



Praise for the writing of Jeanne Barrack

Silver Fire

Ms. Barrack makes excellent use of descriptive language and has created a beautiful and exciting erotic fantasy story that I could not put down.

-- Kim, *Coffee Time Romance*

From the first, *Silver Fire* is filled with funny commentary from Mirelle, setting the stage for fun entertainment. Intertwined throughout the tale is a sense of anticipation and danger. It is hilariously entertaining, and I read it within two days.

-- D.S. Shadows, *Romance Reviews Today*

Ms. Barrack has begun her new series with a bang. Mirelle and Jareth are fascinating characters that grow from their love. The author has a wonderful sense of humor and writes some very funny dialogue.

-- Tewanda, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

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

-- Elise Lyn, *eCataRomance Reviews*

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

-- Jeanine Berry, *In the Library Reviews*

Silver Fire is now available from Loose Id.

SAPPHIRE FLAMES

Jeanne Barrack

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:

 SCORCHING

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

Sapphire Flames

Jeanne Barrack

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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

Copyright © November 2005 by Jeanne Barrack

Excerpt of *Spell of Love: Dragon's Desire* copyright August 2005 by Alyssa Brooks

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-179-2

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

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Irene Williams & Karen W. Williams

Cover Artist: Bonni Elizabeth Hall

Dedication

To Steve - I told you I'd name a hero after you (sort of)

To my folks - I know I have their blessings

To those who've crossed the Rainbow Bridge and those who're with us still

To the folks at Loose Id for their faith and support

Prologue

Journal of Lucky Stevens

I'm writing this on a prototype gadget that a friend of mine is tinkering with. He's thinking of offering it to the CIA. I'm not sure why it still works. I only know I'm glad it does, because if I don't put some of this stuff down, no one will believe me.

Hell, I don't believe me.

So, here goes.

When I answered an ad to develop a security team I sure didn't expect to wake up in the middle of an adventure straight out of my wildest fantasies.

Hell, my wildest fantasy can't match up to this.

It started off -- well, not normal, but understandable for New York City. After Orath Belar wrapped his arms around me, I thought I'd stumbled into some strange, gay white slave ring. I thought someone hit me from behind, because it felt like my head exploded and I blacked out.

It was only after I woke up that things got really strange. I was in a small, shabby room with only a few pieces of furniture -- table, chairs, sideboard -- and a hearth fire blazing away. A lantern gave off a feeble citrus glow.

I lay flat on my back, still in all my clothes, on a thin, lumpy mattress on a crude, narrow bed pushed against the wall. No windows, only an unassuming door that suddenly opened.

And in walked Gandalf. Or at least the closest thing I'd seen to a wizard other than in the movies. He was a stocky figure, and his gray beard and shoulder-length hair framed a

beaming face. His wizard's robes bore all sorts of interesting designs like stars and moons and swirls.

And they glowed. Brightly.

I sat up, my back against the wall, and stared in wonder.

He approached the bed, rubbing his hands together with glee.

"So, Mr. Stevens, you're awake. Welcome, and many thanks for joining us." (Like I had a choice.) "My name is Narik set Theran. I am the High Mage of Narwith, Tarnwite, and Mariess." He paused. "At least I was the High Mage. I am no longer."

He spoke with a faint, untraceable accent in a firm, robust voice.

I took a breath, and then another.

"Who the hell are you really and where the hell are we?"

Rather than get pissed off, Narik answered me with a great deal of patience.

"I know this must all be unnerving to say the least, but do trust me, Mr. Stevens, I am a mage. As to where we are ... the world of Hearthome. And I and Prince Orath need your help."

I snorted.

"Yeah, and I'm the president." I looked around for possible hidden cameras and mikes. "This is a pretty good gag, but enough's enough. Look, I won't press any charges if you just take me back to New York."

A look of sorrow crossed Narik's face.

"I'm afraid that's the one thing I can't do. Travel between dream holes is erratic at best, hazardous at worst. As it is, we took a chance transporting you. There were others ... well, let's just say they didn't make the trip well. Now, please, try to keep an open mind while I -- how do you say it -- fill you in."

I clenched my teeth, trying to think logically. The more information I had the easier it would be to get the hell out of here.

"We are in desperate straits. Mariess, Prince Orath's kingdom, has been stolen away, and his half-sister, Talea, has been placed on the throne as a puppet for Jareth set Morath and his brother, Pentar. The youngest brother, Prince Loran, is on his way to seduce her.

"Although believed to be a love child, Orath is actually the true male heir to Mariess. However, since the marriage papers of King Belar and Princess Fardretha are lost, he has no way of proving his claim. To make matters worse, Jareth and his soulmate have convinced the general population that I have contrived to rule all of Hearthome, and so I have been stripped of my position.

"Orath hides his noble nature by playing the fool and a devious, cowardly dandy. He has been banished from his father's kingdom of Mariess and must dwell in his mother's kingdom of Helar.

"We are forced to resort to armed rebellion, but we require your help. We haven't had the necessity for soldiers for over five hundred years. We need your training and expertise, and your ability to go to Mariess and search for the family book that contains Orath's parents' marriage lines."

Listening to Narik, I wondered where he'd come up with these weird names. The poor guy must really be delusional, but he had a hell of an imagination.

He took a deep breath and let it out, his shoulders hunched with weariness.

"Should you find the book, open rebellion may not be necessary."

I stared at him, every word engraved in my mind.

"You've got to be kidding. Is this some sort of elaborate reality show? If it is, you've gone just a bit too overboard. Now, how about you cut the crap and tell me the truth."

Narik stared at me, his eyes striking sparks. He seemed to grow taller and his lips thinned with anger.

"You don't believe me, Mr. Stevens? Let me summon Prince Orath. Perhaps together we can convince you."

On cue, the door swung open again, and the guy from New York who'd brought me here strode in. Talk about one arrogant bastard. He stared right through me, then turned his back as though I were a piece of furniture.

His hair was pulled back like Steven Segal's but his ponytail reached his ass. His eyes were a deeper blue than Paul Newman's and seemed to glow. His clothes were Superman-meets-Robin Hood, only this guy's tights left no doubt he was hung like a horse. An elaborate dagger was sheathed at his side, and his hand rubbed the pommel as though itching to take it out and stick it in my gut.

Narik turned to Orath.

"I'm sorry, your highness, but Mr. Stevens needs a more dramatic display to convince him of the truth."

Orath spoke, his accent more pronounced than in New York. He looked as though he'd uncovered a turd on the sole of his boot.

"Do we really need him? I can regain Mariess without him. It may just take longer."

Narik tried to placate him.

"He has knowledge of Earth weapons and Earth styles of fighting. He has not a trace of magic in him, yet he was able to transport with you to Hearthome. He's receptive to mind merging so he can speak our language with no trouble. He's perfect."

I didn't say a word throughout Narik's speech. I committed all he said to memory, one of my few talents that I didn't list on my resume. I always knew one day it would come in handy.

Orath looked me up and down in disgust.

"You want an example of our powers? Here. Simple but effective."

He smirked, barked out a short string of notes, and twisted his fingers.

And my clothes were gone. Everything down to my jockeys. I gulped.

"Nice trick. What else do you have?"

Another incantation and the clothes were back.

"Here, come with me."

He fisted his hand and drew it to his side, striding to the door that opened on its own.

And I followed like a puppet on a string compelled by his fist.

Narik brought up the rear, calling for Orath to stop.

Orath dragged me along a short, dark hall; opened another door onto a narrow balcony.

And another world.

The trees were wrong. The light was wrong. The houses were wrong. The smells were wrong. The noises were wrong. In small, indefinable ways, nothing was quite right.

Orath hissed like a snake.

"See. This is my world. Not yours. I need your help to regain my kingdom, but that is all I need." He drew me back inside and locked the door.

"Will you help me?" His hand strayed again to his dagger. "Or must I..."

"Orath, you forget yourself. I know you grow impatient to return to your people, but restrain your eagerness."

Funny, I thought he was eager to kill me.

The prince took a deep breath.

"Mr. Stevens, please forgive my short temper, but it has been difficult to see my good friend's character defamed and my mother's name defiled. I grow weary of this masquerade I play. And I keep thinking of my poor sweet cousin, who's an easy mark for Jareth's unscrupulous brother Loran's seduction." Anger laced his words, and it was his real pain that finally convinced me.

I stepped forward and offered my hand. For a moment, Orath hesitated then gave me his gloved hand to shake. He dropped it at once as though afraid I'd contaminated him.

"If we're going to be working together, you better call me Lucky."

Orath snorted with disdain, then stalked out.

Narik clapped me on the back.

"Lucky it is."

I had to believe that somehow or other, I've been taken to a place where magic rules and there are princesses that need rescuing and bad guys who need to be vanquished. After all, I couldn't discount what I'd seen and heard ... and felt.

And I'm going to be in the thick of it.

Man, I'm lucky.

Chapter One

Princess Talea seta Variette grabbed a hank of her hair and hacked it off just below her ear. It fell from her hand and lay on the floor like shimmering rays of the early morning sunlight. Without a shred of remorse she continued to chop off the knee-length strands, leaving a mass of ringlets springing around her face like curly *banta* wool.

Taking off her amber-colored spectacles, she leaned in closer to the mirror above her chest of drawers and gazed at her reflection.

“By the Great Maker, no change!”

She clenched her fists, almost bending the spectacles’ fragile stems, and took a deep, steadying breath, fighting the tears that threatened to spill over.

Leaving the pile of hair for the invisible household *taisins* to whisk away, she threw herself on her bed, buried her face in her arms, and drifted off into a restless sleep. Hours later, a brisk knock jolted her awake.

“Talea? Talea? It’s Eldermother. Hurry, my child. Prince Loran has arrived. Your presence is required. Oh, wear court dress, please. Protocol, protocol.”

By the Great Maker, not him! Why was he here? Was he checking up on how well his uncle Manar was handling Mariess’s affairs? What other reason could he have to come here?

She hurried over to her wardrobe and opened it. Hanging to the side was the daytime gown her Eldermother wished her to wear. She frowned as she took it out and held it up.

Sunlight filtered through the semi-translucent material created by weaving the unique secretions of the *scylla* worm into a fine cloth. It was far too revealing in her opinion.

She untied her favorite robe, soft and faded from years of wear, and draped it at the foot of the bed. Standing before her mirror, she undid the halter top supporting her breasts, and stepped into the half-slip that had lain folded underneath the gown on the hanger. Trying not to muss her hair, she let the dress fall over her shoulders.

The low, square-cut neckline hugged the swell of her bosom while the rest of the gauzy material fell straight down to her ankles. Sleeveless, held up by thin, gold-colored ribbons, the garment showed off her slim, pale arms. She put on low-heeled slippers and picked up her fan. Drilled by her Eldermother in its art these last few weeks, she had become fairly proficient in wielding it.

The image reflected in the mirror looked like the personification of Mariess nobility, save for her ragamuffin hair and her outlandish eyewear.

She took a deep, calming breath, opened her door, and stepped into the hallway. The long, winding flight of stairs should give her enough time to school her demeanor and enable her to face her childhood friend.

* * * * *

Loran nodded every now and then as the Dowager Mother, Lady Galayne, prattled on about inconsequential events. He sighed inwardly. He knew that his time in Mariess would be excruciating while he was stuck dealing with a sickly Princess and her stodgy eldermother. He had no one to rescue him from the interminable court rigmarole. His uncle, Prince Manar, wasn't even in residence but touring the country. Hopefully, the final portion of Tocson's Book would be found quickly and he could leave the stifling atmosphere behind.

But where was the princess?

"Ah, there you are, Talea. What took you so ..."

Galayne's voice trailed off into shocked silence as the tardy princess stepped into a beam of sunlight at the foot of the stairs. Loran stared and stiffened at the vision before him.

The light streaming through her translucent gown revealed an exquisite figure and pale skin. Talea's short, silvery blonde hair curled about a piquant face. Her lush, pink lips, straight, slim nose and high cheekbones were perfection; the only marring detail, a pair of amber spectacles that hid her eyes and her expression.

Loran gulped. A shaft of lust pierced his flesh. He waited for her to speak.

She stepped forward, her hand outstretched for him to grasp.

"Please forgive my appearance. I thought to try out a new hairdo, but sadly lacked the talent to carry it off."

Loran started. A thin string of words in a monotone issued forth from her lips instead of the melodious tones expected from that beautiful mouth. No expression crossed her face, as if a mechanical doll spoke.

He took her cold fingertips in his and bowed formally over her hand, releasing it immediately.

Loran saw how flustered Lady Galayne was as she bustled over to her son's child, drawing her into an almost protective embrace, one that Talea quickly broke.

He couldn't reconcile the gorgeous, lifeless creature before him with the vibrant, young tomboy he remembered. By the Great Maker, what had happened?

"Please, don't apologize, Princess Talea; I find your hairdo quite charming. May I escort you into the parlor?"

He offered his arm, wanting to feel her touch again and see if she bore a pulse. To his utter amazement, she ignored his bent elbow and, almost running, moved toward the double doors off the entrance room.

Lady Galayne, even more nonplused, ushered him into a small, informal parlor. She rang for the tainsins to bring in warm *mangela chai* to drink and a delicate *pommees* tart to eat. The invisible serving hands put the tray onto a small, oval table placed between two love seats. Lady Galayne joined Talea on one while Loran perched on the other. Talea visibly relaxed as though she feared that he might have sat next to her.

The fragrant, spicy scent of the chai wafted in the air. The expensive brew, shipped from Tarol by boat, absorbed the fresh sea air over the seven-day voyage. The spicy, slightly salty taste of the chai contrasted with the sweet flavor of the *pommees* tart.

Loran gazed intently as Talea performed the ritual of pouring the chai into small, handleless cups. With exquisite precision she sliced slivers of tart for herself and Lady Galayne, cutting a more generous piece for Loran.

"Excellent!" He chewed a slice and swallowed some of the chai to wash it down. "My compliments to your cook."

Lady Galayne simpered and fluttered her fan.

"Oh, but I can't take credit for it. 'Tis Talea's own recipe as prepared under her direction."

"Oh?" Loran tried to keep the skepticism from his voice, but obviously failed. For the first time, he thought he saw a spark of animation cross Talea's face. It was gone in a flash as she bent her head, remaining silent, allowing her eldermotheer to defend her.

"Oh, my, yes, indeed. Talea loves to dabble in the kitchen. Do you not, child?"

She looked up from her hands that lay motionless in her lap.

"Eldermotheer, you know I don't dabble. I merely write down recipes from my mother's collection and send them to the cook. 'Tis the cook's skill which should be applauded."

Loran peered at Talea. Her mild reproof of Lady Galayne's fabrication was delivered in the same flat tones.

Why?

The question piqued Loran's curiosity. There had to be a reason for someone to strip herself of all emotion.

And he was going to find out.

* * * * *

Talea looked down at her fingers, so tightly locked with each other they showed bone white. When Loran had appeared, it was as though she'd stepped back in time and her childish crush dashed down on her.

He'd changed, physically. He'd grown a few inches taller, his light brown hair shorter than her own new length, his frame filled out and more leanly muscled. However, his eyes, though not the mage blue of his brothers, still brimmed with that insatiable curiosity of his youth.

Now his gaze narrowed with suspicion as he looked at her. And how could she blame him? She knew the image she presented -- cold and lifeless -- but it was either that or suffer the consequences, and that she could not chance. So she tamped down the lightning charge that had surged through her that brief moment when Loran had held her fingers. How could she endure his being here without losing control?

An awkward silence reigned until Lady Galayne spoke.

"So, Prince Loran, why do you come to Mariess at this time? We are so terribly out of touch here. Is there news from Narwith?"

"The news from Narwith is both good and bad. My brother Pentar and Princess Rayne of Tarol have joined as soulmates. They send their regrets that they could not have you and Princess Talea at the event; it was quite unexpected." He frowned. "Prince Metres murdered his guard and escaped from his imprisonment for trial, but was killed during recapture. Prince Sontar aided him and was also killed. A great tragedy for their families."

Lady Galayne cleared her throat.

"May I ask the reason for your visit to us?" A slight tinge of pink blushed her face. "Your uncle Manar has been wonderful managing the details involved with running Mariess, while I've tried to assist Talea in the proper behavior of a princess." She sighed. "Her education in court etiquette was woefully lacking." She grimaced and shook her head. "Thanks to that heartless father of hers. Oh, not that she's not the most charming, delightful thing ..." Her voice faltered, as though she realized the absurdity of her description. She quickly rallied.

"So, you're here because --?"

"To do some exploration of the caves around Mariess. I'm going to bring back ore samples for some experiments regarding the properties of raw materials and varicolored *lanbeth*." Loran chuckled silently. A more convoluted and meaningless answer he could never make up. He couldn't mention the varicolored lanbeth he'd concealed in his bag was destined for the Mage Council meeting in secret in the town of Riess. He looked toward Talea. Her full lips had thinned. Could she have recognized his answer for the flimflam it was?

"My, my, that does sound ... interesting. Why of course, feel free to enter any of the caves."

"My thanks, Lady Galayne. But I will need some assistance with this; I'd hate to lose my way within the depths of one of the tunnels. Therefore, I hope Princess Talea might aid me."

"Me?"

Surprise colored the gray tones of her voice. And he could have sworn he saw her spoon jump into the air and hover for an instant, then clatter to the table. Of course, that could not have happened. Only a mage could have caused that spoon to fly.

He chuckled and smiled reminiscently.

"Don't you remember how we used to explore the woods and hills around Mariess, Tally? You knew those caves blindfolded."

Talea's fingers gripped the spoon so tightly it bent in her hand. Emotion threatened to break through her chains. Tally. No one had called her that for years. Memories of her childhood came flooding through her, smashing against the dam that contained them. She couldn't deal with it. One more moment in Loran's company and who knew what would happen. She surged to her feet, her cup clattering to the floor, shattering into knifelike shards. Within moments, the taisins gathered the shards together.

"Sorry. I must ... must ..."

She ran to the double doors leading to the garden, and throwing them open, fled from the room.

Lady Galayne stared after the fleeing form of her son's child, for once at a loss for words. She turned to Loran, mouth agape.

With swift determination, Loran took control of the situation.

"Lady Galayne, let's leave the princess alone for the moment. She's obviously quite shy. Perhaps I'll do some exploring on my own, first. Give her a chance to get used to my presence here before I request her guidance again."

Lady Galayne took a trembling breath of relief.

"Oh, thank you so much, Prince Loran. The poor thing, I should never have left her to fend for herself when her mother died." Her mouth thinned. "But I could not abide that ... that woman ..."

"Woman?"

"Princess Fardretha. My son's lover. A horrible woman. Dressed like a veritable pleasure giver." Her eyes narrowed as she gazed at him. "Come, even young as you are, you know the story. All of the seven kingdoms know how Belar carried on. I blame his father." Her voice faltered and a tear trickled down her rouged cheek. "And myself. I was a coward. I left my sweet daughter-by-casting alone to defend herself and then her child against the dissolute behavior of my son." She shuddered and looked down at the fan she played with in her lap. "He flaunted his lovers before her; 'twas why she retreated to that cottage in the woods. And then when she died ..."

She looked up at Loran. "I cannot prove it, but I thought her death most ... unfortunate." Tears fell freely now. "Did she kill herself? Did Belar kill her? Did that woman pay someone to take her life? I'll never know. I only thank the Great Maker that Talea is simply shy and was not ... abused. Of course, there is her extreme sensitivity to light, but she learned to deal with that." She dabbed at her tears with a napkin. "In the long run, her shyness most likely shielded her from the worst of her father's cronies. But she was so alone. Only with you and your brothers did she forget her shyness for a while. But after her mother's death ... and your family no longer visited the palace ..."

She took a deep breath. "'Twas then that woman and her get settled themselves into the royal suite. I did put my foot down at the time and begged Belar to remove her from the palace. But she and Orath continued to visit, always underfoot, or so I was told." She twisted the damp napkin she clutched in her hands. "Oh, I should have come; I should have!" She sniffled. "But I'm here now and I will see to it that that darling child comes to no further harm." She drew herself up and stared through the open doors through which Talea had fled, then turned back to Loran as though once more remembering his presence.

"I beg you, Prince Loran, please forgive the meanderings of an old woman, and keep my confessions to yourself." She smiled, and Loran could see the traces of a once elegant young woman. "Please?"

"Of course, Lady Galayne. We spoke only of the weather." He smiled gently at her. "Now, if you will excuse me, I think I will take a turn in the garden before I retire to my rooms to freshen up." He grinned. "Are they still the same ones at the back of the palace where my brothers and I used to stay? I think we were kept there so that our noisy antics wouldn't disturb anyone!"

A tremulous smile flitted across Lady Galayne's face.

"Yes, those are reserved for visiting members of court, but this time I think you'll appreciate that they lead directly to the gardens. Your uncle mentioned that you enjoy studying nature." She paused. "Thank you again for listening to my prattling. Remember, we dine at seven."

Loran bowed and exited through the doors through which Talea had left earlier. He couldn't hope to catch up with her, but thought to recapture some fond memories of his boyhood visits. He knew exactly where to go.

The gazebo was still standing, though somewhat neglected, the pomees-green paint peeling in spots. Far enough away from the palace, it had served him and his brothers as their own magical place -- in turn, a castle ... a fort ... a mage's retreat ... any place they wished. His steps picked up speed and he hurried over to it, only to pause when he saw the recumbent figure of Princess Talea on the padded bench within.

With far more caution now, Loran moved forward. Talea's court dress glistened, and the pale strands of her curls curved around her face. Her beauty clutched at his heart. Asleep,

with her guard down, she seemed more vibrant. How could that be possible? An aura hovered about her, calling to him.

He entered the gazebo and moved closer to her sleeping form. He stood for a moment more, just watching her breasts move up and down beneath the low neckline of her gown. They swelled above the material, the pale slopes revealing the light blue tracery of her veins. A stab of desire struck him, more powerful than any he'd felt with the willing pleasure givers in the Houses of Barnite. He stretched an unsteady hand and touched her shoulder.

And was flung through the gazebo opening to lie stunned in the dirt.

* * * * *

Talea dreamed. Loran lay with his head in her lap. They were stretched upon a blanket they had spread out beside the glistening pool in the cave of Arlette and Keret. His hair was damp as though he had just emerged from swimming. It soaked through her court dress which, for some absurd reason, she still wore. Loran, however, was clad only in a sleeping kilt. Her hand smoothed the light brown chest hair that tapered down his skin and she played with his flat male nipples. He lay perfectly still. If he moved the dream would end.

And then he did. His hand reached up to touch her face.

"No. Don't. Don't touch me. You mustn't touch me."

If he touched her, he would hurt her. She knew it.

Still his hand moved. Closer. Closer.

"No!"

And she cast him away.

* * * * *

The breath knocked out of him, Loran couldn't move, but watched as Talea sprang up and shouted.

"No!"

She tore the amber spectacles from her face, letting them lie unheeded on the floor. Tears streamed from beneath her fingers and dripped down her chin. She opened unseeing eyes awash with tears.

"By the Great Maker, mage eyes!"

Talea gasped and fell to the floor, searching blindly for her protective glasses. Crawling like a *kyrscha* bug on his hands and knees, Loran scuttled back to the gazebo and picked up the spectacles, handing them to her.

"Here, Tally, here they are. 'Tis all right. Don't be afraid. I won't tell. Swear by the Archer's Star!"

The childhood vow came easily to his lips and seemed to calm the frantic princess. With unsteady hands she replaced the shields both on her eyes and on her emotions.

Somewhat breathless, but regaining her tight control, she thanked him in that flat tone of voice devoid of all feeling that Loran had quickly come to hate. "I don't know what you think you saw, but I assure you ..."

"Stop it! I know what I saw. You've mage eyes, Tally. Beautiful, sapphire-blue mage eyes. And the spoon did dance in the air earlier and you did toss me twenty feet just now. Tally, how? When? I swear I only wish to help."

She scrambled to her feet and sat down on the bench. She clenched her fingers and then slowly relaxed them. Her heavy breathing evened out and calm settled once more upon her features. She sighed, and, speaking in quiet tones showing little emotion, unraveled her tale.

"I've struggled long and hard to maintain this tight rein on my feelings, then you came, and all the control I've fought for fell apart.

"You want to know how I became a freak? I can't tell you; I don't know how. A year after the last summer you and your brothers spent here, I received my first cycle. My breasts grew, my waist narrowed." She shuddered. "My father looked at me ... with an untoward gaze. My mother took me with her and we retreated to her cottage in the royal forest. She urged me to play in the woods and caves away from the palace." She smiled. "I wrote reams of poetry which I declaimed to the birds. Composed music on the *harmonia* and sang silly songs for my mother's enjoyment. We managed to keep out of my father's way and that of his lecherous friends.

"And then, one day I gazed in the mirror and my eyes had changed. The dark gray had lightened. I thought nothing of it. When my fifteenth birthday neared my father remembered my existence. He sought me out." She gripped the fragile gown in her hands, crumpling the delicate material. "A message was sent to us to come to the palace for my bride-casting. We couldn't disobey him. And so we returned to my mother's private quarters. He was there, waiting for us. He looked at me, my hair still in braids, my knees scabby, my face smudged with dirt, and saw beyond that to the woman I had become, and lust filled his eyes. My mother cried out ..."

Talea remembered that moment as if it had happened yesterday. She could recall every word that had been uttered.

* * * * *

"No, Belar, she's your flesh and blood!"

He sneered at her. "She's safe, my Lady. She must stay untouched for her soulmate, Prince Metres."

Tally remained mute, but her mother spoke up.

“How can you know who her soulmate is? Has the bride-casting been done already?”

He laughed. “It has been arranged. The most advantageous match is with the eldest prince of the Kingdom of Narwith.” He looked at Tally again, fingering his beard, his unseemly desire still a fire in his eyes. “I do not relish the possibility of his ruling my kingdom. We shall put off the formal joining for five years. Perhaps by then I’ll grow weary of bearing the crown.” He gazed at Tally’s mother. “You may return to your refuge after the official bride-casting tonight. Clean yourselves up. Try to look a queen for a change, and dress her as a princess, at least. We’ll dine at six and then have the casting.” He started to leave and then turned back. “By the way, Princess Fardretha and Prince Orath will be joining us, as well as the Regent Manar and his sons. The mage Narik will do the casting.”

All that evening Belar flaunted his affair with Fardretha, fondling her at the table in front of everyone. He seated Orath on one side of Tally and Metres on the other. Throughout the meal their hands crept beneath the table to pinch her thigh or grope her knee. They vied for her attention, filling her cup with fermented pomees cider, trying to make her drunk. Orath’s cloying breath dampened her neck while Metres grazed her earlobe with his teeth. Her mother was seated at the other end of the table, unable to shield her from their attentions. Finally, the meal was over.

Narik brought a small table into the center of the room and withdrew the bride stones from their pouch. He threw them upon the smooth surface of the table and peered at them intently.

“The stones reveal the Princess’s soulmate, Prince Metres of Narwith!”

As the cheering rose, Tally and her mother managed to slip away. No one seemed to care that they had left. Upon their return to her mother’s chambers, she locked all the doors behind them. As they prepared for bed, they heard a noise on the balcony. Belar stood there, an evil smile upon his face. Variette drew Tally closer to her as the doors opened wide to admit him.

“You forget, Variette, I am a mage and this is my castle. No door remains locked to me should I wish to enter.” He drew closer. “You may sleep in the outer chamber, Talea.” He picked up a strand of Variette’s long hair that flowed over her shoulders. “Your mother and I have business together.”

Tally was unwilling, but her mother gave her a gentle push and she left. She lay awake all night, listening to the muffled cries emanating from the other room. Later that night Belar came to her chamber. He stood by her bed in total darkness, his gloating voice assaulting her ears.

“You’re awake. Good. Fardretha reminded me that there are ways to enjoy you without damaging your virginity. I shall see you tomorrow evening.”

“My mother ...”

He laughed. “You need not worry that she’ll interfere in our play, my child.”

And he left.

* * * * *

Loran couldn't contain himself. He placed his hand on hers, but she removed it at once.

"Please, Loran." She took a deep breath. "I've still more to share.

"The next day they found my mother dead in her chambers. It appeared she'd died in her sleep; no one investigated. But I escaped. I hid in the caves for days until hunger drove me out. No one came after me. For a while I thought he'd forgotten me. Finally, I returned to my mother's cottage. Only a couple of old servants saw to my few needs.

"And my eyes continued to change, turning bluer and bluer until my eighteenth birthday. Odd little things began to happen. I ignored the signs. Rummaging through my mother's effects, I found translucent slivers of amber. Polishing and shaping them, I devised my spectacles. Then I informed the servants that I bore an increasing sensitivity to light.

"For three years I led a safe life, forgotten by my father and the court. Then, Orath found me one day in the woods. He came after me, tried to grab me and I fled into the caves, where I lost him. Literally. I became invisible. Only after he left and my fear diminished did I regain solid form. 'Twas then I realized that not only had my eyes become mage blue, but I had become a mage.

"And I know not what to do." She took a deep breath. "My safe haven is gone. My eldermothee has become a part of my life, and I long to be close to her. But my condition grows worse. I cannot sing or dance or play music. Should I show the slightest emotion, things happen ..."

Her story ended, she paused. Her hand crept toward Loran's.

"Can you help me, Loran?"

"I don't know. I can but try."

Chapter Two

Talea stared at her hand laying so near Loran's. Such a difference between the two; hers was pale and slim, his tanned and broad. But then his hand reached out to hers and she snatched it back.

"Tally?"

She shook her head.

"I can't, not yet." She looked up at his furrowed brow. "I'm still afraid." She laughed without mirth. "I don't know why I told you all this. I've never revealed it to anyone. Why you?"

Loran shrugged. "I seem to have that effect on people. Besides, you used to tell me everything when we were children. Remember when you smoked your father's favorite pipe and broke it?"

Talea nodded and sighed. "You took the blame for me." Her voice caught. "You took the whipping my father gave you without a murmur." She gazed off as though seeing the scene again. "He would have beaten me, too. I know it. He enjoyed that whipping you got; he must have, to do it himself."

Loran listened to Tally with astonishment. She still spoke with no emotion. How could anyone live like that?

"He's dead now and can't harm you. But Tally, you can't go on like this, shutting your feelings off. There must be a way to control your powers." He sighed and shook his head. "I may not be a mage, but not for lack of knowledge. I can help you; I know I can. There are books, elementary texts I can get my hands on. Meantime, perhaps we can explore your raw talents."

Talea tried not to let any excitement enter her voice, but as she listened to Loran speak, it became more difficult. "Where? When? Loran, I want to feel again. I'll do anything you say."

Loran started. Emotion had crept into Tally's voice as she spoke, and the color of her fan had shifted from gold to silver. Her control had already begun to slip; they couldn't waste any time.

"Tomorrow after the morning meal. We'll go to the cave."

She nodded, knowing which cave he meant. She had seldom visited it after that last summer of freedom with him and his brothers.

"I'll dress for its coolness. Let me go back first now, please. Until dinner tonight?"

Loran nodded. "Until then."

* * * * *

Lady Galayne noted the change in Talea immediately. Oh, she still spoke in a flat tone with no hills or valleys to liven her words, but an air of suppressed excitement surrounded her body.

And she couldn't help notice that Prince Loran seemed unable to take his eyes off her. Of course, he was only the youngest son in the family and not a mage, but he was a dear young man, and to be affiliated with several of the most powerful Kingdoms in Hearthome could only be a good thing.

She tried to hide her feeling of satisfaction. Now, if only they should be soulmates. She sighed. A bride-casting would have to wait during these perilous times, and of course, there was no guarantee that the right match would occur. But one could hope. In the old days, when a casting could be rigged, the preferred match could be arranged. She shuddered, thinking of the tragedies caused by that practice. Though she knew she shouldn't, she thanked the Great Maker that Metres' well-deserved death had spared Talea that heartbreak.

* * * * *

Fearing that the evening meal would be filled with formality and guests, Loran was relieved that only the three of them were eating together. A small, intimate dining room opening off the larger, more elaborate chamber had been called into service.

He noticed the Lady Galayne eyeing him over the several courses served and smiled slightly. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. If it would make it easier for him and Tally to explore the caves together, he wasn't going to deny her a little bit of wishful thinking.

Human servants served the meal. He supposed that it was less draining on the magic essence in the castle since there was no mage, royal or otherwise, to maintain a large number

of taisins. Would Talea be able to care for the taisins once her mage powers were under control? They'd have to see.

He knew that Lady Galayne viewed him as a potential candidate for a new bride-casting planned for Talea sometime in the future. Now that it was known that castings could be manipulated, the tradition was being reevaluated. The lesser nobility -- the offspring of the lord mayors of the various capitals -- and any adult male mage would now be considered in the mix. Loran smiled. Mirelle's reaction to the entire process had been skeptical from the start. Her opinion -- expressed often and with vigor -- was that true soulmates would find each other no matter what. After witnessing the love and desire that his older brothers bore for their soulmates, he had become convinced that Mirelle was right.

"Prince Loran, would you share with us what made you smile? 'Tis quiet enough here; some laughter would go a long way to lifting our spirits. We've seen few people since Belar's death. All his so-called friends left, as did the rest of the noble families." She sighed. "Twould be good to hear something amusing."

Lady Galayne's request cut through his preoccupation.

"Forgive my wandering thoughts, Lady Galayne, and please, you need not remain formal with me. Call me Loran." He chuckled. "I was thinking of all the bonding that occurred just recently. Of course, my brother Jareth and his long lost love, Mirelle. Then, my brother and Princess Rayne. The akosa, Tran and his first mate, Rosta. Rayne's *canid*, Fel and his *shifra*, Sil. And the former shakos-ai of the Jakosai people, Merkatrosa and his sworn mate, A'ynos." He shook his head and laughed again. "Love is in the air in Hearthome. Who knows where it may strike next?"

The elderly female tittered behind her fan, and Loran noted that even Tally smiled slightly.

Lady Galayne rang for the servants, who brought out the traditional Mariess dessert of cream sweetened with *mei* and poured over fresh, tart, sliced pommies. Cubed pieces of plain yellow cake ringed the fruit served in a deep cup. The very simplicity of the dish pleased Loran's palate.

Lady Galayne smiled. "I am so happy you enjoyed dessert, Loran. 'Twas Talea's suggestion. She remembered how much you liked it when you visited here so long ago."

Loran gazed at Talea's down turned face, catching the blush that painted her cheek. And noticed the napkin that danced off her lap. He caught it on the fly and presented it to her.

"Thank you for thinking of me, Talea."

Lady Galayne observed the way Loran's hand lingered as he offered Talea her fallen napkin and the color that suffused Talea's face. She made an instant decision. "I don't know if you're aware, Loran, but the castle gardens are home to several varieties of night-blooming flowers. Perhaps Talea can show you some of them?"

Loran wiped his mouth, his napkin hiding a smile. Lady Galayne was matchmaking in earnest.

Talea looked at Loran, and he nodded.

"I'd be very interested. Would you join us, Lady Galayne?"

She shook her head and tapped Loran's hand lightly with her fan. "You've no need of a chaperon; I have utter trust in you. I shall retire to my rooms, my dears. Enjoy yourselves."

Loran and Talea arose, as did Lady Galayne. She nodded and smiled at them both. "I shan't kiss you good-night, Talea. I know how averse you are to touching."

Within moments Loran and Tally were alone. Loran broke the silence first.

"I thought I'd have to contend with a bustling court, but instead, 'tis the exact opposite."

Tally's lips thinned. "'Tis just as well. I'd find it more difficult to keep up my charade." She smiled, and a dimple appeared in her right cheek. "I think my eldermothe mentioned that the moonlight starblossoms are quite lovely."

Loran grinned. "So I've heard. Shall we see if they've bloomed?"

Loran motioned Tally to lead, relishing the opportunity to gaze unobserved at her trim figure. The pale blue gown she wore this evening clung to her shape, caressing her rounded behind. The long sleeves flared at her narrow wrists. The heart-shaped neckline displayed the slopes of her full breasts. Her short curls revealed a slim, graceful neck. She was exquisite.

Fragrances filled the night air and grew heavier the closer they approached an area encircled by high hedges. A concealed entrance turned the special garden into a private haven.

Loran gasped as they moved through the gap. Tiny, opalescent blossoms shaped liked stars cavorted before his eyes. Frothy, large crimson flowers shimmered among the smaller blooms, their short, thick stems less than a foot above the ground. Tally knelt to smell them, heedless of soiling her gown.

A heavy, spicy scent filled his nostrils, causing a strange effect on his shaft. A bolt of pure lust surged through him. Could the crimson blooms be the legendary aphrodisiacal *bethlan* plant? The only description of the flower referred to their addictive scent.

"Tally, these flowers ... do you know their name?"

She rose, clutching one of the blooms to her breast. Her pupils dilated and her breath became erratic.

"I don't know their name and I care not. I know only that they make me feel alive."

The hand that held the flower dropped to her side and the blossom fell to the ground. Her gown turned the same shade as the petals and swayed with her as she glided toward Loran.

Her mage powers were running wild.

"Tally, try to calm yourself. You need to control your powers. Look at your dress."

She gazed at her gown and smiled.

"You're right. It would be much better like this."

And the dress vanished, leaving her clad in a sheer, flesh-colored, lacy full slip that did little to conceal her nipples and the thatch of silvery curls between her thighs.

Loran gazed, mesmerized at the seductive vision before him. Then he remembered someone might come along at any moment; she shouldn't be seen like this. Tearing off his loose, long-sleeved shirt over his head, he moved toward her near-naked form. At that moment all he wanted to do was throw her to the ground amid the flowers and fuck her till she screamed in ecstasy.

She giggled, turned, and ran out of the garden, across the open grassy sward that lay between the castle and the gazebo.

"Catch me!" And as she spoke, her feet lifted a few inches from the ground, and she flew straight to the intimate shelter.

Still gripping his shirt, he sprinted as fast as he could, her untamed mage flight exceeding his attempt to gain on her. By the time he reached the gazebo she lay in a crumpled heap inside, weeping as though her heart had broken. She lifted her head to Loran; the tears that fell from her eyes turned into tiny pearls and rolled down her cheeks.

"Look at me! What happened back there? What's happening to me?" She bent her head once more, filled with horror at her lack of decorum. Her hands fisted and she beat them against the gazebo floor. "I can't live like this. I can't!"

Loran knelt beside her and threw his shirt over her shoulders. Though it wrenched his heart not to touch her, he confined his comforting to mere words as he gathered up the delicate pearls and stuffed them in his pocket.

"Tally, *meliflor*, I swear to you that I will help you. Those flowers must be bethlan, the most powerful natural aphrodisiac on Hearthome. Your mage powers reacted to them, as did my own emotions. Once we left their fragrance behind, they lost their effect. Now, listen to me. Take a deep, cleansing breath and try to slow down your pulse beat."

Tally did as he suggested; gradually regaining her self control. When she spoke again, the flat tones had returned. "Please forgive my unseemly behavior, Loran. I shall try to see that it doesn't happen again."

"If you must blame anyone, blame your father. I'm sure the gardens were planted under his direction."

She nodded. "I should have recalled that. My mother spoke of them to me. He'd had them planted when I turned thirteen. She warned me never to go into them with either my father or any of his cronies."

“I shall have the garden taisins destroy the flowers. Now I know why my father used them for gardeners rather than humans. The effects of bethlan vary wildly from person to person. Some become addicted to the fragrance and even ingest the petals for their unique properties.”

“The addiction is almost impossible to cure,” Loran said. “There are those who will prostitute themselves in an attempt to maintain the climaxes created by bethlan. Thank the Great Maker, it isn’t plentiful.”

Tally’s voice fell to a whisper. “Loran, if you choose not to help me with my ... problem, I’ll understand.”

“On the contrary; what happened tonight only reaffirms my determination to help. We’ll meet as planned tomorrow. Now, is there a back way into the castle that we can use so we won’t be seen?”

Tally thought for a moment. “Around the back of the kitchen. There’s a trellis I often climbed when I was a child; it should still hold my weight.”

“I’ll escort you there and then go around through the front entrance. Come.”

Moving as quietly as possible, they reached the shielded latticework and Loran gave Tally a boost. He watched as she moved like a tree climbing *tregart* until she reached her window. Clambering through, she disappeared from view, only to pop her head out a moment later.

“Thank you, Loran. Here!”

His shirt fluttered down to his waiting hands.

“Got it! Good night, Tally.”

“Good night!”

Loran stared up at Tally’s shuttered window. Absentmindedly, he brought the shirt, still warm from her body, to his face and inhaled. The garment bore an enticing combination of Tally’s scent and a trace of the bethlan. He buried his face deeper into the folds and a shudder ran through him.

Thank the Great Maker Tally was no longer in reach. It was all he could do not to throw discretion to the moon, climb the trellis, enter her room, and make love to her. Slipping back into the shirt, he sauntered around to the front entrance and, without encountering anyone, made his way to his room.

Entering the room’s bathing chamber, he turned the spigots, filling the tub. Delving into his pocket he took out the handful of delicate pearls. They glistened in his palm. Shaped like the very tears from which they were formed, they pulsated in his hand as though they lived. He took a clean handkerchief from one of his bags and carefully wrapped the gems, tying the handkerchief tightly and placing it back into the bag. Safe for now.

He began to strip off his clothes then paused, his shirt in his hands. Normally he would have placed it in a hamper for the household taisins to clean, but not this time. Reentering

the bedroom, he turned back the sheet and spread the scented garment on his pillow. Shaking his head, he continued to undress. He toed off his boots and pulled down his leggings.

Naked, he strode back into the steamy bathroom and slipped into the warm, silky water in the tub. Lathering a washcloth, he ran it along his arms. The water caressed his skin and the soapy cloth slid along his flesh. The slightly rough material felt wonderful, invigorating and arousing him. Dipping the material below the water, he passed it along his shaft, but quickly dropped it, replacing it with his fingers. He closed his eyes and remembered the few, brief touches of Talea's soft, smooth skin.

He dreamt of a Talea who could take him in her hands and fondle him, her fingers circling his flesh, moving up and down his rod as she brought him to climax.

His loins tightened; his breath came in short, harsh pants and his hands moved faster. As his head fell back against the tub's rim, he licked lips suddenly dry and bit down hard, drawing blood. The sudden, sharp pain acted as a catalyst and he climaxed. His seed seeped between his fingers and mingled with the liquid in the tub. He licked the blood from his lips as his hands fell limp beneath the water. His racing heart slowed back down to normal.

He stood, water dripping from his body, and grabbed one of the fluffy towels hanging nearby. Never before had he experienced such a sharp, sweet intensity of feeling. The thought of seeing Tally tomorrow, of being close to her, speaking with her, filled him with joy.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and moved toward the bedside. Flipping back the coverlet, he let the towel drop and slipped between the sheets. He turned his face into the folds of his shirt, Tally's fragrance in his nostrils, and fell asleep.

* * * * *

Tally took a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh. She turned to her mirror and looked deep into the image before her. Nothing was any different, yet everything was. For the first time in a long time a feeble ray of hope shone in the night.

And it was all due to him, to Loran.

Her childhood hero had come to her rescue again. She closed her eyes, flung wide her arms, and twirled around faster and faster.

And found herself suspended inches above the floor. Gasping, she fell into a heap, her jubilation cut short. She shook her head. No, not again. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders. She stood and lifted her chin. She would not allow herself to fall back into despair. She would learn how to deal with her mage powers.

And she would finally live her life to the fullest.

* * * * *

Tally approached the gazebo with a spring in her step. She carried a pouch that held a long, coarse, warm skirt and a jacket. Hiking boots and thick knee-high leggings filled another sack. She prayed that Loran would be waiting for her.

She grinned, remembering how they had gobbled up the morning meal. Fortunately, her eldermothe always slept late and hadn't witnessed their inelegant dining.

After the meal, Tally had gone back to the kitchen to coax some food from the cook, who held a soft spot for her. She'd returned with cold slices of pommées tart, fresh cheese, butter sweetened with mel, biscuits warm from the oven, and a water bag filled with pommées cider.

* * * * *

Loran paced back and forth waiting for Tally's arrival. As planned, Loran brought with him a list of simple spells he'd committed to memory. Though his intonation couldn't produce the desired results, his ability to exactly reproduce the sounds would stand in good stead while Talea honed her talent. He relished the opportunity to use the knowledge he'd gained to teach her. Though at one time he might have envied Talea's mage ability, he had learned long ago to deal with his own lack.

He'd decided the skimmer would get them to the cave faster than hiking. They'd have more time for exploring both Tally's mage abilities and searching for the Book.

"Am I late? I'm looking forward to a nice, brisk walk." Tally's voice, though flat, still conveyed more emotion than yesterday. The very air seemed to vibrate with her excitement.

Loran couldn't at first see any untoward spillover, then he realized that the air *was* reacting to her mage talents. Dancing dust motes outlined her shape in the sunlight.

The sooner they got to the caves the better.

"Let's take the skimmer I arrived in. It has the location of the caves ensorcelled in its destination list. We'll have that much more time to do what we need to do."

"Seems like a good idea. Let's go."

Sitting next to Loran in the skimmer, Tally immediately plied him with questions. "What are you going to show me first? How to become invisible? How to make an unending supply of pommées tarts? How to create taisins?"

Loran raised his hand. "Stop, stop! Did you ever see your father or any other mages do magic spells?"

She shook her head. "My father seldom conducted any that were good for anything other than his own sexual pleasures. He added a few personal attendant taisins for the castle and the garden taisins but didn't use his mage power often. He left that to Narik."

Loran's mouth thinned. "Narik defeated the Master Mages of Mariess and Tarnwite during annual trials and was appointed Master Mage of Narwith. The man possessed such power. Who knew he wanted so much more?"

Tally nodded.

"You're right. Who could have foreseen the lengths he'd go to achieve his greed? And how much control he'd have over my father. I now believe that he guided my father's actions. For after my mother became pregnant with me, my father never returned to her bed." She absentmindedly wrapped a blond curl around her finger as her memory drifted back to her childhood. "You know, we have very little Mariessian lanbeth. I heard the whispers when I was a little girl, and I recall the servants talking among themselves when they didn't realize I was around. It was a scandal that my father wasted his essence with lovers and not his soulmate. In fact, I can't believe my mother and he were true soulmates. I'd wager that theirs was one of those contrived bride-castings." She turned and stared out the window. "There's so much I don't know. I've never traveled anywhere; I cut myself off from other people. My mother taught me at home and so I never had any friends." She turned back to Loran. "Except for you and your brothers. That's why I treasured our friendship so much. But I feared to keep up our contact."

Loran reached out and grasped her hand. Wonder of wonders, she allowed him.

"I'm sorry now I didn't try harder to remain in contact, but then I got my hands on some of Jareth's mage texts. I begged him to teach me to read the special language and then I devoured them. I committed every spell to memory. I knew I was going to become a mage." He smiled at her, laugh lines crinkling around his eyes. "I was going to astonish them with my prowess. By the time of my eighteenth birthday, I was more than ready to begin my training." He paused. "And then my eyes didn't change. And my powers never came and I felt like I had wasted my time. I had all this knowledge and no way to use it." He took a deep breath and smiled. "But now I do." His smile broadened into a grin. "You'll be the best damn mage Hearthome has ever seen!"

Tally chuckled.

"Quite a goal; I'll try not to fail your confidence in me."

Loran reached out and lightly touched her hand.

"You could never do that." He peered through the windshield. "Looks like we're here. Grab your change of clothes and I'll get the other bags."

The skimmer slowed and finally stopped at the foot of the hills bordering Riess, the capital of Mariess. Barely waiting for it to stop, Loran threw open the side door and jumped out. The skimmer skidded to a halt and Tally gracefully disembarked. Loran offered his hand but she refused, still skittish about touching too much.

"You can dress behind that boulder. I'll wait here."

"I'll only be a moment."

He nodded and turned his back, his hands in his pockets. Tally appeared to act more at ease each time they were together, but that certainly didn't include disrobing in front of him.

"I'm ready."

Loran spun around at the sound of Tally's voice. The loose clothing masked her slim figure but would keep her warm in the caves' cool interior. She looked like a sweet street urchin -- utterly charming.

"Well? Have I a spot on my nose?"

"I'm not sure; let me take a closer look."

He stepped nearer, peering at her spotless features. Her spectacles still covered her eyes. Moving swiftly, he slipped them off. Her sapphire-blue eyes glinted.

"Nope. Can't find a thing."

"Then give me back my glasses."

He shook his head.

"You're not going to need them inside the cave; they'll only hinder your ability to see. I'll return them when we leave."

Tally placed her hands on her hips, opened her mouth, then shut it.

"You're right. I don't wear them when I visit the caves." She raised her hand to shield her eyes as she looked around. "I haven't been to the cave of Arlette and Keret for a long time. Jareth and Mirelle were the most recent visitors. I hope they left the lanbeth lantern." Suddenly she stopped and pointed toward the right. "There. The akosa-winged stone. Our landmark."

With the stone to guide them, they easily found the cave's entrance and within it, the lantern. Loran unlatched the sides and the light shone brightly.

"Jareth said we'd have no trouble finding the chamber. Just shine the light on the arrows we carved and follow them."

"They're on the high side of the wall. Let's move quickly. I don't want Eldermother to worry about us."

"Follow me closely."

They proceeded through the tunnels leading to the chamber at a steady pace. Following the twists and turns they finally arrived. It had been many years since they'd been there together and the beauty struck them anew.

The shimmering amethyst crystals lining the walls and the glistening pool appeared like the stuff of myths. The waterfall hiding the remains of the doomed lovers cascaded into the water below.

Loran spoke in hushed tones.

"Leave the bags and let's explore the niche where Arlette and Keret are laid. The Book may be hidden there."

"I hate to disturb them. It's almost like sacrilege."

"I know, but we must look. We can't let the Book fall into Narik's hands."

Unhampered by the carry bags, they clambered to the ill-fated lovers' final resting place, praying that the Book lay waiting for them there.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

After Orath's dramatic exit, Narik turned back to me with a sigh.

"Prince Orath can be a bit ... moody. He's had little experience dealing with those who have no mage abilities." He smiled. "I must say I am impressed by your equanimity, Lucky."

I shook my head. "You gotta keep an open mind in the security business. Assess the situation. Get all the information first."

Narik beamed. "Excellent attitude. Now, I presume you want your carry bag."

He went to a cabinet in the corner and pulled out my battered tote bag. I had specially fitted it out with a false bottom and extra padded sides. I was itching to see if my Microtech automatic knife was still concealed there with the little recording gizmo. I had packed only the one knife for personal protection.

"You'll find everything still there, including your weapon and your device." He hesitated. "What is it? I had no wish to tamper with it without your consent."

"It's just something to write down my thoughts."

I thought he'd take it away from me, but he surprised me, instead.

"You may keep it, but conceal it. Perhaps it may come in handy."

Heading to the door, he paused and pointed to a pitcher and a bowl of some exotic fruit. A glass dome covered what appeared to be a wheel of cheese. A basket held rolls and biscuits.

"Help yourself, Lucky. I've work elsewhere. Rest." He smiled benignly. "You'll need it."

He shut the door behind him and I heard the lock snick shut. I let out a whoosh. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath all this time. Now, I was suddenly starved. I ate, my thoughts too jumbled to think straight.

Maybe snatching some shut-eye was a good idea. I'd be able to think more clearly. First, though, I set down what had happened on my gizmo.

I lay on the cot and closed my eyes, doubting I'd actually fall asleep. Several hours later, Narik shook me awake.

Chapter Three

The waterfall's gentle spray misted the air as they climbed, slightly dampening their clothes. Within moments they reached the shallow niche in which lay the remains of the doomed lovers. It seemed odd to Tally that the skeletal forms didn't repulse her, but the aura that hovered around them was one of peace and love.

Each hand bore a silver ring with a deep purple stone. Reaching out, Talea touched the ring on Arlette's hand and fell back in amazement into Loran's arms as the stone glowed with a fierce light.

"Tally, are you all right?"

Loran's arms encircled her. Picking up her hand, he turned it over, trying to see if she had sustained any injury.

Finally catching her breath, she could only manage a whisper. "I'm fine, Loran. It only surprised me. It didn't hurt me."

Loran shook his head and cursed under his breath. He clasped Tally's shoulders, but she shifted, slipping from his grasp. He clenched his hands, his words filled with frustration.

"Don't put it on! I don't think you should take a chance. See, it's still glowing."

"I think I just woke it up. With that much power, it easily could have hurt me if it wanted."

And once more Tally reached out to touch the ring.

"Careful, meliflir. Perhaps you should ..."

Before he could restrain her, her fingers gently touched the slim ornate band. It slipped off the bony digit, fell into her palm, and her fingers curled around it.

"No, Tally!"

She turned her face and looked at him with wonder in her eyes. "It wants me to; I can't resist. Don't worry, Loran. I know for sure it won't hurt me."

The ring vibrated. The stone glowed. Slowly, Tally slid it upon her right hand. She gazed at the silver band encircling her finger and then looked back at Loran.

"It fits perfectly." A smile crossed her face. "See, I knew it wanted me to wear it."

Loran quirked an eyebrow. "Oh? It told you this?"

She balled her hand and punched him in the arm. Pretending great pain, Loran rubbed at the spot, even as he chuckled.

"Don't laugh! It didn't speak; it just feels right somehow."

An astonished look came over Loran's face. "Do you realize you've spoken and acted with emotion since we came to the chamber and nothing unusual has happened?"

Tally gasped, and her eyes widened. "You're right! Could the cave somehow nullify my powers?"

"I don't think so. I think it imposes an outside control on them. Why don't we try an experiment? Let's go down to the chamber floor for now. We can explore the niche later."

They picked their way down to their bags and Talea took a blanket and spread it out. Loran sat opposite her on the edge, idly making patterns in the fine sandy floor. He stopped and spoke without preamble.

"All of the spells that a mage learns are comprised of specific arrangements of twelve tones. These are the same musical notes used by all musicians. Produced by a trained mage, those very tones create magic. The spell can be just a couple of notes or a long string, but they must be done exactly or the spell is wrong and can cause strange results." He gazed at the look of concentration on her face and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. I know you'll do fine. Let's try a simple one. If your mage ability is gone, nothing will happen. But I think it more likely that the cave will give your spells more focus."

"Do I have to wave my hands or anything?" She looked at her slim fingers and the ring now gracing her right hand.

Loran laughed. "Well, some spells do require patterns to weave the words together, but those are more complex. You can let your hands relax." He paused. "Let me think."

Tally stayed quiet, not only giving Loran time but also taking the opportunity to try to absorb everything he'd told her so far.

Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "Let's see if you can change the color of the blanket. You did this without thinking before and it's a fairly simple spell. What color would you like to change it to?"

Tally thought for a moment. "Pommeees green."

Loran nodded.

“Good choice. I know that one by heart. I’m glad you didn’t pick some more exotic color. Here’s the spell to change something from one color to pomees green. It helps if you visualize the color.” He grinned. “Oh, you needn’t wave your hands.”

Carefully, Loran intoned the words to the spell while Tally concentrated.

“The words aren’t like any I’ve ever heard before.”

“The language of magic is unique; the texts are written in a specialized script. Come to think of it, I’ll have to teach you the language.” He chuckled. “You’re trying to delay the inevitable, aren’t you? Well, do you want to give the spell a go?”

Tally nodded. “Do it again, please.”

Once more, Loran intoned the words.

Taking great care, Tally repeated the spell.

And a beautiful, bright green color crept over the length of the blanket.

By the time the color neared Loran, Tally’s eyes were shining. When it reached him, she couldn’t contain her excitement. She threw herself into his lap and they toppled over.

Loran quickly righted himself so that Tally was seated in his arms. He tweaked her nose and hugged her, actions he never thought she’d accept before this moment.

Suddenly realizing that Loran’s arms were about her, Tally tried to pull away. He tightened his hold.

“Relax, meliflir. You know I won’t hurt you.”

For a moment she hesitated, then, giving a deep sigh, she leaned her head against Loran’s shoulder and settled deeper into his tender embrace. She closed her eyes and let her body relax and her hands lie limply in her lap.

Loran’s heart ached at the gift of trust she’d given to him. How many years had it been since someone had held her, loved her? He bent his head and lightly kissed her tousled curls, inhaling her unique scent.

Tally felt Loran’s lips brush the top of her head and stiffened. But it was Loran, her hero, her friend. She let the emotion wash over her and snuggled against his chest. She could feel his heart beating, slow and steady. She could stay this way forever, just listening to his heart.

How could she thank him for all that he had given her in just one single day? She lifted her head, reached up and cupped his face in her hand, turning it so his lips were just a breath away from hers. And kissed him.

His lips were soft and slightly moist, his face lightly stubbled. He brushed his lips back and forth against her mouth, teasing her. His tongue outlined her top lip and pushed, just a little, between her lips, coaxing her to open her mouth and let him in. His arm drifted down to her slim waist and he tightened his hold.

She squirmed, brushing against his unruly shaft that insisted on responding to her innocent movements. She felt his prick thickening, lengthening. His fingers gripped her waist just a bit more and their breathing became erratic. He thrust his tongue deeper into her mouth, delving for her sweetness. She let him guide her, turning her so that her breasts thrust against his chest. She whimpered as he drew his mouth away and whispered against her lips.

“Let me touch you.”

Tally’s mind whirled. Loran’s body pressed intimately against hers should frighten her, but it didn’t. She felt his arousal against her bottom, and the only thought she had was to clench her muscles around the hard ridge. Her breasts tingled. She wanted ... she didn’t know what she wanted.

But she knew what Loran wanted. “Touch me.”

Loran’s hand hovered near her breasts, then fell to the side. “What do you want, Tally? Do you truly want me to touch you? I’ll only do what you want me to do. Tell me.”

She took a deep breath. “I don’t know. I know I want to make you happy, Loran.”

With the utmost care, he touched her cheek. His voice caressed her heart. “Until you know what you truly want, meliflir, I won’t go any further.”

She pushed and he quickly released her. She slid to the now bright green blanket and bent her head.

“So, you don’t really want me.”

Loran had to strain to hear her, but when he did, he reacted without thought. Gripping her arms, he hauled her back toward him, their faces only inches apart. His voice shook. “Not want you? You can’t know how much I want you. Do you have any idea how beautiful you are? ‘Tis a good thing you never came to your father’s court; blood would have been spilt in the palace when men fought over your favor.” His lips thinned and his nostrils flared. “Metres would have bedded you without a joining ceremony. You incite desire.” His hands slid down her arms and fell to her slim waist. “I can span your waist with my hands.” He caressed her hips and he squeezed, then squeezed again as he cupped her behind. “Your curves fill my hands. And your breasts ...I yearn to touch them.” He clenched his eyes and let out his breath. Like a blind man he moved his hands toward her breasts, just stopping below their ripe fullness. He opened eyes that flashed with intense carnal passion.

“Not want you? I want to throw you down on this blanket and make love to you until you scream my name.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “But I won’t, not until you’re ready. Not until you ask me.”

Suddenly a thought struck him. “Do you even know how a man and woman make love?”

She blushed a delicate shade of pink and nodded.

“My mother told me that love between soulmates is the most glorious thing in the world, but to mate without love?” She paused. “Yes, I know what the act entails.”

She fell silent then, and Loran realized that her body was shuddering with intense emotion. Shame washed over him.

“Meliflir, sweetest flower, forgive me. I hurt you, and hurting you was never my intention.” He took up the small slim hand that bore the ring and brought it to his lips. “Within this chamber lies your freedom. You are my princess and I’m yours to command. I swear by the Archer’s Star.”

Tally nodded.

“Then let’s continue my lessons.” She took a deep, cleansing breath. “What other spells can you teach me?”

For the next few hours, Loran drilled his willing pupil in mage lore. An eager student, Tally quickly memorized the dozen spells he shared with her. Magic shimmered in the air. Her powers were so potent, Loran could only be grateful for the dampening effect of the chamber.

“You look worried,” Tally said. “Are you afraid I’ll turn my eldermothee into a chai pot? I’ll do to my magic what I do with my feelings. Lock them away.”

“Make your guard even stronger. Picture your magic as something solid and then lock it up.”

“In a jewelry box?”

“Aye. That will work. Eventually, you’ll be able to release your emotions a bit and your magic will remain secured.”

Something hummed against his wrist, and he realized his timepiece had been vibrating for some time. He chuckled.

“I thought ‘twas your magic humming against my skin, but look, how late it grows. ’Tis midday. That’s enough for now.”

Rubbing weary eyes, Tally yawned and stretched, raising her arms above her head and arching her back. Loran bit his lip, trying not to stare at her breasts thrusting against her jacket.

“I am tired. But I feel so ... liberated.” She grinned. “Finally I feel like I have some control over my life.” She reached out her hand and gripped Loran’s. “I owe it all to you.”

Loran shook his head. “No. I merely gave you some tools to channel your powers. If you had been able to attend mage school you’d be one of the greatest mages known.” He tightened his grip a bit. “One day all of Hearthome will recognize your talent and you will have nothing to fear from anyone. I promise you this, meliflir. I won’t renege on it.” He smiled, defusing the intense feelings that filled the chamber. “Come. Let’s eat.” He patted his flat stomach. “My belly cries out for food.”

Tally laughed. "Strange, I don't hear a thing. Do we have enough time before we return?"

He nodded. "We'll eat quickly. I need to keep my strength up until the evening meal."

Tally pushed and he fell back on the blanket. He flung his arms and closed his eyes.

"I am mortally wounded. You don't know your own strength."

"Mortally wounded, hah!" A mischievous glint entered her eyes. "I wonder. Are you still ticklish?"

She pounced, straddling his body and, aiming for his waist, began the torture. Laughter rang out as he grasped her shoulders and managed to shift her under him. Now it was his turn. Tally's carefree laughter filled his ears and he exulted. He slipped off her and lay, out of breath, on his back. She cuddled against him, her head on his chest; her hand that bore the ring lay near his waist. The ring on her hand gleamed deep purple.

She sighed. "I'll have to take the ring off. It's too striking." She tugged it and it came off reluctantly. "I'll hide it in my carry bag."

"I'm glad you remembered it." He laughed. "Lady Galayne would think we'd pledged ourselves. I can hear her now. 'My dear boy, I'm so thrilled.' Then she'd crush me against her generous chest and I'd suffocate."

Tally laughed out loud.

"I can't remember when I last laughed so hard." She paused. "In fact, I can't remember when I last laughed." She raised herself on her elbow and leaned over. "In the last few hours I've felt more emotion than in the last ten years. I can never thank you enough."

"Don't thank me yet. We don't know what will happen once you're out of the cave."

She sobered but squared her shoulders.

"Let's see. Let's head back. We'll snack on our way home." She grinned. "I hope that will keep you until tonight."

Loran sighed. "It will have to do. Tomorrow we'll look ..." He frowned, silent for once. "We'll have to skip tomorrow. I have an errand that needs doing."

"Oh? Perhaps I can help."

"I'm afraid not. I have to go into Riess. I'm not sure that you're ready for the sensory bombardment."

Tally nodded with reluctance. "You're probably right. Well, let's see how I do at the palace."

"Baby steps."

"Baby steps."

* * * * *

"Baby. Oh, baby. Yes. That's it. That's it. Don't stop. Don't. Stop."

"I won't stop, Dream Boy. Don't worry. I won't stop. I... oh, yes. That feels so good."

Jareth and Mirelle, their minds merged as one, shared their impassioned lovemaking. The wonder of seeing and feeling exactly as the other did never ceased to amaze Mirelle. Sharing Jareth's intense pleasure as he cupped her breasts made her arch even more, thrusting against his fingers as he caressed her. Jareth's thoughts wrapped around her heart.

"Baby, sweet, sweet baby. I love you."

She thought it adorable that he'd picked up some of her Earth endearments, calling her sweet baby. Whether coming from those oh-so-masculine lips or within his mind they never stopped thrilling her.

She moved on him now, rocking gently back and forth, dipping lower so her breasts were in reach of his greedy mouth. His lips replaced his fingers and he suckled her aching nipples. His teeth bit lightly and she moaned aloud.

His satisfied chuckle filtered into her thoughts.

"The sign of approval: making you voice your satisfaction."

"Who says I'm satisfied?" She grinned. *"Two can play that game, Dream Boy. How about this?"*

She clenched and released her inner muscles, milking him. He groaned. Loudly.

"I surrender."

A smug smirk crossed her face.

"Just what I like: a willing prisoner." She moved more quickly. *"Now, kieron, now. Make the sky explode!"*

Their panting increased as their movements became more frantic. Fiery crimson and icy silver lanbeth gathered above them in a great cloud.

Mirelle gripped Jareth's shoulders, her nails biting into his skin. His hands clasped her waist, anchoring her above him. Her skin glistened with the scented oil he had rubbed onto her earlier, and its fragrance wafted through the air. He loved licking it from her flesh when it mixed with the spicy taste of lanbeth.

He moaned again as Mirelle tightened around his prick. His hands slid down to cup her buttocks, and he could feel her intimate movements through his fingertips. She swiveled her hips and he lost the last vestige of control.

His climax roared through him, dragging hers along with it. The lanbeth fell as Mirelle collapsed on his chest. Their lips clung to each other's and their tongues delved deep. Their shared thoughts were incoherent with love.

Jareth's racing heart beat loudly in Mirelle's ears, so loudly it sounded like someone frantically knocking on the door.

Wait. Damn. Someone was. Mirelle groaned.

“Your majesties.”

“Don’t answer, Jareth. Maybe he’ll go away.”

Jareth’s thoughts answered hers.

“I’m sorry, kiereen. It’s Ronar. It must be something important.”

Mirelle pulled away, sitting up in bed, her breasts smeared with streaks of scarlet and silver lanbeth. A hint of petulance crossed her face as she pouted.

“Tell him to wait. We’re covered with lanbeth. We need to shower.”

Jareth leered. *“I’ll ask him to wait, but there are far more enjoyable ways of removing lanbeth than showering.”*

Mirelle giggled and nodded. *“Make him wait.”*

“Let me make sure that there’s no true emergency.”

Raising his voice, he called out through the door, “Ronar, is there an immediate need for my services?”

“Why, er, no, m’lord. But there are problems with the emissaries.”

Jareth sighed from the depths of his soul.

“Give me a half hour. And ask them to meet me in the smaller justice chamber.”

Mirelle’s thoughts interrupted him. *“Have him meet us, Dream Boy.”*

“You needn’t concern yourself with these petty problems.”

Mirelle sighed and shook her head. *“Will you never learn? There is no problem too petty. I’m going with you.”* She smiled. *“You’ll probably need my help.”*

“You’re right. I need those delicate reminders of yours.”

Mirelle stuck out her tongue. *“Bite me.”*

“Later.”

* * * * *

Jareth strode through the castle halls, Mirelle scampering to keep up with him.

“Slow down, Dream Boy. My legs aren’t quite that long. Why don’t you just magic us to the room?”

Jareth paused for a moment to allow her to catch up and shortened his stride so she wouldn’t lag behind. *“First, ‘tis a waste of mage energy to whisk from room to room. Second, ‘tis good exercise to traverse the length and breadth of the palace. Third, I know you don’t like me to use my powers for every little thing.”* He stopped abruptly and Mirelle almost bumped into him. *“Besides, we’re here.”*

Mirelle frowned. *“Wait a minute. I’ve been to that room. This isn’t the door leading into it.”*

"No. This leads to a room behind the throne. Manar showed it to me." He quietly opened an insignificant door into an unlit chamber. "Now, don't speak, kiereen. Let's take a look and see if we can find out anything interesting."

Jareth moved silently to the wall opposite the door, Mirelle following him. He stopped in front of a small window that revealed the interior of the justice chamber. A royal mage stood before the window adjusting the collar of his soft suede jacket, oblivious to the couple on the other side.

"That fancy mirror hanging next to the throne -- it must be a two-way one!"

Jareth moved behind Mirelle and gently squeezed her shoulders.

"Aye, kiereen. 'Twas how Manar ruled so well as regent. He would leave those who sought his assistance cooling their heels in the other chamber. Often they would reveal information to help him make decisions. Let's see if we can take advantage of the possibilities it offers."

"You are truly wise, my lord."

"Bite me."

"Later."

Raised voices from the other room regained their attention.

"Prince Orath, pay attention! You offered to be our spokesman; we needs must go over our demands."

The royal mage swung away from the mirror. His long, braided hair whipped against the glass as he turned.

Mirelle sneered. *"Peacock."*

Jareth agreed. *"If that fancy bird in your mind is one, you have the right of it. Orath is truly vain about his mage attributes. He has not cut his hair since his eighteenth birthday. He drives his toron-a everywhere at breakneck speed. 'Tis said he even uses cosmetics to accentuate the blue of his eyes."*

Mirelle sensed Jareth's derision and added her own thoughts. *"What I don't like is why he's here at all. He's a sly, nasty bastard. Rayne told me he tried to make a move on her in Mariess. She surprised him with a few moves of her own and had him at her feet begging for mercy before he could do anything to overcome her through his mage skills. She got away from him when other people came by."*

Jareth frowned. *"She didn't tell this to Pen, did she?"*

"No. She didn't want the great thrant to challenge him to a duel or anything."

"Wise move. Orath is also a sniveling, crafty coward. He wouldn't play fair. But come; let's leave the topic of Orath and his weaknesses for later."

"Fine with me."

Two other men moved into the mirror's view. Both were of the lesser nobility, guild masters to judge by their attire.

The older of the two, heavyset, wearing rings on both hands and gold hoops in his ears, bore the thick silver, gold, and copper braided chain of the jeweler's guild of Tolos. He carried himself with an air of arrogance that challenged Orath's. A crystal carafe of chilled, fermented pommes cider stood upon a small table in front of the mirror. He poured himself a healthy draught but didn't offer it to either man. He downed the liquid in one greedy gulp and poured another glass before moving away from the table and returning to his seat. He sank low in his seat, his feet sprawled before him as he sipped at his second glass.

The other guild master was quite his opposite. Skinny as the reeds that grew in abundance in the Hanging Gardens of Larbela, his costume proclaimed him the Master Gardener of those gardens. One of the most famous wonders of Hearthome, the gardens appeared to be suspended from the side of the hills overlooking Larbela, the capital city of the country. Over a hundred small outcroppings jutted from the cliff face, each one bearing different varieties of flowers, shrubs and trees. The fragrances that wafted over the city changed, depending upon the season. Even in the dead of winter, evergreen trees and hardy holly-like bushes kept the appearance of eternal spring.

One might think that the master of all that beauty would be as handsome as his work, but the reed-like Master Gardener's visage was as pinched and squinty-eyed as a *ratert*. He poured himself a cup of pure spring water and carried it carefully back to his seat, settling his knobby behind down before he took a cautious sip.

The Guild Master from Tolos spoke again. "Now, you do remember our list of grievances, do you not?"

Orath deliberately turned his back on the man and spoke to the mirror. His eyes betrayed his complete disdain and hatred for him. Unfortunately, the Tolosian Guild Master was not astute enough to catch Orath's dislike.

"We've gone over them many times, Gord. They are perfectly reasonable. I told you that before. If Jareth doesn't accede to them you know what to do."

The Master Gardener frowned, his lips thinning, his nostrils flaring as though he smelled something foul. "I like it not. Prince Jareth has gained too much power in too short a time. But to place exorbitant taxes on lanbeth-infused fertilizer from Narwith! That goes beyond the line."

"Taxes? What's he talking about?"

"I know not. Quiet, sweet. The Master Jeweler is speaking."

"Fertilizer! Pah! Import some bantas from Tarol and make your own! We have the greater problem in Tolos. Some rubbish about the caves of Mariess being unsafe for mining the gems we use for our jewelry making and the diamonds needed for grinding and sharpening precision tools. Raising the prices and limiting the exportation. Ridiculous! Let him magic the caves so they're safe."

Orath muffled a sigh of exasperation. “Now, now, Gord, that much magic takes even more power than Jareth has. Let me speak to him. I’m sure we can work something out.” He turned to face the other men. “In fact, let me speak to him alone. I can be more objective and refrain from making angry comments.”

The Master Gardener replied, instead. “Perhaps that would be best, Gord. Prince Orath is, after all, a royal mage. He can appeal to him as his peer.”

Shielded behind the mirror, Mirelle shook her head. “*Peer! Hah! Your peer, yeah, right and I’m the Queen of England.*”

“England?” Jareth whispered.

“*Hush, Dream Boy.*”

Orath turned back to the mirror, and a look of triumph blazed across his face. He took a deep breath and turned one last time to the Guild Masters. “Then we’re agreed. I’ll plead your case to Jareth and get back to you with his response.”

Mirelle stamped her foot. “*That lyin--*”

“*Now we’ll go in the other door.*”

* * * * *

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Narik spent the next few hours quizzing me about my experience with weapons. He went over everything I had written in my résumé with a fine-toothed comb. He had me prove my skill with my knife, the cabinet door becoming a makeshift target. But every time I tried to question him for more detail about the situation in Hearthome, he put me off. I was becoming more than a little pissed by his attitude, but I gritted my teeth. I knew I was no match for his magic. I decided to wait until the odds were a little more even.

His attention to detail had grown tedious. I had put forth several different ways to organize a standing army and a guerilla-style strike force. He had me draw charts. I demonstrated my technique for hand-to-hand combat. He demanded to be taught some of the throws. And the old dude learned fast, throwing me a couple of times.

Finally, Narik deemed it time to eat.

He left the room, returning with a tray holding several bowls. The tantalizing aroma of cooked meat and fragrant bread wafted in the air and my belly set up a rumble.

The answers to my questions would have to wait until after supper.

Chapter Four

Mirelle and Jareth entered the justice chamber as the Master Gardener downed the last drops from his glass, their unannounced appearance causing him to choke in surprise. Prince Orath recovered first, nodding his head in curt acknowledgement.

“Prince Jareth. And your lovely spouse.”

He swept Mirelle a much deeper bow, gazing up at her from under long lashes that accented mage-blue eyes brimming with barely concealed lust.

Mirelle shuddered, unable to shield her loathing from Jareth’s mind.

“I wish I could kill him now, kiereen. Filthy bastard.”

“You can’t kill someone for what he thinks, kierown.”

“Maybe not on Earth.”

“Hush, they’re getting ready to leave. Stop them.”

The Master Jeweler, who had slowly and near insolently risen from his seat, bowed sharply from the waist, then spoke. “Your majesty, Prince Orath has offered to speak for us in private with you. We shall take our leave, if we may.”

“Nay; stay, Master Gord. I wish to hear from all of you so that I can offer a well-informed response. Please, sit. Orath shall speak first. If you have any additional information or wish to clarify something, you can then do so immediately, saving us all valuable time.”

“Gotcha!”

Mirelle’s smug thoughts filled Jareth’s mind. He smiled pleasantly when what he really felt like doing was wiping the lecherous, supercilious look from Orath’s face. The bastard.

“I hear you, Dream Boy, but he needs to be able to speak with all his teeth intact.”

The Master Jeweler looked askance at Mirelle, masking his disdain for her female presence with exaggerated courtesy. "It truly is a pleasure to see you once more, Lady Mirelle, though I am surprised to see you here. You must find these meetings boring."

Mirelle's grin was feral. "On the contrary, I'm Lord Jareth's most trusted advisor. He makes no decisions without me."

The Master Gardener directed a venomous look at her. "Then it must have been your idea to tax lanbeth fertilizer."

Orath laid a placating hand on the guildsman's arm. "I'm sure Lady Mirelle didn't know what an impact this would make on Larbela's economy."

Jareth's voice dripped with disdain. "Lady Mirelle made no such suggestion. In fact, no one did. 'Tis untrue; there are no plans to raise taxes on lanbeth fertilizer."

Little flecks of spittle flew from the Master Jeweler's mouth as he stepped into Jareth's face. "And I suppose conditions in the mines of Mariess are perfectly safe and there is no embargo planned."

Jareth, regally offering his arm to Mirelle, moved toward the small twin thrones opposite the mirror before deigning to reply to the belligerent guildsman's accusation.

"You forget common courtesy, Master Gord set Poldar, but I'll overlook this due to your agitation. Listen well. There are no plans to raise any taxes, issue embargos, or place restrictions on free trade among the seven kingdoms. My soulmate is not empty-headed or ignorant; to suggest that she is such or that I would listen to anyone whose opinions I did not trust and respect is ... ludicrous." He turned to Orath. "Perhaps Prince Orath might know from whence these ... rumors circulated. I see you have no demands for Helar." Jareth smiled, restraining his contempt. "I trust your uncle, King Kontor, remains in good health. And his advisor, Lord Folar. I would have thought that he would represent Helar in any ... discussions."

Mirelle projected the image of her doing a silly little dance and one of her Earth expressions.

"Way to go, Dream Boy! Keep him off balance!"

Orath took a moment to gather his thoughts. It almost seemed as though Jareth knew of the imaginary charges he had dreamed up. He had had no problem creating fictitious charges. It was easy to spread dissension and dissatisfaction among those who always were contentious and envious, but now his plans to dupe the guildsmen would come to naught.

"Unfortunately, my great-uncle is not well enough to leave Helar. King Kontor appointed me in his place. As to where these evidently erroneous rumors originated ... who can tell?"

Jareth gazed at each of the Master Guildsmen. "When you return to your kingdoms, I hope you will spread the truth and put an end to these allegations. Now is not the time for mistrust among the kingdoms. Need I remind you that Narik is still at large, his plans and

whereabouts unknown? My brother and his soulmate are even now gathering a volunteer army from each of the seven kingdoms to prepare for the possibility of some sort of attack.”

He rose and assisted Mirelle from her seat.

“This audience is at an end.”

Without a backward glance, they swept from the room.

* * * * *

“Hurry, kiereen. Back to the spy room.”

Arriving once again in the room, they moved silently to the window. All three men remained. The Master Jeweler paced back and forth, then stopped in front of Orath.

“You misled us. You said these taxations and restrictions were already writ down.”

Orath shrugged. “That is what I heard. Obviously my informant was ... misinformed.”

Gord snarled, his ample gut heaving with indignation. “Thanks to you, we appeared as greedy, ignorant bumpkins.”

The Master Gardener’s frown dipped even further, puckering his mouth as though biting into a sour pomees fruit. “And we’ve insulted his consort, Princess Mirelle.”

Orath inclined his head. “Unfortunate, but I’m sure soon forgotten.”

Inside, he seethed. When he ruled the world, he’d make them all pay for their disdain. He’d seen that shudder of disgust Mirelle couldn’t quite hide. Slut. If his mother hadn’t been so quick to rut with Belar before she made sure his bride-casting had been fixed in her favor, he, Orath, would be sitting on the throne of Mariess right now. He moved once more to the carafe of pomees cider and filled his glass again. Keeping his back to the two other men, he shielded his disdainful sneer.

“I suggest you return to your kingdoms and guilds and do your best to defuse the rumors.” He turned back to them. “Perhaps a gift or two to the royal couple to make amends ...”

The Master Jeweler’s face lit up. “Excellent idea! I shall craft an exquisite greenstone ring for the prince.”

The Master Gardener struck a thoughtful pose.

“Hmmm. Perhaps a miniature starblossom flower.” He leered. “While not as potent as the bethlan flower, it still possesses a heady, intoxicating scent.” He nodded. “Yes, I shall send one as soon as I return to Larbela.”

On the other side of the mirror, Mirelle softly clapped her hands. *“Oh, goody! Presents!”*

Jareth brought her hands to his lips, brushing her palms with kisses. *“You are a greedy little thing.”*

“I deserve a present for the mental anguish he gave me.”

“Mental anguish, ha!”

The door closed on the two guildsmen as they left the justice chamber. Orath stood still for a moment, then, taking careful aim, threw the delicate crystal carafe at Jareth’s throne, where it shattered.

Turning on his heel, he slammed the door behind him.

* * * * *

Talea shut her bedroom door, dancing inches off the floor. She swirled and dipped, her outfit changing colors back and forth. She laughed out loud for the sheer joy of it, descending slowly to the floor. Sobering, she breathed deeply and evenly, clearing her mind. Imagining her power as a shining sapphire gem, she placed it in a tiny jewel box and shut the lid. She laughed again, and the color of her dress remained unchanged.

Her fears about her mage powers running wild had been diminished. Oh, she knew she’d a long way to go before they stayed under control all the time, and there were hundreds of spells she still needed to learn. But now she felt more secure. And it was due to Loran. She hugged herself, wishing she were back in his arms in the cave. Her breasts tingled and she felt hot all over. He desired her. Wanted her. But she was lacking in experience. Of course, as a princess, that was to be expected of her. But she wanted to please him.

They were soulmates; they must be. Would he be disappointed when he made love to her? She needed advice. She could hardly ask her eldermother for seduction tips. But there was one source that might be available. Her father. Surely there were some books in his library that she could use. Not all of them would be ... unconventional. Would they?

* * * * *

“Excellent breakfast, Lady Galayne. I shall have to skip the midday meal after this. I’m glad you joined me this morning.”

Loran carefully wiped the faint traces of creamy mel-infused butter from his lips and pushed back his chair. He sighed. Tally hadn’t come down for either the evening meal or breakfast, and he feared she might have suffered some sort of delayed reaction to their spell working. He’d carefully voiced his concern last night, and Lady Galayne had done her best to assuage his fears.

“I’m sure she merely has a headache. Her eyes do pain her so.” She sighed. “Such a sweet girl. If only she’d let someone examine her eyes.” She brightened. “Perhaps you could convince her to see a healer.”

Loran shrugged. “I’ll try, Lady Galayne. Perhaps some of the Earth knowledge that Princess Mirelle brought with her may have an answer. Talea seems to have adjusted to her frailty. But now I must be off to Riess. I should be back in time for the evening meal.”

With the lack of formality that Lady Galayne had come to expect and enjoy, Loran dropped a light kiss on her cheek and left the dining room.

She sighed and fluttered her fan.

“He is such a dear boy.”

* * * * *

Loran placed the bag containing the different variants of lanbeth onto the backseat of the skimmer. Jareth had ensorcelled the destination spell for the Council of Mages, and all he had to do was say the name aloud for the vehicle to take him there. Not needing to direct the machine left him plenty of time to think about all that had occurred over the past two days.

The first image that assailed his mind was that of Tally as she looked in his arms. Her tousled curls sun-bright against his jacket, her sapphire-blue eyes gazing at him with such emotion. Thank the Great Maker, he had regained his control. He could have taken her there and then. And spoiled her for her true soulmate.

She deserved a mage, and he was no mage -- just the youngest son. He knew where his future lay -- in a musty library delving into the wonders of Mirelle’s world or assisting in deciphering the wisdom of the Book of Tocson. Once it was safe for Tally’s mage abilities to become known, she would have her pick of potential soulmates. He shook his head. ‘Twould be best for him to maintain a distance and concentrate his efforts on uncovering the final portion of the Book of Tocson. It shouldn’t be too hard to resist the naïve seduction attempts of a virgin. Except with Tally he feared it was damn near impossible.

The skimmer slowed to a stop. He’d reached his destination sooner than he’d thought. He took a moment to gaze at the innocent looking, elegant townhouse. Nothing differentiated it from any of its neighbors. Its bland front blended with all the others. Only the number on the copper plaque set next to the door held any significance, and that only to a chosen few.

The Council of Mages gathered behind the ebon wood door. Over the past few weeks they had spent countless hours poring over the most ancient manuscripts, attempting to glean additional knowledge to combat Narik’s power. Loran knew that the Council would relish the opportunity to explore the properties of the newly created lanbeth. He smiled as he mounted the stairs nearing the door. At one time, he might have been disappointed that he couldn’t participate in the Council’s experimentations. There were some things they would not let a powerless prince do. His smile grew broader. Knowing that, he’d kept some lanbeth aside to conduct his own tests.

He almost laughed out loud. Instead of rubbing shoulders with bearded old men in an airless, lifeless room, he was with Tally. What could be more delirious than discovering her mage powers? What could be more pleasurable than releasing her spirit to enjoy life? He bounded up the last remaining steps, anxious to divest himself of the lanbeth.

As Loran raised his hand to knock, the door swung open onto an elaborate foyer of polished wood and brass festooned with mirrors. An efficient taisin took the carry bag containing the lanbeth and whisked it away. Loran waited impatiently for one of the council members to appear. Although he knew that someone would arrive shortly, he paced back and forth. Offering refreshments or a chair on which to sit was not part of the custom. Visitors were few and sent on their way quickly.

Sure enough, a door opened in the rear of the hall and Belateran, the High Mage entered.

“Greetings, Prince Loran. Your little gift is much appreciated.” He chuckled. “Nay, let me be honest. ‘Twas lusted after. Never in recent memory has there been such incredibly powerful lanbeth. And such variety! Several of our group will devote themselves solely to examining it.” He paused. “Is there anything else you wish to share with us?”

Belatedly, Loran remembered how powerful was Beletaran’s mind merging talent. He threw up a mental wall around thoughts of Talea.

The Mage cocked his head and nodded. “You may be no mage, Loran, but you’ve a powerful mind.” He drew himself up to his full height. “But I remind you that a mage will not invade another’s thoughts without permission. ‘Twas not your mind that caused me to inquire if you wished to speak to me. You’re as tightly wound as the braid of a Larbelan mountain man. I saw your eyes shutter your thoughts.” He sniffed. “If you wish to conceal something, learn also to control your features.”

He turned and moved back to the door from whence he’d come, pausing for a moment before he opened it. Turning, he offered Loran a distant look. “Thank you for the lanbeth. My regards to Jareth and his lovely soulmate.”

And he was gone.

Loran stood transfixed, then ruefully rubbed his head.

“By the Great Mage, I really put my foot in it!”

Sighing, he headed out the door to the parked skimmer, more eager than ever to return to the castle.

And Tally.

* * * * *

Tally waited until Loran left and her eldermothe retired to her chambers to take her daily nap before cautiously opening the door of her room then stepping into the hall. Her father’s study was at the rear of the castle on the top floor. No one had entered it since his death. It was one of two rooms that were cared for by household taisins. The other was his “seduction chamber.”

At least, that was what Tally had heard one of the few human castle servants call it. Only a select number ever entered it, and after they emerged they left the castle. The last

persons she knew to have seen it were Jareth and Mirelle. During that time, she had been in her little cottage waiting with trepidation to be called to the castle for the joining celebration and ceremony. Then news was brought to her of her father's death.

Now the room stood empty. She supposed she should feel sorrow for her father's untimely end, but all she felt was relief. Should she find what she needed, she'd feel a small sense of gratitude, she supposed. The door was locked, but this would only prove a minor impediment. She concentrated, calling to mind the spell she'd learned the other day to open closed doors. She could hear Loran's voice, strong and clear, intoning the necessary notes. She sang them now and the door swung open.

As she entered, the lanbeth-lit chandelier burst into light. Shelves of books lined the walls, going right up to the ceiling. Several books lay scattered helter-skelter on a large oval table in the middle of the room. A thin layer of dust covered these as though the taisins had ignored them. Tally picked one up, her fingers leaving a trail in the dust on the cover. The Adventures of Melakosai. Curious, she riffled through the pages. A chapter heading caught her interest, "How the Peace Bringer met the Champion, Larakosa," and she set it aside to take back to her room. The other titles were nowhere near as intriguing and those she left alone.

Moving around the room, she glanced casually at some of the titles on the shelves at eye level. They appeared innocuous. Books about agriculture, mining, horticulture. She pulled one out at random. The pages were uncut. It hadn't been read. Were the books a sham? She took a closer look at the rows upon rows of printed matter and realized that none of them looked worn.

Somewhere in this room there must be the material she wanted, but where? She'd need some unhampered time to search. As she intoned the spell to lock the door, it swung shut and she stared, mystified.

A gold-framed mirror hung on the back.

"What an odd place for a mirror."

She stepped closer, peering at her reflection. She wore one of her oldest dresses, an unflattering shade of green. Her fingers had smeared dust on the dress, and a smudge streaked her cheek. Her curls were in disarray and her spectacles had slipped down her nose. She pushed them back into place and shook her head.

"Some seductress. I could certainly challenge Fardretha for sexiest Princess in Mariess."

As she uttered Fardretha's name, the mirror grew smoky, and suddenly it reflected not her father's study but another, more opulent, room.

A bedroom. It was as though she looked through a window into the other chamber. As she peered toward either side of the mirror, her viewpoint shifted as though the window were open and she'd poked her head inside.

A door on the right side of the bedchamber opened and a woman in her prime entered. Her full-busted figure inspired awe in Tally. A scarlet gown of scylla cloth clung to every curve as though poured upon her body. Its translucent material revealed the fact that she was completely nude beneath it. Her skin was as white as the starblossom flower with just a faint blush upon her cheeks. Her long, ebon hair was piled upon her head in an intricate arrangement of curls and braids. But it was her eyes that impacted Tally the most. An icy silver, so calculating and chilling they could impale a person with a look.

Fardretha seta Fola, Princess of Helar and her father's former mistress. Who better to show her how to seduce a man than her father's lover? She dragged over a high, armchair and perched upon it, holding her breath, not knowing what she'd see next.

Fardretha glided further into the room, her hips undulating as she approached a low armchair facing the mirrored opening. Her breasts thrust forward as she moved, swaying with every step. She pulled down the top of her gown, shimmied out of it, and let it fall, unheeded, to the floor. She lowered her rounded ass onto the seat, hitching her legs over the chair arms, exposing herself to Tally's view. Staring straight ahead, Fardretha placed her right hand between her thighs and pressed first one, then two fingers in her slit, slowly at first, and then faster, moving them rhythmically. Her left hand kneaded her breasts, shifting from one to the other, her fingers plying her nipples.

Moisture pooled between Tally's thighs as she watched Fardretha. Her breasts grew heavy and her nipples tightened. Her breath caught and her skin felt on fire. She dragged her bodice down, baring her breasts to the cooler air in the room. Some part of her wanted to leave, but her greater urge was to stay and watch what happened next.

Fardretha looked at the observation room from beneath lowered lashes. Princess Talea sat before Belar's mirror. The girl had no idea that her every move was visible to Fardretha's avid gaze. As Belar had aged and his years of dissolute life taken their toll on him, he'd often resorted to the magic mirror to awaken his feeble erection. For him, watching Fardretha with other lovers, both male and female, excited him. His innocent little daughter felt safe behind the silvered glass.

Fardretha almost drowned in her saliva as Tally pulled down her bodice, displaying full, ripe young breasts. She worked her fingers feverishly and saw Tally copy her movements. At this rate she would cum before Tokar could service her. She rocked back and forth, moaning as she felt her climax grow. Her eyes closed and her head fell back against the back of the chair.

Suddenly, her fingers were ruthlessly pulled away from their task, and a long, dexterous tongue replaced them. Tokar. She grabbed the hair on his head with both hands and bucked wildly. Unhitching her legs, she clamped her knees on either side of his head and squeezed as her climax struck in wave after wave. Her arms fell limply to her sides and her knees loosened their grip.

Tokar stood, drawing her up with him and held her against his body. Bending his mouth to kiss her neck, he murmured in her ear, "The Princess watches?"

"Yes. I don't know why the mirror is working and I don't think she knows she can be seen."

He chuckled. "Let's give her a show she'll never forget."

"Oh, you are wicked, my dear. Perhaps that is why you please me so much."

He sucked the tender skin of her neck and bit down hard. She'd have a mark but her servants were inured to seeing them. Indeed, the servants fought to brand her, vying for the privilege.

He traveled down her body now, taking nips of her stark white skin, leaving tiny bruises behind. Fardretha panted and gasped as the bites turned harder and deeper. He reached her inner thigh and took her flesh between his teeth and bit once more. This time beads of blood welled up and Fardretha shoved him off. He fell back, his immense prick still hard.

"Did I hurt you, my princess?"

"You overstepped your boundary, Tokar."

"How can I make it up to you?"

Her eyes gleamed. "You know what I want. Get it."

Tokar moved to the cabinet and threw the doors open. Taking a domed ceramic pot, he set it on the table and opened a hinged flap. He reached in and drew back his hand, concealing what he held in his fingers. He turned a small knob and the bottom of the pot started to glow as the ceramic heated.

"Leave the opening unlatched and come here."

Fardretha moved to the bed, sitting back against the headboard, her knees bent in uninhibited display. Her slit glistened with her cum. "Crawl to me."

Tally watched, mesmerized. It was like attending a play. A very erotic play. What would happen next? Tally's mouth grew as dry as the Devil's Desert as Tokar turned, the muscles in his taut butt tightening as he strutted to the foot of the bed. Though he crawled onto the mattress, he managed to appear as though he stalked the woman waiting for him.

"Give me the bethlan."

"Take it, my lady."

He lay back, his head at the foot of the bed, his enormous erection straight as a tent pole. Opening his hand, he placed a large crimson petal on the tip of his prick. Fardretha glided toward Tokar, her breasts bobbing. Reaching her goal, she paused for a moment, looking straight at Tally. Then her mouth opened wide and she took in Tokar's shaft and the blossom clinging to it. Tokar's hands fisted in her hair, anchoring her.

As Tally watched, Fardretha's talented mouth enveloped the entire length of Tokar's penis. Soon, he was bucking off the bed. With a roar, he flung her away as he climaxed, his seed spurting like a geyser, drenching his thighs. Fardretha slid forward, licking his sperm from his skin, lapping it up like a *bitna* laps up cream.

Tally's heart raced. Her skin grew hot and her thin dress weighed heavily. She clenched the chair arms, squirming.

Tokar's desperate voice caught her attention.

"Please, my lady, give me my reward. Please, one petal."

Fardretha smiled. She lay once more against the pillows. Her fingers played with her nipples.

"Since you asked so prettily, you may. Put it between my lips and feast upon me."

Tally gasped as Tokar took one last petal and placed it on the tip of his tongue and then put it not in Fardretha's mouth, but between her nether lips. He worked his tongue feverishly bringing Fardretha to a screaming orgasm. Scarcely had the last sounds died away when he flipped her over, drew up her rump and rammed his shaft into her. He thrust into her, his balls slapping against her.

Tally couldn't bear it. She drew up the hem of her gown and shifted her undergarment. Her fingers played with her swollen nub until she clenched her thighs around her hand as a torrent of emotion washed over her.

Her hand fell to her side and she slumped in the chair. Her breathing still ragged, she sighed. Her eyes drifted shut as she took a deep, trembling breath.

Suddenly, she felt as though she were being watched. Her eyes opened and she saw Tokar standing before the mirror. His shaft had swelled once more as the bethlan took effect. He stood before the mirror and cupped his balls, staring straight at her, almost as though he could see her.

With a firm, deliberate motion, he stroked the length of his shaft. Faster and faster until with a great shout, he came. His seed spattered the mirror and as the last drops dripped on his fingers, he winked.

Chapter Five

Tally scrambled off the chair. Hastily rearranging her clothes, she fled the study, automatically using a spell to relock the door.

How could she have been so stupid? As soon as she saw that the image differed from the study, she should have left it alone. Her thoughts churning wildly, she continued her headlong dash down the stairs, out the front door, and straight into Loran's solid chest. His arms instinctively reached out to steady her.

"Hold. Stop a minute. What's wrong?"

Tally gulped for air. "I've done something really stupid."

She took a step back as though to distance herself from him, but Loran tightened his grasp, refusing to let her.

"Does it involve your talent?"

She nodded, and her lips twisted in self-derision. "I can't believe I was so foolish."

He shook his head. "Perhaps it's not so bad. Let's go to the gazebo. We can talk freely there."

Tally sighed. "I'm afraid it's far worse!"

As soon as they gained the seclusion of the gazebo, she began her tale, holding back only her real reason for entering her father's study. She paced back and forth, her hands rubbing her arms as though she were freezing.

"I've been inside my father's study. I used the unlocking spell to enter it. I thought he might have some volumes on magic. When I saw how many books were there, I knew I'd need more time to explore. I shut the door and relocked it using the spell I memorized. When it swung shut, it revealed a mirror hanging on the back.

"It didn't seem out of the ordinary until I uttered Fardretha's name. It grew smoky and then there I was in her home. In her bedchamber. A moment later, she walked in, naked, and..." She took a deep breath, trying to get some air.

Loran cocked his head. "And?"

"She touched herself. Pleasured herself. I couldn't move. And then one of her servants came in and they made love."

She stopped pacing and turned her back on Loran. She grabbed the railing and he moved behind her. His fingers twined with hers and she leaned back against his strong body. She felt his lips brush the top of her head, and she took a deep breath as she told him the rest of her tale.

"By the Great Mage!" Loran swung her around, his hands gripping her arms. "Are you sure he saw you?"

She nodded, mute.

Releasing her, he strode to the bench and flung his body onto it. He slammed his fist into his palm. "By the Plains of Torment, Tally, what have you done?"

She stood stock still, not knowing how to react. Loran leaned forward, his head on his hands. Utter silence reined for a few moments. At last, he raised his head.

"This mirror is some of Narik's work. Your father didn't have the skill to create this. It seems to be a sort of device to connect small rifts to each other. In a sense you were in Fardretha's presence." He sighed. "Most likely it could only be activated by a mage, and since the study was locked through magic, only Belar could have used it." He looked at Tally. "And you. I shudder to think of the consequences if Fardretha realizes that you have mage abilities. If she's still in contact with her son, she'll tell him. And if he has ties with Narik, he'll be the next to know."

While Loran spoke, Tally's thoughts raced, trying to come up with a solution. Then inspiration struck. Cautiously, she stepped closer to Loran. Crouching before him, she touched his knee.

"I think I have a way to diffuse the situation." She smiled slightly. "Or at least, confuse it."

Loran covered her hand with his. "Tell me."

With an ease that now was second nature, Tally sat down next to him and slowly unveiled her idea.

"It will take the assistance of a mage, but perhaps we can convince Fardretha that I wasn't the only one in the room today. That I was just the one sitting before the mirror and a mage had set it in motion. Can we enlist the aid of one of your brothers?"

Loran's face brightened as she spoke, and he nodded.

"Pentar." He frowned. "But I'm not sure where he is." He gazed at their hands, still clasped, and tightened his grasp. "Tally, we need to contact Pen quickly. We can't rely on an

ordinary taisin messenger.” He smiled. “I think I can fashion a tracing spell that you can learn. It may take a bit more concentration; it’s long and complicated, but it will reach him no matter where he is and will do so almost instantaneously. We have no choice. We have to take care of this matter as quickly as possible.”

Tally gripped his hand in hers, almost matching his strength. “Teach me the spell.”

Releasing her, he stood and began to pace. Tally smiled a bit as she watched. When Loran thought hard, he couldn’t sit still.

Finally, he stopped. “The spell isn’t as detailed a message as it could be. We’d need a location token to be more informative. But it will have to do.”

He moved back to Tally, and now he was the one to kneel.

“Listen well, meliflir. There are several parts. First, Loran’s identifying notes; next a seeking spell; then an urgency invocation; finally, an emanation spell so he’ll know it came from Mariess. Are you ready?”

She nodded wordlessly.

Loran arose and moved to the middle of the gazebo. Slowly and carefully, he intoned several melodic phrases. It was the longest and most lyrical spell he had given her yet. Loran’s strong, rich baritone wrapped around her heart. He needed no magic to mesmerize her. He repeated the incantation then nodded to Tally.

She got up and stood next to him. She held out her hand and he clasped it in his while she echoed the spell precisely. As the last note faded away, Loran tenderly kissed her fingers, drawing her into his arms. She leaned against him trustingly and closed her eyes.

“Now what?”

“We wait.”

“When do you think he’ll come?”

“I don’t know, but he’ll come. I know he’ll come.”

* * * * *

“Come for me, kerasoko. Now, Pen. Now.”

Rayne’s plea echoed in Pen’s mind. Their mutual passion multiplied as their thoughts and emotions merged. He gazed into her glistening eyes shimmering with desire, and he moved faster upon her body. Her hips rose to give him greater access and her fingers dug into his shoulders as she anchored her body. He could smell her arousal, spicy and musky, as she writhed beneath him. By the Great Maker, he had never known such passion, such fire as the love they shared. He thrust into her tight core, his hands on either side of her shoulders to keep his balance. Her hands slid down and cupped his ass, and he groaned aloud as she gripped him, squeezing his flesh.

He rolled, still joined with her, and she rose above him like the goddess Larakosa. She pressed her hands against his shoulders and arched her pelvis against his groin. He felt her inner muscles clench his prick and he bucked against her.

Amber colored lanbeth gathered above them, glowing like flames. He reached up to caress her breasts and drew her closer so he could suck her tight nipples.

Their thoughts grew incoherent with desire. Their lust fed their love and they moaned silently together. He gripped her hair and opened his mouth on hers, his tongue seeking and given access.

"I adore you, Rayne. Come with me now."

Their mutual cries of completion echoed as they climaxed, and the lanbeth burst in the air like fireworks then descended, coating their bodies.

Rayne collapsed on top of Pen, her body limp as a doll's. He slipped out from beneath her and lay next to her on the bedroll. The interior of their tent was coated in amber lanbeth, as was Rayne's back and buttocks and the back of her legs. Pen licked his lips.

Rayne giggled as her mind merged with Pen's and she saw through his eyes how he hungered for her.

"Stop looking at me as if I were one giant candy stick. You let me ride you so you could have the fun of licking the most lanbeth off me." She turned her head, looking up at him. *"And wipe that smug smile from your face. If you had taken me akosai style, 'twould be your backside getting a licking."*

"A licking?" Pen dragged her over his lap and smacked her lightly on her rear. *"I didn't know you liked getting a licking. Shall I continue?"* He raised his hand and smacked her a little harder on her rump, turning it rosy pink.

"Pen! Stop!"

She squirmed, her belly rubbing against his shaft, but she didn't try to move off him.

Pen grinned. *"Lift up that sweet ass, kerasoka. I'll cleanse you of any lanbeth you've got clinging to your skin."*

Rayne twisted around a bit until she lay facedown on the bedroll with Pen kneeling behind her. He raised her body until he could easily press his lips to the back of her legs, and proceeded to tongue the invigorating lanbeth from behind her knees. Drawing her up until her dust-covered behind was accessible, he swirled his tongue over her butt, between her cheeks and detoured to her swollen bud.

His shaft grew hard and thick once more, and he knew he would have to fuck her again. Now.

"Pillow your head on the carry bags, Princess, and raise that delectable ass. I'm going to fuck you like the akosai harem master fucks his first mate."

"First and only mate."

Impatient, Pen grabbed her around the waist, lifting her. He heard her catch her breath and knew she was eager to feel his rod deep within her.

So he slowed down. Inch by inch he sank into her. She pushed against him. *"Please, Pen, please."*

"I don't wish you to beg, kiereen, only plead."

Rayne knew he teased her and she began to giggle, a sound that turned into a loud keen of joy as he rammed all the way, pounding into her until they climaxed once again.

This time, the back of Pen's body was coated with lanbeth and Rayne feasted.

Their skin still streaked with the amber dust, they lay next to each other, their hearts still racing.

Pen abruptly sat up. He tilted his head as though listening to some unheard voice. He blinked and shook his head as though trying to dislodge a kyrscha bug.

"What's the matter? Are you all right? I can't tell what you're thinking. Pen, tell me what's going on!"

"I just received a tracing call."

"A tracing call?"

"Aye. Some mage has sought me out and sent me a message of great urgency. It's from Mariess." He frowned. *"There are no mages in Mariess, save the Council, and this spell doesn't have a signature I recognize as one of theirs. Kiereen, we must change our plans and go to Mariess."*

"How can you be sure it's not some trick of Narik's?"

Pen searched around until he found his pants and pulled them up. Not bothering to put on a shirt, he put on his boots, hopping as he shoved in first one foot then the other.

"It's not Narik's signature. Even he couldn't disguise his magic aura and turn it to someone else's. Besides, there's something unique about this spell." He lifted Rayne's leggings from the tent pole and tossed them to her. *"Come, we must tell Tran and Rosta."*

Still shaking her head, Rayne finished dressing. She clasped her wristband around her right hand and pulled back her hair. Grabbing the remaining carry bags, she left the tent even as Pen used his magic and folded it up, the remnants of lanbeth still hidden between its folds.

Tran and Rosta trotted from behind a copse of trees, their wings raised. Tran moved over to Pen and butted his shoulder.

"What's going on, my friend? We heard your shouts of pleasure suddenly cease."

Rayne's face turned a fiery red. As wild and unrestrained as she was with Pen, it still caused her to blush to think that others heard their love cries.

Pen shoved the tightly-rolled up tent into the carry bag as he responded to Tran's question.

"I've been summoned to Mariess. A mage there called me. We're changing course and going to King Belar's castle. 'Tis the most likely place that a mage would be were he not with the Council."

Rosta whickered uncertainly. "And are you sure this is not a trick of Narik's?"

Pen looked toward Rayne. "Do you females have some sort of silent code? Rayne asked the same thing." He shook his head. "The only things I'm sure of is that this doesn't emanate from him and I don't recognize the signature. Loran's in Mariess. This must have something to do with him."

Tran nodded, shaking his great mane. "You're right, Pen. We'll fly to Mariess." He neighed and snorted. "We can start recruiting there."

Without further delay, Pen and Rayne loaded up the tent and carry bags and mounted the akosai. With a sweep of their wings and a great leap, they flew off toward the summoning.

* * * * *

Fardretha applauded loudly as Tokar's cum splashed across the glass. She grinned with delight as the frightened Princess ran from them.

"What did you do to make her run, my dear?"

Tokar turned, his flaccid prick still in his hand. He grinned. "I winked at her."

"She knows you saw her." She frowned. "But how did she come to see us?"

"Does it matter? Let's fuck. Look, the bethlan is working its power on me."

Even as he spoke, his shaft grew firm again. He stroked it as he strode over to where Fardretha lay, sprawled naked amid the twisted bed sheets.

He pushed her back, ready to mount her again, but she thrust out a restraining hand.

"Not now. I need to think." She stroked his shaft as though it were a pet canid. "Keep your pretty toy for later." She drew him by his rod to her mouth and licked his tip, wetting him. "Don't start without me." As he turned, she slapped him on his rear.

He strode to the door, but then stopped and turned. "May I give you pleasure, then, the way you like best, my lady? You know how much I enjoy it."

"Perhaps. Now, go."

Fardretha waited until the door shut behind Tokar before she rose and went to the closet standing against the wall and removed a transparent robe of shimmering scylla cloth. Tying it carelessly around her waist, she sat before her vanity and pulled open a small drawer. Only one item lay within it, an oval mirror that fit comfortably in her palm. A braid of copper, silver, and gold framed it. A trace of the lanbeth created by the Great Mage Tocson and his nameless, doomed soulmate infused in the metals.

At least, that was what Narik had told her when he presented it to her over twenty years ago. She smiled, remembering that day. He had just fucked her to a screaming orgasm. He'd left her lying on the divan, sweaty, limp and breathless, and had stalked over to his rolled top desk. Pushing it open, he'd taken out a small, flat box and brought it over to her.

"Here. This mirror is a link. Should you wish to communicate with anyone you've shared blood or life essence, merely write their name on its surface with a drop of your blood." His eyes gleamed as he continued. "Should the need be great, breathe upon the blood and use it to write more information."

He'd placed it in her hand and folded her fingers over it. 'Twas then she discovered the back was covered with tiny, sharp needles. He'd pressed it into her flesh and the pain was excruciating. And exhilarating.

"Press your palm against the silvered surface. From now on it will answer your call and send your message. But use it sparingly. Its spell is powerful and will make its presence known to anyone connected to the magical essence of Hearthome."

She had smeared her bloodied palm and then Narik had carried it to his mouth and licked the blood from her skin. She shuddered with remembered lust as she recalled the bout of lovemaking that followed.

It had also been their last time together.

Narik's need for her lay elsewhere. In Belar's bed. Her timing had been off, though, and her kingdom couldn't compete with the riches of Tolos. When the bride-casting was done, her name was not chosen, but she was already pregnant.

Her face twisted.

Sullied goods, she remained unwed, but not unbedded. Her son, Orath still had a chance to rule Mariess. Thoughts of him recalled her to her present task.

Holding it tight, she pressed her palm against the back. She winced as the pins pricked her skin. Bright, crimson jewels of blood welled up and she smeared it on the slick, reflecting surface. Using the blood, she dipped a thin pen point in the thick liquid and spelled out Orath's name. Gently, she blew upon the blood, warming it. The message she wrote was simple -- *Magic trouble in Mariess*. The mirror grew smoky and then, more quickly than she could believe, the smooth surface absorbed her blood.

Taking great care, she placed it back in the drawer. She pulled the serving bell for Tokar. Within minutes, she heard a knock at her door and, without waiting for permission, Tokar entered. He shut the door behind him and stood passively before it.

She scowled. "Such insolence! For that, you shall ..." She glided toward him, opening her robe and letting it fall to the floor. She lifted her wounded palm to his mouth.

"Spank me."

He grasped her wrist and licked the tender flesh she presented then, with a practiced movement, twisted her hand, bringing her to her knees. He raised his booted foot and

shoved her ass. She fell face forward onto the floor and lay quiet, waiting for his next move. Swaggering, he sat down on the edge of the bed and stripped off his boots and clothes. "Crawl to me. Lick my feet. Then present your ass for chastisement. Now!"

Fardretha slithered like a snake toward him. Then taking his foot in her bloodied hand, she licked his strong toes. Using his muscular calves for support, she drew herself up and lay across his lap, positioning herself so that his throbbing prick lay beneath her belly.

With one hand he held her down below her shoulder blades. Her breasts pressed against the outside of his thighs and her arms and head hung forward.

He lifted his open hand and brought it down hard across her rounded ass. A bright red imprint of his fingers appeared on her skin. She cried out and he smacked her again. Harder. Her cry grew louder.

"Silence!" He ordered. "If you cannot contain yourself over this little pain, I will have to muffle your cries. Do so at once or I'll stop."

"No, don't stop! I'll be quiet. Please."

Tokar nodded and once more brought his palm down. Fardretha balled her fist and bit down hard. As the skin on her buttocks grew more flushed, she grew wetter. Her nipples tightened and she squirmed.

Tokar felt her movements and knew from experience that soon she'd be begging for him to fuck her. He lifted his hand and let it hover above her.

She twisted her head and stared at his upraised hand. "Why do you stop?"

His smile grew broad with unconcealed lust. "Because I want you to beg me." He paused. "My lady."

She shifted beneath the hand that held her down. Sometimes, she played the game all the way and begged Tokar to continue his task. But today, she wanted to feel his thick rod ramming into her again.

She twisted around so that she lay face up across his legs. "I grow tired of this. Take me to bed, Tokar. Fuck me."

For the briefest moment a look of rebellion crossed his face and Fardretha feared that he wouldn't obey her. Tokar's enjoyment in inflicting pain was one of the reasons he was her favorite. The other servants sometimes held back. But Tokar never did.

"Did you hear me, Tokar?"

"I hear and obey."

He scooped her up from his lap and threw her down onto the bed. She drew up her knees and bared her slit. Her body grew heavy and moisture gathered deep within her. Cupping her breasts, she offered them to him.

“Fuck me, Tokar. And don’t stop. Take some bethlan -- several petals -- and chew them, then feed them to me from your mouth. I want to taste the juice warmed by your breath.”

Tokar went to the container and thrust his hand within, pulling out a fistful of petals. He squeezed, mashing them to a crimson pulp, the juices staining his fingers like blood.

He placed the mass in his mouth and slowly chewed. His eyes closed in ecstasy and his loins tightened. The urge was great to swallow, but he knew if he did Fardretha would be angered.

He approached the bed, his prick so hard he hurt. Fardretha lay before him like a meal for a starving man. Joining her on the bed, he knelt between her legs and dipped his head toward her. His lips neared hers and he chewed more vigorously, the liquid seeping from his mouth like the scarlet juice from berries.

Growing impatient, Fardretha grabbed his head, crushing her lips against his. Her mouth opened and she drew in his tongue and the intoxicating pulp.

As the bethlan took effect, they ceased to think and mindless rutting took over. By the time Tokar finally satisfied Fardretha, he left her unconscious and stained with bethlan and his prick limp and coated with her cream. Striding naked to his room, he strutted before the other servants.

Fardretha may have been their mistress, but he was their king.

* * * * *

Orath stared, unseeing, at the crowded tavern. Smoke from greasy patch lanterns stung his eyes. He marked the slatternly tavern maid as she wended her way around tables, outstretched legs, and groping hands. Her bounteous breasts jounced unrestrained beneath her loose-necked blouse. When she bent over, her tits were displayed to her ruby red nipples.

He could feel his prick harden.

She could be his for the taking. Even though a bastard, bearing his mother’s name only, he still was royally born, and a mage. His eyes narrowed. He knew her name, Cora. He’d slipped a coin or two in that deep valley between her breasts. He fingered the few coins in his money pouch. One of the benefits of his station, should he so choose, was free sex.

He emptied the last of his potent ale and motioned her over.

“Aye, milord?”

He smiled winningly and raised his mug. “More, Cora, please.”

She dimpled and bent toward him, her breasts within reach of his hand. Reaching out, he cupped one lush globe and squeezed. The pitcher in her hand shook and her breath caught.

“Milord ...”

“Bend closer, pretty Cora. I’d whisper something in your ear.”

Mesmerized by his coaxing tone, the enraptured female leaned over. Her breasts lay in his cupped palms and her ear hovered by his mouth.

“Come to my rooms at the Dancing Coney when you finish your shift. I’d show you how a royal mage makes love.”

His tongue darted to her earlobe and he licked it. Wordlessly, she nodded and started to move away.

He grabbed her arm. “My ale, please.”

She filled the mug and drifted off, still dazzled by his offer.

In a considerably better mood, he picked up his mug, nearly dropping it as words appeared on its wavering surface.

Orath -- magic trouble in Mariess.

The only person in Mariess with whom he had any ties was his mother. She must be desperate for her to contact him in this manner. And with magic involved, he had better contact Narik in person.

He sighed. There would be no fucking Cora this evening. Instead, he’d have to endure the presence of that fucking Earthman.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Orath stormed through the door without knocking right after we’d finished eating the evening meal. Disregarding me completely, he threw himself into a chair and began badgering Narik in his native language. You didn’t need to understand the words to see he was pissed as hell.

Narik kept his cool, though it seemed to me that it took a great deal of effort. The longer Orath ranted, the harder Narik gripped the table edge, his knuckles whitening. As Orath spoke faster and wilder, Narik’s voice grew softer and more ... menacing? Odd, that.

Orath reared back, overturning his chair, tossed me one last contemptuous look, and slammed out of the room. For a moment, Narik stared at the door, then shrugged and turned to me.

“You must forgive Prince Orath. He’s heard some unsettling news from Mariess. I’m afraid we’ll have to accelerate your participation.”

He led me over to the armchair that he usually claimed as his own and seated me. Taking the pillow from the cot, he positioned it behind my head, indicating that I should grip the chair arms.

"Now, my friend, we're ready. All the information can be given to you through a mind merge. Language, customs, everything from my mind to yours."

"Kind of like Mr. Spock on Star Trek."

Narik got this condescending look on his face and nodded.

"Yes, Roddenberry must have made contact with Hearthome, most likely through dreams. It's happened." He smiled, again with the patronizing attitude that was beginning to tick me off.

"But, let's continue. I'll place my fingertips to specific points on your head. Close your eyes, it may make it easier for you."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Easier?"

"You may experience a moment of pain. But I assure you, it will be over quickly."

Now he tells me.

"Go ahead. Maybe my luck will hold and nothing will happen."

He nodded and placed his thumbs on my temples, his fingers below my ear lobes and the base of my skull.

"Our minds will merge."

For a second, I felt nothing. Then the pressure started to build, and it felt as though a sharp knife was sticking my brain. Words, sounds, images shot through my mind. Meaningless at first, as the pain increased so did my comprehension. Finally, when I thought my skull was going to explode, the pain abruptly stopped. I opened my eyes.

And puked all over Narik's lap.

Grumbling as he did so, Narik used his magic skill to clean up and refresh the air.

"I hardly envisioned jeopardizing our safety having to clean up vomit!"

Settling back into his armchair while I took my accustomed seat on a hard, wooden stool, Narik continued my briefing.

"Now, Lucky, we shall keep your name as it would be in Larbelian dialect. It's actually quite close."

I interrupted him. "Yeah, I know it. Lackeron. Close, but no cigar."

He winced and muttered under his breath, but I heard him anyway.

"Just like that female, Mirelle." Raising his voice, he went on. "Listen well, Lackeron, your life may depend on it. You must not use Earth words in your speech. Should you slip, you may very likely wind up in some dank dungeon being tortured by Jareth's Chief Examiner. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "No slip ups. So, what's the plan?"

"You will masquerade as a second degree gardener, your services offered to Princess Talea by the Master Gardener of Larbela. You will present her with a reflection plant as a gift. Its blossoms ..."

"Yeah, yeah. The blossoms are shaped like tiny eyes; their shiny surface reflects their surroundings."

Narik frowned. "Aye, but this plant will be different. It will actually convey what it sees to you. In your possession you will carry a small oval mirror. Gaze into it only when you are alone, for in it you will see exactly what the blossoms see. Tilt it, move it, and it will show you the entire area visible to the flower."

"Wild."

"Yes, wild, indeed. I will give you the proper attire and specialized gardening tools. You will ingratiate yourself with the princess. She grew up in a forest; she probably likes nature. Use your wits, Lakeron. Be wary of Prince Loran. As Prince Jareth's brother, he is probably a spy, or out to seduce the princess. He is actively seeking the marriage lines between Lady Fardretha and King Belar. Should he find them, he will most assuredly destroy them."

"I thought you already knew he was a spy."

Narik frowned again.

"We surmised this. Now, I must ask you to refrain from further interruptions until I have finished giving you your instructions. To continue.

"You will be taken to a skimmer, which has been ensorcelled with the route to Mariess. Also within its compass is the way to Lady Fardretha's home. As Prince Orath's mother, she is your only ally there. 'Twas her cryptic message which we need to clarify. You will go to her home first. Spend as little time there as possible; we shouldn't wish for you to be seen in her vicinity; it might arouse suspicion. There is a small area in the back of her town home where the skimmer will land. Knock on the servants' entrance there and utter this phrase to whoever opens the door. 'The air is free and clear in Larbela.' They will take you to Fardretha."

"Is that where we are? In Larbela?"

Narik drew himself up like a cobra about to strike, and hissed. "Perhaps you need a direct demonstration of what will happen should you disobey me. I told you not to interrupt me!"

His bright blue eyes glowed.

"Sorry, sorry. Won't happen again." I bit my tongue and shut up.

"Lady Fardretha will explain her urgent call. If she feels that Orath's presence is necessary, you will tell her to use the same means of communication she used before and write his name. Orath will then come in secret to Mariess. He will seek you out. Give him any help he demands. Now, do you understand?"

I nodded.

He sat back in his chair with a relieved sigh.

“Good. At first light in the morning, you will set off. May the Great Maker smile upon your task.”

I took the smart way out and merely bowed my head.

In the morning, I'd head out on the most remarkable journey of my life.

Hot shit!

Chapter Six

“We have to act as though nothing untoward has happened, Loran. I don’t want my eldermother upset.”

Loran nodded. “It’s even more imperative now that we find the final portion of the Book. After the midday meal, we’ll return to the cave and do a more thorough search.” He took out his timepiece. “Do you realize we’ve still an hour or two before midday? It seems like it should be later.”

Tally looked down at her musty gown and grubby hands.

“I’d better wash and change my clothes. Wouldn’t want Eldermother to see me like this. Not at all proper behavior.” She grinned. “I think I’ll be climbing the terrace again today.”

Loran sketched an exaggerated bow. “I’ll be more than happy to offer you a boost, meliflir.”

“I’m sure you would. Come on, let’s go.”

Safely gaining access to Tally’s escape route, Loran cupped his hands and assisted her. Once on her balcony, she dismissed him with an imperious wave and then disappeared inside.

Shaking his head, Loran turned toward the front of the castle. And he’d thought he was going to be bored here!

* * * * *

Tally stripped off her clothes, placing them in a hamper to be laundered. Summoning a household taisin, she sat on her bed brushing her hair while the taisin filled her tub with warm water and fragrant lanbeth crystals. She stepped into the tub and sighed as she sank up

to her neck in the soothing liquid, but didn't linger. She needed to stretch out on the bed and take some time to relax without worrying about falling asleep and drowning in the calming water.

Still dripping, she splashed from the tub and grabbed a towel, vigorously rubbing her body and leaving her damp curls to air dry.

Wrapping the towel around her figure, she moved toward the bed. As she passed her mirror, she paused.

And let the towel drop.

Her gaze wandered over her naked body inch by inch.

Her breasts were firm and full, her waist slim, her hips nicely rounded. She thought of Fardretha's lush figure. If Loran could see them both unclothed, whom would he choose to bed? She snorted most inelegantly. The likelihood of him ever seeing her like this seemed even more remote now he was so focused on retrieving that last precious piece of manuscript.

Lying down on top of the coverlet, she closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Visions of Fardretha and her servant making love assailed her drifting thoughts. Her fingers slipped to the silky thatch between her thighs as she pressed first one then two fingers between her nether lips. Once more she envisioned her father's mistress and her lover fucking with unrestrained energy. But now the participants were different. Loran's forest brown head rested between her own bent legs as he licked her moist slit.

She groaned.

How she wished he were there. She could feel his tongue, the grip of his hands on her thighs. She needed him, wanted him. Now that she'd seen firsthand the ecstasy that passion created, she craved him even more. If he were here now, she'd give herself to him without a second thought. She'd let him take her over and over until she couldn't move. If he were here, she'd ...

"What would you do, meliflir? Tell me, what you would have me do?"

Her eyes shot open.

Loran was there, naked, kneeling on the bed, crouched between her widespread legs.

She blinked. Not possible. Impossible.

"Loran?"

He smiled. "In the flesh, or more rightly, in your flesh."

"My flesh?"

"Your body cried out for me, your mage powers created me. I'm as real as you want me to be, for as long as you need me to be. I am yours to command."

"Can I touch you?"

He nodded once more. "I'll come closer."

He moved up so that his face was mere inches from hers and planted a hand on either side of her waist to steady his weight.

She raised her hand to his mouth and he grasped it, drawing her palm to his lips. His tongue swiped her flesh and she gasped. He was solid!

“What are you?”

He blew his warm breath against the moisture he’d placed on her skin before he responded.

“I’m the reflection of your desires. You conjured me with the intensity of your need.” He grinned Loran’s selfsame grin. “Your powers are awesome, meliflir.”

Tally’s thoughts were a jumble. Desire and fear jostled for precedence. And desire won out.

“You’ll do anything I wish?”

He nodded. “You needn’t even speak aloud. Your body will speak to me and I’ll answer its every craving. Let me show you.”

Letting go of her hand, he slid his palms down, grazing the fullness of her breasts and then cupping them. They overflowed his hands as he gently squeezed them, then pulled her nipples into sharp, aching points.

She arched her body, and he slipped his hands down to her hips, lifting her then thrusting the length of his penis between her thighs.

She groaned.

His whispered response caressed her. “You like that, don’t you, meliflir? The feel of my flesh against yours -- you like that. Do you want more?” He chuckled. “Silly question. I know you want more.”

Her thighs tightened around his lean flanks and her fingers twisted in the bedclothes. Her gaze fixed on his face as though she feared he’d disappear if she closed her eyes.

Tally watched his nostrils flare as he smelled her arousal. She shivered as she saw his eyes darken with passion.

“In me,” she begged. “I want you in me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. I know what I want. I want you!” Without any coyness, she took hold of his thick, hard, long rod and ran her fingers down its length. “This. I want this in me. Now.”

“As you wish.” He thrust first one finger, then two. “You’re wet.” He withdrew his fingers, then brought them to her mouth. “Taste your cream.”

Tally hesitated for a moment, but then obediently flicked her tongue out and dabbed his skin. The taste was intoxicating.

He smiled and pulled back his hand, bringing it to his lips. Like a baby bitna devours cream, he lapped every drop from his fingers.

Tally inhaled deeply. The scent of musk drenched the air. She squirmed amid the tousled bedclothes. She ached.

Her lover smiled again. "Spread your legs wide and close your eyes. Let your other senses take hold. Feel with your body as I sink into your flesh."

With her eyes closed, she listened to her racing heart beat wildly. She heard the rustle of the sheets as Loran moved upon them. His harsh breathing smote her ears.

The scent of their arousal permeated the air. Her skin was so sensitized, the soft sheets felt like sandpaper against it. She felt Loran's hands grasp her hips and raise them. He lifted her onto his thighs and positioned his shaft so she could feel his tip nudging at the entrance to her inner core.

Slowly, inch by inch, he pressed into her. Her body widened to accommodate his thickness as he thrust deeper and deeper within her. At last, he reached her thin shield and he pushed, penetrating it. A sharp pain tore through her and was gone. Why?

As though he could read her mind, he whispered the answer. "Because this is magic of your making. No pain can exist, only pleasure, Sweet, sweet pleasure. Now, let me do what you conjured me to do." He took a deep breath. "Fuck you."

He moved then, harder and faster and deeper until he was flesh of her flesh. Rained kisses over her body while his hips never stopped pumping. Nipped and licked her pale skin until it was rosy and covered in tiny love bites.

He kneaded her breasts. Plied her nipples with roughened fingertips. Threaded his fingers through her curls and cupped her head.

He thrust his tongue between her lips and vied with her tongue, feasting on her taste.

As they moved faster and faster, she could feel her orgasm nearing. She grabbed his shoulders, holding him as close as she could.

Withdrawing his mouth from hers, he spoke, his voice harsh with desire.

"You're coming. I can feel your muscles clenching my shaft. Scream all you want. I'll muffle your voice with my mouth."

Tears seeped from the corners of Tally's eyes as the pressure built and built. Finally, she couldn't stand it. Her mouth opened to shout as her climax ripped through her, but his mouth was there, absorbing her cries.

As the aftershock of her climax struck, she collapsed in his arms. Gently, he laid her back against her pillow, and she felt him slip away from her.

Slowly, her heart quieted and she opened her eyes.

Gone.

He was gone.

She looked around. No lanbeth covered her room as it should when soulmates made love. She gazed down at her body. No lanbeth gilded her. No love bites marred the perfection of her skin. She shifted her legs. No virginal blood stained her sheets.

It was only magic. What good was having the power to create such illusions when the reality was empty, fleeting, and finally, unfulfilling?

She turned her head against the pillows and wept.

* * * * *

Loran gained his room encountering no one other than a few servants. Shutting the door behind him, he stripped off his clothes, tossing them into the laundry.

Shifting his bed flat against the wall, he created a cleared area in the center of the room. He rolled up the area rug covering the slick wood floor and laid out a tightly wound rough mat woven of tough grasses.

He sat cross-legged upon it, the coarse fiber rubbing his butt. Placing his hands on his knees, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. He tensed and then released his muscles until his body was limp and relaxed.

Softly, he began to chant. As always, the music eased his stress and cleared his mind.

When he had learned that mage powers would be denied to him, he had isolated himself from his family. Traveling to the Great Forest of Tarnwite, he had lived off the land, fishing, hunting; harvesting fruits, berries, and herbs to enhance his meals. He drank from the pure waters of the creeks and lakes.

One day, as he drifted lazily in the small rowboat he had built, fishing in the middle of the largest, deepest lake in the forest, he saw a vision in its reflecting surface.

Beneath the wavering ripples lay an underwater city. He leaned over, foolishly attempting to see more, and fell in. Within seconds he was treading water and laughing at his stupidity.

Suddenly, fingers grabbed his ankles and pulled. Flailing wildly, he attempted to get back into the boat. The powerful hands tugged, drawing him underwater, pulling him swiftly.

He felt his lungs grow near to bursting as his unseen captor drew him behind, deeper and deeper.

He knew he was going to die. His last thought before he passed out was, *I'm too fucking young.*

He awoke to find himself lying in the dirt on the floor of a cave, the sound of water lapping against stone filling his ears. A fire blazed before him, warming his naked body. His clothes lay spread upon flat rocks angled to one side of the fire, drying out.

By the Great Maker, where in the world was he?

Too exhausted to move, he lay there, letting the warmth of the flames seep into his bones. Soon, he heard shuffling sounds drawing nearer.

A figure appeared from behind the flames. A slender, tall male dressed in a simple, coarse forest brown robe. A catch of several coneys dangled from his hand.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

He hunkered down near the fire, pulled a sharp knife from his belt and proceeded to clean and prepare the small game for roasting.

Loran lay quiet, mesmerized by the smooth motions of his unknown host. For some unfathomable reason, he felt no need to ask questions at the moment. Soon the delicious aroma of the coneys filled the cave. His stomach growled loudly and the man turned back to him.

“The meat will be ready soon. While we wait, let me tell you where you are and who you’re with. My name is Jayhor set Bern. You were brought to me by the Ser folk.”

“They don’t exist!”

Jayhor shook his head. “They do, but they are dying here. Fewer male children have been born each year. There has been strife among the young women as they vie for men.” He paused. “They have kept among themselves for so many years that there has been too much inbreeding. Twenty years ago when I first came to this forest, I was approached by their queen.” He grinned. “She dragged me down to her city beneath these waters and gave me the means to stay underwater for extended periods of time. But I wanted to live on the surface. Reluctantly, she let me go.” He sighed. “But I couldn’t go far. She was in my blood. Before I even reached the forest’s edge, I had turned back. I dove into the lake where she found me, near death. I could no longer remain under the water for the same length of time. And so I make my home here. Near her, but not near enough.

“It can be a lonely life. People seldom come this deep into the Great Forest. When the Ser folk saw your boat, they thought to bring me some company.

“I know you can’t stay. You’ve family and friends who will seek you out, but I would like to offer you my hospitality for as long as you choose. If you choose.”

Loran remained silent. His thoughts raced. Was this man insane? He seemed harmless - nay, calm and coherent. Could what he said be true? Think of the marvelous knowledge he could gain should the Ser folk actually exist!

“My name is Loran. There is no one waiting anxiously for me to return. I would stay for awhile and ease your solitude.”

Jayhor’s lips broke into a wide grin. “Many thanks, Loran. I ask only one thing. When you leave, please keep the existence of the Ser folk secret. They’ll be leaving here soon and I with them. Their lives are so fragile.”

Loran nodded. “No one would believe me anyhow.”

He spent almost six months with Jayhor. Among the things he learned was the art of meditation, balance and endurance. Called *machashavah* by the Ser folk, it increased his powers of concentration, strength and speed. It rejuvenated his spirit and health, giving him increased lung capacity and control over his breathing.

He practiced it for short periods on a daily basis and for longer stretches of time at least once a week. At that time he would engage in specific movements, chanting, and extended meditation.

For the past six years he had kept the secret of the Ser folk. His time with Jayhor gave him the resolve to focus his life on developing his intellect and leave regrets about what would never be, behind him. At least, that was his goal.

When he returned several years later, Jayhor was gone. Loran could only assume the Ser folk had left, too.

Now, he focused his mind on the cave where he had met Jayhor. Slowly, the cave changed from its cool, shadowy depths to the cave of Arlette and Keret.

And Tally.

She danced into his vision and wouldn't leave. Her eyes shining with eagerness as she practiced her spells, her supple body resting in his arms, her laughter, her scent, her tousled curls, everything about her.

And the feel of her lips beneath his and how he longed to feel her body beneath his. Naked beneath him. Writhing in passion beneath him. Her hips rising to meet him. Her breasts pressed against his skin. Her lips caressing his skin. Her mouth embracing his arousal. Her fingers cupping his balls. Her sheath clenching his shaft as he thrust into her again and again and again and ...

He came back to reality with a groan, aching, his meditation session hardly serene and renewing.

He sighed.

Back to the shower. A cold, stinging shower.

* * * * *

The midday meal was conducted in awkward silence between Tally and Loran. Scarcely daring to look at each other, they let Lady Galayne carry the conversation, offering minimum responses when necessary.

They rose as soon as they finished and took their leave.

"Have fun, my dears. I shall continue responding to the few condolence letters left. We'll meet in the parlor for some chai before the evening meal, shall we?"

Nodding in agreement, Tally and Loran finally escaped.

"Let's use the skimmer again. It'll get us there the fastest," Loran stated.

Tally nodded, offering no argument.

They got in, sitting next to each other in the front, being careful not to touch. Since the interior of the vehicle was shielded from the outside, Tally took off her spectacles. A palpable, uncomfortable quiet reigned within as the vehicle took off. Neither passenger dared glance at the other for fear of betraying their unsettled feelings. Loran still ached with desire, his cold shower having done little to assuage his need. His senses were so heightened by his earlier visions he feared the least thing would break the tenuous control he had in place.

At last, Tally broke the silence.

"Loran, I must apologize again for causing such upheaval with my stupid actions." Her mouth thinned. "I've always been so careful to control my behavior. I can't believe I could have been so, so ..."

"Reckless? After I told you not to use your powers outside of the cave?"

Knowing he was right, Tally still couldn't help but lash out.

"You told me? What right do you have to tell me anything? You're not my father!"

Loran grabbed her, hauling her into his arms, his frustration shattering his restraint.

"You're right. I'm not your father. He would have done this to you."

He smashed his lips against hers, forcing them open. As his anger and fear for the possible consequences of her impetuosity warred with his pent up desire, his mouth gentled.

Just before she bit his tongue.

"Damn!"

Tally shoved off his lap and moved back to her seat. "I told you I knew it was stupid and reckless, but don't ever treat me like you were my father. I'm not a child!" She glared at him, her anger still simmering. "Next time I'll bite it off!"

Loran stared at her, seething. His tongue hurt like the Demons of Torment, but suddenly he had the strongest urge to laugh. Looking at her now, emotions bubbling over, her glorious eyes blazing, he could only compare her to the lifeless automaton she had been when he first met her. Then shame for his actions overwhelmed him and he raised his hands in mute surrender.

"Peace, Tally, peace. Please forgive me. I was a bastard just now. I had no reason to act like I did. I don't know why I did so." He paused, ran his fingers through his hair, and shook his head. "No, I know why I acted like a brute. I'm scared. Scared and frustrated. I can't blame you for doing what you did. I must have frightened the life out of you." He turned to her. "Tally, please, please forgive me."

Tally took a deep, cleansing breath and clenched her hands. She couldn't believe her audacity. Never in her wildest dreams could she have seen herself acting as she had just done to Loran. But she knew exactly what he meant by fear and frustration.

She nodded, extending her hand. "Peace. And here's my hand on it."

Loran grasped it, but rather than shaking it brought it to his lips. Placing a tender kiss in her palm, he folded her fingers around it and released her hand. "And my pledge. Now, let's plan what we'll say to Rayne and Pentar."

"The truth. We must trust them completely. Should we not find the final portion of the Book before they arrive, perhaps they may have some suggestions to aid our search."

"Good thought. Tran and Rosta may also have some ideas regarding its location. Tran is very familiar with legends and such. Perhaps there may be a clue within the story of Arlette and Keret."

Soon the familiar sight of the winged akosai stone loomed into view. Disembarking, they speedily entered the opening and trekked to the cave's chamber.

"Let's examine the bodies again and the resting place," Tally suggested.

"Good thinking. We may have missed something in all the excitement of your donning the ring." Loran glanced at her bare fingers. "By the way, where is it?"

Drawing it from her pocket, Tally placed it on her finger. As soon as it touched her skin, it glowed. "I could scarcely wear it in the castle. I've been carrying it on me. It tends to shine when it's next to my skin."

"You can keep it on while we're here."

Leaving their carry bags lying on the fine sandy floor of the cave, they climbed once more to where the lovers lay in silence.

Tally bent closer to the ring that remained on Keret's bony finger. "It's still lifeless. I wonder why?"

Loran's response was an eerie whisper. "It waits for the mate to don it. Life cannot last long without love."

Tally stared at him. He seemed to gaze right through her. "Loran, what did you mean by that?"

Blinking, he shook his head like a canid shaking his wet fur. "What did I say?"

"You mean you don't know?"

He shrugged. "The last thing I remember was staring at the ring." He smiled. "Did I say something profound?"

"I don't think I'd call it profound; cryptic, more like it." And she repeated his words for him.

"Perhaps we'll find the answer later." Loran placed his hand on the clothed bony shoulder of the female. "Let me shift the remains while you look underneath. Maybe there's something hidden there."

With exquisite care, Loran moved first Arlette and then Keret as Tally searched the ground beneath them.

“Nothing.” She sat back on her heels. “This is hopeless. I don’t think there’s anything here but them. Maybe we should check some of the other tunnels.”

Loran stood and extended his hand, helping her up.

“Excellent idea. I’ll mark our passage so we can retrace our steps. Let’s gather our stuff and start.”

Slinging the carry bags’ straps over their shoulders they headed out of the chamber. Several turns later, they came to the first branching tunnel.

Tally gestured with her right hand. “What do you think? Shall we try that one?”

For a second, Loran was speechless. Recovering, he gently grasped her hand and turned it so that she could see the ring.

“Look, it glows!”

Tally gasped. “Let me move it away from the opening and see what happens.”

As soon as she did so, the stone’s glow faded. Raising it again produced the same effect.

“Mark the tunnel, Loran, and let’s follow it for as long as it goes.”

Taking his dagger, he incised his initials on the right side, and then, holding high the lanbeth lantern, led the way into the tunnel.

As they followed the twists and turns of the passage, Tally’s ring remained at a steady glow. Finally they exited into a small chamber and were faced once more with a decision.

“Raise your hand, meliflir, and let’s see where the light shines brightest.”

Tally lifted the be-ringed finger and slowly pivoted from left to right. The gem flared bright as her hand passed the middle tunnel.

With a nod, Loran led the way to it. His mark quickly cut, they entered.

Using the ring as their guide, they continued on their way. The tunnel became narrower and the heat intensified. At last, they reached a dead end.

Loran growled with frustration. “Damn, we’ve been led a merry dance. Now what?”

“Hold up the lantern nearer to the wall. Let’s take a closer look.”

Raising the lantern, Loran examined the blank wall.

“There’s been a cave-in. That’s what’s blocking us. There must be another tunnel on the other side.”

Tally ran her hand over the rough surface. The purple stone in the ring blazed bright as the sun. “We’ll come back with some shovels and picks and see if we can dig through the debris.”

“Maybe Pen and I can do some digging.”

“And Rayne and I can help.”

Loran laughed. “I wouldn’t dare to suggest otherwise.”

Retracing their path, they reached the cave entrance and moved out into the orange rays of the setting sun. Tally took off the ring, blinking against the glare, and put on her spectacles, then turned to Loran.

They faced each other and began to laugh.

"You're a mess." Loran chuckled. "There's dust on your hair and your face."

"You needn't smirk. "You're filthy, too! And you've torn your shirtsleeve. You'll have to leave it for the household taisins to mend."

"Aye. Come, we'd better clean up before the evening meal."

Tally grinned. "And we'd better not let Eldermother see us like this. We'll have to sneak in again." She shook her hair and dust flew around. "I'm getting to be an expert at latticework climbing!"

Loran shared her laughter. "Aye, you could give lessons in mountain climbing now."

Tally sighed and squared her shoulders. "I'm getting tired of entering the castle like a tree-climbing creature."

"As long as there's a chance that Lady Galayne would see us and ask too many questions, I'm afraid we'll have to sneak in."

"Ah, well, my room could have been on the third floor instead of the second."

They arrived at the castle to unexpected bustle. Lady Galayne lay in wait for them in the front hall.

"Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne are here!"

Loran and Tally exchanged glances.

Help had arrived.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

The skimmer materialized out of thin air -- some kind of shielding spell Narik explained. It looked sort of like the Batmobile but in silver. The windows were opaque. He handed me a carry bag that contained everything he thought I'd need, including my Microtech. The skimmer hovered just above the balcony. Stepping gingerly onto the broad railing, I hitched my body aboard the wing, entered the hatchway that opened up, and stepped inside, stumbling a little as I sat down on the padded driver's seat. The door shut and the skimmer zoomed off, leaving the figures of Orath and Narik growing smaller.

The mind merge had given me a ton of information I was still trying to assimilate, but the view was incredible, distracting me and leaving me gaping. It was like I had stumbled into a fairytale. A silvery tinge gilded the clouds and the sea below was a wild mix of blue and green. At any second, I expected an akosa, one of those flying horses, to come soaring from behind a cloud.

Man, this was more exciting than any movie I'd ever seen or any book I'd ever read.

I decided to sit back and enjoy the ride. The intel was in my brain and would be there when I needed it.

I leaned back against the cushioned headrest and smiled.

Chapter Seven

Lady Galayne fluttered about Loran and Tally, shoos them to their rooms even as she chattered.

“So unexpected! Your brother and his soulmate! Such a striking couple! I’ve put them in your mother’s chambers, Talea. I wasn’t sure where to house the akosai. It seemed discourteous to put them in the stables, but they assured me they’d be fine. What do akosai eat? I’ll ask the cook.” She paused to take a breath and finally took in Tally and Loran’s dishevelment. “You both look like you rolled in the dirt! Talea, make sure you wear court dress this evening. We’ll be dining in the formal dining room tonight.” She nodded at Loran. “I did push the evening meal back to give your brother and the princess time to freshen up.” She sighed. “I’ve so much to do.” Finally leaving them at the foot of the stairs, she turned back toward the kitchen, her worried mutterings trailing behind her.

Tally gazed at her eldermother’s receding back with affection.

“She’s enjoying herself. She’s in her element.”

Loran’s gaze remained fixed on Tally’s profile. Soft and tender with love, it drew him. He reached out and cupped her shoulder, turning her to face him.

“Where’re your mother’s rooms? I think we should speak with Pen and Rayne as soon as possible.”

“They’re right next to mine. Come; I’ll lead the way.”

Linking her hand with his, Tally mounted the stairs. Loran tightened his grip a bit, exultant that Tally was showing increasing freedom by allowing his touch.

Passing her room, they came to a deep ebon wood door with ornate carvings. Loran knocked briskly and Pen’s voice came through, bidding them to enter.

His hair still damp, Pen, dressed in an opulent velveteen robe, sat before the hearth in the room, drying his feet. There was something so natural about it, Tally couldn't help but relax. And when Loran chose to tease him, she broke into a huge grin.

"Has no one taught you any manners, Pen? Stand when a lady enters a room."

Pen sprang to his feet, overturning the chair and tripping on the towel he dropped. Sprawling at her feet, he looked up at her and sketched an imaginary bow in the air.

"Princess Talea, your servant."

Loran gently nudged Pen in the side with his booted toe. "Get up, you oaf. And be careful with the flap of your robe."

Rising to his feet, Pen grabbed Loran, clasping him to his chest. Tally stood nearby, envying their closeness.

The door to the bathing chamber opened and a young woman sauntered out, toweling her long, brown hair. Dressed in a robe similar to Pen's, she moved with an athletic grace and a long-legged stride that Tally wished she owned.

As the brothers clasped one another around the shoulders, the two young women gazed at each other in silence.

Rayne saw a petite, curvaceous blonde with short, curly hair, who stood poised like a frightened young *bant*, ready to flee at a wrong move. Following her instinct, Rayne approached Tally slowly, smiling, her hand open.

"Lady Talea, I am so pleased to meet you."

Tally shook Rayne's hand. "Please, call me Tally." She looked around the room. "But where is your marvelous pet?"

Rayne grinned.

"Fel's shifra will soon bear her first litter. We felt it best that he remain with her."

Pen's fervent prayer of thanks reached Tally's ears. "I, for one, thank the Great Maker for this respite."

Rayne stuck out her tongue at him. "Big baby! Fel would no more bite you than I would."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Wrong choice of words, *kerasoka*. You've bitten me many a ..."

Rayne blushed. "Hush, you great thrant!"

Tally giggled; she couldn't help it. The sight of these two imposing, imperious people teasing each other, their glances and voices filled with love, warmed her soul. And made her yearn even more for someone with whom she could share her life. Someone like Loran.

Loran shook his head at their banter. "Our message reached you, I'd guess."

Pen nodded. "It did, indeed. Just how did you manage that, Loran? I didn't recognize the aura."

Loran sighed. "You might as well get comfortable. This will probably take a while."

Loran and Tally sat in the chairs near the hearth while Rayne and Pen shoved pillows against the headboard of the bed, settling back against them.

As Loran began to speak, Tally laid a restraining hand on his arm. "The easiest thing to do is just show them. We've got to trust them. I know you do, and that's good enough for me."

Loran inclined his head. "As you wish, meliflir. 'Tis your secret."

His term of endearment didn't escape Rayne's notice. Her thoughts joined with Pen as she shared her reaction. *"He's in love with her."*

"Aye. And I believe she returns the feeling. But with typical thrantlike behavior, I'd bet anything he hasn't told her."

"Why not? He's a prince! He's her equal!"

Rayne's indignation on his brother's behalf drew an inner smile from Pen.

"No matter how smart and clever Loran is, he must still feel lacking since he has no mage powers. Hush now, kerasoka. I think Tally is trying to gather her courage and reveal some mystery to us."

Tally squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and whipped off her spectacles.

Beautiful mage-blue eyes gazed directly at Pen and Rayne. For a moment they were speechless, then both spoke at the same time.

"Impossible!" Pen sputtered.

"Wonderful! Ratzah! Ratzah!" Rayne applauded.

Tally's gaze fell and her hands played with the glasses in her lap. Reaching over, Loran laid a tender hand over hers. Her fluttering fingers instantly calmed.

"Then it was Tally who called me?" Pen peered at her intently. "How long?"

"How long have I had mage powers? Since I was eighteen, but my eyes started to lighten before that. How long have I been practicing my mage powers?" She turned to Loran, adoration shining plainly from her eyes. "Two and a half days. Loran has been teaching me." She turned back to Pen and Rayne. "But the reason we summoned you was because I've done something foolish."

Loran interrupted her. "Impetuous. And something that may have put her life, or at the least her freedom, in jeopardy."

"Tell us what happened," Rayne commanded.

As succinctly as possible, Tally shared the incident that had happened earlier in the day.

Pen grew grimmer as she spoke. Rayne gaped with astonishment. As Tally finished, a tension-filled silence fell upon the room.

Pen finally broke the silence.

"The mirror sounds like it's an actual rift to Fardretha's chambers. I've never heard of such a thing. It almost assuredly is Narik's work. Belar never would have had the power to do such a thing. And you activated it when you spoke Fardretha's name?"

Tally nodded.

Loran got up and started pacing, causing the others in the room to grin. His habit of moving while he thought out a problem well known to them, they smiled as they watched him stride back and forth. "There most likely was a way for Belar to join Fardretha through the mirror. I think he may have used it to work up his desire. He'd want to take advantage of his increased potency as soon as possible. But how would he do it?"

Tally arose and began to match Loran's strides, offering her own ideas as they moved together. "Perhaps by merely saying his name? I think a simple spell would be all he'd be able to handle."

"Would it work in reverse?" Rayne asked.

Pen shook his head. "I doubt Belar was that trusting. I'm sure Narik made it possible for only Belar to return through the mirror."

Tally agreed. "Aye, my mother told me he trusted no one." She faltered. "Loved no one." She breathed deeply. "Well, anyone have any ideas what we should do?"

Rayne spoke slowly, sounding out her idea as she went along. "Pen and I should go back to the library. Mention Fardretha's name and activate the mirror's spell. Bring up the incident and attribute it to your wild imagination. Fardretha will most likely be present; from what I've heard about her, she has an insatiable appetite for sex. When she comes into view, we'll act surprised." She grinned. "Here comes the part I like best. I'll poke Pen in the ribs and whisper loudly, 'You've done it again! Turned the mirror on. I hope she can't see us!'"

Pen looked at Rayne with slowly dawning admiration. "It's so simple, it just might work."

Loran and Tally nodded.

"We'd better do it tonight," Loran said. "The sooner we get this situation diffused, the better."

"Aye," Tally agreed. "And speaking of tonight, my eldermothe is making a big to-do about your presence. We're eating in the formal dining room, and she asked me to wear court dress. She's a stickler for tradition."

Pen grinned.

"What's going on in that evil mind of yours, Pen?" Loran demanded. "I know that look."

"Nothing at all, brother. Rayne and I will wear our most regal attire."

Something was going on in Pen's head, but damned if Loran could figure what it was. He only knew that grin and gleam in Pen's eyes usually meant mischief.

“Then we’ll meet you downstairs for the evening meal, and afterwards, we head for the study.”

Rayne nodded. “Don’t worry, Tally. Your secret’s safe with us, and Pen will make everything better.” She clasped his hand and brought it to her lips. “He’s very good at it.”

Tally sighed from the depths of her soul. “I hope so.”

* * * * *

Tally washed and dressed quickly in evening court dress. While this was also made from scylla cloth, it was lined with a brilliant blue-sheen undergarment that covered her from breast to ankle. A high standup collar framed her face. With her spectacles in place, only her slim nose and full lips were visible.

Loran chose to dress more formally also. He was the epitome of nobility, wearing a maroon jacket with a deep V-neck revealing a shirt of blazing white linen, and tight black leggings that molded to his wiry frame and clung to the very obvious evidence of his virility.

He offered Tally his arm while they waited for Rayne and Pentar. The sound of someone loudly clearing their voice caused them to look upward. Loran swore under his breath. So that was what his sneaky older brother had had in mind! He glanced at Tally, noting her admiring gaze. Lucky for Pen that Rayne stood by his side, else he’d wipe that smirk from his face!

Rayne and Pen stood at the top of the stairs dressed in the traditional garb of the Jakosai people of the Hinterlands of her kingdom.

A short kilt, reaching barely below her buttocks and dipping low at her waist, displayed her flat tummy and dimpled navel. Her vest, embroidered with a rainbow of colored threads, was tied tightly with elaborate knots and just covered her breasts. Her hair was pulled back into a high akosa tail and fell below her shoulder blades. Sandals with leather thongs that wrapped around her ankles revealed slim feet.

Pen’s male Jakosai garb would incite the desire of any red-blooded female under the age of ninety. Consisting only of an unadorned, tanned leather kilt, it ended mid-thigh. His sandals also laced up his strong muscular legs to mid-calf. He wore his hair loose to his shoulders.

Tally gaped at the gorgeous barbaric picture they presented. “Oh, dear. I think Eldermother is in for a surprise.”

By the time Rayne and Pen had descended the stairs, Loran had his temper under control and his sense of the ridiculous at the fore. As the stunning couple reached them, he couldn’t resist a little teasing. “This had to be Pen’s idea, right, Rayne?”

Rayne raised a haughty chin. “Why, whatever do you mean? Are you insulting my national dress?” Her tone grew icy. “I certainly hope not.” Then her lips twitched, spoiling

the effect. "You're right. It was Pen's idea." She frowned. "Do you think this will make your eldermother faint? I wouldn't wish to insult her."

Tally giggled. "I think she's made of stronger stuff than you'd think. Why don't Loran and I go in first and make sure she's sitting down before you both enter?"

Loran drew her hand to his mouth and lightly kissed it.

"Very diplomatic of you, meliflir. We'll see you both in a few minutes."

"The dining room is down corridor to the right, the second door on the right." She smiled. "We seldom use it. You should feel honored."

Pen responded, assuming his haughtiest demeanor. "I expected nothing less."

Whereupon Rayne shoved him. "Cloddish Pitt!"

"Pitt?" Tally asked.

"A male from Mirelle's former world. She assured me he's quite handsome, but his name always makes me think of soggy, spoiled fruit." She turned to Pen and poked him in the chest. "Like this one can be!"

Pen grabbed her finger and nipped it. His eyes sparked and there was a moment of charged silence between the two.

Rayne's gaze softened and she nodded. "Later," she mouthed.

Tally and Loran exchanged glances and headed for the dining room. They found Lady Galayne seated at a long, elaborately set table, facing the door.

"At last!" She moved her head to the side, trying to look behind them. "Where are Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne?"

"They'll be here shortly, Eldermother. I just wanted to prepare you; they're wearing traditional Jakosai clothing."

Lady Galayne sniffed. "And why should they not? They are her people, are they not? It shows true understanding of the role of a ruler to honor her countrymen in such a manner."

Tally had no more time to prepare her eldermother for Pen and Rayne's appearance. A brief knock, and they entered the room. Tally had to admit they made a striking couple, and she certainly wasn't immune to Pen's raw masculinity. She could eat him with a spoon. She turned to observe her eldermother's reaction.

Though her eyes widened for the merest moment, Lady Galayne retained her composure. In fact, were Tally to be honest, she thought she saw a hint of lust in her eldermother's eyes.

After all, she was female.

The meal proceeded from there with great ease. Courses of traditional Tarolian foods and those from Mariess and Tarnwite covered the table. The men dug in with hearty appetites and even Lady Galayne sampled some of the more exotic fare.

Finally, after a simple dessert of pomees with sweetened cream, Pen pushed away from the table.

“Lady Galayne, I must compliment you for one of the finest meals I have ever eaten. I hope you will feel no slight, but my soulmate and I are rather fatigued from our trip. If we may, we’d like to retire early tonight.”

Lady Galayne graciously inclined her head, accepting his thanks.

“Do you know, I think I shall call it an early night and seek the comfort of my chambers, also.”

She rose, as did Pen and Loran, and drifted toward the door. When she reached it, she paused and turned.

“By the way, I compliment you on your good taste, Princess Rayne. He is quite the male.” She smiled, blew a kiss to the awestruck couples still seated, and left the room.

Tally spoke first. “See! I told you she would surprise you all!”

Loran grinned. “She really is something else.”

Pen nodded. “Let’s go directly to the study. The sooner we rectify the situation, the better.”

They left the room, moving quickly. As they neared the study, Loran suddenly stopped.

“I just realized I haven’t seen Tran and Rosta.”

“They decided to remain in the stable tonight,” Rayne replied. “I think Rosta may be pregnant.”

Loran chuckled. “The waters of Tarol are potent. After all, Fel’s mate is also expecting.” He grinned. “She became quite fond of Pen. By the way, brother, how is she doing?”

Pen’s voice was fervent with gratitude. “Moody. She begged Fel to stay. She is due soon and shouldn’t travel. ‘Twas the only reason he’d remain behind even after we urged him to do so, for which I am supremely grateful!”

As they reached the study, Pen motioned them to be quiet. Using an unlocking spell, he opened the door.

“Loran, you should remain without. Tally, stay out of the line of sight of the mirror. I think I know how this scenario should be played out.” He turned to Rayne. “Kiereen, merge your mind with me and let me explain.”

Tally and Loran watched as the soulmates communicated silently. Within each of their hearts was the fervent wish to find their own true mate.

“Tally, when I’m ready for you to make an appearance, I’ll say, ‘silly chit, of course, they can’t see us.’ Then step next to us for a moment, shrug, and leave the room. We’ll follow soon after.” He smiled and took a deep breath. “Curtain up!”

Rayne, Pen, and Tally entered the study, closing the door behind them on a frustrated and pacing Loran.

Taking a quick glance, they noted that Fardretha's bedchamber was still visible. Pen nodded to Rayne and Tally and motioned Tally off to the far side of the room. Squaring her shoulders, Rayne sauntered casually in front of the mirror, standing several feet away from it, with Pen behind her.

"Say her name, kierown. Hopefully, she'll appear."

"Fardretha."

As though she had been waiting for her cue, Lady Fardretha entered her room.

Rayne's excited thoughts tumbled into Pen's mind. *"Look! She's there! I really didn't expect her."*

"Nor did I. I'd hoped it was just Tally's imagination." His thoughts turned grim. *"We must make her believe we're unaware of how strong the mirror's connection is, and at the very least that we don't believe Tally's claim of mutual contact. Now, kiereen, start acting."*

Rayne leaned forward, peering intently at the scene before her.

"Why, look, Pen, there she is now. And you say she can't hear or see us? How interesting. My, she is a handsome woman ... for her age, although she's getting quite haggard looking. 'Tis a good thing she doesn't know how she looks to others."

Rayne's barbed taunts almost caused Fardretha to react. But when she realized they were ignorant of her ability to see or hear them, she swiftly masked her reaction. Her thoughts raced. *So, it must have been Prince Pentar who activated the mirror.*

Pen placed his hands on his soulmate's shoulders, then slid them down her arms, drawing her closer.

"Quite a simplistic spell, actually. I didn't even realize what I'd done until Talea told me what had happened to her."

Rayne laughed and grinned wickedly. "Imagine all you set in motion by just saying her name."

Pen nodded and sighed. "Aye." He turned toward Tally. "Silly chit, of course, no one can see us."

Tally stepped into Fardretha's line of sight, pouted, and then quickly left the room.

Pen looked after her, then turned to Rayne. "I'll have to relock the room with a magic spell. We shouldn't take the chance of anyone else peeking into the Lady Fardretha's private chambers. She's perfectly in her right to do whatever she wishes in the privacy of her bedchamber."

"Quite right. Look how it affected that innocent child."

"Come, kerasoka. There's nothing of any interest here."

With that, they moved away. Fardretha could hear a door shutting again in the distance. She sighed. So it seemed it was merely a freakish accident. She'd bothered Orath

and Narik for nothing. Ah, well, at least she'd see one of them again soon. And she did so miss them.

Thoughts of Orath gladdened her heart, but visions of what could happen if Narik would only return to her bed made her grow damp with need. How she longed to have him fuck her once more. She ran her hands over her firm, lush body and scoffed at Rayne's slurs.

Little slut. When Orath ruled, she'd have him make Rayne suffer. Picturing Rayne in torment made her quiver. She'd let Tokar beat Rayne -- he took such pleasure in inflicting pain. Her heartbeat quickened as she thought of the helpless princess pleading for mercy. But there was no mercy for those who insulted her.

She'd watch her bleed while Tokar fucked her helpless body over and over again. Her breathing grew more ragged. She could feel herself creaming as she envisioned the scene. Her fingers strayed to her crotch. Wet.

She pulled the bell cord, summoning Tokar.

She'd have need of him again this night.

* * * * *

Loran and Tally pounced on Rayne and Pen as soon as they exited the study.

"Well?" Loran asked eagerly. "Do you think it worked?"

Tally danced from one foot to the other. "Did she hear you talking?"

Rayne nodded. "Pen is a wonderful actor. I know she heard us. I saw her react to our conversation."

Pen drew her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"No, kiereen. 'Twas your marvelous insults that provoked her enough that she couldn't school her reaction. She heard, and hopefully, believes we are lacking in awareness about such things." He pulled Rayne into his embrace and then turned to Loran and Tally. "Now, I don't know about you two, but I am quite exhausted from today's events. Thankfully, we were still in the outskirts of Narwith when I received your plea and we didn't have too far to travel." He swept Rayne up in his arms and strode with her toward their rooms. "My soulmate and I are off to bed."

As they neared their room, Rayne turned her head and looked over Pen's shoulder at Tally and Loran. "Good night! Tomorrow after we break our fast, we'll travel with Tran and Rosta."

Tally and Loran glanced at each other. Loran cleared his throat.

"Well, we might as well follow their example and go to bed."

Tally smiled mischievously. "Your room or mine?"

Loran shook his head and teased her right back, leering playfully. "We need our sleep, meliflir; otherwise, I think my room. The bed's bigger."

With that, he sauntered down the hall and down the stairs to his room.

Tally watched his receding back. "Just wait. One of these days I'll take you up on your dare."

The events of the day hit her, and she was suddenly exhausted. Her steps dragging, she walked reluctantly to her room. Shutting the door behind her, she quickly disrobed and bathed. Her body fresh for bed, she slipped naked beneath the sheets and tried to sleep.

Now that she'd met Rayne and Pen she knew what both the faces of love and lust looked like. The commitment and trust, the passion and tenderness they showed, filled Tally with envy.

She turned to her side and closed her eyes. If only Loran looked at her like that. Desired her like that. Cared for her like that. If only he would sweep her into his arms and carry her to his bed and make love to her all night. She could almost feel his arms around her. His strong chest pressed against her body. She could feel his warm breath on her neck.

His warm breath on her neck.

He was there!

"Loran?"

She felt his whisper against her skin.

"You called again, meliflir. Your sadness drew me even quicker." His tongue stroked her earlobe and she shivered. "How can I make you happy? Tell me." His hand slipped beneath her waist, then drifted down to her curly snatch. He cupped her breast and squeezed her nipple with his other. She moaned and arched deeper into his caress. "Do you want me to fuck you, meliflir? Would that make you happy?"

Tally took a deep, shuddering breath. "Yes, Loran. Fuck me. Make me happy."

Slowly at first, he sank his prick into her until his balls lay nestled against her. He toyed with the silky curls between her thighs with one hand, and with the other he kneaded her breasts, moving from one to the other.

As he moved harder and faster, she could feel her orgasm near. She wanted to scream aloud when it came.

He read her thoughts. "Cast a shield of silence around the room; then you can call out as loud as you wish."

"I can't think." She moaned and pressed back against him. "When you make love to me like this, I can't remember anything!"

She could feel him smile against her neck.

"Just focus on your desire to shield the room. Your powers are strong."

Her breath hitching in her throat, Tally imagined a barrier that kept all sound within the room.

"Will it work?" she asked.

“Cry out. No one will hear.”

Once more he moved within her. He grasped her hips and pulled her backside against his groin. His movements grew broad and deep, increasing in speed.

And as waves of passion crashed over her, she cried out.

And no one heard.

Chapter Eight

“Dream Boy, stop blocking me. Come to bed.”

No answer. Mirelle shrugged into her robe at the foot of the bed and stormed into the sitting room. Glued to her laptop was her very own soulmate, Jareth set Morath, High Prince of Hearthome, King of Narwith, etc., etc.

And solitaire junkie.

He was cursing now in several languages, one of which was English.

“Blast and damn! Dispeptic thooba. Where is a red three when I need one?”

Mirelle strode over to the table and zapped off the screen.

“Not in here, I assure you.”

Jareth looked up and cringed. The pissed off expression on Mirelle’s face didn’t bode well for his continued good health.

“Kiereen?”

“Now you merge your thoughts with me? Too little, too late. I am really, really ticked off with you, Jareth set Morath.”

Jareth shrugged helplessly.

“I can’t seem to stop myself, kiereen. It takes my mind off things.” He shoved his chair away from the table and ran his fingers through his hair. *“I like it not that Narik has been so silent. And now, Prince Orath is making his obnoxious presence known. He’s sneaky, conniving, out for himself, and intent on creating dissension when we need all the kingdoms to work together. Is he working for Narik?”* He sighed. *“I feel like we’re on a treadmill running furiously and getting nowhere.”*

“I know, kierown.” She leaned over behind him and rubbed his tense shoulders. *“But think, we’ve the first part of the Book and I know Loran will find the last portion. Look how*

far we've come in such a short time. And it's due so much to you, Jareth. Your honesty and courage. Don't underestimate yourself." She grinned. *"Now, enough ego boosting. Come on, Dream Boy, come to bed"* She bent closer, pressing her breasts against his long, blond hair and then backed away. *"How about page thirty seven in the Pleasure Book?"*

Jareth's eyes widened.

"The kyrscha bug move?" He groaned. And instantly hardened. He stood, almost toppling the chair, turned, and swept Mirelle into his arms and into the bedroom. Within seconds they were naked and on the bed.

"What inspired you to choose this position, kiereen?"

Mirelle giggled.

"Cause you 'bug' me, Dream Boy?" She sobered. *"No, because I love you and want you."*

She draped her body about his, clinging to him. Her nipples, hard points of passions, pricked his back. Her arms circled in front of him and closed about his aching rod. She shifted, bringing her leg over his thigh and pressed against his firm ass. Her lips brushed his earlobe and her teeth nipped his skin. She undulated against him and heard him moan. She cupped his balls and gently squeezed. He groaned again.

"Stop, stop. You are torturing me, little demon." He turned within her arms and brought her beneath him. *"Now, kiereen, 'tis my turn."*

He spread her legs and drew her up over his thighs. His prick nudged at her pouting lips and then slid inch by inch into her hot, wet sex. Using his mage strength alone, he pulled her up into a sitting position, her breasts rising before his eager gaze. He cupped her buttocks and held her securely as she moved up and down. His lips found her sweet nipples and suckled them.

Mirelle moaned.

"Aye, pulse of my heart, 'tis gratifying to hear you. Now, enough delay. I think you offered to join me in the 'kyrscha bug' position."

He leaned sideways and toppled toward the mattress, still joined to her.

Mirelle smiled. *"Show off!"*

Reluctantly withdrawing from her, Jareth slid down her body to the auburn curls clustered between her thighs. Still lying on his side, he raised her free leg, giving him access to her plump lips, and placed his mouth on her dripping slit. When her thighs resumed their position as his captor, he worked her with his lips and tongue, bringing her climax crashing down.

Mirelle inhaled Jareth's musky scent and licked her lips. Opening her mouth wide, she took his hard, thick rod as far as it would go. Her tongue swirled along the length of him, enjoying his flavor more than any sweet candy.

He kept his powerful, muscular thigh raised so as not to crush her. The arousing danger of the kyrscha position was the possibility that in the throes of climax, either partner might lose control, allowing their thighs to fall and grip too hard.

Their mouths working together, Mirelle and Jareth pleased each other. The lanbeth gathered above them, glistening streaks of fiery crimson and frigid silver growing thicker as their climax drew near.

With a shout, Jareth's seed spurted into Mirelle's mouth as he came. Her thighs clenched around his cheeks as her climax gripped her, and with a burst of power, the lanbeth rained down upon them.

Mirelle immediately relaxed her muscles and Jareth withdrew his rod from her mouth. They rolled apart, lying next to each other on their backs.

"Feel better?" Mirelle teased silently, unable to catch her breath to speak.

Jareth gathered her in his arms and positioned her over his body like a wriggling, living blanket before he answered.

"Better than solitaire."

She sighed and settled more comfortably upon him. *"Did I scream?"*

"Not this time; otherwise, you might have bitten off my prick. 'Twas I that screamed like a stuck kyrscha bug."

She closed her eyes in contentment.

"It's a good thing, then, that we've a permanent shield of silence about the room. Otherwise, every time we made love, someone would come running, expecting murder at least."

Jareth laughed. *"And they'd be right. You're killing me with sex."*

Mirelle raised up on her elbows and grinned. *"And what a lovely way to go."*

"Aye, it is indeed."

For a moment, their thoughts were at ease, still filled with pleasure from their joining. The moonlight streamed through the windows, causing the lanbeth scattered everywhere in the room to glitter.

Mirelle ran her fingers down Jareth's skin, making a path through the magic dust that covered him. Bringing her fingers to her lips, she sucked the invigorating essence from them. She bent her elbow, bringing her lanbeth-coated skin to her mouth.

Jareth gazed with avid eyes as her tongue darted out and swiped the silver and crimson specks. He pulled her arm toward his mouth and swirled his tongue over the same place, licking the lanbeth and the trail left by her mouth. The taste of Mirelle's flesh and the spicy, sweet taste of the lanbeth was the most potent aphrodisiac in the world to Jareth.

His penis hardened. He brought her hand down to his prick and covered her hand with his own, imprisoning her fingers around his thick length.

"No need to anchor me to you, kierown. You could put your hand to much better use."
"True."

Slipping first one finger, then two, he worked her slick flesh until she was moving against his hand, clenching her muscles around him.

Her breath came in harsh, short pants. As his fingers moved faster, so did hers, rubbing up and down his shaft, squeezing him.

He pulled his fingers from her sheath and brought them to her mouth.

"Taste."

Mirelle gathered some of the pre-cum from his tip and raised her fingers to his lips.

"And you."

They sucked each other's fingers and then licked the lanbeth from every crevice of their skin.

Once more, they mated. This time like the akosai do, Jareth rising behind Mirelle, his enormous erection plunging deep, giving her almost immediate release, bringing the lanbeth down once more.

At last, exhaustion overtook them and they slept, the lanbeth coating their bodies.

The silent taisins gathered the glistening specks that dusted the room, collecting it in special containers deep within the castle. Nearly all the man-high crystals were filled with the lanbeth created by Jareth and Mirelle over the past days.

It would be distributed to the various guilds to be mixed, diluted, infused and incorporated with the many different materials used to make the world of Hearthome run smoothly.

Once Rayne and Pen returned to Tarol, their excess lanbeth would also be utilized in similar ways.

The world of Hearthome would continue to run.

* * * * *

When Tally awoke next morning, she knew not to expect her dream lover to be beside her. She knew no lanbeth would glisten on her body or room. She masked her disappointment and joined Rayne and Pen in the smaller informal parlor to break their fast on a light repast of fruit, fresh-baked bread and butter and a small round of Mariessan cheese.

"Let's take some extra cheese to Tran and Rosta. You know how they crave it," Rayne said.

"Aye." Pen chuckled. "Tran almost bit my hand off one day when I offered him too small a piece. 'Tis a good thing I have fast reflexes." He stared at his right hand and flexed his fingers.

Rayne glanced toward the parlor door.

"Should we expect Lady Galayne soon?"

Loran shook his head as Tally explained.

"My eldermother usually doesn't arise until midday, so we should have ample time to explore the caves."

They reached the stables to hear Tran's neighing laughter.

Coming out to meet them were two winged akosai, a large pewter male and a smaller silvery female.

Tally, never having come this close to an akosa before, was in awe of their beauty. They were such elegant creatures. Their wings lay folded close to their bodies as they pranced out to meet the two couples.

Bowing their maned necks, the akosai whinnied a greeting.

Pen performed the introductions for Tally.

"I have the honor of presenting Princess Talea seta Variette." He gestured to the akosai couple. "Tran, and Rosta, his mate."

Tran bobbed his head. "We are honored to make your acquaintance, Princess."

Tally dimpled and sketched a curtsy. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Laying a gentle hand on Rosta's neck, Rayne stroked her as she spoke. "We're going to do some exploring and knew you'd want to be involved."

Rosta snorted and shook her head. "If it involves caves, I'm not going!"

Rayne laughed. "Sorry, Rosta, I'm afraid it does involve caves."

"But don't worry," Tally said. "I don't think you or Tran would be able to fit through these tunnels even with your wings at rest."

Rosta whinnied her disappointment. "But then we'd miss out on the adventure!"

Tran chided her, bumping her gently in the side. "You can't have it both ways. You either enjoy the thrill or you don't. Me, I live for adventure!"

Both Rayne and Pen burst into laughter.

"Don't believe a thing these akosai say. Rosta is the best of companions, as is Tran." Pen tweaked Tran's mane as the akosa butted the prince in the shoulder.

"Can they each carry two of us?" Tally asked.

Tran whickered. "Such a short distance -- I could carry all of you!"

Rosta bared her teeth and laughed. "May I introduce you to the biggest braggart of the akosai!"

Tally nudged Rayne. "Are they always like that?"

Rayne snorted. "You should hear them tell a joke. Or at least try to tell a joke."

The mood considerably lightened by the akosai's behavior, the group settled down to more serious matters as Loran brought the akosai up to date. After the akosai marveled at the revelation of Tally's powers, Loran continued.

"So we're going to do some digging. I'll get a few tools. I think I can find them in the gardener's shed. I saw an outbuilding that looked promising near the kitchen gardens."

Pen shrugged. "We've no need for tools. I should be able to clear the way with a simple spell."

Loran bit his lip and nodded slowly. "That's right. I forgot your mage power. You'll have to do it yourself. Tally doesn't know that spell."

Tally laid a consoling hand on Loran's arm. "Why don't you get a couple of shovels just in case the spell doesn't work?"

Rayne, sensing Loran's discomfit, quickly chimed in. "I'm almost looking forward to Pen's having to dig." She leered playfully at him. "I do so love it when he gets all sweaty."

Loran grinned, cheered by Rayne's teasing, and set off to gather the equipment.

As soon as Loran moved out of sight Rayne punched Pen in the arm.

"You are so dense sometimes, hunk! Did you need to remind Loran of his lack of powers?"

Grimacing, Pen rubbed his arm. "That hurt!"

"Poor little bitna pup. Shall I kiss the 'owey' and make it better?"

"Yes."

Pen held out his arm for Rayne. As soon as she bent to kiss it, he pulled her into his arms. She raised her head and his mouth swooped down on hers. The kiss deepened.

Tally stared while Pen and Rayne held each other tightly. Finally, Tran trumpeted in Pen's ear.

"Find a cave!"

Mortified, Rayne pulled away, blushing, while Pen's ears turned red.

Tally tried to smother a laugh.

"Please forgive us, Tally. Pen tends to forget his manners!"

"Me? Why ..."

The rest of the exchange was conducted silently as the two soulmates merged their thoughts. Rayne sniffed loudly and turned her back on Pen, crossing her arms and stiffening her shoulders.

Loran returned, carrying a small shovel in each hand. As he neared them, he took in Rayne and Pen's posture and turned to Tally.

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing. Just a minor disagreement. I'm sure things will settle down."

Rosta chuffed. "Make them ride on Tran together. 'Twill force them to make up."

"I will not ride with that ... that ...Pitt!"

"Pitt! I'm no Pitt, shrew!"

The two faced off, hands on hips, glaring at each other. Taking her life in her hands, Tally stepped between them.

"Both of you grow up! We've no time to waste watching you two bicker. Loran and I will take Tran and Rosta and leave you here if you're going to act like children."

For a second more the couple challenged each other. Loran sensed them communicating silently. Then their gazes softened, Pen cupped Rayne's cheek and drew her closer. She settled into his embrace and raised her mouth for a tender kiss.

Loran smiled at the lovers. "You two settled now?"

Rayne nodded.

"Good. Let's be off."

The ride to the cave was considerably more entertaining flying on the backs of the akosai. Loran and Tally rode on Rosta, while Tran carried Pen and Rayne's slightly heavier weight. For Tally and Loran the ride was a combination of pleasure and torment. Tally sat behind Loran, her arms clasped tightly around his waist, her breasts pressed against his back. Loran could feel her trembling, but didn't dare ask if it were due to her close proximity to him or the thrill of the ride.

They soared over the town of Riess and skimmed the tops of the trees in the forest separating the town from the caves. On the left side of the cave system they could see the major cheese making operation going full blast.

Rosta kept up a running commentary, regaling her riders with their exploits for the search for the second portion of the Book. Light-hearted and somewhat boastful, she sobered when describing the demise of the akosai Guardian and the near deadly battle with the Demon.

They veered to the east and soon came upon the landmark stone. Swooping in low, the akosai alighted to the ground and the riders dismounted, grabbing up the gear. Pen turned to Tran.

"We'll return in about four hours when the sun is at midday. Can you keep yourselves occupied until then?"

Tran lowered his head, attempting to whisper into Pen's ear.

"Rosta entered into her season this morning." He lowered one eyelid in an akosai wink. "Now, I've a legitimate goal in mind when I take her."

His voice anything but a whisper, the rest of the crew broke into shouts of laughter while Rosta nipped Tran's flank.

As the akosai trotted off toward the nearby woods, the royal foursome entered the cave.

"We left the lanbeth lantern in its spot to make sure we had a light. I marked the path we took yesterday, the one that Tally's ring led us down."

Tally interrupted him.

"Although the cave-in looks old, there's definitely something on the other side. The stone glowed the brightest when it drew near the rubble. I still think that's our best bet to start looking for the Book."

They all agreed and, linking his hand with hers, Loran led the way. As the stone in the ring on Tally's finger glowed brighter and brighter, they knew they neared their destination.

At last they came to the debris-covered end.

Pen turned to Rayne and sighed dramatically.

"I fear you won't be seeing me get sweaty, kerasoka. It shouldn't take too much energy to disperse the stone." He gestured to the others. "Get behind me in case there's any dust or debris."

Loran's mouth thinned. He'd almost hoped that Pen wouldn't be able to clear the rock. He sighed, but took his place with the two women.

Softly murmuring the appropriate incantation, Pen gestured to the faint traces of an opening, as though outlining it. His brow furrowed as he concentrated.

Nothing happened.

He frowned and recited the spell again. Still nothing. Stepping closer, he tried a third time, yet the stone remained undisturbed.

He turned to the others, running his fingers through his hair, his face a mask of confusion and disappointment.

"I can't understand it. The spell should work ... unless the cave has some sort of dampening affect on magic."

Loran shook his head.

"Tally had no problems with her mage powers. In fact, they seemed enhanced." He paused, his mind racing furiously trying to come up with some explanation for Pen's failure. "Perhaps you need some focal point on which to concentrate. Your mage powers may be more diffused here."

"I would use the amber in my sword pommel, but I left it with Tran, not thinking I'd need a weapon here."

Rayne pointed to her wristband and the gem gleaming upon it.

"Would using my wristband help?"

Pen shook his head.

"It should be something belonging to the practitioner." Looking at Tally, he grinned. "It appears we'll have to dig this out by hand. Forgive me, Princess, but 'twould be better if I stripped while we dig."

Pulling his shirt from his leggings, Pen started to draw his shirt over his head.

"Hold," Loran called. "Leave your shirt on. Tally can use her talents and clear the way. The ring should act as a focus, should she need one. Recite the spell for her, Pen. Her memory's superb and her intonation perfect."

Shrugging, Pen slowly recited the tones. Although he didn't doubt Loran's veracity, it was still a bit hard to take in.

Tally swallowed, trying to concentrate on Pen's intonation. It thrilled her to the core that Loran had such regard for her talents. She couldn't fail his belief in her. She took a deep breath and intoned the spell while raising her ring hand and directing her glance at the glowing purple stone.

A narrow beam of light shot forth from the gem, and as Tally moved her arm, the beam cut through the rubble. A rush of stale, musty air burst through as the rocks tumbled away from the pitch-black opening. The lanbeth lantern couldn't penetrate the darkness.

Pen turned to Tally and sketched a formal bow.

"I'm impressed, Princess. Your abilities are truly amazing."

Tally blushed to the roots of her hair. "Whatever I know, I learned from Loran."

"Did he teach you a light-catcher spell?"

Tally nodded.

"Then let's try it and see if we can conjure two light-catchers. They'll cast a brighter glow than the lanbeth lantern. I think we're going to need all the light we can get."

Tally had no trouble creating and holding the magical light. With Loran carrying the lanbeth lantern and leading the way, and Rayne and Pen holding hands and following behind, they entered uncharted grounds.

They'd moved only a few feet when Loran stumbled over something. Sprawling on the dirt floor, he dropped the lantern. As it rolled along the ground, its light revealed what he had tripped over.

A pair of feet encased in soft leather boots.

Loran's breath hissed between his teeth. "By the Great Maker, what is this?"

"A body." Rayne's voice was as dry as sandpaper. "The question should be whose body is it? Bring your light-catchers closer, Tally, Pen. Perhaps we may recognize the corpse."

The foursome gathered around the mummified remains.

"This is a mage," Loran said. "Look at the length of his hair."

“But look at the style of his clothing.” Tally fingered his jacket. “This style of dress hasn’t been seen in Mariess for hundreds of years.” She gasped. “’Tis the unnamed shape shifter mage who raped Arlette! It must be him!”

Pen nodded in agreement.

“Keret must have killed him and left him here to rot.”

Loran turned the body and examined it carefully. Empty mage blue eyes stared up at them. Looking up at the others, Loran shook his head.

“I don’t think Keret killed him. There’s not a mark on him.”

Tally knelt next to Loran and passed her hand over the body. As the ring came near the mage’s remains, it darkened. “I think the cave killed him. I don’t think it could endure such evil to exist. I think it lured him to this tunnel and then trapped him inside.”

Rayne looked at her with awe. “What makes you think this?”

Tally gestured with the light-catcher. “Look at the walls.” As she raised the light, a myriad of glittering amethyst sparkles danced before their eyes. Her voice was filled with reverence. “These gems are prized in Mariess. A fortune lies here and in the cave of Arlette and Keret.”

Rayne’s chin thrust forward pugnaciously. “We won’t tell anyone about the jewels, right?”

Pen laughed. “You’ll hear no argument from me, kiereen!”

“Or us,” Loran agreed.

“Though the jewels would bring great wealth to Mariess, unless we can think of a way to mine them without disturbing the lovers and invading the caves, I think we must keep this discovery among ourselves. We should conceal this tunnel again.”

“There’s no spell that I know of to reverse what you did, meliflir.” Loran turned to Pen. “Are you aware of one?”

Pen shook his head. Grinning he glanced over at Rayne.

“Looks like this is your lucky day, kerasoka. Seems Loran and I are going to have to do some shoveling after all.”

Rayne licked her lips.

“Yum! Bare chests, sweaty bodies.” She ran her hand down Pen’s arms, the gleam in her eyes intensifying. She pressed her body against his and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Rayne, stop!”

She pulled back as though she had stepped on a demon’s talon.

“What is it about this place? Ever since we stepped into the cave I’ve wanted to do nothing more than ...” Her voice tapered off.

Loran laughed, his voice filled with undisguised relief.

"I thought it was just me. The cave does seem to have an, should we say, energizing affect on some things."

Pen pulled off his shirt and picked up a shovel. "Well, the opening won't get filled if we just stand here. Grab a shovel, brother."

Loran nodded and stripped off his shirt. Though leaner than his older sibling, his muscles were strong and sinewy. Pen took in his younger brother's body and moved closer, pinching Loran's arm.

"Have you been exercising? I don't remember those muscles."

Loran shoved him away.

"The last time you saw me without a shirt, I was eighteen years old and you were pushing me into Tarn creek. I've grown a bit. I doubt you could win against me in a fight now."

"Oh? Want to bet? Ouch!"

Pen lay sprawled at Rayne's feet.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Because you guys are playing *wiener* and we haven't any time for it!"

Tally gazed quizzically at Rayne. "Wiener?"

Rayne answered out of the corner of her mouth. "Who's got the biggest prick."

"Don't you mean who *is* the biggest prick, *kerasoka*? Loran would win that competition hands down."

Rayne stamped her foot. "Enough! Pen set Morath, start digging!"

Within minute rivulets of sweat ran down the backs of the men, leaving trails in the dust.

Rayne whispered to Tally, "Doesn't it make you want to throw Loran down on the ground and have your way with him?"

Tally giggled. "Oh, yes."

With the two princes working smoothly together, the entrance was hidden once more.

"Enough for now," Loran stated. "We'll come back after midday."

"Wait." Pen leaned on his shovel. "Rayne and I will go back later with Tran. Remember our oath, Loran?"

"That we'd renew our vows with our soulmate?"

"Yes." He took Rayne's hand. "There's a beautiful pool in the cave of Arlette and Keret." He drew her close, his arm circling her waist. "We'll bathe, and then ..." He smiled.

Rayne's breath hissed.

Loran took in their total absorption with each other, and shrugged. "Follow the marks we made when we were children and they'll guide you to the cave. We'll leave the lanbeth lantern for you and tell Tran to wait. We'll see you at the castle."

Loran put on his shirt and took the shovel from Pen's loose grasp, hoisting it onto his shoulder with his.

"Shall we go, Tally? I don't think Rayne and Pen will even notice that we've left."

Tally looked at the lovers gazing into each other's eyes.

"You're right. They'll never miss us. We'll come back later this afternoon and continue the search." She smiled. "If we don't join Eldermother when she takes her midday meal, we'll never hear the end of it."

Loran tweaked her nose.

"And we don't want to get your eldermother anxious and inquisitive."

Tally nodded with extreme seriousness, the effect ruined by the gleam in her eyes and the twitching of her lips.

"Indeed, no."

Journal of Lucky Stevens

The skimmer soared over the forests of Mariess with an invisibility shield in place, concealing it from view. It passed a fairytale castle and the streets of a town that looked like one from the eighteenth century. Finally, it descended, circling a charming two-storied home with whitewashed siding. As it landed behind the building, I knew this must be Fardretha's home. As soon as the hatch opened, I jumped out. The invisibility spell was gone, no longer necessary.

Following a fragrant odor which I now knew was crushed mangela leaves, I knocked on what had to be the kitchen door. The door opened, and a hefty male with a floury apron stood before me.

"What be you wanting? Come begging for food? We've none here."

He started to close the door, but I thrust out my hand and held it open.

"I've a message for Lady Fardretha. May I see her?"

He hesitated, but I knew I had him. He wouldn't take a chance of his mistress not receiving a message that could be important. With a great show of reluctance, he ushered me in.

"Here. Stay right there. I'll give you her message, then we'll see if she wants to see you."

I nodded and repeated the phrase Narik had given to me. I figured this was the best I could do for now. I wondered what his dear, sweet mother would do when she heard the words. Probably cry buckets of tears.

I'd just have to wait and see.

Chapter Nine

After informing Tarn and Rosta of the change in plans, Tally and Loran returned to the castle with Rosta. The journey back found the female akosa brimming with good humor and in a playful mood. Soaring high then swooping low, skimming the trees and doing cartwheels in the air, she gave Tally and Loran a ride they'd never forget.

Tally clung to Loran so tightly not a breath of wind could come between them, while Loran held onto the saddle's pommel as though his very life depended upon his not letting go.

And it did.

They set down by the stables, Tally and Loran staggering a bit as they dismounted. Rosta trotted off to drink from the trough and enjoy the fresh vegetables left for her and Tran by the stable master. There were no equines. King Belar hadn't ridden or hunted and had preferred driving a toron-a or being chauffeured in a skimmer. The stables remained empty except when guests came to call bringing their own mounts.

Lady Galayne met Tally and Loran in the foyer. Wearing her best at home dress, she greeted the two eagerly, but peered behind them.

"Where are Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne? I do hope they're enjoying their stay."

Tally and Loran looked at each other and burst into laughter. Leaning on Loran, Tally clutched his arm for support while she giggled helplessly.

When she could catch her breath, Tally responded to her eldermother's question, her voice still quivering with merriment.

"They most certainly are enjoying themselves, Eldermother, and they should be back shortly. At the moment, they're doing some exploring on their own."

Tally's comment set them both off again, and once more they grabbed each other trying to remain upright.

Lady Galayne gazed at her son's daughter with bemused pleasure. In the last few days a radical change had come over her. She brimmed with life. She laughed and smiled and touched and let others touch her.

She couldn't help but notice how much Tally and Loran brushed against each other. And smiled at each other. And laughed with each other. She didn't know what magic Loran had cast over her son's daughter, but her heart was filled with joy at the change.

"I am so glad you returned early from your sightseeing. I've some new recipes I want you to taste, Loran, a few unusual Tarnwitian dishes. I do so want you and your brother to feel at home here."

Loran smiled at Lady Galayne's eagerness. She was a sweet woman, just what Tally would need in her life when he left. A shaft of pain slashed his heart at the thought. Soon. He had to find that last portion of the Book and leave soon before he fell more in love with ... in love. He loved her.

Too late. But at least he could leave before Tally's infatuation grew deeper.

He kept his smile in place through sheer force of will while what he wanted to do was curse the Great Mage and throw something.

They were just finishing the midday meal when Pen and Rayne hurried in, their hair still damp, though their clothes were pristine. Obviously, Pen had used magic to restore their neat appearance.

"My pardon, Lady Galayne, for our late arrival. We were carried away by the beauty abounding in the area."

Stammering, Rayne added her own apologies.

"Aye. The caves in particular were fun to explore."

Loran almost spewed out his glass of pommees cider, while Tally nearly choked on her slice of seven-grain Tarnwitian bread.

"I'm glad we afforded you some laughter, brother. Care to explain?"

Tally and Loran responded together succinctly, "No," and went off again into gales of laughter.

Lady Galayne stared at them with exasperation.

"If you cannot behave like an adult, Talea, you may excuse yourself. And you, Prince Loran. Well, young man, I think I am old enough to stand in place of your parent and say go to your room!"

Still grinning like fools, Tally and Loran left the parlor.

Pen gazed after them with a puzzled look.

"Wonder what came over them? Loran is usually such a sobersides."

Lady Galayne smiled with complacency.

"I've seen behavior like that before. They're in love."

Rayne nudged Pen in the ribs. "Told you so."

Pen insisted in asking Lady Galayne to explain.

"My dears, when a mere glance is sufficient for you to know what is in the other's mind and a slight touch brings forth shivers of pleasure, you can be assured that the two are in love."

Rayne mind merged with Pen.

"But do they know it?"

* * * * *

The foursome returned to the caves after the midday break and searched down one tunnel after another. Although they were able to find their way following the marks Pen or Loran had incised in the stone walls, the gem in Tally's ring remained dull and lifeless.

They finally exited dirty, disheveled, and disappointed.

"Was your search fruitful this time?" Tran inquired as soon as they emerged.

Loran ran dirty fingers through dusty hair, taking his time before he answered.

"No. We've been through tunnel after tunnel."

Pen shook his head like a canid shakes off water, and powdery gray rock flew all around.

"The best I could say for our exploration is that there were no demons, heat or stench."

Rayne smiled, brushing off her jacket and leggings.

"Twas a good deal easier than our trek through the Devil's Hump."

Loran gave a deep, mocking bow, intoning with extreme hauteur, "Well, excuse me, your highness. Had I known you wished to fight more demons, I would have asked Tally to conjure one up!"

Tally gasped.

"Oh, no, Rayne, I never would do that." She paused and looked at Loran. "Can I do that?"

Loran shook his head, laughing as Tally shoved him. He fell to the ground, then held his sides and roared with laughter.

Rayne looked down at her soulmate's brother.

"Pitt. Runs in the family, I see."

Pen simply sat down on the ground, joining his brother in laughter.

Tran and Rosta filled the air with their whinnying laughs, stomping their hooves and shaking their mane.

Finally, the men arose and they all sobered.

Pen caught his breath first.

"We can't stay here any longer, Loran. Jareth and Mirelle should know of Tally's status as a mage. And this is one message that should be delivered in person."

Rayne nodded.

"I agree with my soulmate ... for a change. Her condition must still be guarded, but once the final portion of the Book is found, this latest development should be addressed."

Though Tally agreed with her, she still thought Rayne viewed her as some sort of freak. Her hand reached out for Loran's and his was there immediately, squeezing hers as if he knew how she felt.

"Let's be off now," Tran said. "We'll spend one more night at the castle and then fly back to Narwith."

"I'd like to see how Fel and Sil are doing," Rayne said. "This is the first time in years that we've been separated."

Pen sighed. "I knew it was too good to last. You better warn that furry mop of yours to keep his fangs to himself."

Rayne moved closer to Pen, running her fingers up his arm and then pinching his stubbled cheek. "Why, you know I'm the only one who bites, hunk."

Pen grabbed her hand and nipped her fingers. "Not the only one."

Rosta sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Mount up, you two. The sooner we get back to the castle, the sooner you can bite each other."

Laughing, the royal couples perched upon their respective rides. The akosai sprang into the air, their great wings outstretched, and headed away from the caves.

* * * * *

Loran prowled the silent halls restlessly. The evening meal over, everyone had returned to the rooms, not up for lingering. Pen and Rayne would be leaving early in the morning and so retired as soon as politeness permitted. Loran had overheard Pen whisper to Rayne that he had placed a silence shield on their rooms so they wouldn't disturb anyone no matter how loud she screamed. Rayne's furious answer that his begging for mercy would also go unheard elicited a small laugh from Pen and a swift kiss. They'd left the dining room arm in arm.

Lady Galayne had offered her farewells, since she never arose before the midday hour and drifted her way back to her suite.

Tally had hugged Rayne and Pen, and then moved slowly up the stairs, tugging at her curls; a sure sign that something concerned her.

Loran marveled at the fact that he could discern her moods so easily. Back at the caves, he'd known that she'd been bothered by Rayne's unwittingly unkind comment. But at least

Tally felt free to react. She shimmered with life now, her beauty enhanced by her feelings. Each time he saw her body's responses, heard her laughter, felt her touch, he rejoiced.

And fell in love even more. He wanted her with a hunger that grew steadily. He could barely be in her presence without hardening like an uninitiated lad in a pleasure house for the first time.

Now he found himself lingering outside her door, inhaling the faint trace of her scent, listening as she cried out in pleasure, calling his name.

His name?

Loran tried the door and found it unlocked. Cautiously, he drew it open, standing for a moment on the threshold.

The open windows let in the moonlight and revealed Tally's naked body lying atop the sheets. Her right hand fondled the silvery curls between her thighs while her left kneaded her full breasts. She writhed in ecstasy, calling him.

He stood transfixed, his rod turning to steel, and softly spoke her name.

Her eyes flew open and she smiled in greeting, opening her arms wide.

"I didn't even realize I'd summoned you, kierown." She brought her hands to her breasts and cupped them, lifting and offering them to him. She undulated her belly like the veriest pleasure giver and spread her legs even wider. "Now that you're here, I have no need to fondle myself." She slipped her hands down to her slim waist, over her softly rounded tummy and to the apex of her thighs and opened her legs, raising her hips. "Come to me. Make love to me."

Loran took an involuntary step further into the room and shut the door behind him. Stunned by her lack of unease to have him witness her wanton behavior, he was even more bemused by the sense he had that she wasn't surprised to see him -- nay, she expected him.

She pouted now.

"Why are you waiting? Can't you see how much I need you? Look, I'm wet for you. Come, taste me."

She slipped a finger between her damp curls and then drew it forth. Loran could see the cream glistening on the tip of her slim finger. He groaned. And took another step closer.

She knelt upon the bed, swaying. Her arms rose over her head, lifting her breasts, displaying taut nipples. She smiled.

"Is this a game we're playing? Do you wish me to beg? I can do so." She giggled and salaamed, bowing her head to the mattress. Her voice, when she spoke, was muffled. "Oh, great master, please come to the bed of your most unworthy servant and fuck her brains out."

That was it. Loran had no idea what was going on, but he had denied himself long enough. If Tally wished to get fucked, then by the Great Mage, he'd oblige her!

He threw off his clothes and strode naked to the bed. She wanted to play, did she? Then so would he.

“Raise your head, slave. And kiss the first thing you see.”

Tally lifted her eyes and grinned. The first thing in her sight was Loran’s immense erection. She leaned closer and kissed the tip, then drew back. Eyeing Loran from beneath her lashes, she teased him.

“Did I do that well, oh, master?”

He shook his head. “Not good enough, slave. Take me into that mouth of yours and suck. I want to feel your tongue lick my shaft.”

Opening up wide, she drew him between her lips until she had him all the way to his balls. He grabbed her curls and anchored her.

“Now, show me how good you are. I’m going to fill that luscious mouth with my come. If you miss one drop, I shall punish you.”

Her tongue swirled up and down his penis and her teeth made tiny nips at his skin. Rocking back and forth just a bit, Loran let the pleasure wash over him.

In the back of his mind he couldn’t help but think that this was the conjuring of his mad lust for her. But as he drew closer and closer to releasing his seed within her hot, wet mouth, he knew that it was really happening.

He climaxed with a shout. His seed spurted into her mouth and he felt her throat convulse as she swallowed.

He pulled his now limp prick from between her lips and glanced down at Tally.

Her eyes were shut. Her mouth was lax. A drop of come lingered at the corner of her lips and he smiled.

“Open your eyes, slave. You’ve failed. A drop of my precious essence bedews your lips. You must be punished.”

Tally opened her eyes and the tip of her tongue swiped up the escaped drop.

She bowed her head once more. “I accept my punishment, master. What shall it be?”

“Silence, slave! Do not seek to provoke me.”

Sitting back on her haunches obediently, Tally watched Loran rub his chin, pondering her punishment. There was something different about her dream lover’s third visit. He seemed even more real than at the other times. And he hadn’t merely appeared, but entered through her door. She had left it open, too lazy to get up and lock it. Had she even set the silence shield in place? She couldn’t recall. She had only realized that she needed to feel the sexual enjoyment she’d come to know so well. At that point, she had placed her fingers in her hot core and began to move them, letting the tension build. And then Loran had entered. She licked her lips, still tasting him on her tongue. What punishment would he devise for her?

"Listen well, slave. I am too fatigued this night to ride you. Mount me and pleasure me. If you're a good girl, I may just give you release."

Tally shifted toward the edge of the bed and he moved to the other side. He stretched out, leaning back against the headboard, his arms crossed behind his head. His prick lay semi-erect between his thighs.

"Go ahead. Ride me."

Tally straddled his legs, her buttocks just above his knees. Taking his shaft in her hands, she ran her fingers up and down his length. He felt so real tonight, more real than he should. She closed her eyes. This couldn't actually be Loran. Could it? He wouldn't act this way. Would he?

Then he arched within her hands and groaned.

And she didn't care.

Dream lover or real lover, he was here with her. Her soulmate. She moved up onto his legs until his prick nudged her curls. She raised her body and grasped his rod, positioning herself, and slowly sank down.

And then she felt his prick nudge her maiden's shield.

"Loran?"

"Yes, meliflir. I know. One quick thrust and 'twill be done. Now!"

And he pierced her thin membrane, sinking until he was seated deep within her.

Tears seeped from Tally's eyes. It had never hurt before. What was wrong? But then he reached up and caught the tears with his fingers.

"Are you all right, beloved? Do you wish to stop?"

She shook her head. The pain was already receding, just as her mother had told her when she described that moment when two soulmates joined.

Deep within, she exalted. If this were truly Loran and not a dream lover, there would be ample proof. For now she would enjoy every minute of being with him.

She grasped her ankles and slowly began to rock.

She closed her eyes, her breaths coming in short, harsh pants. Then she felt Loran's strong fingers grip her hips and urge her to move faster.

She fell forward, her hands to either side of his shoulders, her breasts almost within reach of his lips. He grasped her upper arms, bringing her nipples to his mouth. Moving back and forth he suckled at first one then the other, pulling and tugging and nipping. He opened his mouth wide, trying to encompass her lush breasts and failing to do so.

Holding her tightly, he rolled over until he was above her.

"Cross your ankles behind my waist, meliflir. Dig your nails in deep in my skin and anchor your body to mine. And don't let go."

Faster and faster, Loran moved, his lean flanks flexing as he pumped. He felt Tally's fingers sink into his flesh, her moans of passion driving him crazy and moved even faster.

She opened her eyes and gasped. Hovering in the air above them, sapphire-blue lanbeth gathered in a glittering cloud. She gasped Loran's name.

"Look, above you. Lanbeth!"

Loran lifted his head and gazed in awe.

Lanbeth. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever expected to see that gleaming evidence of a mage and soulmate joined together. He looked back down at Tally's shining face. Her eyes were filled with love.

Brushing the curls away from her face, he murmured her name.

"Soulmate. We are soulmates, meliflir."

She nodded. "You're really here with me. Not some dream lover, but here with me in the flesh. I didn't conjure you up."

He smiled. "Let me show you how real I am, kiereen. Let's bring down the lanbeth."

His movements increased in vigor and speed. With every thrust, she whimpered with mindless passion. She clung to him so tightly a shadow couldn't slip between them.

The lanbeth gathered, growing thicker and denser as they neared their climax. The cloud of magic specks touched Loran's back as he gave one final powerful thrust and cried out his release, Tally echoing his cry.

And the lanbeth fell, drenching them. Loran leaned his head back and opened his mouth, swallowing the dust.

Tally licked her lips as the lanbeth coated her skin. *"Kierown, never leave me. I love you."*

"Never. I will never let you go, meliflir. I adore you."

There was utter silence in the room.

Silently, Tally called Loran's name. *"Loran?"*

She felt his presence within her mind.

"Beloved, I'm here with you. Our minds have merged."

"But that's not supposed to happen so quickly."

He rolled off her, his body an exotic blue statue. Rising on his elbow, he smoothed the curls from her forehead.

"Pen said the same thing happened with him and Rayne. As it also did with Mirelle and Jareth. The merging was swift." He grinned. *"And deep."*

She reached up and cupped his cheek, and he turned his head, placing a kiss within her palm.

"Tell me why you showed no surprise when I entered your room."

She smiled, her mouth soft with tenderness. *"Because you had visited me twice before."*
"What?"

She took a deep breath and spoke aloud.

"I found out the other night that if I desired you strongly enough, I could conjure you to come to me." She put his hand on her breast. "Your presence was as real to me as you are now. Only the end results differed." She gestured around the room, glistening with lanbeth. "No lanbeth after you brought me to a screaming climax." She shifted and the moonlight streaming into the room revealed her bloodstained thighs. "And I remained a virgin."

Loran frowned with concern. "Are you all right, meliflir? I'm told the first time can be painful."

She shook her head. "Not for soulmates. The moment is brief, though a bit uncomfortable." She grinned like a bitna that had swallowed the cream. "I can think of a wonderful way to ease the ache."

Reading her thoughts, Loran brought a soft, damp cloth from her bathing chamber and gently cleaned away the blood. Placing it on a nightstand, he replaced the cloth with his mouth.

She moaned and arched her body. Grasping his thick hair, she held him a willing captive as he licked her pouting nether lips. Spreading her flesh with his fingers, he delved deep within her sweet folds, its unique sweet, spicy taste created by the lanbeth.

He lapped her skin, savoring the combination of Tally's fragrance and the lanbeth's scent. He read her thoughts as the passion grew between them. Once again the magic sparks collected, bursting like a thunderstorm, showering drops of mage-blue glitter on them.

He moved up upon her body and kissed her mouth, his tongue seeking entrance.

Tally's thoughts reached his mind. *"I can taste myself on your mouth."*

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes."

He rolled over, bringing her with him, and she slid down until his rod was at her lips. Her eyes widened.

He was already hard. She shivered.

"Are you cold, kiereen?"

The blanket at the foot of the bed slipped forward, covering her.

Loran's mind went blank as though a shutter had slammed shut, then cautiously opened again. *"Tally, did you do that?"*

Tally clenched the blanket around her. *"Moved the blanket? You know I didn't. Loran, you must have done it."*

"Impossible. I am no mage!"

She sat up now, passion tamped down. *"Are you sure? Try something else."* She smiled. *"Change the color of the blanket."*

Slowly, he chanted the proper spell and watched with astonishment as the spring-green blanket turned wine red before their eyes. *"Tally, could it be the lanbeth? Could it have the power to make mages?"*

She shrugged. *"I don't know."*

"Do you remember the spell for gathering lanbeth, Tally? If not, I can repeat it. I'm glad now I know it." His thoughts were filled with wonder. *"I never thought I'd ever have need for it."*

"I've that large crystal bowl. It should do for a container. Let me see if I remember the spell. If not, you can do it, kierown."

Concentrating with all her power, Tally gathered the lanbeth from the surfaces in the room. Toward the end, when it seemed that she was faltering, Loran added his powers, and at last the large bowl was full, even to overflowing.

Loran voiced his fears aloud. "If this is something that can be given to anyone who ingests our lanbeth, who knows what the end result might be?" He leaned against the headboard of the now clean sheets and clasped Tally to his chest. "Meliflir, until we gain the last portion of the Book we cannot reveal this to anyone. Not even my brothers and their soulmates. And we must take great care to conceal our feelings for each other. If anyone learns that we have become soulmates, even without this strange lanbeth there will be speculation. We must continue as we have, friends to the rest of the world, not lovers. Agreed?"

Tally nodded. "Agreed." She sighed and merged her mind with his.

"And that means you had better return to your own rooms before you are seen by anyone."

Loran turned her face to his and kissed her. *"I hate to leave, meliflir."* He looked over at her clock on her nightstand. *"Tis early yet."* His hands caressed her bare breasts, squeezing her nipples. She arched into his palms.

"Shall I leave? Nay." He kneaded her breasts more deeply. *"I will not go, nor can you command me to leave. After all, I am your master. Is this not so, slave?"*

She sighed, turned, and slipped down his body until his penis was between her lips once more. Her mouth busy, she silently replied, *"Yes, oh, master."*

The lanbeth gathered and fell once more.

* * * * *

Tally awoke sensing Loran's gaze on her. He leaned over her, drawing his hand down her body, between her breasts, finally resting his hand on her waist. She could see the first faint pink streaks of dawn outside her window, and she knew he should leave.

"I'll leave, meliflir but first there's one thing we should do."

Tally saw into his heart and she nodded. *"The joining ceremony. Yes. I learned it in preparation for my future joining with Metres."*

Loran shook his head. *"It was fated that he never participate in the ceremony with you."* He got off the bed and stood beside it. *"We should say the words aloud."*

Taking a deep breath he invoked the ceremony.

"I will love you as I have never loved anyone before. I will love you beyond the grave. I will pledge you my essence, my soul, my life. I will give you my seed and may it fall on fruitful ground. I will give you shelter, comfort and sustenance. I swear this."

He reached out and she placed her hand in his and responded, her gaze never leaving his.

"I will love you as I have never loved anyone before. I will love you beyond the grave. I will pledge you my essence, my soul, my life. I will accept your seed and may it fall on fruitful ground. I will share your shelter and make it more secure, take your comfort and give comfort in return, partake of your sustenance and increase its flavor. I swear this."

Loran knelt, took both her hands and placed them on his heart, then his forehead, his shoulders and finally, arising, on his shaft. Their eyes filled with tenderness, they spoke the last words together.

"Make love to me."

Chapter Ten

Loran slipped away just before the sun rose. He moved swiftly back to his room, his thoughts filled with images of last night and that predawn time with Tally. Tucked in her closet was the crystal containing the sapphire magic dust. He had to get it down to the taisin containers designed for storing lanbeth. The power it exuded might be detected should it remain in its makeshift concealment. He'd take care of it after Rayne and Pen left. He didn't want to chance any awkward questions, nor did he wish to place them in danger with unnecessary information.

Taking a quick shower, he dressed for the day and then paused.

Should he try some magic again?

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and intoned the spell for a light-catcher. He opened his eyes a crack. There, dancing on the palm of his hand was a brilliant flame, cool to the touch.

A light-catcher.

By the Great Maker, he was a mage!

A knock on his door broke into his celebrating and he quickly extinguished the light.

"Ready, brother? Rayne and I need to leave."

"Aye, give me a moment."

Rayne and Tally were already seated when they arrived. A hush fell over the room and the women started, their faces awash with guilt.

Tally stammered slightly. "Loran, I didn't expect you so soon."

"So I see." He looked at Pen. "What do you think, brother? Do you see two guilty faces before you?"

Pen moved over to Rayne and lifted her chin, turning her face back and forth. He bent down and peered closely at her features.

"Aye. 'Tis written all over that beautiful --" He kissed her nose. "Gorgeous --" He kissed her eyes. "Face." And he kissed her mouth, lingering, devouring, delving between her lips.

Loran's thoughts merged with Tally's. *"Soon, meliflir. Soon."*

She glanced down at the empty plate before her. *"I yearn for that day."*

Loran cleared his throat. "Are you two going to eat the morning meal or simply eat each other?"

Pen pulled away reluctantly and sat down next to Rayne. He drew his chair closer so that their shoulders touched. "I've developed an insatiable appetite for this woman. I can't get enough of her."

Loran snorted. "'Tis a good thing love isn't fattening. You'd be as round as a pregnant thrant."

Pen picked up Rayne's hand and nibbled on her fingers. "Just wait until you are in love, Lor. You'll find out what the word hunger really means."

Rayne pulled her fingers from Pen's grasp. "I'm really getting tired of you acting like I was the main course at a banquet. After all, you're the Pitt and hunk!"

Pen grinned, not at all abashed by Rayne's reaction. He shifted her hand below the table and murmured barely loud enough to be heard. "And you love to eat me, don't you, kerasoka? Lick me, suck me, take me deep in your mouth ... damn!"

Rayne placed her hand onto the table, smiling innocently. "What's the matter, hunk? Something you ate stick in your craw?"

Pen held up his hands in surrender. "Enough! I surrender! I accede to all your terms."

Tally tapped her spoon against her cup full of steaming chai.

"I call for an immediate cessation of all your antics, Pen. Behave."

Sobering, Pen nodded. "Aye, Tally. But I succeeded in the vow I took to make my soulmate laugh every day of her life."

Rayne suddenly grimaced and wrinkled her nose. "'Tis a good thing for I really don't feel up to laughing suddenly. My stomach's a bit queasy."

Pen was all at once solicitous. "Should we see a healer, kiereen?" He felt her forehead. "You've no fever. Do you want to delay our return trip?"

Rayne sighed and kissed Pen lightly.

"Nay, I'm fine. 'Tis already passing. I'll just have some bread and chai. Don't worry, kierown."

Reassured, Pen turned to Loran and Tally.

"I know you said you searched the cave of Arlette and Keret, but perhaps you might look again."

Loran nodded. "Aye, 'tis a good idea." He looked at Tally, his thoughts clearly evident. "What do you think, meliflir?"

Rayne darted a swift thought to Pen. *"See!"*

"Aye."

The light repast soon consumed, the two couples headed toward the stables. Tran and Rosta trotted out to meet them.

As they neared, Tran tossed his head, whinnying a greeting.

"About time, slugabeds! Rosta and I have been ready for hours."

"I doubt that," Pen said. "I know your penchant for late night carousing."

Rosta chuffed and bumped Pen with her muzzle. "Carousing! 'Twasn't our voices raised in passion last night!"

Tally blushed to the roots of her hair. She obviously hadn't put a silence shield around the room.

Pen and Rayne swiveled about to cast a jaundiced eye on Loran. Going for outraged innocence, he attempted to bluff.

"I have no idea why you're looking at me. I'm not the one with the insatiable hunger!"

Rayne sent a confused thought to Pen. *"Are you sure you placed a silence shield on our room?"*

"Perhaps there are some dead spots here as in the castle at Narwith?"

"I don't think so, kerasoko. Just look at those guilty expressions. I'm telling you, they have joined. They're soulmates!"

"Let's not push it. There must be a reason they don't want to reveal their feelings."

"Agreed."

Pen grinned, speaking in a teasing manner as he offered an alternate suggestion.

"Perhaps it was Lady Galayne?"

Tally gasped with shock. "Pen!"

"Just teasing, Princess. Rosta, if you and Tran weren't carousing last night, you missed an opportunity and 'tis no one's fault but your own. But you're right. We should be on our way." Sweeping Tally in his arms, he dipped her low and planted a loud smacking kiss on her lips. Without missing a beat, he shifted her into Loran's arms.

Taking advantage of Loran's surprise, Pen mounted on Tran's back. Rayne quickly settled onto Rosta and they were off, rising into the morning sky.

Still clasped in Loran's embrace, Tally was the first to regain her composure. "Do you think they know?"

Loran shrugged and hugged her tighter.

"I'm not sure, meliflir. If they do, I think they will keep our secret. Let's get to the skimmer and head back to the caves. There's still some exploring we can do." His hand drifted up to cup the fullness of her breast as he sent her a silent message. *"A great deal more exploring."*

Breathless, almost mindless with desire, Tally nodded.

* * * * *

The skimmer ride did nothing to cool off their ardor. Knowing they shouldn't create lanbeth, they teased each other's body with lips and tongue and fingers. By the time they arrived at the familiar winged landmark, Loran was as hard as iron and Tally's pussy was damp and she was squirming on the seat.

They grabbed up their carry bags stuffed with cheese, bread, tart pommées and iced chai and entered the cave. Heading directly to the chamber where Arlette and Keret lay, their thoughts were a maelstrom of erotic messages.

"I'm going to sink my shaft in you so deeply you won't be able to escape me. You'll cry out so loudly even a silence shield won't contain your cries."

Tally's responses were equally as bold.

"Do you know what I want to do to you, my lover? I want to take you into my mouth and suck on you while and I fondle your sacs. I want to have you on your knees, your mouth on my slit, your tongue licking my cream. I want to lick the lanbeth off every part of your body and then have you fuck me again."

As they entered the chamber, their clothes disappeared.

Tally turned startled, hungry eyes on Loran. *"Did you...?"*

He grinned. *"I didn't teach you every spell I know."*

They spread the blanket on the fine, sandy ground. Tally lay on her back, her knees bent, one hand cupping her breast, the other her dripping silvery thatch.

Loran knelt between her legs, desire clouding his hazel eyes. For the first time, Tally realized that Loran's eyes had remained unchanged.

"Your eyes aren't sapphire blue, kierown. No one would ever dream you're a mage."

"And for now, at least, no one will know that there are two new mages in Hearthome." He grinned. *"But the only magic I want at this moment is the magic of that sweet body of yours."*

He cupped her buttocks, lifting her to his mouth, thrusting his tongue between her moist curls, seeking the cream within. His fingers dug into her rounded ass, holding her steady for him.

Tally writhed beneath the attention of Loran's eager tongue. Knowing she could respond completely to him without fear of alerting anyone to their lovemaking, she urged him on.

When at last he had brought her near to climax, he paused.

"Why did you stop, kierown? You can tell how close I am to coming; you can read my thoughts."

"Aye, and were you to listen to mine, you'd know what I need."

Tally opened her mind to Loran's. Her eyes widened as she realized what he wanted of her.

Loran sat back on his heels, his erection jutting upward, thick, hard, long and needy. She moved closer to him on her knees until her mouth was within a breath of his shaft. Slowly, inch by inch she took him into her mouth, adjusting the angle until she could hold his entire length.

He groaned. *"Never, never has any woman consumed me as you do. By the Great Maker, Tally, your mouth was made for me!"*

Tally slid her tongue along his sticky skin, licking his round head, tasting the pearly drop that beaded from its tip. As though his prick was a sugar stick, she sucked greedily, relishing the flavor that was his alone. She cupped his balls and squeezed carefully.

He moaned.

Joined with his thoughts, she sensed his mind glaze over with incoherent visions of passion. He clung to the curls on her head, gripping them tightly as though he feared she would leave him.

She could feel the tension increase as she worked him. Any second he would lose control.

She wanted him to lose control.

"No! Not alone, meliflir. Release me." His thoughts grew even more seductive. *"Let me fill you with my seed."*

"And may it fall on fruitful ground."

An image filled their minds generated by their mutual love -- a vision of a child created by the love they shared for each other.

Tally lay back on the blanket, her arms opened wide. *"Come to me, kierown. Make love to me now."*

Loran nodded and positioned himself between her legs. His hands supporting her rear, he lifted her up and slowly guided her onto his stiffened rod.

Steadying herself, she placed her hands on his shoulders and began to rock. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster, she moved up and down.

The sapphire-blue lanbeth gathered above them. As before, the cloud was thick and large. The brilliant blue color was brighter than a clear summer day. It glittered and shimmered, emitting lightning sparks of energy.

Loran sat up clasping Tally in his embrace. Her face blossomed before him, her eyes shining as blue as the lanbeth. Dipping her head, she kissed him, her lips opening beneath his slight pressure. She drew his tongue within her hot, wet mouth and flexed her inner muscles around his prick.

"Little demon, you're killing me."

"Aye."

"Aye? I'll show you, aye."

He slipped his hand between them and fondled the breasts pressed so tightly against him, tweaking the nipples.

Tally whimpered.

"You're very sensitive there. I thought you'd enjoy that."

Tally clenched again. *"I thought you'd enjoy that. And this."* Increasing her speed, she rode him as though he were an akosa stallion and she his first mate.

The lanbeth cloud descended as though the weight of the stuff was dragging it down. As they climaxed together, the magic specks exploded, coating them and the interior of the chamber with sparkling blue flecks. They tilted their heads back, opening their mouths to catch the dust on their tongues.

As the lingering aftershocks diminished, Tally clung tightly to Loran. Still out of breath, she rested her head against his shoulder.

"I'm so glad we don't need to speak aloud. I don't have the breath to do so."

"Nor do I, meliflir." Easing her off his hips, he lay down on the dusted blanket. *"As much as I want to lick every speck from your body, I think 'twould be wise to remove the stuff a bit more safely. Let's wash it off in the pool."*

Tally jumped up and dove in, her thoughts trailing behind her. *"Great idea. Last one in is a constipated thrant!"*

Although a good swimmer, Loran couldn't catch Tally. Diving and staying just out of reach, she led him a merry dance. As they sloshed from the water, Loran gestured around the cave.

"Look, Tally, while we were in the water, the cave's collected all the lanbeth. Could the amethyst crystals be infused with it?" He flung himself on the cleared off blanket.

"Damn, I'd love to conduct some experiments with them."

Tally smiled. *"I think you'll always be an investigator first."* She gestured to her naked, wet body. *"How about getting our clothes back?"*

"Let me think about it."

"Oh, no, you don't! If we lay about here naked you know what will happen!" She sniffed. *"You say I'm a sex demon. Look to yourself, lover boy!"*

"You're right." Their clothes reappeared on their bodies. *"We need to do some more intensive exploration."* His stomach rumbled loudly. *"And it looks like not only my hunger for you needs feeding, but my stomach needs some nourishment, too!"*

They set out the food from their carry bags, Tally watching with amusement as Loran devoured everything with gusto. Their simple meal disappeared as though gobbled up by starving desert wanderers.

Loran leaned back against a rock and patted his belly, sighing with contentment.

"Now, that was delicious. Funny how the simplest food tastes better after sex."

Tally cocked her head. "And you've had firsthand experience with food after sex before?"

"I was no celibate *shakos* before we fell in love." He reached for her hand and she snatched it away. "Come, meliflir, I never expected to have a soulmate or join with anyone for love. The pleasure houses of Barnite are staffed by those who enjoy giving pleasure. I took no unwilling female, nor did I enjoy them without compensating them."

She raised her head. "Were any of them better than me?" She moved and sat down on his lap. "After all, I did observe Fardretha closely as she pleased her servant and she *is* well-known for her prowess!"

Loran laughed and hugged her tight. "You'd give the most experienced pleasure mistress a run for the prize. Now, stop pouting, little demon. Let's examine Arlette and Keret again." He sobered. "And we can renew our vows in their presence."

More sure of the climb now, they quickly attained the sheltered niche. Kneeling, they recited the words of the joining ceremony, feeling oddly blessed.

As they knelt, Tally by Arlette's side and Loran by Keret's, Loran's hand brushed Keret's ring.

It glowed.

Unable to speak, Tally merged her thoughts with his. *"Loran, the ring is trying to communicate with us. Slip it on; perhaps it will speak to you."*

Hesitating just the tiniest bit, Loran removed the ring from Keret's finger and slowly slid it down his left index finger. As it settled in place, it flared briefly, then subsided.

"Meliflir, grasp my hand in yours and open your thoughts. Faint pictures are crowding my mind; perhaps with our thoughts merged, they'll crystallize."

Taking his hand without hesitation, Tally unlocked her mind.

And images flooded in.

The story of Arlette and Keret raced past and was quickly replaced by a vision of a strong, proud male figure carrying their bodies to their present placement and laying them

with great reverence within. When he emerged into the main cave, he waved his arm, sweeping the interior with a clenched hand. As his fisted hand passed from one end of the cave to the other, glowing amethyst crystals burst into light, revealing the interior as it looked in the present.

The light revealed his long, silvery gold hair, as light as Tally's but sweeping the floor in a profusion of tight braids woven through with a rainbow of brightly colored threads. A thin, plain gold band circled his head. His eyes blazed a deep sapphire blue. His sleeveless, unbelted, natural banta wool robe displayed a muscular chest and shoulders with the traditional Jakosai wings tattooed on both.

They knew instinctively that they beheld the Great Mage Tocson himself.

He strode to the edge of the pool and knelt, bending over so he could see his reflection in the water. Tally and Loran clutched their hands more tightly as they saw their faces reflected next to his.

Then the Mage Tocson smiled and nodded, and they realized that he could see them, too.

He turned and picked up a leather carry bag and withdrew a large cut-crystal, amethyst-colored covered bowl. Delving once more into the bag, he pulled out a small, torn, leather-bound book.

"The final portion of the Book." Loran's thought flashed through Tally's mind.

"Pay attention, kierown."

Tocson placed the Book within the bowl and took the band from his head. Setting it on the opening, he put the lid back on and recited a locking spell.

He set the crystal bowl on the water and gave it a gentle push. It drifted to the middle of pool and sank beneath.

Tocson stood, nodded, and left the chamber and their vision.

And their minds cleared.

"Meliflir, did you witness what I did?"

"Aye. 'Twas the Great Mage Tocson himself. He laid Arlette and Keret in their resting place here. And he did leave the final portion of the Book within the chamber." She gazed at the pool. "Why didn't we see it before? Why didn't Jareth and Mirelle or Rayne and Pen see it when they swam in the pool?"

Loran shook his head.

"I don't know. Perhaps *we* were destined to find it." He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "Didn't it seem as though he knew we were there?" He hesitated. "Did you see our reflections in the water when he knelt by the edge of the pool?"

"I thought I was imagining it. Were we in his vision or was he in ours?"

"I don't think it matters." He paused. "What we should do now is prepare carefully to search the pool's bottom for the bowl. I don't know of any spell that could help me breathe underwater ... the Ser folk!"

"Ser folk? But they're a myth! Not real."

"No, meliflir, they do exist, though their numbers have dwindled. Years ago I encountered a wise man who knew them, had lived among them. He taught me some of their ways. I think if I prepare myself properly, I would be able to remain submerged for an extended period of time and find the crystal bowl."

Tally took in Loran's excited face. "We'll return after the midday meal." Her thoughts raced. "We'll need to bring a long rope. You'll tie it around your waist and tug it as you go along every ten beats. If you don't tug it, I'll haul you back up."

Loran smiled with admiration. "Very clever, my lady. But do you have enough strength to drag my heavy weight to the surface?"

Tally pointed to a boulder almost as tall as Loran.

"See that rather large rock over there? Watch."

Striding over, she squatted and, using her leg muscles for added leverage, hefted the stone above her head. With a grunt, she heaved it across the chamber.

Loran stood stock still, his mouth agape.

Wiping her hands off, she sauntered back to him with cocky grace. A grin split her face from ear to ear.

"You forget -- mage strength. Go ahead, try it yourself. Pick it up."

Loran walked over to the innocent rock, bent, and lifted it with a grunt. Putting all his newly acquired mage strength behind it, he threw the stone back to its original spot.

Dusting off his gritty hands, he nodded smugly. "My throw was farther."

Tally broke into a hearty laugh. "I'm not going to play 'wiener' with you. I'd lose since I don't have one of my own. You may claim victory for the longest shot." Tamping down the last of her laughter, she gathered up the blanket, folding it absentmindedly.

"Eldermother needs that reassurance of our presence at her first meal of the day; otherwise, I'd suggest we remain to continue our search."

"We also need the rope and I need some time to prepare mentally for this. We'll assuage Lady Galayne's desire for company and return as soon as we can."

He grabbed the carry bags from her and took her be-ringed hand in his own. The two gems nestled next to each other, glowing brightly.

As they reached the entrance to the outside, Tally drew her spectacles from her pocket and placed the ring within. Loran pulled off his own, placing it in a pocket in his jacket.

Tally sighed as she returned the lanbeth lantern to its accustomed niche.

“Do you truly believe that one day I’ll be able to reveal my mage powers? Won’t people look upon me as some sort of oddity?”

He drew her into his embrace. “Should anyone dare to think that, I shall simply turn them into mute *jerly* birds. Then deep fry them.”

Tally smiled broadly at the silly image. “If you are with me to do so, then I won’t care what anyone says, kierown.”

“I will always be with you.”

Her mood lightened, Tally slid into the skimmer and relaxed. Loran intoned their destination and the skimmer took off.

* * * * *

Lady Fardretha sat on the veranda looking out over her extensive gardens. Belar had bought the adjoining lots on either side of the house when he gifted her with the town home. A secured green house stood near the kitchen entrance. Within its glassed walls grew special herbs and plants cultivated to enhance the sexual experience. Every known natural aphrodisiac flourished inside. Except for bethlan. She had only the one plant in her bedchamber, for its effects were so powerful it was dangerous to keep more than one flowering plant indoors. When the petals were all used, she would send a servant for another plant from Belar’s special garden. She had had no need to do this since Belar’s death, but soon she would have to have someone get onto the castle grounds and bring one back.

She sighed. She had little hope that Talea or Lady Galayne would allow her servant free access. She was scarcely certain they’d allow him on the premises at all. What she would do then, she had no idea. She might have to beg Orath to return again. As much as his presence was a blatant slap at the memory of Talea’s mother, as Belar’s child he could not be denied access to the castle. But Orath would not be happy to be summoned once more for such a demeaning task.

She arose and moved inside, heading toward her bedchamber to count again the number of petals left on the stem. If so forced, she could grind the leaves and stem with some hoarded black market lanbeth and ingest the resulting pulp. But the affects varied wildly. She had tried the mixture once before and nearly killed the unwilling serving girl who had been in her bedchamber cleaning at the time. Tying up the mewling virgin, she’d used the handle of the small gardening tool as a makeshift dildo, tearing her maidenhead before she took a handful of the pulpy mass and plugged the girl’s vagina to stop the bleeding.

The creature had screamed and screamed as the potent drug coursed through her body and torn the skin off her wrists as she strived to break free. It had taken Belar quite a bit of money to silence the girl, her family, and all of Fardretha’s servants in the house and then hire a new staff. No. If she must, she would have to summon Orath back again to Mariess. She smiled. Perhaps she could convince him not to leave until after he helped her replenish

her stock. He couldn't know that her earlier message was no longer valid. He should arrive any day.

"Lady Fardretha, you've a visitor. He said to tell you the air in Larbela is free."

Orath!

She hurried into the kitchen, her arms outstretched. His form, a black silhouette against the bright light shining through the windows, stood tall and sure, waiting for her.

She flung her arms around him and drew him to her ample bosom, pillowing his face between her breasts. "My son, my son."

He muttered something incomprehensible.

Reluctantly, she released him. He drew her to the windows. And as the pale light washed over them she looked into the face of a stranger.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Holy shit!

I was expecting Richie Cunningham's mother, and instead I got Sharon Stone.

This hot piece was Orath's mother, Princess Fardretha? With a name like that I was thinking the Wicked Witch of the West. I decided not to question my good fortune, just go with the flow. Besides, what else could I do? I only had a second to savor her body before she jumped away from me like I was contagious.

"Where's Orath? Who are you?"

I bowed real low. "My lady, my name is Lackeron set Melvan, an ally of your son and his mentor, Narik. I am a second degree Master Gardener. I answered your summons rather than Prince Orath because Narik feels Orath remains too vulnerable at this time. They sent me to ascertain whether the situation was serious enough to warrant the prince's return. I've been instructed to infiltrate the castle staff and keep tabs on Princess Talea and Prince Loran."

As she listened, the woman wilted in front of me.

"You mean Orath is not coming?" She paused and I could see the wheels turning. "What must I do to bring him here?"

"Should you still think there is a dire need for his mage skills, or if there is something untoward going on at the palace, you may contact him using the same method as before."

She tapped a well-manicured, slim finger against her chin as she pondered her decision.

"Come with me. I have a use for you anyway."

She turned and flounced back through the door into the hall. In the full glow of the wall sconces gleaming with lanbeth lights, I was able to admire her body.

And what a body.

She moved like some high class Vegas chorus girl, with a figure to match. And she had an immediate effect on my dick. Those tight leggings the men wear here don't leave much room for getting horny. The loose suede-like jacket I wore was cut at the waist, so my erection was impossible to hide.

She suddenly stopped and I ran right into her, my cock bumping her butt. She turned around, teetering a bit, and clung to me, her hands digging into my arms.

Now, I don't mean to brag, but I've worked long and hard to get a good set of muscles. She squeezed my shoulders and looked up into my face.

And smiled.

"My, you are tall. And strong, too, I'd wager." She ran her eyes down my body, pausing at my cock. Her eyes widened. "And big." She looked back into my face and licked her lips, like she wanted to eat me with a spoon.

Damned if I wouldn't let her.

Opening the door of the room we'd stopped at, she ushered me in. To her bedroom.

Lord, could I get any harder?

She went to a cabinet and unlocked it. Using great care, she took out a clear glass dome encasing a scarlet colored flower, kind of like a chrysanthemum.

She placed it on a table and opened a hinged flap. Immediately, a sweet, heavy smell invaded the air. Damned if my prick didn't get even harder.

She spoke, her voice breathy as she gauged my body's reaction.

"Have you ever seen the like before? 'Tis a bethlan flower."

My eyes widened. Part of the knowledge Narik had given me concerned the flora of Hearthome. This flower was so rare it was thought to be extinct. Now I knew why my cock reacted so quickly.

Before me was the most powerful natural aphrodisiac known in this world. Highly addictive, it could drive people to sexual excess.

Her eyes closed as she took a deep breath and inhaled the heady fragrance.

I held my breath.

"Intoxicating, isn't it? King Belar had a private garden in which more bethlan plants grow. When you gain admittance to the palace, find the garden and bring me back some cuttings. Wrap them in moist banta wool cloths and place them in a carry bag. 'Twill keep them fresh for planting."

She picked a petal from the flower and crushed it between her fingers. It stained them as though she had dipped her fingers in blood. She put some of the mashed wad on her tongue and swallowed.

"Here." She held out her hand with the remaining petal. "Have you ever tasted bethlan?" Her words were slurred and her hand trembled as though the weight of the petal

was too much for her. Her breasts swelled above her low-cut gown and her nipples pricked the clingy material. She swayed even closer to me and thrust her stained fingers near my mouth. "Go ahead, taste it."

I shook my head. "I would love to sample some, my lady, but I'm duty bound to serve your son. I'll bring you back your bethlan, but I can't indulge myself now." I paused and looked her dead in the eye. "Much as I'd love to sample your flower."

Taking another breath, she placed the bit of bethlan on her tongue, then swirled her tongue across her lips.

Damn, the bitch was fucking unbelievable.

"Well, Lackeron, you needn't tarry then. Come back as soon as you can with the bethlan." She ran her hand down my arm and made a quick detour to my crotch and squeezed. "Next time, plan to stay as long as you can."

She turned away, dismissing me, and I staggered out of the room.

The scent of the bethlan lingered in my nostrils and I traveled the rest of the way to the palace with the world's biggest hard-on.

The palace was set in the midst of a huge forest as big as Central Park, and situated on the other side of the town of Riess. Looking more like one of those chateaux you see in wine commercials, it was pretty impressive. The skimmer landed at the bottom of a huge wide stairway leading to double-wide, carved wooden doors. I climbed the flight of stairs carefully, the potted reflection plant shifting in its box with every step.

When I reached the top, the doors swung magically open before me. I wondered if these people believed in guards.

I stepped into a fancy entrance hall. The windows on either side of the door let in the natural light of the mid afternoon sun. A chandelier with over a hundred flame-like lanbeth lights blazed overhead. Damn, it was gorgeous! I gaped, my mouth dropping open. I'd never seen anything like it before.

A snooty jerk, his nose held so high in the air I thought he'd trip, and dressed in some sort of formal suit, came striding in. He took one look at my Gardener guild clothes, the bedazzled look on my face, and opened his mouth to probably send me to the servants' entrance. I didn't give him the chance. "Larbela's Master Gardener sent me. I have a gift for Princess Talea."

His face fell, but he recovered quickly. "I presume the Master Gardener wishes you to present the gift to the princess personally?"

I nodded. "He wants to know firsthand how she receives it."

"The princess is not here at the present. You may take a chair over by the wall if you wish to wait till she arrives."

I shrugged. "I don't mind waiting."

Indicating which chair I was allowed to sit upon, he left, with one last warning. “Do not move from that spot.”

I twiddled my fingers for almost an hour, damning her highness’s spoiled brat attitude to keep the trade folk waiting.

Then the doors swung open and an angel came rushing through.

An angel wearing sunglasses.

Chapter Eleven

Tally and Loran raced up the stairs into the castle. They had taken advantage of the skimmer windows appearing opaque from the outside and had pleased each other almost to the breaking point. Still exhilarated, they dashed up the steps and into the spacious entrance hall, skidding to a stop before a bewildered Larbelian Gardener.

Loran spoke first.

“Your pardon, sir. Has Lady Galayne been informed of your arrival?”

The burly fellow shook his head and responded in a near unintelligible Larbelian accent.

“Naw, yon servant bade me set my bones on that seat. He ne’er told me he were to wake the Lady.”

Tally looked toward Loran, sending her thoughts his way.

“Is there some magic to make it easier to understand him? Can we do a spell under our breath?”

“I know one that I think will work. Here are the tones. Let’s try envisioning the notes in our minds first and see if it’s effective.”

Still using their merge, Loran thought of the tones and transferred them to Tally. Following his suggestion, she intoned them silently.

It worked. When he next spoke, they understood each word.

“I’ve been sitting here waiting for your return, my lady. I’ve a most marvelous gift from the Master Gardener for you.” He turned toward Loran. “Forgive me, my lord. We weren’t aware of your presence. I’ve no gift for you.” He gasped and nearly fell to his knees. “Please, forgive me. I meant no disrespect speaking so familiarly to you.” He drew himself up. “My name is Lackeron set Melvan. I’m a gardener second class. The Master Gardener offers my

services to you free of charge, my lady, to oversee your gardens. 'Tis well known that King Belar, may he find pleasant shade in the Great Maker's Garden, had superlative gardens." He inclined his head toward the package in his arms. "May I set this on a table?"

Tally nodded.

Stepping to the large round table in the center of the hall, he whipped off the box lid, revealing a shimmering plant. Its leaves looked like tiny oval mirrors.

Tally gasped as Loran tentatively fingered one of the blossoms.

"A reflecting flower. It's exquisite." She bent over it for further examination. "It has no scent."

"Does something this entrancing need any additional enhancement?" The gardener's voice reeked with affront.

"I apologize. You're quite right. Please convey my thanks to the Master Gardener for his well-wishes. You arrive at a most opportune time; we're sadly in need of someone with your skill. You may take quarters in the empty gardener's abode." She walked over to where a servant's bell chord hung and pulled. The majordomo reentered and stood silently, waiting for direction.

"Please inform the kitchen to prepare a tray for Gardener Lackeron and add meals for him from now on. And have the rooms in the cottage in the back aired out in the meantime."

Bowing and backing out from the hall, the regal servant exited without saying a word. Tally made a face at his retreating form. Smiling, she turned back to Lackeron once more.

"You'll find that we are usually not so formal and stuck up as that. He's a retainer from King Belar's days and we could not relieve him of his duties simply because he acts more hoity-toity than anyone else."

Loran nodded. "In the short time I've been here I've had to fight the urge to see if he really does have a pole stuck up his ..."

"Loran!" Tally poked him in the ribs and blushed. "I do beg your pardon, Lackeron. The prince tends to forget his manners. Please, relax and explore the gardens freely. If you need one, I can have a skimmer placed at your convenience to take you to Riess for whatever you need."

Shaking his head, the Larbelian responded, "I've a skimmer with me, packed with my personal gardening equipment. If I've a need to purchase any more supplies, the Master Gardener has given me leave to charge items to his personal reckoning." He bowed. "Oh, 'twould be good to place the plant in a room without too much direct light. Tends to age the leaves. Most folk keep them in their bedrooms, begging your pardon."

Tally looked at Loran, sending him a silent message. He nodded.

"I'll follow your suggestion, Lackeron, and place it there right now." She turned to go, then looked over her shoulder and smiled once more at the bemused man. "And welcome to Mariess."

* * * * *

“What a lovely gesture.”

Loran shrugged. “Politics.”

“Politics? What in the world could politics have to do with this beautiful plant?”

“One day, the Gardeners Guild might need your help to gain some economical advantage. If the plant also comes from the King of Larbela, there are political strings attached.”

“Until those strings are pulled, I shall just enjoy it.”

They moved up the stairs toward Tally’s rooms, Loran’s hand at the small of her back. He didn’t trust himself to touch her bare flesh. Now that they had pledged as soulmates, the mere contact with her silky skin ignited desire in him.

Tally caught his potent thoughts. *“You, too? I’ve been striving to maintain a shield on my feelings, trying to keep my visions of us concealed.”*

They reached her rooms and she magically unlocked the door.

Setting the plant on the nightstand nearest the window, she turned to Loran. “No.”

He cocked his head. “No, what?”

“You know very well, what.”

He moved close to her, his arms reaching out as she stepped aside nimbly.

“We’ve no time. Eldermother will be expecting us downstairs any minute. Behave.”

He caught her in his embrace as the bed blocked her next move. Her backside pressed against his groin, and she felt his erection prodding her rear.

He gripped her tighter. *“A quickie.”*

“Quickie?”

He licked her earlobe and blew softly against the damp flesh, making her shiver.

“An Earth expression I heard Mirelle use with Jareth.”

She pushed against him to break his hold, but he tightened his grip.

“Loran, kieroown, please. You know what I’d love to do with you, but we can’t linger.” Throwing down the barriers she’d erected around her passion, she revealed the depth of her need.

Loran groaned and stepped back. His flesh grew as stiff as a pole as Tally’s visions surged through his mind. *“I’m not going to be the only one aching. Here are my passions, meliflir.”*

Tally’s eyes widened as Loran’s wildly erotic thoughts raced through her. *“Leave. Now. Go!”*

He strode to the door, stopping to give her one last smoldering gaze, and left the room.

Waiting only until the door shut, Tally sank to her knees by the side of the bed. And prayed for strength.

* * * * *

"I was so sorry that Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne had to cut their visit short. What a sweet couple. Your brother is such a dear."

Lady Galayne sipped her cup of fragrant chai as she chattered on.

"So much excitement these last few days, and now a fabulous gift from Larbela." She smiled at Tally. "And I am very pleased, my dear, to see you come alive." She beamed at Loran. "You've had such a positive effect on her, Prince Loran."

Loran inclined his head graciously. "'Tis Tally who's had the effect on me."

Lady Galayne shrugged. "No matter. She's happy, so I am happy. Now, what are your plans for the day?"

Loran set down his cup of cider and answered. "Some more exploration of the caves. There's an interesting mineral deposit that might work as a conduit for the electrical emissions of lanbeth."

Loran watched as Lady Galayne's eyes glazed over with confusion. The less interest she held in his work, the better. "We'll go to the kitchen and see if we can coax the cook to make a snack for us."

"I'm sure she'll be more than pleased to give you whatever you wish."

Excusing themselves, they headed to the kitchen and thence out the back to the tool shed. They found the new head gardener examining the tools and making two piles.

Dropping a long-handled hoe, he sprang to his feet and sketched a low bow.

"Princess Talea, Prince Loran; please forgive me, I didn't hear your arrival." He gestured to the stacks of tools. "You're well supplied, but some of the tools need work to get them into shape."

"My father used gardening taisins primarily. From what I was informed, the head gardener died several months ago, and at the time of his death King Belar never replaced him. The taisins continued their tasks automatically, but they focused on the King's private garden. That no longer exists so we sorely need your help to direct them and restore the rest of the gardens to their previous condition." A smile as warm as the sun after a spring rain crossed her face. "I look forward to seeing the fruition of your work, Master Lackeron."

Loran smiled.

"As do I. I've visited the gardens of Larbela. If you can transform the place to anywhere near their beauty, we'll be grateful." He gestured toward the shed. "Did you come across any rope while you were looking through the equipment? I need some for our plans this afternoon."

Nodding, the guildsman entered the shed, emerging with a long coil of rope.

"Will this do, Prince Loran? 'Twas the longest length I could find."

Loran eyed it. "I think it will work. My thanks, Master Lackeron. Carry on."

The rope coiled over his shoulder, Loran took Tally's hand and walked to where the skimmer was parked.

Lackeron stared after them, cursing under his breath in a mixture of Larbelian and English. He had two choices -- follow the royal pair or find out what had happened to the King's pleasure garden. He shrugged. He'd have to let them go on their own for now. Hopefully later he'd find out just why they needed a sixty-foot length of rope.

* * * * *

"Jareth, leave the trade agreement papers alone for a moment. I was on the balcony just now and I saw Rayne and Pen land in the courtyard. Something must be wrong."

Without waiting for him to join her, Mirelle rushed from their rooms to the main hall just as Pen entered, carrying Rayne. He set her down on the nearest chair, hovering close to her even as she tried to motion him away.

"Rayne, Pen, what's the matter? Are you all right, sweetie? Move away, Pen, while I see if she's got a fever."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I just got a little faint when I dismounted from Rosta. I probably should have eaten more before we left Mariess."

"Mariess?" Jareth questioned as he strode down the stairs, joining them. "Why were you in Mariess?" He turned to Pen. "Does Rayne need a healer?"

"Yes."

"No." She glared at Pen's quick response. "I'm fine, I tell you. I just felt a bit faint."

Pen snorted. "This from a woman who didn't faint when faced with a Demon in a stench-filled Hell!" He knelt at her feet. "Please, *kerasoka*, let me summon a healer."

Mirelle nodded. "He's right, Rayne. You don't feel hot, but you're as white as bleached banta wool. As long as you're here, let's get the palace healer to look at you."

Rayne teared up. "You're all so sweet. I don't want to be a bother."

Mirelle snorted. "You, of all people, a bother? Now, just sit there for a minute while we summon her." She turned to Jareth. "Shall we put them in the first floor guest suite so she needn't climb any stairs?"

Pen interrupted. "Put us anywhere you like. I'll carry her to our rooms."

Rayne stamped her foot. "Pitt! I wish everyone would stop treating me as though I were an invalid or an ancient crone. Does Jareth treat you like an old woman, Mirelle?"

"He ..."

“You’re not an old woman, *kerasoka*, but you’re ill.”

Rayne pushed him off balance, and he landed on his backside at her feet. “For the last time. I. Am. Not. Ill!”

Two hours later, inside their rooms, with only Pen present, the healer agreed.

“Princess Rayne is fine. She’s not ill, she is merely with child.” She smiled down at her as she continued her diagnosis. “Twins, it appears.”

Pen fell to his knees, clasping Rayne’s hand and showering it with kisses. “Twins! How?”

Rayne giggled then broke into raucous laughter. “How? How not? ‘Tis a wonder ‘tis only twins, if it were predicated on how often we ...”

“Rayne!”

The healer laughed. “Nay, my ears are not virgins! Shall I tell their highnesses now? They’ve been hovering in the hall all this while.”

Pen nodded. “Thank you, and would you also tell the *akosai* Tran and Rosta for us? And please ask Prince Jareth and Princess Mirelle to give us just a minute more. We’d like a little time by ourselves now.”

Wiping her hands with a clean cloth, the healer gathered up the tools of her practice and left the room.

Pen shifted to the bed and pushed back a lock of Rayne’s hair that had slipped from her braid. Their minds merged as they shared their mutual joy.

“Twins. So soon. Are you nervous, kerasoka?”

“About having the babies? Nay. The shakos in the Hinterlands knew I was pregnant. She assured me that all would go well with the births.” Rayne smiled. *“She even knew we were having twins, I think. It’s the after part I’m nervous about.”*

“You’ll be a wonderful mother. I hope I’ll be as good a father.” He sighed and grinned. *“It will be hard.”*

“You’re shielding,” she accused. *“What will be hard?”*

“The abstinence.” He looked down at his quiescent shaft. *“It will be hard.”*

“You!”

And she pushed him off the bed.

Mirelle and Jareth rushed into the room a moment later.

Tears streamed down Mirelle’s joyful face as she ran over to the bed and hugged her friend. She stepped back and did a little jig, singing off-key in English. “I’m going to be an ant! I’m going to be an ant!”

Jareth almost let Pen slip as he helped him to his feet.

“An insect? You’re going to be an Earth insect?” He sighed. “I do not understand these Earth expressions, no matter that I understand the language!”

Mirelle giggled as she grabbed his hands, encouraging him to join her.

“No, Dream Boy. I meant ‘aunt.’ Mother of the heart.”

Jareth, used to her physical expressions of joy, joined her briefly in her dance, then led her over to a chair by the table. Sitting in it, he pulled her onto his lap.

“Ah, now I see. Aunt.” Turning to Pen, he grew serious once more. “So, brother, you weren’t returning to Narwith because of Rayne’s health. And I did not expect you to have traveled to Mariess. What’s wrong?”

“Can you help me place a strong silence shield around the room? We can’t take any chances that we might be overheard.”

Even more concerned now, Jareth added his mage strength to the spell.

“Now. What has happened?”

Without mincing words, Pen conveyed all that had occurred since they’d left Narwith.

Mirelle was the first to regain her composure.

“I knew it! I knew that it didn’t make sense for only males to be mages!” She struck her head with her palm. “Damn, why couldn’t we see it? The shakos in Tarol. She must have some mage powers. And you think Talea and Loran are ...”

Rayne chimed in to answer that. “Aye.” She sighed. “You should see the way Loran looks at her. And talks to her. He calls her meliflir. So romantic.” She began to sniffle and tears ran down her face. “Damn these ‘with child’ moods!”

Mirelle looked at Jareth. “Why don’t you call *me* ‘sweet flower’?”

Jareth laughed and whispered in her ear, “You don’t like that I call you Dream Hole?” He licked her ear lobe and blew gently.

She shivered and squirmed on his lap.

And then he shivered.

Pen frowned. “To return to the problem. Tally’s spectacles shield her eyes, yet draw attention to them. I wish there were something to be done to conceal them without inviting curiosity.”

Mirelle snapped her fingers and jumped from Jareth’s lap. “The eye discs Narik made.” She turned to Jareth. “Do you remember what we did with them?”

He grinned, a slow, seductive smile laced with reminiscence.

“We were a bit occupied at the time, but I did find them later. I placed them in our rooms for safekeeping. I’ll instruct Tally how to use them when I go to Mariess.”

“Without me?”

“Without us?”

Mirelle stalked over to Jareth, planting herself firmly in front of him, her arms akimbo. “Where you go, I go.”

"But the Kingdom ..."

"Your father can run Narwith while we're gone. Appoint him temporary regent."

Jareth gave her a look. "You've thought this out already."

"Aye, kieroyn, as soon as Rayne and Pen returned I knew something was up that would need our help. Since Rayne can't fly around in her condition ..."

"Wait just a minute! I am in perfectly good health! Not even a month pregnant, and there is no reason why I shouldn't be able to fly back with you to Mariess. As if I'd let Pen go off on his own!"

"But riding an akosa, kerasoka?"

"So we'll take a toron-a and Mirelle and Jareth can ride Tran and Rosta. You're not leaving me behind while you go off into possible danger!"

"There. Rayne's right." Mirelle turned to her friend lying in bed with a smug grin on her face. "We'll all go back to Mariess. After all, you men will need our help."

Jareth looked at Pen and nodded. "Couldn't do without it. Shouldn't even try."

Mirelle patted Rayne's shoulder. "You'll rest up tonight, Rayne, and tomorrow, as soon as Morath arrives, we'll leave."

Jareth harrumphed. "And what tale have you come up with to tell my father why we're rushing over to Mariess?"

"The truth."

Pen shook his head. "Too many people already know about Tally."

"Then there'll be one more."

"And the rest of the kingdom?"

"To sign new trade agreements and formally welcome Talea as Loran's soulmate."

Jareth groaned. "And if they aren't soulmates?"

Mirelle snapped her fingers. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Jareth smacked his forehead. "Another incomprehensible Earth expression."

Mirelle grinned. "Just go with the flow, Dream Boy."

Rayne mind merged with Pen. *"Do you understand anything she's saying?"*

"Nay, but as long as she's tormenting Jareth, I don't care! He tormented me throughout our growing up."

"Oh?" Rayne burst into great guffaws. *"Scylla worm? He called you scylla worm? Too late, you can't shield a thought after the shield's come down."*

Pen sighed. *"I just hope our children inherit my sense of decorum."*

This time Rayne laughed until tears ran down her face.

* * * * *

Later, Jareth lounged against the carved wooden headboard of their bed. Relaxed, replete after mind-blowing lovemaking, he suddenly spoke aloud.

"Are you upset that you're not pregnant yet, kiereen?"

Mirelle swiveled around on the vanity stool and looked away from the mirror. Laying down her brush, she responded slowly, measuring each word.

"I'm very happy for Rayne and Pen, especially Rayne. All alone until she and Pen found each other -- it must have been so hard. Now, she'll have a family of her own to cherish." She moved toward the bed and slipped off her robe, placing it at the foot of the bed. Naked, she slipped beneath the sheet and snuggled next to Jareth. Laying her head on his chest, she continued her thoughts.

"I want to have children with you, kierown, but I'm still exploring Hearthome. It seems as though I just got here, like it was only this morning that we first made love; only tonight that we took our vows. I want more time to learn about us." Her voice grew drowsy as her eyelids fluttered shut and she yawned. "Besides, we're gonna have five children. Plenty of time before that happens."

Jareth stared blindly into the moonlight. "Five children?"

Only Mirelle's gentle snores answered him.

* * * * *

King Morath planted a firm kiss on his middle son's soulmate and gazed at her with tears in his eyes.

"If only my sweet Selera could have lived to see this day. A child by casting. Nay, two!" He turned to his eldest son. "And when can I expect your child?"

Jareth laughed. "In time, Father. Meanwhile, you will have two to dandle on your knee. Now, you know the tale should anyone inquire?"

"Aye, aye. I did not drink from the waters of forgetfulness this morning." He reached out and grabbed Mirelle's hand as she poured him more heavily sweetened chai. "This one, she has a head on her shoulders. You're lucky, my boy."

Jareth rolled his eyes. "Please, she is too full of herself as it is."

"Mind your manners, Dream Boy. Show some respect. Never argue with your father. Or me."

"I hear and obey, Dream Ho ... oof!"

Mirelle blew on her knuckles and buffed them against her blouse. "Next time, I won't pull my punch."

"Enough," Morath ordered. "Tran and Rosta wait for you at the stables and my own toron-a is parked nearby. Get yourselves together. Your brother needs your help, lads." He grinned. "And I have another daughter by casting waiting."

Beating a hasty retreat, the two couples left Morath eagerly downing another cup of odiously sweet chai.

Arriving at the stables, they found Tran and Rosta pacing back and forth. Tran neighed loudly as they neared. "About time! When you told us of the plan last night, I thought you said we were going to get an early start."

Rosta trotted over to Rayne and nipped the tip of her braid. "Many congratulations, little mare. I see Fel isn't the only stud in your household."

"Fel!" Pen groaned. "I forgot to tell him. Damn, he'll bite my ass off now."

Rayne laughed. "No need to worry. He knows. Our thoughts were so strong, he heard our joy. He is thrilled to know I'm having a litter, also."

"A litter?"

"I'm having two children, after all. To him, that's a litter."

Mirelle cleared her throat. "I hate to break up all the chit chat, but Tran is right. It's getting late."

"Chit chat?" Pen asked.

Jareth nodded. "Useless conversation. Earth idiom."

Mirelle stamped a sandal-shod foot. "Let's go!"

Jareth placed his hand over his heart. "I hear and obey, my queen."

With Rayne ensconced in the back of the toron-a, her feet raised up on the seat, Pen got in the driver's seat, shut the door, and flew off toward Mariess.

Vaulting easily upon the akosai's backs, Mirelle and Jareth soared up after the high-flying vehicle.

Below, standing just out of their sight, Morath set Cleroth watched his sons and his daughters by casting soar away and prayed to the Great Maker for their safety.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Something wasn't kosher.

I'd expected a vain, vapid, spoiled brat and instead found an angel. A caring, unaffected, laughing angel. With some weird eye disease that she seemed to bravely ignore.

And so in love with the evil Prince Loran you'd have to be a blind man not to see it.

And that doesn't fit either. Forthright, blunt, no airs, no haughty condescending manner, Prince Loran didn't appear to be an evil spy, just stupid in love with Princess Talea. I intercepted enough hot looks between them to get that hard-on back again.

They're definitely covering up something, though. What prince needs a sixty-foot rope?

But there was no way I was going to be able to follow them this time. After they left, I decided to stroll the grounds and see for myself just how bad off the King's Pleasure Garden was.

Following the directions from the cook, I found the high hedges that concealed the garden from casual eyes. As soon as I turned around the end of the barrier, I saw what remained of the flowers and plants.

Nothing. Ashes. Not one single bethlan petal. A lingering trace of the potent fragrance drifted around the burnt ruins. I knelt down to see if the root systems had been destroyed. Methodically I went over every inch of the flowerbeds, growing dirtier and more frustrated as I scrabbled in the dirt with my bare fingers, trying to find one petal, one leaf, one root. Sweat poured from my brow as I delved in the final bed. And then, like some contrived scene in a bad movie, I found a clump of dirt with a partial root system.

It would take several weeks, but with careful nurturing, I could probably grow a bethlan flower. Cradling the moist wad of dirt in my hand I strode back to the little cottage that had been set up for me.

Wrapping it up as Fardretha had directed, I washed up for the evening meal. Tired as shit, I ate the meal left for me by my door by the household taisins and tumbled into bed.

Eavesdropping on the princess and taking up Fardretha's invitation for a return visit with a side of screwing was going to have to wait until tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

“We’ve heard nothing from that Earth creature! He should have spoken with my mother and gathered information from the palace by now.” Orath leaned over the table, gripping the rough wooden sides. His words were filled with venom. “I told you I wanted to investigate my mother’s concerns myself!”

Narik rose and strode over to him. He placed his right hand on top of Orath’s and squeezed, watching dispassionately as Orath winced in pain. Refusing to cry out, his mouth thinned and a narrow stream of blood trickled from between Orath’s lips as he bit down hard.

At last, Narik released his grip. “Do I need to remind you again? I say when and where and what you do.”

“Your plot to wreak division among some of the kingdoms didn’t work.” Orath sneered. “’Twas as if Jareth knew what we plotted.”

Speaking in a soothing manner as though to a child, Narik attempted to defuse the Prince’s temper.

“The seeds were planted. No matter that their concerns seemed misplaced. They will watch for any appearance of favoritism. And your idea to have them compete with gifts was ingenious.” He beamed with the approval of a proud father and sat down in his comfortable armchair.

Orath preened at the compliment. “I did think that was rather clever.” He frowned once more and paced back and forth in the dingy room. “I like not this waiting. How can you live like this?” He waved his hand around the room. “’Tis difficult for me to return to Helar and this shack. I despise masking my appearance and seeming a spindly dandy at my grandfather’s court. Speaking of that, I need more of the poison.” He flung himself into a chair and impatiently drummed his fingers on the table. “’Tis so slow. And my insipid cousin

has been badgering me for more bethlan.” He grimaced. “Who would have thought that flat-chested female would crave the stuff so fast? But at least she’s stopped cornering me in the halls and dragging me into her rooms.” He laughed mirthlessly. “She’s discovered that she’d rather fuck females. She converted her lady’s maid into a bethlan addict.” He sighed. “On my last visit I found her screwing the woman in the library. Idiot female forgot to lock the door. Lucky for her that I was the one to discover them. And speaking of lucky, I say again, why, by the Master of Torment, haven’t we heard from him?”

Narik rose. He straightened his body and dropped the shields he kept in place to diminish his aura of strength. His eyes flashed mage blue. Dust motes danced around his frame as though fearful of touching him.

Glad to be seated, Orath clenched his fists, determined not to cower before the powerful mage.

“Who has brought you to this point where you are close to becoming the most powerful ruler in Hearthome? Who has enabled you to control the court of Helar as though manipulating puppets? Who will give you any female you desire to fuck? Who will destroy your enemies: Jareth, Pentar, Loran, and anyone else who stands in your way?”

Wearing a mulish expression, Orath muttered, “You.”

“Louder!”

“You!”

Narik dulled his aura, his power once more acknowledged.

“Now, you will wait patiently until I tell you what to do.” He spoke in a whisper, his words all the more chilling for being so soft. “Should you go against my wishes, Orath, I shall withdraw any support for you. You’ll be on your own. Think about that before you make any irreversible, rash moves. Now, I think you’d do better to go and fuck that female at the inn. Cora, I think her name is? I shall retire to my pitiful little bed and contemplate our glorious future.”

He moved to the door, opening it with a wave of his hand, and let it slam shut behind him.

Orath unclenched his fists. Four bloody cuts on each palm reminded him of his fear of Narik. He shivered. How had Narik learned of the barmaid?

He poured himself a cup of the sour pommee’s cider and stared blindly into its depths.

Now that he was alone, he openly seethed. Before he’d become partners with the mage, he’d led an indulged life. True, he had little welcome at his father’s court, but his mother saw that he was never without money and women. All except one, his half-sister Talea. He snorted. He doubted that she was kin to him; else, why would his mother not deter his interest? Talea’s mother had probably whored herself out to some servant. His mother had revealed once that Belar’s seed was weak. She said she’d been forced to use a fertility potion

to conceive him. Unfortunately, her timing had been off. Even his mother was nothing more than a spineless creature, beguiled by the power of the bethlan plant.

He drained the cup and poured another. The feeble reflection of the patch lantern broke apart as the liquid sloshed. Even as he watched, the light streaks arranged themselves into glowing letters.

"Come to Mariess."

Orath smiled. His mother needed him. He had been right to doubt Narik.

He gulped the liquid and carefully set down the cup. Moving quietly, he strode to the door. Let Narik think he'd kowtowed to him. 'Twas time he took control of things.

And the first thing he'd do was get rid of that incompetent Earthman. Any way he could.

* * * * *

Tally and Loran entered the caves with a fresh sense of eagerness. They'd have ample time to accomplish their task and return with the final portion of the Book and thence back to Narwith to present themselves as soulmates.

They arrived at the cave of Arlette and Keret and spread out the blanket, placing a large carry bag and the length of rope on it.

Loran stripped down to his loin covering and knelt on the soft fleece coverlet. Taking the rope, Tally tied it securely around Loran's waist, then went to sit behind him, trying her best not to distract him.

Taking slow, even, deep breaths, he prepared to enter the state of machshahvah. As he focused on clearing his mind, he relaxed his control, allowing a state of peacefulness to seep within. Little by little, his pulse rate slowed and there were longer gaps between breaths.

Finally, he rose and glided to the pool. His movements were languid, unhurried, and sure. Step by step he submerged his body until he disappeared from sight.

Tally rose, trembling, gripping the lifeline with Loran so tightly the rough rope abraded her skin. As the length played out, her worries grew. Would there be enough rope?

She followed its serpentine path through the water as Loran searched the bottom for the bowl. At last, it stopped at the farthest point from the bank.

A tug. Once. Twice. Three times. He'd found the bowl!

She held the length loosely, trying not to pull on it. Her eyes never left it as inch by inch, Loran became visible once more.

As his head broke the surface, he opened his mouth and took a deep breath. Holding aloft the crystal bowl, he slogged onto the fine sandy bank.

He handed the bowl to Tally and untied the rope, letting it drop. His chest still heaving, he sank next to her on the blanket.

"I thought at first we had been misled. Then I saw it, wedged between some rocks. I thought it might be difficult to dislodge, but it took no effort." He looked at the bowl Tally still held reverently in her hands. "Let's leave it encased in the bowl. Who knows; it may have unknown powers when it's opened."

"In fact, let's leave it concealed here in the cave. The least time away from here the better. Although I can't put my finger on it, Lackeron, the new gardener, disturbs me for some reason. There's something about him ..."

Loran agreed. "I know. 'Tis odd, but I feel the same way. We'll conceal the Book with the lovers. Tomorrow, we'll take it to Narwith."

Placing the bowl in the carry bag, they hid it with the bodies in a niche behind a rock.

Returning to the blanket, Loran began to dress.

Tally grinned. "Why waste a golden opportunity, kierown?" She tugged his foot and he tumbled. Rolling over, she straddled him. "Do that disrobing spell." She stretched her arms above her head and yawned. "I'm too tired to take off my ..."

And her clothes were gone.

"Whatsoever my lady wishes." He scowled. "Your spectacles are still on."

Tally removed them, flinging them across the chamber. Her lips trembled and tears gathered in her eyes. "I hate hiding who I am."

Loran reached up and caught a tear as it fell. "I know, meliflir. But it will be over soon, once both portions of the Book are in Narwith and out of Narik's reach. We'll have the power that dwells within it to defeat him. And then you'll be safe." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "For now, let me ease the pain, meliflir. Let me give you pleasure."

Cupping her behind, he urged her to raise her body until the tip of his shaft nudged her slit. Slowly, she sank until she was impaled on his flesh. She swiveled her hips, grinding her silky thatch against the coarse hair at the base of his penis.

A groan escaped his lips, and she smiled. Changing her movements, she rocked back and forth, clenching her inner muscles. He groaned again. She cupped her breasts, arching as though offering them as a tribute to the Goddess Larakosa, the goddess of passion.

Reaching up, Loran drew her hands away and replaced them with his. He squeezed her flesh, kneading her fullness. Her nipples tightened in anticipation as he pulled her down to his demanding mouth.

Leaning forward, she helped bring her aching nipples within his grasp, placing her hands by his shoulders and balancing her weight on her arms.

He suckled eagerly, trying to take in her entire globe. He shifted back and forth between her breasts, greedy for the taste of her skin.

As their harsh breaths echoed within the chamber, Tally cried out his name.

And the lanbeth gathered. It sparkled and danced, thick and potent, waiting for their climaxes to burst over them.

Their movements grew more frantic until finally they were overwhelmed. Loran's sperm flooded Tally's core and they came together in a burst of silvery blue and midnight indigo fireworks.

The lanbeth fell, coating the lovers and all the surfaces in the chamber. It floated on top of the water in elaborate swirling patterns.

Tally collapsed upon Loran's chest, her blonde curls dusted with magic blue dust. She pressed her body against his, then slipped to his side. *"I can't speak."*

He caressed her silky curls, his fingers coming away with lanbeth clinging to them. *"Then don't."* He smiled. *"Now I know what Pen meant when he said insatiable."*

"Pitt!"

He grinned. *"What exactly does that mean? Juicy, sweet manflesh?"*

"Idiot! I'm not sure. I only heard Rayne use it when she was ticked off with Pen."

"I shall strive, then, not to cause you to use that term again."

For a few moments they lay quietly in each other's arms, then Loran sighed. *"We should return."*

Tally rolled away and sat up, shaking her hair and scattering lanbeth flakes around. She turned to look down at Loran. "We should just wash off the lanbeth, I suppose."

Laying a hand on her glittering back, Loran nodded. "Aye. Come, let's take care of it and return to the palace." Forcing a grin, he tried to lighten the mood. "I seemed to have worked up a sizeable appetite."

Laughing, they ran into the pool and splashed like children. The lanbeth slid from their bodies and the chamber consumed the rest of the dust, absorbing it into the sandy floor and hard rock walls.

They dried off with the blanket and Loran brought back their clothes. Tally slipped her spectacles back on and they removed the rings they had placed on their fingers when they first entered the sanctity of the cave.

Taking a last look around, they left the chamber.

* * * * *

Orath brought the toron-a in low over the tops of the trees surrounding the cottage that had served as Tally's home for half of her life. It would make a good base of operations for him. With her in the palace, it would most likely be empty except, perhaps, for the two elderly servants who had taken care of her after her mother's death.

He landed in the front of the house; might as well find out now if anyone was still there.

The door opened and Wol, the old man, walked toward him, hands outstretched in greeting.

"Prince Orath, we had no word of your coming. I'll have my woman prepare you some refreshment. 'Twill be simple to add another place at the table."

"Not necessary. I'll be dining alone."

The dagger flew from Orath's hand and struck the unsuspecting servant in the heart. He fell without a cry at Orath's feet. Bending, Orath pulled out the dagger, wiped off the blade on the man's shirt and held it now unsheathed.

He entered the cottage, stepping into the large front room and continuing into the kitchen at the rear.

Wol's woman stood with her back to the door, her hands busy kneading dough. She spoke without turning around, secure in her safe little world.

"Who was that flying in? We weren't expecting any visitors."

Orath slipped in behind her, grabbed her head back, and with one clean swipe, slit her throat.

She sank to the floor, overturning the big bowl of dough and sending it crashing to the floor with her. Shards of glass and bits of dough mingled with the blood streaming from her throat.

Orath tsked. "Very inhospitable, making your guest clean up your mess."

Stepping out to the back of the cottage, he gazed around trying to locate a suitable spot to conceal the body. Neat rows of vegetables and fruits grew in abundance, and in the far corner, a large compost heap.

"Excellent."

Spreading his fingers, he chanted a shifting spell to move the corpse in the kitchen to the compost.

Reentering the dead cook's domain, he noted the absence of the female's body. As expected, his spell had worked perfectly. Only a bloodstain and the glass and dough littered the floor. A simple spell removed the mess.

Whistling a carefree tune, he brought in his carry bags and intoned a spell to shift the male's body into the cottage. Turning it over, he examined the corpse's features, noting the slightly lopsided ears and the bulbous nose. He lifted open the eyelids, marking the color of the eyes. The hair was a dull brown, shaggy and short, cropped to the ears.

He sighed and fingered his long braid. It would have to be cut. He found it easier to conform as much as possible to his model when he transformed his shape. Fortunately, the fellow was fairly lean so his clothes wouldn't be too bad a fit.

He stood and went into the small bedroom that attached to the kitchen.

He knew the house intimately. Over the years he had spied on Tally as she played or climbed the branches of the old tree in the front of the house. When he'd turned mage at eighteen, he used an invisibility spell for brief periods and entered the house. He'd observe her dressing and bathing and would then throw himself into a skimmer, preset to return to either the castle or his mother's town home and jack off.

Aye, he knew the place.

Opening the roughhewn closet, he pulled out a set of clean clothes and, stripping off his own, dressed.

A fair fit. He'd have to roll up the pants and put some rolled hose in the toe of the boots, but otherwise, not too bad.

The most difficult part would be maintaining the brown eyes. The very use of his mage powers made that hard.

He stood in front of the oval shaped mirror over the waist high dresser and carefully intoned the shape-shifting spell that was his greatest power.

He stared as his features seemed to melt and reform into Wol's.

His body shape adjusted to conform to the older man's leaner, less muscular frame. Sighing, he took his dagger and hacked off his long braid. He tied off the loose end and rolled it up tightly, placing it in his pocket. He just could not throw it away. Eighteen years of growing it, gone now because of Narik's excessive caution.

His gaze returned to the mirror and he peered intently as the hair color changed.

He rolled his shoulders and twisted the kinks from his neck. Done. If he avoided speaking too much, none would be the wiser and he could enter the palace freely as a trusted servant. He stepped over the dead man as he was about to leave the cottage and stopped.

Couldn't leave the body like that, now could he?

The proper spell cast, the man's body vanished to join his wife's in the compost heap. Orath opened the door to the man's ancient skimmer. No safety lock to keep it out of the hands of skimmer thieves. No need for it.

He settled into the driver's seat and intoned his destination.

"King Belar's palace."

And relaxed.

* * * * *

"They're back! And they've brought guests! And what guests! Such excitement!"

Tally and Loran looked at each other and smiled at Lady Galayne's greeting. She was dithering again.

"Who's back, Eldermother?"

"Why, Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne. And they've brought Prince Jareth and Princess Mirelle with them! And of course, the akosai. Prince Jareth and Princess Mirelle rode in on them." She sighed. "So striking to see them fly in like some sort of god and goddess!"

"Great," Loran muttered. "Just what Jareth needs to hear."

"Why, I told them that the minute they landed." She paused. "The akosai seemed to find it quite funny. They neighed and laughed that high-pitched akosai laugh." She shrugged. "Oh, well. Now, I've moved Prince Jareth and his soulmate to the rooms that Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne had and given them your room, Loran." She beamed. "Prince Pentar insisted that they would be perfect. Said his soulmate enjoys the garden. I've given you the room opposite Talea's. It's quite nice." She danced away toward the kitchen. "I'm going to confer with the cook. We must have something special for today's midday meal. We'll eat out on the veranda. So charming a setting. Oh, the prince asked if you both would join them in Prince Pentar's rooms when you return." She waved them away. "One hour. On the veranda."

Tally and Loran gazed with bemusement at Lady Galayne's exit.

"She's almost giddy," Loran said.

Tally shook her head. "Beyond giddy. But why in the world are Jareth and Mirelle here?"

"Best way to find out is to meet them in Pen's rooms."

"Somehow I think we'd better go ahead now and tidy up later."

They reached Pen's room in time to hear Rayne's raised voice through the door.

"No. No dry crackers. I. Want. Fermented. Banta's milk!"

They did a double take and knocked.

"Enter."

Opening the door they walked in to find Rayne sitting up in bed, her back against several plump cushions, her arms crossed against her chest, eyeing Pen as though he were a demon. A platter of crackers lay on the floor.

Pen stood by the bed, wringing his hands.

Wringing his hands?

"Please, kerasoka, they don't have fermented banta's milk in Mariess."

Rayne's face took on a stubborn expression. "Then conjure it up for me."

"I can't do that without having at least tasted it. It's an unknown substance to me."

She threw her hands up in the air with exasperation. "What kind of a mage are you?" She turned to Tally. "I bet you could make fermented banta's milk appear, right?"

Tally and Loran stepped all the way into the room and shut the door behind them.

Tally shook her head.

"Sorry, Rayne. I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to do that."

"Ah, good, you're both here." Jareth strolled into the room from the gardens, Mirelle's hand in his.

She dropped it and moved to the bed, sitting down next to Rayne, and nodded toward the open doors.

"When they started to argue we moved out of range of flying plates." She held out her hand to Tally. "You must be Tally. You're even prettier than I imagined." She gestured to her short curls. "I like your hair." She stood and moved over to the blushing blonde. "May I see your eyes?"

Jareth sighed. "This inquisitive, rude female is my soulmate, Mirelle seta Farielle. You fellows don't know how lucky you are having nice Hearthome females as your soulmates."

Rayne threw a pillow at Jareth, while Mirelle whipped around, punching him in the stomach. "You're lucky Rayne is pregnant; otherwise, she'd hit you, too!"

"Pregnant?"

Tally and Loran spoke as one.

"Aye, twins!"

Pentar grinned like a demented thooba and, daring his life, sat next to Rayne on the bed. He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. This time, she smiled and leaned against him.

"Pen insists that I lay down whenever I can and not climb stairs though the healer said I was perfectly fine this early in my pregnancy to do so. She just cautioned me against riding Rosta." She turned her face to Pen's and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry I was such a silly thrant about the banta's milk. Plain pommee's cider will do just fine."

Peace restored, Jareth started to summon the taisins to clean up the mess on the floor, then hesitated, and looked at Tally. "It's not that we doubt your mage skill, Talea, it's just..."

She finished his sentence. "Hard to believe? I only started believing it myself since Loran's arrival. I suppose you want me to clean that up?"

Without any fanfare, she took off her glasses and laid them on the table. Sapphire-blue eyes gazed at the people in the room. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them, intoning a cleansing spell.

The debris on the floor disappeared.

Mirelle let out her breath. "She *is* a mage."

Loran placed Tally's spectacles on her face and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. There was such tenderness in the gesture the other two women sighed.

"Tally keeps her glasses on except when she's in the caves or when she sleeps. 'Tis safest that way."

Mirelle reached into the carry bag on the nightstand and held out her hand. A small, closed case lay upon her palm. "Open it. It's a belated joining gift."

Tally lifted an eyebrow. "Joining gift?"

Mirelle laughed. "You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool women. Of course, you're soulmates. Now, open the case. You're going to love what you see."

Tally shrugged and complied.

Two small, hazel-colored, translucent discs lay within.

"What are they?"

Jareth answered first, cutting off Mirelle. "You place them on your eyes and they conceal the natural color. 'Tis an Earth implement that Narik improved upon. Mirelle and I each wore a pair when we visited Mariess as performers. They can remain on your eyes as long as necessary and are easily removed. You won't need to wear your spectacles any longer, Tally."

Loran gripped Jareth's shoulder and clasped his hand. His voice almost broke as he thanked them.

"This is the most wonderful gift you could give her. The fear of discovery, of someone accidentally knocking off her glasses or their falling off ... with these she can move freely."

"Until the day when I can reveal that I'm a mage."

Loran released Jareth's hand and clasped Tally's. "Now, there must be more than merely informing us of Rayne's pregnancy and bringing Tally a gift that brought you all here. What's going on?"

After sharing their earlier discussions with Loran and Tally, Jareth paused. "I'd feel a lot more at ease if we had the last portion of the Book."

"Then rest easy. We found it this morning."

Questions flew from the two other couples, bombarding Tally and Loran.

Loran held up his hand to forestall their questions. "Hold, hold. Let me tell you everything."

"Before you do," Jareth said, "let me get Tran and Rosta. They should hear this, too."

He turned on his heel, and moved at a trot, returning with the two akosai, a carry bag over his shoulder.

The akosai stuck their heads as far as they could into the room.

Tran chuffed. "This had better be good. Rosta and I were just getting ready to groom each other's wings."

Rosta whinnied and tossed her mane. "And you know what wing grooming leads to." She snorted and pulled back her lips in an akosai smile. "Jareth, your timing was very poor."

"Believe me, you'll want to hear this. In fact, try to come all the way into the room so we can shut the doors."

Crowding inside, the akosai listened with growing wonder along with the others to Loran's tale. Dead silence greeted the finish.

"You saw the Great Mage Tocson in a vision?" Pen asked.

Mirelle's voice was laced with awe. "He saw you, too?"

Rayne gazed with admiration at Loran. "You can hold your breath under water for how long?"

But it was Jareth who asked the most important question. "Do you have the Book with you?"

Tally shook her head. "We hid it in the cave behind the bodies of Arlette and Keret. We planned on going back there secretly tonight and take it back to Narwith tomorrow to join it to the other portion."

Jareth smiled. "Then I'm glad I did what I did. I'll save you the journey. I brought the second part of the Book with me."

Journal of Lucky Stevens

I could hardly believe what I had just seen and heard. I hid within a tunnel that branched off from the cave entrance watching as Talea and Loran left in the skimmer. I didn't know how I would get back to the palace, but that didn't concern me now.

When I took a chance this morning and hid within the trunk of the royal couple's skimmer, I had no idea what they were doing or where they were going.

They didn't speak the entire trip to the caves, and that in and of itself I found odd. I only knew they had traveled to the caves outside Riess when they arrived and they spoke aloud.

The prince said, "If the people only knew what lay within the caves."

The princess replied, "Let us hope they never find out."

Then quiet ensued again.

Listening to their footsteps recede, I figured they'd gone into the caves and I could chance coming out.

Carefully raising the lid of the trunk, I eased out of the slim space. I stretched and then got my bearings.

Where the hell had they gone?

A rocky cliff face stretched endlessly. Squinting against the bright sun, I carefully examined the outcroppings of boulders and rocks looking for anything out of the ordinary.

And found it. If I hadn't been searching, I never would have noticed the wing-shaped rock. A good enough as any place to start, I walked toward it and was gratified to notice bootprints in the soil. They led to what looked like a dead end, but this second boulder concealed an opening into the cliff face.

I slipped the pocket-sized lanbeth light from my jacket and opened the lid. A faint trace of light joined me as I entered the dark cave.

But where had Talea and Loran gone?

I raised the light, passing it over the walls, and found various slash marks, obviously used as guides. Which to follow?

I followed a hunch. The oldest marks drew me and I let them lead me. Moving silently I edged my way down the tunnels until I heard sounds. Hugging the walls, I drew near a large opening that revealed a huge chamber lit with amethyst crystals. A pool took up about a third of the space and a waterfall springing from the opposite wall splashed against the rocks.

Talea and Loran, stripped down to his underwear, were examining a large crystal bowl.

I listened and watched, trying to take everything in, trying to reconcile what I heard with what Narik had told me.

And failing.

The son of a bitch had lied to me. Or at least had played with the truth. I needed time to try to make some sense of everything. I figured I'd hide back in the trunk and was about to turn around when I heard Talea invite Loran to make love to her.

Lord help me, I don't consider myself a peeping tom, but to see that body of hers naked ...

So I looked, and after I managed to drag my eyes away from her luscious tits, I took in that gorgeous face and couldn't believe my frigging eyes.

Her eyes were mage blue!

I knew enough about Hearthome to know that that was impossible. Females weren't mages. Then Loran waved his head and muttered something and her clothes disappeared. And that wasn't right either. Mages had blue eyes and long hair. Loran has neither.

What the hell was going on?

And then I couldn't drag my eyes away as they made love with so much passion I thought they'd go up in flames.

And they didn't talk. Not a word. My dick reacted. Hell, who could help it? I slipped my hand down my pants and masturbated. My eyes closed as I worked my cock. I heard Tally cry out and opened my eyes.

Lanbeth. I knew about that stuff. It only occurred if a mage was making love to his true love, his soulmate. That confirmed my earlier hunch. These two were in love.

But the lanbeth. The only lanbeth I knew of was rainbow colored. That bit of information had been part of the package Narik had dumped in my brain. This stuff was unique.

I watched as it showered down on them and they washed it off.

And realized they were getting ready to leave!

I moved as quick as I could and got to the entrance to the cave in just enough time to hide as they got back in the skimmer and left.

I'd lost my ride.

And I think I've lost my mind.

Now what?

Fardretha.

Of the two places, the palace or the town, Riess is closer and Fardretha's town home is on this side of town. I figured I'd kill two birds with one stone. Tell her about the bethlan problem, borrow a ride, and maybe take care of my half-cocked cock.

I covered the distance of several miles with no sweat. An easy hike, nothing like the ones I forced myself to take back on Earth to increase my stamina.

I came around the back again, this time prepared for the snooty bastard. When he saw me, I thought at first he was going to slam the door in my face, but he let me in.

"Lady Fardretha is expecting me," I lied.

He sniffed. "Is she? She didn't inform me you were coming."

"Well, she may not tell you everything. Just let her know I'm here, buster."

A flash of incomprehension crossed his face and I realized I'd fucked up a bit, but what the hell. He was only a servant.

He returned with the princess almost running into the kitchen.

She waved him away. "You may leave us, Tokar. If I need you I'll ring for you."

He threw me a look that could've killed me on the spot.

Fardretha looked around the kitchen. "Where is it?"

"Well, that's going to be a problem."

"Problem?" That sultry voice of hers flew up an octave.

"The garden has been destroyed. Princess Talea had it burned to the ground."

Her eyes grew wild. "Talea? What am I going to do? I've only the one plant left!"

"Easy. I was able to save a root system; you'll have a plant in a couple of weeks if we use some lanbeth enhanced fertilizer."

She sank into an empty chair, holding her head. Looking up at me, tears gleaming in her eyes, I knew she had one heavy habit.

"If I'm careful, I can stretch out what I have left." She sat up straighter, thrusting out those luscious tits. "How can I thank you, Lackeron? What can I give you to compensate for your trouble?"

I took a step closer, placed my hand on one pouting nipple and squeezed. Her eyes closed then opened. She licked her lips and nodded.

I turned her chair around so I could kneel down in front of her and she put her hand out and stopped me.

"Lock the doors. I don't want anyone to interrupt us."

It only took a second to secure the room. While I'd locked all the doors leading to the kitchen she'd stripped. Her clothes lay in a heap on the floor and she straddled the chair, her thighs spread wide on either side of the seat.

Her clit glistened and her thick thatch dripped with cream.

I moaned.

She fingered herself and smiled. "You like what you see?"

"Are you crazy? You could make a hermit come in his robe."

She threw her head back and laughed. "I like you, Lackeron. You make me laugh. Now, let's see if you can make me come."

I whipped out of my clothes so fast I thought I'd torn my leggings. Damn things, they got stuck on my cock as I hopped on one leg, trying to pull them off.

She laughed again and then stopped laughing when I turned around to her after dragging the damn things off.

Her breath hissed as she inhaled sharply. "You are big. Is that all for me?"

"If you can take it all in." I strutted over to her, my cock bobbing as I walked. "A lot of women have tried."

"Then you're lucky you met me. I won't fail."

Yeah, that's me.

Lucky.

She had me in her mouth, sucking my prick so hard I thought she'd turn me inside out. She knew just how to angle herself so she could take me deep.

Christ, I lost my wad quicker than I had planned, but she didn't seem to care. She swallowed the whole load and then pushed me to my knees.

"My turn. You can use that clever tongue of yours while your prick gets hard again."

I gripped those smooth, creamy thighs and bent my head to the task, thrusting my tongue as deep as I could into her wet pussy. She thrust her snatch against my face, grabbing my head.

She came, her cream smearing my mouth. I licked my lips, tasting the musky flavor of woman.

"You are a greedy man. Do you want more?"

It just came out. I couldn't help myself. "Please, my lady, can I have some more?"

She got up, turned around, grabbed the back of the chair and offered her sweet round ass for me.

I screwed her until I thought my dick would fall off. She took my whole length. No female had ever done that before. I sank into her like a knife into butter, slapping my balls against her until I felt her clench my prick so tight I thought she'd clamped it off. I came in a rush.

My hands squeezed her tits and she whimpered a bit. I let go immediately.

"Why did you stop?" she whispered, her breath harsh. "I liked it. I'm not made of glass. Squeeze harder. I won't break."

She liked it hard. I pinched her nipples as hard as I could and she moaned. I pulled her away from the chair and brought her back against my chest. Her neck was near my mouth and I licked her sweaty flesh. She didn't have a mark on her and I wondered if she had been fucking someone who wouldn't or couldn't give her what she wanted.

So I did. I opened my mouth and gave her the biggest, deepest hickey I could.

And she came. Moaning, crying, thrusting against my groin, clenching her pussy muscles, her hands reaching behind to grab my ass and dig her fingers deep.

I wouldn't let go of her neck, but hung on like a dog hangs onto a bone, until she finally sagged in my arms, spent.

I guided her into the chair and she clung to me as I moved back a step.

"Did you have any of the bethlan plant you saved before you came here?"

I laughed. "My lady, right now it is nothing but root and dirt."

"Do you always fuck like this?"

I looked down at my flaccid cock and looked up again, attempting to be humble. "I try."

She rose, walked over to me and rubbed her sex-covered body against me.

Damned if she didn't get a bit of a rise from me again.

"Come back any time, Lackeron. The door will always be open to you."

She swept up her clothes and, unlocking a different door from the one she'd entered, left the room.

I gathered up my clothes and was dressing when I heard the door behind me open again.

"I'm flattered, Lady Fardretha, but I'm no..."

A hammy paw dragged me around.

Tokar.

"Don't come back. If you do, next time I'll kill you. Fardretha is mine."

Cocky bastard.

I flipped him on his butt. He lay at my feet in astonishment.

"Listen, you cock sucking bastard, the lady decides who's going to fuck her and for now that's me. Watch it. I have a feeling I can get your ass fired without too much trouble."

He looked at me, his eyes filled with reluctant respect and confusion.

"I know you threatened me, though I know not what you said. You may have the upper hand now, but she'll grow tired of you. She always does. Then she'll be mine again."

He stood up, brushed off his clothes and left without a backward look.

I dressed and realized I'd forgotten to ask for a skimmer.

It was going to be a long walk.

Chapter Thirteen

Orath let the skimmer land at the back of the castle by the kitchen and servants' entrance. Wol wouldn't have come in any other way.

Entering the kitchen, he was immediately confronted with the first test of his shape-shifting skill.

The cook looked up and smiled.

"Wol! Been a while since you've visited. Torette good?"

Orath nodded.

She frowned and peered closer at him.

Would he have to silence her?

"What's the matter? Bitnap grabbed your mouth?"

He pointed to his throat and coughed.

Comprehension dawned in the cook's broad face and she nodded.

"Ah, so that be the reason you're here. Going to see the healer? You've come at the right time. She's here at the castle to see the Princess." She lowered her voice. "Word has it, she's pregnant."

For a second, Orath's control wavered. Pregnant? Talea? His Talea? That bastard Loran! Couldn't keep his hands off her! And that slut, letting him! He took a deep breath, striving to regain control.

The cook cocked her head. "You be all right? Should I get the healer now?"

He shook his head.

"You can't wait in the gardener's cottage any longer; we've acquired a new one just the other day. Not too talkative a sort but seems to know his business. Now, you can't be staying

here in my kitchen with that cough of yours. Why not take a stroll in the gardens? It be a right nice day. I'll let them know you're here and have need of the healer."

Orath nodded. He wanted to explore the gardens anyway. He sauntered out the door, the cook staring at his back.

"Wol must be feeling right bad. He didn't even ask for a cup of chilled pommee's cider." She wiped her hands on her apron and untied it, leaving it on the back of a chair. She hurried to the parlor where Lady Galayne was holding court.

* * * * *

Orath checked the gardener's cottage first. No sign of the Earthman. He moved swiftly around the perimeter of the castle grounds, looking for another entrance to the castle. The open parlor door and the dithering voice of his eldermothe smote his ears and he paused to listen.

"Poor Wol is ill? He was here when I first came to the castle as a newly joined soulmate. I'll have the healer see him after she finishes with the princess." She sighed happily. "Such a to-do with all the royal brothers here and their soulmates. 'Tis like old times, eh, Herela?"

"Aye, milady. But better."

"In some ways, in some ways."

Orath started. All were here? He frowned. The situation had become unpredictable. He congratulated his forethought and nerve to go against Narik's unreasonable caution. Why hadn't the Earthman alerted them to this? Was the oaf in league with Jareth and the rest? Impossible. But could he have given himself away and been apprehended? That made more sense. He could count on no assistance now. But then, he never had.

He made straight to his father's personal garden to collect the bethlan needed for his cousin and perhaps bring a plant to his mother. An extra little gift to keep the woman dependent on his largess.

The presence of the royal mages must be what his mother had alluded to in her brief messages. Well, he'd soon find out why they were here.

And make sure they didn't get in his way. He smiled with grim satisfaction. And he'd make that little pleasure giver, Talea, pay for spreading her legs.

He rounded the hedgerow shielding the exotic plants and stopped as though facing a rampaging thrant.

Destroyed. Every plant burned and the ground broken up as if a crazed gardener had weeded it. Had the Earthman gone mad and wiped out all the addictive plants?

He'd better hurry and speak with his mother. Hopefully she'd have some more information for him. Retracing his steps, he returned to the skimmer, fortunately avoiding running into the solicitous cook.

Taking a moment to override the automatic ensorcelling, he turned the wheel toward the east and his mother's home in Riess.

* * * * *

"It's here?" Pen's voice was laced with incredulity. "You mean you rode on Tran with the Book in a carry bag? The damn thing could have fallen off. Talk about coney-brained."

Jareth grinned as sly as a *partour* when it stalks its prey. "Of course I didn't take it with me on Tran. I put it in the toron-a."

"It's still there?"

Looking smug, Jareth patted the carry bag. "It's here. Let me secure the doors to the gardens first."

Setting the bag on the table, he shut the doors and, with a decisive click, locked them.

"Lock the door to the hall and let's set a silence shield and containment spell on the room. We can't take any chance when we examine the Book."

Opening the carry bag, he drew out the second portion and laid it out for all to see.

Pen sighed. "If only Narik hadn't gotten his hands on the first part. Who knows to what information he's privy?"

Loran cleared his throat, waiting until he had everyone's attention. "Actually, he doesn't have much. Just a table of contents. The unique spells he did and the power he has don't come from the Book."

Mirelle cast a speculative glance at Loran. "And just how do you know this?"

Loran took Tally's hand and brought it to his lips before he spoke. "Forgive me, meliflir. I shielded this information from you. Tocson insisted."

"Tocson?" Tally questioned. "When was this?"

"When I submerged looking for the third part. He came again to me in a vision. He revealed that Narik had only the listing of its contents to whet his appetite. We have the rest." He grinned. "Including an index."

Mirelle gave Loran a quick hug then grabbed Jareth to join her in her customary dance for joy.

Leaning over to Loran, Pen whispered in his ear, "I never thought I'd see the day our staid brother would dance a silly dance."

Loran responded quietly. "She's good for him. He's always been too serious. She makes him laugh. When I see them together, I see two halves of one whole." He gazed at Tally sitting on the bed next to Rayne, touching her shoulder without hesitation and laughing. "Look at Tally, so carefree. You would never reconcile this Tally to the lifeless doll I found when I came here. 'Twas our love that changed her. And Pen, she makes me feel more alive, too."

Pen moved toward where Rayne held court. He shifted onto the bed and Tally slid off. Drawing Rayne into his arms, he kissed the top of her head. As the others watched, her eyes melted with tenderness and she leaned her head against Pen's chest. Tears misted her cheeks as she spoke.

"Pen suggested we name the twins after my parents." She looked up at him. "Thank you, kerasoko."

After a moment of silence, Mirelle piped up, a teasing note in her voice. "Here I thought you were going to name the female after me." She grinned. "Wouldn't it be great to have a little Mirelle running around?"

Jareth groaned. "Two Mirelles? May the Great Maker spare you both, if your Mirelle is like my Mirelle!"

Mirelle rounded at him, balling her fist. "And what's your problem, Dream Boy?"

Grabbing her around the waist, Jareth lifted her up high. "They would never get a moment's peace and they would love her to distraction and never let her go."

Mirelle sighed. "Aw, Dream Boy."

Tally cleared her throat. "I hate to remind you all, but my eldermothe expects us for the midday meal. Rayne, do you feel up to joining us?"

Rayne flipped the covers off, revealing the fact that she was still dressed. "A few minutes to freshen up and then we'll meet in the formal parlor."

Tran nodded his head and nickered. "Rosta and I will return to the stables."

Rosta swished her tail and bumped Tran's flank. "I'd love to see Lady Galayne's reaction to everything, but my wings need grooming." She dipped one eyelid in an akosai wink.

Tran stamped his hoof, admonishing her. "Rosta!"

* * * * *

Rather than leave her at her door, Loran followed Tally into her room.

"Mirelle told me how to put the discs in your eyes. 'Tis not too difficult. Come sit down and I'll show you."

Tally moved to the turn stool before her mirror, the reflecting flower shimmering atop the vanity. She flicked the petals, admiring the light, tinkling sound and the splashes of light. Taking off her spectacles, she laid them next to the exotic plant, gazing at it with appreciation.

"'Tis lovely."

"Not as lovely as you, meliflir." He smiled. "I almost hate to conceal your beautiful eyes, but hiding your powers right now makes more sense."

He crouched by her side and opened the case with the discs. Taking them one at a time, he placed them carefully in her eyes. He peered at her intently as she blinked a few times and then stared in the mirror.

Bright hazel eyes gazed back at her. She twirled around on the stool, giddy as a child on a swing. "I'm free!"

"Aye, no more hiding behind those amber spectacles."

She stopped in mid-twirl. "What shall we tell people? Everyone knows I wear my glasses because my eyes are sensitive to light."

"Why we'll just say that Jareth and Mirelle brought a new magic potion that healed your sensitivity."

"Excellent thinking, kierown. But then, I knew I loved you for your mind."

Pretending to take umbrage, Loran pouted. "You mean you don't think I'm as handsome as the day is long?"

Tally laughed, shaking her head at his nonsense. "The day will be cut short if we don't join Eldermother in the parlor."

Loran stood and handed her the glasses. "We'll tell her at that time about your magical cure."

"And I'll continue wearing my spectacles until then."

They entered the parlor to find everyone waiting for them.

Lady Galayne looked up brightly as they sat down. "Your brothers said you had something to tell me, Loran. May I guess?"

Loran looked askance at Pen and Jareth and nodded to her.

"You and Talea have discovered you're soulmates! 'Tis only a formality for a bride-casting, is it not?"

Tally's mouth dropped open.

"Am I right?"

Loran picked up Tally's hand and twined his fingers with hers. "You're right, Lady Galayne. Though we wanted to break the news ourselves. But we've even more news to share with you."

Tally smiled shyly. "Jareth and Mirelle brought back with them the most wonderful potion. It's cured me of my sensitivity to light! Look!"

She took off her spectacles and placed them in her lap, unveiling her unshielded eyes.

Trembling, Lady Galayne rose and walked over to Tally. Carefully, she raised her chin and gazed into her eyes. Tears fell as she caressed her cheek.

"Your mother had the same color and shape eyes. I always thought they were her most beautiful feature." She turned to Jareth and Mirelle, gratitude shining in her countenance. "How can I thank you for what you've done for Talea? You have my eternal blessings."

Mirelle gently gathered Lady Galayne in a swift embrace. Smiling tremulously, the older woman returned to her seat, dabbing at the tears still falling.

Jareth inclined his head slightly. "No need for thanks. It was our pleasure to help Tally. Now, is there someone qualified to do a bride-casting and make it official?"

"Loran can petition the Council of Mages to have the stones cast -- that is, after we take care of a few other things." Tally reached out for Loran, who moved to her side.

Lady Galayne took a deep breath and nodded her head as though making some inner decision. She rose and rang for the servant, who responded immediately.

"Would you please bring in my fan case? It's on my vanity."

When the servant returned, she set the ornate case on the low table in front of Lady Galayne and then left.

Taking a tiny gold key from the small, fringed bag she wore at her waist, Lady Galayne opened the case. Within were several elaborate fans. Lifting them, she revealed a sealed envelope with Tally's name written in a clear, feminine hand.

"Your mother gave this to me the day you came for your bride-casting so many years ago. She asked me to give it to you when you found your true soulmate." Her voice trembled. "Even then, she had hopes that you wouldn't follow the same path she had and join with someone like Belar." She handed the envelope to Tally, folding her fingers over it. "I think it's time now."

Tally leaned over and kissed her. "Thank you, Eldermother. Thank you for keeping this safe for me."

Lady Galayne sniffled, her voice breaking. "It's hardly enough. I should have been there for your dear, sweet mother. But, I vow, I'll always be here for you."

Jareth cleared his throat, his voice suspiciously thick. "Lady Galayne, we have some palace business this afternoon which will involve Tally and Loran." He smiled. "But I promise to have them back in time for the evening meal. Meanwhile, Rayne and Pen can keep you company."

Even while Rayne pouted, Pen cast a grateful look toward Jareth. Now he wouldn't have to worry about Rayne's overdoing it. They couldn't go off and leave Lady Galayne alone. It would be terribly rude.

Lady Galayne beamed at Rayne. "I have a wonderful diet I was on when I bore Belar. It involves eating six small meals a day and lots of chai. Also coney meat ground up and shaped into small meatballs." She paused. "Of course, all that chai means you spend even more time indisposed than usual during your period of confinement."

Rayne shot Pen a wild look, then cast an evil eye on Jareth while the older woman chattered on.

Grateful that Rayne had no mage powers, Jareth hurried Mirelle from the room, Loran and Tally trailing behind.

Outside the door, they paused.

"We'll leave Tran and Rosta at the stable." Mirelle grinned mischievously. "I don't think they want to be disturbed just now."

Tally looked at Jareth. "Is she always like this?"

"I'm getting accustomed to her Earth behavior and sense of humor. Slowly."

Mirelle stood on tiptoe and planted a smacking, wet smooch on his mouth. "Grouch."

"Grouch?" Tally looked at Loran for an explanation.

He replied with great solemnity. "Mean-tempered thrant."

"Oh," she said and burst into laughter.

Jareth frowned, then ruined the effect by joining in her laughter. "Half an hour. And I hope Mirelle won't be a bad influence on you."

Mirelle glared. "Just wait, Dream Boy, when you want to do page thirty-nine, you'll have to beg me."

Now even Loran was confused.

Mirelle winked. "A book Rayne inherited. You might want to ask if she would lend it to you."

Loran's eyes widened. "The Tarolian 'Book of Pleasures'? I've read of it but thought it just another pretty legend." He eyed Jareth and Mirelle speculatively. "They say there are positions in there..."

Jareth reddened to the tips of his ears while Mirelle crowed with triumph.

"I just love watching you lose your composure."

"If it's that instructive, we'll make sure to ask to borrow it, if only for tonight," Tally said, a twinkle in her eye.

Jareth gazed sternly at Mirelle and mind merged. *"Just wait till I get you alone tonight."*

Totally unabashed, Mirelle responded silently. *"That's what I'm counting on, Dream Boy."*

Tally and Loran watched the two communicating as they returned to their rooms and merged their thoughts, too.

"He's so in love, he's stupid with it." Loran's thought echoed Tally's.

"I remember him being a great deal more solemn than either you or Pen. It's good to see him so carefree."

"Aye, kiereen, as 'tis good to see you come to life again."

"It's because of you, kierown."

He shook his head. *"You would have found a way."* He took her hand, climbing with her up the stairs. *"You probably would have stormed the School of Mages, demanding that*

they accept you as a student." He stopped in front of her door. *"I'll knock on your door when I've finished dressing."*

Tally stretched as high as she could and placed a light kiss on Loran's cheek. Dissatisfied, he clasped her around the waist and lifted her up higher. Holding her tightly, he coaxed her lips open and explored her mouth.

"Come in with me now," she begged.

He nodded, though he knew he tempted his resolve to refrain.

She clung to his shoulders for support, then lifted her legs around his waist as he cupped her buttocks in his hands. Using his newly found mage skills, he opened the door, his hands still otherwise occupied, and strode into the room.

The door slammed behind them, the sound startling them both.

Loran relaxed his hold, but Tally clung even tighter to him.

She licked his earlobe. *"I want a quickie."*

"What?" Loran's thoughts were befuddled.

She arched her breasts against his chest and writhed in his grasp. Her arms twined around his neck.

"You know." Even her thoughts sounded breathless. *"Like you told me Jareth and Mirelle do. I want one."*

For a moment Tally thought Loran would disappoint her, then he carried her to the bed and sat down on it with her still on his lap.

He dragged off her top, shifted her clothing and his, and then lifted her up and thrust his prick as far as he could into her sheath.

She dug her nails into his shoulders and began to move up and down. He brought one hard, erect nipple to his mouth and suckled it, shifting back and forth between one and then the other.

Their movements quickened and became more erratic. Their breaths quickened and grew harsh.

And the lanbeth gathered. The glittering specks thickened and filled the air above the pair. Loran gripped the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her curls.

Their moans became audible as they neared their pinnacle, and as their climax burst forth they called aloud each other's name.

Their cries echoed in the bedroom, and the lanbeth fell, dusting them and the room.

Rather than yield to temptation, they showered the lanbeth from their bodies, though even that was torture for them both. Using a special soap, they lathered up and slid their hands along every curve and crevice. By the time they washed away the lanbeth, they were once more panting and aroused.

Loran groaned, his erection nudging against Tally's buttocks as he held her. *"I want you again."*

Tally arched her breasts, her nipples nestling in his palms. *"We can't, not now."*

She groped blindly for the cold water spigot and turned it on full, dousing cold water on them both.

Loran sprang back, clearing the icy water from his eyes. *"By the Great Maker, Tally, you could have warned me!"*

"I didn't think when I did it." She giggled. *"But it sure put a damper on us."*

Loran groaned. *"Only a few hours and already you've caught Mirelle's sense of humor."* He sobered as two towels appeared for them to dry off. *"Do you want to read your mother's letter in private?"*

She wrapped the towel around her, sarong style, and stepped back into the bedroom before she answered. *"No, stay with me, Kierown."* She faltered. *"I may need you."*

Her hands trembling, she carefully slit open the envelope and read aloud.

My dearest child, should you read this it means that I am dead, for what I must share with you I would have wished to tell you in person.

You are not Belar's daughter.

Loran gasped. *"By the Maker, Orath is the rightful ruler."*

With tears blurring her sight, Tally continued.

I gave myself to my true soulmate, Alnath, King Morath's youngest brother. When we realized that the bride-casting was false and yet would be upheld, we lost all caution. I was already pregnant with you when I married Belar; he never knew. I drugged him that first night and brought Alnath to my bed. I had to remain in a loveless union, since no one could doubt a bride-casting. But we met, secretly all that first year.

Belar never fathered a child with me. Most nights when he came to my bed, I drugged him and he never touched me. I saved some of the lanbeth Alnath and I created and would sprinkle it around the room, leading Belar to believe he'd generated it.

And then I conceived again. I was ready to run away with Alnath, and this time he agreed. We planned to take a skimmer and flee to the Hinterlands. But that night when we were to meet at the cave of Arlette and Keret, he never came. There was an accident. His skimmer crashed.

I didn't believe it then and I still don't believe it. Someone must have seen us. Someone wanted me to stay married to King Belar. Although it was rumored that Fardretha's pregnancy was also due to King Belar, it made no sense for her to wish Alnath's death.

And then, right after your brother's bride-casting, he died, also by accident. That too, was no accident.

Someone wanted him out of the way to assure that no son of mine would rule Mariess.

And now, 'tis your turn to be manipulated like some mindless puppet. I saw the way Belar looked at you; the same way he looks at me. I fear for you, my precious child.

I've tried to keep you safe, but I'm not sure I can any longer.

If you read this, remember that I did my best and know that you are the child of true soulmates.

And that I love you and always will.

Your mother, Variette

Tally's voice faltered on the last word and her eyes swam with tears. She smoothed out the single page, her tears splashing onto the paper.

"Oh, Loran, my poor mother."

He gathered her into his arms and tenderly rocked back and forth with her.

"Meliflir, she loved you so much, hold that knowledge to your heart." He brushed back a damp curl from her face and tweaked her nose. "At least there's one good thing to have come from this. You're not King Belar's child." For a moment, he just held her in silence. He took a deep breath and then, loosening his embrace, he lightly smacked her bottom and pushed her off the bed. "Now, let's dress and tell the others what we learned."

"I hear and obey, master." Wiping away her tears, she attempted a watery smile and dipped a mocking curtsy. Refolding the missive and slipping it back into its envelope, she placed it in the jewelry box atop the vanity.

Loran entered his adjoining room and soon they were ready to meet Jareth and Mirelle.

They found them in the great foyer at the front entrance. Jareth paced back and forth as though wearing a groove in the marble floor. Mirelle stood tapping her foot in time to some inner song. Jareth stopped pacing as soon as he saw the new couple.

"It's about time, brother! I was ready to come and drag you down myself, but Mirelle prevailed upon my good nature and begged me not to."

Mirelle grinned, a dimple appearing in her cheek. "Be precise, Dream Boy. I said they were probably getting off a few quickies. He wouldn't want to barge in and catch you both doing the horizontal mambo."

Tally and Loran's voices rose together. "Mambo?"

"I believe that Mirelle wishes to say that she didn't think I wanted to catch you intimate with your soulmate."

Mirelle stomped her foot. "Isn't that what I said? Careful, Dream Boy, I only allow one remark like that a day." She moved to the door, opening the ebon barrier and sauntering down the steps. "Let's get the show on the road, gang."

Jareth threw up his hands. "I give up. I shall never understand that woman."

Tally smiled at him. "As long as you love her, Jareth, that's all that matters."

Jareth sighed. "That's a foregone conclusion: I love her more than life." He grimaced. "And I owe my finding her to that bastard Narik. Don't think that doesn't stick in my throat."

"Don't dwell on it, brother. 'Twas your love that brought her back and keeps her here, not Narik's power."

"Aye, you're right." A smile burst upon his face. "Mirelle has tried to make me realize this, but your words made everything clear." He chuckled. "I always said you were the smartest one!"

"And don't forget it!"

They caught up with Mirelle at the toron-a. Jareth moved toward the driver's side but Loran cut him off.

"My discovery, I drive."

Tally shook her head. "Our discovery, I drive." While Loran stood frozen in place, she slipped inside the front seat. "Now, I suggest you all settle in. We're about to leave."

Jareth leaned forward from the back seat and whispered into Loran's ear. "Does she know how to drive this?"

"We're about to find out. Hold tight, brother."

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Ever go hiking with a hard-on?

Well, to be honest, I was only semi-erect when I left Fardretha's. I skirted the town and headed back to the palace. As I trekked into the forest, visions of Princess Fardretha naked and moaning kept popping up in my mind. By the time I reached the manicured grounds surrounding the palace I was aching.

But not hungry. A side benefit of the information implanted, I recognized what was edible as I tramped through the woods and munched on some berries and nuts. The pure tasting water of a meandering creek satisfied my thirst.

Hearthome was pretty damn gorgeous.

Not wanting to rouse any curiosity, I went around the back detouring around the kitchen. The cook was a bit of a busybody and I wanted nothing more than to take a shower and catch forty winks.

I stripped off my clothes and got into the shower. As the icy cold water streamed over my stiff flesh, I tried again to reconcile what Narik and Orath told me to what had happened today.

No matter which way I turned it, I was no clearer than before.

I needed more intel.

Wrapping the towel around my waist, I went into the bedroom and reached beneath the bed to retrieve the carry bag containing the mirror Narik had given me.

Within a few seconds, it displayed Princess Talea and Prince Loran at it again in her bedroom.

You had to admire their stamina.

The lanbeth fell, leaving a layer of glitter everywhere, but this time they left the room, entering her bathroom, or so I surmised.

The only thing wrong with Narik's magical Viewmaster was the fact that it had no sound and my lip reading skill wasn't that good. I could only get visual information.

They emerged from the bath, towels wrapped securely around their bodies. The princess unfolded a letter and began to read it. Tears fell from her hazel eyes.

Hazel?

Her eyes had changed.

There was no way I could find out now what happened to transform the color. I just watched as she finally finished the letter. She smoothed it out and then carefully refolded it, putting it in a small jewelry box.

They parted, and the princess dressed and then left.

I had to get a look at that letter.

Dressing in the one change of clothes Narik had given me, I grabbed a small bag from the gardener's shed. Didn't know what it was, just that it didn't smell like the fertilizer the farmers used back on Earth.

I poked my head in cautiously at the kitchen and spied Herela, the cook. Stepping inside I nodded my head politely. She smiled and invited me in.

"I didn't see you come get your midday meal, Lackeron. You be working on the gardens?"

"Aye. Lost track of time. But I'm not hungry." I held up the small bag. "But I'm concerned. I left out some plant food that the reflecting plant must have to thrive. Is the princess here? I can give it to her and show her how to use it."

Herela frowned.

"She and everyone but Princess Rayne and Prince Pentar left on some errand. Can't it wait?"

Everyone? Rayne and Pentar?

"Not really. Maybe I could just quick take care of the plant and then tell her about it later? The longer it goes without this fertilizer the more likely it will die."

She gave me a long hard look while I put on my most innocent, earnest air. Finally, she nodded.

"Here, I'll take you up and wait with you while you fix it."

Crap.

"You know, mayhap it can wait until the Princess returns." I stood for a moment gathering my thoughts. "Mistress Herela, I was so busy with the gardens, I wasn't aware there were visitors. Who else is here?"

"Why, all three of the Royal Princes set Morath. Jareth and his soulmate and Prince Pentar and Princess Rayne returned." She leaned closer to me and whispered. "Princess Rayne is pregnant." She smiled, revisiting memories. "Tis like the old days, but better."

Good information, but I still needed to get into that room.

"Ah, Mistress Herela, I am concerned about the light the plant is receiving. Which windows belong to the Princess?"

"Let me see, they're the ones with the lovely climbing vine, around back." She chuckled. "Haven't the foggiest notion what way they face. Never thought about it."

"My thanks. I'll just go and check it out."

Following her description, I soon found the windows; more like French doors. I eyed the lattice. Would it hold my weight? The doors opened onto a balcony. I assessed the sturdy looking tree about ten feet away from the balcony and made a quick decision.

I'd climb the tree and jump to the balcony. Should be easy, especially since the windows were wide open.

These folk really didn't believe in protection.

A climb, a leap, a roll and I was inside.

The room had a fresh, crisp scent unlike Fardretha's home that reeked of bethlan. I moved to the vanity and opened the box.

The letter lay on top and was addressed to Talea. Slipping the note out, I unfolded the single sheet written on both sides.

It was from Talea's mother.

I grew more angered as I read.

Lies. All lies. I'd been fed nothing but lies.

It didn't take much of a genius to read between the lines and extrapolate that the information Narik feed me was bull crap.

I'd have to reveal who I was and take the consequences.

And warn them about Narik.

But first a trip back to Fardretha. She might have even more intel for me. I had a feeling I was going to need all the information I could get.

Chapter Fourteen

Orath reached his mother's townhouse, landed, and went directly to the servant's entrance. Still maintaining his outward form as Wol, he knocked on the door.

He didn't recognize the servant who answered, only the type -- a stud to satisfy his mother's insatiable need for sex. The servant's first words reeked with condescension. "Yes, old man?"

"I be Wol come from the castle with news for the lady."

The fellow sneered. "Tell me the news, and I'll relay it to Lady Fardretha."

"Sorry, sir, but the Lady must hear it direct from me. 'Tis from Prince Orath."

The fellow took a moment to consider, but grudgingly allowed Orath inside.

"Don't move. I'll tell Lady Fardretha you're here and that you bear important news. If she wishes to see you, I'll bring you to her."

He returned a few minutes later.

"Come with me. She'll see you."

Orath knew the way to his mother's bedchamber, but followed the servant. The house looked the same. The only difference he could judge was the even more pungent aroma of bethlan that permeated the air around her bedchamber.

She must have been increasing her use.

The servant knocked, waiting for Fardretha's permission to enter, leaving immediately after.

She sat at her vanity, examining her face for real and imagined flaws. She didn't turn around.

"You've news of my son?"

Orath stepped nearer until his image as Wol appeared in the mirror. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes, relaxing his control.

Fardretha, rubbing lotion into her hands, didn't look up.

"Aye, Mother."

She started and looked into the mirror. "Orath?"

He nodded.

Her eyes lit up and she stood abruptly, overturning the seat. Turning, she flung her arms around him, raining kisses on his face.

With great difficulty, Orath removed her arms from around his neck.

"Dearest, you came! Let me look at you. You've cut your beautiful hair! I've been so worried. That little twit, Talea, she's destroyed the Pleasure Garden! She's been poking her nose into your father's observation mirror with Prince Pentar and that barbaric mate of his." She frowned. "But Lackeron said you weren't coming. Narik felt it was unsafe for you. Has he changed his mind?"

"I came on my own. Narik is an old woman. That fellow Lackeron is not to be trusted."

Fardretha licked her lips. "But he seemed so ... so honest." She closed her eyes and sighed. "And so strong." Her hand drifted to her breast, barely covered by her robe. Her mouth grew slack and her breath quickened.

Orath viewed her with disdain and disgust. "Have you already fucked him, Mother?"

Her eyes flew open and she struck him across the face. He backhanded her without thought and she staggered, a thin trickle of blood seeping from her mouth.

Tears welled up and fell down her cheeks. "Orath? I'm sorry I hit you. But, I'm so alone. I need to feel loved. No one visits me. You're away from me. He seemed ... nice."

Orath dredged up his meager supply of filial devotion.

"I'm sorry I hit you so hard, Mother, but you know what I think of your sexual encounters. One day you'll take the wrong man to bed and you'll be hurt."

Plucking a cloth from the drawer, she stepped back to the mirror and wiped the blood from her lips. She shook her head as she listened to him admonish her.

"Don't worry. I only sleep with my household staff, and they're all devoted to me."

"And Lackeron?"

"He said he came from you and Narik. Why shouldn't I have trusted him?"

"Why did you summon me earlier? Lackeron was to have told us of any information he'd gathered but he hasn't. 'Tis why I felt justified to come on my own when you sent that second message."

She righted the chair and sat down again. Turning back to the mirror, she took in her split lip.

"You cut my mouth."

Orath waved away her concerns. "Use some lanbeth ointment on it. Now, why did you send for me?"

She smiled. "I missed you."

He clenched his fists and closed his eyes, cursing under his breath.

"You drew me from my safe haven in Helar. You made me think there was some unknown magical force at the palace. You made me kill two servants and cut my hair all because you missed me?"

His anger grew as he spoke and Fardretha cowered before him. She tried to grasp his words, but only understood one thing.

He'd killed again.

He'd killed Talea's brother under the mistaken notion that Belar would then claim him as his heir. He'd killed Talea's mother after Belar had fucked her that last time for fear she'd bear him another legitimate heir. It was only his lust for Talea that had kept her alive thus far.

Now he'd killed again.

"Who did you...?"

He smiled, his control back in place. "Wol and his woman at Talea's old cottage. It's why I cut off my hair. I took his form so I could roam freely, but you know how draining it is to maintain a shape when I shift. Keeping up the appearance of short hair while I still had my mage hair would have been too difficult."

She spoke softly, afraid to rouse him again. "That was wise of you to kill Wol and his woman."

He stretched out on the bed, sitting back against the multitude of cushions scattered at the head.

"I had no choice. I needed a safe place to stay." He sat up straighter. "Did you know that not only Rayne and Pen are at the castle? Jareth and his Earthly mate are here, too." He paused. "Had you heard that Talea is pregnant? Loran has been here less than seven days and she already has let him fuck her."

Fardretha shook her head. "It's impossible. She couldn't have conceived already; it's far too soon to be able to tell. You must have heard wrong."

"Lady Galayne said that the princess was pregnant."

"But there are two other princesses here now, you said. Couldn't one of them be with child?"

He thought about it for a minute. "There's one way to prove that she is still a virgin." He stroked his shaft. "I'll fuck her myself."

She moved to the bed and laid a placating hand on his arm. "What does it matter if she is no longer untouched? You can't wed her."

He shrugged off her hand. "I know she's not Belar's child. You've told me over and over how difficult it was to conceive with him. Talea's slut of a mother must have taken some other man to her bed."

"Can't I dissuade you to leave her alone? Why risk everything you've planned for a silly chit of a girl?"

He stood, shaking off her hand. "I will do what I want. Now, try to keep your own legs together. I'm going back to the palace to find out what's going on."

Drawing upon his mage shape-shifting skill, he regained the servant's appearance. He strode to the door where he paused. "Oh, by the way, there is no more bethlan."

"I know. Lackeron told me when he came." She shivered. "I don't know how I'll endure it with only the one plant in my possession. I'll have to dole out the petals one at a time."

He turned around. "If I can find more bethlan, I'll bring some next time I see you."

She smiled. "Thank you, dear. Lackeron found a plant and is nurturing it for me. He does seem so nice."

He threw up his hands. His mouth twisted with disgust. "You're a slut and will always be a slut."

He stalked out the door, slamming it behind him.

A whimper escaped Fardretha and she sank onto the bed. Tears gathered again and she wept. She had given Orath everything and still he always left her.

Then she heard the door reopen and close.

Orath. He'd come back!

"So, my lady fuck-and-suck, even an old man is fair game for you."

Tokar?

He grabbed her by the hair and drew her up so he could look in her face.

"Slut. He hit you." He pulled tighter and Fardretha cried out. "And you loved it, I know you did."

He pulled the sash from her robe and balled it up, shoving it into her mouth with one hand while he gripped both her hands with one meaty paw.

Her eyes wild, she tried to twist out of his grasp. His grip loosened and she ran for the door, only to have him tackle her to the ground. He lifted her to the bed and threw her facedown upon it then, letting his full weight press her into the mattress.

"If I let you turn around will you lie still? Nod once for yes."

A faint movement served as a response.

Tokar eased up and Fardretha rolled over. Her eyes blazed with anger or lust; Tokar couldn't tell and didn't care.

He smiled. "I know I can't trust you." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a tie from it, wrapping it around her hands and then around one of the bed newels. "You're going to like this, Fardretha. I'm going to give you everything you've ever wanted. Over and over and over again."

He walked to the cabinet where she stored the bethlan plant and unlocked it with the key Fardretha kept in her little fringed purse. Opening the cabinet he took out the plant and set it on the table. He glanced over to the bed. Fardretha's eyes were wild. "Now, don't worry, my lady. I'll share." He laughed. "I'll stick some right up that sweet snatch of yours."

Lifting up the hinged flap, he thrust his hand inside and stripped a batch of crimson petals from the plant. Shoving them into his mouth he chewed and swallowed the potent aphrodisiac.

He tore off his clothes and stood in front of the bed, stroking his penis as it grew and stiffened.

"Like what you see, do you?" Going back to the blood-red blooms, he plucked another handful, wadding them into a ball, and popping it into his mouth.

Fardretha made muffled noises, writhing on the bed.

"Didn't forget you, slut. Here." Ripping off the last of the petals, he crushed them between his fingers and bent down by the side of the bed. When she tried kicking him, he came around the bed out of range. "Naughty, naughty." And slapped her hard across the cheek. "Don't try that again." He moved back and knelt between her legs. "Open wide." He placed the last bit of bethlan at the entrance to her vagina. "Don't move. Not until I tell you." And lifting her legs, he impaled her with his massive prick.

The movement acted as a catalyst, the sexual charge sending the bethlan coursing through him.

"I've given everyone a day's holiday so there's no one to help you even if you should get loose. I'm going to fuck you till you pass out, whore. You hear me?" And he pulled out, then plunged again. And again. And again. He flipped her over and took her from behind, ramming into her.

The bethlan kept him hard and aching even as he released his seed into her. As one orgasm hit, he'd feel a momentary lull and then be firm as a rock again.

He wasn't sure and didn't care when Fardretha finally became unresponsive. By the time the bethlan wore off, it was hours later. Fardretha lay facedown on the bed, barely breathing, covered in sweat and cum.

Tokar staggered from the bed. His prick felt as if it were on fire. His breath came in harsh pants like a hiker climbing Mount Larber. A giant fist was squeezing his heart and his arm tingled as though he had slept on it all night.

He couldn't catch his breath.

He stumbled onto the vanity chair, clutching his chest.

"I'll. Just. Sit. Here. For. A. Minute." He clenched his eyes as the pain grew. The fist squeezed tighter. "Can't catch my breath. Can't..."

Agonizing shafts of pain shot through him.

"No! No, not now, not like this. By the Great Maker, no!"

He rose, reached toward the bed with his left hand and crumpled to the floor.

* * * * *

"We're here."

Tally's announcement caught Jareth and Mirelle unprepared. The journey seemed immeasurably shorter than theirs only a little while back.

The foursome entered the cave and headed down the tunnel to the chamber wherein lay Arlette and Keret.

Loran spoke in hushed tones as they traveled down the shaft. "The branch where we found the shapshifter mage's body is blocked off now. It looks as though there never was an opening."

When at last they reached their destination, Jareth and Mirelle gazed around at the cave. Nothing had changed.

Tally stopped and gestured to the cheerful little waterfall. "It's up there. You might as well spread out the blanket and relax while we retrieve the Book."

Mirelle stood at the edge of the pool, gazing at the crystal clear depths.

"Imagine, being able to hold your breath under water for so long." She turned around and grinned at Jareth as he sat idly sifting sand through his fingers. "And he did it without magic, Dream Boy. You should follow Loran's example. He doesn't need magic to get things done."

Jareth rose, brushing off his hands and came to stand behind her, drawing her in his embrace. "Loran doesn't need to worry any more about not being a mage. He has Tally."

Mirelle broke his embrace and stalked back to the blanket. "Loran would love Tally if she had no powers at all."

"As I love you, kiereen. Don't let's quarrel." His voice grew soft and seductive. "I'll let you pick out the next page in the Book of Pleasures."

"Even page sixty-five?"

Jareth groaned. "Even page sixty-five."

Mirelle whirled around and jumped into his arms. "Ha! Gotcha!"

"Little demon!"

"We've got it!"

Loran's triumphant tones drew their attention and Jareth slowly let her slip down his body to stand on her own.

Holding aloft a carry bag, Loran climbed back down, Tally following close behind.

Jareth eyed the bag with wonder. "It's hard to imagine that one of the most powerful written documents is inside that ordinary carry bag."

Tally nodded. "And the sooner we get it back to the castle, the better."

"Aye. Jareth and I will skim through it and see if there's anything we can make use of."

Jareth glanced over to Mirelle. "What, no argument?"

"Nope. There are some things you know more about than me."

Jareth threw up his hands in mock surprise. "By the Great Mage, she agrees with me!"

Mirelle snorted and moved back to the shaft leading to the entrance to the caves.

"You'd better get a move on, then, if you want to have time to examine it."

Scrambling to catch up, Jareth scooped up the blanket and, with Loran and Tally, followed after.

* * * * *

"That's an excellent idea, Prince Pentar. I know I so appreciated the little naps I took during the day when I was with child. Don't mind me. I'll just confer with the cook about tonight's menu. Something special, I think, in honor of Talea and Loran. We'll see you at tonight's meal."

Pen swept Rayne into his arms and left the parlor and Lady Galayne behind.

As soon as the parlor door swung shut, they mind merged.

"She's a dear, sweet thing, kerasoko, but if I had to hear one more time about those banta meatballs I must eat, I think I'd go crazy."

Pen's thoughts concurred with hers. *"And who would have thought she would advise us on our joining?"* He ticked off the older woman's suggestions. *"Rear, fingers, tongue, abstain.' Where does she find these ideas?"*

"She only meant to be kind." Rayne giggled. *"I kept seeing her bent over chanting, 'Rear, fingers, tongue, abstain.'"*

When they reached their room, Rayne leaned forward and turned the knob, almost tumbling from Pen's arms. Shifting her, he kicked wide the door.

Laying her on the bed, he uttered a quick spell, whisking off their clothes, and slipped under the covers next to her. He drew her against his chest, her soft, round bottom nestled against his shaft.

"This is nice. Holding you like this, kerasoka." His shaft began to stir. *"Nice and invigorating."* Slowly he sank into her wet, hot, welcoming core. He rocked against her as sweet and easy as a lullaby.

"Oh, yes, kierown, like that. Like that." Her thoughts grew more blurred as their passion increased. Soon, she was mindless with pleasure.

The amber colored lanbeth gathered in a glowing cloud above them. Pen threw a silence and containment spell on the room as they climaxed, and their cries filled the chamber even as the lanbeth fell and covered every surface.

Rayne sighed with fulfillment and stretched. *"Let the household taisins clear up the stuff. We'll shower later. All I want to do now is sleep."*

Pen grinned. *"I guess Lady Galayne was right, after all. Naps are good for you."* He smoothed her hair from her face and kissed her beneath her ear. *"Rest now, kiereen. You'll need your strength later."*

Completely satiated in mind and body, they slept.

* * * * *

Orath landed the skimmer around the back of the castle again and slammed the door. He was unsure of his facts, a situation he could not tolerate and one that he need to rectify immediately. First, to find out about the royal couples' presence. That should be easy to do. Stepping with a relaxed stride into the kitchen, he approached the cook as she rolled out some dough. Remembering his earlier excuse of ill health, Orath spoke as hoarsely as he could.

"Helera, still cooking, I see."

She looked up, startled. "Wol? Where you been, man? The healer came looking for you and couldn't find you anywhere."

"Went for a walk."

"Walk? Wol, you been drinking fermented pommee's cider? The healer left Princess Rayne as soon as she was done to take a look at you and you be nowhere in sight. She had to go to a birthing or she would have gone to your cottage."

"No, not needed."

Herela nodded. "Aye, that's what I told her. Said if you were truly ill, you'd have made sure to be here." She fitted the dough into a tart pan and trimmed it. "Must get back to work. The dinner they're having to celebrate Princess Talea and Prince Loran's soulmate declaration has me hopping. So, Torette be expecting you?"

Orath nodded.

"Well, give her my best. You take care of that cold. Gargle with some mel and citron."

Orath left, his rage barely contained. So, the slut wasn't pregnant but now claimed that half-prince as a soulmate? She was his, damn it! Was she still untouched? He had to know.

As he passed by the gardener's cottage, he paused. Should he contact the Earthman? No, best to take care of him later. He wasn't going anywhere.

Getting into the skimmer, he circled around to the remnants of the Pleasure Garden and landed behind the hedgerow. He needed time to plan how to get the princess alone. He doubted anyone would be interested in the destroyed garden. Who would want to come here? He settled comfortably in the front seat and contemplated his next step.

* * * * *

Tally knocked on Rayne and Pen's room. Rayne's voice, dulled and drowsy with sleep, answered.

"Come in, we're decent ... enough."

Jareth shut and locked the door behind them. "We stopped at the stables and asked Tran and Rosta to meet us here."

Within a few moments, a whinny outside the closed balcony doors alerted them to the akosai's presence.

Rosta whickered as she and Tran crowded into the room. "I hope your journey was successful; I'd hate to have stopped grooming for nothing!"

Tran bumped her neck with his head.

"Mind your manners, Rosta-ka." He bent his head toward the humans. "How can we help?"

Jareth pulled out the two pieces of the Book and laid them on the table.

"Do you recall any legends from your travels that speak of a weapon that could be found within the pages of the Book?"

Tran considered the question with the utmost seriousness. "There is a tale that Tocson traveled on the back of a pure white akosa from kingdom to kingdom, spending time in each to meditate on the future of Hearthome. When he returned to Narwith, he set down his visions in the Book." Tran shook his mane. "His wisdom was beyond comprehension."

Loran nodded in assent.

"But weapons?" Tran continued. "I'm afraid not."

Jareth peered at the two portions with resignation. "Looks like we've got quite a bit of work waiting for us."

Flipping open to the first page, he stopped and cursed. "It's in some ancient dialect. By the Great Mage, this will take weeks to translate!"

Loran turned the fragment around so he could see it. "'Chapter One: Why I wrote this book'. Don't see what the difficulty is."

Pentar punched him in the shoulder. "Funny. How did you ...?"

"Tocson. He imparted the ability to read the text during that second vision. It amazed me how much information he was able to impart in such a brief time. I only wish we had one of Mirelle's tape recorders so I could simply dictate the translation into the machine to

copy later. As it is, perhaps the best thing to do now is to check the index. We'll look at those chapters first that can give us the most pertinent information we need. You and Jareth can take turns writing down in Narwithian the information. While one copies the text, the other can write down our observations, thus keeping the translation separate."

Mirelle gazed at Loran with admiration. "Damn, you are one smart man." She turned to Jareth. "Now I know where all the brains went."

"Mirelle."

"Kidding, just kidding. Now, what can we do?"

"Leave the room, kiereen."

"What? You're joking, right?"

Jareth laughed. "Sorry, kiereen. There really is no reason for you all to stay." He turned to the other men. "In fact, perhaps we should switch to the library. I'm sure we'll find paper and pen to copy down what we need."

Rayne chimed in. "Mirelle, I'm all for equality, but this is something the men were trained for." She looked over to Tally. "Perhaps one day, if more female mages come forth, we'll have the same knowledge." She yawned, stretching her arms above her head. "As it is, I'm really, really tired." She yawned again. "Seems all I feel like doing today is sleep. I think I'll finish that nap."

Pen moved to the bed and sat down, gathering Rayne in his embrace. "Are you sure you're all right, kerasoka?"

Rayne smiled and caressed his cheek. "I'm fine, kerasoko. You just wore me out."

Rosta let loose an akosai guffaw. "Seems we weren't the only ones grooming wings."

This time Tran nipped her on her flank. "Behave!"

Tally turned to Mirelle. "Guess that leaves only you and me."

Mirelle looked at Tally and narrowed her eyes. "Have you thought of what you'll wear for your joining ceremony?"

Tally shook her head. "But there must be some of my mother's gowns stored somewhere. She left all her trousseau behind when we left the castle."

Mirelle danced her happy dance. "You think your eldermother would know where they are? Or a servant, maybe?"

Tally grinned, caught up in Mirelle's enthusiasm. "Let's go see."

Rayne tightened the sash on her robe and sprang from the bed, their excitement contagious. "I'm coming, too."

In a flash, they'd quit the chamber.

The men looked at each other and grinned.

"Well," Pen said. "That solved that problem."

* * * * *

Lady Fardretha moaned and tried to turn over onto her back. She couldn't. A giant akosa stallion had just fucked every orifice in her body and she hurt too much to move. The inside of her mouth tasted of cum. One hand was still tied to the bedpost, but somehow the other had gotten free. She tried to untie her hand, but the knots were too many and her fingers too clumsy. She felt for her robe. Gone. Her skin was sticky with sweat and Tokar's cum. The air reeked with sex and the potent odor of bethlan and some indefinable acrid smell.

Where was Tokar? Had he finally grown tired of ramming her and hitting her? Had he left?

Using the utmost caution, she slowly rolled over, every bone in her body aching.

The bed sheets were twisted off the bed, the cabinet door hung open. The denuded bethlan plant stood on the table.

She looked downward.

Tokar, stark naked, lay dead on the floor. A puddle of pee pooled near his body and he'd loosed his bowels.

Fardretha gagged.

And screamed and screamed.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

I flew back to Fardretha's house, my mind filled with questions and a deep sense of urgency.

The house was quiet when I pulled up. Too quiet. The cook should have been in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. No one. The room was neat as a pin.

Where was the burly servant with the shit ass attitude?

I retraced my earlier steps to Fardretha's room. The door was locked. A powerful odor of bethlan seeped from within.

Silence. Complete and utter silence throughout the hall. I raised my hand to knock when an earsplitting scream lanced my ears.

Leaning my weight against the door, I crashed it open.

The room was a mess. Sex, sweat, piss and shit reeked within the small confines of the chamber. On the floor lay the cocky bastard servant dead as cheap gasoline.

Fardretha lay on the bed in her birthday suit, one hand still tied to the bedpost, her eyes staring straight ahead, her mouth agape as she continued to scream.

She was hysterical. I grabbed her wrist trying to get her to focus on me, but she smacked my hand away.

And she kept on screaming.

What else could I do?

I smacked her once, hard, and she shut up. Cursing at the tightness of the knots, I untied her hand. "By the Great Maker, what happened?"

She rubbed her cheek where I'd hit her. "Tokar. He used all the bethlan. He went mad with it." She drew the bed sheet around her bruised body. "He hurt me. I passed out." Her lips quivered. "When I woke up ..."

"Why? What set him off to do this?"

She looked up at me. "Orath. He's here in Mariess. Tokar thought he'd just fucked me."

"Your own son?"

She shook her head. "Orath can shapeshift. Tokar thought he was an old servant from the castle." Her eyes grew wild with fear. "Orath can't know what happened. He told me one day I'd be sorry." She looked at me, wary confusion filling her eyes. "He told me not to trust you." She stood up, the sheet falling from her. She pressed herself against me, rubbing her body like a cat against mine. "He was wrong, wasn't he, Lackeron? You'll help me, won't you?"

I pushed her away gently, sat her down on the bed, and found her robe lying on the floor and put it on her. "I'll help get rid of the body. You'd better get in touch with Narik. Things are getting too complicated for me to handle on my own." I examined Fardretha's vacillating moods. Right now, she was still in a state of shock over Tokar's death and unable to think straight, but I still needed some information.

"Fardretha, do you know anything about the allegations that Talea wasn't Belar's daughter?"

Her head shot up and her eyes hardened. "Where did you hear that?"

"Never mind where, just answer me. Do you know anything about Belar's difficulty to father Variette's children?"

Her mouth grew sullen and it hit me.

She knew all right. Orath wasn't Belar's kid either. "Who's his father?"

Her mouth thinned to a stubborn line. "What are you talking about?"

"Orath. He's not Belar's son. Who's his father?" And it hit me again. "The guy doesn't know about Orath, does he?"

She nodded with great reluctance.

"Who could it be?"

"Won't tell you."

She'd kept her secret for over twenty years. She wouldn't give it up easily and I didn't have time to dawdle now.

"Where are the other servants?"

"Tokar gave them the night off."

"Good. I'm going to drag his body to the skimmer and hide it in the trunk. The only other place the skimmer goes to besides the palace is the caves. I'll take him there and hide him in one of the tunnels. They'll never find him."

Fardretha threw her arms around me in gratitude. "I knew you would help me. How can I repay you?"

I looked down at that ripe body, mine for the fucking, and shook my head. The woman was still recovering from being raped and bound and yet wanted me to take her? Christ, that bethlan really was the strongest aphrodisiac in the world. "Later."

Rolling Tokar's body onto a sheet, I dragged him out of the house. I lifted him into the back of the skimmer and stood for a moment to catch my breath.

Tokar was a big bastard.

Fardretha came to the kitchen door, her robe belted around her. She'd cleaned her face and brushed down her hair. She looked younger and scared.

"I'll see if the household taisins can clean up the rest of the mess." She licked her lips. "Thank you, Lackeron. I'll tell Narik how helpful you were."

I nodded. "How long will it take him to get here?"

"From Helar? Not too long. Oh, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone."

I kissed her cheek. "I won't tell him you told. Now get back inside." I noticed her bare feet peeping from the bottom of her robe. "And put on some slippers."

"You are nice, Lackeron."

She giggled and went inside.

I got into the skimmer and asked to get to the caves.

I took a deep breath and almost puked at the stench of Tokar's corpse.

How the hell did you open the windows in this thing?

Thank the Great Maker, as they say here in Hearthome, I found out how to open the skimmer windows.

Setting down at the akosa landmark, I pulled the skimmer in as close as I could. I dragged the body inside the cave entrance and then, deactivated the ensorcelled destinations, putting it into manual. One of several peripheral bits of information Narik had imparted to me. Simply by voicing the word "manual," you could guide the vehicle very short distances, like from one end of a sales lot to the other.

A copse of trees within eye range and thick enough to shield the vehicle from a casual observer seemed the perfect spot. Guiding it by pushing its surprisingly lightweight body, I hid it from sight.

Re-entering the cave, it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dim light within the interior of the opening.

Now where to hide the body?

There was no way I would consider the Crystal Chamber where Princess Talea and Prince Loran had made love. I couldn't dirty that place with Tokar's foul remains.

One tunnel entrance was completely blocked by what was clearly a man-made cave-in.

Two branches looked like possible candidates, so I reconnoitered them.

The first twisted and turned so sharply and sloped as such a steep angle it would have been impossible to work.

The second proved to be the better of the two.

Gently curving and gradually sloping, it dead-ended into a sharply sloping blank wall. The body would fit perfectly.

Using the blanket wrapped around him as a crude travois, I dragged Tokar's corpse down into the tunnel.

Squatting on the ground next to the corpse, I took a well-deserved break. Things had been happening too fast for me to focus. Just when I thought I'd seen and heard everything, something else weird happened. Now I had two more tough jobs to do.

How to make the Princes and Princesses believe that I was a transplanted Earthman recruited to train an army and spy on them -- and not have them execute me on the spot?

How to break the news to the royals that Narik was probably already on his way?

I hadn't the damndest idea.

I sat there on the dark, dusty stone-hard ground and wondered why the hell I had gotten into this mess.

Adventure.

I'd answered an ad and look where the hell I'd wound up.

On another world.

Man, I wanted to get back home.

I wanted a bagel.

And stale movie popcorn.

And greasy fries from any fast food joint anywhere on Earth.

I wanted my old life back.

I let my mind wander. And then I lost it completely when I heard a high-pitched bloodcurdling scream.

Chapter Fifteen

Loran took the crystal bowl encasing the second portion, twisted the lid, and the waterproof seal broke.

The Book, exposed to air for the first time in centuries, appeared unharmed and in perfect condition. The first portion, which Rayne and Pen had retrieved from within the depths of the fiery cave guarded by a demon, also remained unscathed.

“Let’s check the index and see if there’s a listing for weapons,” Pen said.

Loran ran his finger down the first page. He flipped through one leaf after another, stopping every so often. Reaching the end, he looked up at his brothers. “Nothing. Nowhere is there a specific mention of weapons.”

Jareth considered Loran’s revelation. “This concurs with what Tran told us.” He frowned. “There must be something in there we can use.”

Loran stepped away from the table and began to pace. Pen shot a glance toward Jareth and grinned. Loran pacing meant Loran thinking.

He came to a halt and moved back to the table. Leafing through the index, he scanned the contents until he found what he wanted and turned to the page. “Lanbeth. There’s an entire chapter devoted to lanbeth. Tocson named all the different lanbeth we’ve created. Amber, crimson, silver, green, blue and rainbow. He’s indicated the properties of each.” He skimmed through the chapter. “Odd, he mentions other colors we haven’t seen as yet, purple, gold and something he calls ‘negative’ lanbeth. He’s given a description of purple and gold, but all he says about negative lanbeth is one cryptic sentence.”

“What does he say?” Pen asked.

Jareth waited, pen poised to write down the transcription.

Loran spoke with care, making sure he had the correct wording. “Negative lanbeth is created when a mage forces their prurient will upon another mage.”

Jareth paused. "Are you sure that's what it says?"

Pen shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Only soulmates can create lanbeth."

"Not quite," Loran said. "If there is a modicum amount of desire a feeble form of lanbeth may be generated. The rainbow lanbeth is actually the most common form of lanbeth; that's why when some of the earlier false bride-castings were arranged, lanbeth was still produced."

Pen gazed at Loran with unfeigned admiration. "Damn, little brother, you remember everything you've ever heard."

Jareth interrupted them. "All well and good, but is there anything in there that we can use?"

Loran nodded. "Write this down, Jareth, exactly as I read it. We'll do some brainstorming after."

Pen cast a questioning glance at Jareth.

"Brainstorming?"

Jareth smiled slightly. "Another one of Mirelle's Earth terms."

Loran cleared his throat. "Are you ready?"

"Aye, Loran, go ahead."

"The mingling of the varied lanbeth, amber, crimson and silver, and blue, will create a mixture more potent than any singular lanbeth. When ingested immediately after creation, the powers of the mage will increase. Thus, any spell intoned will be stronger and more durable."

Jareth nodded. "Got it."

Pen laughed. "I'm glad you do. I don't. What exactly does it mean?"

Loran began to pace. "Let me think."

Jareth and Pen followed him as he bounced back and forth within the confines of the study.

"If both of you were to consume a mixture of the lanbeth we make immediately after it's gathered, and then chant a spell together, that spell would be more intense. For instance, a light-catcher would be brighter."

Jareth broke in eagerly. "If we were to create a containment field around something it would probably last as long as ..."

"As long as you wished."

Pen scribbled furiously. "Slow down. Let me get all this."

"If we could lure Narik out of hiding," Jareth began.

"And come up with a secure area," Loran continued.

"And then intone a confinement spell," Pen added.

"We could imprison him forever," Loran finished.

Jareth patted Loran on the back. "Excellent thinking. Now, how do we get Narik to leave whatever safe haven he's found?"

Loran thought a moment. "He must still have spies working for him. If we were to be overheard discussing our possession of both portions of the Book by one of his minions ..."

"But who?" Pen asked. "Manar's other two sons are imprisoned, Metres and Sontar were killed when Rayne and I journeyed to Tarol..."

"Orath. That slimy partour attempted to foment an economic disaster just a few days ago. That scheme was not something he thought of on his own. He'd be more likely to think with his crotch. He takes after his father, King Belar." Jareth paused. "But he left directly after his meeting with me and Mirelle. I'm not sure where he's hiding."

"What if we were to throw a large, formal celebration recognizing Tally's and my joining ceremony? As the representative of Helar, he'd be bound to come."

Pen eagerly took up the plan. "At the celebration, we can allow Orath to follow us as we discuss the Book."

Jareth slapped his palm on the table. "Aye! I can let slip that I've brought the first portion with me to present to the Council of Mages."

Pen frowned. "We'll have to conceal the Book and make sure it's safe."

Loran hefted the glass bowl and placed the first part, then the second part of the Book into its crystal-clear confinement. Twisting his hand, he resealed the bowl. "There. Its power is contained by the crystal. We can hide it safely within the castle with no one the wiser."

"Speaking of which," Pen said, "let's hide the Book in the study. Knowing Belar, there must be a secret hiding place somewhere."

"And that's the first place Narik would look," Loran said. "Let me think a bit." He gazed around the room, assessing it for a perfect place of concealment. All at once he began to laugh.

"Share the joke," Jareth commanded.

"Close your eyes."

"What?" Pen asked.

"Both of you shut your eyes. I'll hide the bowl and you tell me where I've hidden it."

Shrugging their shoulders, they complied.

Moving swiftly and quietly, Loran opened the cabinet that held Belar's fine wine goblets and other cut glass objects. Making sure it was on a shelf with other like items and positioning it somewhat to the rear, he placed the bowl and locked the cabinet door.

"Open your eyes."

Pen and Jareth examined the room from top to bottom. Frustrated, Pen vented his annoyance.

"All right, Loran. No more childish pranks. Where did you hide it?"

Loran crowed. "Look at the crystal cabinet. 'Tis in there."

After offering due congratulations, Loran gathered up the sheaf of papers containing their notes.

"Let's share our plans with our soulmates," Pentar said.

"Aye." Loran smiled. "I think it safe to say they'll be impressed."

Jareth shook his head. "Knowing Mirelle, she'll find any weak spots there are and point them out to us with unholy glee." He squared his shoulders and stalked to the door, flinging it open.

Pen's shoulders sagged with resignation. "Aye. Let's get back for the interrogation."

Loran shrugged, a smug expression on his face, and led them out of the study. "I'm sure Tally will applaud our plan."

Pen and Jareth looked at each other and burst out into raucous laughter.

Jareth clamped Loran on the shoulder. "You'll learn, brother. You'll learn."

* * * * *

"Oh," Rayne whispered. "This is gorgeous. Try it on, Tally."

The three women were in one of the many forgotten storerooms in the palace, a brightly glowing lanbeth lantern providing them with ample light. Lady Galayne had suggested that they might find some trunks filled with clothes there. Giving them the key, she declined their invitation to join them.

"My thanks for asking me, but I'm a bit too old to be delving amid dusty, discarded furniture and chipped, incomplete sets of dishes." She gazed sternly at Rayne. "In fact, make sure you have a chair for Princess Rayne. She shouldn't be crawling and bending in her condition."

Taking her suggestion seriously, Tally and Mirelle checked that Rayne was comfortably ensconced on a slightly faded upholstered divan while they scrounged through the chests scattered in the storeroom.

The keyring Lady Galayne gave them jangled as they tried several of the keys in the different locked trunks. Mirelle, frustrated after her tenth attempt to find the right one, threw herself down onto a rickety stool and scowled.

"We'll be here forever if we have to go through this with every trunk."

Tally brightened. "Perhaps I can help. An unlocking spell should open them up. I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner."

Gesturing, she swept the entire room with a glance and chanted a melodic string of notes. All the locks popped open.

Mirelle gazed at her with envy. "By the Maker, I wish I could do that."

Tally shrugged. "It's one of the easier spells Loran taught me." She sighed. "It's what got me into trouble when I tried it on the study lock." She smiled at Rayne. "That's when Rayne and Pen came to my rescue."

Rayne inclined her head with regal grace, then spoiled the picture when she grinned. "I'm glad you sent for us. I loved watching Pen's face when he found out you were a mage. Took him down a notch."

Mirelle giggled. "I love doing that to Dream Boy." She rubbed her hands and surveyed the opened treasure chests. "Let's get started."

The first several trunks proved empty of anything worthwhile. But at last they hit a winner.

In a far corner of the room, Tally knelt before an expanse of shimmering, sapphire-blue scylla cloth.

Mirelle fingered the silky material. "It's like touching gossamer. Tally, you must try it on. Strip."

Standing, Tally made a whisking gesture and her dress disappeared.

Rayne gawked. "Show off!"

Tally's short stature made it easy for Mirelle to drop the gauzy garment over her head. The bodice was fitted to her slender waist, revealing the shape of her firm bust. Small, winged, cap sleeves emphasized the slope of her neck. The skirt was bell shaped and fell to her ankles. As she turned slowly around, the color shimmered with silver and gold highlights.

Rayne spoke in hushed tones. "That's the most exquisite dress I've ever seen. You have to wear it."

Mirelle nodded, for once speechless.

"You think Loran will like it?"

Mirelle gave her a sidelong look. "Are you joking? If that dress doesn't make him want to strip you of it in two seconds, I'll stop calling Jareth Dream Boy!"

"You'll never find anything more beautiful than that dress, Tally," Rayne said. "I wonder whose it was?"

"Anything in the trunk to tell us?" Mirelle asked.

Tally whisked the dress off and her clothes back on. "I'll see."

Delving deeper, she came up with a list of the contents of the chest and the owner's name.

"It's faded. I can't make out the entire name. Let me bring it closer to the lantern." Tally took the slip of paper to the light and squinted. "Princess Galayne seta... Lady Galayne?"

The three looked at each other with astonishment. Tally was the first to find her voice.

"I can't believe it."

Mirelle took the sheaf from Tally's nerveless fingers. "She must have been really something in her day."

Rayne stood, and dusting off her clothes, took the lantern. "Let's go back to my room. The guys might be there already. I can't wait to see their faces."

Carefully folding the dress back up and placing it in a carry bag, they left the room, immeasurably pleased with their booty.

The fellows were waiting impatiently when they entered the room.

Pen scowled. "About time. What took you so long?"

Jareth gazed at the bundle in Mirelle's arms. "What have you got there, kiereen?"

Mirelle laid the bag on the bed and whipped out the dress.

"Tally's betrothal dress."

The men gaped as fold after fold of shimmering material was revealed.

Tally looked at Loran's stunned face. "You like it, don't you?"

He nodded.

Mirelle, chortling with glee, tapped Tally's shoulder. "Told you so."

Putting the dress back into the bag, Tally asked the question the brothers had been waiting to hear.

"What did you come up with?"

Sharing their plans, Jareth, Pen and Loran waited for the women's reaction.

As Jareth anticipated, Mirelle spoke first.

"Wonderful ideas, guys. Up to a point."

Jareth reared back with umbrage. "What do you mean, up to a point?"

Rayne shrugged and sighed as she gazed at Pen. "You forgot a few things."

Pen riffled through the notes he'd taken. "Like what?"

Loran started to pace, stopping in front of Tally. "All right, meliflir, tell us what we didn't think of."

Tally looked at Rayne and Mirelle for agreement. They nodded.

"First, where are you going to imprison Narik? How are you going to get him there? How are you going to prevent Orath from interfering in this venture?"

Mirelle burst out, unable to restrain her exasperation. "And where are Rayne and I supposed to be while Pen and Jareth and Tally are casting spells?" She turned to Loran next. "And don't act innocent with me, Loran set Morath. You may not be a mage but I know you're not going to sit around at the castle while they do their magic thing!"

Rayne just moved to Pen and placed her hand on his arm. "Kerasoko, did you really think to leave us out of this?"

He sighed. "No, though we didn't admit it to each other, we know we need you. We just wished to keep you from harm."

Rayne stroked Pen's cheek. "I know, kerasoko, but remember what we were told when we fought the demon: together we will prevail."

Loran nodded and turned his face into Rayne's palm and kissed it, drawing her into his embrace.

Jareth held his arms open for Mirelle, who threw herself into them, clinging to him.

Loran gazed at Tally, in his eyes an open invitation that she accepted.

She snuggled against his chest, while Loran lightly rested his chin on the top of her curls.

"Give us some ideas, ladies," he said.

Rayne moved to the bed, shifting the dress bag to the side, and curled up against the pillows. "Why don't the rest of you get comfortable? I think I have an idea as to where we can confine Narik."

Pen stretched out next to her, while the others found seats. Jareth hurried out to the stables, coming back with Tran and Rosta. After Jareth got them up to date, Tran and Rosta whinnied their astonishment and approbation.

Rayne spoke without preamble. "The cave of Arlette and Keret."

Loran nodded with approval. "Excellent choice. And we can lure him by saying the Book is still there."

Mirelle continued. "Orath thinks with his cock, as you've said, Jareth. Let's have Tally pretend to succumb to his charms and Loran can knock him out from behind while he's focused on Tally."

Loran frowned. "A bit dangerous for Tally, don't you think?"

"Do you know a spell to put the freeze on him for a minute? If she feels threatened she can just cast the spell."

Loran nodded reluctantly. "I have one. I still don't like it."

"But you'll need me to cast that confinement spell," Tally said. "Three mages are stronger than two." She looked meaningfully at Loran. "Loran, do you have something to add to that point?"

Looking as sullen as a child told to go to bed without a treat, Loran pouted.

Jareth and Pen both turned and riveted their gaze at their youngest brother. He threw up his hands in surrender.

"All right, but I wanted to wait until the last moment and make a grand gesture. Watch."

Gazing at the unlit logs in the fireplace, he murmured a few tones and they burst into flame. He waved his hand; Jareth's leggings slid down and Pen's shirt disappeared. A second later, they were back in place.

"You're a mage!" they accused.

Tran neighed with triumph. "I told Rosta I sensed an increase in your magic aura, but she convinced me it was due to Tally's proximity."

Rayne narrowed her gaze and looked at Loran's eyes. "But your eyes are unchanged."

Jareth clamped his hand on Loran's shoulder. "How did it happen?"

"Our lanbeth. When I ingested it, my inherent mage powers were released."

Mirelle immediately saw the potential. "If Rayne and I tasted some, would we gain mage powers, too?"

Loran shrugged. "I'd hoped the Book would tell me, but it simply said two soulmates may join in every way, their powers shared. It indicated that the sapphire lanbeth is created by a female mage." He shook his head in awe. "Tocson predicted that a female mage would appear."

Mirelle disagreed. "I think he knew that there were females with mage powers already in existence. The Jakosai people have a female shakos-ai right now and they have had them before, Rayne said."

Tally suddenly spoke up. "I have an idea." A faint hint of rose touched her cheeks. "Loran and I should create more lanbeth and collect some to share with Rayne and Mirelle. 'Twould be the easiest way to find out if this would work."

Rosta whickered. "Would it work on akosai?"

Jareth considered it. "Why not?"

Pen pulled out his timepiece and looked with speculation at the couple. "You've time before the evening meal." He grinned. "If you start now." He grabbed Rayne's hand and brought it to his lips. "I think Rayne and I can find a way to occupy our time."

Jareth clasped Mirelle tighter to his chest. His hand slipped down to cup her firm behind. "I know Mirelle and I can. Page sixty-seven, was it?"

Her eyes unfocused, she shook her head. "I can't remember. Does it matter?"

Loran and Tally looked at the two other couples lost in lust and grinned. Loran smiled as he spoke. "We'll meet back in Pen and Rayne's room just before the evening meal. We'll bring the lanbeth with us."

Leaving the others still gazing at each other, Loran grabbed the dress bag and climbed the stairs with Tally to her room.

Their minds merged as soon as the door shut.

"Meliflir, I still like it not that you'll be putting yourself in harm's way, not once but twice."

"We're all in danger every day Narik roams free. With him and Orath imprisoned, we'll finally feel safe." Her lips trembled. *"And I'll be able to hope that one day I'll feel completely free to proclaim my status as a mage."*

Loran grasped her arms. *"I swear on the day Narik is defeated, I'll stand with you as you display your powers."* He gripped her a little tighter. *"And no one -- no one -- will keep us apart or test you in any way."*

Tears gathered and fell, turning to pearls from Tally's eyes. Loran collected them and placed them with the others he'd kept earlier.

"I don't know why that happened again."

"When your control slips." He smiled tenderly. *"It's mentioned in the Book. Only female mages can do this. It disappears as they gain more control. The pearls are perfect and were prized above other gems, for each female mage's pearls are unique. 'Tis why Tocson didn't share this knowledge. He feared that the temptation to force female mages to produce pearls would be too great for many to resist."* His thoughts clouded with passion. *"No more tears of sorrow now; only joy."* He whisked off their clothes and swept her up into his arms. *"Only love."* Kneeling with one knee on the bed, he laid her down upon the mattress and shifted over her, straddling her.

Running his hands from her slim waist up to her full breasts, he sighed. *"Perfection."*

Tally placed her hands over his, trapping them. She watched as his eyes drifted shut and his fingers kneaded her flesh. *"I should have guessed you were a mage. Your hands have always held magic."* She undulated beneath him, her hips thrusting up in invitation. The tip of his penis bumped against the curls between her thighs and she pushed up a bit more.

His eyes flashed open. *"Greedy little thing, aren't you?"*

Purring like a baby bitnap, she stretched and arched deeper into his palms, her taut nipples prodding him to squeeze them. *"I have a lot of catching up to do."* Her hands left his and settled on the base of his shaft. Stroking him with one hand, with the other she urged him to plunge within her welcoming depths.

He shifted, thrusting a bit more of his hard length into her molten core. His thoughts grew more chaotic, and only one thought was able to reach hers.

He wanted to fuck her.

Grasping his lean flanks, she sat up, shifted, and impaled herself on his prick. Taking control, she moved up and down, sinking deeper each time upon him. Her breasts bobbed before him as she swayed from side to side. She leaned toward him, pressing his face between her lush breasts.

His hands clasped her buttocks and squeezed. He took one nipple deep in his mouth and suckled, the suction drawing a moan of pleasure from her.

Her rocking motion increased as desire surged through her. Her fingers threaded through his hair, and she gripped his head. She pumped up and down on his shaft in short, hard moves. Faster and faster as he thrust against her in response.

Their harsh pants echoed in the room and the bed rocked with the strength of their movements. Their thoughts coalesced into one fervent plea.

"Don't stop."

The lanbeth gathered, thickened, the sapphire blue intensifying until it was the color of midnight.

And as their mutual cries of release shattered the air, it fell, drenching them, coating them even as their cream coated their flesh as they came.

Loran fell forward, cradling Tally and then rolling to the side with her in his arms. The lanbeth covered them all over as they lay on the bed.

Loran grinned. *"I'm going to lick every speck from your body this time and don't tell me no."*

Tally's answering grin gladdened his heart.

"No? Of course not. Because I'm going to do the same to you."

She shifted and pounced on him. *"Now, don't move. If you move, I'll just have to punish you."*

"How?"

"Make you beg me not to stop?"

He stretched out his hand to finger the soft thatch brushing his thighs. *"Ah, meliflir, that's no punishment."*

She shifted so that his prick was at her slit. *"I know. I know."* She encircled his flesh and positioned it so that she could push just so and he would be inside. She leaned forward, and like a baby bitnap licks mel-sweetened cream, started to lick the lanbeth from his chest.

He shifted and slipped from her sheath. Turning her on her belly, he raised her hips and thrust from behind. He bent over her back and dipped his tongue in the lanbeth dusting it.

Once more they surged to a wave of ecstasy and fresh lanbeth fell.

Outside on her balcony, in the twilight shadows, Orath set Fardretha stroked his own aching rod. Rage threatened to overwhelm his control as he shifted back and forth between the old servant Wol and his own form. He murmured aloud, his thoughts racing, barely coherent.

"Whore. Bastard. I'll kill them both." He squeezed his prick almost to the point of pain as he thought of squeezing the life from the two lovers. "Who would have thought that Loran was a mage? His eyes never changed. Could he have devised discs like those of Narik? He's clever enough, the whoreson. No matter. It won't help him. I'll make them suffer first.

I'll fuck Talea, kill her, and then frame Loran for the crime. A fit of jealous rage will work. They'll find their bodies with a note revealing his distrust and remorse over his fit of murderous passion." He gloated. "Yes. Perfect, perfect." And as he pictured the scene, his climax erupted and he spewed his cum on his fingers.

He watched as Loran gathered the lanbeth into a covered bowl, unable to tear his eyes away as they entered the bathing chamber. Taking a cloth from his jacket, he wiped the ejaculate from his fingers and carefully climbed down the lattice. He had to refine his plan now.

Soon, he would satisfy his lust and eliminate two more obstacles in his path for power, and without the aid of that cowardly mage, Narik.

Chapter Sixteen

"I just can't believe we created so much lanbeth, Loran."

Tally surveyed the room, noting that traces of the blue lanbeth still dusted the surfaces of the furniture and the floor. The lanbeth in the glass bowl filled it completely.

"I'm glad I remembered a spell to pack the entire bowl. Plenty enough for Rayne and Mirelle to try out."

"And Tran and Rosta."

"Aye. Let's dress and meet the others." A wicked grin crossed his face. "All this strenuous activity gave me a tremendous appetite."

They met Jareth and Mirelle in the hall. Mirelle, dressed in emerald green, clung to Jareth's arm, a look of extreme contentment on her face. Jareth, looking regal in maroon leggings and black jacket, strutted like a *tergat*, well satisfied with his prowess.

Mirelle's natural exuberance quickly bubbled out. "I can't wait to try the lanbeth. My *clarsha* playing has magic in it. I always thought I was just channeling the magic inherent in the notes, but perhaps the images are so vibrant because of an innate mage ability."

Loran paused in mid stride. "You have a good point there. Perhaps it has to do with the lanbeth you consume from your soulmate. I'll have to think about it. There may even be something in the Book." He shrugged. "We'll see."

They knocked on Rayne and Pen's door and were immediately invited in by Pen.

Rayne sat on the bed, braiding her hair and arguing, as per usual, with him. "I tell you, I will be perfectly fine at the evening meal. I'll watch what I eat, and if I feel the slightest bit ill I'll let you know." She pointed her comb at him. "Now, if you want to be able to father more children with me, you will drop the subject."

He threw up his hands in resignation. "Always arguing with me. It's like it was when I rescued you from this very castle; you kicked me in the groin!"

Rayne smiled. "No, I kicked your prick. It's a wonder you were even able to ..."

Jareth cleared his throat.

A deep, rosy blush colored Rayne's cheeks.

Mirelle, not to be suppressed, inquired with a facetious tone, "Is this a prelude to page forty-two? It does say to engage in verbal lovemaking prior to ..."

"Mirelle!"

Three voices joined to quell her, while Loran and Tally broke into unrestrained laughter.

Mirelle brushed her hands together. "Good, my work here is done."

Laughing, the three royal couples entered the formal dining room.

Lady Galayne was already seated at the table. A warm smile crossed her face as the couples entered.

"I hope you don't mind if we eat immediately." She sighed happily. "All this excitement does tend to weary an old woman."

Jareth nodded graciously and the table soon was groaning under the weight of a variety of dishes from the several kingdoms represented by the princes and their soulmates.

Rayne sampled some of each; her queasy stomach no longer a problem. Pen watched in awe as she consumed both the salad and soup offered as a first course and proceeded to finish off the main course and every side dish.

Conversation centered on lighter matters. The first thing Lady Galayne asked about was the search conducted earlier for a new dress for Tally.

"Did you find something that you liked, my dear? I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you which trunks held your mother's trousseau."

Tally, seated at her eldermother's right, patted her hand. "No matter. I found the most gorgeous dress I've ever seen."

"Oh?"

Mirelle entered the conversation, a sly, little smile on her face. "Quite the most daring dress. Made from scylla cloth and a brilliant sapphire blue."

A gasp of astonishment emerged from Lady Galayne. "You found my trousseau chest?" She blushed. "I never wore that dress. My mother felt it was too ... too ..."

"Too sexy?" Mirelle said.

"Yes," Lady Galayne responded seriously. "Belar's elderfather was as lecherous as his son. My mother feared he'd become aroused and try to ..." She shuddered. "There is something tainted in the male line of that family." She smiled at Tally. "I am so happy it obviously only affects the men."

Tally looked at Loran and mind merged. *"Should we tell her that I'm not Belar's child?"*

"I don't think so. I think we should maintain your protection as a legitimate offspring. Mariess would be in chaos if there were no true heir."

"You're right, Loran. For now, it will remain our secret."

The meal drew to a close, ending with cheese from Mariess and sliced tart pomees.

Rayne patted her slightly bulging tummy and sighed. "I'm still hungry."

Pen shook his head. "You ate enough for yourself and a full grown akosa. You'll soon be waddling like a thooba."

She burst into tears, covering her face with her hands. "You said I'm fat! You don't want me anymore!"

"No, no, kerasoka. You're slim as a reed. Supple as a kitra. Sexy as the Goddess Larakosa."

Rayne peeped from behind her fingers.

And stuck out her tongue. "Gotcha!"

"And I've got you!" Pen pounced on her, lifting her off her seat and carrying her out the dining room door.

Lady Galayne sniffed away happy tears. "How I wish I had had a lover like Prince Pentar. So masterful." She gazed at the remaining two couples. "Well, my dears, I am going to retire for the night. May your dreams be light." A teasing smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "And your lovemaking hot. Good night."

And she left the room, leaving behind four identical astonished faces.

Mirelle broke into giggles. "I think Eldermother must have been one hot little number when she was younger."

Jareth swooped her up in his arms. "Don't let it be said that I can't make as grand an exit as Pen. Good night, you two." He paused. "And may your lovemaking be hot!"

Loran reached over to Tally, their minds merging, his thoughts filled with passion. *"It could hardly be hotter than earlier."*

"Oh, I don't know. Rayne lent me a copy of a certain book before we started looking for a dress." Her eyes took on a far away look. *"Page fifty-six was highly recommended."*

Loran stood, knocking over his chair, and strode around the table to her. Lifting her into his arms, he grinned. *"This mode of leaving a room is going to start a new trend, I think."*

As they left the room behind, the door swung silently shut behind them.

* * * * *

Narik gazed at the message blazoned across his mirror and frowned.

Now Fardretha was calling for him. By the Master of Torment, what could that slut want now?

The last few days had been one disappointment after another. No word from the Earthman and now that overeager fool Orath had gone missing right after he had warned him not to leave on his own.

So, now his whore of a mother needed his help. He should never have given that communication tool to her. But she had been so willing.

He licked his lips then as he remembered the occasion on which he had presented it to her. He felt his loins tighten and he fondled his crotch.

She had been such a hot little piece. So young and eager. She had followed him to his rooms and offered her virginity to him, swearing that they were soulmates! Ha! Little whore. But he took her and took her again that day. Over and over. No lanbeth fell, of course. But by that time he had her so full of bethlan, she didn't care. He could have had her all over again if he chose.

He had thought to use her to gain power over Belar. His goal had been to have her as Belar's mistress while Princess Variette would bring the riches of Tolos to him. And so it had been done.

How he loved playing with the naïve royals -- almost every bride-casting for the last thirty years had been manipulated by him in one way or another.

Of course, there were a few exceptions, but for the most part he had corrected those unfortunate slips.

When he saw how much Princess Variette had lusted after Prince Alnath, it had been simple to eliminate the problem.

Now, when he should be focusing his energies on gaining possession of the Book, Fardretha was calling on him for aid.

He sighed. He should go. Orath needed to be punished for his disobedience, and he had to find out what had happened with the Earthman.

Perhaps Orath was right. Perhaps he shouldn't have transported this "Lucky" fellow from Earth. It had seemed a good plan. Find someone with weapons knowledge that couldn't be counteracted by Hearthome weapons. Use his non-Hearthomian aura to enable him to travel incognito and ferret out the whereabouts of the second portion of the Book.

Ingenious, actually.

The Great Mage must have been jealous of his power and thwarted his plans.

He strode down the hall to the hidden entrance in the forest outside Helar. Invoking the most powerful shielding spell around the skimmer, he put it into manual and flew toward Mariess. He'd arrive under the cover of darkness at Fardretha's and learn what was going on.

Then, by the Master of Torment, he'd find Orath and determine whether or not to eliminate him and find another more obedient minion.

* * * * *

Rayne and Pen entered their room and Pen lit the fire in the hearth.

Rayne sighed with contentment as he tenderly laid her on the bed and whisked off her clothes with a wave of his hand. She sat against the pillows, the cover slipping down and revealing her breasts.

She giggled. *"Yes, I think they're a bit fuller already, too. Oh, oh, yes. I like that idea."*

She hastily unbraided her hair, letting it drape over her breasts. She cupped them and lifted them to Pen's avid gaze.

Pen cocked his head. *"Too many clothes? Your wish is my command, kerasoka."* His clothes vanished, displaying his quivering shaft, hard and high and ready.

Rayne turned, grabbing onto the headboard and offering her lush behind for his viewing pleasure. She looked over her shoulder and licked her lips. She arched her head and her long hair fell to either side of her body, curtaining off her breasts. She thrust out her rear and wiggled it playfully. *"Do you think Lady Galayne had a Jakosai lover?"*

Pen stopped in midstride, then strode over to the bed, mounting it and kneeling behind her. *"What gave you that idea?"*

"That she actually suggested we mate akosai style."

He laughed. *"Do you think only Tarolian Princesses, akosai and Jakosai fuck this way?"*

She sank to her belly and flipped over. *"Oh? You'd made love like that before we joined?"*

Pen cursed his unruly thoughts in several different dialects. *"You know I was no celibate before we became soulmates. You know I had a Jakosai mistress."* He shifted next to her and pulled her into his embrace. *"Rayne, kerasoka, kiereen, please, you know my heart. You know it's yours."*

She pouted. *"You said I was fat."*

"I lied. You know I was teasing."

She sighed. *"These moods are driving me crazy."*

"Me, too." His hands reached around her and cupped her breasts, lightly pinching her nipples.

"Ow! Not so hard. They're getting more sensitive."

"Let me make it better."

He turned her around to face him and bent his head, taking one taut nub deep into his mouth and sucking it. Squeezing her breasts closer to each other, he went from one aching point to the other licking, sucking, nipping until she moaned with excitement.

He turned her over onto her belly and lifted her rounded bottom. Grasping the headboard once more, she supported her needy body.

Inch by inch, Pentar sank into her moist, hot core. His hands entwined with hers as he began a rhythmic rocking motion. As her inner muscles gripped his, his speed increased.

The lanbeth gathered, glowing like molten mel. Thicker than ever before, it glowed like the sun.

His hands slid down to her breasts and he kneaded them, marveling at the increased fullness.

"Touch me, kerasoko. I want to feel your fingers on me, too." She sighed. *"I love your hands."*

A touch of laughter colored Pen's thoughts. *"I think Lady Galayne would be pleased. We've used three out of four of her directions."*

He knew Rayne smiled and his heart rejoiced. He'd kept his vow of laughter yet another day.

The lanbeth pulsed above them as they neared their climax. Pen circled her waist and he drew her back against him. Moving at a furious pace, wave after wave of passion flooded them.

And the lanbeth fell.

* * * * *

Jareth smiled as he watched Mirelle perform her "belly" dance. She had kept the outfit that she'd worn the first time they'd been in Mariess. Every so often she'd pull it out and perform for him.

She turned around so he could admire the graceful slope of her back. The sheer scraps of material fluttered as she shimmied, revealing her sweet, rounded ass.

Her hands lifted her hair from the nape of her neck and nimbly untied the halter top's knot. When she turned back to face him, her breasts were fully exposed.

His breath hissed between his lips and his prick hardened so much he ached. His leggings grew too tight as his penis lengthened, and he whisked his clothes away. In gratitude, his shaft sprang up and he sighed with relief.

More at ease now, he returned his full attention to his enticing soulmate.

The melody she hummed had the most astonishing effect on him. He could smell the scent of sex in the room, could feel her hands stroking him, cupping his balls, feel her tongue licking his prick. Even as she raised her arms, lifting her breasts, offering them to him, he could taste her flesh.

"Come here." His voice came out as a growl.

She undulated her hips and shook her head. "Ask me nice."

“Don’t make me get up and get you.”

Mirelle twirled in a circle, the lengths of material flaring out around her. Suddenly, she was left totally nude.

She stopped in mid twirl and stalked over to the foot of the bed. Mind merging with Jareth she taunted him. *“You’d better be able to magic that outfit back again. It’s one of my favorites.”*

He patted the mattress by his side. *“Come here, little demon. You’ve been taunting me with your magical music. Now, let’s have some follow through.”*

Kneeling at the bottom of the bed, she salaamed. *“I hear and obey, oh, master.”*

Inching her way up, she widened her stance so that her knees were on either side of his long, muscular legs as she moved along his body. She paused when she reached just below his upright shaft. A pearl of moisture beaded his tip.

“My, someone is happy to see me. What a nice greeting. He deserves a kiss for that.”

She bent and took just the tip in her mouth, licking off the liquid. Then as delicately as a butterfly, she tongued his shaft from base to tip.

Jareth moaned deep in his throat as she cupped his sacs, squeezing gently. Hitching up, she sank down on his rod, bit by bit until she felt the coarse hair at the base brush against her. She clamped her inner muscles, milking him.

Jareth grasped her hips, his fingers kneading her ass. He bent his legs and she tilted forward a bit so that her breasts were closer to his mouth. Leaning up, he took one succulent bud between his lips, pulling at it, drawing it deep into his hot, wet mouth.

Mirelle moaned.

And began to move, undulating against him, grinding her hips, thrusting her belly against his.

Their minds merged, their pleasure intensified by the mingling of their hearts and thoughts.

The crimson and silver lanbeth shimmered above them. Icy and fiery glittering magic sparkles danced in the air.

Jareth rolled until Mirelle was under him. Bearing his weight on his arms, he thrust deep and hard, his head flung back.

Mirelle wrapped her thighs around Jareth’s lean hips, meeting his every thrust.

Their tempo picked up and their breathing became choppy. Their passion grew almost too much to bear.

The streaks of crimson lanbeth intensified and increased, flashing like forks of lightning as their desire mounted.

At last, Jareth came with a roar, his seed spewing into Mirelle. He sat back on his heels, Mirelle gripped so tightly against his chest not a breath could slip between them.

They kissed, their tongues twining with each other, their hearts beating as one.
And the lanbeth showered down upon them.

* * * * *

Loran gazed at Tally's sleeping form. They had made love again after the evening meal. Their cries of ecstasy were so loud they'd both put up a shielding spell before their shouts could wake the castle.

He tried to sleep but couldn't. He kept thinking that they were missing some vital piece of information about the lanbeth. He sighed. There was nothing else for it but to slip into the study and check it out for himself.

Murmuring a brief incantation, he conjured a robe to cover his nudity. All his clothes were in the chamber in which he was supposedly sleeping. He slipped from the bed trying not to awaken Tally.

No such luck. Her drowsy voice caressed his ears.

"Loran? Anything the matter? Can I help?"

"Nothing, meliflir. Go back to sleep. If I need you, I'll come get you."

Tally smiled and closed her eyes, drifting back to slumber.

Taking a last, lingering look, Loran tiptoed from the room.

* * * * *

Orath waited, unmoving, hiding in a storage closet on the second floor where the servants kept linens, towels, and blankets. With a concealment spell in place, he didn't need to worry about being seen. Leaving the door cracked open just a hair, he could see Talea's room.

He watched as the taisins doused the lights in the halls and the foyer. The moonlight cast a sickly light from the windows at the far end of the hall.

Suddenly, the door to Talea's room opened and Loran tiptoed into view. He turned away from the staircase and headed down the other end of the hall.

Where could he be going? Only bedrooms were down that way.

And Belar's study.

Waiting a few minutes to give Loran time to reach the chamber, Orath glided from the closet, keeping to the shadows and holding onto the concealment spell.

Loran moved with an easy stride, unaware that he was being followed. Opening the study door just wide enough, he slipped inside.

Orath wanted to dance with joy. Instead, he continued creeping down the hall to the study.

Pausing for a moment outside the door, he picked up one of a pair of silver lanbeth lanterns and entered.

Loran's back was to him.

Quickly, before he could turn around, Orath struck, the lantern smashing against Loran's skull.

Loran went down like a felled tree. Taking a sash from the window drapes, Orath tied up the hands and feet of the unconscious prince like a banta herder ties up the legs of a bant before branding. Balling up a linen cloth from his pocket, he shoved it into Loran's mouth to keep him quiet. Checking the hallway first, he carried Loran from the study.

It was easy then, using his mage strength, to move him to the storage closet, hide him behind stacks of linens and put a concealment spell around him. Locking the door, Orath placed a silence shield around the storage space.

Done. Now to get Talea.

Moving swiftly down the stairs and out of the castle, he circled back to Talea's balcony. Staying in the shadows, he peered through the glass at the sleeping Princess. She'd have to remain sleeping.

One of the few handy crafts Narik had taught him was the ancient use of herbal potions. Most magic couldn't counteract the, only another natural antidote.

He'd spent his time this afternoon mixing just enough of a sedative to keep the lovely little slut out while he carted her to the cave.

By the morning she and her lover would be dead.

Concentrating, Orath shape shifted into Loran's form. A glass pitcher filled with pure water and two goblets were in place on the nightstand. Pouring the liquid into them, he added the potion to one. The sedative was swift; she'd fall into a deep slumber within seconds.

Shifting onto the bed, he gently shook the whore awake.

She rose up partway, the sheet slipping from her shoulder, partially revealing her naked breasts.

Opening drowsy eyes, she gazed at Loran, fully dressed, sitting on the bed, holding two goblets.

"Loran?"

Smiling, he held one of the cups out to her and drank deeply from the other.

Without thought, she followed suit. As the liquid coursed down her throat, her eyes widened in disbelief as Loran's form wavered in front of her. In his place sat the one person she feared most.

Orath.

The potion surged through her and her eyes closed once more, blotting out his visage.

Wrapping her in the sheet, he hauled her over his shoulder. Using his mage strength, he clambered down the lattice and into the waiting skimmer he'd concealed, heaving her limp body into the back.

* * * * *

She was still unconscious when he dragged her out of the skimmer and carried her into the cave entrance. He conjured a light-catcher and examined the various branching tunnels. One in particular caught his attention, showing traces of many footprints.

He'd take that one.

Orath moved down the tunnel quickly, Tally's slight form hardly slowing him down.

He gasped when he reached the chamber. The entire cave wall was coated with glittering amethyst crystals, so many the cave didn't need additional light.

A glistening pool reflected back the shimmering lights a thousandfold. A playful waterfall cascaded into the water.

He laid her down on the sandy floor and unrolled the sheet. Quickly, he tore the cloth into strips and tied her hands together in front of her breasts. Another strip and her slim ankles were bound. One final piece and she was gagged.

Orath gazed dispassionately at Tally's nude form. Now that he knew her for the slut she was, she had no hold on his feelings.

Only his hatred was left for the piece of sullied flesh that lay helpless at his feet.

How dare she betray him?

He stripped off his clothes, folding them neatly, his boots on top.

Kneeling by her side, he slapped her face to awaken her.

Her eyes flew open, filled with fear and confusion.

"Good evening, Princess Slut. You have no idea how pleased I am to see you. I've longed for this moment for years. What, nothing to say? No matter. I like my fucks to be quiet."

He ran his hands down her body, pinching her nipples till tears ran down her cheeks.

He shifted so that his enormous erection jutted near her face and her eyes glazed with horror.

He stroked his shaft, working it so that he grew even longer.

"Like what you see? Take a good look. It will be the last thing you see, whore."

Reaching around, he found the torn sheet. Using his teeth, he ripped one more strip and blindfolded her.

Rolling her over onto her belly, he bunched up the torn remnants of the sheet and placed them underneath her, raising her lush ass to a slightly better angle.

He straddled her, and as his prick nudged the base of her spine she began to struggle. Shifting, he placed his knee at her waist and pressed his full weight against her.

She stilled at once.

“Good. Don’t try that again or I’ll break your back and still fuck your ass. Now, enjoy the last fuck you’ll ever have, Princess.”

He grasped his prick and stroked it. Up and down, he worked his rod until he came like a pot boiling over, spewing his seed across her back.

He laughed as she jerked while he coated her silky flesh.

“That was just the frosting on the cake, so to speak. I like to grow inside my fucks, give them a chance to accommodate my size. Isn’t that kind of me? Nod yes.”

Her head remained still and he grabbed her by her blonde curls, drawing her head back and forth.

“Better.”

He grasped his flaccid penis and fondled it.

“Now, feel my power.”

* * * * *

Tally ached in every part of her body. From the moment she awoke with Orath leering over her, her mind refused to focus. Her thoughts were a blur; each time she felt as though she had regained control, he would hurt her again. She took a deep breath, slowing down her pulse. Then she felt his huge prick prod her behind and she clenched her muscles. She felt his hands spread her cheeks and her mind focused on one thought.

NO!

Suddenly she heard him scream over and over again. His weight fell from off her body as his screams grew more intense, then stopped.

Journal of Lucky Stevens

I stood up fast, bumping my head.

Cursing under my breath, I moved silently back down the tunnel toward its opening.

The screams continued, echoing into a chorus of agonizing sounds. I couldn’t tell whether they came from a woman or a man, they were so shrill. I only knew that the tortured cries issued from someone in extreme pain.

I grabbed up a hefty rock as a makeshift weapon. I didn’t have anything else other than my bare hands, and they would only be deadly in close combat.

I stood still, trying to determine where the sounds came from,

The Crystal Chamber.

I set off at a fast clip and reaching the opening; stood thunderstruck.

Two bodies lay on the floor of the cave.

Stark naked.

One was dead. The other, facedown, with her tousled platinum curls identifying her as Princess Talea, appeared to be alive. Her ankles were bound, and her arms, flung above her head, were, also. Another torn strip was tied around her head, probably used as a gag.

Who was the dead man?

And what were the black and gray powdery flakes covering everything?

The stench of burning flesh permeated the air.

Then Talea stirred.

I had to shift the corpse away from her sight.

I kicked it and it turned over. Orath's blank, open eyes stared up at me, his mouth contorted in a silent scream.

The bastard must have tried to rape the princess and something killed him.

But what?

That would have to wait. I had a corpse to move. I kept rolling it over and over until it came to rest near a large rocky outcropping. I grabbed the tattered remnants of a bed sheet and tossed it over the corpse of the once mighty prince.

I deftly untied her bonds, leaving the gag for last. Taking off my jacket, I wrapped it around her and, gathering her in my arms, rocked her back and forth.

At first her eyes were blank, tears seeping from their hazel depths. Then recognition dawned and she clung to me.

My back turned away from the entrance, my concentration focused on comforting the princess, I didn't realize anyone had entered until I was lifted, pitched several feet away and then pounced upon by Prince Loran.

Using his superior strength, he pummeled me. "Bastard! Filthy partour! I'll kill you!"

Then Talea pulled him, trying to get him off me. "No, Loran, no! He didn't do anything! It was Orath. Orath. And he's dead. I think I killed him. Stop, please, stop."

His chest heaving, his eyes still wild, he let me drop.

Talea threw her scantily clad figure into his arms.

He gripped her tightly, kissing her, crying. He ran his hands over her body as though to reassure himself that she was all in one piece.

He held her away and gazed into her eyes like he was talking to her telepathically.

Still ignoring me, he walked over to Orath's body. Flipping off the sheet, he examined it with care, turning it over and gingerly touching the charred back.

Most of the ashy flakes that had covered everything had disappeared, consumed by the cave.

Finally, he recalled my presence and spoke to me. "Tell me what happened and don't try to lie; I'll know."

I decided at that moment to tell Loran everything. It took more than a few moments, but he listened silently, without questioning me.

Offering me his hand, he pulled me up. Still gripping it, he spoke, a note of caution in his voice. "I know not where to believe your tale of how you came to Mariess, Lucky, but it seems I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"I didn't do anything. I just untied the Princess and gave her my jacket. Orath was dead when I got here. Some black powdery stuff covered the cave; in fact, every place but Princess Talea."

Once again they communicated without speaking. Loran nodded, hugged Talea again, raising her chin to place a kiss on her mouth.

Loran spoke once more. "Come with us back to the castle. We must talk with the others."

Chapter Seventeen

Loran drove the skimmer back from the cave, his thoughts scrambling around and around like a canid trying to catch its own tail.

Tally had fallen asleep almost as soon as he set her into the vehicle. With the stranger's jacket covering her breasts and his own shirt tied around her waist to create a makeshift skirt, she had regained a modicum of modesty and relaxed.

What had killed Orath?

He thought he knew -- negative lanbeth. The description that the Earthman gave sounded like what he imagined it would look like. And it had only attacked Orath.

He shuddered, again recalling the charred body. Orath's death had been excruciating, according to what both the Earthman and Tally had told him.

He could have lost her.

Orath had said he was going to kill her after he raped her.

He kept one hand on her bare knee to reassure himself that she was still with him.

The self-proclaimed Earthman sat without speaking in the back seat of the skimmer. Gazing out the window with deep interest, he maintained an air of self-possession that impressed Loran.

He cursed under his breath as he remembered his fear when he awoke, bound and gagged in the storage closet. The door was locked with a containment spell that he couldn't break; his mage powers were not strong enough. He kicked the door, kicked the floor and hoped that the silence shield that he presumed to be in place wasn't as infallible.

At last, Jareth and Pen found him and released him.

Loran nearly went mad with rage and fear when they entered Tally's bedchamber and saw her empty bed. Jareth sensed the magic aura sullyng the air and recognized it.

Orath.

"I'm going after her," Loran flatly stated.

Too late.

Tally had been violated. Though Orath hadn't actually penetrated her helpless body, he had harmed her in every other way.

And when it came time to protect her, she had done so herself. He had failed her. He clenched the steering device, his knuckles whitening, and made his decision.

He would release her from her vows.

"And just what makes you think I want to be released?"

"Tally?"

"Who else?"

Loran turned to her. Her bright eyes glared back at him.

"When Orath was attacking me, the only image I could hold onto was yours. When I felt him prodding me, I thought of what you would do if you were being held helpless and I knew you wouldn't give up. If nothing else, you'd let your attacker know your rage and disgust."

"So, I did. I concentrated all my energy on one single thought -- No. And then I felt my body channel that energy and disperse it."

"I heard him scream, but couldn't see what had happened."

"If Orath had attacked me before your arrival or before we pledged as soulmates, I would have lain there and let him kill me."

She reached out and took his hand in hers, bringing it to her cheek and rubbing her skin against his. *"Your strength and love saved me, Loran. Never doubt that."*

Loran drew her closer to him and twined his fingers with hers.

Humbled and strengthened by her faith and love, his thoughts calmed.

* * * * *

"They're here! I see them!"

Mirelle ran into Rayne and Pen's room where they had gathered to wait for Loran's and Tally's return. Lady Galayne had been left to dream undisturbed. No need to awaken her unless the news was bad.

Chafing at the bit, Jareth and Pen had started several times to take the toron-a or jump on the akosai and fly after them.

Mirelle and Rayne had restrained them with difficulty.

Mirelle had recommended patience. "Don't you think Loran is a match for that slimy partour? And Tally is no defenseless female. I bet they have him on his knees pleading for mercy."

Rayne chimed in, urging them to wait before running off. "If they haven't returned in an hour, you can go after them then. Orath likes to take his time. He'll be so busy bragging about his size and skill ..."

And then Mirelle's voice trumpeted out their return.

Loran brought the skimmer to a screeching halt and jumped out. He reached in to lift Tally from the vehicle and carried her into the room, Lucky trailing behind them. As Lucky caught sight of Tran and Rosta standing by the patio doors, he skidded to a stop. Shaking his head in disbelief, he followed Loran and Tally inside.

Turning back the covers of the bed, Loran laid Tally on the mattress and drew up the sheet. When he would have left her, she grasped his hand and he shifted back onto the bed.

Not wasting any time, Loran stated simply, "Orath is dead."

Bombarded with questions, he held up his hand for silence. "Save your questions for after I'm finished; you'll have a multitude."

By the time Loran was through, his voice was hoarse and utter silence prevailed.

Mirelle lightened the tension first. "Who's the handsome hunk hovering by the windows?"

Loran gestured and Lucky stepped forward. "Introduce yourself. In your native language."

Lucky cleared his throat. "My name is Lucky Stevens. Narik and Orath transported me from Earth to Hearthome to spy on you and train those people Narik would recruit to fight in the use of Earth weapons."

Only three people easily understood Lucky -- Mirelle, Jareth and Loran. Only one immediately believed that he was an Earthman.

"Son of a bitch," Mirelle exclaimed. "You're from New York. I recognize your accent." Striding over to him, she gave him a swift kick in the shin. "I'll kill you myself, you bastard!"

Jareth grabbed Mirelle around the waist and lifted her, still kicking, away from Lucky.

Spreading his hands, Lucky shrugged. "Go ahead. The only thing I can say in my defense is that I'm a gullible fool. Narik fed me a line of crap. He said you all were conspiring to cheat Orath out of his rightful position as heir to the throne and that he needed my help to find the documents that would prove his claim. Once Orath was crowned, I would train those willing to fight you to keep his kingdom secure.

"That's all there is." He moved in front of Jareth and then knelt on one knee before him. "I'd like to offer my services in any way you wish to make up for my part in Narik's plans."

“Get up, Lucky. Up until now you really haven’t done anything other than help us.”

“Oh? How the hell did I do that?”

“We’ve been trying to figure out a way to lure Narik here and you’ve accomplished that in such a manner that he won’t suspect a trap.”

“Excuse me,” Pen said, much aggrieved. “The rest of us would like to know what’s going on.”

Jareth offered a brief rundown.

“How much time do we have until Narik gets to Mariess?” Pen asked.

“I saw Fardretha just around sunset,” Lucky said. “I’m pretty sure she contacted him soon after I left.”

Loran got up from Tally’s side and began to pace.

“He’s coming from Helar, probably by skimmer. I doubt he’d use a dream rift even if there were one nearby; too much disturbance in the essence of Hearthome. He’ll probably get here sometime in the morning. He’ll go straight to Fardretha.” He stopped. “We’ll have to get him out of her house and down to the caves. It’s the best place to surprise him.”

Mirelle spoke slowly, thinking aloud. “Fardretha doesn’t know Orath is dead. If I were a mother and I found out my son had been murdered ...”

Rayne picked up the thread eagerly. “I’d journey beyond the Demon’s Hump to avenge his death.”

“And who better to do the deed, than Narik.” Tally stated. “Especially if we can offer him an even better incentive.”

As though they had all mind merged, the same idea crossed their thoughts.

“The Book.”

Loran’s pacing turned into fast strides. “Lucky, Fardretha trusts you. You can be the one to tell her of Orath’s death.”

Lucky nodded. “I even have a legitimate reason for knowing about it because I was at the cave to get rid of Tokar’s body.”

“Excellent!” He furrowed his brow as a plan burst forth as though he’d thought about it for days. “You came across Jareth, Pen, and I celebrating Orath’s death at our hands. And congratulating each other for recovering the last portion of the Book. We plan to return tomorrow morning with the middle portion and join the two pieces together.”

Pen clapped Loran on the back. “Great plan, brother!”

Mirelle turned to Lucky. “High five!”

Instinctively reacting to her directive, Lucky smacked her hand.

Jareth smiled indulgently, recognizing it as yet another strange Earth custom.

"In the meantime," Loran continued. "I'm going to check out some ideas I have about the cave." He paused. "Something about that place is tickling my brain." He looked at the others. "There's an entire chapter about the caves of Mariess."

Rayne suddenly spoke up. "I feel a bit funny asking this, but Lady Galayne's urging last night to us." She paused. "Did you all, uh, follow her suggestion?"

Tally blushed and nodded. "We filled up an entire bowl with lanbeth."

Each couple agreed.

"We have enough lanbeth to mix together to see if our enhanced combined powers will be enough to entrap Narik," Loran said.

Tran whickered. "There is a prophecy in the akosai religion that a day will come when a rainbow will gain solid form and encircle a demon, imprisoning it for all eternity."

Rosta continued. "Is not Narik a demon in human guise? The time is now."

Jareth turned to Lucky. "Go to Fardretha. Wake her, give her the news, and then return here to the stables. Tran and Rosta will take you to the cave. Loran, Pen, and I will be in there waiting for Narik." He looked straight at Lucky. "Should anything happen to us, warn our soulmates."

Mirelle heaved a sigh from the depths of her soul. "After all this time, all we've been through, you still don't get it? We're a ..."

"Team." Jareth finished the sentence for her and crowed with delight. "At last, I've surprised you."

He strode over to her and picked up her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist. "Kiereen, though we may not see another day, I will never shut you out again. The prophecies all say that we are stronger when we trust in our soulmates." He turned to the other men. "I know my brothers agree."

Loran sat next to Tally and drew her into his arms. "You told me that even though I wasn't with you when Orath attacked, my love for you gave you strength. I promised once that I would never leave you." He paused. "Even unto death. We'll be together."

Tally sank back in his embrace.

Rayne smiled, tears misting her eyes. "I know we'll live through this, kerasoko. The shakos predicted that my labor would be easy. Perhaps she wasn't only referring to bearing our children. Perhaps she also meant the work that we do to keep Hearthome safe for our children. I go with you."

Pen pulled her onto his lap and turned her face to his, tenderly kissing her mouth.

Lucky gazed at the couples before him. He looked at the akosai and nodded. "The day of prophecy has arrived. I'm on my way to Fardretha. I'll see you both here." He bowed his head to the others, turned, and left the room, heading to the skimmer.

And Fardretha.

* * * * *

A bleary-eyed female servant answered Lucky's pounding on the kitchen door.

"What be you doing knocking on the door this time of night?"

"I must speak with your mistress. I have vital news for her that can't wait. Tell her Lackeron is here."

"She'll have my head for waking her, she will."

"She'll have your head if you don't wake her, trust me."

Still muttering under her breath, the old woman shuffled off, returning a few minutes later.

"Well, I don't know what hold you have on the lady, but she said to go straight to her room." She snickered. "Said you'd know the way." She offered Lucky a sly glance. "Me, I'm off to bed. Same as you, I suppose."

Ignoring the sly digs from the wrinkled crone, Lucky went straight to Fardretha's room. He entered without knocking and found her reclining naked on the bed, her legs spread, a single bethlan petal strategically nestled in her lush snatch. The last one, she'd found it hidden beneath the bottom of the bethlan pot.

"Welcome back, Lackeron. I'm so glad to see you. Did you take care of Tokar?"

Spying her robe at the foot of the bed, Lucky tossed it to her.

"Cover yourself. I have some bad news for you."

Casting him a quizzical look, she did as he directed, first popping the petal into her mouth. Although her eyes glazed a bit, Lucky thought she appeared in fair control.

She rose from the bed, sat on the vanity chair, and waited.

Going over to her, he squatted on his heels and grasped her hands. He did feel for her. Even though Orath was a bastard, he was still her son.

"Fardretha, when I went to the caves, I heard screams. I followed them." He took a deep breath. "There's no way to break this gently to you. Orath is dead. Jareth and his brothers killed him. He came upon them when they found the Book that Narik told me about and murdered him." He shuddered. "They burnt his body."

For a moment she sat there in stunned silence. Then her mouth quivered and she shook her head.

"No. No! No!" Her keening wail pierced Lucky's ears. She stood, pushing him so he fell at her feet. She swayed back and forth, tearing at her hair, tears streaming down her face. Her chest heaving, she cursed her son's killers.

"I'll kill them!" She strode over to Lucky, sitting now on the vanity chair.

"Why didn't you kill them? Why did you let them live?"

“Try to calm down. There was no way I’d be able to overcome them. They’re mages. Narik is coming. Let him deal with them. Listen, they’re returning this morning with the entire Book. Narik can get them then and revenge Orath’s death. I’ll go back to the palace and keep an eye on them. If they make a move before then, I’ll come and tell him.”

By the time Lucky finished explaining his plan, Fardretha had regained a bit more control. Her eyes gleamed as she contemplated her revenge.

“Aye. When I tell Narik they killed our son he’ll torture them.”

Lucky started. Narik was Orath’s father? And the bastard had no idea. What would he do when he found out?

She went to Lucky and hugged him. For once, there was no sexual intent in her embrace.

“Orath was wrong. You are to be trusted.”

Lucky felt a twinge of guilt for deceiving Fardretha. She was an innocent in all this, though hardly innocent in other things.

“I’ll leave now, Fardretha. Tell Narik what I told you.”

She nodded and Lucky bent down to kiss her on her cheek. She turned her face at the last second and he found her lips instead.

He left oddly cheered by her return to her normal sexual behavior.

* * * * *

Loran pored over the Book. He’d found the chapter on the caves of Mariess and with everyone now present, toiled through the remainder of the night to refine their plans.

He paced back and forth, Pentar taking a turn to write down whatever ideas might emerge from their brainstorming.

Loran stopped striding. “The crystals!” He leafed through the pages frantically, pausing every now and then to read a line or two. Finally, he looked up. “We have a weapon.”

A chorus of voices tumbled over each other. Loran held up his hand.

“The crystals in the cave amplify our mage powers. When Tally was attacked she did generate negative lanbeth. It honed in on Orath’s negative -- evil, if you will -- mage power. Every essence of his talent became null. The color leached from it and turned back onto him. Our positive powers, conversely, will be magnified.” He took a deep breath. “The spell I found is one that uses the energy of Hearthome to surround that which we want to contain. I don’t know exactly how it works. I only know that it should be impenetrable.

“Tally mixed equal parts of the lanbeth we all generated tonight. Lavish it upon your soulmate’s body. Mix it with the pure water of Hearthome and salute each other.”

Tally gave each of the other couples a slip of paper and a bowl of lanbeth. Three different layers filled each bowl -- amber, crimson and silver, and sapphire blue.

She cleared her throat. "This is the special containment spell. Loran wrote down the pitches and accented words for you so that Rayne and Mirelle can also chant them."

Jareth nodded. "We'll meet here at dawn. Tally, write a note for your eldermother telling her that we're going on a little sightseeing trip this morning. The Great Maker willing, we'll be able to join her at the midday meal."

Pentar spoke quietly. "Each of us should leave a sealed note for our father and give this to Lucky when he returns. Should we fail, he must be made aware that Narik might well seek greater vengeance on our people. I suggest we conceal the Book in some innocuous place and tell Lucky where we've hidden it. He and Tran can convey it then to the Council of Mages here in Mariess."

With all in agreement, Jareth and Mirelle and Tally and Loran left.

* * * * *

Jareth set the bowl on the dresser. In the mirror he could see Mirelle slip out of her clothes and slide under the covers. Sensing him looking at her, she stuck out her tongue. He smiled and merged his thoughts with hers.

"I did well with my teasing, did I not?"

She giggled. *"You shielded your thoughts so thoroughly, I didn't sense a thing."*

He delved within the carry bag laying on top and pulled out a small bag made from the opalescent material that she now knew was scylla cloth. *"I shielded my thoughts again, kiereen. I brought something with me to give to you."*

She jumped from the bed, naked as a thooba bird, and rushed over to him. *"What, what, let me see."*

He laughed. *"Here, stand still, turn around and lift your hair from your neck."*

Still hopping from one foot to the other, she turned and bared her neck.

Jareth slipped a long, thin silver chain from the sack. Suspended from the chain hung a blood red ruby shaped like a star. He placed it around her neck, kissing the soft skin.

Mirelle turned to face him. The stone nestled between her breasts. She gazed into the mirror, fingering the jewel, admiring the way the color danced.

Her eyes shining, she flung her arms around Jareth. *"It's the most exquisite thing I've ever seen! You know you didn't have to give me this."*

He smiled. *"I know, beloved, but I wanted to. Now, get back under the covers."* His smile broadened. *"It's time to taste the lanbeth."*

* * * * *

Rayne got into bed, her long hair unbraided and streaming over her breasts. She watched Pen mix some of the rainbow colored lanbeth into two crystal goblets. He swirled

them in the liquid, the colors dancing and sparkling. They separated into individual glittering motes. Carrying the glasses in one hand and the bowl in the other, he moved to the bed.

He set the bowl on the nightstand and offered one of the goblets to Rayne. *"Whatever may come of the next few hours, I will cherish our time together. Kerasoka, you are my life and my love and, may the Great Maker will it, the mother of our children. Should anything happen..."*

Rayne interrupted him. *"It won't. I have faith in the prophecies."* She grinned. *"Besides, we are bearing the next great hero and heroine. The shakos told me!"*

She downed the colorful drink and set the glass aside. Settling back against the pillow, she invited him into her embrace.

"You're very sure of this, Rayne, aren't you?"

"Aye. I just have a feeling." She pointed to Loran's still full glass. *"Now, drink, hunk!"*

He laughed and did as she bade.

Rayne smiled. *"And now I've joined my vow with yours: I made you laugh."*

* * * * *

The first thing Tally did after they entered her room was strip off her clothes and head to the shower.

Loran placed the lanbeth filled bowl next to the reflecting plant. He kicked off his boots and pulled off his leggings. Naked, he strode into the steamy bathing chamber and opened the shower door, joining Tally.

He took the soap she held and worked up a lather, running his soapy hands along her body.

She arched, her breasts filling his hands. His fingers fondled her nipples and she moaned.

"Meliflir, sweetest flower, how I love you."

He slid his hands down to her waist, drawing her against him.

He was hard, aching, wanting to sink his shaft deep into her warm, wet core. But he hesitated. How could he take her so soon after Orath had violated her?

Would she even want him to join with her?

"Yes, oh, yes, kierown. Please, please. To feel you inside me, oh, yes."

He turned her around so that they faced each other. Cupping her buttocks, he lifted her so that her legs circled his waist. Little by little she sank onto his thick, stiff prick. She gripped his shoulders, her face inches from his.

The water streamed down her cheeks, cascaded down to her breasts. Loran lifted her so that he could taste the liquid dripping from her nipples. He suckled them, pulling them deep into his mouth.

He reached with one hand, shutting off the spigots, and carried her into the bedroom. He sat down with her on the edge, still joined with each her.

She clutched him to her breast, reveling in the feel of his mouth on her skin. She threaded her hands through his damp hair and arched her head back. She undulated her hips, moving faster and faster as passion overwhelmed her.

Loran kissed her breasts, holding her safely around her waist. His hands moved lower cupping her behind. He trembled as desire surged within him.

"Wait, meliflir." Using his mage strength, he raised her off his stiff shaft. *"The lanbeth, we need to consume it."*

He strode over to the lanbeth-filled bowl and poured some of it into the pitcher sitting on the table. Pouring it into two goblets, he brought them to the bed. He held one out to her, but she shook her head.

Pulling open the drawer in the nightstand, she drew out a small closed pot. She gave him an arch glance, and using her mage powers brought the bowl filled with the rest of the lanbeth over to the bed. She dipped a finger into the pot and pulled it out coated with a sweet, thick balm.

"I use this to soften my skin. It's edible. Let's mix the lanbeth with it." Her eyes gleamed as she leaned toward his body, and then pressed her breasts against him. She poured the lotion into the remaining rainbow dust and swirled her fingers in the mix. Then taking the glass, she drank it down. She snapped her fingers and it disappeared.

Loran drained his and waved his hand and his glass also vanished.

He took her fingers dripping with the lanbeth mixed lotion and licked them. He poured some onto his palms. Pushing her back against the pillows, he rubbed the intoxicating balm all over her body, covering every inch.

Tally scooped up the remaining mixture and while he straddled her, she coated his chest and arms.

Their fingers roamed all over, slathering the mix on each other's flesh. And as they spread the stuff, they licked it off.

The sapphire lanbeth gathered above them, hovering, waiting for them to attain release.

Loran turned Tally over onto her belly, raised her rounded, ass and sank his penis into her. They moved together, faster, harder, in short, passion driven thrusts.

Their minds linked, their thoughts a jumble of love and desire.

One last thrust and they reached their goal: mutual and mindless orgasms.

And the lanbeth fell.

* * * * *

Lucky parked the skimmer near the stables. Tran stuck his head over the half-door to his stall. "How did it go?"

Lucky sighed. "About as good as I expected -- she took it hard." He shrugged. "But the plan is in place. Narik will most assuredly come to avenge Orath's death. Orath was his son. Fardretha's finally going to tell him."

Tran whickered. "The mangela leaf doesn't tumble far from the bush."

Lucky looked up toward the castle. "And where are the soulmates?"

Rosta poked her head out. "Doing what they should do."

* * * * *

Just before dawn, a toron-a and two akosai with one clinging rider took flight toward the caves of Mariess.

Chapter Eighteen

Narik landed at Fardretha's home just as morning broke. The concealment enchantments shielding the skimmer and his body prevented the casual observer from sensing his presence.

Using an unlocking spell, he opened the servants' entrance, moving without faltering to Fardretha's bedroom.

The door was unlocked. The room still bore a trace of bethlan and ... death? Fardretha lay on the bed, her robe loosely tied, revealing more of her lush form than concealing it. Dried tears ravaged her face, causing her to look haggard even asleep.

Shards of broken glass and ceramic bottles littered the floor.

What had happened?

He dropped the shielding spell, moved over to the bed, and touched her on the shoulder.

She jumped from the bed, the robe slipping even further down her arm. A plump breast peeked from beneath the clingy material.

"Cover yourself, woman. What have you done now?"

"Narik!"

Heedless of the sharp pieces scattered beneath her feet, Fardretha ran to Narik, throwing herself into his unwilling arms. Tears fell freely, staining his wizard's robe. He pushed her away and she stumbled against the bed, falling halfway onto it.

"I asked you, what has happened? What has Orath done? That impetuous fool, I knew I shouldn't have trusted him to restrain himself." His lip curled. "I told him I wouldn't support him any further if he came here on his own."

Fardretha stared at him, her eyes wild, her breath hitching. She sprang at him, her fingers curled like talons as she scratched his cheek, screeching in agony. "He's dead! Dead! Your son is dead!"

Narik struck her with such force she fell to the floor. "By the Master of Torment, what are you babbling?"

Fardretha looked up at him, her cheek split, her eyes dulled, her voice leaden. "Orath was your son. 'Twasn't Belar who got me pregnant. Our first time together." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I thought you loved me. I did anything for you, even whored myself if you wanted me to. Orath was yours and now he's dead. Murdered."

Narik bent, lifting Fardretha by the lapels of her robe until she was only inches from his face.

"You slut. You kept my son from me? I could have trained him, molded him, made him the greatest mage after myself. Why did you never tell me?" He tossed her away like so much used goods.

Her mouth twisted. "Because you would have taken him from me and I would have nothing. Nothing! As it was, you had him from the time he became a mage." She looked at him. "Well, are you going to avenge his death?"

"You know who did this?"

She nodded. "Lackeron told me. He helped me hide Tokar's body."

"Tokar?"

"One of my servants. He attacked me under the influence of the bethlan. He died from the excessive amount. There is no more. The Pleasure Garden was destroyed and I've no way to replenish my supply.

"Lackeron took the body to conceal it. 'Twas his idea to call you for assistance." She paused, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "All three of the set Morath princes are here with their soulmates. They've found this Book you seek." Tears fell silently, dripping onto the bed. "When Lackeron brought Tokar's body to the caves, he heard Orath's screams of agony as Jareth and Pentar killed him. They discovered him spying and ... they burned him!" She gazed up at him, rage seething in her eyes. "I want you to kill them. Avenge our son's death." Her bottom lip trembled and she rubbed her eyes like a child. "I know he wasn't a perfect man. He's killed people, but he was the only thing in life I loved, other than you." She grasped a fold of his robe, pulling it. "It's not too late, Narik. I'm still young. I can bear you another son. And then when all of Hearthome bows down to you, you'll have your heir."

He looked down at her with pity and disgust, shaking off her hand like one would remove a piece of lint.

"Foolish slut, you're infertile. All this bethlan. Did you not wonder why you bore no other children?"

“But, but you told me ‘twas the herbal potion you gave me. You told me it was temporary.”

He laughed harshly. “Do you think I would trust you to remember to drink it when you should? I wanted no other children thickening your body when I needed it to lure all those weak-willed men to your bed and thence into my power.” He sneered. “Now, tell me whatever else you know. What did Lackeron tell you?”

Fardretha gazed at Narik. She had never failed to take the potion. She wanted no other child but Narik’s. And now, that would never happen. She would remain alone, but at least Narik desired her. He needed her. Didn’t he?

Narik listened to her brief tale, interrogating her over and over to make sure he had gleaned every last bit of information from her.

He rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

“So, the fools think to outwit me? With the Book in my possession, no one will be able to stop me. All my years of suffering in silence while these pitiful royals exercised their feeble mage skills. All these years, garnering my mage powers, remaining celibate so as not to dissipate my energies. Bowing and scraping and licking the boots of my inferiors. Enduring the ineptitude of the incompetent princes I was forced to use ... thank the Master of Torment they’re all dead. As Jareth and his brothers will be.” He smiled, his features twisted into a lustful leer. “I’ll take their succulent little soulmates and fuck their brains out first before I kill them.” Suddenly recalling her presence, he stared at Fardretha, taking in her battered features. “I’d fuck you, but why should I when I can get fresh, barely used goods?”

Fardretha stared at him as though looking at a rabid canid.

“You are vile. No wonder Orath was as he was. Your seed was evil.”

Narik shook his head.

“Orath was a weak, spoiled, vain child. He was as he was because you ruined him by giving him everything he wanted and never saying him nay. But enough. I’ll be leaving to lay the final trap for those meddlesome princes.” He gazed around the debris-strewn room, at Fardretha’s bleeding feet, at her soiled, scarred beauty, and shuddered with distaste. “Get someone to clean up this room and put some ointment on your feet. I no longer need you. I want you out of this place by the end of the day. I think I shall turn it into a pleasure house for my own private enjoyment.”

Fardretha reeled from shock. “But where will I go? When you gave me this house you said it was mine for life.”

“I lied. Farewell, Princess Fardretha. I thank you for your help.”

And he left.

* * * * *

In the predawn hour, Loran and the rest of the determined group gathered before the cave entrance. He spoke quietly, his voice laced with purpose.

“Now, let me go over the plan. Jareth and Pen will kneel in the middle of the chamber with the mocked copy of the Book in the sealed crystal bowl on the rock before them. Mirelle and Tally will hide in the niche with the bodies of Arlette and Keret. Rayne will crouch behind the large boulder on the side, and I will submerge beneath the surface of the pool. When Jareth raises his hand holding the bowl, Tally will send me the thought to emerge and the women will reveal their presence. We’ll immediately start the incantation. Merge your thoughts with your soulmates.” He paused. “And let nothing that may occur cause you to falter.” He turned to Lucky and the akosai. “Conceal yourselves in the copse. When Narik arrives, wait until he enters the cave and then give us a half hour.” He smiled without mirth. “Should we not appear by then, make sure you fulfill your roles and don’t let the Book fall into the wrong hands ... and give the notes to the proper people. May the Great Maker bless our plans.”

Their farewells offered, Lucky, Tran, and Rosta concealed themselves in the stand of trees, prepared to wait.

Jareth and Mirelle, and Rayne and Pentar entered the chamber for the first time since Orath’s death and viewed his charred corpse.

Rayne gagged, managing not to puke. “No one deserves to die like that.”

“On the contrary.” Mirelle bared her teeth. “I’d say he got just what he deserved.”

Jareth marveled at her ferocity. “Bloodthirsty little demon.”

Clearing his throat, Loran regained everyone’s attention. “Let’s get into our places. Remember, guys, your backs to the entrance.” He kissed and embraced Tally and then sloshed into the pool, sinking inch by inch beneath the surface, his features calming, his breathing slowing down. Soon he was lost to view.

The stage was set as each took their position.

And waited.

* * * * *

Narik eyed the toron-a parked casually at the side of the cliff and smiled. “Presumptuous fools.”

He entered the mouth of the cave and created a light-catcher to guide his way. As he moved through the tunnel leading to the chamber, he marveled that he could have passed the cliffs time and after time and not noticed the akosa wing-shaped stone. No matter. After today, he’d destroy the landmark along with sealing up the cave that would contain the bodies of the royal brothers and their mates.

He moved stealthily down the winding path. When the darkness began to brighten, he doused the light-catcher, relying on his mage sight to see the way.

Soon, he heard voices, and he slowed his pace even more, then paused to eavesdrop. He recognized the tones of his former protégée first.

“With the cave dampening the magic, no one will ever know we found the Book.”

Jareth’s gloating words actually cheered Narik. It seemed his royal charge had indeed learned some useful things on his own.

“Aye, Jareth. And why share this treasure with our halfling brother? He’s not even a mage. What use would he have for it?”

Narik strode into view, his voice booming. “Much less than I. Greetings. So kind of you to find the Book for me.” He gazed at them both, madness roiling in his eyes. “But not so kind to kill my son, not kind at all.” He noted their astonishment. “Oh, you didn’t know Orath was my child?” He barked out a laugh. “Well, to be honest, I didn’t know that either until recently. His slut of a mother just told me.” He gazed around the chamber. “By the way, where is his corpse? I wish to see it. Oh, don’t move. I’ll kill you right now if you do.”

Jareth inclined his head toward the side of the entrance.

Narik turned and saw Orath’s almost unrecognizable remains. He knelt by them and examined the corpse with an almost clinical detachment.

“Negative lanbeth. You’ve learned how to control it?”

Jareth nodded.

Narik rose and came toward them. Noticing the beauty of the amethyst crystals for the first time, he grinned. “At least his tomb is attractive. I’m just sorry he’ll have to share it with his killers.” He stared at the crystal bowl. “The Book is in there, is it not? Give it to me.”

Jareth picked up the container. “You mean this? Dive for it!”

And he tossed it into the water.

On cue, the women emerged from their hiding places and Loran rose quickly from the pool.

Jareth threw a swift silence spell on Narik, and Pen a holding one knowing they would work for just a second, but give them enough time for their containment enchantment to begin.

The minds and hearts of the soulmates joined together as did their voices. As they chanted, the amethyst crystals flew at the evil mage.

Stone by stone, flying at him with incredible force, clinging to his form, they coated him in a lavender cocoon. The chunks stiffened his limbs, encasing him forever in a prison of unimaginable beauty. The crystals struck his mouth, filling it and silencing his voice. His right hand was set in an upraised position as though to cast one final evil spell. His eyes darted back and forth like scuttling kyrscha bugs and then ceased moving as the crystals forged with the sandy ground, creating an impenetrable seal. The life’s breath was stolen from him, and his heartbeat slowed and then stopped. The malevolent gleam fled from his eyes. His aura was dispersed.

As they chanted, they moved together in a semi-circle, joining their hands with each other. Now, their task complete, they dropped their links. They stared at the immobile form of the most evil mage ever known and each one shuddered. Only their swift actions and combined magical power had been able to overcome him. And the strength of their love had given them this power.

Mirelle spoke first, irrepressible as always. "Would you look at him? He's downright handsome now. Wonder how good he'd look in the courtyard at the palace back home. We could use a nice statue."

Her words punctured the tension and the chamber echoed with their laughter.

Jareth hugged her and then nodded at the unmoving forms. "Who would have thought that these two were father and son?"

Loran shook his head. "And who would have guessed that they would share a tomb together?"

Tally spoke quietly and with conviction. "We must move the bodies of Arlette and Keret now. They can't remain here with such evil."

Rayne nodded. "You're right. Bring them to the mouth of the main entrance. Seal the chamber and the tunnel leading to it and then seal the whole thing. Destroy the akosa stone so no one will ever stumble upon this place."

Jareth conjured a winding sheet for the remnants of the two lovers and Loran and Pen carried them as the group left the chamber for the last time.

They paused to tumble the walls to fill the opening and then continued until they reached the outer chamber of the main entrance. Laying their burden down with reverence, Loran and Pen straightened and grasped the hands of their soulmates.

Once more the group used their powers to seal the tunnel to the Crystal Chamber.

They left the gloom of the cave to find Lucky and the akosai waiting for them.

Loran shook his head. "I thought we told you to leave if we were gone too long."

Tran whinnied. "Do you truly believe we would not have made the effort to rescue you? Or at least, avenge you?" He tossed his mane. "The Earthman said to give you a few more minutes, then we were ready to charge!"

Lucky shrugged his shoulders. "Well, in the movies, Indiana Jones always wins."

Mirelle gave him a hug. "Idiot, this isn't the movies, but Indiana did win!"

Rosta whickered, for once serious. "So, is Narik dead?"

Rayne patted her neck. "Aye, encased in crystal and imprisoned forever. We removed the bodies of Arlette and Keret to the mouth of the cave and then sealed the chamber, and now we're going to do the same to the cave." She hugged the female akosa. "We must destroy the akosa wing stone so no one will ever use it as a guide."

Tran neighed. "Can you transport it into the entrance? It will guard the bodies of the two soulmates."

Tally gazed at the elder akosa with deep respect. "Much better than destroying it. I'm sure we can shift the stone."

Pen smiled. "The akosai serve as sentinels, protecting those who journey and guarding against evil. 'Tis fitting. Let's move the stone."

Once more they used their combined strength to shift the massive figure into the entrance and seal it completely.

For a moment, they all bowed their heads and uttered quiet prayers of thanks for succeeding in their goals and emerging alive.

Mirelle turned to Lucky, a quizzical expression in her eye. "Did you know Orath was Narik's son?"

He nodded. "With all the planning you guys were doing I kind of thought it might distract you if you knew beforehand that the bastards were related."

Mirelle placed her hands on her hips. "I should make you walk back to the castle for not telling us. The guys almost lost their concentration when Narik announced it."

Tran whickered. "Well, neither Rosta nor I will ride with the Earthman on our backs again. I had no wish to tell you earlier, but he puked over the side on the journey here." He pulled his lips back in an akosa grin. "I will not put up with that anymore!"

Lucky squirmed. "Who knew I'd get sick riding on the back of a flying horse?"

Amid raucous laughter, it was agreed that Loran and Tally would ride back on Tran and Rosta.

Tally fairly danced with excitement. "I loved riding on Rosta earlier." She spread her arms like wings, swooping playfully and suddenly rose in the air. "Oops!" She swirled gracefully to the ground before six pairs of astonished eyes. "You mean other mages don't fly?"

Loran grinned. "Not like that. I hope they see you soar in the air, meliflir. The ability to lift like that comes only after much practice, and only the most powerful mage can do so for any length of time and certainly none as high as you." He slapped Jareth and Pen on the back. "Your faces! Took you both down a bit!"

Jareth and Pen tried to look aggrieved, but couldn't maintain the pose. They hugged Tally, nearly crushing her with their exuberance.

Mirelle tapped her foot. "Now if I were a jealous sort, I might be upset to see you clutching a gorgeous, buxom blonde to your chest."

"Gorgeous? Buxom? Me?"

Rayne crossed her arms over her breasts and frowned. "I might be perturbed to see you hugging another female did I not know she was pledged to Loran."

Loran snagged Tally to his side. "Aye. She is mine and I'd thank you both to refrain from touching her." He hugged her. "But that Tally allows you to do so is cause for rejoicing."

"Let's do our rejoicing back at the castle. My eldermothee will be awakening soon. We need to make sure she doesn't awaken to an empty castle!"

Their rides arranged, they set off on the journey back.

* * * * *

Fardretha paced back and forth. Her room cleared, her wounds treated, her body cleansed and dressed in her favorite gown, she waited for Narik's return.

She knew he would return. Even as she mourned the loss of their son, she knew he couldn't be so cold as to not let her know when he had avenged Orath's death.

A knock on her door halted her steps.

"My lady, a message for you."

Narik!

She flung wide the door and grabbed the envelope from her startled servant, shutting the door again in his face.

She sat down by her vanity, and with trembling hands, tore open the missive.

Our condolences on the loss of your son, Orath set Narik. Though he was guilty of numerous cold-blooded murders, it is always difficult to lose a child.

Know that your part in the conspiracy will be pardoned as part of our generosity to assuage your bereavement.

You may remain in your home for the rest of your days, but you will be banished forever from all the courts of the seven kingdoms. Nor will you be given access to bethlan.

Your son's father has been defeated. He is entombed within the caves of Mariess with his son.

You may thank the intervention of Lackeron for our granting you your life.

Signed this day,

Jareth set Morath.

The pages slipped from Fardretha's hand and fluttered to the floor. She raised her head and gazed at the visage reflected before her. She saw a face she scarcely recognized. Haggard. Her mouth trembling from her need for bethlan. Her eyes blood-shot and filled with tears of loneliness and despair. A face she hated. She clenched her eyes shut.

And smashed the mirror with both her fists.

* * * * *

"We're agreed then," Jareth said. "We won't tell Lady Galayne what occurred."

"Aye. Why cause my eldermother any distress when we've defeated Narik?"

Loran sighed. "We'll need to come up with a believable story for the Council of Mages."

"One that doesn't include transported Earthmen," Mirelle said.

"Or female mages," Tally added. "I'm glad we decided against revealing my powers. I don't think the Council is ready yet to deal with it."

Pen punched Loran on the shoulder. "I'm sure they wouldn't know what to make of this one's mage powers. It's bad enough having to accommodate his incredible ego."

Loran stared at the bowl containing the Book that they'd taken from its hiding place in the study and brought with them to Rayne and Pen's rooms. "We can't tell anyone we found the Book of Tocson. There was a reason he hid it, separating it into three parts. There is too much knowledge contained within its pages. Too much power in its words. Too much temptation in its foretelling. That we found it and used it to defeat Narik was meant to be, I'm sure. I'm also just as sure that it should be concealed once more."

Tran nickered softly. "Your wisdom is even greater than your mage powers, Loran. Give the Book to Rosta and me. We'll conceal it where it cannot be found."

Rosta neighed in agreement. "The akosai are the Guardians of Hearthome. It's part of our history, revealed to only a few. We would never have allowed the Book to be examined and dissected. We would have stolen it if necessary. That you give it willingly attests to the strength of your character."

"Don't compliment him any more," Pen interjected. "We'll never be able to live with him now!"

The akosai laughed. "We know this was a mutual decision of all of you. You've fulfilled the prophecy; we didn't truly expect less."

"And now," Lucky said. "I guess it's time for the final credits."

Jareth turned to Mirelle. "Final credits?"

She grinned.

"The Happily Ever After."

Epilogue

Journal of Lucky Stevens

So, we had a happy ending. There was much rejoicing throughout the seven kingdoms. The Council of Mages never suspected a thing, thinking the guys had tricked Narik into a cave and trapped and killed him. The Council was happy. They had some of the lanbeth to play with, though not the sapphire blue that Tally and Loran created, and Tally's probably going to go for awhile wearing those hazel contact lenses. Loran's been crowned King of Mariess. Orath's death has been deemed an appropriate end for the murders of the old couple at Tally's cottage. And poor Fardretha has gone mad.

I feel like shit about that. She wasn't evil, just weak.

Rayne and Pen flew back to Tarol with Tran and Rosta. The castle healer said she could fly one more time on the akosa.

Frankly, I don't know why anyone would want to.

Pen said he'd have a gift for me whenever I got to Tarol. A puppy from the litter their canid bitch Sil is expecting.

Mirelle offered me my own suite of rooms whenever I visit Narwith or Tarnwite.

I was happy for them all.

And totally depressed about me.

What the hell was I going to do now?

I can't go back to Earth and there doesn't seem to be a great need for a mercenary like I'd always fantasized I'd be. And I don't feel right living off the charity of the royals, generous as they are.

Guess I could be a gardener with the knowledge Narik gave me, but frankly, I can't see myself digging up weeds forever.

But what else can I do?

* * * * *

Journal of Lucky Stevens

Oh, man I can't believe it!

I've got a job!

Jareth pulled me aside after the grand victory celebration they held was over.

We went into this musty storeroom in the castle in Narwith. Jareth shut the door and locked it.

He smiled. "I don't know how much time we have before Mirelle tracks me down. This room is a dead spot, if you will. No magic functions here, so we're safe from any prying eyes.

"I need you Lucky. Though the greatest evil has been destroyed, the kingdoms are still in unrest. The customs and traditions of Hearthome are undergoing incredible upheaval.

"I need someone objective to..." He paused. "What was that word Mirelle used? Troubleshoot. Troubleshoot for me. Visit the different kingdoms. Listen to people. See if there is trouble brewing and tell me about it so I can tamp it down." He smiled. "Or solve it yourself. Are you interested?"

Interested?

I nodded, too excited to speak. He shook my hand, shut the door behind him, and left me alone, too stunned to move.

I found my voice and let out a whoop.

Hot damn, my adventures are just about to begin!

 THE END 

Jeanne Barrack

Jeanne is a native New Yorker, married for thirty-odd years (and they have been odd) to her high school sweetheart. Although they haven't been blessed with children, they still have heard the pitter-patter of little Tibetan Terriers paws all their married life.

She studied voice privately and sings everything from folk music to Grand opera and in ten languages, including Gaelic and Hebrew.

Jeanne's love of fantasy began at the age of ten when she got her hands on her older brother's Ray Bradbury books. Her love of romance started when she read the galley proofs for a steamy Rosemary Rogers romance. Dealt a double whammy six years ago by her mother's death and being downsized from her job, Jeanne turned to her dreams and lo and behold, found *Silver Fire* which combined her two loves of fantasy and sexy romance. Rewrites and edits and contests followed. Life and other projects put it on the back burner until this year, when, all spiffed up, she sent it off to Loose Id where it found a home.

Visit Jeanne on the Web at www.jeannebarrack.com.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Spell of Love: Dragon's Desire

by Alyssa Brooks

Available Now from Loose Id

Spell of Love: Dragon's Desire

She let out a high-pitched scream. On her front mat lay a man, curled in a ball and snoozing. A black cowboy hat covered his head, locks of wispy blond hair peeking out. His jeans and white T-shirt certainly weren't old, but they were dirty. Smeared with mud and something smelly.

Even with her cry, and the door ramming him in the rear, he hardly budged. Just wormed about, as if he didn't care about anything but remaining asleep.

Again the overpowering feeling began to invade her.

"Get up!" With all her might, she rammed the door into his ass. Then again. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Easy, mate." Mumbles groaned from him as he rolled away. The hat fell from his head as he gazed up at her. Startling icy-blue eyes met hers, so dreamy she gasped. Lips so full and sexy, her sex pulsed with the need to feel them. One look at his face captured her, giving her no choice but to run her gaze up and down his length as he stood up. Tall and massively built, strength formed his upper body. His hips were slim, accented by tight Levis that hugged his long legs. And did little to hide the huge bulge in his pants.

Quickly she yanked her gaze back up. He was dirty, smelly. His jaw prickled with days of stubble.

But he was hot enough to make her want to cream her panties.

Who the hell was he? Better yet, why was he on her porch?

"Ms. Fields." Immediately it hit her that his accent was odd. Thickly Australian, yes, but with a hint of something different.

He nodded hello and bent to pick up his hat. With a jerky motion, he slapped it back on his head.

And then it hit her.

"Mr. Wulphere?"

"None other, luv." His blue eyes drifted down slowly, like two falling drops of water. "Is that coffee I smell?"

Figured. He was the man supposed to be getting rid of the damn crocs in her creek. They were eating all her ducks, not to mention she wanted them gone before her big family barbie. Or, as her stepsister would have corrected her growing use of Australian slang, a barbecue. Jess was always picking at her English. She'd sure enjoy that the whole week of the barbie. Amongst other things. And including a croc, if this man didn't work a miracle.

Jay let out a soft sigh. For heaven's sake, children would be here. Along with her snooty parents, who would no doubt be looking for some reason to insist she come home.

She'd expected someone with a bulging belly, maybe a few rotten teeth. Older. Stinky. Dirty. Well, he fit those two. But he wasn't old, and his belly wasn't bulging. To the contrary, he was hot.

She couldn't decide if that was good or bad. Except that already she was envisioning herself in bed with him, and she'd promised herself no more flings. No more fooling around with men who didn't want commitment, just a taste of her fortune.

Since she'd hit the deep vein on her gold mine in the outback, romance had all but disappeared. She was pretty, rich, and from America. She couldn't find one man to take interest in anything but that.

She wanted someone to marry. Have babies with. Someone who would love her.

Not a man like him. Anyone who fell asleep on a new employer's porch in the middle of the night was obviously reckless. Why hadn't he thought ahead, perhaps gotten a hotel? He'd been hasty and careless in his actions. That sort of man hardly made for a good husband or father. No, he was the fling type. And she was not having any more flings.

Besides, she hated being around people anymore. The more contact she had, the more they came. She wanted to keep them away for good. The visions weren't always bad, but they weren't always good, either. Seeing a premonition of her best friend's death and being helpless to stop it had been the final straw. Good, bad, whatever, she had no interest in the future.

She thrust her coffee mug at him. His fingers caressed hers, the sensation of his rough calluses jolting across her sensitive skin.

His hands were everywhere, feeling the most intimate parts of her hot, naked body as he thrust in and out of her. Her sex clenched around him, teetering on the brink of an orgasm, one so strong she couldn't take it. Together they sweated and panted, fucking like wild animals. His hands were everywhere. Everywhere. No man had ever touched her in such places. Everywhere. She screamed out, convulsing. And then he filled her with his pleasure.

Jay jerked out of it, gasping for breath. Her vision cleared, revealing the man staring at her with the oddest look.

Had she done anything weird? Said anything? The man's hands had been everywhere. It had been so powerful, so real. Never had she had one like that.

She had to get out of here.

"Here. Drink it. Then get those crocs out." For some unknown reason, she snapped at him as if he were her worst enemy.

It was just, he was impossible to be around. Not without wanting to jump his bones. And what if he touched her again? She couldn't take another vision like that.

Now she knew. She was going to fuck him. Sooner or later. She couldn't avoid it if she wanted to. Maybe she should throw in the towel and get it over with. Yet ...

The sensible part of her futilely resisted. That door to her was locked. The key thrown away.

She gulped and stepped back, trying hard but failing in her attempt to stop looking at him.

For hell's sake, all she could think about was throwing him down and climbing aboard. From the bulge in his pants, his cock was huge. How big it would be when it hardened ...

Jay fidgeted. Her panties were getting wet.

"I'll need to use your phone. My van's out of gas, down the road a bit. No sense in wrestling the crocs if I can't haul them away." He took a sip of her coffee, then quickly spat it out with a look of disgust. His thick brows furrowed; his lips contorted into a lopsided grimace. "What the bloody hell?"

"I'm on a diet."

Taken aback, he swept his gaze over her. "What in the bloody hell for?"

Bryhan blatantly studied her body -- her perfect, tantalizing body. A diet? She was crazy if she was doing anything to alter that figure.

She had hips. Ass. Not too big; she certainly didn't make J. Lo look like a pancake or anything. But just enough for a man to slip his cock up in between, all nice and warm and cushiony.

Oh, yeah, she'd be fun to pump into.

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Spell of Love: Dragon's Desire

Alyssa Brooks writes a charming tale that is sure to please her fans as well as bring her some new ones. Steamy and emotional, pick up your copy of *Dragon's Desire* today.

-- Sinclair Reid, *Romance Reviews Today*

Dragon's Desire is a great follow up to *Lust Upon Roses*. Ms. Brooks creates another captivating and masculine hero in Bryhan... *Spell of Love: Dragon's Desire* is a winner.

-- Sarah W., *The Romance Studio*