



H. L. Watson

WORLD OF

**RYYYAH**

**short stories**



Kerala, and Akenji's  
Adventure

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# *Table of Contents*

## *Kerala, and Akenji's Adventure*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

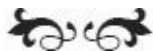
Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

## *World Map*







Western Continent of Ryyah

Veal Mearia Kingdom

Corragal

Shadow Elven Empire

Hollowlark

The Accursed Valley

The Great Chasm

Lunar Elven Kingdom  
Valley of the Moon

Northern High Elven Kingdom

Southern High Elven Kingdom

Gorrendo Republic

The Titan's Spine

Vintoraion Plains

Leafsburg

Eastern Wood Elven Kingdom

Western Wood Elven Kingdom

Alderwood

Eldergate

Benten

The Wildlands

Grendel

Salmon River

Ksbeary River

Ksbeary Plains

Eastern Continent of Ryyah

The Ksbeary Gulf

The Scorching Lands

Volteness







# 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.

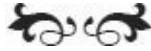
Akenji pushed the encounter with Kerala off from his mind with some effort. Something about her made him feel like an untested boy instead of the leader and fighter he was and he found the experience unsettling... although somehow intriguing too. The whole idea of this arranged marriage had him unnerved. 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



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