



H. L. Watson

WORLD OF

# RYYAH

short stories



Kerala, and Akenji's  
Adventure

Copyright © 2012 by H. L. Watson  
All rights reserved.



ISBN: 1-4791-7547-1  
ISBN-13: 978-1-4791-7547-5  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-62346-192-8

No part of this production may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing. Inquiries should be addressed to:

Watson Lee Publishing  
2665 villa Creek #a112  
Dallas, TX USA 75234

[www.WatsonLeePublishing.com](http://www.WatsonLeePublishing.com)  
Emails can be sent to [support@worldofryyah.com](mailto:support@worldofryyah.com)  
[www.worldofryyah.com](http://www.worldofryyah.com)

# *Table of Contents*

## *Kerala, and Akenji's Adventure*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

## *World Map*







Ice Elven Kingdom  
Icyinveil

The Titan's Spine

Western Continent of Ryyah

Veal Mearia Kingdom

Corragal

Lunar Elven Kingdom  
Valley of the Moon

Northern High Elven Kingdom

Southern High Elven Kingdom

Shadow Elven Empire

The Accursed Valley

Hollowlark

The Great Chasm

Kshearry Plains

Salmon River

The Wildlands

Benten

Grendel

Leafsburg

Eastern Wood Elven Kingdom

Western Wood Elven Kingdom

Alderwood

Eldergate

Kshearry River

Gorrendo Republic

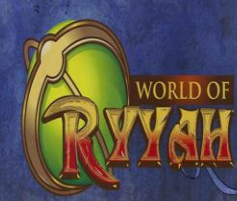
Gorrendo

The Scorching Lands

Volteness

Eastern Continent of Ryyah

The Kshearry Gulf







# Chapter 1



On a hilltop overlooking the Kshearry River, a small, solemn group watched in silence as two Rangers lowered the rough wooden coffin into the ground. Akenji flinched slightly as the first shovelful of soil thumped against the box. His chest tightened as he thought of Donovan's body lying there, about to be buried in a dark finality, and a single tear escaped his eye. He didn't bother to wipe it away but as it slipped down his dark cheek, he took a deep breath and restrained the emotion that was threatening to overtake him. Years of training as a Ranger had given him the ability to control his emotions under almost any circumstance, but burying his best friend was proving to be a test. He glanced over at Brandela, standing so stoically, her hand resting protectively across her belly, and turned his mind in a direction he could more easily manage - the protection of his friend's unborn child.

This child would never have to experience the horrors its father had endured. He swore, then and there on Donovan's grave, that Donovan's child would grow up in safety. Never would it be enslaved or experience the anguish of watching its entire family being murdered in front of its eyes. He swore on Donovan's lifeless body that his offspring would have the one thing that had always seemed to elude Donovan, himself and all of the Rangers – security and happiness. Suffering and loss had been their lot in life. It would not be that way for Donovan's child, not if Akenji could prevent it.

Slowly, Brandela's maidservants and most of the Rangers left the graveside and drifted back toward the settlement, leaving only Akenji, Brandela, Kerala and a few remaining Rangers to bear witness to the completion of the burial. They watched in silence, each lost in their own memories and feelings, as the two coffin bearers tossed the final shovelfuls of soil onto Donovan's grave. Akenji stood for a moment longer, eyes cast upon the mound of dirt and with heavy sorrow in his heart. Finally, he looked up at his men, nodded, and then turned and began walking back to the encampment. The other Rangers soon followed, leaving only Brandela and Kerala.

Kerala watched her mistress with deep concern. Brandela had not cried or spoken during the entire service. She had simply stared at Donovan's grave as though willing him to rise from it and embrace her once again. Kerala, sensing the emotional turmoil within her mistress, decided to stay by Brandela's side to quietly wait for any sign that she may be needed.

After several long minutes, Brandela finally spoke, her voice low and trembling with constrained emotion. "Kerala, you may head back with the others."

"I am your humble servant, Mistress. My duty is to remain by your side," Kerala replied.

Brandela smiled slightly and her eyes left the grave for the first time to look into the face of her head maidservant. The girl was incredibly devoted and loyal and had become as much a friend and confidante as a servant. Her voice was soft when she replied, "Thank you, Kerala, but I would like to be alone with Donovan for a while, please. I will be along soon."

Kerala nodded her understanding, touched Brandela's arm in sympathy and turned toward the encampment. She had not gone far before the sounds of Brandela's mourning reached her. The sound of

her mistress' weeping brought tears to her eyes, but she did not turn back. She would respect Brandela's desire to be alone and go ahead to prepare whatever comfort she could for when Brandela returned to camp.

Two hours later, Akenji strode to the door of Brandela's tent and slipped quietly inside. He had not seen her since the burial and wanted to check that she was all right. As the wife of his fallen best friend, he felt completely responsible for her well-being, and he knew this day would be hard for her.

As his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light in the tent, he noticed Kerala sitting alone at one of the makeshift desks. She turned as he entered the tent and her eyes widened slightly. He stopped in the doorway, feeling suddenly awkward and inexplicably nervous. He glanced around the tent but saw no sign of Brandela. Kerala stood up and he turned his attention back to her.

"Hello, Kerala," he said, struggling to present a confidence that had strangely escaped him all of a sudden. "I've come to check on Brandela. Is she resting?"

"Yes," replied Kerala, "she returned about an hour ago and has requested to be undisturbed in her chamber. I'm afraid the day has been difficult for her."

"Difficult for all of us," agreed Akenji.

"The past months have been challenging in many ways," said Kerala softly. "Perhaps now, with Donovan laid to rest and the settlement started, we will find some days of peace ahead."

Akenji frowned. "There is much to be done before we can be certain of our security. These things, I will discuss with Brandela as soon as she is feeling up to it. I hate to push such serious affairs on her so soon after her loss, and in her delicate condition, but they are important matters and decisions will need to be made very soon."

Kerala stood silently, staring at Akenji, lost in the way his enormous frame filled the entrance of the tent, the fierce strength behind the seriousness of his face, the way his voice resonated, deep and low, through the room and through her. His words came to her, but as a secondary feature. She was too absorbed in his presence to really hear him. Suddenly, she realized that he had not spoken for several moments and was staring back at her with a slightly puzzled and expectant look on his face.

Kerala's cheeks flushed and she lowered her eyes in utter humility. "I'm sure with you as the leader of the Rangers, we will be safe enough," she stammered.

In her moments of silence, Akenji had found himself appraising Kerala's unique looks and finding her quite attractive. Her high cheekbones, auburn hair and hazel-green eyes were not as stunningly beautiful as the more petite bone structure, red-gold hair and turquoise eyes of the Western Wood Elves, and her small, freckled nose was very unusual amongst the Elven maidens he had seen, but there was an intelligent, sophisticated quality about her and she was not ugly by any stretch of the imagination. At about 5'8", she was also taller than the average Elven maiden, although to him she seemed delightfully small. Something about her filled him with wonder and she was not alone in her flustered feelings when she snapped back to the moment at hand.

Akenji cleared his throat uncomfortably and muttered, "I'd better get back to my men. Please pass my condolences on to Brandela." As he turned to leave, he stumbled over his own foot and staggered. As he caught his balance, he cursed softly with humiliation and hurried from Kerala's sight before he could make things any worse.

Kerala stared after him for several long moments, puzzled by his strange behavior and wondering about this man who would soon become her husband. Was it really possible for Elves and humans to interbreed? Donovan and Brandela had conceived a child, but was Brandela's idea of creating a new race of half human-half elf wise or even doable? She doubted if it had ever even been speculated, let alone done before now. She wondered what her parents would think if they knew the path she was about to

tread. They were rule-breakers of their own kind and if anyone would understand, it would be them, but this was a highly unusual situation.

Kerala was the daughter of a Western Wood Elven farmer who had fallen in love and married an Eastern Wood Elf – a union which was widely frowned upon in Western Wood Elven culture and which caused her father to be nearly disowned by his family. Her mother had often told Kerala about how she had left her own people to be with Kerala's father because of her love for him and how, if she had it to do over again, she would make the same decision. Kerala had never understood why anyone would be willing to risk so much for so little and the social standing that her father lost by choosing his mate from amongst the Eastern Elves cost him dearly in later years. Kerala had devoted her life to finding a way to make things better for him and her mother.

She knew from her studies that it was important, in the Western Wood Elven culture, to marry 'up the chain' in order to gain as much prestige and honor for one's family as possible. Love seldom had anything to do with marital arrangements. Kerala had inherited her mother's looks – features considered less than attractive by Western Wood Elven standards – and she was given little regard as a potential mate as she grew. She had little chance, she knew, of restoring her family's honor through marriage.

As she got older, she was sent off to train as an apprentice priestess and she threw herself into her studies diligently, hoping to find the key that would re-open the doors for her family. Her hard work was rewarded by excellent grades and respect from her teachers, but the respect did not go quite far enough. She was constantly overlooked when it came time to apply for one of the apprenticeships to train under the Arch Mages in Alderwood. She consistently performed above average in the entrance tests given by the recruiters who were sent to assess students, yet she was still rejected. She was never given a satisfactory answer as to why, but she knew the reason. Being so different meant that she would have to work twice as hard and be twice as good as any of the others, and she accepted this and gave it her all. Still, year after year, she was refused the chance for advancement despite her ever-growing magical skills.

She had been thrilled, therefore, when Brandela had chosen her to be one of her maidservants in a rare selection of Elven maidens outside of Alderwood. Her chances of finding a suitable mate had greatly improved due to the organized breeding methods used by the Elven nobility. She would have a mate selected for her, they would undergo the bonding ceremony, and her future would be secure at last. She had jumped at the opportunity.

But what had seemed the answer to all of her problems had turned out quite differently. Just when fate was smiling down upon her, a cruel twist had come in the form of a slaver and when the dust had settled, almost a year later, she had found herself in a stickier situation than when she had started. Everything had changed now and, instead of bringing honor to her family, she knew that she had probably brought more disgrace upon them, due to no fault of her own. She did not blame Brandela for this odd turn of events – it was simply fate that had brought them to where they all were now and her fate was deeply intertwined with Brandela's. Kerala would not abandon her mistress and friend for any reason and, whatever might happen, she would accept her responsibility for any and all situations that would arise in their futures.

Brandela had announced, a few days ago, that she would be given to Akenji to take as a bonded mate, and she had been both worried and strangely excited ever since. She could not deny that she was attracted to Akenji, a fact that had not slipped Brandela's notice. She loved the unique contrast of his gray eyes and his rich brown skin, and his honest face was undeniably handsome. He was well built, muscular and one of the largest men she had ever seen in her entire life. Best of all, behind his fierceness and obvious courage, she had seen a genuine gentleness. His kind smile had touched her heart more than once.



But he was human and that presented a world of unknowns. She remembered what Brandela had said about humans not being able to bond the same way as Elves. If Brandela was correct, then what would it mean to be bonded to a man who was not bonded to her in return? The bonding ceremony overcame all issues of lack of attraction or seeking other mates. How could an unbonded mating be successful? This and so many other questions had been plaguing her thoughts since Brandela's announcement.

Akenji pushed the encounter with Kerala off from his mind with some effort. Something about her made him feel like an untested boy instead of the leader and fighter he was and he found the experience unsettling... although somehow intriguing too. The whole idea of this arranged marriage had him unnerved. His Elven trainer and surrogate mother, Alayna, had taught the Rangers the ways and customs of the Western Wood Elves, but he knew these ways were not the ways of humankind... of his own kind. His parents had joined together by choice, through love and need, and a part of him had always secretly hoped to find a mate who would want him for the man he was, not because she had been ordered to. Still, Kerala was interesting. She stood out from the others in a way he could not ignore. Maybe...

He shook himself free of these thoughts and turned his attention, forcefully, to more urgent matters. He had been worried about the location of this encampment since the day Brandela had announced her plan to create a new settlement here, one that would be ruled by her and Donovan's unborn child and attended by the offspring of the human-elven pairs she would select. This land she had chosen was too exposed to be easily defended and went against all the skills and knowledge that Alayna had spent so many years instilling within him and the other Rangers. Akenji studied the inner perimeter of the camp as he wandered now, mentally planning the construction of a defensive wall. The settlement was small enough, at this point, to be easily enclosed, but he would be much more comfortable if they could choose a more isolated and protected area to settle. There was an uncharted forest roughly half a league to the east of their present location. If Brandela agreed, he would send scouts to explore for more suitable areas as soon as possible.

This land that they were settling was largely unknown. Only the Elders knew what strange animals and plant life they would find here. The area appeared to be fertile and the nearby forest and river would mean a steady food supply, but he knew from terrible experience that it was just as important to choose an area that could be easily defended as it was to choose areas with plentiful food, and this area was sorely lacking in that way. The building materials that they would need were scarce this close to the river. Construction of a defensive wall would be labor-intensive and take much valuable time.

In truth, he doubted slave raids were an immediate threat with the settlement on this side of the river. The area was completely uninhabited by any sentient race that he knew of and rarely travelled by nomadic sorts, but he also knew that the raiders were largely opportunistic and if they happened to stumble upon the settlement, it would not be long before their defenses would be tested. It was a dangerous situation that needed to be addressed as soon as Brandela was ready to be seen. One way or the other, he would see to it that they remained safe.

## Chapter 2



Early the next morning, as Akenji left his tent, he heard a commotion near the training grounds. He strode over to see what was happening. He found a few of his men practicing their sword skills, their heated sparring drawing hoots and cheers from the others. As soon as the Rangers saw him approaching, they stopped abruptly, fell silent and saluted him. He smiled and waved a hand at them.

“At ease,” he called out. “Good to see everyone in good spirits today.” He nodded toward the swordsmen. “Looks like the perfect way to get rid of a little tension. But, I think you need a real warrior to show you how to use those swords.”

Grins spread slowly across the men’s faces and a fresh chorus of cheers rose from the observers. Akenji’s second-in-command and trusted friend, Brien, overheard the challenge and wandered over to the group. Laughing, he smacked Akenji on the back and said, “Well, you have to even it up a little bit to give us a chance.”

Akenji’s eyebrows raised slightly at Brien’s use of the word ‘us’. “Oh, are you going to join them, then?” he teased, grinning.

“But of course, my friend. I wouldn’t want you to have it too easy,” Brien answered, a look of clear amusement on his face. “You can’t use that bloody axe you’re so fond of swinging around though,” he added.

Akenji shrugged his massive shoulders nonchalantly and said, “Fine, do whatever you want to make it *fair*.” He sauntered to the weapons rack and selected one of the long swords with the casual air of a man choosing which shirt to wear for the day. As he turned, weapon in hand, and headed toward the sparring ring, the Rangers began to cheer afresh and hoot for their favored contender. Their enthusiastic cheering caught the attention of some of Brandela’s maidservants and they gradually drifted over to see what was happening. Before long, there was quite a large gathering, all excited to see who would triumph as Akenji faced down three of his fellow human Rangers, all armed with long swords.

Kerala heard the commotion while she was dressing and curiosity soon drew her from her tent and toward the crowd. She could see nothing at first because of all the bodies blocking her view, but when she pushed through the onlookers and saw Akenji in the ring, she gasped in alarm.

Akenji was crouched in a fighting stance, his face calm and unworried by his opponents’ advantage and numbers.

Kerala gasped again as Brien suddenly lunged toward Akenji with his blade raised. Akenji waited until the last possible moment before slapping the blade away as if he were dealing with a minor nuisance. The move caused Brien to lurch sideways and stumble to the ground. The other two men immediately rushed at Akenji.

Akenji didn’t move, but waited patiently for the two men to come to him. He easily parried a sword thrust from the second man, and then quickly parried the third blow from his third opponent. Then, to everyone’s surprise, he dropped his long sword to the ground and stepped forward with alarming speed,

catching one of his opponents off guard. He lifted the man clear over his head and threw him to where the other two men were re-grouping, causing both of those men to stumble and fall. As they scrambled to get up off the ground, Akenji quickly darted into the midst of the chaos and took brutal advantage of their lack of attention.

He grabbed two of the Rangers by their hair and forcefully knocked their heads together. The men fell to the ground again, dazed and confused. Brien, now back on his feet, lunged for Akenji, intent on taking him out with his bare hands, but one big back-handed blow from Akenji sent him sprawling into the heap of the first two men. All three lay moaning, clearly out of the fight.

The Rangers on the sidelines began to cheer and chant Akenji's name, while helping the others up with good-natured slaps on the backs and much teasing. The Elven maidens whispered amongst themselves, pointing at Akenji and giggling, obviously quite impressed with his fighting prowess.

Kerala watched in silence, amazed by the show of strength and bravery she had just witnessed, and equally amused by the jesting and playfulness he was now involved in with the three men he had so easily manhandled moments before. The goose bumps on her arms and the wild beating of her heart told her that she was in the presence of an extraordinary man. And he was to be her husband!

Akenji turned and spotted her and for a moment they looked into each other's eyes. He turned to move toward another Ranger, but tripped over his own feet and sprawled, face first, in the dust. The other Rangers, also noticing Kerala's presence, howled with laughter at Akenji's behavior.

"You can take three men without raising a sweat, but a little woman turns you into a bumbling fool," laughed Brien.

Kerala smiled slightly. It was so strange to see this graceful and confident man become so clumsy and awkward every time he was near her. Could Brien be correct? Was it she that made him so flustered? It was the first time she'd realized that she might have some sort of power over a man... and she was curious about it.

Akenji, embarrassed to his toes, scowled at Brien as he stood back up with as much dignity as he could muster. "Fun's over," he growled. "You men need to train. Your performance was pathetic. If that's how easily defeated you are in play, what will happen in real battle?" He brushed past his subdued men and Kerala without as much as a word to her.

The smile faded from Kerala's face and doubt flooded her heart. How foolish to think that she could possibly have any power over a man like him... or any man. She was nothing more than an annoyance to him, not even worthy of a glance. Humiliated, she turned to head for Brandela's tent.

Brandela had been awake for some time now, aroused from a restless slumber by the sounds of excited voices outside. Although vaguely curious about the source of the commotion, she had stayed in bed, her thoughts drifting to Donovan and all that they had been through together that had led her to where she was now. How would she be able to go on without him? She would never be the same now that he was gone. Bonding with a new mate would not be possible for her, and even if she could, there would never be another who could fill the void inside of her. With a deep sigh, she sat up and looked about the tent, as though hoping to find something to inspire her to rise and face the day ahead. She raised a hand to brush her red-gold hair back from her face, and then that delicate hand came to rest on the small mound of her belly.

A deep sadness filled her as she thought of Donovan's child never meeting his courageous and handsome father. But this unborn child of her bonded mate would also be her source of strength in the challenging days and months and years ahead of them. Donovan would have wanted her to go on and provide a safe environment for their child. He would expect her to be strong and do what was best for all of them. The best way for her to honor Donovan's memory was to be the best leader that she could and



create a thriving settlement, fit for the child they had created. With a firm nod of fresh resolve and newfound vigor, she rose from her bed and called for one of her maidservants to send for Kerala.

It was Kerala who answered her call, making her way into the tent at once and bowing low before her mistress.

“How may I serve you, Mistress?” she asked quietly.

Brandela smiled at Kerala’s prompt and humble manner and touched her cheek with fondness. “You serve me well, dear Kerala. We have much to do in the days ahead and I will need your help. This morning, I wish to start creating an inventory and cataloging... well... many things. The supplies we have, and those we need. We’ll include the supplies the Rangers brought with them also. The food stores. A list of each person and the skills they have that can be utilized for the benefit of the settlement. Yes, in fact, why don’t we start with that? We already know most of the former occupations of all my maidservants.”

Kerala watched her mistress patiently as Brandela’s tone became urgent and her actions just as frenetic. She was pacing as she spoke, stopping only long enough to pull out some parchment and push it towards Kerala. When Kerala did not move immediately to pick up the parchment, Brandela stopped and turned, ready to urge her into action. In her face, Kerala read a struggle... duty versus grief, determination versus a pain that threatened to destroy. She knew that Brandela’s pain was deep and her own resolve to help her mistress through this difficult time was renewed.

“Your settlement will be magnificent,” Kerala said softly, consolingly. “It will be the first of its kind in all of history. You will not fail. I will help you in any way I can,” she assured Brandela.

Brandela looked into the eyes of her maidservant and for a moment all of her grief and uncertainty threatened to overtake her. Her brilliant eyes shone with tears and it was with a great effort that she pulled herself together before they could fall. She took a deep breath and when she spoke again, she was calmer, drawing energy and strength from Kerala’s serene and confident demeanor.

“I am grateful for your loyalty and friendship, Kerala. This settlement must be successful, and so it will. Shall we start?”

Kerala picked up the parchment and began to write as Brandela spoke. Over the next hour, they listed the names of all of the maidservants and any useful skills or trades they could use in the building of the settlement. There were weavers and crafters, seamstresses and cooks. Many of the women had farming skills, and some others had grown up learning the skills of the foresters. Several had training in magic and in academic studies. A few had medical training and a small handful could hunt and fish. All of them were young and strong and in their prime for bonding and mating. This, more than anything, would be of great importance in the creation of the new settlement.

“We must catalog the skills of the Rangers, also,” Brandela commanded, “and begin to organize this small labor force into teams. If we wish to succeed, we must make the most efficient use of our people.”

They labored over the list until Brandela finally sat back, satisfied with the beginnings of her plan. Kerala waited patiently while Brandela scanned the list once more and then asked, “Is there anything more you wish to add, Mistress?”

Brandela frowned thoughtfully, and then answered, “Yes. Send for Akenji. We will complete this list with his help this morning and begin to give tasks to the teams. I must speak to him about our immediate defenses as well.”

Kerala drew in a sharp breath and turned to Brandela with an anxious expression. “I apologize, Mistress. I forgot to tell you that Akenji stopped in last evening to check on you. He seemed concerned about the security of the settlement and wished to speak with you about it when you were ready.”

Brandela watched with surprise and amusement as her calm and steadfast servant became flustered and flushed at the mere mention of Akenji’s name. It reminded her of the more pleasant duties that were

still to be taken care of.

“We will also need to start planning your wedding, Kerala,” she said with a coy smile.

Kerala blushed deeply and avoided her mistress’ eyes.

Brandela frowned to see the barely hidden distress cross Kerala’s face.

“You are not happy with this arrangement, Kerala? Tell me, what do you think of this man that I have chosen to be your husband?”

Kerala did not reply for a long moment and then chose her words carefully. “He is an impressive warrior, that is for certain. And he is quite handsome,” she said shyly, picking up the parchment and studying the list more intently than necessary. “It is not my place to question whom you deem worthy of marriage. I will follow your wishes.”

“I was under the impression that this was a desirable choice,” prompted Brandela gently. “I have seen the way you look at him. What makes you hesitant?”

Kerala glanced at Brandela nervously and then lowered her eyes once more. “I do not wish to seem ungrateful, Mistress. I am simply worried that... well... that perhaps *he* may not be fond of the match.”

Brandela’s face lit up with a brilliant, confident smile. “Trust me when I say, Kerala, that this will all work out for the best. You’ll see. Akenji is an excellent man – one of the best I have known. He will make you a good husband. If he were not a suitable companion, I would not have considered him for your mate. Besides the fact that I sense some attraction between the two of you, I also have very practical reasons behind my choice. As you know, it is every Elven matron’s duty to provide the best possible servants for her offspring. You and Akenji are the best of your kind. Your children will be most suitable to serve my child, the new leader of this domain we are creating. They will be like him – half elf, half human. He will not be alone.”

Kerala raised her eyes to Brandela’s. After a long moment, she replied, “You have clearly put much thought into this, Mistress, and I am honored to be chosen as a mate for such a high-ranking and respected man. I will obey you in all things and I look forward to seeing the conclusion of your plans. I will go now and collect Akenji personally so that you may speak with him.”

Brandela nodded and Kerala slipped from the tent, relieved to have a moment to collect herself. She wished to speak to Akenji before he spoke to Brandela. She hurried toward his tent on the other side of the compound. At the door of the tent, she announced herself and heard a deep voice reply, “Enter.”

Akenji looked surprised to see that Kerala was alone. She looked anxious and he immediately came forward, curious about her presence and the reason for her distress. “Is something wrong, Kerala? Why have you come? Is Brandela alright?”

“Brandela has sent for you,” Kerala replied and then added hesitantly, “but I also wanted to talk to you privately, before you go to her.”

“Yes?” answered Akenji.

Kerala did not speak for several long moments as she carefully weighed her words. She bit her lower lip and avoided his eyes, trying desperately to find the way to ask what she wanted to know. Finally, she looked up at Akenji and blurted, “What do you think of me?”

It was Akenji’s turn to hesitate. “I’m not quite sure that I understand your meaning,” he said.

Kerala sighed with frustration. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t very well done, was it?”

Akenji smiled at her encouragingly and said, “How will I know if you did it well or not when I still don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Kerala blushed at his gentle teasing. “Yes, I’m sorry,” she replied, fumbling for words. “What I meant to ask is what do you think about me personally? As a... as a mate? I guess I just want to know if... if you find me to your liking.”

With the words finally out, Kerala seemed to find renewed confidence and looked Akenji in the eyes expectantly.

Akenji emitted a startled laugh – almost a yelp. How on earth was he to answer such a question? Her eyes held him spellbound and tongue-tied and the words simply wouldn't come. Of course he found her to his liking, but how was he to tell her that? He watched, helplessly, as something shifted in her expression. He sensed that he was failing in some way, but did not know how to save the situation.

Finally, Kerala lowered her eyes and spoke, her voice clipped and all business. "Your silence speaks volumes. There is no need to try to explain. Come, Brandela is waiting." Kerala turned her back on him and walked out of the room without even checking to see if he was following. Akenji hesitated for a moment, trying to make sense of what had just transpired, before following her.

Brandela smiled as Kerala and Akenji entered her tent, thinking once more what an excellent pair they would make. Akenji stopped in the doorway, a very imposing figure, before walking up to her and saluting respectfully.

Kerala curtsied and begged to be excused from the tent. Brandela quirked an eyebrow at her request but nodded her head slightly to give her the okay to leave. It was not like Kerala to want to leave her when there was even a slight possibility she would be needed. Akenji's eyes followed the Elven maiden out the door, a look not missed by the observant Brandela. Neither did she miss the look of confusion that passed over his face before he turned his attention back to her. Kerala, it seemed, was puzzling them both with her odd behavior.

Akenji squared his broad shoulders and turned to the matter at hand. "How may I serve you?" he asked.

"Kerala and I have spent the morning cataloging the skills of each of my maidservants and beginning to arrange labor teams. There are one hundred Elven maidens here, all of them with unique skills to offer. I would like to include your thirteen Rangers on these teams and speak to you, also, about the defense arrangements for the encampment. Perhaps some of the women can be trained in the fighting arts?"

"Yes, I've been wanting to speak to you about the settlement, Brandela," Akenji answered, choosing his words carefully. "I am not entirely comfortable with this location that you have chosen. It is very exposed and will be difficult to defend."

Brandela frowned. "I understand your concerns," she replied, "but food is plentiful here. The river will provide an easy water supply for the people and for the crops. The land is fertile and the nearby forest is teeming with game. And... Donovan is here. We will make our settlement here."

"But Brandela, with all due respect, to stay here will put your people at risk. If the slave raiders come..."

"This area is completely uninhabited," argued Brandela. "There is very little chance of us having problems from other groups."

"I agree," said Akenji, "at least for now. But it's only a matter of time before a wandering group of barbarians discovers us. If we don't have suitable defenses in place, we could be in grave danger. They *will* test us. If we were in a more sheltered location, we'd..."

Brandela cut him off for the second time and her face was set with determination when she spoke. "Then I suggest you help me form these labor teams and get your men to work on forming a suitable defense. We will stay right here!"

"As you wish," answered Akenji, his voice controlled and businesslike. He had been raised in a strict command system. He had no desire to fight Brandela on the issue. He had made his point, and would now turn his attention to doing his best to help her, even if he didn't completely agree with her choice.



## Chapter 3



Before another two hours had passed, Akenji and Brandela had cataloged his men's skills, formed labor teams, worked out a basic plan of action and further discussed having some of his men teach a group of about twenty of her women the fighting arts in order to increase their defensive force. Akenji was preparing to leave when Brandela stopped him.

"There is one more thing we need to plan for," she said with a playful smile.

"What's that?" asked Akenji, completely unaware of what was coming. His mind was on what needed to be done to start the construction of a defensive wall. They would start immediately. They would need...

Brandela broke through his distant thoughts. "We need to plan for your wedding, Akenji. It was my hope that we would have you and Kerala bonded soon," she said.

Akenji sighed. "There will be plenty of time for that, Brandela, but our immediate concern should be the construction of the wall. Once that is in place, we can handle all the trivial matters at a more leisurely pace."

"Your wedding is not trivial," Brandela scolded.

"But the wall is far more important to the safety of all of our people. The wall must come first!" he answered firmly.

Brandela nodded slowly and thoughtfully. "Very well," she agreed. "Make the necessary arrangements." After a brief pause she looked up at Akenji with a curious gleam in her eye and asked, "As soon as the wall is completed, you will marry Kerala?"

Akenji brushed the question aside with an irritated frown. "As you will," he answered absently, his mind already back on the enormous task that lay before him.

As Akenji swept through the entrance of the tent, he spotted Kerala out of the corner of his eye. She had clearly been listening to the conversation he had just had with Brandela and wore a hurt expression on her freckled face. He stopped and nodded to her in greeting, knowing instinctively that he was the cause of the hurt, but unsure what he had done to cause it.

Kerala frowned up at him. "You're pushing back the bonding ceremony?" she demanded.

Akenji nodded and opened his mouth to explain, but Kerala turned abruptly away from him and walked into Brandela's tent. He shook his head, puzzled, and headed toward the men's compound. These women and their obsession about marriage made no sense to him. He had far more serious issues to be concerned with at the moment.

Akenji found Brien in the training ring, putting a few of the Rangers through their paces. Brien stopped the men when he saw Akenji approaching and saluted him.

"I need to speak with you," Akenji commanded.

Brien dismissed the fighters and joined Akenji. "You're looking serious," he teased. "You're not about to beat me up again, are you?"

Akenji smiled at his friend. "No, play time is over. We have a great deal of work to do." Akenji discussed with Brien all the things that he had planned with Brandela that morning. "We must get started on the wall as soon as possible. Without it, we're completely at the mercy of any barbarian or slaver who happens to spot us."

Brien's brow furrowed. "We'll have to lug all the timber we need from the forest to the east. That's going to be a tough job!"

"Yes. I tried to persuade Brandela to have us settle in a more isolated and protected area, but she'll have none of it. It's here that she wants to establish her settlement, so, lug logs we must. We'll need to get at it immediately. We've assigned this group to the forest," he said, pointing to a list of men and women's names on the parchment, "and this smaller group to hunt and fish and keep our food supply steady. These men will get the logs back here and begin placing them in the necessary order to make the wall. Brandela has assigned Kerala the job of getting an inventory of all of our weapons and supplies. I'm sure she'll arrange to have as many of the women that we need to do the less physical labor when it's time to raise the wall. We'll certainly need all the manpower we can get."

Brien cracked a smile on hearing Akenji describe the women as manpower. Akenji scowled at him. "You know what I mean."

Brien chuckled, but said nothing.

"By the time this is done, we'll be grateful for every able hand, man or woman, who can pitch in," said Akenji.

"I'll have the crew ready for tomorrow morning," replied Brien, but Akenji shook his head.

"No, I want the forestry crew in there this afternoon. We can get a few good hours of cutting in before nightfall."

Brien saluted and turned to go gather the laborers.

Back in Brandela's tent, the subject turned once more to bonding. Kerala helped her mistress create a suitable list of matches for marriage according to the pair's strengths and weaknesses, with each man assigned to several women.

"You alone will be given a man who will not mate with anyone else. It will be my special gift to you," Brandela said, smiling. "I want you to have some part of what Donovan and I had together. It is my hope that, in time, perhaps the two of you will even come to care for each other as deeply as we did."

Kerala sat, sullen and silent, until Brandela finally confronted her in frustration. "What is going on between you and Akenji? You both seem so disinterested and glum about this whole bonding ceremony. I thought you'd be happy," she said, somewhat accusingly.

Kerala struggled to remain composed as she answered, "I'm sorry, Mistress. I am grateful to have been chosen for such an honorable bonding. It's just that... I don't believe he cares for the match."

"Why do you say that?" prompted Brandela.

Kerala opened her heart to Brandela then and told her about her childhood with the Western Wood Elves. "I have always been different and not accepted by the others. I'm used to being an outcast. I know I'm not beautiful and not a desirable mate by most standards. But part of me has always hoped that I would know the love that my parents had for each other. I know this is probably a childish hope, but I've always imagined that when I finally met the man that I would be bonded to for life, he would care for me and see past the outer appearance to the inner beauty. Perhaps I'm being foolish right now, but I don't believe that Akenji cares for the match or for me."

Brandela listened patiently, letting Kerala talk herself out. When the girl finally seemed spent, Brandela smiled at her sympathetically and said, "You've had difficult things to deal with for one so young. I'm sorry. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for you, but your experiences turned you

into the strong and able woman that you have become... and it was your obvious strength and your differences that made you stand out for me. You are among friends now. We are all different in some way. For better or worse, we are your family now.”

She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “As for Akenji, don’t judge him too quickly. These things take time and he is unaccustomed to the ways of women. Give him time. He has a good heart and he will see you for who you truly are.”

Kerala smiled through her tears and Brandela reached over to hug her. “It will all work out,” Brandela reassured her.

“If we ever get bonded, that is. He may just keep finding reasons to postpone the ceremony,” answered Kerala.

Brandela sat back, startled. “Is that what this is all about?” she laughed.

“He obviously wants to wait as long as he can,” spat Kerala.

Brandela laughed out loud. “Foolish girl, Akenji is merely concerned about our safety. I had no idea that postponing the wedding would have this kind of effect on you. We shall have to rectify this situation right away!”

The following morning, Brandela sent for Akenji. She beamed at him when he entered the tent. “How is the work coming along?” she queried cheerfully.

“The plan has been put into place,” he informed her. “I have a crew of men and women in the forest working as we speak. We’ll begin bringing the logs to the settlement and building the wall within a few days.”

Brandela nodded, impressed. “Can someone else be put in charge of these work crews?” she asked.

“Of course,” Akenji replied, alert and curious about her odd question. “Any of my men could handle the construction groups. Brien is already doing much of it. But, there’s no need to have someone else in charge as I will be personally supervising the entire job.”

“You will need to put one of your men in charge,” commanded Brandela calmly. “Be sure that they know what is required for the entire project because you will not be here after today to supervise the labor groups... or any group for that matter.”

Akenji frowned and replied slowly, “I will serve you as you will, Brandela. Do you have need of my services elsewhere?”

Brandela grinned at the giant man and answered, “Yes, that is exactly what I need of you. I need your services elsewhere!”

Akenji, even more puzzled at her cryptic remark, frowned deeper and waited for her to explain.

Brandela continued to smile suspiciously while sending one of the other maidservants for Kerala and she was still smiling when Kerala arrived several minutes later. Kerala hesitated in the doorway for a moment when she saw a confused looking Akenji standing there, but then moved to Brandela, knelt before her and said, “How may I serve you, Mistress?”

Brandela motioned for Kerala to rise and sit beside her, and then she spoke, directing her words first to Akenji. “I have decided to countermand my agreement with you, Akenji, and stick with my original plan. You and Kerala will be bonded tomorrow evening.”

She chuckled at the simultaneous gasp that came from the pair. She had been expecting it. “I have already made the arrangements and the seamstresses have already begun preparing proper clothing for both of you. Of course, we may have to measure a bit, especially for you Akenji. I’m sure you will be a unique challenge for my servants on such short notice,” she said playfully.

Akenji’s face registered his disbelief and frustration. “Brandela, I appreciate your generosity and eagerness, but this should not be our main concern right now. The defense of this camp is my first priority



and it is my duty to make sure that everything goes along as planned. Once that is done there will be plenty of time for simpler things.”

Brandela smiled at him, completely unswayed. “Akenji, you told me yourself that any one of your men could oversee this job as well as you. These are my orders. You can best serve me by providing my child with loyal servants around his own age. The sooner you two conceive, the better.”

Kerala sat silently, eyes lowered but sneaking peeks at Akenji and Brandela as they argued. She saw Akenji’s look of outrage as Brandela spoke her next words and wished she could disappear. She was so miserable, thinking that Akenji was being forced into this marriage against his will, that it was not his choice. How could a bonding like this possibly work, especially if the spell did not affect him as it would her?

“I have also decided that after your bonding ceremony, you will go together into the wilderness and not return until six months have passed,” commanded Brandela.

“Brandela, that’s...” Akenji began, but Brandela cut him off quickly.

“I know this seems like a long time, but this is necessary, not only for you as a couple, but for me as well. Akenji, your men are accustomed to taking orders from you and only you. They will need to become accustomed to having me giving orders from now on and it will be harder for me to assert my new authority over them if you are in the picture. They need to understand that they now have a new leader.”

Akenji frowned but said nothing. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were blazing, but he nodded his head in understanding of what Brandela required him to do. He should be there seeing to their safety. He should be leading his men. But he knew there was to be no more arguing. She was his leader, too.

Brandela continued, now speaking to both Akenji and Kerala. “The time I spent in the wilderness with Donovan was the most cherished time of my life. We learned about each other, and about ourselves. We learned to depend on each other and care in ways that never could have happened otherwise. I know how closely this time alone together can bond people. You two can best serve me by serving each other. This time alone, away from everyone else, is not banishment or a punishment and should not be seen as such. It is what you need.”

“I will send plenty of food along and I’m sure that you, Akenji, can hunt for whatever else may be needed. Kerala, you have many valuable skills that you can put to good use out there. I want you to go at least ten leagues away from the encampment and do not return under any circumstances but that of extreme injury that cannot be managed by any other method. You two are the leadership of our new settlement, so it is vital that you grow closer and learn to get along well.”

Brandela paused for a moment, letting her words sink in, before asking, “Do you both understand me clearly?”

In unison, they replied, “As you will, Mistress.”

Brandela smiled and clapped her hands together. “Then we will have a wedding – the first wedding of our new settlement. How wonderful!”

She turned to Akenji and continued, “Akenji, you may return to your tent now. I will send one of the seamstresses to take the required measurements.”

Akenji nodded silently and without a look at either of the women, left the tent.

Kerala watched him go and sighed quietly. She turned to Brandela, desperately unhappy with the way things were going. “Mistress, why the sudden change in orders?” she nearly begged. “Is it because of what I told you yesterday? Please, Mistress, I apologize for my behavior. I won’t be so foolish again. It’s not necessary for you to do all of this on my account. Can’t you see that he doesn’t want it... doesn’t want me?” She stopped speaking then and lowered her head, in complete submission to her mistress’ will.

Brandela squatted beside the girl and lifted her chin until they were eye to eye. Her voice was firm

but gentle when she spoke. "Trust me on this, Kerala. I would not make such an important decision with my two most skilled servants if I did not feel it was completely necessary. What I told Akenji was completely true. It is important for me to establish authority over my new servants, and for him to relinquish that control and start to focus on new priorities."

"Mostly, though, I really do feel this is the best course of action for you and Akenji. You will be safe enough in the wilderness with your combined abilities but you will face challenges and the experience will bring you together in a way that I can't really put into words or fully explain."

Kerala sighed, and then answered, "I hope you're right, Brandela, and I thank you for giving us this chance. But I have a feeling that Akenji will not be all that pleasant to be around for the next couple of days. I'm sure he must see this as all my fault, which would not entirely be wrong, and I'm sure he sees this wedding, and me, as a big nuisance. I know he will not be happy about being sent away from his men. They have been his family and under his command for a long time."

Brandela pursed her lips and answered, "I know it will be hard for him, but he will get over it sooner than later, I believe. When a man and a woman are bonded, there are certain things that happen that you may not be fully aware of yet, but that can take a man's mind off his worries and make even the most disgruntled moods dissipate."

Kerala cocked her head quizzically and asked, "What do you mean, Mistress? What is so powerful that it can change a man that much?"

Brandela smiled secretively. "You will figure it out soon enough," she assured Kerala.

## Chapter 4



Several hours later, Akenji emerged from his tent, disgruntled and unhappy after being forced to spend his valuable time being poked and prodded by the two giggling girls who had come to measure him for his wedding apparel. It was time he should have been spending with his men, overseeing the most important duty they presently faced and instructing Brien so that he could take over in the coming months. Six months! He thought he had seen the end of ridiculous requests when he and his men had broken allegiance with High Lord Aden, but it seemed now that the seed hadn't fallen far from the tree. What was Brandela thinking, sending him away at such a crucial time? Anything could happen to the encampment in the time that he and Kerala would be wandering around in the wilderness. He had sworn to protect Donovan's wife and child, but how was he to do that when she was sending him away?

Akenji considered himself a patient man but his patience had been pushed to the limits. He wasn't used to dealing with the opposite sex and having two women measuring and touching him all over had not been a very comfortable experience. The giggling certainly hadn't helped. What were they giggling about, anyway? He sighed, certain that he would never really understand women. He didn't understand Brandela and her strange priorities, that was for sure. And worst of all, the one that he understood the least was his wife-to-be, Kerala. She seemed so displeased with him all the time and he had no idea what he was doing or saying to cause her displeasure. Was this marriage even a good idea? He couldn't deny that she seemed to have a strange effect on him and he found her attractive enough, but...

He shook his head as he strode off toward the far end of the encampment as though to rid himself of all this female irritation. He could hear his men working near the edge of the forest, some of them closer in where the logs were being assembled for the construction of the wall. He needed to find Brien and talk to him about the change in orders. As he approached the first cluster of men, hoots and whistles arose and calls of "Congratulations, Commander" and "Lucky man, Akenji". Akenji glared at the well-wishers, wondering how on Ryyah they had found out so quickly.

"Where's Brien?" he barked.

"Over there, getting the diggers started," answered one grinning man, pointing toward another group farther along. "Looking forward to tonight," he added with a wink. Akenji frowned, puzzled by the comment, but chose to ignore it and walked on past without answering. His mood was not improving!

A fresh round of jeers and whistles arose as Akenji approached this larger group of men, and Brien bounded from their midst, grinning wider than any of them. He clapped Akenji hard on the shoulder and congratulated him warmly.

"Never mind about all that," growled Akenji. "I have important things to discuss with you. I need you to come with me for a while."

"What could be more important than your wedding day?" scolded Brien. "The ladies are all talking about it and Brandela came and told me personally. The men and I thought we'd..."

"The security of this settlement is more important," shouted Akenji. "The timing of this wedding is

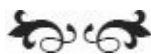
ridiculous. Did Brandela tell you her plans to send Kerala and me out into the wilderness for six months? Did she tell you that you'd be in full charge of the men?"

The grin faded from Brien's face as Akenji raged on. When Akenji was finished, Brien smiled cautiously and his voice was cajoling and almost apologetic when he answered. "Yes, she told me everything. What are you so worked up about, mate? There's not a man here who wouldn't love to be in your shoes. We're all looking forward to getting in on this Elvish mating thing. With all these lovely girls around, it's hard not to be a little distracted with thoughts of... well, you know... girls and families and stuff. All the things we knew as boys and haven't had for so long."

Akenji studied his friend's face and then dropped his eyes to the ground, his anger dissipating. Brien's words had struck a deep chord. Thoughts of what they had known as boys had been haunting him constantly, ever since Brandela had announced that she was giving Kerala to him for a bride. So much had changed in the years since their village had been slaughtered. He barely knew where to start when it came to matters of family and love. And he didn't want to start something, just to watch it be taken by the raiders once again. They had to work on protecting what they were creating. They had to be prepared this time!

"Walk with me, my friend," he said, his voice low and calmer. "There is much to be planned and the load will be on your shoulders until I return."

Brien nodded. "We'll plan and be serious now, but tonight we have a celebration planned. Tonight, we say hello to a whole new life! For you... and for all of us."



A blazing fire sliced through the dark that night, lighting the merry faces of the Rangers as they feasted on fresh venison and drank the sweet wine that Brandela had produced from her limited stores as a gift to Akenji. It wasn't very strong but the men enjoyed it thoroughly, offering cup after cup to the groom.

Akenji smiled politely at the stories and jokes of his men and did his best to get into the spirit of the celebration, but it was an effort and he spent most of the evening watching quietly from the sidelines, lost in thought. As the night deepened and the men slowly settled and fell into quieter conversations amongst themselves, Brien came and sat beside Akenji.

"Still out of sorts about the change of plans?" Brien asked, not looking directly at Akenji.

Akenji shrugged, not wanting to start another conversation about his concerns.

"Everything will be fine, you know. The wall will go up and the place will be safe and sound. I can handle this."

"I know you can," Akenji growled.

"So what's eating you, then?" Brien pushed, ignoring Akenji's obvious cues to not be bothered.

Akenji shrugged again. "Nothing," he grunted.

For a few long moments, the two men sat in silence, watching the fire and listening to the others talking and laughing. Suddenly, Brien sat up straight and laughed out loud. He turned and boxed Akenji on the arm and declared, "Ah, I know what's wrong with you. You're worried about not having too much experience in the marriage bed, aren't you?"

Akenji looked at him, surprised and annoyed, but Brien winked at him and nodded his head knowingly. "Yup, that's what it is," Brien teased, and several of the other men stopped talking and looked in their direction. "I can give you a few pointers if you like. I just happen to know the secret to women's hearts."

Akenji couldn't help but smile and then laugh out loud. What could Brien, who was younger and even less experienced with women than he was, know about marriage? "Oh, do you now? What helpful advice would you offer me then, friend?" Akenji prompted, grinning.

Brian straightened his back and looked off into the fire as though considering how much of his secret he wanted to give away. When he spoke again, he had the attention of every man who sat within earshot. "I can't give you all my trade secrets, but I suppose I could tell you this much. Women enjoy laughter. If you can make her laugh, she will be raw clay in your hands."

Akenji stared at Brian dubiously, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Laughter, huh? That's it? That's your big secret? And how do you know that this is the secret to a woman's heart?"

The other men were chuckling and calling out playful insults and Brian blushed deeply. "Well, I don't know exactly, but I did overhear some of the maidens saying that they would choose a man who could make them laugh over a serious man, even if the serious man was a good provider. They said humor was a big part of what they were looking for in a potential mate."

"I had an older brother," called out another man, "before... well, before the bad times, and he was courting one of the neighborhood girls. I remember him telling me that she liked pretty things. He'd give her little gifts all the time – flowers and trinkets and jewelry."

"My mom always said that if we boys ever wanted a girl of our own, we'd have to learn to play less rough," added another.

"I remember my dad kissing my mom, and I always couldn't wait to have a girl of my own to kiss," chimed in one more.

It was one of the few times that the men had ever discussed their families and their life before the massacre, or their hopes for the future, and many of them now fell into a reverent silence. Was it possible that they could have families again? Wives of their own? Children?

Akenji took a deep drink of wine and studied the fire thoughtfully. If only it could be the way it was. Was his marriage the beginning of new things for them? How could it be, when it was a marriage of duty and not of choice? He frowned as he remembered Kerala's unhappy face at the meeting that morning.

Brien punched his arm lightly. "Come on, Akenji, what is wrong with you? I give you my best advice and you still look as though the end of the world were coming. Who wouldn't be happy to be marrying such a cute little Elven maiden as Kerala? I wouldn't mind that prospect at all," he said, grinning at his friend.

Akenji was surprised by the swift spark of jealousy that coursed through him. "Well, you're not the one who's going to be marrying her. I am!" he retorted, giving Brien a pointed look for emphasis.

Brien burst out laughing and said, "Well, I'm glad to see that you at least approve of your match. Then why so gloomy? You should be happy. After all, it's not every day you get married."

Akenji glanced sideways at his friend and sighed. "I'm just not sure that it's what she wants," he admitted.

Brien's brow furrowed. "What do you mean? Of course she wants this. I've seen the way she looks at you. Heck, the whole camp sees the way she looks at you. It's pretty obvious who she has her mind set on."

"Well, I saw her look when the plan was announced this morning, and I'm not so sure that she's so set on me. I think she only wants the match because it will please her mistress."

"That may be true, but..."

"If Kerala had free choice, I'm not so sure she'd choose me," finished Akenji vehemently. "I can't help but think that it would be anyone *but* me."

After a long, awkward moment, Brien asked, "Would it be such a bad thing if she was only marrying



you to please her mistress? I don't believe that's the case at all, but what if it is? Is that really such a problem? It's just that way with them, you know. The bonding ceremony makes it different for them."

"I know it's different," said Akenji, exasperated. "That's just the thing. My parents had a bond - a deep bond - but it wasn't like this. They bonded naturally, out of choice, out of love. My mother wanted my father. She chose to sacrifice for him. It's just different and I guess it's just how I've always hoped it would be for me if the chance ever came. I want what my parents had."

Akenji had never spoken of his parents before and the men prompted him now to continue. They had been curious about his heritage since boyhood. Many of them remembered when he and his family arrived and he was the only one of their village with the size and dark skin of the ancient warrior people. They had always wondered how he had come to be amongst them.

When he finally began to speak, Akenji's voice was as deep and resonant as the darkness around them, and the fire cast unearthly shadows on the dark man's face, holding all of the men spellbound. No one spoke as he carried them back in time.

"My mother was a devoted and strong woman," he began. "My father died when I was four years old, but I can still remember the way she looked at him, and she raised me on stories of his greatness."

"I am descended from a long line of warriors known as the Eknockoharry people. They were nomadic rhino herders that live on the Kshearry plains. They stood about seven feet tall and were considered among the most formidable shock troops on Ryyah, known to ride into battle atop huge rhinos with sharpened ivory horns. They armed themselves with their traditional ten foot long poleaxes and would crush enemy ranks, sweeping these brutal weapons before them with devastating results. It was these unique tactics that made the Eknockoharry a formidable Empire for many years, until they were destroyed by the Gorrenddo Republic. My father was one of the legendary twelve Chieftains that ruled the Empire."

"Three years prior to the war between the Gorrenddo Republic and the Eknockoharry Empire, there was some internal strife amongst the Eknockoharry tribes. One of the tribes, under the leadership of the great war Chieftain, Tahrowk Hornkill, conquered all the others, eventually uniting all twelve tribes under his leadership. Some of the tribes' people fled behind the borders of the Gorrenddo Republic and were granted sanctuary by the Senate there. Tahrowk Hornkill was incensed and demanded the Gorrenddo Republic return these fugitives to his custody."

"The Gorrenddo Republic refused to comply with his demands and the two were soon at war. The war lasted for ten years and the fighting was fierce. Neither side gained a clear advantage in the first few years. Things changed when the Gorrenddo Republic began to use the Eknockoharry's own tactics against them, dealing out crushing defeats to the surprised armies and eventually killing the great Eknockoharry Chieftain, Tahrowk Hornkill, in a pitched battle."

"After his death and several more crushing defeats, the Eknockoharry tribes eventually scattered to the four winds. Although they had won, the Gorrenddo Republic had suffered heavy losses and could not risk a new war Chieftain rising up amongst the Eknockoharry tribes. They began a campaign aimed at hunting down and assassinating the direct descendants of any of the twelve great Eknockoharry tribal Chieftains, as only a direct descendant could rise and seek to reunite the tribes. My father, Deonock Stonehorn, was leader of the Stonehorn tribe and Tahrowk Hornkill's right-hand man. He was forced to flee to the far north to escape the Gorrenddo assassins."

"My father eventually made his way to one of the few Freetowns on the southern border of the Wildlands and happened upon a fisherman who was being plundered by riverboat bandits. He fought the pirates and saved the fisherman from certain death. The fisherman was so grateful that he offered my father a safe place to stay and taught him the trade of river fishing. The fisherman's daughter fell in love

with the mysterious dark man who had come to live with them and, in time, they were married. Not long after, I was born.”

“Life was peaceful and happy for a time – I remember bits and pieces of that time even now, although most of these things I am telling you are stories my mother told me as a boy. But when I was four years old, the Gorrendo assassins, who had somehow managed to track my father down, attacked us under the cover of darkness, hoping to slaughter the entire household.”

“My father fought valiantly and defeated all five assassins. But in doing so he was mortally wounded. Before he died, he made my mother promise to tell me the story of who he was when I was old enough to understand, and to take us further north before the assassins found out about my existence. If they had somehow managed to find out where he was living, then they would know he had a son. To stay meant certain death for me and my family.”

“Father died the next day and soon after that my grandfather led my mother and me into the Wildlands where we lived in exile for the next six years. We moved steadily north until we came across a small, unnamed fishing village. For the first time in years, we felt safe and decided to settle. That’s where I met most of you... and Donovan, of course. And then...”

He fell silent then, along with the others, as the memories of the day of the slaughter overtook them.

“My mother was one of the few women who fought back,” Akenji said softly.

“May our children never know such wicked times,” offered a man on the far side of the group.

Akenji looked at him and nodded. “That is why I feel so strongly about getting the wall up... and why I wish Brandela would allow us to move the settlement to a more sheltered location. And why I am reluctant to leave now.”

“We’ll get it done,” promised Brien. “We’ll keep them safe.” The other men nodded and called out in agreement, happy to have something to bring them back to the present and away from the painful memories of the past. Soon they were conversing amongst one another again, planning and joking, leaving Brien and Akenji to their own reverie.

In a quiet, cautious voice, Brien finally broke the silence. “You’ve just told an amazing story, my friend. But it is incomplete. What does it all have to do with your upcoming marriage to Kerala?”

Akenji leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and the fingers of his enormous hands entwined in front of him. He studied those hands as though they were vitally important. He chose his words carefully, trying to explain.

“My mother was considered a beautiful woman by many of the fishermen in the village and I even recall a few of them trying to court her, but she refused them all. She never gave them so much as a second glance. I asked her one time why it was that she refused any other suitor and she told me simply that my father was the only man she ever truly loved. She told me that if one does not marry for love then it is pointless. She did not love any of those men and even if it would make our lives easier, she would not marry out of duty alone. I was very confused at the time and didn’t understand, but I do now. I am attracted to Kerala, and perhaps she is attracted to me, but I’m not sure that she loves me in *that* way. How can we hope for lasting happiness and loyalty if there is no love?”

Brien looked sideways at his friend and smiled. “I don’t know much about this stuff, Akenji, but I’ve seen that girl look at you. Are you sure you don’t already have it?”

Akenji sat up, surprised at Brien’s words, but before he could answer, Brien stood and started moving away. “All this love talk’s got me tired out,” he laughed. “We have a busy day tomorrow. I’m heading for my bunk and I’d suggest you do the same.” Most of the other men had drifted away and within the hour, Akenji was alone by the dying fire.

Was there more than simple duty behind Kerala’s compliance to marrying him? Was it possible that

the attraction he felt toward her could be the first spark of love? He desired her, but could that turn into love, given time, as Brandela hoped? It had happened for Brandela and Donovan, after all. Perhaps if he played his cards right, he could help her learn to love him. He just needed the proper strategy and a good dose of self-control.

He smiled, feeling more confident than he had all day. Dealing with a woman was a lot like planning out a battle. Alayna's training would come in handy in more ways than she could have known. One only needed to be patient and diligent and ready for whatever the opponent had to throw at you. The more he thought about their marriage in this way, the more he liked the idea. If he could capture her heart first, then the rest would fall into place. He could have the love his parents had known. It would take will-power and sacrifices on his part, but he had been trained all his life to endure sacrifice and discomfort. He would not demand her 'duties' until he had earned her respect and love. She was a battle he planned to win! With his plan of action set firmly in his mind, he went to his tent and off to sleep.

## Chapter 5



The following afternoon, Akenji stood with Brandela at the center of a wide circle, awaiting his bride-to-be. Every Ranger and maidservant was in attendance, gathered around the perimeter of the circle and just as eager to see Kerala walk down the straight, narrow path that led to Akenji.

An excited murmur swept through the crowd as Kerala appeared at the edge of the circle, led by one of the other maidservants, and then an awed hush fell as she stepped onto the path. Akenji swallowed nervously. She was exquisite in a dress of light green silk with golden borders and a golden leaf-shaped pattern woven heavily within the fabric. Her head was covered with a translucent green veil. The effect was one of elegance, humility and unbelievable beauty. He could hardly believe that in a few minutes, this stunning woman would be his wife.

Kerala stole glances of Akenji as she moved toward him. Brandela's servants had designed a suit for him of rich, dark green silk with white borders on the cuffs and collar. He looked as handsome as she had ever seen him and her pulse sped up as she drew nearer. As tradition dictated, she kept her eyes lowered as a symbol of respect, and allowed Akenji to take both of her hands in his as she stopped and faced him. They kneeled, hands clasped, before Brandela and all who were there to witness the occasion.

Brandela beamed at the crowd and her voice carried to them, clear and joyful, as she began the ceremony.

"We have gathered today to witness the joining of Akenji and Kerala as bonded mates – the first bonded pair of this new settlement, and a beacon of hope to us all. Let us join in their happiness as Kerala recites, and Akenji receives, the pledge of loyalty."

Brandela smiled down at the couple and gave them the signal to begin. Kerala lowered her head until her forehead nearly touched the ground, and then she sat up and made her pledge.

"My heart is yours. My love is yours. Command me as you will, husband, for I am your loyal companion and your faithful wife in times of war and peace." As she finished, she smiled at him shyly.

While Kerala was speaking, Brandela had begun moving her lips silently and focusing on the bonding stone that she held in her left hand. The intricately carved stone began to glow for all to see. When Kerala stopped talking, Brandela placed her right hand on the girl's head and Kerala began to radiate a brilliant golden-white light from her entire body. At a signal from Brandela, Kerala moved closer to Akenji and leaned against him, wrapping her slender arms around his neck. Akenji pulled Kerala to him, his arms around her waist, and for a moment they were engulfed in the light before it began to fade away.

Akenji noticed a strange sensation, as though something was caressing his heart, and then a tingling sensation throughout his entire body. Kerala waited patiently until the glow had completely disappeared and then she leaned away from Akenji to smile up at him. As he smiled back at her, he wondered how he could ever have doubted his love for her. His happiness, at that moment, took him by complete surprise. He renewed his vow to himself to earn her love in return.

Brandela stepped forward and put her hands atop Akenji's and Kerala's heads and everyone present closed their eyes as Brandela recited an ancient Elven blessing on the newly married couple.

"May the blessings of the Elders shine down upon you in good, bad and indifferent times. May your wellspring of life be fertile and abundant. May your descendants be wise and strong as they come from you and begin anew. May your descendants span throughout the centuries of life and continue on."

Brandela opened her eyes and addressed the crowd once again. "I present to all of you gathered here this day, our first human-elf bonded pair. May this be the beginning of glorious times ahead for us all!" A cheer arose from the crowd as they came forward to congratulate the new couple.

Within a few hours, Akenji and Kerala had been feasted and toasted and presented with well-stocked packs. They were now escorted by Brien and Brandela to the edge of the uncharted forest.

"Enjoy this time together," advised Brandela, "and use it wisely to grow stronger within your bond." She drew Kerala to her and whispered, "Take care, my trusted friend. I'll look forward to your return."

Kerala returned the embrace warmly and smiled at her mistress. "I'll be back just in time for the birth of your child," she reminded her. "Please, stay safe until then."

Brien and Akenji clapped each other on the shoulders and grinned at each other.

"You're in for a bit of an adventure," said Brien, winking. "I wouldn't mind being in your shoes right about now."

Akenji frowned at him. "You keep your mind on important things," he warned. "I'm counting on you." He nodded towards Brandela. "Keep a close eye on her. Don't let anything happen to her. Do you understand?"

Brien waved him off impatiently. "Yes, yes, we've been through all of this a hundred times in the past two days. Trust me, everything will be fine."

Akenji looked at him seriously, but then smiled. "Alright, I'll see you when we return. We'd better have a hard time getting into the settlement by then."

For the next hour, Akenji led Kerala through the forest in a northeasterly direction. Neither of them said a word. As they walked, Kerala sensed a strange stillness within her... the quiet control of a vigilant hunter. The feeling, although within her, was somehow not her own and puzzled her greatly. Then she realized that the bonding spell allowed her to 'feel' her husband, to be one with him. She was experiencing the ingrained stealth of her warrior mate. It was a startling realization, and yet somehow also comforting. She wondered if he could feel her confusion, but he gave no indication of anything unusual happening.

She followed him for some time more before finally breaking the silence.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Akenji shrugged and called back, "Not sure. I was thinking that we could use some of our time during this banishment to scout this forest. The information we could gather would be very useful in the future and it would make this trip less a waste of time."

Kerala stopped in her tracks for a moment and stared at Akenji's departing back. *Banishment? Waste of time?* So, the bond hadn't worked on him. He was obviously still upset about the impromptu manner in which they had been married. With a deep sigh, she started after him again and answered half-heartedly, "Brandela would be pleased to have that kind of information, I'm sure."

They walked for a long time in complete silence, Akenji simply doing what he had been carefully trained all his life to do – keeping his mind attuned to his surroundings and his senses vigilant to any sign of danger – completely unaware of the turmoil taking place in the mind and heart of his companion. He was taken off guard then, when she suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop. Her face was twisted with misery and for a moment he thought she might be hurt. Before he could ask her what was



wrong, however, she blurted, "I'm sorry that this wedding was forced upon you so abruptly. It was not my intention nor did I see that mistress Brandela would insist that the event happen so quickly. But we are married now, so why do you not look at me or speak to me? Do you disapprove of our match?"

Akenji gaped at his new wife, too stunned to answer at first. What on earth would have made her think such a thing? He did not understand this opponent he was facing, but his instincts as a commander took over and he knew that this first battle must be won and won convincingly. Looking her directly in the eyes, he answered firmly, "Of course not. You were so beautiful today and I was happy to take you as my wife. I approve in every possible way."

Kerala could feel the conviction and the truth of his words flowing from him into every fiber of her being. It was more than she had expected... far more than she had hoped for... and although she tried hard to stop them, tears of joy sprang to her eyes. He looked puzzled by her tears, but said nothing more. He turned and started walking again and Kerala followed, still trying to regain her composure and calm her frantically beating heart.

They didn't stop travelling until late that night, when Akenji came across a small clearing in the forest. He laid their bags down near the center of the clearing and immediately began scouting for firewood.

"What would you like me to do?" Kerala asked.

"Gather some of those flat rocks and make a circle for the fire. Make it there, by our bags," he ordered, as though answering one of his men.

"As you will, husband," she replied meekly, and turned to her task. Akenji paused for a moment, not quite used to being called 'husband'. A small smile played on the edge of his lips. He liked the sound of it.

Soon, Kerala had a fire pit assembled and Akenji deposited a pile of firewood beside it. He squatted beside the circle and began removing all of the leaves and debris from the center and around the perimeter of the stones.

"This will keep the fire from getting out of control," he explained.

I must remember to do this myself next time, she thought. She knew she had a lot to learn if she hoped to survive in the wild for the next six months.

Kerala watched, attentively, as Akenji assembled some of the smallest twigs and dried leaves in the center of the pit, and then took out two small, dark stones from his shirt pocket. He struck them together repeatedly and sparks flew from the stones, but the leaves did not catch.

Akenji continued for several minutes, cursing softly, before sitting back in defeat.

"The leaves must be a little too wet. I'll have to see if I can find something drier," he said, moving to get up. Kerala smiled and placed her hand on his leg to stop him.

"No need, husband. Allow me."

He frowned, but she had already turned to focus on the small leaf pile. She gripped the Rune pendant that always hung around her neck, drawing energy from it, and placed two fingers near the leaves. There was a bright flash of light from her fingertips and the leaf pile was smoking, and then burning.

Akenji smiled broadly and said, "Well, that's a very useful trick."

"It was nothing, husband – very simple magic. I am only doing my duty."

Akenji cocked his head and grinned at her. "There's no need to be modest. That was very impressive."

Kerala blushed at the attention she was getting and looked down at her fidgeting hands. She is very cute, thought Akenji, and as he watched her stretch her hands towards the fire, he suddenly realized that she was probably also very tired and hungry. This was no warrior he had been marching with all day.

This was his wife.

“Are you cold?” he asked, overcome by sudden guilt and concern about her well being.

“A little,” she replied, “but the fire will soon warm me.”

Akenji reached for the larger of the two bags and pulled out two thick blankets and a smaller package. He gently draped one of the blankets over Kerala’s shoulders.

“Thank you, husband. You’re very kind.”

Akenji kneeled in front of her, opened the bag he was holding, broke off a large chunk of sweet bread and held it out to her. She groaned at the sight and took it from him eagerly. She hadn’t realized just how hungry she was. She began to devour the sweet bread enthusiastically, completely oblivious to anything but the food in her hands. She was nearly halfway through the bread before she happened to glance at Akenji and noticed that he was not eating, but sitting and watching her with an amused smile on his face.

She froze, blushed profusely, and then began stammering an apology. “I’m sorry. You must be so ashamed of me right now. I should have made sure that you were eating first. I am eating as if I have no manners at all.” She hid her blushing face in her hands, utterly contrite.

Akenji chuckled and gently forced her to look at him. “There’s no need to be embarrassed, little one. I should be the one apologizing. I’m used to travelling with men who have been trained to go long periods without resting or eating. I’m afraid I did not take your feelings and needs into consideration as I should have. It seems we both have a lot to learn about each other. Will you forgive me?”

Once more, his sincerity and concern flooded Kerala’s body as he spoke, bringing tears to her eyes. She felt suddenly, overwhelmingly, blessed to have one such as him for her bonded mate. Her tears fell even as she smiled, and Akenji wiped them away, confused.

“Are you alright?” he asked, frowning with concern.

Kerala laughed at his concern and cried all the harder. “Oh yes, I am absolutely fine,” she replied. “I am just so very happy right now.”

He didn’t understand at all, but it didn’t matter. Her shining eyes, moist cheeks and beautiful mouth were irresistible and distracting him. He lowered his face to meet her mouth with a full, gentle kiss on the lips.

Kerala was surprised by the kiss but did not stop it. A strange and pleasant sensation spread in her lower belly but then stopped when he pulled away from her.

It was Akenji’s turn to be flustered and uncertain. “I’m sorry,” he stammered. “You were upset. I shouldn’t have...”

“No,” Kerala blurted. “Please don’t apologize. I liked the kiss.” She looked down and blushed again. “It was very nice,” she added gently. She bit her lower lip and looked back up at him with as much courage as she could muster. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words would come.

Akenji waited patiently and then finally prompted, “Is there something you want to say?”

Kerala, blushing more than ever and clearly nervous, managed to speak up. “I’m afraid you will find me lacking in virtue if I say what I am thinking.”

Akenji grew curious at that cryptic remark. He placed his hands on her shoulders and said, “There’s nothing you need to be shy about with me. I am your husband now, after all. You can tell me anything.”

Kerala studied his face for a moment and saw nothing but sincerity. She looked down and whispered, “May I have another kiss?” Instantly, embarrassment overtook her and she began to apologize again.

Akenji simply smiled, more than willing to fulfill her request. He gently lifted her face to his and kissed her once more. Kerala laid her hands on his chest and could feel his heart beating as madly as her

own. A flood of sensations that she had never felt before swept over her and she knew that he was feeling the same. These wonderful new feelings took her over and she had no thought except to keep them going. She shuddered with pleasure and kissed Akenji more urgently. Akenji, just as caught up in these new feelings, entered her mouth with his tongue. Kerala's body responded instantly and an urgent need grew within her that frightened and excited her at the same time.

Akenji pulled back suddenly, trying to catch his breath. His heart was hammering in his chest and he was very uncomfortable in a way that Kerala would not understand. In a tone that was much harsher than he meant it to be, he said, "That's enough, we have to stop. It's time for you to sleep. We have a long day tomorrow."

Kerala, brought back to her senses so abruptly and feeling rather dazed, exclaimed, "What?"

Akenji turned from her, deeply ashamed. This was not the way he had planned it. He was determined to develop a deeper attachment with her that came from more than physical attraction. He wanted her heart first. She would give herself to him, he knew that. It was her duty. But he wanted her to want him too. He wanted her to love him first.

He glanced at Kerala and then turned his attention to the fire. "I said go to sleep. You need to rest," he said. His anger, frustration and confusion mingled with her own. What had she done to upset him?

"Have I displeased you?" she whispered.

"No," he replied coldly. "I'm sorry, it's just... just get some rest."

Kerala picked up her blanket and walked over to the other side of the campfire and settled herself with her back to Akenji. He frowned to hear her soft sniffles, but did not go to her. He could not trust himself. He would have to keep a tighter grip on his passions from now on.



Over the next month, Akenji and Kerala fell into the routine of traveling for two days and resting for two days. During their resting days, Akenji would scout and map the area within a two league radius of their makeshift camp. They had seen no sign of other inhabitants so far. They had arrived at their current location the day before and they would continue heading northeast tomorrow.

There had been no more kisses and, despite many attempts at reconciliation by Akenji, Kerala had clung to her anger at being rejected and refused to forgive him. His rejection had hurt her deeply and she was determined to punish him. She behaved as respectfully as a dutiful wife could in all ways but one. She could sense the anger her cold behavior sparked in him and she purposely provoked him because it was easier to stay angry with him if he was annoyed with her.

Over the past week, however, Akenji had changed his strategy. Ignoring her stubborn behavior, he began to leave small presents beside her while she slept. He would be up and gone by the time she woke, so she had no chance to reject his gifts.

This morning, she awoke to find a cloth filled with wild blueberries and, lying beside it, a blue and white flower. She smiled, but abruptly stopped herself as she remembered that she was still angry. She looked around to make sure Akenji wasn't watching, and then reached for the blueberries and popped one into her mouth.

She closed her eyes and savored the sweet flavor of the berry and then she reached for the flower and smelled its unique scent. Where had he found such a beautiful flower, she wondered? She sighed. He was making it hard for her to stay angry with him. She knew she was being foolish but she had her pride and she had no desire to be humiliated again.

Suddenly, a quote from one of the High Queens drifted through her mind.

“The wisdom of pride is but an illusionary one. It is relevant only to those who choose to engage in irrelevant behavior.”

She frowned as a pang of guilt swept through her. It was time to put an end to this disharmony that had grown between her and her husband. She was finally willing to admit that she had allowed things to get out of hand, but she wasn't sure how to let him know that she was ready to forgive him and still maintain her dignity. She hated to admit it, but it took entirely too much effort to stay angry at him now.

A half a league away, Akenji stood studying a cluster of strange footprints. They were humanoid and very large – probably Trolls. He had never encountered the creatures, but Alayna had trained the Rangers well in the signs and habits of all the beings she knew of. He remembered her speaking to them about this simpleton race. They were entirely base and ferocious, attacking and eating anything they encountered. As he studied the tracks, his frown deepened. Several pairs of tracks appeared to be heading toward their camp. Kerala! He turned back the way he had come and sprinted toward the camp as fast as he could.

Back at the camp, Kerala had just finished folding Akenji's blanket when she heard a rustling from the bushes behind her. Assuming that it was Akenji, she turned, prepared to smile and greet him warmly. But instead of Akenji, an enormous creature with yellow-green skin that resembled tree bark, a large, pointed nose and lank, black hair emerged from the foliage, closely followed by three more. The creatures were dressed in leather loincloths and wore necklaces of bones and birds' feathers. They were the most primitive beings that Kerala had ever encountered, and they did not look friendly.

Alarmed, Kerala quickly moved to her bag and, without taking her eyes off the hideous beings, she knelt and pulled a Rune crystal ring from the depths of the bag. The ring had been given to her when she had trained with the Arch Mages in the capital city of Alderwood.

The Arch Mages had allowed her to train in basic attack magic. She had not mastered some of the more powerful spells, but she had been practicing the simpler ones daily since then and had grown quite skilled in the use of some of the minor attack magic spells. The Rune crystal that had been placed into the center of this ring was full of source energy and far more powerful than the pendant she wore around her neck. Kerala slipped the ring onto her middle finger and stood to face the beasts before her.

She cleared her mind and focused all of her magical awareness on the ring and the creatures in front of her. She stood her ground as the creatures raised and pointed their heavy spears at her. One of them pointed a thick finger, tipped with a long, sharp, black nail, at her and made sounds in a guttural language that Kerala could not understand. Kerala waited, forcing herself to stay calm and readying herself to use her magic.

The creature that had 'spoken' stamped the ground angrily, his black eyes fixed on her, and repeated the sounds, louder than before. Incensed, the others started to move toward her.

“Stop!” shouted Kerala, as confidently as she could. “I will defend myself.”

Her words had no effect and the creatures broke into an awkward lope, covering the ground between them quickly. Kerala pointed at the ground in front of one of the oncoming beasts and a bolt of lightning shot from her ring. The creatures pulled up, momentarily startled, but the threat seemed to infuriate them still more and they were soon moving toward her again, fanning out to surround her as they approached.

Her next lightning bolt hit the closest Troll full on, sending him sprawling and howling in pain. She focused the ring's energy on the ground in front of the next Troll and watched as the grass roots wrapped itself securely around the legs of the creature and pulled his legs into the ground. A third Troll was knocked off his feet by a lightning bolt, its bark-like skin on fire.

Kerala turned to face the final Troll and lifted her hand once more to shoot at it. Suddenly, a pain exploded in the side of her head and she fell to the ground, struggling to stay conscious. A fifth Troll had arrived, unnoticed, behind her and struck her with a wooden club. It picked her up by the throat and began

squeezing as tightly as it could.

Kerala's last thoughts, before her vision blurred and darkness fell over her, were of Akenji. He would think she had died without love for him, without forgiving him. If only she had a chance to tell him the truth...



## Chapter 6



Akenji charged into the clearing just in time to see Kerala dangling limply off the ground, a Troll's massive hand wrapped in a stranglehold around her delicate neck. In a desperate rage, he threw his two-handed axe as hard as he could at the Troll's back. His aim was true and the creature fell to the ground without a sound and died instantly. Kerala, released from the creature's murderous grip, was thrown to the ground and lay coughing and gasping for precious air. Akenji ran to her side and waited until she was breathing normally again. When she seemed calm and steady, he told her to stay where she was while he dealt with the rest of the Trolls.

He ripped his axe out of the dead Troll's body and ran toward the Troll that had his legs stuck in the ground. He lifted the axe and with a mighty downward blow, he split the creature nearly in half. As he straightened, he spotted another Troll in the distance, running back into the foliage. With a roar, Akenji ran after it.

Akenji, being a much more efficient runner, quickly gained ground on the creature, until it suddenly stopped and turned to face him, spear raised. The Troll grinned horribly, showing all of its jagged teeth. A moment later, six more Trolls, all armed with spears, emerged from the foliage and joined their hideous comrade.

Akenji did not wait for them to organize themselves, but quickly darted forward in a blur of movement. With a mighty overhead, downward swing of his axe blade, he cleaved the head of the nearest Troll, killing him instantly. The attack was so fast that the Troll had not even had enough time to raise its weapon to try to block the blow.

Akenji spun to face the three opponents approaching from his right side. He dodged a spear thrust from one of the Trolls and, before the Troll could retract its spear, Akenji grabbed the creature's arm and shoved it into the path of the others, causing all three Trolls to stumble and fall. Akenji wrenched one of the Trolls' weapons away from it and aimed the spear point at another beast that was coming toward his left flank. He threw the spear with such force that the impaled creature flew backwards, knocking down two other Trolls behind it.

The two remaining, standing Trolls launched their spears at him simultaneously. Akenji quickly sidestepped and let the thrusting heads of the spears sail past him on his left side. With his axe, he hooked the spears and threw them safely out of reach. The Trolls charged. Akenji hooked his foot behind one of the Troll's legs and landed a mighty punch into the creature's unguarded face. It staggered sideways and fell, pulling its companion down with it. Before they could get to their feet, Akenji charged with his axe high above his head. The ferocious downward blow he delivered cut both Trolls nearly in half.

Akenji looked to his right side and spotted two more creatures moving toward him, trying to take advantage of his momentary lack of attention. Another Troll approached from the left. He lifted his great axe and slung it at the nearest Troll on his right, killing him instantly. He sidestepped the spear thrust that he had been expecting from his left side and quickly reached out and grabbed the attacker's wrist. He

squeezed with all of his strength until the Troll dropped its weapon, and then he grabbed the Troll's neck and twisted and squeezed until he heard and felt a popping noise. Almost instantly, the creature's futile struggling ended. Akenji pushed the body aside and began looking for the final Troll.

He was about to turn around when he heard a loud crackling noise directly behind him. He crouched low and turned to locate the source of the sound. In that split second, he saw a brilliant white bolt of lightning strike a Troll whose upraised spear had been aimed at his back. To his right, he saw Kerala leaning unsteadily against a tree, one upraised hand pointed toward the dead Troll's body. The side of her face was black and swollen and large red marks marred her pretty neck. She looked as though she had been through hell and survived it. Akenji slipped the bloodied shaft of his Dwarf-made war axe in the looped leather thong at his back and went to her. He gently touched her bruised face and asked, "Are you alright?"

Kerala nodded, but she was clearly exhausted and badly shaken by the experience. Akenji didn't ask any more questions. He simply picked her up in his arms. Kerala leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck to keep from falling. She nuzzled her head beneath his chin and allowed herself to be carried back to their camp. When they reached the clearing, Akenji set her down gently and began gathering their things.

"We must travel south and get away from this area," he told her as he packed their bags. "Trolls move in large groups – where there are a few, there will most certainly be more. We should be alright once we get a couple of leagues away. Trolls are very territorial but they're poor trackers."

He helped Kerala to her feet and urged her to follow him. Her head throbbed from the clubbing she had taken and the bruises on her neck hurt to touch, but she bravely followed, knowing that Akenji would lead them to a safer place.

They kept moving for the rest the day, stopping for only the briefest rests. At dusk, they made camp. Akenji got a small fire going and brought Kerala food and water.

"I'm going to head back and disguise our tracks and make sure we're not being followed. I'll be back in a couple of hours," he told her and then jogged away, leaving her to her own devices.

Kerala watched his large form disappear silently into the forest and then turned her eyes to the fire. They had both nearly died today. How tragic it would have been if Akenji had died thinking that she hated him. She would have had nothing to blame but her own stubborn, foolish pride. 'Pride will not get in the way of our marriage again,' she vowed. She would not allow the shameful state of their marriage to continue any longer. It was time to become Akenji's wife!

She rose and retrieved her bag and rummaged through it until she found what she was seeking. She smoothed the delicate fabric of the shiny green silk nightshirt that Brandela had insisted be made for her to wear on her wedding night. She had been waiting for the right time to wear it, but after their rough start, she had started to wonder if that would ever come. But now she was sure... this was the right night.

She removed her dress and slipped the nightshirt over her slender shoulders. The silk was cool against her skin and perfectly fitted the shape of her waist and breasts. She shivered in the cool night air and, grabbing her blanket, moved back to the fire. With the blanket wrapped around her, she settled and waited for Akenji's return.

She nibbled a bit of her bread while she waited and winced as the pain in her head was brought back to her attention with every movement of her jaw. She was badly bruised and knew she must look a sight. She lifted her left hand to her face and focused on drawing the source energy from the pendant she wore around her neck. Her hand began to glow with a faint white light and Kerala felt the warmth of the energy entering her face and healing her wounds. She moved her hand to her neck and healed the bruises there also. The process left her tired, so she added wood to the fire and curled up in her blanket, letting the

warmth lull her to sleep.

Three hours later, Akenji made his way back to the small clearing where they had made camp, exhausted, and looked forward to getting some sleep. Kerala slept peacefully near the dying fire and he watched her for a few moments, pleased to see her resting. They would need to travel hard for the next couple of days, so she would need her energy. He quietly stoked the fire and went in search of his own blanket. He found it not far from Kerala, already laid out and waiting for him. He smiled, surprised by her thoughtful gesture. It was the first deliberately kind thing she had done for him since that first kiss.

Akenji moved his blanket to a nearby tree. He removed his boots, cloak and over-tunic and set them on the ground beside him, along with his mighty axe. He wrapped the blanket around himself and settled under the tree. He would sleep sitting up so that he could be alert for anything that might happen in the night. He yawned and closed his eyes, but opened them again moments later as he heard the sounds of movement nearby. His eyes went to Kerala first and he was startled to find her looking back at him. She stood and faced him without saying a word.

Kerala stood for a long moment, gazing into the eyes of her husband. She could sense his slight confusion and growing concern, but he said nothing. She took a step forward and hesitated again, swallowing nervously, before letting her blanket fall to the ground. She longed to hide herself from his view, but this was not the night for shyness. Instead, she stood in the firelight, facing him fully and let his eyes rove over her, unimpeded.

Akenji was stirred as he had never been before. Kerala's beautiful long legs were completely bare, the shirt she was wearing barely reaching her mid upper thigh. The thin, shimmery material of the nightshirt accented every feminine curve of her body. Her arms were bare and she wore her hair down in a reddish-brown cascade of untamed, wavy locks. She was absolutely beautiful and Akenji's desire for her was so great that he didn't know if he would be strong enough to control his passions this time.

As Kerala took another step towards him, he could not tear his eyes from her, try as he might. Despite his vow, a part of him was tired of fighting his attraction to his beautiful wife. His intentions were noble and honorable but he did not think he would be able to resist her this time.

Kerala was completely caught off guard by the ferocity of the emotions coming to her from him and shocked by his level of desire. Her own body reacted to this in ways she couldn't have imagined. Her skin ached for his touch. Although the night air was cool, she was incredibly warm. Her every sense was on high alert. She had never felt so wide awake and alive. She wanted him. Knowing that he wanted her just as much gave her a newfound confidence and determination. She would not be denied tonight. A small smile touched her lips as she stepped ever closer.

Akenji frowned and said, "That's far enough, Kerala. You don't know what you're doing. Go back to sleep and we'll talk tomorrow."

Kerala smiled at his feeble attempt to deter her. She could feel the intense conflict between his formidable will and his ever-growing desire for her flowing between them. Why was he resisting? As she moved one step closer, his eyes pleaded with her to stop. She couldn't help but laugh out loud at the absurd predicament her husband was in. The great warrior was more than twice her size and yet, in this situation, he seemed helpless. She was suddenly the huntress and he the prey. She had never felt so powerful.

As she took her next step, Akenji moved as though to stand and walk away, but he froze at the sound of her voice saying, "No, you will not leave me this time!"

Akenji stared into her eyes and saw the fierce determination. He knew it was pointless to try and fight her any further. Her intentions were perfectly clear. Still, he hesitated, resisting the urge to touch her and give in to his intense desires.

She watched the conflict on his face and felt it from his heart, within her.

“Why do you resist what you clearly desire?” she asked. “There is no shame in this. I am your wife, after all. We are bonded mates. This is as it should be.”

Akenji took a deep breath and answered, “We are married, but you married me only to please your mistress. This is a union of duty. I made a vow to myself to consummate this marriage only when we had formed an attachment based on something deeper... something more than just duty.”

Kerala cocked her head, curious. “What sort of attachment would you have us form?” she asked.

Akenji struggled to find the right words, but failed. Putting his feelings into words was not easy.

Kerala took the final steps to where he sat and nestled herself onto his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her forehead against his. Her voice was soft and inviting when she coaxed, “What is it that makes you hold back from me, my husband? What is so terrible that you can’t even speak to your own wife about it?”

“It’s been hard to speak to my wife about anything lately,” he reproached, playfully.

Kerala pouted apologetically and Akenji rolled his eyes and pulled her closer to him. He then began to tell her the story of his mother and father and how happy they had been together, even during the most trying experiences. He told her the stories his mother had told him, stories about his childhood and his mother’s words about being able to love no other man but his father.

“That is what I want for us,” he explained. “Something based on choice rather than duty. Something that will take us through whatever life throws our way without tearing us apart.”

Kerala smiled. Even though he could not say it, she knew that what he wanted for them was love. She snuggled closer and told him about her parents and the sacrifices they had made in order to be together.

“I grew up wanting to be well bonded in order to restore my family’s status,” she explained, “but part of me always hoped for the type of natural bond... for the love... my parents knew. We are not so different in our desires.”

She turned his face toward hers and looked into his eyes. “Do you know what went through my head as I was being strangled by that creature this morning? I regretted not having the chance to apologize to you about how badly I have acted toward you these past weeks. I didn’t want you to go on thinking that I hated you. The happiest day of my life was our bonding ceremony. You looked so handsome and I thought I was the luckiest maiden in the entire encampment to have been given the opportunity to have you as my mate.”

“But that night when you kissed me... You must understand, I have been rejected all of my life because of looking like the Eastern Wood Elves. I thought that you were unhappy about being forced to bond with me and when you pulled away, it was the worst rejection I had ever suffered. I felt unwanted, even by my bonded mate. I didn’t know you wanted something more... something better. I’m sorry for behaving so badly.”

Akenji pulled her close. He had no need for words now. Having her close was all he wanted.

Kerala rested in his arms for a while, content in the moment and the feelings she was receiving from him. When she spoke again, she chose her words carefully, thoughtfully trying to express what was in her heart and mind.

“What is love? Is it an emotional attachment or is it deep commitment? I suspect a little of both and something more. I have been raised to trust actions more than words because words have meaning only if the actions behind them are aligned. The Elven Elders tell us that love is both patient and kind. It is not envious, nor boastful, nor prideful. It’s not easily angered and does not keep a record of wrongs.”

She paused for a moment and glanced up at Akenji. He was listening attentively and his smile

encouraged her to continue.

“I don’t know if I truly love you yet,” Kerala said softly. “I do know that I care for you deeply and losing you for any reason would devastate me to the point where I don’t know if I would be able to recover. I know that I want to have your children and I know that I want to spend the rest of my life growing with you in every way. Is that the bonding spell or love? Maybe they’re the same thing. I guess my question to you is, what do you believe these feelings I’m having, and my actions, are evidence of?”

Akenji’s smile was his response. He had heard more than he had hoped from her. He leaned his face down to hers and kissed her with all the passion he had bottled up inside for so long.

The kiss was long and mutually passionate and Akenji began to stroke Kerala’s leg. As his hand slowly moved up her thigh, she suddenly pulled back, startled, and grabbed the ends of her nightshirt modestly.

“What’s wrong?” Akenji asked, puzzled by her sudden change of heart.

Kerala looked up at him with the innocence of a little girl and whispered, “I... I have nothing on under this.”

Akenji tried not to laugh. If he lived to be a hundred years old, he doubted that he would ever fully understand how her mind worked.

“Well, that’s kind of the point, isn’t it?” he said kindly. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you about how this works?”

Kerala avoided his eyes and shook her head. “Eastern Wood Elven mothers don’t speak of such things until a special ceremony that takes place the night before their daughters are to be married. No one has been given the duty of enlightening me on this process. You must think it odd that I would instigate this without fully understanding what would happen if I did. I simply knew that I wanted to be your wife... in every way. And I knew that kiss had something to do with it.” She stared at her fidgeting hands, blushing.

Akenji smiled and kissed her forehead. “It’s okay,” he reassured her. “To be honest, I don’t know a lot about it either. More than you maybe...” he teased. When she smiled, he added, “We’ll learn together.”

She looked up at him and said, “Tell me what I should do.”

“This isn’t about taking orders,” he teased her. “What do you want to do? What is your body asking for?”

Her breath quickened as she thought about his words. “Kiss me again,” she answered shyly.

“As you wish,” he answered in a husky tone before drawing her to him once again. Her lips met his eagerly and as he began to stroke her back, she lost herself in the sensations he was awakening in her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and felt him lift her and lay her gently on her back. They kissed like that for a long time, his hands moving over her body until she was relaxed and receptive to his every touch.

“Your body is so soft and you smell so good,” he murmured breathlessly, struggling to keep a firm grip on his desires.

“You are not so soft,” she giggled, rubbing her hands over his solid chest and arms. Her hands moved to his muscular back and she gently raked her fingernails across his shoulders.

Akenji groaned, breathing deeply with the effort it took to control his passion for her. Kerala, sensing his need – a need that matched her own – smiled up at him and whispered, “It’s okay to let go.” With a moan of desire, he pulled her to him and made love to his wife for the first time.

Akenji awoke the next morning with a start, instantly annoyed with himself for falling into such a deep sleep and failing to keep watch for danger. The gentle form of his wife, snuggled up against him with her head on his chest, quickly brought him back to the events of last night and he relaxed again. He



watched her peaceful face for a moment and wondered, 'How on Ryyah did I get singled out to be given this beautiful creature for my own?' She depended on him now. She was his responsibility and he would protect her with his life. And he depended on her and knew that she would give her life for his. Was this the love he had been hoping for? With a small, happy sigh, he shook his head. Some things were just too deep to think about for too long.

Akenji tried to ease away from Kerala's sleeping form so that he could find his clothing but she awoke and opened her beautiful, hazel eyes. She smiled sleepily and touched his face. "Good morning, husband. Did you sleep well?"

Akenji grinned at her and replied, "A little too well. I was supposed to keep watch for nasty Trolls last night, but I seem to recall being sidetracked by some willful little nymph who refused to take no for an answer."

Kerala smiled innocently. "Forgive me for my brazen behavior, husband. I deeply regret what happened between us last night and I offer my most humble apologies." Her eyes were twinkling with amusement.

Akenji laughed out loud at her facetious apology. "What am I going to do with you, woman?" he teased while grabbing her around the waist and pulling her, giggling, up to him to kiss her forehead. He pushed her away, playfully, and then got up to locate his clothes.

Kerala watched him as he unwittingly modeled himself for her perusal. Clothing did not do him justice, she thought, as she watched him dress. Every inch of the man was solid muscle. With an approving lift of her eyebrows, she tore her eyes away from Akenji's beautiful form and turned to the task of finding the discarded nightshirt. She smiled as she picked up the garment and the sensuous fabric slid through her fingers, remembering the look on Akenji's face when he first saw her standing before him. She tucked it away in her bag with some regret and dressed in her walking dress and cloak for the day. She pulled the Rune crystal ring off her finger and tucked it safely in the bag as well and then turned to Akenji.

"What is our plan?" she asked.

"We must travel directly south for the next few days and leave what I believe is the Troll's territory. There are signs of their presence all over this area. We will have to be vigilant and very careful." He straightened from his task and looked directly at her. "We cannot do what we did last night until we are safely out of their range. We took a big risk last night. Do you understand?"

She nodded and replied, "As you will, husband," knowing that it would be just as hard for him to wait as it would be for her and admiring his sense of duty and concern for their safety. She would not deliberately tempt him again until she was sure the time was right.

They traveled south for the next two weeks, stopping only to eat and sleep. They had seen no signs of Trolls or any other inhabitants in the last five days and now sought a suitable place to stop and rest. They came across a large clearing in the middle of the dense forest and stood at its edge, staring in wonder. The clearing was a full league wide and about two leagues long and stretched southward to a small, crystal blue lake. The ground was soft and fertile. It was like an oasis in the midst of the dark forest.

"We will set up here and rest for a couple of weeks," Akenji decided. "I want to scout this area well. This would be a perfect location for a new settlement if Brandela ever decides to move to a safer place." He took Kerala by the hand and led her across the clearing, toward the lake.

Within a few hours they had set up camp near the lake and Akenji was off for a quick exploration of the area. Kerala bathed in the still waters of the lake and basked in the peacefulness of the surrounding forest. She hadn't realized just how much she had been missing the forest before now. There was no greater feeling than that of returning home after a long journey. Somehow, this place felt like home.

She had just dressed and filled the water bags when she noticed Akenji heading her way, carrying a

large object in his hand. His face was serious, but she was becoming accustomed to that part of him. She knew how to make him smile, but she respected his focused and duty-bound nature too. He approached and threw a large goose at her feet. "We'll eat well tonight," he declared.

Her mouth watered at the thought of roasted goose. It would be the first meat they had eaten in weeks. "How very efficient of you, husband. I knew there was a reason I was keeping you around," she said playfully.

He grinned at her. "I'm glad you're pleased with my actions, Your Highness," he retorted. "Perhaps you will indulge your poor, humble servant by cleaning and cooking this creature for our meal tonight?"

Kerala rolled her eyes and sighed in an exaggerated fashion. "As you wish, but you know, husband, I believe your notion of romance lacks refinement. One may begin to think that all you keep me around for is to cook your meals."

Akenji's eyes were gleaming and his voice was husky when he replied, "Oh, I don't know. There are other things that you're useful at as well."

"Does that mean that we are safe from the Trolls?" Kerala asked with mock innocence.

Understanding her meaning clearly, Akenji stared at her, barely breathing. "Very safe," he answered.

Kerala picked up the bird and walked away, with a playful smile on her lips.

As she walked away, Akenji called out, "If this is the mood fresh meat puts you in, I think I'll be doing a lot more hunting."

The goose was soon cleaned and plucked and sizzling on its spit over the open fire. Kerala broke off one of the legs and handed it to Akenji. He closed his eyes as he bit into the savory meat and smiled broadly.

"This is so delicious," he exclaimed. "Thank you. You've done such a wonderful job... I've never tasted such a good goose."

Kerala blushed and replied, "Don't be silly. I did nothing fancy to it. It's no different than any other goose."

"Oh no," Akenji insisted, "this is fantastic. I know I couldn't have done it as well if I had prepared it."

Kerala reached for a piece of meat for herself and started to eat, smiling with pleasure at the compliments.

When their appetites were finally quenched, they sat in silence for a while, enjoying the fire and the stillness of the nearby lake. Kerala glanced at Akenji and found him watching her. For a long time, they looked at each other, neither saying a word.

She didn't have to wonder what was on her husband's mind. She could feel the desire radiating from him in pleasant waves. She grew excited in return just knowing that he wanted her. It took a great effort to keep herself from running to him.

Akenji smiled at Kerala and looked into her eyes. The energy between them was almost palpable.

"Is there anything else you need, husband? Anything I can do for you?" she asked meekly, knowing her words would stir his desire even more.

He didn't answer, but stood and moved toward her, his need showing intensely in his dark eyes.

Her heart was racing as she stood to meet his embrace and they came together in a fury of passion. His kiss bruised her lips and his hands fumbled impatiently with her clothing. They wrestled and laughed and teased, and their lovemaking was not the gentle experience of the first time. When their passions were sated, Kerala snuggled, trembling, in Akenji's embrace, still trying to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry, Kerala," Akenji whispered. "Was I too rough? Did I hurt you? I couldn't help myself."

Kerala laughed. "That was wonderful," she answered. "I had no idea it would be this much fun."

Akenji grinned and laughed out loud. "I have a feeling that we might have to do a lot of experimenting to discover all there is to know in this area of study."

Kerala snuggled closer. "I don't think I'll mind that," she said before drifting into a blissful sleep.

Akenji soon followed and had one of the deepest and most peaceful sleeps he could remember in his entire life.



Although they had planned to stay only two weeks, Akenji and Kerala stayed in the forest oasis for the next two months. Together, they explored and mapped the area, built a comfortable, temporary shelter and enjoyed the bounty of the lake and the woods. Akenji taught Kerala some basic fighting skills and she showed him what she knew of attack magic. He was deeply impressed by this and eager to know more. They spent hours talking about their pasts, the new settlement and what they hoped the future would hold. They explored each other's bodies and each other's minds until they had come to understand and know each other more completely than anyone had known them before. When Akenji announced that it was time to move on and scout the lands further to the south, Kerala packed up their camp obediently, but with a reluctant heart. She would miss this place where she had formed so many fond memories with her husband. She knew that no other place would ever feel so much like 'home' for her.

The next three months proved to be challenging ones as they searched for an alternative route back to the settlement. The comfort and ease of their oasis seemed very far away just one month later. They were plagued with a period of severe weather, the terrain they had entered was much more difficult to negotiate (something that Akenji noted would be to the advantage of the settlement if they were to relocate to the oasis), and food became more scarce for a time. There were signs of wild creatures, including some large predators, in the land through which they passed, and they were constantly on their guard. They regained their old routine of travelling for two days, then resting and scouting for two days. It was an unforgiving area and a test of their endurance, resourcefulness and teamwork. They learned, more than ever, to rely on each other's skills and strengths and to trust.

When, at last, they travelled along the familiar riverbank that would lead them to the settlement, it was with mixed feelings. They were both eager to return to their people and see that everyone was alright, but they had become accustomed to the freedom and solitude of their exile. They had changed in their six months together and returned, not as the two individual servants who had just been married, but as a deeply bonded couple, functioning better as a team than they had ever done on their own. How would they now fit within the society they had left? How could they slip back into their old roles when so much had changed within them? They were quiet and thoughtful in those final days, knowing that something special was soon to end and a whole new life would begin. It was sad and exciting all at the same time.

Brandela's scouts saw them coming before they were even a full day away from the twelve foot wall of spiked tree trunks that now surrounded the entire settlement. By the time they reached the great gateway, a large group had gathered, led by Brandela and Brien. A cheer of excitement arose as they approached and Brien stepped forward.

"Stop there, trespassers," he commanded fiercely, trying not to grin. "What business do you have here?"

Akenji eyed his old friend and looked up at the great wall. Then, in one swift motion, he drew his short blade from the band on his leg and rushed Brien. The younger man, not expecting the attack, was

easily overpowered and soon on the ground with Akenji's blade at his throat. Akenji shook his head disdainfully and said, "Looks like we need to work on our defensive responses around here." He laughed at the look of outrage on Brien's face and offered his friend a hand, pulling him to his feet.

Brien scowled at him but then broke into a grin and pulled him into a rough embrace. "Good to see you back, Commander," he said.

Kerala and Brandela also embraced and Kerala exclaimed over her Mistress's very large belly.

"This must be a big, healthy son to be growing so large already," praised Kerala, surprised by the size of Brandela's baby bump. There was another six weeks left before the baby was due.

"That's what I thought," answered Brandela, beaming, "but it has turned out that I am not carrying only one child, but two."

Kerala's eyes widened at hearing that news. Twins were very rare amongst Elves and were believed to be possible only when created from one of the purest kinds of bonds. Kerala's voice was full of awe when she responded, "Twins! A sign of the depth of the bond you shared with Lord Donovan. It is truly remarkable."

Brandela nodded serenely and then cocked her head inquisitively at her head maidservant. "Speaking of bonds... how did this little experiment go?"

Kerala blushed and smiled broadly. "Very, very well," she assured Brandela. "You were right all along."

Brandela hugged Kerala once more and then turned to greet Akenji. Finally, she turned to the crowd and announced, "We shall hear about their adventure in good time. Right now, let us welcome our friends home and prepare food and drink for a celebration feast."

A cheer went up from the crowd again and the great gate was pulled closed behind them as they returned to civilized life.

Later, at the feast, Brien filled Akenji in on the events of the past six months, giving him a detailed account of the construction of the wall and the recent training he had been putting the men through.

"And... I've also become a husband," he announced nonchalantly.

"What!" exclaimed Akenji. "That's wonderful. Who's the bride?"

A slow grin crept over Brien's face. "Well, actually, there are eleven of them."

For a moment, Akenji was completely dumbfounded. Then he started to laugh uproariously. "Eleven? Eleven wives in six months!"

Brien was grinning like a lecherous fool now and nodding as if he could not quite believe it either.

"Yes," he answered, "they're all very lovely. I'll introduce you to them when we have a chance. Three of them are even pregnant already. Can you believe it? I'm going to be a father soon!"

Akenji laughed even harder on hearing that news and congratulated his friend warmly. "Well, you don't waste time, do you?" he said. "They must be keeping you very busy!"

Brien smiled sheepishly at Akenji and answered, "I'll be a lot busier when these babies start arriving. And what about you? You must have one on the way by now, my friend?"

Akenji frowned and didn't answer. He smacked Brien on the back and changed the subject.

"It's good to be back. Let's find the others and have a drink to celebrate."

Later that night, Akenji and Kerala lay awake in bed in Akenji's sparsely decorated tent, listening to the last of the revelers and thinking about how strange it seemed to be back here instead of alone together in the wilds.

Kerala looked around at her new surroundings and said, "This place could use a woman's touch."

Akenji frowned slightly and asked gruffly, "Exactly what do you have in mind?"

Kerala giggled. "Don't worry, I'll improve things, I promise. After all, this is my tent now as well,

right?”

Akenji nodded his head in reply to her question and said nothing more about it. He wasn't sure what needed 'improving' – it had always worked just fine for him – but he could tell by her tone that he was out of his element, so he decided to trust her with it. He turned the conversation to Brien and his eleven wives and the fact that three of them were carrying Brien's children already.

“Yes, many of the women have bonded since we've been gone. It seems that Brandela is eager to get this settlement growing,” answered Kerala.

Akenji hesitated and then added cautiously, “Brien asked me if I was also going to be a father.” He could sense Kerala's sudden stillness and tension and her voice was equally cautious when she answered, “And what did you tell him?”

Akenji shifted so that he was facing her and said, “I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.” After a long pause, he added, “Was there something I could have told him?”

There was no reply for a moment, but finally Kerala sighed and said, “I wanted it to be a surprise, you know.”

Akenji jolted upright. “What did you say?” he asked, breathlessly.

Kerala rolled her eyes and huffed with mock annoyance. “I said you're going to be a father.”

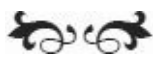
Akenji laughed out loud with a deep rumble and grabbed Kerala, lifting her clear out of the bed. “You are amazing,” he exclaimed between joyful kisses.

Kerala, laughing and struggling to catch her breath from the passionate and playful kisses her husband was showering her with, managed to say, “I'm sorry, I wanted to tell you about it sooner but I didn't know how. I wanted it to be a surprise, but every time I tried to think of the perfect way to tell you, it just never seemed right. I have known for almost a month now.”

“There's no need to apologize to me,” Akenji reassured her. “You are truly amazing. I will always count it as a blessing to have you as my wife. You are all I have ever wanted and more than I had hoped for. I love you.”

Kerala smiled at the sweet and kind words of her husband. With tears of joy in her eyes she whispered, “I love you too, husband. Your words mean more to me than you could ever know.”

Akenji lifted her face to his and began kissing her again, more tenderly this time. Soon they were wrapped in each other's arms and in each other's love, giving all they had to each other once more.



The End

*If you like what you read, please visit us at [WorldofRyyah.com](http://WorldofRyyah.com) where you can purchase, or find out more information about one of our other books in 'The Elven Age Saga'*  
*Thank you for reading*