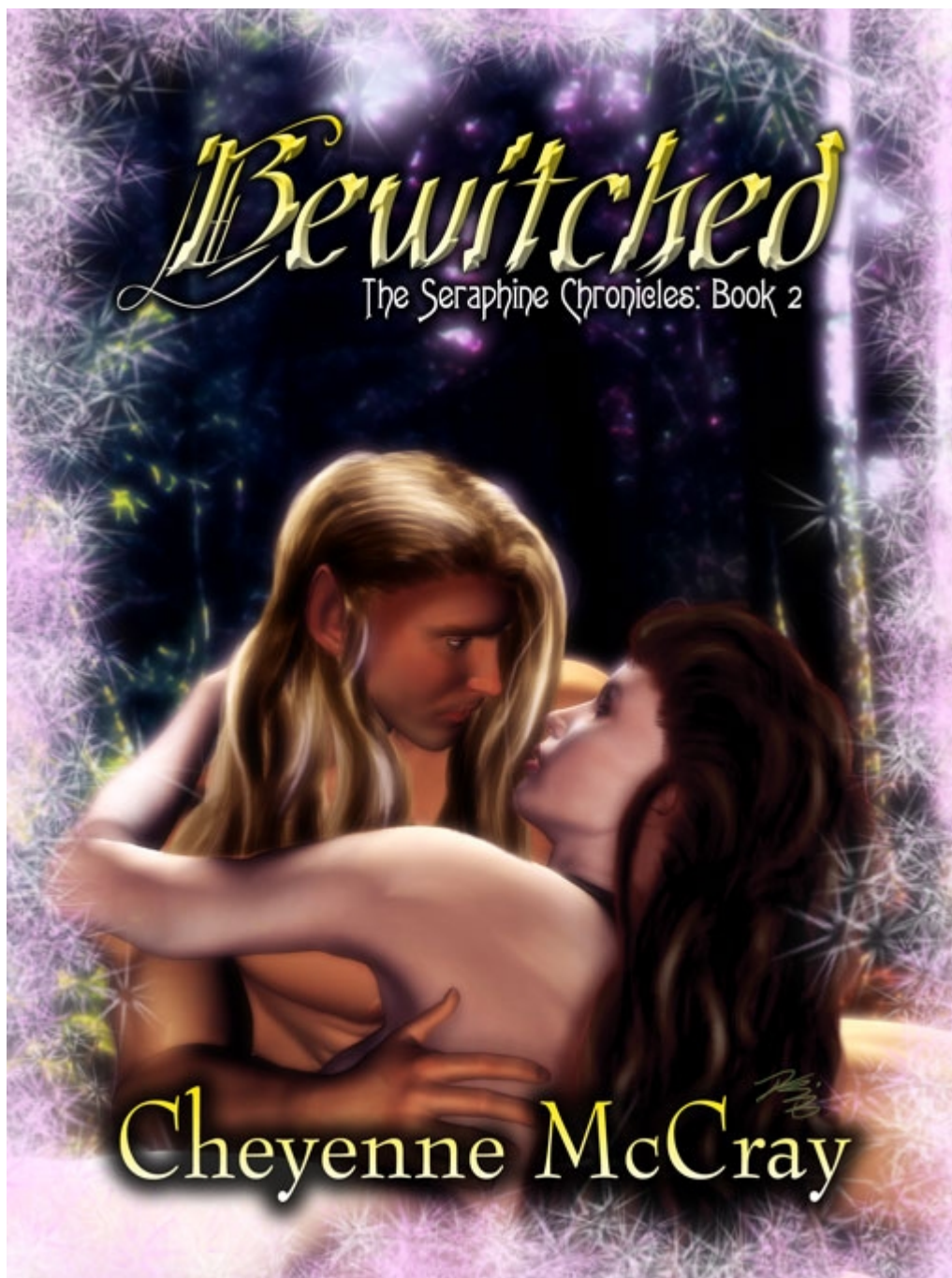




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SERAPHINE CHRONICLES BOOK 2: BEWITCHED

An Ellora's Cave publication written by

CHEYENNEMcCRAY

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. SERAPHINE CHRONICLES BOOK 2: BEWITCHED has been rated NC17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

To Annie Windsor:

Best friend and critique partner in all our fantasy worlds

Let's get wild, child

Fledgling of Nordain, blood hath stolen

Hidden with humans, not forgotten

Dair's hopes doth fade, should those of blood mate

Elvin choice, may avoid such a fate

Chronicles of the Seraphine Elves...XXVIII

Chapter One

He had been watching her for days.

Ranelle had felt his presence, even though she had yet to see him. He was a fleeting shadow, a man who melded with darkness and light.

There, yet not.

The cottage was silent, save for a slight rustling noise in Tierra's bedchamber. In the distance waves crashed against rocks and sand, and the lonely shriek of a nordai echoed through Ranelle's soul. She had always felt a kindred spirit in the nordai, often wishing she could fly as one with the ravens. But even if she could, she would never abandon her *halias*, her heart-sisters Tierra and Liana.

Ranelle slipped on the sparkling *gishla* gown, and it clung to her generous curves. As she dressed, she again tried to reach out with her senses to learn more of the man who had begun to haunt her daydreams as well as her nights. Silken material caressed her nipples and a shiver of excitement trailed her spine. Perhaps he stood in the shadows of the rowan outside her bedroom window, his gaze lingering on her body that was so easily seen through the sheer material of her gown.

While she breathed in the scent of the sea and the sweet perfume of jensai blooms, her thoughts traveled back to just days ago when she had first realized she was being followed. Her senses told her that the man was guarding her. Protecting her. And as long as he was nearby, she would be safe.

A smile curved her lips. Mayhap this would be the night she would meet her fantasy man. In her waking dreams she had seen him, felt him, *touched* him. If her senses were not so highly attuned to the man, if her magic was not so strong, surely she would have thought she had imagined him.

She grabbed her cloak and left her bedchamber. After telling Liana she had an errand to perform and would meet her at the tavern this eve, Ranelle stopped at Tierra's room and peeked in, hoping *herhalia* was feeling better. In all the years they had shared with one another, Tierra had never been ill a day 'til now.

Tierra sprawled on her bed, without even a blanket to cover her naked form. Red tresses shimmered like living flame against the bed sheet, a matching patch of fire at the apex of her thighs. A sheen of perspiration coated her fair skin, and her breasts rose and fell with every breath. Her almond-shaped eyes were closed, her bronze lashes half moons against her cheeks. She stirred and murmured something that sounded like *raven*.

For the briefest flash, Ranelle saw a vision of a dark man between Tierra's pale thighs. A powerful man with a jagged scar across his back and another along one cheek. Ranelle heard Tierra's sensual cries and saw her fingernails digging into the man's shoulders as he thrust inside her.

Ranelle's heart beat faster at the image—but then she blinked and saw only Tierra lying on the bed. With a slight shake of her head, as though to scatter the remnants of the vision, Ranelle moved to Tierra's bedside and whispered, "I am leaving now."

Tierra slowly lifted her eyelids and turned her emerald gaze to Ranelle. Her eyes were unfocused for a moment, as though she was not fully awake. "Such a strange dream," she murmured. "Ravens and winged...creatures."

"Probably the fever disturbing your sleep." Ranelle tried to pull a cover over Tierra, but *herhalia* pushed it away. "Will you be all right?"

Offering a wan smile, Tierra said, "I am fine. Or I shall be once these dreams cease."

Frowning, Ranelle replied, "You will catch your death. At least cover yourself with a light gown if not a blanket."

Tierra shook her head, her fiery hair glimmering on the pillow. "I am much too hot."

"Rest then, sister." Ranelle brushed a stray lock behind Tierra's shell-like ear, catching her scent of honeysuckle musk. "We shall miss you at Nira's this eve."

With a groan, Tierra rolled her eyes. "Ah, but I shall not miss that old goat."

Ranelle laughed. "It is certain you will not." She kissed Tierra's warm cheek and then left the cottage into the gathering darkness.

The moon was full and hung low in the sky. It was a week at best 'til moonchange, when she and her heart-sisters would make their escape from the Sorcerer Zanden's clutches.

Their plan would work. It had to, for all their sakes, but especially for Liana.

Ranelle hurried up the steep path from their seaside home to the cobblestone road that led into the village of Fiorn. To her left was a rolling drop to the shore of the Mairi Sea and its glittering rainbow sands. In the distance, to Ranelle's right, rose the Phoenician Mountains, far beyond the D'euan Forest. It was there that the Nordain, the Sky People, dwelled in the Nordain Kingdom of Phoenicia.

Rocks bit at her feet through the worn soles of her slippers, and she hoped Stefan had not closed the cobbler shop yet so that she could retrieve her new shoes. He knew that by the Sorcerer's orders, Ranelle and her heart-sisters were not allowed to leave their home 'til after dark, and Stefan had promised to keep the shop open.

No doubt Stefan would attempt once again to corner her in his shop, like he had tried before. He was a handsome man with a devilish grin and eyes as blue as the legendary mist of the Wilding Wood. Oft she had considered allowing his advances, curious to experience pleasure with him, but the time had never seemed right—usually because Uba, her former terror of a guardian, had been somewhere nearby.

And now, with the man who had been shadowing her, she had no real desire to find pleasure with anyone but *him*. No matter that she had yet to meet the man.

But she would. *Soon*.

Before Uba had died just weeks ago, Ranelle had been kept a virtual prisoner in the seaside cottage, along with her heart-sisters. The three had been raised by Uba and had been kept under a tight rein. Tierra was somewhat of an imp, a playful, teasing and sexual creature whose spirit had never been dampened, despite Uba's every cruel effort to do so. Gods knew, if Uba hadn't kept her sharp eyes trained on Tierra most constantly, the redhead would have found some way to enjoy true sexual pleasures.

For a moment Ranelle wondered again what her life would have been like, had she not grown up as an orphan, and had been raised by a family who loved her. As a child, she had oft imagined herself as a Princess living in a castle in the clouds. But those days of dreams had long since passed.

And truth be told, she had grown up with the love of her *halias*. They were her heart-sisters, her family, and she could not imagine life without them.

As she walked toward the cobbler's, Ranelle relished the breeze against her cheeks, feeling a sense of freedom now that Uba was gone. Yet the Sorcerer's imminent claiming of the three young women kept at bay any true feelings of liberty.

She let her cloak fall open, allowing the light wind to swirl inside, causing her nipples to harden. Her *gishla* gown sparkled in the moonlight, hugging every curve of her body. She was forced to wear the attire when she danced at Nira's tavern, but it did not bother Ranelle like it did Liana, who hated her own sheer gown. Ranelle loved how the gown sparkled. She had always been drawn to things that glistened and glittered. And she enjoyed knowing that men found her body pleasing.

But she was also thankful for the magic in her dance that kept the barbarians from touching or forcing themselves upon her. Unlike Liana's seer's powers, Ranelle's and Tierra's magical powers were unknown to anyone outside the three of them.

Glancing into the twilight as she walked, Ranelle wondered if the man from the shadows watched her now. She did not feel his presence, but then he was always so silent and fleet—invisible to all but her unusual senses. She was not surprised that neither Liana nor Tierra had noticed him—somehow Ranelle knew that she was more attuned to him than any other being could be.

When she arrived at the cobbler's, Ranelle let herself into the quiet shop through the open door. Lanterns were lit throughout, casting buttery pools of light across the room. The shop's familiar smells of leather, tanning oils and burning tallow washed over her.

"Stefan?" she called out, wondering where the young man was who normally tended the business. Stefan was big and brawny, and Ranelle had always thought him more suited to be a soldier or a farmer than a cobbler.

She heard a rustle and a thump and then feminine laughter.

Intrigued, Ranelle moved silently through the shop to the small hallway that led to the backroom, and then froze in the shadows.

Stefan stood completely naked in the candlelit room, with Vay, one of the serving wenches from the tavern, on her knees before him.

* * * * *

Jalen slipped into the cobbler's, moving into the shadows as he sought his prey.

Like all Elvin males, he was muscular, tall and lithe. He moved with supple grace and easily blended in with his surroundings. If he were to run across an ordinary human, with a mere thought Jalen could erase the encounter from the person's mind.

If Jalen were so careless, which he never was.

The corner of his mouth curved into a smile as he joined with the darkness behind Ranelle. She stood immobile in the hallway, just outside the backroom, her fascinated gaze locked on the couple within.

Jalen couldn't help but find Ranelle lovely, what with her generous smile and quick wit. Her silver eyes usually sparkled with laughter and her mahogany tresses framed her oval features. And her body—large breasts with dark nipples, a slender waist and rounded curves he would enjoy exploring.

Aye, Ranelle was a beautiful, sensual creature, and would easily meld with the world she belonged in...once she learned of it.

For that matter she would fit perfectly into his own, the world of the Seraphine Elves. If they were mated, he would enjoy shaving the *enrli* symbol in the soft hair between her thighs, and painting a matching symbol on her forehead with the sacred dyes. And when he sank his cock into her, he would touch his forehead to hers, their *enrli* joining and enhancing their sexual pleasure.

But it was not to be. Destiny had other plans for them both.

He allowed a sigh to escape as he watched Ranelle's breathing deepen, her arousal growing as she

spied on the man and woman enjoying one another's sexual pleasures.

* * * * *

Ranelle had a perfect side view of Stefan's muscular body. Her mouth watered at the sight of his huge cock. It rose high and thick, and she wondered what it might feel like in her hand. Or in her mouth.

"You are so big, master," Vay's soft voice purred. She knelt before Stefan, her parchment skin pale next to his golden thighs. Vay's blonde locks tumbled to her tiny waist, her small breasts rising high and her nipples pointed.

"Suck my cock, wench," Stefan growled and raked his hand through his long brown hair. "And suck it the way I like it or I will determine a suitable punishment."

"Yes, *master* ." Vay grinned and wrapped her hand around Stefan's thick staff. He caught his breath as she licked the head of his cock and then slid her moist lips down his length.

Ranelle's nipples tightened as she stared transfixed while the serving girl worked Stefan's staff. Vay made small greedy sounds, begging without words for him to come.

"Harder, wench." Stefan buried his fingers in her blonde hair and watched his cock move in and out of her mouth. "Suck harder!"

Vay looked up at him as he thrust into her. His body jerked and he shouted, and Ranelle knew that he was spilling his seed into Vay's mouth.

Ranelle kept back in the shadows and moved her hands to her breasts, rubbing her palms over her taut nipples. She had grown damp between her thighs, and a fierce ache blossomed in her quim. She knew she should leave, but she was too mesmerized and excited by what she was watching.

"You made me come too fast," Stefan said in a menacing voice. "Stand and take your punishment, wench."

"Yes, master." Vay licked his seed from her lips as she stood.

Stefan grabbed her by the waist and bent down. Vay cried out as he took her nipple between his teeth and lightly bit it. She started to grab his muscular arms, but Stefan raised his head and said, "Do not touch me. You must remain motionless and serve your penance." He leaned closer and lapped one of her nipples. "Do you understand, wench?"

Vay groaned as he placed his large hands over her breasts. "Yes."

He squeezed her small mounds. "Yes, what?"

With a gasp she replied, "Yes, master!"

Stefan gave a devilish smile and suckled each of Vay's nipples, his hands roaming her body, but staying clear of her woman's curls.

“Touch me, please,” she begged. “Please, master!”

His muscles rippled as he picked her up by the waist and set her on a small table in the room. “Fondle your breasts, wench,” he ordered. “Spread your legs and let me see your quim.”

Vay obeyed, pulling and twisting her nipples. Stefan knelt between her knees, leaned forward and ran his tongue along the inside of her thighs.

Ranelle barely kept from groaning aloud at the sight of Stefan so close to licking Vay’s pleasure center. Almost without thought, Ranelle moved one hand to the apex of her thighs and stroked her clit through the thin gown.

“Oh, gods,” Vay shrieked. “Taste me, master, please!”

Stefan gripped Vay’s hips tight and buried his face between her thighs.

Faster and faster Ranelle’s fingers worked her own clit through the cloth of her gown as she watched Stefan lick Vay. Ranelle’s knees almost gave out as she reached her climax, and she barely restrained a cry. In the next moment Vay screamed with her own orgasm, her hips bucking against Stefan’s face.

Even though her legs wobbled from the strength of her orgasm, Ranelle started to leave, afraid she would be caught spying. But she paused as Stefan said, “You need more punishment,” and raised himself to stand before the serving girl. Vay looked up at him, her eyes glazed from her climax and her breathing coming fast and shallow.

Vay licked her lips. “What will you do to me, master?”

“I’m going to fuck you, wench.” Stefan picked up Vay and she squealed as he turned her so that he had her bent over the table. “So hard that you’re going to feel my cock at the back of your throat.” He pressed his enormous erection against her smooth and firm backside. “You had better scream if you want any mercy.”

“Yes, master.” Vay pressed back against him. “I want you inside me.”

Ranelle caught her breath as she ran her hands over her own body.

Stefan wrapped his fingers around his cock and stroked Vay’s backside with it. “Beg, wench.”

“Fuck me, master.” Vay rubbed her breasts against the wooden table as she pressed against him. “Fuck me now!”

Stefan grinned and spread her thighs even wider. Vay screamed as he thrust deep inside her. “Yes. Gods, yes!” she cried.

Ranelle lifted the hem of her gown to her waist, this time sliding her fingers into her own wet slit. The thought of the man who had been following her came to mind and she imagined what it might feel like to have his hands on her body while he plunged his hard cock inside her and fucked her ‘til she cried out with her climax.

“Who is your master?” Stefan shouted as he powered in and out of Vay’s wet channel.

“You are.” Vay gripped the edge of the table, her knuckles white from holding on while Stefan bored into her. “You’re my master, Stefan.”

“You’re my fuck.” He gave another savage growl. “Only mine. If another man touches you, I shall be forced to punish you again. Do you understand, wench?”

Vay moaned.

“Answer me!” Stefan commanded and slammed into her even harder.

“Yes, master!” Vay shouted and then cried out as her body shuddered against the table.

Ranelle bit down on her lip, fighting to control her own cry as she reached her climax. Stefan pulled his cock out of Vay and grabbed it with his hand, milking the white fluid onto the serving girl’s buttocks.

Still flushed and lightheaded from her orgasm, Ranelle barely had the presence of mind to let her gown drop. She backed away from the small hallway to the front of the store, and then out the door into the moonlit night.

The new slippers could certainly wait ‘til tomorrow.

* * * * *

Jalen smiled as he eased from the shadows of the cobbler’s and followed Ranelle through Fiorn’s darkened streets. When she had brushed past him, he’d caught her exotic scent of spice and vanilla, mingling with the smell of her sex, causing a hunger deep within him.

The bow slung over his shoulder and its quiver of arrows did not so much as rustle as the Elvin warrior moved. His footsteps were not even a breath of sound as he silently trailed his prey. After watching Ranelle pleasure herself, his cock throbbed, but he had no time for release.

He watched Ranelle meet up with the Tanzinite maid, not far from the tavern. From the stables behind the tavern came a snort and whicker from Aric’s stallion, followed by an answering howl from the wolf Toen, also known as the Overseer.

Aric, Jalen’s Nordain brother-at-arms, was in raven form atop the tavern’s roof. The King of the Nordain would be concerned that Jalen had not made contact, but there was naught to be done about it.

Jalen had his own orders from the Seraphine Council, and although he did not enjoy keeping secrets from Aric, in this regard he answered to a higher power. To Queen Yanea and to the goddess herself. It was important to the future of all the beings of Dair that Aric alone rescue Liana and spirit her away.

It had fallen upon Jalen to safeguard Ranelle and for now to keep her identity from Aric. If Aric knew that the *gishla* was his sister who had been missing since she was a toddler, he might forsake the Tanzinite maid in order to save Ranelle.

And all could be lost.

The Council had deemed it necessary that Aric’s brother Renn return to Phoenicia, yet they had failed to

inform Aric, for reasons not given to Jalen. Ranelle was Renn's sister, too, and Jalen wondered why the young Nordain male had not been chosen to retrieve her.

Jalen narrowed his gaze as he silently followed Ranelle and the Tanzinite maid. More was at work here, and more at stake than even he was aware of.

Reaching out with his mind and his hearing, Jalen listened to their conversation and frowned.

I—we must all go now, Liana told Ranelle in thought.

“A vision?” Ranelle asked aloud.

The Tanzinite maid hesitated. *No...more a feeling* .

Jalen could sense Ranelle's incredulity as she responded, “*A feeling ?*”

Something is watching us, *halia*. The Tanzinite maid paused as she glanced to the sky. *We best get inside. Now!*

The pair slipped into the noisy din of the tavern and Jalen's gaze moved to the rooftop where he could see Aric's raven form outlined in the moonlight, and the slight glitter of the ruby in his dagger. The women could have been aware of Aric's or Jalen's presence, but his senses told him otherwise—

The irani were approaching.

Just as Yanea had forewarned.

* * * * *

Ranelle danced atop the platform in the center of the room, her body swaying and hips undulating in an erotic rhythm. Men pressed close, the malodor of their sweat, mixed with the smell of sour ale, almost unbearable. She could feel heat from their bodies as they shouted and reached for her.

“Take it all off, wench,” one man called out.

“I gotta cock fer ya to suck on,” another man yelled. “I'll wager yer a good fuck.”

Ranelle let their shouts slide past her ears as always, and instead concentrated on working the magic of her dance that kept her safe. As long as she retained her focus, no man would think to act upon his carnal desires and actually touch her without her consent.

While she danced, she watched a raven-headed man thread his way through the crowd toward Liana, where she stood as she told fortunes. A vision flashed through Ranelle's mind of Liana naked and astride the man, impaling herself on his enormous cock and fucking him.

In that instant, Ranelle's senses told her that without a doubt Liana would be safe with the dark stranger. He would never allow her to be harmed. A shudder of premonition gripped Ranelle, and she knew with absolute certainty that Liana would need the man's help.

Soon.

Ranelle frowned as the dark haired man turned on his heel and strode back out the tavern door. Why had he left?

A hand on Ranelle's ankle startled her from her thoughts and dragged her attention to the man at her feet. She had allowed her concentration to waver and Stefan had seized the moment to break through her defenses. Now dressed in a leather tunic and breeches, he grinned up at her as she tried to continue her dance.

"Let go, Stefan," Ranelle said as she threw her mahogany curls over her shoulder.

"You forgot your slippers at my shop." Stefan eased his hand from his ankle to her knee, laughter in his blue eyes. "Now why would you do that when you had me keep the shop open for you this eve?"

Ranelle's cheeks burned as she recalled the image of Stefan's cock sliding inside Vay, and the serving girl's cries as she begged him to fuck her.

Leaning closer, Stefan moved his hand up Ranelle's leg to the inside of her thigh. His palm was hot against her flesh, and so close to her mound that she could scarcely think much less concentrate on her magic.

"Next time," he said as he stroked her thigh, "you should join us." He gave her a sinful grin. "I'd like naught more than to fuck you and Vay both at the same time."

Ranelle went rigid with mortification. *He knew*. The whole time he had planned for her to walk in on him and Vay, and he had enjoyed knowing Ranelle was watching them.

"I'll even let you call me master." He brushed his fingertips against the curls along her slit.

Fury rose up in Ranelle and warmth spiraled inside her, shooting through her limbs as she clenched her fists. "You—you *bastard*!"

Stefan yanked his hand away from her as though he had been burned, a strange expression coming over his face. Just as Ranelle brought her bare foot back, intent on kicking the man's teeth in, a scream shattered the noise of the tavern.

Liana.

The room went silent as all attention was riveted on her. Ranelle held her breath while she watched the raven-headed man rush back into the tavern, trying to force his way through the crowd toward Liana.

"The Sorcerer's devils!" shouted a woman. "They be coming for us!"

Everything seemed to slow down to Ranelle, even as chaos erupted in the tavern and irani shrieks filled the air. Her first instinct was to go to Liana, but Ranelle's senses told her that *herhalia* was safe with the dark stranger, and that Liana would escape.

An even stronger emotion seared Ranelle as flames spread through the room and irani landed on the rooftop—

The Sorcerer had come early for her and her *aliases* .

Ranelle knees threatened to give out and she coughed as her lungs filled with smoke. Before she had the chance to scramble down from the platform, strong arms grabbed her legs and flung her over a massive shoulder.

Chapter Two

Ranelle fought her rising panic as she hung over the muscled shoulder of the man who had grabbed her from the dancing platform. As her rescuer worked his way through the tavern's screaming mob, she coughed from the smoke, struggling to breathe. Her hair covered her face, her eyes burned and watered, and she could scarce think in all the commotion.

The heat of the fire grew more intense, but the man slipped through unseen gaps in the crowd, as silent and swift as a spirit in the mist. Ranelle's nose was pressed against his tunic, and even through the acrid stench of smoke she caught his masculine smell along with the scent of pine and forest breezes. His body felt warm and solid against her own softness, and despite the terror of the fire she felt safe—that she could trust this man.

Without a doubt, Ranelle knew this was the man who had been watching her.

Thumps on the tavern rooftop jarred Ranelle, sending new bursts of fear through her. The Sorcerer's beasts were so close they might pluck her through holes they now tore in the ceiling and carry her away. Irani shrieks split the night as Ranelle and the man neared the door of the tavern. His hold around her hips grew tighter yet, as though he had heard her frightened thoughts.

The man plunged out of the tavern and into the chaotic night. Ranelle breathed in the clear air and with one hand shoved her hair from her eyes, trying to see what was happening. Flames from the burning tavern illuminated the village—and a winged beast heading straight at them.

“Watch out!” Ranelle screamed.

Before the words were even out of her mouth, the man had crouched in a fluid motion, dodging the flying creature. In a flash he set her on the ground several feet from the tavern. “Stay,” he commanded, his sapphire eyes seizing her, his voice deep and captivating.

For a moment Ranelle remained motionless, mesmerized by the masculine beauty of the man as he slid his bow from his shoulder, nocked a feathered arrow into it, and pointed it toward the oncoming irani. His cheekbones were high, his jaw strong and his lips firm. Golden hair flowed down his back, and his sleeveless tunic displayed powerful biceps that rippled as he drew the bow in a movement so smooth that it appeared effortless.

His aim was true and the beast shrieked and tumbled to the ground. He nocked another arrow to his

bow as more winged creatures circled the tavern and flew toward them, as though aware of Ranelle's presence.

The realization snapped Ranelle from her fascination with her rescuer. She was putting him in danger by being there.

She had to sneak away without the beasts seeing her. Had to get to the cottage to warn Tierra.

Blocking her thoughts and mind with her tightest control, Ranelle eased to her feet and slipped into a darkened alleyway. Worn cobblestones were rough beneath her bare feet as she headed down the road, a cool breeze chilling her through her thin gown. She took great gulps of fresh air, her heart pounding as she hurried and tried to stay out of the moonlight and in the shadows as long as she could.

When she could no longer remain in the protection of the darkened village streets, she began to run, knowing that she could now be clearly seen in the moonlit night. In no time she reached the path to their seaside cottage where sharp rocks bit into her tender soles. Mindless of the pain, Ranelle ran faster, her breasts bouncing and her feet flying.

Screams and shouts still came from the village, but they were distant now, almost drowned out by the sound of waves crashing against the shore below the path. She hoped she had been right about the dark stranger she had seen near Liana, and prayed the man had rescued her *halia* and would ensure her safety.

Ranelle wiped the back of her hand against her soot-covered cheek and tried to quell the fear surging through her soul.

Almost to the cottage. Almost to Tierra.

An irani shriek came from behind Ranelle, so close it chilled her very marrow.

Terror flooded her in icy wave after icy wave. She paused to look over her shoulder—

Only to see one of the winged beasts behind her.

Oh gods. What had she been thinking? She'd led the irani straight toward Tierra.

Ranelle screamed and dodged the creature.

Ground gave from beneath her feet.

Another scream tore from her throat as she tumbled down the steep hillside toward the shore below. Dirt and sand filled her mouth as she fought to grab onto anything to slow her descent.

Everything slid by in a blur. Clothing ripped. Her skin burned.

For an instant she was airborne—almost as though she was flying—and then she slammed onto the sand, flat on her back. She couldn't breathe—the very air knocked from her lungs.

Stunned, she lay on the sand, her body aching and burning. But as she saw the irani circling above, a burst of fear gave her the strength to move. As she spit sand and dirt from her mouth, Ranelle scrambled to her feet. She had to get out of the open—but to where?

The irani shrieked again, spurring Ranelle forward. Her feet sank into sand as she ran, the shore's rainbow hues glittering in the moonlight. Wind lifted her hair and rushed through the tears in her clothing. Even in her panic, she realized her gown had been shredded in the fall.

Skin on her back began to crawl and she chanced a glance over her shoulder.

The beast was mere feet from her, its talons outstretched.

Ranelle screamed and stumbled over a chunk of driftwood.

Claws clamped around her shoulders and lifted her into the air.

* * * * *

Jalen dispatched the last of the irani bastards, slung his bow over his shoulder and turned to find Ranelle—*gone*.

Shock rendered him near speechless. Had she ignored his command? The power in his voice had never failed him before.

"Goddess bless," he muttered as he searched the throng of villagers with his senses. How had she vanished without his knowledge? Even if someone had plucked her from the street, he should have known instantly.

The shriek of an irani advancing on its prey echoed from outside Fiorn, followed by a feminine scream. Jalen's blood heated.

Ranelle.

He dodged through the crowded village streets on feet as swift and silent as the wind.

Jalen wasted no time chastising himself for his failure, instead concentrating on reaching Ranelle before the irani did. In a matter of moments he arrived at the path to the women's cottage.

His heart near ceased to beat.

The irani had already snatched Ranelle from the shore. It held her tight in its claws and was bearing her toward the Sorcerer's fortress. The loathsome beast was too high in the air for Jalen to risk shooting down without the chance that the maiden would fall to her death.

Pain wrenched his chest—a pain unlike any he had felt before. By the goddess's gifts, why did this defeat tear at him so? Had Ranelle somehow bewitched him?

A light sweat broke out on his golden skin, despite the night's chill. Jalen clenched and unclenched his fists, sucking in the sea's briny air and trying to clear his thoughts as he watched Ranelle's and the irani's forms grow further away. The confusion that clouded Jalen's senses was alien to him, and he sought to comprehend its meaning with every fiber of his being.

The *enrli* symbol at his forehead and the one above his cock flared with sudden heat.

Blood rushed through his head as he understood.

Ranelle was his heartmate.

And he had just allowed the Sorcerer to capture her.

* * * * *

A steady dripping sound echoed in Ranelle's mind. Her head throbbed and her body ached as she blinked and attempted to place the sound. She couldn't hear the ocean, or the sounds of her *halias* stirring in their cottage.

Dark—everything was so dark. Surely she must be dreaming. In this nightmare she was shackled, her hands high above her head, her legs spread wide.

As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, walls came into focus. Walls made of crumbling stone and moss. And in the midst of the stone was a door. A wooden door with iron bars across a small window. She glanced at her clothing to see her normally sparkling *gishla* gown filthy and torn, exposing her breasts and almost falling from her body.

Ranelle shook her head, trying to shatter the nightmare, but the motion only made the throb in her head increase to a fierce pounding. The dripping noise continued, each drop like hammer against stone to her aching head. A stench near overwhelmed her senses, the malodor of human waste and rotting food, and smoke on her clothing. Her stomach churned and she fought against the bile rising in her throat.

A flicker of remembrance came to her—she had been running from...an irani.

Her skin chilled and her heart moved to her throat as the memory returned—the beast's talons clamping onto her shoulders, snatching her up, and carrying her to Zanden's fortress.

Ah, gods. Ranelle sagged against her bonds. The heavy chains rattled in the eerie silence, the cold metal cutting into her soft flesh.

The sound of boots against stone rang out, and Ranelle's attention snapped toward the noise. The lump in her throat grew larger and her limbs trembled as she tried to straighten and prepare to face whoever—or whatever—might come through the door.

Light glowed outside her prison, becoming stronger and stronger as the boot steps came closer and then stopped before her door. A shadow wavered, followed by a rattle and a thump, and then hinges creaked as the door swung slowly outward.

Ranelle held her breath as a shadowy form stepped into the room...a large form, most certainly a man. She blinked against the light, unable to make out the man's features. A harsh scent, like burnt sugar, stung her nose as he settled the torch in a wall bracket and then turned to her. The stench was somehow familiar...

She tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry. The man gave her a sardonic smile, and she saw that he would easily be considered handsome if not for the evil glint in his black eyes. Dark hair reached his

shoulders and he was clothed from head to toe in black leather.

The man gave a soft laugh. "How you have grown, little magpie."

Magpie? Ranelle's eyes widened as she sought to make sense of what he had said. The name sounded almost familiar, as though a tiny part of her memory recognized it. "Who are you?" she asked, her words dry and rasping.

He gave an arrogant smile. "Most people call me Zanden."

A low moan escaped Ranelle's lips, the ache in her head increasing.

The Sorcerer.

With a smirk he stepped closer and Ranelle fought to keep from flinching. His sickening burnt sugar odor almost caused her to gag. She gasped as he reached up, caressed her exposed breast and ran his thumb over her nipple, and it hardened in response.

Mortified from her body's reaction, Ranelle tried to draw away, but could not so much as move as tight as her bonds were. "S-stop," she said, heat rushing to her face.

He chuckled as he came even closer, brought his free hand to her other breast, and stroked both her nipples. "Ah, but you seem desperate for attention. Stop? Are you certain?"

Revulsion flooded her, so intense it radiated from her very being. She had to make him stop. But how could she, without her dance?

A flash of memory came to her, of her anger with Stefan and him snatching his hand away.

Perhaps she did not need her dance after all.

Using all her focus, she called upon her magic, hoping it would work even though she had no way to move. The power stirred within her chest, spiraling into a tight knot 'til she released it, allowing it to flow through her body in a burst of heat.

The Sorcerer's hands stilled on her breasts and he frowned. Ranelle struggled to maintain her concentration while blocking her mind to him, trying to force the beast to release her.

Zanden's eyes narrowed. Ranelle almost went limp with relief as he stepped back, dropping his arms to his sides. "Your thoughts... why am I blind to you?" he murmured. "You don't have your mother's powers... yet the time draws near."

Ranelle swallowed, hard. "Mother's powers?"

"Later." The Sorcerer gave a slight shake of his head, his ebony hair brushing his shoulders. "Where is my destined mate? What do you know of the Tanzinite maiden?"

With effort, Ranelle worked to keep her focus while continuing to mask her thoughts. "I have no knowledge of where Liana might be."

"And the redheaded wench?" Zanden grated his teeth, loud enough for Ranelle to hear.

A flare of relief went through Ranelle at the knowledge that neither of her *halias* had been captured. She raised her chin and glared at the Sorcerer. "Even if I knew where either of my heart-sisters were, I would *never* tell you."

To her surprise, the Sorcerer smiled—yet it wasn't a pleasant expression. "It shall be a pleasure to tame you, little magpie."

He raised his hand and made a pinching gesture in the air. Pain shot through Ranelle's breast, as though cruel fingers had twisted her nipple. With a gasp, she pulled back against her bonds.

Zanden chuckled and grabbed the torch from its bracket. "Sleep well." In the next moment he vanished through the doorway, the door closing behind him with an unseen force. A grating noise told her the door had been locked from the outside. The room grew darker as the torchlight faded, the Sorcerer's boot steps growing fainter as he strode away.

For one moment she wondered if she should have stayed near the golden-haired man who had been following her, *protecting* her, and who had saved her from the fire. Perhaps she had been foolish to try to reach Tierra on her own. But Ranelle knew she would do it again.

Only the next time she would run faster. The next time she would better shield her mind so that the irani could not follow her.

Darkness became complete in her cell, and the cold reality of her situation closed in on her. Clenching her eyes tight, Ranelle willed away the tears that pricked the back of her eyes and threatened to overcome her.

By all the gods and their mothers, she *would not* cry.

Somehow, someday, she would escape.

* * * * *

The flap of wings and the soft call of the nordai alerted Jalen to Toen's approach. Within moments the rare white raven transformed into his usual form of a white wolf, coming to rest at Jalen's boots.

Jalen gave a quick nod to the Overseer and began jogging down the sandy shore toward Zanden's fortress, his bow and quiver bouncing against his back. The wolf easily kept pace, loping at Jalen's heels.

Aric sent you? Jalen asked Toen in thought.

Aye, the Overseer responded, his vivid blue eyes meeting Jalen's as they went. *The King has the Tanzinite maid and is en route to the Bewitching Pool. If all goes as Yanea foretold, King Aric shall be taking Liana to Seraphine.*

'Tis good. Jalen's boots barely made an imprint in the sand as he ran. His gaze constantly searched the horizon, his senses seeking signs of anything out of the norm in the moonlit night. Waves crashed against the shore, the thrum of the Mairi Sea in tune with the beating of his heart.

I will assist you in your quest to retrieve the Nordain maid, Toen told Jalen. *It is best that the King be alone with the Tanzinite.*

You have my gratitude. Without his mention of it, Jalen had no doubt that Toen would somehow know that Ranelle was Jalen's heartmate. The Overseer seemed to have knowledge of all that transpired, and was always where he was most needed.

Jalen pressed forward. Even running at his top speed, it would be a day at best before he reached Zanden's fortress, more likely two. Unfortunately he could not fly as the Nordain, and he would be forced to scale the sheer rock surrounding the Sorcerer's realm.

He would retrieve Ranelle and take her with him to Seraphine.

No matter the cost or the consequences.

* * * * *

The man smiled as he brushed his lips against Ranelle's. So soft and sensual. When he pulled away, a symbol at his forehead flared and glittered a deep sapphire, the color matching the blue of his eyes. His scent of earth and pine enveloped her as he held her in his powerful arms.

She slid her hands into his golden hair, the feel of it like silk against her fingertips. As she pulled his head down, she reached up and pressed her mouth to his. Only this time the kiss was frantic, urgent, fueled by her incredible need for him. . .

A gentle suction on her nipple caused Ranelle to stir from her dream. She was lying on her back in a bed, and her body felt heavy, weighted down. But at the same time it was as though she floated on a cloud, its softness surrounding her like a cocoon. Wetness and warmth on each of her nipples brought them to peak, and an ache moistened the area between her thighs.

Ranelle moaned as she fought the hazy drugged feeling, and with effort struggled to open her eyes. *So heavy*. She could not move, yet wanton feelings stirred within, her body growing incredibly aroused.

Don't fight it. It's a dream. An erotic dream.

Sweet scents, like jasmine and brandy, surrounded Ranelle. The sucking sensation on her nipples increased and then hands began stroking her shoulders, her belly, her hips. A light pressure forced her thighs apart, and she gasped as something stroked her clit—*like a tongue*.

And in that instant she realized it was no dream.

With everything she had, Ranelle forced her eyes opened.

Through her blurred vision, she saw two naked women sucking her nipples. A third nude woman was between Ranelle's thighs, and then she realized her own clothing was gone.

Who are these women? Where am I?

Ranelle's mind was blank, as though her memories were erased, and she could barely remember her

own name. Her mouth and throat were so dry that she couldn't speak, her mouth opening and closing like a fish in the Mairi Sea.

Yet somehow she knew this wasn't right. She should not be here with these women. Her instincts told her to fight, but those same instincts told her she had been drugged and there was naught she could do to stop them.

"What..." Ranelle finally got out, but then she moaned and arched her back off the bed as the woman between her thighs licked harder at her clit.

"The maiden awakes." A beautiful blonde smiled as she lapped Ranelle's nipple and stroked her body.

"No—I—" Ranelle could not fight the sensations building in her, anymore than she could raise her heavy limbs.

"Shhh, Ranelle," murmured another blonde who sucked Ranelle's other nipple. "Enjoy."

Tighter and tighter the feeling wound inside Ranelle. A vision of a golden-haired man filled her mind. She could see him sliding between her thighs, and could feel his large cock as he thrust in to her and fucked her again and again.

Ranelle's orgasm exploded within her, and she cried out. Bright flashes of light sparkled behind her eyes as she shuddered with wave after wave of her climax. Blood rushed in her head, making her dizzy with its intensity.

The women giggled and drew Ranelle up in the massive bed. "Come, Ranelle," said the dark-skinned brunette who had brought Ranelle to orgasm. "It is time for your bath."

Before she knew what was happening, they had her out of bed and were helping her toward a sunken bath in the corner of the enormous room. Ranelle's mind spun and her limbs were so weak she could scarce walk, much less pull away.

As the laughing women coaxed her to the bath, Ranelle tried to determine where she was. Her thoughts were clouded, as though something blocked her memories.

They managed to get her down the stone steps and onto a bench in the warm water that reached her nipples. Between the drug weighting her body and the orgasm, Ranelle couldn't help but relax, melting into the heat of the bath as the three women laughed and splashed in the water.

The bath filled with bubbles as the women began scrubbing Ranelle's body and hair with a cleansing plant and a soap that smelled of sandalwood. Slowly her mind and body began to return to normal, the drugged haze lifting from her consciousness, yet her memories remained tucked away from her grasp. The three women chatted so much that Ranelle couldn't begin to get a word in to ask where she was.

"I'm Cind," one of the blondes said as she finished washing Ranelle's hair. She scooted onto the bench beside Ranelle. Cind had the largest breasts Ranelle had ever seen.

What would it feel like to touch them? Ranelle's errant thought shocked her. Even though she had not regained her memories, she knew instinctively she had never touched another woman's breasts... although she had seen them.

The smaller-breasted blonde moved to Ranelle's other side. "My name's Ritt." She pointed to the sultry-eyed brunette. "She's Tiali." Ritt rolled her eyes. "Right now she's Z's favorite fuck."

Tiali smiled and licked her bottom lip as her sensual gaze focused on Ranelle. A swell of heat washed over her at the memory of what Tiali had recently done with that tongue.

"I bet your quim tastes sweet." Cind's green eyes glittered as she cupped Ranelle's breast in one hand and flicked her nipple, causing it to bead at once.

Ranelle's throat worked and she pulled away, only to have Ritt stroke her other breast. "It's my turn to taste the maid." Ritt pouted.

Cind shook her blonde head so hard her breasts swayed. "It's *my* turn."

"No." The word came out of Ranelle so loudly that the women stopped and stared at her. "I—I need to know what is going on." Her voice grew stronger as she spoke. "Where am I? And who *are* you people?"

"Good morning, magpie." A masculine voice interrupted, the smell of burnt sugar filling the room.

Chills shot through Ranelle as she turned to meet the man's black gaze, and her heart dropped.

Zanden.

Memories flooded her, almost overwhelming her in their intensity. Her heart-sisters. The irani spiriting her away. The Sorcerer coming to her dungeon cell and fondling her.

And the complete *wrongness* of his callous touch.

Once again, his smell triggered something in her memories. Something she couldn't quite grasp.

The three women squealed with delight at the Sorcerer's presence. They climbed out of the bath and ran to Zanden's side, their breasts bouncing and naked, wet skin glistening in the room's soft light.

A smile flittered across the Sorcerer's face when Ranelle lowered herself in the water, covering herself in the bubbles, as though that might hide her nakedness from him.

"You enjoyed my wench's talents." Zanden stepped closer, and Ranelle flinched as he crouched beside the bath and added, "Time to experience mine."

Chapter Three

At the base of the cliffs below the Sorcerer's fortress, Jalen melted into the shadows and waited for the

irani to circle past. It was early morning, the sun just warming the coast of the Mairi Sea, and a light wind had kicked up. The Elvin warrior and Toen the Overseer had been traveling two nights and a day, and planned to reach the fortress by this eve.

When the irani vanished from sight, Toen took flight as a white nordai to scout the skies and the fortress. *The sky and her heart are yours, my brother*, he told Jalen as he vanished over the precipice.

May the goddess be with you, Jalen returned.

His gaze turned to the spikes thrusting from the perimeter of the fortress. From Jalen's position at the base of the cliff, an ordinary man would not see the shriveled heads of Zanden's betrayers speared upon the many spikes.

With little thought to his own safety, he began scaling the cliff, confident in his ability to reach the top without mishap. The task would be far more difficult once he rescued Ranelle and had to descend the sheer wall carrying her weight.

His muscles flexed as he climbed, one handhold and one foothold at a time. Sharp rocks dug into Jalen's palms and through the soles of his soft boots, yet the pain was naught more than a minor discomfort. The air smelled of the ocean, but it was tainted with the potent stench of evil emanating from Zanden's realm.

While one part of him concentrated on moving stealthily up the cliff, the other part of Jalen's thoughts focused on Ranelle and devising a plan to retrieve her from the Sorcerer's grasp. Jalen could not help but think of the dark-haired beauty whose presence had called to him in both a primal and spiritual way. Yet how was it that he had not recognized her as his heartmate 'til she had been snatched from his protection?

With his highly attuned senses, Jalen felt the approach of another irani as it circled the fortress on its patrol. The Elvin warrior pressed himself close to the cliff side, his muscles straining with the effort to meld as one with the rock.

As he waited for the irani to pass, Jalen's thoughts turned to Ranelle and the danger she now faced. If the prophecy in the Chronicles held true, Zanden planned to mate with her—no matter that she was of his own blood.

Or perhaps because of it.

It took more effort than he was accustomed to, but Jalen forced down the heat in his gut at the thought of the Sorcerer touching such a loving soul as Ranelle. The fact that she was Jalen's heartmate made the battle for control over his emotions far more difficult than normal.

When the irani vanished from sight, Jalen again began climbing the cliff. Wind buffeted him, as though testing his abilities and his determination. He pressed on, stirring nary a loose stone. His intense desire to retrieve the maid before the Sorcerer defiled her gave him strength and energy beyond those that were inherent in his Elvin blood.

Jalen did not question the goddess's wisdom in granting him a heartmate not of his own species. Nor did doubt enter his mind on the outcome of his quest—he would retrieve Ranelle and return to Seraphine with her at his side. The fact that he would be the first Elvin male to mate with a Nordain was certain to cause a stir within the Council, but it mattered not.

Damn the consequences, Ranelle would be his.

* * * * *

Don't touch me, don't touch me, don't touch me! The chant sang through Ranelle's mind as she stared at the Sorcerer who crouched beside the bathing tub. Beneath the bubbles she moved her hands in a rhythmic motion, adding to the strength of the magic burning in her breast.

As she released the power, Zanden cocked his head and frowned. The women at his side stopped giggling and fawning over the Sorcerer, puzzled looks crossing their beautiful faces.

Ranelle's heart raced, but she didn't dare stop focusing on her magic.

"Not yet," Zanden murmured, as though to himself. "But soon, I will possess you. All of you, my lovely Ranelle."

The calm and certainty in his voice sent chills through Ranelle, almost causing her to falter in her concentration.

"Get the wench out of the bath." Zanden stood and reached for Tiali, caressing her taut nipples, his large hand pale against her dark skin that was still wet from the bath. "Prepare her to sup with me this eve."

He lowered his head and kissed the brunette, running his tongue along her lips and then delving inside. "I can taste her essence on you," he murmured as he raised his head, and Tiali smiled.

Revulsion slammed into Ranelle, so forceful that she all but forgot to continue working her magic. Zanden turned his black gaze on her as she renewed the chant in her mind and focused on keeping him at bay. Something in the back of her consciousness told her that her disgust stemmed from more than him being the Sorcerer, but the knowledge was held just outside her grasp.

And she knew with everything inside her that she had to escape him as soon as possible.

Tiali moaned while Zanden licked each of her nipples with long strokes of his tongue and slid his hand between her thighs and into her slit. Cind and Ritt stood to each side of the Sorcerer and rubbed his cock through his breeches. He didn't seem to mind that they were both still dripping from their baths.

"Allow me to suck your cock," Cind begged as she pressed her large breasts against Zanden's shoulder.

Ritt glared at Cind. "It's *my* turn to drink his seed."

Zanden withdrew his fingers from Tiali's wetness, lifted his head from her breasts, and backed away, causing her to give a frustrated whimper. "On your knees, Cind," he commanded. When she complied, he said, "Finish Tiali's pleasure. Then you may assist her in preparing the maid for me."

With a satisfied smile, Cind buried her face between Tiali's thighs and licked her clit while Ritt fondled and suckled Tiali's nipples.

The Sorcerer paused beside the bath, his gaze holding Ranelle's. "I shall be the first and only man to touch you." He raised his hand and licked each of the fingers that had stroked Tiali, and then murmured,

“Yes. This eve I shall feast on you, my little magpie.”

Ranelle’s heart thundered in her ears as she watched Zanden stride toward a door, leaving the malodor of burnt sugar in his wake. He paused before the entrance and muttered a word beneath his breath. It silently eased open and he left the chamber. The door made no sound as it closed behind him, and Ranelle realized it must be magically locked. Perhaps she could find some way to make her escape through it.

“Harder!” Tiali cried, drawing Ranelle’s attention. “Suck me harder!”

An odd fascination came over Ranelle as she watched Cind dig her fingernails into Tiali’s buttocks and lick her clit. Ritt made hungry mewling sounds as she sucked Tiali’s nipples while caressing her own clit. Tiali’s head was thrown back, her eyes closed as she clenched her hands in Ritt’s hair and moaned.

Ranelle could not help but watch as Tiali’s body trembled and perspiration broke out upon her dark skin. The woman’s eyes flew open and she screamed as her body shuddered and vibrated with her orgasm. Ritt cried out with her own climax only moments later.

Dropping her gaze to the bath, Ranelle realized the water had gone tepid, and goose bumps had erupted on her skin. Smells of sex and jasmine surrounded her, mingling with the sandalwood scent of the cleansing gel. She didn’t want to be aroused at that moment, but the erotic scene caused her breasts to ache and a tingling between her thighs.

Hands grabbed her wrists and Ranelle gasped as Ritt and Cind pulled her from the bath.

“You will come to love our master, as we do,” Tiali said as Ranelle stepped onto the flagstones.

Ranelle shivered as the cool air met her chilled skin. “I think not.”

“Zanden is such an incredible fuck.” Tiali began drying Ranelle with a soft towel. “His touch, his mouth, his massive cock—there is no lover like the Sorcerer on all of Dair.”

“I can dry myself.” Ranelle backed up from Tiali, but stumbled into Cind.

The three women giggled and began fondling Ranelle, caressing her breasts, belly and thighs.

“It is my turn to taste the maid,” Ritt said as she dropped to her knees, and Tiali captured Ranelle’s nipple in her mouth.

“No,” Ranelle insisted as she tried to pull away, but they only laughed as though she hadn’t meant what she had said.

Ranelle clenched her teeth and called upon her magic. Power blossomed inside her, growing greater and greater in its intensity. Warmth poured through her limbs as she released the spell.

The trio froze and looked at Ranelle, confusion upon their faces.

A thought occurred to Ranelle at that same moment—if she could control these women enough to make them stop touching her, could she use her magic to command them in different ways? Perhaps get them to help her escape?

“I do not think the maid deserves pleasure,” Ritt muttered as she rose to her feet, glaring at Ranelle.

Tiali slid her mouth from Ranelle’s nipple and backed away. The woman narrowed her gaze, studying Ranelle, as though she knew what Ranelle had done.

“It is certain she is not worthy of our master’s cock,” Cind said with a scowl.

“Nevertheless,” Ranelle began as she tried to keep her voice from wavering, “once Zanden takes me to his bed, he will be finished with all of you.”

Ritt clenched her fists. “You lie!”

“He would never discard us,” Cind said, her blue eyes flaming, “for the likes of you.”

Tiali folded her arms, cocked her head, and continued staring at Ranelle.

Swallowing hard, Ranelle focused on letting the magic ease from her body, lending strength to her words. “I do not wish for this. But I am a Seer and I know this will come to pass unless you help me.”

“How?” Tiali raised a delicate eyebrow as she finally spoke. “He would behead each of us if he learned we dared to defy him. Our heads would be mounted outside with the rest of the traitors.”

Even as Ranelle’s gut churned at the mental image of Tiali’s words, the slight glimmer of hope grew stronger within Ranelle’s breast, enhancing her power. “Do you have any of the elixir you used to drug me?”

Tiali nodded, her full lips pursed in consideration. “Yes. Zanden gave it to us when you were brought in this morning.”

“Give the elixir to me.” Ranelle drew the towel tight around herself as the plan formed and grew in her mind. “I will make sure none of you can be blamed by Zanden for my escape.”

* * * * *

Ignoring the ache in his muscles from countless hours spent scaling the cliff, Jalen drew himself higher, closer to the precipice. Wind from the oncoming storm continued to blast into him, testing his strength and his abilities. Darkness crowded in on him, the swirling thunderclouds blocking the sun’s waning light.

If he should slip, his many years upon this world would end upon the jagged rocks below. Yet he held no fear for himself. His only concern was that he save his heartmate from a fate worse than death—from being forced to mate with the Sorcerer and bear his spawn.

By the time Jalen reached Ranelle, the storm would be in full force, making their escape that much more difficult. If only she knew her heritage and had been prepared. . . . But it would be too risky to attempt the change in such powerful winds without the necessary skills and training.

Despite the darkness, Jalen knew he was close to the top of the cliff. The stench of evil had grown stronger with each fraction he gained in his climb.

Jalen's senses alerted him to Toen's approach before the Overseer silently landed on a nearby ledge.

A cave lies just above, Toen told Jalen in thought. *'Twill serve as suitable shelter 'til the storm passes.*

I cannot wait out the storm to rescue the maid. Jalen pulled himself up higher, disregarding the pain lancing through his shredded fingers and blood oozing down his wrists. *She needs me now.*

Toen's mind-sigh seeped into Jalen's thoughts. *As you wish, my brother.*

Wind slammed into Jalen, forcing him to cling to the wall and halting his progress. A waterfall of stones showered down the cliff, within inches of his face. He paused as one of the falling rocks sliced his temple, then continued his trek, heedless of the pain. Mere feet, and he would reach the top.

And then he would find Ranelle.

* * * * *

The sky outside the fortress window had darkened from storm clouds by the time Ranelle was prepared to flee. She took one last look into the blackness as she belted the tunic tight over the breeches Tiali had charmed off a servant, and Ranelle hoped the pants wouldn't drop to her knees during her escape. The boots Ritt and Cind had stolen from the men's barracks were large on Ranelle's feet, but they would do for the time being. She would need their protection in scaling the rock wall surrounding the fortress.

At her waist hung a rope that Tiali had found for Ranelle to use in descending the cliff. Her long hair was braided, the end tied-off with a strip of cloth and hidden beneath her tunic. If she was fortunate, at a distance she might be taken for a man.

The drug had finally worn off completely, and Ranelle's senses told her it was safe to leave the room. She paused to look over her shoulder at the three women who were curled up on the bed, still naked and fast asleep. Ranelle only hoped she hadn't given them too much of the potion, and that it would prevent them from remembering anything about her disappearance 'til the Sorcerer's ire had died.

Ranelle's heart pounded as she approached the door and whispered, "*Niama*," praying that Tiali had given her the correct magical password. To her relief, the door silently swung inward.

She stole into the darkened hallway, and the door quietly shut behind her. Bearing to the left as Cind had instructed, Ranelle moved toward the light at the end of the hallway. It would be Zanden's suppertime soon, and all the servants were supposed to be in the kitchen seeing to his meal. According to Ritt, the Sorcerer was having an extravagant dinner prepared to go along with the evening's activities he had planned for Ranelle.

Her gut churned at the thought and she had to fight the instinct to run as fast as she could rather than move as stealthily as possible. She reached a set of stone steps at the end of the hallway, just as Cind had told her there would be. A torch was mounted in a bracket, its flames spitting and hissing in the quiet.

Wind wailed through cracks in the stone walls, the eerie sound sending shivers along Ranelle's spine. The rope slapping her thigh, she hurried down the stairs trying to keep her boots from clomping. Every slight sound was loud and harsh to her ears and she feared Zanden could hear her from his chamber.

The twists and turns seemed endless. If it were not for her keen memory and her confidence in having remembered the exact directions, Ranelle would have thought herself lost long before she finally reached the dungeons and the door leading to the outside.

Just as she grasped the handle, Ranelle's senses spun as the knowledge hit her—

The Sorcerer had discovered her missing.

Terror clawed its way up her throat and she struggled to force it back down. With a deep breath she opened the door that led to freedom.

Wind blasted into Ranelle, so fierce and cold that she stumbled back. She regained her balance and plunged into the swirling darkness, shutting the dungeon door tight behind her.

As she fought to gain her bearings, wind and rain pelted her face. A flash of lightning illuminated her surroundings and her breath caught. Three steps farther and she would have stumbled over the precipice. The crack of thunder rattled her soul and her spirits sank as she realized it was too dark to make her way without plunging to her death from the cliffs.

Might death be better than what she would be forced to do with the Sorcerer?

Decidedly, yes.

With renewed determination, she started to remove the rope from her waist. Lightning flashed, illuminating a shriveled head mounted upon a spear.

Ranelle opened her mouth to scream. From out of the storm, a hand clapped over her mouth from behind her, choking off the cry. The rope dropped to her feet.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist and held her prisoner.

Chapter Four

While the storm lashed the night, terror rendered Ranelle rigid as she was pressed tight to a massive chest, a large hand firm over her mouth.

“Shhh,” a deep male voice murmured in her ear, the warmth of his breath licking through her. “You have yet to earn your wings, fledgling.”

That voice. Where had she heard it before?

I am Jalen, the man said in her thoughts, startling her further. Only Liana had ever spoken in Ranelle's mind before. *I have come to rescue you.*

Jalen—this was the man who had followed her in the village. The realization came to her in a warm wave that momentarily erased the cold bite of the storm. This was the same man who had rescued her from the burning tavern. And the same man she had run away from to warn Tierra.

Aye. Jalen released his hold on Ranelle's mouth, turned her in his arms and pressed her tight along his length. *And a merry chase you have led me on.*

Another flash of lightning illuminated his chiseled features. Thunder rumbled as every thought fled her mind. She stared up at him, lost in his devastating smile, and those firm, sensuous lips. He was drenched, as she was, rain coating his handsome face, his sleeveless tunic clinging to his muscular body. Cuts bled on his powerful biceps, yet seemed to already be healing. Another scrape was at his temple, and something blue glittered at his forehead.

How had she not sensed this man's approach?

Jalen took her face between his hands and brushed his lips over hers. The slight contact took Ranelle's breath away.

When he withdrew, she saw that his fingers and wrists were covered with wounds. "You are hurt!" she said, reaching out and cradling one of his injured hands in her palms.

'Tis nothing. All will be healed by morn. He smiled, but then urgency replaced the gentleness in his voice. *We must seek shelter.* His words brought her back to reality and the imminent danger threatening them both.

Ranelle's senses flared, and she could feel the Sorcerer's wrath as he searched the fortress with his mind. Soon he would begin to hunt for her outside in the storm.

Jalen led her to the edge of the cliff, where a glittering rope was already secured around a massive rock that jutted up like a granite finger. *Climb on my back*, he instructed as he crouched.

After only a moment's hesitation, Ranelle complied, wrapping her arms and legs tight around the man, beside his bow and quiver.

With incredible masculine grace and ease, Jalen grabbed the rope and began descending, as though he bore no weight but his own. Her wet body pressed against his, and she was amazed as his warmth seeped through her clothing, chasing away the chill.

Irani shrieks echoed through the stormy night, and Ranelle knew the Sorcerer had released all his beasts in search of her.

While Jalen scaled the cliff, lowering them on the shimmering rope, he replied, *Aye. He has sent his irani along with the sum of his Nordain followers.* Jalen's voice was calm in her mind, as though he and Ranelle had not a concern in the world.

Another flash illuminated the skies and Ranelle gasped at the sight of countless irani circling above—along with smaller winged creatures, most likely traitorous Nordain warriors in their raven forms.

Hold tight, Jalen commanded as he paused in their descent, resting his feet on a narrow shelf. *And do not make a sound.*

Ranelle gripped him harder, and then almost screamed as Jalen jumped from his perch and swung straight toward the cliff wall. She buried her face against his shoulder and clung to him, a prayer to the gods ringing in her head.

Jalen couldn't help but smile as he swung them toward the cave Toen had earlier discovered in the cliff side. When they reached the hidden entrance, Jalen landed lightly in a crouch. Smells of old irani dung and ancient dust met his nose, and Ranelle sneezed.

Still holding the rope, he eased Ranelle from his back and faced the opening. He murmured a soft command, and the magical rope released its hold on the rock above. It returned to him, landing in a sodden, glittering pile at his feet.

He wondered where Toen was sheltering from the storm, but he did not have time to dwell upon it. Jalen raised his hand, his palm facing out. Golden light glimmered at the cave's mouth, and then they were enshrouded in darkness. The invisible wall of protection would shield them from the storm, and hide them from the irani and the Sorcerer.

Ranelle's soft gasp came from behind him, and he realized she could not see in the dark as he could. He turned to her and held out one hand. A ball of light sparkled in his palm, the golden glow flickering and illuminating Ranelle's wide silver eyes. With a slight movement, he encouraged the ball to float to the ceiling where it melded with a rock, its radiance enough to lend gentle luminosity to the small cave.

Her eyes followed the glow, and then returned to him. Jalen watched as her throat worked, and a nervous flutter began at the base of her neck.

He needed to touch her, feel her, consume her. To bury his cock inside her hot core. Yet he would go slow. "Do not fear me, fledgling."

She lifted her chin and her eyes narrowed. "I am not afraid of you."

With a smile he raised his hand and caressed the soft skin along her jaw. "That pleases my heart."

A shudder passed through Ranelle, and for an instant she closed her eyes, pressing her cheek into his palm. But then her eyes flew open. She stepped away from his touch and watched him.

His muscles flexed as he slid his carved bow and quiver from his shoulder, and laid them carefully on the cave's floor. The feathers on his arrows were the same color as his clothing...changing colors, blending in with their surroundings.

"Who are you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes, obviously unsure of whether or not she would receive a truthful answer.

"I am a Seraphine warrior, servant to Queen Yanea and the goddess." He looked into her silver eyes and saw disbelief in their depths.

"Seraphine?" She said the word slowly, as though afraid it might burst upon her tongue. "You are telling me you are Elvin?"

He smiled and she gasped as he caused the *enrli* symbol on his forehead to glitter. "Aye."

Mesmerized by the *enrli*, Ranelle reached up and outlined it with her fingertips, sending a shudder of longing through him. His cock hardened and he yearned to be deep within her quim.

“It sends tingles through my hand to my body,” she murmured. “I saw this in my dream. What is it?”

Ah, ‘tis good, Jalen thought to himself. Ranelle would not realize the significance of her dream, but he did. Only a heartmate would see another’s *enrli* in such a night vision. ‘Twas a sign of the goddess’s approval.

Her fingers moved to a cut along his brow, one of his many from the climb up the cliff. “Does this hurt?”

“As I said, all will be healed by morn.” Jalen clenched his fists at his sides, holding himself back from stripping off her clothing and fucking her. To Hades with ceremony and tradition. If she continued her innocent touching, he might lose control, and that was something he had *never* done.

Ranelle froze as her gaze fell upon his ear. Slowly her fingers eased up higher, into his damp hair, and she traced the edge of his ear to its point. “You could be Tanzinite, like Liana, but your skin is golden instead of pale.”

Jalen fought to hide a grin at her fascination with him. “Have you finished your examination?”

Ranelle’s hand shot back, as though his skin had scalded her. Even in the dim glow from the light above, he saw the cherry blush rise to her cheeks.

“You may touch me.” His voice deepened as he moved closer to her, reveling in her womanly scent, mixed with rain. “As I have longed to touch you.”

Jalen felt the hesitation and doubt in her mind, but then she flung up a barricade in her thoughts, blocking him from reading her. A combination of disappointment and pleasure flowed through him. He had enjoyed knowing her thoughts upon occasion, yet he was pleased she possessed such power. It was no wonder she had been able to slip away from him in Fiorn, although he still did not understand how she had ignored the command in his voice.

Ranelle did not back away as he had feared she would when he had let her know how he desired her touch. Instead she tilted her head up and fixed her gaze upon his. “Why did you follow me in the village?” Her voice was low and lyrical. “And why did you come here, to rescue me from the Sorcerer?”

“I was sent to protect you from Zanden.” Jalen eased his hands to her arms and lightly rubbed his thumbs along the sleeves of her wet tunic, and was pleased when she did not shun him. He paused before his next question, not wanting to ask, but needing to be certain. “The Sorcerer—he did *not touch* you, did he?”

Ranelle’s cheeks went pale as she shook her head, and he regretted the need to learn the truth. “No. But he intended to, this very night. That is why I had escaped into the storm.”

Fury burned in Jalen’s gut, shocking him with its intensity. Never had he experienced a consuming need to protect another as he did with Ranelle. Such anger was unknown to him, but he did not question it. Ranelle was his heartmate.

“I regret that I failed in keeping you safe in Fiorn.” Without another thought he pulled her tight against him, cradling her to his chest. “Enough questions, fledgling. We need to get you out of these wet clothes.”

A flush surged through Ranelle, sending tingles straight from her scalp to her toes. Fire licked at her arms where his body molded hers, and her nipples grew taut against his chest. Was it only days ago that she had imagined the mystery man watching her as she undressed? Yet faced with the flesh and blood of her fantasies, she found herself embarrassed to shed her clothes before him.

And what did she truly know of the man who called himself Jalen? She believed he spoke the truth in that he was Elvin, but he was still a stranger to her.

“You have my word that I will not touch you, Ranelle.” Jalen’s hands rubbed her back through her tunic, and his voice lowered to a sensual rumble as he added, “Unless you wish for my touch.”

Heat in her body increased as she realized the hardness against her belly was his cock, most definite proof that he desired her. His male scent filled her senses, intoxicating her to the point she felt dizzy with wanting of him.

The moment Jalen released her, cold seeped into Ranelle, his warmth denied her, and she wanted to throw herself back into his embrace. Her tongue weighed heavy in her mouth as she watched him remove his tunic and his boots.

Several scrapes and wounds were upon his golden skin, but all looked as though they were almost healed. His muscles rippled in the golden glow of the light he had created with his magic, and she longed to feel his masculine strength beneath her fingertips.

Still in his breeches, Jalen knelt before Ranelle, placed his hands upon her boot and looked up, his sapphire eyes glittering. She swore she could feel the heat of his fingers through the thick leather to her toes.

His hands eased up the lacing to the top of the boot. “May I?”

She nodded, barely able to think with him so close. It took all of her focus to continue blocking her mind, wanting to keep her thoughts private from this man. She didn’t want him to know just how attracted she was to him, and how much she desired—*noneeded*—his touch.

Every movement he made was fluid and sensuous. With deft fingers he unlaced her boot, then grasped her thigh with one large palm and the heel of her boot with his other. Instinctively she bent and braced her hand on his bare shoulder as he pulled the boot from her foot. Jalen’s skin felt smooth and hard beneath her palm, his muscles rippling beneath her fingertips. His long golden hair was dark from the rain, and she was fascinated with the way the strands glittered in the cave’s soft glow.

Within moments he had removed the second boot, and in a liquid movement he was standing before her. “Take off your tunic.” He reached into the pouch at his waist as he spoke and withdrew a small folded square of cloth. “So that I may dry you before your skin becomes too chilled.”

Ranelle eyed the cloth, sure he must be jesting. But as she watched, he shook out the material, and it seemed to grow, blossoming to the size of a small blanket. The cloth shimmered like the rainbow sands of Mairi, catching the light and playing with it, and the scent of honeysuckle and forest breezes replaced the dusty smells in the cave.

As though to prove to her that the cloth was suitable, Jalen rubbed his own damp hair with it. To her surprise his long hair was dry within an instant, and shone like a river of gold as it spilled past his shoulders.

“Now remove your clothing,” he said.

She dug her teeth into her lower lip as she untied the belt and let it drop to the cave floor. As she grabbed the bottom of her tunic, she paused and glanced into Jalen’s eyes. Hunger glittered in the blue depths that frightened and thrilled her all at once. She froze, unable to move.

But he gave a slow, sensual smile that melted Ranelle to her core and caused her knees to go weak and moisture to flood her nether curls.

“Allow me,” he murmured as he let the shimmering cloth slide to the floor. He moved his hands to her wet tunic and helped slip it over her head. Her sodden braid slapped against her bare back as the tunic was removed, and she straightened in a rush of embarrassment at her partial nakedness.

Ranelle’s face burned and her nipples tightened to aching peaks as Jalen’s gaze devoured her. He didn’t even have to touch her to make her feel as though she had been thoroughly stroked by his talented hands.

“Your breeches.” His voice rumbled deep from within his chest, and she knew that he, too, was struggling with his desires.

She dropped her gaze to the lacings at her waist, unable to meet his gaze. With trembling fingers she untied the breeches and let them fall to her feet.

He made a sound not unlike a cat’s purr. “You are exquisite, Ranelle.” Jalen’s caressing tone sent shivers through her.

When she dared to look up at him, she saw that his eyes were liquid fire. They roamed over her body, igniting flames wherever his gaze landed. Gods but she was so hot for him.

Jalen raised his hands and cradled her face. “*Sh’lai noirei de simnai, mi enchantrei,*” he murmured, and then brushed her lips with his. Raising his head, he stopped to gaze at her, then dipped down and flicked his tongue along her lips.

Ranelle gasped at the sensual touch, her lips parting with her moan. Jalen took the opportunity to delve his tongue inside her mouth, and she lost herself in the feel and taste of him. He eased his hand to the back of her neck and deepened the kiss ‘til her head spun. Her entire body shuddered with longing and she almost cried out when he broke the kiss and drew away.

With a cat’s languid grace, he retrieved the cloth from the floor. “Turn around,” he said as he stood.

His command compelled her to do as he bid. Slowly she rotated, her body still quivering from his kiss.

Jalen’s hand brushed her skin as he grasped her braid. “You have the most beautiful tresses.” She shivered again as she felt him untie the braid, and his fingers combed the wet mass.

The cloth glided over her shoulders as he began rubbing her wet head. Warmth emanated from the material, and in a mere instant, her hair was dry. Jalen continued rubbing the cloth over her shoulders, massaging her muscles and erasing the soreness and the aches from them.

A sigh escaped Ranelle and she closed her eyes. “That feels wonderful.”

“Aye. As does your skin against my hands.” Jalen moved lower, drying her back down to her hips. He seemed to pay special attention to her buttocks, caressing them with the cloth and causing her slit to ache.

He finished the back of her legs, and in the next moment she felt him move in front of her. Ranelle lifted her eyelids and watched as he worked the cloth over her feet and ankles, then moving up past her knees and to the front of her thighs.

She caught her breath as his face moved close to her slit.

Pausing, Jalen inhaled. “You smell sweet.” His fingers gripped her hips as his nose brushed the soft brown curls of her mound. “Of the goddess’s nectar.”

Ranelle’s legs trembled and her quim flooded with wetness. But Jalen did not touch her clit as she now longed for him to. Instead he continued drying her body in a slow, measured pace. She wanted to scream for him to stop torturing her so.

After he ran the cloth across her belly, he stood, his gaze fixed on her breasts. Her nipples throbbed and ached for his touch, and Jalen smiled as though he knew how much she needed him. With his frustratingly slow movements, he dried the underside of her breasts, then eased the cloth along the sides and up to her collarbone, and then her neck. The material slid over her breasts, teasing her nipples, but still he did not touch her with his hands.

The throbbing between her thighs intensified. Gods but she wanted him.

Ranelle whimpered. “*Please.*”

“Tell me what you desire.” Jalen rubbed her shoulders with the cloth. “Show me.”

Trembling, she reached her hands up and placed them over his, where they rested on her shoulders. “Touch me,” she whispered as she gently pushed his hands down ‘til they rested on her breasts, still covered by the material.

Jalen flexed his hands over her soft mounds, kneading them through the silken cloth. He let the material slide down her body, and it landed in a puddle upon her feet.

Ranelle moaned at the feel of his strong hands upon her breasts. And when he lowered his head and lapped at her nipple, she cried out from the wild sensations building within her. She slid her fingers into his golden hair as his hot mouth possessed her nipples, from one to the other.

“What more would you like?” he murmured, his breath heating the sensitive skin of her breasts.

She wanted Jalen’s tongue upon her.

“Taste me. Lick my clit.” The words came out of her mouth before she realized she had spoken.

“As I have longed to.” Jalen’s smile was purely and erotically male as he knelt before Ranelle and encouraged her to widen her stance with gentle pressure between her thighs.

He spread the soft folds with his fingers and stroked her clit lightly with his thumb. She cried out and grasped his head, pressing him tight to her slit. Jalen gave a throaty murmur and began devouring her,

licking her nub with his tongue that seemed almost magical in its talent.

Sliding one of his long fingers inside her tight quim, Jalen delved into her wetness, slowly fucking her with his hand as he tasted her intimately.

A storm of sensations swirled through Ranelle. Her head spun, and she didn't realize she had dropped the barricade in her mind 'til she heard Jalen's voice.

You are the sweetest of treasures, fair Ranelle, he murmured in her thoughts. *There is no aphrodisiac as luscious as your nectar.*

She clenched her hands in his hair as the storm grew wilder within her. "Oh, gods," she cried as her hips bucked against his face, her orgasm slamming into her with the force of a hurricane.

But he didn't stop. His fingers thrust harder and his tongue continued lapping at her, drawing out the sensations 'til she climaxed again. "Jalen!" she shouted. "I—I cannot..."

It wasn't 'til she screamed with her third orgasm that Jalen stopped his sweet assault. Her knees had given out long ago, and he brought her into his arms and cradled her in his lap on the cave floor.

Breathless, she stared up at the man who had given her such incredible pleasure. She caught the scent of her own essence on his mouth as he brushed his lips over hers and smiled. *Have you had enough?*

Ranelle didn't hesitate. She shook her head and said, "No."

Chapter Five

Jalen trailed his finger over Ranelle's lips as she lay across his lap, her buttocks firm against his erect cock. She felt soft and warm within his arms, and he inhaled deeply, luxuriating in the scent of her arousal, along with her smell of spice and vanilla.

With a smile he brushed his mouth over hers. "What is it you wish, *mi enchantrei*?"

Her silver eyes were dark with passion as she threaded her fingers in his hair. "I want to touch you." She swallowed and added, "*All of you.*"

A rumble of satisfaction emanated from his chest. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed each knuckle, touching his tongue to her salty flesh. Her warm skin smelled of sandalwood soap and desire. "What would you have me do?" he murmured.

"Stand and let me finish undressing you." The words were said in naught but a whisper, yet they burned a heated trail through Jalen, liquid fire searing his soul straight to his cock.

In a fluid movement he eased to his feet, and helped her stand. For a moment all he could do was gaze upon her lovely features. Ranelle's mahogany tresses, thick and full, tumbled down her back, her nipples were swollen from his mouth and her lips were parted as she stared up at him.

"You are more beautiful than Anistana, Queen of Faeries in Wilding Wood," Jalen murmured.

Ranelle's smile was sweet and breathless. "You have a tongue of gold and the body of a god."

"Remember that Elves never lie." Jalen hooked one finger under her chin and tipped her head up. "I speak only truth." At times he might be forced to withhold the truth from her, but he would never lie.

When he released her, Ranelle's small hands moved toward him, slow and unsure. She touched him tentatively at first, running her palms over the taut muscles in his arms and then to his smooth chest. Her eyes were focused, intent on knowing him. She trailed her fingertips further down, to the flat of his stomach, pausing at the waistband of his breeches.

To his surprise, Jalen found he was holding his breath, waiting for Ranelle to continue her exploration. A sigh eased through his lips as she began unfastening the belt of his waist pouch. It came off easily, and she carefully set it on the floor before returning to her task.

Once again she paused. For the first time in his many seasons upon Dair, Jalen felt as though he might ignite if a woman did not touch him, and then only Ranelle would do. He exhaled as she began pulling at the ties of his breeches. Her fingers trembled and she struggled with the lacing, but finally it came undone and she pushed his breeches over his hips, letting them drop to the floor.

Jalen's cock sprung free. A small gasp came from Ranelle, and her silver eyes widened. "It—I...oh, my." She trailed her fingertips along its length, and Jalen thought he might spill his seed at that very moment. Never before had he feared failing in his control.

Ranelle wrapped her small hand around his thick shaft. "It's hard, yet so soft," she murmured as she moved her hand to the tip. "And here, it is like touching a rose petal."

The *enrli* shaved into the hairs above his cock flared bright sapphire, and Ranelle froze. "What is this symbol?" she asked. "It is the same as the one on your forehead, is it not?"

"'Tis called *enrli* ." Jalen's voice was low and tight with his desire for her. "All Seraphine Elves bear a similar sign."

She brought her free hand up and traced the *enrli* with her fingertip. "It tingles, just like the other one."

The urge to lay her on the cave's floor and fuck her tight channel nearly made Jalen shake in its fervor. And in the next moment, when Ranelle dropped to her knees and flicked her tongue over the head of his cock, it was all he could do to control himself.

She licked the pearl of semen at the tip. "Salty, yet sweet upon my tongue." And then she slid her mouth over his staff, taking him deep within her throat.

Jalen groaned and thrust his fingers into her luxurious mahogany hair. "You have bewitched me, fair Ranelle, *mi enchantrei* ."

"Mmmmm." Her answer was a hum along his cock, vibrating through him and spiraling him toward the

pinnacle.

He clenched his hands in her hair as she suckled and licked his length. The *enrli* above his cock and upon his forehead pulsed. Pressure built within him, sweat breaking out upon his brow. In the next instant an explosive orgasm rocked through Jalen.

Ranelle sucked his seed from his body, swallowing his semen as she worked his cock. Shudder after shudder vibrated Jalen, straight to his lifeforce.

Grasping her head between his palms, he held her still. "Enough." His voice rumbled like thunder, sounding ominous even to his own ears.

A blush stole over her face and she pulled away, slipping his still hard cock out of her warm mouth. "Did I do it wrong?"

"Nay." Jalen dropped to his knees and brought Ranelle into his embrace. "'Twas perfect."

"I could try it again," she murmured against his chest, her softness pressed tight against him. "This time I could do better."

He laughed softly in her ear. "If you do any better I fear I will sleep nigh on a week from exhaustion."

"Are you tired, then?" Ranelle tilted her head up. "Perhaps you should rest."

"No, my fledgling." Jalen touched his nose to hers. "I have something far better than sleep in mind."

Ranelle smiled at Jalen, warmth filling her in ways she never dreamed possible. This man had somehow touched her very heart and soul. She knew little of him, yet it was as though she had known him forever. As though he had lived in her dreams and her consciousness before he ever followed her in the village.

In all her life, the only people she had ever been able to trust were Liana and Tierra. She desperately missed them both, and prayed that her heart-sisters were safe from the Sorcerer.

At the thought of her *halias*, Ranelle's smile faded. Where were they? She had to find them, had to make sure they were out of danger. How could she be enjoying herself with this incredible man while her friends faced certain peril?

"Why have I lost your smile?" Jalen raised his head and stroked her hair from her face with gentle fingers.

"My heart-sisters." Ranelle's voice faltered. "I need to ensure they each remain safe from Zanden."

He cupped her chin, his sapphire eyes capturing hers. "Your friends must each face their own destinies."

Frowning, Ranelle pulled away from his grasp, got to her feet and glared at him. "I cannot turn my back on them if they need me. Damn their destinies!"

Jalen stood so quickly that she caught her breath in surprise. "Think of your visions." He caught her hands and held them within his own. "Do you not remember what your senses told you of their fates? That Liana would be safe with the man from the tavern, and of Tierra's future with the scarred man?"

A sense of violation swirled within Ranelle, and anger rose within her. “You read all my thoughts?” She tried to snatch her hands from his, but he held her fast.

“Not all.” Jalen drew her so close that she felt his cock hard against her belly and she could scarce think any longer. Her anger faded as quickly as it had risen. “And now,” Jalen continued, “when you block your mind against me, I know naught but what you allow.”

She needed time and space away from this man, because right now all she wanted to do was hold him, feel him. . .and to have his cock deep within her. “I—I think it would be best if we sleep.”

“Sleep?” His lips curved into a smile. “Are you sure that is what you desire?”

I want you, her senses screamed. But no. She needed time to think. Time to breathe.

Jalen brushed his lips over hers, and against her mind’s will she melted in his embrace. The feel of his muscled chest on her breasts, his thighs firm against her own, his arms tight around her, his masculine scent and his smile. . .all served to intoxicate her beyond reason.

His breath was hot along her cheek as he moved his mouth to her ear. “What would you have?”

She couldn’t fight it any longer. She didn’t want to fight it.

“You,” she whispered. “I desire you.”

Doubt had never crossed Jalen’s mind that Ranelle wanted him. She was his heartmate, and their joining would bond them together for eternity.

She gave a small sigh as he released her to retrieve the *krstn* cloth. With a quick movement he unfurled the material and it came to rest on the cave’s floor, shimmering like the rainbow sands of the Mairi Sea.

“Lie upon the *krstn* .” He gestured toward the cloth. “‘Tis much softer than it appears to be.”

Ranelle stepped onto the material and he smiled at her look of amazement. “It feels like a cushion—thick and downy,” she said.

“Aye.” Jalen knelt beside the *krstn*. “‘Tis Elvin magic that makes it so.”

Delight spread across her features as she sat upon the material. “This *krstn* is the softest thing I have ever felt.” She paused and ran her tongue over her lower lip as her gaze rested upon the head of his rigid cock. “Well, the second softest.”

He grinned as he reached for his waist pouch, still resting on the floor where Ranelle had set it earlier. From within its endless depths, he withdrew the sacred *enrli* dye stick and a minute blade to shave the symbol into her woman’s curls, along with a vial of *forlai* . He discarded the pouch and moved onto the *krstn* beside Ranelle.

Her eyes widened as she looked from his face to the instruments in his hand. “Ah. . .what are you going to do with those?”

Jalen set the dye stick and the blade upon the cloth. “You will only feel pleasure, I promise you.”

And she would be bound to him for all time.

Only a moment did she hesitate before she nodded and gave an uncertain smile. “What would you like me to do?”

“Drink of the *orlai*.” He uncorked the vial and put it to her lips. “It will enhance your enjoyment.”

Ranelle’s nervousness was apparent as the pulse at the base of her throat fluttered while she obeyed. The moment the fluid touched her tongue, she visibly relaxed.

“Strawberries and a bit of wild ginger.” She licked her lips and smiled, but then pressed her fingertips to her forehead as she added, “I do feel a bit odd.”

He set the vial on the cave floor. “Lie back, *mi enchantrei*.” When she complied, he straddled her hips, taking care not to put his full weight on her. “Now close your eyes and do not open them.”

Jalen picked up the dye and murmured a prayer of devotion to the goddess while he pressed the tip of the stick to Ranelle’s temple. Slowly he sketched a symbol upon her forehead, a design that flowed from his soul, fed to him by the goddess. Every Seraphine Elvin man and woman received the *enrli* when they reached adulthood, and every symbol was unique. The ceremony was erotic and exquisite, and was normally attended by the whole of Seraphine.

The *enrli* glittered in a silver trail on Ranelle’s forehead as the sacred design came to life, and became a permanent part of her. “It tingles,” she murmured as he finished. “May I open my eyes?”

“I will tell you when.” Jalen set the dye stick onto the *krstn*. “Now spread your thighs wide.”

Ranelle arched her back, thrusting her breasts into the air as she complied, and he knew the *orlai* was working its magic. She would be so aroused and so wet by the time he took her that she would feel no pain when his cock penetrated her virgin shield, only pleasure. He was anxious to be joined with her, but by Seraphine laws, they could not be bound to one another unless both had gone through the *enrli* ceremony and bore the sacred design.

He moved lower down her body so that he was crouched between her legs. Her slit glistened with wetness, the dark curls damp with her desire. Unable to resist, he dipped his head close to her mound and breathed deep of her woman’s essence. Her aroma filled him, causing his cock to ache even more than it already was. He longed to taste her again, to bring her to climax repeatedly.

Jalen retrieved the blade and moved it to her mound. “Mmmmm, that feels so good,” Ranelle murmured as he began shaving the *enrli* into her curls.

The design twisted and turned through the soft brown hair. ‘Twas one of the goddess’s symbols for strength, honor, and love. After he finished shaving, he set the blade down and then used the dye stick, tracing the bare skin and filling it in with the *enrli*. Again it left a trail of silver that matched her beautiful eyes.

When his task was completed, he replaced the empty vial, dye stick and blade into his waist pouch. Still kneeling between her thighs, he braced his arms on either side of her waist, but did not touch her. Her *enrli* symbol glittered upon her forehead, and pleasure filled him, deep and satisfying, knowing that he would soon experience the bonding with her.

By the laws of the goddess and the Seraphine Elves, Ranelle would be his.

Ranelle's body screamed for Jalen's touch. The potion he had given her flowed through her veins, warming her blood and stimulating all her senses. The tingling at her forehead and mound sent waves of pleasure through her body. Gods but she wanted him to fuck her.

Her senses told her that he was above her and she squirmed beneath him. "Can I open my eyes?"

"Aye," he murmured.

When she lifted her lids, she saw that his face was above hers, his sapphire eyes focused on her and the symbol upon his forehead glittering.

She couldn't wait any longer. She had to have his cock inside her *now*.

Ranelle slipped her hands into his hair and pulled him down to meet her. His lips were firm yet soft against hers as he kissed her, gently, reverently. But he was too slow. She wanted more... *needed* more. And when her tongue delved within his warm mouth, his kiss grew more urgent, meeting her need as though his fine rein of control had vanished.

But still his body was braced above hers, and she wanted to feel his weight. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him down to meet her. His cock was hard against her mound and his hips solid between her thighs.

Jalen groaned and broke off the kiss. "Slow down."

"No." Ranelle shook her head and tried to pull him back to her. "I want to feel you from the inside."

"You will." He lowered his head and nuzzled her ear, his golden hair sliding across her breasts. "Soon, *mi enchantrei*. Soon."

Frustration coursed through her. She was wild with need for him and couldn't bear to wait any longer. He trailed light kisses down her jaw line, slowly working his way to her chin, and then on to her collarbone.

And when he reached her breasts, he kissed the soft skin between them, ignoring her nipples.

"*Jalen*," she cried. "Stop this torture."

"Is that what you call it?" A hint of laughter was in his voice, and Ranelle considered slugging him.

"Yes. Now suck my nipples," she demanded.

With a hungry groan Jalen complied, fastening his hot mouth on her breast and flicking her nipple with his tongue. She arched her back, moaning with pleasure. "My other nipple. Suck it, *please*."

As he captured it, Ranelle wriggled beneath him, feeling as though she might explode if he didn't enter her right now.

"I want you to fuck me." She almost screamed when he moved his mouth from her breast, and began kissing a trail down her belly. "You are near to driving me out of my mind."

He gave a soft laugh and placed a kiss in her nether curls. "Soon, my love." And then he flicked his tongue along the inside of her thigh.

Unable to take another moment of this sweet torture, Ranelle grasped his head and pulled his mouth to her folds. "Lick my clit."

Jalen gave a rumble of pleasure and delved into her wetness. By the gods, his mouth was incredible. He swirled his tongue, twirling it around her woman's pearl, sending her closer and closer to the precipice.

Just as she reached the summit he stopped, and Ranelle did scream at him. "*Jalen!*"

He rose above her and pressed his mouth tight to hers, and she tasted herself upon his lips and tongue.

When he pulled away, his blue eyes were dark with passion. "You belong to me, Ranelle. Do you understand?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck as she writhed beneath him, trying to pull him back to her. "Jalen, please. I need you."

"Answer me," he commanded as he pressed his cock to her belly. "Do you understand?"

"Yes!" She dug her fingernails into his back. "Yes, yes, yes!"

A possessive smile crossed his face and he murmured, "Then we are as one."

And with that he thrust his cock deep inside her quim, tearing past her virgin shield and Ranelle screamed with the incredible pleasure of it. Amazement flashed through her that she had experienced no pain at his penetration. She rocked her body up to meet him and the feelings that coursed her body were so intense and exquisite she thought she might fly apart.

The tingling at her mound and on her forehead grew more powerful with every thrust. Blood rushed in her ears and the only sound she heard was the pounding of her heart.

Every fragment of her body was alive and on fire as he fucked her. Higher and higher the sensations rose. Vaguely she was aware that the cave had filled with a pulsating silver and blue light that seemed to emanate from their bodies.

And just as she reached the precipice, Jalen pressed his forehead to hers.

Silvery blue light blinded her as she screamed with her orgasm. Distantly she heard Jalen shout and felt his cock throbbing as he spilled his seed inside her. Flash after flash of lightning-like aftershocks tremored throughout her body.

The incredible pleasure was almost more than Ranelle could bear, and it didn't seem as though it would ever stop. Her orgasm had not only rocked her body, but she had felt it in her mind when Jalen had pressed their foreheads together.

When the sensations finally ebbed, Jalen rolled over, bringing Ranelle with him so that she was resting on top, his cock still deep within her.

“You belong to me,” he murmured, his voice rumbling with exhaustion. “For eternity, *mi enchantrei*.”

Chapter Six

Jalen awoke with Ranelle still atop him, his cock still buried in her quim. As always when he wakened, he was instantly alert. His senses told him it was late morning, but overcast outside the cave. They were yet undetected by the Sorcerer—not that Jalen had doubted his magic shield would hold.

Drinking deeply of Ranelle’s womanly essence and the smells of their sex, Jalen smiled with satisfaction. His first mating with her had been far beyond anything that he had dreamed. He had heard that joining with one’s heartmate was the greatest of all Elvin joys. Now that he had experienced such a joining, he knew it to be true.

“Mmmmm,” Ranelle murmured as she stirred in her sleep, and his cock hardened within her. He tightened his grip around her waist, and her dark tresses slid along his arms, her breath warm upon his chest. A smile flitted across her lips, and the *enrli* at her forehead glittered silver.

‘Twould be the greatest joy in his long life to wake every morning with his heartmate. She would be even more beautiful when her belly grew large with his child, and with every babe to follow.

The Council might be displeased with a non-Elvin woman as his mate, but even they could not refute the choice of the goddess and her wisdom in giving him a Nordain female as his heartmate.

Jalen began massaging Ranelle’s back, her skin so soft against his calloused palms. She gave a small moan, and he cupped her buttocks and pressed her tight against him.

“Wake, *mi enchantrei*.” He pressed his lips against her forehead, enjoying the pulse of her *enrli* against his lips.

Ranelle blinked and a slow sleepy smile spread across her face. “Is it morning?”

“Aye.” He smiled in return. “My cock is near to bursting for you.”

“I feel you inside me.” She wiggled her hips and he groaned at the sensation.

“Sit up,” he told her as he grasped her tighter. “And ride me.”

“My Elvin stallion.” At her words a light blush stole across her cheeks. Her eyelids fluttered and she moaned as she pushed herself up, her small hands braced against his chest. “By all the gods, your cock feels so good within me.”

Jalen gave a quick pump of his hips, causing Ranelle to arch her back and cry out. Begging for his touch, her breasts thrust forward. He captured them in his large hands, enjoying the feel of their lush softness

against his palms.

“Ride my cock,” he commanded as he pinched and rolled her nipples between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. “Fuck me.”

She moved her hips, sliding his staff within her tight core. Her cries and her movements grew more and more frantic as she rode him harder yet.

“That’s it.” He moved his hands from her breasts to her hips, his eyes focused on her face. “Aye, my lovely Ranelle, ride me.”

Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed, and her *enrli* sparkling with silver light, growing brighter with every plunge as she fucked him. Just watching her was pleasure in and of itself, adding to his own fervor. Another joining like the one they had experienced last night would render them both exhausted again, so he refrained from touching the *enrli* at their foreheads together.

Jalen gripped her hips and held her tight as he thrust into her hard and fast. “Come with me,” he ordered. The *enrli* above his cock pulsed, in sync with the one at her mound. Ranelle cried out with her orgasm as his own climax burst through him. He continued pumping his staff in and out of her, ‘til every last drop of his seed was spent.

Feeling absolutely boneless, as though her body was made of water, Ranelle collapsed against Jalen’s chest. She might never move again.

“As much as I wish for it, I fear ‘tis not possible to lie here all day,” Jalen said, a teasing note to his voice.

She raised her head and frowned. “You were reading my thoughts.”

“Nay.” He trailed one finger down her nose to the tip. “I was voicing my own.”

“Ah.” Her eyes widened as she caught his hand in hers and studied his fingers, then looked at his forehead and arms. “All your wounds have healed. There is no sign that you were ever injured. Not even a scar.”

“I am Elvin.” Jalen smiled. “Come. We must ready ourselves.”

With regret, Ranelle moved from Jalen’s chest and onto the *krstn* blanket. His cock was still hard when it slid from inside her, and she missed the feel of it deep within her quim.

In an effortless movement, Jalen got to his feet and retrieved his waist pouch. While he dug through the pouch he settled beside her on the *krstn*, then brought out a leaf covered bar and handed it to her. “‘Tis *gorni*. Elvin food,” he said as he brought out another one for himself. “‘Twill give you nourishment enough for several hours.”

Ranelle unwrapped the bar and discarded the leaf onto the *krstn*. The strange foodstuff appeared to be a stick of birdseed glued together with a clear paste, and she cast Jalen a doubtful look.

He was already devouring his own birdseed bar. “Try it. ‘Tis most delicious.”

Taking a tentative bite, Ranelle was pleasantly surprised at the rich flavor that rolled over her tongue.

“Mmmmm.” She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the Elvin treat. “It tastes like spiced cakes, only better.” Nuts, cinnamon, cloves, and other spices she couldn’t identify.

Energetic warmth coursed her body as she savored the *gorni*, and she felt as though she could scale the cliff to the shore below with no help from her Elvin god. She finished the bar and opened her eyes to see Jalen watching her and smiling.

“‘Tis a shame to cover such a beautiful body with clothing.” He held up the tunic and trousers she had ‘borrowed’ from Zanden’s fortress. “Alas, you need the protection from rocks and the elements.”

For a moment she pictured herself descending the cliff naked, clinging to Jalen’s equally nude body. Heat rose to her cheeks at the grin that spread across his face, and she was afraid that this time he *had* read her mind.

He began pulling on his own tunic and breeches, and she furrowed her brow as she watched him. She could swear that last night he had worn black, but today his clothing looked as gray as the cave’s walls. In Fiorn, the first time she saw him, she thought he had worn brown. Or had it been blue?

“It changes,” he said, startling Ranelle from her contemplation. “The color shifts depending on what surrounds me.”

“No wonder I could never see you when you followed me in Fiorn.” Ranelle stood and slid the tunic over her head and pulled the bottom down over her hips. “I sensed you, but no matter how I tried, I could never see you.”

“You sensed me because I permitted you to.” Jalen shoved one foot into a boot, and then his other. “You didn’t see me because that I did not allow.”

Ranelle stepped into her breeches and drew them tight around her waist. “Why did you let me sense you?”

She caught her breath as he moved to her, and cupped her face in his palms. “*Mi enchantrei*,” he murmured as he brushed his lips across hers. “You fair bewitched me the very moment I laid eyes upon you.”

By the gods’ gifts, she wanted to melt into this man every time he touched her.

His lips met hers again, and his tongue slid into her mouth. He tasted sweet, of the *gorni* and his own elemental male flavor.

“Again you distract me.” He kissed the corner of her mouth and moved to her ear. “I fear we shall never leave this cave.”

She sighed. “Would that be such a bad fate?”

Jalen’s soft laughter sent a thrill through her, straight to her nether regions. “Nay. With you ‘twould be the best of destinies.”

He scooped up her makeshift belt that he had discarded last night, brought it around her waist and tied it. “I have something of import to tell you.” His face grew solemn and her stomach teetered as she sensed that what he had to say was serious.

“Have you ever wondered from whence you came?” Jalen brushed hair from her face with a gentle hand as Ranelle nodded. “Did you ever feel as though you yearned to fly, to be one with the ravens?”

She widened her eyes as Jalen spoke aloud her fondest desire. “How do you know this? Did you read it in my thoughts?”

“Nay.” He grasped a handful of her hair and smiled. “You are Nordain, my fair Ranelle. Taken as a babe from Phoenicia and brought to Fiorn to be raised with two other stolen children. You are all orphans, yet not.”

Ranelle’s body vibrated with tremors as she tried to digest what he had just said. She was not human—she was Nordain?

She shook her head. “It cannot be. I do not take raven form and fly.”

“But you can.” He pressed his forehead to hers, *enrli toenrli* and he filled her senses with warmth and assurance...and trust.

Yet the magnitude of his statements overwhelmed her, rattling around in her brain like pebbles in a box. “What do you mean I was taken?”

He pulled back and sighed, but did not release his hold upon her tresses. “When you were naught but a toddler, you were stolen from your family by one of your own blood.” Tremors wracked Ranelle’s body as he continued, “The young man who kidnapped you learned of your destiny through the Seraphine Chronicles and his own twisted visions. He brought you to the house you were raised in, and arranged for Tierra and Liana to be delivered there as well.”

“I do not understand.” Her mind whirled and the cramps in her stomach grew more fierce. “My blood stole me. What does that mean?”

Jalen’s jaw tightened and his expression grew almost fierce. “One of your brothers.”

Numbness crept into her limbs and her hair all but stood on end. “I have brothers?”

“Three.” Jalen began rubbing her shoulders in a manner meant to comfort her, but the numbness continued to seep through her body. “The youngest of the three is Renn. The eldest brothers are twins. One is Aric, King of the Nordain.”

“And the other twin,” she said slowly, “the one who took me is...”

His throat worked, and she knew it was difficult for him to say. The anger in his voice was apparent, as he replied, “The Sorcerer Zanden.”

Ranelle’s eyes widened and her hands flew to her mouth as horror filled her being. Her knees gave out and she would have dropped to the floor had it not been for Jalen’s strong grasp.

“No.” She shook her head vehemently. “No, no, no, *no!*”

Jalen pressed her tight against him. “I am sorry. I wish it were not, but ‘tis truth.”

“He—he...” A sob tore from her throat and she wanted to pummel something, anything. “He was going to—*to touch* me. My own brother!”

“‘Twas a prophecy made long ago, and he is attempting to bring it to light. He is a man filled with greed for power. A being who wishes to have total and complete rule over our world. If he possessed the three of you, his desires would come to light.” Jalen rubbed her back as he spoke, his strong presence lending her strength. “But do not fear, for I shall *never* allow his foul hands upon you.”

“I—I cannot believe it.” Ranelle pulled away and she fought the tears that wanted to burst from within her. “You are trying to make me believe that I am Nordain, and that I am of the same blood as that vile creature who wishes to defile me?”

Jalen sighed. “Elves never lie, as I have told you.”

“I need time.” She placed her hands against his chest and pushed at him. “Let me be.”

Jalen could not believe how difficult it was to release Ranelle from his embrace. He wanted to hold her, comfort her, but she was pushing him away.

With great reluctance he allowed her to withdraw from his grasp. An odd sense of helplessness bled through him while he watched her walk away, toward the rear of the cave. Her head was bowed, her arms wrapped tight around her belly.

Why would she not let him give her solace? Why had she pushed him away?

Loving this creature had already caused so many strange emotions within him. Fierce protectiveness, incredible desire, undying love... And even odder, for the first time in his long life he was experiencing doubt and confusion—questioning his own judgment.

Ranelle stood in the shadows, her back to him. Clenching his fists, he fought for control over the tumult. Heartmate or no, he could not allow himself such doubts. He had made the right decision in telling her about her past. Armed with such knowledge she would better understand her peril.

For the briefest instant he even questioned his decision to bond her to him without discussing it with her beforehand.

Jalen shook his head. Such thoughts were ludicrous. This enchantress had certainly bewitched him and addled his mind in the process.

He turned his mind to his plans for their escape from the Sorcerer as he folded the *krstn* and placed it into his waist pouch. Once Jalen and Ranelle left the cave and reached the shore, they would skirt Wilding Wood as he took her to Seraphine. There he would present her to the Council as his heartmate and ask for Queen Yanea’s blessing.

A small sob interrupted Jalen’s musings. He snapped his head up and looked to see Ranelle’s shoulders trembling. Again indecision flickered within him, but he shoved it away.

Goddess damn Ranelle’s request to be left alone.

For so long Ranelle had wondered who her parents were, and whether or not she had any family alive. Now she suddenly had three brothers—one of which was the vilest being on all of Dair. Her arms tightened around her belly and she shook her head in disbelief.

And what was it that Jalen had said? Zanden's twin was Aric, King of the Nordain. Then did that mean that she had been born of royalty?

When she was a child, she had oft dreamed that she was a Princess in a castle amongst the clouds. As she had grown older, she had pushed away the fantasies, believing that her reality was Fiorn and escaping the Sorcerer with her *halias*.

In a matter of days, all her realities had crumbled to dust, and even *she* wasn't who she had believed herself to be for the first twenty seasons of her life.

What now?

Gods, but she wished that Liana and Tierra were there with her. She needed to talk to them, needed help deciding what to do next. She needed their strength and their sisterly comfort. For they had been the only family she had known as long as she could remember.

So now was she supposed to pop into a raven and fly the skies? No matter that she had oft wished it—at the moment it seemed absurd, and naught more than an Elvin tale.

All that had happened within the past couple of days rushed through her in hot gusts and her eyes flushed with wet heat. Moisture crept onto her cheeks and she almost stomped her foot with anger at her own weakness. She was furious with herself for crying, but once they started the tears wouldn't stop.

A sob escaped her throat, and her shoulders shook with the force of her emotions.

Hands grasped her from behind as she realized that Jalen had come to comfort her despite her request to leave her alone. She did not need his comfort, did not need him at all. But when she tried to wrench herself from his grasp, he refused to let her go.

Instead he forcefully turned her around and wrapped his powerful arms around her. "'Tis all right to cry, *mi enchantrei*," he murmured and drew her down to the floor where he cradled her in his lap. "'Tis the goddess's way of cleansing the soul and healing the heart."

Ranelle gave into the warmth of his embrace, allowing herself to melt against his massive chest and draw strength from him.

She cried 'til every last tear had left her and soaked Jalen's tunic front. And when she finished crying, she drifted into a deep and black sleep.

* * * * *

According to Jalen it was the following evening when she had finally woken, still cuddled in his arms. She had slept for a day, and he had sat and held her in his strong embrace the entire time. Yet he now appeared as fresh as though he himself had rested.

They had eaten another *gorni*, and were preparing to leave the safety of the cave.

Would the Sorcerer and his minions be waiting for them? Still searching for her? If she was fortunate, perhaps Zanden thought she had fallen to her death in the storm, and her body washed out to sea.

Jalen raised his hand, his palm facing the darkened cave mouth. A shimmer wavered across the opening, and then a golden glow came from it, as though returning to his palm and absorbing into his body.

Stars glittered in the black sky in between patches of clouds, and the moon peeked out high above. The air smelled fresh, of rain and the briny odor of the sea.

Her gaze returned to Jalen, who held his hand out, his palm toward the ceiling. The ball of light in the rock above disengaged. It floated back toward his palm where it too seeped into his skin. The cave grew dark again, the only light from the moon and stars.

“We never discard the goddess’s gifts,” he explained as he fastened his waist pouch. After he gathered the magical rope and secured it to a boulder at the back of the cave, he slung his bow and quiver over his shoulder.

Jalen took both her hands within his. “Come, fledgling. ‘Tis time for you to learn to fly.”

Chapter Seven

Ranelle worried her lower lip as she looked into Jalen’s sapphire eyes. She gestured toward the dark sky outside the cave. “What if I cannot fly? What if I fall to the shore below?”

“I can carry you, if you would rather not attempt it.” He squeezed her fingers and smiled. “However, I do have something that will aid you in learning the task quickly.”

Jalen dug in his waist pouch. After a moment he withdrew a small crystal bottle, and pulled out its stopper. “*Theyeroyi* will release the knowledge you were born with,” he said. “‘Twill enable you to make the transformation easily.”

Flutters filled Ranelle’s belly, as though a throng of pixies had invaded and started a small war. Yet despite her nervousness, she realized she already trusted Jalen so much that she was willing to risk what he asked of her.

She tilted her head up as he raised the bottle to her lips.

The thick elixir rolled over her tongue, rich and sweet, a flavor unlike any she had ever tasted. It was smooth and intoxicating, causing warmth to flow through her body from limb to limb, settling the

nervousness in her belly. A weightless sensation came over her and she felt as though she could float down the cliff side.

Jalen moved behind her. His breath tickled her neck as he murmured in her ear, "You are a raven, Ranelle. Feel it. *Believe* it."

Ranelle's brain battled with her senses.

She was human. Woman.

And yet she could be bird.

She could be raven.

It was in her. The changing. To a creature with bones as light as air, and feathers to hold the breeze like a lover's fingers.

Hunger burned in her belly, like desire only cooler. Like arousal, only more focused.

Sparkles flashed around her as the thrilling sensation coursed through her being. The thundering of her heart echoed in her ears as the knowledge of her heritage expanded within her very lifeforce.

She was Nordain.

She could fly.

Stretching her arms wide, Ranelle took a step forward and then another. In an instant her clothing turned into feathers, her arms becoming wings, as she transformed into a raven. She flapped her wings and her bird's feet lifted from the cave floor.

Delight filled her as she flew from the cave and into the night, and Ranelle felt more alive than she had ever felt in her life.

She was meant for this. She had been born to soar the skies.

Cool wind raced through her feathers as she glided out from the cliff and over the Mairi Sea. Below her moonlight glittered across the water's surface, waves cresting and crashing against the sandy shore. The night smelled clean and fresh and pure.

Her senses seemed sharper than ever, her hearing so keen that the sound of the sea was almost overwhelming.

Do not stray too far, Jalen warned in her mind. *The irani and Zanden's Nordain minions are nearby.*

In the joy of the moment Ranelle had unconsciously dropped the block to her thoughts. She allowed Jalen continued entrance into her mind, realizing it would be the best form of communication for them 'til they were safe from Zanden.

Ranelle circled back toward the cliff. Moonlight illuminated Jalen's large form as he quickly descended from the cave, sliding down the same rope he had used the night prior. His muscles flexed with every movement, and as she watched him she couldn't help but visualize his powerful body naked and between

her thighs.

Remain focused, fledgling, Jalen cautioned her, *lest you lose your raven's form. You lack the experience you would have had if you had grown up in Phoenicia.*

A slight chill ran through her as she glided on the wind, realizing that she was already taking her newfound abilities for granted. She increased her concentration and promised herself she would not be so foolish again.

Tingling erupted throughout her being, her senses screamed at her, and a distant motion caught her eye. The irani were close. Heart skittering, she dove toward the base of the cliff where Jalen was just about to alight.

Stay in raven form and land upon my shoulder, he urged her. *You will be safer as a nordai. The irani will not be able to detect you from one of Zanden's Nordain minions.*

Ranelle skimmed lower, heading straight toward the location where Jalen waited in the shadows. If it were not for the sapphire glitter of his *enrli*, she would not have been able to see him. Slowing her flight, she brought her bird's legs down and thrust them toward his shoulder. She landed hard, burying her claws in his tunic. For a second she teetered, and only her talons kept her from toppling over his back.

She would have to work on her landings, to be certain.

Her tail feathers brushed Jalen's neck as she pivoted to face the sea. He whispered an odd word and then gave a light tug on the rope. It dropped to land in a shimmering pile at his feet, all but blending into the sand.

Remain still, fledgling. He pressed back into the shadows and seemed to vanish before her very eyes. She felt odd, like she was sitting on an invisible perch.

A familiar and horrible screech rent the air. Two irani appeared above, flying from over the cliff behind Jalen and Ranelle. The pair circled high, then moved lower. They came closer and closer to the shore, as though seeking something—or someone.

They sought her, she had no doubt.

A strange feeling rose up within her, the desire to shriek as loud as she could for help. As if she could call other Nordain to her aid.

It seemed that she waited in the darkness with Jalen for time on end. The only sounds were waves crashing against the shore and the irani cries. Ranelle did not even hear Jalen's breathing, although she could smell his unique masculine scent.

Finally the irani appeared to lose interest. They shot back over the cliff toward the fortress, and disappeared from sight.

We can travel more quickly if you remain in nordai form, Jalen said as he began heading north, making his way below the cliff while remaining in the shadows. *Unless you would rather not?*

I think I shall enjoy it, Ranelle responded and took flight.

Ranelle sped ahead as Jalen jogged along the shore behind her. He could run for hours without tiring, but knew that she would not have such an easy time of it. He was pleased she had chosen to stay in nordai form as they would make faster progress.

Yet a part of him felt lost without her by his side. As though he was *lonely*.

Absurd. Elves were never lonely as they were one with nature and thus never alone.

Jalen dismissed the thought and pressed forward. Cool wind slid over his skin, but he felt no chill. Like all Elves, his blood heated him from within, keeping his body at an even temperature no matter what the weather conditions might be.

He wondered if Toen would be waiting ahead. When Jalen had recovered Ranelle, the Overseer had made himself scarce, allowing Jalen time alone with his heartmate. It was possible that Toen had left to assist another. The Overseer only stayed where he was needed, for as long as he believed himself to be of use.

On and on Ranelle flew and Jalen ran. Oft she would circle back and he would speak with her in thought. Then she would dart ahead, as though relishing her newfound freedom. When they were finally reunited with Ranelle, Aric and Renn would be enchanted with their younger sister, almost as much as Jalen was. Ranelle's brothers might not be pleased that Jalen had claimed her, but he would deal with that when the time came.

While they traveled, he enjoyed the memories of making love to Ranelle, tasting her, pleasuring her and bringing her to climax. His cock ached to be buried within her sweet folds, and the desire spurred him on.

The moon moved slowly across the sky, and Jalen kept his pace. Ranelle, however, tired before the stars reached apex. Jalen encouraged her to rest upon his shoulder, and she did so while he continued to sprint along the shore of the Mairi Sea toward Wilding Wood.

Not his first choice, for certain, but his best option, given the circumstances.

Jalen knew he was taking a big risk, but he intended to skirt the fringes of the forest, hoping the Queen of Faerie, Anistana, would allow them safe passage. The Faeries of the wood were a mischievous lot, and one never knew what Anistana's whim might be for the day. Still, Anistana was preferable to Zanden's minions.

Most of the time.

Sometime before dawn they reached a sheltered cove below the Wilding Wood, and Jalen came to a halt. *We shall rest here before we enter the forest*, he told Ranelle, who was still in nordai form and perched upon his shoulder.

She fluttered her feathers. Her sharp raven's eyes surveyed him, perhaps sensing his trepidation about the Faeries.

Reining his emotions, Jalen tenderly removed Ranelle from his shoulder, set her on the sand and stood back. The air glittered around her as she transformed back into her lovely woman's body, a tired smile upon her face.

Jalen brought her into his arms and held her tight, enjoying the feel of her body pressed to his. "Although

you were the fairest of ravens, I missed seeing your beautiful smile,*mi enchantrei.* ”

“Flying was wonderful—far better than I had even imagined.” Ranelle gave a small yawn against his chest. “But I fear I shall be too sore to move come the morrow.”

He smiled as he released Ranelle and reached into his waist pouch for the *krstn*. “After we sup, I will tend to your tired muscles. I promise you shall feel much better.”

Jalen unfurled the blanket on the sand, within the shelter of a small overhang that protected them from the wind. The moon sat low in the sky but was bright. ‘T would not be many more days ‘til moonchange.

Sitting cross-legged on the *krstn*, Ranelle ate the *gorni* that he had given her. She devoured the bar, finishing hers almost as soon as Jalen had eaten his.

After she finished her *gorni*, she gave him a thoughtful look. “Will I need that potion to change into a raven again?”

He shook his head. “Nay. The knowledge has now been released within you, and ‘t will be easier the next time. When you desire to become a nordai, you simply need to will yourself to make the transformation.”

Ranelle brushed her hair out of her eyes. “This is all so strange. Yet it felt *soright*. ”

Jalen reached into his waist pouch and removed a vial of *lonoi* oil. “Now ‘tis time to remove your clothing,” he instructed as he set the vial on the *krstn*.

Even in the moonlight he saw the blush rise to her cheeks. “‘Tis a bit chilly out here,” she murmured.

“I shall warm you.” He smiled and tugged at the tie around her tunic. “I promise you shall enjoy the *lonoi*. ”

After she had removed her clothing, Ranelle settled on the *krstn*, face down. A false gray dawn lightened the morning sky as she stared across the sand to the waterline. The sea continued its endless thrust against the shore, pulling back and pushing forward again, like two lovers forever mating.

Goose bumps sprouted along her bare skin as a cool wind swirled within their cove. The moist air smelled of the sea’s brine, along with the perfume of juniper and *hynling* trees from the nearby forest.

She blinked. *Hynling* trees? Where had that name come from, and how did she know what they smelled like? And why did the name disturb her senses?

A shiver skittered along her spine as Jalen straddled her, also naked, his enormous cock pressed against her rounded buttocks. All thought fled her mind, leaving only visions of her Elvin stallion making love to her, and she barely had enough concentration to keep her thoughts blocked from him.

Her quim grew wet at the memories of Jalen fucking her, and she nearly groaned aloud. The first time she had seen his cock, she couldn’t believe how huge it was, nearly twice the size of Stefan’s—and she had thought Stefan’s to be large.

Jalen reached for the vial he had set beside her on the *krstn*. She heard the soft pop of the cork, and then shivered again as she felt warm oil being poured onto her spine. Scents of mint and cedar met her

nose, serving to further relax her. He set the corked vial back onto the blanket, and then began massaging her back.

“Mmmmm,” she moaned as his large hands worked her muscles. “By all the gods that feels wonderful.”

Your skin is softer than Faerie silk, he murmured in her mind. *Queen Anistana herself would be envious.*

Closing her eyes, she turned her head to the side and sighed with pleasure from the incredible massage. “How do you always know the very moment when I’m not guarding my thoughts?”

You are my heartmate. His fingers worked the muscles in her shoulders. *I shall always be aware of your openness to me. And one day you will not feel the need to block my entrance to your mind.*

Her entire being was so relaxed that it took her a moment to process what he had said. She tensed and her eyes popped open. “Heartmate? What are you talking about?”

“Shhh, *mi enchantrei.*” He deepened the massage and she couldn’t help but melt into the feel of his fingers.

Yet a part of her recalled Jalen’s possessiveness during their lovemaking, and his demands that she belonged to him for eternity. Had he been serious? Did he think he *owned* her? Or had it been play, like Stefan and Vay?

Jalen took that moment to ease down her body and press her thighs apart. He knelt between her splayed legs and rubbed her buttocks, moving lower and lower ‘til his hands neared her woman’s curls. All she could think about at that point was how much she wanted him to thrust his huge cock deep inside her.

Moisture flooded her channel and she arched her hips, begging for his touch. The Elvin devil ignored her needy moans and continued his massage. “Patience, my love,” he murmured as he slowly worked the muscles of one leg, down to her calf and ankle.

To Hades with patience! Ranelle’s entire body felt alive and on fire. All tiredness and aches had vanished, replaced with energy and vitality. Her passion was at such an extreme level that she thought she would reach orgasm without him even touching her between her thighs.

“The *lonoi* will vanquish any aches.” Jalen moved to her other leg and began administering his magical hands to its muscles. “And ‘twill keep your body warm for hours yet to come.”

“I want your cock inside me, Jalen.” Ranelle moaned as his hands returned to her buttocks. “Fuck me *now.*”

The maddening man gave a low laugh as he eased his hands up her backside. “You are a lusty one, my Elvin Princess.”

Elvin Princess? She opened her mouth to ask why he called her that, but moaned instead when she felt his hot tongue on her buttocks and the gentle nip of his teeth. His long hair brushed her backside as he swirled his tongue along each cheek, and she grew even wetter for him.

“Get on your knees,” he murmured as he moved back.

Finally. She rose up on all fours. But instead of feeling the penetration of his cock, the next thing she knew his head was beneath her, between her thighs. His tongue flicked at her woman's pearl, and she almost collapsed on his face from the sheer pleasure of his stroke.

Jalen's finger thrust in and out of her wet entrance while his tongue licked her, and one of his hands gripped her hips. She ground her sex into his face while she watched the waves pound the shore. Breasts swaying in the cool morning air, her nipples hard and aching, Ranelle rocked to and fro, fucking his face and seeking release from the sweet torture.

"Yes!" she cried. "Right there. Gods, yes!"

The *enrli* at her forehead and mound throbbed, sending burning pleasure throughout her body. The beginnings of her orgasm trickled through her, growing and growing 'til it burst throughout her in a flood of sensation.

Ranelle cried out, her shout echoing against the rock in the overhang. Even as her limbs refused to bear her weight any longer, Jalen was out from beneath her, his hands gripping her hips. In a smooth movement he had her on her back, his muscled body between her thighs, his cock pressed to her belly.

His jaw was clenched, his eyes glittering sapphires, as he stared down at her. Muscles in his arms bulged as he propped himself above her, as though he fought wild urges rising within him.

Jalen's lips came down hard upon Ranelle's, his tongue plunging inside her mouth, filling her with the taste of herself and his masculine flavor. A heated groan rumbled through him and he clenched his fists in her hair, holding her hard against the *krstn*.

His intensity frightened her, yet excited her all at the same time. For a man who always seemed in control, this explosion of carnal passion was incredibly erotic and arousing.

Ranelle dug the nails of one hand into his thigh, needing to hang on for dear life as he ravaged her mouth. She reached between their bodies, grabbed his cock and brought it to her drenched folds.

Jalen tore his mouth from hers, his eyes wild with lust.

"Fuck me, Jalen. *Please*, " she begged.

He hooked his arms under her knees, raising her hips off the blanket and opening her wide to him. With one long thrust, he immersed his cock inside her waiting core, causing Ranelle to cry out from the mixture of pain and pleasure.

She couldn't take her eyes off his face as he pounded into her. Sweat glistened upon his forehead, his pulsating *enrli* sparkling in dawn's growing light.

This time Ranelle's orgasm took her by surprise, crashing into her like the tide. But still Jalen thrust in and out of her, drawing out her climax 'til it built to another and another.

With her third scream of pleasure, she raked her nails across his back. Jalen shouted and she felt his body tense and his cock pulsate inside her as he released his seed into her quim. His release was hard and powerful, and she could feel his hot semen flooding her womb.

Jalen slowed his thrusts, emptying himself into her. Yet he didn't stop. He continued moving in and out, building up speed again. Sweat rolled down his face and covered his body. His relentless plunging caused her to climax a fifth and sixth time.

As she reached yet another peak, Jalen pressed the *enrli* on his forehead to hers. Silvery blue light blinded her as her orgasm flooded her entire being. Distantly she heard his yell from his own release, and felt his thrusts slow 'til he collapsed atop her.

Exhaustion claimed Ranelle, overcoming her so swiftly that in the next instant she slid into the deepest of sleeps.

Chapter Eight

Shock coursed Jalen's being as he rolled off Ranelle and onto the *krstn*. His breathing came ragged and fast, his cock as hard as *smishnui* wood, his desire barely sated. If she had not fallen asleep, he surely would have taken her again and again.

Jalen's muscles trembled as he drew Ranelle within his embrace and stared into the morning sky. The sea shimmered with golden light, the horizon streaked with the oranges, purples and pinks of dawn.

Ranelle's breathing had already deepened in her exhausted slumber, her lashes dark crescents against her pale skin. Her sweet essence and the smells of sex and sweat clung to their skin, overwhelming his senses and causing another bolt of lust to surge through his cock.

By all the goddess's gifts, what was happening to him? *Never* had he lost control. Never had he felt the urge to rut like a wild stag at mating time.

A faint tinkling echoed in the overhang. His sensitive ears caught something on the wind—a sound as fair as chimes stirred by a breeze...like laughter. A soft feminine sound, a mischievous giggle.

Nay. It could not be. They were yet a hundred yards from Wilding Wood. Surely the Faeries would not stray so far from Astral?

Jalen reached over Ranelle's sleeping form, ran his hand over the *krstn*, and then looked at his fingertips. Gold dust sparkled on each of his fingers and he couldn't keep a slight groan from escaping his throat.

Anistana.

It had been too much to hope they would have safe passage through her wood. Now he had to determine some way to appease her while getting Ranelle safely to Seraphine. His last encounter with the

wily Faerie Queen had not gone particularly well, and he was certain she had not forgotten. And without doubt she would seek revenge in her own devious way.

He fought the raging lust in his body caused by Faerie magic, tempering it with all his will. No longer in the throws of sexual passion, Jalen was able to calm his body and fight the effects of Anistana's enchanted dust. He had seen it used only once before, and that had been a time long ago. His brother-at-arms still carried the scar of that rendezvous with Anistana.

With a heavy sigh, Jalen brought Ranelle tighter into his embrace. She stirred and murmured, "Tierra," her brow furrowed and her voice thick with sleep. He reached into her thoughts, through the guard she had dropped in her slumber, and saw that she dreamed of her redheaded heart-sister—who was entirely naked.

Jalen had seen Tierra many times in Fiorn when he had shadowed Ranelle, but this time there was something oddly familiar about her. As though she reminded him of someone else.

Nay, 'tis impossible.

Frowning, Jalen withdrew, turning his attention toward the surging tide and the sound of seagulls seeking their morning repast. He would allow Ranelle to sleep only a bit longer, and then 'twould be necessary to wake her and prepare for their journey to Seraphine...

And face what might come with the Queen of Faerie.

* * * * *

Tierra bolted through the wood, her heart pounding, blood rushing in her ears, and her lungs burning. She dodged through thick pine, oak and bluewood trees, and hurtled over fallen logs. Branches scratched her face, poked her naked breasts and jabbed at her bare thighs, but she ignored the discomfort.

Behind her the crashing came closer and closer as the warrior drew near.

He was surely furious at what she'd done.

She had to escape him!

He would not harm her, despite his dark and arrogant nature. Of that Tierra felt certain. Mostly. And she could still feel the fire of his touch upon her skin.

Gods, but he was an incredible lover. And an incredibly stupid brute.

A madman.

Low branches snagged her ankle, and she stumbled, barely catching herself before she fell. A surge of renewed energy rushed through her body, giving her the strength to go on.

If she could find a place to hide, she could escape the barbarian and whatever punishment he would exact.

She scrambled between a pair of granite boulders and found herself in an enormous clearing filled with an odd blue mist.

Damn. No place to hide!

Hair on the back of her neck prickled and she knew the warrior was near. She sprinted toward thick bushes to her left. The second she moved she was certain she had felt fingers scrape her bare back.

His fingers. Rigid and cold with anger.

Terror and excitement added strength to Tierra's flight. She dove into the strange mist, toward a gap between the bushes, and began scrambling through on her hands and knees.

What if he caught her here? Took her now, like some wild pack dog, howling before moonchange.

The thought infuriated and thrilled her.

Hands grabbed her hips and yanked her back against a solid male form—as naked as she was.

“No!” Ranelle screamed and fought against her bonds. “Let me go,” she cried as she thrashed and tried to escape.

“Ranelle!” A familiar voice pierced her consciousness. “’Twas a dream, *mi enchantrei*. Only a dream.”

Jalen.

She stilled and focused on the face over hers. Jalen, her Elvin god, held her close, cradling her, his naked skin pressed to hers. She could sense him drawing away the fear of her dream, but her skin still prickled as though warning her.

Blinking away the light, she realized it was now early morning, the sun warming the small cove they were nestled in.

“You are safe,” Jalen murmured and brushed his lips across the *enrli* at her forehead.

The dream came back to Ranelle as vivid as one of her visions. “Tierra. I must find her. She is in unspeakable danger.”

“Your friend will be fine.” Jalen stroked Ranelle's face with his fingertips, his touch designed to soothe.

But she did not want to be comforted. She wanted—*needed*—to help her heart-sister.

“No.” Ranelle pushed her way out of his arms and scrambled to her feet. “I will not stand by and wait for Tierra to be harmed.”

A perplexed frown crossed Jalen's handsome face as she started pulling on her breeches. In an effortless movement he rose and captured her shoulders with his large hands, molding his powerful naked body to her smaller form. “Trust me in this. Tierra must meet her own destiny.”

Anger flared through Ranelle, as quick and furious as a summer thunderstorm. “I would not have such a

vision if my help was not needed!” She yanked herself away from his grasp, scooped her tunic off the edge of the *krstn*, and pulled it over her head. “Tierra and Liana are the only family I have ever known, and I would give my life for them both.”

“Nay.” Jalen’s features became as hard as sculpted marble. “You will *not* go.”

“Ha!” Ranelle thrust one foot into a boot, and then her other. When she was finished she straightened and glared up at Jalen. “You are not my master. You do not own me and you do not dictate what I may or may not do.”

“You are my heartmate, Ranelle.” His voice was calm and filled with self-assurance. “We have been bound together by the laws of the Seraphine Elves and of the goddess herself.”

An odd chill crept over Ranelle and gooseflesh sprouted on her skin as she stared at Jalen. “What in Hades are you talking about?”

“The *enrli* that is now a permanent part of you, and the ceremony... you are bound to me.” He sighed as Ranelle’s jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide. “The ritual I performed makes you, as humans would say, my wife.”

“*What?*” Ranelle shrieked and scrubbed at the *enrli* on her forehead with her tunic sleeve. “Are you saying this is permanent? And that you think I’m *married* to you?”

He shrugged. “Aye.”

She marched up to him and thumped his chest with her forefinger. “How *daire* you perform this—this *ceremony* without my consent?”

“Because you are my heartmate,” he said as though that was the most logical answer on all of Dair. An almost amused expression crossed his face, infuriating her further. “You and I are joined for eternity.”

“You *arrogant*, *Elvinbastard*.” Ranelle’s thoughts spun as she stared up at him, unable to believe his audacity. “I cannot believe I actually *trusted* you.”

She placed her palms to his bare chest and shoved him away, walking backwards out of the cove. Sand and shale crunched beneath her boots as she put a few steps distance between them. There was no doubt in her mind what she was going to do now.

Ranelle clenched her fists. “I’ll show you *exactly* how I feel about this *marriage*.”

At the same moment she turned away from him, she willed herself to *nordai* form. The air shimmered around her and she heard Jalen’s shout of surprise. She felt his fingers brush her tail feathers as she took to the sky and sped toward Wilding Wood.

“Not the wood!” Jalen shouted, running after Ranelle’s raven form. “‘Tis dangerous. Stay away from Wilding Wood!” But even as he sprinted up the sandy hillside, still naked, he knew he would never get to her in time.

He reached the top of the rise and watched her fly into the blue mist of the wood—and vanish.

Goddess help the foolish woman.

The *enrli* burned at his forehead and above his cock, telling him his heartmate traveled farther yet. The fire in the symbols would only become worse... 'til he and Ranelle were reunited.

Feeling an odd numbness in his mind, Jalen jogged back to the cove. He quickly dressed in his tunic, boots and breeches, and gathered his belongings. After he shook the Faerie dust from the *krstn*, he folded it and tucked it away within the pouch secured at his waist. His heart ached to be with Ranelle, and every second they were apart was far too long.

It seemed overlong, yet it was only a matter of minutes before he had slung his bow and quiver over his shoulder and sprinted back toward the wood. All the while he wondered what had gone wrong between him and his heartmate. He had done what was best for them both by binding her to him.

Was it possible he had erred in judgment?

Should he have consulted her first?

That was certainly not the Elvin way. But, then, Ranelle was not Elvin. She hadn't even been raised with the nordain customs. Human relationships were her only reference point.

Damn.

Jalen, who had never experienced doubt of any kind before Ranelle, was now certain the maid had more than bewitched him. She was making him daft.

And he could only imagine what her reaction would be once she learned she was with child. The Faeries' dust was potent indeed, and when used between heartmates, a child was always conceived.

That was not my fault. I did not know—yet, for certain, Anistana will make sure to convince Ranelle I did.

Goddess bless!

He did not pause when he reached the mist, plunging into the thick shroud and the darkness of the forest. The mist's cool tendrils glowed as it snaked around him, clinging to him as he ran through bluewood, oak and *hynling* trees.

At home in any forest, Jalen was naught but a spirit in the wood, undetectable by all but the Queen of Faerie. The enchantress had the power to sense any being that entered her wood, whether they entered willing or not.

The smell of *hynling* sap was pungent, mixing with the dank forest smells of rotting wood and leaves, and rich loam. The sap glittered a brilliant gold as it snaked down the *hynling* trunks, offering some light to see by in the dark forest. His gut clenched as he prayed to the goddess that Ranelle would avoid the sap, and all other dangers within Wilding Wood.

It was unlikely Ranelle would escape Anistana—his only hope was that once his heartmate was captured, that the Faerie Queen would see it fit to allow Jalen entrance to Astral, her magical realm.

Considering the grudge she held against him, that was high hopes indeed.

Jalen pressed forward toward Astral, his boots not making a sound as he slipped through the forest. In the distance he heard the soft cry of the *krakilee* and the flutter of *perna* in the branches above.

He came upon a unicorn and her foal drinking from a crystal stream, their golden horns dipped into the cool water. The unicorns' hides shimmered in the glow of the *hynling* sap, adding to their mystical appearance. Even the keen senses of the unicorn mare did not detect Jalen's passage and he continued on through the wood.

Hisenrli burned, but he paid little attention to the pain, his thoughts focused on reaching Ranelle. He did not fear for her life—even Anistana would not stoop so low as to kill another being. As long as Ranelle was in Astral she would be safe... the trick would be in how he was going to retrieve her.

And in what condition she would be in, once the Faeries had their way with her.

Anger added speed to Ranelle's flight as she left Jalen. She heard his shouts behind her, but damned if she was going to listen to another word he said. With an angry pump of her wings, she headed straight for Wilding Wood. There she could hide 'til she determined what course of action to take next.

How *daire* the bastard bind her to him? She was not a possession. A piece of chattel that he could do with as he pleased. She barely knew the man and he had wedded her without her knowledge or consent!

Blue mist swirled and beckoned to Ranelle as she neared the forest—not unlike the mist she had seen in her dream of Tierra. And blue trees... *bluewood* Tierra had called them.

Ranelle's blood raced as fury continued to churn within her belly. She flew into the mist, dodging branches, flying high and then low, deeper into the wood. It was dark, yet a glow penetrated the forest, allowing her to see.

She alighted on the branch of an ancient bluewood tree, and tried to get her bearings—and realized at once she had made a grave error in entering the forest. Her senses screamed at her to turn around and leave the wood, but she was disoriented. No matter which direction she looked, she could not determine which way she had come.

Below her a stream trickled through a small clearing, blue mist swirling through the shrubbery, writhing as though the mist was alive. Tendrils of it snaked up the bluewood and around her raven's body, like cold bands of silk.

A sharp aroma mixed with rich forest smells of leaves, earth, and juniper. She tried to catch her breath as she took in more of her surroundings—and then she saw where the golden glow was coming from.

Tingling sensations erupted within Ranelle and her feathers puffed up. *Hynling* sap.

A distant memory nudged at her consciousness...

"Pretty, Zjemma." The toddler pointed her chubby finger toward the picture of the tree and the river of gold flowing down its trunk, then looked up at her zjemma, her mother. "Pretty."

"Yes, Carilee." The woman's sweet face grew sober as she stroked the toddler's brown curls. "But oft is beauty not what it seems. You must always beware."

Carilee scrunched up her small face and looked up at her mother. “Bee-ware?”

Zjemma placed her hand over the toddler’s, touching the picture that immediately emitted a pungent scent. “This is a hynling tree. Remember its smell and what it looks like. Hynling sap is dangerous to the Nordain. If your feathers or skin come in contact with the sap, it will trap you...and you will be forever frozen within it.”

Ranelle shivered and ruffled her feathers as the vision faded from her mind. *Zjemma* and Carilee. Those names...

An eerie cry echoed through the wood, scratching through her soul, and Ranelle began to wish that she was back safe with Jalen. That she could feel his kisses on her breasts, his tongue laving her nipples, and his cock plunging into her as he fucked her senseless.

No. How could she even think such a thing after what the bastard had done?

Yet she missed him so badly her heart ached and her body burned. Even in her raven form she could feel the *enrli*, as though they were seared into the flesh of her mound and her forehead, the wounds yet unhealed.

Well, no matter that she desired Jalen. No matter that she missed him as though a piece of herself was gone. She had to teach the man a lesson—he could not make decisions for her, and he must consult her on anything that would involve her.

But what if she never saw him again? What if she became lost forever in the wood, or got caught in the *hynling sap*?

The thoughts chilled her, further drawing away the heat of her ire. By fleeing him in anger, without discussing her feelings with him, had she wronged him as much as she had felt that he had wronged her?

A slight motion caught her eye, and the quietest of sounds met her sharpened raven hearing. Ranelle went rigid with wonder, all other thoughts vanishing for the moment.

Two beautiful creatures strolled from out of the mist—they looked like miniature horses, only far more delicate. Their coats shimmered like Mairi pearls, and they each had a single golden horn upon their foreheads that sparkled with every movement they made.

They must be the legendary unicorns of Wilding Wood.

Breathless, she watched them enter the glade.

And then her senses screamed that danger approached.

Before she had time to take flight, small hands grabbed Ranelle’s raven’s body from behind. Fingers pinched her beak shut.

Terror seared her, but she was bound so tight within the incredibly strong hands that she could not move or make a sound.

The heady perfume of roses and lilies enveloped Ranelle and her senses began to spin. She heard the

light tinkling of laughter...and then her world went dark.

Chapter Nine

Blue mist twisted around Ranelle's body as she blinked away the heaviness in her lids. She was lying on her back, staring up at a canopy of branches. The trees were different than any she recalled seeing before, their leaves sparkling like silver medallions fluttering in a light wind. Sweet perfume of rose petals and lilies teased her senses, reminding her of...what?

It seemed as though the mist was even a fog in her mind. A throbbing sensation pulsed at her forehead and on the mound between her thighs as she frowned in concentration. Like a slow trail of honey being poured from a jar, her memories returned—and her heart began to race.

She had fled Jalen, into Wilding Wood. And as she rested upon a blue tree's branch in nordai form...hands had grabbed her from behind...and she had smelled roses and lilies.

With a start, Ranelle pushed herself up so that she was sitting—and realized she was completely naked.

On a golden bed that was strewn with crimson rose petals.

In the middle of the forest.

Even though she was outside this time, the scene was eerily familiar. She swallowed down her rising fear as she wondered if Zanden had captured her again.

Tinkling laughter met Ranelle's ears and gooseflesh rose along her skin. The sound was musical, like water trickling over rocks.

She tried to slide off the bed, but the mist wrapped around her, silken bonds that pulled her onto her back again. Before she had a chance to struggle, her ankles and wrists were bound to the four golden bedposts, her arms stretched wide and her legs splayed leaving her naked body open and vulnerable.

Ranelle fought against the magical bonds, but the scent of roses and lilies intensified, and her body relaxed against her will.

Mist brushed her nipples, like Jalen's sensual caress, making her peaks hard and aching. While the blue haze fondled her breasts, a finger of the mist slid between her thighs and stroked her clit, causing her to moan. Again she tried to struggle, but the bonds held tight.

Rose petals felt like satin against her back as she wriggled on the bed—trying to get away from the erotic mist, yet pushing into it at the same time. The finger of mist continued its strokes on her clit as the sensual touching intensified on her nipples. A larger finger appeared, slid between her thighs and teased the opening of her quim.

No. Her panic at being entered by anything or anyone but Jalen overrode the power of the rose petal drug. No matter that it was only mist and not an actual being—only Jalen would now do.

The mist finger hesitated, and then joined the other finger that stroked her clit.

Ranelle writhed beneath the touch of the magical haze that would not stop its erotic torture. Her vision blurred and perspiration coated her body as she neared the pinnacle—

The mist vanished.

Ranelle almost screamed from the need for orgasm—regardless of the fact that she had been fighting against the lewd mist only moments before.

At the same time, she realized she had been completely released from her bonds. Sweat glistened on her skin as she bent her legs and squeezed her knees together, as though it might relieve the ache in her quim. But she was hot and wet, and so needy for Jalen's cock.

Ranelle tried to sit up, yet found she could not. She clenched her hands in the satin bed sheet, crushing rose petals in her fists.

“What is this madness?” she asked out loud, her voice echoing in the enormous space—as though her words bounced off of crystal walls.

Another giggle floated on the mist, an eerie yet intriguing sound.

Ranelle frowned and gripped the bed sheet tighter. “Who are you?”

Silver sparkles flashed before her eyes, and then a slender form wavered—a part of the blue mist, yet not.

The intensity of the silver light grew and Ranelle shielded her eyes.

When she could bear the brightness, Ranelle dropped her hand and gaped at the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

The naked woman was petite as Liana and Tierra. She had long hair that tumbled past her buttocks, the same shade of red as Tierra's, and the mound between her thighs was shaved bare. Her nipples were large, her breasts high and firm. Her skin was flawless, her eyes like sparkling emeralds. The Faerie's ears looked like small shells, going up to a point, but ridged along the back, and her eyes were shaped like almonds.

But the most incredible feature of all was the pair of gossamer wings extending from her back. They rose up behind her, shimmering like sunshine on rippling water.

“You are Faerie,” Ranelle whispered as she finally found her voice.

Instead of answering, the Faerie woman moved within a hairsbreadth of Ranelle. The Faerie reached out with her delicate fingers and caressed Ranelle's nipple.

Ranelle gasped and would have drawn away, but her body seemed compelled to do otherwise. She

arched her back instead, pressing her breast against the Faerie's palm. The pressure to reach climax was so great within Ranelle that she trembled.

"So, this is the skin that even I would envy?" The woman's voice was sweet and melodious, reminding Ranelle of the laughter she had heard earlier.

Confused by the Faerie's words, Ranelle shook her head. "I—I don't know of what you speak."

The Faerie dipped her head toward Ranelle's breast, her fiery tresses falling forward and caressing Ranelle's skin in a silken sweep. "Do you taste as good as he believes?" the woman murmured and then flicked her tongue against Ranelle's nipple.

Ranelle cried out, her back arching even higher, as though being shoved from behind. The movement pushed her nipple more firmly into the Faerie's mouth. The feel of the woman's tongue and mouth was incredible, almost dizzying in its intensity.

"You do taste sweet," the Faerie murmured as she moved her mouth to Ranelle's other nipple. "Perhaps I should taste all of you."

Just the feel of the Faerie's lips and tongue was enough to draw Ranelle closer to climax.

But then the woman pulled away and studied Ranelle with wicked delight in her green gaze.

"Why are you doing this?" Ranelle asked in between deep gulps of air.

The Faerie smiled, the delight in her eyes turning into a hard glint. "Revenge."

"But I have done nothing to you." Ranelle frowned and shook her head. "I don't even know who you are."

Laughter bubbled out of the Faerie and she covered her mouth with her dainty fingers. Her smile grew positively devious as she moved her hand from her mouth to Ranelle's tresses.

"Prince Jalen told you naught of me?" the woman asked as she stroked Ranelle's hair away from her brow.

"Prince...Jalen?" A warning flare erupted in Ranelle's senses.

"This is precious." The Faerie giggled. "You have been bound to the Prince, and yet he did not explain his position among the Seraphine Elves? Ah, truly priceless, that is."

Ranelle narrowed her gaze. "Who...are...you?"

The Faerie trailed her fingers from Ranelle's hair, over one breast and the flat of Ranelle's belly towards her woman's curls. Bending down, the woman leaned so close that her hands and lips were but a fraction from Ranelle's slit. The Faerie's breath was warm on Ranelle's clit as she parted the wet folds with her fingers.

"Stop!" Ranelle gasped and tried to scoot away, but the mist wrapped around her so that she was unable to move. Ye gods how she needed to come—the Faerie was driving her mad.

"I am Anistana," the woman murmured and then smiled as confusion, then recognition filled Ranelle.

Swallowing hard, Ranelle said, "You are Queen."

"Aye." Anistana breathed in, as though savoring Ranelle's scent, then flicked her tongue over Ranelle's clit before adding, "I am Queen of Faerie and all of Wilding Wood."

* * * * *

The morn following Ranelle's flight from him, Jalen neared Astral. The throbbing at his *enrli* lessened, and he was even more certain that Ranelle was being held within the magical realm. While he traveled, the only sounds were the gentle calls of the elusive *krakilee*, along with the rush of wind through pine and *hynling* trees.

With grim determination he passed by the Faeries' many traps for the unwary, silently wending his way through the mist 'til he reached the barrier to Anistana's realm.

Invisible to all but faire folke, the gates soared toward the upper reaches of the forest. A testament to the vanity of the Faerie Queen, Anistana's beautiful image was sculpted into the gates that were made of gold and littered with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and amethysts.

Jalen shook his head at the extravagance of Faeries. Elves believed that beauty was in the world around them, not in material possessions fabricated by humans or other beings. Elves lived as one with nature, communing with the goddess's gifts. It was a bone of contention between the two races, causing much friction between the faire folke.

He placed his hands on the mouth of Anistana's image. The lips moved beneath his fingers and it felt as though a tongue flicked against his palms.

Ah, Prince Jalen, the Faerie Queen's musical voice murmured in his mind. *Why have you dared to enter my realm?*

Jalen attempted to pull his hands away from the gate, but they were held fast by Anistana's magic. He did not have to look around him to know that he would not see the Faerie. *You know well why I am here, your Majesty*, he replied.

Your Majesty, is it? Anistana giggled and he could picture the wicked mirth in her emerald eyes. *When I last saw you and sucked the seed from your cock, you did not stand on such formalities.*

Taking a deep breath, Jalen struggled to find words that would appease the fickle Queen. *I have come for my heartmate, Ranelle. Please allow me entrance or bring her to me so that we may return to Seraphine.*

Laughter and blue mist swirled around Jalen, along with the scents of roses and lilies. He sighed. Of course it had been too much to hope for, that Anistana would make this easy. He steeled himself for what he knew would come next.

Heartmate, you say? The Queen's tone held amusement and mischief as the mist pulled at the ties fastening Jalen's breeches, and they dropped to his feet. *You mean the fair Nordain maid whose*

delicious nectar I have sampled? Mist rose up and passed across his lips, and he swore he smelled and tasted Ranelle's sex. Anistana's voice was throaty as she added, *Perhaps I should drink your seed and compare her taste with yours.*

Mist wrapped around Jalen's cock and he barely held back a groan as it began working his shaft. The mist felt warm and wet like Ranelle's sweet mouth. In the next instant all his clothing and weapons vanished, leaving him naked and vulnerable at the entrance to Anistana's realm. His hands were still bound to the gates, the magical mist suckling his cock.

How does it feel? Anistana sounded playful and teasing, yet with a hard edge to her words. *Do you not remember the times we fucked beneath the mishnui? When I took you deep within my quim, and your brother-at-arms entered my nether hole?*

Similar to the ways of the Faeries and the Nordain, in the world of the Seraphine Elves, sex between multiple partners, men and women, and those of the same gender, was an enjoyable aspect of their culture. Such pleasures were gifts of the goddess, and to deny one's sexuality was unheard of. Once an Elvin man found his heartmate, as a couple they might share pleasures with others. However, the man would only penetrate his heartmate's quim, and she would only allow his cock in her core.

Despite the sexual freedom of his culture, Jalen desired pleasure from no one but his heartmate. But he was powerless to stop his cock from hardening to its full length as the mist continued its erotic assault.

Ah, yes, Anistana murmured. *Perhaps you and I shall both fuck the sweet Nordain maid at once. Or mayhap I will allow you to watch me lick Ranelle's slit, bringing her to climax while Ibella suckles her breasts and your cock spills its seed into Elinni's mouth.* The Faerie Queen giggled. *You do remember the nights and days you fucked us all time after time, do you not?*

Stop this now, Jalen replied, even though he knew she would ignore his request.

I think not, her voice whispered in his head while visions of their past sexual encounters began to fill his mind as the Faerie Queen forced them upon him.

Jalen gritted his teeth as the pressure built within him, stroke after stroke, sucking and licking, drawing him closer to climax. He pushed away the images of the times spent fucking Anistana and the Faeries Elinni and Ibella, and instead concentrated on Ranelle's beautiful face and the feel of being buried inside her hot core.

Anistana giggled again. *I shall rather enjoy this revenge.*

The sensations stopped abruptly, and Jalen bit back another groan. His hands were released from Astral's golden doors, and without looking he knew he was surrounded by a guard of four Faeries. He straightened and took a deep breath, using his rigid control to rein in his body's desires.

"Enough." Jalen clenched his fists at his sides. "Take me to my heartmate."

Faerie laughter tickled his ears as the doors swung open, and the exotic scents of Faerie incense washed over him. Anistana's guard followed close behind as Jalen strode ahead, comfortable in his nakedness, through the gate and into Astral's grand entryway.

Silver leaves of *mishnui* glittered overhead, making a soft musical sound. Gold and crystal couches, chairs and tables furnished Anistana's opulent crystal-walled palace. Rose petals littered the marble floor,

and with every step Jalen took, their sweet scent was released into the air.

The smooth marble was cool beneath his bare feet as he strode forward, past countless doorways and rooms, 'til he reached the doors to Anistana's private chambers. As he paused before the entrance, the pain in his *enrli* all but vanished, replaced by a warming sensation, assuring him that Ranelle was in the Queen's bedchamber.

Anistana's guard positioned themselves at the entrance, two on either side. Jalen paid them little heed as he shoved open the doors and walked through, the doors making no sound as they closed behind him.

Upon the Faerie Queen's bed lay his heartmate, her eyes closed but her face tense as though in frustration. Her mahogany tresses spilled across the golden bedcovers, and his cock became so hard he thought he might die if he did not fuck her. Ranelle's legs and arms were splayed, showing her beautiful quim and her pink clit. And goddess above, her nipples were tight buds, calling for him to claim them with his hot mouth.

Realization trickled through him that the damn mist bound his love to the bedposts. A feral growl rumbled deep in Jalen's throat and he strode across the chamber to where she lay—

And struck something. An invisible wall.

Jalen fought to get through the wall to his sleeping Princess, slamming his fists against it, but it was to no avail.

"By the goddess, Anistana!" he shouted, his voice hoarse with fury. "Let me through!"

The Faerie Queen's laughter came from behind him, and he whirled to face the redheaded enchantress.

She gave her wings a lazy flap and rose into the air, moving closer to Jalen. "When I have had my way with you both, perhaps then I will allow you to be together again." Her emerald eyes sparkled with mirth as she added, "That is, if it suits me."

And then the Faerie bitch vanished.

Chapter Ten

Ranelle opened her eyes to stare at the silver leaves above as she shifted on the bed, testing her bonds. Gods but she was going to lose her mind if Jalen did not come to her soon. If *she* did not come soon. Had her hands been free, she would have stroked her clit to bring about some relief.

Prickling erupted at Ranelle's forehead and her mound at the same time her senses stirred.

She turned her head and saw her lover across the room. Fierce joy rose within her breast as she saw his

naked splendor, and her quim grew wet at the sight of his enormous cock.

Angry. Yes. I am supposed to be angry with him...

And I am.

Was.

Gods. What do I feel for him? Besides the unquenchable desire to feel his flesh on mine?

“Jalen!” Ranelle pulled against her bonds, but she was held fast.

Why did he stand across the room, watching her with a tight expression on his handsome face, rather than coming to her? Was he so furious with her for running away?

Arrogant Elvin bastard. He should have known she would not appreciate a forced marriage.

Jalen put his hands up and braced them on the air, and she realized an invisible wall kept them apart. His lips moved, yet she could hear naught but the tinkling of silvery leaves above the bed.

But then he gave her a wry smile, and his deep voice entered her thoughts. Ranelle, mi enchantrei. ‘Tis my greatest joy to see you—but there is peril here. No matter what, do not resist the Queen in her own realm.

“A pity he has chosen to settle his affection on you.” Anistana’s voice startled Ranelle, and she snapped her gaze to where the naked Faerie Queen now stood, at the foot of the bed. “He was such a good fuck.”

“Cease this torture.” Ranelle’s cheeks burned at the realization the Faerie had enjoyed Jalen’s cock in the past, but she refused to acknowledge her jealousy to the Queen. “Free us. Now.”

The flutter of the Faerie’s wings pushed the scent of roses over Ranelle. Anistana moved so close that Ranelle felt warmth radiating from the Queen as she leaned over Ranelle’s breasts. Ranelle’s nipples hardened and her quim ached from the sensual feel of the Faerie’s breath upon her skin.

Anistana glanced at Jalen and smiled when she saw desire rise in his face. “Amazing, is it not? The man has lost his head over a Nordain maid.”

“He rejected you.” Ranelle’s voice was calm as everything clicked into place. “That is why you seek revenge.”

Anistana’s wings twitched and her smile turned into a frown as her gaze returned to Ranelle. “We would have ruled well together, Jalen and I. Both realms, Astral and Seraphine. But he chose to decline my offer to join our worlds.”

Mischief returned to the Faerie’s expression and then she vanished.

Only to appear again on the bed, on her hands and knees, between Ranelle’s legs. Her long auburn hair tickled Ranelle’s thighs and her emerald eyes filled with mirth.

“No.” Ranelle’s refusal was strong, but Anistana only laughed, lowered her head, and stroked Ranelle’s

clit with her tongue.

Intense sensation flooded Ranelle, the mist raising her buttocks from the bed and forcing her quim to the Faerie's teasing tongue. Ranelle was torn between being incredibly aroused by Anistana's mouth, and feeling as though she betrayed Jalen by not struggling against her bonds.

Do not resist the Queen...

Jalen's words echoed in her mind. He must have known something like this would happen. It was near impossible for a human—or a Nordain—to resist Faeries. Or Elves, for that matter.

A part of her thought of trying to use her magic to push the Queen away, yet another part knew it would not work—because the Queen was too powerful.

And because Ranelle desired the exquisite feelings Anistana stirred within her as Jalen watched.

Ranelle cried out at the pleasure of the Faerie's touch and looked at Jalen on the other side of the invisible wall. A pained expression crossed his handsome face as he stared—his look was one of fury at not being able to join with her, and incredible lust at seeing her being pleased by the Queen. His cock jerked as though ready to spurt its seed.

Relax, Jalen's husky voice entered her mind again. *Enjoy. And rest assured, I will enjoy watching this if I know you feel only pleasure.*

Gasping, Ranelle nodded.

Anistana's tongue swirled and teased, just enough stroking and pressure to bring Ranelle close to climax before pulling away and starting the whole process over again. The Faerie was so talented, and Ranelle was so aroused, her body screamed for release.

Ranelle looked across the room to her heartmate. "Please allow Jalen to pass through the wall."

The Faerie Queen only laughed. "Watch as Elinni suckles him."

Silver sparkled in the air beside Jalen, and then a dark Faerie appeared on her knees before him. She was naked and beautiful, with ruby lips, lovely breasts, skin like the night sky and gossamer wings of iridescent ebony.

Jalen tried to push himself away from the wall, his muscles bulging with effort, but his hands appeared to be stuck to its invisible surface. He shook his head as he looked down at the Faerie who reached out and grasped his cock, her fingers dark against his golden length. Her black hair shimmered like raven feathers as she leaned forward, her lips nearing his staff.

Even though she could not hear him, Ranelle saw Jalen's mouth move and she knew he was attempting to refuse the Faerie.

Yet Elinni ignored him and in the next moment, her tongue flicked out, licking Jalen's cock as he fought to free himself from his magical bonds. The Faerie slid her crimson lips over his staff 'til she had taken his full length.

Jealousy filled Ranelle, but she could scarce think with the sexual torture the Faerie Queen was inflicting

on them both. Her thoughts spun between intense arousal and desire to be with her man.

“Mayhap Ibella should join in Jalen’s pleasures, too.” Anistana gave Ranelle another wicked smile and more silver sparkles filled the air beside Jalen.

Another Faerie appeared, almost identical to Elinni—except she had no wings.

Elinni’s twin, Anistana murmured in Ranelle’s surprised thoughts. *Ibella was second-born. Second-born twins never have wings*

“Please.” Ranelle gasped for breath, her gaze moving from Jalen and the twins to the redheaded woman between her thighs. “Stop this insanity and set us free.”

“Why?” Anistana raised her head and licked Ranelle’s juices from her lips. “You do not enjoy my tongue upon your clit?”

Ranelle bit her lip, then nodded. “Yes, I do. But you are driving me fair out of my mind. “

“You ask that I set you free.” With a smile, Anistana trailed one finger along the *enrli* on Ranelle’s mound. “Why would you wish to leave the safety of my realm? Zanden seeks you, even as we speak.”

“No matter that we face certain danger. I only wish to be with Jalen.” Ranelle’s eyes met Anistana’s. “I beg of you.”

“Mayhap...” The Faerie Queen lowered her lids as her gaze flicked from Ranelle to Jalen, and back again. “If the Prince licks Ibella’s quim and fucks Elinni while you watch, then you both may leave Astral.”

“What?” Ranelle tried to sit up and screamed in frustration as the bonds held her tight. “No!”

Anistana blinked and gave Ranelle a lazy smile as she trailed one finger down the inside of Ranelle’s thigh. “You came here enraged with Jalen, fleeing his affections, and now you claim him? Why?”

“Because Jalen is *mine*,” Ranelle shouted as she glared at the Queen. “And I love him!”

Mirth sparkled in Anistana’s emerald eyes as she raised herself up and then forward ‘til she straddled Ranelle. The Queen’s mound was shaved, her quim soft as silk as it brushed over Ranelle’s belly.

“You truly love the Prince?” Anistana pressed close, her perfume of rose petals invading Ranelle’s senses. The Queen brushed her lips over Ranelle’s and whispered, “That is all I needed to hear.”

And the witch vanished.

Jalen fought to free himself, even as the beautiful and talented Elinni wrapped her slender fingers around his cock. He did not wish to hurt her, but if his feet hadn’t been magically fastened to the floor, he would have done what he could have, gentle or no, to push her away without harming her.

Elinni sighed and her lips brushed the head of his staff as she murmured, “How I have missed your fine cock.”

“Stop this at once,” he demanded through gritted teeth as the dark Faerie slid her mouth over his staff, and it was all he could do not to groan.

The Faerie only giggled, the hum of her laughter on his cock driving him closer to madness and the need to come. Her lily scent swirled around him as her almond-shaped amber eyes met his, and he saw mischief in their depths that near matched Anistana’s. She moved up and down his cock with her hot mouth and fingers while her free hand caressed his bollocks.

A groan escaped his lips as Elinni’s twin appeared beside him. Ibella smiled and ran her hands over Jalen’s chest. *It has been a long time since I have enjoyed your body*, the Faerie said in his mind.

His tortured gaze returned to Ranelle and the Faerie Queen, who had been licking Ranelle’s clit. His heartmate was struggling against her bonds and shouting at Anistana, and he wished he could hear her sweet voice.

And then her words rang out, as though to grant his wish.

“Because Jalen is *mine*,” Ranelle shouted, her face furious. “And I love him!”

Jalen’s heart filled near to bursting, and he almost came in Elinni’s mouth. A possessive growl rumbled deep in his throat as Anistana moved up Ranelle’s body and then kissed her.

Just as Jalen almost reached climax, Anistana, Elinni and Ibella vanished in so many silver sparkles, as did the invisible wall.

He stumbled forward, his hands and feet free of their bonds.

“Ranelle!” Jalen strode toward her, even as he shouted her name.

The surprise that had been on Ranelle’s face turned to joy as she scrambled from the bed and flung herself into Jalen’s arms. “Gods, how I missed you.”

“I, too, *mi enchantrei*.” He lifted her and kissed her delicious lips, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“Fuck me, Jalen.” Ranelle’s voice rose with urgency as she clung to him. “I shall die if your cock is not in me now.”

His eyes locked with hers, Jalen held Ranelle tight with one arm while he guided his cock into her soaked quim with his other hand.

Ranelle shrieked and came at once, her body shuddering with the force of her climax. Jalen pumped into her throbbing quim twice and his own orgasm burst through him like a massive wave pounding against a rocky shore. His cock jerked, shooting his seed deep within her womb.

“Again!” Ranelle demanded, the *enrli* at her forehead flaring brilliant silver and matching the intensity in her eyes. “Fuck me again.”

“Goddess, but you are the most beautiful of treasures.” In a quick motion, Jalen had Ranelle on the bed, face down on her belly.

She clenched the golden bed sheet in her fists and arched up her smooth buttocks. "I need you, Jalen!"

Grabbing her hips with his hands, he rammed his staff into her quim, her tight core gripping him as he fucked her. "Do not ever leave me again." His words were filled with all the true passion that had been missing in his life before he met Ranelle. "You are mine, *mi enchantrei*. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" She raised her head and pushed her buttocks toward him. "As you are mine."

"Aye. Forevermore." Powerful lust filled him, made stronger by his love for Ranelle, and her acknowledgement that they belonged to one another. He reached around her hips as he fucked her, and stroked her clit.

Ranelle screamed into the golden bed sheet, violent aftershocks of her orgasm causing her body to jerk while he continued to thrust in and out of her soaking core. A few more strokes and he climaxed, another powerful orgasm slamming into him with the force of a hurricane, and a bellow ripping from deep in his throat.

Jalen collapsed against Ranelle's backside, bracing himself enough that he did not pin her beneath his greater weight. Her breathing was ragged, matching his own, and her skin was as soaked with sweat as his.

Nuzzling her nape, he drank in her sweet scent of vanilla and spice, woman and sex. He withdrew his cock from her quim, and she moaned as though disappointed that he had left her. With gentle hands he turned her over and eased her onto the center of the bed and then lowered himself between her thighs and stared down at her precious face.

Tendrils of wet hair framed her delicate features, and she smiled as she slid her arms around his neck and pulled him close. "I love you, Jalen."

He brushed his lips over her glittering *enrli*. "I know."

"How?" Ranelle stilled, and he had to smile as he pulled back and saw her frown. "Have you been reading my thoughts again?"

Nay. Jalen propped his elbow on the mattress and rested his head in his hand as he traced lazy circles around one of Ranelle's nipples. *I heard you tell Anistana.*

"Oh." Her cheeks turned pink and she hesitated before asking, "And you—do you care for me?"

I love you with all my being, *mi enchantrei*. The thrill in his heart deepened as relief, then happiness filled Ranelle's expression.

"No more secrets, then." She slid her fingers into his sweat-dampened hair and drew his face closer to hers. "And no more making decisions that involve the both of us without consulting me first."

"For you, anything." He took possession of her lips in a gentle but demanding kiss, slowly increasing the pressure. His tongue fucked her mouth, and she squirmed beneath him, begging with her body for his cock. As much as he wanted to pleasure Ranelle by caressing every bit of her, he needed to be inside her quim more than anything.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he plunged into her hot core as his tongue thrust into her mouth. Passion and love for his heartmate near overwhelmed him as he fucked her.

As they both reached the pinnacle, Jalen broke their kiss and placed the *enrli* at his forehead to Ranelle's.

Their orgasms exploded as one. Brilliant flashes of color and light erupted in Jalen's mind. On and on the pleasure rippled through him, until it felt as though their bodies and minds had merged.

I love you, she told him in thought, and his heart almost burst at the knowledge that they had become one in all ways.

You are my treasure, *mi enchantrei*, he whispered in her mind. *My heart. My love.*

When the last fireworks faded into naught but a glimmer, Jalen rolled onto his back. He brought Ranelle with him so that she rested on top, his cock still buried deep within her core. Jalen sensed the moment she slid into a deep slumber, just before sleep claimed him.

* * * * *

Tiali, Ritt and Cind lay sprawled across the flagstone floor of Zanden's bedchamber, exhausted from the many times the Sorcerer had used their bodies. Countless times he had fucked the women, long after they had begged for rest. Yet even as they now slept, his cock throbbed with fury and desire. The room smelled of their cunt juices and his seed.

He would recover his destined wife, Liana, as well as the two other bitches who had escaped him, Ranelle and Tierra. Repeatedly he would fuck them, impregnating each with his seed. They would bear countless children for him, as had been prophesized in the Chronicles.

And damn all the gods, he would meet his destiny. He would rule Dair.

Zanden held the *hrichn* in his massive fist, the sacred metal orb, the tool that had been passed down from Sorcerer to Sorcerer. Voral, to whom Zanden had served his apprenticeship, had taught him well how to wield the *hrichn*, *and how to seek answers with the orb's powers.*

A furious scowl covered Zanden's face as he raised the *hrichn*. Purple light blazed from the orb, spattering across the bare stone wall of his bedchamber.

The vision showed Ranelle in a cave, flat on her back, the Elvin Prince between her thighs. The Prince drove his cock into Ranelle, taking the virginity that belonged to Zanden.

"How dare he steal what is mine!" His fine rein of control snapped, his sight turning blood red. In his rage he almost flung the *hrichn* across the room, which would have ended its centuries long existence. Instead he tossed the orb onto the cushions of his bed and strode to where Tiali lay flat on her belly on the cold stone floor, and knelt between her dark thighs.

With all his fury he grabbed the sleeping woman, lifting her by her hips and driving his massive cock into her quim. Tiali woke and cried out in pleasure while he fucked her cunt, bruising her soft flesh as he rammed himself into her. She liked it rough. His war-kitten. His wench who was always ready for a

good, hard fuck.

Why didn't his destined women understand the power and wonder of what he offered?

"Used or no, I will have Ranelle!" Zanden pounded harder into Tiali. "I will chain her and her bitch heart-sisters in the dungeon and fuck each of them as oft as I please."

The Sorcerer's voice grew even colder as he added, "And the Nordain and Elvin bastards who stole what belongs to me—each will die a most brutal and painful death."

Ranelle screamed and tried to claw her way from out of her prison. She was suffocating! She couldn't breathe, couldn't move.

Strong hands grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Ranelle!" Jalen's voice cut into her terrified mind.

Slowly her world came into focus and she realized that she was safe within Jalen's powerful embrace.

Safe for the moment.

But she had no doubt what her dream vision meant—Zanden was coming for them, and all their lives were in terrible danger.

Chapter Eleven

In her nordai form, Ranelle perched on Jalen's shoulder as he silently wended his way through the blue mist of Wilding Wood. Sap spilled down the *hynling* trunks in waterfalls of soft gold, the glow pervading the mist and lending a comforting yet ominous feel to the wood. The pungent scent of the *hynling* no longer disturbed her. It seemed to belong in these strange and wild woods.

She ruffled her raven's feathers as her thoughts turned to what Jalen had discussed with her earlier. Jalen had told her the most dangerous beings in the Wilding Woods were the Faeries, but other creatures lived there, too. As they moved through the forest, Jalen took care not to come too close to a sleeping lycidian dragon or *akrakilee* in the midst of hunting its daily meal.

Since leaving Astral that morn, Jalen and Ranelle had traveled through the wood for hours. Although Anistana had let the lovers be for the remainder of their stay, she had insisted they remain in the Faerie realm 'til after moonchange, and they had ended up spending nearly a week in Astral. Both Ranelle and Jalen had argued that it would be safer to travel during the time when the Sorcerer would be relegated to his nordai form, but Anistana would have none of it.

Jalen moved through the wood, his blonde hair flowing over Ranelle as she burrowed close to his neck. Ruffling her feathers, she sought the warmth that radiated from him to chase away the chill of her fear of the Sorcerer.

During the past few days—while the moon changed from lavender to brilliant purple, and faded to light amethyst—Ranelle had experienced a deep stirring within her soul. A wild and restless feeling had consumed her. As though she needed to be with other Nordain women, protecting their kingdom and their children.

Today was the last day of moonchange. She felt it in her heart and soul. Tomorrow the Nordain males would no longer be forced to keep their raven forms. Tomorrow Zanden would be free to hunt for Ranelle and her heart-sisters.

During their stay in the Faerie realm, Ranelle and Jalen had made love countless times, unable to satisfy their cravings for one another. Despite the urgency building within her to leave Astral and find her heart-sisters, Ranelle had enjoyed her stay with the sensual and mischievous Faeries. Oft the Faeries had invited Ranelle and Jalen to join in their sexual play, but the couple had declined, choosing to indulge in their own form of erotic entertainment.

When they had been alone, Jalen had taught Ranelle more about her heritage and her magic, increasing her confidence in both, as well as in herself. Every moment they spent together strengthened Ranelle's love for Jalen, and she could no longer imagine life without him.

That morn, after Anistana had kissed them each full on the lips, her parting words to Jalen were, "Tell Renn that he had best steer clear of my realm." She had paused, a devious light in her green eyes as her gaze traveled over Ranelle's body, and she smiled. "Although I always enjoy a bit of revenge."

Renn. My brother, Ranelle thought as Jalen's muscles flexed beneath her bird feet. While in Astral, Jalen had told her much of Aric and Renn, her brothers, and what powerful men and great leaders they were. She had also learned that Jalen, as the eldest child of Queen Yanea, was the destined ruler of the Seraphine Elves.

And one day Ranelle would be Queen, when Jalen became King. She was not sure how she felt about that, or even if she would be accepted by the Elves. However, as long as Jalen was at her side, she knew she could face whatever might come their way.

Jalen paused, tensing beneath her. "We have come to the limits of Wilding Wood." With a gentle hand he removed Ranelle from his shoulder, and she easily transformed into her human body. The many times she had practiced the feat in Astral had helped to make it almost as natural to her as breathing.

Ranelle shivered, although not from any chill, or even the scant clothing she was dressed in. She wore only a minute tunic that barely covered her breasts, leaving her belly bare, and a matching skirt that just reached the top of her thigh. The clothing truly covered her no better than the *gishla* gown Ranelle had worn in Fiorn. However, it was all the Faerie Queen would give her, and truth be told, Ranelle had enjoyed the way Jalen's possessive gaze caressed her when he saw her in the outfit.

Gooseflesh sprouted along Ranelle's arms as she saw that the blue mist lay like a barrier before their feet, signifying the end of Wilding Wood. They stood in a small clearing bathed in the soft glow of *hynling* sap, the grass green and flowers brilliant with color. But beyond the mist barrier was a place so dismal and dark she could scarce see anything within its depths.

Where are we? Ranelle murmured in Jalen's mind, still amazed at being able to communicate with him so freely in thought once she told him of her love.

Xardu Moors. Jalen gestured toward the gloom, then spoke aloud, "It seems that Anistana is not finished toying with us."

Frowning, Ranelle looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Anistana closed every path from Astral but this one." Jalen gave Ranelle a tight smile and brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Once we enter the moors, the Queen's magic will no longer protect us from Zanden's prying eyes."

A prickling sensation at Ranelle's nape told her there was more, but he was hesitant to tell her. "That is not all, is it?"

"The moors are not safe for human, faire folke or other." Jalen's hand fisted in her hair, and he brought her closer. "But fear not. We shall make it through safely. I promise you, my love."

Jalen brought her to him and gently kissed her lips. Slow heat traveled through Ranelle, building and building in intensity 'til its fire matched the blaze that had consumed the tavern in Fiorn.

When he pulled away, Ranelle could think of naught but her desire to have his bare skin next to hers, his cock deep within her quim.

"We shall camp here for the eve, where we will be safe." Jalen nipped at her lower lip, a gentle erotic bite that caused Ranelle to moan. His mouth moved down her throat as he added, "And where I might fuck you 'til you scream, *mi enchantrei*."

Every thought in Ranelle's mind evaporated. Her entire being was totally focused on the feel of Jalen's lips and tongue along her neck to her shoulder. His hands caressed her belly, teasing her navel, and then moved in an agonizingly slow motion beneath her cropped top to her breasts.

"What would make you wild?" Jalen rubbed her nipples with his thumbs as he pulled back to watch her face. "How would you have me pleasure you?"

"All that you do makes me feel raw and untamed." Ranelle cupped his cock through his breeches and smiled at the feel of his incredible length. "Knowing that you desire me as much as I want you, makes me wet and so anxious for you I fear I might burst into flame."

A territorial glint sparked in Jalen's sapphire eyes as he pressed his erection against her hand. "My cock was made for your quim, as you were made for me."

"Mmmmm, yes." Ranelle inhaled his familiar male scent of pine on a forest breeze. Just the smell of him was enough to harden her nipples and cause her slit to grow even wetter. "But I wish to pleasure you, first."

Jalen's lids lowered, a feral growl rumbling from his chest. "I am yours to do with as you would."

Ranelle clenched her fists in his tunic and reached up to brush her lips against his. "Then I would have my way with you."

With Jalen's help, Ranelle removed his bow and quiver, along with his waist pouch, and tossed them aside. His boots, then tunic soon followed as she bared his massive physique, leaving him clad only in his breeches. Before she allowed herself to touch him, she retrieved the *krstn* from his pouch and he spread

it upon the forest floor, and they stepped onto its cushion-like softness.

Shivers skittered through Ranelle as she ran her palms against his golden chest, her sensitive fingertips absorbing the differences between his body and her own. His skin was smooth, but his muscles hard as rock beneath. "By all the gods and their mothers," she murmured, placing tiny kisses on his nipples and flicking her tongue against them, "you are the most handsome man I have ever seen."

"You have led a sheltered life, *mi enchantrei* ." Jalen's cock throbbed, and he reached for Ranelle, intent on taking her. He nuzzled her hair, drawing in her scent of vanilla and spice, 'til she gently pushed him away.

"No man could ever match up to you." Ranelle stepped back and gave him a wicked smile that rivaled Anistana's most devious look. "Do not touch, you impatient man. I am having my way with you."

The sultry tone in her voice rippled through Jalen's body, straight to his cock. It was all he could do to not to rip the scant clothing from Ranelle's body and fuck her into oblivion.

What had happened to his self-control, his ability to master every situation?

All he had to do was gaze upon his enchantress to know, to understand how she had bewitched him. Ranelle's mahogany hair cascaded in waves around her face, her silver eyes dark with passion, her crimson lips moist and parted. Her nipples were tight and hard, lifting the filmy material of her short tunic, begging for his mouth, his hands.

He clenched his fists at his sides as she untied his breeches and let them drop to his feet. Cool air brushed his cock, but then Ranelle's hands warmed him as she played with his length.

She eased to her knees before him, his staff still in her hands. "The gods could make nothing so fine or so pleasurable as your cock."

"Ranelle." Jalen sucked in his breath as her tongue flicked against the head of his staff. "You are driving me fair out of my senses."

A soft laugh hummed along his cock as she trailed kisses from the velvet tip down to the soft cloud of hair and *hisenrli* , and back to the head again. "Perhaps our stay with the Faeries rubbed off on me."

Before he could respond, Ranelle slid her lips over his cock and sucked. Jalen's hips bucked and a low groan rose within him. He clenched his hands in her hair, drawing her farther down his length. Slowly he began thrusting his staff in and out of her hot mouth, her soft moans reverberated through his cock.

Ranelle dug her fingers into his buttocks, her silver eyes wide, looking at him as he came closer and closer to orgasm. Watching his cock go in and out of her sweet lips was enough to send Jalen toward the precipice, faster than an arrow shot from his bow. Sweat beaded upon his skin, his bollocks tightened and his cock jerked. A shout tore from his throat as his semen burst from his body, down Ranelle's throat. In and out he thrust within her hot recesses, 'til she had consumed the sum of his seed.

With a satisfied smile Ranelle pulled away and let his cock slide from her mouth, his hands still clenched in her hair as he caught his breath. She looked up at him, licking his come from her lips as though she wanted to savor every drop. "What more can I do to pleasure you?" Her palms moved up his muscled belly as she spoke, her eyes focused on his.

“Remove your clothing.” His voice was husky, thrumming with his never ending desire for her. “I wish—*Ineed*—to see all of you.”

He stepped out of his breeches and released his hold on her tresses as she eased to her feet. Enjoying the silky feel of her skin beneath his fingertips, he let his hands slide down her shoulders and arms to her wrists.

Ranelle’s breathing deepened as Jalen placed his hands on her breasts, the heat of his palms like living fire through the thin material of her clothing. Desire for him consumed her, so brilliant and dizzying in its intensity that she feared she might swoon. Claspng her hands around his wrists, she clung to him, arching into his touch as he stroked her nipples with his thumbs.

How could she want this man more with every second she spent in his presence? It was as though she was only half of a whole without him. As though her entire life she had been missing a part of herself and had been made complete only when Jalen entered her world.

Jalen’s eyes were glittering sapphires in the waning light. “What would you have me do now,*mi enchantrai* ?”

“Your mouth.” Ranelle fought to capture her breath. “On me. Now.”

His cock pressed against her naked belly as he pushed her tunic up over her head, and she was clad only in the tiny skirt. Cupping one of her breasts, he dipped his head and flicked his tongue over her nipple. Swirling, licking, sucking her ‘til her knees failed and only his powerful arm kept her from dropping to the *krstn* .

Torture, sweet torture, was his touch upon her body. She wanted his cock inside her quim, yet she wanted to savor all that he had to offer. His mouth, his tongue, his fingers, his skin against hers, his weight between her thighs. She wanted it all and more.

“You take my very breath.” Jalen raised his head and captured her face in his hands. “Never in my dreams did I imagine I would find you. A beautiful enchantress who would fill my heart and soul and make me complete.”

The beauty in Jalen’s words, echoing her own feelings, and the love in his gaze was enough to bring tears to Ranelle’s eyes. His firm lips brushed her eyelids, his tongue darting out and tasting her tears. With gentle hands, he coaxed her down on the *krstn* , ‘til she lay beneath him.

“So much there is that I want to share with you.” Jalen lowered himself between Ranelle’s thighs and kissed the *enrli* at her forehead. Tingling sensations skittered throughout her as his tongue traced the design. “I want to show you my world. Have you meet my mother, my sisters.” He paused and lifted his head, smiling down at her. “I must warn you that Damianne and Angelei will insist on greeting you in their own way.”

“A warning?” Ranelle raised an eyebrow as she slipped her fingers into his hair, the locks made even more golden in the glow of the *hynling* . “Are they so terrible?”

“Nay.” An amused expression flickered across his handsome features. “I believe you will find them, ah, interesting.”

“Cryptic.” She cupped her hands against the back of his head and drew him to her. “Enough talk. I have

not had my fill of you yet.”

Jalen’s cock pressed against Ranelle’s belly as he took possession of her mouth. His lips devoured hers, sending her senses reeling. She clamped her legs around his waist, begging him to enter her, but he ignored her body’s plea. Instead he worked his way down her belly, giving her nipples attention and then moving his mouth to her navel. He swirled his tongue inside the button, an oddly erotic feeling that charged straight to her quim and caused Ranelle to gasp at the sensation.

It was all Jalen could do to keep his pace slow and measured. His cock ached and his body thrummed with wanting and desire for his enchantress. When he reached her mound he pushed the skirt up to her waist, baring the treasure he sought. He paused to trace the *enrli*, the sacred design tingling beneath his tongue. Breathing in, the rich scent of her ambrosia filled his senses, and he could no longer wait to drink from her. He flicked his tongue along her slit, and she cried out, her voice echoing in the wood.

Ranelle raised her hips, pressing her clit firmly to his mouth. “You are near as wicked as the Faerie Queen, torturing me so.”

A soft laugh rose up within Jalen and her body jerked at the feel of it against her clit. He slid his hands beneath her buttocks, brought her closer to him, lowering his head and feasting on her.

Ranelle pinched and pulled her own nipples as Jalen licked and sucked her clit. He concentrated on her swollen nub, drawing her closer and closer to peak. Her orgasm began tightening within her belly, spiraling out ‘til it encompassed her entire being. “Jalen!” she shouted, her back arching up off the *krstn* before coming to rest against its surface.

Jalen rose up and braced his arms on either side of Ranelle. While spasms still rocked her body, he thrust his cock into her core, drawing out the aftershocks as he fucked her. His blue eyes were focused on hers, and she couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, so heady was the love she witnessed in his gaze, and so magnificent was the feel of him inside her quim.

Emotion, light, color...all whirled within Ranelle as his thrusts brought her to another soaring climax, and this time she screamed with the power of her orgasm. Not a moment later, Jalen’s muscles went taut and his cock throbbed inside her, washing her womb with his seed.

Chapter Twelve

“Quiet,” he growled in her ear, his hand over her mouth, as he held her in a grip so tight it bruised her flesh.

Fear tore through the child. His awful smell surrounded her, a stench like sugar burnt in the cooking ovens. She gagged, unable to breathe.

Fighting to free herself from his grip, Carilee struggled, but then froze in his arms as he said, “If you make

even the smallest movement, I shall shove you into a vat of hynling sap.”

He would. Even though she was only a fledgling, Carilee knew that he would carry out his threat. She had watched him when he did not know she was hiding nearby. Heard his strange mutterings and wicked plans.

She had tried to tell her zjemma, but she did not yet have the words to make her mother understand. “Mean,” she had said. “Zan hurt you.”

An odd expression had crossed Zjemma’s face, as if she knew what Carilee was trying to say. But the look had passed, and her mother had brushed away Carilee’s fears.

And now he was taking her away from her home. She knew it in all her heart and soul—she would never again see her mother and father, or Aric and Renn.

Fear prickled along her skin as Zan carried her across the room from her bed-nest in the nursery. “In a place far from here, you will be locked away where no one may find you,” he murmured in her ear, causing horrible chills to roll through her. “You shall live there ‘til you are twenty seasons and then I shall come for you, little magpie.”

They moved onto the landing and Carilee wanted to scream, to cry out for her mother and father. But Carilee knew Zan would cover her in hynling sap, and she would be trapped forever in its horrible embrace.

“Zan,” Zjemma called from the doorway of the King’s chamber, the sweetness of her voice filling Carilee’s heart with hope. “What are you doing with your sister?”

He stopped and slowly turned to face their mother, Carilee pressed tight to his chest, one of his hands still over her mouth. “Taking her to meet her destiny.” His tone was casual, yet the edge to his words made Carilee feel sick in her belly.

“Leave her be.” Zjemma’s voice came from behind them this time.

Zan did not move, but Carilee looked over his shoulder and saw her mother there, too.

He remained still, even as Zjemmaspoke again, this time to their left. “You are my son, and I love you...

“But I cannot watch you walk this path.” Her voice, this time from their right.

“And I will not allow you to hurt my daughter,” came in unison, from all around them.

Carilee’s head spun as she looked from one image of her mother to the next. Which one was her real zjemma?

“I have no time for your trickery.” Zan chuckled, a scary sound that made Carilee feel as though mice skittered up and down her spine and into her hair. “This eve I poisoned your wine. Father’s too. If you put your hand upon Father’s chest, you will find his heart no longer beats.” Zan’s voice was cold, matching the ice growing in Carilee’s soul as he continued, “Your magic makes you stronger than him, but you, too, will soon feel its effects.”

One by one, the images of their mother vanished, 'til only the one to their right remained.

Zjemma.

Anguish crossed her beautiful face. She put her palm to her heart as though to make sure it still beat. "Give me my daughter." Holding both hands out, Zjemma tugged at Carilee with all her magic strength, attempting to pull Carilee from Zan's grip.

Zan reared back his free arm, as though preparing to throw a rock—but then he shoved the flat of his hand forward, toward their mother, as if he was pushing a heavy piece of furniture.

Zjemma flew back against the wall, her head striking the stone with a crack that made Carilee scream behind Zan's palm.

As Zjemmaslid to the floor, her eyes fluttered and a crimson stain trailed down the wall. "I love you... Carilee..." she murmured, "I love you..."

"Nooooooo!" An anguished sob tore from Ranelle's lips. Blindly she scrambled to her feet and started to run toward the golden light. She had to get away from Zan. Had to help her mother.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind, pinning her to a muscled chest. Ranelle kicked and screamed, fighting with everything she had, but she could not free herself. She heard nothing but a buzzing in her head and her mother's last words.

I love you, Carilee...

Ranelle struggled and struggled against the powerful grip, 'til she had no strength left in her.

Vaguely, as though her body was not her own, she realized she was being held in a loving embrace—and not the arms of the hideous brother who had taken her from their mother.

Tears burned her eyes as she heard a man's soothing voice, felt his breath on her neck as he gripped her close. The man she loved—Jalen.

"You are safe, *mi enchantrei*," he murmured. "I would never let anyone harm you."

Ranelle sagged against him. It had been a dream. A vision. *A memory*.

Yes, she was safe. For now. But *Zjemma* ... her mother was dead, long ago murdered by her own son. Ranelle's own brother.

"Carilee." Ranelle was surprised at how calm her voice sounded when she spoke. "My mother named me Carilee. To my people... the Nordain... it means 'gift of the gods.'"

"That you are." Jalen kissed her hair and relaxed his grip. "Come, back to the *krstn*. We are far too close to the *hynling* for my comfort."

With a start, Ranelle realized they stood only inches from the golden sap of the *hynling*. Jalen had saved her, had kept her from running straight into its deadly grasp.

He scooped her into his arms and held her close as he carried her back to the *krstn* and settled onto it,

Ranelle in his lap. Snuggled into his arms, she let his heat chase away the chill of her dream and her memories. It was only then that she realized she was still naked, as was Jalen.

The wood was lightening, early morning sun spilling through branches of the bluewood, oak and *hynling* trees. A hint of amethyst still hung over the sky, remnants of the end of moonchange. The Nordain males would no longer be relegated to their raven forms.

Including Zanden.

Blue mist swirled around them, its presence somehow comforting. The air was cool, the wood quiet save for the chatter of birds and a strange cry in the distance. A mournful sound that somehow echoed the ache in her soul.

A shudder traveled through Ranelle, from head to toe. "I remember everything now." As she spoke, Jalen stroked her hair, his touch soothing, comforting. "Tierra gave me the name Ranelle when we were children, because I had no name and Zan. . . Zanden stole all my memories with his magic before he left me with Uba." She frowned as she remembered what Uba had called her before Tierra chose the name Ranelle, and even long after.

Girl, Uba had spit out often. *Filthy, packrat girl.*

Ranelle had enjoyed collecting things that were bright and shiny. Objects that made her feel pretty and special. Uba had taken everything Ranelle had found, of course. It wasn't 'til she was older that Ranelle had stopped collecting odd trinkets and baubles she found in Fiorn.

"Tierra named me Ranelle, because she said it sounded like a Princess's name, and she thought I looked like a Princess." Ranelle smiled at the memory, and then her smile faded to a frown. "I miss Tierra so, and Liana as well. And I am so worried for them both."

"Trust me in this." Jalen cupped her face with his strong hand. "Once we return to Seraphine and I confer with the Council, I shall know what course of action to take next." His thumb rubbed across her cheek, wiping away traces of her tears. "My mother, Queen Yanea, is a Seer of incredible powers. Through her we can locate your heart-sisters, and then we can do what it takes to find them."

"Do you mean it?" Ranelle placed her hand over his as she looked up into his sapphire eyes. "You will help me search for them?"

Jalen brushed his lips over the *enrli* at her forehead. "I promise to do what I can, and to make sure they are found."

"Thank you." She turned her mouth into his palm and kissed it, brushing a butterfly stroke of her tongue against his salty skin.

He took her hand and placed it to her bare belly. "I have waited 'til we are alone to tell you this." A smile lit his eyes and without his telling her, she knew pride and joy filled his heart—but for what?

His gaze held hers as he murmured, "Within your womb, you carry our child."

"A—a babe?" Fluttering erupted within Ranelle's soul, and she could scarce believe him. It seemed somehow surreal, as though it wasn't true. "Are you certain?"

He sighed and caressed her belly, his hand warm against her skin. “The morn before you fled into Wilding Wood, do you remember our lovemaking?”

Heat rose in Ranelle’s cheeks at the thought of their frantic fucking and then how she’d foolishly fled into the wood. She nodded, unable to speak.

“I did not know it at the time, but Anistana had sprinkled a potent Faerie dust upon us.” Jalen’s hand moved to her hip and he gripped her tight. “When the dust is used between heartmates, a child is always conceived.”

An odd flush poured through Ranelle. So many thoughts rushed through her mind—countless feelings and emotions that soared through her like a flock of nordai in flight.

A mother? She would be responsible for another life?

Yet at the same time excitement skittered through her—she was carrying Jalen’s child.

Their child.

“Does it not please you?” Jalen’s expression had gone from pleasure to uncertainty.

“Yes.” Ranelle smiled and her heart filled at the joy she saw in Jalen’s eyes. “I want more than anything to have a child with you. Many children.”

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed her tight to him. “How I love you, *mi enchantrei*.”

“And I love you with all my heart,” Ranelle replied against his chest, her own happiness rivaling Jalen’s. “It seems that in her own way, Anistana has given us a precious gift.”

“Aye, that she did.” Never in his many years upon Dair did Jalen ever believe he could be so happy, and love anyone as much as he did Ranelle.

Carefully he eased her to the *krstn*, needing to slide his cock into her quim and feel her from the inside.

Ranelle clamped her knees around his waist and gripped his muscled arm with one hand. With her other she reached down, grasped his cock, and guided it to her slit.

Even as his cock penetrated her quim, he pressed his lips to hers. He thrust his tongue inside her mouth while his cock thrust into her core. Harder and deeper he fucked her, wanting to bury himself as far as he could go.

When she came, his mouth was still pressed to hers, and he swallowed her cries. He absorbed her every tremor and aftershock into his very being. And in return he emptied all of himself into her.

* * * * *

After they finished their light meal of *Elvingorni*, Jalen stood with Ranelle at the limits of Wilding Wood. Blue mist spiraled around them, a hazy barrier to the Xardu Moors and the dangers that lay ahead. With his keen eyesight, Jalen searched the moors, hoping on this day that the *qinok* would be too full to hunt

for prey.

Sunshine filtered through the Faerie wood, light dappling across Ranelle's long tresses. A color-changing *urli* butterfly floated by, for one second its color going from white to brown as it passed her hair, then to white again as it continued into the wood.

Reaching up, Jalen caressed Ranelle's cheek and smiled. "You understand your instructions?"

"Yes." Although she returned his smile, the corner of her mouth trembled. "If we encounter danger I am to fly beyond the moors." She took a deep breath, as though it was difficult for her to continue. "When I am safely in the D'euan Forest I am to shriek the Nordain call to arms."

Jalen took her by the shoulders and pressed his forehead to hers, their *enrli* joining and sending warmth through his body. "I love you, *mi enchantrei*."

This time her smile was radiant. "And I love you."

When he stepped away, sparkles flashed in the air and Ranelle changed into her nordai form. She flapped her wings and alighted on his shoulder where he had instructed her to remain—unless they encountered the *qinok*.

The moment Jalen stepped from Wilding Wood onto Xardu Moors, the very atmosphere changed. An electric tension filled the air, along with a stench like rotting flesh and urine. A dismal cloud of gases hung over the gloomy moors, blocking the warmth of the sun.

Jalen's body hummed with the need to reach his own lands, the D'euan Forest, and his people—but most of all, to take his heartmate and their unborn child to safety. He scanned the moors one final time, his senses high, and began to sprint as fast as he could through the treacherous land.

Hold tight, he told Ranelle in thought as his feet found what firm ground there was in the swampland. Her bird's talons dug into his tunic, a comforting feeling as he dodged through stubby bushes and spindly trees, leapt over hidden quagmires and treacherous quicksand, and bypassed the poisonous waters.

On and on Jalen ran, his muscles fluid, his feet silent. The journey would take an ordinary man two days—however it was most unlikely he would even survive the first. Running at his full speed, Jalen would be able to make the D'euan Forest by nightfall, if all went well.

He sensed Ranelle's fear, along with her courage. Throughout the journey he read her mind that she kept open to him, and they spoke to one another only in thought. The slightest of sounds could alert the *qinok*, and it was a dangerous beast to confront. He knew of only one man who had survived a confrontation with the multi-legged and dagger-toothed *qinok*, and Renn still bore the scars of that encounter.

Always present in Jalen's consciousness was the concern that Zanden could more easily track them now that they had left the safety of Wilding Wood. If the Sorcerer chose to attack while Ranelle and Jalen were in Xardu Moors...

Thorns scraped his arms and snagged at his clothing as he dodged through the brush. The moor was silent save for the occasional slosh of water or eerie howl of the *nofsta*, mysterious and clannish wolves that hunted the swamplands for prey. Thank the goddess their appetites did not extend to faire folk, Nordain or humans.

Jalen's worries remained intense, but stride by stride, he put the hateful moors behind them.

By the time Jalen and Ranelle neared the end of Anistana's parting trial it was early evening. Not much further and they would reach the D'euan Forest and safety within its confines.

But even as relief added fuel to his tiring muscles, Jalen's senses rose and he came to a halt.

Something was wrong.

Jalen.Ranelle tensed on his shoulder, as though preparing for flight. She knew it, too.

By the goddess! The qinok has found us!

Chapter Thirteen

Flee to safety!Jalen told Ranelle at the same time he swung his bow from his shoulder.*The qinok!*

A screech shattered the silence of the moor as the eight-armed*qinok* thrust up from the swamp and bounded into their path. The bluish gray creature roared and tossed its head, flinging putrid water across the moor as it bared dagger-like teeth. It charged toward Ranelle and Jalen, claws slashing through the air like countless scythes. The scaly beast's rotten meat stench was near overpowering.

While Jalen nocked an arrow to his bow, Ranelle hesitated.*I do not wish to leave you to battle the qinok alone.*

The Nordain battle call, he reminded her as he released an arrow at the beast's single giant eye.*You must reach the D'euan Forest or you will never be heard by my brothers-at-arms.*

I love you!Ranelle cried in his mind as she took flight and flew over the*qinok* , toward the Elvin forest.

The beast slashed at her, one of its claws barely missing her tail feathers. Her raven cry echoed throughout the moor as she escaped, her shriek a haunting and lonely sound. Even as he released another arrow at the beast, Jalen felt her fear for his safety straight to his lifeforce.

The*qinok* bellowed as the first arrow struck its scaled head, missing its eye. It flung up one of its arms in time to block the second attack and screeched again.

Arrow after arrow Jalen nocked to his bow as the*qinok* drove him farther back into the moor. For such an unwieldy creature, the beast was fleet and its eight arms reacted swiftly, its single eye seeing everything that came at it.

Darkness was falling across the moor, the swamp's gloom deepening.

And soon Jalen would be out of arrows.

He had no fear for himself. No fear of death. But he did fear for his heartmate and his unborn babe, and prayed that Ranelle had reached safety.

Heart pounding with the force of a thousand drums, Ranelle bolted toward the D'euan Forest. Her very soul flamed with terror for Jalen. She had wanted to stay at his side, to help him fight the beast, but she knew he was right. They stood a better chance against the *qinok* if she was able to summon the Nordain.

She pumped her wings, pushing herself forward and trying to concentrate on her mission, rather than on the horrible screeching sounds the *qinok* made as it battled Jalen. The beast's shrieks raked along Ranelle's spine, causing her to shiver even as she tore through the sky.

Ahead, through the gray gloom of the darkening moors, Ranelle's keen raven sight spied the green of a forest on the horizon. Hope and fear combined to give her the fuel to fly at a dizzying pace above the swamplands. The moor's noxious fumes made breathing difficult, but she would make it.

She could not lose Jalen. Could not let anything happen to him.

Like she had allowed her mother to die.

The moment Ranelle entered the D'euan Forest, fresh air filled her senses. She sucked in her breath as she alighted on a bush, and then shrieked with all the power she could muster. Again and again she cried out to her kinfolk, calling them to arms, telling them that one of their own was in peril. Phoenicia was too far to the north for any man to travel quickly enough by horse or foot, but as the raven flew, it should not be long before Nordain help arrived.

A flutter and a rustle alerted Ranelle to a presence behind her, and her senses flared. She had been so consumed with crying out for help that she had failed to maintain her guard.

Ranelle started to turn when large hands clasped around her raven's body and fingers pinched her beak shut.

The man's hands had a horribly familiar feel to them. As his sickening smell washed over her, Ranelle's heart dropped to her belly. She did not even have to look to know that Zanden had captured her. Again.

Ranelle is in danger. The knowledge sliced through Jalen's heart and chilled his blood. At his forehead and cock, the *enrli* burned with intensity as he shot the last of his arrows at the beast. He had to find some way to defeat the *qinok* and rescue his heartmate—before it was too late for either of them.

With the speed of lightning in a storm, as he nocked his last arrow, Jalen considered plan after plan. He finally settled on the one that would give the *qinok* confidence enough to underestimate its prey.

Jalen allowed the beast to back him into a pocket of land—where he was almost completely surrounded by the swamp. The only escape was through the *qinok*, for no man or other being could survive the poisonous waters of the moor.

Shrieking its bone-chilling cry, the beast advanced on Jalen and swiped at him, ripping one dagger-claw through the flesh of Jalen's thigh.

Ignoring the pain searing his leg, Jalen trained the last arrow on the beast's eye, then dropped and rolled across the small inlet. As the *qinok* looked down and raised its eight arms, prepared to pounce and finish its prey, Jalen released the arrow.

His bow sung and the arrow shot forward. The beast flung up his arms, but the arrow moved so fast the *qinok* never had a chance to block it. A shriek rent the air as the arrow pierced the beast's eye, the shaft buried in the *qinok*'s brain.

With one last scream, the beast staggered, then toppled into the swamp with a tremendous splash, and Jalen barely escaped the fluid landing on his bared skin. Bubbles rose and broke the surface of the murky waters as the *qinok* disappeared into its depths.

Silence, immediate and deafening, weighed heavy on Jalen's ears. His leg throbbed, blood gushing down his thigh from the artery that had been sliced. But he had no time to waste. He had to get to Ranelle, and he did not have long before the *qinok*'s mate would sense its companion's demise and seek revenge.

Quickly he jerked the *krstn* from his pouch and tied it around his thigh. The magic in the blanket would stem the flow of blood, and help him make it through the moor.

Holding out his hand, Jalen summoned all his spent arrows with his magic, retrieving the gifts of the goddess. Even the arrow that had been lodged in the *qinok*'s eye and those buried in its flesh rose from the swamp and returned to his hand, each magically cleansed of filth before coming in contact with his skin. In only moments every arrow was replaced in his quiver and he was on his way to his heartmate.

Jalen sprinted toward the D'euan Forest, his speed hampered by his wound, but he pressed himself to run beyond his body's ability.

And prayed to the goddess that he was not too late to save Ranelle.

* * * * *

"Never again will you leave me, my little magpie." The Sorcerer turned Ranelle, his hand clenched around her raven form, and raised her so that her eyes met his enraged black gaze. "For you are mine."

Faster than an *urli* butterfly could change from white to red, Ranelle's fear turned to fury.

Fury that Zanden had killed her mother and father.

Fury that he had taken her from her family.

Fury that he had held threat over hers and her heart-sisters' entire lives.

And fury that even now, Jalen might lose his life if Zanden kept her from returning to her love and aiding him in his battle against the *qinok*.

Let me go! she screamed at him in her mind, unleashing all of the anger, all of the pain from her very

lifeforce. She pushed it through her being and straight to the Sorcerer.

Shock changed his angered expression to momentary confusion, and he lost his hold on her.

Sparkles glittered in the air as she shifted back to her human form, landing mere feet from him.

His face flushed, turning almost purple in his rage.

Even as he recovered and began to reach for her, Ranelle summoned her magic—magic enhanced by the countless hours of training with Jalen in Astral. Magic amplified by her anger for her losses, and her fear of losing any more loved ones.

Holding her hand to her chest, palm facing Zanden, she shoved her hand toward him. The Sorcerer flew back, his face twisted in surprise as he landed in the brush.

At the same moment, Ranelle transformed back into a nordai and shot toward the tree above to hide amongst the pine needles. But only for a moment, only 'til she was ready to take the next step.

“You have no idea what this is going to cost you,” the Sorcerer said as he stood, and she saw that he favored one leg—a recent wound. Ranelle’s senses told her at once that her heart-sister, Liana, had been responsible. Liana had recently fought Zanden. But had she won? Or was Liana now a prisoner in the Sorcerer’s fortress?

The thoughts flashed through Ranelle’s mind, even as he raised his hands to her hiding place, and as she put her plan into motion.

She thrust herself into the air and shifted back to her human form at the same time she projected her own image. As she landed, she and four copies of herself surrounded the Sorcerer.

“You did inherit Mother’s powers.” Slowly Zanden lowered his hands and turned in a circle, studying each likeness of Ranelle, an amused look upon his face. “I had hoped as much.”

The concentration it took to maintain the images made her head spin, and she had to struggle to keep them strong and clear. To not be distracted by the flapping of many wings that told her that her Nordain kinsmen had arrived. As they landed, her senses were acutely aware of them as they shifted into their male and female human forms. Each bore a dagger and surrounded Ranelle, her images, and Zanden.

“I remember everything.” Ranelle projected her voice, each image speaking and her voice reverberating through the forest. “You murdered our mother and father.”

“I should have been King.” Zanden cocked his head his eyes shifting from one image of her to another and ignoring the Nordain surrounding them. She knew the Sorcerer was waiting for her strength to fail. Waiting for her to reveal which likeness of herself was the real one. “But they chose to give the throne to Aric,” he continued. “They deserved death.”

“My sword shall dice your treacherous heart and feed it to you while you still live,” boomed a powerful voice. From the midst of the Nordain came an imposing warrior, and Ranelle’s concentration almost failed her.

The scarred man she had seen in her dreams. The one who had been with Tierra.

“Renn,” Zanden murmured. “Mother’s other favorite.”

My brother? The shock caused her images to flicker, but the Sorcerer’s eyes were focused on the Nordain warrior.

“All along it was you, our brother, yet we never realized the extent of your treachery.” Renn raised his sword, his icy silver eyes glittering in the waning light. He clenched his jaw and his features hardened. The scar across his rugged face whitening as the fury in his expression increased beyond measure. “From your very own lips the truth is revealed—you murdered our parents and kidnapped our fair sister.”

Instead of responding, Zanden flung out his hands. His powerful magic wrapped around Ranelle’s body, shattering her concentration. The images failed and vanished, and Ranelle flew through the air and landed at the Sorcerer’s feet.

Before she could move, he placed his heavy boot on her head, its weight pressing into her skull and forcing her head into the pine needles. She had to escape him. Had to get to Jalen!

Nordain warriors pressed closer, but stopped when Zanden said, “I can crush her skull with my boot or my magic, it matters not. Retreat or she dies.”

* * * * *

Blood seeped through the *krstn* despite its magical properties, and the wound throbbed with poison from the *qinok*’s claw. Jalen’s flesh was weakening, but he would not stop ‘til his heartmate was safe.

As he drew near the end of the moors, almost to the D’euan Forest, Jalen sensed the incredible danger that Ranelle was in—and the Sorcerer’s presence.

With renewed energy and determination, Jalen forced himself forward, slipping silently from the moors into the life-giving land of his home. Even as he passed into his home, the gifts of the goddess filled his lifeforce, giving him needed strength.

Before his eyes could see them, Jalen’s senses informed him he had reached the small clearing where his heartmate was, along with many Nordain and the Sorcerer. Jalen slowed, keeping himself hidden as he nocked an arrow to his bow in a fluid movement.

When he saw Ranelle’s head pinned beneath Zanden’s boot, rage filled Jalen. Fury unlike anything he had experienced in his long life. In a swift movement, he trained the arrow on the Sorcerer’s heart, and released it.

Ranelle sensed Jalen as soon as he arrived, her heart and soul filling with both love and fear for him.

Zanden’s attention snapped toward Jalen as the arrow sailed toward him. Although she could not see him from her position on the ground, she sensed the Sorcerer deflecting the arrow with his magic.

His attention was now focused on Jalen. Taking advantage of Zanden’s distraction, Ranelle fisted one hand. With all her strength she brought it up and slammed it onto the Sorcerer’s wounded thigh. To the very location Liana had wounded him in another battle.

Zanden stumbled back, shrieking in apparent rage and pain, as his boot slipped from her head. Ranelle rolled away from the Sorcerer and scrambled to her feet in time to see one of Jalen's arrows stray to the left, missing Zanden's hate-filled heart, instead lodging in the bastard's bicep.

The Sorcerer wrenched the arrow from his arm. "I will have you," he shouted with one last look of rage at Ranelle. And then, like a bit of smoke on a strong wind, he vanished.

Ranelle did not waste time wondering where Zanden had gone to. She only knew that she had to be in Jalen's arms *now*. Ignoring the Nordain still surrounding her, Ranelle ran toward Jalen as he stumbled from the cover of trees.

"Jalen!" Relief at seeing him changed into terror when she realized he was injured, and he slid to the ground. Her very being screamed as she dropped beside him and cradled his head in her lap. "Help him. Please!"

"Brother," Renn said as he knelt beside Jalen. "What ails you?"

Ranelle's gaze cut to the scarred man who tenderly began removing the blood-soaked *krstn* from Jalen's thigh.

"*Qinok*." Jalen's voice sounded harsh, as though he could barely breathe.

"Damnation." Renn ripped his own tunic off, revealing his massive chest, then wrapped the garment around Jalen's thigh. "Nothing will truly stem the flow of blood, save Yanea's magic."

"Aye." As soon as the word passed through Jalen's lips, his eyes closed and his body went slack.

"Oh, my gods." Ranelle pressed her lips to Jalen's forehead and then turned her tear-filled gaze to Renn. "Will he die?"

"Not as long as I have breath to carry him," Renn growled. As though Jalen weighed naught more than a babe, Renn raised and flung Jalen over his shoulder, and began to run.

Chapter Fourteen

From the moment they had arrived in Seraphine, Ranelle refused to leave Jalen's side and threatened to use her magic on anyone who tried to take her from her heartmate. The Elves only smiled, as though amused at her words, but let her be.

"Of course," Queen Yanea had said when Ranelle asked if he would recover. "He is Elvin, and he is my son."

No one had yet asked why Ranelle insisted on being at Jalen's side, or questioned her right to be, even

though she wasn't Elvin. And although she had seen them glance at her *enrli*, none had remarked upon it.

The following day, the day after the battle against Zanden, Renn sat with Ranelle at Jalen's bedside. Ranelle was clothed in a sheer robe, foregoing Elvin tradition to remain nude within the kingdom. Renn had a short kilt wrapped around his trim waist, knowing that Ranelle felt uncomfortable being around her brother when he was naked.

When told of Jalen's joining with Ranelle, Renn had shaken his dark head and muttered, "Sotted fools." But Ranelle knew Renn was secretly pleased. Pleased that his younger sister was now wedded to his brother-at-arms.

Jalen's color had improved, no longer as pale as it had been after the Battle at the Moors. His expression seemed relaxed, and Ranelle sensed his growing strength. Hopefully soon he would wake and she could once again hear his deep voice and feel his gentle touch upon her skin.

Seraphine was a beautiful place, each room a part of the forest, blending and mixing with nature. In Jalen's bedchamber, wildflowers in hues of blue, purple and white were laced into the walls and ceilings that were fashioned of woven vines and trees. Golden orbs hovered above, similar to the ball of light Jalen had used in the cave. The soft light bathed the room, casting a glittering hue across the furnishings that appeared to be designed from living wood. Ranelle had learned the Elves used magic to create the furniture, and would never harm any living gift of the goddess.

To Ranelle's surprise, her brother had become her staunchest supporter and friend within the confines of the Elvin kingdom. They had spent time re-discovering one another in the hours spent at Jalen's bedside, and Renn had shared with her much of what she had missed in the years she had been gone from Phoenicia.

Only yesterday, as Jalen and Ranelle had been crossing the moors, Liana had married Aric, Ranelle's oldest brother. Her heart-sister was now Queen of Phoenicia and Renn and Ranelle's sister-in-law. And Liana was pregnant—with twins!

Renn and the other warriors had been called from the ceremonial feasting by Ranelle's Nordain cry for help. If it had not been Aric's wedding night, he, too, would have come to Ranelle's aid. But Renn had demanded that Aric stay with his bride, that the other warriors would aid the Nordain indistress. They hadn't known it was Ranelle 'til they arrived.

She also learned that Renn had promised his brother that he would find Tierra and return her safely to Phoenicia. Ranelle considered telling Renn of her visions, but decided to keep them to herself. Now that she knew who the scarred man was, and had time to consider her visions, she knew he would never harm Tierra—and if anything, Renn would need to beware of the mischievous and headstrong redhead.

Since the moment they arrived in Seraphine, Renn had been fiercely protective over Ranelle. He even went so far as to warn her not to eat or drink anything that he had not sampled first.

"The Elves are a devious folke." Renn's gaze cut to Damianne as the tall, sensuous, and naked Elvin woman entered the room. "None are to be trusted."

"You have us confused with the Faeries." Damianne's *senrli* at her forehead and mound glittered amethyst as she knelt between Renn's thighs and rubbed his cock through his kilt. "Come," she murmured, loud enough for Ranelle to hear. "What you need is a good fuck."

“Leave, wench,” he growled, his muscles flexing—but lust filled his silver eyes.

Damianne ignored him, pushing his kilt to his waist and sliding her lips and long fingers down Renn’s cock.

Renn roared. He wrapped his hands around Damianne’s slender waist and pulled her away from him. In the next moment he threw the laughing Elvin woman over his shoulder and strode from the room.

With a grin, Ranelle shook her head and turned to look at Jalen, her love. Her husband.

Her quim and breasts ached for his touch. She needed to be near him. To feel his muscular body pressed against hers. To hear his deep and vibrant voice.

She stood, letting the silken robe slide from her shoulders, onto the carpet of moss at her feet. The moss felt like velvet beneath her bare soles, and the air was cool against her naked skin. Her nipples tightened at the sensual feel of the moment, and at the sight of her nude husband who lay flat on his back. Even in slumber, his semi-erect cock was an impressive sight.

She eased onto the bed and snuggled next to Jalen. Warmth radiated from him, filling her with a sense of well-being and love. *My heartmate*, Ranelle murmured in thought, holding her hand to his heart and feeling the strength of its beat. His heart seemed to quicken at her words, or perhaps at the feel of her skin next to his.

Mayhap she might waken him in her own fashion.

She eased up and straddled him, her knees to either side of his hips. Slowly she moved her lips across his massive chest. She pressed butterfly kisses to his skin, drinking in his heady male scent that grew more intoxicating by the moment.

Jalen stirred and murmured beneath her touch. Her own heart beat faster as she sensed him awakening and felt his cock hardening against her belly. Smiling, she continued kissing his chest, flicking her tongue against his salty skin as she worked her way lower and lower, until she reached her prize.

A groan rumbled in Jalen’s chest as her lips slid over his cock. Her tongue swirled over the head, tasting a drop of salty-sweet semen, as her fingers traced the *enrli* above his staff. In the next moment his hands fisted in her hair.

“By the goddess, woman,” he murmured, his tone husky as she sucked his cock. “You know how to wake a man.”

Intense pleasure filled her at the sound of his voice and the knowledge that he was finally awake. But she concentrated on her task at hand, and mouth, sucking and stroking him until he shouted. His delicious come filled her mouth, the taste of it as fine as any dessert she had ever sampled.

His large hands moved from her hair to her shoulders, and in one quick movement he raised her up until she was sitting on his face, her slit pressed to his mouth.

“Are you sure you are all right—” Ranelle started, but then moaned as Jalen’s tongue dove into her slit. She grabbed onto branches on the wall behind the bed, clinging to them for support as Jalen devoured her juices.

His tongue flicked against her clit, and he thrust two fingers into her quim. *You taste better than the immortal food of the goddess*, Jalen murmured in her mind as he feasted on her.

Ranelle's orgasm ripped through her. She arched her back and cried out with her release, not caring if every Elvin man and woman in Seraphine could hear her screams.

Before she had a chance to recover, Jalen lifted her from his face as though she was no more than a doll, and moved her down to his hips. In one thrust he buried his cock deep within her quim.

Ranelle shrieked at the incredible feel of it. Jalen brought her mouth hard to his, and she tasted her own juices on his tongue, and wondered if he could taste himself on hers. She rode him hard as he fucked her, taking him as deep as she possibly could.

When they both reach the pinnacle, Ranelle pressed the *enrli* at her forehead to Jalen's. The world exploded into such an intense climax that she saw nothing but brilliant flashes of light—and felt nothing but her endless love for Jalen.

* * * * *

Jalen strode toward the Council chambers but paused outside the guarded doors as an Elvin warrior approached him. His eyes narrowed at the concerned expression upon her face. Chrys had forsaken removing her clothing and was still garbed in battle gear, her bow slung over her shoulder.

When she reached Jalen, Chrys bowed, the lavender *enrli* upon her forehead glittering. Tall for even a Seraphine Elvin woman, Chrys was almost Jalen's height. Her fire-red locks were swept from her face in a single braid, and her lavender eyes snapped with their own kind of fire. "Your Highness," she said.

He returned her bow. "Chrys."

"King Aric seeks your assistance." Chrys shifted her bow and quiver, her gaze darting to the guard outside the Council doors and back to Jalen. Lowering her voice she added, "He is calling for aid from all peoples, human and faire folke alike. In secret Zanden has been amassing an army. The King's scouts tell him the Sorcerer will strike within the week. King Aric fears his bride is in danger."

Jalen's jaw hardened. "Inform him we will set out for Phoenicia on the morrow."

Naked, as was Seraphine tradition, Jalen stood before the seven members of the Council, his head high, his hands behind his back. He sensed Ranelle's concern as she waited with Renn and her Elvin escort, to Jalen's right. The Council Chambers were packed with countless Elvin men and women as they waited to hear whether or not Ranelle would be the first non-Elvin accepted into the world of the Seraphine Elves as one of their own.

Yanea, Queen of Seraphine, and Jalen's mother, reclined upon the center throne. The gold circlet around her head sparkled, and her *enrli* glittered, matching her amethyst eyes. Jalen could not read her thoughts or her expression—

Until she smiled. "Welcome home, my son. I am pleased the goddess has seen fit to renew your lifeforce

and heal you quickly.”

“I am eternally grateful for all the goddess’s gifts.” Jalen bowed, his eyes remaining fixed on Yanea. “But most of all, I am grateful that she chose Ranelle as my heartmate.”

Yanea’s gaze flicked to Ranelle, and back to Jalen. “Present your wife to me.” A smile hovered upon her lips. “So that I may properly greet my new daughter-in-law.”

Pleasure flooded Jalen as he held out his hand to Ranelle, and she came toward him. By the goddess, she was so beautiful, her dark hair flowing around her shoulders, her silver eyes wide, *theenrli* at her forehead and mound glittering.

His heart squeezed with emotion as she placed her small hand in his, and then they knelt before the Queen, their heads bowed.

“Rise.” Yanea’s voice was clear and filled with love for her son as she stood before her throne.

When Jalen and Ranelle were face-to-face with her, Yanea placed one hand on her son’s chest, and her other hand between Ranelle’s breasts. “I give you my son Jalen and his heartmate Ranelle, your future King and Queen,” Yanea announced.

And as she bade them to turn to the packed Council Chamber, she said, “*Sh’lai noirei vu simnai*, Jalen *né* Ranelle.”

Pride coursed Jalen’s veins as his mother repeated the ceremonial words that he had spoken to Ranelle in the cave. In the eyes of the goddess, and now of his people, Jalen and Ranelle had become one.

Yanea walked from behind the couple to the center of the chamber and addressed the crowd. “I wish to bestow a gift upon my son and my new daughter.” The Queen faced Jalen and clasped her cool palms on his cheeks. “It lightens my heart to see you so happy,” she murmured, and then kissed first one cheek, and then the next.

She moved to Ranelle and stroked her hair from her face. “You have brought joy and completion to my son’s life. For that I am eternally grateful.” She placed a kiss on each of Ranelle’s cheeks.

“I am the most fortunate of women to have Jalen as my heartmate,” Ranelle replied, her voice trembling but clear.

With a smile, Yanea put her hand to Ranelle’s belly. “My granddaughter will grow to be as sweet and lovely as her mother.”

She raised her voice, and it rang through the Council Chamber as she spoke, “As my gift to my son, I bequeath a long Elvin life to my new daughter, Ranelle of the Nordain, and to all of her offspring.”

Applause and cheers broke out in the chamber. Jalen swept Ranelle into his arms and held her tight. Yanea’s gift was all that he had hoped for, yet hadn’t dared to expect.

“Beleie,” Yanea said, her voice rising above the clamor, and the chamber went silent.

While Jalen kept his arm tight around Ranelle’s shoulders, he fixed his attention on his mother.

I have one more gift, as is Elvin tradition. Her voice flowed through the mind of every being in the room, so great was her power. *The sacred gift that will be known only to my son and his bride.*

Yanea held out her palm, where appeared a small silver vial. *Share with one another the arbonidae, and experience all my gift has to offer.*

Ranelle's glance darted from Yanea to Jalen. He gave her a smile and bowed his head to his mother as he accepted the vial. It felt warm against his palm as he clenched it in his fist, and wondered what Yanea's gift would be.

* * * * *

Ranelle's entire being sang with love for Jalen as they slipped away from the Council Chambers.

Jalen silently guided Ranelle through the maze of forest rooms and into the mild evening air, her small hand clasped tight in his big fist. Grass was soft and dewy beneath her bare feet, and a balmy breeze caressed her bare skin, causing her nipples to pucker.

Stars shone brilliant against a silken black sky, the moon still bearing a trace of amethyst upon its face. Across the surface of a small lake, moonlight sparkled like countless gemstones scattered upon it. Crickets chirped and owls hooted in time with the gentle slosh of water against a grassy shore, and scents of jensai blooms and pine perfumed the air.

They came to a secluded cove filled with moonlit flowers and exotic plants, the grass so thick it was like walking on *akrstn*. When they reached the center of the cove, Jalen held his palm up, facing the lake. A glow expanded from his hand, a golden shimmer that flooded the area until a glittering dome surrounded them.

Ranelle could still feel the breeze upon her naked body and see the lake through the shimmering curtain, yet she knew they were shielded.

'Tis part of the arbonidae, Jalen explained in her thoughts as she turned to him. *Our private ceremony. Elvin tradition requires that we experience the Queen's gift, and we must remain here until it is complete.*

Ranelle reached for the vial in his hand and trailed her fingers along its length. Heat rushed through her the moment she touched it. *What is this gift?*

I do not know. Jalen drew Ranelle against him, the heat of his massive arms and chest coursing through her bare skin, his hard cock pressed against her belly. *This we shall learn together.*

A nervous flutter skittered through her, like countless raven wings through a night sky. What did the vial contain?

"In all my days upon Dair, I have never felt such happiness as with you," Jalen spoke aloud, easing her fears. The husky timber of his voice, and the love in his words caused Ranelle to melt against him, as though she was a part of him. "I have lived beyond a thousand years," he continued, "yet 'tis as though my life did not begin until the moment I first saw you. To know that you shall share the remainder of my days, fills my heart with such happiness I ache with it."

Ranelle moved her hands to his face, cupping his cheeks and holding him as if she could freeze that moment for all eternity. "You are everything to me." Her voice faltered, and she could not help hot tears of joy from escaping her eyes. "You are my love, my life, my very soul."

His kiss was soft, gentle, as he moved his mouth over hers. "I love you, *mi enchantrei*," he murmured, his breath warm upon her lips.

"My heart is yours, forever," she whispered in return.

Jalen thought he might die of happiness as he kissed away Ranelle's tears, his tongue flicking out and tasting the salty wetness that had come from her soul. Her hands clung to his waist, as though she needed his support.

He knew he needed hers. He needed all of her.

Before he met Ranelle, Jalen thought he did not need anyone. Thought that he had everything life had to offer. Thought that he had all the answers.

Vanilla, spice, and Ranelle's own erotic scent flowed over him, through his body and straight to the very center of his life force. To the goddess's ears from his soul, he was the happiest being in all the deity's worlds.

"I cannot get enough of you." Jalen's teeth lightly nipped at the soft skin of Ranelle's breast. "With every taste I want more."

Small moans escaped her lips. Her hands slid into his hair, massaging his scalp as he suckled on her nipples. "Every part of me is yours, Jalen. All of me."

The way she said his name, a whispered melody upon her tongue, eased through his soul like the finest of Elvin tonics. Warming, searing his blood.

He raised the silver vial between them and withdrew the stopper. *It is time, mi enchantrei.*

She tilted her head back and opened her mouth like a small bird, and Jalen touched the vial to her bottom lip. A few drops rolled onto her tongue before he brought the vial to his own mouth.

"It tastes of blueberries and cream," Ranelle murmured as the sweetness flooded her senses. But in the next moment the world seemed to spin around her. Fire! The world was on fire! Blue and silver flames danced and flickered around them, licking at her naked flesh.

"Jalen!" Her heart hammered in her throat and she grabbed his arms, digging her fingernails into his skin.

Shhh, relax, fledgling. His voice calmed her mind, even as the elixir seeped into her blood and throughout every fragment of her being.

She caught her breath as he lifted her up and then settled her on the bed of fire. The flames were warm, yet cool, enveloping them as Jalen slid between her thighs, his cock pressed to her slit. Naught existed but the two of them in the silvery blue inferno.

Bracing himself with one arm on the ground, he stared into her eyes. *Herenrli* pulsed in time with the

dancing flames, and he stroked her hair from her brow. She wrapped her legs around his buttocks drawing him closer, needing him to fill her in every way.

I cannot wait any longer. Ranelle slid her fingers into the hair at his neck, tangling them in the long strands and yanking him closer to her.

Jalen's eyes were serious as he plunged his cock into her core. Arching up to meet him, she almost screamed from the pleasure rippling through her body. As he thrust, a vision filled her mind, and at once she knew that Jalen shared the vision with her.

'Tis the gift of sight, he murmured in her mind. *Hold tight to me. We will see our future, or what our futures might be—and some things may be frightening.*

Ranelle could scarce imagine fear at this moment, in the powerful, eternal arms of her husband—and then—

A dark sky, churning with thunderclouds. No! Irani and nordai. Countless treasonous Nordain warriors and hideous irani beasts heading to war...

War with the Elves and Nordain.

War meant to tear Liana, Ranelle, and Tierra from their destined mates. To steal them away and force them into the Sorcerer's servitude.

Ranelle's body burned yet chilled as Jalen plunged his cock in and out of her, the vision still filling their thoughts. No matter the terror the nightmare instilled in her, she could not stop fucking Jalen, no more than he could stop fucking her.

She didn't want to. And she knew he didn't either. As if the very act of coupling so intensely defied the doom they had seen.

Yes, Ranelle whispered.

Yes, Jalen confirmed.

And then they knew, almost at the same moment, the true gift Yanea had bestowed.

She had told them the truth. Darkness was coming, hard and fast. And yet she and Jalen could survive. Together. Trusting, making life and love instead of wasting away in fear.

Dark clouds, splintering like broken glass...

Sunlight and roses, crystal streams and green forest.

Children played in the forest.

A son, with pointed ears and golden blonde hair like his father.

A daughter, with hair the color of a raven's wing. And with a run and a jump she transformed into a nordai, took to the air and soared through the forest.

Their children. Hers and Jalen's.

The first of a new, strong and mingled race, joining the power of Nordai and Seraphine.

"Yes," Ranelle murmured aloud.

"Yes!" Jalen's bellow sounded strong, full of pride and hope.

A fine layer of perspiration glowed upon their skin as their breathing quickened. His strokes grew more powerful as the silvery blue flames flickered around them. Their hearts pounded loud enough for her senses to feel their beats.

Whatever it took, whatever they must face—they would face it together, and those children *would* be born. They *would* grow to their potential in peace and happiness.

Somehow.

Yes. This time, they said the word together, like a new and even deeper vow.

Ranelle's fingers dug into Jalen's back as she raised her head and pressed her lips to his. Her tongue plunged into his mouth as he thrust his cock into her quim.

Her body began to vibrate, and the moment she reached orgasm, Jalen placed the *enrli* at his forehead against hers, and pressed his cock so tightly into her that the *enrli* above his staff melded with the one on her mound.

Their climaxes exploded within them, the blue and silver glows of their *enrli* so intense the Ranelle thought she might fly apart.

As they soared on a new plane, Jalen whispered in her mind, *I love you*.

With her heart, mind, soul and body, Ranelle replied, *We are as one. Forever and always*.

Glossary

Ansi—gems used for barter

Angelei—Elvin Princess and warrior; Damianne's twin and Jalen's sister

Anistana—Queen of Faerie

Arbonidae—private Elvin mating ceremony

Aric—King of the Nordain

Astral—Faerie Realm

Baethel—Aric's stallion

Bewitching Pool—magical pool in the D'euan Forest

Bluewood—trees native to and around Wilding Wood

Carilee—Nordain toddler

Chrys—Female Elvin warrior

Cind—human woman who serves Zanden

Con'tu'a—erotic Elvin ceremony designed to clear a Seer's mind

D'euan Forest—where the Bewitching Pool is

Dair—their continent

Damianne—Elvin Princess and warrior; Angelei's twin and Jalen's sister

Elinni—of the dark Faeries; Ibella's twin

Elves—tall, sensual, beautiful beings

Enrli—Symbol of significance to the Seraphine Elves

Everlasting River—in the D'euan Forest

Faeries—mischievous and erotic beings who reside in Wilding Wood

Fiorn—the village in Zanden's realm where Liana was raised

Gishla—exotic dancer

Gorni—Elvin food bar

Halia—heart-sister

Hrichn—sacred orb controlled by the Sorcerer

Hynling—trees with sap that is both pungent in smell and dangerous to Nordain

Ibella—of the dark faeries; Elinni's twin

Ir—god of the Nordain

Irani—winged beasts of the Sorcerer

Jalen—Aric's Elvin brother-at-arms; brother to twins Angelei and Damianne

Jensai—sacred vines with heavily scented blooms

Kerriel—Female Elvin warrior

Krakilee—mystical creature in Wilding Wood

Krstn—magical Elvin cloth

Liana—Tanzinite female banished at birth to live with humans because she was born without wings

Lonoi—erotic Elvin massage

Lycidian dragon—beast that lives in Merth Darkling and Wilding Wood

Mairi—the sea; its sands glitter in rainbow colors

Merth Darkling—a relatively unknown part of the D'euan Forest

Mishnui—a tree that grows in the Faerie realm with silver leaves

Mount Taka—a volcano

Nira—barkeeper where Ranelle, Tierra and Liana work

Nofsta—wolves of the moors

Nordai—ravens

Nordain—a race of Sky People who shape-shifted to nordai—ravens—at will

Orlai—Elvin potion used for preparation for the *Con'tu'a*

Palme—a Tanzinite man; Liana's father

Perna—magical bird in Wilding Wood

Phoenicia—Nordain Kingdom, also known as Kingdom of the Sky People

Qinok—bog monster of the Xardu Moors

Ranelle—Liana's friend who's gifted with the sight, as well as other powers

Renn—King Aric's younger brother

Ritt—human woman who serves Zanden

Salana—a Tanzinite woman; Liana's mother

Seraphine—Elvin Kingdom

Seraphine Chronicles—charts the history and prophecies for all the races of Dair

Tanzinities—a race of cave-dwellers with wings of bats, usually albino with translucent skin and red or blue eyes

Tiali—human woman who serves Zanden

Tierra—Liana's human friend of mysterious birth; also gifted with magical powers

Tirnac—Elvin warrior

Toen—shape shifting being known as the Overseer

Troyas—Aric's second in command

Uba—cruel woman who raised Liana, Tierra, and Ranelle

Urli—butterfly that can change colors

Voral—Sorcerer who trained Zanden, who now controls Voral's realm

Wilding Wood—where it is said that Faeries, wizards, dragons, unicorns and other mysterious creatures dwell

Xardu Moors—treacherous moors dangerous to faire folke, human and other

Yanea—Queen of the Seraphine Elves; mother to Jalen, Damianne and Angelei

Yeroi—Elvin potion

Zanden—a Nordain gone bad, and a powerful Sorcerer

Zjemma—Nordain word for mother

Zjenni—Nordain word for 'most precious'

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