

CHOSENOF THE ORB

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Chosenof the Orb

Kate Steele

Prologue

Galatin was first son to the chieftain of the Dal Wri clan. He was a warrior, yet also a scholar, a man of intelligence and empathy. Fond of solitary rides, he explored places unknown. On one such ride, he met his fate...

Having ridden the cool morning through, Galatin reined his horse in, glancing at the sky. The sun rose high and hot overhead. Sweat ran down his back, the trickle causing an involuntary shiver. Urging his horse forward, he guided him through a flower-bestrewn meadow.

Galatin smiled with pleasure at the sight of a wide, shallow band of clear water running with joyous abandon over a bed of polished stones. He dismounted, leading his horse forward, allowing him to drink. Divesting the stallion of packs, saddle and bridle, Galatin gave him a gentle swat, urging him into the meadow where he settled to graze.

Hot and fatigued, ripe with the scent of horse and pungent, overheated male, Galatin stripped and stepped into the cool water. He scooped handfuls of the liquid upward, splashing it over his wide shoulders. The glistening liquid cascaded over his well-toned warrior's body, caressing muscle, sinew, and taut, tanned skin. It trickled in cool meandering paths over each hard bulge and plane, dripping from his well-formed cock and full, low-hanging balls. Splashing a double handful over his head, he ran damp fingers through the silky strands of his dark, shoulder-length hair, scooping it back from his hawk-like face. Satisfied with his bath, he emerged, took up his rolled blanket and spread it over the thick grass. He stretched out with a contented sigh to dry and bask in the sun.

Galatin drifted in a half doze as warmth seeped into every pore. The sun was a red haze behind his closed lids. A warm breeze set the tall grass whispering around him. The sound of a splash drew his attention. Instantly alert, he directed his gaze to the stream.

A young woman, nude as himself, emerged from the stream to stroll with unearthly grace in his direction. Her form fluidly morphed from untried virgin in the first budding season of womanhood to voluptuous earth mother, seasoned and sensual, filled with the promise of carnal pleasures.

Galatin knew her, he'd studied legends of the lusty Mother Goddess of Atrios. Of its own volition, his cock rose, thick and full.

Halting before him, she sank gracefully to her knees. She reached out, resting her hand over his heart. Their eyes locked. She held out her other hand to reveal a glistening rock, one that had been taken from the streambed. In a voice that echoed with pure power, she spoke.

“Earth.”

From far below, a warmth seeped upward. Galatin found himself cradled as though the earth itself held him. Heat penetrated his being, flooding him with power as fine, electric vibrations ran through his skin.

“Air.”

The wind increased, blowing haphazardly, until, gathered and directed, it began to concentrate and swirl around the rock held steadily in the woman’s hand. A tiny funnel formed, the infinite power of wind gathered in that small shape. It twisted and turned as it sculpted the stone, polishing it to a round, gleaming sphere.

“Fire.”

Galatin flinched, fearing flames would burst forth from some unknown source to consume them. The Goddess smiled. “Not that kind of fire, Galatin Dal Wri. Passion. The fire of men.”

Her hand traveled, slowly, sensuously down. She caressed his skin, causing his belly to tighten as her fingers flowed over him. They descended to his cock, wrapping around his solid length. Galatin groaned and fell back, his back bowing as she firmly stroked his eager, vein-wrapped shaft, then took him into the wet, velvet suction of her mouth.

Power rose and spilled over them. It sparked and pulsed, matching Galatin’s racing heartbeat. Rising heat pulled musky-scented sweat from his body. His full, aching balls rose tight, his hips undulating, as she worked him with the skill of a seasoned courtesan. Her tongue laved the silky skin that covered his cock, finding that ultra-sensitive spot on the underside where the plump mushroom-shaped cap met the thick meat of his pulsing shaft. Unbearable pressure built.

The earth rocked and shuddered beneath him. His blood thundered in his veins, deafening in its frantic rush. Mere seconds from orgasm, the Goddess allowed his swelling cock to slip from her mouth as it spewed hot rivulets of thick cream over his straining body.

As Galatin shouted his release the Goddess bathed the shaped stone in the fresh, fertile seed of his body. Imbued with the power of earth and air, drenched in the passionate fire of man, it began to glow, the energy seeking release from a vessel too small to contain it. Heat radiated from the rock as its energies made a bid for freedom. The shape of the stone wavered, its outer shell softening like candle wax.

Voice ringing with authority, the Goddess called out. "Water."

Soft rain began to fall. It pattered down, concentrating on the glowing stone. The cool water made its wavering exterior solidify. The warring temperatures of water and stone caused its silvery surface to crack. Mirror-like, it reflected multiple images.

Galatin lay still, welcoming the caress of the rain as it washed away the remnants of his release and cooled the heat that radiated from his skin. With a sigh of contentment, he opened his eyes, sitting up to settle cross-legged on the damp blanket. He met the loving gaze of the Mother Goddess.

"Earth, air, fire and water, all the elements of power are held in this, my gift to the people of Atrios. This orb contains the living essence of our world, a tiny portion of the heart and spirit of the land and the people who dwell upon her. You, Galatin Dal Wri, I appoint to be the first Guardian of the Orb of Atrios. I give the Orb into your keeping. Await my instruction."

Her form grew nebulous until she slowly disappeared.

* * * * *

Galatin awoke with a start, his gaze taking in his surroundings. They were unchanged since he'd lain down upon his blanket.

"A dream," he muttered, "only a dream."

With a shake of his head he made to rise, halting when his hand made contact with a hard, round object. His fingers closed around the thing. Reluctantly opening his hand, he beheld there, resting contentedly in his palm, the Orb. It glowed softly, emitting a low, complacent hum.

“By the Mother,” he breathed, staggered by the proof that his dream had, in truth, been reality. He spoke into the quiet of the drowsy afternoon. “Lady of Atrios, I am honored. I await your bidding.”

Chapter One

Galatin heaved a disgruntled sigh. He felt the distinct need to curse the stubborn nature of a certain newly designated High Chieftain. He closed the doors behind him with careful deliberation, resisting the childish urge to slam them shut.

He strode through the hall and down the stairs, leaving the family quarters behind. Wrapped in his thoughts, he failed to take note of the magnificence of the recently completed residence of the High Chieftain.

Built of cool marble and stone, the place was a marvel of elegant design and function. Beautifully woven tapestries and rugs in bright colors adorned the walls and floors, warming and softening the stark simplicity of the rooms and hallways. Devoted exclusively to public rooms, the ground floor consisted of conference rooms, comfortably furnished areas for informal gatherings, a large banquet hall, and most importantly, the Hall of the Mother.

Entering this sanctuary, Galatin released a second sigh, this one of contentment and relief. The embracing peace of the Hall surrounded him, welcomed him. His footsteps echoed as he made his way to the altar that fronted the cathedral-like room.

In front of the altar, he bowed respectfully. The Orb rested there, a gentle pearlescent glow emanating from its heart.

“It is as I said it would be, Divinity. High Chief Talrion continues in his stubborn refusal to perform the ritual of seeking. He claims he has no need of atezza, that there are more than enough willing women. He sees no reason to saddle himself with a wife and children for many years to come.”

Galatin waited, not really expecting a reply. She had revealed her plan to him—the choosing of a High Chieftain to bring the warring clans under a central rule. After ensuring the cooperation of each clan chief, she had not manifested herself again. Still, when he touched the Orb he sensed an intelligence, a sentience in the softly glowing crystal.

“If all comes to pass as you said it would—and I would never doubt your word—Talrion will soon have no choice in the matter. All the willing women in the world will not satisfy his lusts or longings. I believe our High Chief will quickly realize that he will have to give in to his fate sooner than he wished.”

The glow of the Orb began a stuttering flicker as if the light were giggling. Galatin raised a brow in speculation. “Divinity, sometimes you are truly diabolical.”

* * * * *

Talrion Finn Mal groaned as he labored between the willing thighs of yet another wench. He reveled in the wet heat that gloved his hard, burrowing cock. His hips moved with machine-like precision as he thrust again and again, seeking that blinding rush of relief.

“High One, please, please!” begged the thrashing female beneath him.

Tal bent, taking a swollen nipple in his mouth to tease and suck. A mewl of pleasure resulted from his action. His nostrils were assaulted by the humid, perfumed warmth of her skin. His own skin was moist, heat billowing from his pores, sweat forming wherever skin met skin.

Excitement sent a fresh influx of blood to his cock, causing it to swell, further stretching his partner’s dripping pussy. The increased pressure brought a familiar tingle at the base of his spine. He reached between their straining bodies to find her swollen clit. With a few expert manipulations, he brought her to orgasm. Her sheath convulsed, grasping him tightly. Tal powered through tightened muscles, each thrust massaging, pulling at his sensitized rod. With a deep guttural oath, he came, his attention focused on the exquisitely intense contractions that sent semen blasting out in rhythmic spurts to fill and overflow the tight

channel that held him.

Drained, Tal withdrew, rolling to his back to settle on the disheveled bedding. He stretched and yawned, absently scratching the light golden brown hair that spread over his broad chest. Lying quietly, breath and heartbeat returning to normal, he hoped to slide into sleep. Such was not to be.

With a softly uttered oath, he crawled from the bed, careful not to disturb the two women who had so recently seen to his needs. He gazed down on their sleeping forms, admiring the beautiful bounty of full breasts, smooth, warm skin and shapely thighs that had brought him such pleasure. And still it was not enough.

Leaving the women and the frustrations of his unfulfilled desire behind, he wandered out onto the balcony. A sigh left his lips as he settled his back against the cool stone of the outer wall of his bedroom. He contemplated the moonlit garden, brooding over his increasing restlessness.

“Guardian of the Orb, I believe you have cursed me,” he whispered into the night.

Almost a year had passed since he'd first won the position of High Chieftain of the Clans. And in that year, he'd found it harder and harder to deny Galatin's admonition to seek a wife. Continuity, stability, the promise of one's self renewed in the eyes of your children. All these and more, Galatin had used to entice him into performing the ritual of seeking.

He recalled their earlier argument. Tired of Galatin's insistence, he'd finally stated his true reason for avoiding matrimony. His parents. Two people who had been locked together in perpetual battle, showing very little need or love for each other, or for the child caught between them. Too often he'd suffered the physical abuse his parents dared not visit upon each other. It was this kind of relationship he wished to avoid.

Despite Galatin's assurance that the Orb would see to it that histezza and he were well matched, he remained skeptical. It was for that very reason that the Orb was created, Galatin told him. Love and harmony in the High Chieftain's household would promote the same among his people. A people at peace and in accord with each other would work together to better themselves and their lives.

Muttering a soft oath, Tal went inside, heading for the bathing chamber. He dove deep, hurtling through the warm, soothing fluid with practiced ease. Surfacing, he made for the shallow end, standing as the

floor came up under his feet. A gentle press of long broad fingers against an almost invisible panel at the side of the pool revealed a recessed shelf. He took soap that smelled of woody spices and a rough cloth from the shelf and wet them, working up a lather. Tal slid the soapy cloth over his six-foot seven-inch frame. His warrior's training was reflected in each smooth, efficient movement of flowing, flexing muscle and sinew. Dipping under the water to rinse, he rose, water sheeting from sun-bronzed skin. He wrung the excess liquid from the golden-brown hair that hung midway down his back. Water beaded on the thick lashes that framed his fathomless eyes, green as summer moss.

Leaving the bath, he towed himself dry, dressed, and made his way to the Hall of the Mother. Having made his decision, he found no reason to delay.

As he entered the Hall, he breathed a sigh of relief. It felt as though a weight was being lifted from his shoulders. Perhaps this was the right step after all. How bad could it be? Surely if the Orb had a hand in finding *histezza*, all would turn out well. Wouldn't it? Unbidden, visions of his parents locked in yet another interminable argument filled his mind, causing him a mental wince.

"Goddess forbid," he murmured as he approached the altar.

"I'm sure She shall, if it's warranted."

"Do you never sleep, Guardian?" Tal inquired sarcastically, as Galatin stepped forward out of the shadows.

"Of course. But never on an important occasion such as this."

"Did She tell you I was coming?"

Galatin smiled. "No, but the Orb has been particularly restless this evening. I thought perhaps you might have come to a decision."

"I have," Tal admitted. And for the first time since approaching the altar, he rested his eyes upon the Orb. "The light—it's pulsing like a heartbeat. I've never seen it do that."

Galatin joined him in his perusal. "I believe it is a heartbeat, High Chief. Yours, in fact."

"Mine?" Tal spoke the word with disbelief.

"You've decided to perform the ritual, so the Orb readies itself to become attuned to you. To all that makes Talrion Finn Mal who he is, so that the woman who will complete him can be found." Galatin's voice held quiet, sure conviction.

Tal tore his gaze from the mesmerizing pulse of the Orb. "And how is this miracle to be accomplished?" he asked, clearly disbelieving.

Galatin grinned and slapped Tal on the back. "First, High One, you must have no physical release with or without the aid of a woman for the next three days."

Tal uttered a heartfelt groan. "I knew you placed a curse upon me, Guardian Galatin."

Galatin's laughter rang through the hallowed silence of the Hall as he steered Talrion to his study. He couldn't wait for the young High Chief's reaction when he heard the rest of it. He was not disappointed.

"One of the Handmaidens is going to suck my cock?! Guardian, that's...well it's just not...the Goddess isn't going to like this," Tal concluded lamely.

Galatin chuckled, amused at Tal's embarrassment and confusion. "Believe me, High One, she asks of her Handmaiden nothing she wouldn't do herself."

Tal gave Galatin a narrow-eyed frown. "So speaks the voice of experience?" he asked suspiciously.

Galatin wisely remained silent on that subject.

Chapter Two

“Give over, Sala! I told you I want no man. At least, not on a permanent basis.” Lirandra Senn Var gave her sister an exaggerated leer.

Salandia frowned fiercely, struggling not to laugh at her big sister’s words, “I knew you would say that. Still, aren’t you the least bit curious? He is, after all, the new High Chieftain. That alone makes him a good catch.” She passed a wrapped loaf of bread across the table to Lira. “Word is he’s doing very well at it, too. They say he actually got the chiefs of clan Cin Tar and Thal Tan to sit down together and resolve a disagreement without benefit of sword. An amazing feat considering how much they despise each other.”

Lira continued to pack her saddlebag, “I agree with you that he seems to be doing a good job, but that doesn’t inspire me to consider marrying the man. I’ve no intention of lining up with a bunch of silly wenches, waiting for the Orb to pick me to be Talrion Finn Mal’stezza .” She turned away, shoving a pile of clothing into a second pack.

Waiting for further argument and hearing only silence, Lira turned back to face her sister. Sala’s deep blue eyes were solemn and somewhat sad. She moved closer to her sister, Lira’s greater height causing her to look up. Her hand reached out to flip back the long, thick braid of Lira’s shining, dark hair. “I only want you to be happy,” Sala told her quietly.

“Ah, Sala—I am happy,” Lira assured her. She sat down on the edge of the table that held the supplies she’d been packing for her trip. With her own blue eyes now on a level with her shorter sister’s, she took Sala’s hand. “I’m not like you, little sister. I’m not made for tending the hearth and coddling my man while I birth babies and run the household.” She waved her hand to take in the neat room they occupied.

Sala sighed with resignation as she viewed this reminder of her own highly satisfying situation. The living area was pin-neat and polished. Bright sunshine shone through the clean windows, reflecting off each gleaming surface. All was clean, cozy and comfortable. The home she shared with her husband and small son was her pride and joy, and caring for her family brought her real pleasure. She could never envision Lira happy in these same circumstances.

She narrowed her eyes and fixed Lira with a piercing look. “You’re not disparaging my life and my choices, I hope?”

Lira smiled and squeezed her hand. “Of course not. This is what you love, what makes you happy. I am a huntress, it’s what I love, what makes me happy.”

Sala grimaced and sighed, “It’s just that you spend so much time alone. You could still betezza to some lucky man.”

Laughter bubbled up and broke free from Lira. She rose from the table and gave Sala a swift hug. “That’s what I love about you little sister, you never give up.” She moved back, giving Sala a cynical look. “What man is going to want histezza away for days while she hunts to keep the clan’s warriors supplied with meat? A man wants his woman at home, tending to him and his babes.”

Lira grabbed up her saddlebags and strode for the front door. Sala followed in her wake, struggling to keep up with her sister’s longer strides, not easy at any time—but especially not now, as she was but a few weeks away from the birth of her second child.

“Not all men are alike,” Sala said with conviction, as she watched Lira settle her bags across the back of her tall, rangy mount. Woman and horse were well-matched, both tall, long-limbed and sleekly muscled.

“I suppose I’ll have to concede that point,” Lira admitted as she adjusted her gear. She bent to examine her horse’s hooves. “It was Father, after all, who gave me my training.”

“Our father is a very exceptional man, he has to be, Mother wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Lira snorted a laugh. “Mother says she exercised the same judgment in choosing Father as she does when choosing a horse. It’s an agreed upon fact that Mother has the best ‘horse sense’ of anyone in the clan.”

Sala giggled. “I heard Mother tell Aunt Celeria that she’d picked the best stud in the Senn Var herd.”

Lira straightened, dusting her hands on the soft brown suede of her fitted leggings. “That sounds like Mother, straightforward and to the point. Well, little sister, I’m ready to go. Any specific messages for Galatin?”

“Tell him I said congratulations on becoming an uncle. We’re expecting him to take time away from his Guardian’s duties to visit his nephew, or we’ll come drag him away.”

“I shall pass on your threat,” Lira promised solemnly, then grinned. She reached out and placed a hand on her sister’s swollen abdomen. “I’ll be back in plenty of time for the birth of this little one.”

“Promise me,” Sala ordered. “Promise me you won’t go roaming off on your own for weeks as you’re wont to do when the notion takes you. I want you here, Lira.”

Lira gave a long-suffering sigh and rolled her eyes. “I promise. Satisfied?”

Sala smiled at her sister’s antics. “Yes. Now go on with you. You’re all but vibrating with the need to be on your way.”

Lira gave her a quick hug and took up her horse’s reins, throwing herself smoothly into the saddle. Booted feet automatically found the stirrups as she settled herself into the saddle’s familiar contours. She adjusted the arrow-filled quiver that rested across her back.

Gazing down at her sister, anticipation and elation filling her, her mind was already turning toward the open road. With a jaunty salute she turned her mount, heading him towards their destination.

As Lira’s mount took its first steps away from her, Sala called out, “Remember what I said about all men not being alike. Give greeting to High Chief Talrion for me.”

Lira’s laughter rang out as she put her heels to her mount, “Never give up little sister, never give up!” she called back. She waved as her horse broke into a gallop, and then they disappeared around a curve in

the road.

* * * * *

During her journey, Lira had plenty of time to ponder her sister's words. She had not lied when she told Sala that she loved her life, yet an unwelcome and bewildering loneliness had begun to insinuate itself into her heart.

She'd once considered the possibility of marriage and discarded it almost as quickly. Husbands and children were the province of women who enjoyed the indoors, cooking, cleaning and all the other activities required of them. They were not meant for a woman who would rather wield a bow than a broom.

Lira took stock of her surroundings, deciding to stop early to indulge in a hunt for fresh meat. Pressing on through the trees, she emerged into a clearing that was dominated by the Katal River Falls.

Sheets of frothing water rushed over the rocky cliffs to explode in an arching spray as they hit the foot of the falls. The water rushed and gurgled over boulders that littered the riverbed. Further along, those same boulders created a protective half-circle in which the water calmed, forming a pool at the river's edge.

Dismounting, she led her horse to the edge of the clearing. Unthinking routine saw him cared for and her camp set, complete with fire pit and a stock of dry wood to see her through the night. She took up her bow and headed into the forest.

With each step she became more attuned to the wood. The quiet serenity of the place flowed into her veins. Her movements were smooth as she glided with silent grace through the trees. Sleek and deadly, she found the track she sought. So began the hunt...

Chapter Three

Tal rose up in the saddle, stretching his legs. The sun would be setting soon and he was ready to make camp. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly, a satisfied smile tugging at his finely sculpted lips. Lady, it was good to get away!

Since he had given in to the inevitable and performed the ritual of seeking, he'd felt like first prize in some bizarre contest. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined the number of eligible females who'd flock to the Hall of the Mother, each seeking to be chosen by the Orb to be histezza .

It was ludicrous, it was ridiculous, it was...it was—by the Mother!—it was, in a small way, flattering. And yet not really, as he realized quickly that many of the women sought him out only for the prestige of his position.

He would have been somewhat mollified had he known just how many of the women sought the Orb's approval because of the man in question. There were more than a few who hoped that being chosen by the Orb would bring a happy match with a man who was handsome, virile, intelligent and compassionate. A man who had proven himself worthy of everyone's high opinion and unwavering support.

Tal grimaced, determined to push all melancholy thoughts away. His destination, theKatalRiverFalls, was almost in sight—he could hear the muffled crash of the water as it spilled over the rocks.

He entered the clearing and pulled his horse up short. Another traveler was there before him. Dismounting, he eyed the gear that was neatly laid out, and the magnificent horse that grazed placidly nearby. Feeling it would be impolite to intrude without invitation, Tal freed his mount from the bit to allow it to graze before he went in search of the missing traveler.

Drawing on tracking skills he'd learned from the Finn Mal clan's finest hunters, he followed the trail, ghosting soundlessly through the wood. In moments he realized he followed a very experienced woodsman. The trail was so faint as to be nearly nonexistent. Much of the time it was only the slightly compressed grasses that let him know he was still on the trail.

Tal extended all his senses to the limit. Moments later, he froze. Something or someone was near. From his vantage point, hidden in the deep shadow of several closely spaced trees, he saw the slight rustle of disturbed undergrowth. Barely breathing, he watched as a pair of male kinti broke through the brush. Tal wished he'd brought his bow. Wild kinti were plentiful and made an excellent meal. As though conjured by his thought, the woodsman made his appearance.

Tal was transfixed by the vision that materialized before him—surely a daughter of the Goddess herself. Not fifteen feet in front of him, the woman simply appeared, as though born from the shadows. She was tall and supple, her body finely honed and firmly muscled. With a move so swift and smooth it defied the eye to follow, she fitted an arrow to her bow and let it fly, taking one of the kinti so quickly it never knew what hit it. With a squealing snort, the second kinti raced into the brush. Tal watched its retreat before turning his eyes back to the woman, and found himself the target of the business end of an arrow.

“Was there something you wanted, Warrior?”

The rich contralto tone of her voice flowed over his senses, winding deep into his gut, leaving tingling warmth in its wake. Tal felt himself grow semi-hard at the sound. He stared into deep blue eyes that held his with a steady regard.

“I did not mean to intrude, Huntress,” he apologized, recognizing her vocation by her attire. “I but sought the traveler who makes camp in the clearing by the falls.”

Lowering her bow, Lira returned her arrow to the quiver that rested against her back, “No harm was done, your skills are on a par with most hunters.” Turning from him, she moved to the kinti and began the process of dressing her kill. “The traveler you seek is me—was there something you needed?”

Tal felt an insane desire to tell her just what the sight of her lithe, graceful figure made him need. Never had he felt such instant desire for a woman such as this one. Not that there was an abundance of such women. Tal was used to soft, fragile females, not athletically formed Amazons. Even the sight of her expertly wielding the knife as she gutted the hapless kinti could not stop the rising need that centered in his groin.

“I wanted to inquire if I might share the clearing. I had intended to make camp there, but do not wish to disturb you.” His voice had gone slightly husky with the desire that ran in his veins.

“You are most welcome to share my camp this evening.” Lira gave him a quick, speculative glance. “And if you will give me a hand here and bury the offal, I would be pleased to share the kinti with you.”

Tal grinned and approached. “A most generous offer, Huntress. I accept with pleasure.” He set quickly

to the task Lira had given him.

From the moment she'd first set eyes on him, Lira had felt a tingle of awareness invade her body. There was something about this warrior that made her heart beat faster. The man was exquisite. Tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, wrapped in firm flexing muscle that showed with every fluid movement. And his face—no man should have such beauty. If indeed it could be called such. For this stranger was pure, undiluted male.

When he knelt beside her, using his own knife to dig a hole for the remains of the kinti, she inhaled deeply. His scent assaulted her, nearly drawing a growl from her tightened throat. The warm slightly musky odor of the man shot straight to her pussy. She felt her cunt tighten then release as rich moisture lubricated her, sending the message that it was prepared to indulge in carnal pleasures. As if the thought hadn't already run through her head.

Tasks complete, they used grass to scrub the worst of the blood and dirt from their blades and hands. Rising, Lira set out for the camp with Tal following closely behind, a position he relished.

Feeling as randy as a stud with a mare in heat, Tal watched the sway of the huntress's hips as her long strides ate up the distance to the camp. He'd not touched a woman since the day he'd performed the ritual. The thought had more than once crossed his mind, but when it came to finding a suitable partner it seemed that no woman could find favor in his eyes. Or with his cock. Not since he was an untried boy had his own hand been his only sexual partner.

The woman's long, thick braid swung with each step as it hung down her back to end just above her waist. The muscles of her buttocks bunched and released under the tight, supple suede of her leggings and tunic, making Tal long to see if they felt as firm as they looked. He sighed with regret as they broke through the trees into the clearing. Drawing even with her now that the way had widened, the loss of such a sight was almost painful.

With the same idea in mind, they made for the river's edge to wash. In silence, they returned to the camp. Tal readied the fire as Lira spitted the kinti. They worked in concert, each knowing without words

what tasks needed to be performed to make their meal.

After leaving to see to his horse, Tal returned to the fire, sinking down on the pad he'd made of his blanket and settling his gaze on the mysterious woman. "Where are you bound for, Huntress?" he inquired.

Lira returned his gaze. "Feratil," she replied. "I go to visit my cousin, Galatin."

"Guardian Galatin?" Tal was intrigued. He'd never heard Galatin speak of any family. A sudden suspicion formed in his thoughts.

"One and the same," Lira confirmed.

"And do you also seek to find favor with the Orb, and become tezza to High Chief Talrion?"

She snorted derisively. "I do not, Warrior." She noted the suddenly sour look on the face of her guest. "I meant no disrespect," she assured him. "Are you in service to the High Chieftain?"

"I am of the Finn Mal clan," he answered evasively. Tal had no desire to reveal his identity. He was enjoying this encounter too much to have the woman intimidated by who he was, although that was probably doubtful. He had a feeling there were not many things that would intimidate this huntress.

"I am Tal," he introduced himself, deliberately using the short version of his name.

"Lira of the Senn Var," she returned politely.

"Senn Var. That explains the quality of your mount."

Lira's gaze found the dark form of her horse. The setting sun was dipping below the horizon, leaving

darkness and shadow behind.

“Yes,” she agreed, “my mother, Aderra, raised him. He was a gift for my birthing day.”

“Aderra Senn Var, she who raises and trains horses, is your mother?”

Lira nodded.

“Several times I’ve heard the High Chieftain express a wish to visit Senn Var lands, and your mother, when time permits. He wishes to purchase or trade for several horses, to improve his stable with the addition of Senn Var bloodlines.”

Lira nodded again, pride in her mother evident in her smile. “He would be most welcome, Tal.”

They continued to converse quietly as the kinti cooked. Lira produced bread and cheese from her pack. Tal brought forth a container of spiced legumes and a small pot in which to heat them. He also produced a glazed honey roll which had Lira’s mouth watering. It had been days since she had tasted a sweet of any kind.

When the kinti was ready they dove in, filling their plates and eating with appreciative gusto. Tal was pleased to see a woman eat with such appetite, and couldn’t help wondering what other things she did with such abandon.

As the meal progressed, their eyes caught and held more than once. Tal was certain he could see a heat in Lira’s eyes that matched his own. When he reached out to pass half of the honey roll to her, their fingers brushed with electric effect. His already swelling cock twitched insistently, demanding to be released from the tight confines of his leathers.

Tal knew he was staring in an almost predatory fashion, but Lira didn’t seem to be bothered. In fact, she was returning his look with a boldness that spoke louder than words. He watched her consume the honey roll, each bite an exercise in seduction. With the last bite consumed, her tongue did a sensuous dance over her sticky fingers, ending with a voluptuous swipe across her plump, glistening, honey-coated lips. He was hard-pressed to stifle the growl that built in his chest.

The meal ended, cleanup was quickly seen to. Tal added more wood to the fire and from the corner of his eye watched Lira. She had pulled her braid over her shoulder and, after releasing the tie at the end, was unraveling the heavy mass. Turning to face her, his eyes followed her nimble fingers as they combed through her hair until it was a long, wavy fall that shimmered in the fire's light. Lira rose with fluid ease, her gaze catching his.

"I go to bathe in the river...care to join me, Tal?"

Without waiting for an answer, she sauntered off into the shadows, heading for the calm pool that was formed by the river boulders.

A rush of pure, lustful fire poured through Tal's veins as he silently rose to follow her.

Chapter Four

Lira smiled in anticipation. Excitement and need tightened her insides as she walked to the river's edge. A shiver sent goose bumps coursing down her arms as she thought of Tal's clear green eyes and firm sculpted lips, lips she intended to kiss and lick and bite. It had been a while since she had felt the need for masculine companionship, but even so, she'd never felt a need such as this.

Unlacing her tunic, she turned to watch Tal's approach. He too was working the laces at the throat of his sleeveless tunic. Lira's breath caught in her throat as he crossed his arms over his chest, pulling the concealing garment away. His hard, sculpted upper body was clearly revealed in the ample moonlight.

Smooth skin gleamed. A light dusting of hair shadowed the valley that ran between taut pecs, flowing down over rippling abs, parting around the indentation of his belly button and converging below to disappear in an enticing trail that led under the waistband of tight leather pants. Pants containing a bulge that, to Lira's widening eyes, continued to grow until it looked ready to burst from the leather that barely held it.

Wanting to rid herself of her own clothing—and not wanting to miss the rest of Tal’s disrobing—she hurriedly pulled her tunic over her head and was rewarded by an indrawn breath that emerged as a reverent, “Goddess.”

A sultry, satisfied smile curved her lips as she toed off her boots and opened the fastening of her leggings. Tal’s eyes were riveted to the gentle swaying movement of her breasts. It was only in situations such as this that Lira was glad of her well-endowed chest. Many had been the times she’d wished to be flat-chested, so that her full curves wouldn’t interfere with shooting a bow, or bounce while riding.

She shimmied out of her leggings and stood, tall and proud, her body bared for his eager examination. Much to her delight, he continued to remove his own clothing as his eyes caressed every sensual curve of her body. When Tal finally rid himself of his leathers it was Lira’s turn for reverent reflection.

“By the Mother,” she breathed.

Clothed, he was exquisite. Naked, he was pure devastation. Lira’s eyes wandered his body, drawn irresistibly to the seat of his manhood. Thick and full, it stood tall and ripe, the plump tip glistening with moisture. She felt her empty channel clench with anticipation, moistening, filling with cream.

Her eyes lifted and met his. They stood staring, each well-pleased with what the other presented. A smile began in Lira’s eyes, quickly reflected in Tal’s. With an exuberant whoop, which he returned, Lira ran to the pool and dived in, feeling the pressure of the water behind her as Tal mirrored her movements and gave chase.

She slid through the water like a fish, rising rapidly, breaking the surface of the water to pull in a deep breath. Before she had time to dive again, strong arms wrapped around her waist, a hard, muscled body sliding sensuously across her water-cooled skin as Tal rose and, without hesitation, claimed her lips.

Lira opened her mouth to him, taking his tongue, mating it with her own as they sank slowly into the water. Their bodies drifted down, limbs entwined, straining as they devoured each other’s passion. Lira wrapped her legs around Tal, her heated sex gliding over his solid, unyielding cock.

Reaching the bottom, Tal bent his knees, intending only to push them to the surface. Displaced by the

movement, Lira's body pulled back just enough for the head of Tal's cock to nestle at her entrance. As his knees straightened, pushing them upward, he simultaneously drove the ridged length of his engorged shaft into Lira's silken sheath, impaling her to the hilt.

Lira gave a muffled shriek, maintaining enough presence of mind to keep from inhaling a lungful of water. They broke the surface, each gasping, not only from lack of oxygen, but from the erotic shock of their joining.

Tal kept her pinned to his body and made for the shore. Concern for her could not bely the sensations emanating from his cock. He was buried and tightly held, his cock rocking within, prodding the velvet confines of the slippery flesh that held him. Feet touching bottom, he halted. Lira's legs were locked tightly around him, holding him deep. Standing, with the water lapping at their still-joined bodies, he cupped her face in his hands.

"Are you all right, Lira? Goddess, I never meant to take you so roughly." His eyes were filled with worry, remorse and something more. Pained pleasure.

"It's all right, Tal. I know you didn't," she panted softly. "It was a little abrupt, but I wasn't totally unprepared." She moved her hips, undulating slowly against him, pulling a groan from his throat. Her pussy tightened around his shaft, guiding his thick length into her ever increasing cream. "I want you. Don't stop."

The last words were whispered as her tongue flicked out to slide decadently over the whorls of his ear. Her panting breaths heated the moisture that was left in the wake of her caressing tongue.

A flush of heat flashed through Tal. Driven wild with need, he clasped Lira tighter in his arms. One hand slid to a firm, round cheek, squeezing, encouraging her to writhe against him with each step. The sweet, pungent scent of her arousal rose to his nostrils, causing his groin to tighten as another influx of blood filled his already distended shaft. Tal groaned in desperation—he needed to fuck her. Now!

Lira shivered in his arms, amazed at the man's strength. He carried her effortlessly. Lowering her to the bed she'd prepared earlier, Tal's mouth found hers and swallowed her moans as he began long, slow thrusts. She felt intoxicated by the taste of him as her tongue danced with his. The flavor was indefinable, his essence, hot and wild, mixed with the sweet lingering taste of honey.

Writhing under him, sinking her short nails into his shoulders, she urged him without words to move faster. His pace was moderate, gliding thrusts that teased and enticed, inviting her to burn—yet not quite igniting the fire. When he ignored her, she began to struggle. Levering her bent leg up, foot to the ground, she gave a shove and rolled their bodies, coming to rest on top.

Tal grinned up at her. “Impatient, Lira?”

“Yes!” she hissed.

Lira rode Tal with a fierce grinding motion, drawing a guttural groan from his throat. She eagerly impaled herself again and again on the thick column of man that filled her slick, greedy pussy. Sweat broke out on their bodies as their flesh slammed together. A wet sucking sound accompanied each withdrawal of his cock. Each inward movement displaced the abundant cream of her arousal until it puddled at the base of his shaft, saturating their mingled pubic hair.

Tal’s hands cupped her breasts, his fingers tweaking the hardened nubs of her nipples. It sent a shockwave through her body that centered in her sheath, causing her to grip him with ever increasing pressure. With a feral growl, Tal bucked under her, wrapped his arms around her and rolled, bringing her under him once again. His mouth latched onto her swollen nipple, drawing a startled, pleased cry from her. Without hesitation, he began the hard, pounding rhythm she craved.

As one striving frantic unit, they moved. Thrust. Retreat. Thrust. Retreat. Again and again, the fevered tension of pending release building to explosive heights. They were enveloped in passion’s fire, sweat beading, puddling, running in unrestrained trickles. The sweet, pungent scent of sex suffused the overheated air, inundating their nostrils as they fought for the inadequate, perfumed oxygen. Tal lifted his suckling mouth from the salty, ambrosial taste of Lira’s swollen nipples, his eyes seeking and holding hers.

In that one explosive moment, all barriers were down. Nothing remained hidden as—with eyes locked—the fury of release swept over their heaving bodies. Lira’s legs locked around Tal as she convulsed under him. Piercing pleasure shuddered through her. Beginning in her loins, it radiated outward, up through her belly and down through her thighs as a flush of heat swept over her straining body. Unable to contain the sensations, an agonized wail burst from her throat, followed by hard, helpless whimpers as the shockwave pounded her again and again.

Tal continued to thrust through the ever increasing pressure of her inner muscles. He was drowning in the storm of Lira’s eyes and the volcanic heat of her body. Her cry of release cut through him like a knife.

Spasm after spasm rippled through her pussy as it gripped him, milking his thick shaft as it penetrated and pounded within. Tal teetered on the edge, his balls drawn tight, his cock near bursting. With one last thrust, he ground deep, cock head nudging her cervix as he shot thick ropes of hot creamy seed into her welcoming passage. With each undulation of his hips, their combined fluids flowed free, sliding down Lira's buttocks, anointing the crevice between her cheeks and the pink rosebud that hid there.

Tal's release was an implosion, a violent inward rush that gutted him with overwhelming pleasure and tore a deep, animalistic groan from his chest. His muscles shuddered with relief. With his breath heaving in his chest, he collapsed. Tal rolled to his back, bringing Lira with him, her now pliant body draped over his own.

They lay silent and sated as their bodies regained their normal rhythms of heartbeat and breath. Lira shifted slightly, her thigh sliding over his, her hand lightly gliding over the firm muscles of his arm. Tal's own hand was running soothingly over the smooth warm skin of her back, again and again, the movements gentle and hypnotic.

Tal sat up when he felt the small shiver that shook Lira. The night air was growing cool. He rose, added more wood to the dwindling fire, took up his own blanket and returned to her. Without a word they settled together, Tal spooned against her back facing the fire as he pulled the blanket over them.

They dozed off, an hour or so passing until Lira was awakened by a quiver of arousal. With sleepy eyes, she looked down to find herself on her back, the top of Tal's head visible between her thighs. She gasped, her head falling back as his clever tongue made a swirling journey from her entrance to her clit. It lingered on the swelling nub, rubbing, petting, encouraging blood to engorge the sensitive tissue.

Lira's hips eased up, pushing her body closer to his sinfully agile tongue. Tal acknowledged her awakening with a growl that vibrated her clit and caused her belly to clench. Another moan slid from her throat.

Tal's hands began to make forays over her body, sliding over her thighs, rising to cup a breast and tease the hardened nipple that was pinched tight with arousal. Both hands returned to her buttocks, lifting her as he pushed some of the blanket that had covered them beneath her hips. With her body elevated, Tal was able to fully pleasure her as he wished. His mouth returned to her creamy slit, licking and sucking, tasting the combined musky, salty-sweet fluid from their previous fuck. It was a potent cocktail that went straight to his cock, making him ache for release.

With one hand he explored her juicy slit, two long, broad fingers sliding inside to tease and rouse. With

the other hand he traveled south to unexplored territory. Lira groaned and tried to close her thighs as his finger made contact with the taut rosebud between the rounded globes of her bottom.

“Easy, Lira,” Tal soothed. “Has no one touched you here?” he asked, as his finger glided softly over the puckered flesh of her anus.

“No,” she panted.

“Then I shall be the first.” Tal’s voice was heavy with satisfaction.

His finger had gathered their mingled cum and bathed in the viscous liquid. Slick and coated with cream, he began to penetrate her untried passage. The tiny opening clenched defensively, objecting to this unaccustomed invasion. Tal’s finger probed gently, stroking sensitized nerve endings that began zinging messages of pleasure to the rest of her body. Lira relaxed, her pucker loosening as Tal’s finger slid in slowly and began stroking the hot, velvet interior.

“Goddess!” she cried out.

Tal began moving the fingers that were buried in her pussy in concert with the one now buried in her anal passage. The feeling was exquisite, but nothing compared to the shot of sensation that rocked her when his mouth latched onto her clit and began to suck.

Lira bucked under Tal’s weight. Expecting her reaction, he levered himself over her to keep her steady and open for his touch. Relentlessly he pleased her. Mouth, fingers and tongue working with diligent, single-minded purpose.

Tal was rewarded by fresh hot surges of fragrant cream that leaked past the probing fingers buried in Lira’s pulsing, clenching pussy. He allowed it to drizzle down, anointing a second finger, which he then worked past the tight ring of muscle that guarded her anal passage. A third finger joined those that fucked her gripping sheath. Voraciously he feasted on her plump, juicy clit.

Lira went mad. Her body jerked dramatically, her hips pumping as desperate wails rent the night air. She felt herself sucked down into a hot black vortex, the only color visible were flashes of red that

represented the pleasure-pain of this taking. Orgasm wracked her body as her soul writhed with dark delight. Endless moments later, her rigid muscles eased as the waves of pleasure receded, her trembling body melting back to the blanket beneath her.

Soft panting whimpers continued to issue from her throat as Tal slowly withdrew his fingers from her body, his mouth and tongue gently cleansing and soothing the swollen tissues of her pussy. Finished, he moved up her body, pulled her into his arms and took her lips with his.

Lira felt the darkness recede. Tal's tongue slowly probed her mouth, the intoxicating musk of his kiss awakening her. He pulled away, smiling at her dazed look.

“Back among the living, Lira?” he teased.

Surprisingly, Lira felt herself blush. A shy smile graced her lips. “You are a dangerous man, Tal Finn Mal.”

“So I've been told,” he answered, a wry expression on his face, “but never in this context.”

Lira shook her head at his teasing. “Then your women failed to realize the nature of he who bedded them.”

Her hand wandered down, finding the ridged shaft that prodded her thigh. She insistently pushed Tal to his back as her hand slowly stroked the velvet flesh under her fingers. Tal went without a protest, a rumble of approval vibrating his chest.

Lira leaned over him, her mouth finding a flat copper areola, tongue teasing a hardening male nipple. Tal tensed and grunted, his breath beginning to speed. As she worked first one then the other nipple, her hand maintained a steady rhythmic stroking movement on his thickening cock.

Lira inhaled the moist heat that rose from his skin. The tangy, spicy musk of aroused male filled her nostrils, the vapors winding deep into her libido, urging her to touch and taste.

Moving down, she hovered over his groin, her gaze centered on the plump mushroom cap that topped the thick column of flesh that stood ready for her. Beads of pre-come leaked from the tiny slit that graced the top. A small river formed, flowing over the reddened, blood-engorged shaft. Lira's tongue slid over that clear flowing stream, lapping it up, pulling it into her waiting mouth. Tal's flavor settled over her tongue, wafting up to her palate, filling her mouth with his salty-sweet bouquet. She wanted more.

Her hair fell forward, a dark rippling wave that obscured his groin as her mouth took him in, her lips tightening around his pulsing cock, her tongue laving every inch that slid smoothly inside. Tal groaned, helpless to still the growing need that built as she worked him. He was held in warm, wet volcanic heat. Her tongue and mouth created a world of sensation that held him willing prisoner. His hips unconsciously undulated, seeking to bury his cock deep. Lira relaxed her throat and took him to the hilt. Tal groaned again as she swallowed, the sensation sharp and shocking, one he'd never felt before. Her throat muscles squeezed and massaged while her tongue swirled over him.

Just as he thought it could get no better, her hand found his round, lightly haired balls and began to massage. A startled, "Lira!" was pulled from him as one finger found his perineum, stroking the satiny skin, causing him to shudder.

"Goddess, woman, I'm about to come!" he warned.

His answer was a low guttural growl. She had no intention of letting go. Primal man came roaring to life. Tal gripped her hair in his fists, his hips slamming upward. Lira's lips tightened around him, milking him. Balls drawing tight to his body, loins ready to implode, Tal released. Shimmering pleasure fired through his abdomen, his muscles contracting, constricting, holding the sensation that stabbed his roiling gut.

His first volley shot straight down Lira's throat. She withdrew slightly, wanting to taste the incoming bounty. Burst after burst of rich, potent semen filled her mouth. Her mouth, awash with Tal's release, could not contain the flood. She swallowed again and again, losing some as it dribbled down her chin. His movements slowed as did the flow of semen. Lira pulled back, her tongue lapping gently over his slowly softening shaft.

Tal pulled her up, his gaze taking in her dreamy, satisfied expression and the rivulet of cream that decorated her chin. He brought her face to his, his tongue making a sensual swipe over her chin, capturing his seed, then her lips, plunging inside to share his bounty. Mutual moans filled their mouths as their tongues tangled in a languorous waltz.

Breaking the kiss, Lira stifled a yawn. A sheepish smile lit her face as Tal chuckled. He urged Lira to relax against him as he fumbled for the blanket, pulling it over them. In no time they were sound asleep.

Chapter Five

Tal woke as the light of the rising sun slowly swept away the shadows of the night. The fire had burned down to embers, which glowed under the fine white ash, much like the glow that warmed him inside. He inhaled the fresh scent of the hair his face was partially buried in and smiled. By the Mother, Lira was magnificent.

It had been a night unlike any other. He'd never had a partner who'd shared so completely, so ardently. Lira had insisted—nay, demanded—her right to give as well as take. The results were orgasm after orgasm that reached heights hitherto unknown. But there was more than just the physical pleasure. He wasn't sure what name to put to it, but he knew he would not willingly let it slip away.

His arms tightened involuntarily and Lira stirred, sighing. She gave a little wiggle, settling herself comfortably against him as a yawn took her. Tal rubbed his chin in her hair. "Awake?"

A husky "Mmm," was her reply.

He grinned, knowing he should be exhausted after the night's excesses. Instead he felt renewed, ready to face the day. Mischief lit his eyes as a thought crossed his mind. Deciding to act upon it, Tal rose and pulled Lira up into his arms.

"What are you doing?" she rasped, her voice still rough from sleep.

"Bath time," he pronounced with a grin.

Lira began writhing in his arms. "No!"

Ignoring her struggles, Tal held her firmly and ran for the river. Taking a deep breath, he plunged the two of them in as Lira screamed. She surfaced, sputtering and spitting, ready to turn her ire on him as he emerged beside her. The gleefully boyish look on his face melted her anger. She resolved to take a different approach.

“Tal?” She sidled up to him, a sweetly innocent expression on her face.

“Yes, Lira?” he replied, as caution overshadowed the twinkle in his eyes.

She ran a caressing hand over his chest, trailing it past his waist and over his stomach until it came to rest on his stirring manhood. “If you ever do that to me again, I’ll remove this,” she squeezed his growing cock gently, “spit it like a kinti, and roast it for dinner.” Her eyes met his as a smile curved her lips. “And that would be a terrible waste.” Lira laughed at the alarm that filled his eyes and the way his shaft defensively deflated, drawing close to his body for protection.

Realizing that she was teasing, Tal chuckled, relieved she wasn’t really upset. Just when he thought he was safe, Lira twisted and swept his feet from underneath him, dumping him into the water. It was Tal’s turn to spit water. But it was worth it, he decided, for the decidedly erotic view of Lira emerging from the water, the clear fluid sluicing from her every well-formed curve as she returned to their camp. Oh yes, he thought, she was truly magnificent.

* * * * *

After their impromptu bath, they had dried, dressed and fixed a quick firstmeal. Tal, finding himself reluctant to part company with Lira, decided to return to Feratil. They rode companionably, conversing with the ease of those long known to each other.

With each passing hour, Tal enjoyed her company more and more. He found himself wondering how long she was going to stay, and if she would consent to spend time with him. He even began wondering if he could persuade Galatin to encourage her to test her luck with the Orb. It came as something of a shock to find the idea had appeal. There was only one problem. As each step brought them closer to their destination, he faced the unpalatable task of revealing his true identity.

“Tal?”

He started, realizing that his mind had wandered. While formulating and discarding several ways to bring up the subject of who he really was, Lira had asked a question.

“You seem distracted, is everything all right?”

Tal faced her, seeing the concern in her eyes, hoping it wouldn't turn to anger at what he had to reveal. “There's something I need to tell you, Lira. The name I gave you, Tal, is actually a short version of my real name. My full name is Talrion.”

“Talrion,” she repeated.

“Yes.” He could see the understanding dawn in her eyes.

“Talrion Finn Mal. High Chief Talrion Finn Mal.”

“Yes.” Tal waited for the explosion. It never came.

“I see. Why did you not tell me?” she asked, her voice low and steady.

Tal glanced at her. Her eyes, her expression gave nothing away. “Leadership sometimes weighs heavily on a man. I did not mean to deceive, it's just... I wished to be accepted for myself, not my position.”

Lira made no reply as they rode slowly forward, Feratil looming just over the next rise in the road.

Desperate for some hint of her feelings, Tal asked softly, “Would it have made a difference, Lira, a difference in what happened between us?”

Inborn honesty compelled her answer. “No, Tal, it wouldn’t have. I wanted you from the moment I saw you.”

Before he could reply, he was hailed by several townsmen as they arrived at the outskirts of the village. They rode sedately through, Tal answering each greeting. A scant mile ahead stood the residence of the High Chieftain and the compound of the warriors of clan Finn Mal.

They finished the journey in silence, dismounting before Tal’s home. Handing off the horses to be cared for by the waiting grooms, they mounted the stone steps, crossing the wide, columned portico. Before they reached the front door, Lira placed her hand on Tal’s arm, halting him with her touch.

“I understand about wishing to be accepted for yourself. More than you’ll ever know.” Her smile held a hint of rueful sadness, then her eyes narrowed in mock sternness. “Now, take me to my cousin before I make good on that which I threatened you with at the river.”

Tal grinned, relieved that he was forgiven. “I thank you, Lady Huntress.” He ushered her in, then took the lead. “This way. Guardian Galatin should be in the Hall of the Mother.”

So relieved was he at his reprieve, Tal forgot there would be the usual gaggle of females waiting to take their turn with the Orb. He entered with Lira then stopped, hesitant to approach the milling throng.

“Galatin is there, at the altar,” he pointed out, “If you wish, give him your greetings, then return to me and I’ll show you to our guest chambers. I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to a bath.” At her narrow-eyed look, he threw up his hands in mock surrender. “No tricks, I promise,” he assured her with a teasing grin.

She nodded. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Tal watched her long-limbed, graceful stride as she made her way to the altar. Galatin and Lira embraced. They spoke for a few moments and as one their gaze moved to him. Unfortunately, they weren’t the only ones who turned to look.

Some of the waiting candidates spotted Tal. Those nearest him began to move in his direction. Those closest to the altar began jostling forward, eager to test their luck in Tal's presence, sure that with him there as witness, they would be chosen. The Orb was taken up by the first to slip by Galatin, who had stepped some small distance away to greet Lira.

In the rush to get to the Orb, pushing and shoving began. The woman in possession of the Orb was shoved off-balance. As she made a desperate grab for something to hold on to, the Orb shot from her grasp, arcing into the air.

A general gasp of dismay was torn from the suddenly still mob. They watched the Orb descend, sure its destruction was imminent against the unforgiving marble floor, until a hand reached out, catching it easily. All eyes rested on that hand. The steady hand of Lira Senn Var.

"I've got it!" she called out gaily, then gasped as the glow of the Orb intensified. A pearlescent aura of light traveled the length of her arm and further, encompassing her entire body until she was encased in the throbbing glow.

Tal's heart echoed that throbbing beat of light as he watched Lira become engulfed by the Orb's power. Irresistibly drawn to her, he made his way through the crowd. Lira's eyes were wide with uncertainty, her breath heaving in her lungs as his eyes met hers.

"Help me," she whispered unsteadily.

"It's all right, Lira," he assured her softly. Tal reached out, taking her clenched hand in his. His other hand ran gently over hers, encouraging her to relax. "Open your hand."

Lira complied, unfurling her fingers to reveal the Orb nestled in her palm. As their eyes locked on the Orb, it began to reabsorb its light, until all that remained was the soft glow that surrounded the crystal itself. As the remaining light began to dim, the Orb grew ghostly pale, insubstantial. Sinking into Lira's palm, it disappeared.

Tal smiled into Lira's disbelieving eyes. Hesitancy and hope filled him. "See?" he teased, "It's all right. T ezza."

Chapter Six

Lira saw nothing of the beauty of the garden before her. Instead she brooded, her mind replaying again and again the scene that took place in the Hall of the Mother. How could this have happened? It had to be some terrible mistake.

Pandemonium had ensued after the Orb disappeared. All those women, with their accusing, acrimonious stares and remarks. Thank the Mother that Galatin and the Handmaidens had been there to restore order. Galatin had been quite firm in his statement. In short, by the Mother's will the Orb had chosen. By the time he'd finished, all were subdued and resigned to the inevitable.

One particularly saucy candidate had made the suggestion that perhaps Talrion's warriors would console the losers? Laughter and good-natured teasing resulted, restoring the harmony of the room. Awash in the lighter mood, many of the women gave their congratulations to Lira and Tal.

Lira had been in a state of shock. She'd stood there, smiling, accepting their attentions, all the while wanting nothing more than to quit the room and find a way out of this mess.

She'd watched Tal as he smiled and spoke to those gathered. He seemed happy, totally unconcerned that the Orb had chosen the worst possible mate for him. Could he not see? Did he not realize how very wrong this was? Instead he'd accepted without protest. She recalled again the shocking quiver that shook her body when Tal had called her *hertezza*.

Even more confusing were these emotions she kept experiencing. When the Orb had joined with her it felt as though she'd been wrapped in a warm, welcoming hug. Smug approval, delight and contentment seemed to radiate from some unknown source within her. Unknown until she realized it was the Orb. Somehow it was communicating its awareness to her.

Her wandering steps took her near the wall that enclosed the garden. There, under the sheltering branches of a fully flowered, weeping zar tree, she took refuge on a stone bench and continued to ponder

the situation. Lost in thought, she failed to hear the approaching footsteps until the murmur of voices broke her reverie.

“The guard said she came this way.”

Lira recognized Tal’s voice.

“Perhaps she’s gone to the stables. As a Senn Var, Lira’s love of horses is great. She may have gone to make sure hers is receiving the proper care.”

“Let’s go down and check,” Tal answered. “But first, I’d like to give you my thanks, Guardian, for hounding me into the ritual.”

“After what you told me about your parents’ unhappy match, I now understand your reluctance, High One,” Galatin replied.

“My mother should never have married,” Tal confessed sadly, “She was not a woman suited for home and hearth. Her wish was to be a merchant, as her father was, but her father, a very traditional man, would not allow it. Her bitterness tainted any hope for happiness she had in the marriage she made with my father.”

As the men moved off, Lira sat, frozen with horror. “Oh Tal, I’m so sorry.” she whispered, for she knew she would never be able to make him happy. How could a huntress become a homemaker? Even had she the wish to do so, which she did not, she knew she would make a mess of it. The situation was impossible. With that thought she began her plans for leaving on the morrow.

* * * * *

“Lira? Are you all right?”

Lira turned to find Tal behind her. The setting sun blazed behind him, bathing him in light and shadow.

Her eyes drank in the sight. So tall and strong, his golden brown hair awash with glinting highlights of red and gold. The sincere concern in those moss-green eyes, so intense and focused on her, warmed her deep inside and sent a tingling quiver that started in her heart and ended between her thighs.

She forced a smile to her lips. "I'm fine, Tal, just thinking."

"I imagine there's quite a lot to think about. Yes?" he inquired softly.

Lira nodded. "To say the least."

Tal stepped forward, killing the distance between them. "I know how much of a shock it must be, Lira. I...I'm not unhappy with the Orb's choice. I promise I won't push. We'll take it slow. To start, will you share evening meal with me?"

Lira had intended to retire early, but seeing the vulnerability in his eyes, she was lost.

"I would very much enjoy sharing evening meal with you, Tal."

Tal's face lit with his smile. "I don't think kinti is on the menu tonight, but I'm sure we'll find something worthwhile to feed you." He offered his arm.

Lira's brows rose at his gallantry. With a mock sigh of resignation she took it, allowing him to lead her inside.

During the meal they talked. Tal asked questions about her family and what her life was like. While speaking of her life as a huntress, she subtly tried to make Tal understand how much her freedom meant to her. She willed him to understand, as she hadn't the heart to tell him she was leaving.

Those thoughts of leaving began to weigh heavily on her, until Tal was left to carry the lion's share of the conversation. Lira absorbed his every word and move. The tone of his voice, deep and rich, was so soothing and yet so stirring. She focused on his hands, the fingers strong and broad. There were calluses

from the use of sword, knife and bow. She shivered at the memory of those calluses sliding over her skin.

“You’re miles away, Lira.” Tal’s voice brought her back with a start.

Her eyes locked with his, twin pools of deep blue, inundated with desire.

“Make love to me, Tal.” The words were spoken with a husky intensity that surprised them both.

Tal rose and offered her his hand. His arm wrapped around her waist, and as he led her into the bedroom Lira began to pull at the laces of her tunic.

His hand covered hers. “Let me, tezza . Let me take care of everything.”

The lump in her throat precluded speech. Moisture sparkled in her eyes as she nodded her agreement.

With reverent tenderness, Tal removed Lira’s clothing. He picked her up, laying her gently on the bed. Ridding himself of his own clothes, he joined her. Sensing her vulnerable mood, Tal proceeded with deliberate care, consoling her without words.

His mouth took hers, a soft joining, his tongue gliding over her lips, seeking permission to enter. Lira opened for him, sinking into the sensations evoked by his exploration. As their tongues began a heated dance, Tal’s hands performed their own magic.

Those calluses made their presence known. The slight sandpapery texture sent shivers cascading over Lira’s skin as he sensuously explored every hill and valley. Lira’s body began an unconscious undulation, yielding to and seeking every sultry touch, every burning sensation.

Tal’s mouth broke from hers, traveling with agonizing slowness down the warm silky skin of her throat. Increasing heat brought forth the blended and highly erotic scent of spicy zar blossoms and hot, aroused woman. Tal’s cock jumped eagerly.

His mouth halted at the peak of her breast, sucking her in. Lira bucked under him, crying out her shocked pleasure at his fervent suckling. Tal growled with satisfaction at her response. Lira shivered at the primal sound of that growl. It held a marked contrast to his words as he moved to her other nipple, giving it equal attention. As she felt the tingling brush of his tongue against her moistening skin, Lira's hands fisted desperately in his long silky hair.

One of Tal's hands was again on the move, gliding over her taut belly. Strong fingers combed through the silky pelt that guarded her mound. Those same fingers parted the wet, swollen lips of her sex and dipped into the fragrant cream that coated her yielding slit. Lira spread her thighs wide, welcoming the nimble invasion. One finger swirled in the slick wet heat. She felt it slide from her entrance to her clit. He lay the pad of his fingertip atop her swollen bud. She shuddered at the gentle manipulations, her belly tightening as a small shivering orgasm shook her. She barely heard his crooning words as his finger returned to her entrance, rubbing and swirling in the increasing cream of her arousal.

"Men are like geysers," he murmured softly, "The pressure builds, a small bit of liquid escapes, until suddenly the geyser bursts, shooting its load outward." Tal leaned over her, capturing her gaze. "Women seem to climb steps, each step takes them higher, the pleasure increasing, until they reach the top and plunge over the edge." His finger again moved upward, finding her clit, working it gently as before. "Let's climb another step," he whispered huskily.

Lira's closed her eyes, her breath panting as she strained under him, reaching for the next level. She uttered a soft moan and shuddered, her hips bouncing as another small orgasm racked her body.

"So sweet, tezza," he growled.

Tal continued in this vein until Lira was frantic with need. She tossed her head on the pillows, her hair becoming a wild, tangled mass. She couldn't control the trembling of her body as sweat dewed her skin. Eagerly, she spread her thighs for his touch, her belly knotted with an almost painful, burning need.

She nearly shrieked with relief when Tal's mouth plunged in. His tongue lapped at her swollen tissues, his mouth sucking at the thickened petals of her sex. Feet braced, her hips shot up when she felt the thick invasion of two broad fingers, their intrusion accompanied by the noisy slurp of displaced juices. Her pussy greedily clenched and held them captive.

Feeling the prod of a finger against her lips, she opened her eyes. Tal's other hand was before her face,

his index finger wet with fluid. At his urging she opened her mouth, taking his finger inside. His flavor exploded on her tongue. An animalistic growl rumbled in her throat as she eagerly sucked down the warm pre-come he fed her.

Tal returned to feasting on her engorged cunt, causing Lira to groan and release his finger. She ground desperately against his mouth, the need for release driving her mad.

Leaving her pussy, Tal hovered over her straining body. Lira moaned wildly as his mouth found hers and took it in a fervid, passion-filled kiss. The sweet musk of her arousal sent a wave of dizziness through her. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

“Please, Tal. Please. Fuck me!” she begged.

Tal reached into the bedside stand and opened a small drawer, removing a firm, flesh-colored object that was about four inches long and as broad as two of his fingers together. He brought it to Lira’s attention.

“What is it?” she panted.

“An anal plug,” he answered. “Will you take it, Lira? Remember how my fingers took you? I promise it will enhance your pleasure.”

She remembered the burning pleasure-pain of his possession at the river. A hard, hot wave of lust swept her body as she nodded her acceptance.

“On your stomach, basaya ,” he ordered.

His words made her pause. “I’m not,” she told him.

“Not what?”

Lira rolled to her stomach, the side of her face against the pillow, her voice muffled, “Abasaya.”

Tal leaned over her, pulling long strands of wildly wavy, silky hair back from her face. “You are a beauty, Lira, mybasaya .” His hand landed a stinging swat on one rounded globe of her ass. “Never doubt that. Now, on your knees,basaya .”

Lira gasped with surprise and immediately obeyed. She complied when Tal urged her thighs wider and moved between them. Once again his mouth found her creaming cunt, his tongue swirling over the swollen tissues, drawing muffled moans from her. She felt his tongue pulling a trail of warm cream from her slit, not realizing his intention until his tongue laved her taut, tiny rosebud. She shrieked at the shock of his touch, her head coming up from the pillows.

“Tal, what are you doing?!”

Primitive, aggressive man answered. “Taking you down!” Another stinging swat landed on her upturned buttocks.

His actions brought her own primal reaction. She felt a hot sweep of defiance but hissed and obeyed, her eyes glittering.

The hard puff of Tal’s breath caressed her bottom. She was unable to contain her shocked cry of pleasure or the resistant clench of her silky pucker as his tongue slid over the taut rucked flesh. Lira quivered, her face flushing, breath panting. Tal seemed to revel in the task. His tongue glided, lubricating and probing the tiny pink entrance. She felt a finger swirl in the leaking cream from her cunt, then gasped as it was placed at her tight rosebud. It penetrated, Lira whimpering as it sank into the dark, humid depths of her ass.

“It’s all right, Lira—you can take it,basaya ,” he soothed.

Lira writhed with the burning pleasure and pain as Tal prepared her. His one smoothly stroking finger was joined by two, then three, stretching her entrance, scissoring inside the taut ring, opening her for the plug. Lubricating it with her own cream, he withdrew his fingers and slowly inserted the plug. Lira’s agonized wail echoed through the room. Bright hot flares of pleasure-pain bit at her, nearly driving her

over the edge to release. As her body bucked, she barely felt Tal drape his body over hers, his furred chest teasing her back, his nipples rising hard and taut, boring into her skin.

“Taaal,” she moaned beneath him. “Goddess! What are you doing to me?”

“Loving you, basaya, loving you. Are you ready for me, Lira?”

“Yes! Yes, please! Before I lose my mind.”

Tal chuckled. “Anything for you, tezza. Everything.”

She felt the plump, throbbing head of his cock against her swollen slit. Her throat tightened as he breached the tight entrance, sliding into her tight-fisted volcanic heat. Her tiny whimper joined Tal’s deep, guttural growl as he powered through the tight muscles that resisted his penetration. Deeper and deeper he pushed until fully buried, his hard flesh pulsing and throbbing inside her quivering cunt.

With his first powerful stroke, Lira cried out, the pleasure unbearable, agonizing. Each stroke brought a more desperate wail, until she screamed, her body convulsing under him. Already impossibly tight, her vagina sought to strangle the thick invader that pierced it. Tal thrust once, twice, and with a shout, unleashed his restraint. Hot fluid spurted from his deeply buried cock again and again as it filled and overflowed her gripping sheath.

Tal collapsed to his side, taking Lira with him. After he gently removed the plug, she lay silent, quivering with the receding waves of pleasure. Tal kissed her temple, whispering her name. His whisper conveyed a wealth of meaning. Though he did not say the word—love—it was there in his voice. She lay against him, listening to his breathing. It grew slow and even as he courted sleep. She’d heard the emotion in his voice, not only with her ears, but with her heart. And though she realized she loved him in return, she could not bear the thought of the bitterness that would grow between them when she failed him. Failed to be the wife he needed, just as his mother had failed his father. Dry-eyed, Lira lay staring into the darkness. It reflected the future that lay before her without him.

* * * * *

Having eased out of bed without disturbing Tal, Lira stood in the Hall of the Mother. Fully dressed and ready to leave, she had but one more thing to attend to.

She approached the altar, kneeling before it.

“It was not my choice,” she admonished. “Take it back.” She held out her hand, palm up. Pain and anger sluiced through her. “Take it back! I will not allow you to hurt him.”

Tears filled her eyes. She brought her will to bear, intent on forcing the Orb from her body. Sweat broke out on her forehead as she strained with the effort. Finally, feeling as though her head were about to explode, she forced herself to stop. For the first time in years, Lira wept. Not a simple tear or two, but great tearing sobs that tore at her throat as she rocked with agony.

After a time the tears eased. Lira straightened, “Mother, please,” she whispered, “I don’t want to hurt him. Let him have the kind of wife he deserves. I beg you, please .”

Lira froze. A soft glow filled her palm. She felt the Orb’s protest, disapproval and regret. It emerged and drifted like a feather to land lightly on its accustomed place on the altar. Standing on unsteady legs, Lira felt empty. She let her gaze rest once more upon the Orb.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Thank you for understanding.”

She turned with a wobble and stepped away from the altar. Each subsequent step grew steadier and—with head held high—she left behind the Orb and Tal and her heart.

Chapter Seven

“Do you intend to pout, or do you intend to go after her?”

Tal continued to stare morosely down at his boots. "She made her choice. She doesn't want to be here, or to be mytezza . She doesn't want me." Though he showed no outward emotion, inside, the words made him sick.

Tal had awoken at first light to find Lira gone. Not finding her in his chambers, he'd dressed and gone in search of her, only to learn that she was gone . Taking her horse and all her possessions, she had ridden away, leaving not a word behind, only the Orb. And him.

Galatin continued to prod him. "I thought you were an intelligent man, but I see I was mistaken."

Anger coursing through his veins, Tal whirled to face him. "What would you have of me, Guardian? Must I hear it from her lips? Was her leaving not proof of her feelings? Shall I cut out my heart and hand it to her? So help me, I would if I thought it would make a difference, for Goddess knows, I've no use for it now she's gone."

Tal turned away to stare with unseeing eyes at the garden.

"Talrion," Galatin spoke with soft sympathy, "What do you know of Lira?"

"Beyond the fact that she's wise, funny, honest, compassionate, loving, strong and independent?" Tal shrugged. "Very little I suppose."

Galatin snorted. "It sounds like you know my cousin well. But not as well as you should. Do you think it possible that Lira left because she was afraid?"

"Afraid? Of what? Certainly not me." Tal shook his head. It was inconceivable that Lira held much fear of anything.

"Not afraid of you, afraid for you," Galatin replied.

“Guardian, you speak in riddles that make my head ache. Is plain language beyond you?” Tal retorted.

“Very well, my impatient friend. I think it possible that Lira was afraid she would not be able to make you happy. As a huntress, she is hardly a conventional woman.”

It was Tal’s turn to snort. “Who said I wanted a conventional woman?”

“Did you ever say as much to Lira?” Galatin inquired with a raised brow.

“Of course I didn’t. The subject never came up.” Tal’s eyes were filled with speculation, then growing hope. “Galatin, are you sure?”

“Think about it, High One. You yourself mentioned her independence.”

Tal thought of their conversations, remembering her remark the day they arrived.

“I understand wanting to be accepted for yourself. More than you’ll ever know.”

In that moment, Tal knew Galatin was right. “I’ve got to find her.”

Galatin grinned. “She’ll head for home. Her sister, Sala, is with child. Lira promised she’d return for the birth.”

Tal headed for the door. He’d have supplies gathered and be on his way within the hour.

“Talrion!” Galatin called, “Take this with you.”

Tal turned and caught the pouch Galatin tossed his way. He grinned as he felt the round object inside. “My thanks, Guardian. For everything.”

* * * * *

Tal stared into the fire. He’d made it as far as the Katal River Falls before darkness fell. Having pushed his horse hard, he’d decided to stop at the clearing he and Lira had once shared. His eyes wandered the site, his mind filling with images of her. Cooking the kinti, sharing their meal, talking, laughing, bathing in the river and most of all—making love.

The rustle of undergrowth alerted him to the presence of something. Tal shot to his feet, sword drawn. His horse gave a welcoming whinny as Lira and her mount stepped from the wood.

“May I share your camp, Warrior?” she asked tentatively.

Tal’s tongue released from the roof of his mouth. “You are most welcome, Huntress.”

He followed her movements as she cared for her horse, then approached the fire. Opening her bedroll, she settled herself across the fire from him.

“I have food if you’re hungry,” Tal told her, keeping his eyes on the dancing flames.

“I am not, but I thank you for the offer,” she replied.

Tal felt her eyes on him. He looked up. Recreating their first meeting he questioned, “Where are you bound for, Huntress?”

“Feratil, I have unfinished business there.” Lira followed his lead. “Are you of the Finn Mal clan?”

Tal nodded. "I am. Is there anything I might help you with?"

"Perhaps," she hedged. "Do you know if High Chief Talrion has found atezza yet?"

Tal raised a mocking brow. "I can safely say that Talrion is without encumbrance."

"Do you know your High Chief well?" she asked solemnly.

"We are the best of friends, Huntress," Tal assured her.

"Then perhaps you can answer this question. Do you think Talrion would accept as wife, a woman such as myself? One who has no interest in tending a hearth? Who would rather be out wandering woods such as these?" Lira asked the question with a slight quaver in her voice.

Tal was done playing games. "I would never clip your wings, Lira. I have no desire to chain you to my hearth. Had you but stayed long enough to see, you would know there are plenty in the High Chieftain's residence to take care of such chores." His eyes bored into hers, desperate for a glimpse of her heart. "There are but three things I would ask of you. The first is children, a son to carry on our name and traditions, and a daughter who perhaps might someday carry her mother's bow."

Lira nodded, her throat tight. "That would be acceptable."

Tal felt his heart begin to soar. "Second, when you travel, I would wish to accompany you sometimes. It's good for a High Chief to be in company with one who's not impressed with his title. Keeps him humble."

Lira smiled and nodded her agreement as moisture gleamed in her eyes.

"And lastly," Tal paused and cleared a voice that had gone husky with pent-up emotion. "I would ask that when you travel alone, you stay safe and promise always to return to me. For I love you, Lira. I have

no wish to be without you.”

“Tal,” she whispered, her throat closed with tears. They both rose as Lira circled the fire and threw herself into his waiting arms. “I love you, too. I had to come back. I was so wrong to leave. I’m so sorry, Tal, so sorry I hurt you.” Lira was covering his face with desperate kisses as tears streamed from her eyes.

“Hush, beloved, you are back. That’s all that matters.” He took her lips with his in a kiss that revealed all his pent-up love and longing.

When they were able to pull apart, Tal drew from under his shirt the small pouch that dangled from the waistband of his leathers. He opened the drawstring, dumping the contents into the palm of his hand. The Orb rolled out, its glow dancing and flickering.

“I think it’s happy to see you,” Tal commented with a smile. Taking Lira’s hand, his eyes found and held hers. The love and want visible in his sent a tidal wave of heat charging through her body. “The Orb chose you Lira, but my choice was made before ever it felt your presence. Will you accept me, be mytezza?”

Without hesitation she replied, “With all my heart, Tal.”

Tal placed the Orb in her hand where it blazed gaily, wrapping the two of them in its pearlescent shimmer before it disappeared into her palm with an almost audible sigh of satisfaction and contentment.

Later that night as they lay naked and sated, Lira asked Tal what he had had to do to perform the ritual of seeking.

His laughter rang out as her voice rose indignantly, “The Handmaiden did what to you!?”

About the author:

Having been an avid reader of romance for years, and being possessed of an overactive imagination, Kate decided only recently to try her hand at writing. She discovered that, like reading, writing romance has become addictive. Whether writing about werewolves and otherworldly creatures or contemporary gay/erotic romance, she has found the perfect outlet and is thrilled to be part of the Ellora's Cave family.

Kate lives in a turn-of-the-century house located on three acres in the midst of Indiana farm country. Keeping her company is her family, dogs, and other assorted pets.

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