the shock. Sweet Mother, the torments of the damned!

His precarious, hard-won control shattered, driven to the brink by her weakness. Desperately, he tried to slam the link closed, shut her out, but it was too late. Their souls flew together and locked like the parts of an intricate puzzle.

A puzzle made of lust and anguish and duty. A puzzle with a missing piece.

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Trey's scream echoed in her head as the unshielded impact of both links slammed into him. Needle-sharp, the shards of pain and loss flayed her bloody. The leather about her right wrist stretched and tore as her muscles bunched.

A male voice shouted, "Lufra, she's going!"

Brin scraped his last reserves together for a final act of will. As he strained, the link flickered and winked out.

And she was alone again. Alone in her skin. Scoured out and empty.

Gratefully, she felt the psychic burden overwhelm her physical self, all her senses shutting down, one at a time. As she slipped into cottony darkness, she heard Laran's voice. "Lufra's tits, that was close. Come, I've got her."

The blessed relief lasted no more than a few minutes. Groaning, she levered her eyes open to discover she was cradled in Laran's arms, her wrists still bound with soft padded restraints made of leather. Jasha, Ged and Berde stood beside him, each with his hand somewhere on her bare skin, maintaining the maddening contact, reminding her of what they'd done to her. Shudders racked her body, so that Laran had to press her to his chest to prevent her from shaking herself to pieces.

Light from a dozen tall, flaring torches illuminated a circle of grass, gleamed warm on huge pale figures of stone. Beyond the magical space, shadows shifted and rustled in an ominous twilight. Lufra's temple on the Day of the Dark.

Thudding softly out of the darkness, drums beat like a dying heart doling out its final days. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

"Scout." Hoarse, guttural, the whisper was barely recognizable as human.

Laran set her on her feet, but Anje barely noticed.

They'd lashed him to a wooden framework, spread-eagled in a star. Brin's huge, body had been depilated and oiled, every inch of it. In the torchlight, the muscles of his long, brawny thighs, gleamed, bunching. Continuous ripples ran under the smooth, olive-toned skin of his torso and his hips jerked in a carnal rhythm he was obviously powerless to prevent.

The movement drew Anje's gaze inexorably to his groin. She surged forward and only the grip of four determined men kept her from him. Whimpering, she stared, licking her lips, while the emptiness in her belly convulsed, contracting and releasing as though she held that giant shaft lodged tight in her sheath. Wetness flooded her thighs.

The dragon tattoo heaved with his rasping breath and his penis towered straight up past it, unmoving, so congested with blood, the head was a dark, angry purple. Tight around the wide base was a leather cockring, studded with shining metal. It bit cruelly into his turgid flesh. The torchlight caressed every inch of the shaman's cock with lascivious delight, lingering on the clear fluid that streamed from the inflamed slit in his cock head, tinting it red with fire. She'd never seen anything so magnificent, so rampantly male.

"Scout." There it was again.

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Anje met his eyes and staggered. She would have fallen if Laran and Berde had not supported her. His eyes were no longer black, they were blazing pits filled with fire.

Bottomless.

Totally ensnared, she stared back, her entire being yearning toward the shaman. Brin grunted as if he'd been gut-punched and threw back his head, the dark hair flying. "We burn, scout," he rasped, barely audible. "We burn." His nostrils flared and the frame creaked with strain as he pulled forward, the great muscles contorting.

Lady Chelisand stepped forward. There were dark shadows under her eyes, but otherwise, she was as composed as ever. "Nearly over," she said. Glancing around the temple, she said with authority, "Clear the area. Quickly now."

People melted silently into the darkness until only Anje and Brin were left, with their teams and Lady Chelisand. "Make your farewells," she said briskly, pitching her voice to carry over the pulsing beat of the drums.

Growling deep in her throat, Anje watched as the six priestesses filed past Brin. Tears streaked more than one lovely cheek. Two kissed his mouth, one threw her arms about him and pressed her head to his

chest for a long moment. But the other three had the temerity to wrap their mouths around his cock, to run their hands up his long thighs, stroke the cheeks of his beautiful, dragon-kissed ass.

Mine.*My soul.* Anje's rage made her shake so hard, Ged wrapped his arms completely around her from behind, bracketing her with the warmth of his body. It didn't help, the mindless fury had her clenching her fists so hard, the nails dug crescents in her palms.

"Goodbye, darling. Good luck." Jasha took her cheek in his palm and turned her head so he could kiss her mouth.

Berde bent his head and without a word, sucked a nipple deep into his mouth. Anje couldn't hold back a cry at the heated, suckling pressure. Brin's angry rumble echoed around the clearing.

But it was Laran who brought her undone. Kneeling, he took her thighs in his hands and widened her stance, backing her into Ged's hard body. Angling his head, he licked up and down her dripping folds, his tongue gentle and absolutely thorough. By the time he stopped, she was crying aloud, in small helpless, jerky whimpers.

Brin roared with rage and the frame rattled and shook as he fought his bonds. Blood trickled over his chin from where his teeth sank into his lip.

Laran rose and bowed over her bound hands as if she were a queen. "Be strong, Lady Anje. You can do it." He glanced at Chelisand. "Ready when you are, Chel."

The High Priestess raised a hand and a pure, sexless alto voice snaked out of the darkness, dancing a sensuous counterpoint to the drums.

Chelisand moved to stand behind the shaman. She said sharply. "Now!" Metal flashed blood-red in the torchlight as she and Laran slashed bonds simultaneously.

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Released, Anje and Brin came together with a thundering shock, breast to breast, thigh to thigh. Anje bent her head to worry at the hot skin of his chest, growling in her throat, her hands skimming frantically up and down the wonderful expanse of his back. He was burning, almost too hot to touch. The shaman's great arms closed about her like a vise, lifting her off her feet, until they were eye to eye.

Mewling deep in her throat, Anje fell into the flames there and some fundamental part of her soul sheered off. After the most infinitesimal of hesitations, the dissolution gathered pace, like an avalanche thundering down a mountain. Unstoppable. Destruction incarnate.

She threw her head back in a scream of defiance, ripping herself free of Brin's grasp with inhuman strength. The goddess pattern on her back burned like acid, writhing beneath her skin. As she flexed her shoulders, wings snapped out in a great arc of supple, silvery webbing, soft as chamois, tougher than Hsrda-hide. Humanity fled completely. One thrust of her muscled haunches and she was airborne, bugling her triumph, thundering through the canopy of the sorrowtrees, scattering leaves and broken branches behind her.

Magnificent! Gods, it was magnificent! Waves of energy rippled through her limbs, shimmering on overlapping, scallop-shaped scales. She banked, soaring into a graceful turn, the wind rushing beneath her wings, lifting her to glory.

Puny human voices drifted up to her from the torch-lit glade. “No! Trey, you can’t—” A woman’s voice rose high and sharp out of an angry tumult. “Get him out of here!” Men shouted and scuffled.

Not that it mattered. Not when there was such strength and grace in her huge body, such freedom in the expanse of shadowed sky. Streaking over the dark landscape, she twisted and rolled, reveling. A trail of phosphorescence floated in her wake, making her scales gleam with sumptuous hues of amethyst and violet, a spice of indigo on the flanks.

A huge, gentle voice resonated in her head. “Child.”

Anje drifted, riding the winds on her silver wings, listening, looking. Her great, faceted eyes pierced the darkness. In a spotlight circle far below, two tiny figures lay entwined on the grass. As she watched, completely indifferent, a man ripped himself from a knot of struggling bodies on the periphery and flung himself over the couple, sprawling full-length.

“*Child.*”

Ah,there .

Her soul exulting, she turned and launched herself toward the soft veil of fire that filled the horizon, intoxicated by the beauty of it, dazzled, enthralled. From below, a thin, insect voice cried, “Anje, no!”

Out of nowhere, a dark streak shot toward her. She rolled aside, barely in time. A roar of rage shook the sky as he hurtled past and one ruby-tipped talon scored her flank. Anje shrieked in fury and a stream of white-hot fire shot out of her nostrils.

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Somewhat taken aback, but grimly delighted, she surveyed the interloper. He was a handsome beast, black and scarlet, surrounded by a nimbus of golden fire. Although he was heavier in the shoulders and hindquarters, more powerful, she had him beaten for wingspan. As he wheeled through the shadowed sky in a breathtaking display, she glimpsed a huge, pointed phallus, clamped along his belly.

The voice murmured, “Show me how you dance, pretty ones.”

Dance? She’d show him a dance he’d never forget. A Mating Flight for the ages.

With an ear-shattering clap of displaced air and an insolent scream, she sped past him, passing right beneath his arrogant, scaly nose. He was on her like a flash. Stretching her neck, she fled toward the fire, the enormous power of each down stroke propelling her cleanly through the air.

“Anje, turn back!” For an instant, she faltered. Surely, she knew that voice?

The heat of the black’s huge body blanketed her back, the downdrafts of his wing beats buffeting her about. With deafening bellow, he clamped his great teeth into her shoulder, holding her steady as they hurtled through the sky. A twist of his massive hindquarters and he’d maneuvered them onto a different trajectory, away from the fire.

Anje fought. She wanted the black, but she wanted the culmination of the goddess fire too. She *deserved* the rapture of it, she knew she did.

“Offer for Me.”

Pulling in a breath, she swiveled her long neck and directed a careful stream of white flame over the black’s ribs. When he growled and flinched, she ripped herself out of his grasp and darted back toward the pulsing heart of the inferno. As she increased her speed, she caroled her joy aloud. He was right behind her, racing her to glory, desperately trying to overtake, to get between her and the fire.

She exulted. They’d arrive there together, she and her mate.

The world-embracing voice said warningly, *“Don’t scorch your tails, little ones.”*

“Anje, if you love me, *stop !Now!*” It reverberated in her skull, startlingly loud. Desperate. Urgent.

“You’ll die!” She shook her head, trying to block him out, but he was persistent as a bite me. “Brin too, Anje! *Brin!*”

An agonized moan. “We love you! Come back!” It dropped to a whispering sob. “*You promised ! Oh Anje...*”

She slowed her headlong flight, puzzled. Someone *loved* her? Someone...human? On the thought, the Bond link flared as though it had been waiting to pounce. Green flame twined around her silver, tugging, pulling with shocking strength, like muscled arms banded around her. Gold joined in, caressing her soul, insisting imperiously on her humanity. Dominating, demanding.

Holy Mother! Brin and Trey!

The intoxication disappeared as though it had never been.

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All the strength went out of her body. Her wings folded and she dropped like a stone toward the heart of the goddess fire.

“NOOOO!” The masculine scream echoed in her ears and then cut off abruptly.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Feolin—Religion—Lufra:

The patron deity of the Feolin, Lufra is a goddess of love in all its forms. She may be depicted as Maiden, Mother or Crone. However, her most popular aspect, particularly among Feolin men, is as a divine Harlot, the Lust Dragon—the personification of sexual excess.

In summary, Lufra embodies the eternal female principle.

Excerpt from the Great Encyclopedia, compiled by Miriliel the Burnished.

An eon later, she opened her eyes in a dream. She was cradled in an enormous lap, the Mother’s round,

gentle face hanging over her. The goddess smiled and ran a finger over her cheek.

Tears sprang to Anje's eyes. "Am I dead?" she asked, like a child.

A vast, womanly chuckle shook the goddess. "*You're certainly not alive.*"

Anje tried to struggle up, but her limbs and her thoughts were weighted with a delicious lassitude. "Where's Brin? And Trey?"

"*I can't tell you.*"

"Oh." Anje thought about that and frowned. Anger moved slowly through her. "Can't or won't?"

The Mother smiled again. Who'd have thought a divinity would be so blithe? "*I like your nerve, child. You please Me.*"

"Don't see why," she said stubbornly. "We didn't offer. And after all that, too!"

Another deep chuckle. "*You're a delight, Anje. Know that I enjoy your courage and your love as much as your offerings. You shine.*"

Offerings. Anje rubbed her eyes and levered herself upright, clinging to one enormous finger. "Holy Mother, you're Lufra!" she exclaimed.

This time, the Mother laughed outright, from the belly like a man. They both rocked with it. "*Took you long enough!*" She said.

All amusement left Her voice. "*I am all that is Woman. The sweet, the fierce, the weak, the clever. All.*" Her features flickered, changing as though molded by a master potter. Maiden, Mother, Crone and Harlot. Anje squeezed her eyes shut, confused and awed.

Surely, this was a dream? It felt very strange. "I won't live without them," she said.

"*Indeed?*" The tone was chilly. "*You presume, child.*"

Paralyzing dread swept over her, froze her wits. She ducked her head and made herself as small as she could, trembling.

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"They have played their part." The goddess cupped the back of Anje's skull in Her palm, implacably gentle. "*You, little one, will do as I require. You will do it bravely and with all the love in your heart.*"

"Yes, but..." Anje wet her lips. "Please. It's Brin and Trey I love." She dared to glance up at that inhumanly beautiful face. "And Brin's been true to You all his life."

Lufra's voice rolled like thunder. "*Do you dare to bargain with Me?*"

Anje winced. Her mouth was too dry to speak, but her entire being resounded with pleading. *I beg You, Holy Mother. Please.*

“Know that my plans are subtle, centuries in the making. Beyond your ken. Still...” An eternity of sheer terror later, the goddess chose to be amused. *“You don’t like Me much, do you, child?”* Anje ducked her head, her heart pounding. The goddess gave her a tiny shake and her teeth rattled. *“I know what you called Me.”*

She smiled and the curve of Her lips made Anje’s head swim. *“You’re a lovely morsel, child. So bold. It would serve you right if I kept you. Come here.”* Her long fingers met around Anje’s waist as She lifted her up.

Falling into the star fire of the divinity’s eyes, Anje shuddered, tremors racking her body. She raised a hand to shield herself from the infinite, fire-filled depths. *“Offer for Me, darling,”* murmured the goddess. Her perfectly sculpted lips descended to press over Anje’s and breathe sweet gusts into her mouth.

Anje’s soul convulsed with ecstasy. Over and over, in a culmination of every moment of true love and desire she’d ever felt. Her body was part of it, but only a part. Piercing tenderness gripped her, a love so all-encompassing, so powerful, she knew the light would illuminate her soul for as long as it existed. She’d been given a gift beyond price.

The gift of life.

Tears streamed down her face and dripped off her chin, pooling in the pit of Brin’s throat. She had both arms and legs wrapped around his huge body, and she was crushed so close that the only way to get closer would be to crawl inside his skin. As he was inside hers.

His massive cock was rammed as high into the soft folds of her body as it would go and it was rippling with climax, the contractions so violent his entire body jerked with the rhythm. Tortured groans shuddered from his chest.

Panting, she raised her head. Her throat was scraped so raw she could barely speak. “Brin?” she husked and on the words, a powerful aftershock leaped from her pelvis and ran up her spine to flood her heart with warmth. Quivering, she burrowed closer.

His breath stirred her hair as he stilled. “Here.” His trembling hands framed her cheeks. “Oh, love.”

As they clung together, the light strengthened and the Shadow released its grip on the Sun.

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It was a tiny sound, no more than the shadow of a moan, but Anje glanced down. The sight forced a shriek out of her. “Trey!” She untangled herself and sprang from Brin’s arms. “Gods, no!”

He lay with one hand clasping Brin’s calf. The other arm, the one he’d draped over her knee, was a ruin, a mass of blisters and burned flesh. His face was turned to one side, chalk-white, ribbons of blood trickling from his nose and ears in a hideously cheerful contrast. A black bruise decorated one side of his jaw. Only his chest moved, the breath rattling in his throat.

All else was utter silence. There was no one to be seen, just a long avenue of scorched earth the length of the temple, as if a fireball had rolled down the nave, engulfing all in its path.

Brin moved so fast, he’d cradled the other man against his chest before Anje could open her mouth. “

Chel!” he bellowed, heading into the forest at a rapid jog trot. “*Chel! Where the bloody hell are you?*” Ignoring the flash burn across his ribs, he turned to Anje, his breath coming hard and fast. “Run ahead. Warn them.”

Anje swerved around him and fled toward the building in the clearing as though fellwolves were on her heels. His shout followed her. “And run a cold bath!”

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Chapter Thirty

Sun is set, Shadow too.

Sleep, sweet babe, the dark night through,

In Lufra’s arms and mine,

In Lufra’s arms and mine.

Feolin lullaby (trad.)

Anje drifted out of sleep, a smile on her lips. Her nose was mashed up against the warm, hard curve of Brin’s biceps and Trey had thrown a heavy leg over hers. She could barely move, though her bladder nagged her to get up. Ignoring the urge, she lay for a moment, luxuriating.

Foolish tears swam in her eyes. Her heart warmed as though cupped in vast, loving hands. *Divine Mother, Holy Lufra, thank You, thank You. I will thank You all the days of my life.* The prayer stuttered to a halt. What more could she possibly say? For such love, such an abundance of riches, there were no words big enough to express her gratitude.

She scrubbed the tears away and eeled out from between her lovers, heading for the mundane necessities of the ablutions chamber.

By the time she returned, Trey had rolled into Brin’s side. He was half awake, under the sheet he had one hand on his own fine morning erection, the other on Brin’s. As always, her heart turned over at the sight of his arm and shoulder. Sasreela had done her best and her best was very good indeed, but Anje suspected Trey’s courage and cocky charm had endeared him to the Goddess more than he knew.

She still didn’t understand how they hadn’t lost him. But every day, she got down on her knees and thanked Lufra. He’d been a terrible patient, but after a month of cursing and complaining, the blisters healed and the ugly scabs disappeared. Underneath was not scar tissue, but smooth, creamy flesh without blemish. Not even a freckle. Brin called it the gift of the Goddess. Anje called it a miracle.

He still favored that side. She suspected he always would.

Smiling, Anje put a finger to her lips. “Don’t,” she whispered. “Let him sleep.”

Brin had come to bed in the wee small hours, after delivering Twink’s latest offspring. He lay stretched across the mattress like a fallen giant, taking more than his fair share of room. When Anje lifted the sheet to admire, the dragon tattooed on his loins smirked a toothy welcome. She sighed and licked her lips.

Trey slid out from under the covering and tucked the edges carefully around the slumbering shaman. He lay back and held out his good arm. "Come here, then."

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Anje swooped happily on his delectable cock, swallowing half of him in a single gulp. Trey arched his back and groaned softly. His fingers tangled in her hair. "Fancy a quickie, sweetheart?"

"Mmm." Anje released him with a last lingering lick and cocked a brow. "You want to risk it? You know how he hates missing out. He'll be royally pissed."

"Too bad." Trey rolled her over and drifted a hand between her legs. Obliging, she opened, enjoying his clever fingers, but he stopped. "You do it this time," he said. "I like to watch." He shifted until he could pillow his head on her thigh, inches from her busy fingers.

Ruthlessly, Anje pleased herself to a small, sweet climax. Breathing as hard as she, Trey sighed. "Darling, you are truly perfect." Taking her hand, he sucked the juices from her fingers with relish, then slid into her body, smooth as oiled silk. "With any luck, he'll be mad enough to punish us."

Trey stroked in a leisurely fashion and she shivered with delight. "Punish you, you mean. Gods, you're completely depraved." Her eyelids drooped, thinking of that firm, fair ass reddening slowly under the stinging weight of Brin's heavy palm while she tortured Trey's cock with her mouth. She tried not to smile. "I'll help."

Trey hardened inside her. "Promise?" His beautiful hazel eyes shone with love and lust, and deep in each pupil, a tiny green flame danced and spun.

Tears prickled behind her eyes. She drew his head down and kissed him as sweetly as she knew how. "Holy Mother, how I love you."

Trey rested one elbow on the pillow and cradled her face between his palms. Anje wrapped her legs around his waist and he murmured with pleasure. "No more than I love you, dragon lady." He shot a look at Brin, still fathoms deep, his massive chest rising and falling in a regular rhythm. "Him too, even though he's a controlling idiot."

Anje giggled. "You weren't complaining yesterday."

"Give me credit." Trey swiveled his hips. His cocky grin flashed when she gasped and bit her lip, glancing at Brin. "I'm not that stupid, love. Not when I'm getting it both ways."

Abruptly, his expression grew intent and he began working her with long, gliding thrusts. Anje relaxed, enjoying his skill, loving the ride for its own sake. She wasn't anywhere close, but it didn't matter.

A bead of sweat ran down the side of his strong, young neck, trickling under his torque. Reaching up, she licked it off, nuzzling the firm flesh. The locks braided in the circlet, black and red-gold, shone in the morning light filtering in through the blinds of woven rasa grass. Set in its clasp, Brin's gift of a fire opal gleamed like goddess fire as Trey moved, the muscles bunching in his shoulders.

He sucked in a breath and reared up deep inside her, coming without fuss. To her surprise, his orgasm triggered hers, infinitely sweet and slow.

She smiled up dreamily and pressed a kiss to his good shoulder. "That was lovely."

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"Gods, yes." He gathered her into his body and snuggled her head into the curve of his neck. After a few minutes of contented silence, he said, "I'm visiting Chel today. Come with me? She likes you."

"I like her too. She'd make a fine Matriarch, the Lady Chelisand." Trey's caressing hand drifted across the underside of one breast, wandered to her nipple. Anje yelped.

He froze. "Did we hurt you last night?"

"No, no. I'm just sensitive. Don't stop."

Trey cupped her breast, weighing and assessing. Anje purred and arched.

The silence stretched. Brin mumbled in his sleep. Trey's fingers slowed and came to a standstill.

"Trey?" He was far away, his gold-green eyes curiously blank. With that pouty underlip caught in his teeth, he had the look of a man doing calculations in his head.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing." He gave her an absent smile and a glance that raked her body up and down.

He'd gone so pale, each freckle dusted across his cheekbones stood out separately. "Are you all right?" she asked, concerned.

"Sure." He grinned and pecked her cheek. "Back in a minute." Grabbing Brin's sarong, he knotted it hastily around his hips. A second later, he'd darted out the door. His voice floated back to her, asking for Sasreela.

Puzzled, Anje sank back and yawned. Mother, she was tired! Her bones felt like wax. She curled into the expanse of Brin's warm back and dozed off.

Some time later, she became aware of a weight depressing the mattress and a different voice, a woman's. "Lady Anje, may I speak with you?"

"Wake up, sweetheart." Trey sat at her hip, smoothing the hair out of her eyes. "Sasreela's here to see you."

Anje opened her eyes in time to see him lean over and pinch Brin's nostrils shut with his fingers. "Get up, you big lug. This is important."

Brin shot upright with a grunt and seized Trey's wrist in a bone-crushing grip. He met the other man's smiling eyes and instantly changed the grip to a pull, tugging him down onto his chest. Then he noticed the elderly healer, gazing studiously into the middle distance.

He released Trey. Coloring like a boy, he pushed the hair off his face. Anje was enchanted.

"Good morning, Sasreela," he said finally. "What are you doing here? Trey's fine." He cocked a brow at

the other man. "I make sure he does his exercises." Grabbing his treads, he turned his back and jerked them on.

Anje and Trey watched with interest, but the old woman shot him a look calculated to remind a grown man of boyhood indiscretions. "Trey asked me."

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"It's nothing." Trey shrugged. "I'd like Sasreela to look at Anje."

"I'm fine," she protested.

"You're tired, aren't you?"

She couldn't help the blush. "I have two of you to keep up with."

Sasreela took her wrist, her fingers cool and dry. She closed her eyes, concentrating on her healer's art, while Anje watched the two men exchange a glance she couldn't interpret. A little hurt at being so comprehensively left out, she turned to the old woman. "Is there something wrong with me?"

Sasreela's lips were trembling, her face ashen. Anje's guts roiled.

The old woman asked, "When did you last have your moon-flux, my Lady?"

"What?"

Brin reached out and clamped a hand on Trey's shoulder. Then they froze, still as graven images at a temple door.

"I forget... I've been so busy... Some time ago..." The words trailed off. "*Mother!* It was before... before I met..."

"Sasreela, are you sure?" Brin was so pale, Anje was certain only the hand on Trey's shoulder kept him upright.

Tears streamed down Sasreela's weathered cheeks. "Yes, dear," she said simply. Blotting her face with a fold of her garment, she tottered from the room, leaving a profound silence in her wake.

Brin took a shaky step and fell to his knees beside the bed. He threw his arms around Anje's waist and hugged the life out of her, burying his face in her lap. As she stroked his hair, he began to shudder under her hands, like a spooked vran, and she realized he was crying, harsh, wrenching sobs that were muffled by her body.

"Love, love. Don't." She rocked him as though he was a child, looking helplessly at Trey. But at the expression on his face, she could do nothing but hold out her arms and gather him in as well.

Trey hiccupped, caught between laughter and tears. "Ah, Anje, love. It was a lucky day we found you."

Outside the window, voices shouted and exclaimed as the news spread. A woman shrieked with joy and a man laughed, full-throated. Hoofbeats drummed out of the stable and off down the dusty track to the next ranch.

Anje patted and soothed, while tears of joy dripped off her chin.

The full impact didn't hit her 'til after the emotional storm had passed. Mother save her, she was a scout, what did she know of babies? But then, she'd known nothing of love and she'd muddled through. With the help of the Goddess.

And Lufra knew about children. Wasn't she Mother of all the world?

Still... She drew a breath and need hit her. "I have to pee."

Brin swung her up in his arms. "What you need is a pee and a bath—"

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"In that order," put in Trey, irrepressible as ever.

"Shut up, you," growled Brin, "or I won't let you anywhere above her ankles."

"Bully." Trey dropped the sarong and sauntered ahead of them to the ablution room, putting plenty of swish into that biteable ass.

As they settled into the steaming water, Anje remembered that first time, Brin holding her as he was now, rock solid, watching Trey fuck her, whispering wicked things in her ear, knowing he was next. She trembled with anticipation. Holy Mother, she hoped they weren't going to go all careful on her! Any child of hers would be tough. And any child of...of...

Her thought stumbled. Trey was kneeling, the water lapping lovingly at the heavy sac of his testicles, a sponge in his hands. "Lufra's tits!" he said. "Do you realize—"

"We don't know whose it is," Brin finished.

A deep joy suffused her, warmer and softer even than the perfumed water. "What does it matter?" She laid her palms over her still flat belly. "We'll love her anyway. I don't care if she's got red hair or black. She'll be ours."

Their brows drew down in identical frowns. "He!" they growled in unison.

Anje giggled.

Then she flung her arms open wide.

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About the Author

When Denise Rossetti was very young, she had an aunt who would tell her the most wonderful fairy stories—all completely original. Denise grew up, as little girls do, but the love of stories has never left her. It was only when she dared herself to write down the secret sagas in her head, that life becomereally interesting!

Denise remains an incurable romantic. She loves happy endings, heart-stopping adventure and the eventual triumph of good over evil. All hail the guys in the white hats, she says. Unless the ones wearing black are more...um...intriguing?

She lives in a comfortable, messy old house in the Australian suburbs with her darling husband of more-years-than-she-cares-to-remember. And yes, she knows how lucky she is. She has one of everything that matters—one husband, one son, one daughter, one dog, one cat and, thank heavens, one cleaning lady. Denise is small and noisy and dreadfully uncoordinated and tends to wave her hands around a lot, which can be unfortunate if the tale she's telling happens to have explosions in it!

Denise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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