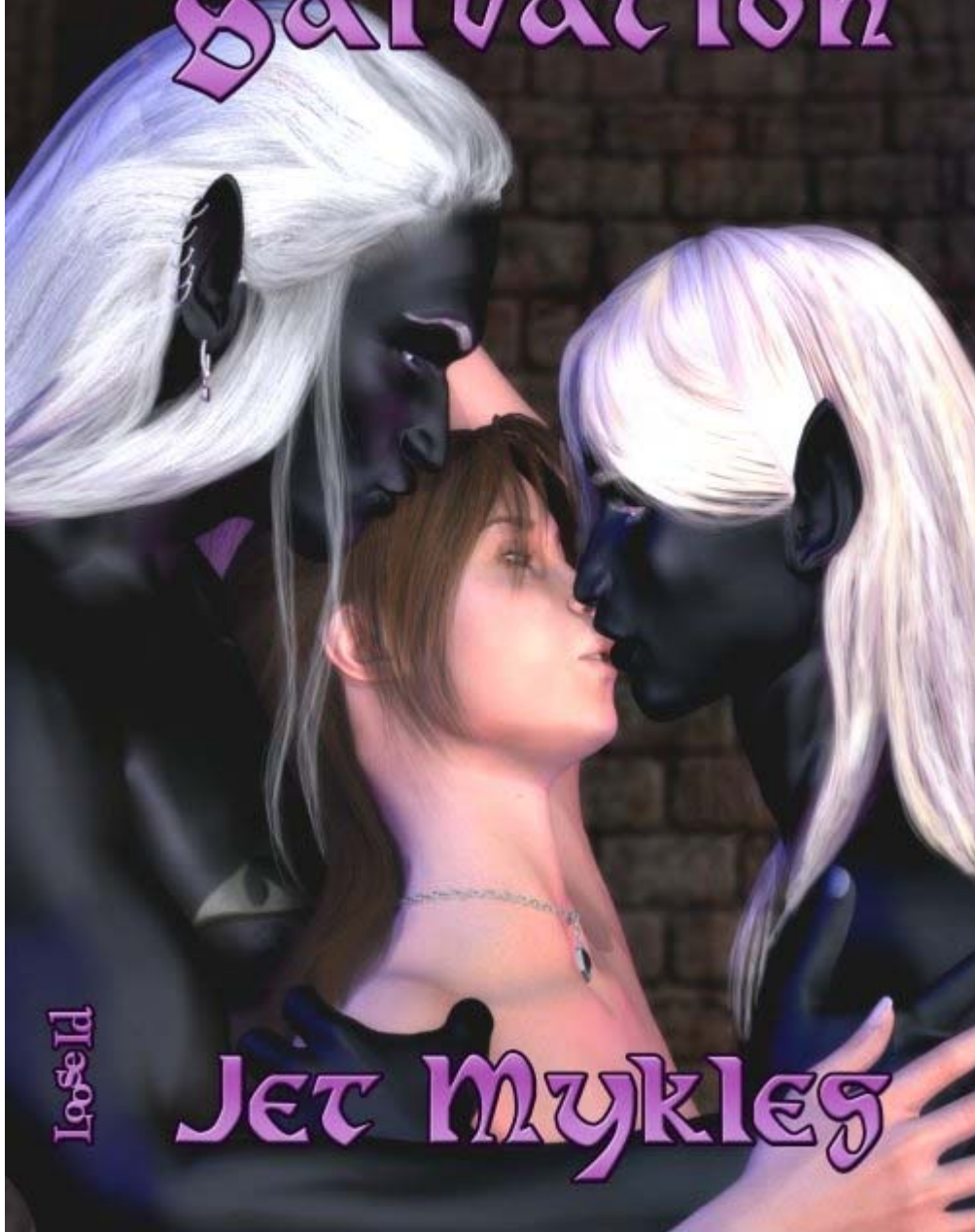


Dark Elves III: Salvation



Loose Id

JET MYKLES

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Her stories literally take flight and weave a sensual spell among her readers. This is a reviewer who is enchanted and anticipating the next in the series of Dark Elves.

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DARK ELVES 3: SALVATION

Jet Mykles

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This book is rated:

SCORCHING

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

Dark Elves 3: Salvation

Jet Mykles

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

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ISBN 1-59632-218-7

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

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Raven McKnight
Cover Artist: Jet Mykles

Dedication

Even though they'll never read this -- and I don't want to know if they do! -- this one's dedicated to my parents. Not once in my entire life have I doubted their love and their support, and I'm profoundly grateful for that.

Prologue

“I’m going to die of boredom.”

Gala didn’t even glance up from her needlework. “There’s plenty to do.”

Diana snorted, glaring distastefully at the array of sewing and needlework strewn on the pillows between them. “This is *not* what I want to be doing.”

Gala smirked. “No. It never was.”

Diana grabbed a lock of her snowy-white hair and toyed with it, twisting the strand around one of her glossy black fingers. “It’s not *your* type of thing, either. You never did anything beyond simple mending when we were on the road.”

“True. But I find it rather relaxing.”

Diana puffed. She pointed a finger at her friend. “*Do not* try to tell me that now that you’re pregnant, all this appeals to you. I know you better than that.”

Gala sighed, putting down the hoop on her distended belly. They sat on a wide, low platform in the middle of the main room of Gala and Hyle’s suite. The room was bright and cozy, a far cry from the scattered mess it had been before Gala had found her truemate. The stone walls were mostly hidden behind gaily colored tapestries that reflected the yellows and oranges of the fire within the broad hearth. The pillowed platform sat in the middle of one

wall, covered with furs, colorful blankets, and pillows to create a comfortable seating area. Small tables set beside it provided places to set food or drink or, in Hyle's case, dozens of scrolls to be read.

Both women lounged comfortably, propped against the wall with pillows to support them. They wore very little by way of clothing, both having adapted to the *raedjour* habit of dress, or lack thereof. Each woman wore a loose skirt wrapped around her waist and soft-soled slippers. Diana also wore white leather restraints about her wrists that matched the high, laced collar about her neck, but these she wore more as jewelry than for their obvious intent.

"I *do* enjoy it," Gala said, smoothing a hand over her bare belly, "but it does get to be a bit tedious after awhile."

One whole cycle and a half of seasons they'd lived among the *raedjour*. According to what they'd been told, they were now more than halfway through their pregnancies; perhaps the equivalent of a human woman at seven months. The extra constitution they gained from the *raedjour* traits that had taken over their bodies helped them to endure the length of their pregnancies, but it didn't help much with the awkwardness. Diana, who had practiced with Salin on sword work a full four seasons into her pregnancy, was now quite close to going insane from boredom. And, since she didn't get along well with any of the other women, Gala was the one who heard about it.

"Let's go to the main arena," Diana suggested. "Maybe Fallil is performing."

Gala smiled. "That might be nice."

"Or maybe there'll be wrestling!"

Gala laughed. Diana did so love to see the elves wrestle. Namely because they did so naked and the winner was rewarded by publicly fucking the loser. Gala had been shocked when she'd first seen it, but Diana had been entranced. Although she wouldn't admit it, she looked for any and all opportunities to see the matches.

Gala was about to agree when the main door to the suite opened. She and Diana looked up to see Hyle enter.

Gala could not help the wide grin that curved her lips. It was always the case when she beheld her truemate. Her man was not as tall nor as slimly built as most of his race and he seemed to have the roundness of youth despite his four hundred cycles of age. As per usual, his waist-length snowy-white hair fell loose down his back except for twin braids at his temples, which kept the hair from his face. His slanted red eyes focused warmly on her as he stepped across the threshold.

Diana's truemate, Commander Salin, entered the room behind him, his huge, muscular body dwarfing the younger man. Before him was a human girl. Of a height with Hyle, she looked perhaps fifteen cycles of age, with long brown hair pulled back from her face except for the long bangs that shadowed dark blue eyes. Salin propelled her gently into the room, one big hand planted on her shoulder. Her pert little mouth was drawn into an uncertain frown, the bottom lip caught between her teeth. A halter top was tied about her underdeveloped breasts, and snug trousers covered her coltish legs, tucked into soft-soled boots.

Gala's interest perked. She began the arduous task of pushing her pregnant body from the platform. Hyle rushed to help her. "Who's this?" she asked, smiling up at him, then back at the girl.

"You bastards!" Diana cried. Gala winced, clutching Hyle's arm at Diana's outburst. "Don't tell me you kidnapped a *girl*? That's low even for you." A pillow went sailing across the room.

Salin caught it and glared at his truemate, flipping his head to clear his eyesight of the heavy fall of his silver-white bangs. On anyone else the glare might have worked, but Diana only met him glare for glare. "Sweet, I'd appreciate it if you'd *once* give me and *our* race the benefit of the doubt."

“Benefit of the doubt? What for?”

He grimaced and threw the pillow back at her, catching her in the face. “Because, in this case, your obvious assumption is wrong. This is Irin. Nalfien rescued her when she was just a babe. She’s lived -- *unmolested* -- among us since then.”

Diana scraped the pillow aside, sneering. “Unmolested? Here, in the pit of perversity? How could you randy sons of bitches keep your paws off her?”

Salin sighed, exchanging glances with Hyle. He gestured toward Diana. “And *this* is why I said I’d have to come with you.” He gave the girl at his side a familiar pat on her shoulder as he rounded her and approached his truemate. Even Gala had to admire his sleek, predatory grace as he stalked Diana. Firelight cast a golden sheen on his glossy black skin. “Let’s start this over,” he suggested, voice low as he knelt on the platform before her. He caught her feet as she kicked at him, pinning her ankles to the padded platform. He never looked away from her glaring green eyes. “Diana, Gala, this is Irin. Nalfien found Irin when she was just a babe, and she’s been with us ever since.”

Diana growled as he crawled forward. He kept her legs braced with his hands until he was sitting on her knees, leaning forward so that one of his arms was braced on the wall over her shoulder. Ungainly in her advanced pregnancy, she couldn’t move fast enough to evade him, so she didn’t even try, although she made a point to show that she was not daunted by his huge body moving to cage hers. Salin hooked one long finger in the metal loop at the base of her collar. He tugged and she hissed. She shot her hand up to grab the wrist above her shoulder, hooking her fingers into the restraint Salin wore to match his truemate.

Gala exchanged smiles with Hyle and waited. As one might suspect, Salin excelled far more than anyone else at subduing Diana.

“Now,” Salin continued calmly, nearly nose-to-nose with her, “you might wonder how such a thing could happen since we’re a rather sexual race. We are *not* --” He tugged her collar for emphasis. “-- molesters of children. That practice is as distasteful among us as it is

among humans.” He released her collar and sat back on his heels, still trapping her legs. “However, Nalfien knew he couldn’t trust that. So he, Radin, and Hyle devised a spell. Irin’s been under the protection of that spell since she was a tot.”

“What kind of spell?” Gala asked Hyle when Salin paused, since Salin and Diana were engaged in a silent staring war.

Hyle went to stand beside Irin and smoothed a hand over the girl’s hair in a very brotherly gesture. “It dampens the lust of anyone in her presence. Even if one of the *raedjour* were to want to molest her, they could not.”

“Interesting.” Gala thought about it, studying her own lusts, but decided she couldn’t tell. A *raedjour* pregnancy had that effect on a woman and her truemate anyway. The rampant sexual desire that had led to the pregnancy was quelled during the final moons before birth and, Gala was told, for about the first cycle of the child’s life. Not that the lust went *away*, Gala thought, looking to Salin and Diana, but it certainly wasn’t the all-encompassing need that it was during the heat.

Gala turned to the girl, smiling warmly as she took pale hands into her dark ones. Irin looked up at her, not at all affected, it seemed, by Gala’s near nudity nor the discussion at hand. “I’m sorry; we’re being very rude. I’m Gala.”

Blue eyes blinked, and an uncertain frown melted into a hesitant smile. “I know. I’ve heard lots about you.”

“You have?” Gala glanced at Hyle.

He smiled, scratching his scalp sheepishly. “I may have said a little about you.”

“But you didn’t tell me anything about Irin!”

“Don’t be mad at him,” Irin said, coming quickly to his defense. “I’m not allowed around any of the women until they’re well into a pregnancy.”

Gala looked back to Hyle. “Oh?”

He nodded. “We don’t know how long the sex is necessary into the pregnancy. We can’t take the chance that having Irin in the vicinity quells desires necessary for the baby’s health.”

“She knows more about it than *we* do,” Diana grumbled.

Gala glanced back just in time to see Salin -- who now sat amiably beside his truemate instead of over her -- pinch Diana’s arm. Diana yelped. “She’s been around longer than you have. And she *listens*.”

“Oh, fuck you! I listen.”

“Since when?”

Gala laughed, taking Irin’s arm and leading her further into the room. She ignored the girl’s apprehensive look at the bickering couple. “Then we’ll just have to keep you around to answer the questions that the men forget to answer.”

“Or kept from us. *Ouch*, damn you!”

Salin’s gaze hooded, and he leaned toward Diana. She swatted at his broad chest without any effect. He overpowered her and eventually got his kiss. A completely chaste, but drawn-out kiss. Gala, meantime, offered Irin some wine or a sweetmeat.

When Salin disengaged from Diana, both were a tad mellower. “We brought Irin to you so that you could all try and keep the boredom away.” He smoothed some of Diana’s straight white hair back from her face. “I know it’s difficult for you.” He flattened the same hand over her belly. “It’s hard for Irin, too. Getting to know each other can only help.”

“How wonderful!” Gala happily kissed Hyle.

Soon after, the men left, promising to join them later for a meal. Gala noted with interest that both men were careful to say fond farewells to Irin.

“How fascinating,” Gala decided, lowering herself back to her seat beside Diana. “You *grew up* here?”

Chapter One

“And so, I’ve lost another son.”

Savous glanced sidelong at his father’s profile, then at Radin’s carefully blank face, then back into the gaping black void before them. “It’s only been two nights.”

Valanth continued to stare at the *vetriese*, his icy-blue-white hair and the white markings on his obsidian skin flickering in the light shed by the lightning ring surrounding the void. “He’s not coming back.”

They sat on carved stone benches that lined two walls of a warm, natural stone cavern. Here, unlike in most of the rest of the underground city, few improvements had been made to the stone to make it more habitable. The benches on which Savous, Valanth, Radin, and Betaf sat were roughly hewn from natural shelves of rock. The seats and the ground beneath their feet were smooth only from the countless feet that had trod upon the stone. The only light in the cavern was provided by the faintly glowing green moss that thinly coated the walls and the eerie magical blue lightning that circled a black opening.

The opening wasn’t just black. It was a void of color. The lightning that surrounded it was a reaction of the natural world to the supernatural gateway. The hole itself was a tall oval, tapered at the top. It was just tall and wide enough to admit the largest of the *raedjour*.

Stone seemed to make up the walls to either side of it, but the hole was not truly in the stone setting.

It was called the *vetriese*, and it was the *raedjour*'s direct connection to their goddess, Rhae. By stepping through the opening, a *raedjour* entered a place where it was possible to commune with Rhae. A man who thought to better himself, prove himself, or who had no other reason for living might pass over the threshold of this portal and let Her judge him. It was not a decision taken lightly. Even a portion of the realm of the gods was not safe. On average, only three out of every five men ever reemerged. Of those who did, none returned exactly the same as they had entered. Some men would enter only to emerge twice as large and twice as thick in muscles, but without a sex drive. Such men became the guards for the women and took their tasks seriously. It was thought that this was a punishment, but the guards rarely spoke of it afterward and didn't seem unhappy. Most who entered and emerged came back with white designs etched in their skin. Although the designs could usually be interpreted by others, the men themselves always knew what they meant. They would emerge and announce what Rhae had chosen for them. The *rhaeja*, as Her chosen, would confirm it. Of all the *raedjour*, only the *rhaeja* and the most powerful of the sorcerers typically re-entered the *vetriese*. And if they did, there was always a valid reason. Not even they knew if She would allow them to return.

Salin had gone into the void and emerged a warrior, justifying to Nalfien his choice not to become a sorcerer. Hyle entered at a premature age and emerged as the youngest sorcerer in *raedjour* history. Radin entered to emerge with both the marks of a sorcerer and that of a wanderer, Rhae's acknowledgement that he could not be tied to the confines of the city. The *rhaeja* entered the portal time and time again, and each time emerged with another marking to symbolize his connection to Rhae.

Valanth stood after a silent moment. "It was Gilbran's choice, but I will miss him."

Savous lowered his head, allowing his hair to fall forward and obscure his doubtful look. Gilbran had not been happy or even content. Marked as a sorcerer and at the right

hand of the *rhaeja*, by rights Gilbran should have reveled in the prime of his life. Instead, Savous had seen his talented brother atrophy. Since emerging from the *vetriese* as a sorcerer, he had been attached to Valanth's hip alongside Betaf. In over two hundred cycles of seasons, Savous couldn't recall seeing Gilbran without either Valanth or Betaf close at hand. Savous had watched from afar as his brother grew silent and withdrawn and finally became a complete recluse. On the few times he had made the effort to try and speak with Gilbran, Savous had the distinct impression that his brother desperately wanted to tell him something, but was somehow prevented from doing so. It had made their few conversations strained and ruined what had been a good relationship, even if it hadn't been a bosom friendship. Savous suspected his brother had re-entered the *vetriese* to ask Rhae to remove their father's mark, although he didn't know it from Gilbran's own words. The removal of a mark had never happened in the past, but it stood to reason that if Rhae could create the marks, she could also remove them.

Savous glanced toward the cavern entrance to where his last remaining brother stood sentry. Vikart was not a sorcerer, unlike Savous and their six other brothers. He'd been born with some of the gift -- evidenced by the dark red eyes he had been born with -- but it was not enough to be that of a true sorcerer. Vikart had entered the *vetriese* over a hundred cycles ago. He'd emerged with a guard's bulky, muscular build and black eyes. Savous couldn't recall Vikart speaking a word since.

One by one they had all been marked, and one by one they had all been changed. As Valanth had stated, Savous was the last of his father's sons. The last he'd ever have unless Valanth's prophecy was what some rumored it to be and, when fulfilled, brought back his truemate.

Valanth stood, breaking apart Savous's thoughts. Savous schooled his features before raising his head. Valanth stepped toward him. His pristine white robe swirled about his bare legs. Behind him, Betaf rolled up the cloth upon which Valanth had sat to keep those robes pristine. Valanth stopped just in front of Savous and stared deeply into his son's eyes.

“You should take Gilbran’s place at my side.”

Savous couldn’t catch the sneer before it wrinkled his nose and curled his lip. Quick as a snake, his father caught his chin, preventing him from turning away.

Valanth’s frown wrinkled the intricate white band etched in his forehead. “You are powerful, Savous. However, you are woefully trained. I could help you be stronger. If you would apprentice yourself to me instead of Radin, I could insure that you are strong enough to face the *vetriese*.”

Savous jerked his chin away and stood, unwilling to continue looking up at Valanth. He took a few steps away, which put him farther away from the *vetriese* as well as put Radin between him and Valanth. “I’ve already chosen my master, Father, and I couldn’t be more pleased with my training.”

Radin sat in uncharacteristic silence between them, without a comment on the direct insult to his training. He leaned back so that his shoulders were against the mossy wall. Casually, he stretched out his legs, crossing his feet at the ankles, creating a barrier of himself between father and son.

Valanth did not deign to glance at the younger sorcerer, keeping his full attention on Savous. “And yet you remain an apprentice after nearly two hundred cycles. What testament is that to your training?”

“As I’ve told you, Father, my not entering the *vetriese* has nothing to do with the quality of my training.”

“Then it is fear. Which is understandable. If you are not up to Her standard, She will not allow you to return. Which is *why* you’re in need of my training.”

Savous avoided grinding his teeth. This was an old argument and the most obvious source of the very public rift between father and son. Even now Betaf listened avidly, prepared to spread talk of every word to anyone who would listen.

“I have my own reasons, Father.”

“And yet you refuse to disclose them.” He gestured at Radin, still without looking at him. “Does your so-called master know your *reasons*?”

“Yes.”

Silence -- so full that it was another presence within the small chamber. Savous watched Valanth's carefully blank face and suddenly realized that the subject of whether or not Radin knew why he didn't present himself to Rhae had never come up between them before.

“I see. At least you have shared your reasoning with someone.” Finally, Valanth turned his head to look down on Radin. “I trust you agree with these reasons?”

Radin slowly raised his gaze. “Not all, no, but I respect them as valid.”

Valanth's gaze shuttered. He looked again to his son. Savous knew that he would dearly like to force the issue, but he couldn't. Although the *rhaeja* was the leader of the *raedjour* and the chosen of their goddess, the elves remained mostly autonomous. They looked to their leader for guidance and general leadership, but they were largely independent and made their own decisions. Boys selected their own masters for their desired trades, and men lived among the far-flung caverns as they chose. Rules were enforced largely by mass-rule and tradition. In times of necessary arbitration, the *vetriese* was often the form of judgment, not the *rhaeja*.

Valanth nodded. He turned on his heel and strode for the door. Betaf, with one long glance at Savous, hurried in his wake. The rest of Valanth's entourage soon followed.

Alone, Savous and Radin sat in silence. Savous stared at the *vetriese*, watching the worms of blue-white light squirm about the perimeter. He asked himself if he could step across that threshold now and felt the familiar, intense reluctance to do so. It was not the right time, and all his motives for not doing so were foremost in his mind.

He lowered his glance to find Radin peering up him from behind a long fall of snowy hair. After another moment, Radin smiled and stood.

“Let’s go to the brothel. You look like you need some exercise.”

Savous followed Radin from the cavern, feeling the ominous sense of *wrong* lift from his heart the further he got from the *vetriese*. “No.”

Radin glanced at him as they walked. He scraped aside the fall of hair that hung loose to his ass, tossing it behind his shoulder, out of the way. “Not in the mood for a woman?”

Savous shook his head, eyes trained forward as they entered better-lit passageways. “Not right now.”

Radin slung an arm about his shoulders, pulling him close. “Rather find someplace just the two of us?”

Savous considered it. “Yes. Do we have enough time to go topside?”

They entered one of the main caverns. In the middle of the wide space was a fountain with an obsidian statue of a woman in the center. She held a bowl at chest level before her, and in the bowl was a flame. The woman represented Rhae, and the flame in the bowl was magical. It reflected the time of night to those who rarely left the underground. When the flame was bluish violet, it was deepest night in the world above. When the flame was yellow, it was midday. The flame blended through the color-spectrum throughout the rest of the day so those who knew how to read it could approximate the time.

“We’ll make it,” Radin confirmed, looking at the currently bluish-green flame, “but we won’t be able to go far.”

Savous nodded. “Let’s go.”

They turned down a side cavern that led to a series of tunnels. Although each tunnel was marked, Radin and Savous were long past the need to heed the signs. They walked along increasingly less-lit tunnels until they came to passages of rough stone. Here, their brisk pace slowed a bit as they had to navigate the twists and turns that would confound any outsider who might make it through the forest and this far into *raedjour* territory. These tunnels had

existed since the time when Rhae was a physical presence among them, before She imbued Her awareness and protection for Her elves into the Dark Forest and the Rhaen Mountains.

After a time, they ended up at one of the openings to the outside world. Savous led Radin out from stone into moonlit trees to one of their favorite places. The small overhang was suspended above an uneven ravine. The effect raised them up above the main treeline and exposed the world to them. From beneath the branches of a spreading oak, they could see for miles over a sea of trees and rocky outcroppings.

Radin settled down on the grass, his back against a huge boulder that was half embedded in the ground. "I take it you don't want to fuck?"

Savous squatted next to him, picking up pebbles and tossing them over the edge. "No."

Radin sighed, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Your father seems to do that to you. Nasty side-effect."

Savous continued to toss pebbles, staring at the moonlit ocean of trees. "I won't take the chance and be marked for him."

"You don't know that will happen."

"Not one man in the last century has come back the same. I did some checking in the records. The odds in just that time are only three in ten that you'll come back."

Radin frowned, his lips parted in surprise. "Does anyone else know that?"

"I don't know that anyone else has looked that closely at the records. Hyle maybe, but I haven't asked him. I only thought to check recently"

"We knew it was bad ..."

"Worse. All who have come back have either been guards or marked for Valanth."

"All?"

"All."

Radin whistled softly. "How could we have missed that?"

“Fewer and fewer are choosing to go to Her. I’m not the only one.”

Radin heaved a bigger sigh. “I suppose we’ve all chosen to turn a blind eye. We don’t want to see.”

“But we have to. She’s killing us off.”

“I don’t think it’s fair to go that far.”

“I do.”

“What would She gain? Without the *raedjour*, She has no substance.”

Savous nodded. He knew that. The gods had been forced from this realm, but their existence still depended on it. A god needed a people, needed the belief system of a large, collective group, to have any form or coherence. Without a people who believed in Him or Her, a god unraveled and became part of chaos.

“Why would She choose *him*?” Savous spoke slowly and in a low voice. He even used a touch of magic to shelter his words and make sure only Radin heard him, even though they were quite obviously alone. “Why does She allow him to do what he does? To make puppets of the men who serve him closest and to slowly kill any woman he takes to his bed? How can She let him live?”

Radin studied him for a long moment, all trace of levity gone from his normally smirking features. “There’s more to this. Tell me.”

Savous slowly lowered himself to sit beside Radin with his back to the boulder, using the time to think. He’d given Radin his reasons, yes, but not *all* of his reasons. Some were dark enough that he’d kept them to himself all this time. “He killed her.”

Radin stilled. “Her?”

“My mother.” In all their seasons, Savous had only once uttered those words, very early on in the apprenticeship, when he was still a young lad and his mother’s death was still recent. “I don’t know how, but he killed her. Just like he’s killed the women ever since. And She’s allowed it. She’s *sanctified* it! That ridiculous prophecy promising him salvation ...” His

anger brought a hiss to his softly spoken words. “He doesn’t lead. He sits there and serves his own purposes. He barely pays attention. He’s stifled our growth. He ...”

“He’s *rhaeja*.”

Savous shut his eyes and pressed his forehead to his knees. “And what does that mean, when he’s allowed to act -- to *not* act -- as he does?”

Radin’s voice was carefully bland. “He’ll continue to be so until someone replaces him.”

Savous breathed in harshly. He shook his head. “It’s not me.”

“Who else?”

“You don’t know it.”

“No. We won’t until you go to Her.”

Savous bit the meat of his knee to keep back the keening cry of anger. “I won’t submit to a goddess who chose *him!*”

And there it was. He didn’t deny the fact that he could be the next *rhaeja*. In fact, it was an unspoken thought among the *raedjour*. He saw it in the way others addressed him, in the way they looked at him. The thought would only grow in strength now that Gilbran was gone.

Valanth was the fourth *rhaeja* in their nearly four thousand cycles since Rhae had left the earth. In that history, he was only the first son to take the father’s place. Rhae had selected the three *rhaeja* prior to him from among the eligible sorcerers of the time, long before the death of the ruling *rhaeja*. Each of the other *rhaeja* had a time with his predecessor to learn to rule and to give the *raedjour* time to become accustomed to the change. Each of those successions had proceeded smoothly, one even before the death of the old *rhaeja*. Valanth’s father, however, had died unexpectedly, long before Rhae had chosen his successor. The *raedjour* had endured a brief but trying time without a ruler before Valanth finally emerged from the *vetriese*, marked as Her chosen.

No, the fact that Savous was Valanth's son was not the reason others assumed he was the next *rhaeja*. It was, however, very likely him because there was no one else capable. Nalfien, Radin, and Salin were the other most likely candidates, but all three had already been passed over by Rhae. No other unmarked man of the likely age was fit to lead. Only Savous, the apprentice who should long ago have been made a sorcerer in his own right.

A warm hand slid over Savous's shoulder. Radin didn't push. "I think," he said, his voice taking on a dreamy quality, "that it's time we took a tour of the east woods."

Savous took a breath, reining in his emotions. "Get away?"

"Yes. It's been a while. I think we both need the change of scenery."

Savous nodded. "Sounds good."

Chapter Two

“Thank you, Trev.”

Irin looked up from the floor where she was playing with Tykir. The boy in the doorway paused in surprise when he saw her. He bobbed his head, dislodging long, unruly white curls from behind his ears. “Hey, Irin.”

Trev. She recognized his pointed chin and sweeping, somehow overlong eyebrows. She nodded and put on a weak smile. “Hey, Trev. How are you?”

“Good. Fine, thanks.” The boy swallowed, then bobbed his head at Gala, who stood holding open the door, the basket he had given her in her hand. “Lady,” he said with respect, then turned and ran.

Gala turned interested eyes to Irin as she shut the door. “You know Trev?”

Irin bent back over the sweet little obsidian-skinned baby lying on the blanket spread between her sprawled legs. Gala’s son gurgled up at her, tightly gripping a lock of her hair. “Trev and I were playmates for awhile. Cycles ago.”

Gala froze. She exchanged glances with Diana, who sat on a plush divan, breastfeeding her own son, Brevin.

“Oh, my. Until now I hadn’t really realized how much faster you’ve grown up than they do.”

Irin shrugged, keeping her face down and hidden by her hair.

Gala and Diana exchanged another glance. For the past cycle and a half, each of the women had spent a great deal of time with Irin and had become very fond of her. So they noticed when the girl became abnormally quiet and moody. “Do you stay friends with them?” Diana asked, keeping her voice casual.

“I’ve always been friends with the boys for awhile, but I outgrow them. Best they’ve figured, as a human I age twice as fast as the *raedjour*. So, when I turned six, the boys I’d played with as a toddler were *still* toddlers. When I turned ten, the boys I’d played with were still really young. When I got to about thirteen, Nalfien started to get worried that something might *happen*. Sex-like.” She shrugged, smoothing a fond hand over the sparse, downy white hair on the baby’s head. “Even with the spell. Nothing did. None of the older boys will come near me. They all know about the spell.” She turned a brief, mildly nasty smile up at them. “It scares them that when they get near me, their cocks go soft.”

Diana laughed, and Gala shook her head. “Irin, you really shouldn’t learn nasty habits from Diana.”

“From me? What do you mean?”

“I saw that gleam in her eye. Laughing at boys because their cocks go soft is not nice.” Gala didn’t quite succeed in hiding her smile.

Diana tried to be offended. “How did she get this from *me*?”

Gala blinked innocent eyes at her. “She certainly didn’t get it from me. And I doubt any of the men in her life would find humor in that particular situation.”

Gala turned shining eyes on Irin as she knelt on the floor beside the girl and her son. She set the basket Trev had brought beside her. “It just isn’t nice manners, Irin. The *raedjour*

take their sexuality very personally. It *would* scare the boys to even feel a little of that go away.”

Irin chuckled. “Oh, I know. But it’s so funny to see the looks on their faces sometimes.”

Gala rolled her eyes toward Diana. “And you still think she didn’t get this from you?”

“Don’t blame me. She’s nasty in her own right.”

They all laughed at that.

“So I’m curious.” Diana raised the baby to her shoulder, rubbing his back. “How much *do* you know about sex?”

Irin played her fingers over Tykir’s chubby belly. “I know the basics. They let me watch the sex shows as long as I stay way in the back. You kiss. You hug. The woman gets wet; the man gets hard. He sticks his cock in, and you both rub around until he comes.”

Diana’s eyes went wide; then she broke into fits of laughter. Gala giggled behind her hand.

“Well, yes, that’s the basics,” Gala said, turning to rummage in the basket. She lifted out the various bowls and platters and the food within. “But there’s so much more to it.”

Irin smirked. “That’s what they say.”

“Who is ‘they’?”

“Radin. Savous.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “Oh, that figures. And you blame *me* when she’s been under the influence of *those* two?”

A thought occurred to Gala. Something which had occurred to her before, but that she’d never brought up. She abandoned the food and went to kneel beside Irin and Tykir. “How old are you, Irin?”

Irin babbled nonsense at the baby, getting a sleepy giggle from him. “Nalfien thinks I was about two when they found me. I’ve been here for seventeen cycles now.”

“That would make you at least nineteen.”

Irin nodded.

Gala frowned. “And you’ve never had your moon time?”

“The bleeding? No.”

“Doesn’t Nalfien think that’s odd?”

“Is it?”

Gala’s mouth dropped open. “Well, yes! It’s ... Doesn’t he know that?”

Irin frowned. “What?”

“You should have started your bleeding cycles ago.”

“Really?”

“Don’t you know that?”

Irin shrugged. “You two are really the only women that I spend a lot of time with. I haven’t spent much time with Iana since I was really young.”

“But surely Nalfien ...”

“Think about it, Gala.” Diana sneered. “Why would he have thought it?”

“But Hyle? Or Radin?”

“How much experience have they had with human women growing up?”

“Iana?”

Diana just gave her a pointed look. Nalfien’s truemate was a bitter woman who tended to stay away from almost everyone except for her two or three close friends.

Gala stared at her friend. “I think it’s time I had a talk with Nalfien.”

Irin sat on the floor in her rooms, playing with one of her cats when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” she called without looking up. Stripes, on his back before her, batted at her hands with his furry white paws. Even though he was fully adult, Stripes still loved to wrestle.

The door opened. “Hello, kitten.”

Irin swallowed and allowed herself the brief moment when her face was obscured by her hair to school her features. Radin’s voice always managed to tickle her spine somehow, and the effect was disconcerting. When she had control, she raised her face, smiling for him. She was proud that her face didn’t falter when she saw Savous trailing into the room behind Radin. In her humble and narrow opinion, these two men were the most handsome, most wonderful beings in existence. Radin stood slightly taller than his apprentice, with snowy white hair that hung loose and flowing past the waistband of the garish red trousers he wore. Savous leaned on one shoulder in the open doorway, arms crossed over his bare, unmarked chest and ankles crossed. His honey-kissed white hair was pulled back into a loose tail that hung just below his shoulders.

“Radin!” she greeted enthusiastically, holding up a hand to him. He took it and easily drew her to her feet and into his arms for a fond hug. “When did you get back?”

“Just today.” He nudged a toe at the cat, who had flipped onto his belly, looking up at the man. Radin had given her Stripes as a half-starved feral kitten, and the cat had adored him ever since.

Irin squeezed Radin’s waist, then went to greet Savous. She kissed him sweetly on the mouth, trying not to pay *too* much attention to the warm, glossy skin beneath the palms she spread on his bare chest for balance.

“I missed you!” she said with a grin.

She always did. They were the only two unmated males who ever spent any time with her, and she appreciated them, even more so because she knew that the spell on her made them uncomfortable. Not that they’d ever show it, but she couldn’t imagine that having their

natural lusts dampened would be comfortable for them. Aside from that, they were just plain fun to be with.

“What did you bring me?”

Savous snorted and rolled his eyes. “Always a gift.”

“What can I say? You’ve spoiled me. Diana says so.”

It was Radin’s turn to snort from where he now knelt, petting the cat. “And, of course, Diana would know.”

“Diana knows *everything*.”

This made them both snort, and Irin laughed gleefully.

Savous straightened from the doorway. He reached and took her hand, his long fingers lacing perfectly with hers. “Gift later. We came to fetch you.”

“Oh?”

Radin nodded, tossing a fall of his hair back over his shoulder as he stood. “We’ve been called to a meeting of minds.”

“Huh?” Irin frowned as Savous pulled her into the hallway. Radin followed, careful to shut the door with the cat inside the room and not following, as Stripes had intended. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

Irin rolled her eyes. “I *hate* it when you don’t tell me things.”

Radin chuckled. “Soon, kitten. Soon.”

“Fine. Then tell me where you went this time. Were there panthers?”

Radin and Savous told her of their impromptu trip as they took her through hallways she well knew. Within this one tower, she was allowed to roam without a constant guard. But if she went to any of the three entrance doors, at least one of the burly guards would peel away to trail her. They had standing orders to make sure that she never left unaccompanied.

Irin had almost giving up trying to give them the slip. Her only consolation was that *any* woman received the same treatment. It was insurance, she was told, against the darker intentions of some of the elves.

Their trip turned out to be a relatively short one. Down one flight of stairs and through two hallways and they arrived at Gala and Hyle's suite. The door to the suite stood open. As always, the room was gaily furnished and pleasantly warm. A grand fire burned in the fireplace, and mirrored sconces illuminated the tapestried walls. Irin's soft-soled boots sank into the thick, loose-woven rug as Savous pulled her in. Gala sat with Diana and Salin on the padded platform that dominated the room. Little Brevin was tucked into the bend of his father's arm, looking terribly tiny but utterly content. Hyle stood to one side of the room, dressed in his typical short robe and trousers. Nalfien stood with him, dressed in one of his voluminous robes.

"There you are." Gala rose to greet them, kissing Irin's cheek fondly.

"Did you think we wouldn't bring her?" Radin mocked, passing into the room.

From the platform, Diana smiled and reached for her son. "Here, let me put him in the other room with Tykir."

"Have a seat, kitten," Savous murmured, walking her to the pillows.

"What is this all about?" Irin asked. They were arranging themselves around her, and even if these were the people she trusted most in the world, it was unnerving. Hyle, Nalfien, and Gala remained standing. Savous sat beside her, and Diana returned to sit on her other side. Salin and Radin sat with their backs against the wall on the platform behind her.

Diana patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, Irin. It's a good thing."

Gala giggled. "Are you hungry? Do you want something to drink?"

"No. What's going on?"

"I suppose there is no sense in waiting, now that we're all here." Nalfien knelt on the floor before Irin, arranging the voluminous folds of his black robes about him with practiced

ease. "It's been brought to my attention that you are nearly twenty cycles of age, by our nearest reckoning." He took her hands, resting both his and hers on her knees. "Has it been so long?"

She blinked, glancing at Gala. She remembered Gala saying she had to talk to Nalfien, but that was nearly a moon ago. "Yes."

"I'm also told that's quite old for not having started your woman's bleeding."

"That's what Gala and Diana said."

"Oh, come on, you old bastard," Diana muttered. She subsided when Radin slung an arm about her shoulders and pulled her back against his chest. She struggled until he muttered something unintelligible in her ear. She frowned, but stayed quiet.

"Gala thinks --" Irin had to tear her jealous gaze away from Diana in Radin's arms and back to Nalfien. "-- that it might be our spell that has delayed this."

"The spell?"

"Yes. It's possible that by suppressing both your natural desires as well as those around you that we've also stunted your sexual maturity. You're perfectly healthy," he assured her, no doubt to ease the look of alarm she felt on her own face, "but now that Gala has pointed this out, we think there may be more to this."

"Oh. So. What can we do?"

"We've decided to try lifting the spell."

Irin's heart stopped; her eyes and mouth went wide. She'd always known it would happen. She'd looked forward to the day. But now that it was actually here, she was stunned.

Nalfien brushed tender fingers over her jaw, his red eyes watching her carefully. "Is this acceptable to you?"

Irin nodded. She kept her attention focused on Nalfien, desperately trying to hide her weirdly cold excitement. She didn't know if she was thrilled, or horrified.

Although he surely felt her emotions on some level, Nalfien thankfully did not comment on them. “We’re not positive how lifting the spell will affect you. Because of this, Hyle and Gala have agreed to watch over you. If it’s also acceptable to you, your things will be moved into their suite.”

Irin tore her gaze from Nalfien to look up at Hyle. His tender smile did a lot to quell her nerves. “Really?”

Hyle nodded. “If it’s all right with you.”

Irin glanced at Gala, who nodded avidly.

She smiled at the other woman. “Oh! I ... Thank you!”

Nalfien continued. “Lifting the spell will most definitely have one effect. Your natural urges will finally surface, as will those of any men around you.” He stared at her seriously. “It’s imperative that you stay away from any unmated males.”

Without thought, her gaze went to Savous. Those sleepy red eyes gleamed at her over a knowing grin.

Radin’s voice sounded behind her. “Don’t fret it, kitten. We’ll see you soon enough. *I*, for one, fully intend to take part in your virgin contest.”

Savous chuckled, his gaze roaming over her face. The hungry look in his eyes had never been there before. At least, not that she’d seen. It made something behind her heart flip. “You’ll have to fight me for her.”

Irin’s mouth fell open. Truly? She’d harbored childish hopes, but ...

“Don’t look so shocked, kitten.”

Radin’s hands closed gently over her shoulders from behind. She started and glanced back into his equally hungry eyes. “Did you think we’d let anyone else be your first?”

Irin dissolved into a smile so wide it hurt her face.

“I thought you said the spell tamped their lusts,” Diana said, sounding amused. Irin could only go by sound because she couldn’t make herself look away from Radin or Savous.

“Physical, yes,” she heard Nalfien say. “But not all lusts are physical.”

“You’re all such randy dogs. You raised her from a babe!”

Savous’s fingers caressed the side of her neck, distracting her from Radin’s gaze. Savous grinned. “She’s not a babe now.”

Nalfien took hold of her chin, turning her back to face him. Savous and Radin stayed close, distracting her, but she tried to pay attention. “We’ll have your things moved tonight. It is imperative that you don’t leave these rooms. This is mainly because we are *not* immediately going to cast the spell to start your change to *raedjour*.”

She shook her head, trying to shake her thoughts into coherence. “Why not?”

“We’re concerned that you haven’t had your woman’s bleeding. We want to make sure that you have before we attempt the spell. That particular spell has been cast on young girls in the past, and the results have never been positive.”

Diana gasped. “You never --!” Something -- or someone -- cut her off abruptly.

Nalfien ignored the comment, still focused on Irin. “Staying in these rooms is for your own safety. Hyle is, of course, already truemated, so his personal interest in you should be at a minimum. He is also exceedingly good at tamping his own lusts. Gala will also be present and ever-watchful, so she can help see to your protection.”

Irin blinked. Other than Savous and Radin, she hadn’t really considered what her presence would do to the men she’d known and cared for her entire life. She glanced at both Hyle and Gala again, but their smiles were reassuring.

“Irin, do you understand why you must stay in these rooms?” Nalfien asked.

“Yes. I’ll stay. I promise.”

He nodded. “Good. You’ll stay here until you’ve bled at least twice.”

“Twice?”

Gala spoke up. “We just want to make sure things are normal for you, Irin.”

Irin scowled. “What if I’m not? What if something *is* wrong?”

Nalfien squeezed her hands in his. “Please believe, Irin, that we had your best intentions at heart. I’m sure I can say with all authority that every person in this room will do anything necessary to ensure your health and happiness.”

The murmurs of agreement from the room flooded Irin’s heart with love. Some of that flood filled her eyes with tears. Although she had sometimes felt isolated growing up and had often felt odd in her surroundings, she had never had cause to doubt that the sorcerers who had saved her loved her.

“OK.” Voice husky with emotion, she nodded.

Gala stepped forward and gently kissed the top of her head. “We’ll be right here with you, Irin. I promise.”

Irin nodded.

Radin’s hands, still on her shoulders, squeezed. “You’ll be fine, kitten. Two moons, and Hyle will announce your virgin contest.”

As he’d surely intended, that thought and the reminder of his touch distracted her from her emotional weep.

“And what’ll the contest be?” Savous asked, playing along. “It’ll give me time to prepare.”

Nalfien smiled at their banter. “That will be up to Hyle.”

Radin growled. “Don’t make it a reading contest or something!”

Savous grinned mischievously at Radin. “Why not, O master of mine? Have you forgotten how?”

Radin reached over Irin’s shoulder to grab Savous’s throat. “Keep it up and you may not be *able* to participate.”

Nalfien sighed, shaking his head. “I think that’s about as much damage as I choose to witness for tonight.” He looked to Irin, eyes twinkling with mirth. “Are you ready?”

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "You're going to lift it now?"

"There's no time like the present." He smiled fondly, brushing the back of one finger across her cheek. "I must apologize to you, little one, for not thinking of this sooner. I've been woefully neglectful of you these past cycles."

"No, that's all right."

"No, it's not. If Gala had not been perceptive enough to see, it might have still been some time before I realized something could be wrong." He placed a hand about the back of her neck and pulled her gently forward to press a fatherly kiss to her forehead. "Please forgive me."

Irin wound her arms around his neck for a firm hug. "You saved my life, and you allowed me to be raised in love rather than as a slave. I'm *forever* in your debt. There's nothing to forgive."

Nalfien returned her hug fiercely. "If we could have daughters, I could not wish for one to turn out better than you have."

A muffled squeak interrupted them. Irin peeked out of Nalfien's embrace to see both Salin and Radin subduing a struggling Diana.

They all laughed as Nalfien set Irin away from him. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Hyle. Radin."

Savous took Irin's hand and placed a quick kiss on her knuckles before rising and crossing to the other side of the room. Radin shook a warning finger at Diana -- who only glared at him over the hand Salin had planted across her mouth -- and crawled back across the bed to kneel behind Irin's right shoulder. Hyle stepped forward and knelt by her left side. Once they were settled, Nalfien began to chant words that seemed to be in the *raedjour* language, but they were none Irin knew. She looked up at him and became lost in those glowing red eyes. Radin and Hyle joined the chant, using similar but different words in a weird sort of harmony. A warmth rose up and spread from the pit of Irin's stomach up

through her chest, suffusing her limbs. It crept up her neck, flushed her face, and made her entire head feel muzzy and warm. She squirmed, closing her eyes, trying to adjust to the feeling. It was as though the warmth was filling her up or bubbling to the top, trying to get out. She felt ready to burst and couldn't decide if the feeling was painful or not. Then, with a sharp command from Nalfien, it popped and all the pressure evaporated, like the air in a floating soap bubble.

Irin blinked. And blinked again. Her mouth fell open as she stared at Nalfien. His black skin gleamed in the bright candlelight, and his gray-white hair glistened. She gaped. He was *beautiful!*

Beside her, Radin grunted. She turned and froze. A tangy, tasty smell assailed her nostrils, and the sight of his black tongue darting out to wet his lips held her captive. She didn't know she was leaning toward him until Hyle caught her shoulder and pulled her back. Nalfien's hand slapped on Radin's chest, stopping his advance.

Radin blinked, then shook his head. "Mother of us all, that's potent!"

Nalfien chuckled. He rose gracefully to his feet, firmly gripping Radin's arm to pull him up and away from the padded platform. For his part, Radin was having trouble looking away from Irin. He reached a hand toward her, his fingers brushing the hand she raised to his.

Nalfien slapped Radin's arm down. "Salin, I'll need your help to get Savous and Radin away."

"Just one little kiss?"

Irin swiveled her head and caught sight of Savous. She was squirming in Hyle's arms without thought. Savous's normally sleepy eyes were wide open, and that hungry look was back tenfold. He stepped toward her, heedless of anyone else.

Salin caught him about the waist and hauled the smaller man toward the door, laughing. "Oh, no, you don't."



Savous struggled, but Salin was far stronger. Irin whimpered from the cage of Hyle's arms as she watched Nalfien and Salin drag Radin and Savous from the room. Neither of the

unmated males took their eyes from her until the barrier of the walls and doors separated them.

Diana emerged from the doorway to the second room, her sleeping son in her arms. She chuckled as she crossed to the outer door of the suite. “Oh, this is going to be interesting.”

Chapter Three

Many times in his life, Radin had found it useful to have a secret mind-to-mind link with his brother, Salin. It allowed them to have a potentially dangerous discussion in complete safety, even in public. After hundreds of cycles, they were both so used to the link that they sometimes forgot to speak aloud when others were present.

Look at him.

Salin, leaning on the stone balustrade above the arena, casually lifted his eyes from the melee below, knowing exactly the *him* Radin meant.

Valanth stood on a similar balcony nearly on the other side of the arena from the one on which Salin stood. His entourage of five flanked him. Ever-present Betaf stood to his right, more like a pet than a companion, despite his ostentatious red robes. Vacant-eyed Brin -- the latest in the line of Valanth's lovers -- sat on the balustrade, naked, seemingly oblivious to the world. Her side pressed against Valanth's chest, her head resting on his shoulder. It seemed only Valanth's hold about her waist kept her from falling back and over the railing. Three burly guards stood behind, one of them his son Vikart. Valanth's attention was focused hungrily on the naked combatants below, his smile excitedly cruel. He didn't seem to be paying any attention at all to the fingers he had buried between Brin's legs.

He's not the only one enjoying the show, Salin pointed out mildly. *Diana's just as bloodthirsty.*

Beside Salin, his truemate was nearly bent double over the balustrade as she screamed encouragement for her favorite combatants. Smiling, he reached over to caress the curve of her buttocks, so nicely defined by her snug trousers. Rather than incite the combatants below further, she was clothed. Scantly, yes, but she was covered in trousers, boots, and a halter top.

It's not the same.

Salin glanced at his brother. Radin stood on Diana's other side, arms crossed over his bare chest.

Below them on the hard-packed arena floor, a dozen naked men wrestled for dominance. Their black skin glistened with oils, both olive oil and the natural oils from their bodies. This type of melee was a common pastime for the *raedjour*. There were few rules -- proved by a few casualties in the past -- and only one goal: to fuck and not to be fucked. Three or four dozen men would start, naked and oiled. The aim was to pin an opponent and fuck him. Doing so disqualified him. The last man to occupy the arena was the winner. The fun came in the fact that the men got carried away in a sexual frenzy. Coming rarely helped, because that meant one's cock wasn't ready to penetrate the next opponent.

Watch yourself, Salin cautioned, thinking of the look of disdain on Radin's face as he glared toward the *rhaeja*.

Radin nodded, shook himself, then leaned forward on the balustrade. To anyone else, it looked like he was enjoying the show. Only Salin, linked to his brother's mind, knew that he barely saw the melee below.

This wouldn't be necessary if he hadn't curtailed raiding, Radin pointed out.

Ah. That's what this is about.

It's about that and many other things. If he'd let us out of this cursed city more, we wouldn't need this for an outlet.

Hypocrite, Salin scoffed. I thought you were in favor of sparing humans more often?

I am.

By keeping us in the city, the humans are safe.

Radin darted another hateful glance at the *rhaeja*. *That's not why he does it.*

And you know why he does it?

No.

Couldn't it be that he wants to be cautious? The humans' caravans are getting larger and better equipped. Their weapons and magic are superior to when we were younger. Much as I hate to admit it, we barely took the last few.

Mentally, Radin grumbled. *Why are you making excuses for him?*

Why are you blindly opposed to him?

Radin didn't answer. He didn't have to. They both knew why. Ever since Savous had chosen Radin as his mentor over his father, Radin and the *rhaeja* had been at odds. In the last few cycles, the antagonism had gotten worse.

When Radin again projected his thoughts, they were calmly modulated. *Do you agree with all he's done?*

Not all, no. But I also can't see that all he's done is wrong, either.

Radin glanced at the woman squirming in excitement between them. He raised his gaze to his brother's. *Would you be able to survive her death?*

Salin froze, the very idea making his blood run cold. He wasn't conscious of shifting his position until he felt the warmth of her buttocks pressing against the front of his thighs. Diana grinned over her shoulder at him, wiggled her ass against him, then turned back to her entertainment.

You're one with her, Radin pointed out, sliding his hand down her back. You couldn't survive without her. What has surviving his true mate for so long done to Valanth?

A few cycles ago, Salin could only speculate. Now, with a true mate and a child of his own, his outlook had changed. He honestly couldn't answer Radin's question.

Chapter Four

Irin peeked out the door to her bedchamber to see Gala happily humming to herself as she lit various candles about the main room of the suite. A low, wide table was pushed up against one wall, set with plates of dried fruits, meat pasties, and a few bottles of wine. The padded platform was piled high with furs and pillows. A fire burned merrily in the fireplace. Irin sniffed and detected incense in the air although she couldn't decide on the source.

Gala caught her peeking and grinned. "Come out, naughty girl."

Irin grimaced, stepping into the room. "Can I help?"

"No. It's all done. We're just waiting on Hyle."

Irin's heart raced. Hyle. Her friend. A man who was more like a brother to her than anything. Tonight he'd become more than that. Tonight he would set the changing spell on her. A spell which could only be cast through sexual contact.

The last three moons had been an interesting time. Irin's first bleeding had begun the night the spell had lifted. The lust for Radin and Savous that had clogged her mind after the spell was removed had faded into the pain and discomfort of the bleeding. Gala had stayed with her most of the first night, providing hot water and towels to press against her twisting belly as well as helping her with the absorbent cloths she would need to wear until the

bleeding stopped. Those first few days had been agony, and she frequently asked Gala to just end her misery. After those first, agonizing seven nights, the first flow had stopped, but Irin had succumbed to a dizzying fever that had worried all of those close to her. For two weeks, she was bedridden and barely able to care for herself. Again, Gala and Hyle were blessings from the gods, each of them taking turns to see to her needs. No sooner had the fever died than Irin began bleeding again. This second time was not as awful as the first, but it still had not been comfortable. Thankfully, she had not succumbed to the fever again afterward, but Nalfien, Hyle, and Gala all thought it would be best if they waited for another bleeding to pass before trying the change spell.

The third bleeding had passed the previous day, and Irin felt fine. After an inspection by one of the healers and by Nalfien himself, it was declared that tonight the change spell would be set.

And the following night, her virgin contest would be held.

Irin knelt by the table and picked up a mug to pour some wine. "Where is Hyle?"

"Getting last instructions from Nalfien. He's never set the spell before, and he's nervous."

Irin nodded and gulped some wine.

"Irin."

Irin finished pouring her refill.

"Irin."

Mug poised before her mouth, Irin turned. Gala sat back among the pillows, watching her. The woman wore her usual outfit of a simple gossamer wrap about her hips and nothing else whatsoever. Irin rarely noticed that the woman was half naked. But tonight, she was quite aware.

Gala smiled and patted the pillow beside her. "Come here."

"Wine?" Irin asked, disgusted that her voice cracked.

Gala shook her head. "Just come here."

Clutching her mug, Irin went to kneel beside Gala. Gala sat up and took the mug from her hand and placed it on the floor a safe distance from the pillows. She returned to kneel before Irin and took the girl's hands into her own.

"Don't be nervous."

Irin swallowed. "I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you."

"You haven't been trouble."

"I know what my being here has done to Hyle."

Gala chuckled. The time between Irin's second and third bleedings had proved to be the most interesting. It was during this time that Hyle's basic *raedjour* instincts kicked in. Despite the fact that he was truemated, he wasn't immune to the presence of a ripe, unmated female. Irin often caught Hyle staring at her in a hungry way that she'd never seen on him before. It was very like the looks she'd seen on Radin's and Savous's faces the night the spell was lifted.

"Please don't be," Gala said, laughing gaily. "Your being here has reminded Hyle about sex. I couldn't be more pleased."

Irin gaped, which only made Gala laughed harder.

"You've know Hyle longer than I have. Surely you know that he'd never had another woman before me?"

Irin shook her head. "No. I didn't know that."

"Hmm. I suppose you were a bit young for that. Well, you know Hyle. He tends to get distracted. I happen to find it perfectly adorable, but it does get frustrating. He's very good at ignoring his lust. But with you here and me here and the fact that he had to stay around to watch over you and not get lost in his workroom, he hasn't been able to hide." Gala sighed dreamily. "I haven't been fucked so well or so often since I was in heat, and I hadn't thought that I would until I went back into heat." She gripped Irin's hands tightly, grinning madly. "I

might have to find another unmated woman to stay with us after you're gone, just to keep him going."

Irin's eyes went wide. Then she giggled. Then she laughed. She did *so* love Gala! The woman always knew how to put her at ease.

Gala laughed with her. She leaned over to retrieve Irin's wine and took a sip before returning the mug to the girl.

"Now," she said as Irin's laughter subsided, "I have a question to ask of you."

"What?"

"It's more of a favor, actually."

"Anything. You've been so good to me; I'll do anything I can for you."

Gala patted her knee. "Thank you, love, but I want you to feel free to say no to this one. You can and I won't take any offense. All right?"

"All right."

Gala's blue eyes fastened on Irin's. "You know some of what Hyle has to do to set the change spell, yes?"

Irin blushed, dropping her gaze momentarily. "Yes."

Gala's fingers played on Irin's bare knees. Like Gala, she wore a simple wrap about her hips, but she also wore a tie about her breasts.

"Do you mind if I stay?"

"Stay?"

"Watch? Maybe ... participate?"

Irin blinked. She didn't know details of what Hyle would do, only that he would touch her sexually. He couldn't penetrate her, for that would take her virginity; but the touches would definitely be sexual, and by all accounts, she should enjoy it. To have Gala with them. Watching. Maybe touching also ...

Her flush deepened, and she stared into the depths of her wine. "I don't mind."

Gala's hand slid up her bare arm to her shoulder, gripping it firmly. "Are you sure?"

Irin lifted a small smile for Gala to see. "I'm sure."

"Oh, good!" Gala went to retrieve her own mug of wine. "So. Have you thought of what kind of virgin contest you'll have?"

"Do I get a say?"

"I don't think other virgins usually do," Gala admitted, folding herself back into the pillows beside Irin. "But you're not the normal virgin, are you? You already know and accept what's going to happen. Most don't. Well, I've only known one woman who went through the virgin contest, but Suza certainly didn't know what was going to happen."

Irin lay back, making herself more comfortable beside Gala. "I haven't thought about it."

"Well, let's. We know it's a contest of some sort. Who do you want to win? Maybe we can come up with some ideas to make sure he does."

Another flush took Irin's cheeks.

Gala chuckled. "Oooh! You *do* have someone in mind. May I hazard a guess?"

Irin just sipped her wine.

"Would it be Radin? Or Savous?"

Irin shrugged. "Both."

"Mmm, very good choices. You do have good taste."

Irin shrugged. "I know them. I trust them."

"Absolutely. It makes perfect sense. So, let's see. A sorcerer's contest, then? Are there any other unmated sorcerers?"

"Rhicard and Betaf are the only ones."

“Hmm. Not much of a contest. I wonder if that’ll be a problem. Besides, if Savous is Radin’s apprentice, it would stand to reason that Radin would win. That’s not much of a contest.”

“Savous is strong,” Irin jumped to his defense before she could think.

“I know that, dear heart. But he is an apprentice.”

Irin settled back and sipped her wine, unwilling to further voice her thoughts on that.

“Maybe there’s another type of contest. What are they both good at?”

The two women happily discussed men for a while until the chamber’s main door opened. Hyle walked in and stopped when he saw them. Irin wasn’t sure he even heard the breathy moan that escaped his mouth.

Gala settled in closer to Irin with a coy look at her truemate. “Welcome home, my love.”

Hyle’s normally guileless eyes drooped to half-mast in a sultry look. A few tendrils of his long, straight white hair framed his round, youthful face, and his full black lips pulled up into anything but an innocent smile. As he stepped closer, Gala snuggled up against Irin’s arm, one breast lightly brushing her forearm. This particular sight seemed to fascinate Hyle.

“Irin says I can stay.”

Hyle dragged his gaze from his truemate’s breast to Irin’s flushed face. “Are you certain?”

Irin remembered to breathe. She had never, even in the past few moons living in his suite, seen Hyle look as he did at this moment. She didn’t know how to define it. It wasn’t quite confidence and it wasn’t quite lust. It was more of an ... assurance? A certainty. Perhaps this was the look that a man got when he knew sex was in his near future. Or maybe it was the expression of a happily mated male.

Irin gazed into those red eyes and suddenly wanted him. Very much. This man who had helped to raise her, who had been more of a brother to her than anything. She finally

saw him in a different light. As a very beautiful man with the potential to make her feel incredibly good. She nodded. "I'm sure."

Gala laughed softly as she knelt up before her true mate. "Let me help you out of those boots, my love," she offered innocently.

Hyle placed a hand on her shoulder to steady himself as he lifted a foot. Gala helped him out of first one, then the other boot as well as the stockings underneath. Once he stood on his bare feet, she hitched up higher on her knees, putting her face on level with the bulge in his trousers. She slid her hands up his shins, his thighs, skirted his groin, and took hold of his belt buckle. He let her take the belt, but stopped her from unlacing his trousers.

"Wait," he answered her pout. He knelt on the pillows before Irin. She took the hand he held out to her and let him pull her up to kneel facing him. "You know what has to happen?"

She shrugged.

"Would you like me to explain it more?"

She smiled. One of the reasons she loved Hyle was that he was always willing to explain, as best he could. His best was usually very good. "Please."

He nodded and closed his eyes briefly. He took a breath. When his eyes opened again, some of the lust had been tamped and his face and eyes were closer to their normal state. "The spell is actually not that dissimilar from the one that was on you most of your life. Like that one, I'll cast a web that will touch every part of your body and will alter you. Unlike that one, this one is far more permanent. The other touched one particular aspect of your body. This one will touch many more. You very likely won't feel anything. In fact, you should be distracted. Because the time I'll set the spell will be during an orgasm. It's the time when your mental and metaphysical shields are at their weakest between you and the one who gives you pleasure." At his last few sentences, a small smile took his lips and the hot heaviness returned to his gaze. "Do you understand?"

She nodded, suddenly impatient to get on with it. She didn't care how it happened anymore. She just had a fierce desire to devour his mouth.

His smile grew and he leaned in, one hand raised to slide into the hair behind her ear. He didn't pull. He didn't guide. He merely steadied her as he leaned in until his lips were a breath away from hers. Then he stopped. The next move was hers.

She swayed forward that extra breath and pressed her lips to his. They were soft and warm. At first it was just a meeting of lips, breath caressing each other's cheeks. Irin's hands fisted in her waist wrap as she lost herself in sensations she'd never considered receiving from Hyle.

He tilted his head and tugged ever-so-gently on her hair to urge her to do the same. The angle allowed a better fit, especially as his mouth opened partially and his tongue slid out, swiping hers. Startled, she parted her own lips and sighed as his tongue slid past her teeth to entice her own tongue to come out and play. How odd! How wonderful! Hyle tasted of heavy cream and some deep, dark spice she couldn't identify. Without realizing, she leaned fully into him, raising her hands to grip his shoulders.

She didn't know how long they kissed. At some point, he pushed up farther on his knees, forcing her to do the same or lose contact. She wound her arms around his neck, loving the feel of his bare, smoothly muscular arms sliding around her waist and back to support her. Her breasts and belly mashed against his chest was a heady feeling that made her wiggle, anxious to feel more of his hot skin against hers.

She was lowered to her back in the pillows. Hyle deposited her there, then sat back, breathing hard. He threw back his head, and it pillowed nicely on Gala's shoulder, as his true mate was wound about him from behind. He turned his head and met her lips. Their tongues dueled briefly before he reached up to grab hold of her ponytail and pull her off to the side.

She giggled as she fell to the pillows. He mock-glared at her. "I need a moment to concentrate."

Gala giggled again and crawled up to lay beside Irin. She propped her head on her hand, her elbow in the pillows, the better to see Irin. "That was beautiful," she assured Irin, her eyes shining. She reached over with her free hand and trailed her fingers lightly up Irin's bare belly, then over the fabric that covered her cleavage. "Isn't that confining?" she asked, a mischievous twist to her lips.

Breathless, Irin couldn't protest as Gala dug under her neck and found the tie to her halter. Knot undone, Gala trailed her hand back to Irin's front, bringing the fabric with it. She hummed happily when Irin's breasts were exposed, echoed by Hyle's moan. Both truemates leaned in, and each suckled a nipple into their mouth.

Irin cried out at the sudden spikes of pleasure. She gripped the pillows and furs beneath her, throwing her head back with a moan as they eagerly assaulted her breasts. Tongues, lips, and teeth nipped at the sensitive peaks, driving Irin insane. Hyle dropped most of his weight down atop her, pressing his belly to her groin. She ground against him, delighted to find something hard to press against her aching center.

Hyle released her nipple with a pop, then edged down to nuzzle the hot crease beneath her breast. He tongued the sensitive skin, making her quiver, before continuing his journey down her belly. Irin was hard-pressed to concentrate on his actions with Gala still torturing her other breast. She bit her lip and whimpered, helpless beneath the dual assault. Hyle's tongue traced her navel, sucked at the slight swell of her belly beneath. Her wrap was gone, victim to his nimble fingers. Those same fingers found the curly hair at her mound and stroked. Petting. Tracing. He bit the strong muscle inside her thigh as his fingers continued to explore her softly, gently. He skirted around that ache, and Irin rolled her hips, encouraging him to find and appease her ache. His fingers found her drenched nether lips and parted them. He dragged his tongue through them. Irin screamed.



“Amazing. Beautiful.” Gala’s words were murmured against her throat. Gala’s breasts were pressed to Irin’s side, her lips nibbling at the sensitive skin behind Irin’s ear. She kept talking, but Irin lost the sense of words as Hyle’s tongue finally found the ache.

She screamed, her hips bucking against his mouth. He caught her hips with strong hands to still her, opened his mouth, and sucked her between his lips. Irin cried, whimpered, bucking into the amazing feeling that Hyle’s tongue presented. Gala held her close, the fingers of one hand tugging hard at her nipple. The twin sensations ruled Irin’s world for precious, agonizing moments before she could stand no more. The most amazing feeling burbled in the pit of her belly and spilled down and up at the same time, heating her blood and firing every sense she had. It exploded outward in a wonderfully horrible burst.

The feeling subsided some, but they kept at what they were doing and the feeling rebuilt until Irin shattered again. And again.

After the third, Hyle tore back from between her legs. Languid and amazed, Irin could only watch as he grabbed Gala’s legs and hauled her onto her back. She released Irin willingly, her hands scrabbling at her wrap while his tore at the laces of his trousers. His cock, thick and hard, sprang free, slapping his belly. He grabbed it and fell on Gala as she spread her legs for him. Irin watched him aim and slam home into Gala’s cunt and gasped with Gala at the move. The frantic, urgent pumping that commenced was entirely unlike Hyle and amazingly beautiful to watch. Gala’s cries could have been pain but were clearly pleasure as she slammed back at her truemate as hard as she could. It took only moments before Gala cried out, her entire body seizing. Hyle whimpered, his thrusting slowing to deliberate, precise pumps.

Hyle collapsed with a sigh onto Gala. Gala panted, then giggled, then laughed. She hugged Hyle, then reached out to take Irin’s hand. “Oh, Irin! I *must* keep you around more often!”

Chapter Five

Garn thumped his chest. “How could she *possibly* deny me?”

“The list of your faults is too long,” Trachon declared.

Savous laughed along with the five others who sat with him, up to their chests in hot, bubbling spring water. The men were enjoying a good soak before the virgin contest later that day. Around them, the air in the main bathing cavern was thick with moisture. The men occupied a pool in the heated corner, still within the main cave and not within one of the secluded caves just through a tunnel nearby. Farther into the well-lit cavern were cooler and larger pools for all sorts of bathing and recreation.

Garn rolled his eyes. “You’re all mad because I’m going to have her.”

“You?” Savous’s eyebrows crowded his hairline. “You’ve never noticed her before.”

“She was just a girl then, Savous! From all I hear, she’s a *woman* now.”

A part of Savous was offended by the remark, although he wasn’t sure why. He chose to overlook it and chuckled along with the others.

Dreidon appeared in the entrance to the caverns and made his way to the group as Garn and Trachon continued their outrageous assumptions. Savous saw him and stopped

teasing, clued to something wrong by Dreidon's expression. The other man slipped into the pool and sat quietly at Savous's side.

"What's wrong?"

Dreidon looked up at him. "Brin's dead."

All talk stopped. No one said a word. No one but Dreidon looked at Savous. Here, amongst his friends, his feelings toward his father were known even if they weren't discussed openly.

Savous growled, instantly furious. He stood in the water. Dreidon caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"I need to take a walk."

"There's nothing you can do."

"I know that."

He left the pool, found a drying cloth, and ran it quickly over his skin. He stalked to the stone bench where his trousers and boots lay and angrily put them on.

He left the bathing chamber, alone with his thoughts. Brin was the latest in the line of unmated women whom his father had taken and ruined. "Ruined," in Savous's opinion, was the only word for it. They were normal women when they went to him, unmated despite at least a cycle of seasons among the *raedjour*. But after a time with the *rhaeja*, they grew withdrawn and, inevitably, ceased to speak, at least in public. Their eyes took on a vacant look, like their minds were gone. It was not long after that look appeared that they would die. So everyone had suspected Brin would die soon, but no one acknowledged it. How could they? Valanth was *rhaeja*. His word was Hers, and Her word was law. If he saw fit to take a woman after his truemate's death, so be it. If he saw fit to kill her slowly, there was nothing to be done but watch. As Savous understood it, Nalfien had objected when the first two had died, but he could never prove that it was something the *rhaeja* did. Besides, the typical

punishment for such things as murder or theft was to have the accused enter the *vetriese*. Valanth had done that and emerged unscathed.

Savous found himself at the main entrance to the tower that contained Valanth's personal suite. No guards were posted, but Savous could feel the tingling awareness of Valanth's personal shields shimmering in the air. His father was upstairs.

Without much thought, Savous turned and mounted the four large steps that led to the thick, wooden outer door. Politely, he lifted the heavy knocker and let it drop with a bang.

Betaf opened the door. As he always did, Savous wondered if there was any menial task Betaf would not perform for Valanth. Betaf smiled, but there was no substance to it. "Come in, Savous. Your father expects you." He bowed low, which Savous thought was just an excuse to show off his new embroidered robe.

"He expects me?"

Betaf's smile twisted. "He is *always* expecting you, Savous. He knows someday you'll come to him."

Savous scowled, passing the other sorcerer. "I'm not here for that. I heard about Brin. I thought he might be in mourning." It was as good an excuse as any, although he fully suspected Valanth did not mourn Brin's death.

Betaf straightened and met Savous's deadpan gaze. The other sorcerer blinked. "Her passing is indeed sad." There was little inflection in his voice. His gaze plainly told Savous that he couldn't care less. "But life is a fluid process."

Disgusted by the man, Savous turned away. He headed toward the left and the wide, curved staircase that led to the upper level. "Is he in his suite?"

"No. He's in the workroom."

Savous hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. Then headed up.

Valanth's workroom was on the top floor of the five-story tower. It lay directly above his sleeping chambers. It also lay embedded within the rock ceiling of the cavern that

encased the tower. Savous had only been in the workroom a few times, and all those had been over two hundred cycles previous, when he'd been a child and his mother had been alive.

He wound round and round the circular stairwells, up and up to the fifth floor. That final floor was guarded by an ironwood door. He hesitated on seeing the door ajar. Steeling himself, he mounted the last few steps and entered.

The circular room was as big around as the tower that sat beneath it. The floor was wooden, but the windowless walls were all natural stone, complete with shining mineral deposits threaded throughout. A large firepit was set in the middle of the floor, circular in shape and surrounded by more stone to protect the wood planking. The bowl of the pit was iron, laced with magic to prevent the metal's heat from catching the floor afire. Sconces and candelabra were scattered along the wall, but as he remembered it from before, the firepit provided the only illumination. For a "workroom," surprisingly few shelves and tables lined the walls, with only a spattering of scrolls and vials set about. These items seemed more decorative than functional. One oddity was what looked like a bed platform, piled high with blankets and pillows, which sat to one side in the dark by the wall. Was Valanth sleeping here now instead of in the suite below?

Valanth sat on a massive, throne-like divan on the opposite side of the firepit from the entrance. His long white hair draped his naked form like a cloak. The white markings on his skin stood out and glittered in the firelight.

"Welcome, my son," he said, eyes opening to reveal orange irises every bit as fiery as the pit before him.

Savous stood in the doorway, staring at the man who had fathered him. Had he ever known him? Even as a child, had he ever loved him? He seemed to remember happier days, when his mother was alive, but most of his memories were of her specifically. Of the man who led the *raedjour*, he could scarcely recall any personal memories. Since his mother's death, he certainly couldn't remember an occasion when the *rhaeja's* actions and words had

seemed anything but *wrong*. He hid something behind that imperious, cold demeanor, and that something was dark and dangerous.

“Come in, Savous. I’m delighted you’ve come to see me.”

Savous stepped into the room even though every instinct screamed at him to leave and to leave now. The very air around the *rhaeja* crackled, and it wasn’t with divine fire.

“I hope I’m not intruding on your grief.”

Valanth had the grace to bow his head, briefly closing his eyes in an expression that was meant to be sadness. “You heard of Brin’s passing.”

“I did.” Savous stopped at the opposite side of the firepit from Valanth just as the *rhaeja*’s eyes reopened. “It must be very hard on you.”

“It is. I will miss her.”

Liar! He stared at the man, debating his next words. But he had to try. “Father, don’t take another.”

One of Valanth’s snowy brows lifted in question. “Another?”

“Another woman. Please, don’t take another. Leave them be.”

“You would have me be alone? Bereft in my grief?” Valanth’s voice was carefully cool.

“I would not see you ruin another woman.”

“Ruin?”

“Kill.”

Valanth opened his mouth in a good parody of shock. “You accuse me of Brin’s death?”

“I do.”

The brows dropped, crowding those half-lidded orange eyes in a dark frown. “And how, pray tell, was this accomplished? The woman was in perfect health.”

“She was not. Her mind was gone. She wasted away.”

“You know this? You examined her?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Then how do you know this?”

“I only had to look at her ...”

“And how often did you see her?”

Savous cut himself off. It was no use. He’d known it wouldn’t be.

Valanth spread his hands wide, palms up. “I spent most of every night with the woman. I assure you, her mind was not gone. She was healthy, until the end.”

“How did she die?”

“Her heart, poor thing.” A common enough ailment for the women who became *raedjour*. After centuries, even with the change spell, some of their organs would succumb to human ailments. Valanth’s look at Savous turned to admonishment. “You should not assume, my son, that just because the woman chose to be a recluse that she was suffering in any way.”

Savous ducked his head, a vain attempt to hide the contempt he knew burned in his eyes. “My apologies, *Father*, but you must see things from my perspective. From the *raedjour* perspective. Brin is only the last of a long list of your lovers who have met a similar end.”

“And because of this coincidence, I am guilty of murder?”

So calm. So assured. If Savous hadn’t been *sure*, he might have been swayed. “But surely you can see ...”

“I see that my son and my people wish for me to be bereft of a lover.”

“What of Betaf?” Everyone knew the younger sorcerer was Valanth’s willing toy.

“There is no substitute for a woman’s body.”

“Father, it’s not right that you take unmated women. Your truemate is gone. You can’t have --”

“I am, far more than anyone else, aware of Gwenyth’s departure from this realm.” Savous held his breath at the crack in Valanth’s voice. He expelled it when Valanth continued in a more measured tone. “And you do not know that I cannot have more children. There is the prophecy.”

“Your prophecy says nothing of children.”

“No. But that could be what it meant.”

Savous gaped. “You don’t really believe that it means you’ll have another true mate!”

“And why not? What else could I be saved from other than my loneliness?”

Savous shook his head. “None of the women you took were mages.”

“A mage has not come to us in all this time.”

“Then wait for your mage. Leave these other women be!”

“I will not have my life dictated by you, whelp!”

Savous staggered back as the fire between them suddenly erupted to touch the seared ceiling. When it died down, Valanth was standing, his knee-length hair floating about his body on angry currents of air.

“I tolerated your accusations because you are my son, but I will not have you dictate my actions. There is only one who could do this, and She remains silent. She has chosen me for my role. She gave me the prophecy of which we speak. She has given me hope to continue. I am still alive, and I will not be brought down by the death of one woman.”

Savous glared. That “one woman” was clearly not Brin but Gwenyth, his mother. He dropped to one knee, bowing his head in a gesture of the respect he wanted to display but didn’t feel. “My apologies, *rhaeja*.”

“Not accepted. I see now that you came only to berate me. I had hoped you came to apprentice with me.”

That again? “I have a master.”

“As you continue to remind me.”

The sounds on the other side of the firepit indicated that Valanth had resumed his seat. Savous kept his head bowed.

“You’ve accused me of murder.”

Savous’s blood ran cold. Valanth wouldn’t force him into the *vetriese*?! How could he not have thought of that?

“However, I am aware that yours is not an uncommon opinion. It seems my people have an unfavorable opinion of me of late. This means that I will keep your punishment for this between the two of us rather than a public declaration.”

Which, Savous thought spitefully, *would work in my favor.*

“You must perform a task for me, my son. Only then will I excuse your words.”

Savous’s heart resumed a steady beat. He stayed on his knee with his head bowed.

“What is this task, Father?”

“I require some galpa fruit. You will leave tonight to fetch me some.”

Savous jerked his head up. “Tonight?”

“Yes.”

Galpa fruit could only be obtained from one section of the forest, a day’s travel away. One day to reach the galpa grove and one day to return with the fruit. “But Irin’s virgin contest is tonight!”

“And you have accused your *rhaeja* -- your *father* -- of murder! You do understand that if there were witnesses, I would demand you be thrown into the *vetriese*.”

Savous ground his teeth. It was true. Fetching the galpa was far preferable. Judging by the look in Valanth’s eyes, his father knew exactly how much it pained him not to participate in a chance for Irin’s virginity. *That* was his real punishment.

Stupid fool! He berated himself, even as he bent his head again. “Of course. My apologies. I will do as you ask, *rhaeja*.”

Chapter Six

Radin was shocked. *He what?*

Salin's next thoughts held the equivalent of a mental shrug. *I thought you might want to know.*

Galpa fruit?

That's what I was told.

Radin let his brush drop to the table at which he stood, staring blankly at the wall as he digested Salin's words. *Whatever for?*

I haven't a clue.

When did he leave?

Not long ago. He probably hasn't even reached the surface yet.

But why did he go?

I'm not sure. All Garn said is that when he heard of Brin's death, he went off on his own. Salin paused. Radin sensed his reluctance to go on. *Dreidon thought he'd go see the rhaeja ...*

What?!

You haven't heard about Brin, I take it?

What about Brin?

She died this evening.

Wearily, Radin scraped a hand over his face. *That will teach me to meditate.*

Salin chuckled dryly.

Radin's thoughts roiled. Hearing of Brin's death would likely have upset Savous. He took the deaths of each of his father's mistresses hard. But would he have confronted Valanth? No. Surely if he had, the *rhaeja* would have killed him. Or thrown him into the *vetriese*.

As they sometimes did, Radin's mental musings must have seeped through to Salin, because his brother answered. *Which would have been a good thing.*

The vetriese? No, it would not.

Why?

Because he's not ready.

Salin sent the silent equivalent of a snort. *Please.*

He has his reasons for not going to Her.

All of them selfish and childish. He could have ended this long ago.

We don't know that.

Stop fooling yourself. Who else but him?

Radin shook his head. *There's no sense in going over this again.*

True.

Is he all right?

Salin sighed, clearly perturbed. As a warrior, Salin preferred to make things happen, rather than wait. He didn't understand or approve of Savous's hesitation. *As far as I know, yes. He was seen leaving of his own volition.*

Good. Radin glanced at the time statue. It was time to go. *Does Irin know?*

No. Should I let Hyle know?

Radin sighed. *Yes.*

Suzana sat toward the front of the low platform, her violet eyes eagerly taking in the gathering. Radin stepped up on the ground beside her, catching her off guard. She jumped, her long white hair falling over her eyes as she nearly tumbled over the side of the platform.

Radin caught her. "I'm sorry, little bird." He steadied her back on her pillows. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She smiled up at him, brushing hair from her round black cheeks. "That's all right, Radin."

Behind her, Krael snorted before taking a sip of his wine. "He meant to startle you right into his arms, Suza."

The smile she aimed at Radin grew. "That's all right, my lord."

Radin laughed and helped right the tiny woman on her knees. Her hair spilled loosely over her shoulders and full, bare breasts. The wrap she wore about her hips was silvery blue, and a thick, gem-studded choker encircled her slim neck.

"You're excited," he observed.

She clasped her hands together, beaming. "Of course! There hasn't been another virgin contest since mine. Now I get to see what it's like."

Suzana had been the first virgin to be found by the *raedjour* in many, many cycles. Before Suzana was found, Nalfien had predicted that Irin would be the next virgin. Suzana's virgin contest had been decided by Radin himself and had been a battle of brawn. Krael had been the one to win her and, surprisingly, had also turned out to be her truemate. Before this couple, the *raedjour* had come to believe that no truemate ever happened with the first man with whom a woman mated.

Lounging behind her, Krael casually picked through the assorted sweetmeats set on a tray beside them. “You won’t see much.”

She twisted to throw him a questioning gaze. “Why not, my lord?”

He smirked. “I’ll have all your attention before it’s through.”

If a blush could have shown on her gleaming black skin, Radin was sure she’d be vivid red. She put fingertips to her full lips and averted her eyes coyly. “Of course, my lord.”

Radin hitched up to sit on the edge of their platform beside Suzana. “You’ll see some,” he told her casually, surveying the growing crowd about them. “And Irin’s contest will be somewhat different than yours.”

“How so?”

“She’s a different woman with different needs.” Radin cast a sly look back at Krael. “It may surprise you to know that not *all* women want ill-mannered, wooden-brained louts like Krael.”

Faster than he’d thought possible, Krael lashed out and kicked him off the platform. Radin laughed as he gained his feet, dusting off his trousers. As though nothing had happened, Krael was again tasting the sweetmeats.

The look Suzana gave him was admonishing but amused. “Radin! You cannot say such things about my lord!”

Radin exchanged looks with a very smug Krael. “She’s far too good for you, Krael.”

“And yet, she’s mine.”

The eyes Suzana turned to gaze upon her true mate were testament to that and more.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Radin turned away to gaze at the crowd that was filling the arena. Irin and Gala sat on a low circular platform in the very center of the wide space. Pillows were piled high around them, with bear fur underneath to provide cushion and warmth. Four burly guards stood about the platform, their backs to the women, facing the

audience that surrounded them on all sides of the brightly lit arena. The crowd -- like Suzana and Krael -- stood or lounged on platforms that circled the sides of the arena.

“Will you be competing, Radin?”

He turned to face Suzana. She eyed him curiously, fingering her necklace.

“Actually, I will.”

She smiled. “Oh, good!”

“Good?”

“Yes. Krael’s told me something of Irin ... recently.” She threw a slanted glance back at her truemate. Radin got the clear idea that Suzana would have liked to have heard about Irin sooner. “And he’s told me how you’ve helped to raise her. I’m sure having someone she knows and trusts as her first will make it better for her.”

Krael stared thoughtfully at his truemate’s back, but her attention was on Radin.

He smiled down at her open, honest face. “There’s no guarantee I’ll win her.”

She tilted her head, a look of mock amazement on her face. “Could someone *possibly* best *you*, Radin?”

He gaped. She was teasing him, the little minx! Krael collapsed in laughter.

Gala grinned at Irin. “Comfy?”

Irin gave her a nervous grin back, fiddling with the edge of her short skirt. “As much as I can be.” Aside from the fact that this was her virgin contest, this was also the first time Irin was in public and the center of attention. All during her life, her protectors had kept her safe on the outskirts. Any public outing she attended, she stayed toward the back and was surrounded at all times. Tonight, although she was still surrounded by protection, she was certainly the focus of everyone’s attention.

Gala chuckled. “Don’t worry. You won’t be comfortable long.” She glanced over her shoulder at the eager looks focused on Irin. “Not if they have anything to say about it.”

Nervous, Irin wouldn’t look and the group of bachelors awaiting their chance at her. She kept her gaze flitting from Gala to her skirt, intensely aware of the fact that she was finally dressed like a woman. She only wore a filmy skirt and sandals. Her breasts were bare, and she couldn’t even cover with her hair since Gala had insisted on pinning it back for the occasion.

Blushing, she cast her gaze about the arena again. “Where’s Savous?”

Gala’s gaze lowered on a frown. “I should have known you’d notice.” She sighed. “It seems he’s not going to be here tonight, Irin.”

Irin gaped. “He’s not? Why?”

“He asked Rhicard to give you the message, but he passed it on to me. Savous wanted to apologize to you, but the *rhaeja* sent him away for a few days.”

“Why?”

“I’m not entirely sure.”

Irin could only stare. “Why would he go away tonight?”

Gala shook her head. “I don’t know, sweetheart, but it must have been a good reason.”

“But ... why would ...?”

“I know. I know. But it can’t be helped. He’s already left. Radin’s here.”

Irin didn’t look. She knew where he was. Had known since he walked in the room. Radin did not stand with the group of bachelors. Instead, he chatted with Krael and Suza, perched on the edge of their platform. He looked positively edible in bright goldenrod trousers and matching knee-high boots with bold black trim. His waist-length white hair was bound in a tail that hung in loose waves down his back. She pouted at that. He *knew* she loved his hair down.

She put thoughts of Savous reluctantly aside. She was too nervous to think on it at the moment. "Can't I just choose now?" she muttered at Gala.

Gala laughed. "Oh, come now, Irin. Look at the gorgeous banquet being offered you." She waved her hand to indicate the waiting men. "Don't limit yourself. Besides ..." She leaned in to whisper in Irin's ear. "... if you let men work for it a little bit, it's worth it in the end. Believe me."

"Work?"

"I know you've decided on him, but don't let him win too easily. Especially since Savous isn't here. If he's not quite sure, he'll work harder and he'll want you more. And anyway, it's about time Radin had to work for something!"

They shared a giggle over that.

A silence descended as Betaf entered through one of the four entrances. The sight itself was a rare occurrence, as the sorcerer was rarely seen away from Valanth. "The *rhaeja* will not be in attendance tonight," Betaf announced, drawing his formal robes about him. He looked to Irin, and a cool smile curved his lips. "The *rhaeja* extends his best wishes to the virgin as well as to the man who wins her favors." With that pronouncement, he turned and left.

"Well. Should you feel offended?" Gala's murmur was not the only one to follow Betaf from the room.

Irin stared after the sorcerer. "Actually, to be honest, I'm kind of relieved."

Gala squeezed her hand. "I understand the feeling."

Hyle stepped up on the platform by their feet. "It's time."

Gala nodded and smoothed a hand over Irin's bare shoulder. "It'll be fine. I promise." She leaned in and kissed Irin very softly on the lips. Irin didn't imagine the murmurs of approval from around the room.

Gala stepped back and off the low platform. Hyle stepped forward to kneel in her place. Irin gladly focused on his calm, sweetly handsome face. “Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath. As soon as she said yes, it would begin.

She nodded.

He smiled and reached out to run his fingers in a brief caress over her cheek. Then he stepped back off the platform. With a gesture, he sent the guards away so that only he and Irin remained in the center of the arena. He stood still, studying her. Then the spark of red in his eyes began to glow faintly brighter. He lifted his hands slowly from his sides. A soft orange glow hovered above his upturned palms. He turned them toward each other, and the orange glow burned redder as he seemed to squish it into a sphere. When the sphere was about a handspan in width, he gave it a shove and the ball drifted toward her. She watched, wide-eyed, as it stopped a thumb’s length from her heart, then burst. There was no sensation, but she blinked anyway. By the time her eyes were open again, the sphere was much larger. It surrounded her platform and was perhaps her height if she’d been standing. It was mostly transparent and only visible as a faint, reddish haze. Strangely, she felt it.

Hyle turned toward the waiting men. “The *shri* has been cast, and the keys are *lus vet fallon*.” Lust and interest.

A few thoughtful looks at that. The announcement of the second key was what they were waiting for. The *shri* was keyed to two emotions. Lust was always a factor and was the basis for this and many other *raedjour* spells. The other key was the variation and changed with each person the spell was cast upon. Or each time the spell was cast on the person. The spell was sometimes used for sport and could be cast on men, as well.

After his announcement, Hyle left her side, taking his place with Gala not far away. As her guardian, it was his duty to keep her safe, but he couldn’t be right beside her.

They approached. Some cautiously, some eagerly. One ran forward and planted himself at the *shri*’s edge, right before her. He leaned in, hands and chest pressed to the *shri*, and

smiled. She knew him and had always thought he was marvelously handsome and very charming. She matched Dreidon's smile. Her eyes widened in surprise when his hands sank into the shield slightly, like a thumb pressed into a soft apple. He had to push, but it did give way. Curious, she flicked her attention to the man beside him to notice two interesting things. First, the other's hand had not sunk into the *shri*. Second, the instant her gaze swayed from him, Dreidon's hands popped back to the edge of the shield.

Irin giggled into her hand. Oh, this was going to be fun!

Radin hovered back, allowing other men to vie for Irin's attention. He watched, amused, as they would gain her attention and slowly step into the shield, only to be shoved back when another snagged her fancy. It was a well-known game, and most of those who took the first try knew they weren't likely to win. But, by showing an interest, they made themselves known to Hyle, who would likely remember and put them on the list of Irin's lovers. Also, they helped to fan the flames of Irin's lust, which spread out to affect the audience.

The initial onslaught subsided in good-natured rivalry as the men jostled for attention. Only one fight broke out, and it was minor.

Gradually, the more serious contenders stepped in. These were older men in their prime, far more intent on actually accomplishing the goal of the virgin. Radin watched these carefully. These men were more vocal and far more seductive, calling to Irin and murmuring dark promises. Radin had to smile at the becoming blushes that heated Irin's round cheeks. Likely she'd heard it all before, but never aimed at her.

Still Radin waited, watching closely. He could feel her growing arousal. The virgin spell let everyone in the vicinity feel it. Behind Radin on the viewing platforms, already dozens of couples -- and more -- were engaged with each other, no longer interested in the outcome of the virgin contest.

Three men remained. Each one of them had succeeded in getting her attention enough that, at different times, they'd stood on the platform.

Radin stepped forward. He was off to her left, so she didn't immediately see him. She lay mostly on her back within the pillows, eyes fixed on Khavya as he stepped carefully onto the platform, murmuring sweetly. The man's hands slid over his chest, drawing her gaze to his tight-fitting trousers.

With a casual gesture, Radin reached up and released his hair from its tie, making sure to let it fly. By shaking it out, he caught her attention. Khavya cursed and stumbled as the *shri* pushed him back to the border.

Irin's big blue eyes fastened on Radin's smiling face. Her pupils were wide, and her breath came in short pants. He wondered if she realized that her hips were squirming. Her hands pressed a little too hard in her lap. The scent of her was intoxicating.

He let his hair fall forward to obscure most of the left side of his face, peering at her through the long white fall he knew she adored. "Hello, kitten."

"Irin!" Khavya called.

Her eyes snapped to the other. Radin rolled his eyes. Wasn't she tired of this by now?

Khavya sank into the boundary of the *shri*, his eyes trained on her, holding her captive. Radin scowled. She couldn't possibly be tempted?

He sauntered toward Khavya, studying the man casually as he passed behind him. Equally casually, he shrugged out of his vest, exposing his bare torso. When he reached Khavya's other side, he tossed the vest toward Irin. The *shri* only prevented the passage of living bodies, not objects. The vest landed half on her lap. She looked down at it and away from Khavya. Khavya sneered good-naturedly at him as she fingered the vest. The rules stated that they had to keep boots and trousers on, nothing about shirts or vests. Radin wasn't the first of the night to distract her with clothing, but Khavya had not.

Grinning for Khavya, he turned back to Irin. He placed a hand on the *shri*, exploring what felt like warm ice, wet and hard and slippery. He ran his hand over it slowly, caressing it. The move caught her eye. Irin watched his fingers smooth over what was visibly thin air. He leaned his whole body against the *shri* as he felt it give, pressing his chin to the back of his hand. “Let me in, kitten,” he murmured. “It’s time for our next lesson.”

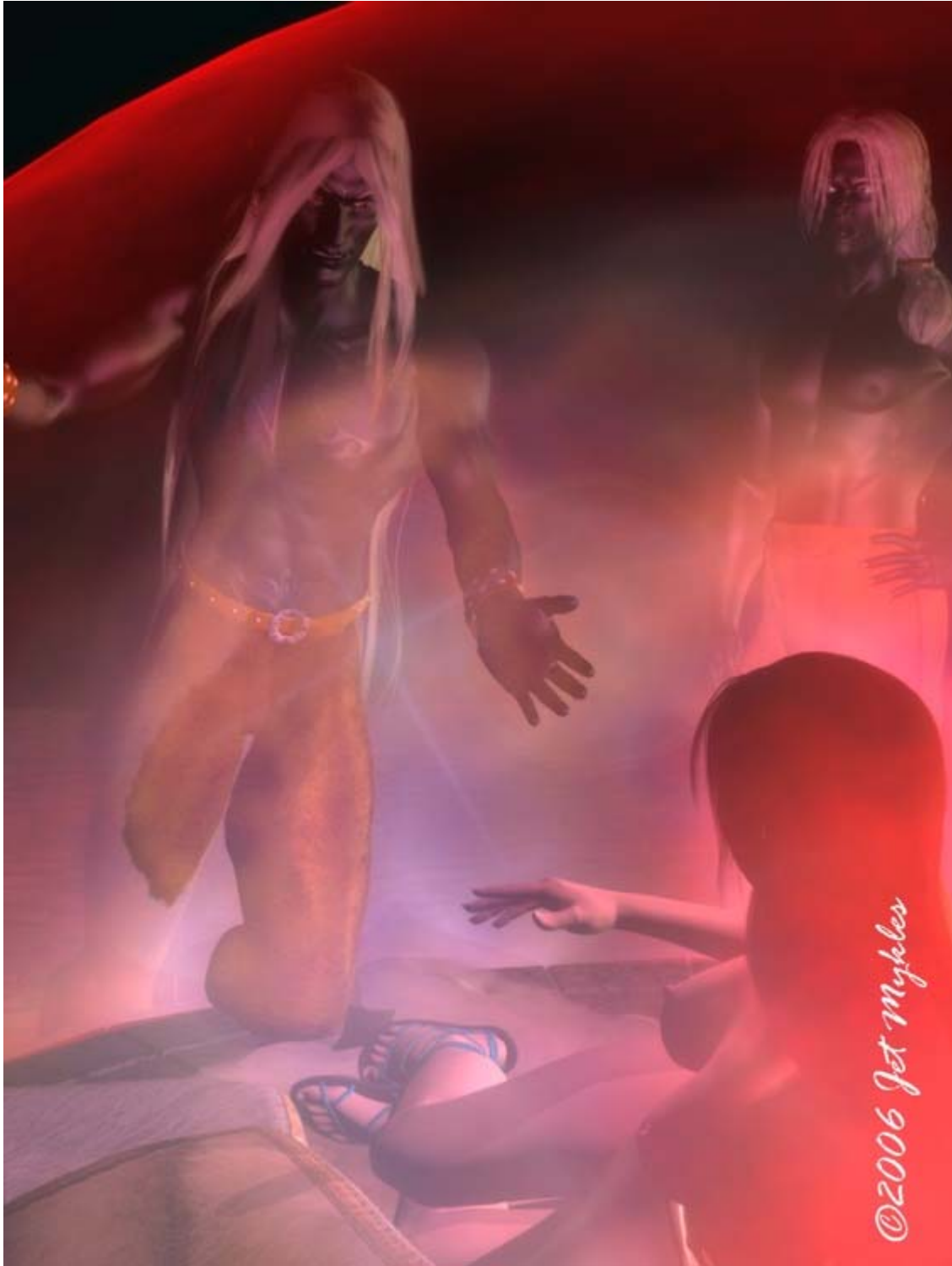
Make him work for it, Irin tried to remind herself, but the reminder was weak, and the desire to feel that hand on her flesh was much more convincing.

This was Radin. Red eyes burned and focused hungrily on her, one of them partially obscured by the fall of white hair she knew personally was silky to the touch. Gold hoops twinkled merrily along the entire rim of his right ear, begging her to trace them. With her tongue. The idea made her squirm.

Make him work for it, she tried again, telling herself to look away. Khavya, after all, was a stunning man, even if he didn’t have red eyes and long hair. Surely his lips would be every bit as tasty as Radin’s. And his body was even more muscular than the sorcerer’s. Khavya was certainly worth looking at. So why wasn’t she? Why was she captivated as Radin sank slowly to his knees just a foot beyond her feet?

Her eyes snagged on the bulge in those blazing yellow trousers, and she swallowed a whimper. Who was she fooling? She wanted him. There was only one other man who she could possibly want more, and he’d chosen to absent himself. She wanted Radin. He was offering. She was *taking!*

Following the rules, she didn’t reach out. She just raised her gaze to his eyes and kept them there, allowing herself to smile. He matched it and crawled forward. Maddeningly, he didn’t touch her. He crawled up her body, straddling her legs, bending over her torso, until his arms were braced on the fur to either side of her shoulders. She breathed in gratefully, filling her lungs with the heated scent of him.



“You’re mine, kitten,” he murmured, bending down, hair falling forward, so that his lips against hers was the touch that dissolved the *shri*.

His lips brushed hers, an almost familiar touch. She'd kissed him countless times before. But this was different. His lips explored the outline of hers, caressing the corners of her mouth. He caught her lower lip between his and sucked it gently. His tongue quested into her mouth, seeking her tongue, drawing it out and coaxing her to explore his mouth. He tenderly devoured her, and she lay beneath him, a willing meal.

Chapter Seven

When he lifted his head, she was breathing hard. Her hands were filled with fistfuls of white hair. He grinned as he pulled back, taking her hands in his. "Come with me."

She stood and only then became aware of the audience around them. Wide-eyed, she watched them for a brief moment, all those naked or nearly naked bodies writhing together. She couldn't fully focus or grasp any details and could only associate writhing movement with the chorus of moans that filled the air.

Radin tugged her hand, and she turned. He stood on the ground now, waiting to steady her as she stepped from the platform. The height difference put her almost on eye-level with him.

Suddenly, she grinned. She couldn't help it. This was too precious a moment. She could only enjoy it. Radin chuckled and tugged her hand again. She went willingly, following him from the room.

A boy she recognized -- Alrek -- met them outside of the arena. He eyed her hungrily for a brief moment, then grinned at Radin. "I knew you'd win," he said, turning to lead the way.

Irin gaped. Radin laughed.

“Am I predictable?” she groused.

“No. I’m just that good.”

“Are you?”

He glanced down at her and smiled darkly. “I am.”

She shivered. For a while they followed Alrek in silence, her hand secure in his. Glancing up at his profile, she saw his grin. Knowing she watched, his grin grew broader.

“Nervous, kitten?”

“No,” she said, knowing he’d see through her bravado.

“Trust me?”

Grinning her own grin, she leaned into his arm, hugging it. “Always.”

He released her hand, only to put his arm about her shoulders, pulling her into his side. “I promise you nine days to remember, kitten.”

She walked like that, securely tucked under his arm, and refused to think of the end of the nine days. The play of muscles underneath his slick skin made her own skin tingle. She couldn’t get enough of the smell of him. This feeling was more than what she’d felt around Hyle. This had a wild and dangerous taste to it while still feeling perfectly right since Radin was there. She was sure that if she just let go, this feeling would get away with her. And she wasn’t sure if she didn’t want it to.

They arrived at the room. Alrek led them to the bedroom and shut the door behind them. The fire was already lit, and the sheets on the bed platform were already down. Dozens of furs and pillows nearly hid the blankets.

Radin led her to the bed and peeled her from his side. Gently, smiling, he pushed her onto the furs and onto her back. As he crawled up onto the bed after her, she giggled and tilted her head, expecting a kiss, but he didn’t oblige her. Instead, he took her hands and pulled them up above her head, pressing them to the furs. “Keep them there.” He straddled her thighs and traced her arms and then the sides of her body as he sat up.

Goddess, he was beautiful! Loose, long hair fell in soft waves about his shoulders, across his chest, to his waist. As she watched, he slid off his belt and tossed it on the floor behind him.

“I said, keep your hands there,” he warned, holding out a finger when she moved one down.

“But I want to touch you.”

He purred. “We have nine days together. Trust me, kitten, you’ll get to touch me all you want. Now put the arm back.”

She grimaced but obeyed. Didn’t he know her body was singing? Then again, of course he did. He’d done this many, many more times than she.

“Good girl.”

Grimace turned to glare, which just made him chuckle. Seemingly idle, he trailed his fingers over the exposed skin of her belly. “You never used to scowl like that before you met Diana.”

She snorted. “She says I learned every bad habit of mine from you.”

He was too distracted to be teased. “I imagine she would.”

He flattened his palms just above her navel, then slowly slid them up. Her skin heated beneath that constant touch. She held her breath when he reached just beneath her breasts. He stopped with each breast just within the curve made by thumb and forefinger, the rest of his fingers closing over her ribs.

His eyes, half-lidded, raised to meet hers. “Frightened, kitten?”

“No.”

“Truth.” His eyes held that amazing kindness that not everyone saw. She knew it. She’d seen it. Others saw the man who liked garish clothes and who made a joke of everything. Others saw the wanderer who could never settle down for long. No one doubted his

intelligence, but many doubted that he truly cared about anything. She knew the truth. He did.

She couldn't lie to him when his eyes were like that. "A little."

He nodded. For reward, he moved his hands and cupped a breast in each hand. He thumbed her nipples, bringing them alive. She gasped.

"You know I love you," he murmured, bending in. His hair fell down, curtaining them. "You know I won't do anything to hurt you."

She bit her lip and nodded, finding it hard to concentrate with his fingers gently kneading her flesh. The words came so easily to him. She knew he did love her. He always had. But the love of which he spoke wasn't the same kind of love she'd seen between Gala and Hyle. At least, not yet.

He plucked one nipple, and she gasped. Unconsciously, she writhed, but her hips, trapped between his legs, couldn't move far. Her hands fisted and opened reflexively.

"Feel good?"

"Yes."

Fingers left her breasts, and she hissed in annoyance until she saw him leaning in further, bracing his hands on either side of her body. Smiling red eyes descended toward her, and a black tongue flickered out to moisten his lips.

"Patience, kitten," he soothed, just before touching his lips to hers.

She tried to push into the kiss, but he pulled back, restricting their contact to the lightest of brushes. Frustrated, she defied his earlier command and went to reach for his head. He anticipated her and caught her hands with his. All four hands were pressed to the bed above her head. And still he didn't deepen the kiss.

"Radin."

"Time, kitten." His tongue swiped over her upper lip. "I want to savor this."

"Savor later."

“Can’t. The first time only happens once.”

She sagged back, frustrated, but touched by his care. Not that she’d ever doubted he cared.

Tenderly he sampled her lips, tongue darting out occasionally to taste her, but only her lips, never farther. Intrigued, she began to mirror his movements. He held back his own explorations, allowing her to sample him.

Finally he moaned softly and pressed his lips to hers. She gasped. His tongue plunged into her mouth. She opened beneath him and again mimicked his actions. She heard little moaning sounds coming up from her chest and gave vague thought to squelching them, but gave up in favor of tongue-dancing with Radin.

He slid away from the kiss, rubbing his smooth cheek against hers before slowly drawing her earlobe between his lips. She clutched her fingers about his as he traced her ear with his tongue, the softest of moans riding his breath. He dipped his head, and she stretched her head up and to the side to give him full access to the side of her neck. He nipped lightly at her racing pulse, then laved the inconsequential hurt with his tongue.

“Radin,” she sighed when his lips reached the base of her neck.

“I’m here, kitten.” He squeezed her hands in warning, then slid his hands down her arms, caressing every inch in their slow descent to her shoulders. With mouth and hands, he explored her shoulders and sides. Again his warm hands closed about her breasts. “Beautiful,” he murmured, kissing the top swell of one breast, then the bottom curve. He laved the side and circled the tip of his tongue around the dusky center of her breast before lovingly taking the nipple between his lips and nipping firmly.

She jumped, whimpering. Her eyes closed, the better to allow her to enjoy the heady sensation of Radin suckling her. He nipped and pulled and bit softly before he lifted his head just enough to switch to the other breast. She squirmed beneath him, arching up into his mouth.

Lips firmly latched onto one breast, he slid his hands down to her waist. He held her as he spread his own legs, allowing his hands access to her groin. His large hand pressed against the apex of her sex, making her cry out. Letting her nipple go with a loud pop, he crawled lower down her body, bestowing kisses to her ribs, her belly, her navel, and the soft curve just below her navel.

He paused there, and she had to pry her eyes open and peer down to see why. She caught her breath at the sight. Crouched over her, facing up, his chin hovered just above the wrap she wore about her waist. The broad expanse of his back and shoulders was partially visible beneath a sparse blanket of snowy hair. "You all right, kitten?"

She whimpered. "No. More."

He grinned, then glanced down, a finger tracing the top of her wrap without touching skin. "I could stop."

"Don't you dare!"

He chuckled and untied the wrap. He kissed the bit of hip that was exposed by the fabric falling. "Are you sure?"

"Radin!"

That made him laugh. He pulled the wrap fully aside to expose her to his sight. He took a moment to smile at what he saw, then met her gaze. "You're exquisite, Irin."

She blushed, insanely pleased by the compliment.

He kissed her other hip, then the top of one thigh as he maneuvered so that her thighs were no longer trapped closed beneath him. She spread them for him, watching avidly as he settled on his belly and elbows between her legs. He kissed the inside of her other thigh, then lapped at the hot crease between thigh and groin. He nuzzled and nipped at the curly hair protecting her sex while sliding a single thumb upward through her drenched folds, spreading them. She caught her breath as the second thumb joined the first; then, together,

they spread her sex apart. Radin stared for a moment, licking his lips, then leaned forward to bestow the sweetest of kisses to her sex.

She moaned, caught between watching him and simply falling back to enjoy the sensation. She opted for the former and saw his impish glance toward her. Then he leaned in and dragged his tongue from anus to clit. Her hips rocked into the motion of their own accord, pressing in when he did it again. And again.

“Radin!”

He took that as a sign and finally took her clit between his lips and sucked. She groaned, her thighs trying to close on the sensation. He caught them, then slid his hands nearly to her knees and pressed them back almost to her chest. He pulled back and licked again. Laving her. Wetting her. She clutched her hands in the furs above her head. Her eyes had fallen closed somewhere along the way, and she could only feel the hot press of his tongue as it danced over her sensitive skin. When he settled in to seriously suck her clit, she writhed beneath him, unable to help the churning of her hips as she scrabbled for climax. Almost there. So good! Almost there!

“Ahhh!” she screamed, body clenching as molten pleasure shot from her sex through the rest of her body.

“Delicious, kitten,” Radin purred, rubbing his chin through her pulsing sex, watching her as she came down.

“Mmmm,” she sighed, settling her sated body in the furs.

At least, she thought she was sated. His fingers toyed at her entrance, petting the lips apart as he extended his tongue so that just the tip nudged her clit. She squirmed. He chuckled, pushing in just a bit more to caress her inner walls. She groaned when he pressed in further, two fingers exploring.

She hissed when he hit a particularly sensitive spot. He purred and rubbed it again, the flat of his tongue against her clit. Goddess, he was devouring her! She churned, she moaned,

driven by the fingers that stretched her and the tongue that lashed her. The fingers matched her rocking rhythm, and two became three, and she felt almost full. Another rocking climax seized her body, and again she happily melted into the furs.

Radin's warmth left her, and she cracked an eye to see him standing, hands at the ties to his trousers. She quickly pushed up.

"Didn't I tell you to stay there?"

"But I want to help." She pouted, moving to kneel before him.

He sighed. "And after I did so much to make you stay put." But he didn't tell her to sit back.

She reared up to press her lips to his, surprised and excited to taste herself on his lips. It distracted her enough that she lifted her arms to wrap them around his neck, sucking and licking at his lips to taste their combined essence.

She almost missed that his hands were busy between them, but was aware when something hot and hard pressed against her belly. Pulling back from his mouth, she glanced down to see his cock, thick and already gleaming from the natural oils from his skin. Fascinated, she unwound one arm from his neck and dropped her hand to circle the thick, black rod. Radin leaned in to nuzzle her ear, causing waves of silky hair to fall forward and obscure her view. The silk of his hair brushed her skin, and the velvety, hot silk of his cock slid through her hand.

"Squeeze harder," he prompted her, reaching up to push his hair back behind his shoulder so she could see. She squeezed and he groaned. He closed his hand around hers and guided it up toward the head, then back down. She watched the loose skin bunch and pull, wondering how that could feel good. But his groan assured her it did.

He pushed his trousers down farther until they fell of their own accord to the floor. When had he taken off his boots? Sometime when she wasn't paying attention. Stepping out of the trousers, he was now fully naked to her gaze and touch, and he was no longer telling

her to stay back. She took full advantage, digging her fingers into his hair to cup his skull as he nibbled her ear. She kept her grip on his cock.

Without warning, he caught her hand, startling her into letting go. When she had, he shoved to tumble her back into the furs. She squeaked indelicately, but subsided when he dropped on top of her. An amazing, exciting feeling of anticipation and, oddly, of safety thrilled through her. She felt wonderfully free, sure she could leap to soar from the heights and Radin would not only take her higher, but would also see her safely home.

He propped himself on one elbow, curling that arm beneath one of her shoulders while the hand cradled her neck. With the other hand, he traced her lips gently. "Ready, kitten?"

She squirmed, spreading her thighs wider to more firmly settle him there. She could feel his cock pressed to her sex, lengthwise. It felt wonderfully good, but she just knew something better was coming.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

"Fuck me, Radin."

He caught his breath, and she thrilled at the surge of lust she saw cross his face. Those glowing red eyes narrowed in a mock glare. "Such language."

She grinned, squirming again. "Learned it from you."

He laughed, trailing his fingers down her neck and over her breast. "True." The hand continued until she felt it gripping his cock. He shifted his hips, and finally she felt the blunt head at her entrance. "It might hurt."

She nodded. "I know. I trust you."

He kissed her softly. "That's all I ask."

He pushed in, just a bit, enough that he could let go and grip her hip. She wiggled and managed to get him inside a bit more.

"Oh, Radin."

He pushed in a bit more, then pulled out. In, then out. Each time a little farther. She clutched his neck, spanning her fingers over the nape to pull his lips to hers. She led the kiss as he was distracted by the movement of his hips. She moved with him, enjoying the wonderful fullness, the hot brand.

He stopped, pulling back his head to look down at her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm wonderful."

"Didn't hurt?"

She blinked. He was in. *All* the way in! She lifted her legs and wrapped them about his hips, and he sank in just a bit more. "I'm wonderful."

He grinned. "Lucky kitten didn't have the pain." He mock glared at her. "Sure you're a virgin?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know I am."

He nibbled her chin. "*Was*, Irin. You were."

"Mmmm, yes." She shifted her hips, loving the friction as he moved inside her. *Inside her!* "Do we move now?"

"Yes." He pulled his hips back, and she hissed at the feeling. "We most certainly move now."

He braced on both elbows above her, his hair a curtain shielding them from reality. The only true light for her world was the glow of his eyes as they locked gazes. He pushed back inside her wet depths, endless, wonderful friction. He set a slow rhythm that steadily increased, his hips rocking, her hips matching. Soon he was grinding hard against her, his hard body pressed so tightly to hers that her clit scraped delightfully against muscle. She dug her nails into his back, struggling to gouge at the tough, satiny skin.

"Radin. Radin. Radin," she chanted his name as a mantra, mind leaving her body as his fused with hers.

Her mind let loose the reins, and her body escaped, tumbling into his. She buried her face in his neck, biting his shoulder against the moans that he pushed from her lungs. Again and again. More and more. Rolling. Tumbling. More. Radin.

Her body tore apart, and she screamed. Her hips fought to push into him, ever harder, ever more as the rest of her body froze in suspended time. Whimpering, panting, she bit him hard over the screams, then collapsed in a heap beneath him.

When she could open her eyes, she blearily saw him grinning down at her. He wasn't moving, just staring. When she fidgeted, she gasped to feel him still hard deep within her.

Her mouth fell open in shock. "There's more?" she asked, voice ragged.

He laughed, briefly kissing her cheek. "Oh, my, yes, kitten. There's *so* much more."

Chapter Eight

Radin returned to find Irin standing unabashedly naked before the table on which Alrek had laid a meal. Her soft brown hair fell straight about her shoulders and back, tickling the top of her sweetly rounded ass. Radin was quite thankful that Irin took Salin's training seriously and practiced with weapons on a regular basis. In addition to increasing her safety, it also kept her body nicely honed and muscled. He smiled to remember the tight grip of her thighs about his waist.

Chuckling at how the very fact made his cock stir -- or maybe it was the view? -- he closed the door behind him. She turned to him, one end of a meat pasty sticking from between her lips. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Where've you been?" she demanded over her bite of pasty. He noticed she was not the least bit self-conscious in her nudity.

"I went to report on your progress to Nalfien and Hyle."

She blushed then, a very pretty flush to her cheeks and neck. "I'd forgotten that." Recovering, she chewed, arching a brow at him. "And how am I doing?"

He shrugged, stepping up beside her to pick up a crunchy, sweet bite-size tuber and pop it in his mouth. "You've made a good start."

She sniffed, finishing off her pasty in one unladylike shove into her mouth. “I think I did very well.”

He couldn't help but laugh. She was so much the child he'd known, but also this delightful young woman. She pretended to ignore him, bringing a mug of wine to her lips to wash down the pasty. He took the opportunity to take in the sight of her body, lean and strong, like a young doe in her first season. He slid his hand over the curve of her rump, letting his fingers trail down the center seam. She shivered, sidling a step closer to him.

When she put down the mug, he reached out to twine one finger in the necklace she always wore. He used it to pull her mouth toward his. “You did very well. Let's see if you can do better.”

He sampled her mouth, struck by the heady taste of her. An overwhelming warmth suffused from her to him and made him fully hard in an instant, his erection pressing into her side through his trousers. It had been so long since he'd taken a woman for a full nine days. Why ever had he stopped? She turned into him, eagerly wrapping her arms around his neck. Radin held her close and deepened the kiss as she busily worked to free his hair from the band that kept it in a tail down his back. He walked her back toward the bed and gently pushed her onto it when her calves hit the side. She dropped gracefully, sweet round face turned up with an expectant grin. He matched it.

“Still hungry?” He gestured at the table casually. “Should I make a plate for you?”

She snorted, hands landing on the ties of his trousers. “No. What I'm hungry for is right here.”

He laughed, amused at her straightforward eagerness. He let her untie his lacings and gasped when she barely shoved aside the fabric to get at the cock within. “Patience, kitten.”

She paid his words no mind. Her eyes were big and round, watching her own hands palm and encircle his length. She could wrap both hands about him, side by side, and still the

head of his cock was exposed. "So big," she breathed, using a thumb to gently press back the loose skin and expose the head.

Vain creature that he was, Radin couldn't help the surge of pride at her innocent admiration. "Thank you."

"Are they all the same size?"

He chuckled. "No. I'm a tad longer than most." Carefully, he pushed at the waistband of his trousers, freeing more of his groin to the warm air. "Here." He placed one of his hands over hers at the base of his cock, squeezing to let her know she didn't have to tread so lightly. The thumb of the other hand he slid along the top of his cock to the head, gathering the lubricating oil that already shone on the skin. He swiped the thumb lastly through the drop of pre-come oozing from the eye, then lifted the thumb to her lips.

Her eyes went wide, watching his actions, then flashing up at him when his thumb reached her mouth.

"Taste."

Her lips parted, perhaps more in surprise than anything, but she accepted his thumb willingly enough. They both groaned, she at the taste and he at the exquisite feel of her little tongue lapping at him.

She suckled Radin's thumb, nearly forgetting the hands she still had wrapped around his cock. He tasted so *good!* Warm and tingly on the tongue. He started to pull back, and she actually bit his knuckle to keep him from escaping. His chuckle broke into her enjoyment. Raising her eyes to his, she released his thumb with a wet pop. "You taste good."

"Oh?" He threaded his fingers in her hair and tugged slightly. "It tastes even better at the source."

Her eyes dropped to the head of the huge organ that pointed at her. First she licked her lips; then she darted her tongue out to lap at the tiny ooze of white seeping from the head.

Radin's rumbling sigh of pleasure goaded her, and she licked the head, swiping it as though to clean it of the delicious oils that covered it. She let the tip slip through her lips, exploring the heated, satiny texture with just lips and the tip of her tongue as she kept both fists wrapped about its length. She hummed, pushing forward to circle the rim of the head, fascinated by the combination of firm and soft.

Radin gasped. Irin glanced up. His eyes were closed, and a grimace painted his dark features. His head was tilted forward so some of that wealth of silky hair spilled forward to shroud his shoulders. She hummed again, entranced by the sight. She let go of his cock with her near hand, giving her mouth more room to slide forward. He filled her completely, nudging the back of her throat. The taste of him coated her mouth, and she closed to her eyes, the better to savor it.

Bliss. Pure, sweet bliss. Radin held Irin's head lightly, encouraging her in her maddening explorations. She nipped and sucked so delicately, sampling him like a delicious treat. Even untutored, her obvious enjoyment spread a nearly tangible warmth through his groin, down his legs, and up his body. It was the most delicious feeling and one he was wholly unprepared for. He stood for long, exquisite moments, letting his mind go to just enjoy.

His body would not put up with it for long. Delicately, he cupped the back of her head, threading his fingers through her hair. He used the hold to pull her back, allowing her lips to slowly slide along his length. She opened her eyes to meet his gaze, and he smiled. "Suck," he suggested, hearing the dark promise in his own voice. She did, and he nearly squirmed like a boy at the jolt that tingled in his balls. "Oh, yes," he sighed, guiding her head forward, then pulling it back again, just as slowly. "Do that."

She smiled as best she could around his girth, then took over. She gripped his hips with both hands, using them to guide him back and forth into the sweet haven of her mouth. That tingling sensation danced underneath his skin, shimmering through his entire body to

coalesce in a burning ball just in front of the base of his spine. One of her hands slid forward to tentatively explore his balls. He gasped at the fiery sensation that nearly made him come down her throat.

He pulled her head away and laughed breathlessly at her confused pout. "That was exquisite, kitten," he assured her, placing a knee on the platform between her thighs. "But if I let you go on, this would be over too soon."

She grinned, happily scooting father back at his slight gesture. She spread her thighs willingly, and he settled between them, nestling his cock against the heat of her sex. He pressed his lips to hers, tasting himself on the tongue she extended to mate with his. She was perfect for him.

Truemate?

He put the thought aside in favor of enjoying the moment.

She murmured against his lips. "Radin."

"Yes, kitten?"

"Do we have to go slow this time?"

He chuckled. "You didn't like last time?"

She bit his bottom lip. "That's not it and you know it. It's just ..."

He raised his head to see her entire face, curious where this was going. "Just?"

She smiled, somewhat embarrassed. "Every time I've seen sex, it's been fast and ... hard."

He grinned. "We did that."

She tugged at a lock of his hair, grimacing at him. "I know. But ..."

He took pity on her. Abruptly, he pulled back to kneel. He grabbed her shoulders. "I know what you want. Turn over."

Her eyes rounded, but she squirmed to obey.

He groaned at the sight of that pert little ass turned toward him. He placed both palms over her rounded cheeks, spanning each with his long fingers, and squeezed. She moaned, peeking at him over her shoulder.

Grinning at her, he slipped his thumb between her cheeks and tickled her anus. “We’ll save this for another time,” he promised, just to see the wicked surprise in her expressive blue eyes.

He put one hand on her back, pushing. Off guard, she fell forward, cheek to the furs, which made it easy for him to nudge her thighs farther apart. The bright pink of her sex unfolded before him. He aimed his cock and slid all the way inside.

Irin gasped at the sudden invasion, loving the stretch of her inner muscles to accommodate him. She moaned, gripping the furs beneath her as he pulled back and shoved forward.

“Is that what you want?” he purred above her.

“Mmmm! More!”

She braced herself as he shoved again, parting her when she wasn’t quite ready. Wet, but tight. He hammered something deep inside her, something she could only assume was her womb, and the agony of that was another sort of pleasure that she didn’t bother to try to comprehend. She squirmed and pushed back, eager to accept any and all that he had to give.

His hands closed around her shoulders, pressing her to the furs and bracing him for the hard, hot pounding that had her crying out. Tears seeped into the sweat that now shined on her skin. She couldn’t move enough, and she couldn’t fathom staying still, squirming and fighting his hold although she was exactly where she wanted to be.

She reached back to him with all she had, physically and mentally. She needed to consume him whole and focused every ounce of her being to that goal. The very air she breathed coalesced about her, suffocating her with heat. She pushed that back at him,

covering him, merging with him. Her life expanded until she couldn't contain it, and she screamed her release.

Radin shouted, unable to stave off the release Irin's tight little body pulled from him. Heat imploded, sucking from his skin, down his spine and into his balls, then shot out of his cock as he came in endless spurts into Irin's choking grasp.

He fell forward with a gasping cry, collapsing her below him. Mindful, he gathered her to his chest and rolled to his side, hugging her to him. They both panted into the oblivion of sleep as their heated release dwindled away.

Chapter Nine

Radin lay on his side, watching Irin sleep. She curled in the furs, very much like the kitten he always called her, with her hands in loose fists tucked beneath her chin. Her long legs tangled with his, one soft thigh pressed warmly beneath his balls, his mostly soft sex nestled against hers. The fire behind her was banked to mere coals, and as it was the sole illumination in the room, it was only his night vision that allowed him to watch her. He kept his body close, letting his heat keep her warm so she didn't need a blanket. He idly wondered what that little round face would look like when her skin turned gleaming black. The thought itself made his cock twitch in interest.

She sighed, almost as though she sensed it. She settled farther down in the furs, one of her hands escaping to search for and blindly find his chest. In her sleep, she smiled.

Radin.

Radin blinked. If he hadn't been staring straight at her, if he hadn't seen that her mouth never moved as she cuddled by his side, he would have thought his name was spoken aloud.

His blood ran cold, quenching any lustful feelings he was starting to entertain. Cautiously, he probed his magical sense toward that inner place where her voice had sounded. Soft and sensuous, but definitely heard. *Irin?*

Hmmm?

He sat up abruptly. She yelped, eyes flying open and hands clutching as he pulled her up with him. His hands gripped her arms, forcing her to face him. The fire in the fireplace flared to life at a thought from him.

Eyes wide, she met his intent stare. "What?"

"You spoke in my mind."

She frowned, still battling the sleep that had just held her. "I did?"

"Do it again."

She shook her head, mouth dropping open. "I ... I don't ..."

Do you hear me?

She gaped. "Your mouth didn't move!"

His gaze narrowed. He released one of her arms and reached out to snag one of the candles from the stand beside the bed. With a thought he lit the flame. He held the candle between them. "Watch." Carefully, slowly, he used a bit of magic to extinguish, then relight the candle. This was among the easiest magical tasks to perform. "Can you do that?"

"What? What's going on?"

"Question me later." He shook her slightly and played the candle again. "Can you do that?"

Wonderful girl that she was, Irin held her questions. She looked at the flame, frowning hard. She didn't succeed in relighting the wick, but Radin saw what he needed to see in her attempt. It was faint. So faint he could have missed it, but it was there.

“Sweet mother of us all!” He gasped, dropping the unlit candle in his lap and gripping her shoulder again. “Irin, you’re a mage.”

“What?!”

Radin shook his head, then impatiently swiped a lock of white hair from his face. “I don’t know how, and I don’t know when. Maybe ... Well, magic comes to you at maturity. Fuck! How much did we cheat you with that damn spell?!”

“A mage?”

“Don’t you feel it? The air, the power around you?”

“I ... I just thought it was the lust. The changing spell. Everything’s so new ...”

Radin’s jaw dropped. The heat during their lovemaking. It hadn’t all been imagined! “Mother of us all!”

She clutched his sides, searching his face. “Radin ...?”

He squeezed her shoulders. “Kitten. Great goddess!”

She giggled, a slightly hysterical edge to it. “I’m a mage?”

He left her have her bit of joy. He didn’t tell her what had already occurred to him. But he had to act. “Yes.” He wound some of his power around her even as he wound his arms about her body, shielding her both physically and magically. Only when he was sure he had her encompassed did he shout. “Alrek!”

A few heartbeats later, the door opened and the boy stuck his head in. “Radin? Do you need something?”

Radin fought to keep his voice level, almost lazy. “Yes. Send for Savous. Bring him here.”

The boy blinked. “Savous?”

“Yes. Now.” He wanted to add “hurry,” but didn’t. Word of Savous’s presence would get out. It would spread sooner if Radin sounded desperate.

Irin picked up the candle from between them, staring at the wick. “What’s wrong, Radin? Why did you call for Savous?”

He cradled her loosely as she tried the candle again. “I need his help.”

“Why?”

He searched her face. Searched the aura that surrounded her. Yes, it was there. It was faint now, but it would grow and, he suspected, grow fast. Magic rarely consented to being hidden for long. When it was unleashed, it was usually with a vengeance. He could only be thankful that hers had not been introduced with a flare of magic.

Or had it? What exactly had he felt that last time they made love? He hadn’t passed out after sex since he was a much younger man, and then only in the beginning. Had he felt the first of her magic then? If so, how lucky that it was couched in sex.

“You’re coming into your powers. Fast. The first spurts of magic use are always, shall we say, ‘loud’ and barely controlled. Even with a mentor. If I’m to guide you through it, I need his help to shield us.”

She raised a hand to clutch over her breast. “Am I likely to hurt someone?”

He rubbed a thumb over her knuckles, seeking to soothe her. “Not with my help, kitten. But Savous can keep anyone else from sensing you.”

“Sensing ...?” She was a quick girl. She’d grown up among them. She figured it out. Horror took over her face. “The *rhaeja!*”

Grimacing, Radin nodded. He tucked her head under his chin, seeking to envelop her in safety while he still could.

Irin clutched Radin’s hand. Panic pulsed in her aura, pushing her fledgling power at him. She knew the prophecy. “Radin, you don’t think *I’m ...*”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, kitten. It matters what *he* thinks.” He smoothed a hand over her head and exerted a bit of power to soothe her aura. To contain her. It was as much as he could do without Savous there. To do more might draw unwanted attention.

“Radin!”

“Shhh, kitten. Don’t think about it. Savous will be here, and he’ll shield us. I’ll lead you through this first burst of power and teach you to handle it. That’s the first thing. *Then* we’ll figure out what to do.”

Unconvinced, she huddled in his arms, burrowing into his embrace. He felt her shudder, felt the tears, but she did her best to contain the panic.

Chapter Ten

Savous lay on his back in the dark of his room. The cold didn't affect him, nor did the dark, but he wondered at the fact that he had lain wide awake in the same position for half the day. He'd returned late in the night from his quest for the galpa fruit. The spiny fruit was piled in a sack on the floor near the door, ready to be taken to the *rhaeja*.

Perhaps that's what kept him there. He knew that his next task should be to see his father and complete his supposed punishment, but his angry resentment had yet to die enough for him to face Valanth.

Dreidon had told him that Radin was with Irin. He told himself he was glad. If either of them was her first, it really ought to be Radin. He had two hundred cycles more experience on Savous and a far keener interest in the ladies. Although Savous did appreciate women, he'd spent too much time with his history and calculation scrolls to have become the true connoisseur that Radin was. Irin deserved for her first time to be the best.

That's what Savous told himself.

A knock on the door roused him finally. He pushed up and crossed the room easily in the pitch black.

"Hello, Trev," he greeted the boy who waited outside.

“Savous.” The boy grinned. “Radin sent for you.”

“Radin? Isn’t he with Irin?”

The grin grew. “Yes.”

Savous blinked. Then laughed. “Well, if he needs help with her, who am I to deny him, eh?”

The boy laughed with him.

“Oh, Trev. I need you to do something for me.” He leaned down and gathered up the sack of fruit. “Deliver this to the *rhaeja* for me.”

The boy’s eyes widened, but he accepted the sack with a nod.

Savous wondered if Valanth would let him get away with not delivering the fruit himself, but he pushed the thought from his mind. Both he and his father knew that the true punishment was missing Irin’s virgin contest. That was over.

He stopped, glancing the way the boy had gone. He wondered if he should have told Trev not to mention that he was going to Radin and Irin. With a sigh, he shrugged. It was too late now.

Alrek let him into the outer room of the suite Radin and Irin were sharing for their nine days. The boy couldn’t quite contain his knowing grin. Savous had to match it, wondering what Radin was up to now.

Begin Radin’s apprentice was rarely dull.

Savous opened the door. “What’s wrong, old man? Irin too much for you?” He frowned as he closed it. Irin sat in Radin’s lap, tucked tightly against his chest. They were both naked, but there was nothing remotely sexual about their embrace. She was frightened, and he was in protective mode. It made Savous’s scalp itch. “What’s wrong?”

Radin jerked his chin at him. “Shield the room.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain after you shield the room.”

“From what?”

“Magic detection.”

He wanted to ask, but two hundred cycles as Radin’s apprentice had taught him that tone. Rarely used, it was always better to do what he asked first and question later. The spell was a familiar one, so it didn’t take him long. Radin had set it early on in their apprenticeship every time he was going to teach Savous a new spell or twist to his power. After a time, Savous had learned to set it himself for their sessions. He drew in power and sealed the walls with it. “All right. Done.” He stepped up to the bed. “What’s going on? Just why couldn’t you cast a simple shielding spell on your own?”

“All of my concentration is going to shield Irin,” Radin snapped. “She’s a mage, and her powers just woke. I couldn’t take any chances.”

“She’s what?” Savous felt the trickle of power as Radin lowered his guard.

“She’s a mage. At least. Maybe a sorcerer. I can’t tell yet.”

“She can’t be! We’d have known.”

Radin shook his head, scooting both Irin and himself further toward one side of the bed to make room for Savous to sit. “My best guess, her power was suppressed along with her lust and her bleeding.”

Irin peeked at Savous through her bangs, her face barely visible behind Radin’s arm. The lost look broke Savous’s heart. He knelt beside them and reached out to smooth a hand over her hair, nearly breaking into tears himself when he saw the moisture brimming in her eyes.

“He’s going to take me,” she whispered.

No need to ask who she meant. Savous forced a grin, deliberately misunderstanding her. “Who? Radin? Hasn’t he taken you yet, kitten?”

She didn't respond to the teasing. "No. The *rhaeja*. If I'm a mage ..." She trailed off unhappily.

Radin unwound one arm from Irin and used the freed hand to brush tears from her cheeks. "Don't think about that now, kitten. Let's give you some control over this power of yours. Then we'll worry about other things." He lifted his gaze to Savous. "I'll need you to stay here. You'll need to make sure that no one knows what's happening."

Savous cocked his head. The first mastering of the power could take awhile. Depending on the student, it could take days. "There will be talk."

Radin shrugged. "It can't be helped. Our only consolation is that it's *me*. Everyone might just dismiss it as one of my whims."

"Are you ...?" He glanced at Irin, but decided he had to ask. "Are you sure you can do this? Human magic might be different than ours."

Radin took a breath. "We don't have a choice. It's similar enough. I saw it ... belatedly." Savous heard the self-disgust in his master's voice. Radin being Radin, however, he brushed it off in favor of the situation at hand. "Can you hold?"

Savous considered it, now that he knew Radin's reason in calling him. He studied Irin, aware of her nudity, of her beauty, but he tried desperately to put it aside. "Give me a moment to settle the shield." He glanced across the room. "Looks like Alrek's yet to stock you for the day." He looked at the time statue, the orange-red flame indicating it was barely past dawn. "Should we have him fetch it now?"

Radin considered it, then nodded.

Savous leaned over the bed and quickly discarded his boots. Before rising, he leaned toward the still-embracing couple. He grinned at Irin. "Give me a kiss, kitten."

"What?"

"Alrek's going to expect that we've started something. We've got to make this look good."

Radin snorted, smiling softly. “Always thinking.” He nudged Irin. “Kiss him, kitten.”

She bit her lip, but pulled from Radin’s embrace, kneeling on the furs. Savous saw the drag on Radin’s aura, saw his master keeping her magic in check. Smiling for her, he reached out to cup her chin in one hand. He purred for her. “Lucky me. I thought I’d have to wait for this privilege.”

She flushed, and a smile teased at her lips.

While she was smiling, he leaned in and touched his lips to hers. She responded willingly, opening under the tongue he swiped over her mouth. He plunged inside and instantly forgot his surroundings. The taste of her was finer than wine and sweeter than any dessert he’d ever sampled. Groaning, he slid a hand up and into her hair, securing her mouth to his. With his free hand, he reached around her hips and hauled her against him. In a simple twist of his waist, he had her straddling his lap, pressed against him. Her strong arms wrapped around his neck, her fingers tugging at his hair.

Radin’s groan brought him back to reality. Reluctantly, he pulled his lips from Irin’s, but couldn’t quite force himself to release her. “Sorry,” he muttered, his lips brushing hers. She tried to press forward, but his hand in her hair prevented the movement. “Radin, I ...”

“Forget it. Fuck her.”

Irin shuddered in his arms, an exquisite little mewl squeezing from her lungs.

He fought for reason. “What?”

“The lust is too high.” Savous recognized the deep, rumbling tone of Radin’s lust. “We’ll need to take the edge off just to get anything done.”

Savous managed to turn his head to face his master. Irin did her best to distract him by nuzzling his ear. Radin’s eyes were half closed, his hand already wrapped around his cock. Radin smiled at him. “Fuck her.”

“But ...”

“You didn’t think you’d get through days here without it, did you?”

“I haven’t had much chance to think.”

“Don’t think!” Irin pleaded. She scraped her fingernails over the sleek skin of Savous’s shoulders. She barely heard anything they said past Radin telling Savous to fuck her. *Yes.* She fought his hold on her hair and managed to get a bit more give. She found his ear and sucked hard on the lobe. His body shook. “Fuck me,” she demanded, breathing hotly into his ear.

He groaned, twisting his head back to take her mouth again. She matched the sound, squirming excitedly against him. She scraped her nails from his shoulders down over the hard muscles of his chest and belly until she found the waistband of his trousers. Anxiously, she pulled at the fastening, breaking something in her haste. She freed him and clutched the hard length, pressing the head into her belly. He gasped from their kiss, then bit down on her bottom lip. She moaned, pumping him as his fingers clutched her bottom.

“Fuck me.” The command was harsh. Later she’d explore him, she promised herself. Now, she just needed him inside.

His strong hands lifted her. She positioned his cock once she was high enough. Then his hands abruptly slammed her down.

She screamed, only barely hearing his echoing groan. It was painfully good. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing her ankles into the small of his back as she clutched at his shoulders. That wondrous, frightening feeling boiled in her belly, in that place deep inside that his cock kept hitting as he lifted and slammed her back down repeatedly.

“Wait,” he muttered, stilling his hands. Breathing.

“No!” she cried, rocking her hips. She was so close.

“I won’t last.”

“I don’t *care.* *Now!*”

An agonized moan ripped from his throat, and abruptly his hands were gone. Blind and desperate, Irin took over. Bracing her hands on his shoulders and folding her knees to either side of his lean hips to get leverage, she lifted and dropped in his lap. She screamed again, trying to release that storm, trying to trigger that --

She tensed and exploded.

It was precious moments of heavy breathing before Irin could open her eyes. She saw now where Savous's hands had gone. Radin knelt behind his apprentice, gripping the younger man's wrists behind his back. Savous panted now, his back supported against Radin's chest. Those beautiful, blazing red eyes were closed, and honey-kissed hair webbed his face.

Irin met Radin's amused gaze. Brief worry crossed her mind. This was, after all, supposed to be *their* time together, and she had quite ruthlessly taken Savous without a moment's hesitation.

But the worry faded in the face of his amusement. He didn't seem remotely upset. Tenderly, he brushed the hair from Savous's face and slid his other hand around to rest on the man's chest. "Feel better, kitten?"

She smiled, a huge, lazy grin. She rotated her hips and jumped at the unexpected pleasure as Savous's still-hard cock moved inside her. "Much," she assured Radin, placing her hand just below his on Savous's chest and rocking again.

This time Savous arched, a look near pain scrunching his features. He rocked his hips beneath her, digging his fingers into her thighs. "Wasn't I supposed to be getting Alrek for food and drink?" he groaned, eyes still closed.

Radin chuckled. "Later." He bent his head and nipped at Savous's earlobe. A lock of Radin's hair fell forward over Savous's chest, almost obscuring his hand as he idly plucked Savous's nipple. "Will your shielding hold for Irin's first lesson?"

Irin gasped, halting with her groin locked tightly, perfectly with Savous's. "Now?"

Savous peeked at her and chuckled. Or was it a groan? “Radin almost *always* teaches through sex.”

Radin glanced up at her from beneath snowy-white lashes. “Makes it much more enjoyable that way.”

She gaped, then laughed. “Everything they’ve said about you is true, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps.” He brushed his lips over his apprentice’s temple. “Savous?”

“Yes. The shield will hold.”

Radin teased the tip of Savous’s pointed ear with his tongue. “Will you hold?”

Savous groaned as Irin languidly lifted and sank on his cock. “Not if she keeps doing that.”

Radin chuckled. “Try and hold for a while.” He reached up to cup Irin’s chin, meeting her gaze fully. “Fuck him slow, kitten. Feel him inside you. It’s comfortable. It’s safe, yes?”

She groaned, shutting her eyes as the feeling started to mount again. “It’s not exactly comfortable.”

He laughed. “But it’s good, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.”

“He’s surrounded by you.”

“Mmmm.”

“Savous, turn around and put her between us.”

Savous reached out to pull her against his chest. Holding her, he twisted without ever losing his place deep within her cunt. The two men quickly had her arranged between them. Her back was cushioned by the hard muscles of Radin’s chest and belly, his cock a hard brand against the small of her back. Savous gathered up her thighs and wound them around his waist, leaning in so he could nuzzle her neck as he commenced a smooth, even glide in and out of her pussy.

“Now,” Radin continued in a calm voice, as though Savous was not slowly driving her to distraction, “you’re surrounded by us.” Radin kissed her temple and ghosted his lips over her ear. “Do you feel safe?”

“Y ... Oh! Yes.”

“Good. Concentrate on it. Memorize it. Decide how it feels, and hold that in your mind.”

“Concentrate?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Concentrate. It’s easy. Can you really think about anything else but how it feels to be surrounded by us?”

Truthfully, no. So she did as he asked. She memorized the warmth, the press of bodies. She squirmed under Savous, trying to speed him up, but he seemed to be in tune with Radin’s calm voice and kept up the slow, measured pace.

“That’s it, kitten. Now, go to that place where you spoke mind to mind to me earlier.”

Savous gasped. “Mind to mind?”

Radin ignored him. “Can you go back there, kitten?”

She frowned. She still wasn’t sure how she’d done it, so she wasn’t sure where to go “back” to.

Radin’s hands smoothed over her cheeks. “It’s all right, kitten. Don’t try so hard. It’s not something you can look for. Go back to feeling safe.”

She followed his instructions, feeling safe, then searching for the elusive something inside her. All the while, Savous distracted her by building a fire in her belly that began to boil through her blood. She squirmed beneath him, trying to concentrate, trying to focus on Radin’s words. She couldn’t stay still.

“Savous, more,” Radin murmured.

“Finally,” Savous grumbled and picked up the pace, slamming hard into Irin.

She came on a scream, clutching Savous's shoulders. But he wasn't done with her. Radin murmured in her ear, holding her, tweaking her nipples as Savous dove into her, catching her before she landed with the first climax and quickly building her toward another. She built, she soared.

Savous! she cried.

Savous's eyes went wide, and he lost hold of his control. His body convulsed over hers.

There, Irin! said Radin in her mind.

Goddess! Savous cried as he came.

Savous braced over her, panting. She lay warm and lax beneath him, but Radin caught her chin, shaking her so she'd open her eyes. "Remember it, Irin?" The urgent tone in his voice woke some sense in her.

"I ... No."

Radin grinned. Savous groaned and fell to the bed beside them. Radin pulled her up farther on the bed and arranged himself so that he lay atop her, his hips cradled in hers. "It's all right, kitten. No one gets it the first time." He nuzzled her jaw. "But we have days to keep trying."

Chapter Eleven

“What will you tell Nalfien?” Savous’s voice was low in an effort not to wake the woman curled against his side.

Radin stared at her for a long, silent moment as he tied his trousers. “I have to tell him the truth. If we’ve any hope of keeping her from ... *him*, we’ll need Nalfien’s help.”

Savous nodded unhappily, nuzzling the top of Irin’s head. “You’re probably right.”

“I’m always right.”

Savous sniffed at the old, shared joke, but the smile didn’t come to his face.

Neither did it come to Radin’s. “Will you be all right?”

Savous dug his hand into Irin’s hair, gently massaging her neck. “If this wild woman doesn’t break me in two, yes.”

Irin gave up the pretense and opened her eyes. “You wish.”

“I *hope*.”

Her eyes turned up to meet Radin’s from where she was tucked up underneath Savous’s chin. “Will he come and get me?”

“Nalfien? I doubt it. He and the *rhaeja* haven’t been on the best of terms for tens of cycles now. He’s not going to let you go without a fight.”

“That might be worse,” she muttered.

Both men chose to overlook her statement.

“All right, you two, don’t have too much fun while I’m gone. Remember, this is *my* nine-day.” Radin left.

Savous and Irin were silent for a time, simply lying side by side, sharing warmth. Then Savous had enough of the maudlin feel to the air. He slid his hand down Irin’s back, shoving furs and blankets out of the way to expose her backside.

“Savous ...”

“Shhh.” He caressed her back, determined to enjoy her smooth skin. “Don’t think about it.”

“But what if ...”

“Stop. We’re doing all that we can.” He used his other hand to tilt her chin so that she looked at him. He smiled into those huge blue eyes, feeling his heart shudder at the fear he saw there. “I won’t let him have you, Irin. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that.”

He sighed. She was too quick and too smart. “I can promise that it’ll be over my dead body.”

She reached up to clutch at his neck, frowning. “Don’t say that! I couldn’t bear it if you died.”

He pressed a kiss to her open lips. “And I couldn’t bear it if he had you.”

She kissed him, but refused to be comforted. “Why do you hate your father so, Savous?”

She'd asked before, many times when they'd been alone during her younger days. He'd always evaded the question. But then she'd been a child. Now she was a woman and in danger. She deserved an answer.

"He's supposed to be our icon. Our leader. We don't follow for the same reasons humans do. We follow because She who made us chose. She chose him. And he's chosen to serve his own ends rather than see to our needs." He shut his eyes, kneading her flesh to comfort himself as well as her. "He was hurt by my mother's death, and he turned inward. I don't know how, but he's used his magic to cause the death of each of the women who have come to his bed since then. He's used his magic in other ways that I can't prove, and he's made the *raedjour* as a race weaker." He shook his head, staring into her eyes as he cupped her jaw. "I've stood by and done nothing. The one time I spoke out, all it earned me was missing your virgin contest." Her eyes went wide. He sighed. "I confronted him. I blamed him for Brin's death. He punished me by making sure I missed your virgin contest."

"Brin's dead?"

He nodded, unhappy to be the one to tell her. But he could see why that had been kept from her just before her virgin contest. "I blamed him for her death and for the others'. I'm just lucky that he was in a relatively good mood and no one else was around; otherwise he would have sent me to the *vetriese* instead."

"Would that be so bad?"

He paused, wondering how much to tell her. "Yes."

"Why?"

Seeking to distract her, he twisted to his side, pulling her up against his chest. "It doesn't matter."

Again, she allowed the kiss, but wouldn't be distracted. "Why won't you go into the *vetriese*, Savous?"

"My own reasons."

“But everyone says you’ll be marked as the next *rhaeja*.”

He froze, staring at Irin’s chin. Radin and Nalfien were the only others who had spoken the words to him.

Irin, in her innocence, clutched at his shoulders. “Savous, I don’t understand. If you want to stop him, wouldn’t being the next *rhaeja* give you some say?”

He closed his eyes.

Soft, caring hands caressed his cheeks, tilting his face toward hers even though he still wouldn’t look at her. “Savous, please. I just want to understand.”

He swallowed. “She chose him, Irin.” His words were soft, pulled from his heart. “She chose him, and She’s let him do this to us, Her people.” He licked his lips and opened his eyes. “How do I trust a goddess who entrusted us to *that man*?”

Irin’s eyes went big as she stared into Savous’s tortured face. His words sank in, and they made perfect sense. Rhae. How had She allowed this to happen?

Irin leaned forward and pressed her lips to Savous’s, eager to wipe away the pain she saw there. She couldn’t stand it.

He seemed just as happy to cease their conversation. He gathered her into his arms, inserting a leg between her thighs to open them. She spread readily, tucking her leg up and over his slim hip. It opened her wide enough that his searching cock found her opening. Together, they eased closer, the connection sealed when he was seated deep inside her.

They stayed still a moment, locked in embrace, locked in each other. A perfect union. A perfect moment. She felt that something within her, that burbling stream that Radin had turned her attention to, come to the surface.

Irin, Savous murmured in her mind, nuzzling her lips. His awe at the ability to speak mind to mind laced his thoughts along with a deeper, warmer feeling reserved only for her and this beautiful moment of perfect connection.

That something in him brushed against that something in her, and the contact was amazing. She tried to control the bit that she shared with him, but it proved to be impossible. Whatever she was wanted to mesh with him, and her very soul reached out to twine with his in a more intimate embrace than the one in which their bodies were locked.

“Savous, I can’t control it,” she whimpered as they began to rock in a dark, primal rhythm.

“It’s all right,” he soothed. “I have you.”

“But you’re shielding us. What if he senses ...?”

“He won’t. It’s all right. It’s just us. I have you.”

She had to trust him. He knew far more about these things than she. She could only accept when he turned them so she was tucked beneath him. She could only hold on, wrapping arms and legs around his muscular body as he took hers. She could only accept the blinding heat of the lust that burned in her blood. And she could only experience in awe the awareness that a mystical, magical other part of her mated similarly with him.

Climax was almost lost in the sensation of utter completion.

Chapter Twelve

Nalfien sat back, staring confounded at Radin. “So you brought Savous in on your nine-day to help shield her.” It was a statement, not a question. “I had wondered ...”

Hyle leaned forward at the table, dumbfounded by Radin’s revelation.

Radin nodded calmly, well familiar with Nalfien’s pattern of addressing small issues when the larger had taken him by surprise. “I didn’t have much choice in the matter. I couldn’t contain her and guide her at the same time.”

Nalfien nodded, intently studying the hand he had spread out before him on the table. Hyle sat back, still stunned. Radin allowed them time.

“We cast a spell that not only delayed her sexual maturity but also delayed her mage powers?” Hyle finally mused. Radin smirked. Trust Hyle to find the wonder in the spell and its inner workings. “What else could we have suppressed?”

Nalfien threw a glare at him. “Let us not borrow trouble by supposing more. What we have is enough.” He looked to Radin. “Were you and Savous successful in teaching her to shield?”

“No. She’ll get the basics soon, but she can’t do it yet.”

“And is she shielded from notice?”

Radin shrugged. "Can you detect her?"

Nalfien sat back. His red eyes flared for a brief moment before he closed his lids over them. Beside him, Hyle did the same. Radin felt the tingling awareness of their power at work, but didn't bother to try and follow their spells. Instead, he rose to fill a mug of wine for himself. He had returned to his seat and was halfway through the cup before Nalfien opened his eyes. Hyle was only a moment behind.

"You've done well with Savous." Nalfien's voice was calm. "His control is flawless."

Radin shrugged. "He's a natural at it."

"He should no longer be an apprentice."

Radin glared into his mug. "Let's not start with that argument again. He has his reasons. And that's not our problem here. The fact that he's still my apprentice has *helped* us."

Nalfien snorted. "As though anyone would question your inviting him to a tryst."

Radin shrugged. "It lends credence."

Nalfien sighed. "That it does." He rose to retrieve his own mug of wine. "So, we have a situation. When *he* finds out what she is, he'll demand she go to him."

"I won't allow that to happen."

Nalfien looked hard at his ex-apprentice. Nodded. "Understandable. And, in this case, I share your conviction. She's obviously a very special case and should be protected from ... being wasted."

Radin sneered at the euphemism, but he let it go. "Do we keep her a secret?"

"We must. Else we directly defy the *rhaeja* and a goddess-given prophecy."

"How can we possibly hide her?" Hyle asked quietly. "It would be for her entire life."

Nalfien and Radin both stared into their mugs. "Indeed. It would seem an impossible feat."

“We could take her from the city,” Radin suggested. “There are places on the far side of the mountain or on the edges of the forest. He might not detect her there.”

“Would you go with her?”

“Yes.”

“No hesitation?”

Radin stared at his former master. “Irin is special to me.”

“Your truemate?”

Radin balked only slightly. “Perhaps. In all that’s happened, I haven’t thought to check.”

“But you feel differently about her?”

“Yes.”

“And if she’s not your truemate?”

“She still needs to be protected.”

“But she must stay in the city for at least a cycle or until her truemate is found. Do you propose we shield her until then?”

Radin glanced at Hyle. “We could. Between Savous, Hyle, and me we should be able to keep track of her.”

“And lie to her truemate?”

“Only until it’s proven he’s her truemate. Then he should know.”

Nalfien looked from one ex-apprentice to the other. “Hyle, do you agree?”

“I do,” the younger man said softly.

Nalfien sat. “Rhae help us, so do I. When did things go so wrong as we defy our *rhaeja* and our goddess?”

Radin had an easy answer. “When Gwentyth died.”

Nalfien nodded, closing his eyes. "Just so. Who would have thought ...?" He shook his head. "But at the time there was no other." Radin stood, turning away, but Nalfien spoke the words he had been expecting anyway. "Now there is a possibility."

Radin froze, his back to Nalfien. He shut his eyes. "It's his decision."

"Yes. But can he not see ...?"

"If he doesn't feel the time is right, then no one can or *should* force him. We could all be wrong and he might not return."

"But then we'd know."

Radin rounded on Nalfien. "At what cost?"

"Most likely, none. I don't believe there is a single man among us, the *rhaeja* included, who doesn't believe that Savous is his successor."

"Which is why he's been trying to lull Savous into being his apprentice for cycles. Yes, we know that. *Savous* knows that. And he doesn't trust him. Which only makes their relationship worse. And what happens if Savous does take to the *vetriese* and comes out marked? Do they battle? Does he sit around waiting for Valanth to die? I doubt Valanth would stand still for that."

Nalfien stayed silent. There was no precedent for this. All other successions had happened when the current *rhaeja* was ready to relinquish his position. Responsibility had passed to the new *rhaeja* without contest, and the elder *rhaeja* had become a trusted advisor until his ultimate death. But Valanth was only the fourth *rhaeja* since the gods left the earth.

"No," said Nalfien, "you are very likely correct. Savous may still not yet be prepared to contest his father. But, in light of the new situation, can he afford to wait any longer?"

Radin glared, but said nothing. The same thought had occurred to him already.

Chapter Thirteen

Radin lay back on the soft furs, eyes closed and hands folded calmly over his chest. The soft moans and sighs of Irin and Savous gently making love were a soothing undertone, fitting music for him to doze to.

If only his mind would consent to doze. Instead, his thoughts were in turmoil. As they had been since discovering Irin was a mage. She'd made some progress in shielding, but only modest. Such was to be expected in a beginner, but they didn't have *time* for her to be a beginner. There was a remote chance that if she could shield well enough, Valanth might not notice her powers for a while. It might give them time to, if nothing else, increase the chance that she would truemate.

Radin frowned, fighting the mental image of Irin in Valanth's control. How soon would the familiar effects show on her? Would Valanth wait until her skin had at least turned and toughened before he asserted his particular brand of ownership?

Radin's eyes opened in panic. He stared at the ceiling, fighting to mask his sudden fear from the lovers beside him. He managed, only barely, to calm himself and close his eyes again. Judging by the sounds beside him, they hadn't noticed.

Valanth liked pain. His true mate, Gwenyth, had purported to love it. This wasn't surprising. Although this wasn't Radin's particular preference, he'd seen evidence that such relationships could work. Krael and Suzana couldn't be happier. Then again, Suzana liked *anything* that gave Krael pleasure. Radin suspected Irin was not built that way. She didn't seem to mind rough sex, but he couldn't see her enjoying being at the business end of a whip.

Needing the reassurance of another, solid mind, Radin let his thoughts drift outside of himself. Gently he prodded at that other mind and waited.

Shouldn't you be busy? Salin asked at length, amused.

Are you?

Salin's amusement sobered somewhat at Radin's serious tone. *We're watching Fallil perform. What's wrong?*

Why does Krael enjoy pain, do you suppose?

What?

I know that he enjoys it, but I've never bothered to think of why.

Why are you wondering now?

Radin hesitated, shielding most of his thoughts. *There are reasons?*

Is Irin a submissive?

No.

Then why ...?

Radin chose his words very carefully. *I'm trying to understand why someone could enjoy causing pain.*

Why?

Bear with me.

Pause. Then a mental shrug. *With Krael, I don't think it's pain so much as it's control and trust. To him, the fact that Suzana will willingly submit to being hurt by him is an amazing show of trust.*

So it's not punishment? Or just causing pain?

I don't believe so, no. Although I think he does like the loss of control of emotions. She seems to crave it, as well.

Salin waited. Radin thought.

Do you suppose the rhaeja's reasons are similar?

Valanth? Why would you think about him? What's wrong?

Radin hesitated, then let go of the careful control he had on his thoughts. *Irin's a mage.*

What?! How?

That seems to be the popular question. Regardless of the answer, she is.

So that's why Savous is with you!

Let me guess, there are rumors flying?

Quite. Everyone is amazed at the confirmation that you and Savous are that close.

Everyone is also wondering if you'll form a threesome.

We could.

That caught Salin off guard. *Truly?*

I care for her. So does he.

Have you truemated? Either of you?

Not that I can tell. But we've a few days yet.

Does Nalfien know?

Yes.

Mmmm. And you're asking questions about Valanth ...?

We all know that it's a slim chance that we can keep what she is from Valanth.

Don't borrow trouble. She won't go to Valanth. Salin's thoughts were ominously cool.

Radin frowned at the conviction in his brother's thoughts. *Salin, there's not much we can do.*

There are things we can do.

Such as?

Don't think about it. You do what you must in the next few days. Maybe we'll get lucky and one of you will plant her.

Radin tried not to succumb to a new panic. What was Salin thinking? He tried and failed to break through the barrier Salin put before his real thoughts. Despite the fact that Radin was the trained sorcerer as well as more powerful, Salin was exceedingly good at shielding himself. Radin sometimes wondered if he'd shielded away most of his power on purpose. *Salin, what are you going to do?*

Nothing. Yet.

Salin ...

You do what you must. I'll do what I think is best. She's my kitten, too.

But ... Radin's eyes flew open when soft lips slid around the head of his cock. The amazing warm flow of Irin's presence settled like a cozy blanket over him, seeping into his skin. He focused on Irin bending over him, busily swallowing his mostly softened cock. "What ...?"

Radin looked up at Savous, who knelt behind her. He aimed his glistening cock at her entrance and slid easily inside. Irin moaned. The vibrations around his cock made Radin shudder.

Savous grinned down at Radin, his hair plastered to the sides of his face. "She wanted a change of position."

Irin let his cock go with a loud pop. She smirked up at him, squeezing with one hand to keep encouraging his cock to waken. "Do you mind?"



Salin laughed inside his head. *Cheeky little devil, isn't she?*

Irin's mouth dropped open as she stared at Radin's face. Both she and Savous froze, staring at him.

"Was that Salin?"

Radin blinked. Before Irin, he'd never had occasion to have anyone but Salin privy to his thoughts. He hadn't even thought to shield. "You heard him?"

She heard me?

"That *was* Salin!"

"Goddess, Radin, you can mind-link with Salin?"

Radin gaped at Savous. "*You* can hear him?"

"Distantly." He frowned. "Through Irin. How long have you been able to do that?"

"All my life." Radin focused back on Irin. "How well can you hear him?"

"I ... pretty clear."

"Could you hear him a few moments ago when you were fucking?"

"Well, no. Not until I was looking at you."

And you knew it was me?

"Well, yeah. It sounds like Salin." She shrugged.

"I didn't think Salin used any of his magic," Savous said.

And why do you think you should know everything?

That's a pretty big secret, don't you think?

"You will *not* have arguments inside *my* head!" Radin snapped. He glared at Savous. "How did you do that?"

"Uh ... I don't know. I just *did*."

"It felt like it was through me." They both looked to Irin, who had pulled away from Savous and now knelt by Radin's thigh. An amazed little smile curved the corners of her

mouth. She reached up to gather sweat-soaked hair from her face and neck and threw it behind her back.

“This link between us is stronger than I thought,” Radin mused, studying Irin. “I wonder if it’s a talent of your own, or something you picked up from me.”

“I didn’t pick that up from you,” Savous pointed out.

“Good point. But Irin’s powers seem to remarkably follow along either your or my particular talents.”

Salin’s mental voice sighed. *And this is where I lose interest. I’ve done enough damage for today. I’ll leave you sorcerous folk to figure out the details.* His thoughts trailed away, and Radin let him go.

“That’s amazing!” Irin gasped.

“Isn’t it?” Savous groused.

Radin frowned at him. “Don’t start.”

“That’s a huge secret to have kept from me!”

“It wasn’t something you could share. There didn’t seem to be a need to let you know about it.”

Savous turned hurt eyes from him. “Me or anyone else.”

Radin’s hand darted out to grab Savous’s wrist. He yanked hard, and although the younger man resisted, he managed to tumble Savous onto his shoulder beside him.

He dug his free hand into the hair at Savous’s temple, holding the younger man’s head steady. “There’s plenty that I’ve shared with you that I’ll never be able to share with anyone else.”

Rebellious red eyes glared at him, but saner thoughts prevailed. Slowly the anger dwindled to a light pain. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s just a surprise.”

Radin nodded and bent to join his mouth with Savous's in a deep, thorough kiss. "Don't doubt my feelings for you. Not now, not ever. We can't afford it."

The pain had subsided further. Savous nodded, squeezing Radin's wrist for emphasis. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Irin watched the exchange with hunger. They were so *beautiful!* Long, muscular bodies pressed against each other. Gleaming black skin rubbing gleaming black skin. Kissing, they were a bounty for the eyes. Unable to resist touching, she reached out and stroked the inside of Radin's thigh and the outside of Savous's hip. So warm.

The move turned them back to her. She felt their attention like a warm flicker around her heart. If she gave it a visual, it was like thick golden bands of luminous light that connected them. When they were all three this close, it was just a great ball of golden light. A light and a feeling she never wanted to be without.

I love you. She let the thought project, aimed at both of them.

She saw them both struggle to hide the pain, the fear. They were frightened for her. Sadly, the same wonderful gifts that formed this amazing union were what put them at risk.

"This is what he'll want me for, isn't it?" she asked bitterly. "Will my magic respond to him as well?"

"No," Savous denied immediately.

"We've no way of knowing," Radin told her truthfully.

He held out his hand and she took it, allowing him to draw her down until she was tucked safely and happily in the heat between their bodies. She let her hand drift down Radin's belly, following the markings that pointed toward his cock. She held it and stroked it, more for comfort and just because she *could*. At her back, Savous nuzzled her neck, sliding his still-wet cock through the crack of her ass.

She accepted the kiss that Radin tipped her chin up for. She let Savous lift her leg so he could ease his cock into her dripping passage. She needed to be held and comforted, and she eagerly didn't want to think of what might happen if either one of these men was taken away from her.

Feeling adventurous, kitten? Radin asked mentally so he didn't have to release her mouth

Yes!

Savous chuckled as he leisurely slid in and out of her pussy. *Are you thinking double?*

Yes.

Double?

Radin did pull back then. He cradled her jaw with one hand, gazing deeply into her eyes. "Would you take both of us at once?"

Irin gaped. "At once? You won't fit."

Savous's hand slid over her hip to her back so he could slide one long finger mostly into the crack of her ass. "You have more than one opening, kitten."

She gaped. "I didn't think you did that with women."

"Why not?"

"Well ... because a woman has a cunt!"

They both laughed. "If men can enjoy it, why shouldn't a woman?" Radin asked.

"Besides," Savous murmured in her ear, "it would be the closest the three of us could possibly be together."

That thought made her shiver. "Oh, yes!" she heard herself say.

Radin reached for her and lifted her away from Savous, dragging her until she lay on him, belly to belly.

"Hmm," Savous mused. "Seems I don't get a choice?"

Smiling, Radin maneuvered Irin and, with her help, lowered her slowly onto his cock. “No. You don’t. Still my nine days.”

Savous rolled his eyes, but gave up the fight easily. He crawled down until he was positioned behind Irin as she writhed atop Radin.

“You’re both talking too much,” she growled, pushing up so she was braced on Radin’s chest.

Radin chuckled, tweaking her nipple.

She moaned as Savous again ran his wet cock down the crack of her ass. This time, however, he used both fingers to spread her, stretching her wide. He lapped at her shoulder. “Stop me if it hurts, kitten.”

In answer, she opened the floodgates of her feelings, willingly sharing.

Both Radin and Savous gasped.

What? she thought.

We’re used to feeling the emotions of our partners, Radin explained. She could almost taste the pulse pounding in his neck. *But this is so much more!*

They all felt the hot drag of Savous’s cock as he slid it down into position. They all gasped at the sharp bite as he pushed forward.

They didn’t so much think in words as in emotional encouragement to her. Under the onslaught, she could do no more than relax her body and push back at Savous, simultaneously pushing down on Radin. It was tight. She was full. It hurt. He stopped. She adjusted, and Savous pushed forward more to assure her that she wasn’t yet full. She got a hint of a memory from one of them of this feeling of being filled, of what it should feel like. One of their memories showed her how to relax and accept.

It was all a wonderful confusion of bodies and minds. Pushing, pulling. Filled and empty. Swelling and, finally, bursting into a burbling, entangling ooze that melded them all into one.

Chapter Fourteen

Salin stood to the side of the practice arena, arms crossed and critical eyes on the men who sparred across the open expanse before him. The air was filled with the music of weapons clanging and singing against each other and the grunts of men intent on subduing each other.

Krael stood beside Salin, his eyes on the men just as critical, if not more so. His long white hair was braided down his back, and his whip was coiled at his waist. Occasionally he would crack it as a signal that each man should find a new opponent.

Though the arena was crowded, the commander and his captain stood alone. They were silent observers, as well as a constant focus of attention. Each of the young men before them sought their approval. These were not seasoned warriors. These were youths new to the training grounds. Many had only recently left their time of service within the kitchens, dining halls, and cleaning crews. Each was anxious to join the ranks of the warriors who served the commander.

Salin's voice when he spoke was casual. Low enough not to be overheard by any except Krael. "A fine gathering of youth."

"Yes. They'll do."

“A worthy gathering. I wonder how many of them will ever truemate.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Salin saw Krael turn just his head to study him a moment. He then turned back to the arena. “Not many.”

“So true. It’s a shame that there are those who believe that the few unmated women among us are expendable. Don’t you think?”

A long silence between them. Salin waited, trusting Krael to catch his meaning.

“Or believe that unmated women are their sole purview. Yes. It is a shame.”

“Do you think these men also think it’s a shame?”

Krael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He kept his eyes trained forward. “I think they might.”

“What of our seasoned warriors?”

“I believe they think it more of a shame. A travesty.”

“A travesty?” Salin kept his tone light, as though they discussed the color of the sand.

Krael matched his tone. “Yes. There are those who still wonder if one of those *expendable* women, with whom he’d never been, just *might* have been his truemate.”

Salin nodded. It was a common fear among the *raedjour*. There were some men who convinced themselves that they didn’t want a truemate -- Salin had been one of these himself, before Diana -- but deep down each man had an ingrained need to seek his truemate. Like all living beings, they sought to procreate.

Salin pursed his lips. “How much of a travesty might this be, do you think?”

“Enough to fight to end the travesty.”

Salin allowed himself a small smile. Trust Krael to find the heart of the matter. “Truly? Even against such a ... longstanding practice?”

“Longstanding practices grow stale. Especially if there is no benefit in them. Life should go on.” Krael cast him a sidelong glance, an evil smile curling his lips. “Occasionally, life needs a little help.”

Yet again, Salin had cause to be glad life had granted him Krael. “Agreed. It would be a good time to remind the men of these things. Casually.”

Krael drew back a muscular arm and snapped it forward, cracking his whip. He drew the weapon back, expertly curling it with both hands. “Times are changing?”

“They are, my friend. Faster than we’d imagined.”

Chapter Fifteen

Valanth stared at the apparition hovering above the flickering flames of the firepit before him. A woman's face and some of her upper torso, blurry and indistinct. Her black skin was dark and glossy, and her long white hair trailed from the image of her head to fade just above the flames. She had a strong, patrician nose, a full, lush mouth, and heavy-lidded eyes he knew only from memory were a deep, rich brown. It was easy to see the resemblance between Gwenyth and Savous, her youngest son.

"Would it please you to see Savous?" he asked the apparition.

No response. He didn't expect one. He had learned long ago that Gwenyth in her current state did not -- could not -- respond. He could see her. Within the *vetriese*, he could *almost* touch her, but he could not talk with her.

Yet.

"I'll have him by my side, my heart. You'll see two of your sons with me when you return to me."

The sensory spells set throughout his tower warned him of Betaf's approach up the stairs. He regarded the image of his wife for a few more brief moments, then banished the sight.

The door opened, and Betaf entered in a flourish of violet and lavender robes.

Unaffected, Valanth waited until the other man stood on the other side of the firepit.
“Well?”

Betaf frowned, displaying his confusion. “Savous is with Radin, my *rhaeja*.”

Valanth frowned. “With Radin? Isn’t Radin in a nine-day with that girl? The virgin?”

“Yes, *rhaeja*.”

“Why is Savous with them?”

“That seems to be the question, my *rhaeja*. As far as I’ve been told, Radin called for him two nights ago, and he’s been with them ever since.”

Valanth sat back in his chair, eyes on Betaf, but thoughts elsewhere. “Isn’t Radin generous to share his time with the virgin with his apprentice?”

Radin again! Always Radin. Such a mistake he’d made so long ago to allow his youngest son to apprentice with the inveterate wanderer! At the time, still grieving for his truemate, Valanth had allowed it to happen. How he now rued his lack of attention!

“And this was two nights ago? That would be why he sent the boy with the fruit.”
Valanth fumed, the flames before him blazing to reflect his temper. “Do you suppose, Betaf, that they might form a threesome with this girl?”

Betaf took a steadying breath. “Judging by their conduct, I would think it is possible, my *rhaeja*.”

“At which time, Radin would certainly turn him against me once and for all.”

Betaf did not voice his thoughts.

“He is my son, Betaf. His place is by my side. Under my control.”

Betaf bowed his head, most likely to hide the jealousy in his eyes. Valanth knew of the man’s possessive feelings toward him, but did not allow Betaf the luxury of thinking the feelings were mutual. “Yes, my *rhaeja*.”

Valanth's mind spun. He was about to lose Savous. He could feel it. He had hoped to lure the boy to his side during his apprenticeship. He berated himself now for waiting. His only excuse was that there had been no urgency and it would have been so much sweeter, so much easier, if Savous had come to him of his own accord. Valanth could now see that was not going to happen.

"This has gone on long enough." Icy anger laced his voice. "That boy has avoided me for too long. I have been tolerant. Too tolerant. I will not put up with his avoidance any longer. Go get him."

Betaf's eyes opened wide. He spread a beringed black hand on his chest. "*Rhaeja?*"

"Get him. Go pull him away from his tryst with Radin and that girl. I've allowed him too much freedom, *and* I've allowed him to be influenced by Radin long enough."

Betaf's jaw dropped in horror. He quickly pulled himself together, bowing low. "Pardon, *rhaeja*, you want me to take him from Radin?" Savous was one thing. He was younger and an apprentice, too frightened to trust his life to the goddess and take to the *vetriese*. Radin, however, was an entirely different matter. Despite his bravado, Betaf was well aware he was not of Radin's caliber, although he would only admit that within his own head.

Valanth considered Betaf and realized what he was asking. Although he valued Betaf at his side, there were drawbacks to keeping another sorcerer under one's thumb. Betaf might be able to take on Savous alone, but Radin was an entirely different matter. It wasn't so much that the younger sorcerer was more powerful than Betaf, but he was certainly *smarter*. Betaf's ideas and actions rarely strayed far from the same track as Valanth's surface thoughts. This, ultimately, made Radin too much of an opponent for Betaf. "No." He stood and turned toward a stand to the right that held his robe. "*I'll* get him."

He left his tower with Betaf, Vikart, and four others trailing behind him. His mind continued to whirl. He had spells at the ready for this encounter. He would *not* take no for

an answer. Savous *would* come with him. As for reasons ...! He growled to himself. He was *rhaeja*. He *would* rule!

His mind roared with such thoughts until he stood in the well-lit hall. He paused just outside the door and felt ... nothing. That, in and of itself, was odd. His senses would usually detect at least the presence of others. He could sense the six men who flanked him, waiting on his orders. He could sense the presence of people within the rooms down the hallway. He caught the brief feel of the boy in the outer room of the suite before him. From the nearby bedroom, however, nothing.

Orange eyes narrowed. He hurled power at the door, shattering the lock with a thought.

Irin lay in a sweaty heap, happily sated and blissfully achy. Radin's body provided a full-length pillow beneath her, and Savous collapsed panting beside them. Each of them vibrated with excess power from their explosive union. A warm, lingering connection still linked their minds and hearts. She visualized the union as the thick golden bands, winding from their heads, hearts, and deep within their bellies to mesh in a beautiful, intricate knot.

"Very good, kitten," Radin murmured, stroking her hair. "The visuals you're using are working. But you need to pull it inside you. You need to fix that power within you."

She sighed, smoothing her cheek against the slick skin of his chest. "But it's so much nicer to bind with the two of you."

He chuckled. "I understand the sentiment, kitten, but we can't stay like this forever."

She burrowed closer. "Why not?"

His voice took on that "teacher" tone. "Kitten, you know that ..."

Suddenly, Savous sat up, a look of horror on his face. He stared at the door. "He's here!"

Radin sat up, catching Irin to his chest to keep from tumbling her to the stone floor.

"What?"

Savous shook his head slightly, mouth slightly open. “He’s in the hall. He’s probing. He’s ... damn it!”

Irin felt his panic through their link. Without thought, she reached to him along that golden band, questing while offering all that she had to help him. She felt something big pushing at him, prodding his handiwork.

No, Irin! Savous cried in their link, desperately trying to push her away and sever it.

She clung, tenaciously. *Savous!*

The shield was ripped from his control with a savage tear that temporarily stunned Savous. He fell back with a cry of pain, falling off the bed as the door exploded inward. Power rebounded through their link, stunning Irin, as well.

“What are you hiding?” Valanth demanded from the doorway. His pristine white robes settled gracefully about his frame as he raked them with his orange gaze. Behind him, a half-dozen men stood sentinel. It took him mere heartbeats to focus on Irin. His orange eyes widened in instant, white-hot rage. “*That’s* what you’re hiding!”

Salin! Help!

Salin fell back from a kiss with Diana, head thumping against the back of his chair.

“What ...?” he heard her demand. Felt her hands on his jaw, but he’d temporarily lost control of his body in shock.

I need a witness! came the abrupt response in Salin’s head.

“Radin,” he gasped for Diana’s benefit.

Brutally, Radin *pulled*. Diana saw blind eyes, blazing an abnormally strong red for Salin, but Salin saw through Radin’s eyes.

The *rhaeja* stood in the middle of the room, white robes and white hair wafting on a breeze of invisible power. Sneering, he lifted a hand and slammed Savous against the wall with a blast that stirred a whirlwind in the room. Instinctively, Radin twisted, protecting

Irin's naked body with his as he gathered a spell of his own. He knew it was too late, but he had to try.

I'll be right there! Salin said on instinct.

No! Just watch, then tell Nalfien.

But ...!

"Give her to me!" Valanth demanded, now a terrible shadowy presence over Radin's shoulder.

"No, *rhaeja*. I won't let you kill any more women. Especially not this one."

Salin only felt an echo of the unnatural pain that flared from the *rhaeja's* hand to Radin's body. His brother's spell evaporated in the face of the onslaught. The pain was enough to make Salin gasp through their link. "That is not your say, boy. She is mine. They're both mine. *You* have interfered for too long."

Radin convulsed in pain, falling to his side. Irin screamed. Her strong little arms wound about his neck; her lips pressed to his temple. "No, please! Radin!"

Radin was helpless, able only to keep his eyes open to keep his witness, as Valanth shoved him back and snatched Irin away.

The *rhaeja* hauled her to her feet at his side. "Silence! You were mine from the start, and they've kept you from me."

Irin struggled madly, but the *rhaeja's* attention focused on Radin. Valanth struck Radin, a nearly mortal blow that almost shattered the brothers' link. Irin's shriek of pain echoed Radin's cry. Valanth noticed. He frowned down at the girl for a heartbeat. "You're *linked?*" he raged, shaking her. His orange eyes apparently saw the weave of golden magic that stretched between Irin and Radin. Between Irin and Savous, who was just now pushing groggily to his knees. "How is that possible? All *three* of you! How *dare* you!"

Valanth grabbed Irin's chin, forcing the girl to meet his gaze. She cringed and managed to tear her face from his grasp once, but he was far stronger than she and managed to

recapture her. She winced in pain as his black fingers dug into her plump cheeks. Orange eyes blazed nearly white-hot, and she again struggled, screaming. The golden connection between Irin and Radin quivered and looked like it started to fray, but although strained, it remained intact.

“*Rhaeja.*” This was Betaf, who came forward to stand behind Valanth. “Please.” His eyes were wide and panicked. “Perhaps this should be done elsewhere.”

Valanth snarled, and his eyes settled back to their normal orange. He sneered at Radin on the bed, then Savous, who groaned from the floor. “I could kill you both for this! How dare you defy me! You would deny the salvation of your *rhaeja*?” His eyes narrowed. “But I can’t do that, can I? You’ve linked yourself to my prize.”

Her upper arms trapped in Valanth’s cruel grip, Irin nonetheless struggled for freedom. “I’m not your prize! Let me go!”

“Silence, girl! You’ve lived under my permission all of your life. How dare you repay my kindness so!”

Irin gaped.

Valanth’s entourage in the doorway remained as statues, physically present, but it was as though they didn’t see. One held Alrek’s limp body in his arms. Radin couldn’t tell if the boy was still alive.

Valanth snarled at the burly guards awaiting him. “Bring them all.”

“*Rhaeja!*” Betaf cried in panic. “Please! This is most unusual. How will we ...?”

“Silence!”

Through Radin’s eyes, Salin saw the *rhaeja* literally shake with rage. Irin’s face was drawn in pain, the skin of her upper arm white from where Valanth clutched her.

Valanth glared at Radin, sending another flare of pain through the younger sorcerer. “So be it,” he said, turning toward the far corner of the room. He tucked Irin’s struggling form under one arm. “I’ll put you away and deal with you at my convenience.”

“*Rhaeja!*” Betaf gasped. “Please, no!”

Valanth paid him no mind. He muttered. Eyes blazed. He raised a hand and made intricate gestures in the air.

Radin’s shock nearly subdued the pain. *What ...?*

A *vetriese* opened in the corner of the room, eerily splitting the very air and hovering over the middle of the stone floor. Gaping, Betaf eyed it, stepping back toward the room’s entrance. After settling it, Valanth turned. Salin could feel the echo of his brother’s horror through their link. Creation of a *vetriese* should *not* be possible! The one in existence had been there since the gods had left the earth, and no more -- at least, none for Rhae -- had ever been created.

Valanth grabbed Radin’s arm. Radin would have struggled, but another surge of pain left him limp and barely able to maintain his connection with Salin. Like a rag doll, Valanth dragged him from the bed. Irin cried out, reaching for Radin. Valanth growled and barked a word. Irin went instantly limp in his other arm.

“Vikart, get Savous,” Valanth ordered as he dragged Radin across the room.

“Vikart!” Betaf snapped.

Valanth turned as he reached the *vetriese*, twisting Radin around as well so they both saw that the large man had not moved from his position in the doorway.

“Vikart,” Valanth began, impatient anger lacing his voice, “get Savous.”

On the floor, Savous had just struggled to his knees, shaking his head as he leveled a glare at his father.

Still, Vikart didn’t move. Expressionless, he stared back at his father’s glare.

Betaf slapped one of Vikart’s meaty arms, then stepped up to Savous. He wrestled the younger man up halfway before he had to call on one of the other guards to help him. The other guard pushed past Vikart’s motionless form.

“Vikart, I will remember this,” Valanth promised.

Vikart nodded.

Radin heard Valanth's growl as he turned back toward the *vetriese*. Radin tried to muster a spell, or at least some strength in his limbs in order to push away, but his muscles wouldn't obey. His gaze filled with the sight of the *vetriese* as Valanth hauled him toward it.

Valanth shoved. Boneless, Radin tumbled into the void.

Salin gasped, shook as his sight through Radin's eyes abruptly severed. Diana still straddled his lap, but all amorous intent had drained to furious panic. She held his face, staring at his eyes, waiting for sanity to return.

"What happened?"

Salin stared at her, shock still holding him immobile.

"Salin?!"

"Radin!"

"What happened?"

Salin shook his head, his fingers tightening on her waist. "I don't know, but ..."
Something was missing. What? His link with Radin, a constant presence in his mind and heart since his younger brother had been born, was *gone*. He stood, easily lifting and setting her on her feet. "I have to go see Nalfien. Radin's in trouble."

"I'm going with you!"

"No, I ..." But then he thought about it. Abruptly, he didn't trust his mate's safety out of his sight. He had a nearly irresistible urge to fetch his son. "Get dressed." Brevin, he quickly reasoned as he fetched his own trousers and boots, was likely safer in the nursery.

Chapter Sixteen

“How is it possible?” Hyle asked, standing beside Nalfien. “How could he open a *vetriese*?”

Nalfien stood in the corner where Salin said the *vetriese* had opened. At this particular moment, he felt every one of his over nine hundred cycles of age. In less than a night, he had discovered two magical talents he had not previously known existed. Commander Salin had rudely roused him from his bed to let him know Radin, Savous, and Irin were in jeopardy. When asked how he knew, Salin had reluctantly told Nalfien that he had -- and had *always* had! -- a mental link with his brother. Nalfien wanted to be outraged that he'd known nothing of this, but then Salin had added that Valanth had not only taken Irin, but that he had disposed of Radin and, apparently, Savous in a *vetriese* that he created.

Nalfien had been content in his knowledge before this night. He was not pleased to have that contentment shattered.

The room in which Radin and Irin, then Savous, should have shared nine days of sexual abundance lay empty. The furs and blankets on the bed were rumpled, and platters of food still lay on the table. The boy Alrek, who should have been waiting on them, was missing.

Nalfien rounded on Salin, who stood with Diana in the doorway. "Where is it?"

The commander's sharp eyes scanned the room. "I don't know. I lost Radin when Valanth shoved him into it."

"A *vetriese*," Hyle murmured. "And you saw this through Radin's eyes?"

"Yes, damn it!" Salin glared at the sorcerers. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know what we *can* do about it," Nalfien admitted. "We can't very well prove what you've said without confronting the *rhaeja*."

"Then *confront* him!" Diana demanded from just behind Salin's shoulder in the doorway. "He might have killed them, for all we know."

Nalfien frowned. "You overestimate me. I'm not as powerful as Valanth." He stared at the empty corner. "Especially not if he's done as Salin described."

"So they closed the room and just left?! How does he expect to get away with this?"

Nalfien shook his head, desperately trying to think. "I don't know. Radin's nine days aren't over for three more nights."

"That gives him three nights to cover his tracks!"

Nalfien nodded sadly.

"Isn't Radin supposed to report to you daily?"

"Not necessarily. He's one of us. He's perfectly capable of reporting to us at the end of his nine days. If he hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have thought twice about it."

"What do we do?!"

Nalfien looked to Hyle, then Diana, then settled his focus on Salin. The commander held his gaze with coolly furious intent. "What *can* we do?"

Salin's gaze narrowed. "What are you *willing* to do?"

Nalfien's blood chilled. "What do you mean?"

"Are you willing to let him get away with this?"

“What do you propose?”

“A revolt.”

“A revolt?”

“We’re not the only *raedjour* who aren’t happy with the *rhaeja* and his behavior.”

Nalfien’s blood chilled. He had seen this catastrophe approaching, but had vainly hoped it would never come to pass. “What are you saying?”

“I’m prepared to take a stand. I’m prepared to confront him.” Salin stood tall, crossing his arms. “And I have the backing of most of my men in this.”

Nalfien spoke very carefully. “A revolt against Rhae’s chosen?”

Salin flipped his head to clear long bangs from his face. His dark red eyes smoldered. “Rhae’s chosen has turned his back on us. He hasn’t truly led us for cycles, and everyone knows this. We tolerate him because he *is* Rhae’s chosen. But this ...?” He gestured at the room. “Two of our most powerful sorcerers and a girl we’ve raised as our own, and he simply *takes* them? Yet another unmated woman that he’ll let wither and die?” Salin shook his head. “We’ve reached the end of what we’ll put up with.”

Behind him, Diana beamed savagely. Her love and support of her true mate shone in her face.

Nalfien glanced at Hyle. His eyes widened to see his normally quiet, distracted son keenly focused on Salin’s words. His stoic expression made it clear that he agreed.

Hyle faced Nalfien. He shook his head. “We can’t allow this any more, Father.”

Nalfien sighed. “Are we prepared to deny our own goddess?”

Salin nodded curtly. “She has clearly denied us a true leader. It’s time we showed Her that we don’t approve of the current one.”

Nalfien shook his head sadly. There were historic details he knew about Valanth’s succession, about the young man who had become *rhaeja*. But none of those excuses made up for Valanth’s lack of leadership. Salin was right. The time had come to act.

He gathered his black robes around him and faced the others squarely. “Very well, I am with you. Go, Commander,” he said. “Gather your men. And hurry. We’ve no idea what Valanth has done while we’ve been talking.”

Chapter Seventeen

Irin gasped a desperate breath, her whole body arching from where she lay as Valanth brought her roughly out of magic-induced paralysis. Blindly, she tried to scabble backwards, away from the *rhaeja's* overwhelming presence above her, but he had a grip on her shoulders, and from the thighs down, her legs were trapped under a blanket and his thighs as he straddled her. The room around them was dark save for the glow of what had to be a large fire somewhere behind him.

“Let me go!” she cried, panicked.

Valanth cracked a palm against her cheek, snapping her head back and momentarily stunning her. “Silence, girl! You’ll obey everything I say if you don’t want your lovers to suffer.”

She whimpered, staring into the curtain of her own hair. Desperately, she sought that golden weave that linked her to Savous and Radin. She almost let out another whimper, this one in relief, when she touched it. The weave was intact. She could feel them, even if it was barely and even if they didn’t seem to be quite conscious. *Radin! Savous!*

Valanth struck her again, then used two hands to grab her hair and force her to face him as he hovered over her. “You call to them. I can feel it. But your lovers can’t help you now. They’re mine. Or they will be as soon as I make you mine.”

“No.”

He shook her so hard that her brain rattled inside her skull. “Whether it causes you pain or not, I don’t truly care. You are a means to an end. Let them go, girl.”

“Where are they?”

“Alive, for now. In safekeeping.” He paused, glancing sideways for a moment. His glare seemed uncertain, but she couldn’t know for sure. He faced her once more, angry purpose again painting his sharp features. “You, however, are mine. The answer to my salvation.”

“No! I don’t ... I’m not.” She screamed when he hauled her up until they were nose to nose. Up close, his orange eyes were far more disconcerting. They were so different than the warm, glowing red of any of the other sorcerers she knew. She could almost swear she saw flames flickering in the *raeja*’s irises.

“You are a mage.” His questing power swarmed over her, enveloping her and trying to press inside. “I have been waiting many long cycles for one such as you. You are the answer to my prophecy. You are *mine*.”

“Never.” She shook her head as best she could. “I don’t love you!”

“We have time for that.”

Even though it was hopeless, she fought. Desperate not to let him have her, hurt her. Take her. “No! No one will believe it. How will you cover Radin and Savous’s disappearance? You won’t be able to convince anyone that they just vanished.”

That angered him enough to slap her again. “That is none of your concern. I won’t be denied.”

“You can’t make me love you.”

His eyes blazed, and a strange lust surged in her body, making her quake. It was unnatural, nothing like the warmth she felt with either Radin or Savous. This lust was skin-deep only and centered in her groin. The rest of her remained cold. She felt the want, recognized the trickle of warmth between her legs, but it wasn't backed by emotion. She groaned, straining against the false need. "You can make me want you, but you can't make me love you."

He fell atop her, his naked body hot against her skin. His lips hovered over hers. Her fingers scratched at the bare skin of his arms with no result other than pain to her fingertips. "All in good time."

"No!"

He pressed his mouth to hers. She expected a brutal kiss. What he gave her was nothing of the kind. The kiss was warm and exploratory. It fanned the heat he'd sparked in her groin and nearly made the heat expand. She squirmed, unwilling to feel any desire for him, but he held her securely, his larger body encasing hers. She whimpered, feeling her hard nipples scrape against his slick skin.

"You see?" he murmured into her mouth, brushing her lips with his.

She panted, willing her hips not to rock and press her aching clit against him. "I don't want you."

"You will."

"I don't love you."

He ignored her. He switched both of her wrists into one hand and pressed them up above her head. His free hand he pressed at the base of her throat, pushing just hard enough to threaten her breath. "I've yet to be denied," he told her, his voice a dark purr. "Your will is nothing matched with mine."

She felt it. Nothing physical, but he was worming his way under her skin. Into her mind. The distraction of the kiss had given him the crack he'd needed in her woefully

inadequate, immature shields. She cried out, trying to fight the icy fingers invading her person, weaving their slow way toward her soul.



No! A surging blast of heat exploded from her core, nearly like an unexpected orgasm. It shot toward that worming ice and melted it. Expelled it.

Valanth gasped in shock, jerking away from her. Beneath him, Irin could only lie and try to catch her breath as her body tingled from a familiar touch.

Valanth growled, eyes narrowed. “Savous.”

Savous! Radin! Irin burned with their combined energy, even if it did feel distanced somehow. They were with her, and she felt their determination to do anything it took to save her.

Valanth stared at her for long, calculated moments. Thoughts made his orange eyes pulse. His scowl made her skin crawl. She forced herself not to move. To meet his gaze steadily. Within her thoughts, Radin and Savous shored up her shields, ready for the onslaught.

As though a new fire had suddenly been lit, Valanth’s eyes widened. His black lips fell open partially, and she barely made out his murmured words. “A mage’s love ...” His dark expression did nothing to put her at ease. “Your love. Is it *them?*” He shook his head in what looked like denial. “That couldn’t possibly be what She meant!”

Irin had no idea what he was talking about. What was this “she”? Rhae?

Growling, he stood. She tried to sit up, but found she could not. Invisible bands held her immobile on her back against the furs. Calmly, Valanth crawled onto the bed platform beside her and pulled something from the wall. She heard chains. He picked up her hand easily and clasped it in a padded manacle. She watched, dumbfounded, unable to move, as he did the same to the other wrist. When he stepped from the bed, she could move again, but the bonds kept her on the bed.

He paid her no heed, striding toward a huge firepit in the middle of the largely empty room. *His workroom*, Savous supplied for her.

What is he talking about? she asked desperately.

But the weak links with Savous and Radin only radiated with confusion, both for her situation as well as their own.

Facing away from her, Valanth lifted a hand. The flames before him banked halfway so that they were even with the rim of iron that surrounded the sunken pit. Above them, a *vetriese* materialized. Irin's link with her lovers strengthened slightly. She tingled with awareness. They were beyond that portal!

Valanth turned to gaze at her over his shoulder. "A mage's love to save the *rhaeja*.' Perhaps you're not the key after all. Just the catalyst to expose the key."

"Wait! No!" she cried.

Too late. Valanth stepped over the flames into the void.

Chapter Eighteen

Savous.

Savous hung suspended in darkness. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. There was no sense of falling or floating, nor did he truly have a sense of *being*. He could tell his body was with him. If he moved, he could feel himself. But it was an odd feeling, almost as though his limbs belonged to someone else. He could see, taste, and smell nothing, which -- for a creature highly developed in all three senses -- was frightening.

Savousavous.

Something buzzed around him, but it only touched him lightly. He got the distinct impression that it was exploring him and wouldn't hurt him directly. He clung to that instinct as he concentrated on helping Irin avoid his father. He sensed Radin near him, but distantly. He couldn't pinpoint Radin's presence, nor could he communicate with his master directly, but he could feel Radin through Irin and sensed the other man's equal determination to protect her.

Irin. He loved her. He knew it. He had known it. She was a warm beacon, an extension of his heart and thoughts. He knew what she saw without seeing it, and felt what she felt in a distant way. When she panicked or feared, he sought to comfort and protect even through

this strange distance between them. He was almost certain she was his true mate. He had wanted to check, but had hesitated, unsure what to do about Radin if his suspicion was confirmed.

Savous savous savous savous savous. The chittering voice nagged at the outer limits of his senses. Brief caresses, like puffs of wind, wafted over his skin. What was it?

“Wait! No!”

Irin’s scream marked the moment Valanth became a towering presence alongside Savous in the void. The chittering increased, crawling over Savous’s body like ants.

“Was *this* part of our agreement!” Valanth roared.

Suddenly, strange visuals ripped into Savous’s awareness. He saw perfectly well, but everything had an eerie edge to it, and distances were hard to judge. He still floated in a sea of black that was so much more than black, but there were others with him. Radin hung suspended like him, trapped within a strange sphere of lights. The sphere looked almost like a writhing blue-white web with layers and layers. Valanth seemed to stand between them, but he also floated in the darkness. His hair hung in a weightless cloud about him, and his orange eyes glowed fiercely. Savous also now saw the little pulsing pink lights that scattered about him. When they darted closer, he felt the strange little puffs like air over his skin. They came near, but never quite touched him. The chittering seemed to come from them.

Mage’s love. Savetherhaeja. Yes.

“*He’s* what you meant? Why didn’t you say that? This could have ended cycles ago!”

The twittering lights spun about him, agitated. *No! Need the girl need the mage.*

Bring the girl here girl bring her here need her now. With Savous.

Valanth scowled, focusing on the lights that surrounded Savous and the chittering presence that echoed through the void. “Why? Why do you need the girl, when he’s what you’ve wanted?”

Bringthegirl! the voice demanded. It was vaguely female, but *larger* than anything Savous had ever experienced. Was this Rhae? Was this presence the goddess the *raedjour* had followed for centuries? *Bringthemagegirlimagegirlbringerherhereneedherhere. WithSavous.*

Another presence sprang to light just behind Valanth. Savous gasped. An image of his mother was suspended in a gossamer web of blue-white strings. The strings extended, weblike, out into the darkness that surrounded her. Her heavy-lidded eyes -- so like his own -- were closed.

“No!” Valanth pointed to his true mate. “You have what you wanted. I’ll not give you more until you bring her back!”

The lights around Savous agitated. *Willbringerback! Bringthegirl. Needthegirl.*

“You don’t get the girl until you bring her back.”

Savous scowled. “What are you talking about?”

The chattering focus turned to him. *Hewantstokillyourlove. Replaceyourlovewithhis.*

“What?!”

Valanth’s gaze narrowed, refusing to acknowledge his son as he argued with the presence. “That was our agreement! We’ve helped each other. Now deliver on your promise!”

“What did you do?” Savous demanded.

“It’s none of your affair!” Valanth roared.

The pink pinpoints of light settled nearly on his skin in a very strange caress. *Madeadeal. ReplaceRhaeforreunitingwithtrue mate.*

“Replace Rhae?!”

“Talk to me!”

The presence continued to focus on Savous. *ReplaceRhae. Makearhaeja.*

“*Make a rhaeja?*” Valanth demanded.

The pinpoints coalesced somewhat, almost fusing. *Bringthepage.*
Willreuniteyouwithlove.

“You will not make a *rhaeja*! I am *rhaeja*.”

Bringthepage.

“Bring Gwenyth back!”

Needthegirl.

“You’re lying.”

Can’treunitewithoutthegirl. The chittering lights danced around Savous. He had the distinct impression that this being -- for it was a singular being despite the multitude of lights -- was laughing at his father.

“What have you done?” Savous demanded.

Valanth sneered, his hands clenching and unclenching in frustrated rage. “None of your affair.”

“It *is* my affair. You’re talking about Irin.”

“What of it?”

“Are you seriously thinking of replacing Irin with my mother?”

“Replace? Ha! No one could take your mother’s place. But She insists She *can* use that girl to bring Gwenyth back.”

Reunite!

“No!”

“Yes.”

“You *are* mad! You can’t do that! Even the gods can’t bring anyone back to life.”

Amagod!

“*Were* a god,” Valanth sneered.

Amagod. Wereagod. Will beraedjourgod!

Valanth tore his sneering gaze from the lights that surrounded Savous and focused on his son. “Your mother never reached the realm of the dead.”

“What?”

“I caught her soul before she left completely, with the help of the lost goddess you’ve been speaking to. We saved your mother!”

Savous glanced at the suspended form of his mother. “How?”

“The *vetriese*. It is so much more than a doorway to Rhae. I’ve had centuries to discover this.”

“But ...”

“If you had joined me, I could have shown you this long ago.”

“At what cost?” Savous gaped. “You’ve tried to do this before? With each of those women that you took!”

Valanth didn’t confirm Savous’s words, but his grim gaze said it all.

“You bastard!”

Bastard! Toldhimheneededmyhelp. Toldhimitwouldn’tworkwithoutamage.

Withoutamage’slove. Bringthegirlbastard!

“No! You can’t have Irin. I won’t let you.”

Savous! The chittering lights swirled at the desperate tone. *No! Lethimbringthamage!*

“What are you planning?!” Valanth demanded. “You don’t need the girl at all! You never did!”

Do! Bringthamage!

Savous drew in his own shield against the twittering lights that started to bite at him as the voice went on about him. Nothing painful, but enough of the little pinpricks were wearing at his defenses.

Valanth sneered. The orange glow from his eyes bled out and surrounded his whole body. Even his hair sparkled, the icy-blue turning to fiery flames. “I suspected you had more in mind. It *was* him. That’s why I’ve let him stay away.”

Bastard!

“You want him just like the bitch goddess wanted him. You want to replace me with him!”

Chosen!

I am chosen!

You’re HER chosen! Not mine!

“Bitch! You *did* lie to me!” Valanth swelled, losing substance in the fiery ball of his rage. “You can’t have my help without returning Gwenyth to me!”

He struck, lashing out with some of that raw rage. The chittering lights solidified around Savous, shielding him from the brunt of it. But the protection wasn’t complete, nor was it directed, and some of it caught Savous.

Will protect you! Love you Savous! the chittering voice promised even as the lights continued to battle Valanth’s rage.

Chapter Nineteen

Radin heard every word of the scene first between Irin and Valanth and then between Valanth, Savous, and the unnamed goddess-that-wasn't who hovered around Savous. He was paralyzed within the web of light strings, but he was fully aware. If he concentrated, he could share some of his power with Irin, but the effort nearly rendered him unconscious.

Methodically, he explored the web that bound him, searching for a way to escape. This was nothing like the *vetriese* should be. He remembered very well the warm, sensuous hold that Rhae had woven around him during his own time within Her *vetriese*. Her embrace had been orgasmic, with thousands of fingers, tongues, mouths, and cunts rubbing, lapping, and enveloping his entire body as She explored his soul. She had shaken him to the core in an experience his mind could only recall as divine, and then She had gently released him. This embrace was cold, like sitting on a block of ice, with no thought to comfort, physical or mental. He was aware, he couldn't move, and he hurt.

The battle raged around Savous. Radin could barely make out what was happening between Valanth's orange glow and the glittering pin lights.

He gathered his power and watched, seeking a chance, anything he could do to break free from his prison and help Savous.

Betaf had only to shore up Valanth's existing shields to hold back the mob outside. He had never seen such a large gathering of his people and had certainly never stood in front of such a crowd. He stood within the main doorway of Valanth's tower, staring in trepidation at Nalfien, Salin, and the hundreds of elves ranged out in the cavern behind them.

"Let us in, Betaf," Salin demanded. "We'll talk to the *rhaeja*."

"What is this about, Commander? Why do you come in mass? Are you threatening the *rhaeja*?"

"Not if he shows himself now."

Betaf noted the uncertain looks on many of the men's faces behind Salin. They darted looks at the commander. Clearly, they were gathered because of him. Betaf searched his brain, trying to decide how to use that bit of information.

"You dare challenge Rhae's chosen?"

Some of the men shifted on their feet.

"We do," Nalfien interrupted. He stood at the edge of Valanth's shield. Betaf felt him pushing at the invisible barrier. Felt hands of some of the warriors toward the sides pressing against it as well. "Let us in, or bring out the *rhaeja*."

"And bring out Radin, Savous, Irin, and Alrek," Salin added.

Betaf couldn't school his features fast enough. How did they know? "Radin? Savous? They aren't here."

"Liar!"

Betaf fell back a step. He scowled. "Commander, how dare you! In this I speak for the *rhaeja*, and they're *not* here! Now, you should leave. To be sure, the *rhaeja* will hear of this."

Vikart stepped up behind Betaf, a hulking presence that gave the sorcerer heart.

"Don't be stupid, Betaf," Salin shouted.

“I? Look to yourself, Commander!”

He jumped when Vikart’s huge arm darted around him from behind. “What are you --?” A huge hand gripped his hair, pulling it back, exposing his throat. He barely saw the dagger that stabbed into the tender skin under his jaw and up into his skull.

“The shield is gone,” Nalfien said as Vikart pulled Betaf’s lifeless body from the doorway. “That means Valanth is otherwise occupied. Tread carefully.”

Salin and Nalfien exchanged a glance. Salin nodded, then surged forward, Hyle at his side. Men flowed in a wave behind him. They found Vikart at the end of the hallway within. The huge man pointed up the far stairs wordlessly. Salin clapped a hand on his shoulder as he ran past.

Hyle paced Salin, up the stairs. Salin trusted him to give a warning of anything magical, but nothing was forthcoming.

They reached the door at the top of the stairs and, after a go-ahead nod from Hyle, burst inside. The *vetriese* above the firepit caught Salin’s attention first. Hyle stopped with a gasp when he saw it. Leaving the magical portal to the sorcerer, Salin scanned the room just as Irin cried out.

Salin barked an order to Krael at the door to keep everyone else out. Hyle stepped up to the firepit, staring at the *vetriese* as Salin rounded the fire to Irin. He hissed angrily at seeing her bound.

“Hyle!” he called, kneeling before her. “Kitten, are you OK?”

“Yes. No. Salin, he took them into that!” She pointed as best she could with her wrists manacled.

Salin nodded. “I know.”

“You know?”

“I saw.”

The question flashed in her eyes before understanding dawned. “Through Radin?”

He nodded.

Hyle dropped to his knees beside Irin. He gripped the manacle in one hand. When he released it, it fell open. He did the same with the other. He twisted around, his eyes again on the *vetriese*.

Nalfien now stood at the side of the firepit, also staring at the *vetriese*. “I don’t know how to get them out,” he admitted. He turned to Irin. “Are you sure they’re in there?”

“Yes! I felt them.” She struggled to her feet.

Absently, Salin helped her, standing as well. “We go in after them!”

“No! We don’t know what he’s done to ... Irin, *no!*”

Too late. As soon as she dropped Salin’s hand, Irin sped toward the firepit and the *vetriese*. Before anyone could stop her, she hurled herself into it.

Chapter Twenty

Cold froze Irin's veins for an instant before it was replaced with immobilizing warmth. She hung in what her mind told her was midair, but it was *tangible* air. She opened her mouth to scream.

Shhhh! The voice was female, and the embrace *felt* feminine. Irin's mouth froze open.
Shhh, little one. I have you.

You're not Valanth.

Amused irritation. *No. I am not.*

Who are you?

You would know me as Rhae.

Do You have them? Savous and Radin?

Sadly, no. They have them.

They?

Valanth. And her.

Irin didn't have time to try and understand the disdain in that tone. Nor could she fully appreciate that she spoke with a deity. Her mind was bent on one task and one task only.

Can You save them?

No. With her help, he's managed to block most of my access and influence on your realm. And they've taken over my portal. I've only managed the bare crack that they've yet to notice. That is what I pulled you through.

But You're a goddess!

So was she.

She?

There is another involved. She was a goddess once, but she lost her people long ago. She managed to find Valanth when he defied me and chaos after the death of his truemate. She made him a promise to reunite him with his truemate if he helped her overthrow me. She lies. It's not possible. But, unfortunately, he's chosen to believe her.

But he's Your chosen!

Of that, I am well aware. But he was never completely mine. Her sadness was evident in the tone of Her voice. At the time, he was my only choice, and he knew I would not have chosen him, given another option. By the time a better candidate was ready, Valanth had already deceived me.

Irin's mind whirled. The *rhajeja* had forsaken Rhae? She didn't have time to think about it. *What can we do? He has them.*

I know. We will do all we can to save them. I promise you that. Together, we might be able to break her hold. We must. Or she'll replace me as the goddess of the raedjour.

Irin's head spun. Was such a thing possible? The scope of such a feat escaped her.

Will you work with me? Will you help me?

I'll do anything to save them!

Savous and Radin? Or the raedjour?

Irin hesitated. What was She asking?

Warmth spread around her body, hugging her with comfort. *It's all right, my dear. You're young. It is understandable that the lives of your two loves are more important to you than an entire people. Luckily, in this instance, the two are nearly the same. We need to save one of your loves to accomplish our goal.*

One?

Unfortunately, you may not be able to save them both.

No! I have to save them both! I love them!

Savous is your truemate.

Shocked, Irin gaped into the darkness.

Given just a little more time, he would have planted his seed in you. The goddess paused. Her voice was stern, but gentle. Very much the tone of a mother. *Does that change your feelings?*

Did You arrange it this way?

No, child. I do not choose truemates. That's the purview of another. But I do recognize the matches when they are formed. Had anyone been able to ask, I could have revealed this cycles ago.

Irin bit her lip. Savous. Her truemate. The one man in all the world destined for her alone was one of two men she had loved her entire life.

He is also my chosen. Would you share him with me? With his people?

Irin frowned. What kind of question was that? *Of course.* Often she'd thought of Savous as *rhaeja*, and never in her childish dreams had she thought to deprive the *raedjour* of him. Nor his goddess.

Ah, yes, you are his truemate. You know and accept his destiny. For that, child, I will give you a great gift.

Irin heard the words, but her mind rolled frantically. What of the other? Despite this truth, she couldn't abandon Radin. *I can't have both?* Even to herself, it sounded petty and childish.

No, child, it doesn't work that way.

You're a goddess. Can't You ...?

Yes, I am, but I don't have that kind of power. We gods are far from omnipotent. We are forced to live by rules that were bargained long ago, just as you are.

Silence.

All I want is Savous and Radin alive, Irin declared. For that, I'll do anything. Share anything.

And if we can only save one?

I have to save them both.

Even if it means losing them both?

Irin clutched hands she could neither see nor feel to her eyes. *I can't choose! How can I choose Radin's death?*

Do not choose now, child. But know that at the moment of truth, you may have to do just that. But we will do all that we can, won't we? I don't wish to lose Radin, either. So listen closely, child, and learn well. Here is what must be done ...

Irin burst from Rhae's hold like a ray of sunshine through a thundercloud.

"Let him go!" she screamed, aiming her burning golden power at the chittering lights surrounding Savous.

Caught off guard and fully occupied with Valanth, the goddess-that-wasn't did not defend against the new invasion. When Irin hit Savous, her power spread over him like

thick, hot liquid, burbling over and into his skin. She wrapped around him, anxious to envelop every bit of him in her goddess-aided shield.

“No!” Valanth roared. “What are you doing?!”

Savous! Irin meshed with his thoughts as she sought to mesh with his body. *Savous, please help me. Merge with me. Hurry! We’ve got to save Radin!*

Mention of his master seemed to rouse Savous, but he was slow to grasp her meaning. She tugged at him, body and soul, searching for that perfect fit, that melding of souls, that Rhae had said she’d know when she felt it.

Savous! An angry squeal of thousands of feminine voices pummeled Irin, seeking a hold on Savous. *Nonononono!Mineminemineminemineminemine!*

“Fuck off!” Irin screamed, finally feeling Savous’s understanding, relieved as he clutched her back. “He’s *mine!*”

No!

There! Just as Rhae had said, Irin felt her connection with Savous complete. He was inside her, around her, within her, just as she was inside, around, and within him. Reminiscent of sex, but on a profoundly divine level. Irin could barely comprehend it and couldn’t help the moment of awestruck enjoyment shared with the other half of her soul.

Savous!

A thousand screams brought her back to what was happening around her. Panic shredded her bliss. The pinpoint lights of the goddess-that-wasn’t whirled, trying to escape the larger cloud of angry crimson red that was Rhae. Pinpoints shot toward Savous, only to muddle when the red cloud coalesced about them. Inexorably, Rhae’s red cloud gathered the pinpoints of the goddess-that-wasn’t into a small space, a space that reduced even as Irin concentrated on it. Trusting Rhae to dispatch the other deity, she turned to the others.

“Savous!” she screamed. “We need to help Radin!”

Valanth had turned his rage toward the younger sorcerer. Radin floated free before Valanth, surrounded by his own pulsing violet power. But that power was clearly losing ground.

“Radin!” Both Irin and Savous screamed, reaching for him. Their combined power slammed into him, boosting his defenses.

“Ha!” Valanth crowed.

Irin and Savous screamed as one when Valanth sheared through their shield. The shield they had themselves weakened by lending help to Radin. Pain of the soul bled from them. Irin felt Savous slipping from her grasp, that perfect union crumbling. She was unable to grasp at it, her own ability weakened by the pain.

“Radin,” she whimpered. She’d failed. Just as Rhae had said, she’d lose them both because she couldn’t choose.

A keening cry filled the void about them. The orange hot that sought to cleave Irin apart faltered as a swelling storm of violet shot with crimson attacked from behind. Radin wasn’t visible as a being, more of a color and a storm. As the storm surged, she felt her connection to him draining.

“Radin!”

Let go, kitten.

“No,” Savous denied beside her.

Yes, damn it! This is your chance. Look at you. Look at you both. Take the chance to rid yourself -- to rid the raedjour -- of the man you’ve hated, and take the woman you love.

Valanth screamed, his anger surging toward Irin and Savous. Radin held him back by a mere thread. The surge of the goddesses took on gigantic proportions behind him. Irin gasped. Rhae had warned her to get Savous and get out. If they were still within the *vetriese* at the final moment between the goddesses, they were dead. The backlash of either one of them banishing the other would kill the mortals.

She thought it. Radin heard it. An awful peace took him.

Let go, kitten.

Valanth howled, abandoning his focus on Irin and Savous to turn on Radin. Orange lashed violet, and she felt the shudders of the impact through their bond. Radin's very being was being torn apart. Unthinking, she reached ...

NO! Abruptly, Radin shoved at her. *Save him.*

RADIN! Irin screamed, echoed by Savous. They both felt Radin give up his sense of self, abandoning his soul to the maelstrom that surged to swallow Valanth's rage. As his soul shattered, so did his link to them.

The lock of souls snapped soundly back into place between Savous and Irin. They spun, clinging to each other and to the tether Rhae had given Irin to their own realm.

Irin straddled Savous's lap. Her arms were wound tight about his back, her legs around his waist, and his cock was buried deep inside her. She felt his thighs, secure and real, beneath her buttocks and knew the pain of his fingers digging into her back. Her face was pressed to his neck, his face similarly pressed to hers. They shuddered as one.

She opened her eyes and lifted her head. She saw a darkened room, but made out details in strange clarity. They knelt in the cold ashes of the firepit in the midst of Valanth's workroom. People she knew -- her brain struggled for precious moments to recognize them -- ringed the pit.

Nalfien. He gripped the edge of the pit, his glowing red eyes anxious on them.

Hyle. He knelt not far from his father, his expression uncertain and his hand extended toward them.

Movement to the side kicked up some of the ashes beneath them. She coughed. A warm hand clasped her arm. She looked up to see Salin's sharp features over Savous's shoulder.

“Irin?” His features revealed his confusion.

Desperate to touch someone else, to verify that they’d escaped the *vetriese*, Irin reached out to him. She froze at the sight of her own arm.

A flame flared somewhere to her right, lighting the room better and confirming what she’d seen in the dark.

Her arm was glossy black. *Raedjour* skin.

“Irin?”

The repeat of his question broke through Irin’s shock. She looked up at Salin. “Yes. It’s me.”

He cupped her chin, staring into her eyes. Beneath her, Savous lifted his head. They both stared at her in wonder.

“Are you all right?” Salin asked, gripping Savous’s shoulder with his other hand.

She dropped her gaze to meet Savous’s. The bond between them was nearly visible, as hard and vibrant as his cock within her. Their hearts beat as one, and their love was all-encompassing. As was their grief as they both broke into incoherent sobs.

Chapter Twenty-one

Radin was gone.

Much later, after Irin and Savous had been moved and had rested, Nalfien had told them. Valanth's *vetriese* had imploded, taking with it the fire in the firepit. In the brief heartbeats it had taken the men in the workroom to focus after the blast, Savous and Irin were already kneeling in the cold ashes. Alrek had been found, alive but unconscious, in an anteroom off Valanth's workroom. Of Radin and Valanth, there was no sign.

The *vetriese* was gone, Valanth's as well as Rhae's. Near as anyone could tell, they'd both imploded at the same time.

There had yet to be any sign of Radin.

Chapter Twenty-two

“*There* you are!”

Savous chuckled as he closed the door. No sooner did he have it closed than he leaned back against it, braced so he could lift his foot to remove his boots. “I informed Salin that, by your direct command, he wasn’t to keep me late again, but he claims not to be frightened of you.”

Irin rolled onto her back amongst the pillows and blankets that covered their wide bed, letting her legs fall open to fully display her naked body to him. She sniffed. “He should be. Diana listens to me.”

Momentarily distracted by the fingers Irin trailed over her full breasts, Savous had to shake himself as he tossed his second boot to the corner and pushed to his feet. “Which is an amazing feat in itself.”

She chuckled, watching avidly as his hands went to the ties at his waist to loosen his trousers. Already, an obvious bulge tented his crotch. Irin licked her lips. “Did the council meeting go well otherwise?”

Savous laughed. “Other than the fact that the *rhaeja* was eager to get back to his true mate? Yes, everything went as well as can be expected.”

Irin tore her gaze from the erection he revealed, an erection decorated with a white band marking that matched the same design across Savous's forehead. "As can be expected?"

He dropped his gaze as he dropped his pants, shrugging. "We knew it wasn't going to be easy."

Indeed they had. Even with Rhae's markings clearly dubbing him *rhaeja*, there were those among the elves who blamed Savous and Irin for the disappearance of the *vetriese*. Once they'd had a chance to think on it, not everyone, it turned out, believed their story, despite the fact that Salin, Nalfien, and Hyle all supported them fully. For the first time in over four thousand cycles, the elves were in open discord under the *rhaeja*. Since he was without direct access to Rhae's counsel, due to the absence of the *vetriese*, Savous had created a ruling council in an attempt to give the elves a better feeling of representation. It had helped, especially since Salin and Nalfien -- both already well respected -- were the first members. But just the previous day, a faction of elves had left the main city, declaring their independence from the man who had severed their ties with their goddess.

Irin sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. She reached out and placed a hand on either side of Savous's slim hips and urged him forward. When he was close enough, she placed a loving kiss on his belly. "I'm sorry."

He placed his hands on her head, gently sifting through her pure white hair. "Don't be sorry, love. Change of this scope is usually painful."

She slid her hands down his hips to his thighs, bending her head to nuzzle the cock that brushed against her cheek. His touch and his scent worked wonders to distract her. She nipped the flared head of his cock, grinning when it twitched in reaction. Slowly, she laved at the spicy oils that lubricated it, letting the taste release the lust she'd been forced to tamp while he was away.

Because of the severity of the situation with the *raedjour*, Savous and Irin were forced to spend time apart, unlike other newly truemated couples, who were left alone for near-

constant fucking during the first moon they were together. Rhae seemed to have anticipated this. According to Savous, although their lust was hot, it was not nearly as all-consuming as he'd seen in other newly mated couples. Although it was there, they *could* suppress it for a portion of each night, which allowed Savous to concentrate on other things.

But he was here now, and Irin intended to make the most of it. She bent further and used her tongue to gather one of his balls into her mouth, rolling it gently with her tongue. Savous sucked in a breath, his fingers clutching her hair, his thighs tightening beneath her palms. She lost herself for the moment in fascination over how soft he was there. How wonderfully fragrant. She savored the taste of him, released his balls from her mouth in order to nuzzle even farther, trying to reach that sensitive spot between balls and anus.

She protested when he gently pushed her away.

He chuckled, lifting and shifting her further on the bed, forcing her onto her back by hovering over her. "My turn," he murmured, brushing her lips with his.

She sighed happily and opened readily for his tongue. He sampled her leisurely. First whisper-brushes of his tongue on her lips, then a more thorough exploration as he lowered his body to press atop hers. She readily accommodated his weight, cradling his hips with her own. She suckled his tongue, which had an equally intriguing but far different taste than his balls. So many tastes to him, and she now knew them all, but she had yet to get her fill of any of them.

She hoped she never got her fill.

His lips left hers to trail over her chin, then down her neck. He paused just below her collarbone, lifting his head. She watched as he freed one of his hands to trace the design that spanned her chest, just grazing her breasts.

She chuckled. "You simply won't rest until you know why, will you?"

He glanced up, grinning. The white, winglike marking that banded his forehead gleamed in the firelight. "It's just that She's never marked a woman before."

“So you all keep telling me.”

Irin had emerged from the *vetriese* not only already changed to *raedjour* in skin and hair color, but also marked with the tattoo-like markings that Rhae etched on the men who emerged from Her *vetriese*. In Irin’s case, the stylized wings on her chest matched the same on Savous’s chest, clearly blessing their union even if Irin’s pregnancy hadn’t sealed their truematch. Irin had an additional marking that Savous did not, however, in the form of a circular pattern just below her navel. According to Nalfien, the wing patterns on both Savous’s and Irin’s chests symbolized change. No one knew what the circle beneath Irin’s navel meant.

Savous bent his head and used his tongue to wetly trace the design. “We’ll need to figure it out eventually.”

She sighed, spearing her hands into his hair to guide his lips to her nipple. “Can we do it some other time, please?”

He laughed, breath gusting over her skin. Skin that gleamed in the firelight and was surprisingly sensitive for how tough it was. Obediently, he nipped at her nipple, his white teeth a striking contrast to his black lips and her black skin.

She watched, quivering, as he laved the peak of her breast. She loved him so. The only thing that could make this more perfect was if Radin ...

Deliberately, she put the thought from her mind. She and Savous shared their grief for Radin, openly acknowledging their third, but she was tired of grieving. Radin wouldn’t want it. Of that, she was quite sure. He’d made the sacrifice for them to live, not for them to spend the rest of their lives wracked with grief.

When Savous released her breast and moved to descend her body, she caught him by the hair. He looked a question up at her. She stared into his eyes. So red. So smart. So loving. He was the perfect choice to lead the *raedjour*, and he filled her heart to bursting. She needed him to fill her body. “Explore later. Fuck me now.”

He raised a brow, grinning, but pushed up to his knees. She raised her thighs, and he hooked them over his elbows. She reached down to take hold of his decorated cock, already wet and slick with his skin's oils, and guided him to the deep crimson lips of her pussy. He slid forward in one long, slow glide that had her back arching in sheer, wanton pleasure.

His name escaped her lips on a whoosh of breath. She did so love the feel of him filling her.

His hands closed around her hips, anchoring them as he pulled out and pushed back, making her groan.

She canted her hips, trying to help him shove inside her. She lifted her hands and flattened them on the wall above her head, bracing herself. "Harder."

Smiling, he leaned forward, adjusting his legs beneath her hips to give him proper leverage to pound her harder.

She scratched at the stone of the wall, desperate cries pushing from her lungs. "More."

He grunted, leaning yet further in. He put his hands to the mattress. Her legs, still hooked over his arms, were spread wide to accept him. He shoved forward, pausing at the end of every thrust to grind his groin to hers, pressing and taunting her clit. He bent his head, and a wealth of his honey-white hair fell to mix with the oily sweat that wet her chest.

"Goddess, Savous!" she cried, desperate now in her efforts to lunge at him.

They almost fought, despite the fact that their goal was the same. Bodies struggled to press, to slam, urging and pushing each other until that burning shock burst within Irin and she screamed. Her body clenched and shuddered, yanking away Savous's control and pitching him over the rim to join her in burbling bliss.

He settled atop her with a heaving sigh. Slipping his arms from under her legs, he slid them under her shoulders to tangle his fingers in the hair at the base of her skull. She moaned happily, meeting his languid kiss.

I love you, she spoke directly mind-to-mind so there was no need to break the kiss.

I love you, he responded readily, his thoughts relaying far more than simple words could. His love for her, his grief for Radin, his fear for his people, and his hopes for the future. She knew it all, absorbed it yet again, determined to help him bear the burden an absent goddess had laid on him.



Epilogue

Irin gave one last push. Gala cried triumphantly as she cradled the wet newborn.

Savous cradled his truemate's exhausted body, gladly providing support now that her task was largely done.

From the foot of the platform, Gala gasped. "Mother of us all!"

Irin pushed up from Savous, her maternal instincts shoving aside her exhaustion. "What? What is it? What's wrong with him?"

Gala's shock turned into a stupefied grin. "Nothing. Nothing at all is wrong -- with *her!*"

Savous gaped. "*What?*"

Giggling insanely, Gala laid the drenched newborn on her mother's belly. Fluid gurgled from the baby's lips, and she uttered her first cry before the astounded adults.

"*That's* the meaning of the marks!" Savous cried, finally understanding. He traced the patterns on Irin's belly.

Rhae's words echoed forth in Irin's memory: *For that, child, I will give you a great gift.*

THE END

Jet Mykles

As far back as junior high, Jet used to write sex stories for friends involving their favorite pop icons of the time. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art.

Only recently, through the wonders of the digital age, has Jet, a self-proclaimed hermit, been able to really share this work with others. It was through a series of images posted to the erotic art website Renderotika and encouragement from the fabulous Angela Knight that she finished and submitted a story to Loose Id.

In real life, Jet lives in southern California with her boyfriend of nine years, his daughter and father and nine cats. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.

Visit Jet on the Web at www.computerotika.com.